

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit.

IF SO,—WHAT THEN?

A Sermon

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“If the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?”—1 Peter iv. 18.

SOME people suppose that it is a very easy thing to be saved; but our Lord said, “Strive (“Agonize” is the original word) to enter in at the strait gate; for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able.” When men hear a simple gospel sermon, of which the pith and marrow is the great soul-saving message, “Believe and live,” they say, “If it is such a simple matter, will not all believe?” But the prophet Isaiah spake not so, for his sad enquiry was, “Who hath believed our report (“our doctrine” is the marginal reading)?” Faith seems so easy that one might ask, “Where will it not be found?” But our Saviour thought not so, for he asked, “When the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?” He who knows where to look for it, and who has the quickest eye to discern it, asks whether he shall be able to find, anywhere on the earth, that scarce thing called faith,—“the faith of God’s elect.” Believe me that, though “the way of holiness” is so plain that “the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein,” yet on account of the hardness of our hearts, it is no easy thing for any of us to enter that way, and to continue in it until it leads us to our everlasting home above.

I do not intend to keep strictly to my text, but to give you the meaning of it in this way. First, *here is a fact stated*: “The righteous scarcely are saved.” Then, secondly, *there is an inference drawn from that fact*; if they are only saved with great difficulty, “where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?” When we have considered that inference, we shall take the liberty to draw *two other inferences which may afford us further instruction*.

I. First, then, **HERE IS A FACT STATED**: “the righteous scarcely are saved;” that is to say, they are only saved with great difficulty. This is not because there is any deficiency in Jesus Christ our Lord

and Saviour, or any lack of efficacy in his atoning sacrifice, or in his intercession for transgressors. God be thanked that there is no difficulty there! It is not through any want of power to save on the part of the Holy Spirit; nor is it through any failure of God's faithfulness that "the righteous" are only saved with great difficulty; but it is for two reasons which I will now give you.

The first reason is, *because of the strictness of divine rule*. Read the first clause of the verse preceding our text: "The time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God," and that judgment is so severe that even "the righteous are scarcely saved." When Christ comes even to his own people, he comes to purge and purify them. The prophet Malachi wrote, concerning his first coming, "He is like a refiner's fire, and like fullers' sope; and he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver;* and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness;" and John the Baptist said, concerning Christ, "He that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire: whose fan is in his hand, and he will throughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." Judgment must always "begin at the house of God;" and there is, as good Archbishop Leighton very properly says, both "equity and congruity in such an arrangement." There is equity in it; for Christians profess to be better than others, and so they ought to be. They say they are regenerate, so they ought to be regenerate. They say that they are a holy people, separated unto Christ; so they ought to be holy, and separate from sinners, as he was. It is right that, where there is a high calling, and an honoured name, there should be a life proving the accuracy of these two things. So, when God begins to test that which professes to be gold and silver, who can say that he does not begin his testing at the right place, and with the right material? There is also a congruity or fitness in this arrangement. The Church of God is his house; and where does a man begin cleansing and reforming? Why, in his own house, of course; he might perhaps feel that he must have some filth in the farm-yard, but not in his own sitting-room. There may be much evil abroad that he cannot remove, yet he can begin cleaning up at home. If we want to do any good in reforming the world, the very first duty for each of us is to begin reforming at home; and the Lord, when he means to clear away the dross, begins at home by setting up his "fire in Zion, and his furnace in Jerusalem."

The tests to which God subjects those who profess to be his people are not easy ones. When his fan is in his hand, woe be unto those who are "like the chaff which the wind driveth away." The Lord says, by the mouth of the prophet Amos, "I will sift the house of Israel among all nations, like as corn is sifted in a sieve, yet shall not the least grain fall upon the earth;" nor shall an atom of chaff be left in the sieve. When omnipotence and omniscience

* See *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, No. 1,575, "The Sitting of the Refiner."

unite to sift the chaff from the wheat, you may depend upon it that the sifting will be thoroughly done. There is also the testing by fire; and if any are not able to endure that test, "reprobate silver shall men call them, because the Lord hath rejected them." Then God will weigh us; we shall be put into the balances of the sanctuary, and if we are found wanting, how terrible it will be! We often judge by appearances, but God looks at the heart. We may be deceived by the outward profession, but God sees what is within. He looks for the Truth in our inward parts; and in our hidden parts there must be the true Wisdom, or else we are not saved.

Now, dear friends, as the tests are so severe, you see how it is that the righteous are only saved with difficulty. Oh, if I may but come out of that scale full weight, if I may but come out of that fire as pure gold, if I may but remain with the wheat in that sieve, and not be blown away with the chaff, I shall bless God for ever and ever that I was saved, even though it was with great difficulty.

Further, *the experience of all Christians proves that the work of grace in their hearts is not easily accomplished*, and that their pilgrimage to heaven is full of difficulties. At the very beginning of the Christian life, some find it hard to lay hold on Christ. We truly sing or say,—

"There is life for a look at the Crucified One."

Yet there was a time when I felt that I would gladly give my life in exchange for that look. Easy as it seems to be to cast ourselves into the Saviour's arms, there are Satanic doubts, and evil questionings, and fierce temptations that cause even that simple act to be accomplished only with great difficulty. Indeed, wherever it is accomplished, it is a miracle of divine mercy, and in every case saving faith is "the gift of God."

Then, how difficult it is to overcome the flesh! Are you a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ? Then I need not ask whether you find it so. You love holiness, yet unholiness tries hard to make you its slave. Perhaps it is a fiery temper that is your "thorn in the flesh," or some constitutional sin, or some lust that you thought had been subdued. You may have said, with David, "My feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped;" and I know that, if your life be that of a true child of God, you have to fight hard in order to "put off the old man with his deeds," and to lead a godly life in the midst of this ungodly generation.

The temptations that assail you from without are equally hard to overcome. There are temptations of wealth, and temptations of poverty; temptations to turn aside to the right or to the left; and it is not easy to keep to the middle of the King's highway, and to walk in the footprints of Jesus, who has left us an example that we should follow his steps. When the world, the flesh, and the devil combine to assail us,—if the Lord doth not cover our head in the day of battle, how can we gain the victory? With some Christians, it is a very hard struggle from day to day, and even from hour to

hour; and then we are like Mr. Stand-fast, who, when he was in what Bunyan calls the Enchanted Ground, was assailed by Madam Bubble, and who could do nothing but fall on his knees, and cry to God for help. There are many of us who have felt like that, and who, in the bitterness of our agony, have had to cry to God to help us, for it is only with difficulty that we are saved. I can say, with good John Fawcett,—

“Temptations everywhere annoy,
And sins and snares my peace destroy;
My earthly joys are from me torn,
And oft an absent God I mourn.

“My soul, with various tempests toss’d,
Her hopes o’erturned, her projects cross’d,
Sees every day new straits attend,
And wonders where the scene will end.

“Is this, dear Lord, that thorny road
Which leads us to the mount of God?
Are these the toils thy people know,
While in the wilderness below.

“’Tis even so, thy faithful love
Doth thus thy children’s graces prove;
’Tis thus our pride and self must fall,
That Jesus may be all in all.”

How difficult is it for a true Christian even to perform needful duties in a humble and holy spirit! It is a simple matter to pray; it is just going, like a child, to tell God all that you feel, and all that you want. Yet I ask you, Christian, whether you do not sometimes find it hard work to pray. When you are on your knees, all sorts of cares come buzzing about you, like so many hornets. You want to wrestle with God as Jacob did; but you find that your wrestling has to be with the devil. I know what it is to long to pray when I cannot find a prayer in my soul! I make this confession because I believe there are many of God’s people who get into that state. And, moreover, I know that we often pray best when we think we are not praying. Perhaps, those groanings, that come from the lowest depths of our spirit when we think we are not groaning at all, are just the most potent prayers that ever reach the throne of God. But there are seasons when one can only say, “May the Holy Ghost feel for me what I cannot feel, and utter for me what I cannot speak, and do for me what I cannot perform!”

And if such ordinary acts of devotion are so difficult, how much more difficult is it to reach gracious attainments in the divine life! If any of your graces come to you very easily, suspect whether they are genuine; for, in the Christian life, all that is worth having has to be fought for in sternest conflict. So determined are the powers of darkness to prevent the Christian pilgrim from entering the celestial city that all the way to heaven will be more or less a Hill of Difficulty. You will have to go often upon your hands and knees because the road is so rough, and the ascent is so steep, that you cannot advance in any other way. We would be holy as God is

holy, but there is another law in our members warring against the law of our renewed minds. God knows that we yearn after perfection; but, alas! like the bird that would fain fly, there is something that holds us down. Many of you have seen an eagle in a cage, and you know how he looks up, with that bright eye of his that was made to gaze into the sun; if he stretches his wings, and tries to fly, he only wounds himself against the bars of his cage; and, oh, what wounds some of us have had when, in our aspirations after better things, to will has been present with us, but how to perform that which we would, we found not! Often have I had to cry, with Paul, "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" Yes, it is hard work for any of us to get to heaven. God, the Eternal Spirit, helps us to overcome our infirmities; but we are often made to feel those infirmities, and to confess that our weakness is no match for the strength of sin, and to admit that, were it not for God himself, we should certainly perish after all. I delight to sing, with holy John Newton,—

"Beyond a doubt, I rest assured
Thou art the Christ of God;
Who hast eternal life secured
By promise and by blood.

"The help of men and angels join'd
Could never reach my case;
Nor can I hope relief to find
But in thy boundless grace."

Do you not, dear brethren and sisters in Christ, sometimes feel how hard it is for you to be saved, when you put your soul before the tribunal of your own enlightened conscience? Our own conscience, at the best, is a poor partial judge compared with the impartial and infallible Judge who will, by-and-by, sit upon the great white throne; yet I ask any Christian here, who is really aware of his own frailties and infirmities, when he comes seriously to take stock of himself, whether he finds any reason in himself for glorying? I have turned over my sermons, and my many labours for the Lord, but there is scarcely one of them that I dare to think of without tears,—they are all marred by sin and imperfection. As I think of every act I have ever done for God, I can only cry, "O God, forgive the iniquity of my holy things!" But what about our unholy things? Brethren, look well to the evidences of your new birth; and as you examine them, see if you do not have to say, with the prophet, "We are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away."* If so, then let each one of us pray, with penitent David, "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow."† If we are really God's people, it is a great consolation

* See *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, No. 437, "A Sight of Self."

† See *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, No. 1,937, "A Mingled Strain." (This is part of a triple number,—containing three choice eight-page Sermons,—price two-pence.)

for us to know that,—notwithstanding our many infirmities and iniquities, our many anxieties, and doubts, and fears as to whether, after all, we have been self-deceived or devil-deceived,—God will never forsake us.

II. This must suffice concerning the fact that Christians are only saved with great difficulty. Now, secondly, let us consider THE INFERENCE FROM THAT FACT.

Peter says, "If the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?" by which he means, I think, first, that *if even the righteous are so severely tested, what short work will God make with the unrighteous*;—if the wheat must thus be winnowed, how certainly will the chaff be destroyed;—if the gold must pass through the fire, how assuredly will the dross be consumed! The God who tries and tests the best will certainly not wink at the worst.

He means next, I think, that *if "the righteous" only attain to felicity with great difficulty, "the ungodly and the sinner" never can attain to it*. Suppose there has been a terrible storm on a rock-bound coast; the lifeboat has gone out, and the men have nobly done their duty, and saved many precious lives; but as each man leaps ashore, he says, "I was never before out in such a storm; it is only by the merciful providence of God that we were able to get back." When the people on the shore see that even the lifeboat so narrowly escaped destruction, they naturally ask, "What must become of those poor leaky and unseaworthy boats that are hardly fit to be in a mill-pond?" Or imagine a river, full of sandbanks, with a channel that twists and turns in a tortuous fashion, and there is a vessel on it with an experienced pilot on board; yet even he is very anxious, and is constantly heaving the lead, and frequently going at half-speed, or stopping altogether. Now, if a steamer, with a good pilot on board, can scarcely get up the river, what will happen to a small sailing-boat, in the charge of a reckless drunkard, who scarcely steers at all, but lets the boat drift wherever it will? Why, it must be lost! So, if "the vessels of mercy,* . . . afore prepared unto glory," on which Christ is the Pilot, barely escape the rocks and quicksands, what must be the end of "the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction," which have no pilot on board, and drift hither and thither at the mercy of winds and waves? If there is a great conflagration in the City, and there is a massive structure, built of stone, with iron girders, which the firemen can only with great difficulty save from destruction, what will be the fate of a wooden house, covered with pitch and tar, and full of oil? If a man, who has built for eternity upon Christ, the only true foundation, †—and who has built, not with gold, silver, and precious stones,

* See *The New Park Street Pulpit*, No. 327, "Vessels of Mercy,—a Sermon on Self-examination;" in which Mr. Spurgeon does not use the term "vessel" in a nautical sense, as he does in the present discourse; but takes the text in its connection, and expounds it with reference to the "vessels" made by the potter. It is a remarkable Sermon, preached at Exeter Hall, in 1860, and is worthy of wide circulation at the present day.

† See *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, No. 1,494, "The One Foundation."

but with wood, hay, and stubble,—if such a man “shall be saved; yet so as by fire,” what will become of the sinner who is only like a dry log fitted for the everlasting burning?

My text does not tell us *where* “the ungodly and the sinner” will appear. This is one of the unanswered questions of Scripture: “*Where* shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?” So I shall scarcely speak of that dreadful place where our Saviour says, “There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth,” “where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.” These metaphors, terrible as they are in their grim suggestiveness, are only faint images of the awful reality; and I again remind you that they are the words of him to whom we teach our children to pray,—

“Gentle Jesus, meek and mild,
Look upon a little child.”

In Psalm 1. 22, there is this dreadful divine warning, “Consider this, ye that forget God, lest I tear you in pieces, and there be none to deliver.” If it is difficult for a Christian to be saved,—and I have shown you that it is;—where shall you, who are not God’s people, you who have no Christ, you who have no Holy Spirit to guide you,—where shall *you* appear? The apostle Paul wrote, “I keep my body under, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a cast-away.” If Paul entered heaven with difficulty, where will *you* be? Martin Luther’s biography tells us that he was the subject of grievous doubts, depressions, and soul anxieties; so, if he only reached heaven as a sinner saved by grace, where will *you* be who know nothing experimentally of the grace of God? If John Knox, after serving his God so faithfully that his epitaph* truly says, “Here lyeth a man who in his life never feared the face of man,”—if he, on his death-bed, found it hard to cherish a hope of heaven, what will *you* do who despise Christ’s mercy, and riot in sin?

Before I close, I want to draw two other inferences; and the first is this,—IF THE RIGHTEOUS ARE ONLY SAVED WITH DIFFICULTY, WHAT ABOUT THOSE PEOPLE WHO ARE “SAVED” SO VERY EASILY? It looks as if they were not righteous, does it not? Perhaps there is a man here who is like Bunyan’s Formalist; this is his hope,—“I was ‘christened’ when I was a child, I was confirmed as a youth, I attend my church, and take the ‘sacrament’ regularly;” or he may say, “I regularly attend chapel.” He says, “Don’t talk to me about anxieties as to my state; I have no such anxieties.” No, I expect you have not; but, if you have no doubts about yourself, permit me to have my doubts about you; and let me go a great deal further than doubts, and solemnly tell you that a hope founded on ceremonies will lead to your “everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power.”

There may be another who says, “I have made a profession of religion, but I never have any questions about whether I am saved

* Mr. Spurgeon here quotes the popular rendering of the inscription, which is given in a fuller form in Pastor W. Y. Fullerton’s Conference Sermon. (See *Fundamental Truths Re-affirmed*. Passmore and Alabaster, 6d. net.)

or not. I pray,—in a fashion; as to praising God, I always could sing; and I believe I am about as right as I can be; I don't see any cause for distressing myself." Yes, friend, but let me remind you that there is a great difference between presumption and "full assurance of faith." There is also a very great difference between believing that you are saved and being really saved.

Possibly there is another who says, "I believe I am one of God's elect, and that I am quite safe." Well, friend, if it is so, no one is more thankful than I am; but if that is your only hope of salvation, and you have never been born again, and know nothing of the new life, with its anxieties and joys, I would not give a bent pin for your hope of heaven, and the sooner you get rid of it, the better. A dead fish finds no difficulty in floating down the stream, it is only the living fish that can swim against the current. The broad road is very smooth, and there is a good deal of company in it; but it leads to destruction. There are few in the narrow way, and many difficulties there; but it leads to life eternal. You say that you never know any changes; no, nor do the statues in St. Paul's Cathedral. There they stand, year after year, upon their marble pedestals, because they are dead; and you are the same. "But I never have to fight that battle of which you have been speaking." No, of course not, because the world and you are friends; and because you are of the world, the world loves its own. If you were a stranger and a foreigner in this world, you would be treated as strangers and foreigners are in an inhospitable country.

I will draw only one more inference from our text, and that is a very comforting one. **THE RIGHTEOUS ARE ONLY SAVED WITH DIFFICULTY, THEN TEMPTED SOULS MAY BE SAVED.** That truth has given me comfort when I have thought, "Well, it is difficult for me to be saved, then it appears that I am numbered with the righteous, and that I am in the right road." "Oh, sir!" says a poor sinner here, "I am glad you said that; I hope I have cast myself wholly upon the Lord Jesus Christ, and I thought I was going to have peace always; but, instead of that, ever since I have believed, or thought I had believed, I have had more fightings in my soul than I ever had before." Well, the righteous are only saved with difficulty, so do not be depressed. "But I have been more tempted than ever I was before, and it seems, sir, as if everybody was against me, and tried to drive me back. I thought I should find cheerful companions who would help me on the road to heaven, but I seem to be alone in an enemy's land." My dear brother, it is so with the righteous always; no strange thing has happened to you. "But, sir," says one, "horrible thoughts and terrible blasphemies arise in my mind, even when I try to pray; and I say to myself, 'If I were a child of God, could it be thus with me?'" Dear friend, be comforted; Satan is afraid of losing you, so he is putting out all his force to try to hold you. Now that you are a Christian, you are a target for all the devil's fiery darts; so do not be astonished, this is the lot of the people of God. When a man has been drowning, I have heard that his sensations have often been very pleasant; but when the circulation of the blood com-

mences again, pain begins at once; and the more pain he suffers, the more surely is he being restored to life. It is just so with the spiritual blood that is circulating in your soul. You are not dead, so you smart and suffer because you are alive. If you imagine that, the moment you believe, your battle is over, you make a great mistake; your battle has only just begun; and because, while really trusting in Jesus, you have battles, and contentions, and difficulties, and troubles, conclude that, *therefore*, you are a child of God.

Recollect this, if the righteous are only saved with great difficulty, they would never be saved if they did not look right away from themselves to the Lord Jesus Christ. There lies the one hope for sinners and saints,—in the finished work of the blessed Redeemer. "I know what you are at," said a good man once to one who was doubting, "Christ has finished the work of salvation, but you are not content with what he has done, so you want to patch it up with something of your own." Come sinners, and come saints, back to the foot of that dear cross where Jesus bought with his own blood the souls of all who believe in him; let us throw ourselves prostrate before him, and say, "Thou art all our confidence, our only hope, and our full salvation for ever and ever. Save us, O Saviour; we are sinners, and thou art the sinners' Friend; save us now, and we shall be saved for ever!" Amen, so let it be!

Exposition by C. H. Spurgeon.

ZECHARIAH VIII. (See Note to Sermon, No 3,045, on Zech. viii. 13.)

Verses 1, 2. *Again the word of the LORD of hosts came to me, saying, Thus saith the LORD of hosts; I was jealous for Zion with great jealousy, and I was jealous for her with great fury.*

Because they worshipped idols instead of the living God, Jehovah of hosts, who is a jealous God, was very angry with his ancient people, and allowed them to be carried away into captivity; and it is well for us, in these days, to recollect that we serve a jealous God, and that, if our hearts are not true to him, he will soon send us sharp afflictions, and make us feel the weight of his rod. It was Paul's anxious desire that he might be able to present the church at Corinth "as a chaste virgin to Christ;" and, certainly, our Lord Jesus Christ will not accept the professing church of these days on any other terms. Let thy heart be loyal and true to him, or else thou wilt stir up the holy jealousy of thy God. Yet the same jealousy which makes God punish his people for their unfaithfulness, prompts him to return to them in love so soon as he sees that he can justly do so. When their enemies have sorely vexed and oppressed them, then is the Lord jealous, not against them, but against their enemies, and he swiftly returneth to his own people in love.

3. *Thus saith the LORD; I am returned unto Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem: and Jerusalem shall be called a city of truth; and the mountain of the LORD of hosts the holy mountain.*

The first coming or the return of God to a church, or to an individual heart, always promotes holiness; so, unless thy piety is daily growing, do not imagine that God is in the midst of thee; for, wherever the Lord comes, he comes "as a refiner and purifier." You will never find Jesus come except as John the Baptist pictured him to the Pharisees and Sadducees of

his day: "whose fan is in his hand, and he will throughly purge his floor." The coming of Christ into any soul, or into any church, is the death of sin and the birth of holiness.

4, 5. *Thus saith the LORD of hosts; There shall yet old men and old women dwell in the streets of Jerusalem, and every man with his staff in his hand for very age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in the streets thereof.*

It is an indication that there is peace in the city when the children can play in the streets without fear. We may apply these verses spiritually thus,—when God greatly blesses a Christian church, there are sure to be many aged persons in it, those who, by their long experience and their matured wisdom, are able to teach others the lessons which they have themselves learnt at the feet of Jesus. Happy is the church that hath in it many fathers and mothers in Israel. At the same time, a church that is largely blessed by God will also have in it many young converts, who will be as full of life and joy as children playing in the streets of a city in time of peace. There is a text which is true both in its literal and its spiritual sense: "Lo, children are a heritage of the Lord . . . Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them." There is no glory so great to a Christian minister, and a Christian church, as that of having an abundance of spiritual children, and multitudes of converts brought to Christ. So shall it be with any church when God is in the midst of her.

6. *Thus saith the LORD of hosts; If it be marvellous* in the eyes of the remnant of this people in these days, should it also be marvellous* in mine eyes? saith the LORD of hosts.*

This is a very remarkable passage, warning us not to judge of God by ourselves. Though a thing may be difficult to us, there are no difficulties with God. Nay, even if we imagine anything to be impossible to man, the word impossibility has no relation to the Deity, for "with God all things are possible." Are you in trouble to-day? Do you say that it is impossible for you to be delivered? It is an easy thing for God to deliver you, though the task seems so hard to you. Do you feel the weight of your sin, and do you imagine that it is impossible for your sin to be pardoned? Would you look upon it as a miracle; and, because it seems so marvellous to you, do you think it is marvellous in God's eyes? Remember what he said by the mouth of Isaiah, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord."† Consider the infinite difference between God and man, and look no longer at God through the misleading glasses of your own feebleness.

7, 8. *Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Behold, I will save my people from the east country, and from the west country; and I will bring them, and they shall dwell in the midst of Jerusalem: and they shall be my people, and I will be their God, in truth and in righteousness.*

Mark God's emphatic language, how full it is of "shalls" and "wills." "I will," and "they shall," saith he, again and again; and if God saith, "I will," who shall dare to say that it shall not be? What God declareth shall certainly come to pass. Surely this is golden language of comfort to those who are bowed down; then, how great must be the sinfulness of that unbelief which dares to despair when God says "shall" and "will"! That one sentence in the eighth verse contains the whole gospel in two short sentences: "They shall be my people, and I will be their God." This is the tenour of the covenant of grace. There is no "if," nor "but," nor

* See *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, No. 1,747, "Marvellous! Marvellous!"

† See *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, No. 676, "Man's Thoughts and God's Thoughts;" and No. 1,387, "God's Thoughts and Ways Far Above Ours."

"peradventure" in it, God does not say, "I will be their God if they will be my people;" nor, "I will love them if they will keep my laws." That is the old covenant of works, which has been broken for ever; but the covenant of grace runs thus, "They shall be my people, and I will be their God, in truth and in righteousness."

9—11. *Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Let your hands be strong, ye that hear in these days these words by the mouth of the prophets, which were in the day that the foundation of the house of the LORD of hosts was laid, that the temple might be built. For before these days there was no hire for man, nor any hire for beast; neither was there any peace to him that went out or came in because of the affliction: for I set all men every one against his neighbour. But now I will not be unto the residue of this people as in the former days, saith the LORD of hosts.*

The Jewish people had been brought into abject poverty; they were all so poor that there was not one who could hire his fellow-man or even pay for the hire of a beast of burden. This was before the foundation of Solomon's temple was laid; but, as that wondrous structure grew, the State also grew; and, often, the prosperity of a church brings prosperity to the people around it, and to the residue of God's people there comes a blessing, and not a curse.

12. *For the seed shall be prosperous;*

It is a happy omen for a church when the Word preached is with power.

12. *The vine shall give her fruit, and the ground shall give her increase,*

Happy are the hearts that are like fruitful vines, and good and fertile ground yielding thirty, sixty, or a hundredfold increase.

12. *And the heavens shall give their dew;*

We cannot bring forth fruit unto God without the bedewing influences of the Holy Spirit. This is that "womb of the morning" of which David speaks in Psalm cx. 3,* and out of which the precious fruit of the Spirit must come.

12—15. *And I will cause the remnant of this people to possess all these things. And it shall come to pass, that as ye were a curse among the heathen, O house of Judah, and house of Israel; so will I save you, and ye shall be a blessing: fear not, but let your hands be strong. For thus saith the LORD of hosts; As I thought to punish you, when your fathers provoked me to wrath, saith the LORD of hosts, and I repented not: so again have I thought in these days to do well unto Jerusalem and to the house of Judah: fear ye not.*

Did you notice the repetition of the exhortation, "Fear not," and then again, "Fear ye not"? The Lord knows how much mischief doubts and fears do to his people, and therefore many a time, in Scripture, he aims a blow at them. "Fear nots" abound in Scripture; it would be well if you made every one of them into a gallows-tree upon which to hang your unbelief until it died. What is your fear at this moment? What is the cause of your trembling? "Fear ye not," saith God to you; will you dare to fear after this?

16, 17. *These are the things that ye shall do; Speak ye every man the truth to his neighbour; execute the judgment of truth and peace in your gates: and let none of you imagine evil in your hearts against his neighbour;*

* See *New Park Street Pulpit*, No. 74, "A Willing People and an Immutable Leader,"—the very remarkable Sermon, composed by Mr. Spurgeon in his sleep, of which some most interesting particulars are given in his *Autobiography*, Vol. II., pages 188 and 189.

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Some have wickedly said that "thought is free, and can't be condemned;" but here we see that, if it goeth after evil, it is a wicked thing which God abhors.

17—19. *And love no false oath: for all these are things that I hate, saith the LORD. And the word of the LORD of hosts came unto me, saying, Thus saith the LORD of hosts; The fast of the fourth month, and the fast of the fifth, and the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth, shall be to the house of Judah joy and gladness, and cheerful feasts; therefore love the truth and peace.*

God turns sad fasts to glad feasts* when he visits his people in love. Is there one here who has been having a long fast? Has your soul been sorely afflicted? Have you been desponding and trembling, so that you have had no joy and gladness? Ah, when the Lord Jesus Christ reveals himself to you, he will soon change your sad state into something brighter and better. He will give you "beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness." Look up, poor trembling soul, to yonder hill of Calvary where Jesus bled and died for you, and there let your joys begin, and never, never end.

20, 21. *Thus saith the LORD of hosts; It shall yet come to pass, that there shall come people, and the inhabitants of many cities: and the inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, Let us go speedily to pray before the LORD, and to seek the LORD of hosts: I will go also.†*

You see that, in the latter days, there is to be a great spirit of prayer and of seeking the Lord. This will include the hearing of the Word, and the love of the truth; and one good sign is that the people will say, "Let us go speedily." They will not come in late, as so many do nowadays, just getting into their seats when the Scripture is being read, instead of being present at the opening prayer. I am sorry to say that some of you are getting later and later; and some morning, I shall most certainly carry out my threat, and preach the sermon first, unless you are more punctual. A little more thought, and a little sooner start, and you might all be at God's house in time. David longed to be a doorkeeper in the Lord's house, and you know that the doorkeeper is always the first in and the last out. May you all have more of David's spirit, though you cannot all be doorkeepers! These people are to say, "Let us go speedily (the marginal reading is 'continually') to pray before the Lord, and to seek the Lord of hosts: I will go also." That is the best way of bringing others to God's house,—to say, "I will go also." I have read that Julius Cæsar never said to his soldiers, "Go," but "Let us go." So should we seek to get others to God's house by saying to them, "Let us go; . . . I will go also."

22, 23. *Yea, many people and strong nations shall come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem, and to pray before the LORD. Thus saith the LORD of hosts; In those days it shall come to pass, that ten men shall take hold out of all languages of the nations, even shall take hold of the skirt of him that is a Jew, saying, We will go with you: for we have heard that God is with you.*

In the latter days, the Jews, who are still despised, and oppressed, and persecuted in many countries, shall be so highly honoured by God that men of other nationalities will want to be in their company. But, no doubt, there is here a special reference to Jesus, the Jew, the Son of God who became the Son of Mary too. Oh that, this very day, many Jews and Gentiles may take hold of his skirt by a living faith, and so may receive blessing from him, and be saved in the Lord with an everlasting salvation!

* See *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, No. 2,248, "Sad Fasts changed to Glad Feasts."

† See *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, No. 1,107, "A Call to Worship."