



Fire and Ice Sermon Series

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On My Back

By C. H. Spurgeon.

Alphonse Karr, in his inimitable work, “A Tour round my Garden,” has a chapter headed, “On My Back,” and a most interesting chapter it is, detailing his observations among the insect and vegetable world from a position by no means the most advantageous for the naturalist. “On my back,” in a painfully literal and involuntary sense, is our position while writing at this moment, and in addition we are not altogether free from a mental prostration, which, in a still more bitter sense, throws us on our back. How long we shall be made to lie prone upon the ever-hardening couch, the great Healer of diseased bodies and souls only knows; our term of chastisement will be exactly as protracted as the divine purpose requires for its benign design, but not a moment longer we are sure. It has already been long enough for nature, but faith makes it none too long for grace. We are the Lord’s prisoner, bound in fetters of pain and manacles of weakness, waiting till the emancipating word shall restore us to the liberty of service. He in this case shutteth, and no man openeth; and when he openeth, no disease can shut.

The sorest part of our captivity, which is sweetened by multiplied mercies, is our Sabbath silence. As the King of Sodom said to Abraham, “Give me the persons, and take the goods to thyself,” so say we to sickness; give us our Sabbaths, and let the week-days be as they may. How we envy the birds which fly around the house of prayer, and above all, the poorest occupants of the remotest seats or standing places in the tabernacles of the Lord. Dumb Sabbaths are a heavy trial to an active minister: to be kept out of market on the market day is a sad loss to those who are covetous of doing good to men and bringing glory to God. The trumpet sounds for the battle, and the hosts are marshalling at the call, but our sword rusts idly upon the wall, and our shield is laid aside. O for a day’s renewal of strength to serve the Lord as our wont has been, by dealing out our heaviest blows against the enemies of his crown and cause! If it must not be, then, good Master, renew our cruse of patience and our barrel of resignation! Six week-days of pain would be a cheap exchange for one heavenly soul-refreshing Sabbath spent in preaching in the power of the Spirit. A silent preacher is like a monarch uncrowned or a vessel laid up to perish by dry rot in the dock, or an eagle penned in a narrow cage, forbidden

to soar into its element. “I am weary with refraining,” said the seer of old: his experience is ours; the word is like fire in our bones; we long for a door of utterance, or our soul will melt for heaviness.

Finding, however, that we cannot march to the wars, but must needs remain a prostrate soldier in the hospital, we must imitate those riflemen who can strike the target while lying upon their backs; if we cannot preach at length, we may at least write an outline discourse, and so let loose a remark or two, which may kindle a holy thought here and there, and perhaps set others preaching. Those who cannot fire the guns, may at least hand out the ammunition to the gunners. He who cannot go to the field to hunt with Esau, may find his savoury meat nearer home.

Reader, silver of learning and gold of eloquence have I none, but such as I have give I thee; not precious fruit, brought forth by the sun of prosperity, but a few clusters put forth by the moon of adversity. The Puritans sometimes called a laborious divine, “a painful preacher;” here is our brief sermon, and for once we also claim the title of “a painful preacher.”

“This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby.”—John xi. 4.

This was a very comforting answer to the messenger sent to our Lord, by the anxious sisters, with the mournful tidings, “Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick.” Jesus was sure to send the best cordial he had to mourners whom he loved so well. To be infallibly assured that all will end well is one of the best possible supports under heavy trials. Such comfort have all the saints. From our Lord’s words we learn—

I. That there is a limit to sickness.

Here is an “unto” within which its ultimate end is restrained, and beyond which it cannot go. Lazarus might pass through death, but death was not to be the ultimatum of his sickness. In all sickness, the Lord saith to the waves of pain, “Hitherto shall ye go, but no further,” while his fixed purpose is not the destruction, but the instruction of his people. Satan was permitted to worry Job up to a certain point—further he must not go. As the porter at the house Beautiful told the pilgrim, “The lions are chained,” even so are our pains and griefs. When God wills it, sickness will bear us unto deep decline, but not unto death; unto weariness of body, but not unto weakness of soul; unto restlessness, but not unto wretchedness; unto moaning, but not unto murmuring. unto depression, but not unto despair. There are bounds about this mount of fire. Wisdom hangs up the

thermometer at the furnace mouth and regulates the heat. Gideon taught the men of Succoth with thorns and briers, till they died under the lesson: our Instructor deals with us far more tenderly; his aim is not to kill, but to cure. We are in the hands of Jehovah, not Nebuchadnezzar; the furnace may be heated seven times hotter, but there is no rage and fury in the King who casts us into it, as is very evident, since he intends himself to be with us in the midst of the flames. Noah's flood rose not an inch higher than God's decree allowed, and it began to assuage at the very moment when the divine mandate was issued. If the Lord ordains our trials ten, they cannot be eleven.

1. The limit is encouragingly comprehensive. The God of providence has limited the time, manner, intensity, repetition, and effects of all our sicknesses; each throb is decreed, each sleepless hour predestinated, each relapse ordained, each depression of spirit foreknown, and each sanctifying result eternally purposed. If the minutiae were not in the decree, we might fret over little things; but now we dare not, lest we murmur against the Lord: if our great pains were not regulated by wisdom, we might be alarmed at them, but now we need not be afraid. Nothing great or small escapes the ordaining hand of him who numbers the hairs of our head, and keeps the paths of our feet.

2. This limit is wisely adjusted to our strength, to the end designed, and to the grace apportioned. Affliction comes not at haphazard; the weight of every stroke of the rod is accurately measured. He who made no mistakes in balancing the clouds and meting out the heavens, commits no errors in measuring out the ingredients which compose the medicine of souls. We cannot suffer too much nor be relieved too late. The wind is tempered to the shorn lamb; the load is fitted to the weak shoulder.

3. The limit is tenderly appointed. The knife of the heavenly Surgeon never cuts deeper than is absolutely necessary. A father smites no harder than duty constrains. "He doth not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men." A mother's heart cries, "Spare my child." but no mother is more compassionate than our gracious God. When we consider how hard-mouthed we are, it is a wonder that we are not driven with a sharper bit. So much rust requires much of the file; but love is gentle of hand.

The thought is full of consolation, that he who has fixed the bounds of our habitation, has also fixed the bounds of our tribulation.

II. That Jesus knows all about it.

He gave the sisters infallible information, for he knew all things. This knowledge he possesses as the only wise God and our Saviour: because he is divine, he has knowledge and foreknowledge; sight, insight, and foresight; perfect, minute, universal, continual, immediate acquaintance with all that concerns his people. The child is cheered as he sings, "This my father knows;" and shall not we be comforted as we discern that our dear Friend and tender soul-husband knows all about us?

1. He is the Physician, and, if he knows all, there is no need that the patient should know. Hush, thou silly, fluttering heart; prying peeping, and suspecting! What thou knowest not now, thou shalt know hereafter, and, meanwhile, Jesus, the beloved physician, knows thy soul in adversities. Why need the patient analyse all the medicine, or estimate all the symptoms? This is the Physician's work, not mine; it is my business to trust, and his to prescribe. If he shall write out his prescription in uncouth characters which I cannot read, I will not be uneasy on that account, but rely upon his unfailing skill to make all plain in the result, however mysterious it may be in the working.

2. He is the Master, and his knowledge is to serve us, instead of our own; we are to obey, not to judge. In some respects we, as servants, must remember that "the servant knoweth not what his Lord doeth." Shall the architect explain all his plans to every common labourer on the works? If he knows his own intent, is it not enough? The vessel on the wheel cannot guess to what pattern it shall be conformed, but, if the potter has a clear eye to the ultimate result, what matters the ignorance of the dull clay? My Lord must not be cross-questioned any more by one so ignorant as I am.

3. He is the Head. All understanding centres there. What does the finger know? What judgment has the arm? What comprehension has the foot? All the power to know lies in the head. Why should the members be so anxious to enquire and question, when the head is already fully acquainted with everything? Why should the foot have a brain of its own, when the head fulfils for it every intellectual office? Here, then, must the believer rest his comfort in Sickness, not that he himself can see the end, but that Jesus knows all. Sweet Lord, be thou for ever eye, and soul, and head for us, and let us be content to know only what thou choosest to tell us.

The tree of knowledge brought no good to man, but in Jesus we see the tree of knowledge united with the tree of life: the second Adam by his knowledge saves us. let us be content to have it so.

III. Jesus assures us that the design of sickness is divinely good: “Not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby.”

Sickness is by no means destructive, but aims at that which every regenerated mind considers to be the highest good, the chief end for which man was created, namely, the glory of God. *Negatively*: sickness works us no real ill. It is not unto the death of our joy, though it may annihilate all physical enjoyment, for the believer’s heart-joy flows from springs which are not affected by the frosts of outward circumstances. Neither does sickness work the death of our peace—we can be calm in heart when racked in body; our peace is not a thing for flesh and blood to reign over. Nor is our usefulness put to death by our illness; blessed be God a weak hand can sow good seed, and a couch may be a pulpit: besides, the experience gained in the chamber of affliction may enrich us for future work, as Lying fallow fattens the soil for future crops. Our usefulness is suspended, and this frets us no little, but we shall do all the more by-and-by, and this may cheer us. Sickness is unto the death of no Christian virtue. like a rough wind, it shakes down a great deal of rotten fruit, but the living fruit of grace is uninjured, nay, it is mellowed and sweetened by it. Oh! how foolish are we to fear and dread bodily suffering, when it hath no killing hand, but two hands full of blessings. We fear our mercies and tremble at our soul-enrichments; we cry out against a friend as though he were an enemy, and chase away an angel as though he were a devil. If we could but see the words, “Not unto death,” emblazoned upon the escutcheon of our afflictions, we should receive them with more willing mind.

Positively: sickness in the believer is intended for the glory of God, and in part this design is answered during the trial. It is to be feared that the Lord gets but a small revenue of glory from some of us; we defraud the royal exchequer of many dues: much conscience-money might we all send into court on account of our long and heavy arrears of thankfulness. Sickness takes out a warrant against ingratitude, and surcharges us for our defalcations, by bringing our negligences to remembrance. God gets many a song from his caged birds which might never be heard if they had strength to wanton on the wing. Psalms and hymns, like music on the water, sound sweetly from the deeps of suffering. Moreover, God is glorified in the after results of sanctified pain, by the gentleness, meekness, quietness, and unction which adorn the spirit of the experienced believer. Until the oyster is sick it yields no pearls. Heavy damps of adversity make souls verdant. Saints, unlike the plants of earth, grow fastest in the sharpest weather. We make most progress in our voyage heavenward when the wind is rough: calms are more pleasant than profitable; better for comfort than for commerce; fairer in the present than in the retrospect. Affliction cats the facets of the Lord’s

diamonds, and so they shine with a greater lustre to his honour. What the church owes to the file and the hammer no tongue can tell.

Would the church triumphant have been so glorious as it now is, if its members had been spared the great tribulation out of which they passed to their crowns? Would half the grace which now beautifies the church militant have been discernible at all, if severe trials had not developed it? Would the Lord have had honour among us if the chastening rod had been laid aside? For the world to see how a Christian can endure hardness, is a great glory to God. The great hospital of saintly suffering is a grand exposition in which the choice works of the Holy Spirit are exhibited to all who have eyes to see. Our covenant God is magnified by the virtues peculiar to tried believers, quite as much as by those which adorn his active servants.

True religion has for its choicest ornaments the patience of the sick, the triumphs of the dying. Lazarus had made small figure in the book of the Lord's mighty acts had it not been for the sickness which so grieved his sisters; but through that affliction, and that which came of it, the name of Jesus became famous, crowds docked together, and many believed on him. If we could but hope that in any way the Son of God would be glorified in our pains, we would fall on our knees and bless the Lord for them with joyful tears. But why should it not be so? It shall be so through the supply of the Spirit; for whose sacred power let us pray with increasing fervour.

This is enough for a man on his back to write, and perhaps as much as our readers may care to peruse, for we fear that our thoughts must be very prosy, since the mind from which they come is far from being in a lively state. We shall, therefore, draw to a close by quoting the following quaint lines from "Quarles' Divine Fancies," written upon "The change of weather;" they argue well the sweet uses of adversity, and therefore suit our state and theme.

“And were it for thy profit to obtain
All sunshine? No vicissitude of rain?
Thinkest thou that thy laborious plough requires
Not winter frosts, as well as summer fires?
There must be both: sometimes these hearts of ours
Must have the sweet, the seasonable showers
Of tears; sometimes, the frost of chill despair
Makes our desir'd sunshine seem more fair:
Weathers that most oppose to flesh and blood,
Are such as help to make our harvest good:

We may not choose, great God; it is *thy* task:
We know not what to have, nor how to ask.”

The Editor's Illness

A letter to our readers and others.

Dear Friends,—

I have spent two months in ill health, and much of the time in severe pain, but, by the good hand of God upon me, I am now much better, and hope to resume my home work very speedily. It is due to many friends to make the following communications; and I beg them to receive them with their customary kindness.

1. MANY THANKS are hereby tendered to the scores of thoughtful friends who have sent me prescriptions of eminent physicians, medical works, and advice as to homoeopathy, hydropathy, animal magnetism, galvanism, Turkish baths, patent medicines, cotton wool, hot fomentations, cold compresses, etc., etc. I can assure my friends that I have had communications concerning all these, and more. It has been a great pleasure to receive such a vast number and variety of evidences that warm sympathy towards me abounds, and an additional comfort to discover that there are at least hundreds of ways in which rheumatism and rheumatic gout may be cured, in periods varying from an hour to a week. My gratitude is doubly due to those who not only gave me advice and prescriptions, but were so generous as to purchase the medicines and send them to my house. I have received boxes of pills, bottles of liniment, and phials of physic in superabundance, I am most truly grateful for the kind feeling which prompted the gifts, but I have been so utterly bewildered as to which out of such a number should have the first trial, that I have fallen back upon my kind friend and tried physician, Dr. Palfrey, of Finsbury Place, and I feel quite content with the result of having followed his directions. Will friends be so good as to cut off the medical supplies, now that all need for them is, I trust, over for the present! While some of the prescriptions are more amusing shall valuable, there are little incidents connected with some of these well-meant gifts which much pleased me, it would not be right to print them, but they proved most clearly that the poorest persons can show their sympathy with as much tenderness and delicacy as the best educated and the most refined.

2. Apologies are offered to those friends who have been disappointed of services which I had promised to render; the act of God in laying me low is a sufficient exoneration from all engagements. These apologies are the more needed, because it will not be in my power, at any future period near at hand, to fulfil those engagements, for, although to a great degree recovered, the limb is weak, and standing upon it in preaching, or wearying it in travelling, will be likely to lay me up again. I have resolved, for twelve months at least, to refuse almost all work

away from home, and I now earnestly beg friends not to distress me with importunate requests to preach here, there, and everywhere. For years I have preached from eight to ten times a week, besides issuing the weekly sermon, editing the magazine, overseeing the church, superintending the college, directing the orphanage, founding new churches, attending committees, and a thousand other things but many signs indicate that there must be a pause. I am not less willing, but I am far less able than I was, to serve the church by preaching. My excellent secretary and myself are very hardly wrought in the matter of correspondence, and the more so because, after having given one refusal, friends often write three or four times, and put us to much trouble and expense. I would refuse no one if I could comply, and therefore a refusal is always meant when given. If friends are unreasonable enough to write two or three times when they have once been answered, they must not wonder if they get no further reply. During the year 1868, I must crave for mercy from the Christian public, and a little lightening of my burdens, or otherwise I shall have to lay them down altogether.

3. AN URGENT REQUEST I would, in closing, offer to my friends in Christ, namely, that as they have so fervently prayed for me of late, they would continue those supplications, beseeching the Lord to bless my ministry to my church and congregation, and to the many thousands who weekly read the sermons; to prosper me in the college, giving much grace to all who are trained in it; and to sustain our colportage, and orphanage, and other works. No kindness can be more effectual than that which leads us to pray for our friends. Brethren pray for

Your affectionate friend,

C. H. SPURGEON.

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