

"Be not afraid of sudden fear...for the Lord shall be thy confidence"

(Proverbs 3.25-26)

draw nigh to you".

BE not afraid of sudden fear, neither of the desolation of the wicked, when it cometh". That we certainly do not want. "For the Lord shall be thy confidence"—that we certainly *do* want—"and shall keep thy foot from being taken". But what of the circumstances under which these two different things can occur? V.21 tells us: "My son, let not them depart from thine eyes: keep sound wisdom and discretion: so shall they be life unto thy soul, and grace to thy neck. Then shall thou walk in thy way safely, and thy foot shall not stumble. When thou liest down, thou shalt not be afraid: yea, thou shalt lie down, and thy sleep shall be sweet".

What a lovely, secure picture that is! But it is dependent on something—keeping sound wisdom and discretion. "My son, forget not my law; but let thine heart keep my commandments: for length of days, and long life, and peace, shall they add to thee. Let not mercy and truth forsake thee: bind them about thy neck; write them upon the table of thine heart: so shalt thou find favour and good understanding in the sight of God and man" (3.1-4). So we might have confidence in Yahweh. "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths". So the situation is clear. *If* we walk in the way of Yahweh, then may we place our confidence in Him, knowing that we shall find favour with Him. On the other hand, the end of this chapter tells us that He scorns those who scorn Him.

Expressed in its simplest form, it is this—and these are the words of James: "Draw nigh to God, and he will

Grounds for our confidence

Now, what grounds do we have for placing such trust and confidence in God rather than in ourselves? Is it wise to place our confidence in God? Is our trust in Him but blind credulity, or is it based on logic and rational thinking? Everyone of us knows that it is based on the latter. The Lord is faithful. He does do what He promises.

Consider some of these things, which we all know very well indeed because we read the Scriptures day by day. The earth *was* flooded and Noah was saved—a huge event in the world's history. A tiny one—Abraham *was* given Isaac. Jacob *did* go away and come back to the land in prosperity. Joseph's family *did make* obeisance to him in Egypt. Israel *were* delivered from Egypt. Jesus *was* born in the line of David and of the seed of Abraham, and the Son of God, and all things spoken of by Moses and in the Prophets and the Psalms *were* fulfilled in him. He *did die*, and he rose to life, to glory, honour and immortality. Israel *were* scattered among all nations, and they have now been brought back in part into the land, and the world even now is looking ever more ready for the very near return of the Lord Jesus Christ, which will certainly come to pass, just as all those other things came to pass. Israel today is in great peril, and the map of Europe is being redrawn, and the most staggering things are happening day by day at a most astonishing rate. Indeed, as the Lord said, "I the Lord will hasten it in his time".

These things are not a mirage, they are real, and we need to remind

ourselves continually of their reality. That is why Psalm 105 says—and we have this exhortation throughout the Scriptures—"Remember his marvellous works that he hath done ... talk ye of all his wondrous works ... make known his deeds among the people ... He hath remembered his covenant for ever, the word which he commanded to a thousand generations". There can be no room for doubt in these things because how can we trust in the Lord with all our hearts if in fact we are not familiar with all His wondrous works, and do not talk about them and discuss them among one another? How can we trust in the Lord our God if we are in fact doubtful about what He has done in the past? How can the Lord be our confidence if we are not sure about the trustworthiness of our Lord?

It is a plain fact that this trust, this assurance and this confidence can only come by a careful scrutiny of His Word, by an analysis of His works in the past, by noting His truthfulness. His absolute reliability, the fulfilment of His Word in the past, and therefore by logical, rational extension we have the grounds for confidence that His Word will yet be fulfilled. As Psalm 9 puts it: "They that *know* thy name will put their trust in thee". We can only know the Name of God in all its profoundness by that close study of His Word.

Now this is quite straightforward. It is the rational way we operate in everyday life. We do trust those that have shown themselves to be trustworthy, and on the other hand, when a man is known to be unreliable we would regard ourselves as foolish to place trust in him. In fact, everyday life cannot proceed without trust in all manner of ways. If, then, we are growing in trust in Yahweh, we will not be afraid of sudden fear or dread.

"Through much tribulation"

Now does this mean that we shall never experience troubles, never have anxieties and worries and blows? Well, what does God teach us? First of all, that it is through much tribulation that we shall enter the Kingdom of God. Jesus learned obedience through the things which he suffered, yet Jesus was completely obedient. So suffering is not necessarily related to sin and punishment. Then why do troubles come upon us? God explains why, and gives many, many examples for us to learn from and be encouraged by.

We are, everyone of us, under the curse, and so was Jesus; subject to a life of vanity, a life which, without the Word of God, is profoundly unsatisfying and pointless; Ecclesiastes spells that out in a ruthlessly plain manner. But to those who draw near to God and become His children, for them life is not vain in the Lord, as Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 15. On the contrary, they are children beloved of their Father, who has an immense purpose with them. In fact, they are undergoing training to be eternal sons and daughters of the Almighty God, to show forth His glory throughout the earth, to rule the earth with His firstborn Son.

No wonder then that Proverbs says (clearly quoting Moses), "My son, despise not the chastening of the Lord, neither be weary of his correction: for whom the Lord loveth he corrected!; even as a father the son in whom he delighteth" (Prov.3.11-12) "... despise not *the chastening* of the Lord". That word chastening conveys the idea of discipline, or instruction, and we have already seen that we do not actually take to instruction and to discipline; it is contrary to the flesh. That word "correcteth" means to reason with or to reprove. Hence Paul's remarks in Hebrews 12, that we do not enjoy the process of discipline and instruction; indeed, he says, we find it grievous,

not joyous.

What do we find in the history of Israel? They were also taught by all kinds of grievous experiences. They hungered, they thirsted, they found themselves in positions of great peril, and they were humbled. The reason—and this is the lesson we have to learn—that God might "prove them", to "know what was in their hearts", whether they would love Him, and trust Him with all their hearts, keep His commandments or not.

The proving of our faith

Here then is a very positive reason for trials and tribulations that come upon us: that God may prove us, to know what is really in our minds. So, says Moses, "Thou shall consider in thy heart, that, as a man chasteneth his son, so the Lord thy God chasteneth thee. Therefore thou shalt keep the commandments of the Lord thy God, to walk in his ways, and to fear (the word here means reverence) him". What were they to learn? "That man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord doth man live". In other words we are to learn by experience that God is in complete control, that God reigns. Our lives are not a matter of chance; they are not aimless affairs, they are not vanity. He is working in us, declares Paul to the Philippians, "to will and to do of his good pleasure". There is nothing aimless about that. God is working in us to do His will.

Hannah learnt that lesson very well, after years of grievous trial and disappointment. The Lord did with her as He had promised, and she had a son, and she gave this beautiful prayer, which shows how much she had learnt: "*The Lord killeth, and maketh alive: he (the Lord) bringeth down to the grave, and bringeth up. The Lord maketh poor, and maketh*

rich"—not matters of chance. "He (*the Lord*) bringeth low, and lifteth up. He (*the Lord*) raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory". We pray that we may be among those who are counted the beggars from the dunghill. "For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's"—how well she had learnt this lesson — "and he hath set the world upon them. He will keep the feet of his saints, and the wicked shall be silent in darkness; for by strength shall no man prevail".

That is what our verses in Proverbs 3 are talking about: the wicked, sudden terror, dread. But those who are drawing near to God have every ground for confidence.

God's correcting hand

So then, trouble does come upon us to prove us and to help us to learn that lesson, that God reigns. But it does not only come upon us for those reasons. It also comes upon us from time to time because we disobey God's commands, and Proverbs by constant repetition is trying to din into our slow minds that fact. We fail to apply the knowledge imparted by the Word of God. We lack wisdom and discretion. Instead we are wise in our own eyes, and we stumble, we bring trouble upon ourselves and perhaps others. In those circumstances we need to take stock of our position very carefully, to remember the ways of Yahweh again, to return to Him in repentance. It is then that we need to think carefully about the way God trained Jacob, for example, following his lack of trust in God and in the fulfilment of the promises made to his mother; to think about how David was disciplined after his awful sin with Bath-sheba; and the troubles that ensue must be seen as evidence of the love of our Father who in spite of our misdemeanours is still taking great trouble to correct and train

us, so that His objective, the great pleasure of giving us the Kingdom, may be brought about.

Now that is a very positive way of viewing troubles that come upon us through our own folly.

Then, what are the kind of things which prove us? They are all commonplace experiences. Do we uphold the Truth, for example, in all our ways, or are we variable—upright enough in the presence of our brethren and sisters but rather wayward when in the world? Are we fearful and anxious about many things, things which we think might come upon us but very often do not; or do we rest, do we sleep easy in our beds as Proverbs suggested, in the security of a real trust in our Father's love and care? Sickness is one of the commonest things that comes upon us; bereavement, unemployment—these things can be devastating to the doubtful, but the reassurance of the Word is a mighty source of comfort and strength to those who are not doubtful, and how many wonderful examples we have amongst us—and have had in the past—of brethren and sisters who have proved by their faithfulness and trust in God under such circumstances that they really do trust Him. God, in proving them in this way, must be delighted with His children.

How many single brethren and sisters, both young and old, have resisted the temptation to marry out of the Truth, recognising it as a trial of faith—because that is what it is. They will surely be rewarded for their faithfulness. And so one could go on listing these things that beset us and test us, prove us, correct us, punish us, but above all, prepare us for everlasting companionship with the Lord God and His Son, Jesus Christ, and the great family of the called.

So we must learn to trust God, to put our confidence in Him, because we are entitled to, and we must do it with all our hearts, and realise that He reigns in our lives as well as throughout the earth, and that He has a purpose with each one of us. Whatever comes upon us He knows and it is in His control. Now if we can really develop this total trust, how secure we must feel! "When thou liest down, thou shalt not be afraid: yea, thou shalt lie down, and thy sleep shall be sweet". Because He has said, "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say, The Lord *is* my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me".

Many other Scriptures chime in with these words. Yet for those who lack that wholehearted trust in God there is a difficulty, a holding back in a belief of them. We must overcome this doubtfulness. "Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat ..." Jesus began to say. "If God so clothe the grass"—and I am sure he was thinking of the words of the prophet, 'All flesh is grass'— "which is today in the field and tomorrow is cast into the oven; how much more will he clothe you, O ye of little faith?" It is obvious, is it not! And he adds: "Neither be ye of a doubtful mind ... But rather seek ye the kingdom of God; and all these things shall be added unto you". And cannot everyone of us here vouch for the truth of those words? Have any of us been hungry? Have any of us gone without clothing?

Fear not!

"Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom". It seems unbelievable almost, but it is not, and we must believe it. Think of the words of Paul in Romans: "What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who *can* be against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for

us all" —that is a thought we need to think long and hard upon, the subject of the atonement; it is a most inspiring one—"how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?"

Let us get these thoughts deeply into our minds, think upon the wondrous works of our Lord, see that we have real grounds for trust, and then we can rest securely in the arms of our Father. One last quotation, because it spells out, it seems to me, this tremendous intimacy and security that God portrays in His Word about Himself as our Father and us as His small children. Isaiah 66.9: "Shall I bring to the birth, and not cause to bring forth? saith the Lord: shall I cause to bring forth, and shut the womb? saith thy God". Of course not. "Rejoice ye with Jerusalem, and be glad with her, all ye that love her: rejoice for joy with her, all ye that mourn for her". This very intimate thought: "That ye may suck, and be satisfied with the breasts of her consolations; that ye may milk out, and be delighted with the abundance of her glory. For thus saith the Lord, Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river, and the glory of the Gentiles like a flowing stream: then shall ye suck, ye shall be borne upon her sides, and be dandled upon her knees". Just try to imagine these things, particularly mothers, who must feel these words much more deeply. "As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you; and ye shall be comforted in Jerusalem. And when ye see this, your heart shall rejoice, and your bones shall flourish like an herb: and the hand of the Lord shall be known towards his servants..."