

A Prospect of Revival

A Sermon

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"For the Lord shall comfort Zion: he will comfort all her waste places and he will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness shall be found therein, thanksgiving, and the voice of melody."—[Isaiah 51:3](#).

THE pedigree of God's chosen nation Israel may be traced back to one man and one woman—to Abraham and Sarah. Both of them were well stricken in years when the Lord called them, yet, in the fulfilment of his promise, he built up of their seed a great nation, which, for number, was comparable to the stars of heaven. Take heart, brethren; these things are written for our example and for our encouragement. His Church can never sink to so low an ebb that he cannot soon build her up again, nor in our own hearts can the work of grace ever decline so grievously that the same mighty power which once quickened cannot revive and restore us. Think of Abraham and Sarah, childless till they were old, then rejoicing in one son, who became their heir. Hence sprang the great multitude that peopled Palestine. With such a panorama unfolding before you, there is no excuse for despair; but you may find ten thousand reasons for confidence in God.

With such preface the Lord proceeds to unfold to his people a series of delightful promises. As we have no time to spare, and no words to waste, we will plunge at once into the heart of the text, and observe, first, that you have before you:—

I. HEAVENLY COMFORT PROMISED.

This is a promise to God's Church. There are some who would have us always restrain Isaiah's prophecies to the Jews, as though this was their exclusive application. I have no objection to your so understanding them in their original and literal sense, nor have I any objection to our friends labouring for the Jews especially, as a class; far rather would I commend them. Only, I would have them recollect that no Scripture is of private interpretation that, in God's sight, neither Jews nor Gentiles are recognised under this dispensation of the gospel, for he has made both one in Christ Jesus. I, therefore, as a Christian minister, when I preach the gospel, know neither Jew nor Gentile, male nor female, bond nor free, but I simply know men as men, and go out into the world to "preach the gospel to every creature." It seems to me that this is the order in which God would have his Church carry out every evangelical enterprise, forgetting and ignoring all fleshly distinctions, understanding that now men are either sinners or saints. As to circumcision or uncircumcision, vast as its

importance in the kingdom of Israel, it is of no account in the kingdom of God. The text, we believe, whatever may be its relation to the Jews as a people, belongs to the Church of God and the disciples of Christ; for "*all things are yours.*" Zion was the stronghold of Jerusalem. Originally a fortress of the Jebusites, it was taken by a feat of arms by David and his valiant men. It became afterwards the residence of David, and there, too, was the residence of the Great King; for in it was built the temple which became the glory of all lands. Hence the Church of God—which has been captured by Christ from the world, which is the palace where he dwells, which is the temple where he is worshipped—is frequently called "Zion," and the Zion of this passage, I believe, we are warranted in interpreting as the Church of the living God.

We are told here, then, that the Lord will comfort his Church. Let *the object of this comfort*, therefore, engage your attention. "The Lord will comfort Zion." Well he may, for she is his chosen. "The Lord hath chosen Zion." He would have those upon whom his choice is fixed be glad and happy. The elect of a great king have cause for thankfulness, but the chosen of the King of Kings should rejoice continually in the God that chose them. He would have his Church rejoice because he has not only chosen her, but he has cleansed her. Jesus has put away the sin of his people by his blood, and by his Spirit he is daily renewing the nature of his children. Sin is the cause of sorrow, and when sin is put away sorrow shall be put away too. The sanctified should be happy. The Lord will, therefore, comfort them, because he cleansed them. The Church of God is placed where God dwells:—

"Where God doth dwell sure heaven is there;

And singing there should be."

What can ye conceive of weeping and lamenting in the house where Jehovah dwelleth? It was a rule with one of the old monarchs that no one should come into his presence sad. In all our afflictions we may draw near to the Lord, but his presence should dispel our sorrow and sighing; for the children of Zion should be joyful in their King. If the Lord dwelleth in the midst of his people, there ought to be shootings of joy. The presence of the King of Heaven is the heaven of their delight. Moreover, Zion enjoys her Monarchs love, and therefore, he would have her comforted. We know not how dear to the heart of Christ his Church is, but we do know this: that for his Church he left his Father's house and came down to earth, and was poor, that she, through his poverty, might be made rich. A man leaveth father and mother, and cleaveth to his wife, and they become one flesh; but what shall I say of the great mystery of this glorious Lover, who left his Father's house, and did cleave unto his Church, and became one flesh with her that he might lift her up and set her upon his own throne, that she might reign with him as the Bride, the Lamb's Wife? Well may, therefore, the Lord desire his Church to be happy. Eternal love has fixed itself upon her. Eternal purposes cluster around her. Eternal power is sworn to protect her. Eternal faithfulness has guaranteed eternal life to all her citizens. Why should she not be comforted?

I do not wonder that the text says the Lord will comfort the people whom he has thus favoured.

And *the Lord himself is the Comforter*. "*The Lord will comfort Zion.*" Beloved, we make but sorry comforters for God's people unless Jehovah puts his own hand to the work. I have sometime tried to cheer up my brethren when they have been desponding, and I hope not without success; yet I have always felt that to relieve and refresh a desponding saint, I must fetch the remedies from my Master's pharmacy. So, doubtless, those of you who have ever sought to obey the command, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people," must have found that it was not your word that could comfort Zion, nor your sympathy, but God's truth applied by God's Spirit, for this alone can comfort Zion. Oh! blessed promise! "*The Lord will comfort Zion; he will comfort her waste places.*" He that made the heavens will become the Comforter of his people. The Holy Ghost, who brooded over chaos, and brought order out of confusion; the mighty Spirit who came down at Pentecost in tongues of fire, with a sound like a mighty rushing wind—that same blessed Spirit will come to the hearts of the members of his Church and comfort them. There are sorrows for which there is no solace within the reach of the creature; there is a ruin which it would baffle any mortal to retrieve. Happy for us that the Omnipotent comes to our aid. It is "he who telleth the number of the stars; calleth them all by their names"; who also "healeth the broken in heart, and bindeth up their wounds!" Where he is, rolling the stars along, filling heaven with wonder as he creates majestic orbs, and keeps them in their pathways, making the comet fling its gorgeous light across space and startle nations, holding the burning furnace of the sun in the hollow of his hand; yet he stoops down to minister to a desponding spirit, and to pour the oil and wine of heavenly comfort into a poor distracted heart! Yes, it is Zion that is to be comforted, but it is Jehovah himself who has promised to be her Comforter!

And how does the Lord propose to comfort Zion? If you read the verse through, you will find it is *by making her fertile*. He will turn her barren deserts into fruitful gardens, and her unproductive wilderness into a blooming Eden. The true way to comfort the Church is to build her synagogues, restore the desolation of former times, to sow her fields, plant her vineyards, make her soil fruitful, call out the industry of her sons and daughters, and fill them with lively, ardent zeal. There is an everlasting consolation for the Church in those grand doctrines of grace revealed to us in covenant, such as election, particular redemption, effectual calling, final perseverance, and the faithfulness of God. Resting in his love, God forbid that we should ever keep back these grand truths; they are the wells of salvation from which we rejoice to draw the water of life. But there are other truths besides these and we could not make full proof of our ministry if we overlooked the rain, even the former and the latter rain, which God gives in due season, or withholds in his chastening anger. I have often remarked that those persons who are always crying after the comfort that is to be derived from the stability of God's purpose are strangely lacking in that present joy and jubilant

song which revels in the goodness of the Lord, who clothes the pastures with flocks, and covers the valleys over with corn. I have also remarked that the best way to make a Christian man happy is to make him useful, ploughing the fields which God has watered, and gathering the fruits which he has ripened. A Christian Church never enjoys so much concord, love, and happiness as when every member is kept hard at work for God, every soul upon the stretch of anxiety to do good and communicate, every disciple a good soldier of the Cross, fighting the common enemy. Thus the Lord will comfort Zion, and he comforts her by turning her desert into a garden, and her wilderness into Eden.

And oh! my brethren, how happy is the Church when all the members are active, all the trees bearing fruit; when sinners are converted, and daily added to the fellowship of the saved; when, instead of the thorn, there comes up the myrtle, and instead of the briar, there comes up the fir-tree; when God is turning hard hearts, that were, like rocks, into good soil, where the corn of the Kingdom may grow. There is no joy like it! If you can be happy in seeking your own good, without caring for the welfare of others, I pity you. If a minister can be content to go on preaching without converts or baptisms, the Lord have mercy upon his miserable soul! Can he be a minister of Christ who does not win souls? A man might as well be a huntsman and never take any prey; a fisherman, and always come home with empty nets; a husbandman, and never reap a harvest! I wonder at some people's complacency. When God never blesses them, they never fail to bless themselves. "Divine sovereignty withholds the increase," they say. But it really is their idleness that tends to poverty. The promise of God is to the diligent, not the indolent. Let Paul plant, and let Apollos water, God will give the increase. It may not come to-day, nor to-morrow, nor the next day, but come it must. The Word cannot return unto God void. It must prosper in the thing whereto he has sent it. Had God sent us on a listless, bootless errand, we might well complain, but he doth not so. Only let us preach Jesus Christ with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven, and we shall, doubtless, come again rejoicing, bringing our sheaves with us. Although when we went forth, we wept because of our inability and our want of confidence, yet this is the way in which God comforts us.

The promise, you will observe, is given in words that contain an absolute pledge. He *shall* and he *will* are terms that admit of no equivocation. What an emphasis that man of God, the late Joseph Irons, used to lay on the words when he got hold of a "shall" and a "will" from, the mouth of the Lord! Though some people say we must not make too much of little words, I will venture to make as much as ever I can of these two potent monosyllables. "The Lord *shall* comfort Zion; the Lord *will* comfort all her waste places." How much better and brighter this reads than an "if," or a "but," or a "perhaps," or a "peradventure"! He *shall* comfort Zion. Oh! how those dear saints, the Covenanters, when they were hunted about, and fled into dens and caves, said, "Ah! but King Jesus *will* have his own; he *shall* comfort Zion!" And our Puritan forefathers, when priests threatened to harry them out of the land,

could see with prophetic eye the time when the harlot church would yet be driven out, and the true, legitimate children of God would take her place; they could say, "The Lord *shall* comfort Zion," and they looked forward to happier halcyon days. No less did those glorious Albigenes and Waldenses, when they stained the snows of the Alps with their blood, feel confident that the Church of Rome would not gain the day, that God would yet return and avenge the blood of his martyred saints, and give the victory to his true people. And surely you and I may take comfort too. "The Lord *shall* comfort Zion; he *will* comfort her waste places." Brethren, there are brighter days to come. The day breaketh, and the shadows flee away! Our hope is in God. Never doubt the true progress of the Church. Believe that, notwithstanding every discouragement that checks our progress, the cause of God goes on; it must go on, and it *shall* go on, till King Jesus is universally acknowledged King of Kings and Lord of Lords. We have not to serve a master who cannot take care of his own. To your tents, ye Philistines, when the God of Israel comes to the battle! Where will ye be? Your ranks are broken; ye flee like thin clouds before a Biscay gale! When God comes forth he has but by his Spirit to blow upon his enemies, and they fly before him, like the chaff before the wind. The Lord *shall* and the Lord *will*; who, then, shall disannul it? Though foes may hoot and fiends may howl, he will keep his word; it shall come to pass, and he will get to himself renown in fulfilling his own good pleasure. Having thus enlarged upon the heavenly comfort promised, we proceed to notice the:—

II. MOURNFUL CASES FAVOURED.

"*He will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the Lord.*" Now are there not to be found in the visible Church persons whose character is here vividly depicted? I think there are three sorts of people in such a case, to all of whom I trust the blessing will come. *There are those who once were fruitful, but are now comparable to wastes.* If God should visit his Church, he will be pleased to comfort the waste places. Do I not address some who must needs recognise their own portrait? You used to be church members, and then you did seem to run well; what did hinder you? You were, apparently, brave soldiers once, but you deserted and went over to the enemy. Still, if you are the Lord's people, one of the signs of God's grace to his Church will be the recovery of backsliders. I remember one Monday afternoon, when we had been waiting upon the Lord in prayer ever since seven o'clock in the morning, that there came a most remarkable wave of prayer over the assembly. And then two backsliders got up and prayed, one after the other. According to their own account, they had been very bad fellows indeed, and had sorely transgressed against God; but there they were, broken-hearted and fairly broken down. It was a sight to make angels rejoice as their tears flowed. Certainly their sobs and cries touched the hearts of all of us who were assembled. I thought to myself, "Then God is blessing us, for when backsliders come back it is a proof that God has visited his people." You recollect when it was that Naomi returned to Israel with Ruth, her daughter-in-law. They never came back during the time

of famine; they stopped in Moab then, but they came back when they heard that the Lord had visited his people in giving them bread. Even then Naomi said, "Call me not Naomi." She seemed to come back from her exile groaning and full of bitterness, and yet she came back because God was with his people. Backsliders, come back, come now, for God is with his Church, and he has promised to comfort her waste places. Oh! you who have forgotten your Lord, remember your first Husband! It was better with you then than now. Though you have gone astray, yet the Lord saith, "Return, thou backsliding Israel, for I am married unto you, saith the Lord." You may break the marriage bond with God, but he will not break it with you. He claims that he is married to you, and he bids you return to him. I hope that some backslider will be encouraged by this promise to return, with full purpose of heart, to the God of his salvation.

Then a second department of the promise is, "*He will make her wilderness like Eden.*" I take the wilderness here to be a place of scanty vegetation. The Oriental wildernesses are not altogether barren sand, but there is a feeble herbage which struggles for existence. We are told, you recollect, that "Moses kept his father's sheep in the wilderness." Oh! how many there are in the Church of God who are just like that! They are Christians, but sorry Christians they are. They do love the Lord Jesus Christ, but it is with a moonlight love, cold, very cold, and chill. They have light, but it is dim and hazy. If they do anything for Christ, their service is scanty; their contribution mean; their charity grudging. They bring him no sweet cane with money. They do not fill him with the fat of their sacrifices, but they make him to serve with their sins, and they weary him with their iniquities. Ah! dear friend, if thou art indeed a child of God, then there is this comfort for thee. We will make her wilderness like Eden. Even you who have borne so little for God shall yet be visited, and made fruitful when the Lord comforts his people.

A third character is implied in the desert—the deserted places where no man dwells, where the traveller does not care to linger :How many professors of religion, how many who attend our chapels, answer to this description of the soil! They are like deserts. You not only never did bring forth fruit, but you never concerned yourself to do so. No man seems to care for you, and you appear to yourselves as though you were like the sand, which it would be a hopeless task to plough, for the gleaner would never fill his hand from the produce, much less the reaper his bosom with the sheaves. Ah! well, but God has a word for these desert souls. He will make her desert like the garden of the Lord. I pray—nay, I know—that during the gracious season which God has given us we shall see many a desert heart made to blossom like the rose. These be they whom the Lord will specially transform—backsliders, scanty Christians, and those who have often heard, but never yet proved the power of the gospel at all.

Ask ye now, what does the Lord say he will do for them? He says (hear it and marvel!) that he will make the wilderness like Eden. You know what Eden was. It was the garden of

the earth in the days of primeval purity. Fruit and flower, lofty tree, and lively vegetation abounded there in profuse luxuriance. I know not how its groves and shrubberies were tenanted by graceful creatures and lovely birds, but I can well imagine that every sense of man was regaled by its unfailing charms. No thorns or thistles cursed the soil, no sweating brow with arduous toll forced the crops from barren sods. The land laughed with plenty. The river, branching into many heads, watered the garden. God himself was pleased to water it with the mists, and to make the fruits grow, to swell in rich abundance, and early come to mature perfection. So the Lord says that when he visits his Church he will make these poor backsliders, these immature Christians, these nominal professors, like Eden. Oh! that the Lord would do it! Oh! that he would make them healthy, fruitful, prolific in fruitfulness, and spontaneously fruit-bearing, so that we should almost have need to say, "Hold, Lord!" just as Moses and Aaron did when the people brought in the offerings for the Tabernacle, until there were more than enough. Oh! that the Church of Christ may be enriched with all spiritual gifts, with all heavenly graces, with all that can minister to the welfare of the saints, to the advantage of the world, and to the glory of him who created and redeemed us! God grant it may be so!

Moreover, as if to strengthen the volume of his grace and our hope, he says that *he will make her desert like the garden of the Lord*. He shall come to you and delight your heart and soul with his converse. If ever you should be an Eden, you shall be like to Paradise for a yet higher reason, because your fellowship shall be with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. There shall be upon you the smell of a field that the Lord hath blessed. The Lord shall water his Church, shall water it every moment. He shall make fat our bones, and cause us to be as a watered garden, as a well of water whose waters fail not. Oh! some of you may well envy those happy days you once enjoyed! Would you like them back again? Then plead with God the promise of the text. You were once blessed with nearness to, and communion with, Christ. You once prayed with fervour, and your souls prospered. Go to God with this promise and say, "Lord, I am a desert; I am a wilderness; I am a waste place; but comfort thy Church, and let me partake of the consolation by making me fruitful in every good word, and work to thy glory!" The Lord will do it, for the promises of God shall certainly be fulfilled.

Who but Jehovah himself can do this? I have already noted this. "He will make her wilderness like Eden." It is he only that can perform it. The minister cannot. The Church cannot, with all her efforts. Talk of getting up a revival! It were insufferable arrogance to make the attempt. It belongeth not to us to do this. Unto the Lord our God alone doth this belong. "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord." If he will but visit his Church, then we shall see the wilderness rejoice, but if not, we may plough, as is our duty, and we may work upon it, as is our calling, but there shall be no joy and no rejoicing. We conclude with the view of:—

III. CERTAIN DESIRABLE RESULTS WHICH ARE PREDICTED.

"Joy and gladness shall be found therein; thanksgiving and the voice of melody." You notice the doubles. The parallelism of Hebrew poetry, perhaps, necessitated them. Still, I am prone to remember how John Bunyan says that "all the flowers in God's garden bloom double." We are told of "manifold mercies," that is, mercies which are folded up one in another, so that you may unwrap them and find a fresh mercy enclosed in every fold. Here we have "joy and gladness, thanksgiving and the voice of melody." Just so; the Psalmist tells us of our soul being satisfied with "marrow and fatness"—two things. Elsewhere he speaks of "loving-kindness and tender mercy"—two things again. The Lord multiplies his grace. He is always slow to anger, but he is always lavish of his grace. See here, then, God will give his people an overflowing joy, an inexpressible joy, a sort of double joy, as though he would give them more joy than they could hold—joy and then gladness—, thanksgiving and the voice of melody.

Oh! *what a delightful thing must a, visitation from God be to his Church!* Without God, all she can do is to groan. Nay, she will not always do that. She sometimes indulges a foolish conceit, and says, "I am rich and increased in goods, and have need of nothing." After that will Soon be heard the hooting of dragons and the cry of owls. Let God visit his Church, and there is sure to be thanksgiving and the voice of melody. It has been remarked that all revivals of true religion in ancient as well as modern times have been attended by revival of psalmody and song. The joy that makes the heart grateful, enlivens the spirits, and diffuses happiness, will seek and must find some tuneful strains. Not to speak of the Hebrew Psalter or of the Greek Hymnals, in Luther's day his translation of the Psalms and his chorales did more, perhaps, to make the Reformation popular than even his preaching, for the ploughman at his field-labour, and the housewife at the cradle, would sing one of Luther's Psalms; so, too, in our own country, in Wycliffe's day, fresh psalms and hymns were scattered all over the land. And you know how, in the last century, Wesley and Whitefield gave a new impetus to congregational singing. The hymns were printed on little fly-sheets after each sermon, and at length these units swelled into a volume. Collections and selections of hymns were published. So fond, indeed, were the Methodists of singing, that it became a taunt and a by-word to speak of them as canting Psalm-singers. But this is the mark of a revived church everywhere. New impetus is given to the service of song. When the Bridegroom is gone we may well mourn and fast, and hang our harps on the willows; it is when the Bridegroom cometh that joy and feasting seek the aid of vocal music, and the people of God break forth into thanksgiving with the voice of melody. I do fervently hope, beloved, that we shall have this thanksgiving, and this voice of melody in our midst for many a day to come! Would God that all the churches enjoyed it! Need I say that from all parts of the country there are, tokens of it now? We do not desire at any time a monopoly of blessing. May every Christian denomination and every Christian community be favoured with the dew of heaven, and have their roots watered by that river which is full of water. Oh! that all the Churches of

Christ were fruitful! Instead of wishing any of them to be weak, I would say, with Moses, "Would God that all the Lord's people were prophets," and that the Lord would put his Spirit upon them! Oh! that Jesus might be extolled from the uttermost parts of the earth to the highest heavens! Brethren, let us ask God to fulfil this promise to the Church at large. Let us say to him, "Lord, comfort thy Zion! She has many waste places—comfort her! Thou knowest she has many barren spots—turn them into gardens of the Lord! Oh! let the heavenly rain descend, and the divine dew come from thee, that the wilderness and the solitary place may yet be glad!"

But what shall I say to those of you who are not saved? If you want to become as these gardens of the Lord, it is only the grace of God which bringeth salvation that can work in you this mighty change. Look to the Lord. He it is who must do it. He hears prayer. A negro was once sent by his master on an errand that did not suit him; he did not want to go. So when he came to a river he turned back, and said, "Master, I came to a river; and I could not swim across it." "Well, but was there not a ferryboat?" "Yes, there was a ferry-boat, but the man was on the other side." "Well," said the master, "did you call to the ferry-man to come and take you across?" No; he did not think of doing that, for, as he did not wish to go over, he was glad to find an excuse. Now it is true, sinner, that you cannot save yourself, but there is One who can. There is a ferry-boat and there is a Ferry-man. Cry to him! Cry to him, "Master, across this river be pleased to take me; I cannot swim it, but thou canst bear me over it. Oh! do for me what I cannot do for myself. Make me to be accepted in the Beloved!" If you seek the Lord, he will be found of you. He never did set a soul a-seeking but what he meant to bless it. But if you will not seek, what should be said of you but that on your head should lie your own blood? I know many of you to be greatly impressed this week. I hope the impression will not be blown away, like smoke out of a chimney. May God make a deep work in your souls! Oh! some of you were easily impressed, but you quite as easily forgot the impression. You are like Ephraim's cake that was baked on one side; you do not get thoroughly cooked. You do not feel the power of the gospel permeating your whole nature in every part. You are like a cake not turned, and God accepts you not because of this. Oh! that there might be a thorough work of the Spirit in your souls, a work of grace that should bring you to Jesus to be rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, abounding therein with thanksgiving. Amen.