

GOD THE GREAT TEACHER AND LEADER OF HIS PEOPLE

Preached at Providence Chapel, Oakham, Tuesday April 18th, 1864

"Shew me thy ways, O LORD; teach me thy paths. Lead me in thy truth, and teach me: for thou art the God of my salvation; on thee do I wait all the day" Psa.25:4, 5

There is one feature in true religion perhaps not much insisted upon, but not the less real and genuine; which is this, that all true religion brings the soul into vital and immediate contact with God. False religion on the other hand only sets the soul at a distance from him. We see this peculiar feature of vital godliness very much developed in the Psalms, and in other parts of Holy Scripture, where the saints of God breathe forth their desires after the Lord. The desire of their souls to get near to God, to have special dealings with the Majesty on high, to receive mercy from his gracious hands, to be blessed with manifestations of his favour, watered with the dew of his grace, and nourished as with marrow and fatness by the smiles of his countenance, shines forth very conspicuously in the Word of truth. How all these breathings after God, which you see so clearly traced out in the Psalms and other devotional parts of God's Word, establish the truth of what I was just saying, that true religion, vital godliness, bring the soul into close and personal contact with God! In opposition to this, there is no mark stamped upon false religion more evidently and plainly than this, that it sets up a false god, an idol god; not perhaps a wood or stone representation, but a god adapted to the carnal mind, and suitable to the natural heart, in a word, such a god as we see in all ages blind, fallen man has worshipped. Thus were you to analyse and examine all false religion, whatever its name or nature, you would find this feature of death stamped upon it, that it sets up a false god for the true God, a false

faith for true faith, and a false righteousness for true righteousness; and thus worships an imaginary, an idol god, instead of the true and living God, the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now we may be well assured, that nothing short of the work and teaching of God in the heart can ever pull down this false god and set up in its place "the only true God, and Jesus Christ" whom he hath sent (John 17:3).

See in the words before us how the Psalmist breathes forth his soul unto God; how he draws near to the throne of the Majesty on high, and finding some access of soul to the ear of him who bows down and listens to the cry of the destitute, cries out in the simplicity of his heart, as though he could not live unless he received an answer to his petition, "Shew me thy ways, O LORD; teach me thy paths. Lead me in thy truth, and teach me: for thou art the God of my salvation; on thee do I wait all the day." In looking at these words I shall, with God's blessing, endeavour,

I. First, to trace out the *breathings of the longing soul* vented forth in the words, "Shew me thy ways, O LORD; teach me thy paths. Lead me in thy truth, and teach me."

II. Secondly, the *source* of these heart breathings, inward desires and spiritual longings. "For thou art the God of my salvation."

III. And, thirdly, how David was found in a *posture*, wherein these blessings were to be communicated to his soul.

I. The very circumstance of the Psalmist breathing out these words from the bottom of his heart, shews that he was well convinced in his own mind of the utter inability of man, except by divine teaching, to find out the ways of God, or to receive them with that approbation and acquiescence, whereby alone we can enter into their

beauty and blessedness. For certainly had there been any innate power or wisdom whereby he could have brought this knowledge into his own soul, it would have been at best but hypocrisy to ask God to do it for him. But he was well convinced, from deep and painful experience, that the ways of God, as the Scripture speaks, are out of sight. "Thy way," he says elsewhere, "is in the sea, and thy path in the great waters, and thy footsteps are not known" (Psa.77:19). Well did he know and feel that there was a veil of ignorance and blindness spread over his eyes by nature, which concealed the heavenly ways from his view. He felt therefore, that it was only as God was pleased to shew him those ways, that he had any power to see or receive them as the ways of God, any inward approbation of their blessedness, or any bowing down and resignation unto them, when they crossed his own natural thoughts and inclinations.

1. The ways of God then are, first, ways of *infinite wisdom*. Indeed, they can be no other. How do we judge of the wisdom of man? By the words he speaks, but more especially by the actions he performs. The ways of God, therefore, must be ways of infinite wisdom, because he is the infinitely wise God. But his wisdom is diametrically opposite to our own. We read therefore, that "the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God," (1 Cor.3:19) and we read also that the wisdom of God is foolishness with the world. But though upon these ways the marks of infinite wisdom are stamped, yet the wisdom is such that they are out of the sight of man, until they are brought down into the scope of his spiritual vision, and the wisdom stamped upon and running through them is made known to his soul by divine teaching. In order to understand the wisdom of God's ways, we must ourselves be made a partaker of divine wisdom; as the apostle speaks, "But we have the mind of Christ." (1 Cor.2:16) Only, therefore, as we have the mind of Christ, and possess a measure of the wisdom from above, can we enter into the wisdom of the ways of

God.

Now look at the wisdom of the way of salvation. What a wise way it is! How stamped with the marks of infinite wisdom it is, that not a single attribute of God's justice should be tarnished, and yet that sinful man be saved; that justice should not suffer nor be diminished, and yet mercy have her full sway. But in order to enter into the wisdom of God in the way of salvation, we must have a measure of heavenly wisdom let down into our soul, so that we may see this wisdom of God in a mystery as it were with the eyes of God.

2. But God's ways also are ways of *infinite mercy*. Of course, when I speak of the ways of God, I mean the ways of God towards his people. But this mercy, as stamped upon all the ways of God, is not for the most part evident in them until we come to see these ways laid open to our view, as full of mercy to us.

The way in which the Lord is now leading you may be a way most trying and painful to your mind, so that at times you may see in this way neither wisdom nor mercy. It may be so hidden out of your sight, or so contradictory to your own judgment and feelings, and to the desires of your own heart, that in the darkness of your mind you may do nothing but rebel against it. But the Lord's ways, nevertheless, are those of infinite wisdom. When you are led to see the ways of God in his past dealings with you, can you not look back and see that those very ways, which at the time seemed anything but those of wisdom and mercy, were still really full of both? The very ways which seemed at the time so confused, that it appeared impossible for the hand of God to be in them, we can now see bear the clearest and plainest marks of the broad fingers of deity. Thus may we not hope for the future, that as the ways of God as regards the past were stamped with wisdom and mercy, so the present and the future will also

be clearly stamped with marks of the same?

3. But again, the ways of God are ways of *faithfulness*. He is a God that cannot lie; he is faithful to his Word; faithful to his covenant; and faithful to his promise. This covenant faithfulness is a most blessed attribute of the Lord. Oh, what a strong refuge for the soul, amidst all the fluctuations of time, all the changeability of daily circumstances, and all the wanderings of an unstable heart, to feel that God is unchanging and unchangeable, and that with him there is neither variableness nor shadow of turning.

4. But again, these ways, though they bear these blessed marks upon them, yet are for the most part *out of sight*. They are so elevated above the reach of human understanding, and are so peculiarly the ways of God himself, that, except to the believing eye, they are lost as it were in the heights of heaven.

Now it was this circumstance above all others which made the Psalmist breathe forth that sincere and simple desire, "Shew me thy ways, O LORD," as though he should say, "Lord, make these ways that have been so trying, so painful, and so perplexing, plain and clear to my soul. Let me have some bright and decisive evidence that these ways are indeed ways of wisdom, mercy, and faithfulness. Oh! let me feel that though these ways may be so painful for my feet to walk in, so contradictory to my reasoning mind, and so completely out of the sight of my speculating eye, yet let me so see them by the eye of faith, that I may feel a solemn acquiescence in, and holy approbation of them." To have these desires in the soul is certainly beyond all the power of the creature; it is a religion completely out of the sight of the carnal mind, and out of the grasp of anyone but those in whose heart the Spirit of God is at work.

ii. "*Teach me thy paths.*" The path is in some measure different from the way, narrower, more intricate apparently more confined. Compare for instance the highway with a path across the fields; the one is broad, and the other narrow. Thus the Psalmist would seemingly make a distinction between the ways of the Lord and the paths of the Lord; the ways of the Lord being the ways of God's dealings with us, those, so to speak, broader ways in which he himself walks; but the paths being those narrower and more intricate channels in which he leads his people. If this view be not fanciful, the ways would be those of wisdom, mercy, and faithfulness in which God moves; and paths, the paths of personal Christian experience, in which the children of God walk. God's movements are ways because they are expansive and extensive; worthy of the broad movements of an infinite Being; but the paths wherein a child of God walks are narrow, because he himself is a creature with a narrow foot to walk in them.

But you will perhaps catch my meaning better if I open the subject more fully. Thus we read, "There is a path which no fowl knoweth, and which the vulture's eye hath not seen;" (Job 28:7) and again, "But the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day." (Prov.4:18) This path then is a path in which none walk but those who are taught, specially taught of God.

1. We may safely lay down, that to walk in *faith*, as Enoch walked with God, is a path in which God leads the soul to walk. So again, we may say, that to walk in a sweet and blessed *hope* of interest in Christ gladdening and cheering the soul onward, is a path in which a godly soul walks. And again, where there is love felt in the soul towards the Lord Jesus Christ, we may say that to walk in *love* is a path of life in which the redeemed walk. Here then, we see at once that the path of *faith*, *hope*, and *love*, is the path in which the redeemed walk.

2. Again, it is a path of *self-denial*, for if a man do not take up his cross and deny himself, he cannot be, according to the Lord's own declaration, a disciple of Jesus Christ. He must walk, therefore, in a path of self-denial, in order to be made and manifested a true and accepted follower of the Lamb.

3. Again, it is a path of *tribulation*; for we read that it is through much tribulation we are to enter the kingdom. If we have no tribulation, we certainly lack one scriptural evidence of those who enter the kingdom of God.

4. It is a path also of *temptation*; for the Lord's people for the most part are a tempted, exercised and plagued people.

5. It is also a path of *much opposition*, for the world hates vital godliness; and what is worse, our carnal mind hates it too. We could do with the enmity of the world without, if we had not the enmity of the carnal mind within. A few words from without do not much hurt us; words from within cut deeply. One traitor in the garrison can do more harm than a host of foes.

6. Again, it is a path of *prayer*, for the Lord leads his people into those supplications and desires after himself which specially mark the out-pouring of the Spirit.

7. It is also a path of *watchfulness*, for unless we watch continually, we shall soon be entangled in some snare of Satan.

8. It is a path also of *meditation*; for we have to meditate on God's dealings with the soul, both in providence and, in grace, as well as on his blessed Word of Truth.

9. And it is a path of *communion with God*, for in this lies

the main secret of vital godliness, the true mark of heart-felt religion.

Now, though really the path is but one, yet speaking, according to our feelings, the varied tenor of our minds, our diversified experience, and the dealings of God with, us, they become paths.

The soul then, feeling its ignorance and inability to understand and realise these paths as suitable and blessed, puts up, if not the words, at least the substance of them, "Teach *me* thy paths." To lie with a broken heart and contrite spirit at the footstool of mercy, beseeching God to teach us, is indeed a blessed spot to be in. It is the evidence of such a childlike spirit; and shows such simplicity, reality and genuineness, that it bears stamped upon it the indubitable marks of true discipleship.

Whenever we see such a coming out of self, such a renunciation of our own wisdom, strength, and righteousness, such a putting aside of all creature religion, and such a real spirit of humility before God, we must receive it as something beyond and above nature. Nothing but the power of God seems able to bring a soul so completely out of the shell and crust of self-righteousness, and so to lay open its spiritual nakedness before him.

Naturally there is something very sweet in seeing a docile, teachable disposition. And on the other hand, few things are more offensive than the pride of ignorance; the abominable conceit of people who think they know everything, when really they know nothing, but are too proud to be taught. The only road to knowledge is to possess a docile, teachable, inquiring spirit, a willingness to learn, springing out of consciousness of ignorance. This spirit is what we see sometimes in children, nor is there a more pleasant sight for parent or instructor than to see a child docile, earnestly seeking information, and glad to receive instruction. If anything can open the mouth to teach, it is from seeing such a heart to learn. But to see a

man shut up in ignorance, proudly stalking in pride and self-conceit as though he were a philosopher of the highest grade; there is something so repulsive in such a miserable being, that it shuts up all disposition to have any communication with such a lump of pride and arrogance. So in grace, where there is a humble, quiet, docile spirit, it seems to draw forth out of the Lord's heart and mouth these secrets of heavenly wisdom which he hides from others; as he spake in the days of his flesh, "I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes." (Matt.11:25) The babes are those who are docile, teachable and childlike, and to whom as such God reveals the treasures of his heavenly wisdom.

Now, till you are brought to this spot, you are still a stranger to heavenly wisdom, you know not that secret of the Lord which is with them that fear him, but are foolishly puffed up with your own attainments. Though perhaps you may not see it, it is a most certain truth that the pride of self-knowledge only sets you far from God, for we read that, "he beholdeth the proud afar off." (Psa.138:6) And what pride is greater than the pride of knowledge? For, as the Apostle speaks, "Knowledge puffeth up." (1 Cor.8:1)

How contrary to this is the breathing of the Psalmist, "Teach me thy paths." What confessions of ignorance are lodged in that prayer! How it says, "Lord, I am unable to see the path; show it me; when I see it I am unable to walk in it; I know if I trust to my own wisdom I am a fool. What I want then is for thee to teach me thy paths, I shall then see them, know them and walk in them with holy freedom and divine comfort."

iii. But there is another petition breathed forth in the same spirit, "*Lead me in thy truth.*" There is something not only very precious in God's truth, but something very ennobling in it. It is indeed that revelation which bears stamped upon

it the highest marks of divine wisdom. Yet how few there are, speaking comparatively, who seem to have any taste of God's truth, or even the faintest desire after it. What lies, errors, and delusions can people gladly take up with in the solemn matters of eternity, deceiving and being deceived. Nay, I believe there is no error or heresy which the devil could invent which he will not find hundreds ready to believe and greedily propagate. The human mind, which seems barred to truth, lies open like an unwalled city to the incursions of every error.

But when God by his blessed Spirit anoints the eyes of his people with his divine eyesalve, and opens them to see his truth, what light and life accompany the revelation of that truth to the soul. One of the first marks of grace, one of the first evidences of the work of God in the soul is, in my judgment, a taste for truth, a yearning and bending forward of the soul after the pure Word of God. A man may be in much darkness of mind as regards doctrine, may sit under legal ministers and be in great confusion of soul as regards his own state and standing, and yet with all that may have a true spiritual yearning after truth, and a great dissatisfaction with error. When, then, he is brought under the sound of truth, and feels a measure of its power, he immediately lays hold of it as something suitable to his state. It is food for which he has a spiritual appetite, and the voice of God so speaks in it that it seems to communicate to his heart sensations before unknown. The Lord sometimes works very strongly in this way. A person may have been in the habit of hearing error for years. Again and again has he quarrelled with it from an inward distaste of it, and yet almost dreaded to leave it lest by so doing he should take a wrong step. But let this man be brought in the providence of God under the sound of truth, or placed in a situation where he has to associate with those who love the truth, and at once he embraces it. In this way, or sometimes by reading books written by men of truth, a light is cast into his soul by which he sees the

truth; and the error, which before he could not see, becomes distasteful to his soul. He has been all along under a measure of divine teaching without knowing it, but now he embraces the truth as not only suitable to his wants, and what his heart really desires to feed upon, but as something glorifying to God. I know this from experience, because when the Lord was pleased to lay eternal things with weight and power on my conscience, there was almost from the very first a bending towards God's truth, and a desire to know it and enjoy it. A soul may be for months and years entangled in a great deal of error and confusion, and yet there may be at the bottom a bending and yearning after the truth of God. It is something like a plant growing in a dark cellar. If there be but a narrow slit in the wall you will find the plant will bend towards the light, or like a tree on the top of a wall, which (at least so I have read) will drop a root all down the wall till it reaches the ground and fastens itself in the fertile soil. Yet the plant is still in the dark, damp cellar, and the tree on the top of the dry wall.

So, wherever God has planted life in the soul, there will be a bending towards the light, though that light come in but through a chink. This in due time will lead to greater discoveries of truth, which will bring the soul into the King's palace. It will then not be a stranger walking about outside the grounds and peeping through the park palings, but like a child at home sporting in the garden and walking in and out of the rooms at pleasure.

But what makes us desire for God to lead us into his truth? Because we feel so unable to get into it of ourselves. We may see it and believe it, but we want to get into it so as to feel the blessed realisation of it in our own soul. And this God alone can do for us. "As many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God." (Rom.8:14) The Spirit of God is promised to guide the church of God into all truth, and as they are thus guided and led into it they

enter into its beauty and blessedness.

iv. *"And teach me."* In the same spirit of childlike simplicity the Psalmist wanted God to be his teacher, for indeed "none teacheth like him," (cf. Job 32:22) and his teachings are "to profit." (Isa.48:17) All other teaching leaves us where it found us. I dare say from hearing me so often you have gained some instruction, some knowledge of doctrine or experience whereby your judgment has been informed.

But all this you may have gained and yet not have been taught of God. You may have gathered information or instruction from my lips, and become established in a sound creed, and yet not have been led into the truth of God by the Holy Spirit, nor been taught by him who is the only wise Teacher. All teaching of man, severed from the teaching of God, is profitless and valueless. It gives no faith or repentance, does not make sin hateful or Christ precious. It leaves us just where it found us, carnal, worldly, proud, covetous, self-righteous, in all our sin, filth, and guilt, being destitute of that operation of God in the soul whereby we are renewed in the spirit of our mind. But God's teachings are, as the prophet speaks, "to profit." (Isa.48:17) They humble, soften, melt, comfort, bless and save. To sum up all in one word, they do the soul eternal and immortal good.

II. But I pass on to consider our second point, the source of these heart-breathings and spiritual longings. *"For thou art the God of my salvation."* David felt that all his salvation was in God, from God, and out of God. And as the Lord had taken care of his salvation, which was the grand point, he would with this salvation, give him everything which was for his good and God's glory. As the apostle divinely argues, "He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" (Rom.8:32). He that hath given the greater, will he deny the less? If he has given salvation, will he not also give those things which

accompany salvation? This living faith emboldened the Psalmist to ask the Lord to bestow upon him those favours which are comprehended in and flow out of salvation. Having already given him salvation, would he not supply him with further blessings by showing him his ways, leading him into his paths, and communicating special teachings from his own most blessed mouth?

Now, there is nothing which so emboldens a soul to plead with God as an assurance of his favour and mercy. It is so naturally. If we have no proof that a person has any regard for us, or any good feeling towards us, our mouth is closed to ask of him any favour. But if we have reason to believe that he is favourably disposed towards us it emboldens us to make our wishes known to him. So in divine things. As long as we are in unbelief, or doubt and fear whether the Lord has any purposes of mercy towards us, it shuts the mouth, there is no liberty to be free with his gracious Majesty, no power to ask him to communicate any blessing. But on the other hand, if he be pleased to raise up in the soul any testimony of interest in his salvation, it emboldens it to ask of him other blessings, and in a godly sense to make free with his divine Majesty. Nay, the more he gives the more it emboldens the soul to ask for more still. Does not he himself say, "Open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it?" (Psa.81:10) Thus, the more evidence of interest the soul has in God's great salvation, the more can it ask of the Lord for blessing after blessing, as feeling a holy freedom in asking him to make them known. This to some may seem presumptuous, but the Lord is not angry when holy freedom is made use of in a child-like spirit. He is not offended, but is rather pleased at seeing his child coming unto him and pleading with him for those favours which he is so ready to bestow. You who are parents do not like to see your little ones putting their pinafores over their faces that you may not see them, or creeping away and trying to get out of sight when you come indoors. It would show there was something wrong in you or them. But to see

them come forward with their faces full of joy and their eyes beaming with affection, does it not show at once that the parent loves the children, and the children the parent? Many a labouring man, when he comes home tired, feels the first beam of pleasure through the day when his little ones creep on his knee, or his wife greets him with a fond smile. It is thus that affection is mutually manifested. So in grace; if we feel a love to the Lord we can go to him and tell him our wants, get, so to speak, upon his knee and lean the head upon his bosom. When the soul is so privileged, there is an opening up of the heart whereby it can say, "Thou art the God of my salvation," which brings us to our third and last point.

III. The waiting posture of the soul. "*On thee do I wait all the day.*" These are great words to use. In what a spiritual state must David have been so as to be able to say that all day long he could and did wait upon God. Yet with a certain limitation there is in every child of God something of this spirit. It is true that he may not be always waiting on God in prayer, supplication, and meditation, in fact, it would be impossible. How are the things of time and sense to be attended to, all the daily vocations of life to be performed if a man is to be on his knees or reading the Bible all the day long? Yet without *God the Great Teacher and Leader of His People* this there may still be a waiting on God, a watching his hand, a sense of his absence, a wishing for his presence, a looking up unto him, and the movements of divine fear towards him; all which may be going on in the soul, independent of falling on our knees, reading the Scriptures, or express acts of devotion. In this limited sense, the more spiritually-minded a man is the more will he wait on the Lord all the day. Without a measure of this watching the Lord's hand, and seeking his face, spiritual blessings are not usually obtained.

But most probably David's soul at this time was passing through peculiar trials and temptations, which placed him

and kept him on his watch-tower, and being pressed down with these troubles he was continually looking out for the Lord's appearing. This, in fact, is the main benefit of trials, that they make the soul wait upon the Lord, quickening its diligence, stirring up its desires, and making it more earnest after divine manifestations.

Such then was the experience of David, and it will be our mercy if we find a measure of it in our heart.