

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit.

GOD FIGHTING SIN.

A Sermon

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DELIVERED BY

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“But they rebelled, and vexed his holy Spirit: therefore he was turned to be their enemy, and he fought against them.”—Isaiah lxxiii. 10.

This is a terrible case. When God is turned to be a man's enemy, and fights against him, he is in a desperate plight. With other enemies we may contend with some hope of success, but not with the Omnipotent. The enmity of others is an affliction, but the enmity of God is destruction. If he turns to be our enemy, then everything is turned against us. The stars in their courses fight against us, and the stones in the fields are in league for our stumbling. “If God be for us, who can be against us?” But if God be against us, who can be for us? The words read like a funeral knell: “He was turned to be their enemy, and he fought against them.”

This shows us that *God is not indifferent to sin.* Men may try to persuade themselves that God does not care; that it is nothing to him how men act, whether they break or keep his laws. Men may plead that he is “kind to the unthankful and to the evil,” and the same event happens unto all, both to the righteous and to the wicked; and so indeed it seems for the present. Our shortsightedness may even assure us that the ungodly prosper, and have the best of it; but this is only our blindness. God hates sin now and always. He would not be God if he did not. God is stirred with righteous indignation against every kind of evil: it moves his Spirit to anger. Some believe in an impassive God; but certainly the God of the Bible is never so described. He is represented in Holy Scripture after the manner of men; but how else could he be represented to men? If he were represented after the manner of God, you and I could understand nothing at all of the description; but as he is represented to us in Scripture, the Lord notes sin, feels sin, grows angry with sin, is provoked, and his Holy Spirit is vexed by the rebellion of men. Let me read the solemn text again: “But they rebelled, and vexed his holy Spirit: therefore he was turned to be their enemy, and he fought against them.”

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God is always the same, but his acts vary. He changes not, and yet he is represented in our text as turning. He turns in his action, though he does not turn in his purpose. He often wills a change, though he never changes his will. He is always the same God, but he does not always show us the same side of his character. Sometimes he manifests mercy, at other times justice: he is as much God in the one case as in the other. At one time he makes a world; at another time he destroys it: but he is the same Jehovah. A change in his outward dispensation does not argue any change in his inward disposition. He is an unchanging God of whom we read, "He was turned to be their enemy."

Having said these two or three things as a helpful commencement, I would invite you to consider this remarkably impressive verse with very great reverence and awe. May the Holy Spirit help us! The current idea now is, "Never preach anything that is dreadful or terrible. If you do, you will earn as bad a character as Spurgeon." Now, I am not ashamed, in the least degree, to have a bad character for preaching against the evil of sin, and declaring the sure punishment of it. What have I to gain by such preaching? Shall I get the applause of men? Nay, the whole current of this generation's liking rushes the other way. Let the preacher tell men that they may live as they like, and that it will come all right in the long run, and that will please them. Universal salvation is a very popular doctrine among the "cultured" folk. I want none of your popularity. I will preach to you, as long as this tongue moves in my head, God's truth, whether it offend or please; and the day shall declare who best loved your souls—those who could flatter, or those who spoke unpalatable truth. Our text has in it very little, apparently, that may minister comfort to anybody; and yet my persuasion is, that if, with reverent heart, you lend your ear to what it teaches, it will lead you into a surer comfort than you will ever find in the philosophies of men, yea, it will bring your conscience into a state of rest with God, for which you will bless God as long as ever you live.

I. First, MY TEXT BELONGS TO THE LORD'S OWN OFFENDING CHILDREN. Let me try to find them out, and lay this text home to them. There are some of God's own people—really converted, saved people—who have, nevertheless, degenerated into such a state of sin that the Lord is turned to be their enemy. If you read this chapter, you will see that it is so. Let me begin at the seventh verse. "I will mention the loving-kindnesses of the Lord, and the praises of the Lord, according to all that the Lord hath bestowed on us, and the great goodness toward the house of Israel, which he hath bestowed on them according to his mercies, and according to the multitude of his loving-kindnesses. For he said, Surely they are my people, children that will not lie: so he was their Saviour. In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them: in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; and he bare them, and carried them all the days of old. But they rebelled, and vexed his holy Spirit: therefore he was turned to be their enemy." See, dear friends: once they were on the lap of love, once they lay in the bosom of favour, once

they knew the sympathy of Christ, once they could sing of loving-kindnesses, and a multitude of mercies; *but they rebelled*. Is it not a shocking thing that the favoured people of God should backslide? Is it not sad that they who have eaten the bread of heaven should hunger for the ashes of this world; that men who have lain in the bosom of Christ should, nevertheless, play the traitor to him, and provoke his anger? Yet it is so, sadly so; we have seen it so in others. God grant that it may not be so with us!

These people, after tasting all this love, and all this favour, became rebellious. He calls them "rebels." They were not merely children that made a mistake, children that fell through folly, but "they rebelled." Does the child of God ever get into that state? Yes, children have rebelled. David thus erred, and many others have shamefully rebelled against their God. I cannot say how far a man who has tasted of the grace of God may go in sin; but, I pray you, do not experiment upon it. Nay, let us keep as far away from sin as possible. Yet it appears that those with whom the Saviour had such sympathy that in all their affliction he was afflicted, nevertheless "rebelled and vexed his holy Spirit."

Well, then, what happened? Now we come to the text indeed: "He was turned to be their enemy, and he fought against them." This is the story in many cases. *He sends affliction*. There come upon the man's harvest the palmer-worm, and the caterpillar, and the canker-worm. There come upon his business a blight and a blast. He cannot make it out; for where everything seemed to go well, all affairs now go amiss. All that he gets is like money poured into a bag that is full of holes. Seeing that he is a child of God, and has become a rebel, he has vexed God's Spirit, and chastisement falls upon him. Perhaps he is brought low by a painful disease. Perhaps a dear child is taken away. Affliction comes into the family one way or another: not the affliction of Job, which tried him for God's glory; but the affliction of Jacob, who was afflicted in his family because that family had become defiled with sin. God is jealous, and deals severely with his erring children.

He sends them affliction; but worse than that, he turns to be their enemy, and *he fights against them by withholding the comforts of the Holy Spirit*. Oh, how they once enjoyed a sermon! it was full of grace and truth. They do not enjoy it now. The same preacher; other people are edified as much as before; but they are not. Such a man goes to pray; but he feels no Spirit pleading within. He reads the Bible, and it is a dead letter. He seeks the company of Christian people, but their society is dreary to him, and yields no solace. God has shut up the windows of heaven. He has made the angels cease to bring down blessings by the way of the golden ladder. God has turned to be his enemy, and fights against him. I have known cases in which true people of God (I know they were the true people of God, for they have come back, and they never did lose the life of God, even when they were away from him) have come to this—that God has fought against them in their prayers, and they seemed to pray like a man shouting inside a great copper caldron, where every sound echoes in his ears like thunder. I charge you that are the

people of God to mind what you are at; for God, who loves you, will deal roughly with you if you sin against him. Remember that text, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities." As I have often said, if a man saw a boy in the street breaking windows, or doing mischief, he might say very little to him; but if he was his own boy, he would give him a smart blow, and send him home; and so is it when the Lord catches his own children sinning. He may let the common sinner go on, and sin until judgment shall be executed; but as for his own children, they cannot transgress with impunity. "He was turned to be their enemy, and he fought against them."

At such times, if they still pursue any Christian career of usefulness, *they are smitten with great barrenness*, and their work is without efficacy. I should greatly sorrow if my words brought bruising to the tenderest of God's people; but yet I know that it is so. If the preacher leaves his God, his God will leave him to preach in vain. If the teacher quits the Saviour, the Saviour will quit the teacher, and leave him, or her, to fail with the children. What generally happens with a minister when God has gone? Well, instead of going to God, and humbling himself and crying to him for mercy, he resolves that he will buy a new organ. That will do the trick. The new organ, after all, blow it as they may, does not come to much. Well, then, he will have sensational entertainments, a Sunday-evening concert—fiddling, or something or other. If God will not help him, he is in the same plight as Saul the son of Kish. He will try music first, and if that does not render him aid, he will go to the witch of Endor, now called "modern theology," and ask assistance there. God have mercy upon us, if we ever do that! I do not wish for success in the ministry if God does not give it to me; and I pray that you, who are workers for God, may not wish to have any success except that which comes from God himself in God's own way; for if you could heap up, like the sand of the sea, converts that you had made by odd, unchristian ways, they would be gone like the sand of the sea as soon as another tide comes up. O child of God, do not try to do without God! Do not bring in new inventions to patch up the breach that your sin has made. If the Lord turns to be your enemy, and fights against you, bow before him, and confess your wrong.

I leave this point when I have made solemn enquiry. Am I speaking to any Christian man or woman to whom this text is sorrowfully true? Is not sin the cause of your sorrow? I beseech you, do not trifle with this matter. It is a very solemn thing to have God fighting against you. Say to him, "Shew me wherefore thou contendest with me." But do not despair. If the Lord had meant to destroy you, he would have sternly said, "He is joined to idols: let him alone." To leave a man altogether alone is God's ultimatum with the hopeless; but to flog the wanderer back to his Lord is love in a mask. The wise man can see beneath the mask, and understand that it is because God would not destroy you with the wicked that therefore he now brings you under the discipline of his family, and makes you feel that sin and smart must go together in an heir of heaven. Seek you the Lord; cry unto him; and confess your sin. The parable of the prodigal son

belongs much more to you than it does to an unconverted person; for you can call God "Father," and you may come back to him as a son; for you are his son, notwithstanding all your riotous living in the far country, and all your wasting of your Father's substance. Arise, and go to him at once. You know the way. Retrace it. You know your Father: fly to him immediately. Put your head into his bosom, and sob out your confession, "Father, I have sinned"; and before this present service is over, you shall receive your Lord's full absolution, and you shall feel yourself—

"To your Father's bosom pressed,
Once again a child confessed;
From his house no more to roam,
But with God to rest at home."

God will soon put away the rod when you put away the sin. If he does not stay the chastisement, you will patiently bear it, and bless him that he has forgiven you; for that is the chief thing to be thought of. As a rule, the Lord ceases to fight against the man who ceases from sin; but if he does not, prostrate yourself before him. There is a picture in a quaint old book which represents a man with a flail trying to strike another, and the man who is assailed runs close in, so that the adversary cannot strike him. Run in upon God, and he cannot strike you. What does he say? "Let him take hold of my strength; and he shall make peace with me." That is—go right up to God, who has been smiting you, and say, "Lord, I fully submit to thee. By the bowels of thy compassion, I pray thee, forgive me, and restore me to thy love." He has no pleasure that you should suffer: as his dear child he would have you happy. He is grieved that you should wander away from him. Come back at once, backslider; come back even now. The Lord enable you to do so now, for Jesus' sake!

II. THE TEXT IS TRUE TO THOSE WHO CANNOT SAY THAT THEY ARE THE PEOPLE OF GOD, who would give their eyes if they could. Many an awakened sinner feels that he has rebelled; and vexed God's Holy Spirit, and now he feels that God has turned to be his enemy, and is fighting against him by sending him trouble. Yes, he was getting on splendidly, and his prosperity was a snare to him. He had plenty of money, and therefore he could go into every place of amusement and every haunt of vice. Now he mourns an empty pocket. To-night he hardly knows where he is going to find a lodging. He was a young gentleman once, but he has to herd with beggars now. Yes, many and many a man has been brought down, by lechery and drunkenness, to the lowest abyss of penury. God has turned to be his enemy, for all things fail him: he has tried to get a situation, and he cannot; he has worn his boots off his feet, and he cannot find work to do. Perhaps I speak to some young woman here whose course has been far away from God; and she, too, has come down in another sense. Health is gone. Alas, for that laughing girl! That hectic flush upon her cheek tells that the worm is within the fruit. Poor soul! she is sickening. She will pass away, and she is still without hope. God has turned to be her enemy (so she thinks), and he fights against her, for the medicine is of no

use to her; while other people seem to have been cured, she remains as sickly as ever. There are those here against whom God has been fighting of late; and when God fights, it is not child's play, nor mere buffeting: he fights indeed. Perhaps he may be fighting with some of you in this respect, that your spirits are gone. You were once as merry as a cricket. You used to count it one of the easiest things to drive dull care away. Oh, what a jolly fellow you were! And now you cannot hold up your head. An awful depression has come upon you, and you cannot look up. It may have been through a sermon: or you were all alone, thinking, and you began to feel despondent, melancholy, unhappy. God is fighting against you, and in the depths of your soul you feel his frown. Or else you are in pecuniary difficulties. Formerly, your prosperity was your ruin. You could not be saved while you were rich; and your ease and your carelessness had to be broken in upon. There was no saving you without burning up the bed in which you slept so securely. God is tearing to pieces all your deceitful joy, and making you see the truth of matters.

I should not wonder if God is fighting against some of you in another way, so that *your flimsy notions of religion are all going*. You formerly boasted, "I can believe in the Lord Jesus Christ whenever I like, and it will be all right." You once thought it such an easy thing to believe; but you do not find it so now. You have been thinking about salvation lately, and it is not quite such a trifling matter as you thought it was. Why, now you cry, "I cannot feel. What is worse, I cannot believe, I cannot remember. I cannot restrain myself from evil, I seem possessed by the devil. God help me, for I cannot help myself." God does not seem to help you, but he makes you feel more of your weakness than you ever knew before; and the more you labour to be better the worse you are. "He was turned to be their enemy, and he fought against them."

In the progress of this battle you may have suffered very serious damage. There came a man into this Tabernacle, some years ago, who said, "I got spoiled one Sunday morning. I came into this Tabernacle, and I thought that I was as good a man as any tradesman within fifty miles of the place." Said he, "I went out spoiled; for I was made to confess that I was as bad as anybody in Newington, or within a thousand miles of the place." That is what comes to us when God begins to fight against our self-righteousness. I thought myself, as a child, a good and decent lad, till I saw my own heart. I was a fine soldier till God came with his battle-axe, smashed in my shield, and hewed away my finery, and I stood there, in my own apprehension at that time, the worst youth that had ever lifted his hand against God. God makes great havoc with the trappings of self-righteousness. Our tawdry finery soon goes to pieces when the truth deals with it.

At such times, when God is fighting against a man, *his inward sorrows seem to increase*. His memory shouts at him, "Remember this! Remember that! Remember the other! Remember that night of sin! Remember that day of rebellion!" His fears rise up and stalk like grim ghosts before him. His hopes, that once sang sweetly siren songs, now turn their sonnets into dirges. His expectations fail. The man's

thoughts are all a case of knives, cutting his soul at every point. O sirs, when God besieges the town of Mansoul, he sets his batteries against every gate. His artillery is turned against every part of the wall. His big shells burst in the centre of the heart. The Lord is a man of war, Jehovah is his name. When he goes forth to battle, it shall be terrible for the man against whom he fights.

I hear you say to me, "You are giving a very terrible description." I am not describing everybody that is saved. Many come to Christ very readily, and simply trust in him, and live at once. But, my hearer, you are not of that tender sort. You would not come. A mother's tears could not persuade you, your teacher's exhortations could not induce you; even the gentler dealings of God could not drive or draw you; and you have lived in sin till at last God has effectively taken you in hand. Your conscience is aroused; you cannot go on any longer as you now are.

"Oh," says one, "I do not feel like that." Alas! I wish you did. I have to meet with a great many people of a sorrowful spirit. They are constantly seeking me out. I have known them come for many a mile to have a talk with me; for they seem to think that I know something about these wounds and bruises. They are right in their belief, although the fact causes me great labour among the sad. Oh, dear hearts, if God fights against you, throw down your weapons! Pull those feathers out of your caps! Down on your faces before him! Yield, and when you have yielded he will do you no harm; but he will stoop over you, and lift you up, and forgive you. The woman taken in adultery in the presence of Christ is a sample of what he will do with you, taken in the very act of rebellion against him. The tender Saviour said, "Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more!" Dear soul, yield, yield, yield! Make no excuse. Offer no extenuation. Yield to the omnipotence of God, which, in your case, will be omnipotent love. He has wounded, and he will heal. He has torn you, and he will bind you up. "The Lord killeth, and maketh alive: he woundeth, and his hands make whole." But how can he make those alive who were never killed? You that were never wounded, you who to-night have been sitting here and smiling at your own ease, what can mercy do for you? Do not congratulate yourselves on your peace, for at the bottom of the painful experience I have described there lies the wondrous secret that this fighting against men is fighting against their evil for their good, that they may be saved. God fights against your pride, that you may be humbled: he fights against your self-confidence, that you may be ashamed of it; and when his warfare has answered its purpose, God will be no enemy of yours; but you will find him blotting out your sins like a cloud, and like a thick cloud your iniquities.

I leave off when I have warned you to watch carefully that you do not go into sin. It is a blessed thing to be forgiven; but it is a more blessed thing to be kept from sin. Oh, what agony, what mischief, I have seen brought upon individuals and families by acts of carelessness which have afterwards led to acts of licentiousness! Steer clear of the lesser forms of sin, lest you so vex the Spirit that he shall turn to be your enemy, and fight against you.

III. Lastly, THIS TEXT IS A VERY DREADFUL ONE IN REFERENCE TO THOSE WHO DIE IMPENITENT. Concerning those who die impenitent, what shall we say? What ought to be the truth about them? You—I speak only now of those who have heard the gospel, of such as are sitting in this Tabernacle, where the warning and the promise are set before them—if you die impenitent, having wilfully rejected the great sacrifice of Christ, you will die with a vengeance. Jesus Christ has died, and you have refused the merit of his blood. You have wilfully and wickedly done despite to the mercy of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost; and this is in addition to all your other sins. Now, let me ask you—What is to be done with the man who will not have mercy when it is set before him? If a convicted criminal is invited to confess and receive pardon, and he will not do it, what remains but to carry out the sentence? Both justice and injured mercy require that it should be so. When a man gets into the next world, who dies refusing Christ, and rejecting divine mercy, he will fight against God there, and, according to his ability, he will be a greater sinner there than here. Shall God give him pleasure? Shall the Lord make such a rebel happy? Shall he stand by and say, “I will reward the rebel. He has vexed my Spirit, but I will ennoble and reward him”? Shall the Judge of all the earth act so? If you will turn to this Book, you will not find between these two covers a solitary ray of hope for a man who dies without God, and without Christ. I defy any man who believes this Book to be inspired, to find anything in its sacred page but blank despair for the man who will not in this life accept the mercy of God in Christ Jesus. My Lord and Master said, “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.” That is his word, and there it stands, and there it will stand for ever. It will never be reversed. It is the final sentence, “Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.” I charge you, by the living God, do not provoke him to this. Rush not upon the edge of Jehovah’s sword.

At once look to Jesus crucified—Jesus crucified for the guilty, Jesus who came into the world, took our nature, and bare our sin and shame. He cries from the cross, “Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth.” I cannot speak to you like an angel from heaven, but I speak like a sinner saved from hell; and I implore you to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved; “for God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” God bless you! Amen.

PORTION OF SCRIPTURE READ BEFORE SERMON—Psalm cvi.

HYMNS FROM “OUR OWN HYMN BOOK”—176, 106 (Part II.), 570.