

# Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit.

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THE SINGING ARMY.

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## A Sermon

PUBLISHED ON THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 16TH, 1905,

DELIVERED BY

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AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON,

*On Thursday Evening, November 23rd, 1876.*

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“And Judah gathered themselves together to ask help of the Lord.”—2 Chronicles, xx. 4.

JERUSALEM was startled by sudden news. There had for a great while been quiet preparations made in the distant countries beyond Jordan. Upon its mountains Edom had been getting ready: the workshops of Petra had been ringing with the hammer; the enemies of Israel had been beating their pruning hooks into spears and swords, and they were now coming down in hordes. There were three great nations, and these were assisted by the odds and ends of all the nations round about, so that a great company eager for plunder was drawn up in battle. They had heard about the riches of the temple at Jerusalem; they knew that the people of Judea had for years been flourishing, and they were now coming to kill and to destroy and to sack and to plunder. They were like the grasshoppers or the locusts for multitude. What were the people of God to do? How were these poor Judeans to defend themselves? Their immediate resort was to their God. They do not appear to have looked up their armour and their swords with any particular anxiety. The fact was the case was so altogether hopeless as far as they were concerned, that it was no use looking to anything beneath the skies, and as they were driven from all manifest earthly resorts they were compelled to lift up their eyes to God; and their godly king Jehoshaphat aided them in so doing. A general fast was proclaimed, and the preparation to meet the hosts of Moab, Ammon and Edom was prayer. No doubt if the Ammonites had heard of it they would have laughed, Edom would have scoffed at it, and Moab would have cursed those that made supplication. “What! do they suppose that their prayers can defeat us?” would have been the sneer of their adversaries. Yet

this was Israel's artillery: this was their eighty-one ton gun: when it was ready it would throw one bolt, and only one, and that would crush three nations at once. God's people resorted only to the arm invisible—the arm omnipotent—and they did well and wisely.

Now, if the Lord shall teach us to imitate them, and by his grace enable us in doing it, we shall have learnt a great lesson. The preacher needs to learn it as much as anybody, and he prays that each one of you may be also scholars in the school of faith, and become very proficient in the divine art of prayer and praise.

I. First, then, HOW THEY ASKED HELP? They asked their help, as you know, by a general fast and prayer, but I mean, what was the style of that prayer in which they approached the Lord?

And the reply is, first, *they asked help, expressing their confidence.* "O Lord God of our fathers, art not thou God in heaven? and rulest not thou over all the kingdoms of the heathen? and in thine hand is there not power and might, so that none is able to withstand thee?" If we begin by doubting, our prayer will limp. Faith is the tendon of Achilles, and if that be cut it is not possible for us to wrestle with God, but as long as we have that strong sinew, that mighty tendon unhurt, we can prevail with God in prayer. It is a rule of the kingdom, though God often goes beyond it, "According to thy faith be it done unto thee." I have known him give us a hundred times as much as our faith, but, brethren, I have never known him give us less. That could not possibly be. This is his minimum rule, I may say, "According to thy faith be it unto thee." When, therefore, in time of trouble you ask help of God, ask it believing that he is able to give it; ask it expecting that he will bestow it. Do not grieve the Spirit of God by unworthy doubts and mistrusts; these things will be like fiery arrows in your own soul and drink up the very life of your strength. However hard the struggle and difficult the trial, if thou seekest the Lord, seek him in the confidence he deserves.

Then *they sought God, pleading his past acts.* This is a fashion of prayer which has been very common among the saints, and it has proved to be very potent. "Art not thou our God, who didst drive out the inhabitants of this land before thy people Israel, and gavest it to the seed of Abraham thy friend for ever?" Remember what God has done for you, and then say, as a sweet refrain, "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever." When you are praying, recollect what he was yesterday if you cannot see that he is comfortable towards you to-day. If there be no present manifestations of divine favour, recall the former days—the days of old—the years of the right hand of the Most High. He has been gracious unto you; can you tell how gracious? He has abounded towards you in lovingkindness, and tenderness, and faithfulness; he has never been a wilderness or a land of drought unto you. Well, then, if in six troubles he has delivered thee, wilt thou not trust him for seven? If you get to sixty troubles, cannot you trust him for sixty-one? You have been carried, some of you, I see, till grey hairs are on your head. How long do you expect to live? Do you think you have got an odd ten years left? Well, do you think

that the Lord who has blest you seventy years will not keep you the other ten. We say that we ought always to trust a man until he deceives us. We reckon a man honest, till we find him otherwise. Let it be so with God, I beseech you. Since we have found him good, faithful, true, kind, tender, let us not think hardly of him now that we have come into straits, but let us come to him thus, and say, "Art not thou our God? Didst not thou bring us up out of the horrible pit and out of the miry clay? Didst thou not bring us up out of the Egypt of our sin? Surely thou hast not brought us into the wilderness to destroy us? Wilt thou leave us now? True, we are unworthy, but so we always were, and if thou didst want a reason for leaving us thou hast had ten thousand reasons long ago. Lord, do not be wroth very sore with thy servants, and cast us not away." That is the style of pleading which prevails. Imitate these men of old, who asked help by recalling the past.

Proceeding a little farther in their prayer, we see that *they pleaded the promise of God*, which promise was made at the time when Solomon dedicated the temple. "That if, when evil cometh upon us, we cry unto thee in our affliction, then thou wilt hear and help." He that getteth the promise of God and graspeth God with the promise—he does, and must prevail. I have known sometimes a man unable to grasp anything; the object has slipped away, his hand has been slippery too, and I have seen him as he has taken up some sand in his hand, and then he has been able to get a grip. I like to plunge my hand into the promises, and then I find myself able to grasp with a grip of determination the mighty faithfulness of God. An omnipotent plea with God is: "Do as thou hast said." You know how a man nails you when he brings your very words before you. "There," says he, "that is what you said you would do. Of your own free will you pledged yourself to do this." Why then you cannot get away from it, for it is the way with the saints that if they swear to their own hurt they change not; they must be true to the words they speak even if it be to their own damage. Of the saints' Master it is always true. "Hath he said and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken and shall he not make it good?" Here then is a mighty instrument to be used in prayer, "Lord, thou hast said this or that, thou hast said it, now do as thou hast said. Thou hast said, 'Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivereth him out of them all.' Thou hast said, 'He shall deliver thee in six troubles, and in seven there shall no evil touch thee.' Thou hast said, 'Surely in blessing I will bless thee.' Thou hast said, 'The Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest.' Thou hast said, 'Thy shoes shall be iron and brass, and as thy days so shall thy strength be.' Lord, there is thy promise for it." With such a plea you must prevail with a faithful God.

Again, as these people asked for help *they confessed their own unhappy condition*. There is a great power in that. One of the strongest pleas with generosity is the urgency of poverty, and one of the most prevailing arguments to be used in prayer with God is a truthful statement of our condition—a confession of our sad

estate. So they said to the Lord these words, "O our God, wilt thou not judge them? for we have no might against this great company that cometh against us; neither know we what to do: but our eyes are upon thee." They had no might, and they had no plan. "We have no might, neither know we what to do." Sometimes even if you cannot do the thing, it is a little comfort to know how it might be done if you had the power, but these perplexed people neither could do it, nor knew how to do it. They were nonplussed. A little nation like Judah, surrounded by these powerful enemies, truly had no might. Their weakness and ignorance were great pleas: the logic was divine. "Neither know we what to do: therefore our eyes are unto thee." It was as if they had said, "If we could do it ourselves, well, thou mightest very well say, 'Go and do it. What did I give you the strength for, but that you could use the strength in doing it?' But when we have got no strength, neither know we what to do, we come and just lay the case down at thy feet and say, 'There it is; our eyes are upon thee.'" Perhaps you think that is not praying. I tell you it is the most powerful form of prayer, just to set your case before God, just to lay bare all your sorrow and all your needs, and then say, "Lord, there it is." You know a man must not beg in the streets of London; the police will not have it, and I daresay that is a very wise regulation. But what does the needy man do? Have not you seen him? He is dressed like a countryman, and looks half-starved, and his knees can be seen through an old pair of corduroys as he stoops. He does not beg, not he: he only sits down at the corner of the road. He knows quite well that the very sight of his condition is enough. There are one or two persons about the streets of London whose faces are a fortune to them; pale, and thin, and woebegone, they appeal more eloquently than words. I was going to say that there is a man who comes to the Tabernacle, who is just of the same sort. I could point him out, but I do not see him now; but he does come here, and the very way in which he shivers, the remarkable manner in which he looks ill, though he is not ill, takes in people who are continually being duped by his appearance. All the world knows that it is the look of the thing, the very appearance and show of sorrow, that prevails with people more than any words that are used. Now, when you cannot pray in words, go and lay bare your sorrow before God: just go and show your soul. Tell God what it is that burdens and distresses you, and you will prevail with the bounteous heart of our God, who is not moved by eloquence of words, and oratory of tongue, but is swift to answer the true oratory, the true eloquence, of real distress, and who is as wise to detect sham misery as to succour real sorrow.

I wonder whether I recall to some of you any particular times of trial. To myself I do. If I do not to you, at any rate, there is one common affliction which has overwhelmed us all, that is the great affliction of sin. When sin, with its multitudinous host of offences, becomes manifest to us under conviction, and we do not know how to meet one single sin or to answer one of a thousand of the charges that might be brought against us; when we feel that

we have no might whatever, and perhaps we realise that through sin we have brought ourselves into such peculiar circumstances that we do not know how to get out of it, though we feel that we must get out somehow: when we go to the right that seems blocked up, and the left seems equally closed to us: to go back we dare not: to go forward we cannot—then how wonderfully God clears the way! In what a marvellous manner we find our enemies all dead that we thought were going to kill us! and as for those that were going to rob us, we are enriched by them. Instead of taking us for a spoil, there they fall and their spoil becomes our right and we take it home with us rejoicing. Oh, what wonders God can do! He loves us to state the difficulty we are in, on purpose that when he gets us out of it we may remember that we were in such a condition. It was a real disaster and a time of real trial, and yet the Lord redeemed us from it.

What did they do after asking help, after pleading the promise and confessing their condition? Why, *they expressed their confidence in God*. They said, "Our eyes are upon thee." What did they mean by that? They meant, "Lord, if help does come, it must come from thee. We are looking to thee for it. It cannot come from anywhere else, so we look to thee. But we believe it will come, men will not look for that which they know will not come. We feel sure it will come, but we do not know how, so we are looking; we do not know when, but we are looking. We do not know what thou wouldest have us to do, but as the servant looks to her mistress, so are we looking to thee, Lord. Lord, we are looking." It is a grand posture that. Do you not know that is the way you are saved—by looking unto Jesus? And that is the way you have got to be saved, all the way between here and heaven. Whatever trouble comes, looking is to save you. Looking, often waiting, looking like the weary watcher from the tower when he wants to see the grey tints of the coming morning, when the night is long and he is weary, but still looking. "Our eyes are upon thee." They are full of tears, but still they are upon thee; they are getting hazy, too, with sleep, but still they are upon thee—such eyes as we have got. We do look to thee. I have sometimes blessed the Lord that he has not said, "See Jesus—see me and be saved." What he has said is, "Look." Sometimes if you cannot see you have done your part if you have looked—looked into the darkness. Lord, that cross of thine, it would give me such joy if I could see it, I cannot quite see it, it looms very indistinctly on my gaze, but I do look. It is looking, you know, that saves, for as we look the eyes get stronger, and we are enlightened. And so in this case they looked, and they found deliverance. God help us, brothers and sisters, to do the same.

That is how they asked help.

## II. Now, secondly, HOW THEY RECEIVED HELP.

Their help came to them, first, by a message from God. *They received a fresh assurance of God's goodness*. A new prophet was raised up, and he spoke with new words. "Be not afraid, nor dismayed," he said, "by reason of this great multitude; for the

battle is not yours but God's." Now, in our case, we shall not have a new promise, that would not be possible.

"What more can he say than to you he hath said,  
You who unto Jesus for refuge have fled."

But you will have that promise sweetly laid home to your soul, and the 'Spirit of God will bear witness with that promise, and so strengthen and comfort you, that you will get deliverance even before deliverance comes, because it often happens that to be saved from the fear of the trouble is the main business. To be quieted, and calmed, and assured, is really to be saved from the sting of trial; the trial itself is nothing if it does not bring a sting to your soul. If your heart is not troubled, then there is not much trouble in anything else. All the poverty and all the pain in the world would prevail nothing if the evil of it did not enter into the soul and vex it. So, in this emergency, God began to answer his people by quieting them. "Be not afraid nor dismayed, for the battle is not yours but God's: the Lord will be with you."

As that gracious promise calmed their fears so that they were able without fear to face the impending attack, then *they received distinct direction what to do on the morrow*, which was to be the day of the assault: that direction was, "Go out to meet the foe." How often has God given his people deliverance by quieting them as to their course of action. Already the step they have taken has delivered them before they know it. The Israelites, by then marching out to meet the foe, and marching out with songs and hosannas, as we shall see, were doing the best possible thing to rout their foes. As we have already said, there is no doubt that their enemies were unable to comprehend such a defence as this: they must have supposed that there was some treachery or ambush intended, and so they began to slay each other, and Israel had nothing to do but to keep on singing.

Then came the real providence: *they received actual deliverance*. When the people of Judah came to their foes they found there were no foes. There they lay all stark and dead; none of the men of might could raise their hands against those whom God had favoured. After this fashion will God deliver you, brethren; in answer to prayer he will be your defence. Therefore, sing unto his name. Did not he deliver you thus when you went out to meet the great army of your sins? You saw that Christ had put them away, and your heart danced within you as you said, "There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus, for he has slain our sins and they can curse us no more." So has it been with a great many troubles that have appeared to you to be overwhelming: when you have come to them, lo, they have disappeared. They have been cleared out of your way as you have advanced, and you have had nothing to do but to sing and praise the name of the Lord.

III. And now, thirdly, and this is the main point, let us note HOW THEY ACTED AFTER THEY HAD PRAYED AND HEARD GOD'S VOICE. They asked for help, and they had it: how did they then behave?

Well, first, as soon as ever they had an assurance that God would deliver them, *they worshipped*. That is one of the intentions of trial—to revive in us the spirit of devotion and communion with God. And mercy, when it comes on the back of a great trouble, leads us sweetly to prayer. I warrant you there had not been such a piece of worship in all Jerusalem as there was that day, when, after that young son of the Levites had stood and delivered the word of the Lord, the king bowed his head and all the people bowed their heads and did homage to the God of Israel. You could have heard the sound even of the wind among the trees at the time, for they were as hushed and as quiet as you were just now. Oh, when you know the Lord means to deliver you, bow your head and just give him the quiet, deep, solemn worship of your spirit. I do not suppose we shall ever fall into Quakers' worship in our public assemblies, though an occasional experience of it would do you a world of good: to sit still before the Lord, and to adore, and to adore, and to adore again and again, and still again, braces the spirit and clears the soul for the understanding of eternal realities. They worshipped, but why did they do it? They were not delivered. No, but they were sure they were going to be delivered. Their enemies were not dead. No, they were all alive, but they were sure they would be dead, so they had worship, and their devotion rose from trustful and grateful hearts. May we get into a worshipping frame of mind, and be kept in it. Then God will appear for our help.

As soon as ever the worship had closed, or rather ere it had quite closed, *they began to praise*. As we read just now, up went the loud voices of the trained singers under the leadership of the chief musician, and they praised the name of the Lord. They sang, as we do,—

“For his mercies shall endure,  
Ever faithful, ever sure.”

That is the way you should deal with God. Before the deliverance comes, praise him. Praise him for what is coming; adore him for what he is going to do. No song is so sweet, methinks, in the ear of God as the song of a man who blesses him for “grace he has not tasted yet”—for what he has not got, but what he is sure will come. The praise of gratitude for the past is sweet, but that praise is sweeter which adores God for the future in full confidence that it shall be well. Therefore, take down your harps from the willows, O ye people, and praise ye the name of the Lord, though still the fig tree does not blossom and still the cattle die in the stall, and still the sheep perish from the folds; though there should be to you no income to meet your want, and you should be brought almost to necessity's door, still bless the Lord whose mighty providence cannot fail, and shall not fail, so long as there is one of his children to be provided for. Your song while you are still in distress will be sweet music to the ear of God.

After they had worshipped and sung, the next thing these people did was, to act: *they went forth marching*. If there were unbelievers

in Jerusalem, I know what they said. They stood at the gates and they said, "Well, this is foolishness. These Moabites and Ammonites are come to kill you, and they will do it, but you might as well wait till they get at you. You are just going to deliver yourselves up." That would be the idea of unbelief, and that is also what it sometimes seems to our little faith when we go and commit ourselves to God. "What! are you going on your knees to confess your guilt before God and own that you deserve to be lost? Are you going to withdraw every excuse and apology, every trust of your own, and give yourself up, as it were, to destruction?" Yes, that is exactly what to do, and it is the highest wisdom to do it; we are going out of the city marching away according to orders, and if, as you say, we are to give ourselves up, so we will. Perhaps, in your case, you are going to do an action of which everybody else says, "Well, now, that will be very foolish. You should be crafty. You should show a little cunning." "No," say you, "I cannot do other than I am bidden, I must do the right." Probably that will turn out to be the very best thing in the world to have done. The nearest way between any two points is by a straight line, the straight way will always be better than the crooked way. In the long run it is always so. Go right out, then, in the name of God: meet your difficulties calmly and fairly. Do not have any plans or tricks, but just commit yourselves unto God; that is the way by which you may in confidence expect to find deliverance. These people of old went out of the city.

But now, notice again, that as they went out, *they went out singing*. They sang before they left the city, and sang as they left the city, and when the adversary came in sight they began to sing again. The trumpet sounded and the harps rang out their notes, and the minstrels again shouted for joy, and this was the song,—

"For his mercies shall endure,  
Ever faithful, ever sure."

It must have had a grand significance when they sang that passage, "To him which smote great kings: for his mercy endureth for ever: and slew famous kings: for his mercy endureth for ever: Sihon king of Amorites: for his mercy endureth for ever: and Og the king of Bashan: for his mercy endureth for ever." Why, every singer as he sang those lines, which look to us like a mere repetition, must have felt how applicable they were to their present condition when there was a Moabite and an Edomite and an Ammonite to be overthrown in the name of the mighty God whose mercy endureth for ever. So they kept on singing.

You will observe that, while they were singing, God had wrought the great deliverance for them. When the singing ceased, *they prepared to gather up the spoil*. What a different employment from what they expected! You can see them stripping the bodies, taking off the helmet of gold and the greaves of brass; the jewels from the ears and from about the necks of the princes; spoiling the dead of their Babylonish garments and their wedges of gold; heaping

up the tents—the rich tents of the eastern nations—till they said one to another, “We know not what to do.” But the difficulty was different from what might have befallen them at the first. Then they did not know what to do because of their weakness in the presence of their foes, but now the difficulty was because of the greatness of the spoil. “We cannot carry it home,” they would say to each other, “there is too much of it. It will take us days and days to stock away this wondrous booty.” Now, child of God, it shall be so with you also. I do not know how, but if you can only trust God and praise him and go straight ahead, you shall see such wondrous things that you shall be utterly astonished.

Then what will you do? Why, you will at once again begin praising the Lord, for so they did. *They went back singing.* “They came back to Jerusalem with psalteries and harps and trumpets unto the house of the Lord.” When God has done great things for you, and brought you through your present difficulty, you must be sure to repay him in the courts of his house with your loudest music and your most exultant notes, blessing again and again the name of the Lord.

After that *they had rest.* In the narrative it is added, “So the realm of Jehoshaphat was quiet: for his God gave him rest round about.” His enemies were afraid to come and touch him any more. After a very sharp storm it generally happens that there is long rest. So shall it be with all the Lord’s people. You will get through this trouble, brother, and afterwards it will be smooth sailing for a very long time. I have known a child of God have a very cyclone; it has seemed as if he must be utterly destroyed, but after it was over there has not been a ripple on the calm of his life. People have envied him and wondered at his quietness; he had had all his storms at once, and when they were over he had come into smooth water that seemed never ruffled. Perhaps you will have the same experience: only ask the great Pilot of the Galilean lake to steer you safely through your tempest, and then, when the storm shall cease at his bidding, you shall be glad because you be quiet; so will he bring you to your desired haven.

I have been desirous to speak these comfortable words to God’s children, for well I know how they are tried, and I pray the Lord, the Comforter, to apply the word to their troubled hearts. But I never can finish my discourse without having the very sad thought that there are always in our congregation some to whom these comfortable things do not belong. They are not believers. They have never trusted in Christ. If this be so with you—if this be so—ah, friend, you have to fight your own battles: you have to bear your own trials, you have to carry your own burdens, and when you come at the last great day before the judgment seat you will have to answer for your own sins, and to bear your own punishment. God have mercy upon you, and deliver you from such a condition as this. It is a bad condition to live in; it is a terrible condition to die in. May you be brought to receive Christ for your substitute and your surety, and glorify his name for ever and ever. Amen.