

SURREY TABERNACLE PULPIT.

THE FLYING ROLL.

A Sermon

PREACHED ON SUNDAY MORNING, AUGUST 2ND, 1863, BY

MR. JAMES WELLS,

AT THE SURREY TABERNACLE, BOROUGH ROAD.

“Then I turned, and lifted up mine eyes, and looked, and behold a flying roll.”—Zechariah v. 1.

WE are assured from what is said of this flying parchment, this roll, that it was nothing else but the law of the living God, and contained nothing but wrath, lamentation, mourning, and woe; and is the same in meaning and substance as that of which you read in the second chapter of Ezekiel. And the Lord God has so ordered it that while all men are by nature under the law and under the curse, and consequently under sin, and death, and wrath, God has so ordered it that not one jot nor tittle of that law ever can fail; that it must in its penalties be carried out in the eternal punishment of the sinner; or else that law must be met and magnified by a surety for the sinner, and so the sinner by the surety be delivered from that curse, and undergo that transition essential to the taking of the soul away from where the curse is, and bringing it to where the blessing is, and that is to Christ Jesus, called that order of things to which the blessing belongs, called Mount Zion, where the Lord hath commanded the blessing, even life for evermore. Herein, then, is one of the things that give great solemnity to the law of God; and happy the man that can say with the prophet,—that is, if he experience, which he will be sure to do, the happy consequences thereof,—that “I turned;” the soul turned to God, and the eyes lifted up to see the holiness and majesty of God in his eternal law; and then to see that there is a roll, or a parchment, a book, that has to be unrolled, and all its items of denunciation to be ministered to the sinner in his eternal condemnation. A sinner thus convinced of where he is as a sinner under this curse, that is the man that will become at once, there and then, in earnest about his soul. He will think, What little things they are that men are so anxious about, and strive so hard for, in comparison of the eternal salvation of the soul! and his concern to be delivered from this curse, his concern to escape hell, his concern to escape the wrath to come, will overcome every other concern, and he will feel in his own mind, if he hath but just a crust to sustain him, and just a bit of raiment to put on, and can just creep along through the world, he will be content with that—that I say is his present feeling—if there be but mercy for him, if there be but salvation for him. And such an one will cease to wonder at the ancients that wandered in deserts, and dwelt in caves and dens of the earth, rather than give up the gospel, rather than give up that escape from the wrath to come which they had realized, rather than give up that kingdom into which they were brought, rather than give up that name with which they were made acquainted, in which there was eternal salvation.

I will notice, then, in the first place, *the length and breadth of this roll*; secondly, *the character to whom the curse belongs*; third, *the destruction which it works*; and fourth and lastly, *the speed of its flight*; a flying roll.

VOL. V.—No. 241.

First, then, I notice *the length and breadth of this roll*. It is said to be twenty cubits long, and ten cubits broad. I do not think it anything fanciful to allow the ten commandments of the law here to be an explanation. There are ten commandments, and no doubt that they are often alluded to, as to their number, in various similes that are used to instruct us in this all-essential matter. Now, then, why, if there are but ten commandments, is the law said to be twenty? If we take it to be the law, if we take each cubit for a commandment, why is it said to be twenty cubits in length? Why, because the law hath a twofold aspect; namely, the preceptive and the penal. And of course the use I shall make this morning, as you may perceive, of this subject, is to show how the dear Saviour hath met the several parts contained in this parchment of denunciation, and how, if we are brought to know him, we are thus in every way delivered therefrom. Take, then, the length—namely, the preceptive, and then the penal, and that will give the idea of the double aspect of the law. Now it is a wonderful thing that Jesus Christ was made under the law, and never when a babe did he think wrong or do wrong. He grew up through all the gradations of age, and yet never had a wrong thought, never said a wrong word, and never gave a wrong look. "That Holy One that shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God;" and he remained that Holy One. Now he was under the law; but then, as we so often said, he was God as well as man, and he was not under the law for himself, he was under the law for others, that he might deliver us, and that the law might thereby be established in all its rights and claims. And so he lived not only a spotless life in the negative sense of the word, so as to speak no guile and to do no sin nor wrong in any way whatever, but he also lived a spotless life in the positive as well as in the negative sense of the word; that is, he not only did no wrong, but he always did right; there was a practical, from day to day exercise of love to God. Now, my hearer, what can be more pleasing, what can be more delightful than this one truth, that the life which the Lord Jesus Christ lived he lived for sinners, and that that life which he lived is in the Scriptures revealed as his righteousness, and it is everlasting righteousness? And the apostle saith, "Now to him that worketh not." Work, indeed! By what rule are we to work? If we attempt to work by the law's rule, then there is this negative put upon it, that the law is spiritual, that we are carnal, that he that offendeth in one point is guilty of the whole. We cannot work by that rule. And then, if we would come into the gospel, we must not bring any works there in a way of merit, nor in a way of condition, nor as forming any part of salvation; no, the whole must be renounced, and we must come simply as destitute of any righteousness, that all our righteousnesses are as filthy garments. "Now," saith the apostle, "to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness;" and that is a laying hold of the testimony of Christ's obedient life,—“by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous.” Now, then, this truth received into the understanding, this truth received into the affection, and you brought into this position, to say, Well, if ever I appear righteous before God, I am sure it must be by the righteousness of Jesus Christ; I see that that righteousness was not for himself, it was for the ungodly, it was for sinners, it was for those that have no righteousness of their own. And at the same time this righteousness is divine; he is called Jehovah our righteousness, and consequently that it is everlasting. Here, then, is the way that answers the question, How shall mortal man be just with God? The answer is, He that believeth in the Lord Jesus Christ is justified from all things from which he could not be justified by the law of Moses.

And thus, then, Jesus met the precept of the law. Your heart and my heart, your nature and my nature, are every day guilty before the Lord

if tested by the perfection of the precept of his holy law. But, precious faith keeping me in Christ's righteousness, the law hath done with my sins, the law hath done with me, the law hath no thunders for me, the law hath no lightnings for me, the law hath no condemnation for me, the law has not a word against me; the law is magnified, and it is God that justifieth; and if God justifieth, who is he that shall condemn? Ah, then, if thou hast thus seen this, if thou hast been thus favoured to turn to God, and to lift up thine eyes high enough to see the majesty of God's law, you will see the blest Redeemer taking the precept, and so the law is dead to you, and you are dead to the law. The truth that I am now stating enrages the professing world most wonderfully. Oh, they call us all sorts of names for insisting upon it, that Christ has so perfectly met the law; that the law is dead to us and we are dead to that; just as much so as the woman's first husband, who is dead, is dead, and she is no longer under the law of her first husband; he is dead to her, and she becomes, of course, dead to him, and she is married to another. The professing world is enraged at this, and calls us all sorts of names. And I do say this morning, in the presence of this assembly, that I most solemnly believe that their being enraged at this truth is nothing else but the inspiration of Satan. I believe that Satan hates it most heartily; for all the time we have nothing but our own righteousnesses, Satan can stand at our right hand, and, as it were, claim us, and we cannot overcome him. But when the Lord steps in, and brings the righteousness of Jesus—"Clothe him with change of raiment,"—why, Satan is then overcome, Satan is then defeated. There, Satan; now that I have justified, condemn if you can. So, then, I know not whether you are prepared or not to be hated of all men for the truth's sake. They will not admit that they hate you for the truth's sake, but they hate this doctrine. Hence, the great Huntingdon was very much persecuted upon this very point; but so it is; and so was the Saviour himself hated for this very matter. He set aside all creature righteousness, and showed the only way, as in the 17th of John, and other parts, wherein alone we can be justified before God. But for myself, I can well afford anything and everything; for being thus justified by faith, I have, by the righteousness of Jesus, peace with God; and if God smile upon me, and I have the light of his approbation, the light of his countenance, the light of his presence, the assurance of his favour by the righteousness of Jesus Christ, then,—

"Careless, myself a dying man,
Of dying men's esteem;
Happy, O God, if thou approve,
Though all beside condemn."

Thus, then, I meet this flying roll, curse of the law. Twenty cubits long. The dear Saviour's life meets the law preceptively; that I will take to be the one ten cubits. And then, when he comes to die, he has the other ten cubits. Like the sun on the sun-dial of Ahaz going back ten degrees, he has to go back over the ten commandments again. He has gone over them preceptively; he now has to go back and go over them penally, or suffering the penalty; and he began with our first sin, shall I say? and did not leave off until the last was atoned for. Every sin,—heart sin, lip sin, life sin, original sin, every sin,—all gone, all laid upon Jesus; and his one offering hath swallowed up the curse, swallowed up death in victory, cast Satan down to hell, established immortal souls as upon an immovable rock, and has put a new song, for old things pass away, all things become new,—put a new song into their mouth, even praise unto our God. Thus, on the one hand, I am cursed preceptively and cursed penally; but when I see Jesus come in and deliver me from the preceptive department, and then deliver me from the penal department, I wish to stay with him, I wish to go nowhere else, I want no righteousness which he is not unto me, I want no ransom which he is not unto me; I want no

life, nor light, nor peace, nor redemption, nor sanctification, nor salvation nor consolation, nor glorification, nor exaltation, nor association, nor any other favour, for time or eternity, which Jesus Christ is not unto me. Thus I get rid of the flying roll, this fiery flying serpent of the law, flying to minister vengeance to all that are under it; and now I come under the gospel; "Behold, in the midst of heaven an angel flying, having the everlasting gospel, to preach to them that dwell upon the earth." So much, then, for the twofold length of the law. The more you understand these things, the more it will endear the Lord Jesus Christ. And mark my words, I speak from personal experience as well as from the word of God, that just in proportion as the Lord Jesus Christ is precious to your soul, just in proportion will be the strength of your faith, and the strength of your hope, and the strength of your love to God, and the strength of your consolation. When is it that your faith is weak? When is it that you fear that your hope is perished from the Lord? and when is it that you are mourning with the poet, and saying,—

"It is a point I long to know,
Oft it causeth anxious thought,
Do I love the Lord or no,
Am I his or am I not?"

When is this the case? When clouds come between your soul and God, and your heart becomes hardened, and Jesus is not to you to-day, not in your feeling, what he was yesterday; the truth, though the same to you to-day in sentiment and belief, is not the same to you in its preciousness as it was yesterday, and the result is the heart is contracted, the soul is in bondage. But once more let the eternal Spirit bring in the dear Saviour's name as ointment poured forth, and make him precious to your soul, and make you happy in that preciousness, then—

"Let cares, like a wild deluge, come,
And storms of sorrow fall;"

you can then see, and feel, and know that—

"You shall safely reach your home,
Your God, your heaven, your all."

But again, we have to notice, not only the twofold length of the law, —and I may, before I step to the third point, just say, If any of you should think this is fanciful, I tell you, when you come to die, and lift up your eyes in hell, you will not think it fanciful then. There is a law, and that law must take final effect somewhere, either in your, as I have said, eternal condemnation, or else in the all-sufficient, adequate sufferings of a surety for you. What is the reason that men make so light of the gospel in our day—the true gospel? The secret is this; they are under that ignorance that Saul was under. He knew not the law of God in its real character; but when the commandment came, entered into his supposed good heart, holy heart, loving heart, heavenly heart,—why, when the law entered, so far from Saul of Tarsus having such a heart as he thought he had, why, he found his heart to be made up of all manner of concupiscences; and this is the heart I have been offering to God, and this is the heart that I have expected to go to heaven with. Why, it is as full of the devil, and as much like the devil, as the devil is like himself. Oh, it changed his note. Ah, now I am the chief of sinners, but, by the grace of God, I am what I am. Let a man, then, thoroughly know something of the law, and that is the man that will be in solemn earnest for the gospel. Many more things besides this I could say here. Now and then, when a ray comes down from God's presence in the perfection of Christ, the things of time and sense lose all their charms; it will make the soul feel as though it would long to depart from all that is seen with mortal eyes, and realize the full blessedness of a Saviour's perfection.

But, then, here is the breadth of the law, as well as the length. David saith, "I have seen an end of all perfection; but thy commandment:"

exceeding broad." Now, what is the breadth of the law? We have seen the length of it, what is the breadth of it? The breadth of it is this. And here, again, we want Jesus Christ. He alone can help us here. Without him we can do nothing. The breadth of the law is this, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy strength, with all thy mind, and thy neighbour as thyself." I should as surely be lost as that I exist, if I were tested by that rule, and so would you. Since the fall of man, there never was but one man under the sun that could bear that test. Now, then, Jesus Christ did love God with all his heart, and delighted to do his will with all his mind and with all his strength; and I am sure he loved his neighbour as himself; I am sure he loved the church as himself. If a neighbour mean one near to him, the church was by electing grace put into relationship with him; and he loved the church even as he loved himself; he could not love himself more than he loved the church. He loved you, poor sinner, that feel your need of him; for if he had not loved you, you would never have been brought to feel your need of him, not on this side Jordan, until you were in hell, and then it would have been too late for you to feel your need of him. He loved you, and gave himself for you,—loved you as he loved himself. He would no more be in heaven without you, if I may use such an expression, than he would be in heaven without himself. Yea, he himself would not go if you were not to be there with him. And hence he prays again and again, in the 17th of John, that those who were given to him might be with him where he is, to behold his glory. My love to God—I do love God, bless his holy name! in the gospel; but, alas! alas! I have a thousand drawbacks to it,—my love to God stands just as an evidence that I am a Christian; just as an evidence that God hath loved me; just as an evidence that I am delivered from the law that worketh wrath, and brought into the gospel that worketh love. But it is Jesus's love to God that extended to the full breadth of the law. He loved God, therefore, to the full breadth of the law. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and thy neighbour as thyself." And, say some, then I suppose, in believing this, you get away from the breadth of the law, as well as from the length of it. Certainly I do. "Love is the fulfilling of the law;" and love is the very essence of the dear Saviour's righteousness.

Here, then, is the flying roll in its threefold aspect; and you have Jesus Christ in all these three respects. First, that he met the law preceptively; second, that he met the law in its penalty; and, third, that he met the law in the breadth of it. And now see how the scene is changed; see how the winter is passed away; how the rain is over and gone; how the law lies quiet, as engraven upon the tables of stone in the ark of the covenant, the mercy-seat resting over the law. And the mercy-seat is not at all afraid of the law ever rising into antagonism to the mercy-seat. The law is quiet; the mercy-seat is quiet; wrath is quiet; God himself, if I may so speak, is quiet, for he resteth in his love; and so, "the work of righteousness shall be peace, and assurance, and quietness for ever." "My people shall thus dwell in peaceable habitations, and in sure dwellings, and in quiet resting-places."

I notice, second, though I have partly anticipated that, *the character to whom this curse belongs*. "It shall enter into the house of the thief, and into the house of him that sweareth falsely by my name." Ah, saith one, that does not touch me; I have never robbed any one. I am glad that you have not. No credit to you if you had. And so, taking a false oath, I have not done that. Well, you ought not to have done it. Well, am I not free? Nay, nay. Do you not read of such a scripture as the following, concerning Jesus Christ, that "he restored that which he took not away"? Every man and woman under heaven is a thief,—the worst kind of thieves. You have run away with God's holiness, and destroyed it; you have run away with God's righteousness, and destroyed it; you have run away with

God's love, and destroyed it; you have run away with that obedience that was due to him, and destroyed it all. Have I been such a thief as that? Yes, yes. We were created in God's image, holy, and that was God's right, and we have robbed him of that; we were created righteous, we have robbed him of that; we were created truthful, we have robbed him of that; and our hearts are become untruthful, deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. The apostle Paul expresses it thus, that "we have all sinned, and come short of the glory of God." Thus we are thieves; we have robbed the law of that obedience, and God of that honour that properly belongs to him. Now it is no small mercy to see this, to understand this. Now mark the Saviour's words, then, and that will help us with this part,—“I restored that which I took not away.” He has restored the image of God, has he not? Yes. That image which he hath restored, or that image which he hath rather substituted into the place of the image in which we were created, is an image of God infinitely superior to that which we lost. We have taken our hearts away from God, and we have said, “Depart from us; we desire not the knowledge of thy way.” We have robbed him of that honour. “Am I a master?” “Where is my fear?” “Am I a father?” “Where is mine honour?” We have taken it away. But the dear Saviour restored that which he took not away. He did not take away the image of God, but he hath restored it; he did not take away the honours of the law, but he has restored the same; he did not take us away, but he hath restored us, redeemed us, brought us back again. And the image of God in the second Paradise; the honours of law, and holiness, and justice, in the second Paradise; the homage and honour which the people shall do to the blessed God in the second or ultimate Paradise, shall all infinitely surpass the first. Thus, then, before God all come by nature under the degraded character of thieves; and if you live and die, my hearer, in that state, then the curse for ever must be your portion. “And into the house of him that sweareth falsely by my name.” All have done this—all. There is not a man under the heavens that is not guilty here. Swearing falsely by his name—what is it? Why, to make a false profession; and there is not a man under the heavens that has not been hypocritical towards God. The Lord is the judge in this matter. And no natural man can be true towards God,—it is utterly impossible for him so to be. Now, then, we needed one in our place that had no hypocrisy about him; that had no guile; that not only restored that which he took not away, but, as the Psalmist beautifully expresses it, “He that sweareth”—which Christ did—“to his own hurt, and changeth not.” The dear Saviour did. His solemn oath was that I will redeem them from death. “Repentance,” saith Jesus, “shall be hid from mine eyes.” He thus entered into an immutable oath to God: he kept that oath. It cost him a life of sorrow, and it cost him a death of unutterable agony, yet he himself saith, “Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory?” So then, my hearer, even before I go any farther, how much evil we are all naturally exposed to! Great is the misery of man. And happy the man who, by the grace of God, is made to turn to God, and discover these inclement skies, and to find out the deadly regions the soul is in, and to be made to fly to Christ for refuge; the only way of escape, not only from the law, but from our own character. And then, in Christ we get a good character; “complete in him.” Not reckoned robbers there, not reckoned hypocrites there. No; the Lord desires “truth in the inward parts, and in the hidden parts thou shalt make me to know wisdom.” So then, if we are thus brought to receive the dear Saviour, then we come out of the character of thieves and hypocrites; that is where we are by nature, in the spiritual sense of the word. We should not like such characters before men; when we see those who are of that character before

men we all tremble at the thought of ever becoming like them. And yet, what is the penal colony, what are a few years' transportation, the most degraded condition, what is the most degraded state into which a criminal can bring himself by the sentence of human law? Why, the heaviest and the longest is but a vapour; it appeareth for a little time, and it is gone; it is only a vapour, compared with the damnation of hell, compared with banishment from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his power. Human life, as every one knows when he gets towards the end of it, is but a poor tantalizing thing; the soul ever restless, the soul more or less on the wing; ten thousand objects are blighted, and ten thousand hopes blasted; so, like the butterfly, we flutter from object to object, until death shall end the scene. And what, then, I say, are all the troubles, or the treasures, or the pleasures of this life in comparison of eternal things? What a mercy, infinite mercy, and eternal mercy, then, thus to escape the curse, and to escape our own natural character, and to have a new character, a true character, a shining character, an unblemished character, a holy character, a righteous character, a sound character before God; presented by Christ Jesus without fault, or spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing. The Lord give us the vitality and spirituality of these blessed things; I mean blessed as looked at in Christ.

Then, third, *the destruction which this curse shall work*. "It shall enter into the house of the thief, and into the house of him that sweareth falsely by my name; and it shall remain in the midst of his house, and shall consume it, with the timber thereof and the stones thereof." There seems an allusion here, in the first place—but then that is only a temporal aspect of it—to the destruction of the temple. The Saviour said, not one stone should be left upon another that should not be thrown down. And God in his providence hath, by the instrumentality of Josephus, given us a minute detail of the working out of those judgments declared concerning the Jewish nation. And we see in the book of that devoted, industrious historian, that the temple was their last hope; for though the Romans thus invaded the land, and even when the walls of the city were demolished, the temple was their last hope; but by-and-bye their last hope was destroyed. There is not anything strong enough to shelter from this tremendous curse. So, in this world, you place your hope here, and you say, If that is gone, then that will be my comfort; and if so-and-so is gone, that will be my comfort. And you will find at the very last there is a mysterious pliancy in nature, and a clinging to life when life becomes a bare existency; and we look upon the object and say, I wonder how such an one can wish to live at all. But they do; there is a clinging to it. Yet the last hope must go; the last stone must be thrown down; the last refuge,—all must be swept away. There is not anything strong enough to stand against death, and much less is there anything strong enough to stand against hell. "If thou hast run with the footmen, and they have wearied thee, then how canst thou contend with horses?" the war horses of Sinai; "and if in the land of peace," this world, "wherein thou trustedst, they wearied thee, then how wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan?" I have the dear Saviour as the remedy here; I leave my old Adam house, I leave my old Adam hope, I leave my old self-righteous house, I leave the whole, and repair, in the name of Jesus, by his work, by his Spirit, and by his truth, I repair to that house that is not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. So that if the one, this earthly house of our tabernacle, shall thus be destroyed, the curse will work out its own sentence; but when this earthly house of our tabernacle is thus destroyed, we have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. *

"Behold the sure foundation stone
That God in Zion lays."

That foundation can never be destroyed. Behold mercy's building

rising; behold the top stone brought home with shoutings of Grace, grace unto it; behold the dear Saviour's delightful declaration, "Upon this rock will I build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Thus, then, you see that this flying roll when thus looked at in its various parts, shows up very beautifully the necessity, the infinite necessity there is for Jesus Christ, and how beautifully he answers to the whole.

I ought to say a few words—must be very few indeed—upon the last point, *the speed of its flight*; "a flying roll." There seems some allusion here, by a figure of speech, to the eagle. Moses, when predicting the incoming first of the Babylonians, and afterwards of the Romans, says, "The nation flieth swift as the eagle flieth." As the prey cannot escape the eagle, much less can the sinner escape the judgments of God; judgments will light upon him in a way he never dreamt of. But just a reflection or two, to encourage the people of God, and discourage those in their ways that are not the people of God. See how swiftly this curse has flown and overtaken its objects. There are many beautiful types of the Saviour as the way of escape; at the same time synchronizing with those types those judgments expressive of the law carrying out its own purposes. See the flood; there was no way of escape; no way of escape besides that which the Lord contrived. See the Israelites, how graciously the Lord appeared for them; but with what certainty the curse fell upon the Egyptians. We come into the wilderness; Korah, Dathan, and Abiram rose against the priesthood; that is it, that is where Satan centres all his malice,—against Christ's priesthood; because Satan well knows that it is there he loses us, and loses his power. Now, said Moses, "if these men die the common death of all men, God hath not sent me." He saw the curse was on its way. "And the ground clave asunder;" where? Not where a believing Israelite stood; but the ground clave asunder, just where Korah, Dathan, and Abiram were. See how God marks the object of his wrath, as well as takes care of the objects of his love. And so, passing by a great many circumstances, man intended that the three worthies should be burnt to death in Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace; but God intended that the men who threw them in should be slain. Man intended that Daniel should be torn to pieces by the lions; but God intended that not Daniel, but the men who were Daniel's accusers, were to be torn to pieces. Man intended that Mordecai should be hanged on a gallows fifty cubits high; but God intended that Haman should be the man. And so we may go on, just to show that wherever God intends the curse, there is no escaping; whereas those of you that know Jesus, and that love his name, you have here, in these things I have presented to you, the judgments of the Lord on the one hand, against his enemies and his care of his people on the other.

Then, if thou hast been favoured thus to turn from darkness to light, to lift up thine eyes to see this flying roll, and understand what it is, and to see Jesus as the way of escape, I am sure thou wilt be in earnest in these eternal things.