

Sermon preached by Mr. J. Delves, at Ebenezer, Clapham on

Sunday evening, January 27th 1935

"Thou shalt guide me with Thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory". Psalm 73 verse 24.

It is very clear and obvious that this Psalm is written by a man of God. No man could really use language like that expressed here but one who had a knowledge of God, and an experience of His truth. Before we can say "Whom have I in heaven but Thee, and there is none upon earth that I desire beside Thee", we must have some clear discovery of Him to our souls. It is not the language of a natural man, neither is it the language of a mere professor; it is the language of one in whom the grace and teaching of God is in lively exercise, and when the writer of this Psalm commenced so, he made an assertion with respect to the goodness of God. "Truly", he said, "God is good to Israel, even to such as are of a clean heart". Here is the assertion. It is evident by that, that though he was in deep perplexity, he desired to clear the character of God. "God is good". He is good even to Israel, to such as are of a clean heart, and so he concludes it. "It is good for me to draw near to God. I will put my trust in the Lord God that I may declare all Thy works". He evidently fell into a temptation which was the occasion of the writing of this Psalm, and that he acknowledges himself. He says, "But as for me, my feet had well nigh gone, my steps had well nigh slipped". What was the cause of that? It was because he had been looking away from God, to circumstances and dispensations of God toward men, which were a cause of stumbling in him; and the cause of his perplexity and difficulty was this:- he looked abroad, so to speak, and he saw the wicked prospering, and the righteous afflicted, and this was very mysterious and very painful to him, and he gives a very vivid description here of the wicked, and how they were prospered and were allowed to get on in life and accumulate wealth. They had more than heart could wish, and naturally speaking, it would seem to him, so viewing the position, that God bestowed His favours upon those who hated Him, and denied them to those who loved Him, and it appeared to him very unjust, and if we view it from carnal reasoning we shall say the same. It does not seem to be quite right, does it? Those who are at enmity with God prosper, and those who desire to walk in His ways, to love and serve Him - they are afflicted. It seemed to bring him to this conclusion, that it was in vain to serve God; as though he would give up his religion; there was no purpose in it. Here am I, afflicted, and others seem to go along easily and have all they desire. "When I thought to know this it was too painful for me." "Surely", he says, "I have washed my hands in

vain and cleansed my heart in innocency". The more he exercised himself in godliness the more things went against him.

When we judge God by immediate circumstances we may come to such a false conclusion as that. "For all the day long have I been plagued, and chastened every morning"; and yet he desires to serve God and walk in the truth. At the same time every day seems to bring him some new trial, some fresh trouble. He was continually chastened, and so he went on until it became a great pain to him. Now where could he find relief? How was he delivered from that temptation? There was one place where he found relief and deliverance, and that was in the Sanctuary of God - he had to come there. "Until I went" he says, "into the Sanctuary of God"- then there was a change, then a light began to break upon his eyes, - "Then understood I their end" Sanctuary teaching and discipline brought him to this. So it is with us, is it not? When we look away from God, when we look at circumstances, we become confused and see things which according to our judgment are not right, and we set up that throne of judgment in our own hearts and we think God deals hardly, until we come into the Sanctuary of God. In the Sanctuary, you see, was a place of teaching. Evidently in his own experience God revealed to him there the mystery. The purposes of God are known to Him from the beginning, but they are not known to us. The result of this was, it brought him to confession. "So foolish was I", he says, "and ignorant, I was as a beast before Thee". He acknowledges that he had not the power of reasoning rightly, he could see nothing before him. He could not see the hand of God in the dispensation. "I was as a beast before Thee". Kicking against it, rebelling against it, until (not before) "until I went into the Sanctuary of God." Now it would seem to show this - that when he went into the Sanctuary he went into the presence of God, and God revealed to him the secret. It was a place of teaching and discipline to him. He could not solve the mystery by the exercise of his judgment. The more he tried to reconcile things, the more difficult they became, until it was too painful for him, - until he went into the Sanctuary. So must we, my friends. We may have, and see, things which to us are very conflicting, but when we come into the Sanctuary as here defined, we come into the presence of God, and God reveals His will there - in the Sanctuary. We come there for prayer, for confession of our sins. This the Psalmist did, and it brought him down divine light, divine sovereignty, and the justice of God in all His dealings, were there shown to him. Then he looked forward, so to speak, and he saw their end. "Surely", he said, "Thou has set them in slippery places".

Now when we can view people of the world prospering in this life,

when everything seems to go well with them, we are very disposed to envy them, - the Psalmist here did the same thing. "I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked." He did not merely observe it and fall under divine Sovereignty, but he envied them, and in his heart, he fought against God in it. He sinned in his judgment of what was right, but God brought him to this:- to see their end, the purpose that God had in the issue, so that he had to conclude that it is better to have a cross with Christ than all this world can offer without Him. Hence, being so instructed, he says, "Whom have I heaven but Thee"? The thing was revealed and made known and made clear to him. He did not envy them then; No, he fell into the hands of God in the matter. "Thou hast set them in slippery places." He was in a slippery place before that. "My feet had well nigh slipped, I was envious at the foolish". "Thus my heart was grieved, and I was pricked in my reins". He was grieved at what he had previously given expression to, and the thoughts of his heart, and he had to come away from all these perplexing, irreconcilable things and difficulties, to God, and he said:-"Nevertheless, I am continually with Thee".

This is true of the saints of God; they are with Him, they walk with Him, though they may not always perceive it; God is with them. His presence is with His Church, "God is in the midst of her, He will help her and that right early." "Nevertheless, I am continually with Thee." He makes this acknowledgment, this confession. I am with Thee, I am protected by Thee, Thou has holden me by my right hand. He had well nigh slipped, but God did not allow him to slip away, He brought him into the Sanctuary and discovered to him His own purposes in these things.

"Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence,
He hides a smiling face."

We may look at a providence, perhaps, and see a frown in it, but we do not see the smile behind it; but that may come later. Nevertheless, though these things are so conflicting, so stumbling, I had almost fallen, become envious, yet, nevertheless, I am continually with Thee, "Thou has holden me by my right hand, Thou shalt guide me with Thy counsel." He speaks confidently; he had learnt a lesson; he was brought to the footstool of grace; he believes in the wisdom and justice of God in all His dispensations. We see in various instances in the Scriptures where God works in a way quite opposite to our reasoning of things. We should say, "O, so and so would be right", but God works otherwise. In the prophecy of Habakkuk, we find the prophet was in great distress because God allowed a nation more wicked than their nation to invade the land

and work such havoc and destruction. It did not appear just, and yet he says, "O, Lord, Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil". He acknowledges God could not do evil, but he could not reconcile these things. What does he do? He makes a resolve, he says, "I will set me upon my watch tower, I will wait to see what he will answer me when I am reproved". Not an unusual experience possibly. We may have some difficult, complicated thing, and we may not know what to do with it. We take that matter to God, we take it in prayer, and lay it before Him. Perhaps a certain matter you want cleared up, a matter in which you may feel to need guidance; you lay that matter before the Lord, and wait and watch, as the prophet did, what He will say unto you. The Lord spoke to him and said, "The vision is yet for an appointed time, at the end it shall speak and not lie". It was very similar to this when the Psalmist came into the Sanctuary of the Lord. Then he understood the matter, the thing was made plain to him. It was a place of revelation, where God revealed His will to him, His end in things. So with the prophet, as though the Lord should say to him, Now you wait, the vision, the will of God, My will, will be made known at the appointed time. At the end, when the time comes, it shall speak and not lie. It shall speak, it shall not tarry. "Thou shalt guide me with Thy counsel". He commits himself to God with a gracious confidence.

Now I would like to speak, if I might have grace, first of being guided with the counsel of God in matters. I believe we may define it in a three fold way. First He guides His people according to His own counsel and purpose. Now we believe that God has appointed for us all our ways; our birth, our life, our death, our movements and the bounds of our habitation, are all fixed by a predetermined and unchangeable purpose. And this is so in the council of God, the council of peace wherein all His gracious dealings with His people were pre-ordered in the eternal mind, all His dealings with them in divine providence, in eternity, in the council of God, the council of eternity. There before the world was formed, all our circumstances, the minutest circumstance, were noted and appointed in divine council. Now He will guide us according to that council. We must be born, come into being, according to His purpose. Our lives are ordered by Him, the bounds of our habitation are fixed. He

"Fixed our first and second birth,
Parents, native place and time,
All appointed were by Him."

and throughout our lives this may be said, that though in dangers oft-

"Not a single shaft can hit,
Till the God of love sees fit."

He will guide His people through their difficult pilgrimage until He receives them to glory, and this guidance will be according to this counsel, according to His own infinite wisdom, not according to our own counsel, not of our own devising. You may say, O! I shall go here or there, I shall leave this place, I shall go to a certain place - you determine something, but you will never carry out that determination unless it is by divine appointment, Furthermore, the people of God when exercised do not do things like that, only when left to themselves. Their language will be "Lord guide me with Thy counsel and give me grace to follow that direction." Hence we read in the prophecy by Isaiah, God says, "Though I feed thee with the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet shall not thy teachers be removed into a corner any more, but thine eyes shall see thy teachers, and thine ears shall hear a voice behind thee saying, this is the way walk ye in it, when ye turn to the right hand and when ye turn to the left." There is a divine guidance, a special providence over the people of God which orders the minutest circumstance of their life. O! but we make mistakes; so we may. Possibly all of us have done. Then you say, is that in the council of God? If we make a mistake, that mistake will be by a divine permission, by the permissive will of God, and will, in the issue, be made to work for our good by chastening, by discipline. Yet there is a divine council according to which irrevocable decree we shall be guided through the difficult sea of life.

But there is another way to view the matter. "Thou shalt guide me with Thy counsel." He will guide us and direct us by the inward teaching of His Spirit in our hearts. There is a divine direction there. The gracious influence of the Spirit of grace in us will guide us in our ways. "As many as are led," or guided,"by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God." Now let us for a moment just consider the work of grace in a believing heart, as one may be brought along from the beginning. We read of the vision of the holy waters in the prophecy of Ezekiel, where the prophet in the first place saw the waters issue out from under the threshold of the Sanctuary. When he was first made to pass through them, they came to his ankles. Then the waters deepened and he was made to pass through them again;- they came to his knees; again,- they came to his loins, and it was then a river that could not be passed over. It was the gradual growth and development of the work of grace; so there is a gradual growth and development of the work in every heart, and this by the work of the Spirit of God. He guides His people in their ways according to Holy Scripture. "Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel." Now you may be in a difficulty; - perhaps you have got to take some course, you may have to turn one way, you are in a certain circumstance where you

have to make some decision, and you feel to lack wisdom in that matter. What then? You seek direction from God, and the Lord may and does condescend to take you by the hand, so to speak, and guide you. Perhaps He may apply to you some fitting portion of Scripture that may be in the form of a direction, which will decide you as to the course you are to take, and, feeling the heavenly influence of that word, you walk and go forward feeling the Lord is with you. Now that is being guided by His counsel. We are on right ground when we first seek that counsel, and when it is given, walk in it in the strength of faith (though it may be difficult) believing it to be the right way. "Thou shalt guide me with Thy counsel."

Thirdly we may view it thus:- The Word of God, that is the Holy Scriptures, and the precepts, as God has there revealed His Will, are our counsel. They are for our instruction. Sometimes I know we may profitably exchange views about things with one another, and in the hand of God sometimes a friend may be directed to give good advice; but really we are brought to this - to come to the Word of God itself. If you need guidance in any matter, then come to the word of truth. It is said, Thy word shall be "a light unto my feet, and a lamp unto my path." The Holy Scriptures shed, so to speak, a ray of divine light upon one's path, principally and primarily on the way to heaven in matters of salvation; but they are not confined to that, they give direction in respect of all matters pertaining to this life that are necessary for our profit. Are we to make a move in a certain matter? Then we should apply ourselves to the Scriptures. Here is our guide. Here is the will of God revealed. Now if the will of God is revealed in His word, and we are exercised rightly before Him, He will guide us by that word. His word is His counsel. "Thou shalt guide me with Thy counsel." Now let us assume for a moment there is a certain matter in providence; you are tried about it, you may not know what course to take or what to do. Prayerfully apply yourself to the Word of God, and ask the Lord to give you gracious direction from that word, and He will do it; and if He gives you that direction, then walk in it, seeing that He has said, "Them that honour Me, I will honour". But someone may say, I cannot walk in it unless the Lord applies the Word with power to my heart. Well that may be quite right, but yet at the same time we have to consider that the precepts of the gospel as they stand in themselves written herein are a guide. We are not to say such a Scripture has never been applied to me, therefore I cannot walk in it. Take for instance this:- and let me give a kindly hint to some of the young people here now. Take the injunction here, "Be not unequally yoked together with unbelievers". Now, if one young in life has the fear of God, and in respect

of any important matter, is brought into such a position to decide, they would say in the prospect of any new relationship in life, does such an one fear God? Could I have union? Could we walk together? Now here is the injunction. There may be a young person, gracious person, with a conscience tender in the fear of God, and perhaps there may be some great natural attraction; that one is not to say because a word like this has not been applied, they are not to observe it. You must not say, It does not apply to me, because I have not felt its application. There is the injunction in the word of truth, inserted there; observe it and walk in it, and if you are enabled so to do, though it may perhaps seem to be a sacrifice, God will honour you in that sacrifice. Keep separate from the world, do not unite yourself to it. "Be not unequally yoked together" - knowingly, wilfully, deliberately, - "with unbelievers," and if that word is not applied to one, yet, nevertheless, it is an injunction. This is the point then, where there is a divine precept bearing upon a matter that may be exercising us, that precept is to be our guide.

Let us just in conclusion, for a moment, take the question of obedience, I mean gospel obedience. Some may say, I could not take a step in respect to joining a Church unless the Lord gave me very clear leading. Well, you may be, and are, quite right in that view. Before such a solemn step can be taken, there does need to be some gracious leading; but we have to consider this, that where the Lord may be pleased to bless one with His fear, and in some measure warms the heart with His love, if they really feel that they have an interest in the blessings of covenant grace, there is upon such an one, what I might term the duty of obedience. It is not a slavish duty, but it is the duty of love. One is hardly to take a certain portion of Scripture and say, Until that portion or another is powerfully applied to me, I cannot move. We are not to bargain with God, in such matters as that, but if we take the leading, the gracious leading and directing of the Spirit of Christ in His sweet promptings, and the movings of divine love in the heart, a gracious exercised person will view the injunctions, the exhortations to obedience, to walking in the ways of the Lord, and say, Lord allow me, permit me, to walk in Thy ways; give me grace to be obedient to Thy will; honour me with that gracious willingness that I may feel by the constrainings of divine love a fervent desire to walk this way. We cannot lay down a fixed rule in these matters, my friends. Each must follow what they feel is their own leading, but there is this to consider, that the ordinances of the Lord's house, the precepts of Holy Scripture, the many injunctions relative to our deportment, our behaviour, are in

themselves our direction. Take our behaviour in the Church, as belonging to it in a visible sense. The Apostle says to such "Walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, in all lowliness and meekness." There is the counsel of God to a believer, and he is to endeavour to walk in that. "Endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." But one is not to say, I am to take no notice of that until it is applied to me. The injunction is to believers in Christ, and it is their sacred duty. We do not use that word much, but some of the good old puritans used it very extensively. Duty is a fitting word in its right place. There is a duty devolving on those who believe in Jesus. There is the duty of obedience to the precepts of the gospel and the doctrine of it. They are the counsel of God.

Now I leave it with this assertion, "Thou shalt guide me with Thy counsel."

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