

SERMON I.

“But it is good for me to draw near to God.”

Psalm 73:28

THESE words are a part of the result of a very strange exercise, which a godly man had, being much stumbled and troubled in heart at the prosperity of the wicked, because they got so much of their will in the world. But now having surmounted the temptation, and got a second view of all things, relating both to the prosperity of the wicked, and to the afflicted condition of the godly, in contemplation of which he resolves to draw near to God. “It is good,” says he, “to draw near to God.” As if he had said, “I trow I am neither wise nor happy to intermeddle so much with these things, and I wot well it is my best to ‘draw near to God.’ It is good for me to flee in unto Him, and, as it were, to look out at my windows, until I see how all things here will roll.” Now there is no great difficulty here, in the words now read, but what we may reach in the doctrine. We may consider them either —

1st, Simply or absolutely; or,

2nd, As they have a reference unto what goes before in the same place or portion of Scripture.

First, Consider these words simply or absolutely, from whence for doctrine we observe.

DOCT. *That IT IS GOOD TO DRAW NEAR TO GOD; or good by way of eminency; it is truly and really good. It is an advantageous good. And it is enough for confirmation of the doctrine, that it is not only positively asserted here in the text, but it is also commanded as our duty by the Apostle James. “Draw nigh unto God, and he will draw nigh unto you.”*

Now, in speaking of this we shall,

1. Show you what it is to draw near unto God.
2. Show you what are the advantages of drawing near to God, or how it is good to do so.

I. To show you what it is to draw near unto God. And,

1. A man should make his peace with God in and through the Mediator Jesus Christ; for until once that be done, a man may be said to be far from God, and there is a partition-wall standing betwixt God and him. It is the same with that advice given by Eliphaz to Job: "Acquaint now thyself with God, and be at peace with him, and so good shall come unto thee." Be friends with God and all shall be well with you. Ye must come up unto some measure of conformity to the blessed will of God, and quit that life of estrangement from Him, as is evident from that fore-cited text: "Draw nigh unto God and he shall draw nigh unto you." And this is explained in the words following: "Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double-minded:" that is, Quit that filthy life of estrangement from God, in being more conformed unto Him and His will, as He hath revealed unto you in His word.

2. It is to seek more after communion and fellowship with God, and to pursue after intimacy and familiarity with Him, and to have more of His blessed company with us in our walk and conversation; according to that word: "Blessed are the people that know the joyful sound: they shall walk, O Lord, in the light of thy countenance." This is to walk through the day, having a good understanding between God and us; and so to be always near unto Him in keeping still up communication with Him. And,

3. As it stands here in the text, it is the expression of one who hath made up his peace already, and is on good terms

with God, and doth differ a little from what the words absolutely imply; and so we may take it thus:

(1.) It implies the confirming, or making sure our interest in God, and so it supposeth the man's peace to be made with God; for whoever be the author of this psalm, it supposeth he hath made his peace, and therefore in the following words it is subjoined, "I have put my trust in the Lord," &c., that is, I have trusted my soul unto God, and made my peace with Him through a Mediator. It is good whatever comes; it is always good to be near unto God that way, and to be made sure in Him.

(2.) It implies to be more and more conformed unto the image of God, and therefore his nearness to Him is opposed to that of being far from God. "It is good," says he, "to draw near to God in my duty, when so many are far from Him."

(3.) It implies that which I was hinting at before, to lay by all things in the world, and to seek fellowship and communion with God; and to be more set apart for His blessed company, and to walk with Him in a dependence upon Him, as the great Burden-Bearer, as Him who is to be all in all unto us. In a word, to draw near unto God is to make our peace with Him, and to secure and confirm that peace with Him, and to study a conformity unto Him, and to be near unto Him in our walk and conversation; in our fellowship, and whole carriage and deportment to be always near unto Him.

II. We come to the advantages, or how it is said that it is good and advantageous to draw near to God. We say, "It is said to be good to draw near unto God." It is good to take good in that way. It is good in itself, and it is good in respect of the happy consequences that follow upon it.

1. It is a pleasant good. “Wisdom’s ways are pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.” And although many of you think that the people of God have a sorrowful and sad life of it, yet this flows not from their nearness unto God; but it is because they depart out of His way, or step aside from following Him.

2. As it is good in itself, and a pleasant good, so it is a creditable and honourable good. Is it not good to be at peace, and in good terms with God, to be conformed unto His will, which is the supreme rule of all righteousness, and to have intimate fellowship with Him? We would think it a very honourable thing to be in favour and on good terms with a man that ruleth over all nations, supposing him to be a good man, and that our intimacy with him were not scandalous and offensive. But it is quite another thing to be in favour and on good terms with Him who ruleth over all laws and all men as so many insects; under whom the inhabitants of the earth appear as so many grasshoppers in His sight.

Oh, but it is good in respect of the circumstances and consequences of it, and so it is also a profitable good! Yea, it secures a man’s soul and eternal well-being. It keeps him in perfect peace. It has many testificates and outlettings of God’s countenance, which is better unto him than barns full of corn, or cellars full of wine and oil. Yea, He is all good. “The Lord will give grace and glory, and will withhold no good thing from them that walk uprightly.” And who are these? Even such as are near unto God; so that it is a good thing to draw near unto Him.

USE. Would you be for ever happy in the enjoying of that which is supremely good? Well then, draw near unto God. Everyone readily follows after something that he thinks to be good. There are many that say, “Who will show us any good?” The most part would be at some visible or seeming

good. Yes, but this is a more sure and permanent good, that will fill your hand. Then go and acquaint yourselves. Seek to have communion with Him, and to be confirmed and conformed unto Him. In prosecuting of this use we shall speak a word unto these two sorts of people:

1. To some who are wholly estranged from God, although I know there are many of you that will not take this charge, go and acquaint yourselves with Him, if you would be for ever happy. And what is this but to know Him, and make an offer of yourselves unto Him? How is it that ye make your acquaintance with one come from France, or so, having some knowledge of him, and expecting great favour at his hand? You offer your service unto him, if it should be unto the tenth generation. But have you done so unto the God of heaven? You will make your court to man in such a manner, and will you not draw near to God? You will do it the better when you know how far heaven and you are from one another. For your better understanding of this, I will give you a few marks of those who are far from Him.

(1.) Have you known anything of His voice? Ye will say, "If I were near such a one, I would know his voice." If you do not, you are yet far from Him. "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." What God speaks in this gospel is foolishness unto many; but those who are His sheep know His voice, and unto them this gospel is the wisdom and power of God. Could ye never lay claim unto that word, "It is the voice of my beloved that knocketh"? I know whose voice it is. Were ye never persuaded that this gospel was the most wise of all devices that ever was contrived, or thought upon to save sinners? This is to know His voice. You that count the preaching of the gospel but babbling, ye are far from God in hearing of His voice, and cannot but expect to stumble upon what ye hear concerning Him.

(2.) Know ye His face? Who is he that says, “Stay till I be near unto Him, and then perhaps I shall know Him”? But if ye do not know His face, ye are far from Him. And yet I am persuaded that there are many hearing me, that know not what I mean. But pose yourselves. Know ye anything of the difference betwixt the smiles and frowns of God; or what it is to have your hearts and souls warmed with the heat and light of His countenance? Hath ever your soul been made to weep within you with His love? If not, it is a bad token; for the people of God know His face; and whenever they hear Him named, their affections go out after Him.

(3.) What dealings have ye in your ordinary way and walk with God? Do ye acknowledge Him in all your ways? He knows the wicked afar off, and hath no dealings with them. Do ye venture upon nothing without God’s counsel? Do you keep your eye upon Him in your ordinary business? And do ye give an account thereof unto Him? If it is so, it is well. But if ye have no mind of God; only when ye put on your clothes, and wash your hands, it may be ye retire a little in secret, and then lose any thought you have had of Him all the day long; that is a bad token that ye are yet far from God: and if death shall meet with you in this situation, your hearts shall be roughly handled by it.

2. The second sort that I would speak unto are those who are truly godly. Would you be happy and good in the land of the living? then draw near to God in all these respects formerly noticed. And that ye may do it, it were good for you, that,

(1.) Ye were convinced of your being in a great measure far from God; and in that respect unlike what I formerly spoke of. I trow there be many of you that are not well seen yet in your interest in God. Then if you would be clear in this, “Draw near unto God,” and resolve on what will be well

pleasing to Him. And what is that? It is even to remove whatever stands betwixt Him and you. When ye go unto prayer, or when you would lay claim unto any promise; then “do not regard sin in your heart.” Put away all idols of jealousy. Let none of them come in with you before the Lord; for if ye do, He will never regard your desires in prayer: and this is a time wherein there are many loose hands in this respect. Therefore it were good for you to step home, and be sure where ye are to take up your lodging at night.

(2.) Study to be convinced, that ye are by nature far from God, and in your walk and conversation, from that communion with Him that ye might attain unto, even while here. And if once ye were at that, you would think it your unquestionable duty to “draw near unto God,” in all these respects before mentioned. But where is that labour of love, that unweariedness in duty, and that disposition to suffer everything for Christ? Are not all these, in a great measure, gone? What fainting, failing, and scaring at the cross? So that but scratch the clothes of many Christians, and they will be like to go beside themselves. Where is that appetite and desire after Christ, and His righteousness, which folk sometimes so vigorously pursued? Where is that estimation of, and enquiry after, marks of grace in the soul, that hath sometimes been? How perilous hath a mark of grace sometimes been, and how did it alarm you when it was observed? And where are that sympathy and longing for the discovery of duty, submission unto reproof, that were wont to be amongst you? Are ye not rather afraid to hear your duty laid out before you? And where is that simplicity of the gospel, or that happiness people had in hearing the gospel, when they had not such skill to shift, or evade the word, and to put all by, except those sentences that pleased their own fancy; and when they durst not entertain a challenge of conscience all night but it behooved them to mourn for it before the Lord, until it was removed? Hath not many

of you got the devil's wisdom to lodge a challenge all night, and not be troubled with it? And where is that tenderness of conscience, that would have made people abstain from every appearance of evil, and would have made them walk circumspectly in regard of offences, and mourn for them before God? And where is that true zeal for the interest of Christ that was once in our corporations in these dominions? Is not that gone, and are there any rightly exercised when they see the matters of God going wrong? Now ye should draw near unto God in all these things. Now,

(3.) Is there any pursuing after this nearness unto God that was wont sometimes to have been a case of conscience? But now to mend our evil faults, of all cases this is the most remote from us. I say, so to speak, it is far to the sheaf here. The time hath been when ye would not have been satisfied, if God had not been drawing out your hearts after Him, or lying, as it were, all night, "as a bundle of myrrh, between your breasts." But, oh! is not this almost gone? Oh! therefore draw near to Him. Again, it is good as we commonly say, to come to old use and wont again, if ye come no farther. But,

Secondly, I come to speak of the words as they have a reference unto what goes before the text. And,

1st, They turn upon this: he had seen the wicked prosper and get much of their will in the world. When he beheld this, he was made to stumble at it; but after recollecting, and considering it a little, he recovers himself, and begins to speak of what he had formerly said concerning it. And here, says he, "It is good for me to draw near unto God." Whence I observe,

1. That a godly man's heart should satisfy itself, over all the prosperity the wicked hath, or can have in the world; and therefore the word in the original imports a gaining of God

unto me. It is good for me; it is an only good for me, to draw near to God, and that is enough to satisfy me, over all and beyond all the prosperity of the wicked in the world. And so much is insinuated of the wicked that prosper in his way. What should we then do? Why, trust in God! Be satisfied in Him as your blessed choice and portion. And the grounds on which a godly man's heart should satisfy itself over all that he sees in the lot of the wicked, are these:

(1.) The fountain itself is better than any drops that come to the wicked. God Himself is better than the creature, He is better than ten sons, yea, He is better far than any good thing that proceeds from Him. Therefore, he says, in the words preceding the text, "Whom have I in the heavens but thee, and there is none on the earth that I desire besides thee." When he has counted all, this is the sum of the whole reckoning.

(2.) He goes further on the same ground, as if he would say, "I see that all this folk, viz., the wicked, stand in slippery places. I would not be in their place for all that they enjoy, and as much to it. But as for me, 'Thou wilt guide me with thy counsel, and afterwards receive me unto glory.'" No other good thing is so good as God. God is good in Himself, and He commands all that is really good unto that man that draws near unto Him, even from his shoe latchet unto the salvation of his soul, and makes everything turn to him, as it were, in the hollow of His hand. "The Lord will give grace and glory; no good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly." And may not that satisfy us fully?

For USE 1. This reproves the godly, who grudge and fret at the prosperity of the wicked. "Fret not thyself because of evildoers." "Simple poor folk, simple fools," would he say, "they will have little enough yet to leave." But the believer's portion is far preferable unto theirs. It is an only good. It is better than many portions. Oh! learn to compare your lot

with the lot of the men of this world. Count, and count on, and see whose number exceeds. Tell, and tell over, and see who tells longest, for there is much counting in your lot compared to what is in theirs. That is a strange word, “Was not Esau Jacob’s brother, saith the Lord; yet I loved Jacob, and hated Esau, and laid his mountain and heritage waste.” Esau had the dominion for a time, yet the headship or superiority belonged unto Jacob. And that might satisfy him, though he had not so much worldly substance as Esau. Believers may sing that song with David, when near his end: “Although my house be not so ordered with God, yet he hath made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and sure.”

USE 2. Although there be a party of wicked men, men of Belial, that we have to do with in the world—a party that are like briars and thorns, so that the people of God had need of gauntlet gloves when dealing with them, yet the covenant is enough for that also, for “this is all my salvation, and all my desire,” although: He make it not to grow.

2. Observe, That the more the wicked get their will, the people of God should still draw the more near unto God. And this is imported in Psalm 37.3, “Trust in the Lord, and do good; delight thyself also in the Lord.” This is opposed unto fretting at the prosperity of the wicked. This is the duty of all the godly when the wicked get most of their desires in the world, and that for these reasons:

(1.) Because they may be satisfied in so doing. Do the wicked get much of their mind in their lot and portion? Well, the people of God should fill themselves full of their portion, for there is a reality in it, but there is none in the portion of the wicked. What are houses, lands, gold, silver, or ease, to eternal life? Oh, take a good draught thereof by drawing near unto God. And

(2.) Because your trials and temptations are coming. And if the wicked get up and have the dominion, as it is likely they may, then the godly may make for their sheet and their shoes, if they can come at them.

(3.) Because this is the way to preserve you, and to guard your hearts from mistakes, when you meet with the temptation this man met with. A sad temptation, when godly folk get not their will in what they would be at, for God and His interest, and godless folk get their will and design. Then they are ready to misrepresent and mistake the voice of Providence. You see this godly man accounted himself as a beast under this. But a drawing near unto God will prevent every mistake in this case. And

(4.) Because whenever the wicked get most of their will, that prognosticates some great revolution in the land. But at the same time it is also true that it is “that they may be cut off and destroyed for ever.” Then may the Lord save the innocent, for there will be stirs. Therefore flee into your windows. Draw near unto God.

USE 1. Ye hear what is your duty when wicked folk get most of their designs and commands over all. Here it is; draw near unto God, and thus hold you out of harm’s way in an evil time.

USE 2. See how ye may be put into a capacity for a day of trial and be creditably carried through. And if ye would be even with wicked men, and guard against mistakes, and be enabled to be faithful, and forthcoming for or to God, then draw near Unto Him in all He has commanded you.

USE 3. This reproves those who are resolving to take another way, and cast about to the leeward, and row to the shore, to see what friends they may have at court, to curry the favour of great men, to get their own business well

managed, and to tell ill tales of the godly. Be sure ye shall meet with a mischief. It is good at all times, but especially at such a time, to draw near unto God. And if ye do not this ye shall never have safety in any other way. But,

2ndly, Take the words as they are, an inference from these words before the text, in the 25th verse; “Whom have I in heaven but thee; and there is none upon earth that I desire besides thee: my heart and my flesh faileth me,” &c. Here we see the Psalmist very near unto God, and yet in the text he says, “It is good for me to draw near unto God.” Whence

I observe, Let a man be as near unto God as he can imagine, yet it is good to draw near unto Him, and to seek to have nearer fellowship and more intimate acquaintance with Him. This man was near, yet he seeks to be nearer unto Him; even to have his arms full of God, so to speak. And the reason is

1. Because the life of true religion in the world is but a strong appetite, and a heart hungering after God. And therefore folk should still be hungering and seeking after more from Him. And

2. Because even that which ye have got ye cannot keep, unless you be still in the pursuit of more. You lose what ye have got, and scatter as fast as ye have gathered, if ye be not still making progress and increase. Therefore, “Hold up my going in thy path, that my footsteps slip not.” That is, hold a grip of me, otherwise I will suddenly go wrong. Ye will come unto a small reckoning, if ye draw not near and more near unto God.

USE 1. This serves for trial of your reception of God. Try if ye be still pursuing after more. Ye that think ye have got something from God, and are sitting down upon that, I am

in doubt whether that reception of God be at all real. For where it

is real it still puts the soul upon looking for more. If your reception of God put you not upon working for more it is a bad token, and says that either ye are not sure, or else there is some dead fly in the pot of ointment.

USE 2. And ye that have really got anything of God, work fast for more. Study to go forward; otherwise I defy you to keep what ye have already gotten. The devil will get his hand upon it, and then ye wilt be in hazard of losing what ye have once gotten.

USE 3. "Open your mouths wide, and the Lord will fill them abundantly." There are treasures of good things with Him, that ye never yet beheld, or lighted upon; sweet fills of love, peace, joy; perfect victory over sin; self-denial, and dying to the world, being alive to nothing but Christ, being filled with all the fullness of God. All these, and much more are to be had for the seeking after.

3rdly, Consider the words, as they are connected with these immediately preceding the text. "Thou hast destroyed all that go a-whoring from thee." Hence observe,

That it is good to draw near unto God; the only way in all the world, to secure a man from the dreadful judgments that are coming upon men, is to draw near unto God.

USE 1. It were good that folk considered, and were oftener thinking upon those judgments that are to be poured out upon wicked men. There was a generation of ungodly men in Scotland that were enemies to the people of God; and many of them are yet alive. God has dropped dreadful judgments on some of them, and yet continues to drop them upon the rest; and it is likely the dregs of the cup will be

the bitterest. Ye may believe it, you that are the people of God have no other way to escape the judgments of God but by drawing near unto Him. Fancy not an immunity from judgment another way. There is a sword of the Lord that will cut off the wicked; and the righteous have no way of escape, but by drawing near unto God. And if ye would set yourselves seriously to it, God would meet you mid-way, and more; as it is evident from the forecited text.

USE 2. It were good for all God's people in times of temptation and trials, to follow this godly man's example here. He hath been in a temptation, and he wrestles with it and carries off the spoil of the temptation, as it were, upon the edge of his hat, and comes off the field honourably.

Finally, Study to carry in this way whenever a temptation comes upon you, and ye are engaged in it. Thus bring some of the honourable spoil of the temptation with you, "It is good for me to draw near unto God."