

THE SWEET USES OF ADVERSITY NO. 283

A SERMON
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AT THE MUSIC HALL, ROYAL SURREY GARDENS

*“Shew me wherefore thou contendest with me.”
Job 10:2*

AND will God contend with man? If God be angry, can He not take away the breath of his nostrils, and lay him low in the dust of earth? If the heart of the Almighty is moved unto hot displeasure, can He not speak in His anger, and will not the soul of man sink into the lowest hell? Will God contend—will He set himself in battle array against His creature? And such a creature?—the creature of an hour—a thing that is not, that is here today and gone tomorrow? Will the Almighty contend with the nothingness of man? Will the everlasting God take up the weapons of war, and go out to fight against the insect of a day?

Well might we cry out to Him, “After whom is my Lord the king gone forth? After a dead dog: after a flea?” Will You hunt the partridge on the mountains with an army, and will You go forth against a gnat with shield and spear? Shall the everlasting God who faints not, neither is weary, at whose reproof the pillars of heaven’s starry roof tremble and start—will He become combatant with a creature? Yet our text says so. It speaks of God’s contending with man.

Ah, surely, my brethren, it needs but little logic to understand that this is not a contention of anger, but a contention of love. It needs, I think, but a short sight for us to discover that if God contends with man, it must be a contention of mercy. There must be a design of love in this. If He were angry, He would not condescend to reason with His creature, and to have a strife of words with him, much less would He put on His buckler and lay hold on His sword, to stand up in battle and contend with such a creature as man.

You will all perceive at once that there must be love even in this apparently angry word, that this *contention* must, after all, have something to do with *contentment*, and that this battle must be, after all, but a disguised mercy, but another shape of an embrace from the God of love. Carry this consoling reflection in your thoughts while I am preaching to you, and if any of you are saying today, “Shew me wherefore thou contendest with me,” the very fact of God contending with you at all, the fact that He has not consumed you, that He has not smitten you to the lowest hell, may thus, at the very outset, afford consolation and hope.

Now, I propose to address myself to the two classes of persons who are making use of this question. First, I shall speak to *the tried saint*, and then I shall speak to *the seeking sinner*, who has been seeking peace and pardon through Christ, but who has not as yet found it, but on the contrary, has been buffeted by the law, and driven away from the mercy seat in despair.

I. First then, to THE CHILD OF GOD.

I have—I know I have—in this great assembly, some who have come to Job’s position. They are saying, “My soul is weary of my life, I will leave my complaint upon myself, I will speak in the bitterness of my soul. I will say unto God, Do not condemn me, ‘shew me wherefore thou contendest with me.’”

Sometimes to question God is wicked. As the men of Bethshemesh were smitten with death when they dared to lift up the lid of the ark and look into its sacred mysteries, so is it often death to our faith to question God. It often happens that the sorest plagues come upon us on account of an impudent curiosity which longs to pry between the folded leaves of God’s great council book, and find out the reason for

His mysterious providences. But I think *this* is a question that may be asked. Inquiring here will not be merely curious, for there will be a practical affect following therefrom.

Tried saint, follow me while I seek to look into this mystery and answer your question, and I pray you, select that one of several answers which I shall propound, which shall, to your judgment, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, seem to be the right one. You have been tried by trouble after trouble, business runs cross against you, sickness is never out of your house, while in your own person you are the continual subject of a sad depression of spirit. It seems as if God were contending with you, and you are asking, “Why is this? ‘Shew me wherefore thou contendest with me.’”

1. My first answer on God’s part, my brother, is this—it may be that God is contending with you that He may show His own power in upholding you. God delights in His saints, and when a man delights in his child, if it be a child noted for its brightness of intellect, he delights to see it put through hard questions, because he knows that it will be able to answer them all.

So God glories in His children. He loves to hear them tried, that the whole world may see that there is none like them on the face of the earth, and even Satan may be compelled before he can find an accusation against them, to resort to his inexhaustible fund of lies.

Sometimes God on purpose puts His children in the midst of this world’s trials. On the right, left, before, behind, they are surrounded. Within and without the battle rages. But there stands the child of God, calm amidst the bewildering cry, confident of victory. And then the Lord points joyously to His saint and He says, “See, Satan, he is more than a match for you. Weak though he is, yet through My power, he all things can perform.”

And sometimes God permits Satan himself to come against one of His children, and the black fiend of hell in dragon’s wings, meets a poor Christian just when he is faint and weary from stumblings in the valley of humiliation. The fight is long and terrible, and well it may be, for it is *a worm* combating with *the dragon*.

But see what that worm can do. It is trodden under foot, and yet it destroys the heel that treads upon it. When the Christian is cast down he utters a cry, “Rejoice not over me, O my enemy, for though I fall yet shall I rise again.” And so God points to His child and says, “See there! see what I can do, I can make flesh and blood more mighty than the most cunning spirit, I can make poor feeble foolish man, more than a match for all the craft and might of Satan.”

And what will you say to this third proof that God puts us through? Sometimes God does, as it were, *Himself* enter into the lists, oh, let us wonder to tell it. God, to prove the strength of faith, sometimes Himself makes war on faith. Think not that this is a stretch of the imagination. It is plain simple fact.

Have you never heard of the brook Jabbok, and of that angel-clothed God who fought with Jacob there, and permitted Jacob to prevail? What was this for? It was this, thus had God determined, “I will strengthen the creature so much, that I will permit it to overcome its Creator.” Oh, what noble work is this, that while God is casting down His child with one hand, He should be holding him up with the other, letting a measure of omnipotence fall on him to crush him, while the same omnipotence supports him under the tremendous load.

The Lord shows the world—“See what faith can do!” “Well does Hart sing of faith—

***“It treads on the world and on hell;
It vanquishes death and despair;
And O! Let us wonder to tell,
It overcomes heaven by prayer.”***

This is why God contends with you, to glorify Himself, by showing to angels, to men, to devils, how He can put such strength into poor puny man, that he can contend with his Maker, and become a prevailing prince like Israel, who as a prince had power of God, and prevailed. This, then, may be the first reason.

2. Let me give you a second answer. Perhaps, O tried soul! the Lord is doing this to develop your graces. There are some of your graces that would never be discovered if it were not for your trials. Do you not know that your faith never looks so grand in summer weather, as it does in winter?

Have you not heard that love is too often like a glowworm, that shows but little light except it be in the midst of surrounding darkness? And do you not know that hope itself is like a star—not to be seen in the sunshine of prosperity, and only to be discovered in the night of adversity? Do you not understand that afflictions are often the black foils in which God sets the jewels of His children's graces, to make them shine the better?

It was but a little while ago that on your knees you were saying, "Lord, I fear I have no faith, let me know that I have faith." But do you know you were praying for trials, for you cannot know that you have faith, until your faith is exercised. Our trials, so to speak, are like wayfarers in a wood. When there is no intruder in the silent glades of the forest, the hare and the partridge lie, and there they rest and no eye sees them. But when the intruding footstep is heard, then you see them start and run along the green lane, and you hear the whirr of the pheasant as it seeks to hide itself.

Now, our trials are intruders upon our heart's rest, our graces start up and we discover them. They had lain in their lair, they had slept in their forms, they had rested in their nests, unless these intruding trials had startled them from their places.

I remember a simple rural metaphor used by a departed divine. He says he was never very skillful at birds' nesting in the summer time, but he could always find birds' nests in the winter. Now it often happens that when a man has but little grace, you can scarcely see it when the leaves of his prosperity are on him, but let the winter's blast come and sweep away his withered leaves, and then you discover his graces. Depend upon it, God often sends us trials that our graces may be discovered, and that we may be certified of their existence.

Besides, it is not merely discovery, it is real growth that is the result of these trials. There is a little plant, small and stunted, growing under the shade of a broad spreading oak, and this little plant values the shade which covers it, and greatly does it esteem the quiet rest which its noble friend affords. But a blessing is designed for this little plant.

Once upon a time there comes along the woodman, and with his sharp axe he fells the oak. The plant weeps, and cries, "My shelter is departed, every rough wind will blow upon me, and every storm will seek to uproot me." "No, no," saith the angel of that flower, "now will the sun get at thee, now will the shower fall on thee in more copious abundance than before, now thy stunted form shall spring up into loveliness, and thy flower, which could never have expanded itself to perfection, shall now laugh in the sunshine, and men shall say, 'How greatly has that plant increased! how glorious has become its beauty through the removal of that which was its shade and its delight!'"

See you not, then, that God may take away your comforts and your privileges to make you the better Christian? Why, the Lord always trains His soldiers, not by letting them lie on feather beds, but by turning them out and using them to forced marches and hard service. He makes them ford through streams, and swim through rivers, and climb mountains, and walk many a long march with heavy knapsacks of sorrow on their backs. This is the way in which He makes soldiers—not by dressing them up in fine uniforms, to swagger at the barrack gates, and to be fine gentlemen in the eyes of the loungers in the park.

God knows that soldiers are only to be made in battle. They are not to be grown in peaceful times. We may grow the stuff of which soldiers are made, but warriors are really educated by the smell of powder, in the midst of whizzing bullets, and roaring cannonades—not in soft and peaceful times.

Well, Christian, may not this account for it all? Is not your Lord bringing out your graces and making them grow? This is the reason why He is contending with you.

3. Another reason may be found in this. It may be the Lord contends with you because you have some secret sin which is doing you sore damage. Do you remember the story of Moses? Never was a man better beloved than he of the Lord his God, for he was faithful in all his house as a servant.

But do you remember how the Lord met him on the way as he was going to Egypt, and strove with him? And why? Because he had in his house an uncircumcised child. This child was, so long as it had not God's seal upon it, a sin in Moses, therefore God strove with him till the thing was done.

Now, too often we have some uncircumcised thing in our house, some joy that is evil, some amusement that is sinful, some pursuit that is not agreeable to His will. And the Lord meets us often as He did Moses, of whom it is written—"The LORD met him by the way in the inn, and sought to kill him"—Exodus 4:24. Now search and look, for if the consolations of God be small with you, there is some secret sin within. Put it away, lest God smite you still more sorely, and vex you in His hot displeasure. Trials often discover sins—sins we should never have found out if it had not been for them.

We know that the houses in Russia are very greatly infested with rats and mice. Perhaps a stranger would scarcely notice them at first, but the time when you discover them is when the house is on fire, then they pour out in multitudes. And so does God sometimes burn up our comforts to make our hidden sins run out, and then He enables us to knock them on the head and get rid of them. That may be the reason of your trial, to put an end to some long-fostered sin.

It may be too, that in this way God would prevent some future sin, some sin hidden from your own eyes into which you would soon fall if it were not for His troubling you by His providence.

There was a fair ship which belonged to the great Master of the seas, it was about to sail from the port of grace to the haven of glory. Ere it left the shore the great Master said, "Mariners, be brave! Captain, be you bold! for not a hair of your head shall perish, I will bring you safely to your desired haven. The angel of the winds is commissioned to take care of you on your way."

The ship sailed right merrily with its streamers flying in the air. It floated along at a swift rate with a fair wind for many and many a day. But once upon a time, there came a hurricane which drove them from the course, strained their mast until it bent as if it must snap in twain. The sail was gone to ribbons, the sailors were alarmed and the captain himself trembled. They had lost their course. "They were out of the right track," they said, and they mourned exceedingly.

When the day dawned the waves were quiet, and the angel of the winds appeared, and they spoke unto him and said, "Oh angel, were you not bidden to take charge of us, and preserve us on our journeys?" He answered, "It was even so, and I have done it. You were steering on right confidently, and you knew not that a little ahead of your vessel lay a quicksand upon which she would be wrecked and swallowed up quick. I saw that there was no way for your escape but to drive you from your course. See, I have done as it was commanded me, go on your way."

Ah, this is a parable of our Lord's dealings with us. He often drives us from our smooth course which we thought was the right track to heaven. But there is a secret reason for it, there is a quicksand ahead that is not marked in the chart. We know nothing about it, but God sees it, and He will not permit this fair vessel, which He has Himself insured, to be stranded anywhere, He will bring it safely to its desired haven.

4. I have now another reason to give, but it is one which some of you will not understand, some however will. Beloved, you remember that it is written, that we "must bear the image of the heavenly," namely, the image of Christ. As He was in this world even so must we be. We must have fellowship with Him in His sufferings, that we may be conformable unto His death. Have you never thought that none can be like the Man of Sorrows unless they have sorrows too? How can you be like unto Him, who sweat as it were great drops of blood, if you do not sometimes say, "My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death"?

Think not, O well beloved, that you can be like our thorn-crowned head, and yet never feel the thorn. Can you be like your dying Lord, and yet be uncrucified? Must your hand be without a nail, and your foot without a wound? Can you be like Him, unless like Him you are compelled to say, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" God is chiseling you—you are but a rough block—He is making you into the image of Christ, and that sharp chisel is taking away much which prevents your being like Him.

Must He who is our head be marred in His visage by reason of grief, and must we forever rejoice and sing? It cannot be.

*“The heirs of salvation, I know from His Word,
Through much tribulation must follow their Lord.”*

Sweet is the affliction which gives us fellowship with Christ. Blessed is the plough that ploughs deep furrows, if the furrows are like His. Blessed is the mouth that spits upon us, if the spittle be from the same cause as that which defiled His face. Blessed are the nails and thorns, and vinegar and spear, if they but make us somewhat like to Him, in whose glory we shall be partakers when we shall see Him as He is.

This is a matter which all cannot understand, for it is a path which no unhallowed foot has trodden, and no careless eye has so much as seen it. But the true believer can rejoice therein, for he has had fellowship with Christ in His sufferings.

5. To the child of God I shall give only one more reason. The Lord, it may be, contends with you, my brother, to humble you. We are all too proud, the humblest of us do but approach to the door of true humility. We are too proud, for pride, I suppose, runs in our very veins, and is not to be gotten out of us any more than the marrow from our bones. We shall have many blows before we are brought down to the right mark, and it is because we are so continually getting up that God is so continually putting us down again.

Besides, don't you feel, in looking back on your past troubles, that you have after all been best when you have had troubles? I can truly say, there is a mournfulness in joy, and there is a sweet joy in sorrow. I do not know how it is, but that bitter wine of sorrow, when you once get it down, gives such a warmth to the inner man as even the wine of Lebanon can scarcely afford. It acts with such a tonic influence upon the whole system, that the very veins begin to thrill as the blood leaps therein. Strange influence! I am no physician, but yet I know that my sweet cup often leaves bitterness on the palate, and my bitter cup always leaves a sweet flavor in the mouth.

There is a sweet joy in sorrow I cannot understand. There is music in this harp with its strings all unstrung and broken. There are a few notes I hear from this mournful lute that I never get from the loud-sounding trumpet. Softness and melody we get from the wail of sorrow, which we never get from the song of joy. Must we not account for this by the fact that in our troubles we live nearer to God?

Our joy is like the wave as it dashes upon the shore—it throws us on the earth. But our sorrows are like that receding wave which sucks us back again into the great depth of the Godhead. We should have been stranded and left high and dry upon the shore if it had not been for that receding wave, that ebbing of our prosperity, which carried us back to our Father and to our God again.

Blessed affliction! it has brought us to the mercy seat, given life to prayer, enkindled love, strengthened faith, brought Christ into the furnace with us, and then brought us out of the furnace to live with Christ more joyously than before.

Surely, I cannot answer this question better. If I have not hit upon the right reason, search and look my dearly beloved, for the reason is not far off if you but look for it—the reason why He contends with you.

II. I have thus done with the saints, I shall now turn myself to address THE SEEKING SINNER, who is wondering that he has found no peace and comfort.

By the way—running a little apart from the subject—I heard a brother saying the other evening, in describing his experience, that before he was converted he was never sick, never had an affliction at all, but from the very hour when he became converted, he found that trials and troubles came upon him very thick. I have been thinking of that ever since, and I think I have found a reason for it.

When we are converted, it is the time of the singing of birds, but do you know the time of the singing of birds is the time of the pruning of vines, and as sure as the time of the singing of birds is

come, the time of the pruning of vines is come also. God begins to try us as soon as He begins to make our soul sing.

This is not running away from the subject. I thought it was. It has just brought me to address the sinner.

You have come here this morning saying to yourself, “Sir, not long ago I was awakened to a sense of my lost estate. As I was directed I went home and sought mercy in prayer. From that day till now I have never ceased to pray. But alas! I get no comfort, sir, I grow worse than ever I was before—I mean I grow more desponding, more sad. If you had asked me before conviction, sir, whether the path to heaven was easy, I should have said, ‘Yes.’ But now it seems to me to be strewn with flints. That I would not mind, but alas! I think the gate is shut which lies at the end of the road, for I have knocked, and it has never opened, I have asked, and I have not received, I have sought, and I have not found. In fact, instead of getting peace I receive terror. God is contending with me. Can you tell me, sir, why it is?”

I will try to answer the question, God helping me.

1. My first answer shall be this. Perhaps, my dear hearer, God is contending with you for a while, because as yet you are not thoroughly awakened. Remember, Christ will not heal your wound till He has probed it to its very core. Christ is no unqualified physician, no foolish surgeon, who would close up a wound with proud flesh in it, but He will take the lancet, and cut, and cut, and cut again crossways, and He will lay the sore open, expose it, look into it, make it smart, and then after that, He will close up its mouth and make it whole. Perhaps you have not as yet known your own vileness, your own lost state.

Now, Christ will have you know your poverty before He will make you rich. His Holy Spirit will convince you of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment to come. He will strip you, and though the pulling off of your own righteousness be like flaying you and tearing off the skin from your breast, yet He will do it, for He will not clothe you with the robe of His own righteousness till every rag of your own self-sufficiency is pulled away. This is why God is contending with you.

You have been on your knees. Go lower, man—go lower, fall flat on your face. You have said, “Lord, I am nothing.” Go lower, man say, “Lord, I am less than nothing and the very chief of sinners.” You have felt somewhat, go ask that you may feel more, may be yet more fully convinced of sin—may learn to hate it with a more perfect hatred, and to bewail your lost estate with a wailing like that of Ramah, when Rachel wept for her children and would not be comforted because they were not.

Seek to know the bottom of your case. Make it a matter of conscience to look your sins in the face, and let hell also blaze before you, realize the fact that you deserve to be lost forever. Sit down often and take counsel with the Lord your God, whom you have grievously offended. Think of your privileges, and how you have despised them, recollect the invitations you have heard, and how often you have rejected them, get a proper sense of sin, and it may be that God will cease to contend with you, because the good is all obtained which He sought to give you by this long and painful contention.

2. Another answer I will give you is this, perhaps God contends with you in order to try your earnestness. There are many Mr. Pliables, who set out on the road to heaven for a little time, and the first boggy piece of road they come to, they creep out on that side which is nearest to their own house, and go back again.

Now, God meets every pilgrim on the road to heaven and contends with him. If you can hold your own and say, “Though he slay me yet will I trust in him,” if you can dare to do it, and be persistent with God and say, “Though He never hear me, if I perish I will pray, and perish only there,” then you have got the mastery and you shall succeed. God’s Spirit is teaching you how to wrestle and agonize in prayer.

I have seen a man, when he has become solemnly in earnest about his soul, pray as though he was a very Samson, with the two gates of mercy in his hand, rocking them to and fro as though he would sooner pull them up—gates, and bar, and all—than he would go away without obtaining a blessing. God

loves to see a man mighty in prayer, intent upon getting the blessing, resolved that he will have Christ, or he will perish seeking Him.

Now, be in earnest. Cry aloud! spare not! Rise in the night-watches! pour out your heart like water before the Lord, for He will answer you when He has heard the voice of your crying, He will hearken to your supplication and give you the desire of your heart.

3. Yet again, another matter. May it not be, my dear hearers, that the reason why God contends with you and does not give you peace, is because you are harboring some sin? Now, I will not say what it is, I have known a man solemnly under conviction of sin, but the company which he kept on market day was of such a caste, that until he was separated entirely from his companions, it was not possible he should have peace.

I do not know what your peculiar besetting sin may be. It may be a love for frivolity, it may be the desire to associate with those who amuse you, it may be worse. But remember, Christ and your soul will never be *one* till you and your sins are *two*. Your desires and longings must make a clean sweep of the devil and all his crew, or else Christ will not come and dwell with you.

“Well,” says one, “but I cannot be perfect.” No, but you cannot find peace till you desire to be. Wherever you harbor a sin, there you harbor misery. One sin willfully indulged in, and not forsaken by true repentance, will destroy the soul. Sins given up are like goods cast out at sea by the mariners in days of storm, they lighten the ship, and the ship will never float till you have thrown all your sins overboard. There is no hope whatever for you till you can truly say,

*“Whate’er consists not with Thy love,
O help me to resign.*

*The dearest idol I have known,
Whate’er that idol be,
Help me to tear it from its throne,
And worship only Thee.”*

4. Then drawing near to a conclusion, let me have your most solemn attention while I give one more hint as to the reason why you have not yet found peace. My dear hearers, perhaps it is because you do not thoroughly understand the plan of salvation. I do feel that all ministers—and here perhaps, I am as great a sinner as any other, and I condemn myself while I chastise others—we all of us do in some way or other, I fear, help to dim the luster of God’s grace, as manifested in the cross of Christ.

Often am I afraid lest I should prefer Calvinism to Calvary, lest I should put the sinner’s sense of need like a quickset hedge round the cross, and keep the poor sinner from getting as near as he would to the bleeding Lamb of God.

Ah, my dear hearers, remember if you would be saved, your salvation comes wholly and entirely from Jesus Christ, the dying Son of God. View Him yonder, sinner, sweating in the garden! See the red drops of blood as they fall from that dear face! Oh, see Him sinner, see Him in Pilate’s hall. View the streams of gore as they gush from those lacerated shoulders. See Him, sinner, see Him on His cross!

View that head still marked with the wounds with which the thorns pierced His temples! Oh, view that face emaciated and marred! See the spittle still hanging there—the spittle of cruel mockers! See the eyes floating in tears with languid pity! Look too, at those hands, and view them as they stream like founts of blood! Oh, stand and listen while He cries, “*Lama Sabachthani!*” Sinner, your life is in Him that died, your healing is in yonder wounds, your salvation is in His destruction.

“Oh!” says one, “but I cannot believe.” Ah, brother, that was once my mournful cry. But I will tell you how I came to believe. Once upon a time, I was trying to make myself believe, and a voice whispered, “Vain man, vain man, if you would believe, come and see!” Then the Holy Spirit led me by the hand to a solitary place.

And while I stood there, suddenly there appeared before me One upon His cross. I looked up, I had then no faith. I saw His eyes suffused with tears, and the blood still flowing, I saw His enemies about Him hunting Him to His grave, I marked His miseries unutterable, I heard the groaning which cannot be described, and as I looked up, He opened his eyes and said to me, “The Son of Man is come into the world to seek and to save that which was lost.”

I clapped my hands and I said, “Jesus, I do believe, I must believe what You have said. I could not believe before, but the sight of You has breathed faith into my soul. I dare not doubt—it were treason, it were high treason to doubt Your power to save.” Dissolved by His agonies, I fell on the ground, and embraced His feet, and when I fell, my sin fell also! And I rejoiced in love divine, that blots out sin and saves from death.

Oh my friend, you will never get faith by trying to make yourself have it. Faith is the gift of Christ! Go and find it in His veins. There is a secret spot where faith is treasured up. It is in the heart of Christ, go and find it in His veins. There is a secret spot where faith is treasured up, it is in the heart of Christ, go and catch it sinner as it flows therefrom.

Go to your chamber, and sit down and picture Christ in holy vision, dying on the tree, and as your eye sees, your heart shall melt, your soul shall believe, and you shall rise from your knees and cry, “I know whom I may believe, and I am persuaded he is able to save that which I have committed to him until that day.”

And now, may the love of Christ Jesus, and the grace of His Father, and the fellowship of His Spirit be with you for ever and ever. Amen and Amen.

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