

THE
Dwelling = place of God.

RECOLLECTIONS OF AN ADDRESS.

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THE DWELLING-PLACE OF GOD.

(PSALM XXVII.)

IT is of the greatest value to us spiritually, to trace through scripture the ways of God, and the corresponding exercises of heart produced by His Spirit in connection therewith. Unfolded gradually as they are in the history of His chosen people, we find in them at the same time God's thoughts and purposes more and more distinctly set forth, in view of Christ's coming. All bears witness to Him.

The ways of God towards man, however they may vary in form in succeeding dispensations, remain the same in principle. As vividly presented in the Old Testament history, they lay hold of our hearts, and command our attention; whereas the doctrines which embody them are often but little apprehended, and, alas! are readily set aside as having but little application to our daily life and walk. Besides this, there is the danger of the mind

being in exercise with doctrines rather than the heart and conscience. We need to preserve the character of the "little child," who learns at first not by doctrine, but by observation of persons and facts to which his attention is drawn. Hence the importance of the Old Testament, by which we discover how truth is co-ordinated, and in what manner it should affect the heart.

As soon as God had gathered a people around Himself in separation from the idolatrous nations, we find that His purpose was to dwell among them. This will characterise the eternal state (Rev. xxi. 3). It is also essentially true of christianity (2 Cor. vi. 16). The divine principle remains unaltered. It was first indicated in the song that Moses and the children of Israel sang at the Red Sea (Ex. xv. 2, 13, 17); and it is definitely stated in Exodus xix. 4, and xxv. 8: "I brought you to myself," . . . and, "let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them." God's purpose is undeniable, both for them and for us (Eph. ii. 22); and the practical question arises, How do our hearts respond to it?

But let us recall the facts. From Exodus xxix. 42-46, we learn what was the position and external relationship with God, into which the redeemed people were brought. After the consecration of the

priests and the institution of the daily sacrifice, we read : " This shall be a continual burnt offering throughout your generations at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation before the LORD, where I will meet you to speak there unto thee (*i.e.* Moses), and there I will meet with the children of Israel, and the tabernacle shall be sanctified by my glory, and I will sanctify the tabernacle of the congregation and the altar ; I will sanctify also both Aaron and his sons to minister to me in the priest's office. And I will dwell among the children of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the LORD their God that brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, that I may dwell among them : I am the LORD their God."

Here we have God's thoughts in connection with the people He had brought out of Egypt. (Compare Isaiah xliii.) He would " dwell " with them, and " make Himself known " to them. In how much fuller measure and deeper blessedness this is to be realized by us now, through the Holy Ghost, we know ; but we have to challenge our hearts as to the value we set upon these things, remembering that the history of the people of Israel was " written for our admonition " (Rom. xv. 4, 1 Cor. x. 11).

In order to make the application more simple to us in our present position and circumstances, let

us suppose that we meet the children of Israel after they have left Egypt and passed through the Red Sea, just as they are commencing the wilderness journey. Let us ask one of them, in the first place, "What are you doing here?" He would, no doubt, reply, "God has delivered us from Egypt, from Pharaoh's bondage, and we are on our way to the land He has promised to give us." That was God's purpose for them. He had brought them out of Egypt, and He was going to bring them in to the land promised to their fathers (Deut. vi. 21-23). As has been often pointed out, in chapters iii., vi., and xv. of Exodus, there is no mention at all of the wilderness. They had left Egypt to go to Canaan. I take it for granted that all here are clear as to the application of this. Through God's infinite mercy we are redeemed from sin and Satan's power, set in Christ beyond death and judgment, and destined for heaven where Jesus is.

Let us now put a second question, and ask one of these Israelites, "What do you possess as a present portion while on the way to the promised land? Here you are in the wilderness, out of Egypt it is true, but not as yet in the promised land; what have you got from God now?" Many a one absorbed, no doubt, with murmurs and complaints about the difficulties, dangers, trials, and disappoint-

ments, met with by the way, could have given no satisfactory reply ; but from a man of faith like Caleb, you would probably have received an answer in accordance with God's thoughts. "What have we now?" he would have said, "Surely we have GOD. God Himself is with us, and has promised to dwell in the midst of us."

The pillar of cloud betokening God's presence was ever over the tabernacle. They always had it in all their journeyings, by day and by night (Num. ix. 15-23), the symbol of God's abiding presence over the tent in which He dwelt, marking out their path and going with them wherever they had to go (1 Chron. xvii. 5-6). The tribes were arranged around the tabernacle, as we see in Num. ii., three tribes on each side, and each one relatively near. Some, at least, of the tents of each tribe were in close proximity to the Levites, who encamped round the court of the tabernacle itself, and from their own tent doors could the people see the hangings of the court which enclosed God's dwelling-place. Of those who were farther off some might be unable to see the tabernacle, because of the intervening tents, but every Israelite could look forth and see the cloud, with its descending pillar—cloud by day and fire by night,—resting upon the tabernacle in token that Jehovah was there, in their midst. True, the

pillar, at night, must have reminded them that "God was a consuming fire"; but, even so, grace and glory were the hidden basis of apparent judgment with its terrors. God is a "consuming fire" (Heb. xii. 29), and always remains so. But while judging evil, He saves the sinner, acting in accordance with the manner in which He had revealed Himself to Moses in the bush, at the "backside of the desert." (Exodus iii.) The bush was a figure of Israel, failing, weak, worthless; but tried in the fire, it was not consumed. And why? For the very reason that God Himself, unchanged and unchangeable, was there, and there for them. In the last prophecy of the Old Testament, we are reminded of the same truth, "I am Jehovah, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed" (Mal. iii. 6). Is not this an immense blessing?—a very real thing for faith? We have to do with One who "abideth faithful," and "with Whom is no variableness neither shadow of turning."

The people were tested by the law. In Exodus xx., are recorded the ten commandments. The chapter opens with, "I am Jehovah, thy God, which brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage: thou shalt have no other gods before Me." The record of what God had done for Israel in sovereign grace and mercy, His work accom-

plished for them, lay at the basis of His ways, and became the measure of their responsibility towards Him. They could not but own that they had known God thus, "long-suffering and of great mercy," as the One who had delivered them from Egypt and from Pharaoh, and they were enjoined to have "no other gods."

Is it not striking to notice that, at the end of John's Epistle, after the fullest unfoldings of grace towards us through the revelation, in the Lord Jesus Christ, of the true God and the eternal life, we get a similar injunction?—"This is the true God and eternal life: little children, keep yourselves from idols." The knowledge in the soul of what God is as He has revealed Himself, is the spring of true piety, and that which determines the character of the practical walk.

When we reach Exodus xxxii., we find that the people had already broken out into open rebellion. God then says to them through Moses, "I will not go up in the midst of thee, for thou art a stiff-necked people, lest I consume thee in the way." (xxxiii. 3.) Moses pleads for them, and, in answer to his intercession, God declares Himself to be "merciful and gracious, long-suffering and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,"

while "by no means clearing the guilty"; and this from the very mountain, whence, amidst lightnings and thunder, had issued the fiery law. How beautiful to see Moses, who had laid hold of this declaration of God's ways, beseeching Him: "If now I have found grace in Thy sight, O Lord, let the Lord, I pray Thee, go among us" (xxxiv. 9); "for," says he, "it is a stiff-necked people; and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for Thine inheritance."

God had given His verdict as to the people, and He had declared Himself. The resource of the true soul is always and only GOD. God must needs go with them because of what they were—hopelessly ruined, irreclaimable, stiff-necked, and rebellious. In God was their only hope; He was their Saviour, and their strength. If He went not with them, as Moses said, they could not go.

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Let us now apply to ourselves the practical question: While on the way to the rest of God, what do we enjoy as our present portion, and how do our hearts answer to it? It is easy to get discouraged through dwelling upon failure, ruin, confusion, decline, and increasing indifference—all sadly true. Every kind of evil is rampant and increasing, and

there is much to fill us with shame and sorrow. But, owning this, what is our resource? Beloved brethren, is it not the same as it was for Israel? We, too, have God with us, not because there is any good in us, but because of what He is. (Compare Deuteronomy vii. 7-9; ix. 5-6). He is ever near for faith. How often the people of Israel "forgot Him" we are continually reminded, as we read their history, even though they had the constant witness of His presence with them, showing that He, at all events, was faithful. And are not we in the same danger of losing the sense of the nearness and all-sufficiency of God for us in our pathway here at the present moment?

Let us now look at the heart's answer to this, as given in Psalm xxvii. We find there the yearnings of a true heart after God, one who delights in what God is—"The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" (verse 1).

If God had made known, as we have seen in Exodus xxix. etc., His desire to dwell with His people, we find here the responsive desire in the soul to dwell with God: "One thing have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to enquire in

ing one to the right hand or the left. Something attracts and would draw aside, and then by the ear is heard a "word behind," the voice of conscience, saying, "No; this is the way, walk ye in it." So here, the heart or conscience speaking for God, says, "Seek My face." A deep impression is made on the soul in the secret of God's presence. No outward observer knows what is going on; no human eye can penetrate the exercises of the soul before God; but there, in secret, is heard the voice whispering, "Seek My face," leading to the ready response, "Thy face, LORD, will I seek." Such is the experience of a true heart that must have God really and experimentally for its object. Nearness to Himself will alone satisfy that soul.

In connection with this, the 6th verse is remarkable. He says, "I will offer in His tabernacle sacrifices of joy; I will sing, yea, I will sing praises unto the LORD." The word used here for "offer" is the one habitually used for killing or sacrificing sheep and oxen, especially in connection with the peace offering, the particular class of offering which sets forth the various features of communion. He speaks of offering, not outside the tabernacle upon the brazen altar, which was the proper place for such sacrifices, but of coming inside the tabernacle, as if to the golden altar, before the veil, to "offer"

and sing praises before Jehovah. How wonderful that the soul should be led into such holy boldness! We are now, indeed, through the finished work of Christ, called to enjoy as "sons" a far more intimate relationship with God than was made known in Old Testament times. But the principle is the same; the Holy Spirit shows how the Lord leads on, and satisfies with Himself, the soul that seeks His face. May we be so kept from the workings of our natural hearts and minds, that the Psalmist's holy desires in God's presence may be ours uninterruptedly. But the heart is treacherous, and if our wills are unbroken, communion is hindered.

Two examples, often referred to, will here serve to show us what our hearts are capable of: Firstly, Jonah, as to the effect of the *knowledge* of God's ways of grace, apart from communion with Him; secondly, Jacob, as to the *will* being in exercise when seeking for blessing.

Jonah was one who knew the truth about God, in which Moses found the rest and joy of his soul. He probably understood better than anyone then living God's ways of goodness and grace; and God made choice of him to carry to the greatest oppressor of Israel a message in which there seemed no room for grace at all, "Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown." It was certainly a great

though a needed, test to the prophet to whom the Lord took pleasure in referring (Matt. xii. etc.). Instead of going to Nineveh in simple obedience to God, Jonah trusted his knowledge, and that led to his going to Joppa, and sailing away in an opposite direction, *i.e.*, to Tarshish. Why he did so, we learn from chapter iv. 2, "Was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish, because I knew that Thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest Thee of the evil." In his heart, he said, I cannot go with this message, for I know full well that God will not overthrow Nineveh, and what will be said then of Jonah and his prophesying in the name of the LORD? Evidently he thought of his own mission as Jehovah's prophet, and constituting himself, as it were, the guardian of God's honour and glory, argued thus: If I go and declare that Nineveh is to be overthrown, and it turns out not to be the case, as I am perfectly assured it will not be, what will they say about Jehovah? In what will He appear mightier than the false gods? Compare Jeremiah xxviii. 9. All the false prophets pretended to speak in God's name, though their habit was to prophecy of peace, not of judgment. But Jonah, reasoning as to the mere fact of the accomplishment or not of what was to be announced,

thought the only way out of the difficulty was not to take the message at all, and with a bad conscience he goes away "from the presence of the LORD." This is three times stated in the first chapter.

Have we not here an example of the fact that mere knowledge, however correct, even of the ways of God, apart from obedience, is a dangerous thing? We see in Jonah one who was well acquainted with God and His ways, but whose heart was not in tune with the grace and goodness in which, in a sense, his heart found rest for himself—making him ready to be cast into the sea,—but which he could not extend to others. Out of communion with God, because disobedient, his knowledge only misled him, and he proved himself unable to abide near the Lord, and trust Him to carry out His purposes in His perfect way.

Jacob affords another instance of the heart's workings. He was not a "worldly" man, like Esau. In his own way he wanted to be right, and he coveted earnestly the promised blessing; but instead of waiting God's time, he tries to obtain it for himself, with the result that he has to leave his home, and flee to Padan-Aram. On his journey, God sends him a wonderful dream, speaking to him from the top of the ladder, upon which the angels of God were ascending and descending, affording un mistake-

able evidence that God would continually minister to his needs. In the morning on awaking, he calls the place "Bethel," the house of God. He is made conscious of God's presence, but this is more than he can bear, and he promptly leaves what to him was a "dreadful place," because it was "the gate of heaven," and continues his journey alone. (Gen. xxviii.) In his subsequent history, it is noteworthy how he avoids Bethel. Desirous though he was of obtaining blessing as an heir of promise, he was unprepared to meet God, and have to do with Him in a close personal way. But God's grace pursued him. Twenty years after he had seen the vision, whilst still in Padan-Aram, God appeared to him, saying, "I am the God of Bethel . . . arise, get thee out from this land." He sets forth on his journey to the well-remembered scene of God's gracious intervention on his behalf, where he had sworn conditionally that the Lord should be his God, and that he would render unto Him a tenth of his substance. On his way southward he gets tokens that God is caring for him, especially so at Peniel, where he has the most signal proof and assurance that God is with him and for him. He has only to continue his journey in the same direction to reach Bethel, but instead of so doing, he deliberately turns aside, and goes to Shechem.

(Gen. xxxiii.) He is still afraid of God. Unwilling to await God's time and accept His way of bringing His purposes to pass, he had sought to become possessed of the blessing before the time, and had thus lost the sweetest part of it, namely, its reception direct from God's hand as the portion bestowed by Him in His rich and free grace. Quiet subjection to God, and waiting on Him in confidence, he had not known. Hence Bethel is still for Him that "dreadful place." Trouble met him at Shechem. Once again God appears to him, saying, "Arise, go up to Bethel, and dwell there" (Gen. xxxv. 1). But notice, now, what comes out. Jacob feels that the inner life and condition of his household is unsuitable for the "House of God," and he has to say, "Put away the strange gods that are among you, and be clean, and change your garments, and let us arise and go up to Bethel" (v. 2-3). No wonder he had so studiously avoided "the house of God." But he could not prevent God having His way with him in grace, so as to bring his conscience into the light.

Who would have thought that "strange gods" would be found in Jacob's household? But so it was; and we, too, have to learn that our hearts are not to be trusted. Unless we are walking with God, our hearts and consciences being brought into

the light and judged there, we may find ourselves going on with all kinds of evil things, while, at the same time, there may be a great deal of outward earnestness, a show of piety, and a seeking after blessing.

We must not trust ourselves. Our only safety is to have everything tested by the light of God's word, and to walk in nearness to the Lord, in humility and dependence upon Him, that we may learn His mind, know more of communion with Himself, and thus, as kept by Him, escape both the perils and the seductive influences of the scene around us. David, at Ziklag, after a course characterised by worldly wisdom and failure of faith, found out whither to turn, and "encouraged himself in the LORD his God" (1 Sam. xxx. 6).

The Lord give us to take to heart the lessons we see exemplified in Jonah and Jacob, and may it be ours to say in all sincerity, "One thing have I desired of the Lord: that will I seek after"; and, with the apostle, "One thing I do" . . .

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It will be observed that the purpose of the above address was to direct attention to the individual state of soul in connection with God's settled purpose to dwell amongst His people. There is,

however, another side of this blessed truth, which should not be lost sight of, and that is, the *collective* responsibility of the christian. We are "builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit" (Ephesians ii. 22). Hence the importance of that word "WITH ALL SAINTS," in the expressed desire and prayer of the apostle, when speaking of comprehending "the breadth, and length, and depth, and height," and knowing "the love of Christ which passeth knowledge," that we may be "filled with all the fulness of God."

