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

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)

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The apostle Paul and his brother Barnabas had a twofold object before their minds in preaching the gospel - first, the glory of God; and, secondly, the welfare of Zion. These two things are vividly set forth in the text and in the chapter containing it. They went from place to place preaching the gospel, and as they went on and thus glorified God, who gave testimony to the word of His grace, this enraged the devil, and the devil enraged the hearts of his agents against the true servants of the Lord. And so "the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles, and made their minds evil affected against the brethren" (verse 2). Then afterwards "the multitude of the city was divided: and part held with the Jews, and part with the apostles. And when there was an assault made both of the Gentiles, and also of the Jews with their rulers, to use them despitefully, and to stone them" (verses 4,5), the Lord's servants acted according to the command of the Lord Jesus: "When they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another" (Matt.x.23). And so these faithful servants of God took their flight to another city, "and there they preached the gospel. And there sat a certain man at Lystra, impotent in his feet, being a cripple from his mother's womb, who never had walked: the same heard Paul speak: who stedfastly beholding him, and perceiving "something unusual in him - or, at least, not to be seen in every one - "perceiving that he had faith to be healed" (And where did he get it from but from the Lord? How came he to have faith to be healed but by the Lord's sovereign and gracious gift?). Paul, perceiving this, "said with a loud voice, Stand upright on thy feet." (How God was glorified!) "And he leaped and walked" (verses 7-10).

Now we find the devil adopts another plan, another scheme. You know, if he cannot succeed in one way, he tries another. He stirs up the minds of the people to worship them - anything will do so that the gospel of God's grace and the servants of the Lord Jesus may be silenced! The devil, finding that stoning and using them despitefully will not do, tries what worshipping them will do, and so he puts it into the minds of certain persons to sacrifice unto them. "When Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they rent their clothes" (verse 14). Oh,

they would not be gods, but they would be God's servants; they would ascribe all praises to God; they would serve God with all their hearts and souls and strength. "They rent their clothes" - thus showing by their actions, as well as by their words, that they were no gods, but that they were poor, wretched, ruined, ragged ones - yes, ragged ones. "We are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags" (Isa.lxiv.6). The apostle could say this; and then how they proceed to glorify God by saying: "We also are men of like passions with you." (We are no more gods than you are. We are no more deserving of worship and praise than you. If we differ from you, we differ by the power of God's rich, free, and sovereign grace, by the working of His Spirit in our hearts.) We "preach unto you that ye should turn from these vanities" (vanities of worshipping the creature and anything else but God) "turn from these vanities unto the living God, which made heaven and earth, and the sea, and all things that are therein: who in times past suffered all nations to walk in their own ways. Nevertheless He left not Himself without witness." (In every period of time He has had His witnesses. What a favour to be a witness for God, and if I am a witness of His truth! In no one period since the fall has God been without His witnesses.) "He left not Himself without witness, in that He gave us rain from heaven" (not only rain for our bodies, but spiritual rain for our souls) "and fruitful seasons" (not only natural seasons, but spiritual seasons), "filling our hearts with food and gladness. And with these sayings scarce restrained they the people, that they had not done sacrifice unto them" (verses 15-18).

The devil will not be silenced; he will go on. He will pursue his course against God's saints to the bitter end. But neither the stoning nor sacrificing, neither Satan's deceit nor his various schemes and plans, were able to turn their faith while the Lord was pleased to keep the hearts of His people stedfast in the faith and in the truth.

"And there came thither certain Jews from Antioch and Iconium, who persuaded the people" (as though the devil had said, "I have tried one thing and then another, but all to no purpose; now I must adopt severer measures"), "and, having stoned Paul, drew him out of the city, supposing he had been dead" (verse 19). (But God did not allow that.) "As the disciples stood round about him, he rose up" (the disciples begging of God to help him, to raise him up again, to open his mouth again, and enable him to preach the gospel again), "and came into the city: and the next day he departed with

Barnabas to Derbe. And when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch, 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" (verses 20-22).

As I have said, Paul and Barnabas had in view the welfare of Zion, God's living family; and this in a twofold way. Every true servant of God has this twofold object - the welfare of God's children and the confirmation of their immortal souls. The apostles preached for the salvation of God's elect, and God made use of it to that end, giving testimony to the word of His grace - that is to say, He, by the gospel preached, regenerated and sanctified poor sinners unto Himself, and they were by the apostles confirmed unto Jesus. The apostle afterwards left them; but he did not forget them. He returned once more, and he spoke to their hearts the great truths of the gospel, for he confirmed the disciples in all of them. Some of you were like these disciples many years ago, when the ministry first came with power upon your hearts and consciences. Have you needed anything since then? Do not you need the gospel as much now as ever you did? Do not you need the Lord's own ministering servants now as much as ever you did? Are not you thankful that God has these men upon the walls of Zion, enabling them to preach the everlasting gospel to your never-dying souls? And do not you find it is a comforting, confirming, strengthening word to you from time to time? O that it might be so this morning!

If the Lord will help me, I will speak of -

- I. The disciples
- II. The confirmation of the disciples
- III. The exhortation to continue in the faith
- IV. The declaration that through much tribulation we must enter into the kingdom of God.

I. In the first place, then, the disciples. "Confirming the souls of the disciples." What is a disciple of Jesus Christ? (i) A scholar, (ii) a follower. Are we scholars of Jesus Christ? We may be under the teaching of man, but are we under the teaching of God? "All Thy children shall be taught of the Lord; and great shall be the peace of Thy children" (Isa. liv. 13); and if we are disciples of the Lord, we know

something about this.

God has various ways of teaching.

(a) He teaches them by His law: "the law was our schoolmaster unto Christ" (Gal.iii.24), or until Christ was manifested unto our never-dying souls as our ever-living and Almighty Saviour. Do we know anything of the teaching of the law? For I am very certain we do not all know it alike, we have not all the same measure of its teaching. I believe every child of God is more or less taught of God by His law. And when that begins to work, it does work sometimes very fiercely. The working of God's law is sometimes compared to a lion rending a garment (Hos.v.14), and sometimes to a moth eating a garment (Hos.v.12). One is as effectual as the other. Look at it literally. A lion might tear your garment and render it worthless, and a moth might eat it and render it equally worthless. It is of no use, whether torn by a lion or eaten by a moth. It must be thrown aside; we must have a new garment. So it is with one under divine teaching, whether God leaps upon him in His law as a lion and tears him to pieces in his soul's feelings, or whether He comes upon him in His law like a moth. In the latter case, he hardly knows when the Lord first lighted upon him; but he afterwards confesses to his friends that it is all over - he is a ruined, lost sinner; he needs a righteousness better than that procured by the sacrifice of the Pharisees. God can soon tear that away, and, sooner or later, will tear it as a lion tears a garment. Or He may quietly and gradually eat it up as a moth does a garment. A sinner taught of God, taught by His law, is brought to see and feel that he must have a garment which no lion can tear, no moth can destroy; and, in his right mind, he will be satisfied with nothing short of this. Here he has a better righteousness than his own. But, without this, with all his self-righteous doings, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. Some of us can carry our minds back to the time when we were torn by the lion, and when we were eaten by the moth. We were brought to feel our ruined, lost condition, and our need of Christ and His great salvation.

(b) God teaches not only by His law, but by His gospel, as the apostle Paul so sweetly writes: "For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." (II Cor.iv.6) - or in the Person of Jesus Christ. What teaching was this, when God first came to teach him! How he could say - a lost, ruined, and hell-

deserving sinner, torn and stripped by His law! But what a turning point it was when joy flowed into his heart! The hope that rose up, the peace that was given, no words can describe. But it may not have been so clear with some of you, and yet you may not be without a hope in God's mercy, you may not be without some degree of faith in the bleeding Lamb, a little love to the name of the Lord Jesus. These are marks and evidences that you are favoured with a knowledge of the blood of atonement.

A scholar, then, in the school of Christ knows something about the law and something about the gospel - the law bringing him down and the gospel rousing him up. This was Hannah's experience. The Lord favoured her so that she was able to say: "My heart rejoiceth in the Lord" (I Sam.ii.1).

(c) There is another way in which God teaches His people, and that is by trials, temptations, afflictions, and sorrows which they are passing through more or less all their lifetime here below. We thought we knew something many years ago when God revealed His dear Son in us. But how little we knew then spiritually, and how little comparatively even now do we know after years of trial, chastisement, and correction! How little we know even now of our misery and of God's mercy, of our death and of His life, of our lost condition and of His great salvation! But God is teaching us little by little. As Moses said to the Lord's ancient people Israel: "And thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep His commandments, or no" (Deut.viii.2). God knew what was in their hearts, but He would have them to know it. He knows what is in our hearts, and will have us to know; and it is little by little that we come to know what is in our hearts. He will make us know that we live not by bread alone, but by the word of the living God (verse 3) - how we are brought to hunger not for the bread that perisheth, but for the bread that endureth unto everlasting life (John.vi.27); and thus we learn that God alone can teach us the mystery of godliness (I Tim.iii.16). May He teach us all in these ways!

(ii) A follower of Jesus is one who follows Jesus in His doctrines, in experience, in precept. How does the matter stand with us? Are we followers of Christ in His doctrines? Men that are defying and denying and fighting against God's truth can hardly be said to be followers of Christ and of His great and precious doctrines. What did He preach? He preached the sovereignty, the omnipotence, the immutability of God. He

preached what some people considered to be hard doctrines or hard sayings. They turned away from them. "Many of His disciples" (so-called disciples, but only in name) "went back, and walked no more with Him" (John vi.66). They considered His sayings were hard sayings. Did He turn to something different? No! He turned to His disciples, and said: "Will ye also go away?" One said: "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that Thou art ~~that~~ Christ, the Son of the living God" (verses 67, 68). Ah! they knew that sovereign and uplifting grace had laid hold of and saved them; they knew that redeeming and regenerating grace had entered into them - or, at least, they had a good hope of it. They knew there was salvation in no other way, and that, if they were saved at all, it must be completely by the Son of God. Well now, are we followers of Christ in His doctrine? He preached election, complete redemption, regeneration, effectual calling, pardon through blood, justification by grace, and so on. What a favour if we are brought to follow in His doctrine! I can remember the time when I staggered at these great truths, but (blessed be God!) I was not permitted to fight against them; I was led to pray and implore God to teach them to me. They were His truth, and I saw from the letter of God's word that they were; but I wanted to enter into the spirit of them and thus to make my "calling and election sure" (III Pet.i.10). And God, in His own time, made me not only a believer in election by grace, but made me to feel that He had chosen me in His dear Son before the foundation of the world (Eph.i.4).

A disciple of Christ is, to some extent, a follower in experience. Look at the dear Redeemer! Look at Him in prayer! Where do we find one like Him in prayer! We find Him praying in mountains. And His people pray in mountains sometimes, and in out-of-the-way places. They would get into any solitary place where they may pour out their souls unto God. He said: "Enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly" (Matt.vi.6).

I believe every true member of Christ begins to pray in the closet. It is not on the housetop, not at the corner of the street, not in a church or chapel. No! They may pray in such places afterwards. But they begin to pray, I believe, in secret, in a place where no eye but God's is upon them - where no ear but God's is open to the sighs, cries, and groans of the Lord's living members. The Lord knew Saul of Tarsus

was saved before Ananias or anyone else knew. The Lord knew that secret cry, "What wilt Thou have me to do?" And the Lord brings His people to the light in one way or another. No presumption with those who are under the influence of God's grace! They are drawn to the front by God Himself. Every one of them is quite willing to be behind, to be out of sight, to be nothing; but they do want God to be glorified. Here is one result of being a follower of Christ in prayer.

Some are followers of Christ in praise, in declaring what God has done. How Jesus glorified His Father! His members, in following Him, desire to glorify Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; and thus they are brought to tell what God has done for their souls, to speak of His great love and mercy to them.

Disciples of Christ are followers of Him in precept if they follow Him fully; but some of them are only partial followers. You know what was said of Caleb (and what a favour to be a Caleb!): "My servant Caleb..... hath followed me fully" (Num.xiv.24).

Now to follow the Lord fully, to be a disciple of Christ fully, we go through the ordinance of baptism. We do not sprinkle infants. Nobody follows Christ in doing that, for Christ was not sprinkled when an infant, and those who call that baptism do not in that matter follow Christ. He did not teach infant sprinkling. When eight days old He was circumcized, but not sprinkled. He was baptized at thirty years old, just at the time when He was entering upon His public ministry. "Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him. But John forbad Him, saying, I have need to be baptized of Thee, and comest Thou to me? And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness" (Matt.iii.13,14). Righteousness here signifies the will of God. It becometh us therefore to fulfil the will of God; as though He had said: "All the ordinances of divine institution; God has willed them, and they must be fulfilled." His dear Son, we see, would fulfil His Father's will. So, if we are followers of Christ fully, we go the way Christ went - we go through the ordinance of baptism. He was baptized in the river Jordan. He, the Son, followed on earth the institution of the blessed and eternal Spirit. It has been an honoured institution. God honoured it, I believe, on the day I was baptized by blessing my soul, by comforting my heart, by giving me "the answer of a good conscience toward God" (I Pet.iii.21). And has not God honoured it in hundreds and in thousands of instances?

What a blessed thing it is when the disciples of Christ follow Him in the ordinance of baptism! I might also name the ordinance of the Lord's Supper and the precepts of the gospel.

II. Confirmation. The disciples, who are scholars and followers of Christ, need confirming, and that confirmation is not one instituted by men, but it is an institution and an ordination of God. It is by the great Shepherd and Bishop of our souls, Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God (1 Pet. ii.25). He makes use of His own servants in this work, and sometimes He makes use of the feeblest. The apostle Paul was one of these, and he felt himself "less than the least of all saints" (Eph.iii.8), but God used him to confirm the souls of the disciples; and, as a rule, God uses those who themselves feel the weakest - feel that they themselves need confirming.

I have proved this, for I can look back to times when God has made use of me in confirming His saints, and at such times I have generally felt myself the weakest. I was preaching once in Warrington, and I felt in myself all confusion, and I did not know what to say. How I got through I could not tell. When I had finished my discourse I could not remember what I had said, and I could hardly refrain from saying, "I will never try to preach again while I live." Oh, the distress my mind was in! What a fool I seemed to be! What an object of derision I thought God had made me! But on the following Wednesday morning I received a letter. Its equal I had hardly ever received. The Lord had been pleased to bless the word on that occasion to a person who had been in great and deep distress. The joy and peace which had come into her heart was indescribable. When I read it I inwardly said, "I cannot believe it." I went upstairs with the letter and read it again. Ah! I believed it the next time; I fell on my knees, and I said: "Lord, if this is the way Thou wilt confirm Thy people; if this is the way Thou wilt accomplish Thy glorious purposes - I am ready now to pass through hell, if that is the way to such an end." I felt I could suffer or endure anything for the comfort, confirmation, and consolation of a child of God.

Another time I remember very well. I was in a very low state of mind, and I was preaching from a text somewhat similar to the present one: "Strengthen ye the weak hands, and confirm the feeble knees" (Isa.xxxv.3). I never felt weaker, I never felt more feeble than I did then. And I was talking about

what made my own hands and my own knees feeble, and was led to speak of some awful temptations. One temptation was that of a spirit of blasphemy - a temptation to blaspheme God - and to fear at times that one had actually done it. There was present a young woman whom I knew. She had been ill for months. I knew that the doctor had prescribed for her without any avail, and that she had been away from home. She wept aloud as I proceeded. I paused, for she disturbed the whole of the congregation for a few moments. As she grew quieter, I went on. But what I had been saying had entered her heart. She had been suffering under that particular temptation. I spoke to her afterwards, and she said she had never before understood a sermon as she had understood that one. Never did God's truth enter into my heart with such power as it did on that occasion.

The Lord's servants, then, are brought into low places and into temptations that they may meet those who are also in low places and in similar temptations. The ministers are used first in preaching the pure truth of the gospel; secondly, in describing the exercises of God's living family.

I well remember that, when God was first teaching me, I was for the most part among Arminians; and I thought for a time they must be right because they were so zealous, but, with all their zeal and influence, they did not strengthen my weak hands nor confirm my feeble knees; but they weakened me by telling me to do what I could not do. And so they seemed to enforce, as it were, a duty upon me and to preach what is called a yea-and-nay gospel. But to a broken-hearted sinner such a gospel affords no comfort, rest, or peace - it rather augments his misery and distress. On the other hand, let the truth as it is in Jesus have full and free course, let the gospel be preached - what a difference! How well do I remember when I first heard it, and that was from the lips of the late Mr. Kershaw! It was a new thing, a new sound, to me. How it spoke my case! How it cheered my heart, and how, by God's power, it raised me from the state I had been in! It "set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings" (Psa.xl.2).

Deep exercises sometimes take hold of the souls of God's people. They are harassed by the world, tempted by Satan, burdened with guilt, groaning under the hidings of God's face, wondering from time to time how and where the scene will end when they die. These poor things follow God's truth when it is preached; and when the Holy Spirit applies it with any power and unction to their hearts, they are thus confirmed,

strengthened, helped, and cheered. And so they get along step by step until the Lord is pleased to bring them through the gloomy valley and give them an entrance into His everlasting kingdom. My text goes on: "And exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God." But I must for the present leave it. May the Lord add His blessing!