

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit.

THE BIRD ESCAPED FROM THE SNARE.

A Sermon

DELIVERED AT THE THURSDAY EVENING LECTURE, BY

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"Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers : the snare is broken, and we are escaped."—Psalm cxxiv. 7.

THIS text describes a soul-matter. The Psalmist is not speaking of a temporal deliverance, although even in that sense an escape from death would be a theme worthy of his sweetest song. He says, "*Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers,*" thus denoting a spiritual rescue. The man's soul is the soul of the man ; and though some give all their attention to the body, their folly is great. It is as though a man should spend all his substance upon his house, and have no bread for himself to eat. Do I speak to any who never think about their souls? Do you really believe that you will die like dogs and horses? I cannot believe that you have such brutal views of yourself. Believe me, you have within you an immortal spirit, which will outlive the sun. If you have hitherto been careless of your nobler part, may God's Spirit teach you wisdom. I pray that you may so think of your soul that our text may become deeply interesting to you, so that you may join in its song of deliverance.

I have called the text a song ; does it not read like one? "*Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers : the snare is broken, and we are escaped.*" It is a canticle of certainty. It does not say, "We hope that we have escaped, and we trust that the snare is broken ;" but "The snare is broken, and we are escaped." "Ifs" and "buts" make no music. Poetry flees when peradventures enter. Certainties are melodies. We hear people speak of "dead certainties," but the Christian rejoices in living certainties, and is wretched till they are his own. Rise then, my beloved, above the fogs and mists which cover the marshes of carnal questioning ; climb the mountains of full assurance, and stand there with your foreheads bathed in sunlight, breathing that serene atmosphere which is untainted by a cloud of doubt.

The text reads like a song, not only because of its certainty, but also because of its joy. It has the wing and the throat of a lark ; see how it rises from the net to God,—"*Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers.*" Anon it takes another rise,—"*The snare is*

broken." And it mounts yet again with still greater joy,—“And we are escaped.” The words melt away into the music of heaven as the spirit perfectly escapes from the snares of earth.

The metaphor used in the text is simple, but yet beautiful and instructive. Pardon me if I make as much of it as I am able to do.

First, we have here *the bird*; secondly, *the snare*; thirdly, *the capture*; and fourthly, *the escape*: we may then add *a lesson* from it all.

I. First, we have here the soul compared to A BIRD. It is a *little bird* too—a sparrow, or one of the sparrow kind. “Our soul is escaped as a little bird”—not as a great bird that could break the net and free itself by its own force. A little bird fitly represents our soul when we are lowly in heart. In our unregenerate condition we think ourselves eaglets at the very least, but we are not great creatures after all. We talk of *great* men: we are all little in God’s sight. “Lord, what is man, that thou art mindful of him?” Sparrows were very cheap in our Lord’s day because of their littleness; in the market you could buy two for a farthing, and five for two farthings, so that they threw an odd bird in when you bought at such a wholesale rate as two farthings’ worth. Sparrows were inconsiderable things, “yet not one of them falleth to the ground without your Father.” If he cares for sparrows, be sure he cares for souls, and when you think least of yourself, yet believe that the Lord regards you.

Again, our soul is like a little bird because it is so *ignorant*. Birds know little about snares, yet they know so much that “surely in vain is the net spread in the sight of any bird.” Even this slender wisdom is more than men display, for they fly into the net when it is spread in their sight; ay, into the selfsame net out of which, in God’s providence, they have just been permitted to escape. Man naturally is the essence of folly; and he is desperately set on destroying himself. He must “see life,” he says, and therefore he haunts the gates of death. He reckons the fowler to be his friend, and dreams that he spreads his nets for purposes of friendly hospitality. He does not know that the fowler is hunting for his life, and will destroy him if he can. So foolish are we and ignorant, we are as birds ready for the lure, till the Lord teaches us wisdom; and even then we need hourly keeping, or we are entrapped by the destroyer.

Our soul is often like a little bird because it is so *eager* and *venture-some*. How birds will trust themselves in winter around traps of the simplest kind if but a few crumbs are used as bait! Alas, men are equally foolhardy: they see others perish, yet they follow their ways. Many sip of the intoxicating cup, yet declare they will never be drunkards; they pilfer littles, and yet despise a thief; they indulge in wanton words, but vow to be chaste as snow; they go into questionable places of amusement, and hope to remain pure. Oh, silly birds! I mean silly souls! Thus the fowler fills his bags. Young people associate with ungodly persons, and say, “We are not so weak-minded as to be led away by them”; thus displaying a weak mind by that boastful speech. Youths tell us that to read sceptical books, and impure novels, and to hear lewd songs and spicy language will do them no harm. Believe no such flattering falsehoods, or you will rue the day. “You don’t catch old birds with chaff,” says the simpleton; and he hops into the net. “Younger birds

must not come here," says he; "it is dangerous for them, but I am safe enough." Yet old birds' necks are wrung as well as those of young birds; and experienced men are as foolish as the juveniles. When a man says, "It is no temptation to me," it may be true, for soot will not blacken a sweep. Little birds, beware: the fowler promises pleasure, but the end thereof is death.

The little bird, also, when once taken in the net, is a good comparison with the soul captured by sin, for it is *defenceless*. What can it do? A mouse might eat the ropes and set free the lion, but no mouse will liberate the sparrow. He will have a short flutter, and we shall hear no more of him. When a man is birdlimed by a vice, the more he flutters the faster he is held by it. What is more defenceless than a soul in the net of sin? What little power men seem to have against their habits! They boast that they can stop anywhere—but, alas, they stop nowhere. "Oh, I have only to come to a determination." Yes, "only to come to a determination"; but to that determination you will not come. When men become entangled in the meshes of sin, their power to escape is gone: Jeremiah asks—"Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil." Such is the entanglement of habit, the slavery of lust.

While they are thus defenceless, we must notice, too, how *alarmed* they often are. The bird is no sooner in the net than he is frightened. Poor thing, how gladly would he escape if he could! Souls are not always so. 'They will be taken in Satan's snares, and yet say that they are happy. Custom in sin kills conscience of sin. "A short life and a merry one," say they, as if there could be any true merriment anywhere except in the great Father's house, where they *begin* to be merry, as if they had never been merry before. Many souls have enough of conscience, and of enlightenment by the word, to alarm them when they find themselves entangled in sin; and then they beat about, and hurt themselves, but, alas! notwithstanding all their efforts, unless a stronger hand than theirs shall break the net, they will perish by the fowler's hand.

Our souls, once more, are like to birds because they are *the objects of snares*. If the Pharisees would compass sea and land to make one proselyte, certainly Satan will compass all the universe to ruin a single soul, for he delights in destroying the souls of men. Nor is it Satan only, for all the world seems to have taken to this fowling; and men who would not lift a finger to save their fellows will go far to ruin them. Oh, little birds, there is no place on earth safe for you till Jesus covers you with his protecting wing!

II. Secondly, we will now speak of **THE SNARE**. The text speaks twice of the snare.

It is wonderful what a variety of snares there are for birds. The tombs of Egypt exhibit the art of bird-catching, and show us decoys, traps, nets, and so forth. Such arts are still practised by fowlers. The main point about the snare is that it is *concealed*. So, when the arch-fowler comes after the souls of men, he will not usually spread his net in their sight. Some silly birds can be taken in that way, but the most of souls need that the temptation should be veiled. Always suspect

that in a temptation to sin there is more than you can see. Never say that it is a little thing; for great evil lurks in a little fault. Death and destruction hide under apparently small offences. Oh, if we could see everything as God sees it, then we poor silly souls might be in far less danger! But, alas, Satan covers the hook with a tempting bait, and we are taken.

Snares and traps are usually *attractive*. The poor bird sees seeds which he is fond of, and he goes for them, little judging that he is to give his life in exchange for brief enjoyment. So is it with Satan. He tempts us with pleasures, with the lust of the eye, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life: we taste the sweet, and are pierced with the smart. Did we perceive the intent of the great enemy of souls we should fly from sin. You know the old sentence, "Fear the Greeks, even when they bring gifts": even so fear a temptation to sin, even should it offer you all the kingdoms of this world. May God keep us from the attractions which conceal the snare!

But Satan's snares, like the fowler's, are sadly *effectual*. Look at the quantities of small birds that will be found for sale in the markets: fowlers must be exceedingly skilful to catch all these. If we could walk through Satan's market, what a multitude of souls should we see in his hands! Multitudes upon multitudes are the victims of their own passions, victims of that hellish art which makes evil appear to be good. God save us from being taken in these most deadly snares!

What are these snares? I cannot mention them all, for they are legion. Snares tuck our bed, and snares attend our board. Snares are in the street, and snares are in the field. Snares are on the table, snares are in our daily walk. But the chief among them are *temptations to sin*. The Evil One endeavours to lead us into a false way, which will be congenial to our taste. We have each a peculiar weakness, and he knows how to adapt himself to it. He has been a student of human nature for so long a time that he knows more about man than man knows about himself, and he, therefore, chooses that bait which is most likely to attract us. Oh that we may have grace to keep clear of pleasurable sin! The rabbis said to the Nazarite who was not to drink wine or strong drink, "O Nazarite, go about, go about; and do not pass through a vineyard." So, child of God, it will be well for you to go about, and not enter into temptation. Your Master bids you pray, "Lead us not into temptation." Against temptation we are to watch and pray as well as against the sin that is likely to come of it.

Another snare is *erroneous doctrine*. There is plenty of that abroad at this time. Be warned. You can have doctrine high, and doctrine low; doctrine broad, and doctrine narrow. You can have it how you like, for nowadays every man makes his own gospel, and sits in judgment upon the Word of God. Dearly beloved, hold fast the truth, and be not decoyed by error. If any come with a new gospel, turn away your ear from their deceptive teaching; for false doctrine is the poison of asps, and the venom of hell lieth therein.

Even Christian people are in danger from another snare, namely, *deceitful action*. The tempter whispers, "You need not do evil, but there are different ways of judging right and wrong, and it is best to go by the custom of the trade." Satan puts things very prettily when he

means to ruin us. You have somebody else's money entrusted to you. Of course, you would not steal it : but you can use it for a little, and then replace it. It is true, if it should be lost, people will call you a thief ; but then you are not going to lose it : you are going to double it by your cleverness. That is the snare. At other times the temptation is in this form,—“Be sure to buy the thing if you would like it, though you have no money with which to pay for it.” You would not steal. No, no ; there is another way of doing it. Buy it, and do not pay for it. This is one of the snares with which Satan seduces men, till they are ruined. Ah, me, that men should be so soon moved from their integrity ! Oh, child of God, be upright in everything ! However well you may gloss a matter over, and however much others may excuse it, yet if a certain act would be wrong in the sight of God, you must not think of it.

I have noticed another snare. Satan tries to get Christian people to *ape the experience of others*. A certain good man is often melancholy. “Ah,” says Satan, “that is how you ought to be : you ought to be bowed down with holy sorrow.” I remember right well when I was a youth hearing a preacher say that it was dangerous to be sure of our salvation ; and he preached up the duty, and beauty, and sweetness of being everlastingly in doubt as to your condition. A few people would gather around such a preacher, and sit and have a little comfortable misery all to themselves, and think that they were worshipping God. Now, that is a snare to a Christian, because he has a right to be glad, and “the joy of the Lord is our strength.” May we be kept out of that snare ! On the other hand, anxious people see Christians who are advanced in grace and full of faith, while they themselves are much cast down ; then the Evil One whispers, “You are not like those good men : you are no Christian.” Brother, you cannot have another man's experience any more than you can wear another man's face. Certain lovely ferns grow best in the shade, and never flourish in the sun ; while many flowers cannot have too much sunlight. Do not wish to be like this man or that man, but pray God to make you like Jesus Christ, and to let your experience glorify his blessed name ; otherwise the desire to copy others will be a snare to you.

Thus I might go on mentioning snares. They are some of them gross and carnal ; but for the spiritual there are snares so neat and pretty that they are apt to be taken in them before they are aware. According to Pliny, the nets in which the Egyptians took little birds were frequently so fine that one person could carry a net large enough to encompass a whole wood. Surely, it must have been a small wood, and even then it is a remarkable statement for so reliable a writer to have made. We may here see an illustration of the delicacy of those temptations with which Satan surrounds the nobler order of minds. Strong as iron, yet filmy as gauze, are the snares for spiritual men. Why, Satan can encompass a whole church with one of those nets, and you scarcely know that it is there ; and yet the minds within its meshes are quite unable to mount up and sing unto their Lord, as once they did, for they are within an invisible net.

III. We cannot further dwell on the subject of the snare, but we must turn to consider THE CAPTURE. Birds are taken in nets, and souls

are taken by temptations to sin, and by errors of doctrine, and by a thousand other methods. Dear friends, it is a dreadful thing for the poor little bird when it is taken, especially when it is so anxious to escape that it beats itself, and hurts itself in its efforts to get free. How came it to be taken ?

It may have been taken through *hunger*. Half-starved, it dashed into peril for necessary food. Many true men are in such straits and difficulties that they are sadly liable to be brought into the net thereby. Dear brethren, pray God to deliver you from poverty and from great riches, for there are perilous snares about each of those positions. May you be neither exalted nor depressed, but preserved in the middle path of experience. If you are extremely needy, you may be tempted to do wrong to provide for your wife and family ; I pray that you may never yield to the temptation, but trust in God, and he will deliver you without your putting forth your hand unto iniquity.

Other birds are taken merely by their *appetite*. They are not excessively hungry, but they enjoy certain choice seeds, and the fowler knows it ; and he scatters such around the trap. Ease of body, indulgence of taste, the joy of being admired, the sweets of power and position, all these and many more have been the fowler's baits. Hundreds have all that heart ought to wish for, but they must needs be rich, and therefore fall into a thousand snares which they might have avoided. Men are snared by eating and by drinking, by fine raiment and by vain-glorious display. Snares lie thickly around the appetites of the body and the longings of the mind.

Some persons are entrapped by *fear*. Birds have rushed into the net for fear of danger ; many persons have become great offenders against God through lack of moral courage. They are afraid of the laughter of fools. They cannot bear the sarcasm of the so-called wise ; and so they suppress truth, and join in sin to escape scorn. God give us a holy bravery wherewith to defy every man's opinion when we know that we are obeying the Lord.

Some little birds are lost by *love of company*. The fowler has a decoy-bird which sings sweetly or coquettes pleasantly, and the other birds must needs follow it. In the church of God we lose many members by ungodly marriages. The worldling pipes his pretty note, and the tender heart is taken by it. The fair enthusiast says, " I shall convert him ; " but it is very, very seldom that this happens ; it is usually the other way. This is a snare of Satan in which many are taken.

Thus you see how souls are captured. Perhaps I am speaking to one here who has flown into the net. You do not know what to do, friend ; for you are quite helpless to break your bonds. You went in very eagerly, and, oh, how eagerly you would get out again if you could ! But you cannot escape. Your own helplessness is now apparent as it never was before. One thing, however, you can do : you can cry to One who is stronger than you. You can pray the Lord to pluck your feet out of the net ; and he is able to do it, for all things are possible with him.

IV. Just a word or two upon THE ESCAPE. This is a very blessed text, although the sermon has been gloomy so far ; for now we shall see the fowler disappointed, and the captive let loose.

I wish that everybody here could repeat the utterance, and cry, *Our*

soul is escaped. We were in the net, but our soul has escaped. The snare is broken ; it has no power over us any longer ; we are free from its grasp, we have escaped. Up, up, we soar, away from the fowler and his nets. Glory be to God, we have escaped.

“ As when the fowler's snare is broke,
The bird escapes on cheerful wings ;
My soul, set free from Satan's yoke,
With joy bursts forth, and mounts, and sings.”

This escape is due to God alone. As the bird could not get out of the snare, so the soul cannot escape from temptation ; but God can bring it out, and he works the rescue. Hear this, ye that are slaves to drunkenness : God can deliver you. You that have fallen into licentiousness : hear it,—God can deliver you. Whatever the sin that has birdlimed you, that gracious hand which once was nailed to the cross can set you free. Up, up, up, ye that pine on the borders of despair ! Jesus can deliver you. He that made the world out of nothing can make a joyful Christian even out of you. He can turn your mourning into dancing, and your despair into confidence.

This escape is achieved by power. That word “broken” has force in it. “The snare is broken,”—the meshes torn with a strong hand, the steel trap dashed in pieces. It matters not what danger you are in, there is power enough in God to fetch you out of it. I thought once that God could never save *me*. I supposed that he would bless my brother and my sisters, but that he would leave me ; yet he did save me, blessed be his name ! And you, too, he is able to deliver. “Oh, but I am the odd man,” cries one. Then there are two of us ; and if God has saved one odd man he can surely save another ; and why should he not save you despite all your eccentricity ? “But I do not think that he will save me.” What are your thoughts worth ? He can save even you. Only trust him, though you be in the net, and out of that net you shall be fetched, for he leaves no soul to perish that puts its trust in him.

Observe that *the escape was complete* : “the snare is broken, and we are escaped.” As long as a little bird has the tiniest bit of cotton tied to its leg, and that is fastened anywhere, the bird has not escaped. And as long as you have one evil habit—one wrong thing that you really love—you have not clean escaped. You must be altogether separated from your sins. No man can be married to Christ till he is divorced from sin. Our deliverance must be entire, or it is not true. Who can give us this but the Lord Jesus Christ by his blessed Spirit ? Trust him to set you free, and no net shall hold you.

I would again put the question, “How many of us can say, We have escaped ?” Let us sing unto the Lord, if we can ; and let those who cannot say that they are free, continue to plead earnestly with God that he would deliver them.

V. I would close with THE LESSON which this subject ought to teach us. A word or two only.

It ought to teach us, first, *to sing*, for if a bird gets out of the net, does it not sing ? How glad it seems to be when once it flies away ! Oh, you that have been delivered from sin and Satan, sing unto the

Lord! Praise and bless his name. Be as happy as possible. Be something more than full of happiness. How can that be? Why, be so full of it that it overflows and cheers others. Let us communicate our joy as far as ever we can, for we are escaped. We are escaped, and we will praise the blessed God who broke the snare.

Next, *let us trust*, for if the Lord has saved us from the dreadful snare of sin and Satan, he will save us from everything else. It is sad to me that any should trust the Lord with their souls, and yet they cannot trust him for their daily bread, or for help in their daily trials. This must not be. If the Lord has given our soul so great an escape, depend upon it he will take care of our bodies. He that gave us Jesus will give us food and raiment, and let us be therewith content.

Lastly, *let us watch*. If we have fallen into the snare once, let us keep our eyes open not to go there again. May the Holy Spirit prevent any child of God from turning aside even for a moment from the straight way. "Let them not turn again to folly," is one of God's own cautions to his people. He has brought you up out of the horrible pit; do not play near the edge of it. He has set your feet on a rock; what have you to do with the miry clay? Get away from the slippery ground, and on the rock let your goings be established.

I would say again to you netted ones—you that are really caught in the trap, and held fast: oh, that the Lord would come at once, and set you free! I think he will, yea, I am sure that he will if you cry to him to do so. I have heard of a sailor who had been in prison, that after his release, he had money in his pocket, and going over London-bridge, he saw a man selling birds—thrushes, larks, and so on. "What do you want for that lot?" said Jack. I forget how much it was, but Jack found the money; and as soon as the birds were his he opened the door, and let them all fly away. The man called out "Whatever did you buy those birds for, and then let them out?" "Oh," said the sailor, "if you had been in prison as I have been you would be sure to set everything free you could get a hold of." You and I ought to display the same kind of feeling towards all poor bonded souls. I am sure that the Lord Jesus Christ is more tender-hearted than we are; and therefore he will certainly come and set free all prisoners who beg him to open their cage doors. He is the great Emancipator: show him your bonds, and beg for liberty, and he will grant it you.

PORTIONS OF SCRIPTURE READ BEFORE SERMON—Psalms cxxiii.,
cxxiv., and cxxv.

HYMNS FROM "OUR OWN HYMN BOOK"—193, 124, 244.