

THE LIVING PULPIT,

OR

EIGHTEEN SERMONS

BY EMINENT LIVING DIVINES

OF

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH.

WITH

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE EDITOR,

BY GEO. W. BETHUNE, D. D.

EDITED AND PUBLISHED

BY REV. ELIJAH WILSON.

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ELEVENTH EDITION.  
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PHILADELPHIA:

C. SHERMAN & SON, PRINTERS,

S. W. CORNER OF SEVENTH AND CHERRY STS.

1861.

CHRISTIAN SUBMISSION.

BY

H. A. BOARDMAN, D. D.

PASTOR OF THE TENTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, PHILADELPHIA.

It is the Lord; let him do what seemeth him good.—1 SAM. iii. 18.

IN this life we are sanctified but in part. The best of men have their infirmities. Even the most symmetrical and shining characters disclose, in one form or another, the imperfection which attaches to all things human. The case is still stronger than this. Eminent virtues are often associated with signal blemishes. Individuals conspicuous for certain Christian graces, are scarcely less conspicuous for grievous defects. The venerable Eli was an example. He was the High Priest of Israel. From the brief sketch we have of his history he would seem to have been a sincere, humble, devout man—attentive to his official engagements, and truly concerned for the welfare of the people, and the honour of their Divine king. But in one department of duty Eli was culpably remiss—he had no family government. His two sons, his assistants in the temple-rites, were profligate young men, whose conduct brought a great scandal upon religion—and yet he tolerated it. He reproved them, it is true, but in so mild a form that

it produced no effect upon them—precisely, indeed, as many parents in our own day deal with the delinquencies of children whom they have, by their misplaced indulgence, trained to respect their authority only so far as it may suit their convenience. After repeated warnings had been given to no purpose, God at length informs the aged and erring priest that he had determined to destroy his sons, and to transfer the priesthood to another family—"I have sworn unto the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be purged with sacrifice nor offering for ever." This threatening was first made known to "the child Samuel," who communicated it to Eli only after he had been solemnly adjured to do it. It would be difficult to conceive of a more appalling message to the heart of a pious father. To such a father, the announcement that a child was to be struck down by a sudden death, must, under any circumstances, be very afflictive; but to be told that two of his sons—sons, not in their infancy or childhood, but grown up to manhood—sons who had become notorious for their wickedness, and who neither had, nor were likely to have, the slightest preparation for death—that God had resolved, as well for *his* sin in not restraining them as for their own crimes, to cut off these sons by some terrible judgment which should "make the ears of every one that heard it to tingle"—to be told *this* must have been overwhelming. How does the unhappy old man receive it? "*It is the Lord; let him do what seemeth him good!*" Such was his answer—his whole answer; not another word escaped him. Wonderful submission! Wonderful illustration of the efficacy

of Divine grace in controlling the strongest affections of the human heart, and subduing man's rebellious will into an unrepining acquiescence in the will of God!

It behooves us all to know something of this rare endowment. We, too, may have occasion to say, "It is the Lord; let him do what seemeth him good." My subject, then, is CHRISTIAN SUBMISSION.

To discuss it in detail is not my aim. All I propose is, to specify some of the chief elements which enter into it.

1. *Christian submission excludes murmuring.*

This proposition is self-evident, but the thought deserves to be dwelt upon.

It is natural to murmur under afflictions and losses. The voice of nature—that is, of our fallen nature—is not the voice of God, but contrary to it. It is as natural for us to murmur, when deprived of what we love, or disappointed in our hopes, as for holy beings to submit promptly and cheerfully to the Divine will. We are apt to feel that what we have is our own unconditionally; that when we have framed and prosecuted our plans with great prudence and energy, we are entitled to success; that when we have accumulated a fortune, we have an implicit right to keep it; that when we have collected the varied means and appliances of an elegant and graceful life, we ought to be permitted, for a period at least, to enjoy them; that when we are surrounded with a healthful and happy family, strong in each others' affections, and rejoicing in each others' companionship, *no* power may lawfully invade the charmed circle to strike down even the humblest or the feeblest of its loved ones. And if, in any of

these cases, disappointment, bankruptcy, death, actually comes, the perverted instincts of the heart spring up in rebellion against God. I say "against God;" but the quarrel is, for the most part, not with him directly; fear prevents this. We dare not "curse God;" we deal with his instruments. Upon these the lacerated heart pours out its resentments; these it charges with injustice or cruelty.

It is not asserted that this is always done; far from it. But this is the native tendency of the heart, a tendency to set up its own will against God's will, to question his sovereignty, to cavil at his dispensations, to complain that "his ways are not equal," and that he afflicts us more than we deserve. That this disposition does not uniformly disclose itself is easily accounted for. In many it has ceased to exist. Nature has given place to a new nature. Grace has changed the lion into a lamb. Instead of saying, "Who is the Lord that I should obey his voice?" the feeling is, "Not as I will, but as thou wilt!" In other cases the tendency to murmur is held in check by prudential considerations, such as the dread of fresh inflictions, and the like. But in too many instances it breaks forth in impious complaints, or in impatient struggles to escape from the pressure of God's chastising hand. Wicked men, by their tossings and murmurings in affliction, often verify that striking image of the "troubled sea when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt."

It is too evident to admit of argument, that this spirit is incompatible with the temper inspired by the gospel; in other words, that Christian submission excludes murmuring.

2. *It excludes repining.*

Under great trials, it is no less natural to repine than to murmur. The heart sinks into despondency. The feeling is, "This affliction *must* crush me—God has forgotten to be gracious; He has determined, as a just punishment for my sins, to destroy me utterly." Or the feeling is, "Now that this calamity has befallen me, life is stripped of its sweetest charm; the world is a dreary void; all that remains to me is valueless; there is nothing left worth living for." And thus the oppressed soul gives itself up to the sway of sorrow, nurses its grief, and refuses to be comforted. So the Israelites, when pent up between the Egyptians and the sea, giving up all for lost, cried to Moses and said, "Because there were no graves in Egypt, hast thou taken us away to die in the wilderness?" And the prophet, in bewailing his own trials with those of his nation in the captivity, "He hath led me and brought me into darkness, but not into light. My flesh and my skin hath he made old; he hath broken my bones. He hath builded against me and compassed me with gall and travail. He hath set me in dark places, as they that be dead of old. He hath hedged me about that I cannot get out; he hath made my chain heavy. Also, when I cry and shout, he shutteth out my prayer. He hath enclosed my ways with hewn stone; he hath made my paths crooked. He was unto me as a bear lying in wait, and as a lion in secret places. He hath turned aside my ways and pulled me in pieces; he hath made me desolate. . . He hath filled me with bitterness, he hath made me drunken with wormwood. . . And I said,

‘My strength and my hope is perished from the Lord; remembering mine affliction and my misery, the wormwood and the gall.’” (Lam. iii. 1—19.) In strains like these, even the believer will sometimes bemoan his miserable condition when under the rod of chastisement. The prophet, it is true, did not pause here; hope was blended with his deepest anguish, and he emerges from this thick gloom of despondency exclaiming, “The Lord is my portion, saith my soul, therefore will I hope in him.” It is the *surrender* of the heart to despondency—a self-abandonment to repining and hopelessness—of which I speak in saying that it is excluded from the elements of Christian submission; for this is to “faint when we are rebuked” of God; it is to distrust his faithfulness or his power; to interpret his dispensations by “feeble sense;” to assume that he has “turned against us to be our enemy,” simply because he has visited us with peculiar trials, when his word every where makes such allotments a pledge of his love and a signature of discipleship. Christian submission excludes repining.

3. *It excludes insensibility.*

Here, perhaps, more persons fail than in either of the particulars already specified. They suppose themselves to be exercising submission to the Divine will, when they are simply indifferent to his chastisements. There can be no genuine submission where there is no sensibility. It seems but a mockery of God to exclaim, “Thy will be done!” where the event which elicits the sentiment involves no trial, and is felt to be no affliction. We may conceive of a case in which the conflagration of a man’s ware-

house would augment his property to a degree that he would sooner it should burn up than not; or of a case in which parents were so destitute of natural affection that, on mere pecuniary grounds, they would rather a child should die than live; and in examples of this sort the parties, unless they were playing the hypocrite, would manifest no sorrow under their "losses;" but who would think of calling this "Christian submission?"

So far, indeed, is this apathy under afflictive dispensations from belonging to the nature of submission, that the Scriptures hold it up as a grievous sin. Afflictions have a voice, and we have no right to shut our ears against it. They are designed to make us feel, and if we do not feel when we are smitten, we "despise the chastening of the Lord." It was one of the characteristic sins of Israel, that they would not "regard the works of the Lord, nor the operations of his hands," and he threatened, therefore, to destroy them. (Psalm xxviii. 5.) "Thou hast stricken them," says the prophet, "but they have not grieved; thou hast consumed them, but they have refused to receive correction." (Jer. v. 3.) A child that remains unconcerned under parental chastisement, who takes the reproof in a sort of stoical silence, which, being interpreted, means, "I care nothing about your displeasure, and you may punish me or not, as you see fit"—such a child is already hardened in sin. To characterize his indifference as filial submission, would be a flagrant perversion of terms, since this pretended "submission" would really have in it the essence of filial impiety. What better can be said in behalf of that "resigna-

tion" to the will of Providence, which resigns nothing, which parts with nothing it would not sooner part with than retain, which makes no sacrifice, is conscious of no loss, misses none of its customary pleasures, feels no aching void, and looks out upon a world as bright and joyous as ever? Can this be "submission?" No, my brethren. The heart must be cleft before this divine virtue can flow out. These strong affections and gentle sympathies must be crushed before they can give forth the savour of true resignation. These stubborn wills must wage a stern conflict with the hand that is stretched forth against them, before they can say in the spirit of the Gospel, "It is the Lord, let him do what seemeth him good."—Christian submission excludes insensibility.

4. *It includes a reverential acknowledgment of God's hand in the afflictive dispensation.*

Nature and unbelief eye second causes; faith fastens its eye upon the great First Cause. It is not meant by this that it is wrong to contemplate second causes; they make up a great part of the book of Providence, and we not only may but must study them. But to stop at second causes is to exclude Providence. Nothing is more certain than that his agency is concerned, directly or indirectly, in all events, afflictive or otherwise. "Is there evil in the city and the Lord hath not done it?" "I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal." When Job's flocks and children were swept away, he does not regard the tempest, the Chaldeans, and the Sabeans, the instruments of his calamities; if he had, he might have murmured. But he looked beyond

these, and in the spirit of true submission exclaimed, "The *Lord* gave, and the *Lord* hath taken away; and blessed be the name of the Lord." So, too, with the venerable Naomi, when she returned to her native town from her sojourn in Moab, a desolate and impoverished widow, and the citizens gathered around her, and said one to another, with mingled surprise and sympathy, "Is this Naomi?" "Call me not Naomi," she replied, "call me Mara; for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the Lord hath brought me home again empty; why then call ye me Naomi, seeing the Lord hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me?" To her view, all her afflictions spoke of God, and they were submissively to be referred to his providence. There can be no genuine submission without this feeling. Nor is it enough to acknowledge his agency in the event simply. He orders as well the minutest circumstances of our trials as the trials themselves. In these circumstances, there is frequently much to harass the feelings. "We could have borne the stroke, (so we are apt to ruminate upon it,) had it been ordered thus and so; had this thing been done or that left undone; could we only have known beforehand that the blow was about to fall; could we have attempted by such or such expedients to avert it; or, failing in this, could we at least have had the melancholy satisfaction of seeing it fall, it would have been less insupportable." So we reason; but how unwisely! with what unbelief! Does God notice the falling sparrow; has he numbered the hairs of our heads; and does he overlook any, the most trivial incident

in the afflictions of his creatures, and especially of his own children? Let us check these fond suggestions of flesh and blood, and say of every circumstance, however slight, in the dispensations of his hand, "It is the Lord; let him do what seemeth him good."

5. *It includes a conviction of his perfect right to do what he has done.*

The Christian, under the influence of genuine submission, contemplates God as the universal Creator and Proprietor; as having a right, underived and unconditional, save as the exercise of it may be limited by his own infinite perfections, to dispose of any and all creatures, as may seem good in his sight. Ascribing to him an unrestricted sovereignty over every department of human affairs, he feels that he may, without trenching upon any real or imaginary "rights" on the part of his creatures, deal with them in the manner best adapted to promote his own glory. If he chooses to send poverty, sickness, pestilence, domestic troubles, mental disquietude, bereavements, or trials of other kinds, faith will vindicate the equity of the procedure even while the heart is bleeding at every pore, and will ask, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" I do not say that this will in every case be done without a struggle; nature is nature still, though sanctified. And sometimes the freshets of affliction burst so abruptly upon the soul, and pour themselves over it with such irresistible fury, that faith is for the time well-nigh severed from the rock, and hope's anchor drags from its fastening within the vail, and destruction seems inevitable. But presently that voice

which said to the raging Gennesareth, "Peace, be still!" goes out over the tempestuous flood, and the alarmed and desponding soul again lifts up a tearful but confiding eye to heaven, and cries, "Father, thy will be done!" Only let the believer realize that it is God who is dealing with him, and he is satisfied that all his allotments are ordered in righteousness and equity. He needs no argument to convince him that even where "clouds and darkness are round about Him, righteousness and judgment are the habitation of His throne." Nor is this all. Submission not only has respect to God's perfect right to do what he has done, and to the righteousness of his dispensations, but,

6. It includes *an assurance of His wisdom, faithfulness, and love*, in the affliction he has sent.

It was a common sentiment among the ancient heathen, that great trials marked a man as an object of the Divine displeasure. Job's friends interpreted his afflictions in the same way. The Christian has been taught differently. He knows that affliction has ever been a part of the heritage of the saints. "In the world ye shall have tribulation." "If ye be without chastisement, then are ye bastards and not sons." It is the specific reason assigned for the punishments inflicted upon Israel, that they were God's children. "You only have I known of all the families of the earth, *therefore* will I punish you for all your iniquities." And herein he has reference, not simply to their aggravated guilt and consequent desert of punishment, but also to the benefits they might derive from his inflictions. They were his own people, and therefore instead of allowing them

to sin with impunity until their cup was full, he would chastise them and bring them to repentance. "When we are judged we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world."

This view of affliction puts another aspect upon it. To the eye of sense it is frowning and terrific; it speaks of vengeance; it forebodes destruction. But faith takes the soul up to the throne, and unveils the other phase of the dispensation—that which is averted from our mortal eyes, and of which flesh and sense can form no conception. Then it is seen that the rod is held by a Father's hand; that it is he who has cast his child into the furnace, and that his bosom yearns over him with all the love and tenderness which a fond father feels towards a son whom he is constrained to punish for his faults. He may not be apprised of all the grounds and motives of the infliction, but he will at least be conscious that he deserves chastisement. "I know, O Lord, that thy judgments are right, and that thou in faithfulness hast afflicted me." Such is the language of true submission. God has engaged to perfect his work in the hearts of his people, to withhold no good thing from them, to do for them whatever may be requisite, not for their present ease, but for their sanctification and meetness for heaven. The rod is too valuable an implement in carrying forward this process to be neglected. If he consulted simply the feelings of his children, he would seldom resort to chastisement—for what child will ask to be chastised? Or, if his affection for them partook of the infirmity which so often attaches to parental affection among men, he might suffer their sins to go un-

reproved; but he is a faithful and covenant-keeping God. No mistaken tenderness will ever lead him to withhold the chastisement which is essential to his people's happiness. He loves them too well and too wisely not to let them drink sometimes of the cup of sorrow.

The Christian is not often left without adequate evidence that his afflictions are ordered in wisdom and faithfulness. One of the first effects of affliction is to drive him to self-examination. Communing with his own heart, and reviewing his life, he will usually find abundant indications of infirmity and sin. He has, perhaps, been the slave of pride or of sensuality; he has cherished an irascible and vindictive temper; he has pursued his secular business with an avidity which has left no time for his soul and for God; he has floated far away from his true anchorage, on the current of worldly fashion and frivolity; he has grown remiss in watchfulness and prayer; he has undervalued and neglected the means of grace; he has failed to profit by former chastisements; and by these or other sins and omissions, he has declined in spirituality, and lost much of his enjoyment in religion, and surrendered his soul to barrenness. With these impressions of his own unfaithfulness and criminality, he will see how wisely, as well as how mercifully, his afflictions are adapted to break up his delusive slumber, recover him from his declension, and bring him back where the light of God's countenance will once more shine upon him.

And even when the affliction may be of such a nature that the grounds of it are not readily de

tected, when it consists in one of those awful displays of his sovereignty with which God sometimes startles and confounds his creatures, even then the Christian will struggle against the doubts and terrors with which unbelief would overwhelm him, and bow to the rod which smites him, with the feeling—

“God is his own interpreter,
And he will make it plain.”

7. Finally, Christian submission properly includes *a desire and determination to profit by the affliction.*

This is an indispensable test of its sincerity. There can be no genuine submission, without an earnest desire to have the lessons the affliction is fitted to suggest, written upon the heart and carried out into the life. It is not for his own pleasure that God afflicts his people; it is from no caprice or cruelty; but “for their profit.” It is that they may become “partakers of his holiness,” and be assimilated to Christ their Head. When we say, therefore, “Thy will be done!” it is not a bare acquiescence in the trial; it is a prayer that the gracious ends he proposes to effect by the stroke may be accomplished; a prayer that it may be so sanctified as to yield to us the “peaceable fruit of righteousness.” To secure this result should be the great concern of the afflicted. The remark is as just as it is common, that trials do not leave us as they find us; they either harden our hearts or mollify them; they are either a blessing or a curse. The Christian is, or should be, too well aware of this, not to tremble at the thought of misimproving his afflictions. God has come very near to him; he is waiting to see the

effect of his dispensations. How solemn, how critical a season is it in the history of that stricken Christian; how closely connected with his peace and usefulness; how vital in its bearings upon his whole future career! He sees this. He feels it. With a holy jealousy he watches over himself. He studies the Scriptures with renewed diligence. He pours out his soul, day by day, in fervent supplications for wisdom, strength, deliverance from sin, and increasing holiness. And he addresses himself with vigour and alacrity to the duties of his station, resolved, with the help of God, to live henceforth for Him who has loved him and died to redeem him.

Such is an imperfect account of Christian submission. Imperfect as the delineation is, it will readily occur to you, that it is a virtue of rare excellence and of most difficult attainment. That which constitutes its excellence, reveals the reason why it is so difficult of attainment, viz., its contrariety to our natural character. "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me." True religion consists much in self-crucifixion, and self-crucifixion belongs to the essence of Christian submission.

To inculcate this virtue is easy; to practise it exceeds our unassisted powers. Blessed be God for the promise, "My grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness." "The things which are impossible with men are possible with God." But for the "everlasting arms," his people would faint and die under the calamities of life; but he upholds them. "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up on

wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

There are few amongst us who have not tested the truth of these Divine promises; who have not been called, in one way or another, to say, "It is the Lord, let him do what seemeth him good." He has stripped you of your property, he has prostrated you with sickness, he has permitted your children to plant your path with thorns, he has baffled your cherished plans of worldly success and honour, he has sent death to fill your hearts and your homes with desolation. You know, then, how hard it is to say, "Not as I will, but as Thou wilt!" But you also know, I trust, that what you cannot say in your own strength, he can enable you to say; and that however painful the stroke at the time, he can so sustain and sanctify you, that you shall afterwards look back upon it with the subdued and grateful feeling, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted."