

Sermon preached by Mr. Raven, at Ebenezer, Clapham
on Wednesday evening July 10th 1935

Text: "And I will bring the third part through the fire, and will refine them as silver is refined, and will try them as gold is tried: they shall call on My Name, and I will hear them: I will say, It is My people; and they shall say, The Lord is my God." Zechariah 13 v.9

In the previous verse you notice the Lord speaks of two parts in the land that shall be cut off and die, but the third shall be left therein. And to this part He says what He will do; He will bring it through the fire. I understand of course this third part to mean the true people of God, those whom the Lord has chosen from eternity and loved with an everlasting love, and whom He calls to Himself and to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, through the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit. It is of these that He says He will bring them through the fire. The Lord Jesus very plainly told His disciples that it was through much tribulation they must enter the kingdom. If we are truly the people of God we shall not escape the furnace. We are told this in the Scripture in Isaiah's prophecy that the Lord's fire is in Zion, and His furnace in Jerusalem. The Lord trieth the righteous, and that is the Scripture; and the true child of God in his right mind would not escape it. As he is instructed by the Holy Spirit he sees a profitableness and a blessedness in it that he would not miss. He will say, as one French hymnwriter has said.

"Why should I dread the furnace hot
That brings the precious gold to view,
Or shrink beneath the graving tool
That graves Thine image on my soul?"

We know the fire is needful, but O, it is easy to talk about furnaces and tribulations, and the needfulness of them but what a shrinking there is when any prospect of such dispensations is ahead of us. I remember that in the beginning of this year my wife and I were reading together the morning portion in one of Mr. Philpot's books, and the text was, "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you". Something in that word made me shrink from it, and my wife said it was as though it were shouted in her ears. Well, very soon we knew something of what a furnace is and what a fiery trial is, but, as I say, how the flesh shrinks from it. It is no use thinking of it without divine grace. We cannot welcome the affliction and furnace. It needs the God of all grace to bring us to that, to accept His dispensations and humble ourselves beneath His mighty hand, under the wisdom and goodness and loving-kindness of the Lord in all his dealings. But there is a needs-be that the

people of God should be made to pass through the fire. And why? Because there is about each one of God's people that which is only fit to be burned up; there is that which is only fit to be reduced to wholesome ashes. For instance, there is what I might term the lustful and worldly old man, and some of us know to our cost what that means. We know what it is to have to contend with a lustful and worldly old man, ah! and with an infidel and atheistical old man too. Well, the furnace is necessary in order that these may be consumed, and it is life-long work too. Then on the other hand there is the religious, the pharisaical old man. O, the old man can wear the garb of the libertine or the pharisee. The old man can be on the side of licentiousness and licence, or on the side of a pharisaical strictness; both these things call for the furnace. O, if we are not put into the furnace in order to the consumption of these things, woe betide us. Think what it means if the lustful and worldly old man is not dealt with in this solemn and yet merciful way. Think what it would mean if the pharasaical old man were not dealt with in this solemn and merciful way. And so every child of God needs the furnace, and every child of God shall find his path lies more or less through the furnace. The Lord suits the furnace to each case. He knows exactly what His children need, and, "Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear Him. For He knoweth our frame; He remembereth that we are dust."

What fire does the Lord use in order that these things in His people may be consumed? Well, He uses, for one thing, His Word in the hands of the Spirit. He makes that a fire in the hearts and in the consciences of His people. Very solemn it is and yet most merciful. O, it is good for us to know the power of the Word, to have the Word come with a solemn, searching, rebuking power, with an admonishing power; to have the Word lay hold of us and deal with us in regard to things that are not good, in regard to these things of the old man, his worldliness, his lustfulness and other things of that sort, and also the pharisaical old man. Well, the Word comes and as the Holy Ghost makes it effectual, how these things are brought into judgment. The Lord has said He will purge away the filth of Jerusalem by the Spirit of judgment and by the Spirit of burning, and as the searching light of the Word of God is turned upon these things in the hearts of His people, they are brought to pass judgment upon these things and against themselves respecting them. In the court of conscience there is judgment passed upon these things, and the Lord brings, as only He can, the person to a willingness to have the sentence executed, an acquiescence in the sentence that the Word of God pronounces, and the conscience is constrained to confirm. John Bunyan, in his Holy War,

speaks of how certain Diabolonians who were in Mansoul, for mischievous purposes, were apprehended with some difficulty and brought to judgment. Witnesses spoke against them and the judgment was passed and they were sentenced to be crucified. Bunyan tells us, in his inimitable style, what hard work the men of Mansoul found it to get those men crucified. The Lord Covetousness was one and Lasciviousness was another. At any rate these Diabolonians had to be dealt with, and what work these men had to get them to the courts, and they never would have done it had not My Lord Secretary intervened on their behalf. So the child of God is led in his own conscience to acquiesce in the righteous judgment of God concerning these things of the old man, and the executing of the judgment against evil is brought about in the conscience. What a confessing there is with godly sorrow for sin, and what pleading for forgiveness and for cleansing, what pleading of the Word, "Sin shall not have dominion over you, for ye are not under the law but under grace".

Do you ever, in your supplications and confessions, take the side of God and of the Scripture against your heart sins, against the abominations that you find in yourself? Well, the Lord makes His Word to be thus a fire against these things and against the religious old man too. O, we have a religious old man now, we have an old man who will take up with any mere form of religion. I once said to a woman, (a believing, a godly character, yet I had been constrained to disagree very seriously with regard to her attitude to some things and people,) 'Your old man can be as good a Calvinist as he was an Arminian', and so he can. There is a good deal of the religious old man underneath the cloak of a Calvinistic profession often, and we need the Spirit of the Word of God to ransack our hearts, and bring to light this subtle evil that is in us, this pharisaical mass, and bring it to judgment. It works in this way often, a resting in the mere form of sound doctrines, and in the mere orthodox and true ways. I remember a godly man in the West Country who said to me but last year, respecting the people of the chapel where he often preaches, 'I am so afraid that they think they be right because they be Strict Baptists,' and I fear that, not only in that place, but in other places in our denomination, there are some who are in that perilous place the Poet speaks of, "Sleeping on doctrines sound." This religious old man will make use often of the doctrines of grace as a cover for indifference, for slothfulness, slothfulness in the things of God.

Then again, sometimes the religious old man will work in this way, a turning aside after a merereligiousness, and confidence in a mere religiousness, instead of pressing after the true knowledge of Jesus Christ and the application of His blood. O, how we do need to be delivered from the legal

spirit that is in us that will

"Look to self or something base
Instead of trusting sovereign grace,"

and that, in so many subtle ways, will be turning away from Jesus Christ, the one Hope set before us in the gospel, and looking for something in self, or at least seeking to find something in self. And don't some of you find this, that in you there is a spirit which, under cover of humility and speaking against yourself, is really traducing and slandering the Lord Jesus Christ and making light of the riches of His grace? I feel it is one danger we need to be warned of, this very humble traducing and slandering Christ and also His work in us. The devil loves to get us at it. It is this fleshly religious principle in us that we need to have detected, and we need the Word to be as a furnace in us, in order to be saved from it.

Then again, just to mention this briefly, the Lord suffers temptations to come upon the children of God. What for? In order to consume their illgrounded hopes, their fleshly confidence, their wrong view of themselves; the many, many things which are opposed in spirit to the gospel. The Lord brings temptations upon them. For instance, a person in a way of religion has a conceit of his own wisdom and his own strength. He doesn't realise his own weakness and is prone to despise some who are weak. He imagines he can make headway in the things of God, he thinks it is an easy thing to believe and will say of some person in darkness, 'Well, it is his own fault; he need not be there'. Well, if that person is a child of God, he will have to be brought into the furnace to burn that up, and so he is put into temptation, and under that temptation he is forced to admit how weak he is. To believe he finds impossible. The faith he seemed to have is quite perished in his heart. Instead of faith he finds infidelity and atheism. and as to coming to the Word and laying hold of the promise he can't do it. The fires of temptation are such that perhaps his Bible becomes a terror to him. This very man who has been despising some other tempted soul, and thinking a man could manage things better if he would, he, in the furnace of temptation, finds out his great mistake. He has to find he is just a poor, weak helpless thing, a reed shaken by the wind, and as left to himself and the fires of Satan's temptation, down he goes and cannot lift himself up. It is a very great mercy when the Lord does bring His people into a furnace of temptation to rob them of their pride, or teach them their absolute dependence upon the Holy Ghost in every particular.

Then again, in addition to temptation from the devil, there are afflictions and adversities. O, how the child of God finds often things unsuspected in his heart revealed in a time of adversity and affliction.

He may have felt himself to be a sinner and he may have trembled at the view he has had of himself as a sinner, but when he comes into some adversities or afflictions such as he had never experienced in his life before, O, what a discovery of unsuspected evils. Look at Job. See what the furnace discovered in him. I expect that Job never thought that he would be so rebellious and peevish. I expect Job, in the days of his prosperity, never pictured himself cursing the day of his birth and pouring out such bitter speeches. He was charged by Elihu with this, "Thou hast walked with wicked men in the company of iniquity," and some of us have walked in that in times of affliction, when it has seemed as though the trial that the Lord has laid upon us there has been the worst and most inconvenient thing that could be devised. We peevishly think the Lord must have taken special pains with His wisdom and power to fashion the most inconvenient cross to lay upon our poor shoulders, and O, the rebellion against God under it, and the unbelief and wicked purposes! We have trembled at ourselves, have we not? We never thought that such things could have risen out of these hearts of ours. Things which ungodly men have been left to put into practice have risen up in our hearts and suggested themselves as ways of dealing with the trouble, or of getting out of it. And what does the Lord do by this? Why, He is burning up the self righteousness and vain conceit of His people. He is burning up their self-confidence, and withering up their fancied strength, and plunging them into the ditch until their own clothes abhor them. He is bringing them to the point where He brought Job when he confessed, "Behold, I am vile." Thus the Lord teaches His people by adversities and afflictions what they are and where they are, what they would be if left entirely to themselves; that they are no better than other men; that their hearts are deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Well, a man hasn't much religion when brought into that. I remember a man was asked a question very plainly, 'Have you any religion? and the poor man answered, 'Not any to speak of.' And sometimes a poor thing feels like this, that he has no religion to speak of, and his soul refuses to be comforted. He is in such a case that nothing will meet but something from God. And so the Lord shuts his people up from all hope and expectation from any other quarter. Note, He says He will bring them through, and you know, in Isaiah's prophecy, He tells the people this, "When thou passest through the waters I will be with thee, and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee; when thou walkest through the fire thou shalt not be burned, neither shall the flame kindle upon thee." "I will bring the third part through the fire." The Lord will bring His people through, refined by the furnace, bettered by the cross.

"I will bring the third part through the fire, and will refine them as silver is refined." We have been told that, in refining silver, the Refiner watches very carefully; he watches both the heat of the furnace and the precious metal that is in the furnace, in the crucible, and he is not satisfied with the result until he sees his own face reflected in the molten metal. And certainly this is what the Lord is aiming at and will accomplish in the cases of His people. He will refine them until, by His sanctifying grace, He sees His own image. What is that? A being brought into some degree of conformity with the suffering Redeemer. You know how the Lord Jesus said, "If this cup may not pass away from Me, except I drink it, Thy Will be done." O, that is a falling into the hand of God. There is an acknowledging of His righteousness, justice, and goodness. There is a confession, "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not." "He hath not dealt with us after our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities." "I will refine them as silver is refined, and try them as gold is tried," not to consume the gold, but to consume the dross. The true gold, says the poet, sustains no loss in the furnace.

Now see what the issue of the thing shall be - they shall call on My Name. Here is what the Lord is aiming at, and what he is determined to accomplish in His people. "They shall call on My Name and I will hear them." Here is the work of God in the souls of His people in temptation, adversity, and affliction, in the winter, the season of desertion and all those things that the Lord suffers to come upon them to try them. Here is the work of God, here is the power of the Holy Ghost manifest in them. They are brought to the mercy-seat. "They shall call on My Name." Call on My Name. How? In a way of humbling themselves under the mighty hand of God. As I just indicated, there is a confession of sin, of ill-desert, that it is of the Lord's mercies we are not consumed; a confession of sin, as having deserved far more than God has laid upon us; a confession of sin with regard to the things that God has laid upon us, the sin of rebellion, the sin of unbelief. O, the multitude of things some of us have been guilty of under the load of tribulation. They shall call upon My Name and say, 'Lord, I am a sinner, and in respect of this dispensation I have proved myself to be a great sinner.' They shall call upon My Name, and what shall they ask for? 'O, Lord, give me grace to bear this, grace to walk under it in a godly manner. From rebellion, self pity, and unbelief, from all those evils that have run riot in my soul, save me, and enable me in this affliction to wait at Thy feet, and give me to prove what the God of love can do.' They shall call upon My Name, 'Hear, O, Lord, and have mercy upon me. Lord, be Thou my Helper.' "And I will hear them." He will

hear the poor feeble breathings of these people. "And I will hear them, and I will say, It is My people." And the Psalmist says, "Thou hast known my soul in adversity." When Israel was in Egypt, the Lord said to Moses, "I have seen the affliction of my people, I have heard their cry. I know their sorrows and am come down to deliver them." "I will hear them and will say, It is My people." He owns His people in the furnace of affliction, and He says,

"I am with thee, Israel passing through the fire."

And He acknowledges them, these poor people who, out of the furnace, are crying unto Him, confessing their sin, and imploring His mercy and the help of His countenance; He will acknowledge them and say, "It is my people" chosen in the furnace of affliction, and they shall say, The Lord is my God. O, there shall be this sweet fruit then of the furnace of temptation and tribulation; there shall be this sweet fruit, "They shall call upon My Name and I will hear them. I will say, It is My people, and they shall say, The Lord is my God." The Lord will show them His mercy and His power. He will show them such tokens for good, He will so speak to them and comfort them at times, and strengthen them in their souls, that they shall say at last, "The Lord is my God." Look at the Apostle Paul in that fiery trial he speaks of. He prayed that the fiery trial might depart from him, but no, he had something better than that. "I will say, It is My people." "My grace is sufficient for thee; for My strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore, will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." The Lord is my God. O, there is a sacred sweetness in this fruit. "Afterwards it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby." What a child of God gets in the furnace and out of the fruit of a sanctified furnace, what he gets from God is exceedingly sweet.

May the Lord command the blessing.

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7

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