

SERMON XVIII.

Of communicating Christian experience.

Psalm 66:16.

Come and hear all ye that fear God, and I will declare what he hath done for my soul,

THIS psalm you will easily discern is made up of praise and thanksgiving, and what indeed should be the habitual employment of Christians when the Lord hath dealt thus bountifully with them, as he had done with the inspired author. In the words, more particularly, we may observe,

First, the person speaking. And I think it is generally agreed it is King David; one who, though he enjoyed the crown of Israel, was not ashamed of the cross of Christ, nor the experience he had of the grace of God, but calls upon all that feared the Lord to come, and attend to what he could declare of his Father's love to him. And in this he may well shame, alas! But too many Christians in our day, who either are too rich or too poor, too great or too mean, for serious and friendly conversation about the things of God. David thought it not beneath him to invite not this or the other favorite only, but all them that feared the Lord, to this entertainment. You may also observe,

Secondly, the invitation itself; it is to a spiritual entertainment, a feast that to the world looks mean, but when the Lord owns it with his presence, it is in reality a feast of fat things. Observe he did not call them to hear an enumeration of the mighty feats of war in which he had been engaged, of the exploits he had performed, and the victories he had won; *but, come, says he, and hear what God hath done for my soul.* He invites them to attend to the account he had to give of his religious experience. From which we may learn, that we are not to hide the dealings of God with our souls from our fellow Christians, but, upon every proper occasion, to be ready to open our hearts, and with the utmost freedom declare the gracious experience we have had of his goodness to us. Again,

Thirdly, we may take notice of the persons David addresses on this occasion. And it was not confined to the princes and lords of his court, or to the mighty men that fought under his banners; but directed to them that

feared the Lord; and to all of them, which maybe understood as the general character of believers, who rejoice with trembling, or approach to the Lord in every duty with humble reverence, at the same time that it is with holy boldness; who fear the Lord with a filial awe, though they are strangers to a slavish bondage; these in general he calls to hear what God had done for him. Or else, it may be an intimation of his desire that the fearful in Zion, and more especially those believers who were ready to entertain dreadful imaginations, whose souls were oppressed with fear, should attend to the account he had to give of his religious experience. Come, says he, all ye that fear the Lord, and I will tell you what he hath done for my soul. Perhaps there may be something in my case that may suit your souls, or encourage you in the way of the Lord: however, you will certainly hear something that may tend to glorify the riches of his grace. Come therefore and hear, and leave the success to the Lord."

From the words thus opened and introduced, we have the following doctrinal observation:

That a child of God, under the influence of his Spirit, reflecting on the great things God hath done for him, cannot but be much affected himself, and exceedingly desirous that, for the glory of God, and the good of others, they should be acquainted with it.

Come, and hear all ye that fear God, and I will declare what he hath done for my Soul. And here,

I. I shall consider the matter of this declaration, and some instances that the believer, on such an occasion as this, may be supposed to have his eye more immediately upon, when he expresses himself in this manner.

II. The several sorts of persons to whom a Christian, when led by the same spirit with the psalmist, would declare these things.

III. The ends he should propose in this duty. And,

IV. The manner in which it should be performed. And then,

1. I shall consider the matter of this declaration, and some instances that the psalmist might be supposed to have his eye more immediately upon, when

he expresses himself in this manner, which may very well be supposed to take in two heads.

1. What God had done for his soul in his covenant, and by his Son. And,

2. What he had wrought in his soul, as a consequence, and manifestation of his interest in those blessings.

1. We may suppose the psalmist here had a special regard to what God had done for his soul, in his covenant, and by his Son. And here doubtless he was not unmindful of his having loved him with an everlasting love, and chosen him to everlasting life. And accordingly every believer, under the like spiritual influence, is ready to address his fellow Christians in some such language as this: See here a poor unworthy creature whom the Lord set his love upon even from everlasting. Notwithstanding he was thoroughly apprised, I should forfeit every thing by my rebellion against him; yet this was no obstruction to the kind designs of his grace. See one whom he has distinguished as the object of his special favor. He hath chosen me from before the foundation of the world, and, as a consequence of this, has provided a powerful and suitable Saviour for me, one who was able and willing to sustain the weight of my guilt, and to make sufficient atonement for it. He was at the expense of parting with his own Son out of his bosom upon my account: and, when there could be no possible relief any where else, he laid help upon him, who was in himself mighty to save; when he could not save me confident with his own justice, without a sufficient satisfaction, he himself provided a lamb without spot to die for me. And when I had nothing to induce the Lord Jesus to take the burden of my iniquities upon him, being all polluted and in my blood, he freely offered himself, and said to the Father, Lo I come, in the volume of the book it is written of me, to do thy will O God¹. The proposal was no sooner made in the covenant of peace, that was between them both, than it was agreed upon, and accordingly the Lord laid on him my iniquities, and so I was preserved in Christ safe from the hands of avenging justice, as interested in his Mediatorial undertaking. But that was not all. In the fullness of time, this same Jesus came, and was content to take upon him the form of a servant, to submit to all the ignominies that sinful and abandoned men could inflict upon him. He hid not his face from shame and spitting, he endured the rage of devils, and drank the cup of his Father's wrath, was bruised for my

¹ Hebrews 10:9

iniquities, and the chastisement of my peace was upon him, that so, by his stripes I might be healed.² He hath thus by one offering for ever perfected this great work³. And as justice has discharged him, by raising him from the dead, and fixing him at the right hand of God; so now I am even risen with him, and set down with him, as he is my head, and I am a living member of his body. See, O my friends, the Lord hath done " all this for me; and if you consider the vast disproportion between him and me, that he is the high and lofty one who inhabiteth eternity, and I a poor despicable worm, not worthy of his notice; what grace is here! Nor is this all; I am not only, in my best estate, but vanity, yea less than nothing and vanity; but in my natural state I was an enemy to God, and he did all this for me while I was such. This is love indeed! Herein he commends his love to me, that when I was without strength Christ died for me⁴. Thus the believer, upon proper occasions, runs over the wonders of redeeming grace, and considers the love of God in its origin, as arising merely of his own good pleasure, and in its consequences as reaching to the soul's welfare in time, and to eternity. And while he is reflecting on these things, his heart burns within him, and from what he feels in himself, he cannot but be solicitous that others should join with him in his wonder and thankfulness: and accordingly from the abundance of his heart his mouth speaketh, Come and hear, all ye that fear God, and I will tell you what he hath done for my sold. He hath redeemed me from destruction, and crowned me with loving kindness and tender mercies⁵; set me above princes, in admitting me to a place in his favor; and he can now smile upon me with due glory to his justice, and delight over me to do me good, consistent with the purity of his nature, and the righteousness of his law. But again,

2. We may suppose the good man to have regard to what the Lord had wrought in his soul, as well as what he done for him ; and so he may be looked upon as calling to his friends to attend to the account of his experience of the goodness of God to him. And then you may suppose him to bespeak them to this purpose. *I was once by nature a child of wrath as well as others, an enemy to God thro' wicked works; running into all excess of riot, sinning against him without remorse, or any sense of my danger, without God and without Christ, and so without hope, in the world. Once I was in worse than Egyptian darkness, ignorant of God , a stranger to myself, unacquainted with the way of God's salvation, a professed enemy to the*

² Isaiah 53:5.

³ Hebrews 10:14.

⁴ Romans 5:8.

⁵ Psalm 103:4.

divine law, and a thorough adversary to every thing that is good: but, through almighty grace, it is not so with me now. The Lord came at such, or such a time, and touched my soul with his powerful hand, and I began to find the terrors of the law stick fast in me. I could not sin at so cheap a rate as before: no, as I began to see the purity of God's law I was most severely lashed by it, and thought hell and destruction must inevitably be my portion. While it was thus with me I found no rest for my soul, nothing but darkness and confusion, horror and despair, till the Lord led me to the city of refuge, and discovered himself in his Son to my soul: and then it was that I emerged from darkness, and began to find myself light in the Lord, beholding a beauty in the method of my recovery revealed in the gospel: then it was that I willingly cast down all the weapons of my opposition, and desired to be subject to none but Jesus. How much so ever before I was for laving myself, now, it was the desire of my heart that Christ alone should be exalted that he should have all the glory, as the work was all his. Thus the Lord has led me in his own way, and brought me to his Son, enabling me to see my need of him, and his meekness to assist and save me, as made of God to me wisdom, righteousness, justification, and redemption⁶; and, at the same time, I hope, revealed him in me as the hope of my glory, and showed me, in the discoveries of his love, that he was mine. Then this or the other promise was brought to my soul, and set home with peculiar warmth. He said unto me, Be of good cheer, thy sins are forgiven thee⁷, I have blotted out as a thick cloud thy transgression, and as a cloud thy sins⁸: Be not dismayed, for I am thy God⁹, I have made an everlasting covenant with thee, even the sure mercies of David¹⁰: I have loved thee, with an everlasting love; therefore with loving kindness have I drawn thee¹¹. Thus with cords of love was I won to Jesus Christ, as with the bands of a man; and at this, and the other time, he told me, in the secret whispers of his Spirit, that my beloved was mine, and I was his¹². And not only so, but, ever since, he hath guided me by his counsel, and comforted me with his love: and though, alas! but too often, through the strength of corruptions, I have sinned against him; yet he hath not been wanting in the discoveries of pardoning grace, hath shed abroad his love in my heart, and bid me return unto him for he had redeemed me. Thus we may suppose the good man addressing his friends when he says Come

⁶ 1 Corinthians 1:30.

⁷ Matthew 9:2.

⁸ Isaiah 44:22.

⁹ Chapter 1:10.

¹⁰ Chapter 55:3.

¹¹ Jeremiah 31:3

¹² Cant. 2:16.

and hear what the Lord has done for my soul. He hath brought me out of darkness into his marvelous light;¹³ he hath set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings.¹⁴ And now with pleasure I can look forward; and, from what I have formerly felt of his goodness, with comfort, conclude, that he will never leave me, nor forsake me.¹⁵ And in this we must suppose the psalmist was very far from being alone: for there never was a believer in the world but (though he might not be able to be so very particular, yet) could set to his seal that he had experienced somewhat of this nature. And I am sure, those that are thus led by the Spirit of Christ will be solicitous that others should hear, and know what the Lord hath done for them. And thus I have finished the first general head, concerning the matter of this declaration, or what it was David must be supposed to have his eye upon, when he says. Come, and hear what God hath done for my soul.

I come now to consider,

II. The several sorts of persons to whom a Christian, when led by the same Spirit with the psalmist, would declare these things. And,

1. The saints would declare them to Sinners, making no profession of religion, when they observe them concerned about their eternal welfare. And I am thoroughly persuaded the Lord hath owned this too many souls. If we hear sinners enquiring the way to Zion, with their faces ever so little inclined thitherward, methinks, we should gladly lay hold on any such opportunity to declare to them what God hath done for us, and the way he led us, when we were in the same case. It is true we may exhort, advise, and direct them; but as example generally influences more than precept, so, if we can say to them not only, we would have them do this or that, but at the same time, declare to them the remarkable dealings of God with our own souls, when we were in the same circumstance, it will be very likely to have a salutary effect. And if we relate the comforts with which we have been comforted, it may prevent them from sorrowing as those who are without hope, since the same Lord, who supported and delivered us, is able to do the same for them. It is true we are not to cast our pearls before swine; that is, we have no call to tell our experience to every profligate sinner, for, as such feel nothing of it, so they would rather turn it into banter and ridicule. But methinks, it should be no objection to us, when we see persons seriously inquiring after the way of salvation, that they are ignorant and weak. No, if we have but the least

¹³ 1 Peter 2:9.

¹⁴ Psalm 40:2.

¹⁵ Hebrews 13:5.

apprehension that any degree of the fear of God is before their eyes, we may safely follow the psalmist's example, and call upon them, to come and hear what God hath done for our souls. Thus, for instance, suppose we hear a poor soul crying out. "O" I feel my sins as a burden too heavy for me to bear! I could be glad to know which way, if it were possible, I might be pardoned and accepted. But alas! I am ready to fear the Lord hath cast me off, that he will never have a gracious thought towards me." Upon such an occasion, what can be more natural than for us to begin, and declare, that when we were in this very case, the Lord led us this, or the other way, into the knowledge of the completeness of Christ's satisfaction, and showed us where we were to flee for refuge, so as to find peace? And thus we should seize such opportunity not only to preach Christ as the only way of salvation, but to declare that we have, in our own experience, found him to be so, and have obtained relief and safety in trusting in him. Thus we are to declare what God hath done for our souls, to assist and encourage poor awakened sinners; but more especially are we to do this,

2. To believers. And,

(i.) To those who are but babes in Christ, weak in faith, that are full of doubts and hesitations, who cannot venture to conclude they have an interest in the Lord Jesus Christ and yet dare not cast away all their confidence. That it is the pleasure of the Lord that the church should abound with these, every day's experience confirms. For where you meet with one strong Christian, perhaps you may find many weak and trembling ones. Well! We should never hear one of these complaining, but, as a proper relief, we should look back upon our own experience, and ask ourselves, was I never in such a case as this? And if so, then let me endeavor to strengthen the weak hands, and confirm the feeble knees, and say to them, Come and hear what God hath done for my soul. And it hath been often observed that the Lord has owned this, to the comfort and establishment of his little ones. What! Saith the poor soul, was this or the other friend in the same case with myself? And hath the Lord delivered them? As I am sure he had no regard to any superior qualifications that might be as an argument to it; so I am resolved, in the strength of his grace, to put my trust in him.

Why should I be cast down, since he who hath delivered this, or the other believer, can, if he pleases, deliver me? Thus we should declare what God hath done for our souls to the weak in Christ's flock. But again,

(2.) This is also a duty even to the strongest saint in the world, to those who are got into the highest class. You know this is the character of the children of God that they speak often one to another¹⁶ and that not only about the things of God in general, but about what they have felt in their own souls. They should, as often as they have opportunity, and especially in their best frames, recount what God has done for them in times past, and communicate also their present experiences to their fellow-Christians. Thus I have gone through the second general head, and have shown you to whom the believer should declare his experience; to enquiring sinners, trembling saints, and growing Christians. I come now,

III. To consider the ends which a believer should propose in the discharge of this duty. And,

(1) The principal end he should have in view, when he declares his experience, is the glory of that God, who hath dealt so bountifully with him. He would surely have the Lord exalted for his faithfulness and goodness to him; he would have it published, that the name of the Lord might be great; that sinners might know that his God is faithful to his word; that he hath not only engaged to be a present help in time of need, but that he hath found him in reality to be so. As he knows the enemies of God are ready enough to charge him with neglect of his people, because of the trials and afflictions they are exercised with; so he would, in contradiction to them, declare what he hath found in his own experience, that in very faithfulness he afflicts those that are dearest to him. And with what luster does the glory of God shine, when his children are ready to acknowledge, that he never called them out to any duty, but his grace was sufficient for them; that he never laid his hand upon them in any affective exercise, but he at the same time, supplied them with all those supports which they stood in need of? I say, for Christians thus to stand up, on proper occasions, and bear their experimental testimony to the faithfulness and goodness of God, what a tendency hath it to make the name of the Lord, who hath been their strong tower, glorious in the midst of the earth? This is what the Christian chiefly aims at. But again,

2. Another end he hath in view is to humble his own soul, as well as the vanity of other men, by declaring how little he has deserved at the hand of the Lord, and yet how much he hath done for him. The believer knows too well the pride that is naturally in man. In order therefore to lower his

¹⁶ Malachi 3:16.

sentiments of himself, he will be ready to acknowledge his own vileness, that he was worse by nature than the beasts that perish, and unless the Lord had been merciful to him, when he was in his blood, he could never have been partaker of such favor at his hands. And thus, while others boast of their own power and worthiness, he cannot forbear declaring, that, how much so ever the Lord hath been pleased to favor him with his presence, yet, that he is obliged to discard all pretensions to merit, and says, Not unto me, not unto me, O Lord, but unto thy name be all the glory. And by this means he many times puts to silence the vanity of other men. But then again,

3. Another end is to promote the welfare of his fellow-Christians. As he loves the head, so he also loves the members. In whomsoever he sees the image of Christ formed, he desires his heart may be knit in love to such an one. And as he would not have it inactive love; so, upon every proper occasion, he would open to his Christian brother what he hath felt of the joy that a stranger intermeddles not with, that he might be a sharer with him, and be comforted by his experience, when darkness comes upon him. And thus he is likewise glad to improve every opportunity of helping the joy, and assisting the comfort of his brethren in the Lord. There are so many difficulties that the Christian is beset with, in the present sate, that he can never follow the Lord: fully, and have the world to be his friends. So that, methinks, since there are so few who name the name of Christ, and yet much fewer that love him in sincerity, where this disposition is in truth, it should have the greatest tendency to enkindle the most engaging affection; an affection which should show itself, in a readiness to do all that lies in our power, towards mutual growth in the knowledge and comforts of the holy Ghost. And as Christian conversation about the dealings of God with our souls hath often been owned with this good effect, methinks we should not be such strangers to one another; but cultivate this heavenly commerce with all our interest and power. Thus, you see what are the ends that believers should propose in their discharge of this duty. But then I come,

IV. To speak of the manner in which it should be performed; or how a Christian is to tell what God hath done for his soul. And it may be reduced to two heads.

1. It should be with the greatest humility. There is too much spiritual, as well as carnal pride among the professors of religion : and it is well if too many of us may not have reason to lay our hands upon our mouths, and acknowledge ourselves more or less guilty in this respect. We had much

better let such conversation alone, than declare our experience with a view to exalt our selves by it. If we aim at railing ourselves in the esteem of our fellow-Christians, or to gain reputation among men, if this is the end we propose, in declaring what God has done for our souls, it cannot but be nauseous in the sight of the Lord. No, when we say any thing of what the Lord has done either for us, or in us, let us remember the rock from whence we were hewn, and the hole of the pit from whence we were digged; let us lay ourselves in the dust; and when we call to those who fear the Lord to hear what he hath done for us, let our souls be filled with the deepest sense of our unworthiness, Let us remember who did it, and give all the glory, where it is justly due. But again,

2. It should also be attended with the greatest thankfulness, wonder, and adoration at the riches of God's grace. I am sure, is we have felt any thing of it, we shall not be able to declare it, without some good degree of thankfulness. The impression will be too lively to be forgotten entirely, and the grace will be too illustrious to be recited without some measure of gratitude. And thus I have gone through what I designed in a doctrinal way, and shall close all with an inference or two. And,

1. Let us each of us ask ourselves, What hath the Lord done for my soul? And in order to determine this, let us ask, what hath he wrought in my soul? For though the work of God's grace in the heart is not causal of God's love to us, or to any act of grace towards us, yet it is declarative of it. And, I am sure, if we always remain in darkness, concerning these things, we shall have no reason to conclude that we are the Lord's. If we would hope that God hath loved us with an everlasting love; we should enquire whether he has declared it, by drawing us with the cords of his love. It is not indeed essential to our happiness, that we should be able to give an exact account of our experience, or every particular circumstance attending our conversion: but unless we know that whereas we were once blind, now we see, whereas we were once darkness, we are now light in the Lord,¹⁷ I know no ground we have of consolation, as having any lot, or share in the riches of pardoning grace. Again,

2. How may we blush and be ashamed, that we have so much conversation in the world, and so little about what God hath done for our souls? it is a very bad Sign upon us, in our day, that the things of God are

¹⁷ Ephesians 5:8.

generally postponed, while either the affairs of state, or the circumstances of outward life, or Something perhaps of a more trifling nature, are the general subjects of our conversation. What! Are we ashamed of the noblest, the most interesting subject? It is but a poor sign that we have felt any thing of it, if we think it unnecessary to declare it to our fellow-Christians. What think you? Suppose any two of us were cast upon a barbarous shore, where we neither understood the language, nor the customs of the inhabitants, and were treated by them with reproach and cruelty, do you think we should not esteem it a happiness, that we could unburden ourselves to each other, and communicate our grief's, and troubles? And shall we think it less so, while we are in such a world as this; in a strange land, and at a distance from our Father's house? Shall we neglect conversing with each other? No, let our conversation not only be in heaven, but about spiritual and heavenly things. But,

3. And lastly, bless God for the Lord Jesus Christ. You would never have had any experience to declare, but a fearful looking for of God's righteous judgments, were it not for him. Well then, when you consider what God hath done for you, remember him thro' whom every blessing has been communicated to you; remember him whom the Father gave out of his bosom for your salvation, whom he sanctified and sent into the world;¹⁸ remember him, who though he was rich, for your sakes became poor, that ye thro' his poverty might be rich.¹⁹ Remember all he did, and all he suffered, that you might be partakers of a rich experience of grace here, and that you might afterwards enter into the glory, which he is gone to prepare for you. And when you consider these things, I am sure; a crucified, risen, and exalted Jesus will be the principal subject of your conversation.

FINISH

¹⁸ John 10:36.

¹⁹ 2 Corinthians 8:9.