

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit

A PRACTICAL DISCOURSE

A Sermon

Delivered by

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“A month they were in Lebanon, and two months at home.” — 1 Kings 5:14

IT was right that, when a temple was to be built for the Lord God of Israel, the Israelites should take their fair share in the building of it. Therefore a levy was made, and a certain number of men were chosen to work in Lebanon. It was, however, most fitting that work for a gracious God should be joyful work; not the bondage of slaves, but the delight of sons. Solomon did not demand that any Israelite should toil in the mountains and quarries for years together, and leave his own fields to lie waste; but he decreed that the workers should have one month in Lebanon at work for the temple, and two months at home for their own affairs. Our God is not a taskmaster, and sacred service should not sour into forced labour. Self-sacrifice is the soul of true religion; but we must not demand of others that which would turn religion into slavery. Solomon knew that the common people would grow weary, of working even for Jehovah Himself, if they were taken away from their own families and inheritances altogether; and

therefore in his wisdom he put it so, “One month in Lebanon, and two months at home.”

I am about to draw from this text two lessons. They are these; first, that *you and I ought to be rendering service to the Lord our God*, and assisting to build up His spiritual temple; but secondly, that while we labour abroad, *we must be doubly careful to watch over our own households and our own souls*. Marthas must also be Marys. We are bound to serve, but we must not be cumbered with much serving. We must work with Martha and yet sit with Mary at the Master’s feet; there must be one month in Lebanon, and two months at home.

I. First, then, **WE ARE BOUND TO DO SERVICE FOR OUR KING**, — service for the living temple of our God.

It is not enough for us to say, “I believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and therefore I am saved”; that is not the end of it all, else religion were a grand piece of selfishness. Our souls may not be hooped in within our own ribs. Absorption in our own safety and neglect of others would betray a spirit directly opposite to that of Jesus and His true disciples. No, brethren; as the Father sent His Son into the world, even so has He sent us into the world, that we may be made a blessing to our fellows. Our lifework is to prepare living stones which may be built upon the one foundation to be a habitation of God through the Spirit. We are to be hewers of timber and squarers of stones for the house of our God.

Lay home to your hearts your *obligations to the Lord Jesus Christ*. “Ye are not your own, for ye are bought with a price;” therefore no man liveth unto himself. Your own salvation is of the utmost importance to you; but an essential part of it is salvation from selfishness. If you begin and end with your own interests, you are the servants of self, and not of the Lord Jesus. We owe our all to the blessed Lord Jesus Christ, and henceforth His business is our business; and what is His business but to seek and to save that which was lost. We are now the lifelong servants of Him “who, though He was rich, yet for our sakes became poor.” Shall we grudge our month in Lebanon? Nay, rather will we not see to it that the whole twelve months of the year are dedicated to temple-service, since He has called us to be priests, and therefore we always dwell in His house?

Remember also our *obligations to others*. How were we converted? Was it not through the instrumentality of some Christian man or woman? Directly or indirectly, it was so in every case; for those who have gone to glory long ago have left us debtors for the knowledge of the gospel which they handed down to us. Most of us were blessed by direct agency — a good book was quietly placed in our way; a kind word was gently spoken; an earnest sermon was aimed at us; a holy example was set before us; by such things as these we were drawn to Christ. By the tears and prayers of others we were brought to the Saviour's feet. Some owe their conversion to their parents, others to Sabbath-school teachers, others to preachers of the Word; the bulk of us were brought to Jesus by some one instrumentality or another. Pay your debt, then. You also are to bring another to Jesus as a recompense to His servants. A certain generous man used to give liberally to the poor, but he did it in this fashion: he said to each one, "I only lend this money to you, and you are to pay it back to me, when you are able to do so, by giving as much as this to some other poor person." That is the method of our Lord Jesus Christ; He grants us a knowledge of His gospel under bond that we tell it to others. Brethren, we are debtors; if we are built up a spiritual house, let us gladly give our month in Lebanon that other stones may be builded into the heavenly temple.

Besides, there is *a life within every Christian* which is the best prompter to holy service. My brother, if you are born again, you cannot be idle, for the life of God is never sluggish. Did not Jesus say, "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work"? If you are not diligent in sacred service, you will soon be afflicted with doubts and fears, for this disease attends on spiritual sloth. The month on breezy Lebanon is for your soul's health. To be idle is to sicken; but to serve God is health and delight. It is like swimming to a strong swimmer, he delights to breast the waves. It is like flight to the condor of the Andes, who joyfully spreads his wings towards the sun. Tell the eagle that it is a toil to mount into the ether, and his joyful flight replies, "Toil to me to fly? I was made on purpose to dart among lightnings, and to be at home amid tempests. My eye can even dare to gaze upon the sun." O brothers, it is not slavery to serve Christ; even when it involves stern effort, the labour brings its own refreshment. The more we can do for Christ, the more are we indulging those sacred instincts which regeneration has implanted within us. Let us shoulder the axe, and spend our month in Lebanon. Felling trees is fit work even for premiers, and preparing stones for the spiritual temple would be an honourable occupation for angels.

This work is *most beneficial to ourselves*. Those Christian people who do nothing are usually troublesome, for they are at leisure to find fault with those who are doing their best. Many can see exactly how it ought to be done, and yet do nothing. They discover where the worker fails; they detect the little crotchets and peculiarities which reveal themselves in His service. The minister would preach so much better if he did it in the patent way which his critics have invented. Why do not these fellows attempt the work themselves? No, they are too fine for that; their high vocation is to review the defects of their brethren. I am sick of them. Is not their Lord weary of them, too?

Working for the Lord necessitates prayer, and this is a great blessing to us. If a man gives himself wholly to soul-winning, he must be much in prayer, for he will be all at sea without help from heaven. If he tries to comfort the downcast penitent, how readily will he be baffled! How soon will he cry to the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, to do the work effectually! Every grace which a Christian man possesses is bettered by its use in heavenly service. The practical value of the gospel will soon strike you if you labour among the fallen, the ignorant, the infidel. Does anybody know how precious the gospel is till he has seen it light up the eye that was dim with despondency? Does any man know how the joyful sound of the name of Jesus can charm a heart till he has seen the smile of newborn faith? I do not see how our coming memories can minister to our eternal happiness unless we earnestly labour to bring sinners to the Saviour. Let us be up in earnest, and win jewels for Jesus and happy reflections for ourselves. Will it not enlarge our heaven to see those in glory who were saved by our word? Was Rutherford wrong when he said, "Oh, to see the people of Anwoth in heaven shall be seven heavens to me"? I can truly say of my hearers that the heaven of each one shall be another heaven to me. For this joy let us each one gladly take his month in Lebanon. Let those who have begun to loiter arouse themselves. It ill becomes any of us to be hearers of the Word for ourselves, and never publishers of it to others.

II. It remains that I now remind you that, if we take our month in Lebanon in active service for the Lord's house, **WE MUST TAKE SPECIAL CARE TO SPEND OUR TWO MONTHS AT HOME.**

Our own households must have special attention. The first duty of a Christian man is within his own heart, the second is within his own house. Teach children? Yes, by all means; but begin with your own. Convert

sinner? Yes; but labour first to win those who are round about you. Religion must begin at home. The apostles were to begin at Jerusalem, because Jerusalem was their home. If we care not for our own households, we shall be worse than heathen men and publicans. I am afraid that many professing Christians will have the doom of Eli pronounced upon them. Eli's sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not. He said a gentle word to them, "Do not do so, my sons;" but he did not put his foot down, and tell them plainly, "This shall not be done in my house. You shall not profane the sanctuary of God by open sin if I can prevent it, I am resolved upon that." The end of his indulgence was their destruction, and you know how sorrowfully the old man ended his days, and what a curse fell upon his household in after-generations. God grant that it may never be so with one of us! If anybody should ask me whether I know an Eli, I fear I could put my finger on several. I do not say that I can see one here, — I will not look that way, but let each one ask, "Lord, is it I?"

Rest assured that all our talk about religion, and all our public labours will go for very little if our own families run wild. It is a horrible thing in Israel when the children of godly men are the sons of Belial. Such cases do occur, and then some say to me, "It is written, 'Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it:' how do you make that out when So-and-so's son is such an open rebel?" I answer, whenever I have been able to lift the veil, I have invariably found a reason for the children's non-conversion in the mismanagement of the household, or in the inconsistent conduct of the parents. I suspect that we may generally say, "Is there not a cause?" I will not say "*always*," because singular things do happen; but yet if God gives His people grace to walk uprightly before Him, and they pray for their children, and instruct them, and set them a godly example, the children usually follow in their father's footsteps.

Take heed, then, that you spend your two months at home. Do not offer to God the sacrifice of public service smeared with the blood of your home duties. Do not diminish your care in your own house, for the neglect of domestic piety will prevent the acceptance of your public service. God forbid that, when you talk to outsiders, they should reply, "Look at your own children." Our own offspring must be prayed for; and we must do more than that, — we must correct them for sin, instruct them in the Scriptures, and pray with them personally till we weep over them. Family prayer must be maintained in a devout and interesting manner, and our young people must go with us to the sanctuary, and be trained to treasure up what they hear. I

know the Spirit of God alone can renew their hearts, but He is not backward to bless the means.

If the Lord helps us to be earnest with our children, what a blessed reward awaits us! “I have no greater joy than this, that my children walk in the truth,” every Christian parent may say this of his offspring. Oh, the delight it is to look upon sons and daughters all in Christ! — to hear and know that they are as earnest for the Redeemer’s kingdom as we are! All the honour must be given to the sovereign grace of God; but the comfort is ours. I am sure that, when my mother pleaded with me, she was doing better than if she had addressed large assemblies. I am equally sure that, when my father knelt down with me alone, and pleaded with God for me, and besought me to pray for myself, he was doing a better day’s work than when he was preaching, though in that he has had great blessing. Who knows what your son may be? Who knows what usefulness God may give to your daughter? Surely, if Dr. Busby used to take off his hat when he went into the schoolroom, because he did not know who the boys might be, for they might turn out to be great statesmen or judges, you might take off your hat to your children, for you cannot tell what God may make of them. Pray for grace to look well to the ways of your household, that they may bring no discredit upon the cause of Christ. Use well those two months at home.

Lastly, I change the run of thought to reach another point. There is a home that is nearer home than our own homes; and that is the state of things within our own breasts. If we give a certain care to the service of God publicly, *there must be double attention to the work of grace within*. We must not neglect the cultivation of our own heart. We must watch our own growth in grace, our own communion with Christ, our own faith, our own hope, our own love; for if we do not, we shall be in great danger. I fear that many Christians are busy here and there, and their own spiritual life is withering. They accomplish little because their spiritual money is put into a bag which is full of holes. They work hard, but take no fish because they never mend their nets. If we neglect our private prayers, we shall not “so run that we may obtain.” In some cases, the neglect will prove to be fatal. I do not mean in the case of the genuine child of God, but I do mean in the case of many whom we take to be such. They keep the vineyards of others, but their own vineyard they have not kept. They urge repentance, but they have not themselves repented; they teach faith, but they have not themselves believed. They forget the work of the Holy Spirit within them in their zeal for their own fussy endeavours to outdo others. If you neglect your own

souls, and hope that you will get right by performing Christian duties, you are grievously mistaken. If you try to shine, and have no oil in your vessels with your lamps, your lamps will go out, and you will die in the dark. If you try to tell others what you do not know, and speak to them of a Saviour in whom you have never trusted, your life will be a dreadful failure. You will preach and teach your own condemnation; what else can come of it? Do see to it that, if you go up to Lebanon, the axe is first laid to the root of your own sins.

Supposing the professor to be a real and true Christian, yet, if he is always active and never contemplative, if he spends much time in working and none in prayer and Bible-reading, it will be very weakening to himself and damaging to his work. A weak hand may wield a good tool, but it cannot do much with it. When you are sickly, ailing, out of sorts, as to body, you cannot do your work well. It would be a foolish thing to put a poor consumptive man to labour like a strong navvy on the railway; he would weary himself and do little with great pain. Fussy work that is done *for* Christ without communion *with* Christ comes to nothing, because it is not wrought in the strength of God. O my brethren, nothing can come out of us if it is not first wrought in us by the Holy Ghost ! It is essential that a Christian worker should himself be the workmanship of God. If we would heal, we must be healthy. If we get out of fellowship with Jesus, it will lead to innumerable evils; and the more we try to do, the more those evils will show themselves. We shall grow proud of our doings, and we shall censure others till we grow unbearable. We shall become self-confident; and the more we attempt, the more self-confident we shall become. Or else we shall take to murmuring, and grow displeased because God does not prosper our work, and feel like Cain when the Lord had no respect to his offering. You must walk in the light as God is in the light if you are to enlighten a dark world and glorify your Lord.

Especially let me say to you, dear friends, there must be the two months at home as to *prayer*. Do not forsake the mercy-seat. Be in the frequent practice of prayer, and — what is better — be in the spirit of prayer always. May the Holy Spirit lead you to baptise every duty into the pure stream of grace, and to do the same in every lesson in the school, every sermon you deliver, and every tract you give away! Pray over the whole business. Prepare for the one month in Lebanon by the two months at home spent in pleading with God for a blessing.

Be much in Bible-reading. We do not read the Bible half as much as we should. Look how the Puritans searched it from end to end. How familiar they were with every book! What blessed family prayer there must have been in the household of Philip Henry since it led Matthew Henry to write that famous Commentary! Oh, that we had more Bible-searching and Bible-preaching! Talking about the Bible is well enough, but searching the Scriptures is better. Feed on the Word yourselves, or else your teaching will be thin and watery.

So, too, as to *self-examination*, — a duty much neglected; let us not fail in it. How few there are who look over the actions of the day before they fall asleep at night; but how well it would be to revive the practice!

Repentance, too, that sweet grace with the diamonds in her eyes, — sweet tears of holy grief for all that has been amiss, — is not this pushed on one side? This must not be.

And *faith*, also, the constant trusting the Saviour, should we not exercise it more continuously? Oh, to have times of quiet for the exercise of faith and the growth of love!

As for *communion with God*, oh, that we lived in it always! But we do not get time enough. We do not take time enough to get near our God. We are like men who eat their meals in a hurry, for business calls them away. If a man has no regular meals, but gets a snack here and a snack there, he soon gets out of sorts. He needs time for regular food and its mastication and digestion. We want the same for our holy feasts upon the heavenly food, and to this end I would urge Solomon's rule, — one month in Lebanon, but two months at home. A word to the wise is enough, and therefore I say no more.

