

Going on Carefully

A SERMON – Preached on Sunday Morning Apr. 21th 1867, by

MR. JAMES WELLS

AT THE NEW SURREY TABERNACLE, WANSEY STREET

"They go from strength to strength, every one of them in Zion appeareth before God."- Psalm lxxxiv. 7.

Editor's note: The first two paragraphs of this sermon may seem strange to us at first glance. This sermon was preached on a special occasion and Mr. Wells correctly used that occasion to minister to his people in a very personal way. He had a special relationship to his people and at the same time his people were immensely faithful to him. He is expressing his concern and thankfulness in these two paragraphs. His method, in regard to finances is, from what I have been able to understand, in direct contrast to Charles Spurgeon. Wells had his whole being set on the truth as it is in Jesus, everything else was of secondary importance. That is the message of this first section, put the gospel first, and put God's glory first. Anything that could possibly interfere with that was an enemy.

Your debt of £10,500 being now paid, this text may be applied, I think, without egotism, as somewhat expressive of our progress as a church and a people. You have marched onward in the strength, and by the Spirit, and by the truth of God, and by the power and the presence of God. You have gone on until you have brought yourselves into a very pleasing, at the same time very solemn position, and the most dangerous position as a church and people you have ever yet occupied,-a position which, by way of introduction, I will state presently; after first observing that when I look back three years and six months, to a day, from last Friday evening, namely, the 19th of October, 1863, I believe most solemnly that the Spirit of the living God as much descended that night at that meeting upon the people of the Surrey Tabernacle as that Spirit did upon the people in the wilderness when they were about to build the tabernacle. The Holy Spirit of God descended upon the people, and they were stirred up in wisdom, one to do one thing, another to do another, and so they progressed until the tabernacle was completed, and the Lord filled it with his glory; which of course must be our solemn aim and prayer here. Now, for you, with the exception, perhaps, of about £200, to pay off, therefore, in three years and six months the sum of £10,500, is indeed something astonishing. We are now in a position to say, "It is done." Such is the case-it is done; just showing that we know not what can be done until we try. I do think that what the Lord has done for us as a body is encouraging to each of us individually in things pertaining to providence and to grace. When the Holy Spirit descended that night upon us-for I believe he did-some of our friends spoke as they never spoken before, and have never spoken since-not with the power they did that evening. The Holy Spirit omitted some; there were some that were frightened, and ran away, saying, "It cannot be done." But our faith laughed at the impossibility; and our faith can now rejoice that it is done, the God of heaven refusing to accept either them or their services in this work. It is done without them; the last mite paid, and some to spare. There were others that would not run away, but they remained with us, drones, all the time, - slugs. They have saved their money to soften their dying pillow. They have their money

least they should give too much to the cause of God; and if it should not be proved to them at the last that they are hypocrites in Zion, happy for them. So, then, the Lord has thus blessed us. Now, I think now the time has come for you to have a little respite, a little rest. "They go from strength to strength;" And you have gone on, till the strength of some of you is gone, and we got to the end just in time. For one said, "Really I am afraid we shall not be able to hold out much longer." Another said, "I can't bear the thought of giving up till the top stone is brought home; and so I will go on subscribing shilling after shilling, -it must be done." And you have gone on, and striven to the very utmost. But there are some of you that, instead of being tired, are just got into working order. You have got your money in your hands, and you say, "Now what shall we have next? Let us on again." Well, now, I must say to such, You just put your money back again into your pockets; be quiet for a few months, and let some of the wearied ones rest a bit; for "thus saith the Lord, the people which were left of the sword found grace in the wilderness; even Israel, when I went to cause him to rest." And so we want you now for a few months to do nothing but just listen to the gospel, and pray for the mercy of the Lord; and then perhaps the time may come when you will want to do something or other. The work, I repeat, is done in spite of the onslaught of monthly prognosticators, marshy-ground parsons, and kind-hearted hypes. The counsel of them all has been turned to foolishness. Nevertheless, many Christian ministers and Christian churches have bid us, and do bid us, God-speed.

But now I come to the point-and it is important to notice it- wherein you stand in a dangerous position. You recollect that when Amaziah wrought a great victory, he thought, having done that, he could do anything; and so, instead of resting, on he started, with the determination to conquer the king of Israel, and, of course, to take the northern part of the land; and add it to his own dominions. But he did not stop to ask the Lord whether he should do so; on he went, and he got the worst of it; he had to repent and to retreat. So there is a strong feeling, perhaps, with some of you to have some sort of school or schools, - some institution of some sort or another. Now that, and indeed everything in a way of connecting anything with the cause, is a matter of most solemn importance. Oh, how many cases have I seen where a school has been introduced, and graceless, frivolous girls and boys for teachers, a bandbox, self-important, self-sufficient superintendent! The deacons are nothing, the minister nothing; and by degrees you get these fashionable, frivolous, graceless young people in. The old minister becomes antique; they want to get rid of him, and get a man-made parson, a bandbox parson; they do not wish to have a minister according to vital godliness, truth, and power, according to the Spirit of the living God, or according to those solemn experiences that feed the people of God. They want to have a minister of the times. Ah, a minister of the times is not a minister of God; for that minister that is conformed to the world is departed from God's truth. Yet this is that at which they aim. And by slow degrees the gospel becomes a secondary consideration. By slow degrees out goes the gospel, out go the people of God, lose the place, meet in a room somewhere, and leave in possession of these graceless, frivolous professors, the very building that they themselves labored with all their might to establish. Nor is it uncommon for a minister to advocate in public most eloquently these wonderful schools, while in private he sighs under their burdens, and all but deplores their existence; and perhaps hectored over by the head master of the poor little imprisoned children, while the minister can scarcely get bread for his own children. Therefore, whether I live or whether I die, for your own sakes, for God's sake, for Christ's sake, for heaven's sake, for truth's sake, whenever the time shall come to propose anything, be careful what you propose, be careful of the principles upon which you proceed. Let any divinely taught Christian, any man that knows his own heart that knows what vital godliness is, go to one of these places where there is so much to do about these things,-Do you find any food for your soul? Do you find a sworn covenant there? Do you find the grace of God there? Do you find the liberty of the gospel there? No. What is the theme of the pulpit? The people's doings. What is the theme of the people? Their own doings. That very day when you shall connect any human organism, let it be what it may, any institution with this place that can by any possibility come into the place of the gospel, farewell forever to the Surrey Tabernacle. Therefore in the plenitude of your

zeal and concern to do something, be aware of what you do, for you know Satan can come into all sorts of shapes and forms. Surround yourselves with those doings and institutions that will gain you the applause of all the Egyptians, and Moabites, and Edomites, and Philistines, and Pharisees, and Sadducee and Essenes, and all the rest - in proportion as that takes place, farewell to the vitality of experience here, farewell to anything and everything worth having here. And therefore be quiet now for a year or two, - be content with what you have done, and look about a bit, and think a bit, and pray a little, and pray a good deal if you can, and let us see what is done in the way of conversion, in the way of testimony of the presence and power of the blessed God. I know some may think me unnecessarily jealous, but it is my place to be jealous as a minister. I myself was the means of planting this church. Like Melchizedek, I had no predecessor. I never succeeded any minister; I have never taken any man's pulpit. When I first preached the earth was my pulpit and the heavens my sounding board. I then went into a little room, from there into a little chapel, from there to another; then built one, now another and have gone on. So, like Melchizedek, I have had no predecessor. Whose people did he take? Why, I have taken no one's people. So that I ought to be a little bit jealous over you. And if I could look up from the grave fifty, or sixty, or seventy years after my death, and see this church just where you are now, I should rejoice, - yea, I believe that it would add in my soul even to the very joys of heaven. I may also just say, that while you have acted to my satisfaction, I believe I may say that I have acted to yours also. I have aimed to get this chapel so invested in trust, upon such principles as to secure the truth, and prevent any one dominating over this people. That is done. Also I wished that matters should be so arranged that the ground rent should be secured; in case when I am gone you should not get a minister to keep the place full long enough to enable you to pay the ground rent and other expenses, and so be in danger of losing the chapel. That is done. The houses are built, and in a few years will pay themselves, and then they will pay your ground rent. Then, if you should have a minister as successful as I have been, you will always find plenty of objects of charity, and you will pay the ground rent without touching the house rent; and you can devote that to such objects as may seem suitable to you at the time. Moreover, I have felt concerned, and my deacons with me, that if I leave a widow I should not leave her a burden to any one; that I should not leave a widow that should have any claim whatever upon this church and congregation, I have done so. That is also clear and free; so that if I die to-morrow, and leave a widow, she comes with no claims upon you. Not but I well know that if £500 or £1,000 were needed to make the widow I leave comfortable, I am as satisfied that though I am not here to see it, you would not let that widow want. I do not believe that the memory of James Wells will die the day that he dies. Hated as he may be by those outside, and by some who know him only by wicked misrepresentations, yet, bless the Lord! We have gone on together simply by the force of God's truth, the vitality of godliness, and I have more confidence in that than I have in anything else.

Having made these few remarks, I will proceed now to notice our text, which I will condense into three parts. First, the people who go from strength to strength. Secondly, the manner of their progression-" they go from strength to strength." Thirdly, their happy end- "everyone in Zion appeareth before God."

First, then people who go from strength to strength. They are a people separated from the world; who, as John Bunyan says, have set out on a pilgrimage to a better country, a better world, a better city. Let us take the fourfold representation of them given by Moses. First, they are a people that by mercy and by redemption are severed from the world. 15th of Exodus:-"Thou in thy mercy hast led forth the people." Now, Christian, how did you come out of the world? Was it not mercy that came to you-the tidings of free, eternal, forgiving mercy? What was it but mercy that came to you - the tidings of free, eternal, forgiving mercy? What was it but mercy that put the first feeling into your soul - "God be merciful to me a sinner."? What was it but mercy that put the first solemn desire into the mind-" O God, in the multitude of thy mercies blot out my transgression"? It was God, who is rich in mercy, and for his great love

wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sin that put this cry into our hearts. Oh, we said, here is mercy for the guilty, for the filthy, for the lost. And it is the mercy of God; and if it be the mercy of God it can do anything. Yea, that very mercy saith, "Come, let us reason together: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." "If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land." Our souls through grace fell in with the same, and thus we became severed from the world by the mercy of God, So, then, not unto us, not unto us, but unto his name be all the glory. "Thou in thy mercy hast led forth the people." If we had not been led forth by mercy, nothing else could have led us forth; nothing else could have gone with us; nothing else could have continued with us to that extent and in that way that we needed. Now we are brought to feel that if we are severed from the world, it must be by the mercy of God. And we trace that mercy up to the sovereignty of God. "He will have mercy upon whom he will have mercy." The source, therefore, is divine, pure, and infinite. We see that mercy came to us by the mediation of the Lord Jesus; that it came to us declaratively by the gospel; and we lay hold of the gospel of the grace of God by the power of the Spirit of God. And this brings us into such a decision for God's mercy that we cannot feel an oneness of spirit with those who are not brought into oneness with the same mercy. Then, again, "Thou in thy mercy hast led forth the people which thou hast redeemed." We have been led to see, and know, and understand, and to rejoice in the truth that the redemption which the Savior has wrought is a redemption worthy of such a Saviour—that it is an eternal redemption. And it stands thus, to show the power of it: - "The redeemed of the Lord shall return, and come with singing unto Zion; everlasting joy shall be unto them; sorrow and sighing shall flee away." Here is eternal redemption that severs us from the world. Again, - Thou hast guided them in thy strength unto thy holy habitation." Now, though this has a literal meaning, primarily, referring to the Jews entering into Canaan, we must take it spiritually, and then we shall see how beautifully it answers. What is God's holy habitation? Why, friends, ultimately it is heaven; and in his strength he will guide his people safe to that heaven. But we must come to something before that. Jesus Christ is also God's holy habitation, and that is where the Lord brings us to. And then mark, Thou hast guided them in thy strength unto thy holy habitation." Take it in the gospel sense:-Thou hast guided us in thy strength unto thy dear Son. A man that is taught of God, that man getting hold of the name of Christ does not satisfy him. That men understanding Jesus Christ as the way, the truth, and the life, that is good; but he wants something more than that. He wants power. "Thou hast guided them in thy strength." Saith such a one, shall never be satisfied until the gospel is made unto me the power of God. Where is the efficacy of his blood to roll peace into my soul? Where is the power to set my soul at liberty, to bring me out of the prison of guilt, and doubts, and fears and darkness that I may in that liberty "Abba, Father," cry? Those that are taught of God will know nothing short of this. Some of you have been for months, for years following the Lord doubting and fearing Bless God for it; I am glad you do doubt and fear. And why do you doubt and fear? You do not doubt God's truth-no, not for a moment. You do not doubt Christ's ability to save-not for a moment. You do not doubt the sufficiency of his grace-not for a moment. But the Lord not yet having guided you in his strength, to enable you to take up your abode in his love, and in his Christ, and to assure you that you are one of his, you still wait and doubt; and yet you feel that no other gospel will do for you. Now, then, is it not infinitely better for a man to be thus waiting for what he knows he does not possess, than to rush on boasting of assurance, when he has not realized it, when he does not possess it and thus deceive his own soul? I like the words of Mr. Hart,-

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

Ministers say, Oh, you have no business to doubt; but then we must distinguish between infidel doubting and godly doubting. Why, say you, is there any such thing as godly doubting? Unquestionably so. The Lord stirs up Jealousy like a man of war; and when a man of war stirs up jealousy, what are you

afraid of? You are afraid you are going to be slain, or taken captive and ill-used. So when God stirs up godly Jealousy, that man is afraid he shall be lost; he is afraid the sword of almighty vengeance will awake against him; he is afraid he shall be driven away into everlasting perdition. Hence the solemn heart-searching, and trembling, and waiting's, and looking's; and he will never feel satisfied until the word is brought home with power, and he can from his own soul's experience testify of the pardoning mercy of God, the efficacy of the blood of Christ, and the all-sufficiency of his salvation. And no man can know the Son savingly, but he to whom the Father shall reveal him; no man can know the Father but he to whom the Son will reveal him; and no man can have the Spirit of God but he to whom God gives him; and the Holy Spirit himself giveth to every man severally as he will. Here, then, is the habitation- Christ Jesus. Here the Lord dwells, and dwells forever; and here the soul is brought to dwell, and if you will never be satisfied until you enter that habitation, and realize the fact that you are complete in Christ, accepted in Christ, that you stand in Christ free from all condemnation. These are they, then, that set out by the mercy of God, by the redemption and strength of God, and are brought thus to the Christ of God. "Every one that hath heard and learned of the Father cometh unto me." Now for such a people a way is made. Ah says one, mercy hath led me forth so far; redemption hath delivered me, and I see the Egyptians are drowned, and I am free. Here is the Lord's strength, and here is the tabernacle, the type of Christ- "thy holy habitation." But how shall I get to his habitation, in the sense of the Promised Land? Ah, when I think of the dukes of Edom, what tyrants they are, when I think of the mighty men of Moab; When I think of the great number of the inhabitants of Palestina; when I look at my own weakness, and the many things I have to encounter, how shall a poor, feeble creature like myself hold out to the last? Then Moses is taught of the Lord to show that the way is made. How encouraging it is to us to go forward! The Lord said to Moses, "Speak unto the children of Israel that they go forward!" "Sorrow," he says, "shall take hold on the inhabitants of Palestine. Then the dukes of Edom shall be amazed," and by that amazement shall be paralyzed; "the mighty men of Moab; trembling shall take hold upon them." Ah, but then Canaan. "All the inhabitants of Canaan shall melt away. Fear and dread shall fall upon them; by the greatness of thine arm they shall be as still as a stone; till thy people pass over, O Lord, till the people pass over, which thou hast purchased." Here the way is made, then. Come, then, if you know this mercy, this redemption, this holy habitation, Christ Jesus, take courage. Jesus hath said, for the encouragement of his little ones, "He that is not against me is with me; and blessed is he, whosoever is not offended in me." So that if we cannot yet call him ours, yet if we are pleased with him, not offended, why, then there are his gracious words to encourage us. And whatever the foes may be, he will find a way to subdue them; so that when thou comest to the place thou dreads, thou wilt find that all is neutralized and paralyzed, and you will be quite surprised to see that very Esau that some time ago was ready to kill you, now falls upon your neck, as it were, kiss you, weep with you, and prove to be a friend. Ah, then, look to the Lord. Let us never think of looking back, but still keep our eyes fixed upon the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus: never give up the little faith we have, the little hope, and the little encouragement we have. Thus, then, the people are distinguished from others by being severed from the world in these four things - mercy, redemption, divine strength, and the habitation to which they come-the Rock of Ages. "Let the inhabitants of the rock sing:" These are the people with whom the Lord of hosts is; he will help them, and that right early; and though the heathen may rage, and the kingdoms be moved, he utters his voice, the earth melts, on they go in the strength of the Lord, sword in hand, cutting their way through hosts of devils, while they fall before the word, thankful to God that helps them to go on conquering and to conquer, and will do so till the last enemy is destroyed.

And then there is the end. They all came to it except those that dis-believed God's truth. Not one fell in the wilderness except by unbelief. Those that held fast the faith, they had their faults no doubt in other respects, but then they had the one essential excellency, "Ye are they that have continued with me." John wished fire to come down from heaven, and the disciples had their faults; but then they had the one

cardinal excellency-that is, the faith of decision for Christ, and for the truth, so far as they then knew it, and for the truth altogether when the other branches and parts thereof were revealed unto them. Mark the end-"Thou shalt bring them in,"-not bring themselves in-"Thou shalt bring them in, and plant them in the mountain of thine inheritance, in the place, O Lord, which thou hast made for thee to dwell in;" that points to heaven itself,- "I go to prepare a place for you;" – in the sanctuary O Lord, which thy hands have established ;"-ah, shall I say, which the bleeding hands of the dear Surety hath prepared? He entered with his own blood into the sanctuary of heaven, and has dedicated all heaven unto the saints. Then comes the eternity. "The Lord shall reign forever and ever." But, say you, he did not there. Why not? Well, there was no sacrifice there by which the Lord could in mercy reign forever. There was no righteousness in the Jews by which he could reign forever and ever; there was no perfection there by which he could reign forever and ever. And they even apostatized from the temporal righteousness and sacrifices which they had. But here, in Christ Jesus, is an eternal righteousness, by which grace eternally reigns; here is an eternal atonement, by which life is eternally sustained; here is eternal worth, by which glory must continue forever. There is no failure.

But, secondly, I notice the manner of their progression- "They go from strength to strength." It is exceedingly pleasing to me when I find a Christian so weak, so faint, that he cannot get on at all, cannot get on in hearing, nor in reading, nor in praying-cannot get on at all. Say you why is that pleasing? Because it strips him of all creature-confidence, supposed creature-goodness, and makes him feel his need of the power and presence of God. Old-fashioned experience was, - "Oh, when wilt thou come unto me?" The modern gospel is, "Come to God, come to Christ, come this morning, come to-night, come when you like, do not let another moment pass." That is the teaching of the day; it is not the teaching of God; God's teaching is to make us feel our weakness. But I want one more thing of this weak one, that cannot get on, and that is this, ask this question, Will you go and hear another gospel? No, saith such a one; for if free grace, sovereign grace, a yea and amen promise-if these things will not help me, nothing else can; so that if I perish, I will perish only here; for I hate the others. That is right. What do you hate them for? Because I believe them to be of the devil. I hate every false way. I am glad of that. "As his part is that goes down to the battle so shall his part be that tarries by the stuff, they shall part alike." "Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation;" I will keep thee from giving up the truth when the hour of temptation shall come upon all the professing world, to bring to light the hollowness of their profession, and they will fly away from that truth they never had a saving hold of. Well, then, there you just remain for a while. But you shall not be always thus weak; no. The Lord will send you a little wine, a little oil, a little honey, a little milk, and there shall be times of refreshing from his presence. As saith one, "Thou hast in love to my soul brought it up from the pit of corruption, thou hast cast all my sins behind thy back." Now the Israelites went out from Egypt by the power of God; they progressed though the wilderness by the goodness of God. There was the daily manna, there was the water from the rock, there was the cloud to guide them, there was the priesthood and the mercy-seat to encourage them, there was the presence of the Lord to assure them, and there was the promise of the Lord to all them that believed. Just so now; we are strengthened and go on by him who is the bread of life; we go on by that river the streams whereof make glad the city of God; we go on by the presence and blessing of the Lord. What a scripture is that! How exactly it describes the feeling of every real Christian! -"If thy presence go not with us, carry us not up hence."

Even an apostle would give war to a legal bias of mind if left to his own heart, and therefore it was requisite that some more of the fountains of the great deep within should be broken up rather than that should be. "My grace is sufficient for thee." We should have liked to go on with all softness of heart and evenness of temper. And when some of you sometimes have got into a tremendous passion, you have said, I never thought I could have done it; I can't think what the reason of it is. Ah, there is a devil of a heart within you;

there is a reservoir of evil; there is Satan's tinder-box, as the old divines used to call it; a spark comes in, it is lighted up, and nothing can meet your case but the great, the boundless remedy,-" My grace is sufficient for thee; my strength is made perfect in weakness." Well, then, Lord, let them call me Antinomian; call me what they may, most gladly will I glory in being a poor, infirm creature, that the power of Christ-his power to save-may rest upon me. Thus was he weakened, thus was he strengthened, thus was he brought down, thus was he renewed, thus was he brought low, thus was he raised up, thus was he thrust, as it were a far off, thus was he brought nigh, thus did clouds darken his path, thus did the Sun of righteousness penetrate the whole, throw a fresh light upon his path, and enable him to go, as the people of God shall do, from faith to faith-one degree of faith to another -from light to light unto the perfect day. "The path of the just is as the shining light." Christ is the path of the just, and Christ will shine more and more unto the perfect day.

But, lastly, I notice their happy end! - "Every one of them in Zion appeareth before God." In Deuteronomy xvi. 16 you have these significant words,-"They shall not appear before the Lord empty." Now, when you come to die, or at the final judgment, you must have four things with you, or else you will not be accepted. It is a promise as well as an implied threat, that if they are empty they shall not be accepted. First, you must have the Christ of God: "They that were ready went in with him;" "I am the door; by me if any man enter, he shall be saved." If thou hast not his righteousness, his atonement, his worth and worthiness, then thou canst not appear with acceptance before God. "No man"- let him be as wise, or pious, or rich, or anything else, as he may-" cometh unto the Father, but by me." Second, you must have God's gospel truth, free grace truth: "Thou desirest truth in the inward parts; and in the hidden parts thou shalt make me to know wisdom;" "I will put my law", - meaning the law of faith, and therefore the law of eternal life-"into their minds, and write it in their hearts," You cannot get to heaven without God's truth. Third, you must have the Spirit of God: "If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his." The spirit of Christ (and most of you ought to hear what I am going to say with great pleasure, some of you with doubtful feelings) is a spirit of practical love to God and to the brethren. "Come, ye blessed of my Father: I was a hungered, and ye gave me meat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink; I was a stranger, and ye took me in;" and so of the rest. You must have that spirit of love to God and to the brethren which is the spirit of Christ, for such was his spirit, as is self-evident, or else you cannot be accepted. The last thing I shall name that we must have is, you cannot be accepted of God at the last without having his covenant. 60th Psalm: "Gather my saints together unto me; those that have made a covenant with me by sacrifice." Perhaps some of you know nothing at all of God's everlasting covenant. You have never yet truly said, "Let us join ourselves to the Lord in a perpetual covenant, that shall not be forgotten;" that covenant of which David speaks as "an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and sure: this is all my salvation and all my desire, though he make it not to grow." You must in death and in judgment have these four things: the Christ of God, the truth of God, the Spirit of God, and the covenant of God. The one presents you complete, the other shows you are rightly conformed; the Spirit shows you are a living man, and the covenant shows that you are brought to where none are brought but those who are taught of God; for "the secret of the Lord is with them that fear him, and he will show them his covenant."

