

BELOVED, YET AFFLICTED

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“Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick.” —*John 11:3.*

THAT disciple whom Jesus loved is not at all backward to record that Jesus loved Lazarus too: there are no jealousies among those who are chosen by the Well-beloved. Jesus loved Mary, and Martha, and Lazarus: it is a happy thing where a whole family live in the love of Jesus. They were a favoured trio, and yet, as the serpent came into Paradise, so did sorrow enter their quiet household at Bethany. Lazarus was sick. They all felt that if Jesus were there disease would flee at his presence; what then should they do but let him know of their trial? Lazarus was near to death's door, and so his tender sisters at once reported the fact to Jesus, saying, “Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick.” Many a time since then has that same message been sent to our Lord, for in full many a case he has chosen his people in the furnace of affliction. Of the Master it is said, “himself took our infirmities, and bare our sicknesses,” and it is, therefore, no extraordinary thing for the members to be in this matter conformed to their Head.

I. Notice, first, A FACT mentioned in the text: “Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick.” The sisters were somewhat astonished that it should be so, for the word “behold” implies a measure of surprise. “*We love him, and would make him well directly: thou lovest him, and yet he remains sick. Thou canst heal him with a word, why then is thy loved one sick?*” Have not you, dear sick friend, often wondered how your painful or lingering disease could be consistent with your being chosen, and called, and made one with Christ? I dare say this has greatly perplexed you, and yet in very truth it is by no means strange, but a thing to be expected.

We need not be astonished that the man whom the Lord loves is sick, for *he is only a man*. The love of Jesus does not separate us from the common necessities and infirmities of human life. Men of God are still men. The covenant of grace is not a charter of exemption from consumption, or rheumatism, or asthma. The bodily ills, which come upon us because of our flesh, will attend us to the tomb, for Paul saith, “we that are in this body do groan.”

Those whom the Lord loves are the more likely to be sick, since they are *under a peculiar discipline*. It is written, “Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.” Affliction of some sort is one of the marks of the true-born child of God, and it frequently happens that the trial takes the form of illness. Shall we therefore wonder that we have to take our turn in the sick chamber? If Job, and David, and Hezekiah must each one smart, who are we that we should be amazed because we are in ill-health?

Nor is it remarkable that we are sick if we reflect upon the great *benefit which often flows from it to ourselves*. I do not know what peculiar improvement may have been wrought in Lazarus, but many a disciple of Jesus would have been of small use if he had not been afflicted. Strong men are apt to be harsh, imperious, and unsympathetic, and therefore they need to be put into the furnace, and melted down. I have known Christian women who would never have been so gentle, tender, wise, experienced, and holy if they had not been mellowed by physical pain. There are fruits in God's garden as well as in man's which never ripen till they are bruised. Young women who are apt to be volatile, conceited, or talkative, are often trained to be full of sweetness and light by sickness after sickness, by which they are taught to sit at Jesus' feet. Many have been able to say with the psalmist, “It is good for me to have been afflicted, that I might learn thy statutes.” For this reason even such as are highly favoured and blessed among women may feel a sword piercing through their hearts.

Oftentimes this sickness of the Lord's loved ones is *for the good of others*. Lazarus was permitted to be sick and to die, that by his death and resurrection the apostles might be benefitted. His sickness was “for the glory of God.” Throughout these nineteen hundred years which have succeeded Lazarus' sickness all believers have been getting good out of it, and this afternoon we are all the better because he languished and died. The church and the world may derive immense advantage through the sorrows of good men: the careless may be awakened, the doubting may be convinced, the ungodly may be converted, the mourner may be comforted through our testimony in sickness; and if so, would we wish to avoid pain and weakness? Are we not quite willing that our friends should say of us also “Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick”?

II. Our text, however, not only records a fact, but mentions A REPORT of that fact: the sisters sent and told Jesus. Let us keep up a constant correspondence with our Lord about everything.

“Sing a hymn to Jesus, when thy heart is faint; Tell it all to Jesus, comfort or complaint.”

Jesus knows all about us, but *it is a great relief to pour out our hearts before him*. When John the Baptist's broken-hearted disciples saw their leader beheaded, "they took up the body, and went and told Jesus." They could not have done better. In all trouble send a message to Jesus, and do not keep your misery to yourself. In his case there is no need of reserve, there is no fear of his treating you with cold pride, or heartless indifference, or cruel treachery. He is a confident who never can betray us, a friend who never will refuse us.

There is this fair hope about telling Jesus, that *he is sure to support us under it*. If you go to Jesus, and ask, "Most gracious Lord, why am I sick? I thought I was useful while in health, and now I can do nothing; why is this"? He may be pleased to show you why, or, if not, he will make you willing to bear his will with patience without knowing why. He can bring his truth to your mind to cheer you, or strengthen your heart by his presence, or send you unexpected comforts, and give you to glory in your afflictions. "Ye people, pour out your heart before him: God is a refuge for us." Not in vain did Mary and Martha send to tell Jesus, and not in vain do any seek his face.

Remember, too, that *Jesus may give healing*. It would not be wise to live by a supposed faith, and cast off the physician and his medicines, any more than to discharge the butcher, and the tailor, and expect to be fed and clothed by faith; but this would be far better than forgetting the Lord altogether, and trusting to man only. Healing for both body and soul must be sought from God. We make use of medicines, but these can do nothing apart from the Lord, "who healeth all our diseases." We may tell Jesus about our aches and pains, and gradual declining, and hacking coughs. Some persons are afraid to go to God about their health: they pray for the pardon of sin, but dare not ask the Lord to remove a headache: and, yet, surely, if the hairs outside our head are all numbered by God it is not much more of a condescension for him to relieve throbs and pressures inside the head. Our big things must be very little to the great God, and our little things cannot be much less. It is a proof of the greatness of the mind of God that while ruling the heavens and the earth, he is not so absorbed by these great concerns as to be forgetful of the least pain or want of any one of his poor children. We may go to him about our failing breath, for he first gave us lungs and life. We may tell him about the eye which grows dim, and the ear which loses hearing, for he made them both. We may mention the swollen knee, and the gathering finger, the stiff neck, and the sprained foot, for he made all these our members, redeemed them all, and will raise them all from the grave. Go at once, and say, "Lord, behold he whom thou lovest is sick."

III. Thirdly, let us notice in the case of Lazarus A RESULT which we should not have expected. No doubt when Mary and Martha sent to tell Jesus they looked to see Lazarus recover as soon as the messenger reached the Master; but they were not gratified. For two days the Lord remained in the same place, and not till he knew that Lazarus was dead did he speak of going to Judea. This teaches us that Jesus may be informed of our trouble, and yet may act as if he were indifferent to it. We must not expect in every case that prayer for recovery will be answered, for if so, nobody would die who had chick or child, friend or acquaintance to pray for him. In our prayers for the lives of beloved children of God we must not forget that there is one prayer which may be crossing ours, for Jesus prays, "Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory." We pray that they may remain with us, but when we recognize that Jesus wants them above, what can we do but admit his larger claim and say, "Not as I will, but as thou wilt"? In our own case, we may pray the Lord to raise us up, and yet though he loves us he may permit us to grow worse and worse, and at last to die. Hezekiah had fifteen years added to his life, but we may not gain the reprieve of a single day. Never set such store by the life of any one dear to you, or even by your own life, as to be rebellious against the Lord. If you hold the life of any dear one with too tight a hand, you are making a rod for your own back; and if you love your own earthly life too well, you are making a thorny pillow for your dying bed. Children are often idols, and in such cases their too ardent lovers are idolaters. We might as well make a god of clay, and worship it, as the Hindus are said to do, as worship our fellow-creatures, for what are they but clay? Shall dust be so dear to us that we quarrel with our God about it? If our Lord leaves us to suffer, let us not repine. He must do that for us which is kindest and best, for he loves us better than we love ourselves.

Did I hear you say, "Yes, Jesus allowed Lazarus to die, *but he raised him up again*" ? I answer, he is the resurrection and the life to us also. Be comforted concerning the departed, "Thy brother shall rise again," and all of us whose hope is in Jesus shall partake in our Lord's resurrection. Not only shall our souls live, but our bodies, too, shall be raised incorruptible. The grave will serve as a refining pot, and this vile body shall come forth vile no longer. Some Christians are greatly cheered by the thought of living till the Lord comes, and so escaping death. I confess that I think this no great gain, for so far from having any preference over them that are asleep, those who are alive and remain at his coming will miss one point of fellowship, in not dying and rising like their Lord. Beloved, all things are yours, and death is expressly mentioned in the list, therefore do not dread it, but rather "long for evening to undress, that you may rest with God."

IV. I will close with A QUESTION—“Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus”—does Jesus in a special sense love you? Alas, many sick ones have no evidence of any special love of Jesus towards them, for they have never sought his face, nor trusted in him. Jesus might say to them “I never knew you,” for they have turned their backs upon his blood and his cross. Answer, dear friend, to your own heart this question, “Do you love Jesus”? If so, you love him because he first loved you. Are you trusting him? If so, that faith of yours is the proof that he has loved you from before the foundation of the world, for faith is the token by which he plights his troth to his beloved.

If Jesus loves you, and you are sick, let all the world see how you glorify God in your sickness. Let friends and nurses see how the beloved of the Lord are cheered and comforted by him. Let your holy resignation astonish them, and set them admiring your Beloved, who is so gracious to you that he makes you happy in pain, and joyful at the gates of the grave. If your religion is worth anything it ought to support you now, and it will compel unbelievers to see that he whom the Lord loveth is in better case when he is sick than the ungodly when full of health and vigour.

If you do not know that Jesus loves you, you lack the brightest star that can cheer the night of sickness. I hope you will not die as you now are, and pass into another world without enjoying the love of Jesus: that would be a terrible calamity indeed. Seek his face at once, and it may be that your present sickness is a part of the way of love by which Jesus would bring you to himself. Lord, heal all these sick ones in soul and in body. Amen.

Taken from: Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Vol. 26, No. 1518

This message was preached before an audience of invalid ladies at Mentone, France. It is taken directly from the METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE PULPIT sermon series, Vol. 26, #1518, unedited and unabridged. It is listed there under the heading: NOTES OF A SERMON, *Beloved, and Yet Afflicted*.

Unedited and Unabridged Delivered in 1880 at the MENTONE, FRANCE