

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit.

THE CAST-OFF GIRDLE.

A Sermon

DELIVERED AT THE THURSDAY EVENING LECTURE, BY

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“Thus saith the Lord unto me, Go and get thee a linen girdle, and put it upon thy loins, and put it not in water. So I got a girdle, according to the word of the Lord, and put it on my loins. And the word of the Lord came unto me the second time, saying, Take the girdle that thou hast got, which is upon thy loins, and arise, go to Euphrates, and hide it there in a hole of the rock. So I went, and hid it by Euphrates, as the Lord commanded me. And it came to pass after many days, that the Lord said unto me, Arise, go to Euphrates, and take the girdle from thence, which I commanded thee to hide there. Then I went to Euphrates, and digged, and took the girdle from the place where I had hid it: and, behold, the girdle was marred, it was profitable for nothing. Then the word of the Lord came unto me, saying, Thus saith the Lord, After this manner will I mar the pride of Judah, and the great pride of Jerusalem. This evil people, which refuse to hear my words, which walk in the imagination of their heart, and walk after other gods, to serve them, and to worship them, shall even be as this girdle, which is good for nothing. For as the girdle cleaveth to the loins of a man, so have I caused to cleave unto me the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah, saith the Lord; that they might be unto me for a people, and for a name, and for a praise, and for a glory: but they would not hear.”—Jeremiah xiii. 1—11.

GOD'S servants, in the olden time, were very anxious to be understood when they spoke. They were not content because the people listened to them, or because they were to their hearers as “a very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument.” They reckoned the people's approval of their style to be proof of its failure. Had it wounded their hearts it would not have gratified their tastes. They wanted the truth to go home to men, so that they could no longer discuss modes of speech, or methods of action, but would be compelled to remember the message, and feel its force. They reckoned that they had done nothing unless they riveted attention, excited thought, and impressed the heart. Oh that all preachers were as solemnly in earnest in all their addresses as Jeremiah was: we might then hope to see more true conversions, and less of the flimsy religion of the day!

The people of Israel and Judah were so sunk in thoughtlessness that it was absolutely necessary to do something more than speak. Prophet after prophet had spoken, “but they would not hear.” Even though Jeremiah, the most plaintive of all the prophets, spoke in such melting tones that it must have been difficult to turn away from him with indifference, yet they remained so hardened that God described them, as “this evil people, which refuse to hear my words, which walk in the imagination of their heart.” Though the prophet wept, and entreated,

and persuaded, yet they regarded him not ; but turned on their heel and went each one his own way, to his merchandise, to his idolatry, to his adultery, or to his oppression. Therefore the Lord bade his servants add to their speech certain symbols which the people would see with their eyes, which would be talked about as strange things, and so would excite attention and command consideration. Perhaps by this means the Lord would extort from some of them a deeper thought, and bring them penitently to their knees. It is better for preachers to do odd things than for men to be lost. If plain talk fails we may even use emblems and signs, for we cannot let the careless ones perish without another attempt to get at them. Oh that by any means we might save some !

In many instances the prophets were bidden to do singular things, and among the rest was this : Jeremiah must take a linen girdle and put it about his loins, and wear it there till the people had noticed what he wore, and how long he wore it. This girdle was not to be washed ; this was to be a matter observed of all observers, for it was a part of the similitude. Then he must make a journey to the distant river Euphrates, and take off his girdle and bury it there. When the people saw him without a girdle they would make remarks and ask what he had done with it ; and he would reply that he had buried it by the river of Babylon. Many would count him mad for having walked so far to get rid of a girdle : two hundred and fifty miles was certainly a great journey for such a purpose. Surely he might have buried it nearer home, if he must needs bury it at all. There was the Jordan : he might have gone to its bank, and digged a hole, and hidden away the garment there, if he thought it well to do so. There would be a good deal of talk about Jeremiah's eccentric conduct, and the more thoughtful would endeavour to spell out his meaning for they would feel sure that he meant much by it. Anon, the prophet goes a second time to the Euphrates, and they say one to another—The prophet is a fool : the spiritual man is mad. See what a trick he is playing. Nearly a thousand miles the man will have walked in order to hide a girdle, and to dig it up again. What next will he do ? Whereas plain words might not have been noticed, this little piece of acting commanded the attention and excited the curiosity of the people. Blame us not if we sometimes dramatize the truth : we must win men's hearts, and to do so we dare even run the risk of being called theatrical. Jeremiah might have been ridiculed as an actor : but he would not have fretted much under the charge if he saw that he had succeeded in teaching the people the truth which God would have them learn. When our young folks cannot learn by books, we try the kinder-garten method, and we will sooner teach them by toys than leave them ignorant : even so was it with the old prophets ; they would use emblems rather than leave the people in the dark.

The record of this singular transaction has come to us, and we know that, as a part of Holy Scripture, it is full of instruction. Thousands of years will not make it so antique as to be valueless. The word of the Lord never becomes old so as to lose its vigour ; it is still as strong for all divine purposes as when first of all Jehovah spoke it. This Bible is the oldest of instructors, and yet it wears the dew of its youth : like the sea, it is ancient as the ages, but time has written no furrow on its brow. It is always venerable, yet ever novel ; eternal,

yet always fresh. Even the symbol of Jeremiah, which was so strikingly adapted to his age and time, is quite as well suited to this present year of grace. May the Holy Spirit give us all instruction thereby.

I. And, first, in our text we have AN HONOURABLE EMBLEM of Israel and Judah: we may say, in these days, an emblem of the church of God. I say it is an honourable emblem; I hardly know of one which is more so except when the church is called a crown of glory, and a royal diadem, or better still, the Bride, the Lamb's wife. The people were compared to a linen girdle with which the prophet in the type girt himself, but which God explains to be *his* girdle, for "as the girdle cleaveth to the loins of a man, so have I caused to cleave unto me the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah, saith the Lord."

Notice first, then, that God had taken this people to be *bound to himself*: he had taken them to be as near to him as the girdle is to the Oriental when he binds it about his loins. The eastern merchant or worker does not go out without his girdle: it is an essential part of his dress, keeping all the rest together: and so the Lord declares that he had taken his people and had bound them about himself to be near unto him, and fastened about him, so that he would not go forth without them. Often he speaks of them as "a people near unto him." Had they acted as they should have done, so as to be not only the natural but the spiritual seed of Israel, they would have enjoyed what every true believer may enjoy, namely cleaving unto God as a girdle cleaves unto a man; for the Lord's own sanctified ones are bound unto God by God himself, so as never to be torn away from him. I invite you, beloved of the Lord, to consider your choice privilege in thus being, as it were, girt about the loins of God. It is a wonderful metaphor. In infinite condescension the Lord has put it so: the believer's place is near his God, in intimate, continuous, open fellowship. What can be more intimately associated with a man's most vital parts than his girdle? What can be nearer to the life of God than his living people? The traveller in the East takes care that his girdle shall not go unfastened: he girds himself securely ere he commences his work or starts upon his walk; and God has bound his people round about him so that they shall never be removed from him. "I in them," saith Christ, even as a man is in his girdle. "Who shall separate us?" saith Paul. Who shall ungird us from the heart and soul of our loving God? "They shall be mine, saith the Lord." They are his, and ever shall be his; neither shall any tear them away from him, for by covenant and by promise are they bound up with the life of God.

Yet remember that there are many who, like the Jewish people, bear the name of Israel, but they are not the true Israel. They are bound about God nominally, as it were, but yet they are not spiritually united to him; and concerning such this parable tells us much that is worthy of solemn consideration. May the Holy Ghost warn all professors by this instructive image. If we are indeed what we profess to be, then we shall cleave to God for ever, as it is written, "I will put my fear in their hearts, and they shall not depart from me." Our faith will encompass Christ our Lord; our love will embrace him: our patience will surround him: our hope will encircle him world without end. In all our service we shall endeavour to cleave fast to God. If anything comes

between us and God it will be our sorrow, a trouble not to be endured. Nothing shall seduce the faithful from their hold upon God ; for he who bound them about himself will allow no enemy to unloose his girdle. Whatever the world may do by way of bribe, or by way of threatening, we shall hold fast to him, and shall not let him go, and that for this reason—that unchanging love and infinite wisdom have bound us too fast for us to be ungirt again. Because the Lord's own love has bound us to himself, therefore we bind ourselves to him by steadfast covenant.

“Loved of our God, for him again
With love intense we burn :
Chosen of him ere time began,
We choose him in return.”

And, as nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord, so nothing shall separate our love from God whom we love in Christ Jesus our Lord. What a privilege this—that the Lord should cause us to cleave unto him, to be unto him for a people, and for a name, and for a praise, and for a glory.” Pardon me if I speak feebly, my heart loses utterance in contemplating the gracious imagery here set before us.

But Jeremiah's girdle was a linen one : it was the girdle peculiar to the priests, for such was the prophet ; he was “the son of Hilkiah, of the priests that were in Anathoth.” Thus the type represents chosen men as bound to God *in connection with sacrifice*. The people of the Lord are the very girdle of the Most High in this sense, that if there is priestly work to do, he puts us about him, and makes us to be the instruments of this hallowed service. For us our blessed Lord girt himself with a linen girdle, for us he even now is girt about the paps with a golden girdle ; and now for him we also become priests and kings unto God and his continued priestly work among men is done by us. I mean, not by ministers alone, but by all the inheritance of God ; by all the blood-washed ones, by all the regenerate ones ; for ye are “a royal priesthood, a peculiar people.” God hath made his people to be “a nation of priests,” and it is ours to offer sacrifice to God continually, the sacrifice of prayer and thanksgiving. We know of no order of priests save the whole body of the faithful, who present their bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ. That is why a linen girdle was specified rather than any other. We are bound to the Most High for solemn priesthood to minister among the sons of men in holy things. The Lord Jesus is now blessing the sons of men as Aaron blessed the people, and we are the girdle with which he girds himself in the act of benediction by the gospel.

The girdle also is used by God always *in connection with work*. When eastern men are about to work in real earnest they gird up their loins. Our garments in this country are close-fitting and convenient, but the Oriental's robes would always be in his way whenever he had work to do, if he did not tightly strap them around him. Whenever we read of earnest work to be done we read of this girdle : so when God comes to do work among the sons of men we always hear of this girdle, which girdle we are, or may be, if we are unto God what we ought to be. When the Lord worketh righteousness in the earth it is by means of his chosen ones. When he publishes salvation, and makes known his grace, his saints

are around him. When sinners are to be saved it is by his people. When error is to be denounced, it is by our lips that he chooses to speak. When his saints are to be comforted, it is by those who have been comforted by his Holy Spirit, and who therefore tell out the consolations which they have themselves enjoyed. The girdle of the Lord's work-day robes is his people. He saith, "Gather my people unto me ; those that have made a covenant with me by sacrifice." When he comes, not to judgment, for that is his strange work ; but for mercy and salvation, then he comes girt about with his redeemed. Blessed are they whose happy lot it is to be connected with God in his sacred acts, and in all his glorious work of salvation.

I cannot explain my deep emotion, but my heart would utter weighty words, if it could talk without my lips ; for I am awe-stricken at the bare idea of our being used as the girdle of the divine strength, cleaving unto God as a girdle cleaveth unto the loins of a man. How blessed a thing it is to be bound to God, bound for hallowed service ; being set apart for the Master's most personal and honourable use. Blessed are you who were once worthless and useless, but are now made so precious in his sight that you are bound around him for his use in the highest exercises of his grace among the sons of men.

Moreover, the girdle was intended *for ornament*. It does not appear that it was bound about the priest's loins under his garments, for if so it would not have been seen, and would not have been an instructive symbol : this girdle must be seen, since it was meant to be a type of a people who were to be unto God "for a people, and for a name, and for a praise, and for a glory." Is not this wonderful beyond all wonder, that God should make his people his glory ? Yet so it is, for true believers become an ornament unto God, adorning the doctrine of God their Saviour in all things. Is it not written, "Thou shalt also be a crown of glory in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of thy God" ? Like as when a man puts on his jewels, or a prince puts on his royal attire, so does God regard his elect "as the stones of a crown," and to prove his value of them he arrays himself with his people as with a girdle.

Can it be so, that God is glorified in his saints ? Is it so, that Christ himself is admired *in* them that believe as well as *by* them that believe ? Do we, after all, illustrate the magnificence of God, and show to principalities and powers in the heavenly places what God can do ? Yes, it is so. You can easily perceive what true glory God has in us if we be sincere. Is it not to his honour that we who were disobedient and obstinate and hard-hearted should by his love be subdued to the obedience of the faith ? Does not this show his glory—that we creatures, possessed of the very dangerous possession of a free will, nevertheless, without violating that will, are led to obey his commands with pleasure and delight ? Is it not to the praise of his grace that we who are, under some aspects, the meanest of his creatures, seeing that we have been guilty of such gross sin, are nevertheless set next to himself, and made to be his dear children ? Next to God, the Redeemer, comes man, the redeemed. Yea, God and man are united—wondrously united in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. What can more grandly set forth the adorable love and goodness of Jehovah ! What great things God has

done for us already in having taken us up out of the horrible pit and out of the miry clay! Let this stand as his beautiful girdle—that he passeth by transgression, iniquity, and sin. Let this be his divine adornment—that he is the Lord God, merciful and gracious. Hallelujah! But how much greater things he will yet do for us! I know that he has taken us from the dunghill, but then it follows, “and hath set us among princes, even the princes of his people.” We are not always sitting among princes yet, but we shall be elevated to the throne ere long. Our spirits, rid of this clay, shall rise up among spiritual dignities and powers, not second to the most exalted of them, and then shall an astonished universe behold the mercy of the Lord. Yet once more; when the blast of the archangel shall have aroused the sleeping dead, even these poor material bodies, made like unto Christ’s glorious body, shall share the glory of the Son of man. Truly “it doth not yet appear what we shall be”; for there are great things yet for men; and the race of men to whom God has had a special favour shall yet be highly exalted, and have dominion over all the works of his hands, and he shall put all things under his feet. In all this the exceeding riches of divine grace shall be resplendent, and thus man shall be as a jewelled girdle unto the Lord of hosts.

Oh, majesty of love! infinity of grace! Here seraphs may admire and adore. My brethren, beloved in the Lord, muse much upon this figure of a girdle. Silently meditate upon it; and try to understand it. We are the girdle that God causes to cleave unto his loins, and that no mere poverty-stricken girdle of a beggar, but the girdle of a royal priest, worn by him in sacrifice and labour, and regarded as his ornament and glory. Oh the splendour of Jehovah’s love to his people!

II. But now, alas! we have to turn our eyes sorrowfully away from this surpassing glory. These people who might have been the glorious girdle of God displayed in their own persons A FATAL OMISSION. Did you notice it? Thus saith the Lord unto Jeremiah, “Go and get thee a linen girdle, and put it upon thy loins, and *put it not in water.*” Ah, me! there is the mischief: the unwashed girdle is the type of an unholy people who have never received *the great cleansing*. God is pure and holy, and he will wear cleansed garments, but of this garment it is said, “Put it not in water.” The priests of Jehovah were continually washing, but of this girdle we read, “Put it not in water.”

Now, when a man seems to be bound to God, and to be used of God, if he has never undergone the great cleansing, he will sooner or later come to a terrible end. “If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me,” is a very solemn word from the Lord Jesus himself. Oh, my brothers and sisters, I invite you to meditate upon this for a moment! No nearness to God can save you if you have never been washed by the Lord Jesus. No official connection can bless you if you have never been washed in his most precious blood. No matter though you may seem to be an ornament of the church, and all men may think so, and even good men may bless God for you, if you have never been washed you are not Christ’s. If Jesus Christ, your Lord and Master, has never enabled you to say, “We have washed our robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb,” then, the great cleansing having been omitted, you will be shut out of the marriage supper of the Lamb. Oh the terror of that

sentence,—“Put it not in water.” Surely, this is what Satan desires; his malice cannot exceed the wish that we may never be cleansed from our iniquities! How accursed are those of whom Solomon saith, “There is a generation that are pure in their own eyes, and yet is not washed from their filthiness.” If that one, first, perfect washing has never exercised its purifying influence upon you, my brother, it is all in vain for you to bear the vessels of the Lord, and to be thought to be great and to be eminent in his house, for you must be put away. On the spot let each one of us pray, “Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.” God loves purity, and will not keep unholy men in nearness to himself. Here is the alternative for all professors,—you must be washed in the blood of Christ, or be laid aside; which shall it be?

The prophet was bidden not to put it in water, which shows that there was not only an absence of the first washing, but there was *no daily cleansing*. Take heed, beloved, that you omit not those after-washings which must follow the washing in the blood of the Lamb. When our blessed Lord took a towel and a basin, and went to wash the disciples’ feet, he did not perform a superfluous action: Peter was misguided when he said “Thou shalt never wash my feet.” It is necessary that we be washed every day. Even “if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.” We are constantly defiling our feet by marching through this dusty world, and every night we need to be washed. There is sin within us as well as sin without us; and even if we do not leave our chamber, but have to lie upon a sick-bed all day long, impatience is quite enough to defile our feet, and we greatly need to be cleansed. The first grand washing is never repeated: that great bath does its work so effectually that the putting away of guilt is perfected once for all and for ever. When our Lord bowed his head and gave up the ghost he offered an effectual atonement by which all the guilt of his redeemed was eternally put away. “This man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high”; and he that hath that one washing “needeth not except to wash his feet.” But the footbath is always necessary. Stains of pilgrimage, stains of service, stains of grief, stains of pleasure, stains of our holy things, these must still be put away. What with pride, or doubt, or ill-desire, or imagination, or anger, or forgetfulness, or error, we are always being defiled, and always need to be put in water, and to undergo that washing in water by the word of which the apostle speaks.

If, dear friends, you and I live without washing, we live in a way that renders us unfit for divine service. And have you not found it so? I know this, that if you suffer a sin to lie on your conscience, you cannot serve God aright while it is there. If you have transgressed as a child, and you do not run and put your head into your Father’s bosom and cry, “Father, I have sinned!” you cannot do God’s work. The external part of it you may perform, though there will often be a great weakness even there; but as for the spiritual and vital part, it will be sadly deficient. If you try to write the epistle of life with an unwashed hand it will tremble, and every line you write will be in the shaky handwriting of paralysis. “He that has clean hands shall wax stronger and stronger,”

but the foul hand shall wax weaker and weaker. There must be this washing or there cannot be abundant working. If you do not know yourself to be "accepted in the Beloved," if you do not know yourself to be clean every whit, you will not be happy with God, and when you are not happy with him, your mind will be taken off from work for him to work for yourself. You will be thinking about your own imperfection rather than *his* perfection: the sin of any single day, though it will not destroy you, will grieve you. A stone in your shoe, though almost invisible, will spoil a day's journey. It is not a great rock to grind you to powder; it is only a little stone, but your foot will blister before you have walked many miles. Ah me, how great the pain of a single unconfessed sin! The best thing you can do is to put off your shoe at once, and remove the stone before you again put down your foot. So it is with every little sin: if it is only a thought, if it is only a look the wrong way, go to your Father and get rid of it. Do not live a day out of fellowship with God, nay, nor an hour under the Lord's frown. You know how it is with your dear child when he has done wrong: he does not expect that you will turn him out of doors and say, "You shall not be my child," but he does expect you to be grieved with him! Children are believers in the "final perseverance" of parental love; they expect always to be your children; but if you are a wise father, they do not feel happy when they have done wrong. You have not perhaps found out their disobedience; but the kiss at night is not half as warm as usual, for they are afraid that father will soon know of their fault and will be angry. When God deals with us as a father who has seen his child's naughtiness, there is no peace or rest in our spirit. Even chastisement, however, is better borne than a sense of having offended. If you gave your naughty child a good whipping at once, it would comfort him, for your displeasure would be over; but as long as you do not chastise him, but only say, "No, my child, I cannot have dealings with you while you act so; I have no word of love for you, for you are so wicked,"—then the dear child will be sorely troubled until your anger is over; he will be ready to break his little heart until you forgive him, and comfort him, saying "I shall put the matter away this time, for I see you are sorry, and I hope you will not behave so badly any more." Brethren, this holy, filial fear of the Lord is not servitude under the law: it is not trying to be saved by what we do; it is the discipline of the Father's house, and that is what we attend to when we ask for daily washing.

There was a fatal flaw about this girdle; it had never been washed, and it is a fatal thing if you and I can go from day to day without being cleansed by our blessed Lord. Oh Lord, purge me by thy continual pardon! Cleanse me this day from every spot, for thy sweet mercy's sake.

But observe, once again, that the more this girdle was used the more it gathered *great and growing defilement*. It was a prophet that wore it, but even with such wear the unwashed girdle began to be spotted and stained; and as he might not put it into water, the oftener the prophet went out to his daily work,—the more the girdle was used,—the more service it performed, the more worn and dirty it became. It will be just the same with us if no water is applied, and there is no application of the cleansing blood of Christ. Without the atonement, the more we do the more we shall sin. Our very prayers will turn into sin, our godly things

will gender evil. We shall be preaching, and when we preach we shall preach our condemnation. We shall gather our class about us, and talk to them of good things, and all the while there will be in our consciences the thought that we are not acting as we talk, or living as we tell them to live, and we shall be growing blacker and more defiled from hour to hour. Oh, Lord, deliver us from this! Save us from being made worse by that which should make us better. Save us from turning even our service into sin, our prayers into abominations, and our psalms into mockery. Let us be thy true people, and therefore let us be washed that we may be clean, that thou mayest gird thyself with us.

III. Very soon that fatal flaw in the case here mentioned led in the third place to A SOLEMN JUDGMENT. It was a solemn judgment upon the girdle, looking at it as a type of the people of Israel.

First, the girdle, after Jeremiah had made his long walk in it, was taken off from him *and put away*. It is an awful thing when God takes off the man that has once appeared to be on him, and lays him aside, as he did Saul when he finally gave him up and took the kingdom from him. Ay, and it is a solemn thing, also, when the Lord takes off the man that has been really bound to him, and for a time lays him aside and says, "I cannot use you: I cannot wear you as mine: I cannot work with you. You can be no ornament to me: you are defiled." He puts away the spoiled girdle: in other words, he works no longer with the backsliding professor. This is a terrible thing to happen to any man. I would rather suffer every sickness in the list of human diseases than that God should put me aside as a vessel in which he has no pleasure, and say to me, "I cannot wear you as my girdle, nor own you as mine before men." That would be a dreadful thing. Is there one here who has come into that condition? Has the Lord left you to your backsliding? Learn the lesson of my text! What you want, my friend, is to be cleansed in the double stream which John of old saw flowing from the Redeemer's riven side. You want spiritual cleansing before the Lord can put you on again, and use you again, and be one with you again; and before you can be again unto him a praise and a glory. While you are unclean you are dishonouring him, and he must set you aside.

After that girdle was laid aside, the next thing for it was *hiding and burying*. It was placed in a hole of the rock by the river of the captivity, and left there. Many a hypocrite has been served in that way. God has said to his servants, "Put him out of the church; he is defiled;" and there has been nothing heard of him any more. He may have been offended at being put aside, and have gone into the world altogether; and though he once seemed to be as the very girdle of God, yet he has rotted and decayed into corruption and open transgression; for the raw material of hypocrisy soon decays, and turns into loathsomeness. The worst things are frequently the rot of the best things; and so the worst characters grow out of those who apparently were once the best.

Thus, then, this girdle is put right away, hidden, and left. God will have nothing to do with it. He has put it aside. And now *the girdle spoils*. It was put, I dare say, where the damp and the wet acted upon it; and so when, in about seventy days, Jeremiah came back to the spot,

there was nothing but an old rag instead of what had once been a pure white linen girdle. He says, "Behold the girdle was marred; it was profitable for nothing." So, if God were to leave any of us, the best men and the best women among us would soon become nothing but marred girdles, instead of being as fair white linen. Alas, for certain goodly professors that did appear to be very fine once, what rotten old rags they come to be when they are put into the hole and left to themselves. We have seen it. They have only been fit at last to be put upon the dust-heap with useless things. They have fallen into such a horrible condition of mind that they can do evil without check of conscience: they have forgotten how to blush. The same persons who did run well (what did hinder them?) are now found, not only sleeping in the harbours of sloth, but rioting in chambers of wantonness. The glorious girdle of God, as the man seemed to be, becomes a mass of rottenness. What does the text say? Let me read the words, for I should not like to say them of myself,—“Behold, the girdle was marred, it was profitable for nothing”; and again in the tenth verse—“Which is good for nothing.” So may men become who have not been washed: so will they become unless God, in his infinite mercy, gives them speedily expiation through his Son, renewing by his Spirit.

I desire to profit you all, and so I want to notice how true this is of the real children of God. I could speak this even weeping. There are certain real children of God whom God greatly honoured at one time, so that they were as his girdle; but they became proud, and were soon defiled with other sins besides, and so the Lord has put them away, and has laid them aside from his service. They are still his, but he has put them under discipline, and as a part of that discipline he has cashiered them from his public service. They were once everywhere in the Lord's battles, and now they are nowhere. He knows where he has put them, and there they will remain till their pride is quite gone. When the Lord has effected this purpose his wandering servant will come back with an altered tale, and you shall hear him as he laments himself and cries,—“I do not feel fit to be in God's church. I have walked in such a way that if I were cast off altogether it would be my just deserts. Oh that I may be forgiven.” The deep repentance of returning wanderers makes you feel that they are the children of God though they have dishonoured him, and you welcome their return, saying, “Come with us, and enjoy the means of grace.” Alas, they answer—

“The saints are comforted, we know,
Within the house of prayer;
We often go where others go,
And find no comfort there.”

One man sighs, “I have my Sunday-school class, and I teach it, but I do not feel tenderly for the children as I once did. There is no power about me. I am a branch of the tree that appears to have no sap in it. I bear no fruit. Alas,” he cries, “I do not enjoy private prayer, and when I pray, and pour out my soul before God, I do not obtain a comfortable answer. I am as one that is forgotten.” Is it at all wonderful that God frowns when we disobey? The Lord will not hear those who decline to hear him. If we are deaf to his commands he will be deaf to our prayers. You have become defiled, for you have not watched

your steps, and now the Lord cannot be in communion with you. You have not been careful, and so the girdle has become foul with public spots and private foulnesses: and the Lord says, "I cannot use that man; I cannot be in fellowship with him. If I should it would ruin him." If God were to be kind and tender to his children when they are living in sin, it would encourage them in evil, and they would go from bad to worse. If a believer grieves God, he must be grieved himself. The heavenly Father takes down the rod, and though it is more pain to him than it is to us, he will not spare us for our crying. Just because he loves us he will lay on his strokes thick and heavy, one after the other, perhaps in sharp affliction, but very often in a continuous and growing loss of all that made us happy and useful. Alas! alas! the girdle is marred: the Lord hath hid it out of his sight!

Oh, what a mercy it is that the Lord can take that girdle and wash it, and make it as good as new, and even better than at the first! He can give back to the man his old joy with an added experience which will make him humble and tender; he can restore his former usefulness, and even increase it by teaching him to deal gently with others that err, and by enabling him to prize and value the mercy of God. Did you ever get into a corner and sing that verse, "Love I much? I've more forgiven. I'm a miracle of grace"? Those sweet lines have often charmed my inmost heart. I have wanted to love my Lord infinitely. I have wished that I could love him as much as seven million hearts put together could love him. I would love him as much as the whole universe could love him. I would I had his Father's love to him, for what do I not owe to him for all his wonderful mercy to me? And do *you* not feel the same? Are not you, also, great debtors to sovereign grace? If you do not at any time kindle with love and gratitude, I am afraid that you are put in the hole with the girdle, and that you are rotting away. Sad case for you!

Certain of God's people are marvellously high-minded: they cannot sit anywhere but in the big arm-chair, or at the head of the table. They cannot mingle with any of us common Christians at all, because they are perfect, and we are a long way from making any claim to such a degree of excellence. Some of the hymns that we are glad to sing are not good enough for them, for they cry, "We hate hymns of this style. They are so below our experience." These are the dons and grandees of the Court of Arrogance. When I see fine professors coming in with the seven league boots on, I am always afraid that they are not God's children at all, because I have never read of any true saints who said much in praise of themselves, and I have read of so many gracious persons whose tone and temper were the very reverse of this lofty boasting. I have seen God's poor little child like Moses in a basket on the Nile, with crocodiles all round ready to devour him, and when I have looked at him, I have always noticed that which the Holy Spirit took pains to record,—"*Behold, the babe wept.*" This was the real Moses: those crystal drops are the tokens of a goodly child. The tears of God's babes are wonderfully precious, and they have great power with him. The dragons of Nilus cannot devour a weeping Moses. "*When I am weak, then am I strong.*" When you are so weak that you cannot do much more than cry, you coin diamonds with both your eyes. The

sweetest prayers God ever hears are the groans and sighs of those who have no hope in anything but his love. There is music in our moaning to his kind and tender ears. He can restore you, even though you be as the marred girdle; and when he once puts you on again, you will cleave to his loins more closely than ever, praying that he will bind you fast about him.

But the worst part of it—and this I finish with—is that this relates undoubtedly to many mere professors whom God takes off from himself, laying them aside, and leaving them to perish. And what is his reason for so doing? He tells us this in the text: he says that this evil people *refused to receive God's words*. Dear friends, never grow tired of God's word: never let any book supplant the Bible. Love every part of Scripture, and take heed to every word that God has spoken. Let it all be a divine word to you; for if not, when you begin to pick and choose about God's word, and do not like this, and do not like that, you will soon become like a marred girdle—for the base-hearted professor is detected by his not loving the Father's words.

Next to that, we are told that they *walked in the imagination of their heart*. That is a sure sign of the hypocrite or the false professor. He makes his religion out of himself, as a spider spins a web out of his own bowels: what sort of theology it is you can imagine now that you know its origin. This base professor grows his theology on his own back as the snail produces her shell: he is everything to himself—his own Saviour, his own teacher, his own guide. He knows so much, that if the world would only sit at his feet, it would become a wonderfully learned world in a very short time, so great a Rabbi is he. When a man is so puffed up that his own imagination is his inspiration, and his obstinacy holds him fast in his own opinion, then he has become as the girdle which was taken from the prophet's loins, and put into a hole to rot away.

Upon all this there followed actual transgression,—“*They walked after other gods to serve them and to worship them.*” This happens also to the base professor. He keeps up the name of a Christian for a little while, and seems to be as God's girdle; but by-and-by he falls to worshipping gold, or drink, or lust. Bacchus, or Venus, becomes his deity. He turns aside from the infinitely glorious God, and so he falls from one degradation to another till he hardly knows himself. He becomes as a rotten girdle “which profiteth nothing:” neither God nor man are benefited by him.

The Lord save you, dear friends, from being found insincere in the day when he searches the heart. May he also save us from failing to be washed in the most precious blood. Is not this a fit subject for immediate and continuous prayer? See ye to it.

The Lord bless you for his name's sake. Amen.

PORTIONS OF SCRIPTURE READ BEFORE SERMON—Jeremiah xiii. ;
Psalm xliv.

HYMNS FROM “OUR OWN HYMN BOOK,”—668, 79, 653.