

The Morning Without Clouds

by J.C. Ryle

The sermon emphasizes the importance of trusting in God's sovereignty and the everlasting covenant, even in the midst of trials and sorrows.

Scripture: 2 Samuel 23:4

Topics: "Covenant", "Hope in Trials"

Description

J.C. Ryle reflects on David's poignant acknowledgment of his family's imperfections and the trials he faced, emphasizing that despite these struggles, God has established an everlasting covenant that assures salvation and hope. Ryle highlights the importance of recognizing that home trials serve to sanctify believers, drawing them closer to God and preparing them for a future free from sorrow. He encourages Christians to trust in God's covenant, which is ordered and sure, and to find comfort in the promise of a future kingdom where righteousness reigns. The sermon concludes with a call to action, urging believers to do good to others as a remedy for their own troubles.

Transcript

"He shall be as the light of the morning, when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds; as the tender grass springing out of the earth by clear shining after rain. Although my house be not so with God; yet He hath made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things, and sure: for this is all my salvation, and all my desire, although He make it not to grow."--2 Samuel 23:4-5

The text which heads this page is taken from a chapter which ought to be very interesting to every Christian. It begins with the touching expression, "These be the last words of David."

Whether that means, "these are the last words which David ever spoke by inspiration as a Psalmist," or "these are among the last sayings of David before his death," signifies little. In either point of view, the phrase suggests many thoughts.

It contains the experience of an old servant of God who had many ups and downs in his life. It is the old soldier remembering his campaigns. It is the old traveler looking back on his journeys.

I. Let us first consider David's humbling confession.

He looks forward with a prophetic eye to the future coming of the Messiah, the promised Saviour, the seed of Abraham, and the seed of David. He looks forward to the advent of a glorious kingdom in which there

shall be no wickedness, and righteousness shall be the universal character of all the subjects. He looks forward to the final gathering of a perfect family in which there shall be no unsound members, no defects, no sin, no sorrow, no deaths, no tears. And he says, the light of that kingdom shall be "as the light of the morning when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds."

But then he turns to his own family, and sorrowfully says, "My house is not so with God." It is not perfect, it is not free from sin, and it has blots and blemishes of many kinds. It has cost me many tears. It is not so as I could wish, and so as I have vainly tried to make it.

Poor David might well say this! If ever there was a man whose house was full of trials, and whose life was full of sorrows, that man was David. Trials from the envy of his own brethren,--trials from the unjust persecution of Saul,--trials from his own servants, such as Joab and Ahithophel,--trials from a wife, even that Michal who once loved him so much,--trials from his children, such as Absalom, Amnon, and Adonijah,--trials from his own subjects, who at one time forgot all he had done, and drove him out of Jerusalem by rebellion,--trials of all kinds, wave upon wave, were continually breaking on David to the very end of his days. Some of the worst of these trials, no doubt, were the just consequences of his own sins, and the wise chastisement of a loving Father. But we must have hard hearts if we do not feel that David was indeed "a man of sorrows."

But is not this the experience of many of God's noblest saints and dearest children? What careful reader of the Bible can fail to see that Adam, and Noah, and Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and Joseph, and Moses, and Samuel were all men of many sorrows, and that those sorrows chiefly arose out of their own homes?

The plain truth is that home trials are one of the many means by which God sanctifies and purifies His believing people. By them He keeps us humble. By them He draws us to Himself. By them He sends us to our Bibles. By them He teaches us to pray. By them He shows us our need of Christ. By them He weans us from the world. By them He prepares us for "a city which hath foundations," in which there will be no disappointments, no tears, and no sin. It is no special mark of God's favour when Christians have no trials. They are spiritual medicines, which poor fallen human nature absolutely needs. King Solomon's course was one of unbroken peace and prosperity. But it may well be doubted whether this was good for his soul.

Before we leave this part of our subject, let us learn some practical lessons.

(a) Let us learn that parents cannot give grace to their children, or masters to their servants. We may use all means, but we cannot command success. We may teach, but we cannot convert. We may show those around us the bread and water of life, but we cannot make them eat and drink it. We may point out the way to eternal life, but we cannot make others walk in it. "It is the Spirit that quickeneth." Life is that one thing which the cleverest man of science cannot create or impart. It comes "not of blood, nor of the will of man" (John i. 13). To give life is the grand prerogative of God.

(b) Let us learn not to expect too much from anybody or anything in this fallen world. One great secret of unhappiness is the habit of indulging in exaggerated expectations. From money, from marriage, from business, from houses, from children, from worldly honours, from political success, men are constantly expecting what they never find; and the great majority die disappointed. Happy is he who has learned to say at all times, "My soul, wait thou only upon God; my expectation is from Him" (Psalm lxxii. 5).

(c) Let us learn not to be surprised or fret when trials come. It is a wise saying of Job, "Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward" (Job v. 7) Some, no doubt, have a larger cup of sorrows to drink than others. But few live long without troubles or cares of some kind. The greater our affections the deeper are our afflictions, and the more we love the more we have to weep. The only certain thing to be predicted about the babe lying in his cradle is this--if he grows up he will have many troubles, and at last he will die.

(d) Let us learn, lastly, that God knows far better than we do what is the best time for taking away from us those whom we love. The deaths of some of David's children were painfully remarkable, both as to age, manner, and circumstances. When David's little infant lay sick, David thought he would have liked the child to live, and he fasted and mourned till all was over. Yet, when the last breath was drawn, he said, with strong assurance of seeing the child again, "I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me" (2 Samuel xii. 23). But when, on the contrary, Absalom died in battle--Absalom the beautiful--Absalom the darling of his heart--but Absalom who died in open sin against God and his father, what did David say then? Hear his hopeless cry, "O Absalom, my son, my son, would God I had died for thee!" (2 Samuel xviii. 33). Alas! we none of us know when it is best for ourselves, our children, and our friends to die. We should pray to be able to say, "My times are in Thy hands," let it be when Thou wilt, where Thou wilt, and how Thou wilt (Psalm xxxi. 15).

II. Let us consider, secondly, what was the source of David's present comfort in life. He says, "Though my house is not as I could wish, and is the cause of much sorrow, God has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things, and sure." And then he adds, "this is all my salvation, and all my desire."

Now this word "covenant" is a deep and mysterious thing, when applied to anything that God does. We can understand what a covenant is between man and man. It is an agreement between two persons, by which they bind themselves to fulfil certain conditions and do certain things. But who can fully understand a covenant made by the Eternal God? It is something far above us and out of sight. It is a phrase by which He is graciously pleased to accommodate Himself to our poor, weak faculties, but at the best we can only grasp a little of it.

The covenant of God to which David refers as his comfort must mean that everlasting agreement or counsel between the Three Persons of the Blessed Trinity which has existed from all eternity for the benefit of all the living members of Christ.

It is a mysterious and ineffable arrangement whereby all things necessary for the salvation of our souls, our present peace, and our final glory, are fully and completely provided, and all this by the joint work of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. The redeeming work of God the Son by dying as our Substitute on the cross--the drawing work of God the Father by choosing and drawing us to the Son--and the sanctifying work of the Holy Ghost in awakening, quickening, and renewing our fallen nature--are all contained in this covenant, besides everything that the soul of the believer needs between grace and glory.

Of this covenant, the Second Person of the Trinity is the Mediator (Heb. xii. 24). Through Him all the blessings and privileges of the covenant are conveyed to every one of His believing members. And when the Bible speaks of God making a covenant with man, as in the words of David, it means with man in Christ as a member and part of the Son. They are His mystical body, and He is their Head, and through the Head all the blessings of the eternal covenant are conveyed to the body. Christ, in one word, is the Surety of the covenant, and through Him believers receive its benefits. This is the great covenant, which

David had in view.

True Christians would do well to think about this covenant, remember it, and roll the burden of their souls upon it far more than they do. There is unspeakable consolation in the thought that the salvation of our souls has been provided for from all eternity, and is not a mere affair of yesterday. Our names have long been in the Lamb's book of life. Our pardon and peace of conscience through Christ's blood, our strength for duty, our comfort in trial, our power to fight Christ's battles, were all arranged for us from endless ages, and long before we were born. Here upon earth we pray, and read, and fight, and struggle and groan, and weep, and are often sore let and hindered in our journey. But we ought to remember that an Almighty eye has long been upon us, and that we have been the subjects of Divine provision though we knew it not.

Above all, Christians should never forget that the everlasting covenant is "ordered in all things and sure." The least things in our daily life are working together for good, though we may not see it at the time. The very hairs of our head are all numbered, and not a sparrow falls to the ground without our Father. There is no luck or chance in anything that happens to us. The least events in our life are parts of an everlasting scheme or plan in which God has foreseen and arranged everything for the good of our souls.

Let us all try to cultivate the habit of remembering the everlasting covenant. It is a doctrine full of strong consolation, if it is properly used. It was not meant to destroy our responsibility. It is widely different from Mahommedan fatalism. It is specially intended to be a refreshing cordial for practical use in a world full of sorrow and trial. We ought to remember, amid the many sorrows and disappointments of life, that "what we know not now, we shall know hereafter." There is a meaning, and a "needs be" in every bitter cup that we have to drink, and a wise cause for every loss and bereavement under which we mourn.

After all, how little we know? We are like children who look at a half-finished building, and have not the least idea what it will look like when it is completed. They see masses of stone, and brick, and rubbish, and timber, and mortar, and scaffolding, and dirt, and all in apparent confusion. But the architect who designed the building sees order in all, and quietly looks forward with joy to the day when the whole building will be finished, and the scaffolding removed and taken away. It is even so with us. We cannot grasp the meaning of many a providence in our lives, and are tempted to think that all around us is confusion. But we should try to remember that the great Architect in heaven is always doing wisely and well, and that we are always being "led by the right way to a city of habitation" (Ps. cvii. 7). The resurrection morning will explain all. It is a quaint but wise saying of an old divine, that "true faith has bright eyes, and can see even in the dark."

It is recorded of Barnard Gilpin, a Reformer who lived in the days of the Marian martyrdoms, and was called the Apostle of the North, that he was famous for never murmuring or complaining whatever happened to him. In the worst and blackest times he used to be always saying, "It is all in God's everlasting covenant, and must be for good." Towards the close of Queen Mary's reign he was suddenly summoned to come up from Durham to London, to be tried for heresy, and in all probability, like Ridley and Latimer, to be burned. The good man quietly obeyed the summons, and said to his mourning friends, "It is all in the covenant, and must be for good." On his journey from Durham to London his horse fell, and his leg was broken, and he was laid up at a roadside inn. Once more he was asked, "What do you think of this?" Again he replied, "It is all in the covenant, and must be for good." And so it turned out. Weeks and weeks passed away before his leg was healed, and he was able to resume his journey. But during those weeks the unhappy Queen Mary died, the persecutions were stopped, and the worthy old Reformer returned to his northern home rejoicing. "Did I not tell you," he said to his friends, "that all was working

together for good?"

Well would it be for us if we had something of Barnard Gilpin's faith, and could make practical use of the everlasting covenant as he did. Happy is the Christian who can say from his heart these words,--

"I know not the way I am going,

But well do I know my Guide;

With a childlike trust I give my hand,

To the mighty Friend by my side.

The only thing that I say to Him,

As He takes it, is--'Hold it fast,

Suffer me not to lose my way,

And bring me home at last."

III. Let us consider, lastly, what was king David's hope for the future. That hope, beyond doubt, was the glorious advent of the Messiah at the end of the world, and the setting up of a kingdom of righteousness at the final restitution of all things.

Of course king David's views of this kingdom were dim and vague compared to those, which are within reach of every intelligent reader of the New Testament. He was not ignorant of the coming of Messiah to suffer, for he speaks of it in the twenty-second Psalm. But he saw far behind it the coming of Messiah to reign, and his eager faith overleaped the interval between the two Advents. That his mind was fixed upon the promise, that the "seed of the woman should" one day completely "bruise the serpent's head," and that the curse should be taken off the earth, and the effects of Adam's fall completely removed, I feel no doubt at all. The Church of Christ would have done well if she had walked in David's steps, and given as much attention to the Second Advent as David did.

The figures and comparisons that David uses in speaking of the advent and future kingdom of the Messiah are singularly beautiful, and admirably fitted to exhibit the benefits which it will bring to the Church and the earth. The Second Advent of Christ shall be "as the light of the morning when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds; as the tender grass springing out of the earth by clear shining after rain." Those words deserve a thousand thoughts. Who can look around him, and consider the state of the world in which we live, and not be obliged to confess that clouds and darkness are now on every side? "The whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain" (Rom. viii. 22). Look where we will we see confusion, quarrels, wars between nations, helplessness of statesmen, discontent and grumbling of the lower classes, excessive luxury among the rich, extreme poverty among the poor, intemperance, impurity, dishonesty, swindling, lying, cheating, covetousness, heathenism, superstition, formality among Christians, decay of vital religion--these are the things which we see continually over the whole globe, in Europe, Asia, Africa, and America. These are the things which defile the face of creation, and prove that the devil is "the prince of this world," and the kingdom of God is not yet come. These are clouds indeed, which often hide the sun from our eyes.

But there is a good time coming, which David saw far distant, when this state of things shall be completely changed. There is a kingdom coming, in which holiness shall be the rule, and sin shall have no place at all.

Who can look around him in his own neighbourhood, and fail to see within a mile of his own house that the consequences of sin lie heavily on earth, and that sorrow and trouble abound? Sickness, and pain, and death come to all classes, and spare none, neither rich nor poor. The young often die before the old, and the children before the parents. Bodily suffering of the most fearful description, and incurable disease, make the existence of many miserable. Widowhood, and childlessness, and solitariness, tempt many to feel weary of life, though everything which money can obtain is within their reach. Family quarrels, and envies, and jealousies break up the peace of many a household, and are a worm at the root of many a rich man's happiness. Who can deny that all these things are to be seen on every side of us? There are many clouds now.

Will nothing end this state of things? Is creation to go on groaning and travailing forever after this fashion? Thanks be to God, the Second Advent of Christ supplies an answer to these questions. The Lord Jesus Christ has not yet finished His work on behalf of man. He will come again one day (and perhaps very soon) to set up a glorious kingdom, in which the consequences of sin shall have no place at all. It is a kingdom in which there shall be no pain and no disease, in which "the inhabitant shall no more say, I am sick" (Isaiah xxxiii. 24). It is a kingdom in which there shall be no partings, no moves, no changes, and no good-byes. It is a kingdom in which there shall be no deaths, no funerals, no tears, and no mourning worn. It is a kingdom in which there shall be no quarrels, no losses, no crosses, no disappointments, no wicked children, no bad servants, and no faithless friends. When the last trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, there will be a grand gathering together of all God's people, and when we awake up after our Lord's likeness we shall be satisfied (Psalm xvii. 15). Where is the Christian heart that does not long for this state of things to begin? Well may we take up the last prayer in the Book of Revelation, and often cry, "Come quickly, Lord Jesus."

(a) And now, have we troubles? Where is the man or woman on earth who can say, "I have none." Let us take them all to the Lord Jesus Christ. None can comfort like Him. He Who died on the cross to purchase forgiveness for our sins, is sitting at the right hand of God, with a heart full of love and sympathy. He knows what sorrow is, for He lived thirty-three years in this sinful world, and suffered Himself being tempted, and saw suffering every day. And He has not forgotten it. When He ascended into heaven, to sit at the right hand of the Father, He took a perfect human heart with Him. He can be "touched with the feeling of our infirmities" (Heb. iv. 15). He can feel. Almost His last thought upon the cross was for His Own mother, and He cares for weeping and bereaved mothers still.

He would have us never forget that our departed friends in Christ are not lost, but only gone before. We shall see them again in the day of gathering together, for them that "sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him" (1 Thess. iv. 14). We shall see them in renewed bodies, and know them again, but better, more beautiful, more happy than we ever saw them on earth. Best of all, we shall see them with the comfortable feeling that we meet to part no more.

(b) Have we troubles? Let us never forget the everlasting covenant to which old David clung to the end of his days. It is still in full force. It is not cancelled. It is the property of every believer in Jesus, whether rich or poor, just as much as it was the property of the son of Jesse. Let us never give way to a fretting, murmuring, complaining spirit. Let us firmly believe at the worst of times that every step in our lives is ordered by the Lord, with perfect wisdom and perfect love, and that we shall see it all at last. Let us not

doubt that He is always doing all things well. He is good in giving, and equally good in taking away.

(c) Finally, have we troubles? Let us never forget that one of the best of remedies and most soothing medicines is to try to do good to others, and to be useful. Let us lay ourselves out to make the sorrow less and the joy greater in this sin-burdened world. There is always some good to be done within a few yards of our own doors. Let every Christian strive to do it, and to relieve either bodies or minds.

"To comfort and to bless,

To find a balm for woe,

To tend the lone and fatherless,

Is angel's work below."

Selfish feeding on our own troubles, and lazy poring over our sorrows, are one secret of the melancholy misery in which many spend their lives. If we trust in Jesus Christ's blood, let us remember His example. He ever "went about doing good" (Acts x. 38). He came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, as well as to give His life a ransom for many. Let us try to be like Him. Let us walk in the steps of the good Samaritan, and give help wherever help is really needed. Even a kind word spoken in season is often a mighty blessing. That Old Testament promise is not yet worn out: "Blessed is the man that provideth for the sick and needy; the Lord shall deliver him in the time of trouble" (Psalm xli. 1, Prayer-book version).

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