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OUR PASTOR'S FIRST SABBATH AFTER HIS ILLNESS

781

Sermon preached by Mr. J. Delves on Sunday morning 1.4.62 at
"Ebenezer", Clapham

Hymns 14, 142 (1-6), 176.

Reading: Song of Solomon 1 and 2

Text: Psalm 116. v. 7

"Return unto thy rest, O my soul; for the Lord hath dealt
bountifully with thee."

Some may remember that I read this Psalm last evening at our prayer meeting and made a few observations upon it, not at that time anticipating any further particular reference to it. Since then, this particular verse has so abode with me and fastened itself upon my mind that I have felt I must take it as a subject, and that for particular reasons both personal and collective. For truly we have reason to say the Lord has dealt bountifully with us. You will know that it is not customary with me to refer much to myself; my desire has ever been to lift up, preach and exalt a precious Christ in my ministry and to lay Him as a foundation in it, but this is a particular occasion and a memorable one in which as a company of people we are witnesses in a special way to a prayer-answering, promise-performing, and covenant-keeping God; and I know you will forgive me if I make a few references to my own case this morning, and although as you know I have described my feelings and exercises to you in my affliction in letters that have been read, I feel I would like to make a little further reference this morning, because I believe we can say that the Lord has dealt bountifully with us and I hope I can say too, with me.

You are well aware of the favour and blessing I believe I felt in my affliction, and I am happy to say that, up to this present moment I have not been tempted or torn in my mind in relation to the reality of what I felt at that time, although I do not feel it in the same sense now. The power and unction and savour and

sweetness of what I felt in my time of bodily weakness has subsided, but the memory is sweet, and I can honestly say concerning it what is said of Jacob at Peniel, "He blessed me there".

You may remember that the last time I entered this pulpit was on Wednesday January 10th., when I spoke a little to you from the 61st. chapter of Isaiah "To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called the trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he might be glorified." At that time I had not the slightest idea of what lay before me, or before us as a people, but from that evening my strength began to fail with an attack of influenza which after a few days I quite thought I should recover from, and anticipated being able to preach again on the following Sabbath, but the Lord had other purposes than this and He brought me very low. There is no need to go into any particulars concerning the physical aspect of this affliction, but I had to be removed quickly to hospital as you all know, and in the hospital, both before and after the operation, the Lord granted me, I hope, a sealing in my soul of this, namely, that the Gospel that I have preached before you for many years is the Gospel that will take my soul to heaven one day, so that I felt it to be the power of God unto salvation in my soul; and this I desire to acknowledge.

I went into hospital under much darkness of mind and could not seem to get near the Lord or feel any comfort or consolation for the time being, until the Friday before the operation. On that Friday the Lord mercifully appeared, a light shone through the dark cloud, and the 24th. chapter of Luke was made sweetly attractive, especially that Scripture, "Ought not Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?" This meditation brought me into a little sweet fellowship with the Lord Jesus which opened up before my mind the awfulness of sin as I believe nothing else can in just the same way. It quite broke me

down, and especially that Word, "Ought not Christ to have suffered these things?" That was the beginning of a turning of my captivity, and on the following Sabbath before the operation, I read the 20th. chapter of John and felt such a sweetness in it, then I turned to the hymns that relate to the resurrection of Christ, hymns 485-490, and as I read each hymn the power and sweetness of it so broke in upon my heart that I wept tears of love and joy before the Lord, each verse and hymn was made increasingly precious, especially hymn 486 where we sometimes sing,

"The struggling Hero, strong to save,
Did all our miseries bear
Down to the chambers of the grave,
And left the burden there."

It was that last line that was so wonderful, "And left the burden there". "He died unto sin once", I felt that He had left my burden there, and it was very sweet. There was nothing between us then, it is sin that occasions separation, and it is His precious sin-atonement blood as applied that removes this sense of separation through guilt and sin, bringing a sensible sinner nigh through His precious blood; and this I felt a little of, particularly concerning His resurrection. It was so wonderful to me to feel that I had a living Christ, a personal Christ, a personal Christ, a representative in heaven, more than words could express.

On the following Sabbath I felt some particular favour again in the chapters I have read this morning in the Song of Solomon. I sat down under His shadow and His fruit was sweet to my taste, and He came very near. I was in a little room by myself the first part of the time, and out of bed sitting in a chair when I read these chapters, in fact I read the whole Song, but it was the 2nd. chapter especially I felt to be in the experience of "He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love", and what a wonderful love it was! Then I wrote another letter the day before I returned home in which I mentioned the need of the Lord's chastening and how broken in spirit I felt under that particular verse in hymn 871,

"For this correction render praise;
'Tis given thee for thy good.
The lash is steeped he on thre lays,
And softened in his blood."

I shed a few more sweet tears, they have all been sweet, very sweet tears of love to Christ, shame of myself, confession and repentance, sweet repentance, mingled with love, faith, hope and humility, all flowing together to the goodness of the Lord.

There is a point here that I would mention in these visits of the Lord to me. Each one more or less has linked my soul more closely to the atonement. I shall not forget what I felt in hymn 160,

"E'er since, by faith I saw the stream
Thy flowing wounds supply,
Redeeming love has been my theme,
And shall be till I die."

It is a mercy to get a sight of Christ, that is by faith. It will do more for us than anything else. It can level mountains in our providences, subdue our stubborn will, break up our rebellion, lay us at His feet, humble us in the dust; and it will make Himself increasingly precious in our affections. It is a mercy to possess a religion that makes Christ in His glorious Person and His finished work all and in all. To possess a knowledge of Him in a saving way will be heaven one day to every one thus favoured.

After my return home, early one morning, very early, the Lord drew so very near to me so that there seemed to be nothing between us. He was indeed to me like a roe or a young hart, not standing behind the wall, He was showing Himself through the lattice and flourishing Himself at the windows of His Gospel, He seemed in His love to embrace me, so that I felt it would be easy to go to heaven then; no cloud came between, nothing at all, this melted me down again and was a moment that I believe will be a sweet memory.

I might mention that it was in my mind, as soon as I felt

able to come into the sanctuary here, which I did one morning, to offer my thank offering unto the Lord; and I felt such a sweetness in my soul as I sat here, alone, in the desk, blessing the Lord for His goodness, thinking and reading of Jacob where the Lord said unto him, "Arise go up to Bethel, and dwell there: and make there an altar unto God;" and Jacob said, "Let us go up to Bethel, and make an altar unto God who answered me in the day of my distress and was with me in the way which I went."

So I have rehearsed a little of what I hope the Lord has done for me in this, and feel that I can say He has dealt bountifully with me. This is wonderful, is it not, for if I had been where hope and mercy can never come it would have been what I deserve, and that I have felt too.

I would like to speak just a word in relation to us as a congregation during this time of trouble and affliction. I do feel thankful, from my heart, that the Lord has preserved and kept you in a spirit of prayer and watchfulness, I believe there has been a spirit of real prayer, not only for myself but for the church and the congregation. I believe the Lord has answered these petitions and preserved you in a spirit of unity one with another, and not only of unity, but of affection and love in and through this time of trouble; for it has been a time of trouble. We have found trouble and sorrow as expressed in this Psalm as well as some experience of the Lord's goodness and mercy to us, this has been a great comfort to me, hearing as I have of the prayer meetings, who had prayed, the hymns and every detail. I have felt thankful for this, and for the help that has been given to our deacons at this time. What cause we have for thankfulness for godly, gracious deacons. I may say this to you now because it has been a time of trial for them, and of much prayer, but also of help and of some experience of the Lord's sustaining mercy and grace to them; and this is cause for thankfulness. Since I have been home I have heard every prayer meeting and the preaching of the Gospel by His servants and I have

enjoyed in my heart hearing the sermons that have been read of those ministers that have gone before, also in the preaching how clearly the Lord's servants who have preached have traced out the exercises of the Lord's people; but for myself having felt such a love to Christ in my heart I have felt to want them to lift Him up and make Him all their sermon; I know experience is vital, for without some experience of the Gospel we have no real reason to conclude we have any interest in the things of God and His salvation; but when Christ's love fills the heart, nothing is so sweet as to hear Him lifted up, and laid as a foundation in the ministry and then to hear of a gracious experience built upon it. I hope and believe the Lord has owned and blessed the labours of His servants among us.

The first Sabbath after I got home I felt such a love to you and to the Lord that my soul seemed almost to leap from my body, if I may express it like that. I felt if only I could get into this pulpit and lift Him up again! I had not strength of body for that then, but there was the feeling; and now the time has come, although I do not feel now quite as I felt then.

In this verse that I have read the author, who had been in the depths of trouble, as we read, was mercifully brought up from it, and was moved to say, "I was brought low and he helped me". Can you feel to say that? Have there been times in your life when you have been brought into such an extreme place that if the Lord had not appeared to you you would have sunk in despair; but He did appear, did He not? And when He appeared to you and helped and delivered and blessed you, you returned to your rest. "I was brought low, and he helped me. Return unto thy rest, O my soul". The Psalmist gives several reasons for this, as "For the Lord hath dealt bountifully with me", that is with the Psalmist, whoever he was; and not only so he says, "For thou hast delivered my soul from death, mine eyes from tears, and my feet from falling". In the first part of the Psalm he says, "The sorrows of death

compassed me, and the pains of hell gat hold upon me; I found trouble and sorrow" sorrow but not despair. The Lord will not allow His people to despair utterly, though He may bring them very near to it, and into sore temptations too, so that it may be a hard and bitter battle to hold on. Some of you can say in your measure, "The sorrows of death compassed me, and the pains of hell gat hold upon me; I found trouble and sorrow". Conviction of sin, the terrors of a broken law, the sentence of death in the conscience of a sinner, and it may be some painful providences in his life, but now he says He has delivered me, He has been my helper, He has brought me up again from the gates of death, He has dealt bountifully with me, He has done three things; He has delivered my soul from death, mine eyes from tears, (they would appear to have been tears of grief and trouble,) and my feet from falling. There may have been some snare laid for him, something in his life, but he says the Lord has delivered me from it; "Return unto thy rest, O my soul; for the Lord hath dealt bountifully with thee". "Return unto thy rest". This word 'return' is expressive of being brought back to a place where we have been before. He had known this rest before; so have some of you too, but heavy trials came upon him, the pains of hell; and he found trouble and sorrow; but when the Lord appeared, helped and delivered him could say, "Return unto thy rest, O my soul; for the Lord hath dealt bountifully with thee".

What is this rest? In the first place it is Christ Himself. He is the Refuge for a guilty sinner. There cannot be any rest but in Him,

"Out of Christ, almighty power,
Can do nothing but devour."

There is no rest for one who feels to be under the terrors of a broken law, and an angry God against sin; there is no rest there, although these are very necessary as a preparation for that rest; but when the Lord appears, breaks through the cloud, shines into

the heart, brings His precious atoning blood by His Spirit, and sprinkles it on the conscience, then there is a wonderful rest. He Himself is that rest, He has made it, and He gives it as He has said, "Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." There is no rest in the world is there? The world to the Lord's people is vanity and vexation of spirit. All is passing away in this world. His people are pilgrims while here; but now and again there is a sweet rest felt in the soul when the Lord comes. It is that union He gives you to feel in your soul to Him that brings the peace, and in all that He is as having fulfilled the law, borne your sins away by His own sufferings and death; and when you have that experience His obedience and death will shine before your view, as I believe it has done in my own case sometimes of late. His obedience to the law is profoundly blessed, there is no rest, no hope, no peace without this, it brings the soul to Calvary, it centres there, it lifts Him up in the heart, in the affections. While looking by faith upon a groaning and agonising God the heart is broken, a sweet rest is enjoyed; and this is an earnest of heaven. "Return unto thy rest, O my soul; for the Lord hath dealt bountifully with thee". Here I shall have to leave it for this morning.
