



**IN ALL THEIR
AFFLICTION**

Murdoch Campbell

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By

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Foreword

THERE are two or three remarks that I should like to make in relation to the following chapters. It may appear to some that my treatment of the subject under discussion is rather subjective and that I should have observed a more obvious balance between the inner, or experimental, side of Christian affliction and its more doctrinal or expository side. It may be seen, however, that opposite every source of sorrow on which I have touched I have, at the same time, tried to show that God's grace and healing balm are ever available and sufficient, and that in every trial His own presence and promise sweeten "the waters of Marah."

I have also introduced a few instances of the Lord giving His Word "in the night watches" and "when deep sleep falleth upon men." And in each case its relevance, and its fulfilment within the sphere of Providence, were the proof that it comes from Him who has "the tongue of the learned." It is the witness of Scripture—and also of Christian experience—that the Spirit of the Lord who dwells in the hearts of His people can apply His own Word to their mind both while they are awake and asleep.

M. C.

CHAPTER 1

The Unpreached Sermon

IT happened one autumn evening. I was walking along a quiet road in one of our Highland glens when, all of a sudden, I felt my heart going out in much tenderness toward those of God's people whom I knew to be bowed down under burdens of sorrow and care. With my heart thus touched I found, at the same time, these words in my mind: "As the lily among the thorns, so is my love among the daughters." And I knew that these words from the lips of our Lord described, in vivid language, not only the spiritual beauty of His people in contrast to the world, but also their painful environment here. For in this world they must suffer till they reach the place where sorrow is unknown.

At that moment I prayed that I might be enabled, as God would have me, to bear their burdens and so fulfil one of the kindly laws which govern His kingdom in this world. Perhaps, I thought, I could do something to comfort them in their manifold tribulations. While life's brief candle was still burning could I not, for example, write a word in season which might, by the blessing of God, help some of them in the way?

As this somewhat wistful, but strangely compelling, thought took possession of my mind I recalled an incident which took place in my life some years before. I was sitting

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in my home in Glasgow, and trying to prepare a sermon which I intended to preach in one of our congregations. It was a Communion preparatory sermon. And, like a sharp blade, it was meant to cut through all the veneer of mere outward formality, and to expose the hidden evils of the hearts and lives of my hearers. It was meant to hurt and to bring those who heard it to their knees in grief and penitence for sin. Into its texture I admitted little or no comfort at all.

When I had finished my task that night I went to bed—and dreamed. I dreamt that I was standing in the open air, and in a place of breath-taking loveliness. The earth around me was green and enriched by the rarest of flowers. Their wafted fragrance made it a joy to breathe. In this exquisite setting I saw a table at which a company of men and women sat down. They were, I knew, waiting to commemorate the death of their Lord. They also seemed to be pressed down with much sorrow, as if they all felt the plague of sin which lodged in their hearts. At the end of this table I stood, but I knew not what to say. It was then that I saw a man walking toward me who said in a calm voice that I should address the waiting company.

“And what shall I say?” I asked him.

“There is,” he said, “but one thing to say here.” Then, in a voice laden with tenderness and affection, he quoted the words of Isaiah: ““Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the Lord’s hand

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double for all her sin.””

When I awoke that morning I decided that I should leave it to others to proclaim the word of severity, and that in addressing God’s people during that Communion season God would have me apply His balm to their wounds.

Remembering that morning, and before I had reached the end of the road, the conviction formed itself in my mind that, with God’s help, I should continue this ministry of comfort. It was impressed on my heart that one great end of our calling is to comfort the people of God. The supreme evidence of our love for Christ is that we feed, and care for, His flock. He is so identified with them that in ministering to them we minister to Himself. This, often unconscious, service of our love to Him is what He will one day acknowledge and reward. But as I came to the end of the way, I was confronted with a very difficult question. Had I the needed personal fitness for this task? Did my own experience—for what it is worth—provide me with even the minimum qualifications to deal with the delicate subject of Christian sorrow and consolation?

And here, indeed, I ought to offer some explanation. During the first years of my Christian life God was pleased to shelter me from almost every storm. The harrowing conviction of sin through which the Lord, I trust, led me into a state of grace gave way to a great peace. I was spiritually but a child then. I was like one whom the Lord carried in His bosom and led gently in green pastures and by quiet streams. Under His shadow I sat down enjoying rest of soul. He restrained every foe. If the devil roared, it

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was from afar. The dogs which sometimes barked and bared their teeth were not permitted to hurt me. My sky was bright, like a morning without cloud. In Scripture, and in Christian biography, I read of the dark folds which so often enclose and distress God's people. The path of anguish of which David, Asaph and Heman speak in the Psalms, my feet had not yet touched. No doubt when I did touch on the subject of Christian affliction my words were scriptural and, perhaps, helpful to some; but into these deep waters I had not yet come.

But the day of trouble did arrive. The sky which was hitherto so bright above me began to darken till every star vanished behind dark and heavy clouds of fear and spiritual conflicts. This contact with adversity was not something which passed in a day or a year. Although some of its earlier tossings may have spent their force the wind is still oftentimes contrary. And this, no doubt, is how it will fare with me—as with so many of God's people—until, by God's grace, I come into the deep calm and perfect peace of the eternal world. I hope, therefore, that in trying to comfort and reassure God's afflicted people I am not altogether a stranger to the inevitable and necessary trials which, for His glory and their own good, they are called upon to endure in this life.

At this point, however, let me introduce a needed word of caution. We live in the age of the false prophet, one of whose works is to place soft deceptive pillows under the heads of men and women who know not the Lord, and who are, therefore, strangers to “the afflictions of Joseph.”

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These men echo their ancient counterparts whose favourite cry was—"Peace, peace." They excel in ministering what they call "uplifts" to those who listen to them. With that one word they lull them into a fatal sleep of spiritual unconcern. Whatever we are, and however we live, we are, according to these men, within the circle of God's love and therefore entitled to His consolation. From this confusion we turn away as from something which is both unscriptural and abhorrent to the Christian mind. It is a confusion which is also abhorred of God, as His Word so clearly reveals.

As a safeguard against this error we ought at the outset to ask ourselves a question. How can we identify God's people in this world? Fortunately for us God Himself gives us a very full and inerrant picture of His Own children, and those who answer to the Scriptural characteristics He sets before us are truly His. We are not, therefore, dependent on man's judgment in this matter—if that judgment is not in harmony with God's voice in His written Word.

In the light of Scripture God's people are to be identified as those who are renewed by the Holy Spirit, who are washed in the blood of Christ from sin's guilt and defilement, who have renounced their own righteousness that they might be clothed in His, and in whose renewed hearts a new love is born. This love rests on Himself, on His Word and on His people. And with this love is an ever-growing desire after holiness of life—a desire which, in the words of the Psalm, God is going to accomplish.

Our Lord further describes His Own people as His

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sheep for whom He died and to whom he gives eternal life. This name, although figurative, is also highly significant and full of instruction. His sheep bear His Own mark and seal. An older generation of Christians used to enlarge on this pleasant theme. Christ's flock, they used to say, have His mark and seal both in the wool and in the ear. The mark in the wool is more conspicuous, and may be seen by all. The believer, in other words, reveals by his outward conduct Whose he is and Whom he serves. There is also a secret seal—they all have the hearing ear. They know and hear His voice, and what He commands they seek to do. In their worship, and in their inner and outward conduct, they seek to be ruled by His will as it is revealed in His Word.

They walk, in other words, in "the footsteps of the flock," or in those holy paths which were loved and cherished by God's people in every age. In His pastures they also feed. God's Word is their spiritual food, and at the Throne of Grace, in communion with their Lord, they drink out of living streams. They refuse to defile their lips with any fare but that which He has provided for them in the Gospel. Their eye, also, is on the Shepherd. He is their Example and Guide. He is the end of their conversation and desire. When they lose sight of Him they mourn, but His hiding is only for a moment. They know His care and love. When they are weary and feeble He leads them gently and bears them in His arms. And because they love Him, they are hated of all men. "For his sake they are killed all the day long: they are counted as sheep for the slaughter" (Psalm 44). They are therefore commanded by their Lord

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to “beware of dogs” that would hurt and pursue them.

They are a people, too, who see the Lord’s love for them in His chastisements. When they go out of the way they come under His rod, and that is how He often conveys His higher lessons to their souls. They have “no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness.” They are a people apart. In their holy attachments they are like sheep and doves. Christ uses both figures to describe them. When clouds and darkness descend upon them, and when their souls are discouraged in the way, they long for the rest of Heaven, and for that country where the inhabitant shall not say, “I am sick.”

There are other figures which the Bible employs to describe them. They are the light of the world and the salt of the earth. In their warfare against evil they employ the whole armour of God. They are not a passive, timid people where the glory of God is concerned. They go forth against the forces of darkness in the name of Him who, as the Captain of their salvation, goes forth “conquering and to conquer.” The Church, with God within her and around her, has been “a terror” to Satan and wicked men in every age. Hell has often trembled before her who is “terrible as an army with banners.”

This subject, however, is too rich and inexhaustible; for a perfect picture of the Lord’s people is outside our power to produce here. “It doth not yet appear what we shall be”; but what we have said, based on Christ’s Own words, should enable us at least to identify them as “not of this world,” but as truly His.

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This following pages are, therefore, meant for those who bear His mark and who enjoy the earnest of good things to come in their hearts. And the comfort we would minister to them is, we hope, that comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.

CHAPTER 2

Our Bethels — A Preparation

THERE are some who draw a picture of the Christian life as one of undisturbed quiet and unfailing joy, and from which conflict and adversity are almost absent. But the voyage to Heaven is not always on such a tranquil sea.

Christ in His parable of the sower tells us of a spurious type of conversion which consists of a mere flash of emotional joy, but which fades away with its first contact with trial. Bunyan's "Pliable" ran toward Heaven when he heard of its glories and rewards; but with his first encounter with adversity he ran even faster in the opposite way. Certain forms of modern preaching too often picture the Christian life as without cross or burden. And many take the bait only to find that, without persevering grace in the heart, their hopeful beginnings die under the first shock of temptation. It is this absence of grace, and the neglect of counting the cost, which cause the great majority of those who apparently "receive the word" to go back and follow the Lord no more.

Certainly there are within the context of true Christian experience perfect peace and unspeakable joy. But there is something else. There is sin and therefore there is sorrow and continuous warfare. The heavenly wayfarers' path to Heaven lies through dark vales where enemies prowl and try—if that were possible—to destroy them.

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In the New Testament we see the wisdom of the Lord in the way He warns all true believers with regard to the implications and commitments of the Christian life. There is no belittlement of what is in store for those who renounce the world, forsake the Devil's camp, and so wage a daily warfare against sin. "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you" (1. Peter 4: 12): "for we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Ephesians 6: 12). And to be forewarned is to be forearmed.

The young Christian, especially, is sometimes in danger of envisaging a calm and happy future in keeping with his first spiritual enjoyments. Job did this. He was to die in his nest, with God's secret upon his tabernacle, and his faith in God wrapped up in peace to the end. He had, as yet, no awareness that the hateful eyes of Satan were upon him, and that "he desired to have him that he might sift him as wheat."

David, too, thought that his "mountain" would stand strong and remain unclouded to the end; but before long, with God's face withdrawn, sorrow and fear filled his heart.

There are many illustrations both in Scripture and in Christian biography of this season of quiet rest before the disciplines which God so often uses for our spiritual profit and refinement.

But the day will come when, through steep and thorny

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paths, and beneath terrifying precipices, we haltingly follow Him. The blessedness we enjoyed when first we knew Him becomes a wistful memory. The Prophet speaks of this in his parable of the infant in the field. He gives us a picture of the Church in the first season of her spiritual marriage, before the days of darkness had arrived. "And when I passed by thee I said unto thee, Live, and thy time was the time of love...and thou becamest mine" (Ezekiel 16). Was this not a picture of Israel when they stood on the further shore of the sea with all their enemies lying in the silence of death? There they sang for joy. The days of their mourning had ended. By the sprinkling of the blood of the Covenant, and by the exertion of God's power they were free. Elim with its palm trees and refreshing springs now gladdened their souls. But Elim was not Canaan. Between them and the place of rest lay "the great and terrible wilderness" where God was to try their faith and search their hearts.

The story is told of a young man who entered into peace with God. But his day of spiritual calm came to an end. Sin began to rear its ugly head within his soul. What did it mean? Was he really a converted man? He decided to consult an older Christian man about his fears. Before, however, he had time to unfold his distress, his friend greeted him with the words, "So, I hear you are called up to the war." He then understood that God had called him, not only to Himself, but to wage war with Satan and sin.

Let not the young in grace be discouraged, then, if after solid tokens of the Lord's love they are led to endure hard

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things. Our Lord Himself, speaking with all reverence, had His hour of holy calm before His feet touched the path of tribulation. At the Jordan God proclaimed His pleasure in Him, while the Holy Spirit rested on Him in the form of a dove; but from that quiet scene He was led to wage war with the powers of evil and to endure temptations which, in their unknown depth, have no parallel in mere human experience.

One reason why God's hand may be so bountiful toward us at the beginning of our Christian life is that in remembering His goodness we might not faint in the way. God said to the Prophet, "Arise and eat; because the journey is too great for thee." And in the strength of that great blessing he covered the long road between Dan and Beersheba.

For example, the Lord knew all the trials and frustrations which Jacob must endure for twenty years in Padan-aram. But before the stress of that long period, He made him lodge with Him one night in Heaven, and gave him a blessing that sustained his hope through all his days. It was a night which Jacob shall remember, we believe, throughout eternity. At Bethel God's blissful Presence filled his soul. "Surely the Lord is in this place... this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of Heaven." His wonderful and meaningful dream brought him much nearer to the bliss and reality of eternity than any other event in his life. That treasured hour ever afterwards served as a fond link between his soul and God. The God of Bethel was his God for evermore. But that lovely dawn was but a prelude

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to a long day of sorrow.

The same could be said also of Paul. It was some time after his conversion that he was favoured with great nearness to God. How it happened he did not know. Whether he was "in the body or out of the body" he could not tell. In a moment he found himself in "the third heaven," that is, in the higher dimension of the eternal world.

The Hebrews sometimes spoke of three heavens. The first is the place immediately about us—where the birds sing. The next is the awesome astronomical heavens which form the universe. The third is the glorious place beyond, or the "City of the Great King." There Paul saw and heard things which no pen or tongue of man could describe. And ever after that day he makes little of his sufferings in the service of his Lord. In one place he presents us with an appalling catalogue of his many trials. But not one syllable of complaint ever fell from his lips! "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content." He made light of all, knowing that eternal happiness with Christ in Heaven—of which he enjoyed such a rich foretaste—would not only enhance his reward but would also more than compensate for all he had to endure in this lower vale.

As it was in the lives of God's people in other days, so it is now. Let me give but one example. It is that of a young man who was one of my dear companions on earth. This young man could be seen walking on a summer day on a Hebridean moor. He was accompanied by a friend. Sometimes he would stoop down to pick one of those rare and heather-scented flowers which, in early June, delight

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and surprise those who know the island moorlands. With each flower that met his eye he would exclaim in near ecstasy: "How lovely He must be Who created these, and Who has done all things well!" This was not a mere artistic appreciation of Nature in one of her colourful and fragrant robes, but the welling up in his soul of a deep love of Christ Who had, a few days before, forgiven him his sins and rescued his soul from spiritual death and despair. In his pre-converted days this young man wandered into the dark shadows of atheism and unbelief, till at last he felt like one imprisoned in a silent meaningless universe. Then one night, as he listened to a neighbour singing a Psalm, he felt himself, as by an omnipotent hand, brought out of darkness into the marvellous light of the Gospel. God broke through every barrier and embraced his soul in love and tenderness. In a moment, with his inner eyes unveiled, he could see it all. Christ had taken his place on the Tree. He died that he might live. His sin was put away "as far as east is distant from the west." Now he saw himself, not in a lonely universe without a purpose or without a God, but enjoying the presence of the One Whose existence he had so often doubted, and "accepted in the Beloved." That night a new love was born in his heart for the One Who loved him. That was why he loved even the flowers which He had made. They were speaking to him of a lovelier flower by far—"the Rose of Sharon and the Lily of the Valleys."

But his happy spiritual morning was soon followed by deep and prolonged spiritual conflicts. He went to Heaven

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on a stormy sea. But Christ's promises to his soul, along with a treasured assurance of His love, and a foretaste of the joys reserved for him in a better world, sustained and supported him to the end. With Paul he could say: "I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day."

As a fit comment on this story I should like to quote the words of a Christian man who had for many years been a follower of the Lord. This man once found himself in the company of several young believers. A young woman, who had but recently "tasted that the Lord is gracious" was telling the story of her new-found joy, and of that love "which is better than wine." It was the love of Christ shed abroad in her heart that caused her lips to speak. When she had finished her story her older friend said in a quiet voice, "Drink your wine, my dear, while you may: the waters of Marah you will reach soon enough."

These remarks may serve to show that before God places us under our several burdens and crosses He often gives us solid tokens of His love and care. We must not, therefore, be discouraged if, after a morning of joy, much of life's brief day may be laden with heavy clouds. But through these clouds many rays of comfort often break through. They are the tokens that our times are in His hands, and that behind these clouds the sun of His love is for ever shining.

Whatever sorrows may touch the life of God's people in this world their joy in the Lord, consciously or uncon-

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ciously, remains with them. Paul was exceeding joyful in all his tribulations. Those who, on the other hand, say that God's people should dismiss all sorrow from their lives speak contrary to Christian experience in every age and to God's purpose for them in this life. It is out of the womb of sorrow that many of their future and endless joys are going to emerge. In that day their sorrow and sighing shall give place to joy and gladness.

While the Lord's people should never deliberately conceal their spiritual joy from an unbelieving world they should, on the other hand, be careful against disclosing their peculiar sorrows to those who are strangers to these. One thing which greatly impressed the pagan world of the apostolic age was the joy of those whom the glad tidings of the Gospel had drawn to Christ. The shout of a King was among them. They were like those who had found great spoil. This is what we often lack today. How "joy unspeakable and full of glory" can dwell at the same time in a broken and a contrite heart is, of course, one of the paradoxes of the true Christian life. It is, however, something which is very real to all who know the Lord. And the one cannot bear comparison with the other! The one is momentary and light while the other has its source in our everlasting communion with God. It was a frequent remark of Dr. John Duncan that the sighs of the Church of God were infinitely preferable to the so-called pleasures of the world. Moses, to use but one example, had more joy in sharing the afflictions of the people of God for a season than he would have with all the riches, honours and

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pleasure of Egypt in his possession. While we therefore mention some of the sorrows of the Lord's people we know that beyond and greater than all these is the joy which by the Spirit of God, is sown in their heart.

But the heights and depths of the Christian life are not the real evidence of its existence; but rather our sense of need bringing us daily to the Lord for the needed strength. And as the Christian life—however normal its complexion—is never free from pain, God's ministry of grace is continuous. And no trial shall ever emerge in our life, but His grace is sufficient for us; and He is there with the grace that He gives.

We should also remember that chastisement, whatever form it may take in the life of each one of us, is a fundamental implication of our relationship to God. "You only have I known of all the families of the earth, therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities." "For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth and scourgeth every one whom he receiveth."

Not long ago I met an excellent Christian man who, in the days of his youth, "sat under" a well-known minister—the Rev. George MacKay of Fearn in Ross-shire. Out of the treasures of his memory this man brought forth some rare sayings of this herald of the Good Tidings. One of these was on the love of God in His chastisements upon his own children. The preacher illustrated his theme. He recalled the old Highland days when a wise and affectionate father would have the little domestic "strap" suspended on a nail by the fireside in his home. It was there, more or less,

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as a reminder that any serious form of misbehaviour on the part of his children, either in words or deeds, might bring them under correction. He loved his children, and he would therefore, if need be, exercise the appropriate discipline which would ensure their safety, their moral welfare, and a becoming conduct. In the same way, said the preacher, “the Lord has the rod of His chastisement suspended by the fire of His eternal love in His covenant Home,” and when His children, in heart or in walk, go against His will He will use it for their good. “Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child, but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him.” As long as we are in this vale we remain as children both in knowledge and wisdom. Not till we enter Heaven shall we come to the stature of the perfect man. Though we grow in grace and in knowledge the follies and limitation of children cling to us here. Besides, before God called us into His grace, and adopted us into His own family, we were the children of wrath even as others. And do not the marks and habits of our former life sometimes mar, and cast their shadow, over our Christian life and witness? It was an apt saying of the famous Alexander Gair that although God took the Children of Israel out of Egypt in one night it took Him forty years to take Egypt out of them. Their murmurings, indiscretions and rebellions had their roots in their own sinful and often foolish hearts. Therefore God’s chastisement followed them throughout their long pilgrimage. He loved them. He pitied them “as a father pitieth his children.” He kept pace with their slow and uncertain progress.

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By the rod of correction He often withdrew them from their purpose and folly. His unchanging love for them was often and necessarily wrapped in pain.

If many of God's dealings with us here are mysterious, the day is coming when all shall be made plain. "In that day," says Christ, "ye shall ask me nothing." How beautifully is this expressed in the verse:

"Not till the loom is silent,
And the shuttles cease to fly—
Will God unroll the pattern,
And explain the reason why:
The dark threads are as needful
In the weaver's skilful hand,
As the thread of gold and silver
For the pattern He has planned."

It were well for us also to remember that only through affliction and chastisement do we come to know something of the Divine Compassion, or of the depth of pity and love which dwells in the heart of Christ toward His own. It can never be discovered otherwise. We can but faintly know the love which dwells in the heart of a mother or a friend till we are touched by affliction. But human sympathy is but a feeble reflection of the love of Him who was born for adversity, and "who makes all our bed in our sickness." "Lord, he whom thou lovest is sick." These were the words which touched the heart of our Lord on earth, and brought Him to Martha's and Mary's side in the day of their grief. It was in the hour of their sorrow that they saw something of the unspeakable love which lodged in His soul. "Jesus

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wept.” “Behold, how He loved him.” “In all their affliction He was afflicted.” This is, indeed, a discovery that shall endear Him to us, beyond all that tongue can tell, throughout eternal ages.

It was my deep affection for these words of the Prophet that compelled me to use them as a title for my little work. They are words which, on innumerable occasions, have served as a well of indescribable consolation to my spirit.