

A BOTTLE IN THE SMOKE

NO. 71

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 AT NEW PARK STREET CHAPEL, SOUTHWARK.

“For I am become like a bottle in the smoke; yet do I not forget Your statutes.”
Psalm 119:83.

THE figure of “a bottle in the smoke” is essentially oriental. We must therefore go to the East for its explanation. This we will supply to our hearers and readers in the words of the Author of the Pictorial Bible—“This doubtless refers to a leather bottle of kid or goatskin. The peasantry of Asia keep many articles, both dry and liquid, in such bottles, which, for security, are suspended from the roof, or hung against the walls of their humble dwellings. Here they soon become quite black with smoke. For as in the dwellings of the peasantry there are seldom any chimneys and the smoke can only escape through an aperture in the roof, or by the door. Therefore the apartment is full of dense smoke whenever a fire is kindled in it.

“And in those nights and days when the smokiness of the hovels in which we daily rested during a winter’s journey in Persia, Armenia and Turkey seemed to make the cold and weariness of actual travel a relief, we had ample occasion to observe the peculiar blackness of such skin vessels, arising from the manner in which substances offering a surface of this sort, receive the full influence of the smoke and detain the minute particles of soot which rest upon them. When such vessels do not contain liquids and are not quite filled by the solids which they hold, they contract a shrunk and shriveled appearance to which the Psalmist may also possibly allude as well as to the blackness.

“But we presume that the leading idea refers to the latter circumstance, as in the East *blackness* has an opposite significance to the felicitous meaning of *whiteness*. David had doubtless seen bottles of this description hanging up in his tent when a wanderer and though he might have had but few in his palace, yet in the cottages of his own poor people he had, no doubt, witnessed them. Hence he says of himself, ‘I am become,’ by trouble and affliction, by trial and persecution, ‘like a bottle in the smoke; yet do I not forget Your statutes.’ ”

First, *God’s people have their trials*—they get put in the smoke. Secondly, *God’s people feel their trials*—they “become like a bottle in the smoke.” Thirdly, *God’s people do not forget God’s statutes in their trials*—“I am become like a bottle in the smoke; yet do I not forget Your statutes.”

I. GOD’S PEOPLE HAVE THEIR TRIALS. This is an old truth, as old as the everlasting hills, because trials were in the Covenant and certainly the Covenant is as old as the eternal mountains. It was never designed by God when He chose His people, that they should be an untried people—that they should be chosen to peace and safety, to perpetual happiness here below and freedom from sickness and the pains of mortality. But rather, on the other hand, when He made the Covenant He made the *rod* of the Covenant, too. When He drew up the charter of privileges, He also drew up the charter of chastisements. When He gave us the roll of heirship, He put down the rods among the things to which we should inevitably be heirs.

Trials are a part of our lot. They were predestinated for us in God’s solemn decrees. And so surely as the stars are fashioned by His hands and He has fixed their orbits, so surely are our trials weighed in scales. He has predestinated their season and their place, their intensity and the effect they shall have upon us. Good men must never expect to escape troubles. If they do, they shall be disappointed—none of their predecessors have escaped them—

*“The path of sorrow and that path alone
 Leads to the land where sorrow is unknown.”*

Mark Job, of whose patience you have heard. Read you well of Abraham, for he had his trials and by his faith under them, when he offered up Isaac, he became “the father of the faithful.” Note you well the biographies of all the Patriarchs, of all the Prophets, of all the Apostles and martyrs and you shall discover none of those, whom God made vessels of mercy, who were not hung up like bottles in the smoke.

It is ordained of old that the cross of trouble should be engraved on every vessel of mercy, as the royal mark whereby the king's vessels of honor are distinguished. As surely as we are born we are born to trouble, even as the sparks fly upwards. And when born again, it does seem as if we had a birth to double trouble. And double toil and trouble come to the man who has double grace and double mercy bestowed upon him. Good men must have their trials. They must expect to be like bottles in the smoke.

Sometimes these trials arise from *the poverty of their condition*. It is the bottle in the cottage which gets into the smoke, not the bottle in the palace. The Queen's plate knows nothing of smoke. We have seen at Windsor how carefully it is preserved. It knows nothing of trial, no hands are allowed to touch that, so as to injure it, although even it may be stolen by accident when the guards are not careful over it. Still, it was not intended to be subject to smoke.

It is the bottle in the tent of the poor Arab that dwells in the smoke. So with God's poor people. They must expect to have smoke in their dwellings. We should suppose that smoke does not enter into the house of the rich, although even then our supposition would be false. But certainly we must suppose there is more smoke where the chimney is ill built and the home is altogether of bad construction. It is the poverty of the Arab that puts his bottle in the smoke—so the poverty of Christians exposes them to much trouble and in as much as God's people are for the most part poor, for that reason must they always be for the most part in affliction.

We shall not find many of God's people in the higher ranks. Not many of them shall ever be illustrious in this world. Until happier times come, when kings shall be their nursing fathers and queens their nursing mothers, it must still be true, that "God has chosen the poor in this world, rich in faith, that they should be heirs of the kingdom." Poverty has its privileges, for Christ has lived in it. But it has its ills, it has its smoke, it has its trials. You know not sometimes how you shall be provided for. You are often pinched for food and raiment, you are vexed with anxious cares, you wonder from where tomorrow's food shall come and where you shall obtain your daily supplies. It is because of your poverty that you are hung up like a bottle in the smoke.

Many of God's people, however, are not poor. And even if they are, poverty does not occasion so much trouble to them as some suppose—for God, in the midst of poverty, makes His children very glad and so cheers their hearts in the cottage that they scarce know whether it is a palace or a hovel. Yes, He does send such sweet music across the waters of their woe, that they know not whether they are on dry land or not.

But there are other trials—and this brings us to remark that *our trials frequently result from our comforts*. What makes the smoke? Why, it is the fire by which the Arab warms his hands, that smokes his bottle and smokes him, too. So, Beloved, our comforts usually furnish us with troubles. It is the law of nature that there should never be a good, without having an ill connected with it. What if the stream fertilizes the land? It can sometimes drown the inhabitants. What if the fire cheer us? Does it not frequently consume our dwellings? What if the sun enlightens us? Does he not sometimes scorch and smite us with his heat?

What if the rain brings forth our food and causes the flowers to blossom on the face of the earth? Does it not also break the young blossom from the trees and cause many diseases? There is nothing good without its ill, there is no fire without its smoke. The fire of our comfort will always have the smoke of trial with it. You will find it so, if you study the comforts you have in your own family. You have relations. Mark you—every relationship engenders its trial and every fresh relationship upon which you enter opens to you, at one time certainly, a new source of joys, but infallibly also a new source of sorrows.

Are you parents? Your children are your joy. But those children cause you some smoke, because you fear lest they should not be brought up in "the nurture and admonition of the Lord." And it may be, when they come to riper years that they will grieve your spirits—God grant they may not break your hearts by their sins! You have wealth. Well, that has its joys with it. But still, has it not its trials and its troubles? Has not the rich man more to care for than the poor? He who has nothing sleeps soundly, for the thief will not molest him. But he who has abundance often trembles lest the rough wind should blow down that which he has built—lest the rude storm should wreck that argosy laden with his gold—lest an overwhelming and sudden turn in the tide of commerce should sweep away his speculations and destroy his hopes.

Just as the birds that visit us fly away from us, so do our joys bring sorrow with them. In fact, joy and sorrow are twins. The blood which runs in the veins of sorrow, runs in the veins of joy, too. For what is the blood of sorrow—is it

not the tear? And what is the blood of joy? When we are full of joy do we not weep? Ah, that we do. The same drop which expresses joy is sorrow's own emblem. We weep for joy and we weep for sorrow. Our fire gives smoke to tell us that our comforts have their trials with them. Brothers and Sisters! You have extraordinary fires which others have never kindled—expect then to have extraordinary smoke. You have the presence of Christ. But then you will have the smoke of fear, lest you should lose it.

You have the promise of God's Word—there is the fire of it—but you have the smoke sometimes when you read it without the illumination of God's Spirit. You have the joy of assurance. But you have also the smoke of doubt which blows into your eye and well near blinds you. You have your trials and your trials arise from your comforts. The more comfort you have, the more fire you have, the more sorrows shall you have and the more smoke.

Again—the ministry is the great fire by which Christian men warm their hands. But the *ministry has much smoke with it*. How often have you come to this house of God and had your spirits lifted up! But perhaps as often you have come here to be cast down. Your harp strings at times have been all loose. You could not play a tune of joy upon them, you have come here and Christ tuned your harp so that it could awake, “like David's harp of solemn sound.” But at other times you have come here and had all the rejoicings removed from you by some solemn searching sermon.

Last Sabbath-Day how many of you there were like bottles in the smoke! This pulpit, which is intended at times to give you fire, is also intended to have smoke with it. It would not be God's pulpit if no smoke issued from it. When God made Sinai His pulpit, Sinai was altogether on a smoke. You have often been like bottles in the smoke—the smoke caused by the fire of God's own kindling, the fire of the Gospel ministry.

I think, however, that David had one more thought. The poor bottle in the smoke *keeps there for a long time, till it gets black*. It is not just one puff of smoke that comes upon it. The smoke is always going up, always girding the poor bottle. It lives in an atmosphere of smoke. So, Beloved, some of us hang up like bottles in the smoke for months, or for a whole year. No sooner do you get out of one trouble than you tumble into another. No sooner do you get up one hill than you have to mount another. It seems to be all up hill to Heaven with you. You feel that John Bunyan is right in his ditty—“A Christian man is seldom long at ease. When one trouble's gone, another does him seize.”

You are always in the smoke. You are linked perhaps with an ungodly partner. Or perhaps you are of a singular temperament and your temperament naturally puts clouds and darkness round about you so that you are always in the smoke. Well, Beloved, that was the condition of David. He was not just sometimes in trial—it seemed as if trials came to him every day. Each day had its cares. Each hour carried on its wings some fresh tribulation. Instead of bringing joy, each moment did but toll the knell of happiness and bring another grief. Well, if this is your case, fear not, you are not alone in your trials—but you see the truth of what is uttered here—you are become like bottles in the smoke.

II. This brings us to the second point—CHRISTIAN MEN FEEL THEIR TROUBLES. They are in the smoke. And they are like *bottles* in the smoke. There are some things that you might hang up in the smoke for many a day and they would never be much changed because they are so black now, that they could never be made any blacker. They are so shriveled now that they never could become any worse. But the poor skin bottle shrivels up in the heat, gets blacker and shows at once the effect of the smoke. It is not an unfeeling thing, like a stone—it is at once affected.

Now, some men think that grace makes a man unable to feel suffering. I have heard people insinuate that the martyrs did not endure much pain when they were being burned to death. But this is a mistake, Christian men are not like stones. They are like *bottles* in the smoke. In fact, if there is any difference, a Christian man feels his trials more than another because he traces them to God and that makes them more acute, as coming from the God whom he loves. But at the same time, I grant you, it makes them more easy to bear because he believes they will work the comfortable fruits of righteousness.

A dog will bite the stone that is thrown at it, but a man would resent the injury on the man that threw the stone. Stupid, foolish, carnal unbelief quarrels with the trial. But faith goes into the Court of King's Bench at once and asks its God, “why do you contend with me?” But even faith itself does not avert the pain of the chastisement it enables us to endure—but it does not remove the trial. The Christian is not wrong in airing way to his feelings—did not his Master shed tears when Lazarus was dead? And did He not, when on the Cross, utter the exceeding bitter cry, “My God! My God! Why have you forsaken Me?”

Our Heavenly Father never intended to take away our griefs when under trial. He does not put us beyond the reach of the flood but builds us an ark in which we float, until the water is ultimately assuaged and we rest on the Mount Ararat of Heaven forever. God takes not His people to an Elysium where they become impervious to painful feelings—but He gives us grace to endure our trials and to sing His praises while we suffer. “I am become like a bottle in the smoke.”

The trial that we do not feel is no trial at all. I remember a remarkable case of assault and battery that was tried some-time ago. I knew a friend who happened to be in court. It was a most singular affair. For when the prosecutor was requested to state in what the assault consisted. He said, in curious English, “Ah, Sir, he struck me a most tremendous blow.” “Well, but where did he strike you?” “Well, Sir, he did not hit me. It only just grazed me.” Of course the judge said here was no assault and battery, because there was no real blow struck.

So we sometimes meet with persons, who say, “I could bear that trial if it did not touch my feelings.” Of course you could, for then it would be no trial at all. Suppose a man were to see his house and property burned, would you call it a trial, if he could do as Sheridan did, when his theater was burned? He went to a house opposite and sat down drinking and jokingly said, “Surely, every man has a right to sit and warm his hands by his own fireside.” It is *feeling* a trial that makes it a trial. The essence of the trial lies in my feeling it. And God intended His trials to be felt. His rods are not made of wheat straw, they are made of true birch. And His blows fall just where we feel them. He does not strike us on the iron plates of our armor. He smites us where we are sure to be affected.

And yet more—*trials which are not felt are unprofitable trials.* If there is no blueness in the wound, then the soul is not made better. If there is no crying out, then there will be no emptying out of our depravity. It is just so much as we *feel* that we are profited. A trial unfelt must be a trial unsanctified. A trial under which we do not feel at all cannot be a blessing to us because we are only blessed by feeling it, under the agency of God’s Holy Spirit. Christian men and women! Do not blush because you are like a *bottle* in the smoke—because you are sensitive under affliction—for so you ought to be.

Do not let others say you ought not to feel it so much, because your husband is dead, or your child is dead, or you have lost your property. Just tell them that you know you ought for God sent the trouble that you might feel it. (Not excessively and murmur against God) but that you might feel the rod and then kiss it. That is patience—not when we do not feel—but when we feel it and say, “Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him.” “I am like a bottle in the smoke.”

Now, a bottle, when it is in the smoke, *gets very black*—so does the Christian—when he is in the smoke of trial, or in the smoke of the Gospel ministry, or the smoke of persecution—gets very black in his own esteem. It is marvelous how bright we are when everything goes right with us. But it is equally marvelous how black we get when a little tribulation comes upon us. We think very well of ourselves while there is no smoke. But let the smoke come and it just reveals the blackness of our hearts. Trials teach us what we are. They dig up the soil and let us see what we are made of. They turn up some of the ill weeds on the surface. They are good for this reason—they make us know our blackness.

A bottle, too, that hangs up in the smoke, will become *very useless*. So do we, often, when we are under a trying ministry, or a trying Providence, feel that we are very useless. We feel good for nothing, like a bottle that has been hung up in the smoke that nobody will ever drink out of any more, because it will smoke everything that is put in it. We feel that we are of no use to anybody—that we are poor unprofitable creatures. In our joys we are honorable creatures. We scarcely think the Creator could do without us—but when we are in trouble, we feel, “I am a worm and no man”—good for nothing. Let me die. I have become useless, as well as black, “like a bottle in the smoke.”

And then a bottle in the smoke is *an empty bottle*. It would not have been hung up in the smoke unless it had been empty. And very often under trials how empty we become. We are full enough in our joys. But the smoke and heat soon dry every atom of moisture out of us. All our hope is gone, all our strength is departed, we then feel that we are empty sinners and want a full Christ to save us. We are like bottles in the smoke.

Have I described any of your characters? I dare say some of you are like bottles in the smoke. You do feel your trials. You have a soft, tender heart and the arrows of the Almighty stick fast in it. You are like a piece of seaweed, affected by every change of the weather. Not like a piece of rock, that might be hung up and would never change—you are capable of being affected and it is quite right you should be—you are “become like a bottle in the smoke.”

III. And now, Beloved, the third and blessed thought is that CHRISTIANS, THOUGH THEY HAVE TROUBLES AND FEEL THEIR TROUBLES, DO NOT IN THEIR TROUBLES FORGET GOD’S STATUTES.

What are God's statutes? God has two kinds of statutes, both of them engraved in eternal brass. The first are *the statutes of His commands*. And of these He has said, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but not one jot or tittle of the Law shall fail till all be fulfilled." These statutes are like the statutes of the Medes and Persians. They are binding upon all His people. His precepts are a light and easy yoke. But they are one which no man must cast from his shoulders. All must carry the commands of Christ and all who hope to be saved by Him must take up his cross daily and follow Him.

Well, the Psalmist said, "In the midst of my trials I have not swerved from Your statutes. I have not attempted to violate Your commands. I have not in any way moved from the strict path of integrity. And in the midst of all my persecutions, I have gone straight on, never once forgetting God's statutes or commands." And then again—there are *statutes of promise*, which are equally firm, each of them as immortal as God who uttered them. David did not forget these. For he said of them, "Your statutes have been my song, in the house of my pilgrimage." And he could not have sung about them if he had forgotten them.

Why was it David still held fast to God's statutes? First of all, *David was not a bottle in the fire*, or else he would have forgotten them. Our trials are smoke but not fire. They are very uncomfortable but they do not consume us. In other parts of Scripture, the figure of fire may be applied to our trials but here it would not be appropriate, because the bottle would be burned up if it were in the fire. But the Christian may say, "True, it is all smoke round about me but there is nothing which tends to burn up my piety. Smoke may dim my evidence but it cannot burn it. It may and certainly will be obnoxious to my eye and nose and all my senses, but it cannot burn my limbs. It may stop my breath and prevent my drinking in the pure air of Heaven, but it cannot consume my lungs and burn the vital parts of my body."

Ah, it is well for you, O Christian, that there is more smoke than fire in your trials. And there is no cause why you should forget your God in your troubles. They may have a tendency to drive you from Him, but like great waves they often wash the drift wood of the poor lost boats upon the beach of God's love. And the mast that might have floated out to sea and been carried, no one knows where, is often stranded on the shore and there once more is made to do fresh service. So are you, Christian, washed on shore by the waves of your trouble. But never are you washed away by them. "I have not forgotten Your statutes."

Another reason why, when David was in the smoke, he did not forget God's statutes was this—*Jesus Christ was in the smoke with him and the statutes were in the smoke with him, too*. God's statutes have been in the fire, as well as God's people. Both the promise and the precept are in the furnace. And if I hang up in the smoke, like a bottle, I see hanging up by my side God's commands, covered with soot and smoke, subject to the same perils. Suppose I am persecuted—it is a comfort to know that men do not persecute *me*, but my Master's Truth. It is a singular thing with regard to all the envenomed shafts that have been hurled at me—that they have generally fallen on that part of my frame which is most invulnerable—because they have generally fallen on something I have quoted from somebody else or proved from Scripture.

They may go on. It is sweet to think that Jesus Christ is in the smoke as well as we are. And the more flame there is the better we shall be able to see our Master in the smoke with us—

*"By God's command wherever I stray,
Sorrow attends me all the way,
A never failing friend.
And if my sufferings may augment
Your praise, behold me well content—
Let sorrow still attend!
It costs me no regret, that she
Who followed Christ should follow me
And though wherever she goes,
Thorns spring spontaneous at her feet,
I love her and extract a sweet
From all my bitter woes."*

Another reason why David did not forget the statutes was *they were in the soul, where the smoke does not enter*. Smoke does not enter the interior of the bottle. It only affects the exterior. So it is with God's children—the smoke does not enter into their hearts. Christ is there and grace is there and Christ and grace are both unaffected by the smoke. Come

up, clouds of smoke! Curl upward till you envelop me! Still will I hang on the Nail, Christ Jesus—that sure Nail which never can be moved from its place. And I will feel that “while the outward man decays, the inward man is renewed day by day.” And the statutes being there, I do not forget them, “For I am become like a bottle in the smoke; yet do I not forget Your statutes.”

To such of you as can join with David, let me give a word of consolation. If you have been persecuted and still hold fast by God’s Word—if you have been afflicted and still persevere in the knowledge of our Lord and Master—you have every reason to believe yourself a Christian. If under your trials and troubles you remain just what you were when at ease, you may then hope and not only so, but steadfastly believe and be assured that you are a child of God.

Some of you, however, are very much like Christians when you hear sermons full of promises, When I preach to you about bruised reeds, or address you with the invitation, “Come unto Me, all you that labor.” But when I give you a smoky sermon—one which you cannot endure—if you then can say, “Guilty, weak and helpless I may be, but still I fall into His arms. Sinful I know I am and I have grave cause for doubt, but still—

*‘There, there, unshaken will I rest,
Till this vile body dies.’*

I know, poor, weak and helpless though I am, that I have a rich Almighty Friend.” If you can stand a little smoke, then you may believe yourself to be a child of God.

But there are some people we know of, who are shocked with a very puff of smoke—they cannot endure it, they go out at once—just like rats out of the hold of a ship when they begin to smoke it. But if you can live in the smoke and say, “I feel it and still can endure it”—if you can stand a smoky sermon and endure a smoky trial and hold fast to God under a smoky persecution, then you have reason to believe that you are certainly a child of God.

Fair-weather birds! You are good for nothing! It is the stormy petrels that are God’s favorites. He loves the birds that can swim in the tempest. He loves those who can move in the storm and, like the eagle, companion of the lightning flash, can make the wind their chariot and ride upon forked flames of fire.

If in the heat of battle, when your helmet is bruised by some powerful enemy, you can still hold up your head and say, “I know whom I have believed,” and do not swerve from your post, then you are verily a child of Heaven. For constancy, endurance and perseverance are the true marks of a hero of the Cross and of the invincible warriors of the Lord. Those are no invincible ships that flee away before a storm. He is no brave warrior who hears reports from others that a fort is impregnable and dares not attack it. But he is brave who dashes his ship beneath the guns, or runs her well-near aground and gives broadside after broadside with a desperate valour against his foe.

He who in the smoke and the tempest, in the clamor and roar of the battle, can yet coolly give his commands and knowing that every man is expected to do his duty, can fight valiantly—he is a brave commander, he is a true soldier. He shall receive from his Master a crown of glory. O Christian! Cleave to your Master in the smoke, hold onto your Lord in trials and you shall be refined by your afflictions. You shall exceedingly increase and be profited beyond measure!

However, I have some here who can consume their own smoke. There are some of my congregation who, when they have any trials, can manage to get over them very well themselves. They say, “Well, I don’t care, you seem to be a sad set of simpletons, you feel everything. But as for me, it all rolls off and I don’t care for anything.” No, I dare say you don’t. But the time will come when you will find the truth of that little story you used to read when you were children, that “don’t care” came to a very bad end. These persons are not like bottles in the smoke, but like pieces of wood hanging over it. But they will find there is something more than smoke by-and-by.

They will come to a place where there is not only smoke but fire. And though they can endure the smoke of this world’s troubles, they will find it not so easy as they imagine to endure the unutterable burnings and the everlasting flames of that pit whose fire knows no extinction and whose worm shall know no death. Oh, hardened Sinner, you have sorrows now which are like the skirmishers before an army, a few light-armed troops to lead the way for whole hosts of God’s avengers, who shall trample you beneath their feet.

One or two drops of woe have fallen on the pavement of your life, you laugh at them. Ah, but they are the heralds of a shower of fire and brimstone which God shall rain out of Heaven upon your soul throughout eternity. And yet you may be pitying us poor Christians because of our troubles and sufferings. Pity us, do you? Ah, but our light affliction is but for a moment and it works for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory. Take your pity back and reserve it for

yourselves. For your light joy, which is but for a moment, works out for you a far more exceeding and eternal weight of torment. And your little bliss will be the mother of an everlasting, unutterable torture, which we shall happily escape. Your sun will soon set and at its setting your night shall come and when your night comes, it will be night forever, without hope of light again.

Before your sun sets my Hearer, may God give you grace. Do you inquire what you should do to be saved? Again comes the old answer—"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and be baptized and you shall be saved." If you are no sinner, I have no salvation for you. If you are a Pharisee and know not your sins, I have no Christ to preach to you. I have no Heaven to offer to you, as some have. But if you are a sinner, a *bona fide* sinner—if you are a real sinner, not a sham one, I have this to tell you—"Jesus Christ came to save sinners, even the chief."

If you will believe on Him you shall go out of this house of prayer, absolved, absolved, without a sin—forgiven, pardoned, washed, without a stain—accepted in the Beloved. As long as you live, that pardon shall avail you. And when you die you will have nothing to do but to show it at the gates of Paradise to gain admittance. And then, in a nobler and sweeter song, that pardon shall form the basis of your praise while Heaven's choirs shall sing, or while the praise of the Eternal shall be the chant of the universe. God bless you! Amen.

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