

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit.

MERCY FOR THE MEANEST OF THE FLOCK.

A Sermon

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“In that day, saith the LORD, will I assemble her that halteth, and I will gather her that is driven out, and her that I have afflicted.”—Micah iv. 6.

THIS is spoken, I suppose, in the first place, of the Jewish people, who have been so afflicted on account of their sin that they almost cease to be a nation, and are driven hither and thither among the lands, and made to suffer greatly. In the last time, when Christ shall appear in his glory in the days of halcyon peace, then shall Israel partake of the universal joy. Poor, limping, faltering Israel, afflicted with tempest, shall yet be gathered, and rejoice in her God.

However, I am sure that the text applies to the Church of God, and we shall not do amiss if we also find in it promises to individual Christians. We will regard the text in those two lights, *as spoken to the Church* and *as spoken to individual souls*.

I. First, then, AS REFERRING TO THE CHURCH OF GOD: “In that day, saith the Lord, will I assemble her that halteth, and I will gather her that is driven out, and her that I have afflicted.”

The Church of God is not always equally vigorous and prosperous. Sometimes she can run without weariness and walk without fainting, but at other times she begins to limp and halt; there is a deficiency in her faith, a lukewarmness in her love, doctrinal errors spring up, and many things that both weaken and trouble her, and then she becomes like a lame person. And, indeed, beloved, when I compare the church of God at the present moment with the first apostolic church, she may well be called, “her that halteth.” Oh, how she leaped in the first Pentecostal times! What wondrous strength she had throughout all Judæa and all the neighbouring lands! The voice of the church in those days was like the voice of

a lion, and the nations heard and trembled. The utmost isles of the sea understood the power of the gospel, and before long the cross of Christ was set up on every shore. Thus was the church in her early days; the love of her espousals was upon her, and her strength was like that of a young unicorn.

How the church halteth now! How deficient in vigour, how weak in her actions! If I compare the church now with the church in Reformation times, when, in our own land, our fathers went bravely to prison and to the stake to bear witness to the Lord Jesus, when, in Covenanting Scotland and Puritan England, the truth was held with firmness, and proclaimed with earnestness, and what is, perhaps, better still, when the truth was lived by those who professed it,—then was she mighty indeed, and not to be compared to “her that halteth,” as I fear she is now in these days of laxity of doctrine and laxity of life, when error is tolerated in the church and loose living is tolerated in the world.

I might almost use the same simile for the church to-day as compared with those early days of Methodism when Whitefield was flying like a seraph in the midst of heaven, preaching in England and America the unsearchable riches of Christ to tens of thousands, when Wesley and others were working, with undiminished ardour, to reach the poorest of the poor and the lowest of the low. Those were good days with all their faults. Life and fire abounded; the God of Israel was glorified, and tens of thousands were converted. The church seemed as though it had risen from the dead, and cast off its grave-clothes, and was rejoicing in newness of life. We are not without hopeful signs to-day. There is not everything to depress, but much to encourage. At the same time, the church limps; she does not stand firm, and run fast. Oh, that God would be pleased to visit her!

Moreover, if I look at the text, I perceive that the church not only is sometimes weak, but, at the same time, or at some other time, *the church is persecuted, and made to suffer*, for the text speaks of “her that is driven out.” And it has often happened that the church has been driven right out from among men. It has been said of her, “Away with her from the earth! It is not fit that she should live.” But how wondrously God has shown his mercy to his people when they have been driven out! The days of exile have been bright days. The sun never shone more fairly on the church’s brow than when she worshipped God in the catacombs of Rome, or when her disciples “wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented.” In our own country, those who met by stealth, perpetually pestered by informers, who would bring them before the magistrates for joining in prayer and song, often said, when they got their liberty, that they wished they had the days again when they were gathered together in the lonely house, and scarcely dared to sing loudly. They had brave times in those days, when every man held his soul in his hand, when he worshipped his God, not knowing whether the hand of the hangman or the headsman might not soon be upon him. The Lord was pleased to bless his people when the church was driven out.

If the snowy peaks of Piedmont, if the lowlands of Holland, if the prisons of Spain could speak, they would tell of infinite mercy experienced by the saints under terrible oppression, of hearts that were leaping to heaven while the bodies were bruised or burning on earth. God has been gracious to his people when they have been driven out.

Sometimes, trouble comes to God's people in another way. *The church is afflicted by God himself.* It seems as if God had put away his church for a time, and driven her from his presence. That has happened often in all churches. Perhaps some of you are members of such churches now, or have been; discord has come in, and the spirit of peace has gone. Coldness has come into the pulpit, and a chill has come over the pews. The prayer-meetings are neglected, the seeking of souls is almost given up; the candlestick is there, but the candle seems to be gone, or not to be lighted. The means of grace have become lifeless; you almost dread the Sabbath which once was your comfort. It is wretched for Christian people when it comes to this; and yet, in scores of villages and towns in England, this is the case. The sheep look up, and the shepherd looks down, but there is no food for the sheep, neither does the shepherd himself know where to get the food because he has not been taught of God. It is a melancholy thing, wherever this has been the case; but I would encourage the saints to cry mightily for the return of God's Spirit, for the restoration of unity and peace, earnestness and prayerfulness, that once again the wilderness and the solitary place may be made glad, and the desert may rejoice, and blossom like the rose.

My brethren, may God never treat the church in England as she deserves to be treated, for, when I look around me and see her sins, they seem to rise up to heaven like a mighty cry. We have been lately told, in so many words, by an eminent preacher, that all creeds have something good in them, even the creed of the heathen, and that out of them all the grand creed is to be made, which is yet to be the religion of mankind. God save us from those who talk in this way, and yet profess to be sent of God! They who know in their own souls what God's truth is will not be led astray by such delusions; but yet God may visit his church, and chasten her sorely by depriving her of his Spirit for a while. If he has done so, or is about to do so, let us still pray that he may gather her that is driven out and afflicted.

I may not dwell longer upon these points, but hasten to notice the blessing that will come, in answer to prayer, upon churches that are weak, or sorely persecuted. There are scattering times, no doubt; but we should always pray that we may live in gathering times, that we may be gathered together in unity, in essential oneness, round the cross, in united action for our glorious Master, and that sinners who are far away may be gathered in, too, and backsliders who have wandered may be restored. Pray for gathering times, brethren, and may the day come when the Lord will assemble her that halteth, and will gather her that is driven out and afflicted.

Notice that the text speaks of a "day." So we may expect that God will have his own time of benediction. "In that *day*, saith the Lord, will I assemble her that halteth." I believe that to be a day in which we enquire after the Lord, a day in which we are prayerful, in which we become anxious, in which an agony lays hold upon the souls of believers until the Lord shall return unto his people;—a day when Christ is revealed in the testimony of the church, and the gospel is fully preached,—in *that day* will the Lord assemble her that halteth. May that day speedily come! But if we do not see the blessing to-morrow, let us recollect that to-morrow may not be God's day, and let us persevere in prayer till God's day does come. There are better days in store for the church; and ere the page of human history closes, there will be times of triumph for her in which she shall be glorious, and God shall be glorified in her.

II. I shall, however, pass from this first point about the church, because I wish to speak to mourners, to melancholy ones. I trust I have a message of mercy to some that are desponding. We shall look on the text, secondly, AS REFERRING TO INDIVIDUAL SOULS: "In that day, saith the Lord, will I assemble her that halteth." There are three characters described here; let us find them out.

First, *the soul that halteth*. Of course, by that is intended those Christians who are very weak. Some are "strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might." It would be a great mercy if all God's people were so; but there are some Christians who have faith of but a feeble sort. They have love to God, but they sometimes question whether they do love him at all. They have piety in their hearts, but it is not of that vigorous kind one would desire. It is rather like the spark in the flax, or the music in the bruised reed. They are like Little-faith and Miss Much-afraid. They are alive, but only just alive; sometimes their life seems to tremble in the balance; and yet it is hidden with Christ in God, and therefore, it is really beyond the reach of harm. They are the weak ones, and God speaks to such weak ones, and says, "I will assemble her that halteth."

It not only means that they are weak, but that they are slow and halting persons. A lame person cannot travel quickly; and, oh, how slowly some Christians move! What little advance they make in the divine life! They were little children ten years ago, and they are little children now. Their own children have grown up to be men, but they themselves do not appear to have made any advance. They are just babes in grace, and still have need of milk. They are not strong enough to feed upon the strong meat of the kingdom of God. They are slow to believe all that the prophets and apostles have spoken, slow to rejoice in God, slow to catch a truth, and perceive its bearing, but slower still to get the nutriment out of it, and learn its application to themselves. But, slow as they are, I trust we may say of them that they are as sure as they are slow. What steps they do take are well taken; and if they come slowly, like the snail, yet they are, like the snail in Noah's days, crawling towards the ark, and will get in some time.

With this slowness there is also pain. A lame man walks painfully. Perhaps, every time he puts his foot to the ground, a shock of pain goes through his whole system; and some Christians, in their progress in the heavenly life, seem afflicted in like manner. I meet with some Christians who are very sensitive, and every time there is anything wrong they are ashamed and grieved. I wish some other Christians had more of that feeling, for it is an awful fact that many professors seem to tamper greatly with sin, and think nothing of it at all. Better the sensitive soul that is fearful and timorous, lest it should in any way grieve the Spirit of God, with a watchful eye over itself, and a conscience that is quick and tender as the apple of the eye, than such presumption and hardness of heart as others have. But some have this sensitiveness without the other qualities which balance it, and it makes their progress to heaven a painful one, though a safe one. They do not look enough at the cross. They do not remember that "if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin." They have not come to see that the Lord Jesus Christ is able to deliver us from all sin, so that indwelling sin shall not have dominion over us, because we are not under the law, but under grace. So their progress is painful. But, halting one, this word is for you, "I will assemble her that halteth;" when I call my people together, I will call her; when I send an invitation to a feast, I will direct one specially to her. She is weak, she is slow, she is in pain, but for all that I will assemble her with my people."

The allusion, perhaps, is to a sheep that has been somehow lamed; the shepherd has to get all the flock together, and, therefore, he must bring the lame one in too; and the great, good Shepherd of the sheep takes care that the lame sheep shall be gathered. I find that the original word has somewhat of the import of oneness; a lame sheep goes as if it went on one side. It cannot use this foot, and so it has to throw its weight on the other side. How many Christians there are that have a oneness in religion, and, unfortunately, that often happens to be the gloomy side! They are very properly suspicious of themselves, but they do not add to that a weight of confidence in the Lord Jesus Christ. Looking back upon their past, and seeing their own unfaithfulness, they forget God's faithfulness; looking upon the present, they see their own imperfections and infirmities, and forget that the Spirit helpeth our infirmities, that, if we had not infirmities, there would be nothing for the Spirit to do to glorify himself in our weakness. When they look forward to the future, they see the dragons and the dark river of death, but they forget that promise, "When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee." What a mercy it is that the Lord will not forget these on-sided limpers, but that even they shall be assembled when, with the Shepherd's crook, he gathers his flock, and brings them home!

We may add to these those who have got tired with the trials of the way. It is a weary thing to be lame. It saddens my heart often to see the sheep go through the London streets, they go

limping along, poor things, so spent and spiritless. There are many Christians who are like them, they seem to have been so long in trouble that they do not know how to bear up any longer. What with the loss of the husband and the loss of the child, what with poverty and many struggles and no apparent hope of deliverance, what with one sickness and then another in their own person, what with one temptation, and then another temptation, and then a third, they feel very wearied by the way. They are like Jacob when he halted on his thigh. The blessing is that the Lord says, "I will assemble her that halteth." Lay hold on that, you halting one. I daresay you suppose you are the last one of the flock. You have got so tired and lame that you think that, though all the others are close by the Shepherd's hand, you are forgotten. You remember that the Amalekites in the wilderness fell upon the children of Israel, and smote some of the hindmost of them, and perhaps you are afraid that you will get smitten in that way. Let me remind you of a text: "The Lord will go before you; and the God of Israel will be your rereward." Those that lead the way can rejoice that God goes before them, but you can rejoice that God is behind you, as we read again, "The glory of the Lord shall be thy rereward." He will take care that you shall not be destroyed.

But now, secondly, *the soul that is exiled*: "I will gather her that is driven out." Perhaps I address someone here who has been driven out from the world. It was not a very great world, that world of yours, but still it was very dear to you. You loved father, mother, brothers, and sisters; but you are a speckled bird among them now. Sovereign grace and electing love have lighted on you, but not on them. At first, they ridiculed you when you went to hear the gospel; but now that you have received it, and they perceive that you are in earnest, they persecute you. You are one by yourself. You almost wish you did not live among them, because you are farther off from them than if you were really away from them. Nothing you can do pleases them. There are sure to be a thousand faults, and they fling the taunt at you when you fail, and say, "This is your religion!" You cry out, "Woe is me that I dwell in Meshech!" Do you recollect what became of the man when the Pharisees cast him out? Why, the Lord met him and graciously took him in. Remember what Jesus said to his disciples, "If ye were of the world, the world would love his own; but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you." When I go to a man's house, and his dog barks at me, he does it because I am a stranger; and when you go into the world, and the world howls at you, it is because you are different from worldlings, and they recognize in you the grace of God, and pay the only homage which evil is ever likely to pay to goodness, namely, persecute it with all their might.

Perhaps, however, it is worse than that. "I should not mind being driven out from the world," say you, "I could take that cheerfully, but I seem driven out from the church of God." There may be two ways in which this may come about. Perhaps you have been zealous for the Lord God of Israel in the midst of a cold

church, and you have spoken, perhaps not always prudently; the consequence is, that you have angered and vexed the brethren, and they have thought that you fancied yourself to be better than they, though such a thought was far from your mind. It is an unfortunate thing for a man to be born before his time, yet he may be a grand man. Some Christians in certain churches seem to live ahead of their brethren. It is a good thing; but, as surely as Joseph brought down the enmity of his own brethren upon himself because he walked with God, and God revealed himself to him, so is it likely that you, if you are in advance of your brethren, will draw down opposition upon yourself which will be very bitter. Never mind; if the servants repulse you, go and tell their Master, do not go and grumble at them. Pray their Master to mend their manners. He knows how to do it.

But it is just possible that you have been driven out only in your own thoughts. Perhaps the members of the church really love you, and esteem you, and think highly of you; but you have become so depressed in spirit that you do not feel that you have any right to be in the church. You have made up your mind that you will not be a hypocrite, and, therefore, you have given up all profession. You have a notion that some of your fellow-members think evil of you, and wonder how ever such an one as you can come to the church. Oh, the many poor little lambs that come bleating round me with their troubles! And when I tell them, "I never heard anything against you in my life, I never heard anybody speak of you but with love and respect, I never observed anything in you but tenderness of conscience, and a quiet, holy walk with God," they seem quite surprised.

Brethren, look after your fellow-members; do not let them think you are cold to them. Some of them will think it whatever you may do. Some of you, brethren, are thought to be so proud that you will not look at people; if they did but know the truth, they would see that you are very different. Now, you lambs, do not be grieved about nothing. But you who are stronger than they, mind that you do not give any offence that can be prevented. "It is impossible but that offences will come: but woe unto him, through whom they come." Let us be careful not to break the bruised reed, even by accidentally treading upon it. But, dear brother or sister, if that is your condition, let me tell you that you are not driven out,—it is quite a mistake. But if you think so, go to your Lord. If you will tell Jesus, he will make up for any apparent change that may come over his people.

Ah, but I think I hear one say, "It is not being driven out from the world that hurts me, nor being driven out from the church; I could bear that, but I am driven out from the Lord himself. I seem to have lost his company, and losing that I have lost all.

"What peaceful hours I once enjoyed!
How sweet their memory still!
But they have left an aching void
The world can never fill."

Thank God if you feel like that! If the world could fill your heart, it would prove that you are no child of God; but if the world cannot fill it, then Christ will come and fill it. If you will be satisfied with nothing but himself, he will satisfy you. If you are saying, "I will not be comforted till Jesus comforts me," you shall get the comfort you need. He never did leave a soul to perish that was looking to him, and longing for him. Cry to him again, and this text shall be true to you, "I will gather her that is driven out." May that word come home to some of you! I do not know where you may be, but the Master does; may he apply the promise to your hearts!

One other person is mentioned here, *the soul that is troubled*: "her that I have afflicted." Yes, and in all churches of God there are some dear, good friends that are more afflicted than others. They are often the best people. Are you surprised at that? Which vine does the gardener prune the most? That which bears the most and the sweetest fruit. He uses the knife most upon that because it will pay for pruning. Some of us seem scarcely to pay for pruning; we enjoy good health, but when trial comes, when the Lord prunes us, we may say, "Thank God, he means to do something with me after all."

Perhaps this afflicted one is afflicted in body,—scarcely a day without pain, scarcely a day without the prospect of more suffering. Well, if there is any child the mother is sure to remember, it is the sick one; and if there are any Christians to whom God is peculiarly familiar, they are his afflicted ones. "Thou wilt make all his bed in his sickness," is said concerning a sick saint. The Lord makes your bed, dear brethren and sisters, if you are suffering bodily pain!

Some are mentally afflicted. Much of the doubting and fearing we hear about comes from some degree of mental aberration. The mental trouble may be very slight, but it is very common. I suppose that there is not a perfectly sane man among us. When that great wind blew, at the time of the Fall, a slate blew off everybody's house; and some are more affected than others, so that they take the black view of all things. This mental infirmity, for which they are not to be blamed, will probably be with them till they get to heaven. Well, God blesses those who are thus troubled.

Then some are spiritually afflicted. Satan is permitted to try them very much. There is only one way to heaven, but I find that there is a bit of the road that is newly stoned, a harder path to travel on, and some persons seem to go to heaven all over the new stones; their soul is perpetually exercised, while God grants to others to choose the smoother parts of the way, and go triumphantly on. Let those I have spoken of hear the word of promise, "I will gather her that I have afflicted," for when God himself gives the affliction, he will bring his servant through, and glorify himself thereby.

To close, let us regard this promise, "I will gather her," as meaning "I will gather my tried ones into the fellowship of the church, I will bring my scattered sheep near to me." The Lord Jesus will gather his dear people into fellowship with himself. "I will gather them every day around my mercy-seat. I will gather

them, by-and-by, on the other side of Jordan, on those verdant hill-tops, where the Lamb shall for ever feed his flock, and lead them to living fountains of waters." Poor, tried, halt, afflicted, limping soul, the Shepherd has not forgotten you. He will gather all his sheep, and they shall pass again under the hands of him that telleth them; there shall not be one missing. I cannot make out how some of my brethren think that the Lord will lose some of his people, that there are some, whom Jesus has bought with his blood, who will get lost on the way to heaven. It is an unhappy shepherd who finds some of his flock devoured by the wolf, but our Shepherd will never be in that strait with his sheep. He says, "I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand." What say you to that, you halting ones? What say you to that, you, the hindmost of all? He has given eternal life to you as much as to the strongest of the flock, and you shall never perish, neither shall any pluck you out of his hand. He will gather you with the rest of his sheep.

And when will he fulfil that promise, beloved? He is always fulfilling it, and he will completely fulfil it in the day when he is manifested. As this chapter describes him when he comes to make peace, and men beat their swords into ploughshares, then will he gather you. Even now, when he comes as the great Peace-giver, he gathers her that halts. When the storms of temptation lie still awhile, and he shows himself in the heart as the God that walked the sea of Galilee of old, then are his people gathered into peace; they rest in that day. Thank God, the most tried and troubled believer has some gleams of sunlight. In winter time sometimes, you know, there comes a day which looks like a summer's day, when the gnats come out, and think it is the spring, and the birds begin to sing as if they thought that surely the winter was over and past; and in the darkest experience there are always some blessed gleams of light, just enough to keep the soul alive. That is in one measure the fulfilment of the promise, "I will assemble her that haltefh, . . . in that day."

But the day is coming when you and I, who have been halting, and feeble, and weak, shall be gathered, never to halt, never to doubt, and never to sin again. I do not know how long it may be. Some of you are a long way ahead of me, according to your years, but we cannot tell. The youngest of us may go soonest, for there are last that shall be first, and first that shall be last. But there is such a day written in the eternal decrees of God, when we shall lay aside every tendency to sin, every tendency to doubt, every capacity for tribulation, every need for chastisement, and then we shall mount and soar away to the bright world of endless day. What a mercy it will be to find ourselves there! Oh, how we shall greet Jesus with joy and gladness, and tell of redeeming grace and dying love that brought home even the halting ones, and the weakest and the feeblest!

I think those that are reckoned strong, and do the most for God, are generally those who think themselves weakest when it comes to the stripping time. I read of a man who had been the means of

the conversion of many hundreds of souls by personal private efforts, —I refer to Harlan Page. On his dying bed, he said, "They talk of me; but I am nothing, nothing, nothing." He mourned over his past life; to him it seemed that he had done nothing for his Master, that his life was a blank. He wept to think he had done so little for Christ while everyone was wondering how he had lived such a blessed and holy life. That man only is rich towards God who begins to know his emptiness, and feels that he is less than nothing, and vanity.

Beloved, it is because those who serve God best often feel that they are halt, and driven away, and afflicted, and tossed with doubts and fears, it is because of this that this promise is put to the lowest case, and the blessing given to the very meanest capacity. It is so in order that one who is strong may be able to come in, and when in depression of spirit say, "That promise will suit me, I will get a grip of it. I will come to God with it in my hand, and at the mercy-seat get it fulfilled to me, even to me." The Lord grant you, beloved, to be numbered amongst his jewels in that day!

What shall I say to those who know nothing about the divine life at all, who, perhaps, are saying, "Well, we never get halting or doubting. We have a merry time of it"? Yes and so does the butterfly, while the summer lasts; but the winter kills it. Your summer may last a little while, but the chill of death will soon be on you, and then what is there for you but hopeless misery for ever and for ever? God give you grace to fly to Jesus now, and be saved with an everlasting salvation, through Jesus Christ our Saviour! Amen.

Exposition by C. H. Spurgeon.

MICAH IV.

Verse 1. *But in the last days it shall come to pass, that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established in the top of the mountains, and it shall be exalted above the hills; and people shall flow unto it.**

God's cause and kingdom shall not be hidden away in a corner: "the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established in the top of the mountains," an Alp upon other Alps, higher than all the other hills. The day is coming when the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ shall be the most conspicuous thing in the whole world, "and people shall flow unto it." The heathen, the people who knew nothing about it, shall flow to it like a great river.

2. *And many nations shall come, and say, Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, and to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths:*

That is the way the grace of God works in us; he teaches, and then we not only learn, but we obey.

2, 3. *For the law shall go forth of Zion, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. And he shall judge among many people, and rebuke strong nations afar off;*

* See *The New Park Street Pulpit*, No. 249, "A Vision of the Latter-day Glories."