

"Obedience without Love, as Instanced in the Character of Balaam"
Parochial and Plain Sermons vol. IV sermon 2
St. John Henry Newman
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"The word that God putteth in my mouth, that shall I speak." Numb. xxii. 38.

1 WHEN we consider the Old Testament as written by divine inspiration, and preserved,
2 beyond the time of its own Dispensation, for us Christians,—as acknowledged and
3 delivered over to us by Christ Himself, and pronounced by St. Paul to be "profitable for
4 doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness," [2 Tim. iii. 16.] —we
5 ought not surely to read any portion of it with indifference, nay, without great and
6 anxious interest. "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?" is the sort of inquiry which
7 spontaneously arises in the serious mind. Christ and His Apostle cannot have put the
8 law and the Prophets into our hands for nothing. I would this thought were more
9 carefully weighed than it commonly is. We profess indeed to revere the Old Testament;
10 yet, for some reason or other, at least one considerable part of it, the historical, is
11 regarded by the mass, even of men who think about religion, as merely historical, as a
12 relation of facts, as antiquities; not in its divine characters, not in its practical bearings,
13 not in reference to themselves. The notion that God speaks in it to them personally, the
14 question, "*What* does He say?" "*What* must I *do*?" does not occur to them. They
15 consider that the Old Testament concerns them only as far as it can be made typical of
16 one or two of the great Christian doctrines; they do not consider it in its fulness, and in
17 its literal sense, as a collection of deep moral lessons, such as are not vouchsafed in
18 the New, though St. Paul expressly says that it is "profitable for instruction in
19 righteousness."

20 If the Old Testament history generally be intended as a permanent instruction to the
21 Church, much more, one would think, must such prominent and remarkable passages in
22 it as the history of Balaam. Yet I suspect a very great number of readers carry off little
23 more from it than the impression of the miracle which occurs in it, the speaking of his
24 ass. And not unfrequently they talk more lightly on the subject than is expedient. Yet I
25 think some very solemn and startling lessons may be drawn from the history, some of
26 which I shall now attempt to set before you.

27 What is it which the chapters in question present to us? The first and most general
28 account of Balaam would be this;—that he was a very eminent person in his age and
29 country, that he was courted and gained by the enemies of Israel, and that he promoted
30 a wicked cause in a very wicked way; that, when he could do nothing else for it, he
31 counselled the Moabites to employ their women as means of seducing the chosen
32 people into idolatry; and that he fell in battle in the war which ensued. These are the
33 chief points, the prominent features of his history as viewed at a distance;—and
34 repulsive indeed they are. He took on him the office of a tempter, which is especially the
35 Devil's office. But Satan himself does not seem so hateful near as at a distance; and
36 when we look into Balaam's history closely, we shall find points of character which may
37 well interest those who do not consider his beginning and his end. Let us then approach

38 him more nearly, and forget for a moment the summary account of him, which I have
39 just been giving.

40 Now first he was blessed with God's especial favour. You will ask at once, How could so
41 bad a man be in God's favour? but I wish you to put aside reasonings, and contemplate
42 facts. I say he was especially favoured by God; God has a store of favours in His
43 treasure-house, and of various kinds,—some for a time, some for ever,—some implying
44 His approbation, others not. He showers favours even on the bad. He makes His sun to
45 rise on the unjust as well as on the just. He willeth not the death of a sinner. He is said
46 to have loved the young ruler, whose heart, notwithstanding, was upon the world. His
47 loving-mercy extends over all His works. How He separates in His own divine thought,
48 kindness from approbation, time from eternity, what He does from what He foresees, we
49 know not and need not inquire. At present He is loving to all men, as if He did not
50 foresee that some are to be saints, others reprobates to all eternity. He dispenses His
51 favours variously,—gifts, graces, rewards, faculties, circumstances being indefinitely
52 diversified, nor admitting of discrimination or numbering on our part. Balaam, I say, was
53 in His favour; not indeed for his holiness' sake, not for ever; but in a certain sense,
54 according to His inscrutable purpose,—who chooses whom He will choose, and exalts
55 whom He will exalt, without destroying man's secret responsibilities or His own
56 governance, and the triumph of truth and holiness, and His own strict impartiality in the
57 end. Balaam was favoured in an especial way above the mere heathen. Not only had he
58 the grant of inspiration, and the knowledge of God's will, an insight into the truths of
59 morality, clear and enlarged, such as even we Christians cannot surpass; but he was
60 even admitted to conscious intercourse with God, such as we Christians have not. In
61 our Sunday Services, you may recollect, we read the chapters which relate to this
62 intercourse; and we do not read those which record the darker passages of his history.
63 Now, do you not think that most persons, who know only so much of him as our Sunday
64 lessons contain, form a very mild judgment about him? They see him indeed to be on
65 the wrong side, but still view him as a prophet of God. Such a judgment is not incorrect
66 as far as it goes; and I appeal to it, if it be what I think it is, as a testimony how highly
67 Balaam was in God's favour.

68 But again, Balaam was, in the ordinary and commonly-received sense of the word,
69 without straining its meaning at all, a very *conscientious* man. That this is so, will be
70 plain from some parts of his conduct and some speeches of his, of which I proceed to
71 remind you; and which will show also his enlightened and admirable view of moral and
72 religious obligation. When Balak sent to him to call him to curse Israel, he did not make
73 up his mind for himself, as many a man might do, or according to the suggestions of
74 avarice and ambition. No, he brought the matter before God in prayer. He *prayed* before
75 he did what he did, as a religious man ought to do. Next, when God forbade his going,
76 he at once, as he ought, positively refused to go. "Get you into your land," he said, "for
77 the Lord refuseth to give me leave to go with you." Balak sent again a more pressing
78 message and more lucrative offers, and Balaam was even more decided than before. "If
79 Balak," he said, "would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go beyond the
80 word of the Lord my God, to do less or more." Afterwards God gave him leave to go. "If

81 the men come to call thee, rise up, and go with them." [Numb. xxii.] Then, and not till
82 then, he went.

83 Almighty God added, "Yet the word which I shall say unto thee, that shalt thou do."
84 Now, in the next place, observe how strictly he obeyed this command. When he first
85 met Balak, he said, in the words of the text, "Lo I am come unto thee; have I now any
86 power at all to say any thing? the word that God putteth in my mouth, that shall I speak."
87 Again, when he was about to prophesy, he said, "Whatsoever He showeth me I will tell
88 thee;" [Numb. xxiii.] and he did so, in spite of Balak's disappointment and mortification to
89 hear him bless Israel. When Balak showed his impatience, he only replied calmly, "Must
90 I not take heed to speak that which the Lord hath put in my mouth?" Again he
91 prophesied, and again it was a blessing; again Balak was angered, and again the
92 prophet firmly and serenely answered, "Told not I thee, saying, All that the Lord
93 speaketh, that I must do?" A third time he prophesied blessing; and now Balak's anger
94 was kindled, and he smote his hands together, and bade him depart to his place. But
95 Balaam was not thereby moved from his duty. "The wrath of a king is as messengers of
96 death." [Prov. xvi. 14.] Balak might have instantly revenged himself upon the prophet;
97 but Balaam, not satisfied with blessing Israel, proceeded, as a prophet should, to deliver
98 himself of what remained of the prophetic burden, by foretelling more pointedly than
99 before, destruction to Moab and the other enemies of the chosen people. He prefaced
100 his prophecy with these unacceptable words,—"Spake I not also unto thy messengers
101 which thou sentest unto me, saying, If Balak would give me his house full of silver and
102 gold, I cannot go beyond the commandment of the Lord, to do either good or bad of
103 mine own mind? but what the Lord saith, that will I speak. And now behold, I go unto my
104 people; come, therefore, and I will advertise thee what this people shall do to thy people
105 in the latter days." After delivering his conscience, he "rose up, and went and returned
106 to his place."

107 All this surely expresses the conduct and the feelings of a high-principled, honourable,
108 conscientious man. Balaam, I say, was certainly such, in that very sense in which we
109 commonly use those words. He said, and he did; he professed, and he acted according
110 to his professions. There is no inconsistency in word and deed. He obeys as well as
111 talks about religion; and this being the case, we shall feel more intimately the value of
112 the following noble sentiments which he lets drop from time to time, and which, if he had
113 shown less firmness in his conduct, might have passed for mere words, the words of a
114 maker of speeches, a sophist, moralist, or orator. "Let me die the death of the righteous,
115 and let my last end be like his." "God is not a man that He should lie; neither the son of
116 man, that He should repent ... Behold, I have received commandment to bless; and He
117 hath blessed, and I cannot reverse it." "I shall see Him, but not now; I shall behold Him,
118 but not nigh." It is remarkable that these declarations are great and lofty in their mode of
119 expression; and the saying of his recorded by the prophet Micah is of the same kind.
120 Balak asked what sacrifices were acceptable to God. Balaam answered, "He hath
121 showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do
122 justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" [Micah vi. 8.]

123 Viewing then the inspired notices concerning Balaam in all their parts, we cannot deny
124 to him the praise which, if those notices have a plain meaning, they certainly do convey,
125 that he was an honourable and religious man, with a great deal of what was great and
126 noble about him; a man whom any one of us at first sight would have trusted, sought out
127 in our difficulties, perhaps made the head of a party, and any how spoken of with great
128 respect. We may indeed, if we please, say that he fell away afterwards from all this
129 excellence: though, after all, there is something shocking in such a notion. Nay, it is not
130 natural even that ordinarily honourable men should suddenly change; but however
131 this *may* be said,—it may be said he fell away; but, I presume, it *cannot* be said that he
132 was other than a high-principled man (in the language of the world) *when* he so spoke
133 and acted.

134 But now the strange thing is, that at this very time, *while* he so spoke and acted, he
135 seems, as in one sense to be in God's favour, so in another and higher to be under His
136 displeasure. If this be so, the supposition that he fell away will not be in point; the
137 difficulty it proposes to solve will remain; for it will turn out that he was displeasing to
138 God *amid* his many excellences. The passage I have in mind is this, as you will easily
139 suppose. "God's anger was kindled, because he went" with the princes of Moab, "and
140 the Angel of the Lord stood in the way for an adversary against him." Afterwards, when
141 God opened his eyes, "he saw the Angel of the Lord standing in the way, and his sword
142 drawn in his hand" ... "And Balaam said, I have *sinned*, for I knew not that thou stoodest
143 in the way against me; now, therefore, if it displease thee, I will get me back again." You
144 observe Balaam said, "I have sinned," *though* he avers he did not *know* that God was
145 his adversary. What makes the whole transaction the more strange is this,—that
146 Almighty God had said before, "If the men come to call thee, rise up, and go with them;"
147 and that when Balaam offered to go back again, the Angel repeated, "Go with the men."
148 And afterwards we find in the midst of his heathen enchantments {26} "God met
149 Balaam," and "put a word in his mouth;" and afterwards "the Spirit of God came unto
150 him."

151 Summing up then what has been said, we seem, in Balaam's history, to have the
152 following remarkable case, that is, remarkable according to our customary judgment of
153 things: a man divinely favoured, visited, influenced, guided, protected, eminently
154 honoured, illuminated,—a man possessed of an enlightened sense of duty, and of moral
155 and religious acquirements, educated, high-minded, conscientious, honourable, firm;
156 and yet on the side of God's enemies, personally under God's displeasure, and in the
157 end (if we go on to that) the direct instrument of Satan, and having his portion with the
158 unbelievers. I do not think I have materially overstated any part of this description; but if
159 it be correct only in substance, it certainly is most fearful, after allowing for incidental
160 exaggeration,—most fearful to every one of us, the more fearful the more we are
161 conscious to ourselves in the main of purity of intention in what we do, and
162 conscientious adherence to our sense of duty.

163 And now it is natural to ask, what is the *meaning* of this startling exhibition of God's
164 ways? Is it really possible that a conscientious and religious man should be found
165 among the enemies of God, nay, should be personally displeasing to Him, and that at

166 the very time God was visiting him with extraordinary favour? What a mystery is this!
167 Surely, if this be so, Revelation has added to our perplexities, not relieved them! What
168 instruction, what profit, what correction, what doctrine is there in such portions of
169 inspired Scripture?

170 In answering this difficulty, I observe in the first place, that it certainly is impossible,
171 quite impossible, that a really conscientious man should be displeasing to God; at the
172 same time it is possible to be *generally* conscientious, or what the world calls
173 honourable and high-principled, yet to be destitute of that religious fear and strictness,
174 which God calls conscientiousness, but which the world calls superstition or narrowness
175 of mind. And bearing this in mind, we shall, perhaps, have a solution of our perplexities
176 concerning Balaam.

177 And here I would make a remark: that when a passage of Scripture, descriptive of God's
178 dealings with man, is obscure or perplexing, it is as well to ask ourselves whether this
179 may not be owing to some insensibility, in ourselves or in our age, to certain
180 peculiarities of the Divine law or government therein involved. Thus, to those who do not
181 understand the nature and history of religious truth, our Lord's assertion about sending
182 a sword on earth is an obscurity. To those who consider sin a light evil, the doctrine of
183 eternal punishment is a difficulty. In like manner the history of the flood, of the call of
184 Abraham, of the plagues of Egypt, of the wandering in the desert, of the judgment on
185 Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, and a multitude of other occurrences, may be insuperable
186 difficulties, except to certain states and tempers of mind, to which, on the contrary, they
187 will seem quite natural and obvious. I consider that the history of Balaam is a striking
188 illustration of this remark. Those whose hearts, like Josiah's, are "tender," scrupulous,
189 sensitive in religious matters, will see with clearness and certainty what the real state of
190 the case was as regards him; on the other hand, our difficulties about it, if we have
191 them, are a presumption that the age we live in has not the key to a certain class of
192 Divine providences, is deficient in a certain class of religious principles, ideas, and
193 sensibilities. Let it be considered then whether the following remarks may not tend to
194 lessen our perplexity.

195 Balaam obeyed God from a sense of its being right to do so, but not from a *desire to*
196 *please Him*, not from *fear and love*. He had other ends, aims, wishes of his own, distinct
197 from God's will and purpose, and he would have effected these if he could. His
198 endeavour was, not to please God, but to please self without displeasing God; to pursue
199 his own ends *as far* as was consistent with his duty. In a word, he did not give his heart
200 to God, but obeyed Him, as a man may obey human law, or observe the usages of
201 society or his country, as something external to himself, because he knows he ought to
202 do so, from a sort of rational good sense, a conviction of its propriety, expediency, or
203 comfort, as the case may be.

204 You will observe he *wished* to go with Balak's messengers, only he felt he *ought not* to
205 go; and the problem which he attempted to solve was *how* to go and yet not offend God.
206 He was quite resolved he *would* any how act religiously and conscientiously; he was too
207 honourable a man to break any of his engagements; if he had given his word, it was

208 sacred; if he had duties, they were imperative: he had a character to maintain, and an
209 inward sense of propriety to satisfy; but he would have given the world to have got rid of
210 his duties; and the question was, *how* to do so without violence; and he did not care
211 about walking on the very brink of transgression, so that he could keep from falling over.
212 Accordingly he was not content with *ascertaining* God's will, but he attempted
213 to *change* it. He inquired of Him a *second time*, and this was to tempt Him. Hence, while
214 God bade him go, His anger was kindled against him because he went.

215 This surely is no uncommon character; rather, it is the common case even with the
216 more respectable and praiseworthy portion of the community. I say plainly, and without
217 fear of contradiction, though it is a serious thing to say, that the aim of most men
218 esteemed conscientious and religious, or who are what is called honourable, upright
219 men, is, to all appearance, not how to please God, but how to please themselves
220 without displeasing Him. I say confidently,—that is, if we may judge of men in general
221 by what we see,—that they make this world the first object in their minds, and use
222 religion as a corrective, a restraint, upon *too much* attachment to the world. They think
223 that religion is a negative thing, a sort of moderate love of the world, a moderate luxury,
224 a moderate avarice, a moderate ambition, and a moderate selfishness. You see this in
225 numberless ways. You see it in the course of trade, of public life, of literature, in all
226 matters where men have objects to pursue. Nay you see it in religious exertions; of
227 which it too commonly happens that the chief aim is, to attain *any how* a certain definite
228 end, religious indeed, but of man's own choosing; not, to please God, and *next*, if
229 possible, to attain it; not, to attain it religiously, or not at all.

230 This surely is so plain that it is scarcely necessary to enlarge upon it. Men do not take
231 for the object towards which they act, God's will, but certain maxims, rules, or
232 measures, right perhaps as far as they go, but defective because they admit of being
233 subjected to certain other ultimate ends, which are not religious. Men are just, honest,
234 upright, trustworthy; but all this not from the love and fear of God, but from a mere
235 feeling of obligation to be so, and in subjection to certain worldly objects. And thus they
236 are what is popularly called moral, without being religious. Such was Balaam. He was in
237 a popular sense a strictly moral, honourable, conscientious man; that he was not so in a
238 heavenly and true sense is plain, if not from the considerations here insisted on, at least
239 from his after history, which (we may presume) brought to light his secret defect, in
240 whatever it consisted.

241 And here we see why he spoke so much and so vauntingly of his determination to follow
242 God's direction. He made a great *point* of following it; his end was not to please God,
243 but to keep straight with Him. He who loves does not act from calculation or reasoning;
244 he does not in his cool moments reflect upon or talk of what he is doing, as if it were a
245 great sacrifice. Much less does he pride himself on it; but this is what Balaam seems to
246 have done.

247 I have been observing that his defect lay in this, that he had not a single eye towards
248 God's will, but was ruled by other objects. But moreover, this evil heart of unbelief
249 showed itself in a peculiar way, to which it is necessary to draw your attention, and to

250 which I alluded just now in saying that the difficulties of Scripture often arose from the
251 defective moral condition of our hearts.

252 *Why* did Almighty God give Balaam leave to go to Balak, and then was angry with him
253 for going? I suppose for this reason, because his asking twice was tempting God. God
254 is a jealous God. Sinners as we are, nay as creatures of His hands, we may not safely
255 intrude upon Him, and make free with Him. We may not dare to do that, which we
256 should not dare to do with an earthly superior, which we should be punished, for
257 instance, for attempting in the case of a king or noble of this world. To rush into His
258 presence, to address Him familiarly, to urge Him, to strive to make our duty lie in one
259 direction when it lies in another, to handle rudely and practise upon His holy word, to
260 trifle with truth, to treat conscience lightly, to take liberties (as it may be called) with any
261 thing that is God's, all irreverence, profaneness, unscrupulousness, wantonness, is
262 represented in Scripture not only as a sin, but as felt, noticed, quickly returned on God's
263 part (if I may dare use such human words of the Almighty and All-holy God, without
264 transgressing the rule I am myself laying down,—but He vouchsafes in Scripture to
265 represent Himself to us in that only way in which we can attain to the knowledge of
266 Him), I say all irreverence towards God is represented as being jealously and instantly
267 and fearfully noticed and visited, as friend or stranger among men might resent an insult
268 shown him. This should be carefully considered; we are apt to act towards God and the
269 things of God as towards a mere system, a law, a name, a religion, a principle, not as
270 against a Person, a living, watchful, present, prompt and powerful Eye and Arm. That all
271 this is a great error, is plain to all who study Scripture; as is sufficiently shown by the
272 death of that multitude of persons for looking into the ark—the death of the Prophet by
273 the lion, who was sent to Jeroboam from Judah, and did not minutely obey the
274 instructions given him—the slaughter of the children at Bethel by the bears, for mocking
275 Elisha—the exclusion of Moses from the promised land, for smiting the rock twice—and
276 the judgment on Ananias and Sapphira. Now Balaam's fault seems to have been of this
277 nature. God told him distinctly not to go to Balak. He was rash enough to ask a second
278 time, and God as a punishment gave him leave to ally himself with His enemies, and to
279 take part against His people. With this presumptuousness and love of self in his
280 innermost heart, his prudence, firmness, wisdom, illumination, and general
281 conscientiousness, availed him nothing.

282 A number of reflections crowd upon the mind on the review of this awful history, as I
283 may well call it; and with a brief notice of some of these I shall conclude.

284 1. First, we see how little we can depend, in judging of right and wrong, on the apparent
285 excellence and high character of individuals. There *is* a right and a wrong in matters of
286 conduct, in spite of the world; but it is the world's aim and Satan's aim to take our minds
287 off from the indelible distinctions of things, and to fix our thoughts upon man, to make us
288 the slaves of man, to make us dependent on his opinion, his patronage, his honour, his
289 smiles, and his frowns. But if Scripture is to be our guide, it is quite plain that the most
290 conscientious, religious, high-principled, honourable men (I use the words in their
291 ordinary, not in their Scripture sense), may be on the side of evil, may be Satan's
292 instruments in cursing, if that were possible, and at least in seducing and enfeebling the

293 people of God. For in the world's judgment, even when most refined, a person is
294 conscientious and consistent, who acts up to his standard, *whatever that is*, not he only
295 who aims at taking the highest standard. This is the world's highest flight; but in its
296 ordinary judgment, a man is conscientious and consistent, who is only inconsistent and
297 goes against conscience in any extremity, when hardly beset, and when he must cut the
298 knot or remain in present difficulties. That is, *he* is thought to obey conscience, who only
299 disobeys it when it is a praise and merit to obey it. This, alas! is the way with some of
300 the most honourable of mere men of the world, nay of the mass of (so called)
301 respectable men. They never tell untruths, or break their word, or profane the Lord's
302 day, or are dishonest in trade, or falsify their principles, or insult religion, except in very
303 great straits or great emergencies, when driven into a corner; and then perhaps they
304 force themselves, as Saul did when he offered sacrifice instead of Samuel;—they force
305 themselves, and (as it were) undergo their sin as a sort of unpleasant self-denial or
306 penance, being ashamed of it all the while, getting it over as quickly as they can,
307 shutting their eyes and leaping blindfold, and then forgetting it, as something which is
308 bitter to think about. And if memory is ever roused and annoys them, they console
309 themselves that after all they have only gone against their conscience now and then.
310 This is their view of themselves and of each other, taken at advantage; and if any one
311 come across them who has lived more out of the world than themselves, and has a
312 truer sense of right and wrong, and who fastens on some one point in them, which to his
313 mind is a token and warning to himself against them, such a one seems of course
314 narrow-minded and overstrict in his notions. For instance; supposing some such man
315 had fallen in with Balaam, and had been privy to the history of his tempting God, it is
316 clear that Balaam's general correctness, his nobleness of demeanour, and his
317 enlightened view of duty, would not have availed one jot or tittle to overcome such a
318 man's repugnance to him. He would have been startled and alarmed, and would have
319 kept at a distance, and in consequence he would have been called by the world
320 uncharitable and bigoted.

321 2. A second reflection which rises in the mind has relation to the wonderful secret
322 providence of God, while all things seem to go on according to the course of this world.
323 Balaam did not see the Angel, yet the Angel went out against him as an adversary. He
324 had no open denunciation of God's wrath directed against him. He had sinned, and
325 nothing happened outwardly, but wrath was abroad and in his path. *This* again is a very
326 serious and awful thought. God's arm is not shortened. What happened to Balaam is as
327 if it took place yesterday. God is what He ever was; we sin as man has ever sinned. We
328 sin without being aware of it. God is our enemy without our being aware of it; and when
329 the blow falls, we turn our thoughts to the creature, we ill-treat our ass, we lay the blame
330 on circumstances of this world, instead of turning to Him. "Lord, when Thy hand is lifted
331 up, they will not see; but they shall see," in the next world if not here, "and be ashamed
332 for their envy at the people; yea the fire of Thine enemies shall devour them." [Isaiah
333 xxvi. 11.]

334 3. Here too is a serious reflection, if we had time to pursue it, that when we have begun
335 an evil course, we cannot retrace our steps. Balaam was forced to go with the men; he
336 offered to draw back—he was not allowed—yet God's wrath followed him. This is what

337 comes of committing ourselves to an evil line of conduct; and we see daily instances of
338 it in our experience of life. Men get entangled, and are bound hand and foot in
339 unadvisable courses. They make imprudent marriages or connexions; they place
340 themselves in dangerous situations; they engage in unprofitable or harmful
341 undertakings. Too often indeed they do not discern their evil plight; but when they do,
342 they cannot draw back. God seems to say, "Go with the men." They are in bondage,
343 and they must make the best of it; being the slave of the creature, without ceasing to be
344 the responsible servants of God; under His displeasure, yet bound to act as if they could
345 please Him. All this is very fearful.

346 4. Lastly, I will but say this in addition,—God gives us warnings now and then, but does
347 not repeat them. Balaam's sin consisted in not acting upon what was told him *once for*
348 *all*. In like manner, you, my brethren, now hear what you may never hear again, and
349 what perchance in its substance is the word of God. You may never hear it again,
350 though with your outward ears you hear it a hundred times, because you may be
351 impressed with it now, but never may again. You may be impressed with it now, and the
352 impression may die away; and some time hence, if you ever think about it, you may
353 then speak of it thus,—that the view struck you at the time, but somehow the more you
354 thought about it, the less you liked or valued it. True; this *may* be so, and it *may* arise,
355 as you think, from the doctrine I have been setting before you not being true and
356 scriptural; but it *may* also arise from your having heard God's voice and not obeyed it. It
357 may be that you have become blind, not the doctrine been disproved. Beware of trifling
358 with your conscience. It is often said that second thoughts are best; so they are in
359 matters of judgment, but not in matters of conscience. In matters of duty first thoughts
360 are commonly best—they have more in them of the voice of God. May He give you
361 grace so to hear what has been said, as you will wish to have heard, when life is over;
362 to hear in a practical way, with a desire to profit by it, to learn God's will, and to do it.