

SURREY TABERNACLE PULPIT.

CITIZENS OF ZION.

A Sermon

BY MR. JAMES WELLS.

“In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem, Fear thou not; and to Zion, Let not thine hands be slack.”—ZEPHANIAH iii. 16.

THE Jerusalem here, of course, must be understood to mean the new Jerusalem, that spiritual Jerusalem founded by the Saviour; and the Zion here spoken of must, of course, be understood in the same way. Now this book of Zephaniah divides itself into two parts. All the former part of this book takes up the people by their sins, and consequently deals out nothing but the threatenings and the judgments due to those sins. But a part of this chapter takes up the people by what the Lord in his mercy makes them. And here the scene is entirely changed. When he takes them up simply by their sins, there his righteous but terrible threatenings are recorded. But when he begins to take them up by his grace, then he brings in promise after promise, in all the freeness of his mercy, in all the greatness of his love, and in all the order of his established and eternal counsel. So that that is a happy people who are thus taken up by his grace, and spoken of and spoken to by him as taken up by his grace. I will therefore notice our text under, as it seems to me, the threefold form in which it is presented; taking the words “Jerusalem” and “Zion” to be metonymical—that is, the container mentioned, but the contained meant; so that by Jerusalem we are to understand the citizens of Jerusalem; by Zion, of course, we are to understand the citizens of Zion; the very same people of whom the apostle saith, “Ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God.” We will therefore first notice *the persons spoken of*. Secondly, *the encouraging and kind exhortation here given*—“Fear not!” Lastly, *what is implied in the last clause*,—“Let not thine hands be slack.”

First, then, *the persons spoken of*, the persons that are here taken up by the grace of God. Let us trace out what the work of the Holy Spirit is in so doing; and if we are taught of God, we shall hereby trace out our own experience; for there everything, especially with the advanced Christian, lies. Because the advanced Christian is not troubled much about eternal election, he is too well established in that; he is not troubled so much about the completeness that is in Christ, he has no doubts about that; he can see that and understand that. But what he wants to know from time to time is whether he himself is included in that great act of grace—eternal election; whether he himself is included in the mediatorial and wondrous work of the dear Saviour; whether he himself is included in the promises of God, and in that glory yet to be revealed. For it is not every aged Christian that can rise so high in assurance as Peter did when he said, “I am an elder, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed.” Let us, then, notice in the first place how these citizens are taken up by the Lord. In the ninth verse of this chapter commences a description of the work of the Holy Spirit, and of the implantation in their souls of the spirit of grace and supplication. “For then will I turn to the people a pure language,”—an unconfounded language. It does not mean merely a holy language; it does mean that, so that the man becomes a lover of holy things, of God's holy book, of God's holy ways, and of God's holy people, and of God's holy service. All this is included. But there is something beside. “I will turn to the people a pure language” means that it shall be a language consistent with itself; it shall all be of the same kind; that is, the whole language of the gospel, from its origin to its ultimate glory, shall be the language of grace, unconnected with any worth, or worthiness, or merit, or doing, in the creature. If we mingle any human tradition with the pure language of free grace, we do thereby corrupt that language. As saith the apostle, “We are not as many”—so it appears that in his day there were many that did corrupt this pure, free grace language by mixing something else with it—“We are not as many, which corrupt the word of God.” Kitto, in a note upon that scripture, tells us that the original word refers there to a vintner putting water into the wine, because he considers the wine too strong, and he will make more money by it, of course, if he puts some water to it, for it will increase its bulk. And if that be the meaning there, we are not to corrupt the word of God, then the real truth always was too strong for the world, and always will be. Hence the language of the prophets was too strong; they all went too far to suit the taste of the public; and the Saviour went too far to suit the taste of the public; and the apostle Paul went so far in the strength of his language that people said, “This.

man certainly doth hold that we are to do evil that good may come." Nevertheless, when the Galatians seemed to like a good deal of water in the wine, a good deal of something that should make it more suitable to the taste of the public, the apostle says, "Ye have not injured me at all." What does he mean by that? Why, they had not injured him because they had not moved him from the truth. If they could by their revolting at the truth have removed him from it in ever so small a degree, that would have injured him; but they could not do so. Now "I will turn to the people a pure language;" and therefore anything mixed with it of a human kind corrupts it. And yet, unless it be diluted and softened down, it does not suit the taste of the public. As an old divine somewhere very well observes,— "To preach the gospel in its purity is an insult to the taste of the public." But then the Lord never did and never will suit his truth to the taste of men; but he will suit the taste of men to his blessed truth. He will make them to feel what poor sinners they are, and a free-grace language shall be to them sweeter than honey and the honeycomb; shall be to them as that heavenly wine that cheereth the heart. "Then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the Lord,"—it is sure to lead to that, you see,— "to serve him with one consent." Here you see the unity of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit bestows a variety of gifts, as the body hath many members, yet there is neither schism nor want of symmetry. So it is that one Christian is taught after this manner, another after that manner; one has a deeper experience than another; still all of them are brought to feel their need of free grace, all are brought to feel their need of the Lord Jesus Christ; as the Saviour himself witnesses, ["Every one that hath heard and learned of the Father cometh unto me." That seems to imply that those that are of this pure language, and that call upon the name of the Lord, have nothing else to trust in, they have nothing else to go to, they have nothing else to look to. Therefore saith Jesus, "Every one that hath heard and learned of the Father cometh unto me." Then the next thing is that those persons so favoured see themselves by nature to be a long way off from God, and they see sin, and death, and the curse, as it were, rolling between them and God; they see a kind of gulf which they cannot ford. Now the question is, How are they to have access to God? Mark the beautiful representation of their access to God as given in the very next verse. "From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia." Ethiopia means *black, dark*. Sin is a dark night; death is a dark night; tribulation is a dark river; Satanic delusion, of which so many drink, and by which so many are carried away, is a dark river. The rivers of Ethiopia— these dark rivers between us and the bright realms of bliss, between

us and the blessed God. Now mark the language:—"From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia my suppliants, even the daughter of my dispersed, shall bring mine offering." Now, then, if these people are to bring an offering from beyond these rivers, the first question is, What is that offering? The answer is, Jesus Christ. I know of no other offering. How will they come into possession of this offering? Ah, the answer is delightful. The Saviour forded the dark river of sin, rolled it eternally back. He forded the dark river of wrath divine; he forded the dark river of death; he forded the dark river of tribulation. Yea, when these rivers unite, they make up a kind of sea. "Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord; awake, as in the ancient days, in the generations of old. Art thou not it that hath cut Rahab, and wounded the dragon? Art thou not it which hath dried the sea, the waters of the great deep; that hath made the depths of the sea a way for the ransomed to pass over?" So, then, in the possession of Christ we can defy the dark river of sin, and roll it back; in the possession of Christ we can roll back, as it were, the threatenings of God's word; in the possession of Christ we can roll back the river of tribulation. We thus leave these rivers behind us, and come into a position where there is nothing between us and God but Christ; where there is nothing between us and God but that atonement that brings us up pleasing in his sight; where there is nothing between us and God but that Mediator that God himself hath appointed as the way of access unto himself—"Having boldness by the blood of Jesus to enter into the holy of holies."

Now, friends, what know we of this pure free-grace language? What know we of thus calling upon the name of the Lord? and the name of the Lord is in Christ. All the names of mercy centre in Christ. "It pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell." His name is Jesus, as expressive of the salvation, love, and purpose of the Father. His name is Immanuel, as expressive of the indissoluble oneness which the Father hath formed between our souls and him. And what know we of seeing this our condition, these dark rivers, these rivers of Ethiopia; and how, if the Saviour had not forded them, come unto us, and given unto us by faith his atonement, his righteousness, his name, his Spirit, his word, his presence, those rivers would have rolled for ever between us and God, and would have carried us away into remediless woe. But bless the Lord! the work is done, the gulf is forded, and he hath brought us out of the mystic Egypt, and brought us up to the spiritual Jerusalem; and many times have we thought, with the Psalmist, "Our feet shall stand within thy gates, O Jerusalem."

"Jerusalem, my happy home."

Every Christian feels it to be so. He feels that his home is on high ; he feels that his hope is there, that his inheritance is there." "Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon the earth I desire beside thee." These are the people to whom it shall be said in that day, "Fear thou not." Others have cause to fear, and you had cause to fear when you did not fear ; but now that you do fear, you have no real cause to fear. Well, the Lord knows our weaknesses and infirmities. And some of these persons who were thus to be brought to know the Lord, were dreadfully proud of their religion, and they were so haughty that they could not bear the truth of God to be where they were. Yet they were high professors. I will prove this presently. Now the Lord saith, When this shall come to pass, then you shall loathe yourselves in your own sight for all your transgressions against me, "and thou shalt no more be haughty because of my holy mountain." There the marginal reading to all intents and purposes is the true reading, and brings out the mind of the passage. "Ye shall no more be haughty," saith the margin, "in my holy mountain." Many men in the day of Jesus Christ were so haughty, that they could not endure his presence, and they said, "Away with him, away with him." And Saul of Tarsus was in God's holy mountain professionally ; a Hebrew of the Hebrews, of the tribe of Benjamin, circumcised the eighth day, touching the law blameless. He was so holy that he could not endure that Jesus Christ should be there. Jesus Christ was not holy enough for him. Jesus Christ, he had heard, was a friend of publicans and sinners ; Jesus Christ, he had heard, was a winebibber and gluttonous man, and he could not endure that Jesus Christ should be there. But oh ! when the Lord turned to him a pure language, revealed to him his own impurity, made him loathe himself for his transgressions wherein he had transgressed against the Lord, so great was the change that, while before this he could not endure that Jesus should be there, now he could not endure that Jesus should be absent. How great the change ! "What mean ye, to weep and to break mine heart? for I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." Ah, "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world." Many Jews, then, poor things, that had been thus blindly haughty in God's holy mountain on the day of Pentecost, when they were pricked in the heart, their eyes were opened, this pure language turned to them, the dark rivers discovered, and what Jesus Christ had done in fording them—they were no longer haughty in God's holy mountain, but were now humbled down into the dust of self-abasement before God ; and the language of such would be,—

"If I hap a song of praise,
Each note shall echo, Grace, free grace."

Such is a part of the path the Lord leads his children in. But we have not done yet. Then see how the Lord describes these people, "I will leave in the midst of thee"—not these haughty Pharisees, not these self-gratulating people; no, he shall gather out of his kingdom these offensive things;—but "I will leave in the midst of thee an afflicted and poor people." He will so afflict you from time to time in his dealings with you, as to make you feel what a poor creature you are. And thus he will bring into exercise the graces of the Spirit, and the business of every grace of the Spirit is to receive Jesus Christ, to enjoy him, and to abide by him. "I will leave in the midst of thee an afflicted people." Well, your humble servant can say what hundreds of you can say, that as the Israelite that was bitten by the serpent felt that that bite was a deadly bite, and infused the poison into his system, and that nothing but the remedy the Lord had provided could save his life, so do I feel that sin has bitten me with a deadly bite, that the old serpent has bitten me with a deadly bite, that my soul is poisoned, my body poisoned, and I am poisoned with the poison of hell, poisoned with the poison of death; and there is but one remedy, and that remedy is the efficacious blood of the Lamb, that can take the venom of the poison away, reconcile my soul to God, heal all its wounds, make me happy, and fulfil his own blessed word wherein he has said, "The poor and the needy shall praise my name." "I will leave in the midst of thee an afflicted and poor people." There is nothing more displeasing to the Lord than for a man professing religion to say concerning something he has provided,—"I do not want it." Yet that is the language of a great many now. One saith, "Oh, I do not want election; I can do without it." "I do not want predestination;" saith another; "I can settle my own affairs without the Lord settling them. And I do not want so much of the completeness that is in Christ; and I do not want so much of the certainty of the Holy Spirit carrying on his work; and I do not want so much of the everlasting covenant." Ah, all that is the language of Satan; all that is the language of ignorance and enmity. Remember that he sendeth the rich empty away; it is the hungry that he filleth with good things. Woe unto you that are full; ye have received your consolation; woe unto you that laugh at God's truth, for ye shall weep when the end shall prove you are nothing but enemies. "I will leave in the midst of thee," then, "an afflicted and poor people; and they shall trust"—nothing else to trust in—"they shall trust in the name of the Lord." Now there is not anything can rob them of this. Let them be tried how they!

may by the world, by circumstances, by their own hearts, or by Satan ;—they are brought to know the name of the Lord, and they will never put their trust anywhere else.

Now this “remnant of Israel shall not do iniquity;” they are brought out of the iniquitous systems of men ; “nor speak lies,” but they shall speak the truth ; “neither shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouth.” They shall honestly confess what devils they are ; they shall honestly confess that they are sensual, earthly, and everything that is bad in their nature, and that the deepest damnation is only what they must have sunk to if they had been lost. Hence what did one of old say ? What does an Old Testament saint say upon this point, and what does a New Testament saint say upon it ? An Old Testament saint, thus delivered from those iniquitous systems, made to know the truth, and thus made honest, saith, “Thou hast”—as though he should say, I will leave my brethren and my sisters to speak each for himself or herself ; I will speak for myself, and say—“Thou hast delivered my soul from the lowest hell.” And a New Testament saint speaketh thus :—“This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.” Here is one, then, delivered from the lowest hell ; here is another that sees and feels he is the chief of sinners. Ah, let these two meet, they would indeed strive, as Erskine says, which should praise the Lord most for such wondrous grace. These, then, are the citizens that have this pure language, and to whom the offering is revealed ; that are brought to see that these dark rivers are rolled back ; that they have access to God, and who feel that they are poor enough to need the provision the Lord has made,—“Thou, O God, of thy goodness hast prepared for the poor ;” and who are delivered from erroneous or iniquitous systems ; they do not speak lies ; and “they shall feed” upon the yea and amen promises of the gospel ; and they shall “lie down, and none shall make them afraid.” It is a kind of custom in the Scriptures to give a thing emphatically rather, and then give an explanation of it. The Saviour did this in the parables, you see, friends ; he gave an ambiguous parable, and then gave the explanation. Now we have here the rivers of Ethiopia, and that, perhaps, might seem to some of you, though it ought not now we have had these remarks upon it, rather a dark scripture. Now comes the explanation,—“The Lord hath taken away thy judgments, he hath cast out thine enemy ;” there it is : “the king of Israel, even the Lord, is in the midst of thee ; thou shalt not see evil any more.” What does that mean ? The Saviour hath said, “In the world ye shall have tribulation ;” so it does not mean, you shall not see evil in the world any more ; and it does not mean, you shall not see evil in your own

hearts any more ; and it does not mean, you shall not see evil in the church any more. What, then, does it mean ? Well, friends, you know what the Saviour saith, " In me ye shall have peace." We have seen all our sins on Christ ; we have seen that he bare those evils in his own body on the tree ; we have seen that he poured out his soul unto death ; but we shall never see sin there again—no. He died finally unto sin, because he died atoningly ; he died finally unto sin, because he hath brought in everlasting righteousness : " he dieth no more, death hath no more dominion over him." Christian, where is your hope for eternity ? In Christ, where there is no iniquity. There never was any sin in him ; but there was sorrow in him, there was pain in him, there was agony in him, so that he sweat, as it were, great drops of blood, falling down to the ground. But now the blessed Jesus reappears to his disciples, without a tear, without a sigh, without a grief ; transports himself from Emmaus to Jerusalem with infinite ease. No more being weary, sitting on the well ; no more being thirsty, asking for drink ; no more sorrow, no more death, no more pain. Ah, then, look to Jesus, and thou shalt never see any evil in him again. But this is not all. It means that you have seen evil in the first Adam, where you are corrupted and ruined. But John saith, if I may venture such strong language, if I may venture to offer a cup of such strong wine—John, when looking at the Christian as he stands in Christ, says, " He abideth, and the wicked one toucheth him not." I have often enjoyed the thought that the time will come when the Christian, as he stands in Christ, can say to sin, Sin, as I stand here, you have not injured me at all ; Satan, as I stand here you have not injured me at all ; death, as I stand here you have not injured me at all ; hell, as I stand here you have not injured me at all ; world, as I stand here you have not injured me at all ; my own heart, as I stand here you have not injured me at all ; slander, reproach, lies, villainous lies, that some professors even so delight in, as I stand here in Christ you have not injured me at all. There he overcometh, and the wicked one toucheth him not. " Thou shalt not see evil any more." Oh, my hearer, what a leap will that be when the soul shall leap from this poor, weak body, and from this poor, dark world into the realms of light, into the full presence of him whose distant presence can make mortality itself shine like the sun ; as it was with Stephen, his soul was so filled with the presence of Christ that it made his poor, dying face shine like the face of an angel. Ah, we may well say,—

" Religion! what pleasures untold,
Beside in that happy word ;
More precious than silver or gold,
Or ten thousand worlds such as this could afford."

" Thou shalt not see evil any more," when these things are brought

about; in that day, when you are thus brought to know the Lord, when you thus cross the dark river into the realms where there is a river of a very different character. John had seen this dark river, and therefore he says, "He showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal." Then if it be clear as crystal, I know where it will come from; ah, it comes from "the throne of God and the Lamb." In that day, when these things shall be revealed, it shall be said to these citizens, "Fear thou not; let not thine hands be slack."

We will now hasten to the next part,—*the encouraging and kind exhortation here given*,—"Fear not." Most ministers tell us that it is a disgraceful thing, a wicked thing, an awful thing, to disobey God's commandments. Well, so it is. But then they say, God commands you not to fear, and if you do fear, you disobey the Lord's commandment. Well now, when, according to what we see, everything seems against us, and our poor weak nature begins to tremble and fear, I do not think the Lord means this as an arbitrary and legal command. I think he means it just in the same spirit that he spake when he said to the disciples, "The flesh is weak, but the spirit is willing." Did the Lord say to Abraham, Abraham, I commanded you to fear not, and there are you trembling at these mighty nations against you. Is it not disgraceful? Ought I not to damn you? Such would be the interpretation of book-made parsons, and of men-made parsons, and of devil-made parsons. But the Lord's language is very different; the language of a father, the language of a friend. "Abraham,"—poor little fearful thing—"fear not; I am thy shield and thine exceeding great reward." I will take care of you. I have always been weak enough to think that these "Fear nots," are the language of sympathy; at all events they apply to me in that way; they sympathize with me. You must be sure that in my position I have a great many doubts and fears in one way and the other—a very great many fears; and this language has always been to me the language of sympathy. "Fear not, I will uphold thee," the Lord says; "I will strengthen thee with the right hand of my righteousness." It is the language of a father sympathizing with his children; nay, it is the language of the heavenly Husband's love to his bride; saying to her, "Fear not." Just as Boaz said to Ruth, "Fear not, my daughter:" you are welcome to these free-grace fields. If you go into other fields, mind this—they will make you work for nothing; and instead of your going home with a good lap full, as I shall send you; they will give you about half a dozen ears of corn, enough to make you a halfpenny loaf, and you will come and work all the day and get nothing. Therefore do not go into other fields, but stay here, and I will command the reapers to let fall some handfuls

for you, and that they shall not reprove you, and that you may go and drink of the vessels of water which the young men have drawn. And then he adds the beautiful words, "The Lord recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust." Well, we will have another "Fear not," and let us see whether it is the language of arbitrary command or the language of paternal sympathy. Here is the widow of Zarephath. How do you get on? Very badly indeed; here is my poor dear boy, almost starving; we have just a handful of meal in the bottom of the barrel, and a little oil in the cruse; I am going to gather two or three sticks of wood for a fire, that we may have just one meal more, and then we must die, for we shall have no more food. How did Elijah deal with her? Ah, he said, "Fear not." Is that the language, pray, of arbitrary command? Was it not the language of sympathy, the language of love, the language of pity? "Fear not, go and make me a little cake first, and bring it unto me, and after make for thee and for thy son." What! rob me of a little cake! Both these parsons, what a plague they are. There is just enough for me and my boy, and now this parson wants to have his dinner first. Ah, he says, stop; don't be in a hurry—"For thus saith the Lord God of Israel, The barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail, until the day that the Lord sendeth rain upon the earth. And she went and did according to the saying of Elijah; and she, and he, and her house did eat many days." And I have not the least doubt that it did their health a great deal of good. You see they were vegetarians and teetotallers. They had no animal food, and that would keep down their animal propensities I was going to say, for I often think when we eat animals we eat their tempers. The food was so calm and so mild that it was sure to do them good; and thus they lived many days, until the Lord sent rain upon the earth. So the "Fear not" was the language of sympathy. Ah, friends, when we are tried, any of us, in providential matters, if we have faith in the Lord, the "Fear not" belongs as much to us as it did to the widow of Zarephath.

When you are in trouble, it is not essential that the selfsame "Fear not" should be applied with power to you in order to make it belong to you; because all the promises belong to faith, for the Saviour says, "What I say unto you I say unto all."

One more "Fear not," and then I close. Now here is a poor creature, and he says to himself, What a crawling worm I am; what a worthless, poor thing. I a Christian! Why, I am all earth, and all earthliness. I have a Christian experience! Why, I am a stranger to it. I envy those spiritual, holy, heavenly people that can rejoice in the Lord. Is that it? The Lord comes in—"Fear

not, thou worm." Ah, you cannot come lower than that, can you? "Fear not, thou worm of Jacob," and it says, "*and* ye men of Israel." I wish that conjunction was not there; it is not in the original, and ought not to be in the verse. It ought to read, "Fear not, thou worm Jacob; ye men of Israel." Ah then, he that thus feels himself to be a poor worm is a man in Christ. "I knew a man in Christ." "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." "Fear not, thou worm Jacob;" a worm in thyself, but a man as thou standest in Christ, he himself being thy mighty strength. Then here is another, seeking after consolation in the gospel, and seems as though the word would never come home to him again, as though Jesus Christ would never come to him again, and as though God's everlasting love was a mere hearsay subject, and as though God's salvation was far away, and as though the Lord would never come to him again. "Thus saith the Lord, Fear not." "When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue faileth for thirst, I the Lord will hear them." Well, if their tongue fail, they cannot make much noise—no; but Jesus knew that his disciples were desirous to ask him, and he sees the thirst, sees the desire. "I will open rivers in high places, and fountains in the midst of the valleys."