

Treasures of Darkness

by J.C. Philpot

The sermon emphasizes the importance of God's preliminary work in going before His people, making crooked places straight, and breaking in pieces gates of brass, in order to give them the treasures of darkness and hidden riches of secret places.

Scripture: Acts 8:21

Topics: "Spiritual Leadership", "Christian Character"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher delves into the significance of 'kleros,' a term used in the Bible to denote casting lots, inheritance, or destiny. The casting of lots was a method used by both pagans and believers to make decisions, with believers interpreting the results as guided by God. 'Kleros' is also used to refer to one's allotted portion or inheritance, including the distinct congregations of Christians assigned to different pastors. The preacher emphasizes the importance of spiritual leaders serving as examples to the flock, leading by mature Christian character rather than dictating, following the ultimate example set by Christ.

Transcript

Preached at Eden Street Chapel, London, on Tuesday Evening, August 2, 1853, by J. C. Philpot

"I will go before you, and make the crooked places straight - I will break in pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron - and I will give you the treasures of darkness, and hidden riches of secret places, that you may know that I, the Lord, who calls you by name, am the God of Israel." Isaiah 45:2,3

To whom were these words spoken? To Cyrus. And who was Cyrus? King of Persia. But how did Cyrus come to be introduced into the Word of God; and how did it happen that the Lord gave such promises to a heathen monarch? Cyrus, though a heathen prince, was an instrument chosen of God to do an appointed work, which was to overthrow the great Chaldean empire, take the city of Babylon, and restore the children of Israel to their own land; and therefore one hundred and seventy years before he executed the office thus assigned to him he was expressly pointed out and personally addressed by name in the record of inspired prophecy. What a proof is this of the inspiration of God's Word, and that all events are under His appointment and control!

Not only, however, was he thus called by name, but the very work which he had to do was expressly declared long before the necessity arose for its being accomplished. The work for which he was raised up and divinely appointed, was to rescue from captivity the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin, which, as a

punishment for their sins, were to be carried into captivity to Babylon, where they were to continue for a definite period, the space, namely, of seventy years. To rescue them, then, from this Babylonish captivity, when the seventy years were expired, and to enable them to return, was the work that Cyrus, in the appointment of God, had to perform. This was a very great work for him to execute, a work so great that he could not have performed it unless he had been specially aided by God. For he had to take a city whose walls were fifty cubits thick and two hundred feet high, surrounded by a wide ditch full of water, and defended with one hundred gates of brass. The city was also well manned and well provisioned, and altogether so strong and powerful as to defy every mode of attack then known. If the Lord, therefore, in the words of the text, had not "gone before him;" if He had not "broken to pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron," Cyrus could never have taken that mighty city, but must have been utterly defeated in the attempt.

This, then, is the literal meaning of the text. But does it not admit of a more extensive application? The promise, it is true, was given to Cyrus, and we know was literally fulfilled; but are the words applicable only to Cyrus? Have we no fortress to take, no city of salvation to win? Do we not need the Lord to go before us, and make our crooked places straight? Have we no gates of brass, no bars of iron, which shut out approach and access, and which we need the Lord to break in pieces and cut in sunder for us? Does the road to heaven lie across a smooth, grassy meadow, over which we may quietly walk in the cool of a summer evening and leisurely amuse ourselves with gathering the flowers and listening to the warbling of the birds?

No child of God ever found the way to heaven a flowery path. It is the wide gate and broad way which leads to perdition. It is the strait gate and narrow way, the uphill road, full of difficulties, trials, temptations, and enemies, which leads to heaven, and issues in eternal life. If, then, we are Zion's pilgrims, heavenward and homeward bound, we shall find the need of such promises, in their spiritual fulfillment, as God here gave to Cyrus. This idea may give us a clue to the spiritual meaning of our text. I shall, therefore, with God's blessing, this evening, endeavor to take this experimental view of it, and interpret it as applicable to God's family, omitting further reference to Cyrus, except as it may help to elucidate the spiritual meaning. Considering it, then, in this light, I think we may observe in it three special features:

I. What I may perhaps call God's preliminary work in "going before His people, making for them crooked places straight, breaking in pieces gates of brass, and cutting in sunder bars of iron."

II. The gifts which the Lord bestows upon them, when He has broken to pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron, here called "treasures of darkness and hidden riches of secret places."

III. The blessed effects produced by what the Lord thus does and thus gives--a spiritual and experimental knowledge, that "He who has called them by their name is the God of Israel."

I. God's preliminary work in "going before His people, making for them crooked places straight, breaking in pieces gates of brass, and cutting in sunder bars of iron." Before, however, I enter into God's preliminary work, and show how it all stands on the firm footing of promise, I must drop a remark or two on the characters to whom these promises are made. To make this more clear as well as more personal, we will look at it in the singular number, as God has worded it - "I will go before you." It is evident from the very language of the text, that the promises contained in it are given to the exercised child of God, and to him alone. No one else, therefore, has any business with or any spiritual interest in it. Consider this point a moment for yourselves before I proceed further. Let this point be firmly impressed upon your mind, that if

you have no spiritual exercises, trials, or temptations, you have, at present, no manifested interest in the promises made in the text; nor can you enter spiritually into their suitability and beauty, or know for yourself the divine and heavenly blessedness which is lodged in them. But if, on the other hand, you are a tried, exercised child of God, one who knows the plague of your heart, and the many difficulties and perplexities which beset the road to heaven, you have so far reason to believe that you are one of the characters to whom these promises are addressed.

1. The first promise, as it is the sweetest, so it lays a foundation for all the rest - "I will go before you." But look at the words. Have you ever considered what they imply? How great must those difficulties be which need the God of heaven and earth Himself to go before us in order to overcome them! Surely they must be insuperable by any human strength, if they need nothing less than the immediate presence and power of the Almighty Himself. Go out some fine evening and look at the sky, spangled with thousands of stars, and then say to yourself, "What, do I need the same Almighty hand which created all these glittering orbs to go before me?" Now, suppose that at present, as regards religious matters, you have never encountered a single trial, temptation, or difficulty; but have found everything easy, smooth, and a matter of course, and have never met with one obstruction which you could not by some exertion of your own remove. If matters be so with you, how in the world can you need the Lord to go before you? You could not, I would think, except by way of compliment, presume even to ask for such a favor.

But if, on the other hand, you are contending with great inward perplexities of mind, feel to be in much soul peril and sorrow, and are surrounded by difficulties which you cannot surmount by any strength or wisdom of your own, and yet surmounted they must be, then you will feel a need for the Lord "to go before you." There is nothing that we are more averse to than trials and afflictions in providence or grace, and yet, if truth be spoken, we never come to know anything aright or receive any real blessing without them. Usually speaking, the Lord does not appear in providence or grace, or make Himself known in love and mercy to the soul, except in the path of trial. We must, therefore, go into trials and afflictions to learn not only the end, but the very beginning of religion--I may add, even to know that there is a God, so as to experience the power of His arm, the greatness of His salvation and the light of his countenance.

If we, then, are rightly taught, we shall feel a need for the Lord to go before us, not only now and then, but every step of the way, for unless led and guided by Him, we are sure to go astray. How strikingly was this the case with the children of Israel. How the Lord went before them every step from Egypt to the promised land, marshaling their way night and day in the cloudy pillar! How, also, He went before them after they reached Canaan, and made the hearts and hands of their enemies as weak as water so that they could offer no resistance to their victorious arms. How the very walls of Jericho fell, as it were, of their own accord, and how the promised land was almost conquered before the children of Israel set foot upon it! So must the Lord go before us step by step.

A. But you may apply this promise to a variety of things. It is applicable not only to spiritual but to temporal trials and perplexities - to His going before us both in providence and grace. If the Lord goes before, preparing the way and opening a path for us to walk in, all is well; every difficulty at once disappears, every mountain sinks into a plain. But if we cannot see nor feel Him going before us, then no ray of light streams upon the path, no friendly hand removes the barriers. Beset behind and before, we know not what to do. It seems as if we were thrown back upon ourselves--miserable refuge enough, and we know not what step to take.

B. But the words apply not merely to the Lord's going before us in afflictions and trials and removing them out of the way, or giving us strength to bear them, but also to the manifestation of His holy and sacred will. There are few things more trying or perplexing to a child of God than to desire to do what is right, yet not to know, in particular circumstances, what is right, or if known how to do it; to long to learn the will of God in some important matter, and yet be unable to discover plainly and clearly what that will is. In this case, when brought into some extremity, the Lord sometimes goes before in His kind providence by unexpectedly opening a door in one particular direction and shutting up all others, intimating thereby that this is the way in which He would have us walk; and sometimes in His grace by whispering a soft word of instruction to the soul which at once decides the matter.

C. But it is especially in the removal of obstructions that the Lord fulfils this part of the promise. This was especially the case with Cyrus, in whose path such formidable obstacles lay. What these are we shall more clearly see by passing on to the next portion of the promise.

2. "And make crooked things straight." This promise springs out of the former, and is closely connected with it; for it is only by the Lord's going before that things really crooked can be straightened. But what if there be in our path no crooked places; what if the road we are treading be like an arrow for straightness, and a turfy lawn for smoothness? Why, then we have certainly no present interest in the promise. It wears to us no smiling face; it stretches to us no friendly hand. But on the other hand, if we find such crooked places in our path, that we cannot possibly straighten them, and such rough and rugged spots that we cannot smooth them, this so far affords ground for hope that we have an interest in the promise given that the Lord will go before us and straighten them for us.

But what is meant by crooked places, and whence come they? Viewing them generally, we may say that these crooked places are so in two ways. Some are inherently crooked, that is, it is in their very nature to be so - and others are so not from any inherent necessity, but from the Lord's appointment that they should be so.

A. The things which are crooked in themselves, that is, inherently and necessarily bent and curved, are so through sin; for sin has bent crooked that which was originally straight. Thus crooked tempers, crooked dispositions, crooked desires, crooked wills, crooked lusts are in themselves inherently crooked, because being bent out of their original state by sin, they do not now lie level with God's holy will and Word; and these are felt to be crooked by a living soul through the implantation and possession of a holy principle which detects and groans under their crookedness and contrariety.

B. But there are crooked places in the path of God's family, which are not inherently crooked as being sinful in themselves, but are crooked as made so by the hand of God to us. Of this kind are afflictions in body and mind, poverty in circumstances, trials in the family, persecution from superiors or ungodly relatives, heavy losses in business, bereavement of children, and in short, a vast variety of circumstances curved into their shape by the hand of God, and so made "crooked things" to us.

Now, the Lord has promised to make "crooked things straight." Taken in its fullest extent, the promise positively declares that from whatever source they come, or of whatever nature they be, the Lord will surely straighten them. By this He manifests His power, wisdom, and faithfulness.

But HOW does He straighten them? In two ways, and this according to their nature. Sometimes He straightens them by removing them out of the way, and sometimes not by removing them, but by reconciling our minds to them. We have perhaps a crooked path in Providence. It may be poverty,

persecution, oppression; it may be family trials or temporal difficulties; and these spring out of, or are connected with, circumstances over which we have no control. These crooked things we may frequently have tried to remove or straighten; but all our attempts to do so leave them as bad or even worse than before. Rebellion, peevishness, or self-pity may have worked besides in our minds, all which may have made them more crooked than ever, until at last we are obliged to have recourse to the Lord. Now then is the time for Him to appear and fulfill His own promise, which He does sometimes by removing them altogether, taking us out of those circumstances which make them crooked to us, or putting an end to the circumstances themselves. In this way the Lord sometimes makes crooked places straight. This He did to Jacob, when He delivered him from Laban's tyranny and Esau's threatened violence, and to David when He took Saul out of the way. So health given for sickness, a deliverance in providence, a removing of an enemy out of the way, a bringing us from under the power of the oppressor, are all means whereby these crooked things are straightened.

But there is another way, and that is not by removing the trial, but by bending our will to submit to it. We must not think that the Lord will, in answer to prayer, remove all our temporal afflictions. So far from that, we may have more and more of them to our dying day. How then, it may be asked, can He fulfill His promise that He will make crooked places straight, if He leaves some of our worst crooks as crooked as before? He does it by bending our will to submit to them; and this He accomplishes sometimes by favoring the soul with a sweet sense of His blessed presence; and sometimes by throwing a secret and sacred light upon the path that we are treading, convincing us thereby that it is the right road, though a rugged one, to a city of habitation.

When the Lord thus appears, it brings submission - and as soon as we can submit to God's will, and the rebellion, peevishness, and unbelief of our carnal mind are subdued, a sweet and blessed calmness is felt in the soul. The crooked place now at once vanishes as being melted into the will of God. It is in this way, for the most part, that those places which are inherently crooked are made straight. There is no change in the things themselves, but in our views of and feelings towards them. The carnal mind which was crooked is crooked still; our crooked tempers and dispositions, our crooked lusts and desires, are in themselves as much curved as ever, but they are so far straightened as not to irritate and vex as before.

In a similar manner, the trial in providence which was crooked is crooked still; the people we have to deal with; the circumstances we have to encounter; the cross we have to carry; the burdens we have to bear, all remain unchanged and unaltered; but the Lord gives strength to endure the pain and trouble caused by them - and while they are borne in submission to His holy will, their weight is taken off the shoulders, and their crookedness is not so keenly felt. See how this was the case with those three eminent saints, Job, David, Paul. Job's trials, David's bereavement, and Paul's thorn were all as before; but when the Lord appeared, Job repented in dust and ashes, David arose from the earth and anointed himself, and Paul gloried in his infirmities.

3. But the Lord also promised Cyrus in the text that He would, by going before him, "break in pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron." Cyrus longed to enter into and take possession of the city of Babylon; but when he took a survey of the only possible mode of entrance, he saw it firmly closed against him with gates of brass and bars of iron. These effectually barring all progress, he could not achieve the object of his desire. They were continually before his eyes, too strong for all his weapons of warfare; and unless battered down or broken to pieces, he could not capture the city.

Now can we not find something in our own personal experience which corresponds to this feeling in Cyrus? There is a longing in the soul after the attainment of a certain object, say, such as an obtaining of everlasting salvation, or a winning of Christ and a blessed experience of revealed pardon and peace, or an inward personal enjoyment of the sweet manifestations of God's favor and love. This, we will say, is the object the soul is set upon to attain, the Lord Himself having kindled these desires after it in the breast. But when, in pursuance of this object, we press forward to obtain it, what do we find in the road? Gates of brass and bars of iron. And these insuperable obstructions so stand in the path that they completely block up the road and prevent all access to the enjoyment of the desired blessing. It is, then, by the removal of these obstacles that the Lord fulfils His promise--"I will break in pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron."

Look for instance at our very prayers. Are not the heavens sometimes brass over our heads, so that, as Jeremiah complains, "they cannot pass through"? No, is not your very heart itself sometimes a gate of brass, as hard, as stubborn, and as inflexible? So the justice, majesty, and holiness of God, when we view these dread perfections of the living Jehovah with a trembling eye under the guilt of sin, stand before the soul as so many gates of brass. The various enemies too which beset the soul; the hindrances and obstacles without and within that stand in the path; the opposition of sin, Satan, self, and the world against all that is good and Godlike--may not all these be considered "gates of brass," barring out the wished-for access into the city?

But there are also besides "bars of iron." These strengthen the gates of brass and prevent them from being broken down or burst open, the stronger and harder metal giving firmness and solidity to the softer and weaker one. An unbelieving heart; the secret infidelity of the carnal mind; guilt of conscience produced by a sense of our base and innumerable wanderings and backslidings from the Lord; doubts and fears often springing out of our own lack of consistency and devotedness; apprehensions of being altogether deceived, from finding so few marks of grace and so much neglect of watchfulness and prayer--all these may be mentioned as bars of iron strengthening the gates of brass.

Now, can you break to pieces these gates of brass, or cut in sunder the bars of iron? That is the question. Could Cyrus do it literally? He had doubtless a large and valiant army, soldiers of the most approved valor, and possessed of all possible skill in the use of their weapons; but before them there stood the gates of brass and bars of iron. He might look at them in all their depth and width; but looking at them would not remove them. He might wish them broken asunder and cut to pieces; but wishing would go a very little way towards making them fall asunder. There they still were ever standing before his eyes, insuperable, impenetrable.

So with the feelings and experience of the child of God. There, there, right in his very path, the insuperable obstacles stand. He can no more break down his hardness of heart, darkness of mind, unbelief or infidelity than Cyrus could break to pieces the gates of brass of ancient Babylon. He can no more subdue the workings of a deceitful and desperately wicked heart than the King of Persia could by drawing his sword cut asunder at a stroke the bars of iron which strengthened the gates of brass. Here then, when so deeply needed, comes in the suitability and blessedness of the promise. "I will break in pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron." The words, spiritually taken, mean of course the removal of all hindrances that block up the road. Let us see, then, how these are removed, that is, so dealt with by the hand of God as to be hindrances no longer.

Look, for instance, at the holiness and justice of God, which, as pure attributes, stand arrayed against the soul's entrance into heaven and glory. How, it may be asked, are these to be removed? Can God part with any one of His eternal and glorious attributes? Can they be, as it were, disannulled and cease to exist? No; that is clearly impossible; but as regards the heirs of salvation, they can be so dealt with as to be no longer gates of brass and bars of iron to shut them out of heaven. When Jesus, by His sufferings and death, by His meritorious obedience and divine sacrifice, satisfied God's justice, glorified the law and made it honorable, He opened an entrance for His people into the city of God. Thus the apostle speaks of His "blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, taking it out of the way, and nailing it to His cross." In this sense the law, which is the reflection of God's justice and holiness, may be said to be broken to pieces as a gate of brass, and cut in sunder as a bar of iron; in other words, it stands no longer in the way as an insuperable bar to the salvation of the soul.

But if we look at the gates of brass and bars of iron as shadowing forth other hindrances, we shall see them not figuratively in this way, but actually broken down and cut in sunder. Thus ignorance, unbelief, infidelity, hardness of heart, darkness of mind, guilt of conscience, with every other gate and bar, are at once broken asunder when the Lord dissolves the heart by the sweet application of love and blood. So the various temptations and besetments from without and within which seem arrayed against the soul, all disappear at once when touched by the finger of God; nor is there one, however strong, deep, or high, which does not fall to pieces before the word of His mouth.

II. The gifts which the Lord bestows upon them, when He has broken to pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron, here called "treasures of darkness and hidden riches of secret places." But when, by the breaking down of the bronze gates, and cutting asunder the bars of iron, Cyrus got admission into the city of Babylon--what did he find there? Countless treasures. Of these he at once took full possession, as the Lord's own free gift; for the promise ran, "I will give you the treasures of darkness, and hidden riches of secret places." Cyrus did not get hold of "the treasures of darkness," nor did he lay his hand upon "the hidden riches of secret places," which were stored up in the cellars of the king's palace, until he got into the city of Babylon through the broken gates.

Now look at this spiritually. Before your eyes in the dim distance is the city of salvation--the city which the Lord has blessed with every spiritual blessing. See how its towers rise in the horizon, and how the sun gilds its domes and palaces. But see how the same sun gleams upon the gates of brass thickly bound with bars of iron, and look how those shut out all entrance. But the Lord goes before, cuts in sunder the one, and breaks in pieces the other, and gives the soul a blessed entrance into the city.

1. Now what does He then and there manifest, and of what does He then put the believer in possession? First, "Treasures of darkness!" But is not this a strange expression? "Treasures of darkness!" How can there be darkness in the City of Salvation of which the Lord the Lamb is the eternal light? The expression does not mean that the treasures themselves are darkness, but that they were hidden in darkness until they were brought to light. The treasures of Belshazzar, like the bank bullion, were buried in darkness until they were broken up and given to Cyrus. It is so in a spiritual sense. Are there not treasures in the Lord Jesus? Oh! what treasures of grace in His glorious Person! What treasures of pardon in His precious blood! What treasures of righteousness in His perfect obedience! What treasures of salvation in all that He is and has as the great High Priest over the house of God!

Yet all these treasures are "treasures of darkness," so far as they are hidden from our eyes and hearts, until we are brought by His special power into the city of Salvation. Then these treasures are not only

brought to light, revealed, and made known, but the soul is at once put into possession of them. They are not only seen, as the Bank of England clerk sees notes and sovereigns, but are by a special deed of gift from the Court of Heaven made over to him who by faith in the Lord Jesus receives Him into his heart. No one has the least conception of the treasures of grace that are in the Lord Jesus until he is brought out of darkness into God's marvelous light, and knows Him and the power of His resurrection by the sweet manifestations of His presence and love.

But the word "treasures" signifies not only something laid up and hidden from general view, but, being in the plural number, expresses an infinite, incalculable amount--an amount which can never be expended, but suffices, and suffices, and suffices again for all needs and for all believing comers. When we get a view by faith of the Person and work of the Lord Jesus, and see the everflowing and overflowing fullness of His grace, and how it superabounds over all the aboundings of sin, it may well fill our minds with holy wonder and admiration. When we get a glimpse of the virtue and efficacy of His atoning blood, that precious blood which "cleanses from all sin," and that divine righteousness which is "unto all and upon all those who believe," what treasures of mercy, pardon, and peace are seen laid up in Him! To see this by the eye of faith, and enter into its beauty and blessedness, is indeed to comprehend with all saints the length, and breadth, and depth, and height, and to know something of the love of Christ which passes knowledge. The sun will cease to give his light, and the earth to yield her increase; but these treasures will still be unexhausted, for they are in themselves infinite and inexhaustible.

2. But the Lord promised also to give to Cyrus "the hidden riches of secret places," that is literally, the riches of the city which were stored up in its secret places. But has not this also a spiritual and experimental meaning as well as the rest of the text with which it stands in connection? Yes! Many are "the hidden riches of secret places" with which the God of all grace enriches His believing family. Look for instance at the word of God. What hidden riches are stored up in its secret depths! How every promise is worth a thousand worlds! And could we see it, how every portion of inspired truth is filled to overflowing with the richest discoveries of the wisdom and goodness of God. But these riches are hidden from view. They lie concealed from the very vulture's eye in "the secret places" of revealed truth. But when the Lord is pleased to bring them forth to the eyes and heart of any one of His believing children, it makes him say, "Oh, I could not have believed there was such fullness and depth in the Word of God, or such a sweetness and preciousness in the promises; nor, until thus brought to light and set before my eyes, could I have conceived there was such beauty in Jesus, such love in His heart, such virtue and efficacy in His atoning blood, nor such joy and peace to be felt in believing. I could not have believed there was such power in the Word of God to wound and to heal, to cast down and to lift up." Oh, how the Word of truth in the hand of the Spirit surpasses not only every conception, but every anticipation of the heart. Oh, how these riches of secret places surpass all earthly wealth, and exceed in value thousands and millions of gold and silver.

But it is only as these hidden riches of secret places are thus opened up to the soul that we see, or feel, or know what the Lord Jesus Christ is to those that believe in and love His holy name. It is this bringing forth of the hidden riches of secret places which stamps a divine reality upon God's Word, and makes it to be spirit and life to the soul. To feel the power and blessedness of these things is a part of that "secret of the Lord which is with those who fear Him;" and it is by getting into these blessed secrets, handling these treasures, and obtaining possession of these riches, that we come experimentally to realize what a blessed power there is in a divine heartfelt religion. We may see the doctrines plainly enough in the Word of God; but if that be all we know about them, it is like seeing money which is not our own, and casting up accounts of other people's property. The grand point is not only to see the riches, but to be put in

possession of them. A religion without power, without savor, without a felt blessedness in the truth of God, by the application of the Spirit, is worthless both for time and eternity. Like a school-boy's sum, it is all upon paper--a vast amount in figures, without the possession of a penny.

But observe how the promises are connected with "crooked places," "bronze gates," and "iron bars," and the going before of the Lord to remove them out of the way. Without this previous work we would be ignorant to our dying day of "the treasures of darkness;" we would never see with our eyes, nor handle with our hands, "the hidden riches of secret places." There are but few, comparatively speaking, who know anything of the sweetness and reality of a God-taught religion; of the power of grace upon the soul, or of the riches which are stored up in the fullness of the Son of God. Most even of those who profess the truth are satisfied with a name to live, a sound creed, a consistent profession, and admission to church membership, without knowing or desiring to know anything of the blessed reality of communion with God, of a revelation of the Lord Jesus, of the manifestation of His love and mercy to the soul, and the sealings of the blessed Spirit on the heart.

III. The blessed effects produced by what the Lord thus does and thus gives--a spiritual and experimental knowledge. Now what springs out of having these treasures of darkness brought to light? A spiritual experience and a knowledge of God, and that He is the God of His people--"That you may know that I, the Lord, who calls you by your name, am the God of Israel."

Observe the expression, "I, the Lord, who calls you by your name." How special is this! What an individuality it stamps on the person thus addressed! How it makes religion a personal thing! When God singles out a man by name, it implies that he has special dealings with Him, and that he personally and individually knows Him. This stands good naturally. How many, for instance, are here this evening before me whose names I know not. Were I, therefore, to meet you in the street I could not address you by name. But there are some whose names I know, whom I can call by your name when I meet you, from having a personal acquaintance with you.

Is it not so in grace? The Lord may be said "to call His people by name," when, by a special work of grace upon their heart, He calls them out of the world to a knowledge of Himself. He does not indeed speak in an audible voice, but the effect is as distinct as if He should say, "John," or "Mary, I want you." We are not indeed to expect to see the same light, or hear the same audible voice which shone upon and called Saul of Tarsus; but we must experience a measure of the same power, and feel something of the same divine influence. When, then, God thus calls a man, he will, he must come, for He puts forth a power which he cannot and will not resist--at least, not to any purpose. It is certainly grace invincible, if not grace irresistible. Now just see the process. God calls the sinner by name; and though He calls us not vocally as the Lord Jesus Christ called His disciples when He said, "Follow Me," still the effect is the same.

But what is produced by this special, individual, and personal calling? Knowledge. But what knowledge? Spiritual, heartfelt, and experimental. Of what? "That the Lord who called them by name is the God of Israel." They thus learn two things - first, that the Lord has called them by their name, in other words, that it is a real work of grace upon their souls. They have had their doubts and fears about it; they have been tried about the beginning, middle, and end; they have been exercised with unbelief and infidelity, and many anxious misgivings; but by the secret power of God put forth in their souls, they have felt their hard heart softened, their unbelief removed, their infidelity smitten to pieces, and treasures of darkness brought to light, which sensibly enrich them, and put them into possession of the love of God. Now they can see that God did really call them by their name, that the work is genuine; and looking back upon all the way in

which they have been led, they can see that the Lord has "gone before them" in everything, and has made "every crooked thing straight." They have thus a testimony that He who called them by their name did so because He had first written their names in the book of life. To have this sealed upon the heart is to have a drop of heaven in the soul.

But the chief and second thing which He thus gives them to know, is "that He is the God of Israel." Much is contained in this expression; but the main point consists in this, that He thereby declares Himself to be their covenant God; and that every promise which He has made to Israel is virtually theirs. It is as "the God of Israel" that He manifests mercy and grace; it is as "the God of Israel" that He never leaves nor forsakes the objects of His choice; it is as "the God of Israel" that He fulfils every promise, defeats every enemy, appears in every difficulty, richly pardons every sin, graciously heals every backsliding, and eventually lands them in eternal bliss.

What a light does the whole text cast upon God's way of saving sinners, and the work of His grace upon the soul. Here we have set before our eyes a religion which will stand as being based upon the promises and sure testimonies of God. In this religion there is a divine reality, as that which comes down from heaven into the soul. It is not a mere change of views in doctrine or alteration in life; it is not an adopting of a certain set of tenets, and hearing a certain minister, or coming to a certain chapel, or attending to certain ordinances. It is something very different from this, exceeding and excelling it as much as heaven exceeds hell, or eternity time.

But perhaps you may say, "Must all persons that are to be saved pass through this experience?" To answer that question, let me ask you another. Do you think that Cyrus could have got into the city in any other way? The walls he could not get over, through, or under. The only passage was through the gates of brass and bars of iron, and all his own attempts to break them to pieces or cut them in sunder left them standing as before. God must do the work for him or the work could never be done. So must He work effectually for and in us; and, as in the case of Cyrus, so in ours it is these very, difficulties that make us feel our need of, and prize His grace and power.

If then we have no trials, difficulties, or perplexities, we certainly do not need God--we can do very well without Him. If I can soften my own heart, I most certainly do not need God to soften it. If I can believe in the Lord Jesus Christ whenever I please, I certainly do not need God to give me faith. When a rich man needs money, he goes to the bank, and draws a cheque for as much as he needs. He need ask nobody to give him money, nor plead bankruptcy, with the excuse of poverty. So if I can raise up faith in my own soul, I surely need not go to God as a pauper or a beggar, to cry unto Him to bestow upon me faith. If I have hundreds in my bank, I can go and draw upon it for as much as I please.

So I might run the parallel through every branch of a freewill religion. If my path in providence is but a crooked one, and I can by a little exertion of my own strength sufficiently straighten it, what need have I that the Lord should do it? Or if I could climb up to heaven by my own exertions, why do I need the Lord to help me?

But on the other hand, if I have a very crooked path, and can scarcely live unless it be straightened, to do which is utterly beyond my power, why, then I have an errand to the throne of grace. I have something really and truly for God to do for me - and when He does it in answer to prayer, I can thank and praise His holy name. This brings a revenue of praise and glory to God, exalts Him, and abases me. So it is with every difficulty, trial and perplexity. If I neither have them, or if I can of myself overcome them, I may with

my lips pay God the compliment of asking Him to appear but I can in reality manage exceedingly well without Him.

Now perhaps we can see why God's people have so many "gates of brass and bars of iron"--so many trials and severe temptations. This is to bring them into personal acquaintance with God, the great God of heaven and earth, the covenant God of Israel; to make religion a reality. I am well convinced that a religion which has no trials or exercises, no temptations or perplexities, is but a mockery and a sham. If you think otherwise, just tell me what it is worth. Does it glorify God? Not a bit. Does it comfort man? How can it, when he needs it not? Does it bring a man out of the world. Not one whit. A man with a mere notional religion is hand and glove with the world. Does it subdue sin? It never has subdued, nor can it ever truly subdue even the least. Nor, indeed, does he ever feel to need it, for his sins give him no disquietude; he and they are bosom friends, and why need they ever part company? Does it bring pardon? Why should it, if there be no burden to remove, nor guilty conscience to cleanse? Does it bring heaven into his soul? He is too well satisfied with earth to want that. Take away then, the trials, exercises, and perplexities with which true religion is so mixed up, and with which it so largely deals, and you take away, at a stroke, all that in which the power of real religion consists.

Have you not seen sometimes ivy growing out of and over a wall? The ivy is not the wall, nor is the wall the ivy. But take away the wall, and the ivy falls. So trials and temptations, sins and sorrows, are not religion any more than the wall is the ivy, and yet religion grows up, out of, and upon these things, and entwines itself into their very interstices, as the ivy penetrates into the chinks of the wall. Take away then the trials and temptations which are entwined with religion, and they both fall together. Let me appeal to the experience of any person here present who has any life or feeling in his soul.

It is Tuesday evening. Now, let me ask you what sort of a day has this been with you? "Well," say you, "I have been a good deal engaged in business, I have had much to attend to in my calling, and my mind has been occupied all day long with worldly things." Now, what religion had you at work in your soul all this time when you were so taken up with the things of the world? You answer, "Why, to confess the truth, none at all. No one could have, if he had all my business to attend to." But another might answer, "To tell you the truth, I have had a very trying day of it, and have been sighing and groaning nearly all the day long." Now, which of these two characters needs the preaching to be blessed to his soul this evening? which needs the sweet application of a promise or a manifestation of God's love? Need I say which of these two men is the best hearer? I would insult your common sense if I gave the answer.

If we have any insight into ourselves, and feel what our hearts are made of, we know, we cannot but know, that unless we are tried in our minds in some way or other, there is no meeting of the promise in our soul; for there is no suitability in the promise to us or in us to the promise. There is, so to speak, no door for the Lord Jesus to come in by and manifest Himself unto us. But let me have some severe trial or painful affliction - let me have many crooked things in my path, and everything seemingly against me, if the Lord works by it, it makes me desire a blessing from Himself, and that He would manifest to me His power, presence, and grace. The thing is so plain, that I wonder people cannot see it. Well-near every page in the Bible testifies to it.

Now, if this be the case, will not a living soul cry, "Give me my trials, and God's mercy in them? Give me my burdens, and God's support under them? Give me my afflictions, and God's comfort in them? Give me my temptations, and God's grace to deliver me out of them? For I know when I am left to myself, without trial or blessing, I am a poor carnal, worldly wretch, and at such seasons, although I make a profession, it

is but a name!"

Blessed be God, then, for all our trials and temptations. As James says - "Count it all joy when you fall into diverse trials;" and blessed be God for every burden and every exercise; and above all things, blessed be God for His grace which supports the soul in, comforts it under, and eventually brings it out of all its trials, landing it eventually on the happy shore where tears are wiped from off all faces!

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/jc-philpot/treasures-of-darkness/>

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