

SURREY TABERNACLE PULPIT.

A LOVER OF GOOD FRUIT.

A Sermon

PREACHED ON SUNDAY MORNING, SEPTEMBER 10TH, 1865, BY

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AT THE SURREY TABERNACLE, BOROUGH ROAD.

"Woe is me! for I am as when they have gathered the summer fruits, as the grape gleanings of the vintage: there is no cluster to eat: my soul desired the first-ripe fruit."—Micah vii. 1.

THAT the Lord Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life is a truth into which the Holy Spirit brings all the saved. Every one that has learned and is taught of God is sure to come to Christ; and such a one soon becomes established in the great truth that Jesus Christ is thus the way out of all the sin and woe into which by the Fall we are brought; that he is the way into possession of all that is blessed and glorious. They soon become established in this. But then the great question is, there is another path—namely, a path of Christian experience; and what, in connection with Christ being the way, the truth, and the life, what is that path of Christian experience wherein we have a saving acquaintance with Jesus Christ? For not only must he be to us the way, the truth, and the life, but our acquaintance with him must be of a vital and of a saving character; there must be that personal experience that brings the soul into that path which the vulture's eye hath not seen. And this experience is that which will include a kind of godly sorrow that none can understand but those who are taught of God. Godly sorrow, real godly sorrow, that which is the produce of the Holy Spirit, is as great a secret to the natural man as any other department of the salvation of the soul. I will, therefore, in explaining our text, notice in the first place, *some analogous lamentations to the one contained in our text*; secondly, *the lamentation contained in our text*; and then, thirdly and lastly, *the ultimate object of desire*—"My soul desired the first-ripe fruit."

For the sake of making this lamentation the more clear, I will notice, in the first place, *some few analogous lamentations in the word of God*, wherein the Christian has used similar language, and hereby our path is marked out. Now the Saviour hath said, in relation to his people, that "they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world." But sometimes, in the mystery of his providence, he is pleased to place his people in the world, or so in the world that they are surrounded, as may be the case with some of you, they are surrounded, perhaps, with ungodly characters, and they are daily hearing the ungodly language, and witnessing the ungodly doings of those by whom they are surrounded; and they wonder why they are so placed, and perhaps they themselves sometimes, in being so placed, are so cast down and so discouraged that they would give the world if they could get away from such a position. And yet it is the Lord that is pleased so to place them. Hence the lamentation in the 120th Psalm, and I will notice the lamentation for the sake of itself, and for the sake also of pointing out the remedy. Now there are ten thousand maladies in this world for which we can find no remedy; but there is no malady in the experience and the circumstances of the people of God for which the Lord

hath not provided a remedy. Hence the Psalmist, when he was placed among the enemies of the Lord, and witnessed nothing else but that of which I have spoken, he says, "Woe is me that I sojourn in Mesech, that I dwell in the tents of Kedar." He was so placed. And it is for the Christian to remember that whatever his position is, the Lord is with him. The Lord will be with you; he will not deny your faith, because of the unbelief of those around you; he will not set their wickedness to your account; he will not set their ungodliness to your account. You are placed where you are, and you often say, "Woe is me! for these things seem to strip me of everything spiritual and sacred, so that there is nothing apparently, as the prophet here saith, left." And David, it appears, did speak a little truth to some of these people around him, and wished to be the means, if it were the Lord's will, of bringing them into the same reconciliation to God into which he was brought; and I am sure every one that is brought into reconciliation with God desires to see others brought also. Hence David says, "I am for peace." And what peace was David for? We know what peace he was for; we know that he was for that peace that was by the eternal perfection of the Great Melchizedek; we know that he was for that peace which he describes so beautifully in the 32nd Psalm, the peace arising from transgression being forgiven, from sin being covered, and from the non-imputation of iniquity, and the righteousness imputed without works; that is the peace which he was for. "But," he says, "when I speak, they are for war." So the Christian will generally find when he speaks in favour of this vital and divine peace with God, he will generally find, unhappily, that all his fellow-creatures are blindly at war with that only reconciliation to God by which we can escape the wrath to come, and share in that inheritance which is incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away. And David saith, "My soul hath long dwelt with him that hateth peace." I am aware there is some internal experience there closer than I have stated. Your old man of sin within you, that hates your new man, and hates the peace you have with God; and Satan makes use of the evils you have in your nature to perpetually interrupt and break your peace with God. But, bless the Lord, it is a peace that cannot be destroyed, a peace that no man can take from you. But let us look at the remedy. Now, then, are some of you so placed that you are thus tried, and seem as though you would rather be otherwise placed? Well, the Lord has placed you where you are in his providence; he has so placed you; let us hear what the remedy is. David's remedy was this, and a beautiful remedy it was—Here am I, surrounded with the ungodly, in an ungodly world, yet I feel I am not of them; I feel that I love the habitation of God's house, and the place where his honour dwelleth. And the remedy was this,—“O send out thy light and thy truth; let them lead me; let them bring me unto thy holy hill, and to thy tabernacles. Then will I go unto the altar of God, unto God my exceeding joy.” There is a thought there so exceedingly sweet, I think, we can never dwell too much upon it. “O send out thy light,” and Christ is that light; “and thy truth,” to inform us as to the kind of Christ he is, the kind of Mediator he is, and the kind of righteousness he has brought in, and the kind of atonement he has made, and the kind of salvation he has wrought, and the kind of redemption he has obtained, and the kind of glory into which he hath entered, and the origin of that, and the order of that. So we want Christ as the light that gives us hope, but we want truth to inform us and put us to rights as to the meaning of all these things. “Let them lead me; let them bring me unto thy holy hill, and to thy tabernacles. Then will I go unto the altar of God.” I think there is something in that beautiful beyond description—“to the altar of God.” Am I conscious that I am a sinner? Then all that will be laid at the altar of God. Am I conscious that I am unworthy of the least of his mercies? Then the altar of God, the sacrificial altar, is the way. “Then

will I go unto the altar of God, unto God my exceeding joy ;" that is, in that order of things after which God is our exceeding joy. So, then, you that have ungodly relatives, and are obliged to live with them ; you that have ungodly neighbours, are surrounded with the ungodly, and obliged to be with them, let me use the apostle's words, and use them carefully. When the apostle wrote to some Christians who were actually in slavery, and therefore could not get out, he says, " Art thou called being a servant, a slave ? " care not for it ; but if thou mayest be made free "—if the way is open, you would be glad, of course, to improve, at least as far as you can judge, your position ; but if a way is not open, remember the Lord can take care of you in one place as well as in another. So, then, you may be saying, Woe is me, I am not so placed that I can meet the assembly of the saints so often as I could wish ; I cannot always join with them, and I cannot enjoy those privileges I could wish to enjoy as much as I could wish. Well, then, your prayer must be with David, that the Lord would send his light and his truth into your soul, and make you feel that he regards your solitude, he knows where to find you, and how to bless you.

Let us now come, then, *to the language of the lamentation of our text.* " Woe is me ! for I am as when they have gathered the summer fruits." Now here it appears that the prophet—for of course you must understand the words strictly in their spiritual sense—that the prophet had been fruitful, that he had known what it was to bring forth great fruit ; that he had known what it was to love the Lord very greatly ; that he had known what it was to have great faith ; he had known what it was to have such faith in the Lord as to say, " Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him ;" he had known what it was to triumph over all his troubles ; in a word, he had known personally and experimentally the meaning of the 11th—of the things recorded, at least, in the 11th of Hebrews ; that his faith was mighty, overcame everything, kept him walking with God, and with the Saviour, and with the Holy Spirit, in the new covenant, in the liberty of the gospel, in the sunshine ; nothing wintry, no coldness, no indifference ; no ; the winter was past, the rain was over and gone, flowers appeared on the earth, and it appeared to be such summer with him, and the dew resting all night upon his branch, and in the Lord's light he could walk through darkness, and had not a trouble. But oh, how great the change now ! Now, " Woe is me ! for I am as when they have gathered the summer fruits ;" they are all gone.

And so some of you ; you look back at the time when it was indeed in months past well with you, and perhaps now there is nothing but hardness, nothing but hardness ; the peaceful hours you once enjoyed seem to be gone, gone for ever. Now the prophet laments this barren state, and I would not say anything harsh, but I will say this, friends, if we are content to be in this barren state, it is certainly no good sign. The prophet, you observe, lamented it ; " Woe is me !" And so, if you seem loveless, and faithless, and prayerless, and that you can read the Bible, you can hear sermon after sermon, nothing seems to touch, nothing seems to do you any good ; I am sure, if this be your state, if this be your experience, it will more or less be a trouble to you. And this experience too, this experience of destitution, and your own helplessness, will enable you to understand many scriptures which without this experience you would not understand, and will enable you to pray many prayers. Leaving the simile, then, used in our text for a moment, I would just remind you of some few scriptures which this experience will enable you to understand, and prayers it will enable you to pray :—such, for instance, as this, " Bring my soul out of prison, and I will praise thy name." It is only varying the simile ; it is the same thing ; the soul shut up in prison, and cannot help itself. " Bring my soul out of prison, and I will praise thy name." And another prayer saith, " Oh, when wilt thou come unto me ? When

shall I hear thy word again as I have heard it? When shall I read thy word again as I have read it? When shall I enjoy thy presence again as I have enjoyed it?" "Turn again, O Lord, our captivity, as streams in the south." And it will enable you to understand this scripture also, that "he hath hedged up my way as with hewn stones;" he has fitted them so close together there is not a crevice left for a little light to get in; "he hath made my paths crooked. He was unto me as a bear lying in wait, and as a lion in secret places. He hath turned aside my ways, and pulled me in pieces; he hath made me desolate." Now the Christian is not a stranger to this; there will be times when you will be afraid of God; there will be times when you can understand what Job means when he says, "God maketh my heart soft, and the Almighty troubleth me; many such things are with him. Therefore am I troubled at his presence; when I consider, I am afraid of him." We sometimes get down into this low state; there are all sorts of forebodings, and we feel afraid of our best friend, because we fear he is not our friend; we feel afraid of our God, because we fear he is not our God; we feel afraid of the Bible, because we fear that the threatenings, and not the promises, belong to us; we feel afraid of death, because we fear the sting for us is not taken away; we feel afraid of judgment, because we fear our sins will appear against us; we feel afraid of eternity, because the way into that eternity is not clear. These are some of the heart-sinkings of the real child of God. If, therefore, thou art the subject of these, then thou art only where the prophet was. And you will sometimes, when you read of the barren fig tree, "Cut it down, why cumbereth it the ground?" Why, you will say, some judgment, some disease, some calamity, will cut me down; for I answer more to the barren fig tree than I do to the fruitful tree; ah, then, what am I but a cumberer of the ground? But then, Christian, if thou wert dead thou wouldst not feel this. Those who are really barren do not feel that they are barren; those who are really poor do not feel it, and are not conscious of it. Hence it was with the Laodicean church, they knew not that they were poor, and blind, and naked, and miserable; and the Lord wakened them up, and gave some of them a consciousness of what they were, and presented the remedy—namely, to buy of him gold tried in the fire, and white raiment, that they might be clothed. Thus, then, I think the Christian doth a great many times during his pilgrimage apply the words, "Woe unto me!" Ah, what will become of me? My experience! why, I seem to have no experience. And yet how paradoxical, yet not paradoxical; how astounding, that this very experience of which I am now speaking, is that experience that makes way for the gospel. Take such a man as this under a yea and nay gospel, he could not listen to it, for one simple reason; he says, "This is no use to me." "But," his neighbour says, "it is of use to me; it does very well for me." "Well," says the poor in spirit, "it does not do for me; it may do for you, but it is of no use to me." Now then, a minister cannot go too far for such an one; a minister cannot make the Saviour's mediation occupy too large a space for such an one; he cannot make out the grace of God to be too rich for such an one; the minister cannot go too far in proclaiming the boundless mercy of God for such an one; the minister cannot go too far in proclaiming the certainty and infinite ability of God's truth for such an one. These are the things that humble us, these are the things that try us, and these are the things that make way for the coming in of the glorious gospel of the blessed God. Therefore, Christian, if you cannot take your softness of heart as an evidence of belonging to the Lord, take a consciousness of your hardness of heart to make it so; if you cannot take your faith as an evidence, I will not say take your unbelief as an evidence, but I will say, take your consciousness of it as an evidence. If you have not rich enjoyment in your soul as an evidence of belonging to the Lord, then take your con-

sciousness, not the poverty itself, but the consciousness of it, as an evidence. "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

But just let us trace out this. It gets worse and worse. First, the summer fruits are gone, and, of course, the summer is gone. "I am as when they have gathered the summer fruits, as the grape gleanings of the vintage." So the gleanings, the very gleanings, are gone. Now he speaks here according to appearances. So you; why, if you could do such a thing, when you are in this state of mind, if you could begin at the first verse of Genesis, and go in one day all through the Bible; if I may call the Bible for a moment a tree yielding wondrous fruits; you go through chapter after chapter, "Nothing for me;" you read a hymn, "Nothing for me;" hear a sermon, "Nothing for me;" kneel down and pray; it is only a mere form, no access to God, no answer; "Nothing for me." The very gleanings are gone; it seems to get worse and worse. Oh, what a mystery! The time when that blessed book was my meat and my drink, the time when I could sing as I passed through this valley of tears, "The righteous shall hold on his way!" But it is not so with me now; thou hidest thy face. And, Lord, if it be only the hidings of thy face, if I could persuade myself of that, that would lessen my trouble; but I fear it is not the mere hidings of thy face; I am afraid thou art by slow degrees giving me up, as thou didst King Saul, and Judas, and Demas, and that by-and-bye I shall be given up to a reprobate mind; and Heaven alone, mercy alone knows what will become of me. But those men never had these fears; they were never so exercised; but you are afraid. Oh, it is a great thing to have this trembling fear, this reverential fear. But things will go on, and you will become wretched beyond description, and after you have rebelled, and murmured, and wondered how matters are, the Lord by-and-bye, in his own time and in his own way, will break in, in all the majesty of his eternal mercy, and say, "Peace be unto thee! what aileth thee?" "Ye that sit in darkness, show yourselves." Why, you have been hiding yourselves; you are afraid God has something against you; there is nothing: you are afraid the officers are after you, and that you are going to be cast into the prison of hell, and that you shall not come out until you have paid the last mite. Why, I have paid the mighty debt you owe; I have paid it with my life; I came into the world to give my life a ransom for many. "Ye that sit in darkness, show yourselves." And the Lord to everything that binds you fast will say, "Loose him, and let him go;" and when you are loosed and let go you are sure to run to Jesus, "for he hath loved the people: all his saints are in thy hand, they sit down at thy feet; every one"—mark that!—when they are thus brought down "shall receive of thy words." These are the humbling experiences, then, that make us little in our own eyes, and make Jesus great. These are the humbling experiences that make us sensible of our poverty, and make us appreciate and prize the unsearchable riches of the grace of God. "No cluster to eat!" I would not exaggerate, and I should be very sorry indeed to impress you with an idea that I have a deeper experience than I really have, for I do not like people to think me to be above that which they see me to be; but I will say this one thing, that when it is so with me, that there is no cluster to eat, my heart sinks within me. Here are providential difficulties, hardly any hope in the Lord. I see blessed promises, but I cannot get one. Wretched and miserable, and can hardly bear myself. And I make no hesitation in saying that no remedy ever has been found, and no remedy ever will be, for my soul, but the presence of the blessed God. When he comes in, then it is the heavens are rent, though before as brass; then it is the earth is impressed as it were, though before as of iron; then it is the mountains flow down; then it is I can break out, and say with the prophet, "O God, no eye beside thine hath seen, nor hath it been perceived

by the hearing of the ear, what he hath prepared for him that waiteth for him." Welcome, blessed Jesus, we have been waiting for thee; "Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly," is the language of every heaven-taught soul. I leave you to judge what you know of this path of humiliation, this path of earnestness that makes way for the coming in of the great truths of the gospel.

We notice now the last part, "My soul desired the first-ripe fruit." Perhaps no less than four things are meant here. First, the Lord Jesus Christ; he is the first-ripe fruit; he was the first by his obedient life and atoning death that was ripened into perfection; for I think the word *ripen* here will carry the idea of perfection as well as the idea of sweetness. Things are not sweet until they are ripe, you know. The sweetness of Christ is in the perfection of his righteousness, in the perfection of his death. And some of you, that have tasted the sweetness of his perfection, the testimony that declareth his perfection, oh, how indescribably sweet have his words and those seasons been. This is a department I enter upon with very, very much pleasure. Oh, that great scripture upon this subject of Christ being the firstfruits, that great scripture upon this in the 11th of Romans, where the apostle throws a beautiful light upon this doctrine of Christ being the firstfruits—"If the firstfruit be holy, the lump is holy." The idea literally is this, that if the sheaf that was cut down at the beginning of the harvest under the Levitical law were accepted of the Lord, that one sheaf consecrated the whole harvest to the people, so that the harvest itself could not be injured, nor could enemies take it away. But if the sheaf were not accepted, then, if that were not reckoned holy, or accepted as holy, then the lump was not holy. Now, then, there is no doubt about Jesus Christ being accepted, is there,—not the slightest whatever? no doubt about his being holy? Jesus Christ is holy; Jesus Christ is accepted entirely, with infinite welcome; accepted, and accepted to all eternity. So that the prophet, in desiring the first-ripe fruit, Christ Jesus, would thus desire acceptance with God. How little the meaning appears in the letter, but how great when you come to the meaning thereof! Is not this our desire—is it not the very end we are seeking, namely, whether we sleep or whether we wake, whether we live or whether we die, saith the apostle, that we be accepted of him? And if we are accepted of him, it must be by oneness with him, by faith in him; and by faith in this firstfruit we are exempted from every one of our faults, exempted from all condemnation, exempted from death and hell. And just so sure as the first sheaf, Christ Jesus, is gathered into the heavenly garner, so, if our faith be in him, and we are decided for him, our souls shall be gathered into the same heavenly garner; as he himself saith, "Where I am, there ye may be also." Secondly, I think the first-ripe fruit may also mean the promise of God; of course that is in Christ Jesus. It was the first-ripe fruit that Abraham ever knew, when the Lord came to him and said, "In blessing I *will* bless thee, and in multiplying I *will* multiply thee." It was perfect, it was ripe. Oh, if the Lord were to bring that promise into your soul, what a loss you would be at for language to describe the blessedness of it; because the blessing there means all the blessing that infinite love could think of; it means all the blessing that Christ could embody; it means all the blessing that the great God can bestow—if I may use such a phrase without irreverence; "My God shall supply all your needs, according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus." Well, you say, Lord, give me this ripe promise, this yea and amen promise, this sweet and precious promise, and that will make me happy. Then, thirdly, I think the first-ripe fruit will mean also the fruits of the Spirit; they are called the firstfruits by way of pre-eminence; "We," saith the apostle, "that have the firstfruits of the Spirit." If that be the meaning, then it will convey this idea; Lord, leave me not to love thee after the mere common order, but

make me love thee uncommonly, in the pre-eminent sense of the word, as the woman did that sat at the Saviour's feet. Lord, leave me not to pray after a mere common manner, but after a pre-eminent manner, that I may really pray. Lord, leave me not to believe after a mere dead-letter manner, but grant that my faith may be that which is uncommon and unknown to the world. And, Lord, leave me not to stand out for thee in a lukewarm manner, as though it did not matter whether I stood out for thee warmly or not, but let me stand out for thee like an iron pillar, like a brazen wall, like a defenced city. Then, fourthly, I think the first-ripe fruit will mean also the foretaste of heaven.

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

Give me, then, Jesus Christ in his perfection; give me the promise in its perfection; give me the pre-eminent fruits of the Spirit, that I may glorify that God much, that has done so much for me, so much for you, and for all his people, and give me the foretaste of heaven, and that will lessen my desire for the things of earth, and make me thirst more and more to be at the fountain head, and say,—

" If such the sweetness of the streams,
What must the fountain be?"

We come, lastly, to *the desire*; "My soul desired the first-ripe fruit." I will give a fourfold view of this desire, as concisely as possible. First, he understood what he desired. So the Christian prays with his understanding; he understands what he desires. Now there are many things we desire we understand but very little about. Eve did not clearly understand what she desired when she desired the forbidden fruit. Now if in that case there had been any necessity for Eve to partake of that tree, and the Lord had stepped in and said, Well now, I, as a general rule, have prohibited your touching this tree, but there is a case of necessity arising, and I will now modify that law, and so far suspend it that in this exceptional case you shall take of this fruit and commit no sin: but the Lord did not so step in to modify the law; the Lord did not so step in to suspend for the time, under the pressure of certain circumstances, the law; therefore Eve sinned: now when God steps in, as in the case of the shewbread, and modifies the law, there David partakes of that shewbread by faith; that is, by faith in God's authority; so David does not sin. The priests worked in the temple, and the laws of the sabbath were so modified that they did not sin in so doing. Rahab had divine authority to conceal the spies; as some of you,—some of our brethren,—have well suggested, what she did she did by faith; and James says, "Was not Rahab justified by works;" "and they say she was not justified by *words*," but you cannot separate her *words* from her *works*. Her words were works, for by her words she repelled the enemies, by her words she saved the lives of the spies; and what she did, as our brethren have suggested, and I fall in with them in the idea, and adopt it as it were mine own,—what she did she did by faith; James says she was justified. Now, I have followed the Scriptures in this. I, for the life of me, could no more lay a single fault to Rahab than I could to anyone else where no fault is found. The Holy Ghost declares that in her receiving the messengers, and sending them out another way,—the Holy Ghost has sanctioned, in my opinion—it is but an opinion, I grant—those evasions. That has nothing to do whatever with the general conduct of men; that is another thing altogether; that is an exceptional case; but the Holy Ghost says that Rahab was justified: and if all the ministers in Christendom, and people too, turn against me, I dare not condemn what God justifies; I dare not call that person a criminal liar that God is pleased to

justify; and if he has justified her, then the matter with me is for ever settled. They may quibble, and quibble, and quibble, to all eternity; there are the words of James. God justified her, and there the matter must rest. We must be very careful, on the one hand, to have the authority of God for all our faith and practice, as Rahab had, as Abraham had when he was going to slay his son Isaac, and as Jael had when she committed, according to human judgment and appearance, one of the most deceitful murders put upon record, when she slew Sisera; yet she had divine sanction; and, as one of our own members well suggested, the Virgin Mary is said to be blessed *among* women, but Jael *above* women. What she did she did by faith. Why is Rahab justified? Because what she did she did by faith. They may quibble as long as they please, but let us be careful to have divine authority, then it is a matter of faith, and we are right. On the other hand, let us be very careful not to limit the Almighty. Remember, his prerogatives are too high to measure; he can do just what he pleaseth among the armies of the heavens and the inhabitants of the earth, and all the inhabitants of the earth are but as grasshoppers in his sight. So let these great men look upon themselves as grasshoppers. Now, then, Eve, I say, knew not what she desired; she knew not the infinity and eternity of evil embodied in her awful desire; there she was wrong, sinned, and all fell in Adam. Now, then, the prophet, I say, knew what he desired; he understood his desire, and that his desire was not only a desire of understanding, but a sincere desire. But as he understood what he desired, so his desire was a *sincere* desire; it was not the desire of the sluggard, which cometh to nothing; nor the desire of Balaam to die the death of the righteous without living the life of the righteous; but it was that desire which made him seek the better country, and kept him from returning to that from which he came.

Third, it was an unquenchable desire. There was an incorruptible principle at the root, and he who began the good work performs it to the end.

And, last, it was a righteous desire, and the desire of a believing man, and, therefore, a righteous man; and the desire of the righteous shall be granted. Never shall it be said of such that the things which they thirsted for are departed from them, and they shall find them no more at all. Such shall, indeed, in truth be said of all who make up their portion in this life. Such shall go down in eternal privation and sorrow, lamentation, and woe. But Holy Scripture abundantly abounds in assurances to those who hunger and thirst after righteousness; to the poor and needy who seek the water of life, and long for the fruit of the tree of life; such have everlasting life. The heavens and the earth may pass away, but such shall not, cannot be disappointed, for their God is a faithful God, and he will not suffer his faithfulness to fail. He hath sworn by himself, and by that oath he eternally and sacredly abides. Not one shall die of thirst or of anything else; nor can the seed of the righteous go spiritually begging bread; for the God of Zion shall satisfy her poor with bread.