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Surrey Tabernacle Pulpit.

THE HIDDEN PATH.

A SERMON

PREACHED ON SUNDAY MORNING, 3RD MAY, 1868,

By MR. JAMES WELLS,

AT THE NEW SURREY TABERNACLE, WANSLEY STREET.

“I said, my strength and my hope is perished from the Lord.”—LAMENTATIONS iii. 18.

THERE are many worse states of mind to be in than that here described. It is a very much worse state of mind to be careless about the soul, and about Christ, and concerning God and eternal things altogether. Such is the state of the profane world; and they are deceived and deceiving themselves, and the hope that they had in the first Adam is indeed perished—the strength that they had there is indeed perished. But none of us care aught for it until the Lord, whom we have sinned against, whom we have offended with many offences, in the face of all our sins and offences, comes in the greatness of his mercy, and lays home upon our consciences the welfare of our own souls, convinces us of our woful condition, holds up our sins before us, holds up ourselves to ourselves. Then to such a man his being without Christ, and without hope, and without God in the world, for the first time, becomes a trouble; it becomes a matter of concern to him, and he says, Well, all the things that I have hitherto followed will soon leave me, and I must soon leave them, what, then, will become of my guilty, my never-dying soul? There is a Judge, there is a tribunal, there is the great assize—what will then become of me? And then, another very much worse state of mind to be in, is to be pharisaically proud and presumptuous, and to have an ill-feeling towards God's truth, and presumptuously to claim God's promises as ours when they are not ours, and to claim Jesus Christ as our Saviour when he is not our Saviour, and to claim God as our God when he is not our God. The Pharisees of old did this, and the Saviour turned round, and said, “Ye are of your father the devil.” You are calling the promises yours, but they are not yours; you are calling God your Father, but he is not your Father, and you are not his children. It is a solemn thought, when we look at the profane world deceiving itself; but the thought grows in gravity and solemnity, when we look at the testimony of God's word concerning the professing world. Not only is the profane, the unconcerned

world deceiving itself, and unconsciously so, without hope and without God in the world, but the majority of professors will be lost. Hence the Saviour said, "Enter in at the strait gate: for many shall seek to enter in, but shall not be able. For strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, that leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it." You observe, here is a contrast between the many that shall seek and not find, and the few that shall enter in by the finished work of Christ, and shall walk in that narrow path of experimental godliness known to none but those that are taught of God. How is it, then, that many shall seek, and not be able to enter in? Why, first, because of their enmity against God's truth. Look at that Scripture upon this matter in Romans xi.—"The election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded." Oh, my hearer, if thou art a professor, and thou art not sinful enough in thine own eyes, if thou art not base enough, weak and helpless enough, to make way in your soul for God's sovereignty, for eternal election—if you have an enmity against that great testimony of the exercise of God's sovereignty, and you are seeking, in opposition to that truth, to get to heaven—if you so live and so die, you may seek, but you will never obtain. "The election hath obtained it;" the man taught of God is brought to feel what a poor sinner he is: he sees that the origin, the manifestation, and the continuation of the salvation of the soul is entirely of God. So then, because of their enmity against God's truth, that is one reason why they seek to enter in, but are not able. Another reason, which naturally follows, is that described by the apostle in the Romans, when he saith, "The Gentiles, which followed not after the law of righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness which is of faith. But Israel, which followed after the law of righteousness, hath not attained to the law of righteousness." Wherefore was it, then, that the Israelites sought to be saved, to enter in, and could not? Why, saith the apostle, because they sought it, as it were, by the works of the law, not abstractedly by the works of the law, but they sought it by a kind of conditional gospel, not by faith. Whereas the Gentiles, taught of God, and brought to know their lost condition, were led to seek salvation in entire accordance with God's own way. These are they that attain unto the law of righteousness, even the righteousness of faith; and there is no righteousness like the righteousness of faith, because Christ, is the righteousness of faith; he is Jehovah our Righteousness. And were it possible for you to attain to such a righteousness as you had before the Fall, that would be infinitely inferior to the righteousness of faith; for Jesus Christ is the righteousness of faith; he is Jehovah our Righteousness. Then again, the Lord has said concerning the seed of Jacob, "I have never said unto the seed of Jacob, "Seek ye me in vain." You will observe that Jacob was a man acquainted with the sovereignty of God. He was a remarkable instance of it, as every saved soul is; he was a remarkable instance of it in his own person. "Jacob have I loved." And what could Jacob attribute the love of God to him to but to God's good pleasure? And then the Lord showed Jacob the mystic ladder, the way to heaven; and when he came to die we see that he was still hanging upon God's salvation. Our text, however, refers to the peculiar trials of the people of God. Here is a man, favoured as Jeremiah was:—he had been wonderfully favoured; he had not been out of the service of God all his lifetime; he is now between sixty and seventy years old, and had been in the ministry upwards of forty years out of that time, and yet still sunk so low as to say, "My strength and my hope is perished from the Lord." As I have said, there are many states of mind worse than this. Only think of it for a moment; look at the stake you have at issue; it is the eternal salvation or eternal damnation of your own self. Now we all do care each for him and herself. There can be no question about this. And yet there is a self unhappily that we care not for till the Lord maketh

us, and that self is our souls, our eternal destiny. I shall then this morning point out in the first place the state that Jeremiah was in, that led him to express himself as in our text, "My strength and my hope is perished from the Lord. And, before I enter upon the subject, I would just observe that the reason there is so little soul-trouble in our day is because most professors are mere letter professors; they are converted, and they jump into an assurance that all is well and all is peaceful, when at the same time they are total strangers to that soul-trouble essential to a right knowledge of self and to a right knowledge of the Lord. We will, then, first notice *the state that Jeremiah was in*. Secondly, *the encouragement the Holy Scriptures hold out to such*. Third, *what this state of mind led Jeremiah to*.

First, *the state that Jeremiah was in*. First, it was a state of darkness. "He hath led me, and brought me into darkness, but not into light." He had enjoyed the light of God's presence, but now it was darkness with him. So it is with the Christian; the Bible is dark, the ministry dark, the throne of grace dark, experience dark, and all seems dark and dull together. He says, I must be a child of the night, for I see no light; I cannot see what evidence I have that I am a child of God. All is darkness. As to my conversion, whether that was real or only formal, I hardly know; and as to past experience, I hardly know what to make of that. My present state is a mysterious state. "He hath brought me into darkness, but not into light." There was a time when I saw such beauty in Jesus as to be enraptured with him; but now all seems hidden from mine eyes. There was a time when I could read the Holy Scriptures with light and understanding, but now all seems gloomy. There was a time when I could see the heavens, and the Sun of Righteousness shone into my soul; now the heavens seem to be brass, and the earth under my feet seems to be as iron; yea, "my strength and my hope is perished from the Lord," and I shall be lost at last. I am nothing but a hypocrite; there is something wrong somewhere, and I shall be lost at last. Are some of you thus tried? If you are, happy are ye; for, "happy is the man whom God correcteth;" and this is one of the ways in which he doth correct us. He brings us into darkness that we may know the difference between darkness and light. "Happy is the man whom God correcteth; therefore despise not thou the chastening of the Almighty!" Then the next thing is, "Surely against me is he turned; he turneth his hand against me all the day." Now when you are in this dark state of mind there is hardly a threatening in the Bible that you do not feel belongs to you. Ah, say, you, there sinners are threatened; I am a sinner, and the threatenings belong to me. The law is a fiery law, and the word of God calls for a perfection I have never had. And such will read the precepts of the gospel:—"He that is angry with his brother; he that giveth a wrong look; and so of the rest. Such an one will say, Well, I see the darkness of my mind, and I see the swarms of evil thoughts that my wicked heart sends forth; and the worst kind of thoughts that my wicked heart sends forth are those thoughts that are direct against God. And let us esteem it a privilege that we are not called upon to express definitely what some of our thoughts in relation to God are. I am sure, while I hope I say so with that self-loathing which becometh me, I must bear testimony against my own heart, and say that my own wicked heart has risen in most awful thoughts against the blessed God. Even when reading his holy word I have had some of the worst besetments. And I am then apt to think, If the Lord were on my side he would not allow this; if the Lord were on my side I should be very different from what I am; I should not be in such a state as this. "My strength and my hope is perished from the Lord." Now do not let us deceive ourselves; the Lord help us to examine ourselves upon this matter. It is positively declared in God's word that every one

taught of God shall know the plague of his own heart, his own grief, and his own sore. Mr. Hart is right when he says,—

“From sinner and from saint
We meet with many a blow ;
Our own bad heart creates a smart,
Which only God can know.”

First, then, darkness and not light; secondly, that God was against him; circumstances went against him; everything went against him. The very things that he prayed for were denied him. He prayed for the preservation of the Jewish nation; but instead of this being granted, the whole, as you know, was swept away. And do not wonder, therefore, if you should pray for some peculiar interposition of the Lord on your behalf, and he should do just the contrary—sweep the whole of it away. Mysterious it is; but then he sees the end from the beginning, and when the end shall come you will see that he did wisely, did righteously, and even did lovingly.

The third was that Jeremiah felt as though he was worn out. “My flesh and my skin hath he made old; he hath broken my bones.” This of course must not be taken literally. Let us get at the meaning. The meaning there intended appears to me to be this—that as the body wears out by old age, so he spiritually seemed to be worn out. My spiritual youth is gone; the stamina seems gone; the vitality seems gone. David speaks, as you know, of youth being renewed as the eagle’s. Now Jeremiah says, “My flesh and my skin hath he made old.” I am in soul like a poor, tottering, feeble old man, just tottering into the grave; and as the strength of that man’s body is nearly perished, and as his hope of living much longer is nearly perished, just so with my soul; I am afraid I shall not hold out much longer. I have already once or twice said, “I will speak no more in the name of the Lord,” and I am afraid now that it will be over with me very soon. I shall not keep a seat on in the chapel much longer. I shall give it all up. I never was in such a state before. No Christian could ever be in such a state as this. But you see Jeremiah was a Christian; that is, he was a believer, and he was in such a state as this, and Jeremiah was a man that had been highly favoured too. See his 1st, 31st, and 33rd chapters; what revelations the Lord made to him. Ah, say some, I dare say this Jeremiah was one of those high doctrine men. Well, I must admit that charge is true, for you cannot read his 31st and 33rd chapters without being fully convinced of this; there is no question about that. Indeed, the Lord brings his people low in order that he may make them high; he brings them down into the dust in order that he may lift them up to the throne of glory; he brings them down as to the dunghill that he may set them up with the princes of his people, and then in the contrast they will see what they are and what the Lord is in the salvation of their souls. But Jeremiah saith, “He hath broken my bones.” Of course you must not take this literally. Some of these similes may seem far-fetched and strange to us, but we must look at the meaning. What is the meaning of this? “He hath broken my bones.” Well, we just now said that Jeremiah was in soul like the body almost worn out; and you know from God’s word that in ancient times they would break the bones of malefactors to hasten their death. See what a view Jeremiah had of the Lord. “He hath broken my bones.” So far from the Lord dealing kindly with me he is hastening my death; I shall soon give up. And hence he saith, “My strength and my hope is perished from the Lord.” Here is a contradiction you see. Why, if you were dead, you would not feel that; you would not be concerned about it; you would not be troubled about it. But he thought he was dead; he thought his faith was gone, his confidence gone, and all was gone. He hath broken my bones.” There was a time when I could stand; I cannot now; there was a time when I could walk a little, but I cannot now. This is a very trying ex-

perience, but it is the path of every man that is taught of God. I may perhaps be speaking this morning to some mere professor. You are a total stranger to what I am saying. What I am saying you cannot understand, cannot make it out. And yet if you do not, you will be a lost man. For, as I have said, happy is the man whom God correcteth; and the Lord saith, "I wound;" and this is the way he does wound; "the Lord hath torn;" and Jeremiah saith, "He hath pulled me in pieces." The Saviour when he takes a sinner in hand breaks him to shivers as a potter's vessel; and the poor sinner makes sure that the Lord's object in thus dealing with him is nothing short of damnation of his soul. "My strength and my hope is perished from the Lord." But again, Jeremiah felt as though he was dead—spiritually dead. "He hath set me in dark places, as they that be dead of old." I feel dead. What a dreadful thing this death is, is it not? We all experience it. The apostle describes it when he saith, "We have the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in the living God that raiseth the dead." Ah, when we look at the liveliness of God's love, of the Lord Jesus Christ, of the oracles of God, of the Eternal Spirit; at the liveliness of the prophets when in their right minds; at the liveliness of angels, and at the liveliness of vital godliness altogether; and then feel so dead, as though we had neither part nor lot in the matter, and that we are more like the dry bones in Ezekiel's valley than like the living creatures in Ezekiel's wheels, it brings us to the conclusion of our text,—“My strength and my hope is perished from the Lord.” You cannot imagine anything more dreadful. What! no confidence in God? Then I am ruined. What else can I have confidence in that will serve me through life and death? What! no hope in God, no hope in Christ, no hope in his mercy, severed from him, cast out by him, hated by him, rejected by him? Ah, better indeed that I had never been born. Oh, it is a great mercy to be thus exercised and tried in relation to eternal things. Now modern doctrines would have said to Jeremiah, Don't remain in that state; get out of it all. But what is the doctrine the prophet has put on record? "He hath hedged me about, that I cannot get out." As the Israelites were, as it were, hedged up on the western side of the Red Sea, the mountains right and left, the Egyptian host in the rear, and the roaring sea before them—they were hedged up, and could not get out; so, saith Jeremiah, I cannot get out. Ah, how many sermons have I preached in that state of mind. I have looked, and turned, and twisted, and always hide my weakness from you as much as I can, because I do not want you always to know whether I am comfortable or uncomfortable, for I have lived to learn that what I may sow in great weakness God may raise in great power; and that what I may state in great confusion, he may bring into saving order. We have this treasure of eternal truth in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us. But why speak I thus? Do you not come into the house of God sometimes, and is not your soul hedged up, and you would like to get out of that with which the soul is hedged up, and think of something better, and be happy in the Lord? But, saith the prophet, "I cannot get out." And David saith the same;—"Bring my soul out of prison, and I will praise thy name." But then another doctrine comes in, very well in its place, but let it be rightly understood. The next doctrine is that he should pray. Very true. The Lord forbid we should ever make light of the unspeakable privilege of prayer. But at the same time, there is a set time to favour Zion; and we must look upon prayer as an evidence that there is on the way for us the mercy that we need; but when, how, and which way it will come we must wait to see. Jeremiah saith, "Also when I cry and shout, he shutteth out my prayer." Oh, how encouraging this is to me, because it describes just where I have been a great many times. People say, "Oh, you have nothing to do but pray. A very Pharisaic

gentleman said to me some time ago, "Well, our troubles arise from not praying sufficiently." Just after that he said, "A son of mine was ill, and I prayed to the Lord; my son soon got well;—nothing to do but pray, sir." Walking along a little further, he said, "I lost a son six months ago." "Why, how came that? You didn't pray." "Well," he said, "I think I did." "Well, but if it depends on prayer, how is it that one got well, and you lost the other?" "Well, I must confess I think I prayed more for the one that died than for the one that is spared." "So," I said, "you see you have been putting your prayers into the place of God's sovereignty. You have not been praying with submission to his will; you have merely devised a plan, and have asked the Lord to carry out your plan, and you have adopted the notion that he will be sure to do so; that he is so much pleased with your wisdom, your contrivance, and your plan, that he will carry it out." Jeremiah did not find it so. "When I cry and shout, he shutteth out my prayer." Ah, we must not be so discouraged; for these things are encouraging; they show that in such circumstances we are not alone. Some of the greatest men of God that ever lived have walked in this same hidden path—a path unknown to the ungodly world and the mere professor, but well known to the man that is taught of God, from time to time humbled down, made weary, hungry, and thirsty. But again, Jeremiah says, "He hath also broken my teeth with gravel stones; he hath covered me with ashes;" that is, he has given me such hard things to eat that I do not seem to have any teeth left; and therefore I conclude that the consequence is he does not mean to give me any more to eat. He has broken my confidence, taken away my strength and my hope. "Thou shewest thy people hard things." He has broken my teeth—does not mean to give me any more to eat. Have you not often said this—Shall I ever be led into the green pastures and by the still waters again? Will he ever again take out of my hand this cup of bitterness, this cup of trembling, and put into my hand the cup of consolation and salvation? It is true the word of God everywhere is encouraging to those that hunger and thirst; but then I fear that my hunger and thirst are not real—in a word, "my strength and my hope is perished from the Lord." It was not so, but it seemed to him that it was; and so it does sometimes to us. One more sample; "Thou hast removed my soul far off from peace; I forgot prosperity." I have no peace with God, no peace with Jesus Christ; the Holy Spirit is not a peaceful dove to me; troubled in heart, in life, in the world, in the church, everywhere; perplexed on every side. "I forgot prosperity." I forgot how God the Father prospers in all his plans, that his counsel shall stand, and he will do all his pleasure. I forgot the prosperity of Jesus Christ—that he made his unfathomable sorrows the very means by which he prospered—the pleasure of the Lord prospered in his hands. I forgot the prosperity that the Lord will bestow upon his people; and so "my strength and my hope perished from the Lord." We must never make light of doubting and fearing, and never try to drive the doubts and fears of the people of God away; for if you drive them away, they will soon come back again. But if the oil and the wine come in, they will go away themselves. If the King send the royal steed and the royal apparel, and you feel that it is by his authority; that he has given you, by his power, beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness, then your doubts and fears go away by something being put into their place that satisfies your soul, and makes you see that all these experiences have been a path marked out for you.

Secondly, I notice *the encouragement the holy Scriptures hold out to such*. The apostle Paul meets the people of God in a similar state of mind, and he seems to suggest to them two things. If thy soul do lovingly believe in Jesus Christ, and if thy soul do retain the love of the

brethren, then, notwithstanding thy fears, all is well. I refer now to Hebrews x. "Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy who hath trodden under foot the Son of God?" Well, saith the poor sinner, that is what I could not do. I do admire him, for he is the chiefest among ten thousand; I know that he is the one thing needful. "And hath counted the blood of the covenant wherewith he was sanctified an unholy thing." No, no, there is nothing from which the Christian is further than that. There is a point here that I must dwell upon for a moment. "Counted the blood of the covenant an unholy thing." I am afraid (and I will put it in the softest shape possible)—I am afraid there are thousands that do that, and yet do not know that they do it. I will tell you how they do it. There are two doctrines there: First, there is the doctrine of an everlasting covenant, Ah, saith one, that is Calvinism; I hate that; it leads to sin. That's it. Then if the testimony of God's everlasting covenant, of which Christ is the mediator, is an unholy doctrine, that is the way in which you do count the blood of the covenant—you do not know it, but you do—an unholy thing. Satan will not allow you to look it in the face. No, says Satan, you may hate the doctrine but love the thing testified of, but that is impossible. Then again, the blood of the covenant, as that that cleanseth—past, present, and to come—from all sin. Ah, saith one, that is high Calvinism; I do not like that very well; then you will not be included in the number I shall come to presently. "And hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace," who is, the Spirit of truth, that leads the soul into the very truths to which I have referred; that begins the good work, and will perform it unto the day of Jesus Christ. Ah, say you, that is high doctrine again; I hate that. Very well, then, you are doing despite to the Spirit of grace. Now those of you who are fearing that your strength and your hope is perished from the Lord; if you do not tread under foot the Son of God, if you do not count his truth unholy; if you are not in antagonism to the truthfulness, sovereignty, and prevalency of the Eternal Spirit, then "call to remembrance the former days, in which, after ye were thus illuminated, ye endured a great fight of afflictions, partly whilst ye were made a gazing stock both by reproaches and afflictions." How often that happens—personal affliction, or family fault, or bereavement, There, says the devil, I told you how it would be; here is the hand of the Lord against you for preaching such dreadfully high doctrine, "Partly, whilst ye were made a gazing stock both by reproaches and afflictions; and partly, whilst ye became companions of them that were so used. For ye had compassion on me in my bonds, and took joyfully the spoiling of your goods, knowing yourselves that ye have in heaven a better and enduring substance." Now then, seeing that you still reverence the Son of God, that you still love the testimony of the everlasting covenant, that you still love the work of the Holy Spirit, seeing that you have stood the fire, and have shown a brotherly love, "cast not away your confidence, which hath great recompence of reward." If you had parted with the Son of God your confidence would not be worth a straw; the sooner you cast it away the better; but as you have held fast the Son of God, "cast not away your confidence, which hath great recompence of reward."

Lastly, let us see *what this state of mind led Jeremiah to*. It led him into solemn self-reflection, it led him into a comfortable hope, it led him into the triumphs of the gospel. Hear his own testimony, "Remembering mine affliction and my misery, the wormwood and the gall, my soul hath them still in remembrance, and is humbled in me"; is humbled in me at my despairing under them; is humbled in me at the recollection of my weaknesses under them. Ah, there was but one, there is but one, that never under trouble showed any weakness; that one is Christ. "This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope." Though I have greatly murmured, and not borne my afflictions with the submission I

could wish, yet with it all I have not been left to the great transgression of God's truth; therefore have I hope. He is getting a little up hill now; getting up towards the delectable mountains now. He looked around, saw the desolating judgments of God upon his own beloved land; and then he looked at the few that were friends to God, and he said, "It is of the Lord's mercies that we"—I, Jeremiah, Ebed-melech, Baruch, and the few that are brought to love the truth—"it is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed." Just so with you; it will lead you just to that. And if you want to know what the mercies are that preserve you, you will find them in Isaiah lv, "I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David." "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning;" they retain their freshness, their youth, their fragrance; no sign of withering; no sign of losing the beauty of their appearance, the fragrance of their perfume, their medicinal qualities, or any of their vitality:—they are new every morning. "Great is thy faithfulness. The Lord is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him." Well, then, this is a good path to be led into; and you will always find that these humbling and trying experiences will lead you ere long more into the deep mercies of the Lord, to rejoice and triumph in Jesus Christ the Lord.

Now I will close with a word of advice, a word of instruction, which the Lord has kindly given us, and which I may by a little alteration, accommodate to our experience. In 1 Samuel xii. when the people had very foolishly chosen them a king, Samuel said unto them, "Ye have done all this wickedness." I am not going to apply those words to you, because of your doubts and fears, because I do not think it is a wicked thing for a man honestly to doubt and fear whether he is not deceiving himself; it is not a wicked thing to examine ourselves whether ye be in the faith; it is not a wicked thing, if you fear you are in the wrong road, to go on inquiring till you make sure you are not in the wrong road, but in the right road. But the way I will apply the words is this. You have had all these weaknesses and rebellions and fears, "yet turn not aside from following Jehovah, but serve Jehovah with all your heart." So then, those of you that are tempted to cease from so doing mark the advice, "Turn ye not aside, for then should ye go after vain things"—the heathen gods—"which cannot profit nor deliver, for they are vain. For the Lord will not forsake his people for his great name's sake; because it hath pleased the Lord to make you his people." Come, then, do not run away; come again this evening, come on Wednesday evening, come again next Sunday; do not run away. Do not run away from the Bible, do not run away from the Lord, do not turn aside from following him. And then, says Samuel, "As for me"—and I may, though in a very humble shape and form, put myself in Samuel's place there,—"God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you." There is always plenty for a minister to pray for; the people are a tried people in a great variety of ways. "God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you; but I will teach you the good and the right way. Only fear the Lord, and serve him in truth," as you here are favoured to do, "with all your heart; for" consider, though you fear at times your strength and hope is perished from the Lord, yet "consider how great things he hath done for you."

May the Holy Spirit lead us more and more into these vitalities, for his name's sake.