

LIBERTY AND SAFETY

A SERMON

Preached on Sunday Morning, September 5th, 1869

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At the New Surrey Tabernacle, Wansey Street

Volume 11 Number 567

“And to the woman were given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness, into her place, where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time, from the face of the serpent.”

Revelation 7:14

IT is to be regretted that the very mentioning of the Book of Revelation throws a kind of discouraging chill over some good people, who view that book as containing things never to be understood while the world shall last. This is a notion that is very common, and it is caused just for want of taking the Bible itself to be its own interpreter. Now before I enter upon the subject, I may remind you that what cannot be taken literally must be taken figuratively; and what, if taken literally, would amount to nothing, or even not to common sense, in that case you must take it figuratively. Hence we cannot take our text literally; it does not mean a literal woman, and it does not mean the wings literally of a literal eagle, and it does not mean her flying into some particular place at some particular time; for locality in reality is not here intended, but rather spirituality, state rather than place. Nor can you take the serpent to mean a literal serpent; because if it were a literal serpent, why, we have plenty of means, such is the progress now of mechanical powers that we could destroy very easily the most mighty serpent that there is upon the face of the earth; so we should not need something supernatural to protect us from that which, with our mechanical appliances, we can easily destroy. Seeing, therefore, that the words cannot be taken literally, they must be taken figuratively; and as “all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for instruction,” we must include this book among the rest. I shall therefore at once proceed to notice the doctrines or the things which we have represented in this text. The first is *the liberty of the gospel*; “two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly.” Secondly, *separation from the world, and the pathway to heaven*, indicated by the woman being in the wilderness. Thirdly, *the sure supply of her necessities*, “where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time.” This “time, times, and half a time,” is called in the 6th verse, “a thousand two hundred and threescore days,” meaning the same thing, but given in different language, that is a period of time, the duration of which is known to none but God himself. The fourth thing we have is that of *defense* “*from the face of the serpent.*”

First, the *liberty of the gospel*. The very mention of eagles' wings conveys the idea of freedom. And when the sinner feels how far he is in bondage to sin, how far he is in bondage to God's law, and how far he is in bondage to the old serpent, and how he is in bondage to death, and in bondage to wrath, altogether a bondman, his soul begins to struggle, and he says, How am I to get rid of my sin? how am I to get rid of my solemn responsibility before God? how am I to get rid of all this that holds me as it were in everlasting chains? Well, the answer is, "If the Son make you free, you shall be free indeed." Let me bring a Scripture to begin with to show that the meaning is that of gospel liberty; and wherever the Lord intends liberty, there will be a consciousness of the need of that liberty; it will be with you spiritually as it was with the Israelites in Egypt literally; they cried unto God because of the oppressors. And if you know something of this spiritual and solemn oppression of sin and wretchedness, you will pray the prayer, "I am oppressed; undertake for me, bring my soul out of prison, and I will praise your name." Now let us hear what the Lord says upon this. He said, in the 19th of Exodus, "I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself." these eagles' wings representing faith and love; as Watts nicely sings, "Give me the wings of faith to rise." "I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself." Oh, my hearers, to be thus brought out of the prison of sin, death, and hell, into the bosom of God's everlasting love, and to look around and see that those whom the Lord loves he loves forever, what a blessed state is this. "And brought you unto myself;" having chosen you, brought you into his electing grace, into the perfection of mediation; for the victory which the Lord wrought in bringing the Israelites out of Egypt was a type, as you are well aware, of the complete victory wrought by the Lord Jesus Christ. And the Lord said, "Now, therefore, if you will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then you shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people; for all the earth is mine; and you shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation." But then he begins, notice carefully the language, "If you will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant." We must take that first in relation to the old covenant, and they did not obey the Lord's voice, they were more ready to obey any voice than the voice of his prophets, and therefore did not keep his covenant. Hence the holy prophets had to bring before the Lord the solemn lament, "They have forsaken your covenant, dug down your altars, and slain your prophets with the sword." But let us bring the words on to gospel ground, and hear God the Father saying to Christ, "If you will obey my voice indeed." Now Jesus Christ did indeed obey God's voice, Jesus Christ did indeed keep God's covenant that God taught him; and we poor, rebellious creatures, are by faith to lay hold of Christ's obedience, and to lay hold of him by faith as having kept all the items and order of the everlasting covenant; and hereby the people of God become a peculiar treasure unto him above all people. I need not stop here to range over the Scriptures to set before you the illustration or exemplification of that testimony that "you shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people." The Lord regards one that fears him more than all the world besides that does not fear him; and if the world be about to be destroyed, why he regarded the eight souls that were to be saved more than all the world beside. It is a blessed thing to know our bondage, and to see that if liberty is by the interposition of the Lord Jesus Christ, on our behalf, obtaining the victory, it is by precious faith in him that we thus become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Hear the apostle Peter illustrate this; "You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar," or purchased "people, that you should show forth the praises of him that called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." While, therefore, the church is here spoken of as a woman, or in her collective capacity, we may nevertheless look at our text in its relation individually to each believer. So then the Lord has given us, as it were, the wings of it great eagle, that is, he has given us great confidence in himself, and has given us a

gospel like himself, to give us to see how our thralldom is eternally destroyed, for Christ came to destroy the yoke of the devil, which he has done, and to set us so free that before long not a sigh shall heave, not a sorrow shall be felt, not a tear shall fall, not an adversary nor an evil shall be occurrent; before long we shall come to where everlasting spring abides, and never withering flowers. May we not be left to such folly as to attempt to make our home or find satisfaction in anything short of the glorious liberty of the everlasting gospel. Again, to show that this is the meaning here, that it means being brought into the liberty of the gospel, we go to the 32nd of Deuteronomy, and there, while the Lord had brought the people out as on eagles' wings, interposing for them, he now speaks of them as eaglets, as young ones, as little ones; and this scripture, as well as two more scriptures I have to name, will show the blessedness of this liberty of the gospel. "As an eagle stirs up her nest, flutters over her young, spreads abroad her wings, takes them, bears them on her wings; so, the Lord alone did lead him." Do you ask, what is that bodily pain for? To stir you up. What is that child ill for? To stir you up. What is the husband or wife afflicted for? To stir you up. What is that family trouble for? to stir you up. What is that business trouble for? To stir you up. And what does the Lord hide his face for? Why, to increase your godly jealousy, and to stir you up. "Examine," with increasing earnestness, "yourselves, whether you be in the faith." "As an eagle stirs up her nest." That is a remarkable thing. The eaglets are very comfortable in the nest; but then the parent eagle sees the necessity of their being stirred up, and being taught to fly, taught to be independent, and taught to range in the open firmament of heaven. Alas, when we are settled down pretty comfortably, we have not much sympathy with those that are afflicted; for so it is written, "He that is ready to slip with his feet," ready to give up all hope, and think all is lost, "is as a lamp despised in the thought of him that is at ease." Therefore, let me say to you Christians, if some of you are tried exceedingly, troubled in a way perhaps I know nothing about, which I may be a stranger to experimentally; for, while you appear here this evening, as lovely an assembly as one would wish to look upon, yet after all I suppose there is not one of you without a thorn of some kind; well then, the Lord help you to see, or at least if you do not see, to believe that whatever the thorn be, there is a needs-be. So then, "as an eagle stirs up her nest;" she will not let the eaglets take their nest too long where it is not good for them to continue. But at the same time, when she flutters over them to keep them from going to sleep again, she "spreads abroad her wings." And when affliction and trouble set in, the wings of the Almighty are as much spread over you then as at any other time. Hence said one, "You have been my help; therefore, will I put my trust in the shadow of your wings." She "spreads abroad her wings, and takes them." The eaglets may be very much scared, and wonder what is coming to them, but "she takes them, bears them on her wings." They gaze upon the sun, and the eagle begins to teach them to fly; and by degrees they learn to take larger and larger circles. When the eagle teaches the eaglets to fly she takes with them very little circles at first, then gives them a little rest, then a wider and a wider circle, then a little more tomorrow, and so they go on till by and by the eaglets become eagles, become independent, spread abroad their majestic wings, take very large circles, rise very high, bask in the sun. and glory in their freedom. So, it is the soul goes on increasing its circle of acquaintance with God's love and God's truth; so, believers rise high, high, higher, and higher, until their unwearied feet arrive where perfect pleasure is. It means, therefore, the freedom of the gospel which have by Jesus Christ. But this second passage which I am now referring to, namely, the 32nd of Deuteronomy, points out the blessedness of this freedom, what it is. It means in the first place not only freedom in the sense I have stated, from the curse, but it means freedom from false gods. "So, the Lord alone did lead him, and there was no strange god with him." Is our hope in God, and in God alone? Is our confidence in Christ, and in Christ alone? Is our expectation of

being preserved and saved at the last in the promise of God, and in the promise of God alone? No confidence in the flesh, no confidence in human devices; for our faith is to stand not in the wisdom of men, but in the omnipotent power of God. And now notice, it is liberty also to enjoy the feast which the Lord has prepared, and which Satan labors hard to hide from our eyes and keep us from. Hence it goes on thus in this freedom; “He made him ride on the high places of the earth,” the fertile mountains; you read of the precious fruits brought forth by the sun, and the precious things put forth by the moon; the promises ripened into perfection by Christ, those are the chief things of the ancient mountains, and the precious things of the lasting hills, God’s eternal perfection and God’s eternal settlements. “He made him ride on the high places of the earth,” that is, the better land, the promised land, “that he might eat the increase of the fields and the gospel fields will never cease to yield.

“The hill of Zion yields
A thousand sacred sweets.
Before we reach the heavenly fields,
Or walk the golden streets.”

“He made him to suck honey out of the rock, and oil out of the flinty rock.” The sweetness of the gospel can take away the bitterness of everything. It matters not what it is that makes your mind bitter; it matters not what it is that embitters your existence, let it be what it may, if the Eternal Spirit is pleased to drop a word of loving kindness and mercy into your soul, it will take all the bitterness away, will turn the bitterness into sweetness, and you will be at a loss then in what language to address the dear Redeemer; you will indeed say, “How sweet the name of Jesus sounds.” The Psalmist in the experience of this, sad of the blessed testimonies of God in this great matter, that “they are more precious than gold, yes, than much fine gold, sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.” “And you did drink,” in this liberty of the gospel, “the pure blood of the grape,” that wine that cheers but does not stupefy; that wine that gives cheerfulness followed by no collapse; that wine that buoys the soul and spirit, makes the man happy, and enables him to look back to the time when he was thus brought to the banquet of the Lord, where the King said, “What is your petition and what is your request? it shall be given unto you.” And as in olden times they were at liberty to ask any question at the banquet of wine, so by the pure blood of the grape, or by the blood of Jesus Christ, we can ask our God any petition, any request, any hard question, and he will not say to us no, but grant us our petition, for he will not deny the prayer that comes by precious faith in the name of his dear Son. Why then should we be at a loss to understand what is meant here by the wings of the eagle?

But we will have two more scriptures very hastily. The next is in the 103rd Psalm. David was in bondage to guilt, unpardoned sin; David was in bondage to soul disease, felt that he was, as it were, full of wounds, and bruises, and putrefying sores; David was in bondage virtually to destruction; David was in bondage to iron poverty; David was in bondage to weakness and helplessness. Ah, he said, what a poor creature I am, guilty, diseased, destruction hanging upon a mere hair as it were over my head; destitute, desolate, helpless; what a miserable condition I am in. Presently the Lord steps in; for all the Lord wants is your misery. Ah, if you are a poor miserable creature, he will take care that before long you shall drink of the wine of the kingdom, forget your poverty, and remember your misery no more. Now let us hear David describe what this was: “Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless his holy name, who forgives all your iniquities,” there

is the freedom; “who heals all your diseases,” there is the freedom; “who redeems your life from destruction.” there is the freedom; “who crowns you with loving kindness and tender mercies; who satisfies your mouth with good things, so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.” And by this pardoning, healing, redeeming, sustaining, crowning mercy, David could spread, as it were, the wings of faith to rise, and behold the glories of God, and sing of his mercy and his love. One more scripture, 40th of Isaiah: “The youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fail,” fail in their worldly enterprise; they shall aim to get a heaven here below, but they shall all fail; “but they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk and not faint.” I hope, then, that I am in some measure understood here. The matter stands like this, that all of us by nature are in the most awful sense, or rather senses of the word, in bondage, and by the coming in of Jesus Christ we are set everlastingly free, and the consequence is, we must be eternally happy.

But secondly, *separation from the world and the pathway to heaven*, indicated by the woman being in the wilderness. As the Israelites went into the wilderness, and were thereby separated from Egypt, so the people of God are separated from the world. But in what sense is this world a wilderness to the Christian? There are some people who almost insinuate that this world is a wilderness to the Christian in the natural sense, in the providential sense. Now, friends, that is not true, for there is a covenant of providence that seed time and harvest, cold and heat, day and night shall not cease. Why, is not the Lord wonderfully kind to many of you in his providence; and this world to you providentially is not a wilderness. Very few among you, I suppose, know what it is to want food, really to be destitute; very few among you perhaps know what real poverty is, there may be some few of you. Therefore, it is not in this temporal sense that the world is a waste howling wilderness; for the mercies of the Lord are innumerable, they are very great indeed. And though I would be the last to use any flattering words, I am inclined to think that England has not yet arrived at one-tenth of its greatness in wealth and power. Its wealth and power are increasing every year, and so far from there being any signs of that, that some would try to make us believe, it is just the reverse. There are very few now thoroughly industrious, sober, steady men that may not get a comfortable living; and there are very few women, unless they are terribly awkward squads, that by a little ingenuity, perseverance and honesty, may not get a living; for there are a great many masters in our land who when they get good servants are glad to keep them. Hence some of you have been in your positions pretty well forty years as servants; that just shows that you are good servants, and I should think it shows the master is a very good master too; at least he has sense enough to see his own interest in your devotion to his interest. Therefore, I do not apprehend that the world is a wilderness in that respect. Let us see then in what sense the world is a wilderness. The world is a wilderness to the children of God spiritually; in that spiritual sense the world is a wilderness. In that sense you may say indeed of the world, oh what a wretched land is this; it can yield us no supply, you cannot say that providentially; you may say it spiritually. Therefore, it is in worldly company you get nothing godly, nothing spiritual, nothing gracious, nothing advantageous. You may go to all the rioting’s and all the amusements devised by man, and which the world follows so eagerly; but to your soul spiritually all this would be a waste howling wilderness, and to your conscience something that you would not care to face the second time. You would say, God is not here, the fear of God is not here, the Christ of God is not here, and the Spirit of God is not here, the presence of God is not here; and so you would fly with your eagles wings from the places where the presence of the Lord is not, and seek to the place where the presence of the Lord is. “Tell me, you whom my soul loves. where you feed, where you make your

flock to rest at noon.” It was this that, brought Ruth so far. She saw the fear of God was not in Moab, she heard that it was in Bethlehem, and she wended her way to Bethlehem; there she was received in the name of the Lord, and she had no desire to go back again to her native land or to its gods; for her native land, where she had been nourished providentially, was to her but a waste howling wilderness. It is then in this spiritual sense that the world is to the people of God a wilderness; it is not so in the other sense. I do not myself like to hear people talk as though religion made them unnatural. A young person once came to me for advice, and she said that she was so spiritually minded that she could not do any work, and her sisters thought that being so very spiritually minded she would not live long. She said, What advice do you give me? I said, I must ask you a question before I give my advice. You say you are so spiritually minded that you cannot work; but let me ask you this question, are you so spiritually minded that you cannot eat or drink? Oh no, she said, I can eat and drink very well. Well then, I said, if you are not spiritually minded enough to live without eating and drinking, you certainly ought not to be spiritually minded enough to live without working; for the apostle says, “If any man will not,” not, if he cannot: if he cannot, then he is an object of sympathy; but “if any man *will not* work, neither shall he eat.” So, I said, if I were in your sister’s place, I would lock the cupboard, and you should not have a bit of anything more to eat until you learnt to work. So then, friends, do not let us suppose that religion makes us unnatural, or that religion releases us from the common responsibilities of life; it rather makes us go on with more pleasure in our lawful calling. You that are Christians, when you go to your lawful calling, is it not a pleasant thought that the Lord has placed you there, and he will be with you in it? and do you not sometimes see the Lord in your lawful calling? Have you not some sweet thoughts of him sometimes, and some sweet impressions and meditations? Do you find your lawful calling any hindrance to him? Do you find that he confines his visits to you, either to your house, or to the chapel? Does he not visit you, as it were, in all places at times? Decidedly he does. Therefore, not temporally, but spiritually the world to the Christian is as a wilderness; this flying into the wilderness as here meant, is not flying to any particular place, but into a particular state, and thus, while in the world, is separated morally and spiritually from the world. No, you must come to Zion for the bread that never perishes, you must come to Zion for the pastures that are always green; you must come to Zion to drink of that river of water of life clear as crystal, and whosoever drinks thereof it shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life. Thus, then this flying into the wilderness means separation from the world, and the pathway to heaven. So you must expect your pathway to have a great deal of the wilderness in it; you must expect to meet with a fiery serpent now and then, with a pit-fall now and then, with droughts now and then, with plagues, and troubles, and enemies; for as the Arabian deserts are to this day intended with Arab robbers, so you will meet with many things to rob your soul, to strip you, and leave you half dead; you will meet with many of these things; but then that is not to turn you back, no, these wilderness trials are only to put us to the test whether we will keep the truth or not, whether we will fulfil what the disciples through grace fulfilled when the Savior said, “You are they that have continued with me in my temptations.”

But I must hasten to my third point, *the sure supply of her needs*, “where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time.” The times you see are divided into several parts; they will be, I should think at least; because Solomon says there is a time to weep, so you will find it; there is a time to laugh, so you will find it; and there is a time to lose, so you will find it; and there is a time to gain, so you will find it, but then our comfort is that all our times are in his hands. Now these people shall be nourished, they shall be nourished temporally, and nourished spiritually; in both

senses they shall be nourished. When the Israelites came into the wilderness, they were where they could not help themselves; the Lord alone could bring them food, the Lord alone could bring water to satiate their thirst. And so, if we are taught of God we shall be brought spiritually into that state where none but the Lord himself can feed our souls. He may employ his servants to do it, but then they do it only instrumentally, for it is he in reality that does the work, and he will bring us into a position where he himself alone can help us. Now I will wrap up the two together, and make a few general remarks upon this part of my subject. If then it be true that Joseph's brethren are to be nourished, if it be true that the Lord will supply our needs freely and fully, as seems good to his infinite wisdom, then where should our faith be? Why, friends, our faith should be in God. When one or two of your customers leave you, take offence at you don't know what, what is that for? Why, that you may have faith in God. Say to yourself, Well, they are gone; I don't know what they left me for, but the Lord can send some more. That's it; you abide by that; pray unto your Father which is in secret. And if some of your friends are offended, turn around and leave you, then have faith in God, and say to yourself, Well, the Lord will not leave me; he is a friend that sticks closer than a brother; he does not go away. Whoever may leave you, your faith is still to be in God. He said, "You shall be nourished;" there stands the testimony. And not only Christians, but ministers themselves, should have great confidence in God, especially in this matter. How often does a hearer take offence, and mercy knows at what, I do not know. Why, even in our own place, while we have as nice a place as any people could wish to meet in, yet there are some few among us that are not good tempered; and some very few, they are but a very small sprinkle, are upon the balance now; they do come, but I don't know what they are cross about; I know not what has got hold of them, or what reason there is, but there is not that unity, and life, and interest, with some few, there was even when we opened the place; and some few, of course, have left us, and a great many others have come. And Satan has said. There, such an one has gone, and such a one, and such a one, and they will be all gone by and by. My answer is, Oh no, the Lord will not go; and if he had had anything more for me to minister to them, they would not have gone, for he would have kept them: and if he had wanted them to do anything more for this cause, they would not have gone away; though I love some that are gone, and pray the Lord to be with them and to bless them. So our faith must be in God, and a minister must not number the people, because if there are a large number he may get proud, and if there are very few he may be discouraged; so his calculation must be upon the promise of God, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world;" "You shall be nourished." So then if some of your customers or friends leave you, don't be too much discouraged; think to yourself, Well, I will be quiet, I will not say much; I have done the best I could for them; I could not serve them better than I have done; they are gone, I don't know what for; my faith must be in the Lord. And in a great many cases the Lord will send you some better customers, and some of those that left you will be pretty sure to come back to you again. What, you have come back again then. Well, yes; I was rather displeased, but I cannot get better served now so well, anywhere else. So, they come back again. You be quite and leave the matter with the Lord. You may depend upon it, it is a thing to be able to commit your person, and your family, and your business, and all your concerns, into the hands of the Lord, for you are where his providence has placed you; it is your place, and you shall be nourished, God said it; God enable you to believe it, and to look to full confidence that he will interpose for you, appear on your behalf, never leave you nor forsake you. And if you have but a grain of faith, the Savior you know lays great emphasis upon this, if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, why you may say to this mountain, because you have God on your side, "Be you cast into the sea," it shall be done; or to the sycamore tree, "Be you plucked up by the roots," and it shall be done. If you have but heartfelt confidence in God, you

shall be nourished. Now you go away from this house of prayer this evening encouraged by the thought that the Lord has severed you from the world, and that he has brought you somewhat into the liberty of the gospel; that while you have had many troubles, those troubles have not been able to stop you altogether; they have not severed you, as we said last Lord's day evening, from the love of God; and that you have been nourished and will be nourished. You are very often weary, but the Lord is never weary; you are often at a loss, but he is never at a loss. We may say, "Whence shall we buy bread, that these may eat?" but he himself knew what he would do. The Lord enable us increasingly to cast our care upon him.

The last point, upon which I must say but very few words, is that if *defense* "from the face of the serpent;" that is, that what the serpent does shall not prove fatally injurious to any of the Lord's people. That is the idea. I will mention just three things. Tribulation. that is often the work of the old serpent, "the face of the serpent." Satan showed his face before God, and set his face against Job. and the Lord suffered Satan to go a long way. Ah, what rebellion after a time he got poor Job into. So, you must not think you are beaten because the enemy has prevailed up to a certain point. No, look at it, how Job was defended from the face of the serpent. The serpent came, liar as he is, and said "Put forth your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." But Job did not do so. Then see the hand of the Lord, how he turned Job's captivity. I have sometimes thought in my own mind, when Job's captivity was turned, he would look about and say, Devil, where are you now? Dragon. where are you now? Serpent where are you now? Adversary, where are you now? Why. I cannot see you; I can't hear you. I don't know where you are. The devil was glad to get away from Job, and no doubt went and took an oath he would never trouble himself about Job again; for the devil so got the worst of it, and Job so got the best of it and God so got the glory of it, gave such honor to his name, and furnished a glorious illustration of the truth of the promise of his word, to encourage his children in all ages to have faith in him. Secondly, persecution. What persecutions have come upon the saints of God. But who were the victors? Those with whom the Lord was. As we said last Lord's day evening, did those persecutions sever one redeemed soul from Gods love; or pluck it out of the hands of Christ? No. Thirdly and lastly, error. The serpent casts out of his mouth floods of error.