

THE WIDOW OF SAREPTA

A SERMON

Preached on Sunday Morning, May 15th, 1864

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“For thus saith the Lord God of Israel, The barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail, until the day that the Lord sends rain upon the earth.” 1

Kings 17:14

ESSENTIALLY and circumstantially our extremity is the Lord's opportunity. Hence when a sinner in soul-trouble, as described in the 33rd of Job, is brought to self-despair, and the soul solemnly overwhelmed with the fearful apprehension of being eternally lost, then the Lord steps in with that eternal ransom which his dear Son is unto all them that are thus brought to know their need of him, saying, “Deliver him from going down to the pit; I have found a ransom.” Also, providentially, it is the same mind with his own people; for we cannot speak of others in this respect: others are not the objects of the Lord's care in the sense that his own are. Hence this widow of Zarephath, if she were not a believer previously to Elijah coming to her, she certainly became a believer in the God of Israel when Elijah did come, for she acted upon that advice which he gave, made him a cake, and believed the words that he had heard. Now, then, where a sinner has a grain of faith, there it is, that in providential extremity also, as in this case, the Lord steps in. And while she had but little, and was just despairing, saying, “As the Lord your God lives, I have not a cake, but an handful of meal in a barrel, and a little oil in a cruse; and, behold, I am gathering two sticks, that I may go in and dress it for me and my son, that we may eat it and die.” Thus, there was but a step between her and death. But the Lord stepped in, and gave this gracious promise, contained in our text, that “the barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail, until the day that the Lord sends rain upon the earth.” It is a very great thing to be spiritually minded, and then we shall be contented with the Lord's promises of providence. You will observe here is nothing promised, in the first place, beyond mere sustenance. The barrel of meal is to continue, and the cruse of oil shall not fail. Her life and the life of her son were in danger, and hereby this promise was made, above all things, the one thing needful and acceptable. And the Lord knows how to make us thankful for the least of mercies; and he also knows how to heap riches into the hands of men, and leave those men to the natural and carnal consequences of those riches; and such become callous; their soul-trouble, having never been real, is soothed down, and goes off, and they settle down at their ease, they become mere easy professors, and the minister may as well preach to the pews, for any good that is done, as to preach to such professors as these. “The full soul loathes the

honeycomb; but unto the hungry soul every bitter thing is sweet.” And it is a truth, that the people of God do learn a great deal more by adversity than they do by prosperity. The words of Solomon, though not at all, perhaps, in accordance with the natural temperament of some, and certainly not in accordance with flesh and blood, yet they are true, that “it is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of laughter; better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting.” And we have never met with any harm taking place in the house of mourning. If the fear of God is anywhere, it is generally there. And this widow of Zarephath, her house was certainly, when the prophet arrived there, a house of mourning; and the prophet, therefore, in his message was gladly received, and his message acted upon; and we have the promise, the happy consequence of her faith, contained in our text; and this same chapter shows us the circumstances that followed, that the barrel of meal did not waste, that the cruse of oil did not fail, until the Lord gave rain upon the earth.

I will take, therefore, a spiritual view of our text this morning, and embody in it, as I go along, some references to that kind providence which perhaps some of you can fully appreciate; others of you, perhaps, not so much; but those of you that feel your dependence upon the Lord as a God of providence as well as a God of grace will at once see that the text, taken spiritually, is encouraging, and the text taken providentially is also exceedingly encouraging. I do not know how many, perhaps comparatively few of the people of God that have not been, when in straitened circumstances, encouraged by the words of our text, that “the barrel of meal shall not waste, and the cruse of oil shall not fail.” Passing by, then, the first clause, I will just explain *how we are to spiritualize this meal and oil*. You will find, in the 2nd chapter of Leviticus, that cakes of unleavened bread were a part, mingled with oil, a part of the sustenance of the Levites. These cakes were baked, and afterwards broken up, and mingled with olive oil, which is a favorite dish with the Orientals to the present day. And taking that as our guide, it thus becomes a figure of the measured sustenance of the gospel. We will therefore take that view of it. And then, secondly, we will see *the way in which the rain, the abundance of rain came*, denoting the abundance of blessedness that the people of God, however straitened now, they have always abundance of sure blessings in prospect. You cannot say that in relation to this world, but you may say that pertaining to eternal things. And then, if time will permit, I will, thirdly and lastly, bring before you *what the Lord says concerning this abundance of rain*.

First, then, concisely, *a remark or two spiritually upon this meal and oil*. The meal and the oil are of course figures of the sustenance of the gospel. But here, on my entering into this subject, I enter upon that which none can, taking it spiritually, understand, but they that are born of God. Now to be in the state this woman was, of all but despair, let us look at this spiritually. Let us ask the question of ourselves this morning, Have we ever been so convinced of sin, and of our state before God as sinners, for all our Pharisaic, all our false hope to be taken from us, and to be brought to feel that we have no right, by any righteousness, and holiness, and goodness of our own, to hope in God; that we have no reason to hope in God whatever, and that we are nothing but sin and sinfulness? Do we know what this is, and to be made solemnly concerned as the consequence of these convictions? Think you that this woman was not deeply concerned about her life? Why, we will just take what little there is, and I shall be starved to death; and here is my son will be starved to death: this will be a dreadful death to die, and we have nothing before us but this dreadful death. So, when a sinner is convinced of his state as a sinner, he says, I have just a few more providential favors, a little more sleep, a little more slumber, a little more folding of the hands to sleep, I shall

remain a little longer on the earth, and then comes that terrible death that I shall have to die; then comes that terrible banishment from all hope; then comes that terrible period when I shall lift up my eyes in hell, and be deprived entirely and eternally of the least help or hope whatever. This woman, therefore, under a sight and sense of the danger of her natural life, felt solemnized. "All that man has will he give for his life." And if this be true, how much more, when God lays home upon the conscience a sight and sense of the value of the soul, how much more readily all that a man has will he give for his soul! "for what shall it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?" Now we will suppose, while you are in this despairing state, feeling and saying you have no reason to hope in God, you have no business to hope in God, you have no right to hope in God, by or from any goodness of your own, and you have not a particle of claim upon God; but the God of Israel, in infinite mercy, sees your solitude, sees your state, he steps in, gives you a gracious promise, for instance, "He will hear the prayer of the destitute." Perhaps from that you get a little comfort, and begin to see that if you hope in God it must be entirely by the promise of the prophet in our text, a positive promise; and every positive promise, whether it relates to life or pardon, or whatever it may relate to, every positive promise is by the Lord Jesus Christ. And you will say, Well, if I hope in God, it must be by what Jesus Christ has done; he has atoned for sin; he has swallowed up sin; he has said, "Him that comes to me I will in no way cast out." Looking at what he is, and what he came into the world to save, and what the gospel is preached for, namely, to carry out the very mission for which he came into the world, to seek and to save that which was lost, you begin to get a little comfort. And then such a scripture as this may come in: "Blessed is he whosoever is not offended in me." There again you get a little help. Well, you will say, I never did see the suitability of Jesus Christ before as I do now; and as to being offended in him, a heart-searching God knows there is not anything in the whole range of existence with which I am so pleased as I am with Jesus Christ, and what is embodied in him. I would not, grace keeping me, part with one particle of his truth for all the world; but I would part with mortal life and a thousand such worlds as this for his sake, if called upon so to do, if grace enabled me to act as the ancient martyrs did. Now, if you are thus pleased with him, then, however measured your comforts are, and you say, Well, I have had a little comfort, but not much; I have had a little reviving, but not much, and I am afraid I shall get no more. Yes, you will. For even in this spiritual sense the comfort is measured; there is a little every day. What some of you want is to be brought into the banqueting-house, and to see that his banner over you is love. What you want is to be brought into the mount of transfiguration, and your interest in the book of life rendered indisputable. What some of you want is to be like a hind let loose, and your soul set free, and to see and feel that God, in his eternity of glory, is your present and your everlasting portion. But then this may not be the lot of some of you, even until you come to die; and therefore, if you cannot live in the assurance of faith, then live in the adherence of faith; and if you cannot live in the rejoicing of hope, then live in the hope of rejoicing; for in this sense the gospel will always give you a little hope. And as you go on, infirmities abound, tribulations abound, Satan, knowing he has but a short time, will be very busy with you in a variety of ways, and you may depend upon it, if you are never fit for heaven until you fit yourself by being spared on earth, however many years, by your own doings, you will never be fitted at all, for even the Christian, as he sees, grows worse and worse; the man that has known the Lord forty years is a greater sinner, a very much greater sinner, than he was the first day that he knew the Lord; the man that has walked with God, and even enjoyed much communion with God, is a greater sinner, and were he responsible for his own sins, has ten thousand sins to answer for now, that he had not to answer for when he first knew the Lord. Every Christian is sensible of this. Wherein, then, lies his fitness for heaven. Ah, it is, as we

described last Lord's day, that the soul is born of God, one with the atonement of Christ, one with the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ, and herein lies his fitness for heaven. If, then, you have a desire for this, shall I say, unleavened cake mingled with oil; this free-grace gospel, mingled as it were with the anointings of the Holy Spirit, if this be your spirit, then your soul is fitted for heaven. It is a saying at which some, I suppose, among the clergymen and Church people, and plenty among the Dissenters, were rather shocked, when Dr. Hawker, when he was sixty years old said, "Here are sixty years gone of my sins and the Lord's grace." And that is the way every wise man will speak, the same as good old Jacob did, "The days of the years of my pilgrimage are an hundred and thirty years: few and evil have the days of the years of my life been." And we see, on his dying bed, where his hope was: "I have waited, O God, for your salvation." I have not waited to make myself better, Lord, for I soon found that was no use; I have not waited to be worthy, I have not waited till I could say, Well, Lord, I have become so good that I think I am too good for this world, and good enough for another; no, "I have waited, O God, for your salvation." Thus, then, our text, when taken spiritually, belongs to the really poor, to the sinner who feels and sees he has no right to hope in God but by the promise of the gospel, and that that promise is by Jesus Christ; and that such are just kept from despair, and perhaps that is all. And one of old, a great man, and as holy a man of God as ever lived, I mean Jeremiah, whose happy lot it was to be born of God before he was born of his mother, and was ordained a prophet of the nations, the Lord appeared to him wonderfully, and he lived in solemn times, and a man of deep solemnity, and some parts of his writings, where he puts upon record the revelation which the blessed God made to him of the everlasting covenant, see his 31st and 33rd chapters, as well as other parts, after all this, this holy and wonderful man of God said, "My hope and my strength are perished from the Lord." What then becomes of your boasting professors of the present day, that never have a doubt, that never have a fear, always easy, and always happy? but "woe unto them that are at ease in Zion!" Thus then, my hearer, do we know anything spiritually of what this woman knew something of naturally? I have no doubt that the widow of Zarephath knew something of these things, at least, after Elijah was there, spiritually; that it became a life and death matter with her. And until our religion becomes a life and death matter, it is not real; you will be a frothy, empty, frivolous professor, and you will be driven away by-and-bye like chaff. But if you have been brought into self-despair, and you have had before your eyes the terribleness of the death you must have died but for the interposition of a gospel promise by Jesus Christ, but for the interposition of the God of Israel, if this be the case, then you are an humble, a trembling, a solemnized, a sincere follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will reckon the sabbath day the most important of all the days of the week. We know the carnal mind is glad when the sabbath is gone; the carnal mind is delighted to be in its business on the Monday, delighted to hear the money rattle. Why, it is the music, the best music they know. But it is not so with the real Christian. He says, Now I have been buried in the world all the week in the calling in which the Lord has placed me, now comes the solemn day, now comes the important day. I am to come tomorrow before God; tomorrow is the Lord's day; I am to come tomorrow to my Judge, judge me, O God; I am to come tomorrow to my Maker; I am to come tomorrow to worship the Savior; I am to come tomorrow in hope, as Simeon came, of seeing God's salvation; and I hope, ere I close the morrow's day, that I shall have some token of the love of God, some evidence of interest in eternal things, that I shall feel nerved and braced up for another week, and shall go on feeling sure that the Lord of hosts is with me, and the God of Jacob is my refuge. And you will say, too, when you come to die, "Ah, the best days of my life have been those when I have been in God's house and his service." As a respected member of ours said, who omitted to come to our service on a week-night, he said on his dying bed, for the Lord

sustained him, he died very happy, still he did say this one thing, "The only thing I have upon my mind is not going to hear the word of God on a week-night." Now you know I do not wish any one to run away improperly from their business, I do not mean that, but where it can be consistently done. And I do like to see a people, and you hitherto have, I am not speaking to you in reproach, by any means whatever, for what I am now saying is not to reproach you, but rather to describe those deep solemnities of mind and soul which you have felt, and from which you have so persevered that you can this morning say in all solemnity, that "having obtained help of God, I continue unto this present day." Such, then, is the work of the Holy Spirit in thus sinking us into self-despair, in conforming our taste to the provision of the gospel, in just, shall I use the expression? keeping, as it were, our heads above water, so that we just hope, and sometimes, like Jeremiah, fear that our hope and strength are perished from the Lord.

The second thing that naturally strikes the mind in this matter is, that if the widow of Zarephath turned away from this provision, there was none other. She must have this or die; there was none other. Just so you will see the doctrine of it, in a moment, that there is none other name given under heaven among men, whereby we must be saved, but the name of Christ Jesus. Then, what should we do if there were not a sufficiency to save to the uttermost in the name that is given? What a dreadful declaration, "There is none other name given under heaven"! Suppose it was followed up like this, There is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby you must be saved, but the name of Jesus; and therefore you must make up the deficiencies as well as you can: and those that make up the deficiencies to that standard required, why, then you will get to heaven at last! Who of us would get to heaven? I am sure I should not. Bless the Lord, then, that every provision that is needful is embodied in that name. "You are complete in him." That name is a strong tower; that name is all the life we need, and all the holiness we need, and all the righteousness we need, all the perfection we need; Christ is all, and in all. So then, I say, if this widow of Zarephath turned away from this provision, there was none other. And so, if we turn away from the gospel, there is none other. I do not set myself up as a judge of the personal state of people that I do not understand. There are some that will go one Sunday, or part of the day, and hear a duty-faith minister. Now I dare not do it; my conscience and my feelings would not let me do it. A voice would follow me, "What do you here, Elijah?" and I should not be able to give such a good account as Elijah did; he said, "I am jealous for the Lord God of hosts." Yes, a pretty jealousy this is, when you come where you believe error is preached! that is pretty jealousy for the Lord God of hosts! Now there are some that do this; how they can do it I know not. For myself, I have infirmities enough without adding thereto faults in eternal things. Let us be straight here at any rate. But still I say I must leave such; I could not do it myself. I feel there is something so unique and so suited in the bread of eternal life, that I want nothing else. I don't care how many scriptures they bring to build up their system; Jesus Christ is all the bread of life I want; he is that meat that endures to everlasting life; he is that provision of which the Lord said, "I will satisfy her poor with bread." Turn away, then, from the new covenant, and you are lost; turn away from God's truth, and you are lost. What made all the prophets so firm? Because they knew there was no life or salvation out of God's truth. I have no doubt that Moses was privately called all the ugly names that the people could think of, for grinding the golden calf to powder. Why, it is a beautiful calf, costly calf, a very, popular calf; why, see, they are all worshipping it; all delighted with it; the people were never so merry before; they have no doubts and fears now, they are all right now. But Moses ground it to powder, and made the people drink the water, just to see how they would like it; just to give them a kind of hint of what the consequence would be of turning away from God's

truth. Why should we turn away? The gospel shall not fail; the golden oil shall not fail; it will yield you comfort; the Lord will stay by you; but a word upon that presently.

First, then, here is the necessity, the solemnity of it, a life and death question. Second, here is the only provision. Third, it is a secret. How in the world does that widow live? how does her son live? and how does the prophet live? Where do they deal? at your shop? No. Nor at yours? No. Can't think, they have been living for months, can't think how they live. It was a secret. So said the Savior, "I have meat to eat that you know not of." And the Christian, if he has sorrow that the world knows nothing of, he has also sustenance, he has also joy, he has also moments of access to God. Ah, says the world, whatever can that man see in religion that he is always after it? What ever can you see in that man that you go to hear him preach every Sunday, and week-night as well? and if he should go off to preach anywhere else, you are after him there, some of you. Can't think what you see in that man; can't make it out. It is a secret, they cannot enter into it; and as their religion consists merely of a set of opinions in their head, and a little decent formality in the life, they judge us by themselves, and suppose our religion is of the same texture and of the same make. Theirs was manufactured by themselves; ours came down from heaven. Here, then, is the secret. There is that in the love of God to the people of God that there is to no other people; there is that in electing grace to the chosen man that there is to no other man; there is that in the perfection of Christ, and in the immutability of the blessed God to the real Christian, that there is to none other. "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him." Now can we not this morning, in the sight of a heart-searching God, say that it is from these internal feelings, that it is from our acquaintance spiritually with these things, that we adhere to them? We can truly say that we do not walk in the ways of the Lord in order to conform to the religious custom of the age; we can truly say we do not hold certain doctrines because men have made a creed for us, and we have been educated into that creed, and have adopted it as our watchword. We can truly say that our zeal does not arise from any party spirit, or from attachment to any section or party whatever; but that our zeal arises from the love we have to God, he manifesting his love and his mercy to us. What a vitality, what a reality is religion!

Fourth, this provision was made supernaturally. How this meal and oil continued we cannot explain certainly not by the common laws of nature. The Lord framed a new set of laws, I use the plural advisedly, the Lord framed a new set of laws; brought in a new cause, which produced new effects. What these laws were, some of your philosophers would like to understand, because you would enjoy that. Well, I will not find fault with you if you can find them out, no harm if we could find them out. There certainly was a class of laws introduced that operated regularly from day to day upon this meal and this oil. The widow took out a handful, as much as was needful for the day, a little is left; she comes tomorrow, without paying a halfpenny, without any labor, and whether she was good-tempered. or ill-tempered, whether she was sleepy or wakeful, whether at home or abroad, or whether she slept well or slept badly, or whether people hated her or liked her, or whether she was spoken well of or spoken evil of, or whether the weather was cold or hot, stormy or calm, still there was the meal and oil. So that she might say, "Well, I don't know what sort of a day it will be tomorrow, but I know there will be some meal and oil. I don't know what people will say of me tomorrow, but I know there will be some meal and oil. I don't know what temper I may be in tomorrow, but I know there will be some meal and oil. I don't know whether I shall be at home tomorrow, but I know there will be some meal and oil; because the God of Israel, the God of time and eternity, the God of creation, the God of providence, has promised that the barrel of

meal and the cruse of oil shall not fail." Now you know how to apply this spiritually, do you not? What is the new covenant but a new set of laws? The foundation law of all the new set of laws is that of life. Death is at our root as sinners; Christ has taken away that death and put life just where death was. "A priest after the power of an endless life." Then comes the law of love, the law of election, the law of predestination, the law of mediation, the law of promise, all these will work together; and not in any one age yet has any one poor sinner been able to testify and say, "The gospel is no use to me, the gospel has failed." No, it never has failed, never will fail; no, no. The meal and the oil were kept up by supernatural laws, a new set of laws. So, our eternal salvation is by the laws of the new covenant, the Mediator embodying those laws, carrying those laws out. Hereby it is we have the law of life, the law of faith, the law of love, and are caused to live forever.

Now there is one more point I must mention, and that is this: Here is a widow, perhaps as insignificant in the world as I am; here is her son, upon whom, of course, her hope was placed, as far as this life was concerned: for sons in the East never dream of neglecting their parents, never dream of despising them, never dream of forsaking them when they are old, never, especially the mother. If a king, if a man arrives at the highest degree of monarchical glory in the East, his mother is still an object of veneration, deep regard, and high respect. Not always so, perhaps, among us, it ought to be so; but it is so there. Now just look at the infinite condescension of the great God, the creator of innumerable worlds, as space is infinite, so I believe that he who created this world has created innumerable worlds. Every star you see is nothing else but a world; some of them would make ten thousand times twice told the world that we inhabit. Yet, amidst all these innumerable worlds, the Majesty of heaven comes down to notice this solitary widow. And if I may, without irreverence, say it, for we must use anthropomorphisms, or forms of speech after the manner of men, as though the Lord should come to the widow and say, "What have you in the house?" The Lord knows what you have got in your cupboard, and when it is our collection day, which it is not today, he knows what you have got in your pocket, and how much you ought to give. Now the Lord, shall I say, kept his eye upon the barrel of meal. "I will see that that barrel does not get too full, for if you get a stock you will be running off somewhere or another. Just give you enough to keep you where I mean you to be. Now I mean you to be there. You are living at Zarephath, not far from Sidon; but I don't mean you to go to Sidon. You are living at Zarephath, not far from Tyre; but I don't mean you to go to Tyre. So, I will keep my eye upon the barrel of meal and see that it does not get too empty; and I will see that it does not get too full." I dare say the widow thought, Well, I wish the barrel would get full, and then I would pack up and be off. So, the Lord says, It shall be just a little at a time; just what is necessary. And so the widow was sure to keep her eye upon the barrel, for she had nothing else to depend upon, and the Lord kept his eye upon the barrel, and so she and that would go on together; and she found in it every day sufficient, and so she would thank and bless the Lord. Now, I say, look at the wonderful condescension of the blessed God here, to come into this widow's house, thus, to take this personal care of her; for the Lord to look to the barrel and to the cruse. Why, only think of it, was there ever such a housekeeper as the Lord? He condescended to be the housekeeper. Bless his dear and precious name! And what are these things put upon record for? Why, friends, that those that have not many loaves in the cupboard, nor grist at the mill, much less any corn growing in the field, they look to the Lord, and say, Well, Lord, you know what I need, and if you are pleased to look to the barrel of meal and the cruse of oil, they shall not fail nor waste. See the infinite condescension of our God; see how he cares for his children; he cares for each of them more, infinitely more, than many sparrows. Well, you say, perhaps, this morning, I have but five shillings

in the world: I wish I had ten. Well, but that five will last till tomorrow comes; yes, it will, it will. The Lord knows you have but five: he has got the other five on the way for you somewhere. Ah, say you, I wish I had got them now. What for? they are safer with him. One of old said, I think I shall live cheaper and better if I board myself. Very well, take your portion, and go. And so, he did, and a pretty concern it was very soon became penniless, and shoeless, and houseless, and friendless. "I will arise and go to my father." Yes, I should think so now; you wish to be at home now. Yes, I do; better off than I am here, a great deal. Then you won't set up again for yourself? No. You won't rebel against your father again? No. You may depend upon it, when the prodigal got home, he never wanted to go away again. And you may depend upon it, when this widow of Zarephath began to see the faithfulness of the Lord, she from day to day blessed his holy name, that he was so faithful to his holy promise that the barrel of meal should not waste, neither should the cruse of oil fail. Take it then spiritually, and it is true; take it providentially, and it is also true; only with this exception; while it is true providentially, I cannot preach to you that the time will come when you will be all rich men and women temporally. I know if I were going to preach a sermon upon that, and to have bills printed, that Mr. James Wells, of the Surrey Tabernacle, is going to preach a sermon to prove that in a few years' time all the people in England will have at least not less than twenty thousand pounds each, what, on that occasion, a congregation I should have! Why, many would say, if he can prove that, why, it would be more to us than eternity, no doubt about that; more to us than Jesus Christ, no doubt about that; more to us than all the high doctrines they talk about, no doubt about that; because that would be a heaven that flesh and blood could inherit, no question about that. And therefore you must look at the abundance of rain in a spiritual sense, that while we cannot hold it out that you are going to be rich temporally, we can hold it out that you are to be rich eternally; heirs of God, joint-heirs with Christ; kings and priests to God.

You see I have not got through the first part of our text this morning. Why is it said, then, "The barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail"? I should like to leap out of my body, I was going to say, and go to heaven, and there, if it was only half an hour, praise God with all the might with which, stripped of mortality, I could do it, for his yea and amen promises. Oh, my hearer, what a blessed covenant God! Notice the form of our text. Here is not an if, here is not a but, here is not a may be, not the least conditionality, not a word about the widow's goodness or her badness, nor anything else; here stands the positive declaration that "the barrel of meal shall not waste." It is God eternal that says it; it is God immutable that says it: he said it in the tones of the sworn covenant, that this barrel of meal shall not waste. And has his grace ever failed? Never. Has his providence ever failed? Never. Is his mercy clean gone? Never. Does his promise fail for evermore? Never it shall continue. God help us more and more to enter into these things, to feel their happy consequences, and live a life of gratitude to his dear name for such promises. Amen and Amen.