

Letter 135.

by James Bourne

James Bourne's sermon 'Letter 135' calls believers to discern true faith from false, emphasizing humility and reliance on God's mercy amidst spiritual struggles.

Scripture: Jeremiah 4:23

Topics: "Spiritual Deception", "Restoring Hope"

Description

James Bourne addresses the struggles of young P. who has fallen among thieves, losing his simplicity and hope, emphasizing the importance of discerning between the dead professing church and the true church of God. Bourne warns against having a form of godliness without power, urging to turn away from such deceptions. He encourages spiritual simplicity in writing about one's experiences, highlighting the need for honesty and confession in times of darkness and difficulty. Bourne shares his personal journey of losing and regaining hope, emphasizing the Lord's faithfulness in restoring His beloved ones despite their failings.

Transcript

[To M. and J. G.] London, January 1837.

My dear Friends,

I have been thinking a good deal about young P., and sometimes wonder what the nature of that work was which appeared so genuine upon his heart, and the simplicity that continued for some time. I am truly sorry to hear that he has fallen among thieves, as I am sure they will strip him of his simplicity and rob him of all his tenderness and the measure of hope he had, and leave him dead in soul. Poor man, he is not aware of the danger to which he has exposed himself, nor will he find it out until his feet are so entangled that he will not be able to make his escape. I think one of the greatest mercies God bestows is to give us a distinct apprehension of the difference between the dead professing church and the church of God, which is not discernible by the natural man. This especial error appeared even in the apostles' days, and spread itself far and wide in the first century - "having a form of godliness, but denying" (absolutely denying) "the power." From such we are told to turn away. [2 Tim. iii. 5.] But carnal reason shows so many plausible excuses, and makes us believe that it is a sad thing not to attend worship, and thus without making God our wisdom, we at once turn to fables. If the poor man has really known the right thing, then I am sure he has laid the foundation for much sorrow, and the light and teaching of the Spirit will now and then come with such deep conviction and sorrow as he has never known before; he will feel much darkness and

confusion, and not know when good comes, nor how to get out of his misery; and here he may be left many years to rue his folly.

I was glad to hear of you both, and will again explain what was my meaning respecting your manner of writing. I perfectly understood the first part wherein you described the sensible wrath and displeasure of God in a broken law; and that though this was so fearful, yet it was not without hope. It is well described by Jeremiah (chap. iv. 23, &c.) - "I beheld the earth, and lo it was without form and void" (that is, it was a desolate waste wilderness, descriptive of the heart of man); "and the heavens, and they had no light" (that is, there was no access to God, but we were sensibly afar off by wicked works). "I beheld the mountains, and lo they trembled" (all the presumptuous confidence in which we walk, before God shines into the heart, now gives way)" and the hills moved lightly" (all difficulties and hindrances become light when God begins to work). "I beheld, and lo there was no man, and all the birds of the heavens were fled" - now the scene begins to open and change, and a ray of light darts into the soul, and shows us that all refuge will fail, and no man will care for our souls; and makes all cheerfulness and the natural vivacity which men possess to vanish. "I beheld, and, lo, the fruitful place was a wilderness, and all the cities thereof were broken down at the presence of the Lord, and by his fierce anger." All carnal means of pleasing God (such as Sunday Schools, Bible Meetings, Organs, Singing, and many other things by which we have sought to obtain the favour of God) prove a wilderness; every refuge of lies gives way here, however well we may attempt to defend ourselves; nothing can stand when "he searches the inmost parts of the belly." Then follows what you meant to describe - "For thus has the Lord said, The whole land shall be desolate; YET WILL I NOT MAKE A FULL END."

But you justly observe that though this is encouraging, yet it is not all you want; and you say truly, for as soon as these dreadful meditations are over, you need a little more spiritual simplicity, for you lose the power both of describing the past, as well as that you are looking to obtain. My dear friends, when you wish to set forth your experience of these things, be sure to pen it down at the time you are under the exercise; and if you then put it aside and return to look at it a few weeks after, you will be surprised to see the simplicity and clearness of your tale.

In all that I have said there is a caution to us both, which is, that this trying hour will come upon us, and we shall lose our comfort, and not be able fully to hold fast our hope; there will be a discovery of the evils of our hearts and of God's holiness, which will bring us very low. The Lord asks "What will thou do" (when thou art thus spoiled)? "Though thou clovest thyself with crimson, though thou deckest thee with ornaments of gold, though thou rentest thy face with painting, in vain shalt thou make thyself fair; thy lovers will despise thee, they will seek thy life." This is the picture of all the false pleas that a poor creature can make, and will, but in vain; and we must in the end cry, "Woe is me!" But "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no Physician there? Why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?" [Jer. iv. 30, 31; and viii. 22]. If the Lord brings us to these places of darkness and difficulty, and shows us wherein we have exceeded, we know that such shall be brought further to understand his lovingkindness and tender mercy; and surely this same prophet sets before us strong grounds for its accomplishment - "If heaven above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth searched out beneath, I will also cast off all the seed of Israel" (that are thus brought before me in judgment) "for all that they have done, saith the Lord" [Jer. xxxi. 37].

I do not like to close this letter without some account of myself. I was very comfortable about a fortnight since, and had a sweet hope abounding; but a treacherous backsliding heart caused the Lord to depart, and I felt his evident displeasure; no access in prayer, no sweet power in the word, but all darkness and all

reproof. I could but reproach myself exceedingly, till my hope seemed almost gone, and I began to think I should see his reconciled face no more in this world; at least Satan would have persuaded me so. I had short and transient views of his mercy, but so short that I felt as if these could be no tokens of the Lord's favour restored; but at length, while meditating on the word, the Lord surprised me with his love in Christ Jesus so as fully to satisfy me. He again restored to me the light of his countenance and the love of his heart.

These words, in Jer. xii. 14, were very sweet to me, and I found the Lord's wonted power in them - "Thus saith the Lord against all mine evil neighbours, that touch the inheritance which I have caused my people Israel to inherit, Behold, I will pluck them out of their land, and pluck out the house of Judah from among them." I went back to the 7th verse, and the Lord showed me the cause wherefore the "dearly beloved" of his soul was left in the hands of her enemies. The enemies there spoken of are the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life; when these attack us, and we fall into confusion and darkness, we must yet, if possible, remember that though this sad condition has befallen us, we are still the Lord's beloved, and must strive with all our spiritual might to maintain this spiritual position. My beloved: encourage the thought, that notwithstanding all you may feel, and all the charges laid to your conscience, still thou art my beloved! Begin to reflect, What was that which I felt a day, a week, a month, or a year ago? Was it not a sweet token of God's love? Did I not get some answer to prayer? Did not one word counteract the despair I was in, and could I not then in some measure hope I was his beloved? And does he not say, "I the Lord change not?" Be assured, however low we may be cast down, the Lord will bring us up. The Lord suffers our evil neighbours (that body of sin within and a tempting devil) to torment and perplex us, that our pride may be brought down, and we be made more sensible of our slighted privileges, and learn to feel it a sore evil to grieve the Holy Spirit; nor shall we be recovered till power is given us to come with an honest confession, and to put our mouth in the dust.

Then verse 8 - " Mine heritage is to me as a lion in the forest; it crieth out against me; therefore have I hated it." They have lost a tender conscience, and presumptuous claims upon God are made, and unpurged guilt is passed by and forgotten; humility is laid aside, and some word or other taken out of Scripture to vindicate a declining cause; or perhaps such a saying as this in a fleshly manner applied, Once in Christ, always in Christ. This is the bold lion that God hates, because there is no brokenness of spirit. Such will roar out, I cannot help my sins; faith is the gift of God, I cannot quicken myself. Thus they cry out against God; and though the Lord says that he hates them, yet they, as bold as a lion, will call themselves the beloved of God.

Verse 9 - "Mine heritage is unto me as a speckled bird, the birds round about are against her. Come ye, assemble all the beasts of the field; come to devour." Here is set forth the two natures. It is hard to believe we are the Lord's beloved, when these beasts of the field are suffered to devour; the corruptions of the heart make head, and darkness covers us; dead professors either counsel or condemn, and we have not a word to say; we dare not unite, we scarcely know why; we die to the world, though we feel dead to God; we find ourselves strangers and outcasts whom no man regards. The people of God stand aloof from our sore, and watch to see which way it will turn with us, so that we sit solitary, and cannot venture to say "I am my beloved's." Still, do not sit down and conclude the contrary; let the Lord be judge; "MINE HERITAGE is unto me as a speckled bird."

Verses 10, 11 - "Many pastors have destroyed my vineyard, they have trodden my portion under foot," &c. The world is full of pastors that destroy God's vineyard and make his pleasant portion desolate, by subtly training their hearers to rest upon the written word without the application of the Holy Ghost, and saying

that Jesus is very pitiful and tender and will show mercy, and not setting before the people that he will show them judgment as well as mercy, and that all who are saved shall certainly find that he will first turn them to destruction, and then show them that it was only to the LOST SHEEP of the house of Israel that he was sent. These pastors will tell us that we are sinners, to be sure, and the greater sinners the better, for we have the more need of a Saviour; but they neither tell us how the Saviour is to be obtained, nor set before us the anger of God in a broken law; these make the heritage desolate, so that few are found who mourn to the Lord, nor do they lay to heart their fatal mistake.

Such of the children of God as are for a while caught in this snare will be made to feel what an evil and bitter thing it is to sin in this way against God; and though they have "sown wheat" (v. 13) that is, some honest prayers and some sorrowful confessions, yet they will find the Lord will resent their sins, that they may know and keep in remembrance the wormwood and the gall; and "the spoilers," even the devil and our corrupt hearts will be left to hinder our prayers, and no access will be readily found either in reading, hearing, or in conversing with the saints. All this the Lord suffers for the further humbling of our pride and independence; yet even here is set before us an open door, that when he has made them ashamed of themselves, he will take in hand those "evil neighbours" (or deceitful hearts and a tempting devil) and pluck them out of their hands, and have compassion upon them and bring them again to his heritage; and he will again be their beloved, and they shall be his.

Thus I have written what I found to be exceedingly sweet and encouraging, and hope you will all sooner or later be able to find you are the Lord's beloved, though a poor and an afflicted people.

Yours &c. J. B.

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