

FEAR AND HOPE; OR, THREATENING AND PROMISE

A SERMON

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“I will break in pieces the gates of brass and cut in sunder the bars of iron.” Isaiah
45:2

THESE words were to the Babylonians a threatening; they were to the Israelites, a promise; and it is under this two-fold form that I shall treat this part of our text this morning, after just observing to you, that it matters not at all what strength, or what advantages, a man has on his side, if the Lord be not for him. Hence, this city of Babylon, was so founded, and so remarkable for strength, that the king and the people felt themselves safe, and seemed to despise all thought of ever being overcome. Here was a city sixty miles in circumference, lying four square, walls enormously high and enormously broad; a moat all round them; twenty-five gates on each side of the city; each side being fifteen miles; one hundred brazen gates altogether; and within this area they had parks, and farms, and gardens, so that they could grow and cultivate everything they needed; and could have held out against the siege generation after generation, because they had within the city all those resources that would have made famine quite impossible. Therefore, with all these advantages on their side, they looked at the walls, they looked at the gates, they looked at the bars, the mighty bars of iron, they looked at their internal resources; and looking at all these things, they despised the thought of ever being overcome; they believed that they were safe. But then they knew not that God who had said to his people, “I will go before you, and make the crooked places straight; I will break in pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron.”

My object in noticing this text this morning, first, as *a threatening*, and secondly, as *a promise*; one object I have in view in so doing, is to describe to you in the first place, in what way the threatening's of the Bible are made essentially useful in the salvation of the soul; and then, secondly, as I have said, we will notice our text as promise.

First: We notice it first, then, AS A THREATENING. “I will break in pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron.” There are in the word of God, instances where men have feared greatly the threatening's of God; and yet that fear, being without any hope, that fear, being without any faith in Christ; has not led to God. And on the other hand, there are persons spoken of that are presumptuous, that have no fear; they were all faith and no fear; but then their faith did not lead them to God. I must therefore, first set before you this two-fold class of persons; and then describe the way in which the threatening's of God have been, are, and will be useful in bringing souls unto

God. First, then, I notice those who have been subjected to great fear; at the same time there has been no apprehension of Christ, no hope in God's mercy, no faith in Christ. Cain was made afraid; he was made to fear and to tremble; and described his own fear when he said; "I shall be cast out from your presence, and every one that shall meet me shall slay me. "Here was fear;" but at the same time, Cain had no apprehension of Christ, no faith in Christ, no knowledge of Christ; therefore, his fear did not lead him to God. Now, we go on further; and there is no question, I think, but that Korah, Dathan, and Abirham, when they saw their tents were forsaken, and the terrible judgment of God threatened that they should not die the common death of men, there is no doubt they feared; yet their fear did not lead them to God; they still remained ignorant of the way of escape, or the way of salvation. So, the Canaanites; they trembled, their heart melted, and there was no spirit left in them; yet it did not lead them to God; still they fled from God; still remained where they were. So, with Judas; he feared and trembled; and such were his fear and trembling that he could not endure his mortal existence; but this fear did not lead him to God. So, it was with Felix; when the apostle reasoned with him upon temperance, and righteousness, and judgment to come, he trembled and feared; yet at the same time he had no apprehension of Christ, no taste for Christ, no looking after Christ. You see then, from these instances that men may undergo very great fears, and yet these fears after a time wear off, and the soul is left where the fears found it. On the other hand, there are some professors; and I think that the kind of characters alluded to by Jude, that have no fear at all, all faith and no fear, are worldly professors; persons that go on through their rounds of duties from time to time; when at the same time their hearts are in the world, their pleasure is in the world, their delight is in the world; they have no real delight in God's Christ, in God's way; in the cross of Christ; there is no glorying in him; and hence, the apostle Jude calls them rainless clouds, "Clouds without water." And so it is when you are brought into contact with such professors, you may try to get from their conversation a little of the dew of heaven, but you will find that they are clouds without rain; they have no experience of what they are as sinners, they have no experience of God's truth, no acquaintance with his mercy; and therefore their testimony is dry, and there is not the slightest union of soul felt to them. And then, these same persons are spoken of as "Trees whose fruit withers; without fruit;" that is, without any knowledge of the truth, without any love to Christ; "twice dead;" that is, dead as sinners in the general sense of the term, and dead in their profession, having a dead profession; "plucked up by the roots;" plucked up in their federal head, Adam, as all are; and plucked up virtually in their profession, as all mere professors must be; "For every plant which my Father has not planted shall be rooted up." And he calls them "raging waves of the sea;" and so, if you tell the truth to such men, they foam and they rage, and thus foam out their own shame; that is, their enmity against the truth, against God's Christ, against the way in which a sinner is saved; that is what the apostle calls, "Foaming out their own shame." Then they are called "wandering stars;" and they may well be called so for they have no right fixed principle; they have but one fixed principle, and that fixed principle forms a kind of center round which they wander; and that fixed principle is one of enmity against God. "The carnal mind is enmity against God." However, much Pilate and Herod may differ, however much people differ in other matters, they will agree in that one thing, they hate the truth, repudiate it, and trample it down; such then are called "wandering stars;" "to whom," it is said, "is reserved the blackness of darkness forever." Thus, you see the one is all fear, and no faith; and the other is all confidence, and no fear. So, the apostle says, "These are spots in your feasts of charity, when they feast with you, feeding themselves without fear no fear, no trembling."

Now, let me look at the threatening's of God as made useful. In what way is the threatening of God made useful to the soul, made useful in the salvation of the soul? Let me bring some instances before you, where grace has produced the fear; and let us see if we can come in with any of these instances; and if we can come in only with one, then our conclusion must be that the very judgments of God have been made a blessing to us, that the very threatening's of his word have been made a blessing to us. In the first place, do I see that an ungodly world has corrupted God's way; for it is said that "all flesh had corrupted his way." It is always a bad sign, there is not a sign so bad anywhere, as that man that corrupts God's way, perverts God's way; that is, God's free-grace way of saving a sinner. When that way becomes perverted, and stopped, as it were, and something else put in its place, this is a bad sign. And this is just what the old world did; the old world was filled with violence against God's truth, and all flesh had corrupted his way, Noah saw this, and he saw something else; he saw that close upon the heels of this was a tremendous judgment; he saw that the world should be engulfed and drowned; he saw that it was no fancy, no fiction, no mere make believe; he saw that there was an almightiness of wrath, he saw that there was an eternity of certainty in the terrible threatening's of the great God; and he was moved with fear. But where was he moved to? Not away from God, but towards God, led to sigh to God, to cry to God, to look to God. "O Lord whither shall I flee?" For I see the flood is universal; I see there is not a mountain, there is not a castle, there is not a tree, there is not a tower, there is not a place under the whole heavens where I can be safe, where I can be sheltered. What is to be done? He was moved with fear. But if this had been all, he could not have been saved. Presently, the Lord reveals to him the way in which he is to be saved; and how nicely he fell in with that way, went to work in accordance with that way; and I think he is a good exemplification of that Scripture, where it is said, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." And think you that this wholesome fear did not more or less attend Noah all the time he was laboring, until the Lord had shut him in; and think you that there were no trembling when the flood began to rise? when the highest mountains were covered? when the last groan was heard? and the whole world was silent, and universal desolation reigned; think you then there was no solemn fear? And then in the Lord's own time, this man, thus moved with fear, and brought finally into God's way of escape, found himself rejoicing in the manifestation which the Lord made of himself, afterwards to him. So, I say now, with us my hearers; our destruction is universal as sinners; if we look at our sins, they are on the right hand and on the left; they are within and without; everywhere there is nothing but universal desolation; and we are brought to feel and to tremble at this? and in connection with this, has the Lord revealed to us the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ; that he is the ark? that he is, as he himself so beautifully says, the door? "I am the Door; by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved." There was but one door to the ark; and there is but one way to escape, one way of access to God; Christ is the Door. Therefore, if the Lord has made these things to have this weight with us, if we are moved towards Christ, and he is become the Door, we dare not despair; he came into the world to save the lost, the helpless, the guilty, the wretched, the poor and the destitute. If these then be our feelings, then it is as true of us as it was true of Noah; and that which is said of him includes everything; the words are very simple, but I know not anything you can think of that is not included in them; if you were to study for seven years, you would not find words that would embody a greater meaning, that would embody more blessings, more glory, or that could possibly give you more certainty; and what are the words? "*Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord*" Noah found grace; and if you go to Ephesians 1 you will find it was electing grace, predestinating grace, adopting grace, redeeming grace, forgiving grace, ultimate grace, ultimate glory, pardoning grace, reigning grace. You cannot think of anything greater than that. Again, Rahab heard of the

judgments of God, and trembled, like the rest. But God sent spies to her; and no doubt they gave her some information concerning the God of the Hebrews. Ah, she says, if you are spies of the God of Israel, I will receive you; it's no use for me to stand against him. Why, I know so much of his greatness, and so much of his integrity, that I know he has given you the land; it is done, it is settled; and you must be a happy people to have such a God as that, you must be a favored people; oh, how you must love him, how you must adore him. God in heaven above, your God is God in the earth beneath, your God is; the everlasting God, your God is; oh, that I was one of this people; Happy is the people in such a case; "happy is the people whose God is the Lord." Can you show me kindness? Is it possible that one who is, or has been, a harlot by trade, a devil by name, (for Rahab means "pride,") a heathen by nation: is it possible that kindness can be shown me? Well, are you sincere, what do you really feel now? would you really like to have him as your Friend, would you really like to have him on your side? Oh yes, nothing I should so much like. Well, we must put you to the test, and see whether you are sincere. Now then, if you utter not this our business do not betray us, and put this scarlet line into the window, (perhaps a figure of the scarlet line of God's eternal truth, for we read of a line going to the end of the earth; but that I will leave) if you do this, that will prove your sincerity. She was sincere; she sent the spies out another way; she proved she was sincere; and therefore, when the day came, oh, look at it, my hearers, the great God, having under his immense survey innumerable worlds and innumerable beings of all orders, yet keeps his eye and his heart upon this poor, solitary woman; that when the Lord God of hosts threw down the walls (for the blowing of the ram's horns did not throw the walls down), but God threw the walls down; he took care that part of the wall should not fall where Rahab was; she was spared, she became a princess in Israel; and there stands her name in the genealogical list of the first chapter of the New Testament, and what is this for? Why, to encourage sinners that are brought to feel that it is to their destruction to fight against God, brought to fall down at the footstool of his mercy, and to have some confidence in that mercy; for there was not fear only, there was confidence as well as fear.

Then I take another. Here is a woman, a young woman. Well, Naomi, where are you going? I am going to the land of Israel. Well, says Ruth, Moab has been my home hitherto, but I am afraid to make it my home any longer; your God is not there, your Christ is not there; plenty of gods in my native land, but not the true God; I am afraid to stop. Oh, says Naomi, perhaps it is only a temporary feeling you have; you had better go back again to your people and to your gods. And she wept bitterly; thinking of course, there was no hope for a poor heathen like her, and whose origin was so revolting and disgraceful. Satan would make use of all that; but still, she could not help declaring to Naomi, "Where you go I will go." And when she came into the land, she met with a good man; he saw that Ruth had been moved with fear, had left the land of her nativity, her people, and her gods, to come to a people she knew not heretofore. And what a sweet sermon did Boaz preach to her, "The Lord recompense your work, and a full, reward be given you of the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to trust." So, Ruth, like Rahab, stands also in the genealogical list in Matthew 1; there to set forth, as old divines have observed, the truth that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. So, the Publican. He felt he could not live if God were against him; he felt that all other questions that pertained to his being, to the affairs of life, were as mere shadows in comparison of the great question, Is the everlasting God against me, or is he for me? Has he recorded my name in the Lamb's eternal book, or has he not? Has he laid my sins upon Christ, or has he not? Is there hope for me, or is there not? For what are all other questions, what is honor, wealth, or mirth, to these questions? "What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and

lose his own soul?" And bless his holy name for those weighty and terrible declarations by which he thundered into our souls, brought us into the secret place of thunder, and filled us with an apprehension of the awfulness of God's being against us; until with the Publican we sighed out, "God be merciful to me a sinner." Thus, then there are persons whose fear drives them from God, to whom the threatening is not useful, lastingly useful; there are persons all faith, and no fear, their faith is delusive.

Second: But there is (as we have shown) another order of persons that are moved with fear and moved towards God; persons allied to the truth, who are hereby brought into the other position of our text, namely, that of the PROMISE, "I will break in pieces the gates of brass and cut in sunder the bars of iron." Well then, if we are brought out of Babylon, then the text to us is not a threatening, but a promise. If we are brought over to God, then the text to us is an exceeding great and precious promise, "I will break in pieces the gates of brass and cut in sunder the bars of iron." No religion, friends, will profit us unless it be a weighty religion. I am sure when you read the seven or eight articles of the religion of the Pharisees, as described in Mathew 23 under the eight woes, there is one sentence that you will look upon as having in it something different from all the rest. When I read it, I look at the words again, again, and again; I go back, I read the items of the first, and second, and third woes, and so on; and there I gather what their religion was; and then I come to the Savior's religion, his religion, what a difference; what was it? Faith, judgment, mercy. Faith, to believe in God's word; judgment, to convince the sinner of what he is, bring him down to the dust of self-abasement; then mercy, to raise him up together with Christ Jesus, make him sit together in heavenly places, and rejoice in the blessed truth that the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting. I like a weighty religion, such as makes me pray to God earnestly, such as makes me read his word earnestly, such as makes me preach his word earnestly, such as brings me into such sweet acquaintance with him, that I am neither afraid to live nor to die; for "If God be for us, who can be against, us." But let us look at the words as a promise. We apply the words in a fourfold sense, as a promise; first, *sin*; secondly, *delusion*; third, *tribulation*; fourth, *as a promise of freedom*.

First, *sin*. The principalities of sin enclose us as gates of brass, as iron walls, and iron bars. Ah, my hearers, little do you think (I speak now to you that know not God,) little do you think what mighty powers embody you, what mighty powers hold you fast. Why, the law is the strength of sin; tremendous is its strength! Have you any instance in the word of God of any creature ever freeing himself? Satan is a strong being; but he never could break in pieces these gates of brass; he never could cut in sunder the bars of his own sins that imprison him, and form the very strength of his prison. Oh, when you are brought to see the mighty powers of sin, holding you fast to all eternity, bars that you can never break, then in comes the promise, "I will break in pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron." Where was this done? At Calvary's cross. Jesus Christ, as the mighty Corner Stone, in the omnipotence of his power, fell upon our sins, and ground them to powder; there it was he cut in sunder these bars of iron; there it was our sins became as the chaff of the summer threshing floor; there it was that our sins became as dust, and the fan of truth shall fan them away. I care not for the strength of sin, for there it is gone; I care not for the strength of Satan, for there his head is bruised; I care not for the strength of heart-sin, life-sin, past-sin, future-sin, it is all conquered, all virtually gone, by what the dear Savior has done. The law is the strength of sin; he is the end of the law; and his victory is complete. So that he has in this mediatorial sense, fulfilled the language of our text.

And now, if I am brought thus far to receive Christ, I will take another step, that these gates of brass and bars of iron will also mean *delusion*, "God will send them strong delusion." And this literal Babylon was a type of a mystic Babylon; a type of another Babylon; a type of a Babylon that deceives the souls of men; but over which Babylon the saints of God shall at last solemnly and everlastingly rejoice. The question is often asked, How among so many religions, are we to know which is the right? There are only a certain people that can know. Let a sinner be brought to where the apostle Paul was, when he says, "The commandment came," that is, God brought the life of the law into Paul's heart; that to have an earthly desire, an improper imagination, to offend in his heart in one point, was to be guilty of the whole; and the law thus entering into his heart, he felt in himself what he never felt before; and he felt that, and that only that, could be the right religion that could bring him legally to the end of the law; and that was Christ's righteousness; that could only be the right religion that could redeem him from the curse, and that was Christ's blood; that could only be the right religion that fitted him for an eternity of enjoyment with God, and that was regeneration, Christ being the very essence and life thereof; that he was in that helpless state that there was only one religion that could save him, and that must be entirely of grace: the Lord must have chosen to save him, undertaken to save him. He felt all this, was brought to know all this; and now he might say, Well, with all the sins that I may be the subject of, to give up the truth, to apostatize from the truth, to set aside the truth, that would be the great transgression, the cardinal sin; that would be treading underfoot the Son of God, and counting the blood of the covenant wherewith he was sanctified an unholy thing; that would be doing despite to his grace; therefore, of all the sins I could commit, nothing can equal this. The Lord makes his people right; brings them to feel the solemn force of the truth, there is none other name under heaven, given among men by which we can be saved, but the name "of Jesus." Strong delusion God breaks down in his people; he breaks it down. People think that we ought to try to break down popery in the world. My hearers, you never will break down popery in the world, until God breaks it down in men's hearts; and then they will break it down themselves. Let God take hold of a Jew, a Catholic, a Mahometan, it does not matter what he is, and convince that man of his state as a sinner; down go the gates of brass! away fly the bars of iron! the poor man feels a wound that none but God can heal; he feels that he is in a condition that none but the Great Physician of souls can manage; and that he is so far lost, that nothing but God's eternal salvation can save him. That is the way God brings him out of delusion.

I will mention one more delusion, and it is this; a very refined delusion; that those who are brought to Christ, that Christ lives with them, and communes with them, and walks with them, and talks with them, and manifests himself to them, just in proportion as they behave themselves; but if one fault, one sin, should overtake them, Christ is driven away directly, and does not come back again for a long time. Well, if that be your motive for walking consistently, that God will love you, and that Christ will dwell with you on that ground, why, you are a Pharisee of the Pharisees. The Apostle Paul upsets all this, overturns all this, casts all this to the winds, when he says, "With my flesh I serve the law of sin." I do not live with Christ, nor Christ with me, on the ground of my consistency; I do not commune with Christ, nor Christ with me, on the ground of any piety or goodness about me. What is the ground, then, say you? Why, there is but one ground; that ground that is consecrated by blood. On what ground did he continue with the disciples? Was it on the ground that they never had a fault? did they never make a mistake? did they never show a childishness? did they never have any disputes which should be the greatest? never show that they

were carnal like the rest of us? Did Peter never, in a moment of fleshly feeling, set the Savior's sufferings aside, saying, "Be it far from you, Lord?" Oh, if he had continued with them on the ground of a fleshly perfection about them, he would never have stopped with them for a day. No, the way the real Christian lives is this; he lives with God by the atonement of Christ. Now you are a sinner, every day subject to sin; therefore, you want a way to live with God. Now there is something that can keep pace with your sins, pardoning them, and subduing them, and strengthening your hope, and strengthening your faith; so that the Apostle says, "The life that I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God;" not by piety in the flesh; that is what he ought to have said, according to this doctrine of conditional dwelling, God with man, and man with God; but "the life that I now live is by the faith of the Son of God." I can go forth to my lawful avocation in the strength of the confidence I have in that atonement by which the Lord makes me free; I am the subject of sins and failings, but that atonement is a remedy for them; my sins cannot sink me into despair, for there is more power in Christ to save than in my sins to destroy. "I live by the faith of the Son of God." Now the hand of precious faith brings the sprinkling of clean water, and the precious word of the Lord washes his weary feet; and the traveler sets out afresh. And so, it is, the righteous shall hold on his way, and have clean hands. No one has clean hands by nature; and therefore, if he has clean hands it must be by grace.

Thus, we see then, how the Savior has broken in pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron, breaks the prison of strong delusion, brings us out of it, brings us to see what he is, and what he will yet do.

Just a word or two upon *tribulation*, and I must close. Now tribulation is sometimes like gates of brass and bars of iron. Oh, how shall I get through this? What will become of me? Family troubles, circumstantial troubles, business troubles, soul troubles, what shall I do? Why, my hearers, faith will do everything. Give me the man that has no troubles at all; well in health and circumstances, as easy as possible. He goes and hears the word, reads the Bible, dead as a post; sees a Christian coming towards him in the street, slips around the corner, lest he should come into conversation with him, for he feels he can say nothing to him. Now, that man looks very happy and comfortable, but he is one of the most poor, puny, miserable creatures in existence; his life is scarcely worth having, a good man, too. Take the other side. There is a man; if he looks on his left hand, there are troubles like gates of brass, and bars of iron; if he looks on his right hand, it is the same; if he looks forward, it is the same. What shall I do? His heart sinks at the contemplation. Presently a ray of light comes from the mercy seat, from the throne of God, and he feels that God is his life, his light, his salvation, his portion. Oh Lord, he says, I would not have been without this trouble for all the world; for those very things that I thought would kill me have only blasted my worldly repose, they have only brought me nearer to you. Oh Lord, if this be your way, then,

"How harsh so ever the way,
Dear Savior, still lead on:
Nor leave us till we say,
Father, your will be done."

For all these gates of brass, and bars of iron will by and bye give way. I find the Lord can uphold me and strengthen me; and I would rather have strength in my soul, and weakness round about me in circumstances, than strength in circumstances round about me, and weakness in my soul. Oh,

say you, I should like to have both. Well, the Lord can give that too; he is a sovereign; and he will do what seems good in his sight.

How encouraging, then, taking our text as a promise, how encouraging it is to cast our care upon the Lord; with the blessed assurance that he will do all that is needful; for there is not anything that is too hard for the Lord.