

PRISONERS OF HOPE

A SERMON

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“I am shut up and cannot come forth.” Psalm 88:8

I SHALL this morning, the Lord enabling me, be very particular to point out that experience that belongs to the regenerated, man, and by which he stands out from all others; and by which he can bear testimony before God that he is that poor, feeble creature that the word of God describes. I am aware there are some that tell us that they have no patience with our groaning and our sighing, and our being always miserable, they have no patience with it, no, but that we ought always to be rejoicing. This is what some say. But, my hearer, the word of the Lord does not despise the groanings that cannot, be uttered; the word of the Lord does not despise the whisper out of the dust; the word of the Lord does not despise the cry of little faith, the mere infantine cry of little faith. So, then while men prescribe paths, and say we ought to be this, and ought to be that, and ought to be the other, it does remind us of the sweet privilege of having the Bible for ourselves, and of having the Holy Spirit to be our teacher, and of every one to walk in that path or part of truth that seems good and suited to his experience. Not but all the Lord's people receive the whole truth; but so it is with every Christian, one Christian seems generally to get on better with the sympathetic kind of parts of the word of God than he does with the exultant parts; not but he loves those parts of the word of God, he sees the victory, and sees the rejoicing, yet he cannot reach the same. Well, then, if he cannot, here are the sympathetic parts. And then there are times when we are not shut up, and when we can come forth, when we can rise with wings as eagles, then we can take up the exultative parts, of scripture. And just the same in preaching the gospel, every minister is sure to be found a great deal of fault with, for after all every one that is sent of God must go in his precise line of things. I could mention men that are good men, I could not preach in their line of things, simply because I am not led in that way. It is the same gospel that they preach; but they, some of them, dwell more upon the deep experience and the dark side than I do. There are others that dwell less upon that than I do, and dwell more upon the rejoicing part. Hence it is that Mister Huntington was led in that path that his experience brought him into, Dr Hawker was led in that path that his experience brought him into and surely no one can doubt but those two men are now before the throne of God, and that that God who was all and in all to those two men while on earth is all and in all to them now they are in heaven. Yet perhaps there were Christians of that day that could hear the great Huntington but could not hear the great Hawker so well. And so, it is, my

hearer, the suitability of the ministry depends entirely upon its sympathetic nature with our own experience. We love the Bible because it knows us, it describes us, it sympathizes with us; it points out the malady, and while we feel the malady it at the same time presents the remedy. So, when men want to tie us down to their line of things it is our privilege to cast off all their bonds and ties, and come to the word of the Lord, and enjoy the whole range of that word so far as the Lord shall enable us to do.

This morning then I shall notice our text without much dividing it. I shall notice *the several respects in which those who are born of God are shut up*; and then in every respect in which they are shut up I shall notice, *where and how comes their deliverance*.

First: First then, what are we to understand by being SHUT UP, and unable to come forth? I will take in the first place the leper. When a man was suspected of leprosy the priest was to shut him up, and being shut up he might adopt the language of our text, "I am shut up, and I cannot come forth." So, my hearer, the question with us is, has Jesus Christ ever taken us in hand? for if he has, he has shut us up in the way I will presently describe, and we shall know what it is to be the Lord's prisoners, and the Lord despises not his prisoners. Do you not see here a difference between the prisoners of Satan and the prisoners of the Lord? The Lord despises not his prisoners; that soul that he intends for a palace he will first bring into prison. And the matter stands thus, that this leper when the priest took him in hand. was allowed no longer to go at large; and so his leprosy, where this leprosy proved to be real, became loathsome to him, and he was shut up until he became loathsome to himself, until the leprosy was beyond all dispute demonstrated unto him and to the priest. And just so when the Lord takes a sinner in hand he can no longer go at large.

First he cannot go at large in the profane world; he is severed from that, he cannot now make that his home; he is shut up under a sight and sense of the solemn truth that he is in the sight of a holy God unclean, and that nothing unclean or that defiles can enter into the heavenly city. He is shut up under a consciousness that in the sight of a righteous God he is unrighteous. He is shut up under a consciousness that in the sight of a God of infallible integrity this poor sinner is altogether a sinner, having come short infinitely of the law and glory of God. And yet people say you should come to Christ and come to Christ. So, he may in his thoughts and will, so he may in his desire, and so he may have in his mind and hope. And the priest was to keep the leper shut up so many days, it was to be seven days, a sufficient number of days, until the leprosy was demonstrated. So, now a sinner is thus shut up under conscience, shut up under these convictions, and there he learns the hardness of his heart, and feels that repentance is not at his command; there he learns the faithlessness of his heart, and finds that faith is not at his command; and there he learns the lovelessness of his heart, and finds the love of God is not at his command; and there he learns in a word the loathsomeness of his heart, that out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, and all manner of concupiscence, and that the imagination of the heart after the flesh is evil, and only evil, and that continually. And while men are telling him to take the promises, and to come to God, and come to Christ, and accept Christ, if you know what this experience is, what this Divine dealing is that I am now describing, all such talk among men will be to you but mockery; you shall remain shut up, and you shall adopt the language of my text in substance, if not in words, "I am shut up, I cannot come forth." I cannot get out of this state; here I remain. I am no longer at home in the world, either the profane world or the mere professing world; I hope I have a liking to the real people of God, and I feel that if ever I am saved it must be by the grace of God; I am shut up, and

cannot get myself out of this state or out of this condition. Well, what does such a one want? Why, he wants to be brought out of this; he cannot come forth. Now it is not said he *will not* come forth; no, but he *cannot*. Take the leper literally, shut up day after day, he would like to be at large, not indeed illegally; the leper says, I do not want to be at large illegally, contrary to law, I do not want to be at large contrary to the provision of the Most High; I want to be at large in a way that there will be no necessity for shutting me up again; I want to be at large in a way that will give me access to the holy things, that will give me a place in the courts of the Lord, and bring me into the presence of the Lord, where I shall be happy. Now my hearer, what know we of this, of being thus taken in hand, and being shut up? I know when I was thus shut up, when the Lord began to deal with me, I should not have suffered so much as I did had it not been for false ministers; but they were false to my experience, and to the experience of the people of God, and to God's word. They told me that it was my own fault that I did not get out of prison. I did not understand much about the gospel then; but I found out after that that no less a person than Immanuel, God with us, could sustain and carry out the great mission of bringing a soul out of this state; that Jesus Christ was anointed by the Holy Spirit of God to preach good tidings to the meek, and cleanse the leper, and thus bring up poor sinners out of this state of bondage into freedom. And how think you was the leper set free, or rather when was he set free? That is a beautiful scripture, worthy of your attention, that the priest was to look over the leper, and if he found him to be a leper from the sole of the foot to the crown of the head, now these are not my words but the words of the Lord, as you find in Leviticus 13, then he was pronounced clean, because he was a man then fully prepared for the way in which he was to be made clean.

Now the first thing in the deliverance of the leper was death and freedom. There was a bird killed, and another living bird dipped in the blood of the bird that was slain; and this bird that was not slain was set free, was to fly in the open firmament of heaven, have all the range of the fields and the produce, and live at large, and live happily. Does not this bird that died set forth the Lord Jesus Christ? It may be a very humble way offsetting him forth, but then, it is, at the same time, a very plain and instructive way. And does not the bird set at large set forth the resurrection of Jesus Christ; for that could not be done without a miracle with one bird which, was done with two; and then that which was physically impossible in nature, the Lord completes the picture, as it were, the representation, by having one bird to be set at large. I have often thought that one indicates the death of Christ; and as this one that was set at large was dipped in the blood of the other, setting forth the blessed truth that the dear Redeemer rose from the dead by the blood of the everlasting covenant; that he himself, to change the figure, the hind let loose, gives goodly words, and that by his own precious blood. You see here, then, are death, and resurrection. And so poor sinner, if you are cleansed in your conscience, and ever get peace with God, and ever obtain deliverance it must be by the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ; this living bird indicating the resurrection of Christ, and, indicating also our freedom, for he said, "Because I live you shall live also;" as though, he should say, There is no more occasion for you to be put to death, than there is for me to die again; I have died once, and having died once, I have completed the work; I have, by my one offering, perfected forever, and therefore there is no more necessity for you to be put to death than, there is for me to die again. See what a suited way of escape. Ah, my hearer, the Lord help you to look, then, to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; and if you cannot come forth, if you are blessed with an understanding of the way in which you shall come into liberty whenever the time shall come, for there is a set time to favor Zion, and when the Lord shall come to build up Zion, he will appear in his glory; and I am sure that the death and resurrection of Christ are the

glory of God; all his glory centers in those two departments; not the death of Christ without his resurrection, but the death and resurrection of Christ; for if Christ be not risen, though he died, yet your faith is vain, and they also which are fallen asleep in Jesus have perished, and we should be of all men the most miserable. But his resurrection demonstrates the triumphs of his atonement, the completeness of his work. This is the way the leper was to be brought out. It is a remarkable scripture; he was to be brought to the priest; the priest was to take him in hand. Bless the Lord for this, so he is the Great Physician, Jesus is the Great Physician; ah, when he steps in in all the efficacy of his blood, in all that right and freedom which he enjoys as the result of what he has done, and says to a poor sinner, "I will, be you clean," what will be the result? Away will go your guilt, your fear, your trembling, and you will, as it says in the 33rd of Job very beautifully of a poor sinner brought into the sweet liberty of the gospel; it there says, "His flesh shall be fresher than a child's; he shall return to the days of his youth;" it is a state of freshness and a state of freedom, and you shall feel fully at liberty now to cry, Abba Father; fully at liberty now to enjoy eternal things, to say, "My beloved is mine, I am his;" fully at liberty now to bid farewell to all perishable things, and to recognize the eternal inheritance as your happy and glorious destiny, and to feel more and more the importance of this matter; but, as Mr. Hart says;

"May we never, never dare'
What we're not to say we are."

If a work of grace be not begun in our hearts, if God has not taken us in hand, and made us know what it is to be thus shut up as unclean and to be delivered only by the death and resurrection of Christ; if we are strangers to this, where is the reality of our religion? Ah, we shall want our evidences presently, when we come into the valley of Jordan, when we come to have to face eternity, when the physician's skill shall fail, when the sympathy of the nearest and dearest friends shall all fail, and we are left in the solitude, and hear nothing as it were but the rolling of Jordan, threatening apparently to carry us down into the Dead Sea of eternal perdition; we shall want our evidences then; and if we have our evidences sweetly brightened up, then we shall be enabled to rejoice that we have finished our course, that we have fought a good fight, that we have kept the faith. But we cannot keep what we never possessed. It is this heart-felt work that brings us to know the truth in reality. But we have not yet done with this leper. He was shut up and could come forth only as he was brought forth by the priest. The next representation, which is very beautiful, was, there was a trespass offering; now comes the trespass offering. I know this is included by implication in the death even of the bird, but the Lord enlarges upon it, because everything centers in it. There is the lamb as the trespass offering, or as the sin offering. Oh, how sweet the thought, there is something delightful in it, that Christ was the sin offering, all our sins laid upon him, he bares our sins in his own body on the tree. And it is when the Holy Ghost brings you into a realization of Christ having borne your sins away that you come into liberty.

And then there was also the burnt offering. Ah, no one that understood the spiritual meaning of these offerings would be content without the burnt offering; the sin offering meaning Christ as bearing our sins; the burnt offering meaning Christ as enduring that fire of hell that was due to our sins. So, put these two offerings together, they give a beautiful representation of Christ; the one representing him as bearing our sins, and the other representing him as enduring the wrath of God; so sin is gone, and wrath is gone, and there is no more curse. But again, this subject became the path in which the leper, the cleansed leper, was to walk; it became the way in which he was to lay

hold of eternal life, it became the way in which he was to listen to God. I think that threefold representation is beautiful; the blood to be sprinkled on the right foot; yes, so he is to walk in the path that is made by atoning blood, says Christ, "I am the way." His right hand tipped with atoning blood, to lay hold of eternal life by the blood of the Lamb. His right ear tipped with blood; I will never listen to anything as gospel that is not by the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. All that God the Father gives me is by the atonement of his dear Son; all that Jesus Christ gives is by his precious atonement: all that the Holy Spirit gives, whether life, or light, or liberty, is by this precious atonement. Now see the leper, he is brought forth now; but how is he brought forth? First, at the appointed time, he shall be shut up long enough to demonstrate that he is a leper. And so you shall continue in bondage long enough to know that in your flesh dwells no good thing; you shall dwell in bondage long enough to know that without Christ you can do nothing; you shall dwell in bondage long enough to know that all doctrines contrary to the sovereignty of God, are contrary to the gospel, and of no use to your soul. Ah, how many, many things we learn in this prison. John the Baptist would not have been such a preacher as he was if he had not had a previously good collegiate education; and what think you was that? Why, it says in the last verse of the first chapter of Luke, and those words are very significant: I thought, What a significant close that is to that first chapter; "And he was in the deserts till the day of his showing unto Israel." Ah, I said, that is the minister that has been into the deserts of solitude; that has been into these desert wildernesses-like experiences; and that there the Lord came to him in this solitary place, in this desert; that is the man that knows the secret; that is the man at our church meetings, that is the woman, that has been in these desert-like experiences, these solitudes, and that knows what it is to have wandered in a solitary way, found no city to dwell in, and thought they should never find a way out; but at last the Morning Star began to dawn, at last the Great High Priest began to appear; at last the atonement began to come near, and at last the path began to be opened, and they saw the way of access to God was by the blood of Christ, they saw the way to lay hold of eternal life was by the blood of Christ, and they saw the way to listen to tidings that were good tidings to poor sinners was by the blood of Christ. All this I think is indicated by the leper being thus sprinkled, the right foot, the right hand, and the right ear, to denote that it became his right-hand theme, his prominent theme, his chief theme. That man that loves the world more than he loves Christ will never see the kingdom of Christ. That we do love the world it would be hypocritical to deny, but then it is one thing to love the world with a love that is natural, it is another thing to love the world more than we love the Lord Jesus Christ.

But this is not all; the leper was to be anointed also with olive oil. Olive oil is in the word of God made use of as a symbol of peace. Perhaps the idea might originate, making the olive and olive oil the symbol of peace, in the circumstance of the dove bringing an olive leaf to the ark, to denote the flood was gone, that now peace was established. And so, the leper was anointed; and so, the sweet anointings of the Holy Spirit, making as it were the face to shine, consecrating us to God, and giving us peace with God. Now my hearer, what know we of being thus shut up, as unclean, of standing before a holy God and saying as the leper had to say, to put his hand upon his upper lip, and to say, "Unclean, unclean:" to say as Isaiah said; "Unclean, unclean, woe is to me;" and we see the way in which Isaiah was delivered, it was by the precious atonement of Jesus Christ.

But second, shut up not only as the leper, but also as the manslayer. Hence in olden time the manslayer was to flee to the city of refuge; and he could come forth out of that city only at the hazard of his life; for if the avenger of blood found him out of the city his life was lost. But then

this manslayer must be a man who was a manslayer against his will. Now all of us by nature are willful murderers of Christ, willful enemies to God. But when the Lord begins the work he changes the will, he makes us unwilling to be enemies any longer; I can be an enemy to my own precious soul no longer; I can be an enemy to Christ no longer, I can be an enemy to God no longer, I can be an enemy to his holy way and his holy cause no longer, I desire to be a friend, and so I flee for refuge into the city of refuge. And if you ask what the city of refuge is, my answer in a moment would be, the Lord Jesus Christ, he is the city of refuge. I am not extravagant in saying that, I am sure he is worthy of that name he is a city in himself, a world in himself, an inheritance in himself, he is everything great and glorious in himself that you can imagine. I have enjoyed those words many, many times you have sung here:

“Secure when mortal comforts flee,
To find ten thousand worlds in you.”

Ten thousand worlds would come infinitely short of the unspeakable wonders, beauties, and glories that are in Christ Jesus the Lord. He is the city of refuge. “Wherein, God, willing more abundantly to show unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath; that by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us; which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters into that within the veil; whither the forerunner is for us entered, even Jesus, made an high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.” Now that man was to remain shut up, he was not to be at liberty; if he went out the avenger of blood might destroy him, justly so. And so, if you have fled to Christ for refuge, and say, I have no other hope, all my other hopes are taken away, I can have pardon nowhere else; now is that real? If it be, you will abide there; but if you apostatize from what you now profess, and like the dog go back to your vomit, or like the sow that was washed go back to your mire; ah, then you will go out of the city again after professing to be in it; and by-and-bye the avenger of blood, the law of God, will overtake you and slay you, and slay you justly too, for there is no shelter but in this city of refuge. But if the work be real you will abide there. Now how long was this man to remain before he should enjoy liberty? Here it is again, the same subject, bless the Lord, I am glad of it. Ah, say some, there is a great sameness. Ah, but it is a sameness that I love; I should be very sorry if there were not such a sameness. He was to remain there until the death of the high priest. There it is, you see, there it is. Ah, poor sinner, you must remain long enough to know that you cannot kill your sins, not one of them will die, that you cannot stop the avenger of blood, you cannot stop the vengeance of the law. But by-and-bye when the death of Christ is revealed to you in what it has done, then you will be set free,

Ah now he is not only my place of refuse, but he is my place of banqueting; now I am free, I can range over the promises, and I can see that all that is his is mine, that I am his, that he is God’s, that God is ours; and here I am free. Bless the Lord, though I was a willful murderer, the Lord gave me a new will, and now my enmity against him is against my will, and so these are contrary one to the other; but the Lord judges me not after the flesh, but after the spirit; if there be a willing mind, it is accepted according to what a man has. And therefore, if he had meant to slay me, he would not have given me a change of will and made me unwilling to be an enemy any longer. “Him that comes unto me I will in no wise cast out.” I think it is a beautiful representation. And

that man would say, if any one wanted to get him out of the city, I am shut up, and cannot come forth; I must abide here, and if I perish, I must perish here; I have nowhere else to go.

“I have nowhere else to flee,
No sanctuary, Lord, but you.”

Here, then, such an one would say, I am shut up, and cannot come forth. But the Lord is not shut up; I cannot come forth, but the Lord can come forth. And so, the manslayer would say, I am shut up, but the Lord is not shut up; and I cannot come forth, but the Lord can come forth. Here is the comfort; everything is too hard if left to us but bless the Lord, there is not anything too hard for him.

But third, when our mouth is stopped from a sense of what we are as sinners, for by the law is the knowledge of sin, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world become guilty before God. Here is one, on he goes, breathing out cruelty and threatening's against the saints of the Lord; he is at large, doing as he pleases. It is wonderful the daring that some men that know not God will manifest. But it never was any comfort to the apostle Paul, though he was not an infidel, because he believed in the Old Testament, though in a wrong way, still it was no pleasure for him to look back, you may depend upon it, upon his abominable conduct. On looking back upon it, he says, “I am less than the least of all saints, and not worthy to be called an apostle.” Not worthy, what is it grieves your mind, Paul? Ah, I persecuted the Church of God; I persecuted that that God Almighty eternally loves, that the dear Redeemer shed his blood to redeem, that God has ordained to eternal glory. He never forgave himself, depend upon it. But the Lord stopped him, and Paul was shut up, and could not come forth. What are you now? A miserable sinner; helpless sinner, condemned sinner, a wretched sinner; I am shut up, and cannot come forth; Ah Saul, get up and go on again in your old ways; get up and persecute Jesus again. Oh no, no; I have felt too much of the awful majesty of his great name ever to say a word against him again. I am shut up, and cannot come forth, Well, but come to Christ, accept Christ, take the promise. Men will talk like that. Well, I should like the few days I am spared to spend less and less time on controversial matters; I wish to go on with vital godliness; still we are obliged to make some little reference to erroneous doctrines in order that in the contrast we may see how the Lord undeceives those of whom he is the teacher. Now I say it would have been all mockery had any one thus exhorted Paul. But when the Lord personally commissions Ananias, “Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and enquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus.” and he went and said, “Brother Saul, receive your sight,” and immediately he received his sight; there is the first thing, 22nd of Acts. Yes, I can see now; the Lord has shown a vision that you were to come to me. Well now, here is something for you to see, you have received your sight. Yes, I can see now. Well, here is something for your to see, and the first thing is your election of God; “The God of our fathers has chosen you;” ah; that gave him one lift; the door is open; “that you should know his will;” that is another lift; well, I am getting on and see that Just One, he who died the just for the unjust; ah then I shall be free; and should hear the voice of his mouth. For you shall be his witness unto all men of what you have seen and heard. Out he came, and away he went, and preached that Christ to others that he himself had found; he knew what it was to be shut up, what it was to be unable to come forth but he knew how he was brought forth into freedom, and therefore could preach that to others with which he himself was experimentally acquainted. And the words of our text will also apply to all the after experience of the people of God. Ah, we have much to go through from

time to time. The apostle says, "I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. The good that I would I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do." "I am shut up; I cannot come forth." I know that there is in Christ Jesus glorious liberty for the children of God, wherein the creature is delivered from the bondage of corruption: but we can enjoy that liberty only as the Lord maintain us therein. Hence the apostle might well be anxious, as far as the truth is concerned, that we should stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free. Yet in this state of imprisonment, there is hope; ah yes; it is this dungeon-like work, it is being in the low dungeon, in the pit, that makes us willing to listen to what we should without this experience spurn; that when brought to feel our gloomy, wretched, helpless state, glad we are then to listen to the teachings of the gospel. Let us hear a word upon this matter. "As for you, by the blood of your covenant I have sent forth your prisoners out of this pit wherein there is no water." Then comes a little counsel and advice to them that are still in prison, and it stands thus: "Turn you to the stronghold." Now we know that stronghold to be Jesus Christ, he is the stronghold of the daughter of Zion, he is the tower of the flock. "Turn you to the stronghold, you prisoners of hope." Ah then, if shut up today, you may not be tomorrow; if shut up at present there is liberty in store for you. "Turn you to the stronghold, you prisoners of hope; even today," this salvation day, this gospel day, this gracious day, this mercy day, this everlasting day, for the gospel day is an everlasting day, as a sun that will never go down "even today do I declare that I will render double unto you," grace now, and glory hereafter, for the Lord will give grace and he will give glory; and thus justification and glorification go together in the happy destiny of all these poor prisoners.

But one word more. "I am shut up." It is a great thing, friends, to have a personal religion, "I am shut up." You see the text, comes home to personal experience. "I am shut up and cannot come forth." "I am shut up," said Jeremiah; "I cannot go into the house of the Lord." "I am shut up:" a personal matter. "Cannot," here is a fact, you see, stated here. Then who can persuade us that we can if we cannot? If is this experience that has kept me where I have been. I will not now stop, as your time is gone, to touch upon some of the dealings of the Lord with me, but I do find that I am altogether passive in the hands of the Lord. I may kneel down in private and pray, and I find such a difference at different times, and in preaching I find a difference at different times. I find the sovereignty of the Lord; the Lord does as he will. The Lord knows I would live daily in his love and enjoyment of his salvation and would have no concern worth speaking of for earthly things. I would be diligent in business, and give myself to my lawful calling, entirely to God; and thus diligent in business, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; and if calamities come, they may go again; and in that state of liberty and enjoyment I would say, "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away, and blessed be the name of the Lord."

Now I have said nothing about being shut up circumstantially; I intended to have had a word or two upon how Peter got out of prison, in the 12th of Acts; and how Paul and Silas got out of prison in the 10th of Acts; but time forbids, and I say no more.