

## SERMON UPON PROVERBS III. 18.

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*She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her ; and happy is every one that retaineth her.—PROV. iii. 18.*

THE context is spent in an exhortation to wisdom, to get spiritual and heavenly wisdom. The argument is first generally proposed and particularly amplified. Generally proposed, ver. 13, 'Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding ;' secondly, particularly amplified—

1. By the worth and excellency, ver. 14, 15, 'For the merchandise of it is better than the merchandise of silver, and the gain thereof than fine gold. She is more precious than rubies ; and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared with her.

2. From the utility and profit, ver. 16, 'Length of days is in her right hand ; and in her left hand, riches and honour.' She is represented as a queen having both hands full of blessings, 'Length of days in her right hand ; and in her left, riches and honour.'

3. The pleasantness of wisdom, ver. 17, 'All her ways are pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.' Which is added to sweeten the difficulties in attaining or pursuing after it, or regulating our lives and actions according to the tenor of it.

4. Here is another special benefit which we have by wisdom, or the saving knowledge of God in Jesus Christ, above all hitherto mentioned before: as pleasantness and peace during our service, so eternal life and happiness as our final reward. Here it is metaphorically expressed, with allusion to the tree of life in paradise, 'She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her.'

In the words we have—(1.) The benefit we enjoy by wisdom ; (2.) The persons qualified.

1. The benefit is expressed metaphorically and literally ; the latter explaineth the former. It is 'a tree of life,' and 'happy is every one.' She is so a tree of life as to make them happy that get her ; as it is usual with Solomon to express any great felicity by a tree of life: Prov. xiii. 12, 'Hope deferred maketh the heart sick ; but when the desire cometh, it is a tree of life ;' that is, the man is pleased and satisfied, as if he were fed with apples in paradise. So Prov. xi. 30, 'The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life ; and he that winneth souls is wise.' Therefore by this metaphor Solomon understandeth some great felicity, and ordinarily eternal felicity, as the latter clause mani-

festeth, 'And happy is every one.' He meaneth it of our chief happiness; that is, all and every one that so do, how despicable soever in the world, they shall not be forgotten and passed over by God.

2. The persons qualified to enjoy this happiness. They that 'lay hold on her,' or they 'that retain her.' The one expression noteth the getting of wisdom, the other the keeping of it; and they both imply the manner also, diligence in getting, and constancy in keeping.

[1.] In getting. Wisdom is not profitable to them that only see her at a distance, or lightly salute her, but to those that with singular industry seek after her, and labour to get her: Prov. iv. 7, 'Wisdom is the principal thing, therefore get wisdom; and with all thy getting get understanding.'

(1.) Get it above all things; that is, whatever you go without, be sure you be not without wisdom or saving grace: Luke x. 42, 'One thing is needful; and Mary hath chosen the better part, which shall not be taken away from her.' You may do well enough though you want worldly honour and greatness, but you cannot do well enough if you want spiritual wisdom: Mat. xvi. 26, 'But what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?'

(2.) Get it upon any terms, though with the loss of all other things: Mat. xiii. 45, 46, 'The kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchantman seeking goodly pearls; who, when he had found one pearl of great price, he went and sold all and bought it.' You must get wisdom, though at the expense of all that you have gotten.

(3.) Get it by any means, with all the care and diligence that you can use: Prov. viii. 34, 'Blessed is the man that heareth me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors.' Begrudge no labour and pains to get into the gospel-state.

[2.] In keeping, constancy is required. We must not be put off till we have it; and when we have it, we must not let it go, but persevere in the way that wisdom prescribeth, and obey God at the dearest rates. We must retain her, though despised, though opposed by the world: Heb. x. 39, 'For we are not of them that draw back to perdition, but of them that believe to the saving of the soul.'

To the purchasing of the soul: we do not purchase it from God, for we have it by mere gift, but we purchase it from the world; liberty to save the soul at hard terms. But if we have gotten wisdom, we must never part from her, whatever it cost us. Well, then, get this wisdom we must, with all earnestness of endeavour, with all watchfulness and care, and firmness and certainty keep it. He that doth not do both is not blessed; that is, that doth not make it his main work and business to get wisdom, and doth not hold out and overcome temptations.

*Doct.* That wisdom doth restore men to that life and happiness which they lost in Adam.

We shall explain the point.

1. By wisdom may be understood Christ, who is the wisdom of the Father, 1 Cor. i. 24, and is both the object and fountain of happiness of the saints. He is the fountain of happiness as being the procurer and author of it: Col. iii. 4, 'When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory.' And the object of it:

John xvii. 24, 'Father, I will that those whom thou hast given me may be where I am, and behold my glory;' and is truly and properly the tree of life, whose fruit is for food and leaves for medicine: Rev. xxii. 2, 'And in the midst of the street of it, and of either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bore twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.' There is no inconvenience to understand it of Christ, or else of the saving knowledge of God in Christ; as one is the author, the other is the means to bring it about: John xvii. 3, 'And this is life eternal, that they may know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent.'

2. By life is meant the life of grace, begun here by the Spirit, and perfected in heaven. By wisdom we begin the life of grace here, and hereafter shall obtain the life of glory. In the Hebrew the word for life is in the dual number, the tree of lives; of both the lives, the life of holiness and the life of happiness, of grace and of glory. How this agreeth with the metaphor here used I shall show you by and by. This life is begun in regeneration when Christ cometh to live in us by his Spirit: John iii. 3, 'Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.' The immediate effects of the new birth are life and likeness to God; and it is perfected in heaven: Col. iii. 3, 4, 'Our life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall we also appear with him in glory.' This life is safely laid up in God, through Christ, in due time to be manifested in all its glory.

3. That this life is restored to those that live under the evangelical dispensation, provided they use the means, which are to lay hold on her and retain her. These are the things we must press upon you, to apprehend and retain, that is, we must receive the faith of Christ, and live accordingly. First be engaged in a course of godliness, and then hold it on, whatever temptations we have to the contrary. And accordingly two ordinances are required in the gospel—baptism, which signifieth our entrance, and the Lord's supper which confirmeth our vows of a new life, and bringeth down more grace for the performance of them; or, as our Lord sets it forth, by the gate and the way: Mat. vii. 14, 'Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way that leadeth unto life; and few there be that find it.' The gate by which we enter is faith and repentance. The narrow way is a strict obedience, doing the will of God, and not our own. And though few mind these things, we must mind them. It is elsewhere represented by making and keeping covenant. Making covenant: Ps. xl. 5, 'Gather my saints together unto me, those that have made a covenant with me by sacrifice.' Keeping covenant: Ps. xxv. 10, 'All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth, even to such as keep his covenant and his testimonies.' We make it by faith; we keep it by a resolved, holy, and heavenly life: Rev. xxii. 14, 'Blessed are they that do his commandments; that they may have a right to the tree of life.' They that believe, repent, and obey, they have a right to the apples of paradise, to eat of this blessed tree; as (to accommodate the notions of the text to these things) many as take hold of Christ by a lively faith, and resolve to live holily; and this resolution must be made whatever difficulties we have to fight with in the

accomplishing of it : Rev. ii. 7, 'To him that overcometh I will give to eat of the tree of life which is in the midst of the paradise of God.' It is promised to the conqueror who overcometh the world, and is faithful to death.

1. Let me confirm it—(1.) By showing what the tree of life was to Adam ; (2.) What Christ will be to us if we choose him and walk in his ways.

[1.] What the tree of life was to Adam. That there was such a tree in paradise appeareth, Gen. ii. 9, 'And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food ; and the tree of life in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil.' For the physical use of it, whether it might be wholesome, and a natural means to prolong life, we meddle not with ; the mystical use is that which falleth under our consideration, as it was a sacrament of immortality, or a sign of eternal life to man, if he had obeyed God his Creator. Now sacraments have a mutual respect to privileges and duties. As it relateth to his duty, Adam had two things enjoined him ; the one *præesse creaturis*, to rule over the creatures, the other *subesse creatori*, to be subject to his Creator. He had no need of a caveat for the one ; he was ready enough to govern and bear sovereignty : but for his duty to God, he had great need to be put in mind of that ; therefore under the condition of obedience, life present and future was promised to him. Those were his privileges : as he had received a natural life, *in esse*, in being ; so an eternal life, *in posse*, in power, and so had matter and just occasion of thankfulness and obedience. For this end served the tree of life as a token and pledge that he had received and should continue his life at God's will and pleasure. The tree of life sealed the continuance of his natural life during his abode upon earth ; and eternal life, when he should be removed thence, to enjoy the fulness of God's blessed presence for ever in heaven ; for in all probability the life promised answereth the death threatened. Now the death threatened is eternal, and therefore the life promised is eternal also. In short, it was God gave him life, and not the tree ; working not by physical efficacy, but by sacramental representation. It represented to Adam that God was his life and the length of his days, as he is also to us : Deut. xxx. 20, 'That thou mayest love the Lord thy God, and that thou mayest obey his voice, and that thou mayest cleave unto him ; for he is thy life, and the length of thy days ;' Job x. 12, 'Thou hast granted me life and favour, and thy visitation hath preserved my spirit.' Expressing thereby God's care in preserving his natural life. His life could not be preserved but by God's immediate power, care, and love, which Job calleth his 'visitation,' or looking after us, as a parent overseeth his child *conditione corporis*. Adam was mortal as other men are, and no temporal thing could preserve him but immortal *beneficio conditoris*, by the bounty of his Creator, and the tree of life was the sign and assurance of it.

[2.] When Adam sinned, this privilege was forfeited : Gen. iii. 22, 'And the Lord said, Behold, the man is become as one of us to know good and evil ;' that is, he will be at his own finding and know what is good or evil for himself, and not take my direction, but live according to his own will : 'And now, lest he put forth his hand, and take

also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever. 'Therefore the Lord sent him forth from the garden of Eden.' That expression might seem to intimate that if Adam, in a state of sin and mortality, had tasted of the tree of life, he should now, notwithstanding his fall, live for ever; but God respected not the event in that speech, but the opinion of Adam, or the use for which the tree was ordained. Possibly man might believe Satan suggesting that Adam notwithstanding his fall might be immortal still by the use of that tree; therefore God drove him out of paradise. But the true reason is, God would not suffer Adam to make use of the token of life when he had forfeited life itself by his transgression. The tree had lost its use; it was the sign of life to Adam; therefore to prevent his sin in profaning the holy ordinances when he had no right to them, God drove him out. Thus our first parents, being separated from God, they were separated from life, for God was their life.

2. What Christ will be to us if we choose his ways, and walk in them. Take that in these propositions—

[1.] That we, that did once partake of life (which lieth in the fruition of God) in our common root and first father Adam, are now excluded by sin: Eccles. vii. 29, 'Lo, this only have I found, that God hath made man upright, but they have sought out many inventions.' In our mere natural estate we are deprived of life: Eph. ii. 1, 'And you hath he quickened who were dead in trespasses and sins.' And the longer we live in our unrenewed estate, we are the more estranged from it: Eph. iv. 18, 'Being alienated from the life of God, through the ignorance that is in them because of the blindness of their heart.' And so made incapable in a further degree: Ps. liii. 2, 'God looked down upon the children of men to see if there were any that did understand, that did seek God.' Every sin maketh the breach and distance between us and God broader and wider.

[2.] In pity to lost mankind God hath set up a new tree of life. Though we are deprived of the first tree, yet God hath planted a better, which yieldeth better fruit, to be enjoyed in a better place. This better tree is Christ: Rev. xxii. 2, 'And in the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for healing of the nations.' This tree can be no other but Christ, who by his ordinances dispenseth all manner of blessings and comfort to his people at all times. His fruit, abundance of spirituality in obedience to the doctrine of the twelve apostles: the leaves, the mere outward and civil conversation, is so excellent that it draweth others to imitation and conversion. And it is said, 1 John v. 12, 'He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son hath not life.' His fruit is better; the fruit of the first tree was corporeal, and did only represent spiritual and heavenly things; but this fruit is the things themselves, saving grace and eternal life: Cant. ii. 3, 'I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste.' And we have this life and immortality in a better place than Adam had. Not in an earthly paradise among beasts, but in an heavenly paradise, in the immediate presence of God and his holy angels: Eph. i. 3, 'Blessed be the God and Father

of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ.' Therefore heaven is called paradise: Luke xxiii. 43, 'This day shalt thou be with me in paradise.' And Paul was caught up into paradise, 2 Cor. xii. 4, 'Which is the same with the third heaven,' ver. 2. Oh! what should we do but take hold of this tree, gather the fruit of it? What greater thing can be given us than Christ, and what shall we want if we have him for our Redeemer and Saviour?

[3.] This grace is offered to all that lay hold of him, and will not let him go, but still cleave to him by an entire dependence and close adherence. There are two things qualify us for the grace of Christ—thankful acceptance and close adherence; and the heirs of promise are described sometimes by the one, and sometimes by the other.

(1.) Acceptance: John i. 12, 'To as many as received him.' Whosoever do broken-heartedly, thankfully, and heartily take the Lord Jesus to be their Lord and Saviour, and are resolved to seek their happiness in God through him, are adopted into his family, and are made heirs according to the hope of eternal life: Heb. vi. 18, 'Who have fled for refuge, to lay hold upon the hope set before us.' They have a heaven of glory at their lives' end. They cannot be satisfied till they are in their city of God, till they have a right, and get some possession of Christ and his benefits, which is mainly done by faith and hope. We believe Christ to be that to us as the gospel sets him forth to be; consent he shall be such a one to us, and therefore trust in him, and resign up ourselves to him, that he may do the works of a saviour for us and in us. Well, then, do you heartily entertain him in your souls for these ends? and do you depend upon him, that he will according to his word accomplish these ends? namely, deliver you from the guilt, and power, and punishment of sin; also work grace, and preserve, and quicken, and strengthen it unto eternal life. Then we begin to live in him: Gal. ii. 20, 'The life that I live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God.'

(2.) Adherence. There is first choosing and then cleaving: Acts xi. 23, 'And exhorted them all that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord;' Cant. iii. 4, 'I found him whom my soul loveth; I held him, and would not let him go.' Abiding in him: John xv. 4, 'Abide in me.' There is no fear of breaking the union on his part. His gracious presence is secured by his love and promise. All the danger is in breaking on our part. And though Christ doth finish the work he hath begun, yet we must use caution and watchfulness; not consent to quit him upon any terms. This adherence is a continuance in faith, and love, and strict obedience.

(1st.) In faith: Col. i. 23, 'If ye continue in the faith, grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel.' He had spoken of their reconciliation with God through Christ; now the comfort did depend on their perseverance. It is not enough for us to assent to the truth of the gospel, and once to embrace Christ, and choose the good things offered by him for our portion, but still Christ must be precious to us, and our faith firm and fixed.

(2d.) Love: Rom. viii. 35, 'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or

nakedness, or peril, or sword?' Cant. viii. 7, 'Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it; if a man would give all the substance of his house, it would be utterly contemned.' Love cannot be bribed nor quenched; nothing can unclasp those mutual embraces.

(3*d.*) Strict obedience and holiness: Rev. xxii. 14, 'Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have a right to eat of the tree of life.'

[4.] And this when there are sore temptations to drive us from God: Rev. ii. 7, 'To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life which is in the midst of the paradise of God.'

*Use* 1. To persuade us to get and keep this wisdom, and this saving knowledge of Christ, which may produce faith, love, and obedience.

1. Consider the motives propounded, life and blessedness. These are most desirable things. All would be happy, and all would live to enjoy them; yea, the general desire of all men is to prolong their life, though in misery; but this life is happy, and it is eternal, and recommended to us with all the advantages which the place heaven can afford us. The tree of life is gone, when paradise was defaced by the flood; but God hath provided a better life by the death of his Son, that we shall live for ever, both in body and soul, eternally in heaven. Nothing else but this deserveth to be called life. The bodily life is short; it is a dying life or a living death. It floweth from us as fast as it cometh to us; but this never fadeth, but endureth for ever. The bodily life is subject to pain and misery, but the heavenly, full of joy and endless glory. The bodily life is supported with meats and drinks, but there God is all in all. The bodily life is consistent with sin, but this life is pure and perfect: 'We shall see God as he is, and be like him,' 1 John iii. 2; Jude 2, 4, 'Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy.' In the bodily life we have a mixture of sorrow with all our comforts, but here is full contentment and satisfaction: Ps. xvi. 11, 'In thy presence is fulness of joy, and at thy right hand are pleasures for evermore.'

2. It is a new recovery of life lost and forfeited. After our long exile from God, he hath found out a way how we may return to him again, and live in communion with him. The work of redemption Christ himself hath performed for us, without asking our consent, or imposing any conditions upon us. He took our nature, fulfilled the law, satisfied the offended lawgiver, merited grace, conquered death, the devil, and hell. But to apply the comfort of these benefits, somewhat is required of us; for a neglected Christ will not profit us. Of how much sorer punishment shall we be thought worthy if we despise God's second dispensation? Then to the breach of our duty will be added the slighting of our remedy: John iii. 18, 'He that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only-begotten Son of God.' And if salvation itself cannot save us, nor life quicken us, what will become of us? If God offereth his grace, and we will not lay hold of it and retain it, we are justly miserable.

3. Here is motive enough to recompense all the difficulties and troubles in getting and keeping Christ.

[1.] In getting. Christ is not to be had with a large wish or a cold prayer. There is much waiting and striving, and praying and meditating ere the soul is well settled, and can be brought to trample upon all things so we gain Christ. The tree in paradise was provided by God, and planted in the midst of paradise without Adam's labour: so is Jesus Christ provided for us by the mere grace of God; but before we get to him, we must conquer guilty fears, rebellious lusts, and much averseness of heart; many a bitter pang before we come to lay hold of this grace, which is troublesome to them which would sleep quietly in their sins. But if you will set yourselves in good earnest to get him, it will be worth your pains; for 'he is a tree of life to them that take hold of him,' and your first faith is rewarded with a sweet taste of this blessed fruit.

[2.] In keeping. The trouble will be recompensed: Ps. cxxvi. 5, 'They sow in tears, but they shall reap in joy.' You have your temptations to overcome; you make your way to heaven by conflict and conquest every step: 'Without are fightings, within are fears.' Now we have the wrestling life, overcoming first one difficulty and then another. We make a snare to ourselves if we look for too much satisfaction in the world: but the clearer sight we get of heaven by faith and hope, the more we are strengthened. Here we must expect our conflicts, but there our quietness and rest. Now the happiness God hath provided for his people in heaven is enough to sweeten our crosses and encourage our obedience. Surely if we kept this recompense in our view it would strike temptations dead: Rom. viii. 18, 'For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.' The reward is sufficient, though we lay down our lives for Christ; for the case is, whether we will yield it as a debt to nature, or resign it to Christ, who hath promised to render it again with advantage.

4. There is wisdom in it. Surely they walk most wisely that are guided by God's counsel. Carnal men think their own way to be wisest, who spend all their time and care in attaining profit, and pleasure, and preferment in the world. There is present advantage, and they judge the way of the godly to be mere folly, who spend their strength in looking after spiritual and heavenly things, which they count to be but fancies; but a little time will discover this error. They who thought themselves to be the only wise men shall certainly be found to be mere fools, and the godly the wisest adventurers, whose wisdom shall be to them a tree of life. Oh, what poor things are present delights, which draw away the carnal, if compared with these choice satisfactions and pleasures which are to be had at God's right hand for evermore! Death will soon show that they are in an happier condition that suffer all things for an unseen world and the life to come, than the sensual and ungodly, that have their good things here: Luke xii. 20, 'Thou fool! this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall these things be which thou hast provided?' Jer. xvii. 11, 'At his end he shall be a fool.'

*Use 2.* To inform us that life is to be had and best preserved by



obedience and close adherence to God. Which, though it be principally meant of life eternal, which is God's gift: Rom. vi. 23, 'The gift of God is eternal life;' assured to us by promise, if we believe in Christ, and obey the gospel: 1 John ii. 25, 'And this is the promise that he hath promised to us, even eternal life;' yet in its proportion it holdeth good of life natural also. Our life and breath is in his hand: Dan. v. 23, 'And the God in whose hand thy breath is,' to take it away or continue it at his own pleasure: Ps. civ. 27, 'Thou takest away their breath, and they die.' The sound in the pipe continueth no longer than he that pipeth bloweth in it. Now obedience or disobedience are the terms of communicating or withholding of it. It is said, Job xxxvi. 6, 'He preserveth not the life of the wicked.' Though it be continued by him, yet it is not out of any respect to them. They have not a moment's assurance of the continuance thereof. If therefore we live by him, let us live to him and for him, and then, when he is pleased to put a period to this natural live, we may live for ever with him.

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