

An Unjust Imputation Repelled by Jehovah.

by Edward Payson

The sermon emphasizes the importance of treating God with reverence and gratitude, and warns against regarding Him as a wilderness or a land of darkness.

Scripture: Psalm 23:1, Psalm 139:23, Isaiah 41:10, Jeremiah 2:31, Matthew 11:28, Romans 8:31, Philippians 4:7, Hebrews 13:5, James 4:8, 1 John 1:9

Topics: "Gods Love", "Repentance"

Description

Edward Payson preaches about God's tender expostulation with His people, questioning if He has been a wilderness to them, a land of darkness. He highlights how even though God speaks with authority and rebuke, His gentle approach of love and kindness can melt the hardest hearts. Payson emphasizes that treating God as a wilderness happens when one finds no pleasure in His service, neglects communion with Him, and seeks happiness in worldly pleasures. He challenges believers to reflect on the blessings they have received from God and to repent if they have treated Him unjustly.

Transcript

"Have I been a wilderness to Israel? A land of darkness?"

Jeremiah 2:31

an ingenuous mind God never appears so irresistible, so overpowering, as when he addresses his creatures in the language of tender expostulation. He may speak in the loftiest accents of uncontrollable authority and almighty power; and such a mind, though awed, will too often hesitate to yield obedience. He may titter the language of severe rebuke, and terrible denunciation; his reproofs and threatenings may descend from heaven like a tempest of fire; but the heart, wrapped up in its own adamant hardness, will brave the storm with sullen, unrelenting, and even apparently increasing obduracy.

But when, laying aside the rightful claims of his authority, and the terrors of his wrath, God comes in the meek majesty of injured excellence, and unrequited kindness, to expostulate with his offending creatures, every heart, which has a particle of ingenuousness in its composition, relents, melts, and falls contrite at his feet, overcome by the omnipotence of love. Did all men possess such a disposition, he would seldom address them in any other language, and even now, destitute of it as they naturally are, he condescends occasionally to employ it.

One instance of its use we have in our text, where, addressing his ancient people, God says, Have I been a wilderness to Israel? This language evidently intimates that they had regarded and treated him as such and at the same time indirectly asks, whether they had any good reasons for regarding and treating him in this manner? Had he indeed been no better to them than a wilderness, a land of darkness? A question, this, which it was much more easy for him to ask, than for Israel to answer.

My hearers, we may, we should, consider our God and Redeemer, as still addressing, in similar language all who, while, like Israel, they are favored with his distinguishing blessings, like Israel treat him as if he had been to them only a wilderness, a land of darkness. Especially should we consider him as thus addressing those of his professing people, who have treated him in this manner. And are there none such among us? Should the symbols before us be transformed into the mangled body which they represent, and endowed with life and speech, should our crucified Redeemer appear standing upon that table, leaving the marks of the thorns, the scourge, and the cross; and look round upon this assembly with an omniscient eye, as he once looked upon Peter, would he find no professed disciples to whom he might justly say, Have I been a wilderness to you, a land of darkness?

If not, why have you treated me as such? That every one may be able to answer these questions with respect to himself, it is necessary, I. To show when professed Christians expose themselves to the charge which our text implies, or, in other words, when they treat their God and Redeemer as if he were to them a wilderness, a land of darkness. The mention of a wilderness, especially of a wilderness, as it appears at night, when darkness prevails, suggests to us ideas of dreariness, solitude and gloom; of a place, where there is nothing to cheer, to nourish, or shelter us, where numberless obstacles impede the wanderer's progress, and through which is no discoverable path.

In fine, we regard it as a place, which no one would choose to visit, unless impelled by necessity, and from which every one would wish to escape, as soon as circumstances should permit. And is it possible, perhaps some will ask, that any man, who professes to be a disciple of Christ, can regard his God and Redeemer in this light? Yes, my hearers, it is possible. Every declining professor of religion, every one who serves God with reluctance, who does not find pleasure in his service, regards him precisely in this light, and treats him as if he were a wilderness, a land of darkness.

When a professor becomes slack and remiss in waiting upon God, careless in walking with him, and negligent in seeking communion with him, does he not practically say, God is, to me, a wilderness? The path in which he requires me to walk is adorned with no flowers, it furnishes no fruits. When he enters his closet with reluctance, enters it merely because conscience with her scourge impels; when he reads the Scriptures without interest, when he repeats prayers without feeling, when the minutes spent in these duties seem long, and he is eager to leave his closet, that he may engage in more pleasing worldly pursuits, does he not say as plainly as feelings and actions can say, God is a wilderness; the place to which I retire for the purpose of worshipping him, is a place of darkness, a place which has no attractions?

We read of Doeg the Edomite, that he was on a certain occasion at the tabernacle detained before the Lord. The expression is remarkable. He was detained before the Lord. This language forcibly intimates, that he was there reluctantly; that he thought the time long, and would have preferred to be in some other place. Now he evidently regarded the place where God was worshipped as men regard a wilderness; that is as a place which he would not choose to visit, unless impelled by necessity, and from which he would wish to escape as soon as possible.

In the same manner does every one regard it, who in any place of worship, whether private, social, or public, feels as if he were detained there, and as if he would prefer some other situation or employment. Still more loudly does the professing Christian declare that he regards his God and Redeemer as a wilderness, when he repairs, in search of happiness, to the scenes of worldly pleasure, or to the society of worldly-minded men. He then says to them in effect, the ways of wisdom are not ways of pleasantness; a religious life is a life of constraint and melancholy; I should die with hunger and thirst, did I not occasionally forsake the wilderness in which I am doomed to live, and refresh myself with the fruits on which you are feasting.

Suppose, my hearers, that while Adam resided in paradise the world had been filled, as it now is, with sinful inhabitants. Had he, in these circumstances, frequently, or occasionally, forsaken the garden of God, and wandered out into the world to seek happiness, in the society, or in the pursuits, of sinful men, would not his conduct have seemed to say, Paradise is a wilderness, a land of darkness, in which happiness is not to be found. I am weary of the presence of God, which is there manifested, and am constrained to come to you, in search of pleasures which my place of residence does not afford!

Just so, when the professed friends of God wander from him, and from the path of duty, in search of happiness, they practically say, He is a wilderness, a land of darkness, in which I find nothing pleasant, nothing to allure, nothing which satisfies my desires. Having thus shewn when we treat God as if he were a wilderness, a land of darkness, permit me, II. To apply to all, who have treated him in this manner, the pathetic, melting expostulation in our text. Let me ask them, whether they have indeed found their God and Redeemer no better than a dark and dreary and desolate wilderness?

With a view to assist you in answering this question, let me, in the first place, remind you of the temporal blessings which you enjoy. Look at your comforts, your possessions, your children, your friends, your liberty, your security. Did you find all these blessings in a wilderness, or did they come to you out of a land of darkness? Some of you have spent ten, some twenty, some forty, some sixty years, in the world. During all this time, you have had food to nourish you, garments to clothe you, and habitations to shelter you; and did you find all these things in a wilderness?

If so, it must surely have been a most fruitful wilderness. Let me in the second place, remind you of the religious privileges with which you have been favored. From your childhood you have had in your hands the Scriptures, the word of God, containing all things necessary to make you wise unto salvation, and have been taught to read them. From the same period, you have been permitted to enter the sanctuary of God, to present unto him your petitions, to listen to his instructions and invitations, to hear the gospel of salvation, and to see life and immortality brought to light.

In fine, the full blaze of gospel day has shone around you. And did you find all this light in a land of darkness? Did you find the Bible, the sanctuary of God, and the gospel of salvation, in a wilderness? Surely, a wilderness, where such blessings are to be found, must be preferable to the most fertile spot on earth! Thus far, the questions which we have asked are applicable to all alike. With those of you who are professors of religion, we may proceed further, and remind them of the spiritual blessings which they have, or profess to have, enjoyed.

We may say to them, You have found the table of Christ spread for your refreshment. On that table Jesus Christ himself, his body, his blood, all the inestimable blessings which he dispenses, have been symbolically set before you, that you might eat, and drink, and live forever. When you entered the church

of Christ, you professed to have found light to illuminate your minds, grace to sanctify your hearts, mercy to pardon all your sins, and divine consolations, which gave you joy and peace in believing.

If you are what you profess to be, you really have found all these blessings. You have found that Christ's flesh is meat indeed, that his blood is drink indeed. You have enjoyed precious seasons of communion with him at his table, in his house, and in your closets. You have tasted the first fruits of the heavenly inheritance, celestial fruits, the food of angels, such as earth does not produce. And these fruits were the earnest, the pledge of better things to come, the proofs that God has adopted you as his children, and made you heirs of himself, and joint heirs with Jesus Christ.

Look back, then, upon the years which have passed away, since you began to enjoy these blessings; review God's dealings with you, the favors which he has bestowed on you, during that period, and then say, what he has been to you. Will any of you say, can any of you say, He has been to me a wilderness, a land of darkness? Did you find all the inestimable blessings which have been mentioned in a wilderness? Was it a wilderness which produced the celestial fruits, on which you have feasted?

Did a Savior, and salvation, and pardon, and peace, and everlasting life, come to you from a wilderness? Once more. Has God been a wilderness, a land of darkness to this church, considered as a body? Look back, my brethren, and see what it was twenty years since. Consider how it has been preserved, blessed, increased, during the intervening period. Consider how much mercy, how much grace, how much divine interposition was daily necessary, to preserve it, and make it what it now is.

Every day it has needed, and it has received, what no power on earth could give. O then, with how much propriety, with what irresistible force may God ask, Have I been a wilderness, a land of darkness to this branch of my church? From this enumeration of the blessings with which God has favored us, it must, I think, appear evident, that he has by no means been to us a wilderness, and that, if we have regarded and treated him as such, we have been guilty of great ingratitude, and injustice.

And yet, notwithstanding all that has been said, there are probably some present, who feel as if, in one respect at least, God has been to them no better than a dark and dreary wilderness. We allude to those who, though they have professedly paid some attention to religious subjects, and have perhaps enrolled themselves among the visible followers of Christ, have found no happiness in religion. Such persons often say in their hearts, We have spent much time in religious pursuits, and have made many endeavors to find that rest and peace and consolation which Christ promises to his disciples, and of which many Christians talk so much.

But all our endeavors have been in vain; and we must say, if we speak the truth, that our way has been like that of a man travelling through a wilderness, where he finds no path, no refreshment, but meets with thorns and briars and obstacles at every step. In reply to such complaints, we remark, that the persons who make them compose several different classes, and that the complaints of each of these classes are wholly unreasonable and without foundation. The first class which we shall mention, is composed of those who, to use the apostle's language, go about to establish their own righteousness, and do not submit to the righteousness of God.

That such persons find no happiness in God, in religion, is not wonderful; for to God, and to religion, they are entire strangers. It is only by believing in Jesus Christ, that men are filled with joy and peace. But these persons never truly believed in Christ, never came to him for rest. Who then can wonder that they have not found it. They have indeed been wandering in a dark and thorny wilderness, but that wilderness is not

God. The second class which we shall mention, is composed of the slothful.

That they should find no happiness in religion, is not surprising; for inspiration declares, that the way of the slothful man is a hedge of thorns. He finds no path, and at every effort which he makes to press forward, he feels the thorns piercing his flesh. But his difficulties and sufferings are the consequences of his own slothfulness, and he ought not therefore to ascribe them to religion. Would he lay aside his slothfulness, he would soon experience the truth of the assertion, The way of the righteous is made plain.

A third class of complainers is composed of such as an apostle calls double-minded men, who are unstable in all their ways. They are engaged in a vain attempt to reconcile what our Savior has declared to be irreconcilable, the service of God, and that of mammon. In making this attempt they wander from God, and lose themselves in a wilderness; and then inconsistently complain, that wisdom's ways are not paths of peace, that God is to them a land of darkness. But their complaints are as unreasonable as those of a man, who should bury himself in a dungeon, and then complain that the sun gave no light.

In fine, all who pretend that God is a wilderness, a land of darkness, prove only that they know him not. In opposition to them we may array the testimony of all who have ever known him. We may exhibit the testimony of the inspired writers, and of good men in former ages, who declare that God is light, and that in him is no darkness at all; that he is the Father of lights, from whom cometh down every good and perfect gift: that it is good to draw near to him; that it is not a vain thing to seek him; that in keeping his commandments there is great reward; that in his presence is fullness of joy, and at his right hand are pleasures forever more.

Indeed, if there is any light, any happiness on earth, if there is any in heaven, if there is any in the universe, it is, it must be in God alone. If he is a wilderness, all is a wilderness; if he is a land of darkness, there is no land of light, and not only man, but all intelligent creatures, must be bewildered in darkness and wretchedness forever. Permit me now to improve the subject, 1. By applying it to the members of this church, and to all the professed disciples of Christ before me.

Let me say to each of them, have you never treated your God and Redeemer as if he were a wilderness, a land of darkness? Have you never been negligent and remiss in waiting upon him in your closets, in attending upon his worship, in reading his word? Have you never felt like Doeg the Edomite, when he was detained before the Lord? Have you never wandered from him and been slow to return? Have you never engaged in his service with reluctance, and with a disposition to leave it as soon as conscience would permit?

If so, let me present to you, your God, your Redeemer, with the tender, affecting language of our text upon his lips. Hear him saying, Am I indeed a wilderness, a land of darkness, as your treatment of me would seem to imply? Have I been such to you? Have I deserved at your hands this neglect, this coldness and inconstancy of affection? Is there nothing in my character, nothing in all the blessings I have bestowed on you, that renders me worthy of different treatment? Surely, my brethren, no Christian's heart can resist this language.

Surely, every Christian's heart will reply, with shame and sorrow, No, Lord, thou hast not deserved this treatment at my hands. Thou hast never been to me a wilderness, nor a land of darkness. So far as I have walked with thee humbly and faithfully, I have found thee, not a wilderness, but a paradise, not a land of darkness, but a region of light. I have found that the light of thy countenance, lifted upon me, gives more joy than sinners feel when their corn and their wine increase.

It is folly the most inexcusable, it is madness the most unaccountable, which leads me to forsake thee, and to treat thee with a neglect, and a coldness, which thou art infinitely far from deserving. My brethren, is this the real language of your hearts? If so, God's expostulation has produced its proper, its designed effects. It has broken your hearts, it has led you to repentance. Come, then, and receive a free pardon, through that Savior, whose table you are about to approach.

Come, and hear your offended, but pardoning God, say to you, I heal all thy backslidings, I freely forgive thee all thy trespasses; go in peace, and sin no more. Go and receive pledges of pardon and peace at the table of my Son. And while you hear God thus addressing you, let your heart reply, O Lord, I will praise thee; for though thou wast angry, justly angry with me, yet thine anger is turned away, and thou comfortest me. Who is a God like unto thee, that forgivest iniquity, transgression and sin? 2.

In the second place, let me apply this subject to impenitent sinners, especially to those who, though they are convinced that religion is important and even necessary, do not embrace it. To such persons let me say, You are guilty, in a far greater degree than those whom we have just been addressing, of treating God as if he were a wilderness, a land of darkness. You stand, with God on the one side, and the world on the other. When you look at the world, which is in reality a wilderness, it appears to you like a garden in which you love to walk, and whose flowery paths we cannot persuade you to quit.

But when you turn to contemplate the service of God, a life of religion, it appears to you like a dark and dreary wilderness. On the borders of this wilderness you stand lingering, and though you are perhaps convinced that it contains in its bosom many valuable blessings, yet we cannot persuade you to enter it. Year after year you stand hesitating and lingering, often turning your eyes and your steps back to the world, which you are unwilling to leave. O then, how loudly do your feelings and your conduct say, God is a wilderness, a land of darkness.

But can he indeed be so? Have good men in all ages been deceived? Are all the inhabitants of heaven deceived? Remember that, if there is any happiness in heaven, it consists in the service, the enjoyment of that very being whom you now regard as a wilderness. And if you continue to regard him as such in this world, you will regard him as such in the world to come. If you can find no happiness in serving him here, you cannot be happy in his service hereafter.

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