

Letter 63

by James Bourne

James Bourne's sermon emphasizes the importance of genuine faith, the role of affliction in spiritual growth, and the necessity of repentance and humility before God.

Scripture: Psalm 118:19

Topics: "Spiritual Struggle", "Genuine Faith"

Description

James Bourne delivers a sermon to a friend, reflecting on the struggles of a professor of religion lacking vital power, who faces darkness, dryness, and barrenness in their spiritual journey. Bourne emphasizes the importance of repentance, self-loathing before the Lord, and the distinction between genuine faith and hypocrisy. He highlights the necessity of afflictions to humble the heart and the conflict between the flesh and the spirit within believers. Bourne encourages a deep reliance on God's compassion, mercy, and truth, especially in times of affliction, to experience true transformation and live out the Gospel in sincerity and humility.

Transcript

[To a Friend.] Holmwood, September 1834.

My dear Friend,

Of all states of men in this life there is none like that of a professor of religion, who is destitute of the vital power. The prophet Ezekiel gives a fearful account of such, written in a book full of "lamentation, mourning, and woe." He calls them "impudent children and stiff-hearted" and "a rebellious house" [Ezek. ii. 3-10]. These are they who are ever learning, and never attaining; who tithe mint and anise and cummin, but omit the weightier matters of the law.

How often have I had a dread upon my spirit lest this should be my case! Darkness, dryness, and barrenness have come upon me, and my backsliding heart has driven me further and further into the wilderness, and seemingly nothing is left, but a little glimmering light in some measure to discover the condition to which my sin has brought me. How this has fretted me, and made my temper sour, adding sin to sin, until a fearful apprehension springs up that surely this is not the spot of God's children, but a mark of the "perverse and crooked generation" [Deut. xxxii. 5]; I bring every one into bondage, therefore cannot belong to the true church. Such as these become the secret meditations of my soul night and day, until the misery grows too great for me to bear with, and some affliction or cross is laid upon me, to rouse me from

this wretched state. Here I feel my sin, that it is exceeding sinful in the sight of God; nor do I ever find comfort until I am made to repent in dust and ashes, and to loathe myself before the Lord, with my mouth in the dust. Here the Lord shews me the difference between real love and dissembled love, feigned faith and living faith, a good hope and the hope of the hypocrite; and here the "gates of righteousness" are opened, and I go into them and praise the Lord [Psalm cxviii. 19]. Here too I have had a sweet view of God's love in Christ Jesus, manifested to us in the way of communion with him. "Did not our hearts burn within us, while he talked with us by the way?" And though this talking may be, and sometimes is, in finding many faults, and giving some correction and much admonition and counsel, yet if we have the witness of the Spirit that he is teaching us by all these means, we cannot but cry, "Thou art my God and I will praise thee."

How often have I felt this, with a lively testimony of God's goodwill - "The Lord hath chastened me sore, but he hath not given me over unto death." He has been pleased to make a discovery to my soul of the necessity of a sharp furnace; he has plainly shown me many times the mischievous effects of an easy path, the danger of the foolish pride of my heart, which must be humbled, and the repeated blows which are necessary for that purpose; and the exceeding shortness of memory of that man of sin within us, for unless the strokes are repeated the effect is quickly lost.

"Ye are the temple of the Holy Ghost." "An habitation of God through the Spirit." What manner of men then ought we to be? What manner of men should we be, if left in the quiet management of ourselves? I stand deeply convicted here, and can only pray with Hart,

"How harsh so e'er the way,

Dear Saviour, still lead on;

Nor leave us till we say,

Father, Thy will be done."

In this I perceive another lesson, namely, the conflict of two contending parties, the flesh and the spirit, two manner of men within us; which is a mystery to the world and to all carnal professors.

While we thus gain by trading, and profit by affliction, we learn to believe and feel that the Lord Jesus Christ is full of compassion, gracious, and longsuffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth. One said, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted" [Psalm cxix. 71]. We do not know how gracious our God is, until we have been well immersed in afflictions. In them we find his bowels are always moved towards us, and that he is plenteous in mercy unto all that call upon him. By them does God "turn to the people a pure language" [Zeph. iii. 9]; and by degrees we know what it is to become a little child, and learn in heart, in secret before God, as well as openly, to prefer others that fear God, before ourselves. An ear made ready, a heart warmed with the love of God, and abased under a sight of our sad condition, will receive what the Lord may send us even by babes, or fools made wise unto salvation.

O then, may you and I prize this teaching of God's Most Holy Spirit, and thus make manifest to the church, to our own families, and in the world, that we are not such as have "a name to live," while dead in trespasses and sins; but that, life and immortality have been brought to light in us, through the Gospel. So may we live, and so die, is the prayer of your unworthy friend,

J. B.

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