

SURREY TABERNACLE PULPIT.

—o—o—o—
TO BRING TO REMEMBRANCE.

JAN 1966

A Sermon

BY MR. JAMES WELLS,

PREACHED ON WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON, 19TH OCTOBER, 1870.

—o—o—o—
“And thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness.”—Deuteronomy viii. 2.

It is exactly forty years ago this day since this Christian church was what we call formed, consisting of twenty members. We are met to day to acknowledge especially, after these long years of mercy, the goodness of the Lord unto us, and at the same time to express our confidence that as the Lord hath been kind unto us, so he will be; and that as he hath abode by us, so he will abide by us still. It is now nearly forty-three years since I began publicly to speak the Lord's word, and I did so from the Lord having brought my soul into liberty by the 8th verse of the 54th of Isaiah. I was happy beyond expression, and I thought what an infinite mercy it would be if all my fellow creatures were brought to know the same God, the same mercy, and the same salvation; and I thought, What shall I do to express my gratitude to God? So I rose early on the Lord's day morning, and went to the Broadway, in Westminster, about half-past five or six o'clock in the morning, and there I began to speak, and I went on speaking on Sunday mornings as well as I could, without the slightest idea whatever of ever being what they call a minister. When the summer was gone, they took a little room in Rochester Row, Westminster; and there we did pretty fairly at first; by and by some left, and we were at last reduced to three people, at which I did not feel the slightest discouraged, because I had no idea I should ever be a minister, and no particular desire to be so. Presently the room became crowded all at once, and would not hold half that wanted to come. Then we got to a schoolroom in Prince's Place, Westminster, and there it was forty years ago to-day that the church was formed; and of the twenty members of

which it then consisted there is now only one left. That place became full, and then, after being there about twelve months, we went to a place called Dudley Court, Denmark Street, Soho, and that became thronged. Then I went on Sunday afternoons over to Webb Street, Bermondsey, called now Ebenezer Chapel, and there we were crowded; and I thought if some chapel offered itself between the two positions, it would be well to take it. So there was the Borough Road, a chapel almost in the shape of a lantern at that time; the minister for whom it was built had left the place some time before;—we came there, and that became filled. It was taken down, and another built, and that became filled; then it was enlarged, and that became filled; then you set to and built this one, and paid for it completely, and this has become filled. Now this is the path that we have come. And as regards the people that have been with me, some of them nearly all this time, and a great many of them a very large part of the time, I shall never be able to speak sufficiently in their praise. I am sure the kindness that I have experienced for forty-two years—I may as well go back as far as that—from the people that in the order of the Lord's providence I have been connected with, surpasses all that I can ever express. And somehow or another—I do not know how it is, but the people seem to get more and more kind;—whether it is they think they shall very soon lose me, and so will try and keep me alive by kindness. And therefore for myself, although there may be some few individual exceptions among what they call high-doctrine people, there is no people that I have such a union of soul to as I have to those ministers and those congregations and churches where they stand out for the truth, utterly regardless of what a carnal, unregenerate, profane, or Pharisaic world may say. Those who know the truth, it is for them to abide by it; they are not to listen to man, but they are to listen to the great and the blessed God. Of course I had not the slightest idea that we should prosper as we have; but I knew the people, I think, quite as well as any one I was ever associated with, and I will tell you what I always said of them,—If they undertake a thing they will do it; and all these forty years not a single thing that the people have undertaken have they failed in; not a society among us has broken down; nothing has shown so much sign of breaking down as the poor minister; he seems sometimes as though he had not a word to say; and yet somehow or another the Lord keeps us up, and he will do so. And I should like to see all our brethren in the ministry have full confidence in the people that are lovers of God's blessed truth. I had almost said, what will not a good man do for God's truth and for the sake of the truth?—individual exceptions there may be. Now

the Lord has blessed me very much in this respect, so that I am almost a stranger to church meeting disputations; we have had a few in times past, but not worth speaking of. And another thing in which we have been blessed I will mention before I enter more particularly upon the subject before me; and what I am about to mention now I might and could dwell upon largely, because it is almost impossible to name a circumstance more important in the church of the living God; and it is this,—I have been blessed upon the whole all my time with excellent deacons. The office of deacon in a church, which I must not now stop to enlarge upon, is of vast importance. When the deacons are decided for the truth, when they look to the minister, to the people, to the cause of God at large, and do everything they possibly can for the good of the cause and the comfort of the minister, it is almost impossible to speak too highly of the importance, the greatness of their usefulness. It sets the minister's mind free. I have no trouble in coming here and going back again. I never come trembling and fearing lest any of the deacons should be put out, and lest this should be wrong and that wrong. We have no head deacons and no under deacons, for all are brethren here. And therefore when a minister has not a thorough good staff to work with, I pity him with all my heart; how such men can preach at all I cannot tell. It is true we have had in my time I believe about four rebellious deacons; but I turned policeman, took them to task, and sent them off, and so we saw no more of them; and that is the way it should be done when a deacon sets up a certain plan, and because his will is not done, the cause may be scattered, the minister gagged, and everything go wrong. I can truly say that I have never turned right round against a deacon in my life—I have done so three or four times, and effectually too,—but I have never done so but conscientiously; I have done so for the cause of God. As soon as ever the minister wants to be master over deacons or people, or as soon as ever the deacons want to dictate to him, or the people want to dictate to him, good-bye to brotherly love. We must remember we are all upon a level; that is how I view the matter. Where I have had those little unpleasantnesses, some outside have said, Oh dear! what a pity, what a pity! Well, it may be a pity to them, but I could never see the pity yet. I believe that if a determined decision had not been taken in the last unpleasantness I had, this chapel never would have existed. But I always was of that fiery caste that I will have the truth and the liberty of the gospel; and the people shall have their liberty, or else I will not be their minister. I would be in bondage to no man, let him be as big or as rich as he may; my confidence is not in rich nor in poor; but the confidence of faith will

be placed in the living God. Therefore the cause of God ought to be to ministers, to deacons, and to people, everything; it is this decision that does the work. There may be a few individuals sometimes that do not like it at all; never mind that; always look to the main body of the people, and never feel moved at two or three individuals. Let the minister, like the eagle, have his wings free, and let him spread abroad his ministerial wings; and if by that liberty he is not the means of bringing the people of God along, and bringing them into the enjoyment of eternal things, nothing else can do it. After all, then, we have had forty years' very pleasant sojourn, as far as the things of God are concerned; and the Lord will take care to follow up his people with trouble enough to make them feel their need of him. Such, then, is an outline of the history of our church.

I will now take hastily a threefold view of the text. "Thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee." First, *why we are to remember the beginning*; secondly, *why we are to remember the present*; and thirdly, *why we are to look at the future*.

First, *why we are to remember the beginning*. It was almost the first business of Moses, in giving this long address which we have in Deuteronomy, to show that the Israelites, for want of remembering all the way the Lord had led them, for want of remembering the beginning and acting upon it, lost the promised land. Had they have remembered their beginning, and have acted upon it, and kept it with them, and gone on with it, all that did so came to the promised land; but those that lost sight of the beginning came short of the promised land. Ah, just so now, friends; if we are taught of God we shall remember the beginning. Let us, then, take a threefold view of the beginning, as applicable to us spiritually. What is the first thing that we shall call the beginning? That which the people of God as a general rule come to last, and that which is almost everywhere despised. What was the beginning? The beginning was a manifestation of the pure sovereignty of God. In Exodus xi. the Lord said that he would put a difference—as the margin reads it, a redemption—between the Egyptians and Israel; referring to the paschal lamb. Now how did the Lord begin with you? Why, by making a difference, not only between you and others, but by making us something very different from what we had been before. He began, therefore, by making a difference in our present from our former state. We began to tremble at our condition as sinners, we began to pray, we began to look upon godliness as the only thing worth living for; we began to see that there was nothing but curse, wrath, and condemnation apart from godliness. A change was wrought. And all of you that are thus

they have. But when a man is made to differ by the power of God, what a change there is then; how willingly he leaves the Egypt of this world, this world spiritually called Egypt, where our Lord was and is crucified. The true Christian practically declares that he is a stranger and a pilgrim on the earth, seeking a better country, with no desire to return. That is one reason, then, why we are to remember all the way—that we might cling to God's sovereignty, and remember that our salvation, originally as well as now and ultimately, must come entirely from the Lord. Then the second thing in the beginning was that beautiful circumstance I will not enlarge upon, as a type of the dear Saviour; it has made my heart rejoice many times, it has helped me in my darkest seasons,—when I have been doubting and fearing, some one clause, some one sentence or another out of the gospel has helped me, and especially that beautiful one, “When I see the blood I will pass by the house, and the sword shall not come near to hurt you.” Oh, let us remember, friends, that the first shelter we ever had was Jesus Christ, that the original way of escape was by Jesus Christ; if we were left of the sword, it was by the blood of the Lamb. Am I then a believer in Jesus? When the Lord sees this, he will look not at my sins, but he will look at the atonement that is made for my sins, he will look at the righteousness that covers the whole, he will look at those blessings which were treasured up in Christ before the world was. So, then, remember the beginning; as it was God's good pleasure then, oh let us own that it is his good pleasure now; as it was by Christ Jesus then, so let it be by Christ Jesus now. Shall we ever cease to enjoy that which is embodied in the ultimate anthem, “Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God.” Then the third thing in the beginning was the victory which was wrought. Look at the victory the Lord gave to the Israelites; see how he divided the sea. It is self-evident, it is clear to you all, that in dividing the Red Sea, overthrowing Pharaoh and his host, and bringing the Israelites out, God did in that case what none but God could do; none but the living God could have given them such a victory. Now apply this closer home. Who but the God-man Mediator could have divided a greater sea? who but the God-man Mediator could make the depths of a greater sea a way for the ransomed to pass over? who but the God-man Mediator could bring in such a victory as Jesus Christ hath brought in? who but Jesus Christ could penally bear our sins? Look at the 28th chapter of this same Book of Deuteronomy; there are, I think, somewhere about seventy bitter curses there put upon record, and they were more or less inflicted upon the Jews; but then they have a spiritual

they have. But when a man is made to differ by the power of God; what a change there is then; how willingly he leaves the Egypt of this world, this world spiritually called Egypt, where our Lord was and is crucified. The true Christian practically declares that he is a stranger and a pilgrim on the earth, seeking a better country, with no desire to return. That is one reason, then, why we are to remember all the way—that we might cling to God's sovereignty, and remember that our salvation, originally as well as now and ultimately, must come entirely from the Lord. Then the second thing in the beginning was that beautiful circumstance I will not enlarge upon, as a type of the dear Saviour; it has made my heart rejoice many times, it has helped me in my darkest seasons,—when I have been doubting and fearing, some one clause, some one sentence or another out of the gospel has helped me, and especially that beautiful one, “When I see the blood I will pass by the house, and the sword shall not come near to hurt you.” Oh, let us remember, friends, that the first shelter we ever had was Jesus Christ, that the original way of escape was by Jesus Christ; if we were left of the sword, it was by the blood of the Lamb. Am I then a believer in Jesus? When the Lord sees this, he will look not at my sins, but he will look at the atonement that is made for my sins, he will look at the righteousness that covers the whole, he will look at those blessings which were treasured up in Christ before the world was. So, then, remember the beginning; as it was God's good pleasure then, oh let us own that it is his good pleasure now; as it was by Christ Jesus then, so let it be by Christ Jesus now. Shall we ever cease to enjoy that which is embodied in the ultimate anthem, “Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God.” Then the third thing in the beginning was the victory which was wrought. Look at the victory the Lord gave to the Israelites; see how he divided the sea. It is self-evident, it is clear to you all, that in dividing the Red Sea, overthrowing Pharaoh and his host, and bringing the Israelites out, God did in that case what none but God could do; none but the living God could have given them such a victory. Now apply this closer home. Who but the God-man Mediator could have divided a greater sea? who but the God-man Mediator could make the depths of a greater sea a way for the ransomed to pass over? who but the God-man Mediator could bring in such a victory as Jesus Christ hath brought in? who but Jesus Christ could penally bear our sins? Look at the 28th chapter of this same Book of Deuteronomy; there are, I think, somewhere about seventy bitter curses there put upon record, and they were more or less inflicted upon the Jews; but then they have a spiritual

significance. I am not going to say that those seventy curses were in the form there stated inflicted upon Jesus Christ, because that would not be true; but I think I shall have the approval of the brethren and the friends if I say that all the wrath implied in those curses was borne by the Saviour. He took our sins, and whatever wrath was due to our sins came upon the Lord Jesus Christ. Why, my hearer, I hope you will not think I am extravagant in saying it, I should be literally ashamed to think of the possibility of a man being lost for whom Christ died. You see he has taken the man's sins away; they are blotted out, they are forgiven and forgotten, and the moment you receive the Lord Jesus Christ in his substitution and perfection, you then receive that that does pardon, that does sanctify, that does save, and does give you the victory. Only you must draw a distinction between receiving that that pardons, sanctifies, and gives you the victory; you must draw a line of distinction between receiving Jesus Christ in his perfection by faith, and your realizing the pardon which his mediation brings. As the Israelites were under the shelter of the paschal lamb before the sword passed by, and before they realized the deliverance, so the Lord now sometimes leads some to receive Jesus Christ, and to see that everything you need in a way of pardon, victory, and everything, is by Jesus Christ,—you receive that testimony as a faithful saying, worthy of all acceptation, that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners; but if you are asked, Are your sins forgiven? you say, That is what I want to realise. Have you realized your title clear to mansions in the skies? and has Jesus Christ been made so precious to you as to overcome all the banks and swallow up all the mountains of your sins, and to make you feel that God hath loved you with an everlasting love, therefore in lovingkindness hath he drawn you? Ah, say you? that is what I am waiting for. Well, if you thus receive the testimony of Christ, and are waiting for it in that way, you are waiting for it in a way in which it will come. The Jews of old were waiting for the Lord to appear for them, but they were not waiting by faith in Christ, and therefore the deliverance did not come; and the Pharisee was waiting to be blessed, but he was not waiting by faith in Christ; and therefore, not waiting in the right way, the blessing did not come. So you read that “many shall seek to enter in, and shall not be able.” Then, if you know something of the truth that if you do savingly differ it is grace that has made you to differ; secondly, if you know that Jesus Christ has done what none but such a person could do; and if you believe that you can escape the wrath to come, and be formed and fitted for heaven, and get there only by the mediatorial work of Christ,—if you are got thus far, all I say is, blessed are they that wait:—“Tarry

ye in Jerusalem until ye be endued with power from on high;" and that blessed Jesus Christ in whom you believe will by and by send the Holy Spirit like a mighty rushing wind down upon your soul, and will take away all your doubts, and fears, and troubles; and you will hardly know what it means; you will wonder what is come to you; and presently a little reflection will show that it was nothing else but the pardoning mercy of God, nothing else but his presence. So then "thou shalt remember all the way;" remember the Lord has made thee to differ, remember thou didst escape by the paschal lamb, and remember a victory was wrought for thy welfare which none but God could achieve; and so thou hast a victory now by Jesus Christ which none but Jesus Christ could achieve.

Now, had the Israelites to a man have taken with them this divine sovereignty, abode thus by the living God in his having made them to differ, and taken with them this paschal lamb, and have abode by the Lord according thereto; if they had taken with them the victory that God wrought, and understood it, they would have spurned all other gods. They would have said to one, Who are you! I am Chemosh. Chemosh! what do you want? you have no claim upon us; you did not deliver us from the Egyptians; you did not provide the paschal lamb for our escape: you did not divide the sea; you did not give us the victory; you did not overturn Pharaoh;—you may be off, or you will soon have your head off, as Dagon had his. In comes another:—Who are you? I am Baal. What have you done? Ah, I will do a great deal. Will you?—when? Now, if you will wait. Yes, and wait long enough. So Elijah says, We will see what Baal can do; come now, cry aloud. And they cut themselves pretty well to pieces with their lances, and swore too, I dare say, at Baal. You may think it very strange of me to talk in such a way, but it is a fact that the heathen to this day will break out and swear most fearfully at their gods if they do not give them what they ask. So Elijah said, "Cry aloud; for he is a god; either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth, and must be awaked." Elijah was happy enough. Now then, Baal cannot bring fire, let us see if our God can; and you know what our God did. And now that we have got the fire, and the sacrifice accepted, let us see if Baal can bring rain. No; but our God did. And thus, friends, if they had kept with them that which was from the beginning, then that would have been true of all that was said only of some:—"Ye that did cleave unto the Lord your God are alive unto this day."

After I began to think I was to be a minister, I had many pretty little lessons given to me. One gentleman said, You go on in a very extravagant way; nobody will respect you, all ministers will be

against you, and nobody will like you; you must be moderate and careful, for I can tell you it is a very dangerous thing to preach before everybody such doctrines as you preach. I took up my hat to go. What, I said, the grace of God a dangerous thing! the mercy of God, the promise of God, a dangerous thing! "I will and they shall" a dangerous thing! Why, my good sir, they are the only safe things in the world; there is not anything safe in the world but God's truth. Dangerous things! Ah, but people may make a bad use of them. Well, I said, if these truths make a good use of the people, the people will make a good use of the truths. Now the people that know these truths are too friendly with them to ill-use them;—you would not ill-use a man if you loved him. These blessed truths are for the people of God; and the people shall curse the man that withholdeth these glorious truths from them. Ah, he said, I shall not bring my family any more if you preach those high doctrines. Well, I said, I am sorry for your family; but I believe you are nothing but a man-made professor. I never thought much of you; and there are plenty will be very glad of your sittings. Ah, he says, you do not preach precept enough; you are not practical enough. He was a very practical man certainly; for three days afterwards I met him so drunk that he could not walk;—very practical, of course—very so. He kept at a pious distance after that, and so did I. Whenever you find such a great pretension to superior sanctity, there is generally just the reverse in reality. Depend upon it the truth of God is safe; it will maintain its own ground, clear its own course. Never mind what people may say about you; hold out, and God will stand by you; you stand by the Lord, and he will stand by you. God brought me, forty-five years ago, to a decision that I was nothing but a sinner on the one hand, and into another decision, that if I got to heaven it must be by his grace from first to last; and for forty-five years I have been kept as an iron pillar, a defended city, a brazen wall; and, rather than I should ever show before I die the slightest sign of difference, I would sooner drop lead in this pulpit this very instant. The blessed truths of the eternal God will do what nothing else can do. "Thou shalt remember all the way" who made thee to differ, who gave thee escape, who it was that wrought the victory, who it is that hath done all this;—it is the Lord our God.

But let us look at *the present*; "led thee these forty years in the wilderness." How much wilderness experience the people of God have! what solitude! I like those scriptures—I do not like the experience of them, but I like those scriptures because they sympathize with us in trouble; "like a pelican of the wilderness," "like an owl of the desert," "like a sparrow alone upon the house-top;" and

that he will hear the prayer of the destitute, and not despise their prayer ;” and “ they wandered in a solitary way, and found no city to dwell in.” I dare say some good Christians think that ministers have not much of this wilderness experience; but I can tell you this, if they have not, they will not be of much use to the people. They may pretend to weep with the people, but they cannot feel as they would if they had these experiences. The doctor may be very sympathizing over the dying patient, but the doctor cannot feel what the parent feels, the doctor cannot feel what near and dear relatives feel. The apostle saith, “ We have ten thousand instructors, but not many fathers.” For a minister, therefore, to be of that sympathizing nature that he shall strengthen the diseased, heal the sick, bring again that which is driven away, he must from time to time know what this wilderness experience is; and then he will think when he comes into the pulpit, and say to himself, I am a poor, dark, helpless creature, no more fit to preach the gospel than to create a world; and thus the man is humbled down like a little child, and the Lord knows that is just the time for him to come; so in the Lord steps, the man’s heart is warmed, his soul is enlarged, Satan flies off, and glad to get away; and the man is astounded how it is he is so strong; and one thought comes, and another; and the man that one half his time perhaps is little more than a stammerer, all at once becomes eloquent, and pours forth torrents of thoughts, and blessing after blessing, until the people lose their troubles and their sorrows, and he loses his. Lord, he says, thou canst prepare me for the pulpit very much better than I can prepare myself for it. I have found that out. It is a mysterious way, but all the ministers and people of God can understand it. The Lord leads us about the wilderness—not out of it, but about it, to humble and prove us, whether we will keep his commandments or no. Now, Job, you are going through a very desolating part of the wilderness: what do you say now? will you keep God’s truth now? Yes. You will not go back from his way, from the commandment of his lips? No; his commandment is for me to believe in him, and I do believe in him. “ His way have I kept, and not declined.” Well, but you have cursed the day of your birth, Job. Well, enough to make me. Have you ever done it, say you? Yes, more than forty times—that is more than once a year—since this church was formed. And here I may say something else: I think of all labours or positions, that of a public minister of the gospel is the most trying; it is the last thing that I should choose. If I were young now, and knew what I now know of the ministry, and were asked, Would not you like to be a minister? Anything but that. Why, you are never easy, you are never comfortable. You get a little comfort sometimes when you are preaching; and the next day there is a

poisonous anonymous letter, or else some impudent fellow or another abusing you, and I don't know what all. Numbers of letters I have had abusing me. The people here have given thousands and thousands of pounds, and distributed to the poor; now I have letter after letter; sometimes,—“You covetous wretch, you niggardly wretch, and you Surrey Tabernacle people, you are not worthy of existence; you do nothing for the poor.” I do not very often get the names of such persons as these. Such persons do not look at what the people do do, but they look at what they do not do; and then, looking at what they do not do, they conclude they do nothing. I catch it sometimes amazingly. One comes,—Cannot you introduce our case to your people? Well, we have got so many cases already that we do not know what to do with them. So I am blamed for pretty well everything; the poor parson is never right. Some of you that are tradesmen have great trials, but if you had the position of a minister for one month, and it happened to be a pretty trying one, depend upon it you would say, I shall give this up, this will not do at all. And I believe that nothing but the power and grace of God can sustain and support a man in it. I ought not perhaps to name these things; for after all, all our troubles, cares, and anxieties, and all we may be the subjects of, are mere trifles in comparison of the infinite and eternal good which is done. Let a minister look at this,—if he be the means of bringing only one soul out of a state of nature to a saving knowledge of Christ, he has been the means of doing that that time cannot undo, that life cannot undo, that death cannot undo, that Satan cannot undo, and that judgment and eternity will not undo; he has instrumentally formed that man for eternal life and eternal glory; and if all the silver and gold in the world were put into the one scale, and the good done to that soul put into the other, the good done to that soul would outweigh the whole. Let us therefore willingly suffer, willingly be reproached, willingly be annoyed, and go on from time to time to preach God's blessed truth.

“Thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee these forty years.” Your time is nearly gone, and so I must say but little more; just remind you that the Lord did not leave them nor forsake them. The manna continued, the rock continued, and the priesthood continued, and the mercy-seat continued. There was the cloud by day, and the fire by night; so that darkness was needed to bring out the light of the cloud; and if that cloud be a figure of God's truth, then the darkness of soul-trouble and affliction bring out the light of God's truth. You and I could not know what we do know, were it not for troubles and afflictions; these afflictions bring out in God's own time the light of eternal truth; and the truth shines brighter by those afflictions than by any other means.

Thus the Lord abode by them ; and they were not, after all, so very badly off in the wilderness. Well but, say you ? it was a terrible time ; there were fiery, flying serpents, and scorpions, and drought, and it was a dreadful place. What signified that, if the Lord were with them ? Why, the fiery furnace was a dreadful place, but then the Saviour took the dread of it away ; the lions' den was a dreadful place, but the Lord took the dread of it away. All we want is the presence of the Lord, to continue to cleave to him and abide by him ; and as goodness and mercy have followed us, so they will do in the future. And then the Lord instructs us how we are to look upon our troubles ; we are to consider that "as a man chasteneth his son, so the Lord thy God chasteneth thee ;" and so all our troubles are those chastisements by which we are kept in our senses, and by which we are humbled down from time to time for our good at his feet, that we should be glad to live in his way ; and the end of it will be that he will bring us into a good land, where he will be unto us a place of broad rivers and streams, where we shall eat bread without scarceness, where we shall lack not any good thing, but where our dwelling will be permanent, even in everlasting mansions.

May the Lord preserve us then from forgetting him, from forgetting what he hath done, and from forgetting how he undertook our cause ; and that he abides by us by the same laws now—the laws of grace and truth. The Lord thus bless us all, for Christ's sake.

Amen.