

Life Given for a Prey

by J.C. Philpot

The sermon warns against seeking great things for oneself, and encourages listeners to seek to serve the Lord instead, promising that He will give their life for a prey in all places where they go.

Scripture: Romans 4:2, 1 Corinthians 5:6, Galatians 6:4, Philippians 2:16, Hebrews 3:6

Topics: "Faithful Living", "Boasting In Lord"

Description

The preacher discusses the concept of boasting in the Bible, distinguishing between proper and improper boasting. He emphasizes the importance of boasting in the Lord and His work rather than in oneself. The sermon delves into the idea of running the race of faith without running in vain, highlighting the need for believers to live faithfully and endure to the end to receive the imperishable prize awaiting them at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

Transcript

"And do you seek great things for yourself? Seek them not- for, behold, I will bring evil upon all flesh, says the Lord. But your life will I give unto you for a prey in all places where you go." Jeremiah 45:5

These words were addressed to Baruch, and addressed to him under very peculiar circumstances. Those of you who are diligent readers and students of the word of God, will perhaps recollect the peculiar circumstances to which I have alluded. But, as I cannot expect that you all are either such diligent students, or should be able to call them immediately to mind- for some very good people have very bad memories- I will briefly mention what those circumstances were. And as the chapter is short I think I cannot do better than read a good part of it to you. It begins thus- The prophet Jeremiah gave a message to Baruch son of Neriah in the fourth year of the reign of Jehoiakim son of Josiah, after Baruch had written down everything Jeremiah had dictated to him. He said, "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says to you, Baruch: You have said, 'I am overwhelmed with trouble! Haven't I had enough pain already? And now the Lord has added more! I am weary of my own sighing and can find no rest.' " Jeremiah 45:1-3

The verses which I have just read will give you a clue to the special circumstances under which I have intimated that these words were addressed to Baruch. The very date is significant. Baruch is said to have written these words in a book (or scroll, as the word means) at the dictation of Jeremiah in the fourth year of Jehoiakim. Now, if you will turn to chapter 36 of this prophet, you will find that- During the fourth year that Jehoiakim son of Josiah was king in Judah, the Lord gave this message to Jeremiah: "Get a scroll, and write down all my messages against Israel, Judah, and the other nations. Begin with the first message

back in the days of Josiah, and write down every message you have given, right up to the present time." Jeremiah 36:1-2

Jeremiah, however, was at that time in prison, and was, therefore, not able himself to go forth and read the scroll to the people unto whom it was sent. Consequently, he sends for Baruch the son of Neriah, to write it for him. Whether there was some physical reason why he could not write it himself, as, for instance, his hands being chained, or whether it was more convenient to write by dictation, a thing which I often do myself, I cannot say; but he employs the pen of Baruch, who, therefore, wrote from his mouth all the words of the Lord which he had spoken unto him, on the scroll of a book.

Now these words were a denunciation of God's wrath upon Jerusalem and Judah, and his determination, if they repented not, to give them into the hands of the king of Babylon, who would bring upon that city swift and certain destruction. Baruch was to read this scroll in the house of the Lord, which he faithfully did; for he went up into the chamber or Gemariah, and there he read the words out of the scroll of the book. But he also read them in the ear of the princes, and they, struck with amazement and consternation at the contents of the scroll, mentioned it to the king. The king sent for the scroll that he might hear it read; but when he had heard read part of the scroll, about three leaves or rather columns, he took his penknife- he was sitting by the fire in his winter-house or winter-palace- cut it to pieces, and cast it into the fire until all the scroll was consumed.

Now, these were the circumstances under which the Lord sent this message by Jeremiah unto Baruch. The power of the king in those days was absolute. There was no check upon it either by law or custom; and this made the wrath of the king so dreadful. It was, as Solomon declares, "The wrath of a king is as messengers of death," (Prov. 16:14); for the messengers of death, that is the executioners, as we see was the case in John the Baptist, followed quickly upon the king's command. Joab found no protection from the wrath of the king even at the altar; for at the command of the king, Benaiah went up and fell upon him and slew him, as he afterwards did Shimei. Well, then, might Baruch dread the wrath of the king.

And as the word of God often gives us, by its graphic touches, incidental discoveries of men's natural disposition, I think we may gather from Baruch's language that he was naturally timid, and one might almost say, disposed to give way to fretfulness and complaining. But this very weakness, if such it were, of Baruch, did not escape the noticing eye, or was it unfelt by the compassionate heart of the God of Israel, who in all his people's affliction is afflicted. He had heard Baruch's passionate lament, and reminds him of it. "You did say, Woe is me now! for the Lord has added grief to my sorrow; I fainted in my sighing, and I find no rest." He had already been deeply plunged in sorrow. Doubtless he was one of the men whom Ezekiel saw in vision (Ezek. 9:4), as one of those upon whose forehead a mark was set, in that "they sighed and cried for all the abominations that were done in the midst of Jerusalem." And as believing the sure language of prophecy, that God would give Jerusalem into the hands of the Chaldeans, he might well have cause for sorrow, in seeing what a destruction was coming upon the city and the whole land. Day and night these trials, and no doubt he had others also of a more personal and peculiar nature, made him grieve and groan but now the Lord had added grief to his sorrow. He seemed to have as much before as, or even more than he could well bear. But now an additional load was laid upon his back; the weight of his cross was doubled, and the poignancy of grief was added to the load of sorrow.

How suitable are these words to many of the family of God. Like Baruch, they have their enduring sorrow, the weight of a daily cross which severely presses them down. But upon this often comes a keener, sharper, and more cutting trial. Say, for instance, that their daily cross in an afflicted body, or trying

circumstances in providence, or a series of heavy family afflictions. These are their daily burdens; but upon the back of this may come some peculiarly distressing bereavement of wife, husband, or child- or powerful soul temptations, or keen spiritual distress, or a whole sea of disquieting doubts and fears, so as almost to remove the very foundation of their hope. When, then, to their daily cross is added some especially cutting grief, then they are ready to say with Baruch, "You have added grief to my sorrow. Was it not enough for me to have the weight and burden of a daily trial? Was not the cup already quite full? Why should this last drop of peculiar bitterness be added not only to make it overflow, but to make the whole draught full of gall and wormwood? Why should I have this peculiar grief sent me in addition to all the other crosses, losses, trials, and burdens with which I have been so long and so painfully exercised? It is more than I can bear; I faint in my sighing, and I find no rest."

Now, if this be your case- and doubtless I have before me some who have, perhaps even lately, had grief added to their sorrow, and thus can enter feelingly into the mournful language of Baruch- I have a message for you; I have something to say to you this morning from the Lord. And if you ask me what this message is, and what I have to speak to you in the name of the Lord, my answer shall be the words of our text, "Do you seek great things for yourself? seek them not- for, behold, I will bring evil upon all flesh, says the Lord- but your life will I give unto you for a prey in all places where you go."

We may observe, I think, in these words, four prominent features:

We have, first, a searching inquiry- "Do you seek great things for yourself?"

We have secondly, a faithful admonition- "Seek them not."

Thirdly, a solemn denunciation- "I will bring evil upon all flesh."

And fourthly, a gracious promise- "Your life will I give unto them for a prey in all places where you go."

I. A searching INQUIRY- "Do you seek great things for yourself?" The Lord reads the heart; we can merely see the countenance, or form our judgment of men from their actions; and though this latter is by no means a bad test of men's dispositions, yet there is in them often much that lurks in the inward recesses of their heart, which is manifested neither in their face nor by their conduct. Samuel, when he saw the stately height and manly form of Eliab, said at once, as if he were sure that he was the object of God's choice, "Surely the Lord's anointed is before him." But Samuel, like us, could neither read God's thoughts nor man's hidden devices. "But the Lord said unto Samuel, Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him- for the Lord sees not as man sees; for man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." (1 Samuel 16:7.)

And as we cannot read the hearts of one another, so we but dimly and imperfectly read our own. Self-love hides from our view much of the secret depths of our heart; and temptation or opportunity will sometimes bring to light such hidden evils that we are ready to start back in horror from our own selves. All at once the lid is taken off, and we see unbelief, infidelity, blasphemy, obscenity, lasciviousness, adultery, envy, wrath, and murder, all seething as in a boiling pot, and ready to boil over. Now the Lord sees all this; nor is it ever hidden from him, though often hidden from us.

So it seems to me that the Lord, who read Baruch's heart to the very center, saw in him what was perhaps hidden not only from those who knew him, but hidden also from himself. There was then, it would seem, in Baruch's heart, what indeed is in the hearts of all, but in some working more strongly or more subtly than

in others, an ambitious spirit seeking after great things. I judge this from the Lord putting the question so closely to him- "Do you seek great things for yourself?" Had he not been given to this propensity, the question would not have had that peculiar application to his case, nor carried with it such special rebuke. He might not have been conscious of this propensity, and his ambitious spirit might have worked in a very subtle and secret manner. As a gracious man, as one who feared and loved God above many, as Jeremiah's bosom friend and companion, as sympathizing and suffering with him in his afflictions and persecutions, and as honored of the Lord to write the words from Jeremiah's mouth, and to proclaim them to the people, he would hardly seem to have been, one would almost think, under the power of "secret ambition".

It was not a time, it was not a place, his was not a post wherein great things should be sought after. What was power in the court of a king like Jehoiakim? What was property in a land soon to be laid desolate? What was money, house, furniture, worldly luxuries in a city which was to be speedily burned with fire? Or if we suppose that Baruch coveted promotion as a prophet, to occupy Jeremiah's place when Jeremiah was shut up in prison, he must have seen and known that such a promotion would bring with it Jeremiah's afflictions. If he now said, "You have added grief to my sorrow; I faint in my sighing, and I find no rest," what would he say when cast into Jeremiah's dungeon? And yet with all this, the Lord, who reads all hearts, saw that there was in him an ambitious spirit, which he here reproves.

But let me now, turning from Baruch's case, apply it to our own; and to make my inquiry more searching, let me address it specially to you. Let me ask you, all of you, each of you individually, "Do you seek great things for yourself?" You may answer "No; I am not aware of any great things that I am seeking. I think, at least I hope, I am pretty moderate in my desires; and as to great things, I hardly know what you understand by them." But great and small are relative terms. What is great to one is small to another; and what is small to one is great to another. When, therefore, I put this searching inquiry, "Do you seek great things for yourself?" I must adapt my inquiry to the state of the case, to the circumstances of the people before me.

You may think that you are not seeking great things because you are not in a line of life which is usually considered great, even were you advanced in it much higher than you now stand; and thus you measure great things by a wrong standard, for you are looking at great and small as the world views them, and not as the word of God, or an enlightened conscience would consider them. You may also not be conscious of an ambitious spirit, and yet there may be working in your heart, unknown to yourself, an inordinate desire to rise out of present low and depressing circumstances, or a great dissatisfaction with your appointed lot of life, and a spirit of great restlessness to emerge out of it, and to advance yourself into a spot more gratifying to your pride, more pleasing to your flesh, more lifted up beyond that neglect or even contempt which is often cast upon you in that inferior condition, as you think it, that is, inferior in your opinion to your ability, skill, industry, age of life, and so on, which you now occupy. With such views and feelings you may be thinking that it is quite right and justifiable for yourself, or if not altogether for yourself, at any rate for your family, to do all that you can to get out of your present inferior position; and if this be your desire mainly, that you may live honestly and honorably, and owe no man any debt but the debt of love, you cannot be justly blamed.

But under this good appearance, under this lawful aim and object, there often lurks and works a proud, self-seeking, ambitious spirit which is seeking great things, that is, great to you, considering your station in life, which might not be great to another whose lot in providence is of a higher grade. Here we are apt to deceive ourselves. Let me then ask you, Are you content with that station in life in which God has seen fit

to place you? Is there no grasping after something better, something greater, something higher and grander, something to make you more respectable before man and less dependent upon the providence of God? And how we see this ambitious spirit, this trying to rise, this grasping after something great, at least great relatively, if not absolutely, in every station in life.

How the professional man is ever seeking to be at the head of his profession, and frets and murmurs if outrun in the eager race, even though many are behind him probably as well skilled as he. How the tradesman is seeking if possible to enlarge his connection, add to his business, drive a flourishing trade, and is ever fixing his eye on those who seem to outstrip him in success, even though he has no real reason to complain of lack of income, and is doing far better than very many in the same line. How the laborer, to take another instance, is dissatisfied with his position, thinks himself hardly treated because others are preferred, grumbles at his wages though fully equal to his industry and skill, and is reaching after a post which, could he obtain it, he would not be able properly or successfully to fill.

Is there one here who does not think himself qualified for a higher post, or a better position than he now occupies, and does not secretly fret and murmur at the success of others, his self-love blinding him to the fact that they have better abilities, greater skill, more unwearied industry, or higher qualifications than he? Don't you want to live in a better house, have more money to spend, wear finer clothes, buy handsomer furniture, dress your children better, work less hard, and get more pay? Could we look into men's hearts, we would see how in every station of life, from the highest to the lowest, there was a restless discontent with their condition in life, an overlooking of the hand of God in providence which has done so much for them, and a continual reaching forth of anxious desire for something greater and better than they at present possess.

Thus far have I viewed this ambitious spirit, as manifesting itself in matters of providence, but now take the words in another sense; for the searching inquiry as to seeking great things for oneself reaches far beyond mere providential matters. Take, then, religion; that which concerns us most deeply; take that which we all of us more or less profess to have, or at least, hope to be found having in the great day. How often there is a seeking great things in religion.

How many ministers, for instance, are seeking after great gifts, thirsting after popularity, applause, acceptance among men. They are not satisfied with being simply and solely what God may make them by his Spirit and grace, with the acceptance that he may give them among some of his own people, and the blessing which he may make them to a scattered few here and there. This inferior position, as they consider it, so beneath their grace and gifts, their talents and abilities, does not satisfy their restless mind and aspiring turn. Their ambition is to stand at the very head of their peers, to be looked up to and sought after as a leader and a guide, to have a larger chapel, a fuller congregation, a better salary, and a wider field for the display of their gifts and abilities. Gladly would they stand apart from all others, brook no rival to their pulpit throne, and be lord paramount at home and abroad. And what is the consequence of this proud, ambitious spirit? What envy, what jealousy, what detraction do we see in men who want to stand at the top of the tree! And though these very things tend, and justly tend, to sink them lower in the estimation of men than they would otherwise be, yet how, again and again, do they seek to rise by standing, as it were, on the slain bodies of others.

How also in those who are not ministers, but who may occupy some lower part, and yet not an inconspicuous one, as say, deacons in a church, or as gifted members frequently called upon to pray in public- how many we see seeking after great gifts in prayer, so as to be more acceptable to the people

than they at present feel that they are, and to be admired for their fluency, their variety, their fervency, their superiority to their brethren, who may, occasionally, take a part with them in the same service. O the pride of man's heart! How it will work and show itself even under a guise of religion and holiness.

How often, too, do we see men employing their time and abilities in the study of the Scriptures with scarcely a thought or a desire after any savor, sweetness, or power that may flow from God's word into their heart. How anxious, also, are others to penetrate into deep mysteries and acquire a knowledge of doctrine merely as doctrine without prayerful meditation, or any earnest cry that what they read may be made life and spirit to their souls, or may lead them into a believing, obedient knowledge of God's will, so as to do those things which are pleasing in his sight. Thus, instead of seeking to know and feel the power of God's word, that it may bring into their hearts pardon and peace, union and communion with the Father and his dear Son, deliverance from doubts, fears, and bondage, that they might walk before God in the light of his countenance, and bless and praise him with joyful lips, they are rather seeking after such great things, as men count them, which shall carry with them human praise, exalt them upon a seeming pedestal above others, and make men esteem, honor, and admire them for their great attainments.

Few can see that in religion, what are considered great things, are really very little, and what are considered little, are really very great. How few can see that a broken heart, a contrite spirit, a humble mind, a tender conscience, a meek, quiet, and patient bearing of the cross, a believing submission and resignation to the will of God, a looking to him, and to him alone, for all supplies in providence or in grace, with a continual seeking of his face and desiring nothing so much as the visitations of his favor; a loving, affectionate, forbearing, and forgiving spirit, a bearing of injuries and reproaches without retaliation, a liberal heart and hand, and a godly, holy, and separate life and walk, are the things which in God's sight are great; while a knowledge of doctrine, clear insight into gospel mysteries, and a ready speech are really very little things, and are often to be found side by side and hand in hand with a proud, covetous, worldly, unhumbled spirit, and a living in what is sinful and evil.

Now looking into your heart, unless God has humbled or broken you down, you will very probably find some of these ambitious aims secretly working there with greater or less power; and even if it is not manifested in word or action, there will be the feeling, the desire, the craving more or less clearly discovered to your view.

Now the Lord was determined that Baruch should not seek these great things. He therefore sent upon him continual disappointments. He led him into a path of daily sorrow; and at the particular period recorded in the chapter before us, he added grief to it. Seeing the necessity of breaking down this pride, humbling this ambition, and bringing him to a spot, that only spot of real safety, to be nothing good or great in himself, either in providence or grace, the Lord, in addition to the daily cross, sent him this special grief, and under the weight of it, he fainted in his sighing, and could find no rest. He was not, like most around him, blind to the signs of the times, or deaf to the threatenings of God by the mouth of his prophets. He knew that God would surely bring to pass his severe judgments denounced by Jeremiah against Jerusalem. He could see by the eye of faith, that the king of Babylon would take the city by force, and he knew well what scenes of horror would follow- such scenes as we find described in the Lamentations, when the priest and the prophet were slain in the sanctuary of the Lord, when the young and the old lay on the ground in the streets, when the virgins and young men fell by the sword, and they ravished the women in Zion and the maids in Judah. (Lam. 2:20-21; 5:11.)

As a patriot, he would mourn over the destruction of his country; as a godly Israelite, he would grieve over the sins of the people against God, and the destruction which they would bring upon themselves in body and soul; as a citizen, he could not but deeply feel the blighting of his own prospects; as a father, he would be filled with dread as to what would become of his children; as a husband, what might be the fate of his wife, when the city was taken by storm. And we may well believe that amid the hidings of God's face from Jerusalem, a dark cloud would also hang over his soul. Putting all these things together, we see that there were abundant reasons why Baruch should have grief added to his sorrow, should faint in his sighings, and find no rest for either body or soul.

It may be so in some degree, though not to the same extent, with you. You have never been able to succeed in any one of your ambitious projects. As you have tried to be something, or get something, greater than you at present are or possess, God has thrown it down. Everything has gone against you; business has not flourished; disappointment has ever attended your path. Troubles at home, trials in your family, distress in circumstances, continual disappointment and frustration- all these have been so many blows upon the head of your pride.

And as regards your ambition in the things of God, if you have sought to gain applause by your gifts, or to make yourself wise by doctrinal knowledge, you have found the emptiness of all gifts, when guilt lay upon your conscience; the inefficacy of all knowledge to staunch a bleeding wound; and the barrenness of all doctrine, when not attended with life and power to the soul. Now, if you know this, and have been in some measure cured of this ambitious spirit by grief being added to your sorrow, you will be able to listen to the Lord's faithful admonition-

II. The faithful ADMONITION, which I said I would consider as a second branch of our subject; "Seek them not."

A. The Lord tells us we must not seek great things as our portion in this life. They are not for us to handle, to strive after, or to enjoy. Let the world have them. Let the carnal and the ungodly have what is their portion here below. But let not the people of God aim at obtaining in this world success, prosperity, and happiness. The world is meant to be to them a place of trouble and sorrow, and they are to have vexations, grief, and disappointments, as more or less their daily lot. If then, contrary to the revealed will of God, they have set their heart upon earthly things, they are sure to be disappointed, for the Lord will not allow them to obtain, or at least enjoy anything which shall be really and permanently injurious to their soul. He, therefore, says to them in his providence, as well as in his word, what he said to Baruch, "Seek them not."

But you will perhaps say, "What are we then to seek?" I will tell you in one word- REALITIES. What are these great things that you are seeking after? say in religion. Could you see them in their right light, you would see that they are but shadows. You feel, for instance, your deficiency in gift in public when you are called upon to pray, or in private when you converse with those who possess readier speech, and you desire what are commonly called gifts, such a greater fluency of utterance, more ability to quote Scripture, and a more abundant variety of expressions, so as to make a deeper impression on the hearers- your real desire being that you might stand higher in their estimation. But what would these gifts, if you had them to the fullest extent, so that men might almost worship you for them, do for you when you shall be called upon to lie upon a death-bed- when eternity is in view, and your soul has to deal with God only? You will desire no gifts then. Grace will be the only thing which can do you any good.

Or perhaps, feeling your ignorance in many points of doctrine, compared with the clear views of others, you have been aspiring after knowledge. But what will knowledge do for you when guilt lies hard upon your conscience?

Or it may be that you have been aiming at great attainments of assurance and confidence, so as to be delivered out of a path of daily exercise and trial, and to reach a firm and settled standing beyond all doubt and fear. I by no means condemn this, for a sweet assurance of the love of God is a most blessed spot to be in; but there is often a temptation to obtain a settled assurance by resting in the doctrine of it, and thus not to be dependent upon the comings and goings of the Lord's presence. This very attainment, therefore, at which you have been aiming, might leave you when you needed it most, and fail you in that solemn moment when nothing can speak peace to your soul but a word from the mouth of the Lord.

Thus far I have confined myself to the point of seeking great things RELIGIOUSLY; but let me now drop a word upon seeking them naturally and PROVIDENTIALLY. Surely I need not ask what peace you are likely to get when your head lies upon a dying pillow from all that you have grasped after or gained in the things of this life. Does not your own conscience tell you that those great things which so many are seeking after in providence, when life is fast ebbing away, when divine consolation is sought for, and some balm to be applied to a bleeding conscience, will, as is said of riches, have made themselves wings and flown away, and left nothing but disappointment and sorrow?

Is it not now then your wisdom to seek, not GREAT things, but REAL things; divine blessings; things of which we shall never be ashamed; things which God will own, not only upon a bed of death, but at the great day when he will make up his jewels? I do believe, from what I have known and felt myself, that every child of God, according to the measure of the work of grace upon his soul, can never be satisfied with anything short of realities. He has a real soul. Sin is a real thing; the law is a real thing; its condemnation is a real thing; a guilty conscience is a real thing; and he must have blessings from God suited to, and, as it were, more than able to counterbalance these solemn and felt realities.

Any trifle will suit and please you until the life and fear of God enters your breast. But of all trifling, to trifle with God and one's own soul is the worst- and yet on every side we seem surrounded with triflers. I do not mean the world's giddy triflers, who trifle time and life away, until, in a moment, they go down into the grave; but our churches and chapels are filled with religious triflers, who trifle with religion as worldly people trifle with dress and amusements, or even trifle with sin as Indian jugglers play with venomous serpents. Now those who do not feel the weight of divine things, whose souls have never been quickened into spiritual life, with all their profession, all their knowledge, and all their attainments, have never sought for divine and heavenly realities. They have never seen the distinction between a blessing from God- what we may call a real blessing, as carrying with it its own unmistakable mark and impress of coming from God and such a dim and distant hope as they may attain unto by believing the letter of the word; and thus their faith stands in the wisdom of men, and not in the power of God. But the Lord will take care that his people shall, each in their measure, be seeking after divine realities, and not only seek them, but obtain them.

B. But let me explain a little more clearly what I mean by divine realities, and I shall best do so by mentioning some of them.

1. A manifestation of the mercy, goodness, and love of God to the soul, is a divine reality. It will do to live by; it will do to die by; it will make death a welcome messenger and not a gloomy foreshadow of apprehended wrath. But to be seeking great things and yet miss the real thing; to be aiming at gifts and

miss grace; to be seeking form and miss power; to be seeking the applause of man and miss the approbation of God; to miss salvation, to miss mercy, pardon, peace, and acceptance; to miss the favor of God manifested to the soul by a divine power- O what a fool must a man be, to speak after the manner of men, to be hunting after shadows and miss the substance; to be aiming after high things that can only feed the flesh, and to miss what many think to be low and little things, but which in the sight of God are of great price.

Hence we may see the benefit of grief being added to sorrow- of fainting in one's sighing and knowing no rest. These sharp trials and exercises of soul prepare for realities, for nothing else can live in the furnace. Wood, hay, and stubble are all burnt up in it, and nothing stands the fire but gold, silver, and precious stones. I wish you, however, to observe, that it may be a long time before a child of God gets those realities which he is longing after, and without which he can never be satisfied. But I would say to him for his encouragement that what he has already, though it be little is real. The word for instance may not come home to his soul with all the power he is longing for, yet what little may come is real. The little faith that is given has a reality in it; and so the love which is shed abroad in his heart, it may be faint and feeble in his apprehension, but it is real. It is of God, for love is of God, and will act and work in a way which manifests that it is from him.

2. Another reality to be sought after and enjoyed, as far beyond any great thing, is a sweet revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ to the soul; to have a view of his glorious Person, a taste of his presence, a breaking in of the light of his countenance, a gracious visitation from his most blessed Majesty, a smile from his most lovely countenance. To be favored with these, will kill a man to seeking great things, either naturally or religiously; for all those great things which worldly professors are seeking, would, if he could obtain them, only serve to keep out the life, presence, and power of Christ from his soul. If he had everything that heart could wish, had risen as he once hoped in the world, and fully grasped all that his towering ambition pointed to, he would have had no heart for Christ.

And if in religion he could have attained to human applause, or satisfied himself with mere gifts and acquirements, there would have been no room in his soul for the love, and blood, and blessed visitations of the Son of God. Thus he will, sooner or later, see how much better grace is than gifts, and the approbation of God than the applause of man. For when once the Lord has been pleased to manifest a sense of his love and mercy, bestowed his presence, and given a view of himself in his beauty, it has killed the soul to all other lovers and all other love. Having once tasted that the Lord is gracious, there is a continual seeking after him as a reality, compared with which, how empty and vain is all earthly good.

3. So, again, quiet submission to God's will; grace and strength to bear the daily cross with patience; not to be full of rebellion and self-pity- not to be given up to the sorrow of the world which works death; but to bear what God lays on us with meekness, resignation, and humility- this is a thing to be sought after, for in this is a divine reality. God will take care to lay cross after cross, and trial after trial upon his people, until he brings them to submission. O how soon he can give this sweet and heavenly grace! How, in a moment, he can pour oil upon the troubled waves! How he can break to pieces that stubborn obstinacy and rebelliousness of which the heart is full, and give submission to his will! How he can bow and bend the proud spirit, fill the heart with humility and love, enable us to kiss the rod, and to fall prostrate before his dispensations, however severe they may be to the flesh!

4. To be spiritually-minded, which is life and peace; to have our affections in heaven; to walk with God in sweet communion; to enjoy his word, to love his truth, to feel the heart going out after him, and finding its

happiness in him- this is another reality which is to be sought after. This is not a great thing in the world's esteem, nor a great thing in the estimation of the great bulk of professors of religion; but it is a great thing to those who know its value. Does not the Lord himself declare that "to be spiritually-minded is life and peace?" What greater blessings are there than the life of God in the soul, and his peace ruling and reigning in the heart?

5. Again, to be favored in secret with the presence of God; to read his word with understanding and faith, to drink into the sweetness of his promises, find their suitability to the varied trials which we are called upon to pass through, and so know the word of God to be our food and drink; this is what we should seek after as a divine reality. It may not be counted great, but it is real.

6. To have our continual afflictions, trials, and exercises sanctified and made a blessing to us; not to see merely the hand of God in them, but to feel they are working in us the peaceable fruit of righteousness, that they are producing in us a conformity to the suffering image of Christ, and working in us for our benefit- is also what we should seek after as a divine reality.

7. To be kept from evil, that it may not grieve us; to have the fear of God deeply planted in our bosom; to see the evil of sin, to hate it, abhor it, and to turn away from it; to be kept as the apple of God's eye, hidden under the shadow of his wings, never allowed to transgress, but to walk with holy caution in this world full of snares- this is what should be sought after; for as there is a bitter reality in sin and disobedience, so there is a sweet reality in practical obedience and vital godliness.

8. So also, to come out of the world; to live separate from it; to have no companions but those that fear God; to turn our back upon empty professors and on empty profession; to live with and love those who walk tenderly in God's fear- these are things to be sought after; for there is a divine reality in them.

9. So again, to live to God's honor and glory- not to live to self, to pride, to the world; not to live as other men live, merely to feed the flesh, but to live to the glorifying of God in our several vocations- this is what we should seek after as proving our religion to have a divine reality in it.

10. May I not also add, that to help to the best of our power God's dear children, if enabled to do so, by contributing to their needs; if not able, by prayer and sympathy, and affectionate communion- is what we should seek after, as far more consistent with the word of God, and the path in which he would have us walk, than seeking after great things.

11. So also, to avoid all matter of contention and strife; not to take up cudgels upon every occasion of wounded pride or real, much less, fancied injury, but to walk in peace with the dear family of God, and, as far as lies in us, to live peaceably with all men, is another thing which we should earnestly seek after- for there can be no peace within, if there is no peace without. The Lord says to his bride, "My dove." A dove-like spirit, not that of a hawk or a vulture, is the spirit of a Christian.

12. To have our evidences continually brightened, doubts and fears chased away, backslidings healed, sins manifestly pardoned, and a sweet sense of reconciliation to God through the blood of his dear Son- this is another choice blessing that we should be ever seeking after.

13. The sensible approbation of God on our walk and conduct; that what we set ourselves unto, what we say and do, and that, with all our failures, the line of conduct we endeavor to act upon, should have the approving smile of God upon it, so that we may be able to bring it out before him, that he may shine upon

it, and prosper it; this is the last divine reality to be sought after, which I shall name.

Though what I have said may seem to draw a very straight and narrow line, yet I could not forbear bringing these things before you, as derived from the solemn admonition to Baruch, "Seek them not." It is true, that the things which we ought to seek, are not named or even alluded to in the admonition, for it is negative rather than positive; and yet it would not have been sufficient for me to have warned you, in the name of God, not to seek great things had I not laid before you also what I believe your own conscience, if rightly instructed, will tell you are real things, and as such, deserve our diligent and earnest search. And I must add, with all faithfulness, that if you have no desire after these divine realities, and still more if you despise or think them trifling things, it shows how little you know of the kingdom of God set up in the heart, which is "righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit."

III. But I pass on to my next point, which is God's solemn DENUNCIATION- "Behold, I will bring evil upon all flesh."

This is a very comprehensive declaration from the mouth of God. Taking it in its widest extent, it embraces many circumstances, in fact, well near every circumstance, which is not connected with the kingdom of God, and the graces of his Spirit. Let me explain myself. God was about to bring evil upon all flesh in the days of Baruch- not moral evil, but evil in the way of wide and general distress, heavy national judgments, destruction of the city, and desolation of the whole land, with terrible slaughter of the inhabitants, and all those horrors which take place when a city is taken by storm. We cannot read the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah, without seeing what denunciations they contain against all flesh, that is, not merely all who are in the flesh, as men and women, but against every thing carnal, earthly, and distinct from what was of God.

You will see this especially declared in chapters 2 and 3 of Isaiah, in which, after pronouncing that "the day of the Lord of hosts should be upon every high tower and upon every fenced wall," the prophet adds- "Your men shall fall by the sword, and your mighty in the war. And her gates shall lament and mourn; and she being desolate shall sit upon the ground." (Isa. 3:25, 26.) Now when that evil was to be brought upon all flesh, what benefit would it have been to Baruch, if he could have gotten his great things? Say that he had risen very much in the world, had added house to house and field to field, and had become the wealthiest or most honored man in Jerusalem- what would it benefit him when the Chaldeans rushed through the breach in the wall with wrath in their faces and swords in their hands? Or if he was richly endowed with, and highly esteemed for his prophetic gifts, what would those gifts have availed him unless proportionate grace had accompanied them to support his soul when his prophecies came to pass? What became of those false prophets who buoyed the people up with false hopes? They were slain by the sword of the Chaldeans, and they and their prophecies perished together.

But, leaving the case of Baruch, let us take the words in another sense and view them as having a spiritual bearing. There is no use looking back through the vista of years at Baruch and his troubles; it is better to look at home and see how far the words are applicable to ourselves. God means to bring evil upon all flesh, and if so, taking the words in their full extent, there is not a single fleshly thing upon which he will not bring evil.

Now he brings evil upon all flesh in two ways- first, by bringing down his heavy hand upon it in the way of judgment; and secondly, by manifesting unto us the evil that is in it.

Have you found your airy dreams and cherished projects realized? Have your ambitious projects been crowned with success? Have you not had repeated disappointments, and have not others, who seemed inferior to you in ability or in promise, outstripped you in the race? Here was God bringing evil upon all flesh. Your fleshly projects, your carnal hopes, your airy castles, your dreams of happiness, your romantic expectations of a little earthly paradise, have all been cruelly, as you have thought in the bitterness of your soul, disappointed; the buds dropped off just when they began to promise flower, and a blight fell upon your whole life, or at least, until you could recover from the blow. This was bringing evil upon your flesh so that you could not reap the harvest you had been indulging anticipations of.

But take the words in the other sense which I named. God shows us sooner or later the evil of all flesh- the evil of a fleshly confidence, of fleshly faith, of fleshly hope, of fleshly love, in a word, of all religion that stands in the flesh. Now when we begin to see the evil that God thus brings upon all flesh, and upon our flesh in particular, so as to cut up root and branch all our fleshly confidence, fleshly hopes, fleshly religion, it makes us look out for something which is not flesh, which bears the stamp of God upon it; in other words, which is spirit and life. And we usually find, when we make the search, that that which is spiritual in us lies in a very small compass, and that which is fleshly takes a very wide circumference.

Take away from you all the knowledge which stands in the flesh; take away all your faith, all your hope, all your love, which has not been wrought in your heart by a divine power; cut down into your religion and dissect it minutely, so as to get into its deepest center; weigh and examine it in the light of God's countenance, so as to reduce it to its actual dimensions, and separate its constituent parts, putting on your right hand what is of the Spirit, and on your left what is of the flesh- how much real, living faith will you find in your soul? How much of a good hope through grace, and how much love of God's own shedding abroad? How much of your long profession is there which weighed in the balance of the sanctuary is found to be good weight? How much is there of your daily life and walk which has God's approbation, or even your own upon it, when you lie upon your bed at night and look through with searching eye the transactions of the day?

Don't you marvel sometimes when you look at your religion to see how small and scanty it is- when you weigh your experience by the word of God and its daily practical effect upon you, to see how short it comes? When you compare your religion, your actions, your life and conduct with the Bible standard, with what godly men have done and suffered of old, with books written by gracious men that are commended to your conscience- when you compare your poor, scanty religion with theirs, does it not make you tremble with fear and apprehension lest you have none at all?- lest you be a presumptuous hypocrite and not a real child of God?

Now do not think that this earnest and anxious spirit of inquiry is legal, full of hard and heavy bondage, contrary to the spirit of the gospel and the liberty with which Christ makes his people free. If you really possess the liberty of God's giving, and the love of his shedding abroad, such a searching of your heart will not damp or destroy them. But if you have not been exercised about your religion, and had it settled by the Lord himself in your favor, you may depend upon it, that sooner or later, you will be put into the furnace; for "the fire is to try every man's work of what sort it is." God has "chosen Zion in the furnace of affliction," and you will find that he will put you into circumstances in which your fleshly faith and confidence will be burnt up. When, then, you get into the furnace and begin to look out for something that is of God, that he has done for you and in you by his Spirit and grace, you will find how scanty it seems to be, so that in the confusion and darkness into which you will fall you may scarcely be able to lay your hand upon anything which seems to be truly and really of God.

This is the effect of the Lord bringing evil upon all flesh; that he may search you and try you, and by burning up everything which is not his own gift and work, strip you of all that vain confidence in which you may have so often sought to rest. O when the Lord searches Jerusalem as with candles, what hidden evils he brings to light; and as our sins are thus laid open to view, what little grace we may have seems as if buried and lost out of sight.

IV. But now comes the gracious PROMISE! "But your life will I give unto you for a prey in all places where you go."

The Lord had told Baruch that he was not to seek great things. He would not allow him to go on in a path which would bring destruction and death into his soul. He warned him that he would bring evil upon all flesh; that he would pluck up what he had planted, even the whole land. But he gives him a gracious promise, that amid all this destruction he would give him his life for a prey.

Now this life might have been in Baruch's case, and most probably was, his 'natural' life, and that he should not perish in the destruction of Jerusalem. But the life which most concerns us, taking the text in an experimental sense, is the 'spiritual' life, the life of God in the soul. Where the Lord has begun a gracious work, he has deposited deep in the heart his own life. However surrounded, therefore, this life of God may be by the flesh; however it may seem at times buried in the dust and chaff of this wretched world and of this evil heart, there it is, in all its holy beauty, in all its heavenly nature, in all its blessed reality, in all its divine origin. And remember this, that it is a life not only spiritual, but eternal; a life that can never die. Our gracious Lord, therefore, said to the woman of Samaria, that the water which he gives is a well of water springing up into everlasting life. John the Baptist also testified that "he who believes on the Son has everlasting life;" not shall have, but "has," that is, has it now.

A. But this life is given in a very peculiar way; it is "given for a prey." But what is life given for a prey? It is, as it were, snatched out of the very paw of the bear and the lion; something which is rescued out of the hand of an enemy that would destroy it in a moment, and valued all the more as a precious gift of God, because taken out of the hand of the spoiler.

Now examine your religion and your experience, and the way you have been led by the light of this testimony. You have, you hope you have, the life of God in your soul; you have, you hope you have, a divine principle in your bosom. But now see how it is surrounded by everything which has evil in it, and all ready to prey upon it. Here is the flesh surrounding it on every side. God then brings evil upon this flesh. He cuts to pieces by his keen strokes your fleshly confidence, fleshly faith, fleshly hope, fleshly religion. By shining into the dark recesses of our mind, he shows us evil in all we say, think, and do. Then we find what little religion we have is God's special gift and work, that the little we possess is snatched out of the hand of the spoiler, and is kept in the soul only by the mighty power of God.

Have you never seen with dismay this troop of wild beasts, all hungering after this life of God, that they may tear it to pieces? Here is sin, the world, Satan, and what is worse than all, our own vile nature, all seeking to lay violent hands upon the life of God in the soul, like so many wild beasts at the Zoological Gardens at feeding time, roaring after the food to be given to them. Yet it is kept by the power of God in a miraculous way out of their mouths. The life he gives he maintains; the hope he imparts he encourages; and the love which he has shed abroad he never takes away, but now and then shines upon it and renews it.

B. But observe, further, for I must be brief now, how this life is "given for a prey in all places where you go." Baruch could never go out without wild beasts being after him. Yet the life of God remained firm in his soul, nor did he get into any place in which that life was not preserved. So you may sometimes get into dark places, dead places, rebellious places, unbelieving places, places of great affliction, desertion, desolation, trouble and sorrow; and yet if the Lord has put life into your soul, he has given that life for a prey in all places where you go. You may change your station in life; you may change your house, your employment, your circumstances; but it will still be the same- life given for a prey in all places where you go.

"O," you may think, "it will be better with me by and by; I shall get a better religion, a better faith, or I shall be in a better state of soul, when I shall not be so much tried and exercised." You are mistaken- it will always be the same. Life is given for a prey. You may change your trial; you cannot change your heart. You may change your situation, but you cannot change your nature. Wherever you go, you will still find circumstances after you, the world after you, SELF after you, and all seeking to prey upon the life of God. Wherever you go it will always be the same life given for a prey. Thus you will have to carry your life in your hand to your dying day, and prove that nothing but the grace of God can save your soul.

But, amid it all, you will find his faithfulness to endure to the end, his strength to be made perfect in your weakness, and his love to support and bear you up until it brings you to himself. What a mercy it is that though given for a prey, the life of God can never be destroyed. Don't expect, therefore, to have it on any other terms. It is for the express purpose that he may have the honor and the glory of securing it entirely for himself!

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/jc-philpot/life-given-for-a-prey/>

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