

A Psalm of Remembrance

A Sermon

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“We have known and believed the love that God hath to us.”—[1 John 4:16](#).

IT IS VERY pleasant to read descriptions of the Holy Land from observant travellers, who, in glowing language, have depicted its interesting scenes. I must confess, that all books which speak of the land where Jesus lived and died have an attraction for me; but how much more delightful must it be, to journey there one’s-self, to stand on the very spot where Jesus preached and prayed, and to kneel upon that blood-stained garden of Gethsemane, in which he sweat that sacred sweat of blood. I can scarcely imagine what must be the sensation of a true Christian, when he stands on Calvary, that spot of all others most dear to the believer’s soul. All the descriptions that the traveller can possibly give, can never awaken the emotions which would be felt if we were really there ourselves. Now, this law of nature I would transfer to matters of grace. Let me tell you this day what I may concerning the acts of God’s goodness in the souls of his people, my description will be dullness itself compared with the glorious reality. If God should lend me help, so that I could, in glowing pictures, pourtray the amazing love of Christ Jesus to those who believe in him; if I could tell you of their matchless experience, their divine drinkings at the fountain of life and bliss, their heavenly feastings in the banquetting-house, all this would be nothing, compared with what you would feel, if you yourself could taste, and handle, and see, and know, and believe.

Let me add another figure to render this truth yet more apparent. Suppose an eloquent foreigner, from a sunny clime, should endeavour to make you appreciate the fruits of his nation. He depicts them to you. He describes their luscious flavour, their cooling juice, their delicious sweetness; but how powerless will be his oration, compared with your vivid remembrance, if you have yourself partaken of the dainties of his land. It is even so with the good things of God; describe them as we may, we cannot awaken in you the joy and delight that is felt by the man who lives upon them, who makes them his daily food, his manna from heaven, and his water from the rock. ‘Tis feeling, ‘tis tasting, ‘tis actually receiving and enjoying, which is, after all, the highest oratory with which we can possibly explain to you the sweet and precious things of God.

Now, do you not see that John could specially speak with power, for he spake from his own experience. And do you not perceive that his language cannot be understood, except we put ourselves in his position, and are able to echo his words, when he said, “We have known and believed the love that God hath to us?” There are many here, I doubt not, who

can join in this declaration of the apostle. And may the Holy Spirit help me, while I endeavour to draw out an expression of grateful thanks from those who have believed and known the love which God hath to them.

First, then, I shall look upon my text as being *an abstract of Christian experience*; secondly, I shall view it as *the summary of Christian testimony*; and after that, I shall regard it as *the groundwork of Christian encouragement*.

I. First of all, we have before us here, THE ABSTRACT OF CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE: Some will demur to this. If you should bring some Christians up and say, "Come now, just tell us in a few words what you think of the Christian life;" they would begin with a deep fetched groan, and then with the slightest possible allusion to mercy they would pass on to describe their continual exercises of soul, their deep afflictions, their desperate adversities, and their tremendous corruptions, and then they would end with another groan. But I think the healthy Christian, if he is asked this question,—“Now can you possibly give in one short sentence a statement of your Christian experience?” would come forward joyously, and say “I will say nothing about myself, but I will speak to the honour of my God, and I am sweetly constrained to affirm, that *'I have known and have believed the love that God hath to me,'*” That would be his abstract of experience, and the very best I am sure that any child of God can present. It is true that we have our trials, but it is just as true that we are delivered out of them. It is true that we have our corruptions, and mournfully do we know this to be the fact; but it is just as true that we have an all-sufficient Saviour, who overcomes these corruptions, and enables us to tread the dragon beneath our feet. In looking back we dare not say that we have not passed the den of leopards. It would be wrong if we were to deny that we have floundered through the slough of despond, and have crept along the valley of humiliation, but we can say we have been *through* them; we have not remained in them; we have not left our bones bleaching in the burning sun, nor our bodies to be the prey of the lion. Our sorrows have been the heralds of mercies. Our griefs cannot mar the melody of our praise, for we reckon them to be the deep bass notes of our song. The deeper our troubles the louder our thanks to God, who has assuredly led his servants through all and hath preserved us until now. Our past troubles are no disturbers of our happy worship; they do but swell the stream of oar grateful affection. We put down all our trials into the account, but still we declare our one uncontradicted avowal, that “we have known and believed the love that God hath to us.”

You will observe the distinction which the apostle makes. I may not be able clearly to bring it out, but it struck my mind as being a very beautiful description of the Christian's two-fold experience. Sometimes he *knows* the love that God has to him and at other times he *believes* it. There is a difference here: I hope I shall be able to make it plain.

1. Sometimes the Christian knows the love of God to him, I will mention two or three particular ways in which he knows it.

Sometimes he knows it by *seeing* it. He goes to his house and he finds it stored with plenty—"his bread is given him and his water is sure." The secret of God is upon his tabernacle, the Almighty is with him, and his children are about him. He washes his steps with butter, and the rocks pour him out rivers of oil. His root is spread out by the river, and the dew lieth all night upon his branch; his glory is fresh in him, and his bow is renewed in his hand. He is blessed in his going out and in his coming in; he hath the blessings of heaven above, and of "the deep which lieth under." He is like Job; the Lord hath set a hedge about him, and all that he possesseth. Now, truly, he can say, "I know the love of God to me, for I can see it. I can see a gracious providence pouring forth out of the cornucopia of providence,—an abundance of all that my soul can desire." This, however, might not completely convince him of God's love if it were not that he has also a consciousness that these things are not given him as husks are cast to swine, but they are bestowed on him as love-tokens from a tender God. His ways please the Lord, and therefore he maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him. The man at such a time has a joyous spirit; when he reads the Scripture it is one great transparency from beginning to end; when he meditates upon its pages it is like a bracelet set about with the rarest jewels. He goes about his Master's service, and the Lord makes him successful. He sows and he reaps, he ploughs, and the furrows team with plenty; the sower overtakes the reaper, and the reaper overtakes the sower. God gives him many harvests in a year. The work of his hands is established, and his labour of love is accepted. The Lord hath made him exceeding rich, he hath blessed Him, and his cup runs over; he hath all that heart can desire. "Now," he says, "I know the goodness of God." This, truly, is very easy work, and yet easy though it be, we ought not to forget that we have had such seasons, we have had many trials, but, in the desert of our trial, we have had sometimes an oasis like this; we can look back to some sunny spot when we could say, "Surely the arms of love are round about me both temporally and spiritually." "He hath set me upon a rock, and established my goings." Then the Christian *knows* the love of God.

Another time in which he knows his Father's love is, when he *sees* it after coming out of affliction. He hath been sore sick, and while he has been on his bed he has been vexed with anxious thoughts concerning those he might leave behind, or even about himself. In the hour of languishing he cried to the Lord for deliverance; and at last he felt the young blood leaping through his veins anew. New health was restored to him, and he trod the green sward again with light, elastic steps, singing, "The Lord hath heard my cry, like Hezekiah, and has lengthened my days. Now I know the love which God hath to me." Or else he has incurred great losses in business. One after another the curtains of his habitation were rent, the cords were cut in twain, and all the tent pins pulled up by the invading enemy; he thought at last that nothing would be left him, "Surely I shall die in poverty," says he, for bankruptcy stares him in the face. But anon the tide is changed, the keel of his ship almost grated on the gravel, but now it begins to float, and boldly he spreads his sails, and gallantly

he rides the billows; now can he exclaim, "I know the love that God hath to me." He has brought his servant out of the horrible pit, and out of the miry clay, and hath again appeared to me in mercy and chased away my doubts and fears.

So also has it been with many a man when he has for years been labouring under a heavy trial and at last escapes from it. Look at old Jacob. I believe that all his life long he would have put in a demurrer against what I have just declared, viz., that this is a summary of Christian experience. He would have said, "No, young man, I tell you it is not; my experience has been one of trouble and trial ever since I left my Father's house." And we could tell him the reason of it too, if he particularly wished to know. But surely when at last he put his aged arms round the neck of his son Joseph, when at last he saw him ruler over all Egypt, and when his two grandchildren were brought to kneel before him to receive his blessing, the old man might have reversed what he said and no more have exclaimed, "Few and evil," but "Now I know the love that God hath towards me." As it was he did end his life with a song, and finished by praising the angel who had blessed him and kept him from all evil. Even Jacob is no exception to the great rule—that the life of God's people is a proof of the text. "We know and believe the love that God hath to us."

There are other ways in which God's children *know* their Father's love. Besides what they see there is something which they *feel*. There are times when the father takes his child into his arms, presses him to his bosom, and kisses him with the kisses of his lips. These are the fond expressions to set forth the tender communings which God hath with his children. John could say, "We have known," for he had laid his head on Jesus's bosom. He had been with him in the garden of Gethsemane, he had been with him on the mount of transfiguration, he had been with him, too, when he worked his special miracles, and therefore, from the fact that he had communion with Christ at the supper, and in his sufferings and his miracles, John might say, "We know the love that he hath to us." And have not you and I—let us now speak from personal experience—have not *we* had fellowship with Christ? There have been times when we were not nearer to ourselves than we were to God, when we were as assured that we were having fellowship with him as a man talketh with his friend; as sure, I say, as we were of our own existence. Bitter though we sometimes think that our lives have been, yet have there been periods in them akin to heaven, when we could say, "If this is not glory it is next door to it. If I am not on the other side Jordan, at least my Master is on this side of it. If I have not yet been permitted to walk the golden streets, yet these very streets on earth have been trodden by heavenly footsteps while I have walked with God." Times there have been when a Christian would not have changed his blest estate for an angel's wing of fire. He has felt that he was with Christ, and was as certain of it as if he had seen his pierced hands and his feet. Then could he say, "Now I *know* the love that God hath towards me."

And at times, too, there has been another knowledge, not so high, perhaps, as communion, bringing with it less of rapture and ecstasy, but not less of solid consolation: I mean the infallible testimony of the Holy Ghost, the Spirit of God witnessing with our spirit, that we are born of God. I am no believer in those dreams and visions with which many persons mar their experience. I do not believe in those tales I hear people tell about hearing a voice, or seeing an angel. Such things happen now and then—*now* and *then*; but when we are overdone with them, we begin to suspect them to be utterly false. But I speak not as a fanatic or enthusiast when I testify that there is such a thing as an express revelation, made by the Holy Spirit to the individual man. Besides, this written Word of God, which is that on which we rely, as a sure word of testimony, whereunto ye do well to take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place. There is, besides this I say, another, a distinct, decided, infallible utterance of the Holy Spirit in the soul of man, when he beareth witness with our spirit that we are born of God, and at such times—and I will not stop to explain how it is; for the natural man would not understand me, and the spiritual man knoweth already—at such times the believer says, “Now I *know* the love that God hath to me.” If the devil himself in person should meet the believer when he hath this witness, and tell him that God did not love him, he would call him a liar to his face, and say, “The Spirit of God has told me so, and I will believe the Spirit of God, and I will not believe thee, thou liar from the beginning, thou father of lies.” Now, this is a very joyous part of the believer’s experience, that both by sight and by feeling, and by distinct inward witnessing, he can often say, “I *know* the love that God bath towards me.”

2. But times there are of thick darkness, when neither sun nor moon appear for many days; when the tempest rages exceedingly, and two seas meet in dread collision. There are seasons when the Christian, dismasted and dismantled, drifts before the storm a miserable hulk, unable to grasp the rudder or to man the yards. All strength and hope are gone. He looks upward, but he sees no helper; downward, and he beholds nothing but the uttermost depths of despair; around him there is nought but terror, and all about him everything frowneth dismay. At such a time, noble is the Christian who can say, “Now it may be I do not *know* the love that God hath to me, but I *believe* it. Now I believe it,” saith he: “Yes, roll on ye waves; tell me that ye shall engulf me, but I believe not you. He who hath promised to preserve me—him I believe, and on his love will I rely, even though now I see no proof of it. Now, poor vessel, drift before the storm; and you, ye rocks, roar yonder with your sounding breakers; but I fear not you, for I *believe* the love of God towards me. I cannot be wrecked completely. Driven before the storm I may be; half a wreck and tempest-tossed I am, but wholly lost I never can be; and now this day, in the teeth of evidence, in opposition to everything which goes against it, now I *believe* the love which God hath for me.”

The first position, that of knowing God’s love, is the sweetest, but that of believing God’s love, is the grandest. To feel God’s love is very precious, but to believe it when you do not

feel it, is the noblest. He may be but a little Christian who knows God's love, but he is a great Christian who believes it, when the visible contradicts it, and the invisible withholds its witness. No one so grand as that prophet, who sees the olive wither, the fig-tree blasted, the vines devoured by the caterpillar, the stalls emptied, and the flocks destroyed, who sees famine staring him in the face, and yet rejoices in the Lord. Oh, that is honouring God. Ye that believe him in the sunshine, ye offer him pence; but ye that believe him in the storm, ye pay him pounds. No revenue so rich as that which comes from the fat yet seemingly barren land of affliction; God gets no honour greater than that which he receives from the trustful faith, of a cast down but not destroyed believer. Blessed is he who is perplexed but not in despair, persecuted but not forsaken, who is poor, yet, by his faith, maketh many rich; who hath nothing yet possesseth all things; who cries, "I can do nothing," and yet can add, "I can do all things through Christ that strengtheneth me."

And now, do not these two states make up a summary of Christian experience? "*We know and believe* the love that God hath to us." "Ah," says one "we have sometimes doubted it." No, I will leave that. You may insert it in your confession, but I will not put it into my song. Confess your doubts, but write them not in this our psalm of praise. I am sure, in looking back, you will say, "Oh how foolish I was ever to doubt a faithful and unchanging God." Bring all your doubts and fears this day; hew them in pieces like Agag before the Lord, let not one escape; take them and hang them up upon a tree till evening, and then take a great stone and set it at the mouth of their sepulchre that they may rise no more. Oh for grace from this day forward to say, "When I know not my Father's love, I will believe it, and when I have his presence, then will I sing aloud 'I know that love which he hath towards me.'" This, then, is my first head.

II. The second is,—this text is A SUMMARY OF THE BELIEVER'S TESTIMONY. Every Christian is to be a testifier. Everything that God has made speaks of him. One speaks of his power, another of his majesty. The rolling sea, and the bespangled sky, both tell of his power and of his strength. Others tell of his wisdom; some of his goodness. But the saint has a peculiar testimony. He is to be a witness with heart and lips. All the other creatures speak not with words. They may sing as they shine, but they cannot sing vocally. It is the believer's part in the great eternal chorus to lift up voice and heart at once, and as an intelligent, living, loving, learning witness, to testify to God. Now I think I can say, or rather, I will speak for the thousands of Israel gathered here this morning,—*we can say our testimony to an unbelieving world, and to poor despairing sinners, is just this,—“we know and have believed the love that God hath toward us.”* This is our testimony, and we desire to tell it everywhere as long as we live; and, dying, we hope we shall be enabled to repeat it with our last labouring breath. We will say, when life is finished, and eternity begins, "*we have known and have believed the love that God hath towards us.*"

Let me enlarge, however, upon this testimony; and in the presence of many who know nothing of God, let me give an outline of the full testimony of every believer.

In the first place we have known that God's love to us is *undeserved*. This we can tell you with the tears in our eyes.

"There was nothing in us that could merit esteem,
Or give the Creator delight.
'Twas even so Father, we ever must sing,
For so it seem'd good in thy sight."

Our astonishment increases every hour when we think of his love to us, for there was nothing in us that could have caused it. Often have we asked ourselves the question:—

"Why was I made to hear thy voice
And enter while there's room
When thousands make a wretched choice,
And rather starve than come?"
and our only answer is—
"'Twas the same love that spread the feast,
That sweetly forced us in;
Else we had still refused to taste
And perish'd in our sin."

Ye poor sinners, ye think that there must be something in you before God can love you. Our testimony is, that God hath loved us; we are sure of this, and we do not speak half-heartedly, when we declare that we are equally sure that there never was anything in us by nature that he could love. We may doubt a great many doctrines, but we cannot doubt this. This is a matter of fact, that in us, that is, in our flesh there dwelleth no good thing. We have known and have believed that the love of God towards us is free, sovereign, undeserved, and springs entirely from the overflowing love of his own heart, and is not caused by anything in us.

Another thing we can bear testimony to, is this—that the love of God is *unconquerable*. This is my witness, and the witness of all the thousands here to-day. We strove against God's love at first; Jesus knocked at the door, but we would not open to him; he invited, but we would not come; he called, but we would not hearken. We can say with deepest grief we treated our best friend most shamefully. He knocked at our door in the night with his hair wet with dew and his locks filled with the drops of the night, but we regarded him not. In sloth and pride we still kept the bed of indolence and self confidence, and we would not rise to let him in. And we can testify, that if his love could have been conquered, we should have conquered it; for we shot out the envenomed shafts of ingratitude, we held up against him perpetually the shield of our hard-heartedness, and if he could have been overcome, if he were not an Almighty Saviour, we should have defeated him, and have been still his enemies.

Ye sinners, we can affirm that love divine is a love which many waters cannot quench, and which the floods cannot drown.

We can yet again bear another testimony to God's love. We can say concerning his love that it has never been diminished by all the sins we have ever committed since we believed. We have been verily guilty, and we blush to say it. We have often revolted, but we have never found him unwilling to forgive. We have gone to him laden with guilt, but we have come away with our burden removed. Oh! if God could ever cast away his people, he would have cast away me. I am sure God never turns his children out of doors, or this had been my lot long ago. I am certain of the doctrine of final perseverance, because I have persevered as long as I have. If God meant to take my name out of the covenant, he has had mighty reasons enough long ere this.

“If ever it should come to pass,
That sheep of Christ should fall away,
My fickle feeble soul, alas!
Would fall a thousand times a day;
Were not thy love as firm as free,
Thou soon would'st take it Lord from me.”

No, we have known, we have believed the love of God to us is not to be cut asunder by our sins, nor diminished by our unworthiness.

And yet another thing we may say. We have known and we have believed the love of God to us to be perfectly *immutable*. We have changed, but he has changed never. We have doubted him; but when we believed not he has remained faithful. We have sometimes been in the greatest depths, but never too low for his long arm to reach. We have sometimes, it is true, run so far from him that we could not see *him*, but he could always see us. We have never found an end to his all-sufficiency, or, a limit to his omnipotence. We have never found a change in his love,

“Immutable his will,
Though dark may be my grave;
His loving heart is still
Unchangably the same.
My soul through many changes goes;
His love no variation knows.”

We have known this. We have tasted and handled this. We are not to be argued out of it. We are sure it is true. God is immutable. Because he has been immutable; to us, so far, “we have known and believed the love that God hath to us.”

I will make but one other remark here, and that is, we can bear our willing witness that the love of God to us has been an unfailing support in all our trials. I cannot speak as a grey-headed man of the storms and troubles which many of you have endured; but I have had

more joys and more sorrows in the last few years than any man in this place, for my life has been compressed as with a Bramah press—a vast mass of emotion into one year. I have gone to the very bottoms of the mountains, as some of you know, in a night that never can be erased from my memory, a night connected with this place. I have had to pass also through severe suffering and trial from the calamny and scorn of man, with abuse hailed pitilessly on my head. And I have had to pass through severe personal bodily pain. But as far as my witness goes, I can say that he is able to save unto the uttermost and in the last extremity, and he has been a good God to me. Unfaithful I have been; he has forgiven that, and will forgive; but unfaithful to me he never has been; and if I had the choosing of the rest of my life I would not choose, but let him map my way to the end as he has done until now, for “surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.” As for you grey-headed men now present, what tales you could tell. You remember the many deliverances you have had under your sharp afflictions. You have seen a wife buried, but you have seen your God living. You have seen your children carried one after another to the tomb, but you have been able to say “The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away, and blessed be his name.” You have had your dearest friends sundered from you, but still have said:

“How can I bereaved be
Since I cannot part with thee.”

You have had attacks of Satan, you have had doubts and fears—you have been assailed by men, by earth and by hell, but you can say—

“When trouble like a gloomy cloud
Hath gathered thick and thundered loud;
He near my soul has always stood,
His loving kindness, O how good.”

Your testimony is without a flaw. Not one good thing hath failed of all that the Lord God has promised, he has never left you, never forsaken you. But to this day you can say, glory be unto the name of an unchanging God, the same yesterday, to day, and for ever.

III. And now the last point is—the practical use of this great truth. It is the ground work of christian encouragement. Will you just think that I am coming down out of the pulpit now to you. I cannot perform much pastoral visitation in going from house to house, and so let us do it wholesale this morning, and may the Spirit of God make it a reality.

Dear brothers and sisters, there are some of you here to day who have been very much and very sorely tried, for your path has been through fire and through water. You are servants o God, and in looking back you can say that you have been helped hitherto. Just now your health and your spirits are failing you; you are brought very low indeed. Permit your minister to take hold of your hand, and look you in the face. My dear brother, will you dishonour your God now? You say, “No, God forbid that I should dishonour him.” My dear friend,

you have now before you a noble opportunity—an opportunity which an angel might well envy you; you have a noble opportunity of honouring God in the fire. I will not speak lightly of your troubles; I will suppose them to be just as great as you say they are. But will you glorify him in them all? Come, you have trusted him many times, will you trust him now? Perhaps Satan has a commission from on high to try you, and sift you in his sieve. He has been before God, and your Lord has said to him, “Hast thou considered my servant Job?” “Ah,” says Satan, “he serves thee now, but thou hast set a hedge about him and blessed him, let me but touch him,” and he has come down to you, and he has afflicted you in your estate, afflicted you in your family, and at last he has afflicted you in your body. Shall Satan be the conqueror? shall grace give way? O my dear brother, stand up now and say once more, once for all, “I tell thee, Satan, the grace of God is more than a match for thee; he is with me, and in all this I will not utter one word against the Lord my God. He doeth all things well—well, even now, and I do rejoice in him.”

The Lord is always pleased with his children when they can stand up for him when circumstances seem to belie him. Here come the witnesses into court. The devil says, “Soul, God has forgotten thee, I will bring in my witness.” First he summons your debts—a long bill of losses. “There,” says he, “would God suffer you to fall thus, if he loved you?” Then he brings in your children—either their death, or their disobedience, or something worse, and says, “Would the Lord suffer these things to come upon you, if he loved you?” At last he brings in your poor tottering body, and all your doubts and fears, and the hidings of Jehovah’s face. “Ah,” says the devil, “do you believe that God loves you now?” Oh, it is noble, if you are able to stand forth and say to all these witnesses, “I hear what you have to say, let God be true, and every man and everything be a liar; I believe none of you. You all say, God does not love me; but he does, and if the witnesses against his love were multiplied a hundredfold, yet still would I say, “I know whom I have believed.”

“I know that safe with him remains,
Protected by his power,
What I’ve committed to his hands,
’Till the decisive hour;”

He will bring me safe to heaven at last, unhurt by the way.

I have but one other use to make of my text. In this large assembly, composed of so great a multitude of men, there are doubtless some who are saying, “I cannot think that God would have mercy on such a sinner as I am.” “I cannot conceive,” says another one, “though I know my guilt, I cannot conceive that the love of God can blot out such iniquity as mine.” Permit me to take your hand, and if mine is not enough I could take you around these galleries, and down here, and I could give you hundreds of hands, and hundreds of lips should speak and say, “Sinner, never think that the love of God can be exceeded, or destroyed, by your sin, for *I* obtained mercy,” and round the gallery the sound would go if this were a

gospel chorus—“and I,” “and I,” “and I,” and you might go up to the brother, and say, “What were you?” “I was a drunkard;” says one. “I was a swearer, I cursed God ;” says another, “I loved the pugilistic ring, and the skittle ground;” says another; “I was a whoremonger, an adulterer, and yet God has forgiven me,” and O how sweetly would we all sing in chorus, concerning the power of Christ to save, for we have all in our measure felt its might.

Now, my dear friend I take your hand, and I say, “We have known and have believed the love that God hath to us,” and *we* are the very chief of sinners ourselves. Will you honour God by believing that he is able to save you through the blood of Christ, for if the Lord now enables you to honour him in believing, depend upon it, he has begun a good work in you and has set his heart upon you. Sinners, believe that God is love. O trust him who gave his Son to die. He will deny you nothing. If you ask with humble faith, you shall assuredly receive. Our witness is given; reject it not. “We have known, we have believed the love that God hath to us.”