

# PROSPERITY AND ADVERSITY

A SERMON – Preached on Sunday Morning August 11th 1867, by

MR. JAMES WELLS

AT THE NEW SURREY TABERNACLE, WANSEY STREET

VOL. IX.-No. 456".

"In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider."-Ecclesiastes vii. 14.

FROM week to week we come together to look, not at the things that are seen, but at things that are not seen; for the first are temporal, the second are eternal. And I do wish every one of my sermons to be of that kind, and to contain those solemn and living testimonies upon which and by which we can live, and if called upon to die at the end of the sermon to say, Well, on such a testimony as this I could die; could trust myself in the hands of such a gospel as this, such a God as this. Such has been, such is, and I trust such ever will be my feeling, and you're feeling as well. And therefore we, of course, shall this morning take our text spiritually. Many things might be said of it taken merely in the temporal sense, but I am sure that that would be very unprofitable to us. Taking it, then, spiritually, we have here in the first place the joyful prosperity. Secondly, the day of adversity.

First, then, we have the joyful prosperity,-"In the day of prosperity be joyful." The Lord Jesus Christ is the day of prosperity. He is, in the 118th Psalm, called the day: "This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it." He therefore is the day of prosperity. And it is the day of prosperity with us when we receive him, and are brought into that light of which he is the center and the eternal duration. Now it says in the 1st chapter of this book that "that which is wanting cannot be numbered: and that which is crooked cannot be made straight;" and it says in the previous verse to our text, "Consider the work of God; for who can make that straight which he hath made crooked?" This I think will help us a little into the meaning of our subject. In the first place, "that which is wanting cannot be numbered." If a natural man turn religious, he performs a number of duties, and he goes through a number of formalities, and he does a number of what he supposes to be good works, and he turns round and says, "What lack I yet?" And you know that the young man who had thus acted from conscience, and from a natural, not a supernatural religious feeling (for we all have by nature a religious element in us, that is, we all have a natural conscience and circumstances will bring that natural conscience to do many things), you know that when the Savior put this young man truly to the test it came out that he lacked everything. So, then, how shall we meet this? The answer is that Jesus Christ alone could number the mercies that God alone could number the blessings, and that God alone could number our real necessities. Those of you

that know the most or you: need, you know very little in comparison of what the Lord .Jesus Christ knows. He hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in Christ Jesus the Lord." And I am sure you will not think I am going too far when I say I have held for many years, and I hold the doctrine now, that the blessings that are in Christ are innumerable, that is to say, they are so great as not to be numbered by angels or by men. Hence David means, in another form of speech, the same thing when he says, "How precious are thy thoughts unto me, O God! how great is the sum of them! If I should count them, they are more in number than the sand." Let us stop here for a moment, and look at the infinite condescension of our God, and remember that our eternal election to eternal glory is on the ground not only of his love to us, but also by the infinity of his knowledge, -"Elect according to the foreknowledge of God." He saw what we needed, and he has treasured up all the blessings in his dear Son. "And that which is crooked cannot be made straight," that is, not by man. Oh, what a mercy it is to find this out; to feel that, when tested by the law of God, we are altogether crooked! You know this word crooked, when applied to character, is a satanic character; it is one of Satan's characters, for he is called the crooked serpent. And so we ourselves,-we do not lie straight in heart, or soul, or lip, or life, with God's law. When tested by that we are as crooked and as wrong as God's law is right, and that which is thus crooked cannot be made straight-that is, not by man. Men have labored to do so, but it has never been done. And yet there stands the declaration in another place that the crooked shall be made straight. That which is thus crooked, and cannot be made straight by man, is made straight by the Lord. If we ask how it is done, we have a beautiful answer, an answer we never seem weary of looking at-"to wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them." This brings everything straight. Jesus Christ has succeeded in bringing- to man those innumerable blessings that shall constitute us all that the Lord has designed us to be; he hath succeeded in making that straight which was crooked. "He died, the just for the unjust, to bring us to God." Who then can make that straight which has been made crooked? None but Jesus Christ. He hath done this. So in the 31st of Jeremiah the Lord says, "They shall come with weeping." Ah, happy the man that finds out thus his crooked Satanic character as a sinner before God, and that dying in that state he must be lost. This crooked condition, this guilty and sinful condition, becoming a concern to him, he weeps after mercy, he weeps as he hears after Jesus Christ, and he weeps after salvation. "He that goeth forth weeping, bearing precious seed "-the precious seed of faith, if it be but a grain of faith, even as a grain of mustard seed-the precious seed of prayer, and the precious seed of living desire, and the precious seed of sighs and groans, for those are, as it were, the seeds in the soul that indicate that the Lord hath begun a work there. They shall come with weeping, and with supplications will I lead them; I will cause them to walk by the rivers of water in a straight way, wherein they shall not stumble." Ah, when we are thus brought to see how Jesus Christ hath made everything straight, and to receive him, he is our day of prosperity. Not only did the Savior not fail in anything, but that the pleasure of the Lord prospered in his hand in everything; for he was not even discouraged:- "He shall not fail nor be discouraged; he shall bring forth judgment unto truth;" or as the New Testament renders that lovely-I had almost said more than lovely scripture, for really the most sublime language seems to fall short of its meaning, so full is the Holy Scripture of depth and greatness of meaning, "He shall bring forth judgment unto victory:" And so it stands, that he hath accomplished the warfare, hath prospered in everything. Now this is the day of prosperity; and just as the Lord Jesus Christ is our light, just as we are brought into the light of this day, here it is we are to rejoice. Do

you not see, even before I go any farther, what a blessed rejoicing it is? In the first place, it is a rejoicing in what the Lord Jesus Christ hath done; it is a rejoicing in what he is in all the relations he bears; it is a rejoicing in God himself. It cannot be said of any but those that are thus brought to rejoice in Christ, "Now is the day of salvation." That can be said in all ages declaratively, so far as the Bible declaration goes; but it could not be said of you while you were in a state of nature that now is the day of salvation with you. But when the Lord met with you, he gave you an inquiring heart after him; and he knew where to find you, whether you were under the fig tree, or whether you were climbed up into the sycamore tree, like Zacchaeus; and Zacchaeus came down and received him joyfully. And while Zacchaeus had light enough to receive Jesus Christ, like many more good people, he had not yet light enough to reject his own works; and so he thought if he threw in a little goodness of his own, it would make matters right. He would restore fourfold, as a publican or tax-gatherer, if he had wronged any one; "and the half of my goods I give to the poor." There is no doubt he did, under the present partial, imperfect light he had, name that as a sort of recommendation to the Lord -that bad as he had been, he meant to be good in future. But see how the Lord meets him. Ah, he says, "This day is salvation come to this house, for so much as he also is a son of Abraham;" that is, a spiritual son of Abraham; he is taught of the same Spirit, brought to believe in the same gospel that Abraham believed in, brought to receive the Savior. He received him joyfully; and thus it was the day of prosperity. We can prosper in sanctification, justification, peace, plenty, and happiness only by him. It is not what we have done, or what we have not done; it is not where we were, or who we were, or what we were while in a state of nature,-that is not the question. The question is whether the pleasure of the Lord did entirely prosper in his hands. Hence he was surety for the sins of the people, he was surety for the persons of the people, he was surety for the demands of the law, and he was surety for every item of the new and everlasting covenant. I need not quote scriptures to prove all this; yet perhaps a scripture or two might be as well. Now, he was made under the law, and was a debtor to do the whole law; that point is clear; and that he was the surety of the better testament or new covenant the apostle himself clearly and positively asserts; and that he was surety also for the people the scriptures are equally clear:-"Other sheep I have, which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and there shall be one fold and one shepherd." Ah, when we receive him we overcome everything. But let us look at his prosperity. Let us come to that which appears to be the reverse. The Lord has not been pleased to record largely the internal feelings of the disciples; he has spoken a little of those feelings they had when he was crucified, and by what is recorded we may, by a little close thought, get at a great deal that is not recorded; for the testimonies of God are as we so often say, are not only very expressive, but also very suggestive. What if Satan come in and said to one disciple and to another disciple, do you not see that you have all been deceived? Why, he is dead, he is crucified. Where is your religion now? Where is your Jesus Christ now? You see that he did indeed save others, but himself he could not save. And he will never rise from the dead; you see he is dead. I say, what havoc Satan would make upon their souls in that way! Prosperity! What is the good of talking of prosperity? Don't you see how helpless this man was? He was enclosed in Gethsemane, and he was hurried from judge to judge, from the regal judge to the priestly judge, and from the one to the other, and was crucified. Why, he is dead. You must be all out of your minds together to think that you have not been deceived. They did not know that this was the greatest step of all that he had taken; they did not know, not as yet, that in this step, this mysterious step, mysterious

to them then-they did not know what he had achieved; nor do we know-that is to say, not fully; it will take us to all eternity to read out the height, and depth, and length, and breadth of the wonders the Savior wrought in those dark, solemn, and awful hours. But by and by comes the prosperity again. We cannot get fully at their feelings. But how delightful the thought, He is risen from the dead; he has succeeded, sin is gone, but Jesus Christ is not gone; Satan is gone, but Jesus Christ is not gone; death is gone, but Jesus Christ is not gone; wrath is gone, but Christ is not gone; all tribulation is virtually gone, but Jesus Christ is not gone. Ah, he has risen from the dead, he has prospered so far, and he has overcome so far. Now let us watch again, and you find he gathers in his disciples, speaks kindly to them. By and by comes another wonderful step:—"He led them out as far as to Bethany; and he lifted up his hands, and blessed them." You may depend upon it the more you are enabled to receive Jesus Christ as your everlasting prosperity, the better it will be for you. I did this morning, while meditating upon these things, bless the Lord with all my heart for the Bible. There I get a friend that loveth at all times, and they are no true friends who do not; a brother born for adversity, and by his prosperity we are brought away from that adversity. When he left them, instead of reading a long lecture, as some of you hypocrites would have done, upon past grievances; instead of recording a long list of probabilities as to some naughty things of which they might be the subjects in future, and thus flogging them with their past faults and their future faults, and being as contracted and as stingy as every Pharisee and hypocrite in the world is, as everyone of the devil's agents is-instead of this, not a syllable of the kind. "He lifted up his hands and blessed them." And in order to give emphasis to this, he says, "Go and tell my disciples, and Peter. Now you would have thought he would have said, "Go and tell my disciples except Peter." He must repent, and do a little more penance, before I can be friendly with him; so go and tell my disciples except Peter. But instead of this, to our delight-at least to my delight, and to the delight of the majority of you, I trust, he said, "and Peter;" and Peter was among them when the Savior lifted up his hands and blessed them. Why, every stone must have cried out, the Mount of Olives itself must have cried out in a voice of thunder if the disciples had not returned to Jerusalem rejoicing in such a blessing as that, and what they saw in his being taken to heaven, and the assurance that he would come again in like manner-just the same, with the same heart, the same love, the same mercy. Why, I say, no wonder that they should return to Jerusalem with great joy in this day of prosperity. Ah, now he is ascended up on high; here is our prosperity in receiving him, his prosperity is our prosperity. Our prosperity lies entirely in fellowship with God by Jesus Christ. Well, they tarried in Jerusalem; but it is very hard work to do nothing- very hard; and therefore, when the disciples had to tarry some weeks in Jerusalem, they said, as it were, Now we are out of work; let us do something. Well, what trade shall we set up in? We will set up parson-making; we will have a parson manufactory. We will choose two, and then cast lots to see which one of the two it shall be; and if that one will do, we will make another, and then we will make another; and so we will make a rare lot of parsons, some for home consumption and some for exportation. But when they had got up their commodity, and took it into the market, it would not go off; no, there it was, and it was taken no notice of. Matthias no doubt was a good man, but the Lord did not want him for a minister; and after the first attempt you never find them set up in that trade again. It was hard work to do nothing. Well, let us be thankful that they did nothing worse, and that they were convinced that God would make his own ministers and his own people. "This people have I formed for myself; they shall show forth my praise." By and by came the wonderful

day of Pentecost. Ah, says the reflective disciple, he prospered in his life, he prospered in his death, prospered so as to rise again and ascend to heaven; and now that the Holy Spirit has thus descended, it is a proof that while the Savior prospered on earth he is equally prospering in heaven; that what he did on earth is accepted in heaven; that what he did on earth dedicates heaven to the people, and prepares them for it. What a wondrous, what a joyous day was that! How many hearts, how many souls on that wondrous, wondrous day received the dear redeemer! They said, here is prosperity divine, here is prosperity holy, just, and good; here is prosperity that has no snare in it, that has no curse in it; here is the blessing of the Lord that maketh rich, and addeth no sorrow. Now I have no doubt but the apostles often stood amazed when they saw their humble but plain, unlearned but at the same time mighty testimonies carried into the hearts of Gentile sinners, and souls innumerable- east, west, north, and south-brought to know the Lord. How great the work wrought by those few men in those few years! This was the day of -prosperity indeed. But you will perceive this first clause would so enlarge upon us that we might go into the sufferings of all the Old Testament and New Testament martyrs, and we should see that in the very midst of outward adversity they enjoyed this day of prosperity. I need not remind you, then, of the many interpositions of the Lord on their behalf, on behalf of his people since, on behalf of his people now. So, then, if we would prosper for time and for eternity, it must be by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; he has never failed; if he had failed in any one thing, Satan and all the world would be very busy to point it out. But the way of a serpent upon the rock Solomon could not comprehend; but he could comprehend one thing-that the rock was invulnerable, that the rock was impregnable, that Satan could find no faulty place in the rock,-sound every whit, sound every way. The Savior failed in nothing. Oh, let me know that he is my life, let me know that he is my light, I am not in the least afraid then of not prospering; I know then that I shall prosper. Yea, though the body must die, the outward man perish, yet the inward man shall be renewed day by day. The day of prosperity, then, is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Secondly, let us look at the day of adversity; when it is not the day of Christ-that is, not in the manifestation of him to us. The Savior saith, "The time shall come when ye shall desire to see one of the days of the Son of man, and shall not see it; for the bridegroom shall be taken from you; that is, in a way of communion, but not in a way of relationship. If I may, without seeming to degrade so sublime and beautiful a theme, just say the husband, when from home, however far, or however long, he is as much the husband as though he were at home. He is absent, and the wife for many reasons may wish his return, still he is the husband; that does not alter the relationship in any way. He will be anxious to get home, and the wife, I was going to say, never has him out of her thoughts. And so it is that when the Lord Jesus Christ is hidden as to the manifestation of himself to us, and we get no fellowship, no communion-I need not remind you in Solomon's Song, when the bridegroom was absent, and the little ones said, "What is thy beloved more than another beloved, that thou dost so charge us?"-when the Savior was absent, and there was no sensible enjoyment of him, nevertheless you find how nicely the church spoke of him. And I think it is a wonderful thing, and worthy of remark, that with all the legal workings of the disciples, and the power of Satanic temptation, and their being as yet comparatively in their nonage, yet when the Savior was crucified, and before they knew that he was risen from the dead, there was not anything could get them to say anything against him. Why, when he joined the two that were going to Emmaus, those two disciples very beautifully betrayed the secret love they had in their hearts to him. See how nicely

they spoke of him. They spoke rather warily, because they knew not as yet who this stranger was; but it is plain there was still a living, vital principle in their souls. So, then, the day of adversity will be when the bridegroom is thus taken from the church. There is not, then, a promise in the Bible that gives you the least comfort, nor a hymn, nor prayer, nor the ministry; all is dreary, all is barren, all is dead, all is dark, and everything seems wrong. Then it is that the beasts of the forest, as it were, creep forth; then it is infidelity, then it is rebellion, then it is that we curse the day of our birth, then it is we are ready to exclaim with Jacob, "All these things are against me." While it is impossible to be unhappy when the Savior is present, so, on the other hand, whatever confidence we have in him, it is impossible to be happy when he is thus absent. Hence when they said, "Why do not thy disciples fast?" the Savior answered, "Can the children of the bride chamber fast while the bridegroom is with them?" And it is said of Samuel-and I dare say that scripture has not escaped any of you; I dare say you have read it in private, and thought, how beautiful that is! that is just what I feel, and just what I know to be the truth-that "the people will not eat until he come." If we take it spiritually, the truth is they cannot; for if he come and ask, "Have ye any meat?" they are sure to say no-as sure as that they exist. "The people will not eat until he come, because he doth bless the sacrifice; and afterwards they eat that be bidden." Well, but, say you, suppose I have no appetite. Ah, if he bids you eat, the very bidding will give you an appetite. So it is, then, that the Bridegroom is thus, as it were, taken from us.

Now in this day of adversity, in the absence of the Lord, we are to consider. What are we to consider? More, a great deal, than one, or three or four sermons will enable me to say; but I will just mention one or two things. First, we are to consider that this day of adversity is to bring to light more and more of what is in our hearts, that we may never open our mouths any more in a way of boasting. Let us illustrate it thus. Here is a leper-a spot here, a spot there;-rather uncomfortable; and the priest shuts him up. Why, he does not like that at all. Then the priest looks at him again. It is no use to shut me up like this, says the leper; I am getting worse. Ah, says the priest that is just what I want. So the priest shuts him up seven days more. Seven days! says the man. Why, it seems seven years to me pretty well. So a sermon three quarters of an hour long seems to be two or three hours to you when you cannot enter into it, or when the Lord is not with you in it. Well I am ashamed for the priest to come now; I know what the consequence will be-I shall be sent off; I am worse than ever now; I am all over a leper now. In the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> verses of the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Leviticus you get what I am now saying. The leper would form his judgment thus;- Well, now, I shall be pronounced not fit to be in Israel, nor to be on earth, nor anywhere else but where such filthy creature as I am are to be found-in hell; that will be my doom. So the priest looked and it was all turned white -deadly white; and the priest pronounced him clean! Most astonishing! the leper would say; why, I never knew such a thing in all my life -covered with the leprosy, and yet the priest pronounces me clean! And the priest pronounced him clean twice. He was a leper all over-all turned white, deadly white; not one part free and yet the priest pronounced him clean. So Saul of Tarsus found out that there was no goodness in his flesh, that there was one entire leprosy of soul and body that the whole heart was sick the whole heart faint, full of wounds and bruises and putrefying sores; no place clean nothing the creature could admire. Now, then, consider that this adversity is thus to make you know your need of a complete atonement, of a complete righteousness, of a complete Savior. There never was a sinner thus convinced, and lost at last. For what had the leper to listen to? Not to anything he was to do, but to the glorious tiding

that he was clean. Then there were sacrifices to be offered, as expressions and testimonies of the fact that he was cleansed. So "the blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin." Consider, then, that this adversity is thus to bring to light what is in thine heart, to humble thee and to prove thee, and to see whether it be real or not. Consider, then, this is one end in view of the day of adversity-to bring to light what we are. We live in a day when the majority of the gospels that are preached all go to the outward doings of life; but "thou desirest truth in the inward parts, and in the hidden parts thou shalt make me to know wisdom." "I will put my law," the law of truth, "in their minds, and will write it in their hearts; and their sins and iniquities I will remember no more." When I die, it is only my body that will die; my soul that is in the body, will live forever, and therefore I want to know how it is with the soul-with the inward part. Consider then that it is to bring to light what you are, and to humble you, and to endear unto you the glorious tidings of the everlasting gospel. But for this experience I should not have one quarter of the zeal I have in the service of the Lord. What poor wretches. What miserable worms are we apart from God's mercy and salvation! Then another reason why the Lord thus tries you is to bring to light what you are-whether you can stand it or not. "The trial of your faith, being much more precious;"-not the trial precious, but the faith itself is precious-true faith, because it brings what silver and gold cannot bring. The things that silver and gold bring are perishable, paltry, and soon pass away; I say paltry in comparison of the life, the blessedness, which come into the soul by precious faith. Therefore this adversity tries you. If the work be not real; if you heard the minister because he was a very nice man; if you went to the chapel because it was a nice chapel, and liked the people because they were a nice people, and you were very pleased altogether; by and by this goes off, and you go off with it. But where the work is real you will not hear the minister because he is what they call a nice man, but because you believe him to be a man of God, a messenger of God, a minister of God; that he lives in the things he preaches, that he has an experience of them, a possession of them, and out of the treasure of his heart he brings forth things new and old. And you will go where the people go, not because they are what you call nice people, but because you believe they are real Christians, that are made sensible of their condition, and that their profession is no plaything with them, but that they come in solemn earnest before God and man, taking from time to time, and praying for grace to enable them to do so, more earnest heed onto the things they hear, lest they should let them slip in any measure. Neither will you go because it is a nice chapel -though I bless the Lord for a comfortable chapel, and never could see why the house of God should not be comfortable; but still, at the same time, we must have higher motives, higher feelings than these; so that when days of darkness come on, you will nevertheless stand fast. It may be dark, neither sun nor stars appearing for many days, and no small tempest may lie on you; but when the question comes, Will you give it up? your answer if the work be real, will be, Ah, where shall I go? What shall I do? If that Friend that loveth at all times that Brother born for adversity, does not defend me, who else can? No, I will not give it up. I will cast out as many anchors as I can-this promise, that, and the other,-and wish for the day, and the day will come by and by, for there is a promise that "the Sun of righteousness shall arise with healing in his wings unto you that fear my name." Consider, then, these things; that it is to bring to light what you are, in order to make way for the riches of his grace; that that same answer that was given to Paul may be acceptable to you, "My grace is sufficient for thee." Also to demonstrate the reality of your religion-that you have in you, like Job, the root of the matter; for though he anathematized the day of his birth, he did not anathematize God's truth; he held that fast

through every trial; and when he had gone a long way on in his trials he might well say, "Why persecute ye me, seeing the root of the matter is found in me?"

And then, thirdly, consider also that there is necessity. Look back at the first Adam, and trace all your trouble to sin. Sin is the root of it. It is sin that made mediation necessary; it is sin, the state we are in by nature, and what our nature is, that makes tribulation necessary. Hence the 94th Psalm is very beautiful upon this:—"Blessed is the man whom thou chastenest." Sin is at the root, and we must have all that chastisement that shall bring to light, as I have said, what we are. "Blessed is the man whom thou chastenest, O Lord, and teachest him out of thy law; that thou mayest give him rest from the days of adversity, until the pit be digged for the wicked. For the Lord will not cast off his people, neither will he forsake his inheritance." But there is one more consideration which I might name, and that is, consider the promise that adversity shall work for good. I do not believe that there ever was or ever will be an adversity that the people of God have been or shall be subject to that when they come to the end thereof, and the full consequences are seen, they shall ever regret that they had it. It is written, "All things work together for good." Now a giant can do more work than a Lilliputian or a boy; and so if your trouble be a gigantic one, it will do the more work for you, that is all. Well, say you, I don't like such rough workers. No, I dare say not. It is a worker I would not employ if I could help it; I would dismiss it if I could. But you cannot help it. It will not say first, Can I do anything for you? It will do the work without asking you; and the more gigantic the trouble, why, the greater the work it will do. Job was in great trouble, but it did great work for him; such great work that he had twice as much after the work was done as he had before. Besides, look at the testimony of God's word. There is no wrath in our afflictions; there is no curse in any of these troubles; therefore the apostle on that ground calls them "light afflictions." Nothing but God's wrath can give permanence to any affliction; nothing but God's wrath can give permanence to any trouble. But not only is there no wrath in these afflictions and trials of the Lord's people, but there is positively love in them, there is wisdom in them, there is mercy in them, there is kindness in them; there is everything in them that is good. This made the apostle call them "light afflictions," and made him say they could not last long;—"which are but for a moment, working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."

I have given a mere sample of what you are to consider in the day of adversity. When I first came into this kind of adversity the ministers I heard said, Ah, you should come to God; you should take the promise; you should fall flat on Christ; you should believe in Christ. Well, I thought, dear men, they wish me well; but they do not tell me how to do it. And when I went to the Bible, and read what Job said, my confidence began to be shaken in them. Job says, "Oh that I knew where I might find him!" Well, I said, Job that is a better sermon than all the sermons I have heard from these men. If you did not know where to find him I do not think they can. And I had more love to him than all the others because he seemed to understand my case so nicely, and I quite agreed with him, only I could not rise so high as he did when he said "Will he plead against me with his great power? No. Ah, I thought, I wish that "No" was mine; I wish both the negative and the positive were mine; I would give anything for those two. Will he plead against me with his great power? No.



