

Sermon preached by Mr J K Popham
at Galeed Chapel Brighton
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ECCLESIASTES 7 v 13 and 14

"Consider the work of God: for who can make straight, that which He hath made crooked? In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider: God also hath set the one over against the other, to the end that man should find nothing after him."

The dependence of God's people on Himself is what, by nature, they, in common with all men, dislike intensely, but what, by faith, they are enabled to accept and rejoice in. "It is not in man that walketh to direct his steps." We are but of yesterday and know nothing, and we have in us an evil heart of unbelief ever ready to depart from the living God. But Scripture, inspired by the Holy Ghost, calls the people of God to their senses. They are made useful for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works. (2 Timothy 3 v 15/17). God has not left Himself without witness in the world. Much more we may say, and should say, He has not left Himself without witness in the Church, and when, as alas is very often the case with us, through unbelief we depart from the living God, He has many means of bringing us back. One means is the Word of God. He sends Scriptures like arrows, shooting them into their consciences. We are not all ignorant of that. Mercifully has the Lord spoken reproofs to us, shooting them directly as arrows into our spirits, telling us thereby that we have gone astray like lost sheep, and causing us to pray, "Seek Thy servant, for I do not forget Thy commandments." Mark, my brethren, this dealing of God, for it is one of His mercies never to be forgotten, that God, from heaven, has spoken and caused His voice to be heard. Another means He uses is holy, wise, unerring providence. There is no mistake made by Jehovah. "God only wise". If we had more gracious wisdom than we have, we should much more closely follow providence - we must hear it; we are made to hear it; - but to follow it. Pray, wait on God, and watch the working of His hand in providence; see how it affects our hearts,

what influence it has on our spirits. The text in this particular is remarkably solemn and true. "Consider the work of God". We are very apt to consider the work of men in providence. Second causes catch our attention and affect our spirits, specially if men have to do with providence, with our matters. If there be anything like injustice, then we are too apt to regard them as enemies against whom we would rise, on whom we would take vengeance. We need mercy and grace here to commit our way to God and not avenge ourselves. "Commit thy way unto the Lord, trust also in Him."

We are to consider this evening, as enabled, a little of this great word. "Consider the work of God", lay it to heart, examine it, look into it. I believe Job had this wisdom, and when his great adversity befell him he was not found inveighing ^{railing} against the Sabeans nor complaining against the Chaldeans, nor quarrelling with God because of the wind and the fire. He may have due reason, doubtless had reason, to think of the Chaldeans and the Sabeans, as inveterate enemies, but for the time his eye, his heart, his spirit submitted to God. He considered God. He considered the work which had brought this ruin to him to be the work of God. The Lord had given him what he possessed; therein he rejoiced, but now that he was stripped of all his possessions, he did not say the Sabeans and the Chaldeans and the fire and the wind have bereaved me, but he said, "The Lord hath taken away". That was a true consideration of the work of God. David also in his affliction had this before him when Absalom had driven him from his home and his throne and his faithful friends went after him and took the Ark of God to be with him. This was his spirit, he considered the whole position and found it to be of God. "Carry back" said he to his friends, "the Ark into the city. If the Lord take pleasure in me, He will bring me again and I shall see both it and His habitation. But if He say, I have no pleasure in thee, behold here am I, let Him do what seemeth Him good." He considered God's work. A beautiful spirit of faith that was given to him and maintained in him by God the Holy Ghost. "Shall we receive good at the hand of God and shall we not receive evil?" "Shall there be evil in a city and the Lord hath not done it?" "Hear the rod and who hath appointed it". When the king of Assyria went against Israel his appointment was to destroy cities, and that not a few. God's appointment was otherwise. "Consider the work of God".

"Consider the work of God" in the first place in saving you. A great work that, and that work of salvation enters into all God's works with His people. He has their good in His heart and in His eye. Whatever He does has relation to His people and whatever He does with them, and to them, has relation to their salvation, to their growth in grace, to their acquaintance with Christ, to their coming to know Christ as their Friend, and their Mediator, and their Intercessor. So this is the great point for us, first of all. Though not the first nor particularly intended in this word, but it is the first thing in my mind for us to notice. Consider that work because, as I have said, it has relation to all God's subsequent dealing with you.

Consider His work in respect of what is crooked. A crooked thing is a troublesome thing. It is meant to be else God would not make it crooked. "Who can make straight that which He hath made crooked?" And this crooked thing, first of all, may be when the Holy Ghost has something to say against you, when the inward dealings of the Holy Ghost are strange. When, as it is in the chapter I read, He is against you, hedges up your way with hewn stones, breaks your teeth with gravel stones, covers the face of His throne with a dark cloud. When He does not give you what you have had, and enjoyed, the spirit of prayer, and near and dear access to Him. When it is as if He has covered the face of His throne. A very crooked thing this, in the experience of the saints of the Most High God. We may complain, without much consideration, we may complain that it is not with us as it used to be. We may say, "Oh that I were as in months past" (Job 29 v 2) and yet not diligently consider that this is a work of God. He never withholds His smile without a reason in His people. He never rebukes them without a cause. He does not approve of the injustice of men. How then can He be unjust in His dealings with His people? He does not approve of a man subverting the cause of another. How then can He subvert the cause of those He loves? And well were it for us if we were more under the influence of grace leading us to consider closely why the throne is covered with a cloud and why God has made darkness His pavilion round about Him with respect to us. You cannot make this straight. He can and will when He has broken down a hard, obdurate heart and spirit, and brought a proud spirit into the dust - for He does humble His people - and when He has brought them to wait

on Him - for "He is good to the soul that seeketh Him, to them that wait for Him" If any of you be under this crook in your present lot, the Lord help you to duly consider it. When Israel did wrong, the Lord said to her, consider your ways; shall it prosper? That is, the evil you have done, shall it prosper? It is good for a man to consider his spiritual ways; how he has requited God, what his walk has been, whether he has indulged in unbelief and thereby, and therefore, departed from the living God. That is the first thing I would entreat you to consider in the work of God. It is for a searching purpose. God may make your circumstances into candles, and light them by His Spirit and begin to search you as with candles. It is said that "He will search Jerusalem with candles", and He may take a trouble in providence and make a candle of it and light it; put it with His Own hand into some dark corner in your heart until you are shocked at the discovery that that candle makes to you. O brethren, we are poor Christians at the best, and we do provoke God sometimes to turn providential things into candles to search our hearts and cause us to search them and try our ways. Consider a crooked providence. Consider God's hand in removing a prop. Consider your heart toward that prop. Did you lean too much on it? Were you unthankful for it? Did you not properly prize it? Did you take it as a matter of course that you should have it to hold you up? Now God has made a crook in your lot by removing it. Consider why He has done it. He has not done it without a cause. "He doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men." Let us search and try our ways in this particular if we have such a crooked thing to trouble us.

And consider, in the next place, in another line as it were, consider this word. "Who can make that straight which He hath made crooked?" Here, consider first our utter helplessness. We cannot make it straight. If we had to deal with men in such matters, we might manage somewhat to straighten matters, to straighten out crooks and put things more or less right. But when you have God to deal with, God who is of one mind and cannot be turned, that is different. Who can make that straight? Who can replace a loss? Who can set up another prop? You may rebelliously say, the bricks are fallen down but we will build with hewn stones, but you will find you may build but God can throw down. Here our helplessness comes in and with this consideration of our helplessness let us turn to Him who says, He will

make the crooked straight and the rough places plain. Consider His goodness in this promise, that what we cannot do is as nothing to Him. All He needs to do is just to say the word. We may weary ourselves till we are ready to fall down entirely, but God has said we are not to make that straight; that is to say, we cannot do it. We are utterly helpless. Now I believe this; when we feel, as before God, that we are utterly helpless, there will be a turning to Him. "Undertake for me." Said one, "O Lord, I am oppressed, undertake for me." My spirit is oppressed, my conscience is oppressed; my heart is nearly broken; undertake for me.

Consider, in the next place, as you may be enabled, what has brought this. And if the light of God shines upon you when you are thus considering a matter, you will find that your transgressions have exceeded; that He exacts of you less than your iniquities deserve; that, if with your sins compared, how light, and all in mercy and good judgement is sent. I believe no child of God under affliction, when led to consider his ways, will say that any crook or crooked thing that he has now to hurt him, is undeserved. No church will ever say, of what God does to her in a way of rebuke and affliction, that it is undeserved. You will be with me in this, you who fear God, and you will say, it is not a despairing thing, it is not an unmitigated gloom that hangs over your spirit; it is a hopeful thing when we are brought to consider our ways in connection with the work of God in making a crooked thing for us. He can make a very straight path by crooked things and lame feet are thereby led, and not turned out of the way. The solemn searchings of heart and lip and life in connection with a crooked thing will turn to a good account, and you will find it so. It will be a means of deeply humbling you. It will be a means of bringing you to your knees many a time when otherwise God would not hear from you. It will be a means of your forming a more just judgement of God than you have hitherto formed and you will be saying what a crooked creature I am, what an unmitigated sinner I am, and what infinite goodness and mercy I stand in need of. Consider the work of God in this.

And consider also this, His infinite mercy. Why has He taken all this trouble with you? Why has He taken all this trouble with me? An enemy, seeking to avenge himself where an injury has been done, may

well be watching for opportunities to take vengeance. We, poor sinners, offending, displeasing a heavenly Friend, have this to consider; we have a gracious God to consider, infinite in mercy and goodness. A good God, who said, I will do thee good at thy latter end. You may consider Him so, as Job said, to be troubled at His presence in affliction, but you will come to this: "When He hath tried me I shall come forth as gold". What did He say to the church in Isaiah? "I will purely purge away thy dross and take away all thy tin". That is what He does, what He intends to do; takes trouble with us. O, the pains of God with His poor, erring people; the kind intention of God. You say, "Against me is He turned", but you will live to say that it was a hasty spirit that made me utter that. "I said in my haste", said the Psalmist, "all men are liars". And again he said in affliction, Wilt Thou show mercy; shall the grave praise thee? Nay, he began to question the promises, whether they failed evermore, and all that out of unbelief, but he came at last to say, "This is my infirmity". And you will say that, and then you will want the blood of Christ to cleanse your infirmity and to put your heart straight with God's purpose and your will straight with His will.

Consider the end God has in view. His great end is heaven for all His people, but between the new birth and heaven God has many ends in dealing with His people. One is this. He led you, said Moses, through the wilderness; He fed you with manna; He gave you water to drink out of the flinty rock. And what for? That you might know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or no. That is one end of affliction, that God will show us what we are, what we are capable of doing, and what we have done; that we have rebelled.

Another end is this, that you may know His faithfulness. I have said more than once to you, faithfulness regards an engagement. If God has spoken kindly to you, dropped a word of goodness and mercy into your heart, it is an engagement. If He has given you a promise it is an engagement, and He is not a man that He should lie or the son of man that He should repent. "Hath He said and shall He not do it?" "Faithful", said the Apostle Paul, is He that calleth you, who also will do it". And what did God call thee to, but to the fellowship of His Son? So when crooked things are in our way, when crosses are laid

upon us, when we are rebuked by God and thus have crooked things to deal with, the end is coming when faithfully and lovingly and tenderly He will speak, and say, "Is Ephraim My dear son? is he a pleasant child? for since I spake against him I do earnestly remember him still: therefore my bowels are troubled for him; I will surely have mercy upon him." Consider the work of God and that these crooked things which He makes, not man - they may be the hand; His is the power, the working - the crooked things made by God for His people are for their instruction and their salvation. Another end is that they may come to more implicit confidence in Himself. We are very apt to look to creatures, very apt to lean on a friend, very apt to think that this and that in respect of friends is pretty sure. God says, No, I will be thy King; your dependence must be on myself; and that is an end accomplished more or less distinctly, perhaps gradually, through a course of years, but it is accomplished by the Lord. Consider the work of God. Look at the question; it says you are very helpless, but it does not say the case is hopeless. It says you have deserved it but it does not say you will be destroyed by it. It says God is Almighty and He has done this, but it does not say He will employ His infinite power for your destruction. These things are for our salvation.

"In the day of prosperity be joyful". There are two kinds of prosperity just to name. The first is in His holy, wise, good providence Health given is a prosperity; sufficiency for our needs is a prosperity; gracious friends with whom we have communion is indeed a prosperity, and God says, consider that, be joyful in that. Use His mercies thankfully. Use them as His precious gifts. Not one mercy have we that we should not take joy in. Everything given by God in which, so to put it, is His smile, is matter for joyfulness. Therefore in the day of prosperity, outward prosperity, be joyful. When God is in a church, when He manifests His mercy, when He smiles on the church, when He gives true peace to a people, when He shows His great power in feeding the flock and in adding some who shall be saved to a church, that is a day of prosperity. In His holy providence He works and by His Spirit in this He also works, and we are to be joyful in it. Everything that God gives us is matter for joy. But this day of joyfulness has another day set over it. "But in the day of adversity consider" Here again consideration is to come. Adversity?

Contrary things, opposing winds, destroying storms, raging seas, moving mountains - adversity. All seeming to say, you will never get through; this will destroy you, that will overcome you; your corruptions will master you, the devil will destroy every good thing that you have. The day of adversity is a day of darkness, a day when God turns away from your prayer, when He makes the heavens as brass and the earth as iron, and we are to consider this. "Shall there be evil in a city and the Lord hath not done it". Shall there be trouble in a sinner's circumstances and the Lord hath not done it? God is first. God is to be considered. If He sends trouble into your house, consider it. If He sends affliction to your person, consider it. If He sends affliction into a church it is to be considered. He will be first in these things. O the aptness of our nature to rebel against Him and turn away from Him, but says He, consider in the day of adversity.

Consider the end of this dealing. "God also hath set the one over against the other". These two are to be, as it were, in opposition - not for destruction but for instruction - "to the end that man should find nothing after him". Nothing to boast of, No. He shall be at the end an empty sinner, a poor, guilty wretch. The publican's prayer shall suit him, the dying thief's petition shall suit him, the trembling question of the jailer shall suit him. The adversity empties a man, takes away the spirit of pride as to its prevalence, and removes the disposition, as to its prevalence, to depend on self or something base instead of trusting sovereign grace. What an end this is my friends. Perhaps many and many a time some of you have said, Lord make Thyself first, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning of my religion and the end of my religion, the glory of my religion, and you have meant your prayer, without perhaps considering how God might answer it. This is one of the ways He has of answering that prayer to the end you might find nothing of yours. Abraham had nothing whereof to glory. He was justified as a person without circumcision which was given him as a sign afterward, and you will have nothing to glory in and this is the spirit of the text. "God has set the one over against the other", tempered them, fitted them, ordered them, and maintained them in that order, just so as that you shall say He is first, may He be last.

Have you grace enough to consider these two things set one against the other by God? You did not order them did you? You could not have ordered them. There is wisdom, there is power in God's ordering these things, the day of prosperity and the day of adversity. If one had time and grace one might show the wisdom of God in this ordering. God orders things. O if man had to order them what utter confusion would prevail. But no, He comes to the church and He says, this day of prosperity will be to you like too much honey if it continues; I must send adversity. He just fits them in, sets them over one against the other, that the one shall not undo you, that the other shall not destroy you. O my friends, may the Lord give us wisdom thus to consider these things and to remember that we are absolutely helpless in respect of good, in respect of helping ourselves, and in respect of altering the work of God. Do not try - God keep you from attempting to make that straight which He hath made crooked. He can do you more good by a crooked thing than you imagine at present and make a very straight path for your feet by a crooked providence, by a crooked dispensation. May He grant us mercy, and if - if I may repeat myself - if God makes all your circumstances candles and lights them and puts them into the corners and hidden places of your hearts, you will have many a shake, but you will have much mercy, and thus may it be with us and Christ be exalted in the whole work and be the Alpha and the Omega of our religion.

AMEN.