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SERMON

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JOB x. v. 2.—Shew me wherefore thou contendest with me.

THE man who presented this petition to "the hearer of prayer," stood high above his fellows in the divine friendship and favor. Before the events occurred, to which he has reference in the phrase *contendest*, the God he addresses, had borne to the superior excellence of his character this remarkable testimony, that "there was none like him in the earth, that he feared God and eschewed evil." Yet, very shortly after this divine certificate was drawn up in his commendation, it seemed as though all the billows of Jehovah's displeasure had obtained permission to roll over him; he was "broken with breach upon breach." Disease took possession of his whole corporeal frame. Death swept his children with the besom of destruction; the wind prostrated his habitation, lightning destroyed a portion of his property, and robbers plundered the rest. His dearest friends assailed his reputation by their cruel suspicions and accusations, and the wife of his bosom urged him to blaspheme the author of his existence; thus, beset with innumerable difficulties, and besieged by unparalleled trials, he spoke at last in the bitterness of his soul, and in the words of our text, implored his maker, "Shew me wherefore thou contendest with me."

But other men are afflicted as well as Job, if not in the same extremity, yet, to a degree sometimes sufficiently severe and inexplicable to induce an earnest desire to know if possible, why "the Judge of all the earth" deals with them in a manner they cannot comprehend. There have been times when not a few among ourselves have been in a condition to render the words of the text appropriate to their case; and those who have not yet, may nevertheless see the day and be placed in circumstances, to justify if not to require the prayer "Shew me wherefore thou contendest with me."

I. Let us endeavour to ascertain, when God may be considered as contending with us. He may be regarded as doing this, whenever, in the course of his providence, he does any thing, or

suffers any thing to be done, by which we are pained or distressed, our wishes crossed, our plans frustrated, and our expectations blasted.

1. God contends with some by *sickness*. It is the natural wish of our hearts to be in health, and what can there be wrong in the desire of exemption from bodily suffering, and from personal confinement. But sometimes, instead of the continued enjoyment health, disease invades our frames; sleep in a great measure forsakes our eye-lids; "in the morning" we have to say "would God it were evening, and in the evening, would God it were morning;" "we are made to possess," weeks, if not, "months of vanity, and wearisome nights are appointed to us;" our heads ache with pain, our frames burn with fever, our limbs shake with ague, paleness sits on the countenance, and shudderings fill the heart. Instead of walking at liberty, we are imprisoned in our chamber, or even confined to our bed. At such times, God is plainly contending with us.

2. God contends with others by the breaches of *death*. On that happy, social circle of which we form a part, a distressing, violent, fatal assault is made. From one family, a dear, engaging, interesting, promising child is removed, taken from the breast, the arms, the lap, or the table, laid in the land of silence, and consigned to the gloom of the grave. From another of these domestic communities, the head is taken: the wife dies, or the husband expires, the father "goes the way of all the earth," or the mother lies beneath "the clods of the valley," dreariness and sorrow reign throughout that mansion, where joy and happiness lately held their habitation. And the sad survivors go from room to room, and from apartment to apartment, but the voice is not heard, nor the countenance seen, with the sight or audience of which they were once so familiar and so delighted. Ah! when such as these are the facts of the case, God is carrying on a contest. But he has other arrows in his quiver.

3. God contends with man by frustrating his plans, and *disappointing his hopes*. Every individual is in quest of some object, and very often, that object is in itself lawful, and may be even laudable. But, though the means adopted seem well calculated to insure the success desired, the enterprize fails, the labour is lost, it is found to be "not in man that walketh to direct his steps." The most common object of human pursuit is worldly gain, the increase of substance. But here "the race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to men of understanding, nor favor to men of skill." While some seem to get forward in the world almost without an effort, others, "rise early, sit up late, and eat the bread of carefulness," yet after all, fail. Their study, toil, contrivance, vigilance, avail nothing. And others, who have beheld their labours for a while, prosper, and their exertions rewarded, afterwards find themselves reduced from competence to the near neighbourhood of penury. Fires, or floods, or draughts, or frosts, or insects, bring to naught their hopes; fraud or extortion prostrates their prospects, and induces the exclamation, "I have laboured in vain and spent my strength for nought." These then form another class of events which appear to exhibit God, in the attitude of a contender against the happiness of man.

Another has no desire to "lade himself with the thick clay" of pecuniary acquisitions, but bends his mind to the attainment of that official elevation, in which his intellectual talents will find room to expand into usefulness to others, in addition to the procurement of renown for himself. But the honest and honorable aspirant after station fails to reach the eminence he aims at: another steps in before him, and one perhaps much less qualified than himself to fill the station with credit. Here is unwelcome, and unintelligible disappointment, and the failure extorts the cry, "Shew me wherefore thou contendest with me." And these contests are sometimes of a shorter, and sometimes of a longer duration. With some they appear to be occasional, only the cloud breaks away, and their sun shines brightly and clearly afterwards. With others a kind of controversy is kept up through life, and "shadows, clouds and darkness," almost perpetually encompass their present path, and envelope their future prospects.

O that all with whom God contends in either of these various ways, would with pious Job, go and humbly ask, why these things are permitted to happen. Instead of this, many of the sons and daughters of affliction, behave under their trials like bullocks unaccustomed to the yoke, or like "wild bulls in a net," they roar and toss, foam and complain; they "kick against the pricks," and only wound themselves the more severely; or they give God occasion to say, "why should ye be stricken any more, ye will revolt more and more," and then he sends on them the very worst of trials, he gives them up to their own hearts' lusts, and says, of them "Ephraim is joined to his idols, let him alone."

Happily, however, this sad career is not run by all on whom the Almighty's hand is laid. Some desire to know the cause of their sufferings.

4. With others he enters into contest and controversy by awakening within them mental trouble; conscience is sometimes roused to utter its fearful remonstrances with the hitherto secure sinner. While others not naturally or even practically worse than himself, are left to sleep the sleep of death; some particular individual feels applicable to his own case, the question, "a wounded spirit who can bear." He loses his accustomed sense of enjoyment in worldly things, the spirit of God "sets his secret sins in the light of his countenance." This is a painful and sorrowful predicament, the man has, as yet, no taste for religion, yet in a manner, both unwelcome and unaccountable to himself, he seems constrained to turn a reluctant attention to it. So far from falling in with this new mental current, he labours with all his might to stem the tide. He is angry at the holy agency that is at work in his soul. God is now evidently contending with him.

II. Let us next enquire then, how we may ascertain the reasons of the contest which Jehovah, in his wise and holy providence, carries on with us.

1. One mean is *prayer*. To that we may observe, Job had recourse. "Is any afflicted," says the Apostle James, "let him pray" And how he is to pray, the text in part directs him. He is to ask

of God an explanation of his dealings. Bildad, Job's friend, in the 8th chapter, had advised him to "seek to God betimes, and to make his supplication to the Almighty," and encouraged him to hope, that in this way, "though his beginning were small, his latter end should greatly increase." And, in addressing God in prayer on such an occasion, we are to take it for granted, that the author of our afflictions, heavy as those afflictions may be, never "visits us" more, but always, "less than our iniquities deserve." Elihu accordingly, another of the friends of Job, observed with propriety, "surely it is *meet* to be said unto God, I have borne chastisement: I will not offend any more; that which I know not, teach thou me; if I have done iniquity, I will do no more." The *general* sins of an individual are sufficient to justify God for the visitations he employs in the way of chastisement; but it is of importance to ascertain, if it can be done, whether there is any *particular* evil to be corrected, or any special good to be attained, that we may be fellow-workers with God, and do all in our power to co-operate with his appointed and approved plan for removing the dross from our character, and extracting, refining and improving whatever may be found in it. Both while we are in the furnace of affliction, and after we have passed through it, and come out of it, we should carry our case and our cause in prayer to God. As God contends in the way of affliction, both with impenitent sinners, and with renewed christians, both should be solicitous to discover, what ends he has in view in the visitations with which they find themselves respectively exercised. Christians, besides the grace which reigns within, having much corruption remaining there that requires to be worked out of their system, have reason to unite with David in his supplication, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my thoughts, and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

2. But in addition to the employment of prayer, as a mean for discovering the special reason why the disposer of events afflicts us, we should also *examine ourselves* deeply and closely, at the same time. Indeed no prayer can be considered as rightly entitled to the name, which is found unaccompanied with self-searching. Accordingly, when Jerusalem was in bondage and captivity, and cried out to Jehovah for his merciful interposition in her behalf, her children associated the exercise now recommended with their supplication. They said, (Law 30, 40,) "Let us search and try our ways, and turn again to the Lord," "Commune with your own heart upon your bed and be still," is advice from the Psalmist, exceedingly suitable to such a season. "Thus saith the Lord of Hosts, consider your ways," is counsel repeatedly recommended to the Jews in the time of their public calamity.

When the subjects of afflictive dispensation are thus intent on knowing the causes of their sufferings, thus earnest in enquiring by prayer of God, thus careful of finding out by self-examination, we have every reason to believe, they will make the needed and desired discovery. This seems to have been the case in so many instances on record in the Bible, that we may safely conclude, every age can present its own specimens of similar discoveries arrived at by similar means.

Having thus considered what are to be regarded as contests of Jehovah, with men, and what methods afflicted men should take to discover the cause of such divine contention with them, we proceed in the

III^d, and last place, to specify some evident particulars of sin for which chastisements have been inflicted on mortals.

1. God shows some of those with whom he contends, by trials, that they are too *worldly minded* in their views, too inordinately and extravagantly bent on rejecting future, in order to secure present good; and *on this account*, he sends the blast of disappointment on all their schemes and endeavours. Some, who do not thrive in the world as fast as they desired and expected, or who after having greatly thriven, have witnessed their accumulated property, "make to itself wings and fly away," may on enquiry perceive the above to have been the cause of Jehovah's contest with them. They were too eagerly bent on "laying up treasure on earth," while they were careless of becoming "rich towards God;" and therefore, in mercy to them, he dispatched some secret worm to know the root of their idolized gourd, or in some manner more open and undisguised, commissioned one or more of the innumerable agents he has ever at command, to write emptiness and vanity upon their gains and acquisitions.

God contends with others again, on account of the unjust and *unwarrantable methods* they have adopted for the furtherance of their schemes of pecuniary advancement. If he has seen them employing fraud, or practising extortion for the furtherance of their welfare in the world, and impoverishing others with a view to enrich themselves, he has stepped in, and given affecting proof, that without his blessing, all contrivances for personal interests must fail, and that he will not smile upon the unwarrantable measures which some are adopting to accomplish their worldly ends.

With some who are ascending the ladder of elevation, he contends in order to convince them, that they have mounted far enough for their own safety, or for the benefit of those who may be involved with them in the success or failure of their enterprizes, and the interposition is proved to be kind and merciful, by which he says to you, "Thus far shalt thou go, and no further."

Again, when he contends with mortals by those dispensations, which are denominated *bereavements*, and by which, friend is torn from friend, and families are made to undergo, with regard to those who compose them; material alterations and painful diminutions, he does not refuse either directly to assure them, or in some way, to discover to them, why he lays their comforts in the grave. Sometimes he crops the choicest flower, which grows in the family garden, because he sees that it was too extravagantly estimated, that it was injudiciously loved and treated; and that the course which was pursued towards it by the mistaken tenderness of surrounding friends, would have prevented or corrupted, instead of maturing its fruits. Who can tell, how many children have been safely housed in heaven before their parents or other injudicious relatives had time to ruin them on earth? What an inconceivable amount of agony would David have been spared, if his indulged and spoiled Absalom

who lived to "pierce his heart through with many sorrows," had been removed from his embrace in infancy or early childhood. Doubtless when he witnessed the affecting end to which Absalom came, he was the more reconciled to the removal of another child whom he had previously lost, when it was at the maternal breast.

And when God contends with an individual, or with a family, by the death of one of its heads or adult members, he frequently afterwards explains the reasons why he did it, to their satisfaction, and furnishes them with grounds for acquiescence in that event, to which at the time of its occurrence, they found it next to impossible to bring their mind to feel reconciled.

In "shewing us wherefore he contends with us," God may make choice of some future rather than of the present time. "What I do," he may say, "thou knowest not now, but thou shall know hereafter;" but if he brings us to be contented with this arrangement, if, though we cannot now see the reason, why he has acted with us in this or that particular manner, we learn much of his general character, or have acquired such confidence in the rectitude of his government, as to feel and be assured, that whatever he does, *must be right*. He has already in a good degree explained to us, "Wherefore he contends with us." In that sweet childlike acquiescence in his will, to which he has enabled us to attain, we may perceive his object. Probably, when some trial in which we are now involved, was far ahead, and entirely unexpected, we could not endure even the thought of its possible occurrence. But now, that it has come upon us, we are astonished at ourselves, amazed at our composure, our support, our consolation. The whole pressure of it is much more tolerable to us than the bare apprehension or anticipation once was. "As thy day is, thy strength shall be," is a sentiment written as with a sunbeam upon our deportment in the day of our calamity.

In the case of Job himself, who offered the prayer in the text, the full exposition of the motives and reasons of the divine conduct did not take place, till sometime afterwards. Hence the apostle James, in referring to this very case, for the edification and instruction of Christians of his own day, says, "ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the *end* of the Lord." The *termination* of Job's remarkable career, furnished a most beautiful and interesting commentary on the dark and difficult text, proposed for consideration in an earlier part of his life.

Thus must we, as Christians, look forward to future years of our earthly pilgrimage, for an explanation of many events and occurrences of preceding periods, and some of these occurrences and events may have their full exposition deferred, till the period when the light of a future world shall effectually and forever disperse the darkness of the present state of being.

Why does God contend with that sinner, whom he awakens seriously to consider his way? Why but to induce his flight from "the wrath to come," morally to compel him to embrace "the hope set before him." He is wounded by "the sword of the spirit," that he may apply "the balm of Gilead" for his cure, and call in "the phy-

sician there" to manage his distressing and deplorable case. O how merciful this arrest, and with what an exulting and adoring heart should the sinner thus smitten by the law, avail himself of the remedy prescribed and offered in the gospel. Has he discovered his nakedness? It is that he may be induced to clothe himself with the garments of salvation. Has he felt his poverty? Why was he made to realize it, but in order to his prizing and appropriating "the unsearchable riches of Christ."

Who among ourselves now, are the individuals that, in view of past or present sufferings, feel a right to say, "I am the man that have seen affliction by the rod of his wrath." Did you at such times "hear the rod and him that appointed it?" Did you honestly entreat the sovereign disposer of events and dispenser of trials, to "shew you wherefore he contends with you?" And are you not able to testify, that, in some respect or other, he met your expectation and answered your enquiry? If so, trust him to expound in due time to your satisfaction subsequent arrangements of his providence into whose meaning and purport, you may not yet have been introduced. When disposed to complain, check yourself, and say with the Psalmist, "this is my infirmity; but I will remember the years of the right hand of the Most High." "Unto the upright there will," for so it is promised, "arise light in the darkness."

To conclude. Does God contend with us in this world? With sinners to induce them to break away from their wrong choices and attachments, and to say "what have I to do any more with idols: thou art the Lord my God?" With Christians to prevail on you, more entirely to renounce the world, and more conscientiously to devote yourself to his better and happier services? Let both look forward to the eternal world, when those who have been benefitted by his contentions with them here, will enter into his future everlasting rest; and when those whom neither his Providence nor grace has subdued to an obedient spirit, will find him their irresistible, unchangeable and most formidable adversary. O Christian sufferer; how cheering is that sentence which John, in the book of Revelation, was commanded to write "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord: for they rest from their labours and their works do follow them." How cheerfully may, and ought you now to endure those "light afflictions which are but for a moment," in the promise and assured expectation that they "will work out for you a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory." "Be patient" and submissive; "for the coming of the Lord draweth nigh." Tho' weeping should endure the whole night of time; "Joy will come in the morning" of the glorious resurrection.

But how sad is the state, and how fearful the prospect of those who, when God has been "contending with them" by afflicting visitations, instead of submitting and humbly asking to know the reasons of his displeasure, have preferred to contend with him in turn; and have been hardened under a process which ought to have subdued and softened them, have insisted, that they "did well to be angry, even unto death." O bethink yourselves, if such there be in this assembly, of the awful result of "striving with God." And bow at once in submission at his feet, and "humble yourself under the mighty hand of God, and he will exalt you in due time."