"Watching at the Gates."

SERMON BY A. J. GORDON.

"Blessed is the man that heareth me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors." — Prov. viii. 34.

Wherever you find the word "blessed" in the Scriptures, you will do well to pause and ponder. It always marks a spot where a ray of God's glory falls. When the sun is shining, there are always objects that lie at such an angle, or present such a surface, that they can reflect the sunlight; and hence, they gleam and glisten, when everything around is dark and somber. Now, blessedness is the light in which God dwells, the glory by which He is encompassed — He is the blessed and only Potentate; "Blessed be the Lord God, the God of Israel,..." 2 Chron. vii. 14.

As the sunlight goes forth from the sun, that blessedness is ever going forth from Him, to find a resting-place in the heart of man; and wherever there is a heart that lies in the right attitude to catch the rays of that blessedness, or presents such a cleansed and polished surface that it can reflect those rays, there you will find it resting. And these beautitudes, mark you, are divine, not human: they come from God, and not from man; and man has no authority to confer them. I am permitted to call God blessed — "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus;" but only God has a right to call me blessed, for He only knows whether there is any grace or condition or state in me that can wear this crown. And if you search out the several hundred beautitudes which occur in Scripture, you will find this to be true, as a rule — that they rest on some lowly state or condition, rather than on some great achievement; on some humble grace or temper of mind, rather than on some great work of the hands; and this is what we should expect. It is not a brilliant light, which we need to hold up to reflect the sunshine, but a clean and burnished radiator; and it is not our goodness and holiness that are needed to catch the reflection of God's goodness and holiness, but rather our humility and meekness and faith. Hence, the constant benediction on what would be called the passive virtues: sorrow, poverty of spirit, meekness and spiritual hunger. And why are these states blessed? Because they are receptive states. "It is more blessed to give than to receive;" but since God claims the greater blessing for Himself, that of giving, ours must be the other, that of receiving; hence, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," that they may receive of His enduring riches; "Blessed are they that mourn," that they may receive the comfort of the Holy Ghost; "Blessed are the meek," that they may inherit the earth; and "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness," that they may receive of His fulness, grace for grace.

In the text, we have God speaking to us under the name of Wisdom; as in the Gospel, He speaks by Him who is called the Word. Let us hear Him:

"Blessed is the man that heareth Me." There are no words more important for the present day, than these. It is so hard to get a hearing for God, amid the clamor and tumult of human voices. Men will hear this teacher and that teacher, this preacher and that preacher; but it is an exceedingly difficult thing to get them to shut out all human sounds for a while, and erase from the tabula rasa of memory all human impressions, and just turn the ear to God, and say, "Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth." And yet, this is what is especially needed in our times. The world clammers for good speakers; God wants good hearers. And let us be sure of this, that, in the Lord's estimation, no man can be a good speaker, however eloquent or finished or fervent he may be, unless he has first learned to be a good hearer. God help us, and all who preach His word, to be sure, before knocking at men's hearts with our message, that we have watched at the Lord's gates, and waited at the posts of His door, to find out what He would have us say.

But why is it that it is so difficult to get men to listen to God? Because His voice is, for the present still, a small voice. He can speak in thunder tones; He has done so, and will again. "Our God shall come, and shall not keep silence," saith the Prophet. He has been keeping silence for these eight hundred years. Never once, so far as we know, since that day when He spoke to His Son from heaven, in such tones that "the people who stood by, and heard it, said that it thundered," has G
uttered His voice in audible tones from the sky. He gave us this Word of His for us to read; and He gave us His Spirit, to witness with our hearts—both silent voices; and then He retired into heaven, and shut the door, putting us, His children, to this test: whether we would listen to Him through these, His silent witnesses; or would turn from Him to the loud and noisy and self-asserting voices of mere human teachers. And there is no question, but that it is often at the expense of very great trial and reproach, that one has to listen to God’s voice. When a preacher, whose words are “as a very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice,” is charming and fascinating the unrepentant multitudes, crying, “Peace, peace,” it does seem like a very great affront for us to shut our ears to that voice, and open them to another voice, which we hear sounding out in solemn tones, from God’s Word, “There is no peace, saith My God, to the wicked.” Why break the spell which this lovely preacher has thrown around men, by such rude dissent? and why bring discord into this charming chorus of peace, in which so many are ready to mingle their voices, by introducing this harsh, dissenting voice? Only because we hear the voice of God, whose word must be true, though it makes every man a liar!

But here is the test of Christian faithfulness: whether we are willing to hear the voice of the Lord, where it was more agreeable to the flesh to shut our ears to it, lest, in heeding it, we may come into conflict with the opinions and convictions which prevail about us. The imputation of singularity is about the hardest reproach that a sensitive man is called upon to bear. “There is that eccentric man,” they say, pointing to one who is marching to the music, and keeping step to the directions of a heavenly voice, which the world does not hear. “Eccentric”—which means, according to the dictionary, “having a different center, or moving in a different orbit, from the common one.” Very well: the motion of the sun is eccentric to that of a wandering star; and the Scripture calls the unbelieving, “wandering stars.” What wonder if they, having lost their orbit, and gone astray from God, and yet trying to persuade themselves that they are in the right way, should be scandalized as they see one moving in a totally different course, simply because he hears a voice they do not hear, and yields to an impulse they do not feel; and what wonder if they shall bring the charge of eccentricity against him? The reproaches of men often lie at antipodes to the blessings of God; and the benediction, “Blessed is the man that heareth Me,” may have as its unpleasant earthly counterpart, “The reproaches of them that reproached Thee fell on me.”

Here is the secret of the loneliness and rejection of Jesus Christ on the earth: all the time he was down here He was listening to the words of His Father, and obeying them. “I speak to the world those things which I have heard of Him,” he says. And it was this that brought Him into collision with false teachers and godless sinners alike. “But now ye seek to kill Me,” he says, “a Man that hath told you the truth, which I have heard of God.” That is what it costs to hear God and report what one hears. It is said that the songs of the Swiss mountaineers are so dear to them, that, even when wandering amid the crowds of a strange city, if some one strikes a strain of one of these songs, it sets these Alpine peasants to dancing for joy if it be a glad strain, or to weeping if it be a plaintive strain. The notes may be very rude and inharmonious to those who never have heard them, but they thrill the souls of those to whom they bring memories of their fatherland. Christ, from the great fatherland of heaven, came into a world that knew him not, sounding the notes of perfect wisdom and purity and truth. There were souls in communion with heaven, like Simeon and Anna, who recognized His voice at once, and responded to it, and there were others, whom it woke up. But to the great mass he says, pathetically, “We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced. We have mourned unto you and ye have not lamented.” And the disciple cannot be above his Lord. Hear God, and obey what you hear, and wonder not if it brings you reproach and contempt from them that know Him not.

And we can see, on other grounds, why this must be so. To dissent from the wise and learned of this world, simply because you imagine you hear God’s voice giving different teaching than theirs, gives the impression of
self-conceit and superiority which it is hard to brook. It is not self-conceit, but the exaltation of humility; for the most ignorant man who hears God's voice, and follows it, stands on a higher plane than the wisest who simply beguiles himself with the sound of his own voice. And then, if with the hearing of God's voice there be implicit obedience, there will be a purity of character and a holiness and separation of life which will provoke unpleasant criticism. For there can be nothing so annoying to faulty and fault-finding persons, as the presence of a faultless Christian. His life is a standing conviction of their own sinfulness and imperfection, and hence he cannot be greatly admired. A black sheep in a white flock can be much more easily tolerated than a white sheep in a black flock; for in the former case there is a chance for favorable comparisons, but in the latter case comparisons are odious. Every glance at that white fleece awakens a painful reminder of the blackness of that with which it stands in contrast. "If I had not come and spoken unto them," says Jesus, "they had not had sin; but now they have no cloak for their sin." That white life and stainless example, towering up above the dead level of wickedness — into what startling relief it brought the faults and impurities and imperfections that might otherwise have remained concealed. And as with the Master, so in infinitely smaller degree with the disciple. Every increment of growth upward toward that perfect standard will be a growth away from the sympathy of what is unlike to Christ. So remember, and count the cost before you aspire to be a high saint; it may be at the expense of sure reproach from many low saints as well as low sinners.

Listening, then, to this gentle benediction of God, "Blessed is the man that heareth Me," remember what it may cost to hear implicitly. It may cost a surrender of many cherished opinions; the surrendering of many dear associations; the doing of many unpleasant duties. Yea, He, the gentle and gracious Lord, who commands us to pluck out a right eye, and cut off a right hand and right foot when they offend us, may require us to cut off a right ear before we can listen fully to Him. The ear that has been charmed by the beguiling words of some false teacher, or ravished by the flatteries and blandishments of a false world, may have, through great pain and trial, to be cut off from these things before God's voice can be heard in the soul, saying, "This is the way; walk ye in it."

And it is possible that even Christians who profess to be hearing and heeding, need a word on this point. "Take heed how ye hear." Have you been lending your ears to such as deny God's Son; to such as speak not according to His Word; to such, perchance, as blaspheme that holy name by which you are called? Beware what you do! "Ye are not your own, for ye are bought with a price." Then your ears are not your own. It is not your right to use them as you please. Ye are washed, ye are sanctified. Do you remember how, in the ceremonial consecration, the blood was sprinkled on the right ear and right hand and right foot, in token that the whole was dedicated to God? And you have been cleansed. The blood of Christ, that has consecrated your whole person, has sanctified your ear, and made it holy before God. Be careful, therefore, how you lend it to such as may distill into it the poison of falsehood, and so dull and deaden it forever to the voice of God's truth. But rather keep that ear turned always in humble attention to the Lord, alert to catch His slightest whisper, and quick to detect His faintest call to duty; caring little what men may say, if you can hear your Father saying, "Blessed is the man that heareth Me."

The second thought of my text is more specific: "Watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors."

It is not enough that we hear when God speaks; we must watch daily at His gate, to learn His will — waiting for Him to find out to what service he would have us set our hands, and upon what errands He would have us go. This is the posture of the servant of the Lord. It seems to me that we have too much fallen into the idea that we are simply to be served by God, rather than to serve Him, that we are to be ministered unto, rather than to minister. And so we come to His door, and knock, saying, "Give us this day our daily bread." and we knock again, saying, "For
give us our trespasses”—just as we ought; but how often do we come with these words, “Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do, to-day? what task hast Thou for me to fulfill? what word hast Thou for me to speak?”’ Alas! what habitual beggars we have been at God’s door, when we should have been servants, attending on Him to do His bidding. Lazarus, with his sores, laid at the rich man’s gate; and the lame man lying daily at the gate of the temple called Beautiful, to ask alms—these are the types of the great mass of Christians, I am afraid,—coming with their sores of sin and sorrow, to be healed; coming with their poverty and wretchedness, to be relieved; and if, per chance, they have no present sense of pain or poverty, thinking that they hardly need to come at all. Shame on us, Christian brethren! that we have so degraded our calling into that of spiritual paupers, when Christ has ordained us to be “stewards of the manifold grace of God!”’ God help us, if we have never been coming to Him, day after day, with the open supplicant hands, saying, “Give, give!” to come to-day, at least, with the nervèd and outstretched hand, saying, “Receive, O Lord, my humble service, and send me where I can best serve Thee.” I cannot tell you the glad surprise it gave me, when, of the scores of beggars whom I have fed at my door, one came back one day; and as I came out, expecting only a repetition of the old request for alms, he met me with a manly and self-respectful look, and said: “Sir, you gave me food, the other day; I come to-day to ask that you will give me work, in return for it.” He was only one, perhaps, of a hundred, who have ever returned, except to repeat their requests for help. But how is it in the Church, whom Christ has redeemed, and daily fed upon His bounty? “Were there not ten cleansed; but where are the nine?” —the nine who should return to give glory to God, for their salvation, in offering their bodies and their substance, their time and their talent, for His service. So many requests for pardon and forgiveness, and never one denied; so many prayers for blessing, and never one withheld; but so few offers of service, to delight the Lord who bought us, by showing how deeply grateful we are to Him, for what He has done. Do you wonder that when so few come to proffer to God their ser-

vices, and they so infrequently, He should bring out this golden benediction, this diadem of blessing, for the man that comes every day, asking to be sent on his Master’s errands, and to be set about his Master’s business: “Blessed is the man that watcheth daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors”?

Now, the inspiration to this spirit of watchful service comes from two sources, as we find in Scripture; viz., from a constant remembrance of the cross, and from a constant expectation of His coming. The Lord has put us between these two mighty motives, that we may feel the constant sway of both of them. If the cross is the “door of heaven,” as it has been so fittingly called, there is the place to go to get our commission and receive our orders. For the lintels of that door are sprinkled with the blood of God’s Lamb, that has saved us from the destroying angel. If that crimson token assures our faith as we gaze upon it, won’t it also stir to its highest exercise our consecration? It is here that the apostle Paul brings us to get our motive and inspiration for service. Mighty logician truly, he, when speaking by the Holy Ghost, and he puts the “wherefore” and “therefore” in their true place. “I beseech you, therefore; brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice.” “For ye are bought with a price; therefore, glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s.” Looking up at the cross, seeing the handwriting of ordinances that were against us nailed there and taken away, can we help saying, “This, Lord, hast Thou done for me; what can I do for Thee?” That is the inevitable logic of love and gratitude. Who has not heard that touching story of the East India slave girl redeemed by an English officer, and saved from a degraded life? And how she followed him wherever he went, watching every step, and anticipating every want with tireless vigilance; and when strangers, wondering at her devotion, asked, “Why are you so attentive to this man?” she would answer with beaming face: “Oh, he redeemed me; he rescued me!” I look up to that one hundred and forty-four thousand described in the vision of the Apocalypse, and of whom that exquisitely beautiful thing is said, “These are they which follow the
Lamb whithersoever He goeth.” And if I ask the reason of this wondrous devotion, I find it told in the next line, “These were redeemed from among men.” Oh! if we remembered that single word, “redeemed,” as we ought, I believe that every morning would find us waiting at our Master’s gate, and asking, What, Lord, may I do for thee to-day?

“So many hands that without heed
Still touch Thy wounds and make them bleed!
So many feet that, day by day,
Still wander from Thy fold astray!”

What may I do in Thy name to bring these wanderers back, that they may find healing from Thy wounds?

And that other thought must be with us—the Master cometh. No period has been fixed for His absence; no time appointed us in which to finish our work. Tomorrow He may come back and reckon with me. I must not say, Next day or next week I will go to His gate to learn His will; I must go every day. As those who guarded the gates and porches of the temple by night knew that their superiors might at any time be making their rounds of inspection to learn if the watchmen were on duty, and would strip them of their garments and degrade them from office if they found them sleeping, so our Lord warns us: “Behold, I come as a thief; blessed is he that watcheth and keepeth his garments.” At His door we must be always attending. That door is now a door of mercy, open to all who will come and knock. But when once the Master of the house has risen up and shut to the door, then our time of watching will be over, and the time of invitation to poor sinners will be ended. Because we never waited by that gate here, shall we stand there with piteous knocking, crying, “Open unto me, open unto me!” while He from within shall answer, “I never knew you”? He is calling you to-day. Oh, enter while there is room. Rouse you from the sleep of sin, and, with the watchman’s girded loins and lighted lamp, stand watching for souls, as they that must give account, and watching for the Master, that you may have his benediction.

What, then, is this blessedness of which we have been speaking? It is, as we have seen, the token that we are the sons and servants of God; for hearing God’s Word is, at once, the condition and proof of our sonship. That Word is the “incorruptible seed,” by which we are born again; to listen to it, and receive it, is again and again declared the condition of our regeneration; so that we are warranted, by other Scripture, in adding another link to Paul’s chain of grace, and saying, “Life cometh by faith, and “faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.” Hence how vastly serious the issues depending on our hearing. Do you recall the beatitude of Christ, which is a perfect echo of this. A certain woman, seeing Jesus, lifted up her voice and said unto Him, “Blessed is the womb that bare Thee, and the paps which Thou hast sucked.” But He said, “Yea, rather, blessed are they that hear the Word of God, and keep it.” To be the mother of the Lord, through giving Him birth, is a great honor, entitling her on whom it is bestowed to be hailed by all generations, as, “Blessed among women;” but to be the brother of Christ, by being “born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the Word of God, which liveth and abideth forever,” is an incomparably greater honor, entitling him on whom it rests to be hailed by God Himself, “Blessed is the man that heareth Me.” And if we are sons, we shall be servants, taking ever the attitude of our elder brother, who, by His incarnation, “took upon Him the form of a servant,” and who was ever among His brethren “as one that serveth.” Oh, the joy of sharing with him his service, as we share with him his life! not sleeping while that which is behind in His sufferings remains to be filled up, so that He must chide us, as of old, “What, could ye not watch with me one hour?” but waiting, as He did, day by day, at the Father’s gate, to hear your commission, and then going forth to fulfill it. Let us magnify our office, as the servants of Jesus Christ, that at His coming we may hear Him say to us, “Blessed are those servants whom the Lord, when He cometh, shall find watching.”

“Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others” (Phil. ii. 4). “A selfish man’s heart is no bigger than his coffin—just room enough for himself.” —Guthrie.