John Wesley FM & UW Sermon 127 [129]

The Trouble and Rest of Good Men [130131132]

"There the wicked cease from troubling, and there the weary be at rest."

Job 3:17.

When God at first surveyed all the works he had made, "behold, they were very good." All were perfect in beauty, and man, the lord of all, was perfect in holiness. And as his holiness was, so was his happiness. Knowing no sin, he knew no pain. But when sin was conceived, it soon brought forth pain; the whole scene was changed in a moment. He now groaned under the weight of a mortal body, and, what was far worse, a corrupted soul. That "spirit" which could have borne all his other "infirmities" was itself "wounded," and sick unto death. Thus, "in the day wherein he sinned, he began to "die;" and thus "in the midst of life we are in death;" yea, "the whole creation groaneth together," "being in bondage to sin," and therefore to misery.

The whole world is, indeed, in its present state, only one great infirmary. All that are therein are sick of sin; and their one business there is to be healed. And for this very end, the great Physician of souls is continually present with them; marking all the diseases of every soul, and "giving medicines to heal its sickness." These medicines are often painful, too: Not that God willingly afflicts his creatures, but he allots them just as much pain as is necessary to their health; and for that reason — because it is so.

The pain of cure must, then, be endured by every man, as well as the pain of sickness. And herein is manifest the infinite wisdom of Him who careth for us, that the very sickness of those with whom he converses may be a great means of every man's cure. The very wickedness of others is, in a thousand ways, conducive to a good man's holiness. They trouble him, it is true; but even that trouble is "health to his soul, and marrow to his bones." He suffers many things

from them; but it is to this end, that he may be “made perfect through” those “sufferings.”

But as perfect holiness is not found on earth, so neither is perfect happiness. [In this life adult Christians are saved from all sin, and are made perfect in love. See Mr. Wesley’s “Plain Account of Christian Perfection.” — Edit.] Some remains of our disease will ever be felt, and some physic be necessary to heal it. Therefore we must be, more or less, subject to the pain of cure, as well as the pain of sickness. And, accordingly, neither do “the wicked” here “cease from troubling,” nor can “the weary be at rest.”

Who, then will “deliver” us “from the body of this death?” Death will deliver us. Death shall set those free in a moment, who “were all their life-time subject to bondage.” Death shall destroy at once the whole body of sin, [This doctrine, that we are saved from sin by death, is nowhere taught in sacred Scripture, as Mr. Wesley afterwards perceived, and demonstrated in the treatise just mentioned, and in several of his Sermons. — Edit.] and therewith of its companion, — pain. And therefore, “there the wicked cease from troubling, and there the weary be at rest.”

The Scriptures give us no account of the *place* where the souls of the just remain from death to the resurrection; but we have an account of their *state* in these words: In explaining which I shall consider,

I. How the wicked do here trouble good men; and,

II. How the weary are there at rest.”

[I.] Let us consider, First, how the “wicked” here “trouble” good men. And this is a spacious field. Look round the world; take a view of all the troubles therein: How few are there whereof the wicked are not the occasion! “From whence come wars and fightings among you?” Whence all the ills that embitter society; that often turn that highest of blessings into a curse, and make it “good for man to be alone?” “Come they not hence,” from self-will, pride, inordinate

affection? in one word, from wickedness? And can it be otherwise, so long as it remains upon earth? As well may “the Ethiopian change his skin,” as a wicked man cease to trouble both himself and his neighbour, but especially good men: Inasmuch as, while he is wicked he is continually injuring either them, or himself, or God.

First. Wicked men trouble those who serve God, by the injuries they do them. As at first, “he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now.” And so it must be, till all things are fulfilled; “till heaven and earth pass away,” “all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.” For there is an irreconcilable enmity between the Spirit of Christ, and the spirit of the world. If the followers of Christ “were of the world, the world would love its own: But because they are not of the world, therefore the world hateth them.” And this hatred they will not fail to show by their words: They will “say all manner of evil against them falsely;” “they will find out many inventions” whereby even “the good that is in them may be evil spoken of,” and in a thousand instances lay to their charge the ill that they know not. From words in due time they proceed to deeds; treating the servants as their forefathers did their Master; wronging and despitefully using them in as many ways as fraud can invent and force accomplish.

[2.] It is true, these troubles sit heaviest upon those who are yet weak in the faith; and the more of the Spirit of Christ any man gains, the lighter do they appear to him. So that to him who is truly renewed therein, who is full of the knowledge and love of God, all the wrongs of wicked men are not only no evils, but are matter of real and solid joy. But still, though he rejoices for his own sake, he cannot but grieve for theirs. “He hath great heaviness and continual sorrow in” his “heart, for” his “brethren according to the flesh,” who are thus “treasuring up to themselves wrath against the day of wrath, and revelation of the righteous judgment of God.” His eyes weep for them in secret places; he is

horribly afraid for them; yea, he “could even wish to be accursed” himself, so they might inherit a blessing. And thus it is, that they who can not only slight, but rejoice in the greatest injury done to *them,* yet are troubled at that which wicked men do to themselves and the grievous misery that attends them.

[3.] How much more are they troubled at the injuries wicked men are continually offering to God! This was the circumstance which made the contradiction of sinners so severe a trial to our Lord himself: “He that despiseth me, despiseth Him that sent me.” And how are these despisers now multiplied upon earth! Who fear not the Son, neither the Father. How are we surrounded with those who blaspheme the Lord and his Anointed; either reviling the whole of his glorious gospel, or making him a liar as to some of the blessed truths which he hath graciously revealed therein! How many of those who profess to believe the whole, yet, in effect preach another gospel; so disguising the most essential doctrines thereof by their new interpretations, as to retain the words only, but nothing of “the faith once delivered to the saints!” How many who have not yet made shipwreck of the faith are strangers to the fruits of it! It hath not purified their hearts; it hath not overcome the world; they are yet “in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity.” They are still “lovers of themselves,” “lovers of the world,” “lovers of pleasure,” and not “lovers of God.” Lovers of God? No. He “is not in all their thoughts!” They delight not in Him, they do not thirst after Him; they do not rejoice in doing his will, neither make their boast of his praise! O faith, working by love, whither art thou fled? Surely the Son of man did once plant thee upon earth. Where then art thou now? Among the wealthy? No. “The deceitfulness of riches” there “chokes the word, and it becometh unfruitful.” Among the poor? No. “The cares of the world” are there, so that it bringeth forth no fruit to perfection. However, there is nothing to prevent its growth among those who have neither poverty nor riches:” — Yes; “the desire of other things.” And experience shows, by a thousand melancholy

examples, that the allowed desire of anything, great or small, otherwise than as a means to the one thing needful, will by degrees banish the care of that out of the soul, and unfit it for every good word or work.

Such is the trouble — not to descend to particulars, which are endless — that wicked men [continually] occasion to the good. Such is the state of all good men while on earth: But it is not so with their souls in paradise. In the moment wherein they are loosed from the body they know pain no more. Though they are not yet possessed of the "fullness of joy," yet all grief is done away. For "there the wicked cease from troubling; and there the weary be at rest."

II. 1. "There the weary are at rest" — which was the Second thing to be considered, — not only from those evils which prudence might have prevented, or piety removed, even in this life; but from those which were inseparable therefrom, which were their unavoidable portion on earth. They are now at rest, whom wicked men would not suffer to rest before: For into the seat of the spirits of just men, none but the spirits of the just can enter. They are at length hid from the scourge of the tongue: Their name is not here cast out as evil. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the Prophets, do not revile, or separate them from their company. They are no longer despitefully used, and persecuted; neither do they groan under the hand of the oppressor. No injustice, no malice, no fraud is there; they are all "Israelites indeed, in whom there is no guile." There are no sinners against their own souls; therefore there is no painful pity, no fear for them. There are no blasphemers of God or of his word; no profaners of his name or of his Sabbaths; no denier of the Lord that bought him; none that trample upon the blood of his everlasting covenant: In a word, no earthly or sensual, no devilish spirit; none who do not love the Lord their God with all their heart.

2. There, therefore, "the weary are at rest" from all the troubles which the wicked occasioned; and, indeed, from all the other evils which are necessary in

this world, either as the consequence of sin, or for the cure of it. They are at rest, in the First place, from bodily pain. In order to judge of the greatness of this deliverance, let but those who have not felt it take a view of one who lies on a sick or death bed. Is this he that was "made a little lower than the angels?" How is the glory departed from him! His eye is dim and heavy; his cheek pale and wan; his tongue falters; [his hand trembles;] his breast heaves and pants; his whole body is now distorted, and writhed to and fro; now moist, and cold, and motionless, like the earth to which it is going. And yet, all this which you see is but the shadow of what he feels. You see not the pain that tears his heart, that shoots through all his veins, and chases the flying soul through every part of her once-loved habitation. Could we see this, too, how earnestly should we cry out: "O sin, what hast thou done! To what hast thou brought the noblest part of the visible creation! Was it for this the good God made man?" O no! Neither will he suffer it long. Yet a little while, and all the storms of life shall be over, and thou shalt be gathered into the storehouse of the dead; and "there "the weary are at rest."

3. They "are at rest" from all these infirmities and follies which they could not escape in this life. They are no longer exposed to the delusions of sense, or the dreams of imagination. They are not hindered from seeing the noblest truths, by inadvertence; nor do they ever lose the sight they have once gained, by inattention. They are not entangled with prejudice, nor ever misled by hasty or partial views of the object: And, consequently, no error is there. O blessed place, where truth alone can enter! truth unmixed, undisguised, enlightening every man who cometh into the world! where there is no difference of opinions; but all think alike; all are of one heart, and of one mind: Where that offspring of hell, controversy, which turneth this world upside down, can never come: Where those who have been sawn asunder thereby, and often cried out in the

bitterness of their soul, “Peace, peace!” shall find what they then sought in vain, even a peace which none taketh from them.

4. And yet all this, inconceivably great as it is, is the least part of their deliverance. For in the moment wherein they shake off the flesh, they are delivered, not only from the troubling of the wicked, not only from pain and sickness, from folly and infirmity; but also from all sin. A deliverance this, in sight of which all the rest vanish away. This is the triumphal song which everyone heareth when he entereth the gates of paradise: — “Thou, being dead, sinnest no more. Sin hath no more dominion over thee. For in that thou diedst, thou diedst unto sin once; but in that thou livest, thou livest unto God.” [The sentiment which is here again expressed, that it is death which destroys sin in the human heart, though couched in the language of an Apostle, is a branch of that philosophical Mysticism which Mr. Wesley entertained at this early period of his life, and which he afterwards renounced for the scriptural doctrine of salvation by faith. According to the New Testament, every believer is already delivered from the dominion of sin; and the Bible never represents the entire sanctification of our nature as effected by death. It is the work of the Holy Spirit; and is not suspended upon the dissolution of the body; but upon the exercise of a steadfast faith in the almighty Saviour. — Edit.]

5. There then “the weary be at rest.” The blood of the Lamb hath healed all their sickness, hath washed them throughly from their wickedness, and cleansed them from their sin. The disease of their nature is cured; they are at length made whole; they are restored to perfect soundness. They no longer mourn the “flesh lusting against the Spirit;” the “law in their members” is now at an end, and no longer “wars against the law of their mind, and brings them into captivity to the law of sin.” There is no root of bitterness left; no remains even of that sin which did “so easily beset them;” no forgetfulness of “Him in whom they live, move, and have their being;” no ingratitude to their gracious Redeemer, who poured

out his soul unto the death for them; no unfaithfulness to that blessed Spirit who so long bore with their infirmities. In a word, no pride, no self-will is there; so that they who are thus "delivered from the bondage of corruption" may indeed say one to another, and that in an emphatical sense, "Beloved, now we are the children of God; and it doth not yet appear what we shall be; but we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is."

6. Let us view a little more nearly the state of a Christian at his entrance into the other world. Suppose "the silver cord" of life just "loosed," and "the wheel broken at the cistern;" the heart can now beat no more; the blood ceases to move; the last breath flies off from the quivering lips, and the soul springs forth into eternity. What are the thoughts of such a soul, that has just subdued her last enemy, death? That sees the body of sin lying beneath her, and is new born into the world of spirits? How does she sing, "'O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? Thanks be unto God,' who hath given me 'the victory, through our Lord Jesus Christ!' O happy day, wherein I shall begin to live! wherein I shall taste my native freedom! When I was 'born of a woman' I had 'but a short time to live,' and that time was 'full of misery;' that corruptible body pressed me down, and enslaved me to sin and pain. But the snare is broken, and I am delivered. Henceforth I know them no more. That head is no more an aching head: Those eyes shall no more run down with tears: That heart shall no more pant with anguish or fear; be weighed down with sorrow or care: Those limbs shall no more be racked with pain: Yea, 'sin hath no more dominion over' me. At length, I have parted from thee, O my enemy; and I shall see thy face no more! I shall never more be unfaithful to my Lord, or offend the eyes of his glory: I am no longer that wavering, fickle, self-inconsistent creature, sinning and repenting, and sinning again. No. I shall never cease, day or night, to love and praise the Lord my God, with all my heart, and with all my strength. But what are ye? Are 'all these ministering spirits sent forth to minister

to' one 'heir of salvation?' Then, dust and ashes, farewell! I hear a voice from heaven saying, 'Come away, and rest from thy labours. Thy warfare is accomplished, thy sin is pardoned; and the days of thy mourning are ended.'"

7. My brethren, these truths need little application. Believe ye that these things are so? What then hath each of you to do, but to "lay aside every weight, and run with patience the race set before him?" To "count all things" else "but dung" and dross; especially those grand idols, learning and reputation, if they are pursued in any other measure, or with any other view, than as they conduce to the knowledge and love of God? to have this "one thing" continually in thine heart, "when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up?" — to have thy "loins" ever "girt," and "thy light burning?" — to serve the Lord thy God with all thy might; if by any means, when He requireth thy soul of thee, perhaps in an hour when thou lookest not for Him, thou mayst enter "where the wicked cease from troubling, and where the weary are at rest."

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[129][text from the 1872 edition]
[130]Preached at St. Mary's in Oxford, on Sunday, Sept. 21, 1735
[131]Published at the request of several of the hearers
[132][This appears to have been the first Sermon that Mr. Wesley ever committed to the press. It was preached about a month before he sailed for Georgia; and published the same year by C. Rivington, in St. Paul's Church-Yard. After remaining out of print upwards of ninety years, it is here republished as an authentic, and not uninteresting, specimen of his preaching at the time when he left his native country to convert Heathens; and, as he states, learned in the ends of the earth, what he least suspected, that he had never been converted himself. The reader will observe that while the Sermon displays great seriousness and zeal, it exhibits a very inadequate view of real Christianity. The Preacher attributes the sanctification of human nature, in a great measure, to personal sufferings; assumes that the body is the seat of moral evil; and that sin exists in the best of Christians till they obtain deliverance by

the hand of death. With what ability and success he afterwards opposed these unevangelical principles, and taught the doctrine of present salvation from all sin, by faith in Jesus Christ, is well known to all who are conversant with his Works, and especially with his Journal and Sermons. Viewed in connexion with his subsequent writings, this Sermon is of considerable importance, as it serves very strikingly to illustrate the change which took place in his religious sentiments previously to his entrance upon that astonishing career of ministerial labour and usefulness, by which he was so eminently distinguished. As a perfect antidote to the doctrinal mistakes which it contains, the reader is referred to the admirable Sermon, entitled, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," [43] (Sermons, vol. 2, p. 43.) — Edit.]

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