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SERMON

*By the Rev. Wm. L. Breckinridge, A. M. Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, Louisville, Ky.*

ISAIAH XL. 1.—Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, saith your God.

IN the revelation which God has made to us, in the sacred scriptures, of his own character, He has presented very prominently that display of it which we call his grace. His great glory is his grace. We are certainly not at liberty even to admire one of the attributes of the Almighty to the discrediting of another; but we read that when He rises up to judgment, it is to “do his work, his strange work, to bring to pass his act, his strange act.” And “though he cause grief, yet he doth not willingly afflict the children of men.” His people are taught to feel, even in the bitterness of their sorrow, for having wandered from him, that he will “have mercy upon them according to his loving kindness, according unto the multitude of his tender mercies will he blot out their transgressions.” So rich and ample are the displays of his gracious goodness, that it is said “God is love.”—And it is presumed that we “know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, though he was rich, yet for our sakes became poor, that we, through his poverty might be rich.” This grace is displayed in every part of the plan of salvation; in every successive step by which a poor sinner is led along, till he becomes a glorified saint. The topstone of the spiritual building will be laid with shouts of grace, grace unto it. The acclamations of the redeemed will forever arise to the praise of God’s glorious grace!

By this and the succeeding verse there are suggested several considerations which illustrate and enhance this gracious goodness.—1. The guilty, miserable, hopeless state of those to whom it is directed.—“Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem.” In like manner spake our blessed Lord in his last interview with his disciples, teaching them that repentance and remission of sins should be preached, in his name, among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. It was an illustrious display of the Saviour’s love, that salvation was offered to the inhabitants of that rebellious and bloody city; that they, who in cruel mockery had crowned his sacred head with thorns, should be offered crowns of everlasting glory. “God

commendeth his love towards us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

2. The close and tender relation, into which such wretched creatures are not only invited to enter, but are actually introduced. "Comfort ye my people."—God's people are not only recognized as his servants, his subjects and his friends, but they are also often called his children. There runs through the Bible the precious sentiment, that there really does subsist such a close and tender connexion between God and ransomed sinners.—"Be ye followers of God as dear children."—"Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him."—"The Lord taketh pleasure in them that fear him, in those that hope in his mercy."

3. This relation is an enduring and indissoluble one—else there could be no lasting or solid comfort arising from it—Nay, that poor joy which could arise from a transient connexion, would only embitter the deep horrors of the eternal separation. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him, *should not perish*, but have everlasting life."—"Verily, saith the Saviour, he that believeth on me hath everlasting life."—God's covenant with his people is an everlasting covenant, nor shall any ever pluck them out of his hand, or make their joy premature or unavailing.

4. Vile and guilty as those who have received God's grace originally were, yet by its power they shall be made holy. The apostle Paul having spoken of those who shall not inherit the kingdom of God, continues "and such were some of you, but ye are washed, but ye are *sanctified*, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the spirit of our God." Those who shall dwell on high are a holy people. Not *for*, nor *by* simply, but yet in connection with this holiness on their part is their salvation perfected. "Without holiness no man shall see the Lord." Jesus Christ gave himself for us that he might "redeem us from all iniquity and purify unto himself a peculiar people zealous of good works." How is the glory of this grace exalted, in making such rebels first holy, and then possessors of salvation.

But our chief object is, in view of this passage, to consider *some of the sorrows and some of the consolations of God's people.*

I. Then, some of the sorrows of Christians—for the command to comfort them, presumes that they have sorrows.

1. Christians suffer from all the natural causes of sorrow which afflict other men—as sickness, losses, disappointments, the thwarting of their most fondly cherished expectations, the frustrating of their best laid plans, that deferring of their hopes which makes the heart sick, that utter blasting of their most precious earthly hopes which seems oftentimes enough to make the heart burst.—Nay, it appears sometimes as if Christians had more troubles than other men. We are frequently constrained to remark the great prosperity of the wicked, their exemption from many of the calamities of life, and the singular success of all the schemes they lay. It is, perhaps, because they are receiving now their good things, and the Christian, like Lazarus, is receiving his evil things. So it

is, this is a world of woe, and Christians have their full share of its distresses.

2. There is another set of sorrows which many wicked men probably never feel; some doubtless do, but all Christians must; that deep and bitter anguish of the soul which we call conviction for sin. No doubt the children of this world, so wise in their generation, although in their gay passage through it, they often feel that the way of the transgressor is hard, do often pass from the cradle to the grave without once feeling, as they should, the bitterness of sin; that misgiving of the soul, that beginning of repentance, with which they are sometimes troubled, they forget amid the laughing throng, or in the midnight revel, or somehow dash from them amid the care and love of the world. No doubt too, many a poor wretch has felt deep conviction, has suffered unutterable agony under the lashings of conscience; the incipient gnawing of that worm which shall never die; and after all has gone back to perish in his sin, and had all his pangs for nothing. But these deep and bitter sorrows, under a sense of sin, every Christian at some time or in some degree has felt; and this anguish of the unrenewed soul is a bitter sorrow.

3. But Christians have many a bitter pang from sin after they have received a sense of pardon. Still their worst enemy is sin; numerous, powerful, and alas! too successful temptations assail them. It is of the state of perfect rest, that the poet has taught us to sing—

“Sin their worst enemy before,  
Shall vex their eyes and ears no more—  
And every power find sweet employ,  
In that eternal world of joy.”

In this world, said our blessed Lord, ye shall have tribulation; and here is the chief fountain of sorrow. Nor do they merely grieve in general terms, because they still fall into sin. There is, and they feel it, peculiar odiousness, nay, peculiar atrocity in their sins. They are committed against that kind and gracious Father who has so touchingly asked, “He that spared not his only son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?” Against that compassionate Redeemer who loved us and gave himself for us. Against that Divine Spirit who maketh intercessions for us, with groanings which cannot be uttered.

How often have they to utter against themselves, with no mistaken application, Absalom’s bitter taunt to Hushai—“Is this thy kindness to thy friend.”—It is remarkable that David after a series of the most atrocious acts of cruelty and injustice, of which a monarch was ever guilty, towards a gallant and faithful subject:—when at last he came to feel his sin against God, seems utterly to forget the injuries of Uriah.—“Against thee,” he exclaims, in the anguish of his soul, “Thee only have I sinned and done this evil in thy sight.”

4. Christians have sorrow sometimes in the apprehension that their afflictions are sent for their sins, in deep and bitter chastise-

ment. Not indeed in irreconcilable judgment, but in holy and strong displeasure. In the Prophet's interview with David, in the case which has just been mentioned, he assured him, that in consequence of his sin he should not only suffer a speedy and very affecting trial, but that the sword should never depart from his house; and when years thereafter, David, fleeing before Absalom, "went up the ascent of Olivet and wept as he went up and had his head covered, and he went barefoot," no doubt he mingled with his tears and his apprehensions of his enemies, acute remembrance of the sin which entailed this bloody curse upon his house. No doubt he whispered in his prayer, Lord they are the sword, the hand is thine. And when we hear him mourning over the just, but sad catastrophe, in all the brokenness of a parent's heart, "Oh my son Absalom, my son, my son, would God I had died for thee, oh Absalom, my son, my son;" how much of the agony of that moment which assured him that he had lost his child forever, is traceable to the recollection of his own great sin!

5. Christians have great sorrow in view of the sins of others. Every one who loves the Saviour in sincerity, and knows something of the evil of sin, has mourned over the iniquity that abounds in this vile world. We find in the journals and letters of our brethren, who preach the gospel to the heathen, very striking expressions of the sorrow with which they behold the abominations around them. Brainerd relates that one of the Indians who had been hopefully converted under his ministry, was seen weeping with every mark of great distress; and being asked the cause of such sorrow, after the joys of peace with God, answered, "I weep because my people will not come to Jesus."

It seems precisely the sentiment of the great Apostle, when he spoke so solemnly of his great heaviness and continual sorrow of heart for his brethren, his kindred according to the flesh. Just so too did the Psalmist mourn—"Horror hath taken hold on me, because of the wicked who forsake thy law." "Rivers of waters run down mine eyes because they keep not thy law."

6. And this grieving over the sins of others is often greatly aggravated by the thought that our sins have led to theirs. Unquestionably the wicked are often encouraged in their wickedness, by the inconsistencies of Christians; some of the most remarkable sins of pious men recorded in the Bible, have not only been for centuries a standing reproach to Christianity, but are constantly used by the wicked to quiet their own consciences. How would Noah have felt, could he have lived to hear some bloated sot taking comfort from his sins. How must the Christian now mourn when he has reason to fear that his unfaithful conduct has led others to sin!

7. Many a time the sins of Christians bring sufferings upon others. To refer once more to David, you remember when he had wickedly numbered the people, how the wrath of God fell upon his subjects for his sake, and you remember the sorrow of his heart in view of their suffering. "And David's heart smote him, after that he had numbered the people." "And David said unto God, I am in a great strait." "And David and the elders of Israel, who were clothed in sackcloth, fell upon their faces, and David said unto

God, is it not I that commanded the people to be numbered, but as for these sheep what have they done?"

8. But apart from their agency in producing them; Christians suffer many sorrows in those of others. Doubtless religion softens and refines the sensibilities of our nature, and renders more tender and acute the sympathies of the heart. As the people of God mourn over the sins, so they weep over the sorrows of others. Jeremiah could say, "Oh that my head were waters and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people. Let mine eyes run down with tears night and day, and let them not cease, for the virgin daughter of my people is broken with a great breach, with a very grievous blow." The spirit of our holy religion is a tender and sympathising spirit. The great High Priest of our profession, was a man of sorrow and acquainted with grief, for he bore our griefs and carried our sorrows. Jesus wept, not only at the grave of Lazarus. "His spirit was tender and he admitted the impressions of sorrow." We never read that he laughed, but often that he wept; grief was his intimate acquaintance, for he acquainted himself with the grievances of others and sympathised with them; and he never set his own at a distance, for in his transfiguration he spoke of his own decease, and in his triumph he wept over Jerusalem. Such was the Saviour's spirit, and such in some degree is that of his disciples; for if any man have not the spirit of Christ, he is none of his.

9. Christians have many seasons of distress in view of that hardness of heart, which keeps them from feeling more for others as well as for themselves. They mourn that they do not desire more earnestly the glory of God and labour more assiduously for its promotion, that they do so little for the Saviour's cause, pass so many of their days almost uselessly, and have so little love to Christ and zeal for his interests. It was a petition in almost every prayer of a very eminent Christian in the latter part of his life. "Let us not outlive our usefulness." They mourn over their small attainments in piety, the selfishness that mingles with their best exercises, the frequent hidings of God's face which they know are referable to their own sins; for his ear is not heavy that it cannot hear, but their iniquities do separate between them and their God, and cause him to hide his face from them, that he will not hear. They have many a dark hour of unbelief and despondency and fear. It is said of the man after God's own heart, notwithstanding his sins, a man of exalted piety and very singular faith; after all the deliverances effected in his behalf and all the sacred promises of God, that he should sit upon the throne of Israel, it is said of him; and "David said in his heart, I shall now one day, fall by the hand of Saul."

10. And even in the happiest moments that God's people enjoy, when the spirit leads them by living fountains of waters and brings them nearest to the throne of grace, when they view most clearly their kind redeemer as he bled upon the cross for them, and are assured that his blood cleanseth from all sin, even then, shame and grief mingle with the tears of their delight.

"They see their sins, his blood had spilt,  
And helped to nail him there."

They feel the enormity of those sins that crucified the Lord. They weep over the melancholy repetition of those sins by which they crucify him still and open all his wounds.

It was a look of tenderness and forgiveness and love, a look of meek upbraiding, but of unutterable kindness, which the Lord turned upon Peter. But Peter could not bear the compassionate glance of that eye. He went out and wept bitterly, and even now do Christians in the sacred interviews with which the Saviour blesses them, catch many a tender look which makes them weep. When Jesus would go into Judea, Thomas could say to his fellow disciples, "let us also go that we may die with him," and yet, when he was risen from the dead, this same Thomas said, "except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my fingers into the print of the nails, and thrust my hands into his side, I shall not believe." With what a strange mixture of delight at the recognition of his Lord, and shame for his unbelief, did Thomas hear the blended accents of rebuke and mercy, as they dropped from those sacred lips; "Thomas, reach hither thy finger and behold my hands, and reach hither thy hand and thrust it into my side and be not faithless but believing." There seems to be shame and extacy mingled with the very tones of his answer, "my Lord and my God."

II. Some of the consolations of Christians. And these, unlike the joys of the men of this world, are real and solid and satisfying, because they come from God. The means by which they are communicated are various, but the author and agent is one, the Holy Spirit of God. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace. "If ye love me, says the Saviour, keep my commandments, and I will pray the father, and he will give you another comforter that he may abide with you forever, even the spirit of truth." Whence it appears that the comfort derivable from this blessed source of consolation is intimately connected with keeping the commandments, and therefore the consolations of which we speak are not mentioned, as those which every Christian does at all times enjoy, but which all may enjoy.

1. Then, the people of God find great comfort in the reflection that they *are His people*. The consolations of religion belong to them as religious people. The benefits and the pleasures of Christianity are theirs as being Christians. It may appear to some a violation of good taste, others may think it wild enthusiasm, but 'tis the joyous gushing of a warm and tender heart, which leads a minister of my acquaintance in preaching the Lord Jesus, the desire of all nations, sometimes to clasp his hands and exclaim; Oh, I am so glad I'm a Christian! The assurance of reconciliation with God is enough to bring joy to the soul. When it has been tossed upon the billows that conscience has rolled mountain high. To find a calm resting place in the Saviour's bosom, must be joy indeed! 'Tis heaven begun below! The wonder is that we are not always rejoicing in the Lord, "for light is sown for the righteous and gladness for the upright in heart.

2. The very mode by which this reconciliation is communicated is extremely joyful, the Holy Spirit, the *Comforter* leading us to him who loved us and gave himself for us. He was delivered for our

offences and raised again for our justification; *therefore* being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. The love of God displayed in this amazing transaction, when duly appreciated, imparts joy to the soul. Every view which we can take of this great sacrifice and plan must rejoice the heart that feels its efficacy. There is a power which religion excites over the heart to make it glad. The preaching of the cross is to them that are saved the power of God. And one of the instances in which this power of the cross is displayed, is to fill the soul with precious consolation, and thus it is, the "tongue breaks out in unknown strains and sings surprising grace."

3. All the sacred principles which the spirit implants and cultivates in the hearts of Christians are new sources of delight. It is said, "they shall be abundantly satisfied with the fatness of thy house, and thou shalt make them drink of the river of thy pleasures, for with thee is the fountain of life, in thy light shall we see light." It is but a whisper of God's power that we can hear, it is but a glimpse of his glory that we can behold, while we dwell here below. But the very training of his children for his presence is a joyous work, and all the influences of his grace are pleasant and consolatory. Faith, hope, charity, every Christian grace, while they are all his gifts, do richly comfort the possessor. He who has been taught of God confidently to believe all that he has said, and firmly to trust him for all that he has promised, he that indulges a strong and well founded hope of seeing the King in his beauty, he who has glowing in his bosom genuine love to God and man, he begins already to drink of the river of God's pleasures. He can already have some faint conception of the Psalmist's triumph, when he says, "I shall be satisfied when I awake in thy likeness." A rich collection of these joyous fruits of the spirit, the apostle Peter throws together when he says, referring to our Divine Redeemer, "Whom having not seen, we love; in whom though now we see him not, yet believing, we rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory."

4. There is great happiness found in active obedience; in running out into practice the above-mentioned principles, in acting out our love to God and man, our zeal for the Divine honor and man's true happiness. In keeping his statutes there is a great reward. It is more blessed to give than receive. The way not only to cultivate and apply, but to enjoy religion, is to labour in our master's vineyard. How much happier was Howard in the loathsome dungeons that he penetrated, and Clarkson in his toilsome and thankless labours for the poor slave, and Henry Martyn, in his fearful toils for the Heathen; how much more consolation in their own bosoms, did these men enjoy in the trials that were inseparable from their respective errands of mercy, than all the devotees who ever buried themselves in the solitude of their cloisters. And oh, if their labours of love afford such pleasure in the performance, how rich will be the final recompense!

5. Even in the common enjoyments of life, the true Christian has greater zest than other men; for he feels that all comes from God's covenant love in Christ, and is to be appropriated to his ser-

vice. That which is presented as the token or consequence of kindness entertained for us, is doubly precious on that account. That which is afforded to us, that in the use, and by the means thereof, we may promote the pleasure of him whom we love, is received with double satisfaction. Thus Christians ought to receive, and prize, and appropriate the common blessings of life. Doubtless the child of grace, who eats his crumbs in singleness of heart, feeling that God's love bestows them, that they are far more than he deserves, and that the strength derived from them must be given to God, is happier, far happier in the use of what the world would despise, than all this world's possessions can make its votaries. Perhaps this is what the Saviour means, when he declares that those who have given up all for him, shall receive an hundred fold more in this present time.

6. And as the common enjoyments of God's people, so their very afflictions have blessings connected with them. Their very trials have precious consolations. In their darkest hours often arise their brightest joys—"Man's extremity is God's opportunity." He often exalts the riches of his own grace, and comforts the hearts of his children, by making streams break forth in the desert. In the midst of their trials they are often comforted. "Before they call I will answer, and while they are yet speaking I will hear." And *after, from, and out* of their afflictions come their richest pleasures. "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning." The mountains are most elevated and afford more brilliant prospects, but the valleys are more fertile. No growth is so luxuriant for the Christian as that which has been watered by his tears. "He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him." The rule of this blessed service is, first the cross and then the crown: and although the crosses which we bear, win not the crown, yet the bearing of the one, is a prelude to the wearing of the other. "In the world ye shall have tribulation," saith our Master, "but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world," and we are solemnly assured that our "light afflictions, which are but for a moment, shall work out for us a far more exceeding and an eternal weight of glory." Many a time it is necessary in drawing us towards our rest, that God should take the "cords of our affection from earth and fasten them in heaven."

7. Doubtless all the sanctified afflictions of God's people tend to their comfort and to their great advancement in piety, by teaching them to say and to feel "*Thy will be done.*" I suppose, to feel this perfectly, is the highest attainment of the Christian in this imperfect state, and will secure to him the purest peace, the richest and most unmingled consolation which he is capable of enjoying in this world of sin, and change, and commotion.

8. There is another pure and exalted source of consolation for God's people. The advancement of his kingdom. "Blessed are your eyes, for they see—and your ears, for they hear—for many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them—and to hear those things which

ye hear and have not heard them." This, their joy, is sustained, by that which is untouched by all the opposition of the powers of darkness, and all the difficulty to be surmounted in the establishment of God's kingdom upon earth;—nay, by that which is far stronger and more encouraging than all the prospects or probabilities of success which appearances can present; the unfailing promise of the Almighty. A child was once asked, if there is any thing which God cannot do? Yes, was the reply—God cannot lie. That being who cannot lie has sworn by himself, that the world shall be filled with his glory. And this promise, firm as his own throne, affords precious consolation to all his people. Their hearts exult in view of that day, when the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established on the tops of the mountains.

9. Some of us have seen Christians die. In that trying hour, the power and willingness of God to comfort his people are often exhibited. "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me." "Oh death where is thy sting? Oh grave where is thy victory?" How rich are those consolations of religion, how precious those instructions of the Spirit, which can teach men how to die! And how far do the calmness and triumph of the Christian's death surpass in dignity, the madness of him who rushes upon this enemy of us all—as the horse dashes into the battle, and dieth as the fool dies!

X. And who shall tell the consolations, the eternal joys and the pure and boundless recompense of God's people, in the world of light and glory. We dare not attempt to lift the curtain, that shuts in the glories of that world. Our eyes could not bear the brilliancy of its scenery. Our ears could not sustain the richness of its melody. The mind cannot now at all comprehend, what it is for the soul to be with God. But then they shall see the King in his beauty." They shall live and reign with Christ. They shall have attained to the full possession of glory, honour and immortality. Eternal life shall be theirs. They shall have no more sorrow, all tears will be wiped away from their faces. Their eyes shall thenceforth beam with the glorious effulgence of the sun. No dross of sorrow to dim the radiance of those orbs. They shall sin no more. Then shall they love and serve their Master perfectly. They shall glorify God and enjoy him forever. There shall be no impediment to that blessed work. It doth not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he shall appear we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is!

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THE TRIAL OF ANTICHRIST.

(Continued from page 95.)

*Phocas* the Emperor examined by the *Solicitor General*.

This witness being a prisoner was brought into the court attended by two of the keepers of the black gulf, and made a most awful and terrific appearance.

Q. Are you *Phocas* the Roman Emperor?