

## **FOLLOWING ON TO KNOW THE LORD**

Preached at Providence Chapel, West Street, Croydon, Lord's Day morning, April 16th, 1865

"Then shall we know, if we follow on to know the LORD; his going forth is prepared as the morning; and he shall come unto us as the rain, as the latter and former rain unto the earth" Hosea 6:3

I was speaking, in my exposition of Hosea 5 this morning, of the various keys of a house, and that these were all different. Thus there is the key of the street-door, of the parlour, of the study, of the bedrooms, of the kitchen, of the pantry; and there is no use taking the street-door key to open the door of the study, or of the parlour door key to open the tea-caddy. You may fumble at the lock with the wrong key and hamper it, but you will never open it unless you have the right key. How many bring their keys to open God's Word, but miserably fail because their wrong keys will not fit into, or turn the lock. But there is a master-key which will open those inner chambers which are filled with all precious and pleasant riches (Prov.24:4); and that is the key of experience. We might, for instance, understand the literal meaning of the book of Hosea, have a critical knowledge of the language in which the Holy Ghost originally composed it, explain the ancient or Oriental customs referred to in it; but that would be taking the street-door key to open the cash-box. What we want is the key to understand the spiritual meaning, which, after all, is the only one to do our souls any real good. Now we only understand the spiritual meaning of God's Word by having some experience of that Word in our own hearts; for then we have an unction from the Holy One, whereby we know all things, and can penetrate beyond the letter of the Word into its inner core and spirit. Indeed I may say that

only so far as we are blessed with some experience of the truth and know divine things by divine teaching, can we enter into any of the heavenly mysteries of God's Word, and find it to be spirit and life to our souls.

Let us then take up the subject where I dropped it this morning, viz., the end of the preceding chapter. The Lord had there said, "I will go and return to my place, till they acknowledge their offence, and seek my face: in their affliction they will seek me early" (chap.5:15). But this chapter opens with Ephraim's words: "Come, and let us return unto the LORD: for he hath torn, and he will heal us; he hath smitten, and he will bind us up" (chap.6:1). "Come, and let us return unto the LORD." We have basely departed from him, but now let us return. "For he hath torn." Now Ephraim sees where the moth came from, and who was the lion; who had torn, and there was none to rescue. "For I will be unto Ephraim as a lion, and as a young lion to the house of Judah: I, even I, will tear and go away; I will take away, and none shall rescue him" (chap.5:14). The soul sees that its wounding strokes come from the Lord. "He hath torn, and he will heal us." Here is faith springing up into living exercise in the power of God. "He hath smitten;" it was from his hand the blows came; it was he that rent and tore us; and he, and he only, can and will bind us up. From the same hand must come both wound and cure. Ephraim has now got on the right track. There is no more being "broken in judgment, because he willingly walked after the commandment" (chap.5:11); no, more going to the Assyrian, or sending to king Jareb; no hiding sin in his bosom, or rolling it as a sweet morsel under the tongue; but some dawning beams of opening day breaking in upon his soul show him the path in which he must walk to find pardon and peace; for he seems to have had a view by faith of the resurrection of Christ. "After two days will he revive us: in the third day he will raise

us up, and we shall live in his sight" (chap. 6:2).

Something like this was felt in some of our souls when the Lord first appeared to us as a suitable Saviour. We felt that we had departed from God; that this was the cause of his hiding his face, and that he would not be found of us till we acknowledged our offences. But when in our affliction we sought him early, there was some view of a risen Christ at the right hand of the Father as the Mediator between God and men. This was the opening of a door of hope. When Christ rose from the dead, the church mystically rose with him. We are said, therefore, to be risen with Christ (Col. 3:1); to be quickened together with him, raised up together, and made to sit together in heavenly places (Eph. 2:5,6). Ephraim therefore says: "After two days will he revive us: in the third day he will raise us up, and we shall live in his sight." Then come the words of the test: "Then shall we know, if we follow on to know the LORD: his going forth is prepared as the morning; and he shall come unto us as the rain, as the latter and former rain unto the earth." In opening up these words I shall, with God's help, direct your attention to these three leading points:

I. First, *the condition*. I use the expression reluctantly, but I can find no better. "If we follow on to know the LORD."

II. Secondly, *the promise*. "Then shall we know."

III. Thirdly, *the mode of fulfilment*. "His going forth is prepared as the morning; and he shall come unto us as the rain, as the latter and the former rain unto the earth."

I. I use the word *condition*, I have already said, with reluctance; but bear in mind, that though I use the word, I do so in a gospel sense. It is true that there are no conditions

in the gospel; and yet there are "ifs," which, though not conditional, because the Lord enables us to perform them, are so connected with the promise to which they are attached that they cannot be separated from it. So stands the "if" of our text. "Then shall we know, *if* we follow on." If no following on, no knowing. And yet the Lord must give both will and power to follow on as much as to know.

But now let us consider the spiritual meaning of the words thus conditionally expressed, introduced, and guarded by the "if." "If we follow on to know the LORD." Before the soul can even begin to follow on it must first be put into the right path; and before it can keep on pursuing its course boldly and perseveringly, it must be well assured that it is the right road. If I were to ask my way to Mitcham, and a person on whom I could depend were to say to me, "All right, Sir; keep on this road; if you follow it, it will bring you there," it implies that I am in the right road, or he would tell me that I was wrong altogether. So when the text says, "Then shall we know, if we follow on to know the LORD," it shows that we are already in the gospel path. When the Holy Ghost turns us from Mount Sinai, that fiery mount, and plants our feet in the road to Zion, every step is a step forward to heaven, and every step is a good step; for the way is good, the direction good, and the end good. And we have companions in it, according to that word: "And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem" (Isa. 2:3). But we follow on for what? To know the Lord. The Lord said in his intercessory prayer, "This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" (John 17:3). Thus the eternal life which the Lord bestows on as many as the Father has given

him consists in these two things: 1. To know the only true God; and, 2. To know Jesus Christ whom he has sent. There is, then, no eternal life in a man's bosom, no eternal life reserved for him in the time to come, except he is taught and brought to know the only true God, and Jesus Christ the Son of God. This knowledge is no natural knowledge, no fruit of learning or study, no acquisition of human industry, talent, wisdom, or investigation, but a knowledge arising out of spiritual manifestations to the soul. The Lord, therefore, said to Simon Peter, "Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 16:17). So Paul also speaks: "When it pleased God .... to reveal his Son in me" (Gal. 1:15,16). I am satisfied, both from Scripture and my own experience, that there is no true knowledge of God except by some personal manifestation of himself to our soul, nor any saving knowledge of Jesus Christ except by some revelation of him to our hearts. I am at a point here, and so are all who have felt and groaned under the darkness, ignorance, and unbelief of their mind, and had any shining in of the true light of God from heaven.

In the first leading of the blessed Spirit in the path Zionward, there is some discovery to the soul of the Father. If you look at the words of John in his first epistle, you will find he speaks to fathers, young men, and children: "I write unto you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake" (1 John 2:12). The word rendered "little children" here is a different word in the original from that used in verse 13; it is a more general and comprehensive one, as in the last verse of the epistle, and includes all the family of God. But each of these three classes has its distinctive character. "I have written unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning" (1 John 2:14) that is, Christ, who was "in the beginning" (John

1:1), and "from the beginning" (1 John 1:1). This was the fathers' mark, that they knew the Lord Jesus for themselves. "I have written unto you, young men, because ye are strong, and the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one" (1 John 2:14). To fight, wrestle with, and overcome Satan, was the young men's mark. "I write unto you, little children, because ye have known the Father" (1 John 2:13) Here the word means "little children," as small in stature and young in age, and is the same word as the little child whom Jesus called unto him, and set in the midst of the disciples (Matt. 18:2). This then is the little child's mark, that he knows the Father. See the distinction; the little children know the Father, that is God, and the fathers know him from the beginning, that is Jesus Christ. Does not this correspond with what the Lord said to his disciples, "Ye believe in God, believe also in me" (John 14:1)? But by knowing the Father here, we must not understand that the little children at first know him as a Father shedding abroad his love in their hearts, so much as they know him as a righteous God. The foundation of that godly fear which is the beginning of wisdom is some personal discovery of God to our souls. If we have not had that, we have not a right fear of God; for only as he reveals himself to our hearts is there a right knowledge of him. But you may say, "How can we see him who is invisible, or know him who dwelleth in the light which no man can approach unto?" How do you see the sun? By his beams. The sun itself is too bright to look upon. He is revealed by the beams which shine out of him. Is it not so in the early dawn, when the rays of the sun discover his presence? So we see God by a beam of himself.

Every step, then, in the way, is to make us know more of that great God whom we are thus taught to fear. There is a following on, if we know God in this way; for these beams have a guiding light, an attractive influence, and a

quickenings, enlivening power. But all this time we may have very dim views of God's dear Son: true views, yet faint views; right views, yet feeble views, seeing him in the Word more than in the light of his manifested presence; something breaking in, perhaps, of the true light with sweetness and savour, yet we can hardly tell what it is, or if there is salvation in it. This is what I may call an incipient knowledge of the Son of God. But after a time, it may be, perhaps, a long time of doubt and fear, conviction and trouble, prayer and supplication, there is a blessed revelation of the Son of God to the soul. His glorious Deity, his sacred humanity, his complex Person, are set before the eyes of the mind as clearly as if we saw him with our bodily eyes. And what is the immediate effect? He is at once received into the heart, embraced in the affections, and enthroned in the conscience as Lord and King.

But even after this manifestation of Christ there is still a following on to know the Lord. The soul that has once known something of the Lord is never satisfied but by obtaining clearer, deeper, more spiritual and abiding views of his beauty and blessedness. After such a clear revelation of the Person and work of the Son of God as left no doubt on the mind that we saw him by the eye of faith, we may walk in such thick darkness and bewilderment of soul as to lose all sight, and to our feelings all knowledge of him, so as even to doubt whether there is a God. But, O, how intense sometimes are our desires that he will break through the cloud, and speak a word to our soul. I have stood sometimes under a tree, lifted up my eyes to the Lord, and cried unto him with such earnestness and vehemence to break in on my heart. How at such seasons, we long for him to rend the heavens and come down and manifest himself to our soul. How at times we seem not to have a shred of religion, not a grain or an atom. Then we have again, such goings up of

desire that the Lord would only speak one word, give one look, apply one soft touch. This is all we want. A word from the Lord, some breaking in of the light of his countenance, some manifestation of his presence, some knowledge of and communion with himself, some healing beams, bringing with them light, life, liberty, and love, this is all our religion. When we have not this, where is all our religion? Gone, fled, vanished. I have none. I don't say I am going into the world, or to give up all my profession and all my hope; but I have no religion; at least nothing that I call religion, unless the Lord is pleased to speak into my poor heart, and make himself known by his almighty power. We have the fear of God, it is true, still there, with faith and a good conscience, for these we must never put away; but as to any felt enjoyment of the things of God, we have no religion to satisfy the heart, or give rest and peace to the soul.

Here, then, is the blessedness of the promise: "Then shall we know, if we follow on to know the LORD." This promise has a very wide bearing, a keen, far-seeing eye, a strong, far-reaching hand. Perhaps you are only just beginning to follow on. You have desires, something more than wishes; for some may wish to be saved who have no strong desires after manifested mercy. You have prayers, you have sighs and cries, tears and groans, often begging of the Lord to appear. You are in the track; you are following on to know the Lord; for that is what you want. You want to know God the Father in the sweet shedding abroad of his love in the soul, God the Son in a revelation of his Person and work, and God the Holy Ghost in his heavenly communion. You are following on, though it may sometimes be through a cloud of darkness, a crowd of fears, a host of devils, and a sea of troubles.

II. But we now come to the second part of our text, *the promise*. "Then shall we know, if we follow on to know the



LORD."

"Then *shall* we know." There is, then, no doubt about it. It is one of the Lord's "I wills," and "Ye shalls!" What fixedness, what firmness are here! But, if you observe, there is here what is called an ellipsis, that is, a designed omission of some words to complete the sense, and this omission is of the things which we shall know. But may we not fill up this ellipsis by bringing from other parts of the Scripture promises of what things we are made to know by the teaching and testimony of the blessed Spirit? As the apostle speaks: "Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God" (1 Cor.2:12). The things, then, which we shall know are "the things that are freely given to us of God." These are too many to enumerate, for they comprehend every spiritual blessing with which God has blessed us, already blessed us, in heavenly places in Christ Jesus. I can only, therefore, name a few of them.

1. The first which I shall name is contained in the words which the Lord spake to those Jews of whom we read that "they believed on him." It is true that their faith was, as the event proved, but a natural and temporary faith; but the Lord's words still stand good to those who believe in him with a spiritual, living, and lasting faith: "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31,32). This promise assures them of two things; first, of a *knowledge of the truth*; secondly, of an experience of its *liberating power*. You may often fear that, with all your long profession, you do not know the truth. Your mind is often so dark and confused, and you are from time to time so tossed about, that it seems as if you do not know the truth, that is, rightly and savingly for yourself, and that you never will

know it. But you shall. Here is the Lord's own promise for it. It shall be sealed upon your heart by a divine power, and you shall know it by the teaching and testimony of the blessed Spirit in your own soul. And you shall also know the sweet liberty of truth, the efficacious power of it in your own bosom, and the giving way of every bond and shackle under its melting influence; for "the yoke shall be destroyed because of the anointing" (Isa.10:27). This is receiving the love of the truth so as to be saved thereby (2 Thess.2:10), and enjoying the blessing of which the psalmist speaks: "Blessed is the people that know the joyful sound: they shall walk, O LORD, in the light of thy countenance" (Psa.89:15).

2. But what else shall you know? The *pardon of all your sins*; the blotting out of all your transgressions. There are those here, it may be, that truly fear God, who do not yet know that. You have many hopes and expectations; and sometimes these rise very high, for there is what the apostle calls "the full assurance of hope" (Heb.6:11), as well as "the full assurance of faith" (Heb.10:22). But because you cannot rise up into the sweet assurance of forgiven sin, you often fear that you are wrong altogether. But if you follow on to know the Lord, he will sooner or later speak to you the pardoning word, and say, "Go in peace, for thy sins are forgiven thee" (cf. Mark 2:5-12).

3. But you shall also know *more than you have ever known* of the Lord Jesus Christ. From what you have seen and known of him already, you are following on to know him more. But you have not seen a thousandth part of what he is to those who believe in his name. You shall know his faithfulness to every promise, his suitability to every want and woe, and what he is in all his covenant offices and gracious relationships to all who look unto him. He will bring you to the spot to which he brought Paul: "I am crucified

with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me" (Gal.2:20). You will thus learn to live a life of faith on the Son of God; and, as Bunyan speaks in his "Grace Abounding", find what it is for him "to stand by you at all turns." You will learn the riches of his grace as superabounding over all the aboundings of your sin; the efficacy of his precious blood to cleanse your conscience from guilt, filth, and dead works; the blessedness of his righteousness to cover your needy, naked soul; and the sweetness of his dying love shed abroad in your heart, with his strength made perfect in your weakness to support you in every trying hour. In fact, what is there which you shall not know? The text seems given to us like a blank cheque, signed by a man of wealth, with permission for us to fill it up with any sum that we please. Fill up the cheque, then, with as large a sum as your faith can muster courage to do; and when you have done that, you will still fall far short of the intentions of the donor. God will pay it in full, for he will surely keep back from you nothing that is good for you to know.

Follow on, then, follow on to know the Lord. Never be satisfied till you cash the cheque and get the money, and when you have got it, ask for more, and be ever crying, "More faith, more hope, more love, more power, Lord, more vital godliness, more spirituality of mind, more conformity to thine image, more knowledge of thy will and desire to do it, more unfitness for the world, more fitness for heaven." Ever keep following on, and you will find that the more you know of the Lord, his truth will be more and more felt in its preciousness in your soul. It is true that with it you will also know plenty of trials, afflictions, and cutting strokes; for it is through much tribulation we are to enter the kingdom, and

sufferings and blessings, trials and deliverances, always go hand in hand. The apostle even prayed that he might know "the fellowship of Christ's sufferings" (cf. Phil.3:10); viewing that knowledge as even a greater blessing than to know the power of his resurrection.

But once more consider the words, "Then shall we know, if we follow on to know the LORD," and do apply them to your own case. I have already said that there is an "if." This "if" stands, so to speak, as an angel at the head of the way, to keep out those who are not following on to know the Lord, and to let in those who are. Now, if you are following on, you have a testimony, not only that the Lord has planted his fear in your heart, but has given you a gracious promise to hold you up in the strait and narrow way. Keep firmly, then, in the way in which he has planted your footsteps. Do not listen to erroneous men. Deal with them as the church did at Ephesus, to whom the Lord testifies, "I know .... how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars" (Rev.2:2). Read no erroneous books, which, in our days, so awfully abound. Keep close to truth, close to conscience, close to a preached gospel; close to the things which God has shown you, and of which you have felt the savour and the power. Be this ever the desire of your soul, to know the Lord in the sweet manifestations of his Person and work, his blood and love, and he will reveal to you everything which shall be for your good and his glory.

III. But I now come to our last and third point, the *mode of the fulfilment* of the promise, and, indeed, I ought to add, the *certainty of its execution*. We may look at the last point first. I. Observe how the execution of the promise is spoken of as the Lord's "going forth," and that this going forth is compared to two things: First, it is prepared as the morning;

and secondly, he shall come unto us as the rain, as the latter and former rain unto the earth. Is not the morning "prepared?" Before the morning comes, say, when you lie down at night, have you any doubt whether to-morrow's sun will rise? Do you not close your eyes in sleep with a certain persuasion that the sun will rise at its due hour to give light upon the earth, and to call you to your daily work? The going forth of Jesus for the salvation of his people is as certain as the rising of to-morrow's sun. As sure as the morning will come to-morrow, so surely will Jesus go forth according to the promise of our text. And is there not something sweet as well as significant in the word "prepared?" There is a preparation for the sun to rise; and that not only that he may come out of his chamber as a bridegroom, and rejoice as a strong man to run a race, but as issuing out of preceding darkness, and making all things light before him. How the morning springs out of the shades of night! Is it not always night before morning? We have not always daylight with us. What a dark night of sorrow and trouble often precedes God's morning; darker than the night which precedes the rising of the natural sun. How often mists and fogs also obscure the sun when he begins to rise. Yet it is the morning, and they will be soon dispersed. So the Lord will as certainly come to manifest himself to your soul if you are following on. But does not the morning come very gradually? But before the sun rises, a preparation is made for his appearing. His beams and rays, while he himself is still below the horizon, streak and lace the eastern sky as harbingers of his coming. And sometimes the morning star glitters like a diamond in the east, heralding his approach and proclaiming his speedy appearance. So it is often in grace; I will not say always, for sometimes the Sun of righteousness bursts at once out of the dark shades of night. But often, if not usually, the Lord's going forth in grace is prepared as the morning in nature. There are beams and rays of the coming morning before the

Sun himself rises upon the soul; some gracious breaking in of coming mercy, some dawns of hope, some expectations of manifested salvation; "My soul, wait thou only upon God; for my expectation is from him" (Psa.62:5); some good reading, hearing, or praying times; some glimpses, glances, and transient sights of the King in his beauty, enabling the heart to feel and the tongue to say, "O Lord, how precious art thou to my soul." All these preparations precede and herald the Bridegroom coming out of his chamber. And sometimes spiritually there shines forth, when the day dawns, the morning star, "the day star" spoken of in Peter as arising in the heart (2 Pet.1:19); which we may, perhaps, understand as some promise applied to the soul with special unction and power as a prophecy of coming good. But in due time the Sun himself comes in a blessed revelation of Christ to the soul; a gracious manifestation of the Son of God in the glory of his Person, and the efficacy of his blood, righteousness, and finished work. Thus "his going forth is prepared as the morning." How certain, O how blessed is this promise to every waiting, expecting, longing, and desiring soul, which can find neither rest nor peace until the Lord himself appears and personally manifests himself as all its salvation and all its desire.

2. But we have another figure given to us in our text scarcely inferior in certainty, or in the fulness of its blessing: "He shall come unto us as the rain, as the latter and former rain unto the earth." In Palestine there were but two seasons in the year when rain fell. It fell first in the autumn, about the equinox; that is, the latter part of September and the beginning of October. I say "first fell" because the civil year of the Jews began in the autumn, in the month Tisri, corresponding to the last half of our September, and the first half of our October. This rain, therefore, is called the former or early rain. Until that fell, from the hardness of the soil,

baked by the burning summer sun, they could not plough the ground to receive the seed. But the frequent showers of this former or early rain, for it began with gentle showers, broke down the hard clods, and the seed being then committed to the furrow, the same rain, falling more copiously, made it germinate and grow. It was then, therefore, they sowed their wheat and barley. Then there came a cold winter, with showers of hail and snow. But about the end of March and through April rain fell again, called "the latter rain," as coming later in the year, which prepared the corn for the early harvest, which, for barley, was about the Passover, when they presented the first-fruits of the barley harvest. The wheat, ripening later, was not cut till near Pentecost, or fifty days afterwards, when the first-fruits of the wheat harvest were presented at that feast, which fell about the middle of May. I have explained these things to throw light upon the figure here given us of "the latter and former rain." Now these two seasons of rain were so certain in the Holy Land that they might be looked for as certainly as the rising of the sun; for, indeed, without them the land could not have been cultivated, and the people would have died of famine.

But now for the spiritual meaning of this figure of the latter and former rain. Two things are implied in it; first, *Certainty*; secondly, *Blessing*.

First, then, *Certainly*. "He *shall* come unto us as the rain." Do we not see certainty here? But for its certainty of fulfilment, where would be the promise as a promise? How could it be one of "*all* the promises of God" which in Christ "are yea and in him Amen" (2 Cor.1:20), if it were not to be certainly fulfilled? Hosea spoke to a people who were certain that these rains would come in their appointed season. The very life of the nation depended upon them. But even if, for the wickedness of man, the Lord should, as Solomon speaks,

"shut up the heaven, that there should be no rain," or even if the Lord carried out in nature his declaration by the prophet: "And also I have withholden the rain from you, when there were yet three months to the harvest" (Amos 4:7), yet he will not deal so with his people in grace.

But let us now look at the *blessedness* of the promise, and see how far we may find in it a spiritual description of the Lord's gracious dealings. May we not, then, compare the first work of grace upon the heart, the softening influences of the blessed Spirit in the soul, with the former or early rain? Is not some softening influence needed to break the hard heart and make it tender, that there maybe a tilth for the seed of the Word to lodge in, that it may germinate and grow, and not perish under the clods? "God," says Job, "maketh my heart soft" (Job 23:16); and the Lord's own word to Josiah was, "Because thine heart was tender" (2 Kings 22:19). Is not this softness and tenderness also what is intimated by the prophet? "I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them an heart of flesh" (Ezek.36:16). But in the east, as I have observed, frequent showers precede the fuller and more copious rainfall sufficient to soften the clods for the plough, and yet hardly enough to make the seed spring up and grow. So in grace. The Lord's people have not at first usually copious showers. They have sprinklings and waterings sufficient to soften the heart, and to allow, so to speak, room for the plough of conviction to make a deep furrow and prepare a suitable seedbed for the Word of life to fall into and grow in. But when Christ is revealed to the soul, the heart is broken under a sight and sense of his bleeding, dying love; and godly sorrow for sin with real contrition breaks the heart all to pieces. This may be called the former rain in its more copious showers, for then the truth takes deep root downwards and springs forth upwards. The hard clods have been already broken under kindly showers and



gracious convictions. But the fulness of the former rain is not yet come. It is often in grace as in nature. Farmers will sometimes say, "This little rain is not enough after such a long dry season. We want a day's rain, at least, a good soaking rain, to go down into the depth of the soil." So spiritually. The first sprinklings and little showers of heavenly grace are enough to soften the hard clods; but they do not go deep enough; something still is wanting for the Word of life to take root and bear fruit. Now, this seems to be when the heart is softened and melted by a gracious discovery of the Lord Jesus to the soul; for then the truth is so commended to the conscience, and brought into the heart, that it strikes a root into the innermost affections, called, in Scripture, receiving the love of the truth (2 Thess.2:10).

Now, look at these two things, that you may judge for yourself whether you have had the early or former rain. View it in its first sprinklings, and view it in its more copious outpourings. Have you had your heart softened so that the plough of conviction has drawn a furrow in it? This is good, for it is the first falling of the former rain. Then look if you have had the fuller shower, in some discovery or manifestation of the blessed Lord. But you may depend upon it that great blessings are very rare. There are dews which keep the soul alive, as in the Holy Land the heavy dews kept vegetation alive during the interval of the two seasons of rain. "I will be as the dew unto Israel" (Hosea 14:5). "My head is filled with dew, and my locks with the drops of the night" (Song of Sol.5:2). But a copious rainfall, a thorough blessing, is only at certain seasons; and we may be truly thankful if we can lay our hand upon one or two memorable spots in our experience, and believe that at such and such a time we had a real soul-blessing from God.

But I now come to "the latter rain," which, though put first in

our text was called latter because it fell after the other, and, as I before intimated, in the early spring. I observed, also, that this rain was to prepare for the harvest, enabling the ground to put forth its strength and fill the ear with corn, that it might not be shrivelled with drought, but well filled with the fat of the wheat. May we not apply this to the experience of a soul in its latter stages? When the Lord is going to take one of his dear people home to himself, he often gives him a good copious shower of the latter rain to ripen him for the harvest. How often do we find that when a saint of God comes to his dying bed, the Lord breaks in upon his soul with his love and mercy. Does not this seem to be the last showers which fall upon the soul to make it ripe for the sickle of death? And is it not the desire of your soul to have upon your deathbed those manifestations of the love and mercy of God which will carry you happily through the dark valley of the shadow of death, that, as has been said, you may then have nothing to do but die? But though I have thus opened and explained the figure, I by no means wish to confine to it the free grace of the gospel. This would be to limit that which is unlimited, and to cramp that which is free. As a figure, it beautifully represents the certainty and blessedness of the gracious comings of Christ; but we must not think that there are no comings of his power and presence but those which strictly correspond with the figure. A figure at best is but a figure, and must not be strained beyond its due place among other figures; as if, like Aaron's rod, this one figure swallowed up all the rest. Do not think that because the latter and the former rain are spoken of, as I have explained, according to the figure, that there are no other showers but those of the former and latter rain. There are, as in our own climate, showers at other besides these set and peculiar times. At any rate, there are often little sprinklings and gentle bedewings where there are no copious showers. If you get a good hearing-time under a sermon, a

sweet visitation on your knees, a blessed opening up of God's truth to your soul, a softening and melting of heart by some unexpected glimpse or glance of the Lord in his blessedness and beauty, highly prize them. These may be considered by some small things, scarcely worth notice; but "who hath despised the day of small things?" (Zech.4:10). Is any thing small that comes from God, or that leads to him? Look for and expect great things; but prize small things. Only mind that, whether great or small, they are real. Look at the things, which you experience in a way of mercy and grace, as narrowly as a jeweller looks at stones which are brought to him by a stranger for him to buy, as if diamonds or rubies. He does not take it for certain that they are real jewels, because they are offered him as such. He carefully examines them before he pronounces them to be diamonds, and wants also to know whether they were honestly come by. Deal with your mercies and blessings as he does, not only to examine them carefully, but after he has ascertained their reality. They all are precious; but they are not all equally precious. The larger, clearer, and brighter are more valuable than the smaller and less brilliant. When you get a blessing, be it small or great, do you not often say, "Is it real, Lord? Is it truly of God?" You may have feelings of sorrow or joy, sorrow for sin, or joy in the Lord; but are those feelings wrought in your soul by the Holy Ghost? You may have various marks and evidences of divine life; but have you a divine warrant to believe that they are of God? The reality of your religion must be tried one day; try it now. If a man has a reality in him, it will stand the keenest trial.

I remember once going to the Bank of England to get a note cashed. When I presented it to the clerk, he first looked at me hard in the face, I suppose to see whether I had a roguish appearance, and next he compared my note with a list which hung by his side, to see, I suppose, whether mine

was one that was forged, or of which payment had been stopped. I did not flinch. I knew the note was good. But suppose it had been forged or payment of it stopped; the next thing might have been for a bank porter to take me by the shoulder, or a policeman to carry me before the Lord Mayor. So you need not be afraid of a searching ministry, if it searches the very core of your heart. Men of God do not stand up to flatter people, or pay with solid cash the forged or stolen notes of mere professors. They would do everything, indeed, to encourage God's family; that is their work and office; but they cannot and will not stand in the name of God and deceive people, be they sinners or saints; for of all deceivers a pulpit deceiver is the worst. We have heard much lately of burglars breaking into shops of watchmakers and carrying off much valuable property; but even their guilt seems less than that of robbing and plundering the souls of men. But I must pause. As the Lord's ministers cannot be deceivers, so the Lord's people cannot be deceived. And may I not add that whatever ministers and people be, or turn out to be, he never can, he never will, deceive his people, who has declared that his going forth is prepared as the morning; and that he will come unto them as the rain, as the latter and former rain unto the earth.