

SURREY TABERNACLE PULPIT.

THE ASCENSION OF THE WITNESSES.

A Sermon

PREACHED ON LORD'S-DAY MORNING, APRIL 28TH, 1861, BY

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AT THE SURREY TABERNACLE, BOROUGH ROAD.

'And they ascended up to heaven in a cloud, and their enemies beheld them.' Revelation xi. 12.

We have in our discourses upon this subject before, shewn that the witnesses here spoken of do, in the first place, mean the ministers of the gospel, and that these represent all the people of God; so that what is here said of these witnesses, as we have shewn before, will apply to the people of God at large. Now in this my last discourse upon this subject we have this morning to notice, first, *the heaven to which they ascended*; and then, secondly, *the manner of their ascension*, that they ascended in a cloud; and then, thirdly, *the downfall of their enemies*, implied in the last clause, 'their enemies beheld them.'

I. First, then, we have to notice *the HEAVEN to which they ascended*. It is not my intention to speak of the heaven to which the people of God shall finally ascend. But that which I have to speak of this morning is the present ascension that the people of God do now at this present time realize; taking it spiritually, we shall find they ascend to heaven in the sense here intended. We must, therefore, understand this heaven spiritually. Hence it is just the same as you would understand the apostle in the 2nd of Ephesians, where he says, 'He hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.' Now the idea is this, that when the slaying times are over (and we have shewn what they were), and the soul is again revived, it then ascends spiritually into that completeness which it has in the Lord Jesus Christ. There is a state which they have in Christ, and that state is their heaven; the living God in and by Christ Jesus is their heaven; as you sometimes sing of the Lord,

Himself my heaven, himself my joy.

Hence we may take, to help us to something like an understanding of this heaven, we may take something from the 7th and something from the 14th chapters of this same book to shew what this heaven is. John saw there a multitude clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands, expressive of that purity, that victory, and that completeness, which they had in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is, my hearer, one of the privileges of the people of God to know that, whatever their experience may be, whatever their faults may be, whatever their circumstances may be, that does not for one moment touch them as they stand in Jesus Christ; they are always spotless there, always in a state of sanctification there, always in a state of justification there, always perfect there, always faultless there; there eternal election places them, and there the Lord hath kept them, and there they remain; so that while we are

overcome from day to day in ten thousand ways by the law that is in our members, and by the vexations, and trials, and troubles of the way, so that our memories sometimes seem entirely plundered of everything spiritual, and our consciences may, indeed do, very justly reproach us with a great many faults and a great many drawbacks; but then the remedy for all this is that we are complete in Christ, we are still spotless in him. And then again, in the 14th chapter, you will find the Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with him the hundred and forty-four thousand, representatives of all the people of God, having his Father's name written in their foreheads; and John says, 'I heard a great voice from heaven;' so they speak with a heavenly voice; not a voice from earth, but a voice from heaven; that is, they testify of God's love; they testify, as shewn in the 7th chapter, of God's salvation; crying with a loud voice, 'Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb.'

And it is in this state of perfection they have in Christ, it is in this state of freedom they have in him, it is on these high grounds, it is in this standing, that they are led to living fountains of waters; and here, in accordance with that perfection they have in him, God wipeth away all tears from off all faces. And forsooth, this, by the religious world, is called high doctrine, and dangerous doctrine; and yet, my hearer, if there were not a completeness in Jesus Christ to be on our side continually; if Christ in his perfection as the Priest, were not a Priest continually; if this perfection did not stand on our side continually and eternally, then there would be room left for something fatally to be laid to our charge; and the sword of justice might step in at that corner, at that gap, where there is that want of perfection, and cut us down, and in spite of all Christ has done we should lift up our eyes in hell. But bless the Lord, not so; there is perfection, and this is the heaven into which we ascend; and hence it is written that they shall come and sing in the height of Zion. And when can you pray with confidence? It is when you can see this perfection in Christ. When can you pray with assurance that the Lord will be with you? It is only when you look to that perfection that you have in Christ. And when can you, when you come to a dying hour, see more glory to attract in the dear Redeemer than there is in sin, and death, and circumstances, to alarm or distress?

It is when you can behold this perfection, when you can ascend, sustained by precious faith and love, into this heaven, into this perfection you have in Christ Jesus the Lord. Now these persons then, are represented to speak with a heavenly voice—and that voice is said to be as the sound of many waters. Perhaps there is a meaning in that that we have not taken notice of: the waters represent life in contrast to death: and they represent sanctification in contrast to the degradation of sin, and they represent satiation, or the soul being replenished, and its thirst satiated, in contrast to the soul lifting up its eyes in hell. And the waters represent also a land of plenty in contrast to a land of drought: so that those who ascend into heaven thus speak with the voice of heaven, give testimony of heavenly things, and the sound of many waters indicates the contrast of their second Adam to their first Adam state; their first Adam state is a state of death, their second Adam state is that of eternal life, the water of life; their first Adam state is a state of degradation, corruption, by sin; their second Adam state is a state of sanctification and freedom from sin; their first Adam state is a state of privation and destitution; their second Adam state is a state of plenty, where they shall drink of the river of God's pleasure and shall be satisfied. Their first Adam state throws them into a land of destruction, of darkness, of barrenness: but their second Adam state brings them into a land of plenty, into a paradisaical land. This appears to me to be meant by the voice: and when we ascend into this perfection in Christ and ascend into these heavenly things

and speak with this heavenly voice, indicating this life, this sanctification, and this satiation, or satisfying the thirst of the soul, and this land of plenty, then it is we are happy, then it is we can rise with wings as eagles, and leave the earth and all the things thereof behind. But again, it is said, 'And as the voice of a great thunder;' that denotes the majesty of the voice. Hence ministers are called sons of thunder, because they roll forth the majestic truths of the everlasting gospel; and so the saints of God, they roll forth testimonially the great truths of the everlasting gospel, and these are the thunders that will roll—not terrifically, terrific to the enemy, but to the friend eloquent: it is the voice of heavenly eloquence; and they shall roll these thunders of Divine eloquence along to all eternity, and in this voice of thunder shall praise the name of the Lord their God, not in the feeble whisper as they do while wrapped in mortality: but even now when we can ascend into this heaven we have in Jesus Christ, we can then speak in a way we cannot at other times. And John says, 'I heard the voice of harpers harping with their harps.' Now go again to our old interpretation, take the 71st Psalm, the 22nd verse: 'I will also praise thee with the psaltery, even thy truth O my God;' so then God's truth is that which is meant by the psaltery. Taking that 22nd verse then as a key, the harps mean the truths of the gospel. Harpers harping with their harps therefore will mean, in the first place, ministers of the gospel preaching the truths of the gospel, and bringing melody into the hearts of the people of God; secondly, it will represent all the people of God that by means of the truths of the gospel are making melody unto the Lord. And is it not so? Oh, give me the harp of election, the harp of everlasting love, the harp of redemption, the harp of mediation, the harp of mercy, the harp of saving grace, the harp of yea and amen promise, give me any one of these harps, and the Holy Spirit teach me to touch it in the right way, I shall then make melody in my heart as unto the Lord.

Then we read, 'And they sung as it were a new song, and no man could learn that song but the hundred and forty and four thousand'—certainly not; the man that never felt the thralldom of sin can know nothing of deliverance from it; the man that never felt the guilt of sin can never appreciate the redeeming love of Jesus Christ from that guilt; the man that never knew anything of the condemning power of sin can never appreciate the redeeming power of the blood of Christ; the man that knows nothing of being sunk in his own feelings as into a pit wherein there is no water, can never prize that blood of the everlasting covenant that brings us up out of that pit, and sets us among the ransomed of the Lord. So that those that sing this song sing it from their own personal experience. Ah, my hearer, personal religion, like personal preaching, is that which is wanted. If a man gather up a great deal of theological knowledge, and preaches that, that man preaches out of his intellect, and out of his acquirements, and out of books, and out of what he has gathered together, but he does not preach out of Divine teaching, he does not preach out of his own soul's experience; whereas the good man brings forth out of his heart good treasure, the man sent of God speaks out of his own soul's experience that which the Holy Ghost has wrought in the soul. Just so with every saved sinner, it is not what he has intellectually picked up, but it is what he has experimentally known, what the Lord has taught him. 'None,' saith the Lord, 'shall appear before me empty.' Ah then, says one, I shall never appear before him, for I am a poor empty thing. Do you mean to say you have no testimony for God? Can you say experimentally you are a lost sinner, and that your only hope is in Christ, and in that perfection which is in him? If thou canst say that, thou art not empty, for thou hast in thy soul a testimony; thou canst acknowledge thyself a condemned sinner before God, and that thou hast no hope but in his dear Son. 'None shall appear before me empty.' Each virgin must have a

lamp of her own, oil of her own, grace of her own, experience of her own,—as saith Paul to the Philippians (and I long to preach a good sermon, if I should ever live to see the day when I could preach a good sermon, upon these words) —‘Ye all are partakers of my grace:’ that scripture has been with me for weeks now with a great deal of power; when I look at the grace by which Saul was saved, and then look at the fact that others who were saved were saved by the same grace, I am not at all at a loss to know after what order they were saved.

And now it is said of these persons (and here is where some good people err, they suppose the following words refer to eternal glorification only; that they do apply to that there can be no question, but they apply to our present state as well;) it is said of these persons that ‘in their mouth was found no guile, for they are without fault before the throne of God.’ In their mouth was found no guile. Say you, is that true of the Christian now? Yes, spiritually it is; certainly it is. ‘Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile.’ Nathanael had as much guile in the flesh as the rest of us; but in his profession there was no guile, because in that he was right and sincere, or sincerely right. And so in the 32nd Psalm, when David speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin, and to whom he imputeth righteousness without works, in whose spirit there is no guile, he says, and I may say—it may seem strong language to use, and I hope I use it in a proper spirit; but I do feel as though I can bear the scrutiny of the all-searching eye of God himself on my soul, in this matter, that in my spirit is no guile in that great matter there represented in the 32nd Psalm, that blessed is the man to whom the Lord imputeth righteousness without works. I trust I can say in the sight of a heart-searching God that that is my only hope before God; that I am that poor, helpless, lost wretch, that were it not for such a substitution of things that my sins were all imputed to Christ, and his work imputed to me, I have no more hope than as though I were in hell. To be insincere in that, if you are divinely taught, is impossible; you will cling to it, and whatever intrudes upon it, whatever degrades it, whatever obscures it, whatever slights it, whatever perverts it, or whatever distorts it, you will turn away from, and you will say,—Spoil this substitutional work of Christ, you spoil my resting place, you spoil or pervert the substitutional perfection of Christ, and you spoil everything: and therefore you will turn away from that, and you will cleave to Jesus, not saying the words, as thousands do, in mere theory, but from real experience, that

None but Jesus can do helpless sinners good.

Here then in the spirit is no guile, in the mouth is no guile, when you pray you pray not as a hypocrite, but as an earnest man; and when you testify of your hope, you speak as an honest and an earnest man. And ‘they are without fault before the throne of God.’ How can they be there without fault? In no way but by him who is faultless. Jesus Christ was faultless, and his faultless work is imputed to them, and by him they stand faultless before the throne. Now, my hearer, so much for high doctrine as people call it; so much for dangerous doctrine; and yet if you are taught of God you will climb the heights of Zion; ah, you will climb up terrace after terrace, and step after step: or, to use another simile, the promises will come down to the foot of Jacob’s ladder, and you will step up round after round, and the Lord is at the top, and you will never rest until you reach this perfection; and when you reach this perfection that is in Christ, then you will find all that you can possibly need. This is our heaven, then; take away this perfection, you take God away, you take Christ away, you take the Holy Spirit away, the gospel away, our hope away, our life away, you take everything away, for here it is, Christ is all and in all.

This is the heaven then, to which the witnesses, while on earth, ascend. The Lord sometimes so orders things, that he gives an opportunity for people to shew to which house they belong, whether the house of Esau or the house of Jacob. You read in one place, 'And they went every man to his own house.' Just so it is now; let the Christian have his choice, he will go up into the perfection of Christ; let the free-willer have his choice, he will go right away from it; let the duty-faith man have his choice, he will go just as the people did that you read of in the 48th Psalm; 'they came;' well, that is better than nothing, you say—I do not know, stop—'they saw;' well, come, that is better still; I do not know, stop do not be in a hurry, 'they came and they saw,' but how long did they stop? Ah, not long, off they were again before the end of the sermon down into the wilderness of duty-faith; 'they came, they saw, they hastened away,' while the real Zionists stopped, and said, and sung, 'This God is our God for ever and for ever, and he will be our guide even unto death.' Every man goes to his own house. When a man goes to his own house, he goes to stop; it is his home. And this perfection, this height of Zion is the Christian's home, the poor sinner's home, the poor and needy's refuge; the place where bread is given, not offered or sold, but given; where waters are sure, where the defence is impregnable. Thus they will stand on this heavenly ground, and praise the name of the Lord their God, who hath done such wonderful things for them. This is the heaven, then, the completeness we have in Christ, the testimony we are enabled to bear, the faultlessness that we have before him—without fault before his throne. Ah, it is a blessed thought, I cannot dwell too much upon it. Ah but, say you, you must not neglect experience nor practice. No, we will not; but all experience, all practice that is not either expressive of the need of this, or does not lead direct to it, is wrong; it is not of God; that that comes from God will lead to God. Besides all the Lord's delight centres here. Does he not say, 'Behold my servant, mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth?' Remarkable thing it is that the Lord should take such care even of the very word *elect*; that he should put his own delight so close to it.

II. Now after setting forth the heaven that came down to us, for what I have said this morning of this perfection in Christ, is after all nothing else but that city of God that came down to us; is after all nothing else but that city of God by which the living God tabernacles with men, and by which he will dwell with him; I must come now to *the MANIFOLD CLOUD*; they ascended to heaven in a cloud. Is there anything difficult here? I think not; I think I can bring five or six clouds, or rather the Bible can, and a sweet oneness in them all; and all answering the idea of ascending to heaven. Take in the first place the sacrificial cloud. 'Who is this that cometh out of the wilderness like pillars of smoke, perfumed with myrrh;' there are the bitter sufferings of Christ; 'and frankincense,' there is the intercession of Christ; 'with all powders of the merchant,' there are the spiritual graces and blessings of Christ. Now, first, the sacrificial cloud; as the sacrifice ascended in a cloud of smoke, and was accepted by fire: how do you ascend to heaven now? Why, by that sacrifice that puts your sins down, and brings your soul up, that is the cloud, you ascend with the cloud. Is it not so? Ah, sometimes cast down from a sight and sense of what we are, circumstances, and a variety of things; what a poor creature I am. Presently a seraphim is sent with a live coal from the sacrificial altar; and in the smoke as it were of this altar we ascend; our sins drop, our fears drop dead, our doubts and troubles are gone, our God is come, our Christ is come; mercy, peace, and freedom are come; and if it be said of the people in the time of Elijah as a matter of mere reformation, how much more may we say it as a matter of real revival, 'The Lord he is God, the Lord he is God.' This is one idea of the cloud in which we ascend, and there is a fact in it. Men sometimes thrash us, and say, you ought to rise to God,

you ought to go to God, you ought to look up to God. Well, my dear sir, that will not bring me up. Let me have the sacrificial cloud; shew me Jesus Christ, and if the Blessed Spirit is pleased to bring me into sweet fellowship with what Christ in his sacrificial work has done, then I can ascend by that sacrifice as in a cloud, and leave all my doubts, and fears, and sins behind; I have access to God by the sacrifice of Christ. Then, secondly, there is the intercessory cloud; cloud of incense. Hence in the 8th chapter of this book you read of the angel standing at the altar, having a golden censer; and that he offered much incense with the prayers of the saints, and the cloud of incense went up before God. Take away the cloud of Christ's fragrant intercession, then you could not pray with certainty. He still remains in that respect the Intercessor; so that by the fragrance of his intercession; by the loftiness of the cloud, shall I say, of his intercession, we are carried up to request all that Christ has requested for us; we cannot open our mouths too largely here; 'open thy mouth wide, saith the Lord, and I will fill it.' Here then is an intercessory cloud, by which we ascend to heaven. And is it not so?

* Come back once more to the slaying times. Are there not times when the mouth of prayer with you is stopped, when you are slain as to prayer? How many times have you knelt down before the Lord in private, and tried to pray, and could not—how many times have you tried to sigh out before the Lord, and could not—and how often have you been discouraged on that ground. Where has your security been? Why, while you have been like Moses, slow of speech, your Elder Brother Christ Jesus, like Aaron, could speak well, so that while you could not speak at all nor pray at all, Christ was pleading and interceding for you. I often think what a mercy it is that he abideth a Priest in his intercessory department as well as in his sacrificial, and that continually; so that whilst you are busied about the things of time, Jesus Christ is interceding for you still—presenting your name before the throne on the breastplate, and interceding for you in the cloud of the sacrifice which he himself hath offered. Now when the Lord again awakens you, this truth of Christ's intercession becomes a cloud of testimony by which you ascend in a way of hope, of admiration, of love; for how can you but love a God that ever loved you, even when you had no love in exercise to him. Third, the covenant, covenant of grace; that is another cloud by which we ascend. Ninth of Genesis: 'I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth;' that there shall be no more curse; 'and the bow shall be seen in the cloud.' It is the token of peace: Christ himself wears the rainbow around his head, the pledge of peace: 'and I will look upon the bow, that I may remember the everlasting covenant.' Apart from it, apart from this covenant, he might look upon you as a sinner, and send you, if the thing were possible, to a thousand hells: but instead of this he looks on Jesus, and Jesus having sealed that covenant, he looks upon that covenant he has made in our behalf, and remembers the everlasting covenant, and so he comes down by it to us, and we ascend to him. What a delightful truth is this—one of old said, (and I believe they were covenant words, gospel words, new covenant words;) 'Thy words were found, and I did eat them, and they were the joy and rejoicing of my heart.' And then mark something else, friends, in this cloud—see how independent it is of men; so that we must be brought off from all human dependence, and be brought to depend upon the Lord alone. So he looks upon the sacrifice, and remembers you as identified with that: he looks upon the intercession of his dear Son, he looks upon this covenant, and remembers you as identified therewith: and that is the reason he is so kind to you. Hence he associates the word kindness with this covenant: 'My kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed.'

Then there is fourth, the interpositional cloud. Here are the Israelites in

a low place: they are down among the miry clay, and over them are task-masters. But an interpositional cloud comes down to them, interposed between them and the Egyptians, and brings them up out of the bondage into freedom. And the Lord speaketh of the matter thus, varying the imagery a little, but conveying the same thing, in the 19th of Exodus: 'Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagle's wings, and brought you unto myself.' Again I repeat the words,

Himself our heaven, himself our joy.

So that by that cloud interposing between them and the Egyptians they ascended from all their bondage into freedom. Just so it is now, by Jesus Christ interposing, and by the cloud of his truth we are severed from our sins, our enemies, and our troubles, and our bondage, and slavery, and degradation, and ascend into the sweet liberty of the gospel, and there we are made to rejoice that the Lord hath triumphed gloriously.

I have another cloud yet, I might mention two or three more, but perhaps one is as many as I must name: the 12th of Hebrews, you find it indeed in the 11th, but called a cloud in the 12th; 'Seeing then that we are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses:' there it is. And do we not by the testimonies these prophets and apostles have borne often ascend to heaven? Do not ministers preach those truths, and do not the testimonies of the prophets, that are called a cloud of witnesses, do they not sometimes come down and take us up to where they themselves are? And where is that? Mount Zion; they are come unto Mount Zion. Cloud of witnesses; see that: bless the Lord for this; the apostle does not say *clouds* of witnesses; but a 'cloud.' What does it mean? It means that they were all harmonious in their testimony. Men of God in all ages, true men of God, have seen eye to eye. Away with your stupid old cut and dry notion that the time will come when Zion's watchmen will see eye to eye; they do now; real men of God see eye to eye now in everything essential; they so far see eye to eye as to know that salvation is by sovereign grace from first to last with God. As I said last Wednesday evening, I would come and preach in the most peaceful way, and never make an allusion to error, if I could help it; but then as long as error does abound and some are deceived by it, if I came to my deathbed to-morrow my conscience would not clear me if I did not bear that testimony against delusion which that delusion requires, and which the welfare of the soul requires, and which the honour and glory of God require; for if the prophets had been made of such india-rubber sort of material as many professors are of now, what sort of a Bible should we have had? They were united in their testimony; cloud of witnesses. Thus then they ascended up in this fivefold cloud.

III. Lastly, *the DOWNFALL of their enemies*; 'their enemies beheld them.' And it goes on in the next verse to say, 'The same hour was there a great earthquake, and the tenth part of the city fell; and in the earthquake were slain of men seven thousand;' or as the margin reads it, and the Greek literally reads it, 'There were slain seven thousand names of men; and the remnant were affrighted, and gave glory to the God of heaven.' Now the earthquake here means a revolution in favour of the witnesses; an earthquake is expressive of a political, ecclesiastical, or social, or all three at once, revolution in favour of the saints. Take our Reformation, 300 years ago, or more now, by the instrumentality of the men then living, as well as a great many other circumstances I could point out, and I could even bring it down to personal experience, which my time does not allow me to do this morning. And the earthquake, taking it in this sense, the Lord wrought a revolution in the favour of his saints. Now apply this to your circumstances in private life, friends; does everything stand against you?—that man is against me, that

circumstance is against me; just those very persons that should do me good seem to be set upon doing me harm. You go on doing your duty, and pray to thy Father which seeth in secret, and he will work behind the scene and work such a revolution that the tenth part of the city will fall; that is, a tenth part of the hostile city. So Popery has lost its power in this country; that is, lost that power to exercise that domineering, abominable tyranny over the conscience of man which it would exercise; but it has lost the tenth part, has not lost all. And so when your enemy turns in your favour, Well, say you, he is altogether a friend now. Ah, there is only a tenth part gone; nine-tenths yet remain; there is only a tenth part of him in your favour, and that tenth happens to be in the ascendancy now; but presently the planets will get into another aspect, and put that phase of the man's character down, and bring the other nine-tenths up; and therefore you must not trust him even now, but trust in the Lord. That is the reason I have kept clear of some ministers that have wanted to be personally friendly with me of a duty-faith caste; ah, there is one tenth slain, but there are nine-tenths left; I will not go, but stop where I am. A tenth part of the city fell; that is all; just enough to enable you to get over a certain difficulty, to surmount a certain trouble; just enough to make room for a gallows for Haman, just enough to make room for Mordecai to be exalted, just enough to make room for the poor and needy Jews to come into the enjoyment of their privileges.

And there were seven thousand—a definite number, for an indefinite—of the names of men slain. You recollect we have shewn in our former discourses that these witnesses were many of them only officially slain, not personally; and so the names of men being slain when this revolution takes place, means that they are officially slain. For instance, suppose Italy now at this time should undergo a certain revolution from Popery to Protestantism, what would be the result? Why, the priests would lose their office, they would be officially slain; then we should say there is the slaughter of the seven thousand names of men, and that would go a very little way towards the number of locusts in that country. Ah, Mr Priest, he is out of office, his name is slain, his office is gone. Thus then, as the witnesses ascend to this perfection they have in Christ, the earthquake, or revolution after revolution shall be brought about in their favour, until all the kingdoms of this world be subdued to the reign of the Saviour and to the advantage of the church.

But it is said, 'the remnant were affrighted, and gave glory to the God of heaven.' Well, I think there are two things meant there. If you go to the 5th chapter of the Acts of the Apostles you will find that Ananias and Sapphira—and you young people and old people too, some of you, do not like to read that chapter;—Ananias and Sapphira were slain for breaking that commandment that is broken perhaps more than any other commandment, 'Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.' Lying is become as fashionable now a-day as anything I know of; they think nothing of telling a lie in our day among professors even. It is an awful practice, a fearful practice, prepares the man for everything that is bad. Ananias and Sapphira were smitten dead; and that circumstance wrought so much fear in the minds of the ungodly that the disciples and apostles were held in respect by their very enemies. The Lord knows how to make his people respected both by his judgments and by his mercies. Then I think there is another idea in it, and that is this, that some by these revolutions should be so affrighted as to be brought to the knowledge of the truth; that they should be so affrighted at their sins, so affrighted at their state, so affrighted at hell, so affrighted at the judgment of God, as to cry for mercy, and never, never rest till they find an interest in that love which alone can save them.