

The Visitor's Pulpit.

Times of Depression—Seasons of Joy.

A SERMON BY REV. J. E. CRACKNELL.

Although the fig-tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines, the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls; yet I will rejoice in the Lord. I will joy in the God of my salvation.—Habakkuk iii. 17-18.

This is one of the sublimest passages that even the page of inspiration supplies. The prophet surveyed the Divine perfections—the power and majesty of God—and thought of the denunciations of Divine judgment which the sins of the people had called forth. He is overwhelmed, filled with consternation, for a moment the mind of the man of God seems to be overbalanced. His heart trembles, his lips quiver, his very breath seems to be taken away. He thought of famine and of war, of the threatened invasion of the Chaldean army. The secret voice he heard at first filled him with dismay, which seemed to border on despair; but after a little time the mental storm is allayed, and there is a "great calm;" serene tranquility enters the tempest-tossed soul, which becomes filled with a sense of the most exalted joy, finding expression in the sublime words of our text: "Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines, the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls; yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation." May the Lord help us to find in these words instruction and comfort, and, it may be, a peculiar adaptation to the circumstances of many at the present time of general depression; and if helped to the prophet's view of things, times of depression will speedily become seasons of joy. There are two things to consider.

First. The calamities described.

Secondly. The confidence expressed.

I.—The calamities described.

The prophet portrays a time when many of the comforts of life shall be cut off.

The land of Canaan was an exceeding fruitful land; there were figs and grapes in great abundance. We read of Abigail making a present of a hundred clusters of raisins, and two hundred cakes of figs. In the tribe of Judah where Habakkuk lived, men might find grapes in the highway, and bind their beast of burden to the vine. God can turn a fruitful land into barrenness, for the iniquity of them that dwell therein; and the prophet supposes the fruit to fail and the fig-tree to give no indications of fruit, the vine shooting out its barren branches, and the labor of the olive, that is, the pressing the olive and straining the oil, to prove labor in vain, to lie—as in the margin, or deceive so that when pressed there should be no flowing fatness. Not only the comforts, but even the necessities of life are described as failing. It is evident the several kinds of fruit formed an important part of the food of the people; and the expression: "the labor of the olive shall fail" has a far deeper meaning than at first sight appears. Think of the various uses to which the fruit of this tree was applied. The berry preserved formed a relish to the farmer's bread, which frequently constituted his only meal. Food was cooked in oil—this, therefore, was indispensable; and not for cooking only, the lamps in the dwellings were fed by this, while the soap for cleansing was also from the produce of the olive. Then, beside all this, the prophet pictures the fields yielding no meat, neither grass for cattle, nor "corn for the service of man;" and when it is added "the flock shall be cut off from the fold and there shall be no herd in the stall," it presents a sad and distressing case, fruit, corn and flesh, all failing.

He further represents the future as dark as the present. "The fig tree shall not blossom"—no fruit, no indications or promise of fruit. The whole stock of cattle destroyed—the flock and the herd, the young and the old of both. The prophet seems to represent two of the most dreadful calamities—famine and war—as uniting their forces. The invasion of the troops doubtless refers to the Chaldean army, and the desolations described in some measure occasioned by the Chaldeans ravaging their fields and vineyards, and destroying the fruits of the earth; and if death be combined with war, as the language indicates, then it sets forth a concurrence of calamities, making the picture dark indeed.

We have heard much of late of depression arising from calamity and loss. There are numerous instances on every hand where the comforts of life have been curbed: luxuries enjoyed at one time can be

no longer thought of; and not luxuries only, alas! In how many cases that never come to the light is there suffering, severe suffering, by reason of the absence of the necessities of life. If the present be dark, how dark is the future to many who cannot see the "bow in the clouds"—who think only of things becoming worse and worse! When the prospect is good, present suffering may be patiently borne; but when a dark cloud seems to hang over the horizon, when no silver lining is perceived, and no bright light from behind seen fringing the edge of the cloud, no wonder if with such calamities the spirit is overwhelmed. Let us now turn to look in the second place at

2.—The Confidence here expressed.

"Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation." He realized that when all things should become changed, "the Lord changeth not." When creature streams were cut off the fountain would still flow. How sublime is the confidence here so resolutely expressed! Who would not covet such illustrious faith? The time of adversity and trial proves where the confidence is placed. It has been said, in the summer, when the leaves are on the branches, we cannot see the birds' nests, but when in the winter the branches are bare they are easily perceived. And so in the summer of prosperity and the time of plenty it is difficult to discover where the confidence of the soul really rests, but in the winter of adversity, and in the trial, it is clearly seen that the man of God has a secret spring of consolation and source of comfort that flows when all else fails. When wealth and friends are about us it is hard to know whether they are the props on which dependence is placed, but when they are taken away it is seen if the weight rested on these, or if the confidence was in God.

"I will joy in the God of my salvation." Calamities are sometimes the result of human folly, the fruit of our doings. The God of salvation is the "only wise God," and so wise and wonderful are His ways that He works salvation for His people, and saves them from the results of their own follies and the mistakes of others. Calamities are sometimes the result of crimes.

The God of salvation is the "God of all grace," who pardons the sins of His people and saves them from the evil consequences of their transgressions. He listens to the cry of the penitent, and ere they call He answers. Let not the thought, then, that times of depression are the result of human folly or sin lead to despair; the God of salvation presents in His own gracious character the ground of confidence, of hope, and of joy. However unfavorable things may appear, and however much you may lose, you have more that you cannot lose. Plenty may give place to poverty, but the Divine fulness is our fortune. Health may give place to sickness, but the Divine promises shall be our comfort. The society of loved ones may give place to loneliness, but the Divine presence shall be our solace.

Do we rejoice in the Lord?—In order to do so we must know ourselves as sinners, and have clear views of the plan of salvation by the grace of God, through the infinite merit of Jesus. Let us make sure of an interest in the Lord and His love; let us seek simple faith in His Son, then believing we shall rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory.

Are there any with whom joy is a thing of the past?—Then surely it was not in the Lord, but in circumstances you rejoiced; true they have changed, but there is no failure in Him. "He is evermore the same." And if He be the "spring of all our joys, the life of our delights," then come now and receive from His fulness and realize that "the joy of the Lord is our strength."

Do some say, "I should like to have the prophet's confidence, but I do not want the calamities"? Remember there may be a connection between these you have not thought of. You pray for grace and faith, you ask for confidence; it may be the calamities have something to do with the answer, if, indeed, they are not a part of it.

I asked the Lord that I might grow In faith and love and every grace; Might more of His salvation know And seek more earnestly His face.

I hoped that in some favoured hour, At once He'd answer my request; And by His love's constraining power Subdue my sins, and give me rest.

Instead of this He made me feel The hidden evils of my heart; And let the angry powers of hell Assault my soul in every part.

Lord, why is this? I trembling cried, Wilt Thou pursue Thy worm to death?

'Tis in this way, the Lord replied. I answer prayer for grace and faith.

Let the calamities of life lead us to exercise more implicit confidence in God; then times of depression shall become seasons of joy, and many be found saying, "Although banks may break, and crops may fail, and trade may flag, yet will I rejoice in the Lord and joy in the God of my salvation."

GEORGE MULLER ON BAPTISM.

HOW HIS VIEWS BECAME CHANGED—BELIEVERS THE ONLY SUBJECTS AND IMMERSION THE ONLY SCRIPTURAL MODE.

About the beginning of April, 1830, (when twenty-five years old), I went to preach at Sidmouth. While I was staying there, three sisters in the Lord had, in my presence, a conversation about baptism, one of whom had been baptized after she had believed. When they had conversed a little on the subject, I was asked to give my opinion concerning it.

My reply was, "I do not think that I need to be baptized again."

I was then asked by the sister who had been baptized, "But have you been baptized?"

I answered, "Yes, when I was a child."

She then replied, "Have you ever read the Scriptures, and prayed with reference to this subject?"

I answered, "No."

"Then," she said, "I entreat you never to speak any more about it till you have done so."

It pleased the Lord to show me the importance of this remark; for whilst at that very time I was exhorting every one to receive nothing which could not be proved by the word of God, I had repeatedly spoken against believers' baptism, without having ever earnestly examined the Scriptures, or prayed concerning it; and now I determined, if God would help me, to examine that subject also, and if infant baptism were found to be scriptural, I would earnestly defend it; and if believers' baptism were right, I would as strenuously defend that, and be baptized.

As soon as I had time, I set about examining the subject. The mode I adopted was as follows: Repeatedly I asked God to teach me concerning it, and I read the New Testament from the beginning, with a particular reference to this point. But now, when I earnestly set about the matter, a number of objections presented themselves to my mind.

First. "Since many holy and enlightened men have been divided in opinion concerning this point, does this not prove that it is not to be expected we should come to a satisfactory conclusion about this question in the present imperfect state of the church?" This objection was thus removed: "If this ordinance is revealed in the Bible, why may I not know it, as the Holy Spirit is the teacher in the church of Christ now as well as formerly?"

Second. "There have been but few of my friends baptized, and the greater part of them are opposed to believers' baptism, and they will turn their backs on me." Answer: "Though all men should forsake me, if the Lord Jesus take me up I shall be happy."

Third. "You will be sure to lose one half of your income if you are baptized." Answer: "As long as I desire to be faithful to the Lord, he will not suffer me to want."

Fourth. "People will call you a Baptist, and you will be reckoned among that body, and you cannot approve of all that is going on among them." Answer: "It does not follow that I must in all points go along with all those who hold believers' baptism, although I should be baptized."

Fifth. "You have been preaching for some years, and you will have thus publicly to confess that you have been in an error, should you be led to see that believers' baptism is right." Answer: "It is much better to confess that I have been in error concerning that point than to continue in it."

Sixth. "Even if believers' baptism should be right, yet it is now too late to attend to it, as you ought to have been baptized immediately on believing." Answer: "It is better to fulfil a commandment of the Lord Jesus ever so late than to continue living in the neglect of it." ***

As soon as I was brought into this state of heart, I saw from the Scriptures that believers only are the proper subjects for baptism, and that immersion is the only true scriptural mode in which it ought to be attended to. The passage which particularly convinced me of the former, is, Acts viii: 36-38; and of the latter, Rom. vi: 3-5. Some time after, I was baptized, I had much peace in doing so, and never

have I for one single moment regretted it. Before I leave this point, I would just say a few words concerning the result of this matter, so far as it regards some of the objections which occurred to my mind when I was about to examine the Scriptures concerning baptism.

First. Concerning the first objection, my conviction now is, that of all revealed truths, not one is more clearly revealed in the Scriptures, not even the doctrine of justification by faith, and that the subject has only become obscured by men not having been willing to take the Scriptures alone to decide the point.

Second. Not one of my true friends in the Lord has turned his back on me, as I supposed, and almost all of them have been themselves baptized since.

Third. Though in one way I lost money in consequence of being baptized, yet the Lord did not suffer me to be really a loser, even as it regards temporal things; for he made up the loss most bountifully. In conclusion, my example has been the means of leading many to examine the question of baptism, and to submit, from conviction, to this ordinance; and seeing this truth, I have been led to speak on it as well as on other truths; and during the twenty-three years that I have now resided in Bristol, more than a thousand believers have been baptized among us.

Greater Reverence for Christ.

Too frequently we speak of our Redeemer simply as "Jesus," but is not the treating the name of the Messiah with undue familiarity? Have we any authority for so doing? Peter, when he was sinking called him "Lord," and at the Last Supper his disciples, even the beloved one, all called him Lord. Did not Christ himself teach us how he was to be addressed when he said, "Go and say the Master saith?"

Is it not equally improper to address the man Christ Jesus as "Infant Redeemer," or "Holy child," (as in Bickersteth's last edition,) or by such pet names as "Sweet Saviour," "Gentle Jesus," and does not this tend to Mariolatry, teaching the children at least to look upon our Lord as still a child obedient to his mother, instead of looking at Emmanuel as God over all blessed forever.

In Faber's hymn, "O! come and mourn with me awhile," the last line of each verse was "Jesus, our Lord is Crucified." In Bickersteth's latest edition "Lord" is altered to "Love"—"Jesus our Love is Crucified." Is this an improvement?

We love the queen, but would the most loyal of her subjects presume to apply even to her such terms as Sweet Victoria, Gentle Victoria, Victoria my Love, and shall we dare to use greater freedom with him who said, "One is your Master, even Christ?"

The Martyr Stephen saw the heavens opened and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God, and his dying words were, "Lord"—"Lord Jesus." The name once, the title twice.

Our Lord had attained the ripe age of thirty three years before he died, and had ceased to be a child. The expression used by the apostle, "Thy holy child Jesus" (Acts iv. 17), is not a correct translation, and Dean Alford renders it, "Thy holy servant, Jesus. He was Jehovah's servant."

There are several instances where the titles given to our Lord in the Sinaitic and other oldest versions are omitted in our authorized version of the New Testament.

It is no wonder that the Bishop of Manchester lately condemned the sensational and sentimental hymns now so popular.—Evangelical Churchman.

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