

Letter 95

by James Bourne

James Bourne's sermon emphasizes the importance of seeking God's mercy and maintaining faith in times of despair.

Scripture: Jeremiah 30:7

Topics: "Gods Mercy", "Spiritual Despair"

Description

James Bourne preaches about the danger of young believers assuming they know God's plans and falling into despair, emphasizing the need to humbly seek God's mercy despite feeling sinful and unworthy. He shares his own experiences of despair and how crying out to the Lord in desperation led to a profound sense of God's mercy and peace. Bourne encourages the listener to diligently seek God's presence, reminding them of God's faithfulness in times of despair and the importance of not giving up hope in God's mercy.

Transcript

[To one who said there was no hope.] London, 7 October 1835.

Dear Friend,

I know of nothing so disheartening, though very common, as for young professors to take the seat of judgment and finally decide what the Lord means to do; and then to hold their notions so fast as to think it must be as they judge, and can be no otherwise. They are not aware that this snare is a master-piece of hell, and a death-blow to spiritual life; for they generally add, It is no use seeking God - I am so sinful that he cannot have mercy. Now, if natural things were so treated, a man of natural common sense would soon discover the fallacy. I cannot but believe that the Lord allows all this for the humbling of our pride, and the bringing down of our native strength, which till this trial comes on, we think is wonderfully great. We are suffered sometimes to labour here for long, to be more deeply convinced of our totally lost condition.

"He shall by means like these

Thy stubborn temper break;

Soften thy heart by due degrees,

And make thy spirit meek."

You are yet not able to understand the deep necessity of the chastening hand of God. I wish I could prevail on you to make your present despair a plea, and not hastily conclude that God's purposes towards you are only final destruction; one says, truly and wisely, that it is not the office of the Holy Spirit to bear witness to this. Therefore let me entreat you in prayer to dispute the point, and to refuse to give up crying for mercy while the Lord gives you breath. You can but despair and sink into ruin, if you pray in vain; but where will you find one that was ever finally lost, who looked to Jesus Christ for help? He was sent unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

Luther remarks, that though David says, "The sorrows of death compassed me, and the floods of ungodly men made me afraid; the sorrows of hell compassed me, and the snares of death prevented me," and though these were so overwhelming as to leave no room for hope or help, for he was completely surrounded and overpowered by them, yet in his distress "he called upon the Lord, and cried unto his God;" and his cry entered into the ears of the Lord. [Psalm xviii. 4-6.]

These things are left on record as an especial check to our rebellion, and ought to stop our mouths from daring to decide what God in his sovereignty has in all ages chosen to keep a hidden mystery. I cannot but yet hope that your trouble is what is called "Jacob's trouble," of which it is said, "Alas, for that day is great, so that none is like it: it is even the time of Jacob's trouble; but he shall be saved out of it" [Jer. xxx. 7].

John Bunyan was two whole years labouring in this despair, which the Lord suffered him to know in order that he might have a clear conception of the cases of many poor lost sinners to whom he would have to preach, and set forth Jesus Christ as the only source of help and redress against all the objections that can be raised.

I myself have been long at the point of despair, not having in my apprehension the least shadow of a hope that the Lord could have any purpose of mercy towards me. I could neither eat nor sleep, thinking it could be no use to mind anything, seeing I was doomed to destruction. I lay in this state long without any interval of hope; but about six o'clock one evening in my desperation I cried to the Lord with much agony of spirit, that if there could be mercy shown, he would show it to me; and presently these words were whispered in my heart, Thou shalt return in the power of the Spirit. I put it away, because I thought it was only spoken of Jesus Christ; but it came a second time, and was repeated seven times, before I could receive the power of it upon my heart, I had so many objections, and was so fearful that it was impossible any mercy could be shown to me. But the power became so great as to remove all objections, and fill my soul with joy and peace in believing. The effect was the most sensible self abasement, while I enjoyed such sweet holy familiarity and access as I had never known before. How sweetly did the Bible speak to me! That which was lately full of vengeance and judgment, was now all mercy.

One day a cloud came over me which caused such heaviness that I knew not how to bear the loss of the sweet things I have written above. I made many lamentations and confessions, and earnestly begged of the Lord to return; and these words were spoken upon my heart with great sweetness and power, "What woman, having ten pieces of silver, if she lose one of them, cloth not light a candle and sweep the house, and seek diligently, till she find it?" [Luke xv. 8.1 The word diligently was greatly impressed on my mind, and I cried, Lord give me this spiritual diligence; and I found my spirit would not rest from crying, and the Lord again restored to me the light of his countenance, and I once more went on my way rejoicing. In that light I had often a sweet discovery of God's especial favour towards me, telling me the battle was not mine but his, and that he would never leave me nor forsake me.

This sweet way of living continued some time, but a foolish backsliding heart again insidiously drew me aside into the spirit of the world, and again I required heavy strokes. Under the apprehensions of death I felt much despair, sometimes to such an extent as to alarm my friends, till they sunk with me and thought my case hopeless; but here also the Lord did not judge as man judgeth. When he had humbled my pride, and made me effectually feel my lost condition, he showed me that "the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house, and it fell not, for it was founded upon a rock." The discovery came with such power as to counterbalance all my despair, and the Lord was pleased to turn my captivity, and spoke these words to me, which were unspeakably sweet in the unfolding of them, "Thou shalt again go forth in the dances of them that make merry" [Per. xxxi. 4]. This was spiritual, and was fulfilled by the joy unspeakable that he gave me; restoring me to health both of body and soul. This conflict lasted four years at least; but his faithfulness never fails.

After this also I gradually and foolishly went back again to a distance from the Lord. In this melancholy and fearful trial my feelings were such that even the remembrance of them makes me shudder; but I must say, O Lord, I can by thy grace acknowledge that thou art clear when thou judgest. I knew not at the time what the Lord would do with me. His judgments are a great deep. My heart had gone astray from him, and I read these words, "Ye have forsaken me and served other gods, wherefore I will deliver you no more. Go and cry unto the gods ye have chosen" [Judges x. 13, 14]. My spirits sunk and I seemed to have no hope, nor to find any way of escape. The terrors of the night almost over-came me, and I fully concluded I should go in the bitterness of my soul all my days. None seemed to care for my soul, and none could help me. Yet here also the Lord appeared for me, and these words came with such power and divine authority as to fill my soul with the greatest joy: "He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall DOUBTLESS come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him."

All these things I desire to set before you, at the same time knowing that the natural mind of man is more obstinate than a mule, and more violent in opposition to God than can be set forth. This will join you in affinity to Satan, to set the shoulder against all that God has left on record in his word, and against all the sweet deliverances he has wrought for his people, under the most distressing despair. O do pray, and let not a rebellious spirit tempt you to refrain, "lest your bands be made strong." Think of Esther's memorable words, and try them, "If I perish, I perish." Joel asks, "Who knoweth if the Lord will return and repent, and leave a blessing behind him?" You are not yet where Jonah was; there seemed no hope for him; yet he cried and found deliverance. Do not limit the Holy One of Israel. May he prove himself better to you than all your fears! and pray do never again say anything more about your knowing that God's judgments were denounced against you, which you can never prove.

Yours &c. J. B.

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