

VITAL GODLINESS

A SERMON

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“The Lord is good, a strong hold in the day of trouble; and he knows them that trust in him.” Nahum 1:7

THIS book is a detailed prediction of the destruction of ancient Nineveh, which destruction came to pass just as this book described. And about one hundred and fifty years before the time of this prophecy Jonah visited this same Nineveh, and his ministry wrought repentance in the main body of the people, natural repentance, of course, not spiritual or saving, but only that moral repentance of reformation which is the duty of every man under the sun, though that kind of repentance must be distinguished from that which Christ is exalted a Prince and a Savior to give; for that repentance which he gives stands inseparably connected with remission of sins, and remission of sins stands inseparably connected with eternal glorification. Now in process of time there arose a king in Nineveh that knew not Jonah; there arose a generation, or generations, in Nineveh that knew not Jonah, that set themselves against Jonah's God and Jonah's people. Hence you learn, in the 9th and 11th verses of this chapter, that they had set themselves directly against Jehovah, and having set themselves against the one true and eternal God, they of course set themselves against his people. And one man seems to have been particularly noted and listened to, called, in the 11th verse, “a wicked counsellor against the Lord,” and to him the people listened. They were determined, therefore, to do the people of God, who at this time were many of them scattered abroad, all the injury they could; and whenever such a feeling lodges in the mind of any person, or of any people, the Lord sees it, and the destruction of such certainly is not far off, it must come upon them, and they shall not escape. Yet amidst the outpouring of these vials of his wrath he will ever remember his mercy; amidst it all he is good unto Israel, he is good unto the soul that seeks him, and is to such “a strong hold in the day of trouble; he knows them that trust in him,” and is stronger for them than anything and everything put together can possibly be against them.

I will notice then, first, *the circumstances by which the Lord's goodness and strength appear on behalf of his people*; secondly, *his recognition of them*, indicated in the last clause, “he knows them that trust in him.”

We notice, first, *the circumstances by which the Lords goodness and strength appear on behalf of his people*. We shall get this from the preceding verses; for while those verses have reference, to

the ministration of judgment, they have also evidently a mystical or spiritual meaning. And those that know something of the troubles I am about to notice, they are the people to whom the Lord is good, a strong hold in the day of their successive troubles, and whom he recognizes as those that put their trust in him. Now the first trouble I have to name is the fear of being lost. In the early part of this chapter it is said, "God is jealous, and the Lord revenges; the Lord revenges, and is furious; the Lord will take vengeance on his adversaries, and he reserves wrath for his enemies." He does not immediately minister that wrath, seeing he is "slow to anger;" he will get his people out of the way first; he will let the ark be finished first; he will let Lot be out of Sodom first; he will let the Israelites be out of the sea first; he will let the Christians be out of Jerusalem first. Then, when his people are out of the way, the judgments come. He is "slow to anger." But notwithstanding his being "slow to anger," he "will not at all acquit the wicked." Let us ask ourselves the question, Has God's wrath ever been made a day of trouble to us? There is God, a jealous God, so far so that not one jot or tittle of his holy law shall fail; and yet all of us are by that law under condemnation. I mean in our state by nature; but in that state this is no trouble to us. And we have here also the certainty of his wrath: "The Lord will take vengeance on his adversaries, and he reserves wrath for his enemies." We are in our state by nature dead to this; this wrath is no trouble to us; the certainty of this vengeance is no trouble to us; our being adversaries and enemies to him is no trouble to us. And though he will not acquit the wicked, and we ourselves are wicked, for "there is none righteous, no, not one," yet it is no trouble to us. While in a state of nature we go sleeping on. We have a land full of Bibles. Almost all the civilized world now are blessed with Bibles. What an evidence is this that men by nature are dead in trespasses and in sins! Why, there are Bibles enough, and there is preaching enough, in our day to convert the whole world, if conversion were that kind of change that could be brought about by any efforts of the creature; but conversion is that kind of change that none but he that raises the dead can accomplish. Oh! how solemn the question ought to be with every one that professes the Savior's name, Was my conversion natural or supernatural? Was it the conversion merely of reformation, or was it regeneration? Had I, in my conviction of my state, that apprehension of God's wrath that made way for the coming in of his goodness as a strong hold in the day of trouble? But to hundreds of you happily the day did arrive when the wrath of God became a trouble to you; when the certainty of his vengeance became a trouble to you; when you're having been hitherto an adversary to him, and consequently to your own soul, became a trouble to you; when you're having been an enemy to him and to your eternal welfare became a trouble to you. Your mind was solemnized by the thought that God was now making a pause between, as it were, your state and the time when he would call you to judgment, and that he will not acquit the wicked, this became a trouble to you, lay upon your conscience, and thus you were led to know what the Savior means when he speaks of deceptive ministers, and deceptive professors, and deceptive doctrines. He says they pass over the weighty matters of the law, that is, of the law of truth, faith, judgment, and mercy. These are weighty matters; and the wrath of God is a weighty matter, an awful matter. Is it any wonder, therefore, that the Lord should address those to whom this wrath has been made a trouble as poor, and of a contrite spirit, and that tremble at his word? Here, then, is a day of trouble. O my hearers, one and all, have we seen this day of trouble? Has this wrath been a trouble to us? If it be not a trouble to us now, it will be our eternal destruction hereafter; if it be not apprehended now, it will be felt to our shame and everlasting contempt when time with us shall be no more. Now when this wrath is apprehended, what is the remedy? Wherein does the Lord appear as a stronghold in this day of trouble? Turn to the 9th of Zechariah, and there you get a beautiful representation of the goodness of the Lord in this matter. Here is the sinner sensibly under wrath, and in the greatest trouble that a man can be, and has the

greatest business on hand that a man can have, namely, the eternal deliverance of his soul from the wrath to come. Mark the beautiful language: As for you also, by the blood of your covenant I have sent forth your prisoners out of the pit wherein is no water." You will be led to see that Jesus Christ has met that torrent of wrath that was coming towards you, and turned it back; that Jesus Christ met that curse that was progressing towards you, and himself compassed that curse, suffered it, and put it away; and that Jesus Christ met your sins, all of which must have been living witnesses against you at the last day, not a secret sin, of heart, lip, or life, that will not be there to bear testimony against all that live and die out of Christ Jesus. You will see that he met our sins; they were gathered together and laid upon him, that he bore them in his own body on the tree. "We like sheep have gone astray, we have turned everyone to his own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquities of us all." Then you go on a little farther, and you find not only did Jesus Christ atone for sin, but that he lived a life of obedience to God's law, and that that obedience was not for himself; he was not made righteous by his own obedience, for he was righteous without that; he was naturally righteous; and therefore what he did was for the people. "By one man's obedience shall many be made righteous." Now, when you see this, then your inquiry will be, How am I to get at this wonderful atonement that delivers from the wrath to come? How am I to get at this righteousness that delivers from all condemnation? How am I to get at that best robe, that wedding garment, in which to appear acceptably before God? We must be careful in this matter of getting at these things, for herein, in this atonement and in this righteousness, appears the goodness of the Lord, and herein he is a stronghold in the day of soul-trouble. "Turn you," said the Lord, "to the stronghold," and Jesus Christ is the stronghold, "you prisoners of hope; even to-day do I declare that I will render double unto you." But there are two things it is well to be careful upon in getting at this atonement and this righteousness, and being favored to know that it is yours. The first is faith. You must believe that Jesus Christ is the end of the law for righteousness; for the Lord will never make Jesus Christ righteousness to you all the time you have any righteousness of your own; the Lord will never make Jesus Christ redemption to you all the time you fancy you have any goodness of your own. But if you see that he is the end of the law, and see what his atonement has done, that it has perfected forever all that were chosen in Christ before the world was, then you get at it so far as to see what it is, and where it is; you believe in it, and a hope springs up in your own mind of interest in it. But there is one more thing besides this, and if you are content to stop short of that, it is because your religion is a delusion. You may have had some soul-trouble, and you may get a theoretical acquaintance with what Christ has done, and feel a sort of hope in it; but there is something else, and if you are satisfied short of that something else I would not be in your place, especially when you die, for a thousand worlds. And what is that? Why, the testimony of the Holy Ghost, bringing home the word with power, and making the peace in your soul like a river, and making Christ's righteousness to your soul like the waves of the sea. There is no end to the waves of the sea; they have been coming in ever since the foundation of the world, and they will come in to the end of time; and this is made a representation of the incoming of promise after promise, and blessing after blessing, into the soul that is thus saved of the Lord, and justified by the righteousness of Jesus Christ. So that if you are content without this experience of it, without this realization of it, without the Lord himself speaking to your soul, then you are content with what no prophet was content with, with what no apostle was content with. When Isaiah was in the position I have just now stated, when he saw the wrath and his sinner-ship, saw the sacrifice, saw the altar, and believed in the same, he was not content with that. One of the seraphim flew with "a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar," applied it to his lips, and said, "Lo, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged."

So, with Joshua the high priest; he stood before the angel; he was brought into the right way, believed the right thing, took the right position, stood before the angel of the covenant; but he was still clothed in filthy garments, and nothing could satisfy him but a change of raiment, a sense of pardoning mercy. "Take away the filthy garments from him. And unto him he said, Behold, I have caused your iniquity to pass from you, and I will clothe you with change of raiment." Isaiah, when speaking of this same matter, says, "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels;" so has he delivered, beautified, healed, and ornamented my soul, and made me fit for the highest glory in the whole range of existence. And David speaks after the same manner: "Bless the Lord, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name." He then goes on to describe that experience which he had of the forgiveness of sin, his diseases healed, his soul redeemed; and he himself, his youth renewed, and crowned with loving kindness and tender mercies. If you are content with anything short of this, your religion will not stand by you when you will want it the most. However, lest I should unnecessarily discourage the little ones, you must understand this, I am not saying unless you have this your religion is as nothing; I am saying, if you are content with anything short of this your religion is nothing. There are some of you that I know have not experienced this deliverance, that have not thus realized the efficacy of the Savior's blood, and you cannot cry, "Abba, Father." But then you are discontented without it; you are seeking it, you believe in it, and you are desiring it, and you are unhappy for the want of it. I would not say a word to discourage such. I am speaking of those who are content without it, not of those who are seeking, and have not yet found. "You, Lord" which is very encouraging, "have not forsaken them that seek you." They have not yet found you, not in that way that their souls desire; but "you, Lord, have not forsaken them that seek you." Therefore, we will say to such, Wait on the Lord still, be of good courage; wait, I say, on the Lord: for the Lord will not deny the hungry soul, he will not leave the thirsty soul to perish, he will not leave the mourner after him to lie down in sorrow; for "blessed are they that mourn; they shall be comforted." Thus, then, when his wrath becomes a day of trouble, then by Jesus Christ how good the Lord appears in sending such a Savior! and what a stronghold he is for the guilty, filthy, trembling soul! a fountain opened for sin and for uncleanness; everything said that can be said to show that Jesus Christ is a stronghold for a trembling sinner. "Come, and let us reason together: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though red like crimson, they shall be as wool." If you be willing thus to seek the Lord, and obedient to his way, for that is the obedience of faith, you shall eat the good of the land. There stands the promise. This I will call, then, trouble the first. I am afraid that a great many in our day, professing to be Christians, are strangers to this work of the Holy Spirit. Remember that if any man has not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his; if any man be not made a Jew inwardly by the circumcising work of the Holy Spirit, he is not a real saved character. There must be this work of the Holy Spirit; "you must be born again? Therefore, when men talk of there being nothing to do but believe, they ought not to forget the nominative. There is a great deal said in the 3rd of John about believing, but we must not forget to take the nominative of that faith as given in the first part of that chapter, "You must be born again." Here, then, God's wrath becomes a day of trouble; and when led to see the provision he has made, the Savior he has sent, here you learn his goodness, and that his mercy endures forever.

The next day of trouble I notice is that which is pretty sure to follow such persons. I have often noticed the accuracy of the descriptions given by the Holy Spirit of divine leadings. Hence, what

is the next day of trouble? Adverse circumstances. "The Lord has his way in the whirlwind and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet." So if you have left Satan, and are made one with the Savior, you must expect some adverse winds; if you have thus left error, and are made one with the truth, you must expect some whirlwinds trying to carry you away from where the Lord has brought you. If you thus belong to him, you must expect some dark clouds; and you will sometimes find encouragement from those beautiful words so often sung, that:

"Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face."

But I must look at this just for a minute or two in a higher quarter. "The Lord has his way in the whirlwind and in the storm." Our sins are spoken of as a whirlwind; our iniquities, like the whirlwind, have carried us away. God's wrath is spoken of as a storm. "He shall rain upon the wicked a horrible tempest." Our sins are also spoken of as clouds. "I have blotted out as a cloud your sins, and as a thick cloud your transgressions." He will permit the whirlwind, and the storm, and the clouds to whirl us about, and drive us to our wits' ends, and we cannot get our way; but he will have his way, for his counsel shall stand, and he will do all his pleasure. You read of Satan bringing the four winds upon the house of Job, and slaying his family; and if I may suggest such a thing, which, perhaps, is hardly warrantable, if it were Satan that caused the storm when the Savior was in the ship asleep, and the winds and the waves alarmed the disciples, he said simply, "Peace, be still." And many of you know what it is to be tossed about on the mighty waves of the sea; what a mere straw, a mere piece of stubble you feel yourself to be when in a ship. Why the waves laugh at you, toss you about; you may sit down and wish the ship would be still, for you feel very queer; but the waves laugh at you, and you do not think of telling them to be still, for you well know it would be useless. But yet the man Christ Jesus, who was Immanuel, God with us, he throws a word into these furious elements, and all is calm in an instant. At another time he can walk on the waves. He always had his own way in the whirlwind and in the storm. And so, when the time came for him to lay down his precious life, and he was brought to the bar of Caiaphas, and of Pilate, and of Herod, and hurried and driven about as he was, apparently driven about, yet he had his own way. And even on the cross, when storms and whirlwinds surrounded him, all the political, and military, and ecclesiastical powers set in motion against him, he had his own way even there. What a beautiful demonstration of this is his receiving the thief into paradise! But there is something more here than this; with our sins he had his own way, and finished them, made reconciliation. With the wrath of God, he had his own way, and turned it back. With Satan he had his own way, and bruised his head. With death he had his own way, and swallowed up the same in victory. And with God he had his own way, for he so pleased God as to be brought again from the dead, not as an act merely of pity or compassion, he was brought again from the dead by the blood of the everlasting covenant. Jesus Christ, then, had his own way in the whirlwind and in the storm. And as to the witnesses against him, the false witnesses, clouds of them, they were the mere dust of his feet; at a mere puff of Ilia breath he could have blown the whole into hell if he had been pleased to do so. But then he felt, I came to suffer, and suffer I must. I am come not to judge the world now; I am come upon a salvation errand now; I must accomplish that now, and judgment shall come hereafter.

Now let us make this the foundation of our plea with God. Have we adverse circumstances? Well, the Lord will have his way, he will humble us, and mortify us, and try us, and in many respects

spoil us, and we shall be so tossed about that we shall be toiling in rowing and trying to get to land. "I will come to Christ; I will come to the promise; I will come to God; I will cast my burden upon him; I will stop these mighty adversities; I will overcome all things." But, nevertheless, the adversities and trials go on, and we are spiritually just as the disciples were literally, they could not bring the ship to land. They worked hard, but they could not do it. But as soon as ever Jesus Christ came, "immediately the ship was at the land whither they went." They might have toiled themselves to this day, and would not have got to land, that is, when God is pleased to teach them their own helplessness, mark that; for he will then keep things in such a position that they shall feel their entire dependence on him. And Peter hoped to have been able to boast a little. "Lord, if it be you, bid me come unto you on the water. And he said, Come." So, Peter did act wisely in having the Lord's authority for coming, but he did not walk far; as soon as ever he saw the wind boisterous he was afraid, and began to sink. But there was the prayer (as Huntingdon said, if he could not have prayed without a prayer-book, he would have sunk before he could have got his prayer-book out of his pocket), "Lord, save me;" and so the Savior did. The Lord knows, therefore, how to deal with his people, to bring them into positions that shall make them in earnest with their religion. Earnestness is a great thing; it is a great blessing to have earnestness, "to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip;" to earnestly contend for the faith once delivered to the saints, and earnestly to pray, earnestly seek the Lord our God. There is nothing more offensive to God than trifling with his name, with his lovingkindness, and with his truth. Christians in all ages, true Christians, have been earnest men and earnest women. I bless the Lord for the happiness of being associated in the order of his appointment with so many that have shown in every possible way the reality of their earnestness for the cause of God, the progress of the gospel, the glory of his name, and the good of the souls of men. So, then, if we have a day of adversity, I say we cannot get our own way. Job could not get his way, but the Lord got his way. And if the three worthies could have got their way they would not have gone into the fiery furnace; but after they came out you may depend upon it, they were glad they went. If Daniel could have had his way he would not have gone into the lion's den, but afterwards he would be glad that the Lord had his way. And if David could have had his way, he would not have been hunted about by Saul from place to place as he was; but afterwards, when the Lord appeared, David would then bless the Lord for the past experience that he had had. There is no adversity, there is no bereavement, there is no enemy, for which we shall not have some day to bless the name of the Lord. Days of adversity we must expect; the Lord will have his way, and his way is a right way, a gracious way, a good way, a way that shall at the end establish what our text declares, "The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble." Would you exclude his government from your heart if you could? Would you exclude his government from your house if you could? Can you sit at your table from day to day, and not want the Lord with you? I should not like to live with you if that is your character; I should be afraid to live there, except that I know I love the Lord, and he will spare the house for my sake, I am sure he would not for your sake. Would you wish to exclude the Lord from his government of your circumstances, your business, and the world? Could your business be in better hands? He bestows upon you gifts, and industry, and all that wisdom that accords with your temporal welfare. The Lord has greatly blessed many of you even in this respect. He has his way, then, not only in adversity, but also in prosperity. And is it not an infinity of condescension on the part of the Lord to pay any attention to these things? He might say, I do not care what you do; you may sin, or hate me, or go to hell if you like; nothing to do with me. Instead of this, "in all their affliction he was afflicted." Look at it. "Like as a father pities his children, so the Lord pities them that fear him." He does not expect that of us which is

not in us; “for he knows our frame; he remembers we are dust. “As far,” by his dear Son, “as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.” He is, then, a stronghold in the day of circumstantial adversity.

The third day of trouble is the drying up of all earthly comforts. “He rebukes the sea, and makes it dry, and dries up all the rivers; Bashan languishes, and Carmel, and the flower of Lebanon languishes.” We must not here understand the sea literally any further than to get the meaning. Now, if the sea were dry, there could be no rivers; again, if the sea were dry, there could be no rain, and consequently Bashan, Carmel, and Lebanon would indeed languish. The sea of course represents here the source of all our earthly comforts, and Bashan, Carmel, and Lebanon, those fertile regions, represent the pleasures of earth; but these all languish, are all dried up. Well, say you, that is not the case now. But it will be presently. See your dying sister in your house, or your dying brother, several of whom there are now; are not to them all the comforts of life dried up? Where is the sea now that sent them showers of consolation? Where is the river now that ran by their side, and out of which they drank, and were refreshed? Where is the fertile Bashan now? where is Carmel? where is the flower and fragrance of Lebanon? All is gone, all is gone; nothing left but a dying body, and, if belonging to God, a happy soul,

“A mortal paleness on the cheek,
But glory in the soul.”

“The prudent foresees the evil, and hides himself;” and it is for us as Christians to act just as though, I was going to say, these things were now actually gone, for they will be gone in relation to us, and that before long. Then what have we left? Ah, we have a sea of love; we have a river proceeding from the throne of God and the Lamb, clear as crystal, the water of which flows on to eternity; we have the immortal rose of Sharon, we have the peaceful and beautiful lily of the valley; we have paradisiacal scenes, a God of peace, a God of love, a God of glory. So, then,

“Let the sea shrink all away,
And flume melt down the skies;
My God shall live an endless day,
When the whole creation dies?”

It is a great thing, then, to see that all your worldly pleasures will pass away like a deceitful brook, just where you most want them to soothe you, there they will leave you; just where you would give the world, as it were, a kingdom for another minute to live, as a monarch said, that is just where they will forsake you. But will the fountain of living waters forsake you? Never; the Holy Spirit shall be in you as a well of water, springing up into everlasting life; and Jesus Christ will be unto us ever as rivers of water in a dry place. Here, then, when this life’s comforts are gone, the Lord will be unto us a stronghold in that day of trouble also, for it is a day of trouble; but by the presence of the High Priest, the ark of the covenant, the mercy-seat, and by the power of our God, we shall pass clean over Jordan triumphantly into possession of that land of brooks and fountains and depths that spring out of the valleys and the hills, the glorious consolations of his love, that can never, never run dry.

The fourth day of adversity I name, and the last, is when all earthly confidences are destroyed. "The mountains quake at him." Have you a mountain of gold? When he comes that mountain will terribly tremble, and so will you to see it go. Have you a mountain of self-righteousness? When he comes, he will make that tremble, and so will you to see it so. Whatever confidence you have, if it be not in him, that, is a mountain of false refuge, of false confidence. "And the hills melt." The ranks and dignities upon which some so pride themselves, they are little hills, they will melt away. Ah, the humble Christian walks in the churchyard, and says, There it is; the tall, the wise, the reverend head is laid as low as ours, monarchs and beggars, all upon a level there; these little hills are melted away. "The earth is burned at his presence; yes, the world, and all that dwell therein." Well, say you, that has not come to pass yet. As the Lord lives, it is come to pass, though not in that terrible sense in which it will at the last. His law is a fiery law. Ask a scientific man, well versed in anatomy, how it is you grow old; he cannot tell you. They all confess they cannot explain it; they all confess that they see no reason in physical nature why man should die. What is it, then? It is the fire of God's law in your bones, that begins very gently, and by slow degrees dries up the moisture of your bones, debilitates the various organs of your body, till that fire will, if we live long enough, shrivel us up at the last. Many a tall man have I seen shriveled up at the age of eighty or ninety to a mere nothing in comparison of what he was. My hearer, this is nothing else but the progress of the fire of God's law in your bones, in your person. And then, when there is something added to that that makes it burn higher, such as fever or disease of any kind, how soon it sweeps you away! See what numbers lately have been swept away by a superadded fire. Another fire sets in with that fire, doubles its force, and the poor creature dies. So that "the earth is burned at his presence; yes, the world, and all that dwell therein." Is there a man or woman on the earth that must not grow old if they live long enough? Can you live without growing old? Impossible. Can you live without the bones being dried by degrees? Impossible. Can you live without coming to the days, if you live to be very old, in which you will have no pleasure in any of the things of this world? Impossible. "Can I any more taste what I eat, or what I drink? Can I any more hear the voice of singing men and singing women? Wherefore should I be a burden unto my lord the king?" Ah, then, where is the remedy? Here it is, to those that love his blessed name, "Even to your old age I am he; and even to hoar hairs will I carry you: I have made, and I will bear; even I will carry, and will deliver you." "Though the outward man perishes, the inward man is renewed day by day." Ah, then, when this fire in our bones shall have done its work, and burnt us to ashes, "ashes to ashes, dust to dust," the soul that feels that it has immortal youth as it stands in Christ, that it has untarnishable holiness, that it has victory complete, that God is its all and in all, such a one will not at all lament the dissolution of the one, seeing it is the emancipation of the other, but will say, "I desire to depart, and to be with Christ, which is far better. Is it therefore no concern to us that our most mountainous confidence must give way, and that our most exalted hopes of an earthly kind must melt? The fire of God's wrath is still doing its work; but this fire will by and by be lighted up to awful perfection in body and in soul where the worm dies not and the fire is not quenched. How great the blessing, then, to be brought into the knowledge of Him who makes us new creatures.