

SURREY TABERNACLE PULPIT.

THE POOL OF BETHESDA.

A Sermon

PREACHED ON SUNDAY MORNING, MAY 29TH, 1864, BY

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AT THE SURREY TABERNACLE, BOROUGH ROAD.

"For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had."
—John v. 4.

ALMOST endless is that variety of form in which the Lord has been pleased to present the great matter of eternal salvation. And that this circumstance of Bethesda's pool hath a gospel meaning, and a reference to eternal things, there can, I think, be little, or rather no doubt. It is true this scripture, which I have now read in your hearing, has been by German writers and by English writers very much argued against. There is something about it that reason does not seem to like, and so they try to prove that the verse I have taken this morning as a text ought not to be here, that it is not in some of the ancient manuscripts, and that it somehow or another crept into our version, they hardly know how. And this is a very, certainly, convenient way of getting rid of a difficulty: if I come to a scripture that runs rather counter to my prepossessed notions, then, in order to set the matter right, say that it is not in some of the ancient manuscripts, and therefore ought not to be here. But I trust we have too much of the fear of God before our eyes to give way to such a line of things as that. And what is very remarkable, too, as will come before us in the course of our discourse this morning, is this, that all that have written against this verse as being an interpolation, not liking the idea of an angel descending and troubling the water now and then—there is something in that so supernatural, the natural mind does not like it,—but it is a remarkable thing that there is one thing in this paragraph which all these writers have mysteriously overlooked, and which one thing, if it had happened to have struck their minds, they would have seen to be fatal to all their objections, and they would have seen the absolute necessity of the verse I have read as a text to make sense of the whole paragraph. But we will take a spiritual view of this circumstance; and in so doing I shall first notice *the analogy this circumstance hath to the gospel*; and then, secondly, *meet the main arguments which are used against that which is contained in our text*.

I notice first, then, *the analogy that there is between the circumstance of Bethesda's pool and the gospel*; clearly showing, I think, that it hath a spiritual meaning. Now, first, the Holy Spirit tells us very emphatically the name of this pool—Bethesda, which signifies, "the house of mercy." And you may easily imagine that the healing character of these waters, —though the virtue given to the waters was but temporary—you may easily imagine what an attraction this place was to the impotent and the blind, the lame and the halt. Great multitudes came, and a number, even five porches, were built for the accommodation of the afflicted that waited. We see, therefore, what an attraction it was—called "the house of mercy!" Let us take up this phrase just for a minute or two, "the house of mercy."

Now, what is the church of the blessed God but the house of mercy? It has been so in all ages. Whenever a sinner has obtained mercy, that sinner has testified of that mercy to others. And the reason that the ancient prophets preached mercy to others was because they themselves had obtained mercy; and the reason that the apostles preached mercy to others was because they had obtained mercy; and the reason why the apostle Paul felt so strongly, and consequently spoke so strongly, upon this matter, was because he was sensible of the freeness of the mercy by which the Lord had dealt with him; he was sensible of the exceeding riches of the grace by which he had escaped his just desert; he was sensible of the infinite efficacy of the blood that washed his foulest stain; he was satisfied of the blessedness of the righteousness that presented him righteous before God; and he was deeply sensible, too, of the sovereignty of that mercy. This is the reason why he preached mercy. And so the apostle, when looking to the Gentiles as obtaining mercy—mercy coming to them, and they being brought to know that they were saved by mercy,—the apostle gives us to understand that if any of the Jews are gathered in it must be by mercy; they are to obtain mercy through our mercy. And therefore the Christian ought to be, in order to be in keeping with a Christian's real character, one of the most merciful men upon the face of the earth. "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." The true church, then, of the blessed God in her real character is the house of mercy. And when a poor sinner, whatever may be his state or condition, when he finds that church, he finds then a house of mercy. Ah, he says, this people shall be my people, because these people are lovers of mercy, of eternal mercy, of mediatorial mercy, a covenant of sure mercies. I find that their language is, and I should like to be able to say the same—their language is, "I will sing of the mercies of the Lord for ever." See how attractive Bethesda would be to all that needed the kind of mercy that was there obtainable. Now this is a beautiful figure then, first, of the church of God; secondly, of the gospel of God. How attractive doth the gospel of God become to a sinner sensible of his need of mercy! And yet that gospel is scattered over the Bible amidst many threatenings, amidst many judgments, and amidst many covenants, and amidst many dispensations, and we have but few in our day ministers who know how rightly to divide the word of truth, and jumbling it all, as it were, up together; or, to use their own language, they say they take it just as it is—showing that they do not understand the difference between the gospel parts of the Bible and the old covenant and law parts of the Bible. Now such a ministry, to a sinner that feels his guilty and wretched condition, is of no avail. But when he finds a ministry that is pure, and is led to see that eternal salvation is by the sworn covenant of the blessed God, and that that mercy, in the order of that covenant, is from everlasting to everlasting; when the true church is thus found out, and when the true gospel is thus found out, it becomes a house of mercy. Let me dwell here; here are promises of mercy, here is a way of mercy, here is a rising tide of mercy, here is all the sympathy a poor sinner can need. And so the Lord Jesus Christ, it will apply to him as well; he is the house of mercy. And oh, how attractive he becomes! Happy was the day, friends, when vital godliness became attractive to us; when we became thoroughly convinced of what we were, and led along by degrees to see that we must be saved from first to last by the mercy of the Lord, and that the Lord Jesus Christ, as the way of God's mercy, became, according to his own word, "I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto me." Here, then, a man must first be prepared before he can be attracted. It is the sinner, and the sinner only, that needs the Saviour; it is the wounded and the sick only that need the physician; it is the lost, and the lost only, that is, the man sensible of his lost condition, that needs and appreciates the tidings of salvation. Here, then, is mercy.

But then, mark, in the next place, that these waters healed only as the angel troubled the waters—only as the angel moved and gave virtue to the waters. This appears to me to be a beautiful part of the circumstance. The house of mercy representing the delightful truth that Christ is the house of mercy and the way of mercy; but there is another delightful truth brought before us by the angel; that the waters were healing only as the angel rendered them virtuous, efficacious, and powerful. Now the Lord Jesus Christ is called the angel of God's presence. Why is he called the angel of God's presence, or the messenger of God's presence? For this reason, that no other person ever did, since the fall of man, acceptably approach God,—that none could approach God since the fall of man. If any man approach God, it must be a person that can come before him with a righteousness that his law can approve; and Jesus Christ is that person: it must be a person that can come before him with sacrificial power to put sin eternally away, that God with man might dwell; and Jesus Christ is that person. So that he is the angel, the messenger of God's presence. Doth not this set before us the delightful truth that the angel troubling the water is a figure of Christ, the Mediator of the new covenant, giving life and virtue to the word? Let the water represent the word of God, and that word is made life to us,—made healing to us,—cooleth us and refresheth us, only as it derives efficacy by the angel of God's presence. But there is another point here, and that is this;—he is not only the angel of God's presence, as the only person that could ever approach God since the fall of man,—as the Lord saith, "Who is this that hath engaged his heart to approach unto me?"—but he is the only person that could bring others into God's presence. Bless his holy name! he has done so, and he does do so, and he will do so. He brings his people into the knowledge of the truth, and thus brings them into the service of God here below; and then, he is daily taking his children home to heaven one by one, and bringing them into God's presence; and by-and-bye, at the last day, when he shall descend from heaven with all those that are now in heaven with him, to meet those that shall be at that day alive on the earth, he shall then change the living, and raise the dead, in the twinkling of an eye, and shall enter into God's presence, and present himself and all the people before God. Thus, then, here is the house of mercy for poor, miserable creatures like ourselves; and here is the order of that mercy, indicated in the angel being here,—the angel of God's presence. And then there is something stronger still, if possible, and that is, that he is called not only the angel of God's presence, but he is also called the angel of the covenant—the messenger of the covenant. The original word there translated *messenger* is just the same as in other places translated *angel*, or rather rendered *angel*; it might have been rendered with equal propriety there, "The angel of the covenant, whom ye delight in." Now, what covenant was Christ the angel of—that is, the messenger of? Certainly not of the Jewish covenant, for that waxed old and vanished away; but he is the messenger of the new covenant of God's good will, and God's will is that all that he has given to Christ should have everlasting life; God's will is that every one that seeth the Son, and believeth on him, hath everlasting life. Now, then, Christ is the angel of this new covenant—of this good will. Here, then, take away Christ as the angel of God's presence; take away Christ as the angel of the new covenant; just look at it; and I pause here for the sake of your getting at the force and meaning of it; because what I am going to say is such a truth, it is so recognized by us, I do not know any truth more recognized by us than what I am now going to say. You will say, What is that? Why, if you take away Jesus Christ as the angel of God's presence, in the sense I have stated, or if you take him away as the messenger of the covenant, and give us a gospel without him, it would be like the pool of Bethesda without the

angel; no life, no refreshing, no healing. Oh, how many in our day preach the letter of the gospel! but they know not the angel of God's presence, nor how he is the angel of God's presence; and they know not the angel of the new covenant, nor how he is the messenger of the new covenant. A sworn covenant is not rooted in their souls; they have not been brought away from every other refuge, and really into this eternal order of things; and, therefore, their gospel is dead, provoking, irritating, agitating, generating bondage; a miserable gospel. You just enjoy the mercy of God by Christ Jesus; you just be brought into his presence by the angel of his presence; you just be brought into the blessings of this covenant; and then go and hear, if you like—you will not catch me, I can tell you—one of these dead-letter men. He will lay hold of your flesh, and he will go on, and make you out to be so good, and so pious, so amiable, and belabour your poor old Adam, while your new man is shrieking murder all the time you are hearing him. There is no life but in the mercy that is by Christ Jesus; there is no efficacy in the word without the angel of God's presence, without the angel of the everlasting covenant. Here, then, we may rejoice; here we may stand, in this mercy, and rejoice; here we may stand, in God's presence by Christ Jesus, and rejoice; here we may stand, in this everlasting covenant, and rejoice. And some of us have many, many times realized many healings by the word of God, just in this order of things; the mercy of God, the angel of God's presence, the angel, the messenger of the everlasting covenant. This is the order of things in which we are thus to be saved, to be healed. Those are two analogous points, then, or parts; first, the house of mercy; and secondly, the order of that mercy, the angel of God's presence, the angel of the covenant. The third analogous part is the ability of these waters, when they derived efficacy from the angel of the covenant, that whosoever stepped in first after the troubling of the water was healed of whatsoever disease he had; it did not matter what it was; sure to heal him.

Now, taking this view of it, how it sets forth the ability of the Saviour! As there was not one bodily disease that was too much for him when he was on earth, so there is not one soul disease: it matters not whether it is a Magdalene, a thief on the cross, or a Saul of Tarsus,—matters not who he is, nor what he is, nor where he is; whatever disease, whether it is the disease of fresh contracted guilt, whether it is the disease of heart-hardness, whether it is the disease of unbelief, impatience; let it be what it may; let the wound or trouble be what it may, I will tell you this morning plainly, that while the word of God saith, "The spirit of a man will sustain his infirmity; but a wounded spirit, who can bear?" I will tell you this morning that, let your troubles be what they may,—they may be as great as the troubles of Job were; but if the Lord is pleased to bring home a word, and heal your soul, strengthen your soul, you shall carry a mountain as though it were a straw, and you shall see your way through midnight darkness as though it were noonday; and you shall run through troops as though there was no hindrance in your way; and you shall leap over walls as easily as at other times you could step over a straw. Why, when the Lord is thus with us, it matters not what we may be surrounded with. Hence it was, all the time the Lord granted Job his presence. Well, Job said, my property is gone, and my health is gone, and my family all swept away; and yet he could not feel it; he was too happy to regret it. "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away, and blessed be the name of the Lord." But, say you, Job did not continue in that state. No, but the Lord could have kept him in that state if he had pleased. Why, some of our martyrs, they put them to death by degrees, and they did not feel more of it, I was going to say, than as though they had been chloroformed or mesmerized. No; there was the presence of God, which so strengthened them that they could face it all;

say, Ah, you may cut my body into mincemeat,—do not care; no, I have in me the eternal Spirit of God, as a well of water springing up into everlasting life. I rather question whether we look quite enough to the Lord for this or not. Instead of looking to the Lord to be strengthened in the inner man, we want the body to be comfortable, the house to be comfortable, the purse to be comfortable, and circumstances to be comfortable, and the world to be comfortable, and everything to be comfortable; and then we are great believers, then we are very happy, then we are very comfortable. All this is worldly, you know; all this is after the flesh; all this is that which anybody can be happy in. And then come adversities and afflictions; and none of us know such afflictions as the ancients underwent; then we feel how small our faith is. The Lord help us, therefore, to look less for worldly comforts; and if a trouble come,—well, I am not surprised, I expected it, if I didn't expect that one, I expected one of some sort. There is nothing certain here, most uncertain. Just a few days ago, a friend called at my house,—had a chat with him; healthy apparently, comfortable apparently,—dead now, gone. So it is that we may expect trouble. But if we are enabled to look to the Lord, and remember he can strengthen us, and enable us to smile at trouble, then—

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

if the Lord heal our souls, strengthen us, why, we shall smile at the troubles at last, and pay as little attention as possible to what people say of us. They will make their remarks, such people having no business of their own, or else, if they have, they neglect it to attend to other people's; pay no attention to this, go right on. As I hinted just now in prayer, if we never have peace with God, if we never love him, serve him, and derive comfort from him, until there are no troubles, why, we may go pining on all our days over our troubles.

“Why should the children of the King
Go mourning all their days?”

Let our prayer be—

“Great Comforter descend, and bring
Some tokens of thy grace.”

And then, having food and raiment, we shall be content, and bless the Lord that he is a substitute for all things, while not anything can be a substitute for him. Here then, first, is the house of mercy; secondly, here is the order of that mercy, indicated by the angel; and then, third, the ability of the gospel, indicated by the clause, “Whatsoever disease he had,” “to comfort them,” saith the apostle, “in any trouble.” But then there is an essential or two to that. First, there must be confidence in the Lord Jesus Christ; and secondly, there must be reconciliation to God by the Lord Jesus Christ; and having these two things, confidence in what he has done, and reconciliation to God by him, so as to love God after this gospel order of things, you become thus a friend of God, and then what will he not do for you? These then appear to me to be the three analogies between this pool and the gospel. First, a house of mercy, attractive to all that know their need of that kind of mercy; secondly, the order of that mercy, indicated by the presence of the angel; third, the ability of the gospel to heal, indicated in the man being healed of whatsoever disease he had.

Now let us look at the contrasts. As there are analogies, there are also contrasts. In the first place, there was a great uncertainty about their being healed at all here, for it appears only one at a time was healed. There was a great uncertainty about it. Hence the man in our text, he had been there thirty-eight years, and no one had put him into the pool. And I don't much wonder at it, for it strikes me that he was one of those

self-conceited, disagreeable, find fault, grumbling, murmuring, hateful sort of dispositions, everybody fled from him. I think he was one of that stamp; nasty, crusty, sour, disagreeable. Hence, after he was healed, he could not help being disagreeable. He went away, and brought a persecution upon Christ. He was not healed spiritually; he had not, by the body being healed, any saving knowledge of Christ. He went away, brought persecution upon Christ; just the same as persons now join the church, and stop about a fortnight or three weeks; away they go, and do all they can to injure the minister that baptized them and the church that received them. There are some of that stamp now: the Saviour was accustomed to that. Well, you seem a disagreeable sort of fellow, will you be made whole? I dare say he had a great mind to say no. So I am inclined to think this was the spirit of this man. And the Saviour said to him, "Sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee." The Saviour never said that to one of his own disciples; he never said that to one that was healed in soul as well as in body, and went away with a heart full of gratitude and love to the blest Redeemer. The dear Saviour didn't say that to the man in the ninth of John, whose eyes he had opened; no, no, no; couldn't get that blind man, who was now a seeing man, to speak so of Jesus; he would not bring any persecution upon him; no. Whereas this disagreeable fellow, he turned round and brought persecution upon Christ for having done this on the sabbath day. Let us, then, be careful not to take temporal advantages for spiritual,—that which pertains only to this life for that which pertains to eternity. A man's prospering in the world is no proof of his belonging to God, nor is it any proof that he does not belong to God; it is no proof one way or the other; we must look to spiritual things for that. We see, then, that there was an uncertainty about their being healed. But there is no uncertainty in relation to the gospel; the language of the gospel is, "Every one that thirsteth," and the Saviour binds up the broken hearted, whose hearts are broken with grief, fearing the Lord will not have mercy upon them; and Jesus looseth every prisoner that feels he is a prisoner of sin, and guilt, and wretchedness, and groans under it. The Lord looks down from heaven to hear the groans of the prisoner, and to loose them that are appointed to die. Thus, then, about this pool there was great uncertainty, but in the gospel there is no uncertainty; no, the blest Redeemer receiveth every one that is brought to know his need of him. "Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out." Again, it was here also conditional; after the troubling of the water, he that first stepped in. So that the weakest here had the least chance of being healed. But, bless the Lord, it is not so in the gospel; it is not conditional, no, no, no. The Lord comes, and he himself wounds, for there is not a man nor woman under heaven so wounded in conscience, and heart, and feeling, as to know their need of Christ, but those that the Lord himself hath wounded; he wounds and he heals, not conditionally, but freely, absolutely, and with certainty. Then, again, the persons who were thus healed, it is just possible they might be subjected to the same disease again, as we often see that old diseases kill people at the last. But where the Lord heals, he heals for ever. Are my sins forgiven? They are forgiven for ever. Is my soul reconciled to God? The breach can never again be made, that once existed. Have I undergone change of raiment, and passed over from creature righteousness to the righteousness of Christ? I am righteous for ever. Am I brought out of wrath into God's love? I am brought there for ever. Is my name in the book of life? It is there for ever. Am I born of God? Then it is of an incorruptible seed, that liveth and abideth for ever. So that I can be no more dead in sin; I can be no more a guilty sinner before God, in the sense I once was; I can no more be under condemnation, no more under sin, no more under the law, no more under the curse, no more under death, no more a child of wrath; no, bless the Lord, the work is done, and done for

ever. Thus, then, we have here, first, the mercy of God; secondly, the order of that mercy; third, the ability of that mercy, and then we have the contrasts. That there was an uncertainty, that it was conditional, and that disease might return again—not so in the gospel sense.

I will now notice *the main arguments that are used against this verse*. Some of you happily escape these controversies; some of us do not. But my attention has been called to this paragraph, and I feel it important to make a few remarks. The first argument that is brought against our text is by men who profess to be Christians,—mind, I take no notice of infidels, I do not think their arguments worth noticing, but men that profess to be Christians. They tell us we nowhere read of the waters of the pool of Bethesda having any virtue in them, and that if those waters had had the virtue in them ascribed to them, something would have been said about it, therefore they use that as an argument that this verse has crept in somehow or another, and has no business here. Now let us look about for an answer. I will grant that the Scriptures do not, apart from this paragraph, say anything about the virtue or power of the waters of the pool of Bethesda. But suppose we could bring some other scriptures that would be analogous to that, would not that rather help us? I think it would. Suppose I were to stand by the side of the river Jordan; suppose I see a man coming that is a leper; suppose he informs me that he is going to wash or immerse seven times in the river Jordan; suppose I answer and say, That will be of no avail, for I have known a great many lepers do that. The man would answer, But I am doing it by the command of the God of the Hebrews, and I believe that the God of the Hebrews will give temporary virtue to the waters, and I believe that if I immerse myself seven times in this river, as I do it by divine authority, I believe my leprosy will leave me. Well, he did immerse himself seven times, and his leprosy did depart from him, and his flesh came like a little child's; he was as fresh as though he was just beginning life again. Well, now, here is efficacy. But then other lepers might have gone and washed in that river, and have derived no good. You see all the difference is between the presence of the power of the Lord and the absence of that power. When the Lord is absent, then it is all nothing. You may wash yourself morally in the word; you may become a very great professor; but if it be not by the power of the Eternal Spirit of God, you will never know the efficacy of God's word to make you clean. Thus, then, I do see that the Lord hath given virtue to water to heal the leper. Why should it be thought, then, if the river Jordan, on a special occasion, had virtue given to it by the living God to cleanse the leper, why should it be thought a thing incredible that the pool of Bethesda also was blessed with temporary virtue and power, every time the angel troubled it, to heal the one that then stepped in? Or suppose I could give another instance of the efficacy of water. And water is a subject I like to dwell upon. I think we should be all as well in health, perhaps better too, if we never drank anything but water; neither tea, nor cocoa, nor coffee, nor anything of the kind. Ah, but, say say you, these drinks are so comfortable. So they are; still I think we should be quite as well if we were to drink nothing but water, morning, noon, and night. But as I have no hope of being able to get you so far as that, I will not attempt it; and besides that, I like a cup of tea myself—must confess that—not because it is essential, but one likes the comfort of it. Now suppose, then, I bring another instance of the efficacy of water. Here is a man; the Saviour spits on the ground, makes clay of the spittle, anoints the eyes of the man; he says, "Go, and wash in the pool of Siloam." Well, Lord, a great many people have washed there; I have washed there a great many times. I dare to say the man had washed his face there many times before, for it is a very nice, flowing sort of brook, just down by the south-eastern side of Jerusalem—I know where it is very well. But here is a special occasion; he went just as he was, obeyed the Lord's command; the Lord went with him, gave efficacy to

the water, and in washing the clay off he washed his blindness off. Why, I can see myself now, and everybody else. Here, then, is another instance of the efficacy of water. I might as well say, while I am about it, that whatever the Lord is pleased to make use of as a blessing, however weak it matters not to him; he can turn a farthing into ten thousand pounds, and he can turn ten thousand pounds into a farthing; he can enable a worm to thrash mountains, and he can slay a giant with a stone from the sling of David. The Lord help you to understand these things, and that they may increase your confidence in his blessed truth and name. So much, then, for there being no virtue in water. The second argument used against this verse is, that if this water of the pool of Bethesda had efficacy in it, then Christ, in healing this man, set aside a divine institution, and adopted a course different from that. Well, my answer to that is, that Jesus Christ came into the world to set aside divine institutions. The priesthood of the Jews, and all the ordinances of that dispensation, with all the laws of that covenant, were divine institutions; and Christ came, as the antitype, to set the whole aside. That seems to me to clear up that point. And then the third argument is, that it encouraged a spirit of selfishness, for each would struggle which should get into the water. Well, my answer to that is, that the water did good to those who were healed, and did no wrong to those who were not healed; it simply left them where it found them, and it must be acknowledged that it was better that *some* should share in the good, than that none at all should be healed. If men were selfish, and rebelled, that was not a fault to be laid to the charge of heavenly mercy. The fourth argument is, that this verse is not found in some ancient manuscripts. What of that? That is just what the Socinian says of those parts of the Scriptures where the Trinity is spoken of, and where the atonement is spoken of. It is very easy to get a number of old, mutilated manuscripts, and say, Such a verse is not there. Why, that ought to have no weight whatever. And the fifth argument is, that admitting this to be true, that the waters were as they are here represented,—that it encourages superstition. Hence, they say, the Roman Catholics, with their holy wells and holy rivers and holy water, encourage superstition. Well, I do not see that. If these waters, having temporary efficacy, encourage superstition, then Naaman washing in Jordan must encourage superstition, and the man washing in the pool of Siloam must encourage superstition, and therefore such an argument appears to me to be worth just nothing. These are the arguments brought against this verse. Let us, in conclusion, notice the oversight which they all commit. They say that this fourth verse was originally in the margin, and ought not to be in the text. But it is a strange thing that these men do not seem to see that if the fourth verse should be put out, you must put the seventh verse out, and if you put the seventh verse out, you may as well take out the whole of it. I do not know whether you catch fully the idea or not. Our text says that an angel came down at a stated season and troubled the waters. Now, then, they say that this verse should not be there. And yet, in the seventh verse, we read, “The impotent man answered him, Sir, I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool.” Well, this man says the water was troubled, my text tells me how it was troubled, and this seventh verse says it was troubled. Now, all these writers overlook this. So that if you take away the fourth verse, which explains how the waters were troubled, you must take away the seventh verse. Why, here is the man himself testifies, in the seventh verse, that the waters were troubled. Thus, then, it does appear to me to be a species of infidelity that would take from us this part of the word of the blessed God. We have, then, the man’s own testimony that the waters were troubled, and I have endeavoured to explain its spiritual meaning. May the Lord help you to think about it better than I have spoken about it.