

James Durham – Sermon 3 on Jeremiah 50:4,5

This is the third of five sermons preached about the time of a communion; the first four within a very few days before it, the fifth after it. The text was Jeremiah 50:4,5:

In those days, and in that time, saith the Lord, the children of Israel shall come, they and the children of Judah together, going and weeping: they shall go, and seek the Lord their God. They shall ask the way to Zion with their faces thitherward, saying, Come, and let us join ourselves to the Lord in a perpetual covenant that shall not be forgotten.

It is probable that at the first reading of these words, you will approve both the design that this people have of engaging themselves to God in covenant, and their endeavour to have their engagement so solid and sure, as it may not be broken anymore, but may hold for ever. We take it for granted also that you will judge, that the disposition and frame of soul wherein they are about this great business, is very becoming and suitable for such as have dealt unfaithfully and foully in the covenant of God, and are, from the conviction thereof, stirred and put upon resolutions to engage with him anew, and to enter again into covenant with him. We heartily wish that it were a piece of our exercise this night, before approaching the table of the Lord the next day, to compare the frame and set of our hearts with what these words hold forth this people's frame and disposition to be.

We need not now speak to the scope of the words, it being so clear and having been touched at before. There is here a people prophesied of, who are to be brought to repentance and covenanting with God in the latter days, whose spiritually good and desirable frame is described, *They shall go weeping and seeking the Lord*, each of them stirring up our another, having this for their design and the language of their hearts, *Come and let us join ourselves to the Lord in a perpetual covenant, never to be forgotten.*

That which we would now speak a little to is two general points very much becoming a people who design and intend to covenant firmly with God. And seeing it is at this time, in a more especial manner, professed design to close the bargain with him, and, in evidence thereof, are (if the Lord will) to partake of the sign and seal of the covenant, as supposing it to be indeed a closed bargain, or at least that it is seriously desired by us that it may be so, they will not be unsuitable for you to hear and make use of them.

The **first** general point then is this, *That covenanting with God, when people are in earnest in it, will be a very uptaking, exercising and weighty business.*

This is clear here, if you consider how these people go about this work: they are in very good earnest. And there are several evidences of it: *they are weeping and going; they are seeking the Lord, asking the way to Zion, with their faces thitherward.* and every one of them stirring up one another to renew the covenant and to cast the knot so firmly that it may be *a perpetual covenant never to be forgotten*, and such as may never loose or be broken again.

Whence the general is clear, viz., That where people mind in earnest the making up of a breach between God and them, (which is done by covenanting with him), it will be an exercising and uptaking business to them. You may consider some Scriptures for confirmation of this which will also hold out what it is

And namely, Matthew 11:12, *The kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force.* The Lord is speaking there of men's making peace with God, through himself the mediator, by which they are brought to heaven. And he tells us that it is a most serious business, that will abide them brangling (to speak so) and using of violence.

Luke 13:25, *Strive to enter in at the strait gate, for many will seek, and shall not be able.* It is a narrow gate and there must be thronging and thrusting to win in at it. Men will be put to a sort of *agony*, as the word signifies.

Consider also Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 9:24, *So run as ye may obtain*, insinuating that there is a sort of running, wherein men are not in earnest, but indifferent whether they get the prize or not. And therefore he would have them make earnest of it. And he proposes his own practice as an example and a copy to them, *I therefore run, not as uncertain; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air, but I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection, lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.* These are the expressions of a man who is in good earnest in this business. And his seriousness therein is proposed to you for a pattern, what way you should run and fight.

The like word we have in Philippians 3:13, *This one thing I do*, (it is an uptaking work to me) *forgetting those things that are behind, and reaching forth to those things which are before, I press towards the mark*

for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. And in verse 11, *If by any means (says he) I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead.* Every word has its own weight, to make it out that it is so his *one thing*, that he cares not what it costs him, so be he may obtain it.

That which we would say further on this point shall be a word of application, in these two or three uses. The first Use whereof serves for **instruction**. Would you know what is required of you, as the direction to duty at this time? And would you know if things be right in your preparation for the communion? This may be a mark to discern, and a direction on the matter, even to be serious, and to make it an uptaking business, your *one thing*, to be about it, as such an occasion and work calls you to be.

And if you shall ask, wherein consists the seriousness and uptaking exercise in covenanting with God? I shall sum it up to you in these *four*, which comprehend it:

1. *The man is taken up in respect of exercise in his conscience.* Convictions become fresh, challenges are put home, he is pricked less or more at the very heart. There is something within him that gives him a conscience-alarm, that puts in his hand a libel, and assures him of an appearance before God's tribunal. And indeed, unless something of this be, men will not be in earnest. And it is clearly implied in the text, for there are here sharp challenges, that make this people weep, to extort tears from their eyes.

2. *There is a seriousness in respect of the work that it has on people's hearts and affections.* There will be a kindling of desires to have covenanting with God at a point, with a holy fear lest they miscarry in the doing of it. And these put together do much take up the man and make him seel after thorough acquaintance with his own spirit, which he finds to be so fickle, inconstant and backsliding. And thus, apprehending the work to be great and difficult, he is put in holy fear and jealousy over himself, lest he mar the matter and make it worse with himself, as it is said of godly sorrow in 2 Corinthians 7:11, *What carefulness, what fear, what indignation, what vehement desire, what zeal, what revenge is wrought in them.* Now when these are tumbling (to speak so) through other in the man, and he has an intimate wrestling to have the work secured, and is afraid lest it miscarry, is it possible, but he will be serious and much taken up? And this is also implied in the words, *Come (they say) and let us join to the Lord in a perpetual covenant.* There is a desire to have the covenant at a point, and they fear it slip while they are casting

the knot. Therefore they say, Let it be *a perpetual covenant never to be forgotten*. It is good to fear in the very time.

3. *This seriousness is in respect of people's duty*. It makes them pray, that never prayed before to purpose. It makes them examine themselves, meditate, read and confer, that never knew before what it was to be taken up with those duties. Therefore we find this people going and seeking the Lord, and exciting one another. They are put to their feet, and to reaching forward, so that they leave nothing undone whereby they may attain the end.

4. *This seriousness appears in the manner of their going about duties*. There is another edge than was wont to be on their prayers, self-judging, and wrestling with God. They are much like to Jacob: they will not let the Lord go till he bless them. They will still wrestle, though it should be all the night. They cannot find in their heart to part with him on any terms. And, as the word is in Isaiah 64, they shall *stir up themselves to take hold of him*. They are not only *going*, but *weeping*. They are not for the fashion in the work. They seek the Lord, and stir up one another to do so.

May we then ask you, Are you thus in earnest making for the communion? Nay (for this is not all), are you thus in earnest about covenanting with God? which must precede and go before, if things be right. It were good preparation, to have our very hearts moving and fluttering (as it were) within us to be at this.

The second Use serves for **expostulation** with many that pretend a desire and design of covenanting with God, and that they would be at heaven, but yet would never in good earnest to have things at a point between God and them and to make sure of a covenant interest in him.

The most part are, alas! taken up with poor, low and insignificant things, with unnecessary things comparatively. If they be sick, they will be in earnest about the means of their health. If they suffer any loss in their estate, they will be serious to have it made up. If their credit be impaired, they will be much concerned to have it repaired. They are carried forth with a sort of bentness towards those things. But where is there a man or woman, amongst many with their faces *towards Zion* in a serious manner, and with a resolute purpose, that peace with God, holiness and heaven they must have?

Here is the great stop and stand. And is it possible, think you, that you can have peace in your going about duty, while you are not serious, nor

strive to win in at the strait gate? When you exercise not yourselves to godliness? When you never (to speak so) cast your coat, nor strip yourselves naked, as it were (as the word in 1 Timothy 4:7 signifies) for that great work? When you do not run and wrestle as those who mind to obtain, but are entangled in the things of the world, and languish with laziness in everything that is spiritually and truly good? How few are there under much exercise about the case of their souls, afraid lest they miss the mark and prize, with jealousy over themselves unless they mistake the way to heaven? How few are there, who have it for their *one thing*, to be firmly joined to the Lord in a perpetual covenant? It is my fear that amongst all the great number that are here, there be but very few to be found who are in earnest in this great business. I shall hint at a few sorts that are not in earnest.

1. Such who are very serious to be at the external ordinance of the communion, and who will, it may be, take it ill if they be kept back from it, who yet never troubled themselves, nor were seriously taken up with covenanting with God, and with the study of holiness in all manner of conversation, or how to come by the enjoyment of his special and gracious presence. They can be year and day, nay many years, without it, and never miss it, nor be troubled with the want of it. Alas! it is not seriousness to be at the communion, without this, which will profit you. And even you that are not admitted to the communion, are called to this.

2. A second sort are such as are in different in all religious concerns. They care not for the communion, and would not be very desirous of it, if it were not a shame to them, and some reflection on them, to be debarred from it. They think that whatever in religion goes beyond their job is but preciseness, niceness, vanity, conceit and fancy. Such never knew what it was to be troubled with doubting or tentations about their souls' state, or the truth and reality of their grace, nor what it was to be under any exercise of conscience on the account of much sin and guilt. Nay, they are glad and can boast themselves they were never under any such serious exercise.

3. A third sort is of such, who are very civil in their carriage, but they have no more. And, if heaven be had with ceremonies and fair fashions, they will be in it as soon as any. But they cannot endure to be at pains beyond their ordinary, to take hold of it, to do violence to their own negligence, to take the kingdom of heaven by force, nor in the least to amend their pace, and to be serious, come of it what may. These are a dangerous company. They have communicated many years, and were never debarred, and so think that all is well with them, and that they may

sit still and be at peace. I shall only say to such, that that was not David's way, nor Paul's way, nor the way of any of the saints, nor the way that Christ commended to his hearers. And I think he will not chalk out another way to you, nor take you to heaven in a way by yourselves, or in a way of your own. Oh be not deceived, for God will not be mocked.

4. A fourth sort are those who have been ordering and dispatching their external business, so as they may win to the communion without distraction by them, but they have taken little or no pains at all to put their hearts in order. Little or no time in secret between God and them, to examine and try, whether matters as to their souls' state and frame be right, clear and distinct. It is the alone direction that the Apostle gives in in 1 Corinthians 11:28, *Let a man examine himself, and so let him eat.* That is a serious man who puts himself to that comprehensive and uptaking exercise in earnest, who proves himself, if he be in the faith, whose heart smites him that he has not taken as much time in secret as he has done in coming to a preaching. It may be many have come four or five miles to a preparation sermon, who yet never seriously once looked within themselves to see how matters stood between God and them. Oh sad, lamentable and soul-ruining neglect!

The third Use serves for **exhortation**. And let me exhort, beseech, and obtest you, to be in good earnest in this business. Believe it, the business of covenanting with God, so as, from this time forth, you may have it made sure and clear that you are God's, and that God is yours, is a thing of greatest concernment; and infinitely greater, than if kings, and such as are called protectors, were sending ambassadors to treat with you about making you great in the world. To press this a little, let me ask you:

1. In the first place, What think you will come of it, if the covenant be not made sure between God and you? You will most certainly live and lie still, yea even die strangers to God, liable to his curse and wrath ready to be inflicted on you. Oh lay this to heart, if you believe that God will call you all to a reckoning, and that he will say to such of you as are not in covenant with him, *Depart from me, I never knew you.* Yea, suppose there were not such great ground of fear as to that, as indeed there is. Can you promise to yourselves God's hearing any of your prayers, the performance of any promise, or the accepting of any duty of your hand as service to him, till you be in covenant with the Lord? And think you nothing, or but little, of this?

2. Secondly, consider the great prejudice that follows on not covenanting with God, and that will attend many in the visible church. *Many*, says the

Lord in Luke 13, *will seek to enter, who shall not be able*. The solid faith of this would make many congregations to tremble, for it is not only many profane persons, but many of them that countenance ordinances, yea, many of them that have preached and prayed to the edification of others, and many of them who have heard Christ preach in their streets, and, and who have had indignation at others that did not so, who *will not be able to enter*. This word, with that other which we have in Psalm 78:34, where there is such a seeming seriousness, and personating of many graces of the Spirit, and yet nevertheless it is but *a flattering of God with the mouth and a lying to him with a tongue* (which is a very rife and common thing among professors, among such as profess covenanting with God), should put us in fear.

3. And thirdly, consider this, that you have naturally such hearts as others have, that are ready to beguile you, and to backslide and slip out from God. And, are not these beguiles and disappointments of others written for our warning and advertisement? And if any of you should say, We hope there is no such ground of fear as to us, that is but a bewraying of your ignorance and senselessness. For those who are best acquainted with their own hearts will tell you that it is a ticklish and difficult business to deal truly and thoroughly with God. Do you not know that many take a counterfeit for grace? And were you not hearing lately, that many hypocrites have personated almost (if there be need to say almost) every grace? Surely many of you will find it true one day, that *the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked*; and that you have erred and played the fool egregiously, and in nothing more than in trusting your own hearts. For, says the wise man, *he that trusts his own heart is a fool*.

4. Fourthly, consider that it is now come to a nick and pinch with you, that either you must close the covenant with God, or put yourselves further under his curse, and eat and drink damnation to yourselves. Because you have mistaken God's covenant, and slighted covenanting with him and so have come as enemies to his table, without making your friendship with him, we declare to you, that ere the morrow at this time, many of you will either have a hit or a miss of the greatest bargain and of the greatest concernment that ever was made between parties. And although you should not eternally incapacitate yourselves for covenanting with God, which many may do and bring themselves under such a sad sentence that they shall never henceforth be quickened nor awakened any more, yet you may make your bands stronger, and may make the business of your covenanting with God far more difficult to yourselves than now it might be.

The **second** general observation is this, *That a soft, tender and melting heart is a good and suitable frame for covenanting with God.*

Would you then know what is a fit frame for covenanting with God? It is even this, a heart-melting frame: *they shall go, weeping as they go.* They have much seriousness, inward stir and warmness of heart, and that makes it to melt and as it were flow down before the Lord. This is according to what we have in Zechariah 12: 10, *I will, says the Lord, pour upon the house of David, and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and supplications; and they shall look to him whom they have pierced, and shall mourn, and be in bitterness as one is for his first-born.* Even when they are coming home, *and asking the way to Zion with their faces thitherward,* and about to enter into covenant, *they are mourning.*

Hence, in Isaiah 44:3-5 and elsewhere, even almost wherever entering into or renewing of the covenant with God is spoken of, the outpouring of the Spirit is spoken of also: *a pouring water on him that is thirsty, and floods on the dry ground, bringing rivers out of rocks,* etc., for preparing a people for the Lord.

And this will be the more clear, if we consider that softness and melting of heart gives a man a right impression of himself and a right impression of God and of his free grace and goodness; and it makes the man to become folding, tractable, pliant and yielding to God, and also makes way for such spiritual sense and comfort, and for God's refreshful manifesting of himself to the soul that is so pliable and tender. Thus the Lord says in Hosea 2: 14, *I will allure her, and bring her to the wilderness, and speak comfortably to her, or to her heart* as the word is. *Alluring* speaks pliability, and that has God's comfortable speaking to the heart following on it.

1. The first Use of this point serves to give you another word for **trial**, if things be right and in good case with you for covenanting with God. And, as the upshot of all, to commend such a desirable frame as this to you. Would you know then further, what is a right frame for covenanting with God? Here it is, even to have a heart-melting within, to have a soft, tender and mournful disposition of soul. And would you know what this is? We think that from the words it may be gathered to consist in these five or six things that concur to it:

1. There are some pricking challenges for sin and wrongs done to God. They humbly acknowledge, take with, and are made sensible of these.

2. There is some missing and sensibleness of the want of God's presence, and of the want of communion and fellowship with him. They know not well where he is, but they are asking after him.

3. There is an ardent affection and serious desire to be at him and in covenant with him, a heart filled with love to God, whereby it is softened and made to flow down, as wax by the fire is melted, and the hardest iron made soft.

4. There is a holy fear and carefulness, whereby the heart is kept from growing cold and indifferent as to this condition, and from settling and sitting down in it; such a fear and trembling as old Eli had in 1 Samuel 4 for the *ark*, whereby he was kept in a fright. Here is *going* and *weeping*, with a holy fear lest the covenant be again broken.

5. There is a self-loathing, kindly humiliation and exercise of repentance, which especially appears in this weeping; when serious looking into the person's own condition so affects the heart, as it flows, either in tears without, and in sighs and groans within, or in the latter without the former.

6. There is a holy indifferency as to their external lot, and an absolute submissiveness to the will of God, to be dealt with and disposed upon as himself thinks fit. If so be they be admitted into covenant with him, they are sweetly submissive to the terms, let God do with them what he will. They know it will be well if they can get once within the bond of this covenant; and that it will never be well with them if they be without it.

Though this be somewhat general, yet it will be found to be a near and narrow trial. If softness of heart bespeak a good frame and fit for covenanting with God, ah! where is it? The little heart-softness that is among us is one of the neck-breaks of religion and mars our growth exceedingly. What shall we say or think of our condition, when we called to remembrance the seekers of God of old, who *watered their couches with tears, and made their beds to swim, who mingled their drink with tears, and their meat with weeping?* Oh what is become of that now? Or, what religion is this that we have in these days, in comparison of that which they had, who were so serious and so much affected and heart-wrought with their religion, when we are so chill-cold and frozen, when our hearts are scarce kindly warmed, much less softened and melted? It is no wonder there be much lamenting for the want of sense and life, when there is so much heart-hardness, the contrary of this heart-melting softness.

But it may be asked here, How comes it to pass, that the people of God are now so unlike that which God's people were wont to be, so little softened, contrite and melted? I speak not of external weeping and shedding of tears, for there may be much of that, where the heart is but little softened, though not ordinarily. Often, when the heart is inwardly melted, external weeping in some measure follows, though the one of these may be and is sometimes without the other. Neither do I speak of that softness which is peculiarly requisite for the communion, but of that which is called for in our ordinary walk to make us folding, yielding and pliable to God, ready to receive any impression that he will please to stamp on us. What (I say) can be the causes of the want of this, or that we are not in it as God's people were wont to be? I answer:

1. It may be that professors now have much more conceit of their profession, and content themselves better with the form, and with the gospel's being clearer now than it was in former days; and *God resists the proud*, yea, even pride in the godly. Trembling, and such other evidences of tenderness in several of those saints mentioned in the Scripture, are not so much to be found with us. We are, alas! very unlike them. A sharp word from God would have made the strongest of them to tremble. Nay, the godly are several times in the Old Testament described to be *tremblers at the word*, but we, very generally, are bolstered up, in a manner, with match stoutheartedness and self-conceit, as if we were above challenges, fears, doubtings, and puzzling cases of conscience. David, Job, Paul, and others of the saints, who had not such ground for that sort of exercise as most of us have (may I not say, as all of us have?), yet were more in it than we. Whence this comes, were worthy of our serious enquiry. It is probable that pride and self-conceit had much influence upon it.

2. We fear that Christians nowadays have much betaken themselves to the external deckings and adornings of religion, with neglect, in part at least and to the prejudice of religion itself, of the soul and substance of it. The godly of old were single and plain in religion, (as Jacob is called *a plain man*) and taken up with the power of godliness. But many now are so much taken with gifts, and are so fond of them that a covenant interest, self-denial, mortification and the like take them up the less. Many of you are at more labour and pain to hold up a name than to mortify such a lust as is a self seeking humour, or to have matters thorough and clear between God and you.

3. They made more and greater account of communion with God than we do. Seeking after it was a thing they were taken up with, which now,

alas! is much neglected. Because we hear that our salvation does not depend simply on intimate and familiar fellowship with God, we are the less careful and solicitous about it. Whereas of old, the want of it made them *sick of love*, as the spouse is in Song of Solomon 5. And what longing, fainting and out-crying is there for it, as in Psalm 42? It was a prison to them to be in a palace, wanting God's company. This is a main thing that softens people's hearts, even to have the Lord manifesting himself, to have the light of his countenance lifted up and the beams of his love and goodwill shining warm on us.

4. Too much seeking of great things for ourselves, for grandeur or greatness in the world, in making godliness some way to be gain, and counting gain as it were to be godliness. Alas! it is not much our care to have victory over the world, and that it may have little of our heart, and Christ much of it. It is not the design that we drive with suitable vigor, even to be heavenly-minded and to brook a soft heart. *Love not the world*, says the Apostle in 1 John 2:15, *nor the things of the world; for whoso loveth the world, the love of the Father is not in him*. They so far overcame the world, that *they suffered joyfully the spoiling of their goods, knowing in themselves, they had a better and an enduring substance in heaven*, as it is in Hebrews 10: 34.

But the wicked, and men of the world, *having what heart can wish, even waters of a full cup, are wrung out to them*, God's people *turn in thither*, and will needs essay and try the comforts of a present world, what satisfaction they can yield them, as we may see Solomon did, to his great prejudice; for the things of the world in a great measure got the upper hand of him, and that *after the Lord appeared to him twice*. It were good and much to be wished that many of you did espy this evil in yourselves. The Scripture insists much in it, as that which men's hearts are mainly carried out after, and yet we can get almost none convinced of it. Men will be convinced of gross out-breaking evils, but of this evil the most earthly-minded worms cannot be convinced. Nay, even good people are hardly convinced of it, but you are not in the less hazard of it. And we know well, it is a plague in the generation that we live in, and has much defaced religion, as to its beauty in the face of the conversation of many. Ah! how much are they in this conformed to the world! And how lamentably little behave they like *pilgrims* and *strangers* in it, as the saints did of old!

As a second Use of the point, We have ground here to **commend** to you the study of a soul-fixing and fastening condition. As you would not make an unsure bargain with God, endeavour to have this softness and

melting of heart. This thing is that which makes a man to *sit alone, and to keep silence before God*, Lamentations 3:27, and so to be in a posture of meeting and covenanting with him. Such of you as know nothing of this, and are not afraid of being hard, cold and dead at such an occasion, are in imminent hazard of losing a good bargain. And woe to security and hardness that have that as the fruit of it! And, in the by, we may say, that there is a woe abiding many of you, who have no serious thoughts of this frame, and especially at such a time. Therefore let me exhort you to compose yourselves, as having to do with God, and as having God's love and favour, and his hatred and wrath, laid together in the balance, and as having life and death set before you; and seriously to seek after such a soft and tender framer of soul, that fits for covenanting, for renewing the covenant, and for comfortable communicating.

But some may *object* and say, It is very sad, if this be peremptory, that persons who would rightly renew their covenant and communicate must be in a soft and mounting frame. *Answer*: It is useful, and it is needful. Nay, in some measure it is simply necessary.

What should we then do that want it? For *answer*, I wish many were asking the question, from serious minding, prizing and longing after the thing. For the want of softness proceeds often from this, that we do not seriously mind it. Otherwise, the want of it would much affect and afflict us, and would put us to ask after it, and God would not fail to give them the direction that were thus *asking the way to Zion*. Yet for your help in this matter, I would say these three words:

1. Once take a view of your case, and labour to have a distinct look of it: what lusts are up, what challenges may be tabled, and keep a good count of them.
2. Endeavour to have faith in exercise on God's covenant and promises, and be sure that the promise is certain that you lay hold on, and see that you make use of it according to the covenant, which is done when with your souls you take hold of it. And that is not, or shall not be reckoned presumption, when you bestir yourselves from the faith of God's covenant and promise promises, laying the weight of that which you would be at on the promise, cleaving thereto for attaining of it. And in time, through God's blessing, your unsuitableness shall piecemeal wear away, and you shall become tender. And any bit of softness and tenderness that you win at, cherish and watch over it
3. Make this a particular errand to God, having your eye on the covenant

of promises, and on this promise in it in particular, and on other promises of this nature and to this purpose, as, concerning *taking away the stony heart, and giving a heart of flesh; of giving you a new heart; of making you to loathe yourselves for all your abominations*, apprehending, receiving and closing with Christ in the covenant, for attaining of it as a fruit of his purchase. For it is not obtained but in the covenant; and therefore it is remarkable that this Scripture is set down promise-wise, *They shall come, the children of Israel and the children of Judah together. Your heavenly Father, who knows that you have need of this thing* (as it is in Matthew 6: 32), *will give his Holy Spirit to them that ask him*, (as it is in Luke 11:13). And you would credit and trust him with the performing of that promise to you. And, endeavouring to be serious in having this for your task and work, you shall find it made good for you and to you.