

The Afflicted Heard

by J. K. POPHAM

"For He hath not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted, neither hath He hid His face from him: but when he cried unto Him, He heard." (Psalm 22:24)

This Psalm is emphatically the Psalm of the Lord Jesus Christ. It belongs to Him; much of it is His own language when He was here below. The Holy Ghost was in the psalmist, speaking as the Spirit of Christ; and it is very remarkable to find Christ thus clearly and solemnly set forth, speaking in the Spirit of prophecy in the Psalm. And as it belongs to Him as a whole, this text is His. It struck me, this morning, as a very blessed scripture; first, as being Christ's own word, and then as belonging to His mystical body, filled with His Spirit, moved by His Spirit, following in His suffering footsteps, praying His heavy prayer. But the verse preceding the text gives it a very remarkable aspect: "Ye that fear the Lord, praise Him; all ye the seed of Jacob, glorify Him; and fear Him, all ye the seed of Israel." And the text gives the reason for this exhortation, "For He hath not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted." So the sufferings and the death of Christ are to be, throughout our journey, in the church of Christ, matter for praise and glorifying and fearing God. If we are led into this great truth, we shall see what is written by Isaiah concerning Christ, is blessedly true: "With His stripes we are healed;" (Isa. 53:5) that the groans and tears and prayers and griefs and brokenness of heart of the Lord Jesus, are the matter of the praises of His children. Praise the Lord, for He hath not despised nor abhorred the sufferings, the afflictions, of His afflicted Son. Praise the Lord, for He heard His afflicted Son when He prayed. Glorify the Lord, because His Son was covered with shame. Glorify the Lord, because the Lord Jesus Christ suffered His judgment to be taken away, suffered dogs to compass Him about, suffered His enemies to take away His garments and to cast lots for His vesture. Praise the Lord, because the Lord Jesus Christ said, "I am a worm and no man, a reproach of men, and despised of the people." (Ps. 22:6) Led of the Spirit into this truth, we shall see that the ground of our hope and the cause of our thanksgiving and praise must always be the suffering, despised, persecuted, afflicted Lord Jesus Christ. And then, as the ointment ran down Aaron's beard to the skirts of his garment, covering the whole person; so the Lord Jesus being the Life and the Head of His children, truly brings them, each one, to say in his time and measure the very things that Jesus Christ here says in the text; and brings each one to prove what He Himself, their Head, proved. He was afflicted, and His Father did not despise His affliction. He prayed, and His Father heard Him pray. So every troubled, afflicted, tormented child of God praying, crying, will prove that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ will not despise nor abhor his affliction, nor turn away his prayer from Him. And as these truths, thus feebly expressed to you, have more or less distinctly occupied my mind through the day, I wish by the help of the Lord to bring them before you. They are substance. They will bring us to heaven, if we know them. They are part of the glory of Christ, and they become the life and the experience of the church.

First of all, I would humbly and with reverence and the fear of God, draw your attention to the afflicted Person in the text. He is Jesus Christ. He was afflicted, afflicted by men, who despised Him, set at nought His claims, said that He had a devil and was mad, that He blasphemed when He said God was His Father; that when He cast out devils, He did it by the prince of devils. He

was afflicted by men--a solemn thing this. And if the men who afflicted Him in His Person and His character when He was here below, were not forgiven, what will they suffer in hell! Are we better than they? Should we have behaved better? Should we have received and entertained Him? If we had been there, should we have loved and followed Him? No; unless He had called us as He called His eleven disciples we should have been just as were all the Scribes and Pharisees and doctors of the law, and all the priests, despising and burdening Him with all the vile aspersions that our wicked hearts could have invented. We should have just said as they said of Him, "He hath a devil and is mad, why hear ye Him?" (John 10:20)

The devil afflicted Him. He was tempted of the devil in the wilderness; He was forty days and forty nights with wild beasts and a wilder devil; tempted in every way that the devil could invent, appealing to human nature; and perhaps--this is only a thought of mine--perhaps ignorant of the absolute purity of that nature that the Son of God had taken into union with Himself, he appealed to it in various parts, so to speak. As, when he would come to you, he would appeal to your pride and set the glory of this world before you; as when, if you were hungry, he would appeal to your hunger, and tempt you to be presumptuous in order to satisfy that hunger: so he went to Christ and tempted Him. But Christ had no sin. That human nature He had assumed was spotless, innocent, pure; it was impossible for Him to sin; and so the god of this world, as Christ said later on, had nothing in Him, nothing to work upon. If he come to you, child of God, he has plenty to work upon, has he not? Plenty of unbelief, pride, vanity, presumption. He touches us, through his intimate knowledge of human nature, where we are very susceptible, and fans into a flame the sparks of vanity and lust that we have in us. But when he went to the dear Saviour, the blessed Lord Jesus Christ, and tempted Him, there was nothing in Him that could be influenced, that could receive or be allured by a temptation; but it was an affliction to be in the vile presence of the devil.

He was afflicted by the law, the law under which He was made. It is a great point this, that Christ was "made under the law." (Gal. 4:4) If He had not been so made, He could not have "redeemed them that were made under the law." But being "made under the law," its claim on human nature reached the Man Christ Jesus. I am not speaking a dry doctrine. I am saying that which is vital to the salvation of the election of grace, and may the Lord open the truth to our hearts. It is vital to salvation. For we are under the law, and must obey it or, failing to obey it, be cursed by it; and if no Surety be found to take our place, to put Himself in precisely our condition, without our sin; unless a Surety be found to undertake our duties, to take on Himself our debts, our salvation is impossible. O what a mercy it is that Jesus Christ was afflicted by the law! It came to Him, it claimed at His holy hands the obedience it failed to receive from us. It claimed from His holy heart the holiness it could never receive from us fallen sinners. It claimed from His holy heart the holiness it could never receive from us fallen sinners. It claimed from His affections that supreme love for God that it demands from us, and receives not. It claimed from His will that perfect straightness with the holy God that never, never could it find in us since the Fall of Adam. And it claimed His life, because He stood in the place of men whose lives were forfeited by their sins. May the Spirit of Christ open this to us! I have thought that His own heavenly light has shined into my own understanding just a little on these points, to enable me to express them, though it is very feebly and insufficiently. And, my brethren, beg of the Lord to lead you into these things. For Christ was made under the law for this precise purpose--"to redeem them that were under the law." If ever we get from the Holy Ghost a witness that Christ gave His life in

place of our forfeited lives, we shall be supremely happy; we shall be freed from the law by that testimony in our experience; even as we were really, in the sight and judgment of God, freed when Christ said, "It is finished!"

And lastly, Christ was afflicted by His Father. Yes, and that, one would say, was the worst, the heaviest, the most piercing of all His afflictions, when His Father hid His face from Him. He who had eternally lain in the bosom of His Father, (John 1:18) He, the afflicted Son in human nature, He, who had always done those things which pleased His Father, He cried out, in the deepest agony of His afflicted soul, "Why hast Thou forsaken Me?" And this affliction, my dear friends, means heaven to us, if we are interested in it. This affliction will take us out of ourselves, will take us to the Throne of grace, will bring us before the Lord in humble prayer and supplication. This affliction will bring consolation and peace and comfort and happiness into our souls, as applied to us by the eternal Spirit.

Now the experience of our Lord Jesus Christ was this, that God His Father did not despise nor abhor this affliction of His afflicted Son. Men despised Him. Yes, they would look upon Him as a stranger and a heathen would look on the tabernacle with its last, rough covering of badgers' skins, knowing nothing of the hidden beauty of that tabernacle. And men, knowing nothing of the divinity and the human glory of Christ--for there was a glory in His human nature, it having no sin and being united to His eternal Person, and the Spirit dwelling in Him without measure--men seeing not this, knowing not this, despised Him. "He was despised and rejected of men;" but His Father did not despise this affliction. There was in this affliction a covenant-understanding working out. In this affliction there was a doing perfectly the will of God. In this affliction there was love sustaining Him, love that kept Him from being offended:--"Great peace have they which love Thy law, and nothing shall offend them." (Ps. 119:165) In this affliction there was a perfection that pleased God. Jesus was perfectly doing the will of Him who sent Him to be afflicted. He was doing the holy will of God when Men were despising Him, and rejecting Him, and afflicting Him. And in this affliction He prayed; He spent nights in prayer; He went to His Father. "Who in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto Him that was able to save Him from death, and was heard in that He feared." (Heb. 5:7) He could have asked His Father for twelve legions of angels, and He would have had them; but this was in His heart, and was better than all else: "I delight to do Thy will, O My God, yea, Thy law is within My heart." (Ps. 40:8) Now if the Spirit should lead us to see this, what a glory would cover Christ's sufferings to us! What a beauty we should see in the affliction of this afflicted Man! Not an afflicted sinner, He was not a sinner. He had sin imputed to Him, but He was "holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners." (Heb. 7:26)

And He prayed, and His Father heard Him. "I know," He said, "that Thou hearest Me always." (John 11:42) He knew He had His Father's ear. You know it sometimes when you pray; He always knew it. What converse went on always between Christ and the Father, what inter-communications there must have been between the human nature of Christ and the eternal God, to whom Christ prayed! If the Lord lifts the vail to us, we shall see a little into it, but I would tread with reverence, and speak with humble fear on such a mighty and mysterious subject. The subordination of the Lord Jesus Christ to His Father, the mystery of One who is God and Man praying to God, we can only just look at a little as the Holy Ghost lifts the veil. But He did pray; and says Christ, "Neither hath He hid His face from Him, but when He cried unto Him, He

heard." Once He prayed that God would glorify Him, and the Lord said He had both done it, and would do it again. When He was in the wilderness tempted of the devil, and the devil departed from Him He afterward hungered, and angels were dispatched from heaven to minister unto Him. When He was in Gethsemane's garden, having prayed, and humbled Himself to that death which was near to Him, and having taken the cup which His Father had put into His hand, and entirely submitted to the divine will, the agony which produced that bloody sweat weakened His human frame, and there was sent from heaven an angel to strengthen Him. It is a wonderful subject, and I feel unworthy to name it to you; but I have hope of interest in it. There is a great solemnity in it, and if God should make it spirit and life to us, we shall have reason to praise Him that ever we were led to look on the afflicted Man Christ Jesus, and, so to speak, to hear His prayers. The Lord says His Father did not despise the affliction of the afflicted. He did not only look on His afflicted Son, but He regarded the affliction, He regarded that which burdened and wounded and grieved and weakened His dearly beloved Son Jesus Christ, and heard His prayer.

What did all this accomplish? It pleased the Father, it removed hell, it magnified the law, and made it honourable, it destroyed him that had the power of death, that is, the devil, and therefore it will bring deliverance to every person for whom the dear Saviour suffered all this affliction. And as it is made known, it will kill our natural flippancy, it will bring out a spiritual sympathy for a suffering Christ. "They shall look upon Me whom they have pierced;" (John 19:37) and then the effect is, "The land shall mourn, every family apart; the family of the house of David apart, and their wives apart," etc. Repentance, evangelical repentance, is not public; it is carried on in the spirit. It is not like the Pharisees, loving to pray in the market places and in the corners of the streets, to be seen of men. It is a private thing; when you repent, you want to be alone. The suffering Saviour seen by faith will produce that spirit in you that the prophet Zechariah said should be in the house of David, and in the house of Nathan, and all those houses that are named; all the houses apart and their wives apart should mourn.

Now I would leave this great subject, I have not grace and wisdom to enter fully into it. It needs much wisdom and much godly fear, and much of the Holy Spirit's unction for any person to open his mouth and say much about it. I have brought it to your notice, and may the Lord cause you by precious faith to enter into it. Let me repeat what I have said: you will go to heaven by this, if you go at all. If you get to the Throne of grace, you will get there by this,--this suffering, this affliction of the afflicted Saviour, the Man Christ Jesus.

But one more remark let me make here. This text is very encouraging. Here is the full gospel, here is an open way, here is Wisdom's house builded, here are her seven pillars hewed, here are the killed beasts, here is the prepared wine, here things are made ready. And who are the people invited? The simple. Says the prophet Isaiah, or the Spirit of God in him: "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters." Come, afflicted sinner, and look on an afflicted Saviour. Come, wounded soul, and look on a wounded Christ. Come, you who are bowed down with guilt, and look on One who was bent beneath the load of sin imputed to Him. You have your own, Christ had all His people's, sins. You have your burden; He had you and your burden and the burden of a multitude that no man can number, who all had an interest in Him then, as from eternity.

"Come, then, repenting sinner, come,
Approach with humble faith."

Come, poor sinner, amazed at what you have discovered to you in your own heart, and see Jesus sweating blood at every pore; and all in order that the vilest, the guiltiest, the weakest, the worst may come boldly to the Throne of grace and obtain mercy.

Now, secondly, that which I said takes place; namely, that what belongs to the Head belongs to the members. Can you believe it? It is true. May the Holy Ghost make it out to you. But does God look on the affliction of the afflicted sons, and not despise nor abhor that affliction? Yes, He does. But what is the affliction that God does not despise nor abhor in the members of Christ? Well, it is the affliction of conviction, the affliction that results from a living, an abiding, a growing conviction of sinfulness. Kept outwardly you may be, and bless God if it is so, but the spreading leprosy, the deep deceitfulness, the unspeakable wickedness, the eruptions of the ill humors of sin, eruptions that may not come before even the eye of a friend, but are visible to yourself,--this is an affliction. You say, "Surely God must despise that." He despises the sin; but sorrow for it, the affliction on account of it, that He does not despise.

"He understands a sigh divine,
And marks a secret groan."

Can you believe that? Can you believe it of yourself? You may apostrophize and speak to yourself, "You a Christian! Can you think you have grace when you have such abominations in you?" And the old enemy will afflict you, and if allowed, hide from your view your sorrow, and just point out to you your sin; and you will see your sin, and for a time forget that you have sorrowed, and do sorrow and sigh and drop a tear before the Lord in secret again and again. Now it is this affliction that is on you, afflicted saint, that God will not despise nor abhor. You may be stumbled about the measure of your conviction, about the depth, or lack of depth, or your affliction; you may be stumbled because you do not know when it began. But the Lord looks on it. What a mercy the Lord looks on the affliction of a sinner who says, "I wish I were not the sinner I am." Yes, the sorrow for sin that you would not name to a creature, but about which you sigh, and under which you bend before the Lord, this He does not despise. It is sorrow, the burden of grief which you carry, that the Lord does not despise.

You, it may be, are sorely troubled with fear and doubt, doubting your interest. That Christ can save you you do not doubt; that He will save you is your doubt. That there is righteousness enough in Christ to justify a sinner, you do not question; but that He will give you that righteousness, that is the question with you. So I might run through the doubts and fears that the Lord's people have. They see a remedy, but will the Lord apply it to them? They see a Refuge, but will He take them in and cover them? They see salvation, but will He bless them with it? They doubt it, and are burdened with this doubt. It pains them, it wounds them, it cripples them, and makes them very weak. It is an affliction.

They are afflicted with ignorance, a sense of it I mean; for all men are ignorant, but all do not feel they are. They read, and often feel as if they must close the book, and say they cannot read, for they are not learned. They feel ignorant of the Trinity, ignorant of the gospel, ignorant of the Person of Christ, ignorant of the Holy Spirit, ignorant of the way of salvation; and it afflicts them. And their affliction is not despised, for it takes them to the Lord; it gives them an errand many a time in a day, "Lord, teach me. That which I see not, teach Thou me. I am a stranger in

the earth; hide not Thy commandments from me." (Ps. 119:19) And the Lord will not despise this affliction. They are empty, as all are, of goodness; and that emptiness grieves them, pains them. They are empty of the knowledge of Christ, and that emptiness seems constantly to be an opportunity and a place for the devil to cast in his injections and his vile things; and their emptiness is an affliction. They are afflicted by an unwillingness sometimes to take the cross up. Old nature says, "I will not have it;" and yet the new man says. "I wish I could take it up." And the man is afflicted and says, "Lord, do help me; help me to submit." There are dangers before them, and afflict them. They are afraid of being wrong and making a mistake; afraid of claiming what is not their own; afraid of calling God theirs. O the many fears they have! Afraid of being tempted and drawn aside; afraid of being imposed upon by their own imaginations, and by Satan's temptations. They are afraid of falling, afraid of making any profession, lest they should fall, lest they should do that which would be a reproach to the saints of God and a wounding of them, and a disgrace to themselves. And well may they fear it, when they feel what is in them, and what temptations and inclinations they have to this and that sin. They are afflicted because they walk in darkness and have no light, and afraid lest they should be left to kindle sparks of their own, and walk in that delusion until they lie down in darkness. Afraid, because they do not get answers to prayer: "Also when I cry and shout, He shutteth out my prayer." Afflicted, because their hearts are hard, and because they are so unfeeling. Afflicted in many ways, and afflicted by providence, afflicted by temptations. I must leave you to fill up for yourselves on this point. Here is the affliction.

Yes, and does God despise it when He looks on you bowed beneath a load of sin and sorrow? Does He despise your cry, and abhor you because of this? No. Every afflicted saint will prove in his measure what Christ proved so wonderfully and gloriously: that the Lord "hath not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted, neither hath He hid His face from him, but when he cried unto Him, He heard." This is a very beautiful line of experience. I can but touch upon it: "When he cried unto Him, He heard." There is this in the soul, a living cry; a living child of God must cry. It is the dead soul that knows nothing, and has no cry in him. The living, the living, he feels and he cries, cries of necessity, cries of pain, cries out of his want, cries because he is what he would not be, and he is not what he would be,--he cries to God.

There are two ways in which the afflicted one knows that God has not hid His face from him, but "when he cried unto Him, He heard." Now notice these two ways, and I expect that what I am going to say will get hold of some of you, even if you do not acknowledge it. First, there is often a real sense of relief when a person prays, when the Spirit helps his infirmities, when the Throne of grace is set open, when a sinner sees the Saviour's infinite merit and goodness and mercy; and by that sight feels drawn to God, drawn out in prayer and humble, fervent petition; and a sacred feeling takes possession of him like this: "Verily God hath heard me." He says, "I do feel as if I have had the ear of God, as if He has condescended to listen to me, to grant me audience." What an experience it is! May we thank God for it. And the second way is this,--when you get an answer. Jesus Christ got answers. "I knew," said He to His Father, "that Thou hearest Me always." On one occasion the Father said, in answer to His Son's prayer that the Father would glorify His Name, "I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again." (John 12:28) And Christ said of His Father, "For the Lord God will help Me; therefore shall I not be confounded." (Isa. 50:7) If the Spirit helps you to pray, your prayer will go up to heaven, enter heaven, and go into the censer that has in it much incense, and ascend to God perfumed. And an answer will come

down, and you will say, "Blessed be God who hath not turned away my prayer, nor His mercy from me." (Ps. 66:20) Then this will be in your heart--that you have received this through the merit of Christ. The Father smiles through Christ, the Father answers through Christ; the Father shines on you through Christ, and discovers His beauties to you as they are in Christ, and makes known to you how good and how kind and how gracious He is to you through Christ. Then you will say, "Bless the Lord, praise the Lord."

Let me remind you, ere I sit down, of what I said at the beginning: that the Lord's people are to praise God and glorify Him for the sufferings, the afflictions of His dear Son. May we be led to do that, and then to see that our own afflictions are as one little infinitesimal drop. Christ's the ocean; and yet that our affliction is not despised by the Lord; that our poor prayers are not turned away by Him, but heard.