

1298a
La 0 2

SUBSTANCE OF A SERMON PREACHED BY MR. OLDFIELD, AT GOWER
STREET CHAPEL, LONDON, ON 19th APRIL, 1891 (Evening)

Text: "Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God." (Acts xiv.22)

This morning we spoke of (I) the disciples, and (II) their confirmation. We now pass on to consider:

III. The exhortation to continue in the faith. Exhortation is needed as well as confirmation. I feel that this is not sufficiently regarded. The apostle says: "Suffer the word of exhortation" (Heb.xiii.22). The exhortations of the gospel, when preached by the Lord's living ministers, are as powerful a part of the gospel as is forgiveness, and are as needful as the promises and the doctrines of the gospel. What a favour I have sometimes felt it to be that God caused such exhortations to be written. We need flesh and marrow - marrow within our bones and flesh upon our bones - for these bodies. Otherwise, what would become of them? And so we need the consolation of the gospel for our never-dying souls. But, as we need bones in our bodies for their support, so we need the exhortations for our guidance and instruction. They show us God's mind and will; they show us what is for our good and for His honour and glory. They are also means, when the Lord is pleased to use them, of inciting us to prayer. They sometimes bring out of my heart words like these: "Lord, who is sufficient for these things?" (II Cor.ii.16). This makes one pray for grace to walk in the Lord's way and to perform His pleasure; it causes one to run in the way of His commandments with an enlarged heart (Psa.cxix.32). And, when God gives us some enlargement of heart in answer to prayer, we can sweetly run in the way of His precepts. The Lord's exhortations then are precious.

Is there no fear that a child of God may depart from the faith? There is a fear of being drawn aside more or less by sin, by Satan, and by wrong influences. Which of us has not swerved more or less? I know that I have been turned aside at different times, especially in the early days of my profession, when I was between twenty and twenty-three - a mere babe in divine things. We must remember that these disciples were babes in grace; they had only just been called, and hardly knew the first letter of the alphabet in divine things. They knew little about the devices of Satan, little of the blackness of their hearts, little of the degeneracy of human nature. They knew little of the agents of Satan,

such as are lying in wait to deceive (Eph.iv.14), trying to captivate and turn their minds away from the simplicity of the gospel, as was the case with the Galatians (i.6). Then how needful is the exhortation!

How is one to continue in the faith? Not by his own strength or wisdom. If I had had nothing more than that, the devil, the world, and erroneous teachers would have triumphed over me long ago. This exhortation, then, makes a child of God feel very little and to realize his dependence, and so he flees and runs to the throne of grace. To continue in the faith does not mean that you hold your faith, but that faith holds you. You may hold any doctrine; but if the doctrine does not hold you, you will never go to heaven. It is not your holding the doctrine of election, but the doctrine of election holding you, that will take you to glory. What a difference between the two!

Look for a moment at the effect when one has been led to depart from the faith. Has that brought him comfort or peace of mind? Just the reverse. He comes into trial, trouble, and sorrow out of which none but the Lord can deliver. And he may be in trouble for a long time, so that there have been many cries, sighs, and tears before being delivered. Look then! The apostle, knowing the stratagems and devices of Satan and his agents (II Cor.ii.11), affectionately and earnestly exhorted these dear children of God to continue in the faith. May God ever enable us to obey this exhortation, and by His strength to continue in the faith!

And what is the faith? I apprehend that it means simply the gospel or the truth as it is in Jesus (Eph.iv.21). What is the truth as it is in Jesus? The truth of a Three-one God. What a departure there is even in our day from this! What a denial of the eternal Godhead or the eternal Sonship of the Lord Jesus Christ! But every other doctrine of Christ is embodied in this one word "faith." Continue in the faith of Christ's redemption, of the Holy Spirit's regeneration, of effectual calling, and so on. These doctrines are precious, doctrines to those who have an experimental knowledge of them; they are enabled by divine grace to prize such doctrines as their own. Without dwelling further upon the exhortation, I will now speak of the declaration that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.

- I. Tribulation
- II. The kingdom
- III. We must (as my text says) pass through tribulation before we enter the kingdom of God.

First then, a little about tribulation. We are told that this word "tribulation" is taken from another word which means to beat or thrash. God may permit His children to be beaten in various ways; and He may, and does, even do it Himself, but not unto death. The Lord will chasten us, but He will not deliver us over unto death (Psa.cxviii.18). This beating is hammering or pounding. When God is beating His people, He never beats the gold of His grace into something that is not grace (Zech.xiii.9). I was watching some gold-beaters the other day, and I saw the gold beaten so thin that it seemed as though a slight breath would be sufficient to blow it away; but, still, it was gold; if blown from one place to another, still gold. And so a person with divine grace in his soul may be beaten very thin and very light, so light that he might be carried away with a breath; but, wherever he may be carried or blown, he still has that grace. None of the afflictions and trials that may befall him can make that choice gold into anything else; and, wherever he goes, whether in flood or furnace, it remains gold. No fire or flood can destroy that. Gold is gold, be it where it may; and a child of God is a child of God, be he where he may.

There are different kinds of tribulation, or, in other words, God's saints may be said to be beaten in various ways. My religion began with it, however yours may have begun. Mine began with tribulation. God's word entered into my conscience, as the Lord by Jeremiah says, "Is not My word... like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?" (Jer.xxiii.29). This is how God began with me. Has He thus begun with you? Has He smitten you, proved you, broken your heart, laid you low? Has He discovered to you your worthlessness, your nothingness? Nevertheless, if He has put His Holy Spirit, His precious grace, His tender fear into your hearts, you are rich in that sense, though poor in self. This is one way of tribulation. I well remember the time when it seemed to me as though I should be beaten until there was nothing left. I seemed to sink lower and lower; everything seemed to get darker and darker, worse and worse, viler and viler. I tried to pray, but I did not then believe that I ever really had prayed. Many a sleepless night I had about it, and I thought that, if only one word of prayer had gone from my lips, God would regard it. Oh, if only I could have prayed! But I felt that I could not. Thus I seemed beaten into nothing. If I tried to cherish a little hope, it seemed pressed to nothing, and, as a tiny flower, blown away by the breath of Satan. Yet, though it seemed blown away, it returned again and again, and it would rise more or less

from time to time. But I found it very difficult to believe that it was a hope of the right kind. So with faith: I believe there is faith in the heart the moment a sinner is quickened. The moment that God begins with a sinner, that sinner is a believer; he has faith in his heart. He would, but cannot believe - that is, to his comfort and satisfaction. Thus it was with me. There was anxiety for something that I felt I had not; but I now believe that it was there. This anxiety and concern of soul springs, I believe, from the love of God. If there is one before me in this state, I believe that God will, in His own time, appear for you. David said: "Wait on the Lord: be of good courage, and He shall strengthen thine heart" (Psa.xxvii.14). I have been so low that I have thought He would never strengthen me. The trial of waiting may be great, but thou wilt be amply repaid by and by when the Lord graciously appears.

There is tribulation not only at the beginning of divine life, but there is tribulation afterwards - and tribulation of a very trying nature, too. But when the Lord blessed my soul with peace, liberty, and joy, I should have liked to die. I remember crossing some fields and feeling as though I could tell the beasts and birds what the Lord had done for my soul, and I should have liked everything that had breath to praise Him (Psa.cl.6). I felt, too, that I should have been glad to go to glory then and there, out of that field - my soul was so blessed. I never thought of having trouble again.

But, with the hidings of God's face, trouble did come again. When the Lord gradually withdrew His special grace from my heart, then what a state I was in, what a trial it was to me! There will, then, be tribulation in the trial of the grace which God has put into the heart. Hope, faith, and love are all tried. It appears as though they are pounded or beaten as though there is nothing left, as though the wind has come and carried all away. In such a trial one feels as though they were gone for ever; but if they were, there would not be any anxiety about them. They are gone from the sight of our eyes, but not from the possession of our hearts. Yet, oh, what a trial, what tribulation! One needs no more sorrow than this to press him down, to bring him into a low place or into a valley. His heart drives him to some solitary spot, and he is for a time shut out from the communion of saints, feeling destitute of everything his soul loves. I can well remember when I came into this spot. I could not say a word about God or godliness. It was upon this ground that I feared I had been deceived, and that, if I mentioned God and godliness, it would in some way or other bring reproach upon God's name and cause. I therefore wished I

had never opened my lips, and for a time I kept these things a profound secret. But God appeared to me again.

Since then, tribulation of other kinds have been experienced. Sometimes it has been divine chastening. Which of us have not been naughty children. We all have a wicked heart; and we have all committed those evils, more or less, which Israel did. The Lord says: "My people have committed two evils; they have forsaken Me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water" (Jer.ii.13). God will not let His children have a cistern of their own. He will smite them to pieces. No member of my body can claim independence of my head, and no child of God can claim independence of the Head of the body, which is Christ (Col.i.18). We are dependent upon Him: "for it pleased the Father that in Him should all fulness dwell (Col.i.19). So we must come under God's chastening hand or His rod, which is for our good and His glory. And when He uses it, He causes us to feel it; then we writhe under it and sometimes think that He will pursue His poor worm to death (295). But, as we have before said, the Lord may chasten us sorely, but He will not deliver us over unto death. Yet, "what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards and not sons" (Heb.xii.7,8). We all need it, and we all have it. "He that spareth his rod hateth his son" (Prov.xiii.24). But God loves His people with an everlasting love, and therefore He will not spare the rod. He will use it, and not only use it, but bring the soul to confession and to obedience. What a favour that our God has power to sanctify the affliction to the soul!

Then there are other tribulations which a child of God passes through. There is an inward conflict, the flesh striving against the Spirit. These are like two fighters, one against the other. Then there are times when God permits one to be smitten to the ground (Psa.cxl.3), and, when at times he falls, there seems to be "none to help" (Psa.xxii.11). Then there is a cry, and that cry goes to the Lord; but, till the Lord appears, what tribulation the soul is passing through! It seems to be defeated, but, dear friends, the soul shall not fall finally, for "grace shall overcome at last" (728) "Rejoice not against me, O mine enemy: when I fall, I shall arise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord shall be a light unto me" (Micah vii.8). One cannot always say this; but when God enables the soul to say it, and to wait in hope for His sweet deliverance, it is a mercy.

Then there is tribulation in the outward conflict; and where is the child of God that has not had more or less of this? In the family sometimes there is trouble. A godly man, perhaps, has an ungodly wife, or, in some instances, a godly woman has an ungodly husband; godly parents have ungodly children, and godly children have ungodly parents. Oh, how painful! David says: "Although my house be not so with God" (II Sam.xxiii.5). What trouble he had! Absalom was David's son and yet David's enemy; and when he died in his sins David lamented his death, saying: "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!" (II Sam.xviii.33). Ah, God sometimes greatly exercises His children by means like these; but what a favour to find that He is able, as some of us have found, to comfort in such tribulation!

Just briefly, look at the internal conflicts with Satan, who, "as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour" (I Pet.v.8). How often and heavily he smites God's people. How he smote the Lord's servant Job - not only his substance, but his poor soul! Further, God hid His face from him, and then we find Job wished he had never been born. What a conflict, what tribulation! Some have the tribulation more particularly in one way, and some in another; but all God's people prove that "through much tribulation we must enter into the kingdom of God."

II. The kingdom. What is the kingdom of God? I believe that by the kingdom of God in our text we may understand, first, a present life of grace, and, secondly, a future life of glory. We cannot have glory fully while in the body; and the child of God finds that he gets into no branch of the blessing of God's grace but through tribulation. Just look at a few branches.

(i) How do you get to a knowledge of regeneration by the Holy Ghost (for that is one great branch of the kingdom of God)? You do not come into that knowledge in a moment. Through tribulation you come to know that you are a sinner. I knew I was a sinner many a month before I knew, to my satisfaction, that I was regenerated. O the sighs and cries, the doubts and fears, the exercises that I had to wade through before I came to know that great branch and blessing of God's kingdom! But the day came when I knew my dependence, that God was my Father, and when I was enabled to call Him my Father. One says:

"My God, my Father, blissful name!" (1083)

Then I saw that God had led me the right way, and that He had led me into this blessing of His kingdom.

(ii) There is also the blessing of reconciliation. Do you become easily reconciled to God's way of saving sinners? Where is the man or woman under heaven that is by nature reconciled to this? Each of God's children naturally wants to have a hand in the matter of his or her own salvation. It is not so easy to be reconciled to God's way of saving sinners as some people say it is. Before I came to be reconciled to God's way, He had to pull me to pieces and to show me my utter helplessness and ruin. It is through tribulation that one is brought to be reconciled, as the apostle says, unto God's way of saving sinners (II Cor.v.20). Have not you found that it takes a good deal to reconcile you to the Lord's discipline? I felt to need a good deal of beating, breaking up, crumbling, and humbling by divine power before I became reconciled to the Lord's dealing.

(iii) Then, again, without tribulation we shall never get into a knowledge of justification. Before I knew what it was to be a justified sinner, I knew what it was to be a condemned sinner - condemned in my conscience by God's law. I feared God's wrath would be poured out upon me, and that hell would be my portion. Yes, it is through tribulation that we must come to a knowledge of justification.

(iv) Again, we may consider sanctification. Were you easily sanctified - that is, set apart? Set apart for what? Set apart for a holy calling, for His whole service - made willing to be nothing or anything in His family. Wasn't it through tribulation? How needful this is! A man is naturally as full of pride as he can hold. If he must be anything, it must be something great. But when the Lord lays him low, he is then willing to be nothing in the Lord's house, in the Lord's family. In being sanctified, he is made "meet for the Master's use" (II Tim.ii.21). O, to be used by the Lord in any way for His glory and for the welfare of His church and people!

III. We must, then, through tribulation enter into the kingdom of God. For this is the way to glorification as well as sanctification. Supposing God were to take to heaven a man in his sins without any knowledge of deserving hell and everlasting destruction, or without any knowledge of his own corruption. Would that man be happy in heaven, or could that man sing an everlasting song? Not he! He would have nothing to sing about. This tribulation, then, is for the good of His people, that He may prepare them for heaven. It is to purify us (Titus ii.14), to refine us (Zech.xiii.9), to set us apart

for Himself (Psa.iv.3), to prepare us for His everlasting kingdom (II Pet.i.11), for the future life of glory (I Pet.v.10), as we have said.

And then, again, it is not only to prepare us, but that we may feel it when we get there.

"Sinners can say, and none but they,

How precious is the Saviour! (806)

How often one feels he needs divine teaching now, so that he shall follow the Saviour when he gets to heaven (Rev.xiv.4). It is to prepare you for an everlasting song that He puts it into your heart in this time state. He gives you a knowledge of sin and of quickening grace; He gives you a knowledge that you are a hell-deserving sinner, and that "it is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed" (Lam.iii.22). Thus, by His power and grace, you are furnished with a song, a new song. And you desire to go on singing while you live; you do not want to wait till you get to heaven before you sing a song of praise unto God. You would commence now, and go on, if God would only keep your heart in tune, until you die and so continue singing in an eternal world. One feels that he cannot praise God enough for the rich and matchless grace bestowed upon him, delivering him from sin, Satan, and hell, and giving him a sweet hope that he will spend an eternity with Christ. All this is really needful for communion with Him.

Now just take a simple illustration. Here is a healthy wife; can she sympathize with an afflicted husband? Here is a husband who has never known what illness is, and he has an afflicted wife; can he sympathize with her like one who has been in affliction? The pathway of the heavenly Bridegroom was one of tribulation and affliction (Isa.liii.3). His saints, then, must follow Him through the same pathway (Rev.xiv.4). Then here is Christ the Husband, here is the church the wife (Rev.xxi,9); they are brought into union and communion, and they sing one song (Matt.xxvi.30). One says:

"And Jesus leads the song" (850)

Oh, what a meeting when Christ and His church meet together (Rev.xix.7)! And so the apostle says: "If so be that we suffer with Him, that we may be also glorified together" (Rom.viii.17). May God add His blessing!