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COMFORT PROCLAIMED.

A Sermon

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AT EXETER HALL, STRAND.

"Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God."—Isaiah xl. 1.

WHAT a sweet title: "My people!" What a cheering revelation: "Your God!" How much of meaning is couched in those two words, "My people!" Here is speciality. The whole world is God's; the heaven, even the heaven of heavens are the Lord's and he reigneth among the children of men. But he saith of a certain number, "My people." Of those whom he hath chosen, whom he hath purchased to himself, he saith what he saith not of others. While nations and kindreds are passed by as being simply nations, he says of *them* "My people." In this word there is the idea of proprietorship to teach us that we are the property of God. In some special manner the "Lord's portion is his people; Jacob is the lot of his inheritance." All the nations upon earth are his; he taketh up the isles as a very little thing; the whole world is in his power; yet are his people, his chosen, favoured people, more especially his possession; for he has done more for them than others; he has bought them with his blood; he has brought them nigh to himself; he has set his great heart upon them; he has loved them with an everlasting love, a love which many waters cannot quench, and which the revolutions of time shall never suffice in the least degree to diminish. "My people!" O my hearers, can you by faith put yourselves in that number who believe that God says of them, "My people?" Can you look up to heaven to-night, and say, "My Lord, and my God: mine by that sweet relationship which entitles me to call thee Father; mine by that hallowed fellowship which I delight to hold with thee when thou art pleased to manifest thyself unto me as thou dost not unto the world?" Canst thou, beloved, put thine hand into thine heart and find there the indentures of thy salvation? Canst thou read thy title writ in precious blood? Canst thou by humble faith lay hold of Jesus's garments, and say, "My Christ?" If thou canst, then God saith of thee, "My people;" for if God be your God, and Christ your Christ, the Lord has a special, peculiar favour to you; you are the object of his choice, and you shall be accepted, at last, in his beloved Son. How careful God is of his people; those of whom he says, "My people;" mark, how anxious he is concerning them, not only for their life, but for their comfort. He does not say, "strengthen ye, strengthen ye my people;" he does not say to the angel, "protect my people;" he does not say to the heavens, "drop down manna to feed my people;"—all that and more also his tender regard secures to them; but on this occasion, to show us that he is not only regardful of our interests, but also of our superfluities, he says, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people." He would not only have us his living people, his preserved people, but he would have us be his happy people too. He likes his people to be fed, but what is more, he likes to give them "wines on the lees well refined," to make glad their hearts. He will not only give them bread, but he will give them honey too; he will not simply give them milk, but he will give them wine and milk, and all the sweet things which their hearts can desire. "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people;" it is the Father's yearning heart, careful even for the little things of his people. "Comfort ye, comfort ye,"—that one with a tearful eye; "Comfort ye, comfort ye,"—yon child of mine with an aching heart; "Comfort ye,"—that poor bemoaning one; "Comfort ye, comfort ye—my people, saith your God."

Now to night we shall notice the *parties to whom the command is addressed*; secondly, *the reason for it*; and thirdly, *the means for carrying it out*.

I. First, then, TO WHOM IS THIS COMMAND ADDRESSED? You know, beloved, the Holy Spirit is the great Comforter, and he it is who alone can solace the saints if their hearts be really cheered; but he uses instruments to relieve his children in their

distress and to lift up their hearts from desperation. To whom, then, is this command addressed? I believe it is addressed to *angels* and to *men*.

To *angels*, first of all, I believe this command is addressed: "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people." You often talk about the insinuations of the devil; I frequently hear you bemoaning yourselves because you have been attacked by Apollyon, and have had a hard struggle with Beelzebub; you have found it hard to resist his desperate thrusts which he made against you; and you are always talking about him. Allow me to remind you that there is another side of that question, for if evil spirits assault us, doubtless good spirits guard us; and if Satan can cast us down, doubtless it is true God giveth his angels charge over us, to keep us in all our ways, and they shall bear us up in their hands lest at any time we dash our feet against a stone. It is my firm belief that angels are often employed by God to throw into the hearts of his people comforting thoughts. There are many sweet thoughts which we have by the way, when we sit down, and when we rise up, which we scarcely dare attribute immediately to the Holy Ghost, but which are still beautiful and calm, lovely, and fair, and consoling; and we attribute them to the ministry of angels. Angels came and ministered unto Jesus, and I doubt not that they minister unto us. Few of us have enough belief in the existence of spirits. I like that saying of Milton's, "Millions of spiritual creatures walk this earth, both when we sleep and when we wake." And if our minds were opened, if our ears were attentive, we might hold fellowship with spirits that flit through the air every moment. Around the death-bed of saints angels hover; by the side of every struggling warrior for Christ the angels stand. In the day of battle we hear in the air the neighing of their steeds. Hark! how softly do they ride to help the elect of God, while in the stern conflict for the right and for the truth, when they would have been cast down, some angel whispers, "Courage brother, courage, I would I could stand by thy side, shoulder to shoulder, and foot to foot, to fight the battle, but I must not; it is left for men. Courage then brother, because angels watch over thee!" It is a good wish of ours, when we say at eventide, "Peace be to thee beloved! good angels guard thee! may they spread their wings o'er thee and stand around thy bed!" But it is more than a wish, it is a reality. Do ye not know it is written "the angel of the Lord encampeth round them that fear him?" "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister unto them who are heirs of salvation?" This command then, comes to angels: "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people." Full oft the bright winged seraph flaps his wing to earth, to comfort some desponding heart. Full oft the cherub, ceasing for a moment his mighty song to go on errands of love, descends, as Gabriel did of old, to cheer the heart of many a struggling man and to stand by the side of those who are in conflict for God and for his truth. Ye angels, ye bright spirits, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people."

But on earth, this is more especially addressed to the Lord's *ministers*. He calls his ministers angels of the churches, albeit, they should be a great deal more like angels than they are. Ministers are bound to comfort God's people. I am sure, however, they cannot do it, unless they preach the good old doctrines of truth. Except they preach grace and gracious doctrine, I cannot see how they are to console the minds of the Lord's family. Were I to adopt a lax theology which teaches that God's children may fall away, that although redeemed they may yet be lost, that they may be effectually called, and yet slide back to perdition—I want to know how I could carry out this command? I should say, "Brethren, God has told me to comfort you; that is what I have to preach; you must get what comfort you can out of it, for I really cannot find much." I have often marvelled how the Arminian can comfort himself, wherewith he can light a fire to warm his own heart! What doctrine hath he? He believes he is a child of God to-day, and he is taught to believe he is a child of the devil to-morrow. He is now, he says, in the covenant, but then that covenant is such an uncertain thing that it may at any time be broken down, and he may die beneath its ruins; he knows himself to be redeemed by the blood of Christ, yet he is taught that that will not be sufficient without the concurrence of some good thoughts, good actions, or certainly by some good grace, some faith of his own. He is led to believe that his standing depends upon his own keeping near to God, instead of remembering that his keeping near to God must be by a sweet attraction that proceeds from God himself. Whence then comfort is to be procured I cannot tell. Happy I am I have no such gospel as that to preach. Let me preach the old gospel of Chrysostom, the old gospel of Augustine, the old gospel of Athanasius; and above all the old gospel of Jesus Christ, the originator of it; for there I can find something to comfort the child of God, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people." It is our duty to reprove, to exhort, to invite,

but it is equally our duty to console. The minister should ask of God the Spirit, that he may be filled with his influence as a comforter; that when he ascends his pulpit on the Sabbath morning, his poor hard working people, who have been toiling, fretting with care and anxiety all the week, may say, "Here comes our minister; he is sure to have his mouth filled with good things; as soon as he opens his lips he will utter some great and glorious promise from God's Word. He has little to say himself, but he will be sure to tell us some good old truths with some fresh unction, and we shall go away refreshed." Oh! ye sons of toil, some of you understand this. With weary feet ye come to God's house; but oh! how gladly do ye sing there, and how sweetly does your singing harmonize with your hearts! and when you have heard the Word you go away and say, "Would God it were Sunday all the week! Oh! that I might sit and ever hear the words of God! Oh! that I might sit and ever drink in such comforts, so should I be satisfied as with marrow and fatness!" But sometimes you come up, and there is a flogging for you just when there needs to be consolation; or you get some dry hard metaphysical subject that has not any nourishment for your souls in it, and you go away half starved. You hear some fine discourse with rounded periods, and people say, "Oh! such an oration! never was English so beautifully spoken by Hall or Chalmers. How admirably it was delivered!" But alas! alas! what of the dish, the porcelain, the knife, the plate, the splendid damask cloth, the vase of flowers—where is the food? There is none there. You have got the garnishings and you ought to be thankful, and hold your ministers in esteem, even if they withhold from you your necessary bread! But the child of God wont like that; he says "I am weary of such things, away with these garnishings, give it me in plain rough Saxon if you will, but give me the gospel! Cut it up in any fashion you like, but do give me something to feed upon." The language may be rough, and the style homely, but the heir of heaven says, "There was 'comfort ye my people' in it; and that was what I wanted. Its style, humanly speaking, may not have exactly suited my taste, but it has fed my soul, and that will suffice me."

But, my friends, do not support your ministers as an excuse for the discharge of your own duties; many do so. They think when they have subscribed towards the support of the ministry, it is enough; imagining, as our Roman Catholic friends do, that the priest is to do everything, and the people nothing; but that is very wrong. When God said, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people," he spake to all his people to comfort one another. And who is there here that knows the Lord and has tasted of his grace who cannot comfort his brethren? There is my strong friend who is on the mount feasting on dying love; he is the subject of rhapsodies and high excitement; his soul is like the chariot of Amminadib; it is on fire with his Master's presence; he is living near to God and drinking in fulness of joy. Oh! my brother, go and tell out a portion to seven, and also to eight; for thou knowest not what sorrow there is upon the earth. When thou art happy, remember there is sure to be some one else sad. When thy cup runneth over, find out an empty cup to catch the drops that overflow. When thy soul is full of joy, go, if thou canst, and find a mourner and let him hear thy song, or sit down by his side and tell him how glad thou art, and mayhap his poor heart may be warmed by thy sweet cheering words. But art thou weak? Art thou sad thyself? Then go to him who is the great Comforter and ask him to relieve thy distresses, and after that go out thyself and comfort others. There are none so good to comfort others as those who once were comfortless. If I were an orphan now, and needed a helper, I would seek one who had been an orphan in his youth, that he might sympathize with me. Were I houseless and poor, I would not go to the man who has rolled in wealth from earliest youth, but I would seek out the man who, like myself, has trodden with bare feet the cold pavement of the street at midnight; I would seek out the man who, penniless and poor, has begged his way from town to town, and then, by God's providence, has worked himself up; for I could believe that such an one would have a heart to sympathize with me. Go, thou poor tried one, go thou weather-beaten soul if thou canst, and call to thy mate, who is just out at sea with thee, and tell him to be of good cheer. Thou who art in the valley of the shadow of death, sing, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil;" and mayhap some brother far behind thee will hear the song, and will take heart.

"Lives of great men all remind us,
We can make our lives sublime,
And departing, leave behind us,
Foot-prints on the sands of time.

Foot-prints that, perhaps, another,
Sailing o'er life's solemn main,
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,
Seeing, may take heart again."

Go, and when thou hast found any good, strive to perpetuate it by communicating

it to others. When thy foot is on the rock, show others how to put their feet there. When thou art glad, tell others how thou wast made glad, and the same cordial which cheered thee may cheer them likewise. "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people."

Now why do we not enjoy this a little more? I believe one reason is because we are most of us rather too proud to tread in our Master's footsteps. We like not to say with him, "I am not come to be ministered unto, but to minister." "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people" is a sublime admonition, but never surely intended for the meagre sympathy of fashion,—for a lady who can ride in her carriage, and send her card up, when she calls to inquire for a friend, who is sick; but were I to press home the duty, and tell her that "my people" includes the poorest of God's flock, the weakest and the meanest, she would think me a rude and vulgar young man, unacquainted with the etiquette of genteel society. Comfort the poor!—why should she? "The lower classes expect a great deal too much of the upper, I shall not demean myself by stooping to them." This kind of feeling many professing Christians have; they talk with a fine lisp, they deem it enough to say, "Poor creature, I pity your case, I am sorry for you!" But the heir of heaven reads, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people." There is a poor man in the streets who has just come begging a crust at your door, and you can see by what he says, that there is something of God's grace in his heart; then comfort him. There is another up the creaking staircase in that back alley; you never went up there, you might be afraid to go; but if you hear of a child of God there, do not shrink back. God's diamonds may be often found amidst heaps of rags and tatters, in the very outskirts of the city, the abodes of haggard poverty; so go after them. Whensoever you hear of a child of God, go and find him out; for this command, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people," never ought to be put aside by our pride. Why, you go to your churches and chapels, sometimes, and sit in your pews, without even a thought of speaking to your neighbours. Some men will go to a chapel seven years, and scarcely know the name of the next seat-holder. Is that right? Many will sit at the Lord's table too, and not speak to each other. But that is not the fashion of communion as I understand it: it is not the fashion of the gospel either. When I was but a youth, the smallest boy almost that ever joined a church, I remember I thought that everybody believed what he said, and when I heard the minister say brother, I thought I must be his brother, for I was admitted into the church. I once sat next to a gentleman in a pew, and we received the bread and wine together; he called me "Brother," and as I thought he meant it, I afterwards acted upon it. I had no friend in the town of Cambridge, where I was; and one day when walking out, I saw this same gentleman, and I said to myself, "Well now, he called me brother; I know he is a great deal better off than I am, but I don't care for that; I will go and speak to him." So I went and said "How do you do, brother?" "I have not the pleasure of knowing you," was his reply. I said "I sat next to you at the Lord's table last Sabbath day, sir, and you called me 'brother' when you passed the cup to me, and I was sure you meant it." "There now," said he, "it is worth while seeing some one who believes a little with sincerity in these times; come in with me." And we have been the nearest and dearest bosom friends ever since, just because he saw I took him at his word, that he meant what he said. But now-a-days profession has become a pretence and a sham; people sit down at the church together, as though they were brethren, the minister calls you brethren, but he won't speak to you, or own you as such; his people are his brethren, no doubt, but then it is in such a mysterious sense, that you will have to read some German theologian in order to comprehend it. That person is "your very dear brother," or "your very dear sister," but if you are in distress, go to them and see if they will assist you. I do not believe in such a religion as that. I would have those who profess to be brethren, believe that "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people," applies to every member of Christ's church, and that they all ought to carry it out to the utmost of their abilities.

II. Secondly, WHAT ARE THE REASONS FOR THIS COMMAND? Why does God say "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people!"

The first reason is because *God loves to see his people look happy*. The Roman Catholic supposes that God is pleased with a man if he whips himself, walks bare-footed for many miles, and torments his body. I am certain if I were to see anyone do that, I should say "Poor soul, give him a pair of shoes; do take that whip from him, I cannot bear to see him so." And as I believe that God is infinitely more benevolent than I am, I cannot suppose that he would take pleasure in seeing blood run down a man's back, or blisters rising on his feet. If a man would please God, he had better make himself as happy as he can. When I am by the sea-side, and the

tide is coming in, I see what appears to be a little fringe, looking almost like a mist; and I ask a fisherman what it is. He tells me there is no mist there; and that what I see are all little shrimps dancing in ecstasy, throwing themselves in convulsions and contortions of delight. I think within myself, "Does God make those creatures happy, and did he make me to be miserable? Can it ever be a religious thing to be unhappy?" No; true religion is in harmony with the whole world; it is in harmony with the sun and moon and stars; and the sun shines and the stars twinkle; it is in harmony with all the world; and the world has flowers in it and leaping hills, and carolling birds; it has joys in it; so I believe religion was meant to have joys in it; and I hold it to be an irreligious thing to go moping miserably through God's creation. You cannot help it sometimes, just as sins will overtake you, but happiness is a very virtue. "Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy and drink thy wine with a merry heart, for God now accepteth thy works," which means not so much eating and drinking, as the living with a joyous countenance, and walking before God, believing in his love, and rejoicing in his grace.

Again, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people;" because *uncomfortable Christians often dishonour religion*. Look at my friend who is come here to-night with such a sorrowful countenance. Yesterday, he had a new servant in his house, and when she went down into the kitchen, she said to her fellow-servant, "Is not our master a pious man?" "Yes, surely." "I thought so because he looks so miserable." Now that is a disgrace to religion. Whenever a Christian man sinks under affliction; when he does not seek grace from God to battle manfully with his sea of troubles; when he does not ask his Father to give him a great weight of consolation whereby he shall be able to endure in the evil day, we may say he does dishonour to the high, and mighty, and noble principles of Christianity, which are fitted to bear a man up in times of the very deepest affliction. It is the boast of the gospel that it lifts men above trouble; it is one of the glories of our Christianity, that it makes us say, "Although the fig-tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vine, the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat, yet will I rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation." But when the Christian gets sad and miserable, run to him, brother; wipe that tear from his eye, tell him to cheer up, or at least if he is sad, not to let the world see it; if he fasts, let him anoint his head, and wash his face, that he appear not unto men to fast. Let his garments be always white, and let his head lack no oil; let him be happy; for so he giveth credit to religion.

Again, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people;" because *a Christian in an uncomfortable state cannot work for God much*. Break a poor man's heart and let him come on this platform with a grieved and agonizing spirit; and oh! what a want of power there will be in him! He wants all his time for his own sighs and groans, and will have none to spend upon God's people. We have seen broken-hearted ministers who have sadly lamented that when in trouble, they have found themselves unable to declare God's truth as they could wish. It is when the mind is happy, that it can be laborious. Nothing hurts the man whilst he can keep all right with heaven, and feel it so; whilst he can say that God is his own God, he can work night and day, and scarcely feel fatigued. But take away his comforts and his joys, and then one day's labour distracts his nerves and shatters all his mind. Then comfort God's people, because bruised reeds give little music, and the smoking flax makes little fire. "Comfort ye, comfort ye" the saints, for they will work ten times better when their minds have once been made comfortable.

Again; "Comfort ye" God's people, because *ye profess to love them*. You call that poor aged cripple, loitering home to-night, leaning on her crutch, your sister; do you know that she will go to bed to-night supperless? Only once has she tasted food to-day, and that was dry bread; do you know that? and is she your sister? Let your heart speak: would you allow your sister to eat dry bread once a day, and have nothing else? No; out of love to her as your relation, you would go and comfort her. There is another poor brother who will pass you on the road home, not poor in bodily things, but poor in soul, distressed in spirits. Don't do as that person has just done—he has quickened his pace, because he says that old man makes him miserable, and it makes him melancholy to talk with him. No; just go to him and say, "Brother, I hear you are in the valley of Baca; well, it is written, they that pass through the valley of Baca make it a well, the rain also filleth the pools." Join yourself to him, for it is written, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people." "No, sir," you say, "I intend to go to-night with one or two very good people, and we shall enjoy ourselves together, and be very glad to-night." Yes, but if they be glad you cannot comfort them, so go and seek out some

broken-hearted one if thou canst, some poor, sad, mourning one, and say, "The Lord hath appeared to thee of old, saying, 'I have loved thee with an everlasting love.' God's mercies have not failed and, therefore, we are not consumed." Go and cheer him. What! are there no families near you where the head has lately been removed by death? Have you no bereaved friends? have you no poor in your streets, no distressed, no desponding ones? If you have not, then yonder Scripture might be rent out of the Bible, for it would be useless; but because I am sure you have such, I bid you, in God Almighty's name, to go and seek out the needy, the distressed, and the poor, and send them portions of meat. "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people."

III. In the last place. God never gives his children a duty to do without giving them **THE MEANS TO DO IT**; he never bids them make bricks without straw, and when he tells us to comfort God's people, we may be certain there are many means whereby they may be comforted. Let me just hint at those things in the everlasting gospel which have a tendency to comfort the saints. What, child of God! Art thou at a loss for a topic to comfort the aching heart? Hark thee, then; go tell of the ancient things of former days; whisper in the mourner's ear electing grace, and redeeming mercy, and dying love. When thou findest a troubled one, tell him of the covenant, in all things ordered well, signed, sealed, and ratified; tell him what the Lord hath done in former days, how he cut Rahab and wounded the dragon; tell him the wondrous story of God's dealings with his people. Tell him that God who divided the Red sea can make a highway for his people through the deep waters of affliction; that he who appeared in the burning bush which was not consumed, will support him in the furnace of tribulation. Tell him of the marvellous things which God has wrought for his chosen people: surely there is enough there to comfort him. Tell him that God watcheth the furnace as the goldsmith the refining pot.

"Thy days of trial then,
Are all ordained by heaven;
If he appoint the number 'ten,'
You ne'er shall have eleven."

If that does not suffice, tell him of his present mercies; tell him that he has much left, though much is gone. Tell him there is "now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus;" tell him that now he is accepted in the beloved; tell him that he is now adopted, and that his standing is safe. Tell him that Jesus is above, wearing the breast-plate, or pleading his cause. Tell him that though earth's pillars shake, God is a refuge for us; tell the mourner that the everlasting God faileth not, neither is weary. Let present facts suffice thee to cheer him.

But if this is not enough, tell him of the future; whisper to him that there is a heaven with pearly gates and golden streets; tell him that

"A few more rolling suns at most,
Will land him on fair Canaan's coast."

and therefore he may well bear his sorrows. Tell him that Christ is coming, and that his sign is in the heavens, his advent is near, he will soon appear to judge the earth with equity, and his people in righteousness. And if that suffice not, tell him all about that God who lived and died. Take him to Calvary; picture to him the bleeding hands, and side, and feet; tell him of the thorn-crowned King of grief; tell him of the mighty Monarch of woe and blood, who wore the scarlet of mockery which was yet the purple of the empire of grief; tell him that he himself bore our sins in his own body on the tree. And if I have not said enough, go to thy Bible, read its pages, bend thy knee and ask for guidance, and then tell him some great and precious promise, that so thou mayest accomplish thy mission, and comfort one of God's people.

I have but a few words to say to some, who I grieve to think want no comfort. They want something else before they can be comforted. Some of my hearers are *not* God's people; they have never believed in Christ, nor fled to him for refuge. Now I will tell you briefly and plainly the way of salvation. Sinner! know that thou art in God's sight guilty, that God is just and that he will punish thee, for thy sins. Hark thee, then: there is only one way by which thou canst escape, and it is this: Christ must be thy substitute. Either thou must die, or Christ must die for thee. Thy only refuge is faith in Jesus Christ, whereby thou shalt be assured that Christ did really and actually shed his blood for thee. And if you are able to believe that Christ died for you, I know it will cause you to hate sin, to seek for Christ, and to love and serve him world without end. May God bless us all, forgive us our sins, and accept our souls for Jesus's sake!