

## **The Mighty God in the Midst of Zion**

Preached at Gower Street Chapel, London, on Lord's Day Evening, May 21, 1865

"In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem, Fear thou not: and to Zion, Let not thy hands be slack. The Lord thy God in the midst of thee is mighty: he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love; he will joy over thee with singing." Zeph. 3:16, 17

Of the Old Testament Scriptures, taking of them a general view, I do not know a more difficult part to understand than that which is contained in what are commonly called "the minor prophets;" that is, the series of prophecies commencing with Hosea and terminating with Malachi. They are called, as you probably know, the minor prophets, not because of any inferiority in inspiration, in authority, or in subject matter to the greater prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, but on account of the comparative brevity or smallness in bulk of their compositions; rarely extending, except Hosea and Zechariah, beyond the compass of two or three chapters.

Now if these minor prophets are so difficult to understand, at least I have found them so, there must be some reason for this difficulty. But perhaps you see no difficulty; perhaps you are a thorough master of the whole subject, and have penetrated with an eagle eye into the whole series, so as clearly to see both their literal and spiritual meaning. But will you allow me to gauge by a few questions the depth of this knowledge? Can you understand Obadiah? What meaning would you affix to such a passage as this? "And the house of Jacob shall be a fire, and the house of Joseph a flame, and the house of Esau for stubble, and they shall kindle in them,

and devour them; and there shall not be any remaining of the house of Esau; for the Lord hath spoken it." (Obadiah 18.) Are you fully master of Amos? And can you explain the meaning of this verse? "I saw the Lord standing upon the altar: and he said, Smite the lintel of the door, that the posts may shake: and cut them in the head, all of them; and I will slay the last of them with the sword: he that fleeth of them shall not flee away, and he that escapeth of them shall not be delivered." (Amos 9:1.) Do you understand the meaning of Nahum, where he says, "Where is the dwelling of the lions, and the feeding-place of the young lions, where the lion, even the old lion, walked, and the lion's whelp, and none made them afraid? The lion did tear in pieces enough for his whelps, and strangled for his lionesses, and filled his holes with prey, and his dens with ravin." (Nahum 2:11, 12.) And do you think you have sounded all the depths of Joel? "O," you say, "I have not thought about the meaning of such passages as those." Then don't think you understand it until you have considered the subject a little more closely, and sounded some of these hidden depths; for you may depend upon it that these minor prophets, though we may gather up much of their general meaning, are very difficult to understand in their minuter details, and especially when we desire to invest them with a spiritual interpretation. For this difficulty there seem to be several reasons.

1. First, we are but imperfectly acquainted with the kingdoms, states, and persons generally against whom they were uttered, and the events of the period in which the prophets themselves lived; so that many things which they wrote, though perfectly intelligible at the time when they were written, are very obscure to us now. Thus Obadiah prophesies of the destruction of Edom, which was a country to the south of Canaan, and chiefly remarkable for its rock-hewn city, situated in a narrow, inaccessible defile, formerly

called Selah, but now Petra. The prophet therefore says, "The pride of thine heart hath deceived thee, thou that dwellest in the clefts of the rock, whose habitation is high; that saith in his heart, Who shall bring me down to the ground? Though thou exalt thyself as the eagle, and though thou set thy nest among the stars, thence will I bring thee down, saith the Lord." (Obadiah 3, 4.) But how little is now known of the ancient state of Edom? So Nahum prophesies the destruction of Nineveh. At the time of their prophecies both of these were flourishing cities, but now neither of them has an inhabitant; and till a few years ago the very site of Nineveh was unknown.

2. Another reason to my mind is, that some of the events which are prophesied are still unfulfilled: as for instance, "And they of the south shall possess the mount of Esau; and they of the plain the Philistines: and they shall possess the fields of Ephraim, and the fields of Samaria: and Benjamin shall possess Gilead." (Obadiah 19.) The full meaning, therefore, of the minor prophets may not be understood until the events to which they refer are accomplished.

3. There is also a third reason for this difficulty, viz. the harmonising of the literal and spiritual meaning which cannot well be done whilst the former is obscure.

But the question may perhaps arise in your mind, If these prophecies are so difficult to understand, why do you preach from them? This morning you took your text out of Hosea, one of the minor prophets; and this evening you are taking your text out of Zephaniah, another of the minor prophets. Are you come this evening with some of these difficulties—to raise up giants that you may kill them, and set us enigmas that you may solve them?" God forbid! I would rather clear up difficulties than make or state them. But you will please to

observe that though there may be great difficulties in fully understanding these minor prophets, yet there are many very blessed passages in them; sweet openings up of experimental truth; most gracious and suitable promises given for the consolation of the church of God in all ages. We must ever bear in mind this feature in all the prophets, that as regards the people of God, all their prophecies are promises; and therefore prophecies being promises, they are all in a state of continual fulfilment. God's dealings with his Church are the same in all ages; for he himself is "the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever;" and thus if many of these prophecies look forward into the dim and distant future, when they will have their full completion, yet there is a continual fulfilment of them as containing in their bosom every promised blessing to the saints of God. It is, I may add, this peculiar feature of divine revelation which makes the reading of the Scripture of the Old Testament profitable, and furnishes us, both as ministers and hearers, with food for instruction, consolation, and edification in righteousness.

Bearing then these observations in mind, now look at our text. But take it first as it stands before us in its naked simplicity: "In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem, Fear thou not: and to Zion, Let not thine hands be slack." Have you any idea of the meaning of these words? Do you think you understand what the Lord intends when he says, "In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem, Fear thou not: and to Zion, Let not thy hand be slack?" What is Jerusalem? what is Zion? and what is the exhortation given to each about not fearing and the hands not being slack? And what is meant by "that day?" Is the meaning of all this as plain as the sun shining in the mid-day sky? Is there no difficulty here? If you see and feel this, may I be instrumental in God's hand to clear up any such difficulty, and bring out of it some truth to feed your souls. And then look again at the second verse of our text. Is

that all easy and plain? "The Lord thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing." Is it all so easy that a child may understand it? I do not claim to myself any great knowledge or wisdom; but I hope God has given me some understanding of the word of his grace. At least if he has not done so, I am not fit to stand here this evening to preach to you, and had better come down from the pulpit and take my seat in the pew. But with the hope that, with God's help and blessing, I may be enabled to bring out of these words some things that may be for your instruction, edification, consolation, and encouragement, I shall approach the passage which I have undertaken now to speak from; and in so doing I shall, as the Lord may enable,

I.—*First*, take up what the Lord says in a *way of promise*, or rather, to speak more correctly, of *exhortation*, to Jerusalem and to Zion: "In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem, Fear thou not: and to Zion, Let not thy hands be slack."

II.—*Secondly*, consider *the basis* on which God grounds the reasons why Jerusalem should not fear, and why the hands of Zion should not be slack.

When we come to examine this a little more closely, we shall see that, in laying down this firm basis, the Lord presents himself to the church in a beautiful and blessed light: "The Lord thy God in the midst of thee is mighty." How full of truth and beauty is every word. "The Lord *thy* God"—there is personal possession; "in the *midst* of thee"—there is his immediate presence; "is *mighty*"—there we have *his omnipotent power*. Now out of the presence of the mighty God in the midst of the church there flows these three encouraging considerations:—1, his *determination* to save:

"he will save;" 2, the *fulness of his joy*: "he will rejoice over thee with joy;" "he will joy over thee with singing;" 3, the *rest* which he has in his eternal love: "he will rest in his love." And he holds these blessed considerations up before her eyes, that they may be so many encouragements why Jerusalem should not fear and why the hands of Zion should not be slack.

I.—Every reader, at least every intelligent, spiritual reader of the Scriptures, for many read the Bible who have neither intelligence nor spirituality, must observe the frequent recurrence of the expression, "In that day." There is scarcely a page of prophecy in which you will not find some mention of "that day," or of an expression of the same import, "The day of the Lord." But if you examine the passage in which "that day" or "the day of the Lord" is spoken of, you will find them for the most part of a twofold, nay, of an opposite character and meaning; indeed so opposite to each other, that at first sight it may seem difficult to reconcile them. Thus, "that day" sometimes is spoken of as a day of trouble: "Alas! for that day is great, so that none is like it: it is even the time of Jacob's trouble; but he shall be saved out of it." (Jer. 30:7.) Again, "Woe unto you that desire the day of the Lord! to what end is it for you? The day of the Lord is darkness, and not light. Shall not the day of the Lord be darkness, and not light? even very dark, and no brightness in it?" (Amos 5:18, 20.) In Isaiah too we have a description of what shall be done in "the day of the Lord," of which the sum is: "And the loftiness of man shall be bowed down, and the haughtiness of men shall be made low: and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day." (Isa. 2:17.) How strong also is the language of Zephaniah, the prophet from whom I am speaking this morning. "The great day of the Lord is near, it is near, and hasteth greatly, even the voice of the day of the Lord: the mighty man shall cry there bitterly. That day is a

day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of wateness and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness." (Zeph. 1:14, 15.) Nor does the prophet Isaiah speak less strongly: "Howl ye; for the day of the Lord is at hand; it shall come as a destruction from the Almighty. Therefore shall all hands be faint, and every man's heart shall melt: and they shall be afraid: pangs and sorrow shall take hold of them; and they shall be in pain as a woman that travaileth: they shall be amazed one at another; their faces shall be as flames." (Isa. 13:6, 7, 8.) From these and other passages we gather that "the day of the Lord," or "that day," is a day of trouble, distress, affliction, and sorrow; of breaking down the pride of man, and the manifestation of the terrible wrath of a justly offended God. But if you examine the prophetic Scriptures a little more closely, you will find quite another feature often stamped upon the expression, "In that day." Again and again it is spoken of, loudly heralded and joyfully proclaimed as a day of deliverance, of surpassing mercy, of boundless grace, and, in its effects, of praise and thanksgiving. You must well remember the words of that short but sweet chapter, Isaiah 12, which thus commences: "And in that day thou shalt say, O Lord, I will praise thee: though thou wast angry with me, thine anger is turned away, and thou comfortedst me. Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid: for the Lord Jehovah is my strength and my song; he also is become my salvation." (Isa. 12:1, 2.) And again: "In that day shall this song be sung in the land of Judah." (Isa 26:1.) And who that fears and loves God has not felt the sweetness of those words? "And it shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he will save us: this is the Lord; we have waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation." (Isa. 25:9.)

But now comes the question, "How can these two opposite

things be reconciled? How can we have in the same day deep distress and blessed joy, heavy trouble and sweet consolation?" The answer is easy, I think, and admits of a twofold solution. First, view the day as regards God's dealings with his out-stretched arm in a way of judgment. He has to deal with foes as well as friends; and his foes are his Church's foes. The same day, therefore, shall be a day of woe and sorrow to the one, and a day of deliverance and joy to the other. Was it not so in that signal day when the Lord delivered Israel out of the hand of Pharaoh? That day was a day of trouble and destruction to Egypt, but a day of deliverance and joy to Israel. Thus, the same day is a day of trouble and of joy—of trouble to the defeated and destroyed oppressor, of deliverance and rejoicing to the oppressed who are delivered.

But there is also another solution of this apparent contradiction, when the words are viewed in connection with the experience of God's people. Do not these two things go together in the experience of the living soul? Is not the same day often, if not usually, a day of darkness and light, of oppression and deliverance, of sorrow and of joy? It was so with Hezekiah, David, the publican, and the prodigal. What is a day of deliverance but a day of deliverance out of trouble? What is a day of joy but a day that brings us out of sorrow? And what is a day of singing but a day in which a new song is put into the mourner's mouth after a night of mourning? Does not David thus speak? "For his anger endureth but a moment; in his favour is life: weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning." (Psa. 30:5.) Thus the first part of the day may be a day of darkness, and the second part of the day be a day of light; the first part of the day be a day of trouble, and the second part a day of joy, and yet all be but one day.



But observe, also, that whether it be of trouble or of joy, its distinctive feature is that it is "the day of the Lord." If it be a day of trouble it comes from the Lord. It is his day. Whence comes all real soul trouble? From the Lord; does it not? No man can bring trouble upon his own soul, distress his own conscience, or break himself down into repentance. It is the Lord's word and the Lord's work to do this; and the day in which it is done is that day of days which may well be called "the day of the Lord." How many go on for years with a shilly-shally religion—a poor, worldly, lukewarm, Laodicean profession, and too often a very inconsistent life, for want of this day of the Lord—this day of distress and trouble to break them to pieces, shake them out of their false standing, and cast them down into the dust of death. But how this day of the Lord prepares them for the other day of the Lord, such as that of which our text speaks,—a day of salvation and deliverance.

It appears, then, that there is a day in which it shall be said to Jerusalem, "Fear thou not;" clearly implying that there is a day when Jerusalem fears, and one in which God speaks with power to her heart, and says, "Fear thou not."

What is intended here by "Jerusalem?" I shall omit all mention of any literal fulfilment of the words as referring to the dim future, though I have no doubt myself of some such literal fulfilment, and shall confine myself to the spiritual interpretation as that in which we have the nearer and more personal interest. Spiritually viewed, then, you may take "Jerusalem" as a symbolic representation of the Church of God, for we find the word so applied in the New Testament. Thus Paul speaks: "But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all." (Gal. 4:26.) So also we read: "But ye are come unto Mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable

company of angels." (Heb. 12:22.) We have thus ample warrant for our spiritual interpretation of Jerusalem, as mystically representing that glorious Church of which holy John speaks, and which he saw in vision in its last phase as coming down from God: "And I John saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." (Rev. 21:2.) Viewing, then, the text in its spiritual meaning, we may apply the exhortation, "Fear thou not" to the Church of the living God; and the day spoken of as that day when she is in trouble and sorrow, and beset with many fears on account of the number and strength of her adversaries. But as the members of the mystical body of Christ are all partakers of the same afflictions, though each in its different measure, we may consider the words as addressed personally to each individual believer who is beset with doubt and fear. By so doing we seem to make the words more distinct and more personal, and to speak more pointedly to the heart and conscience of each sufferer in and with Christ.

When we look around at the suffering Church of Christ, how many of the dear family of God do we see in circumstances under which they are greatly afraid and much distressed. Let us look at some of these circumstances to give our subject greater point and distinctness.

1. Take, for instance, when God, in the language of the prophet, "*lays judgment to the line* and righteousness to the plummet;" that day when he brings the soul to book, when he searches Jerusalem with candles, when the light and life of the Holy Spirit visit the heart, rend asunder the veil of ignorance and unbelief spread over it, and discover the sin that lurks and works there, which has been the fruitful source of that long stream of iniquity which has defiled lip and life, and now distresses the awakened conscience. However God

may for a time have seemed to take no notice of the sins of his people, sooner or later a day surely comes when he arrests them by his word, brings them before his holy bar, searches every inmost thought of their heart; and not only recalls to their mind and memory actual transgressions, many perhaps till then buried and forgotten, but sets their secret sins in the light of his countenance, manifests his inflexible justice, immaculate purity, and eternal displeasure against all iniquity; and by these dealings and doings brings them down before him into the dust. Now this day is a day of great fear, because in that day a holy God and a guilty sinner meet together. In that day a righteous law and a guilty conscience come together face to face. In that day the inflexible justice of God and hosts of sins open and secret are brought to look upon each other without shield, shelter, or refuge. How the soul now hangs as it were trembling in the balance lest the sentence go forth of eternal destruction from his presence. Have you never had such a day as that—the day of your soul trouble—when God brought you to book, laid the weight of sin upon your conscience, and made you see what you were in his sight as a justly condemned transgressor? I do not wish to lay down a rigid, unbending standard, and decide how deep or how long this trouble may be; but I cannot see that we can even breathe out our soul for a sense of mercy unless we have in some measure been thus convinced of sin and brought down before the Almighty. It may have been a gradual work, but it must have been a sure one to make it a day of the Lord.

2. But the words, "In that day," will also apply to *a day of trial*. Have you not from time to time had days of trial? Perhaps you are under some very heavy trial now. There may be a heavy load of temporal trouble even now pressing upon your shoulders, and a heavier load of spiritual trouble pressing upon your conscience. The two often go together, as

with Job and Hezekiah; and it is this meeting together of the two waters that makes the trial so heavy. This made the wise man say, "The spirit of a man will sustain his infirmity; but a wounded spirit who can bear?" (Prov. 18:14.) It is then perhaps a day with you of deep trial, both of temporal difficulties and much exercise of mind in spiritual matters. Wave upon wave, billow upon billow are rolling over your soul. But are you not one of the citizens of the new Jerusalem? Have you not in times past felt something of the liberating power of God's truth, and are thus a son and daughter of that free Jerusalem above which is the mother of us all? If so, you are one of the children of promise. (Gal. 4:28.) Unto you then God speaks in our text, "Fear thou not."

3. But with another it may be a day of *great temptation*. You seem under the influence of the Prince of darkness; Satan plies hard at you with his fiery darts, and shoots the very artillery of hell thick and fast even now into your carnal mind, scarcely allowing you breathing time, or, as Job speaks, "to swallow down your spittle." In prayer, in reading, in hearing, in your daily employment, at home and abroad, wherever you are, Satan is pressing you hard with his temptations, so that you often fear where the scene will end. Still God says to you, "Fear thou not." "Greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world." (1 John 4:4.) Our gracious Lord "has spoiled principalities and powers, triumphing over them in his cross." (Col. 2:15.) "Through death he has destroyed him that had the power of death, that is, the devil" (Heb. 2:14); and his promise is, "The God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly." Therefore fear thou not. Satan knoweth that he hath but a short time, and is therefore come down upon you having great wrath. (Rev. 12:12.) But fear thou not, for the Lord has said, "Behold, I give unto you power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the

power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you." (Luke 10:19.)

4. But with others it may be a day when you are *looking forward to the future* with great apprehension. Some dark cloud in providence is gathering in the distance, and as it approaches gradually nearer and nearer you fear lest, instead of breaking in showers upon your head, it should burst forth in a thunderstorm and you be exposed to its fury. Still the Lord says, "Fear thou not." Does he not hold all creation in his grasp? Are not the gold and silver his, and the cattle upon a thousand hills? Has he not always appeared for you in your past troubles; and can he not, yea, will he not appear in that which now fills you with dread in its dim and distant apprehension? How true are the words, "He shall deliver thee in six troubles: yea, in seven there shall no evil touch thee." (Job 5:19.) You have had the six, and found deliverance; now in the seventh, your present one, there shall no evil touch thee.

5. Or it may be a day,—for I wish to take in as many of these days of the Lord as I can, to throw the net wide to catch as many as I can of the fish now swimming about the ship,—it may be a day of *great darkness* with you, of much soul desertion. Many difficulties and perplexities may try your mind, and many doubts and fears as to the goodness of your state teem all in arms against you. You are terribly afraid lest all your profession prove a delusion, lest all which you know should be in the flesh; that you never felt or believed anything aright, and that no work of grace has been wrought in you. Now these exercises are not marks of death but rather of life, and are often made very useful and profitable to the soul. God puts you into these spots, not only to try and prove you, but that he may have a word to say to your heart. These sharp and severe exercises are not meant for

your destruction, as you may fear. They are not intended as intimations from God that he may clear himself of having any hand in your deception, but he brings you into these spots that you may listen to his voice, attend to what he says in the word of grace, that there may be a place in your heart for his word to come into. To you who are passing through that day, the day of Jacob's trouble, God speaks in our text, and says, "Fear thou not." You are beset by many fears; you have fears in Providence and fears in grace; you fear that your spot is not the spot of God's children; that there is no reality in what you have hoped was a work of grace upon your heart; that what you tasted, felt, and handled of the things of God may prove a delusion; that you have not been led in the right way; that you began wrong, have gone on wrong, and will end wrong; that there is something peculiar in your case, something in your experience, that if it were thoroughly searched into would prove you to be unsound to the very core. Circumstances, too, have come upon you which have made the stroke keener and the blow heavier. A day of affliction, temptation, and trial has come upon you; a weakly body, a sickly frame, and an apprehension whether some stroke has not come for your end. With all this a whole host of fears has sprung up like so many armed men, and you do not know what to do with them, or what to do with yourself. Distressed, cast down, and exercised, you know not how to deal with them, get rid of them, or put them away. Thus you are in a strait where none can help you and where you cannot help yourself. Now God says to you, "Fear thou not." I shall by and by show the ground of his admonition to you and blessed counsel; but for the present I will content myself with God's own language. I repeat, then, art thou passing through that day? God says—listen, O, listen to his words—"Fear thou not."

ii. But he speaks to *Zion* also, and says to her, "Let not thy

hands be slack," or "faint," as we read in the margin. By "Zion" here we may understand the same thing as Jerusalem, for Zion was a part of Jerusalem, a lofty eminence on which David built his palace, and is therefore combined with it by the apostle: "But ye are come unto Mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem;" and what is this but "the general assembly and church of the first-born, which are written in heaven?" (Heb. 12:22, 23.) I shall, therefore, assume that the people of God are here spoken to in the day of their fear, and that to them is addressed the exhortation, "Let not thy hands be slack." How suitable, how appropriate is this word to their case. For is there anything which makes our hands so slack as this day which I have already described as the day of temptation, or the day of affliction, or the day of trial, or the day of searching Jerusalem with candles? Now in this "day of the Lord," instead of proving ourselves good soldiers of Jesus Christ, putting on the whole armour of God, and going out manfully to battle, we tremble and fear; and thus our hands are slack, or, as the word means, droop and hang uselessly by our side. At the very moment, in the very circumstances when we need all our armour and all our strength against our enemies, what with inward guilt, strong unbelief, killing doubts, cutting fears, dismal apprehensions, weighty trials, and urgent temptations,—in the very day and hour when we should be most strong to meet our enemy, we are most weak. Instead of boldly and manfully taking the girdle of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, the sword of the Spirit, and the weapon of all prayer, which we are bidden to do, through guilt and fear and dismal apprehension, the hands droop: the girdle gets slack, the shield falls, the sword slips out of the hand, the breastplate gets loose, and the helmet drops off the head. Thus our hands are slack in the use of this armour of God, which we

are to take that we "may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand." (Eph. 6:10-18.) How do you meet a trial, a temptation, a perplexity, a chilling doubt, a cutting fear? Can you rise above it? Are you like an active swimmer in the sea, who, when a towering wave comes, breasts it with skill and vigour and mounts over it? Or are you rather like a poor half-drowned wretch who is dashed by the wave upon the rock, or carried out by its reflux into the sea? Take the generality of God's people. Are they not more like a poor half-drowned sailor, under a heavy wave, who is just saved and only just saved at the last gasp, than a bold and active swimmer who can breast the wave and rise above it? God speaks then to his Zion under these circumstances when heart and hands alike droop, and says, "Let not thy hands be slack." O faint-hearted soul! O tossed with tempest and not comforted! O poor afflicted one, why dost thou give way to thy doubts and fears and dismal apprehensions? Fear not; let not thy hands be slack; play the man; look at thine enemies boldly in the face; stand to thy colours; take up thy shield and sword, and once more front thy cruel foe. But Zion says, "Alas! I cannot. My heart is full of fear, my hands are slack, and they drop the weapon as soon as I take hold of it." Are there not those here whose experience finds an echo to my words? Are not your hands too often slack to fight and slack to pray? Are you not such as the apostle exhorts? "Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down and the feeble knees." (Heb. 12:12.) As I speak not thus to blame you, for I am too often myself in the same spot of weakness and fear, I do not stand here to scold but to sympathise, to help not to hinder, to lead on not to drive back, to strengthen not to weaken, to take burdens off not lay them on. Is not this a part of the minister's office? Does not the Lord himself bid his servants strengthen the weak hands and to confirm the feeble knees? "Say to them that are of feeble heart, Be strong, fear not: behold, your God will come with vengeance,



even God with a recompence; he will come and save you." (Isaiah 35:4.) The Lord never gives us an exhortation without confirming it by a suitable promise.

But this brings us to the second part of our text: "The Lord thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing." (Zeph. 3:17.)

II.—We see then here how the Lord comes and gives his Zion blessed reasons why she should not fear and her hands should not be slack. What is the first encouraging word that he speaks to her, and by her to our hearts that we should not fear, and that our hands should not be slack?

i. *"The Lord thy God in the midst of thee is mighty."*

How he presents himself here as being in the midst of his Church. How he represents himself as standing in the very centre of Zion, that he himself may fight her battles and bring her off more than conqueror. But before I enter into the meaning of these words, let me ask you one question, and do you put it home to your heart and conscience, that you may be enabled to gather up some balm to your wounded spirit out of these words of the Lord. Did you ever feel God to be in your midst? When you have been cast down sometimes with soul trouble, hard pressed by doubt, guilt, and fear, was your soul ever blessed with the presence of God? In your room, upon your bed, in the house of prayer, was there ever a solemn visitation of the power and presence of God to your heart? Then he was in your midst. The way to prove that God is in our midst is to feel him there. True religion is a religion of feeling. The true way to realise that God is in our midst is to feel him in our heart, and to know that he is with us by the manifestation of his presence and of

his power.

But let us see in what way God is "in our midst." It is good to see the foundation on which this rests—how firm, how stable; how independent of all change, all mutability of events, all vicissitude of circumstances, it is that the God of heaven is in our midst. It is in the Person of his dear Son. When our gracious Lord took part of the flesh and blood of the children, he came into our midst as one of us. He said, therefore, "I will declare thy name unto my brethren; in the midst of the Church will I sing praise unto thee." (Heb. 2:12.) His name is "Immanuel," that is, God with us—God in our midst. As our Mediator he is in our midst; for the word Mediator means a middle person—one who can stand in our midst between God and us. John saw him in vision in the midst of the seven candlesticks, representing how he stands in the midst of the churches. (Rev. 1:13.) But for this Mediator and for his divine mediation God could not be in our midst. Sin must have eternally separated between us and him; but now God in Christ can come and dwell with us, according to those words: "I will dwell in them and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." (2 Cor. 6:16.) This was the distinguishing glory of the children of Israel that God was among them. No other people could say this, and no other people knew this, as the Lord said of old: "And I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God, that brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, that I may dwell among them: I am the Lord their God." (Exodus 29:45, 46.) This made the Psalmist sing in the triumph of expectant faith: "God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved: God shall help her, and that right early." (Psa. 46:5.)

As we then, poor Gentile sinners, have succeeded to Israel's

place, being grafted into the good olive tree from which they were broken off, so as to partake of its root and fatness, the promises made to Zion belong to us who believe. If God then is in your midst, to you I speak who believe in his dear Son, whom need you fear and what need you fear? Your sins, it is true are great, mountains high, oceans deep; your crimes, for so I may well call them, are of the blackest dye; your iniquities of the deepest hue. What can you do with them? Can you put them away, speak pardon to your own conscience, bring a sense of forgiveness into your own soul, and view all these sins rolling away from off your burdened mind like a summer cloud dispersed from the firmament of heaven by the rays of the sun shining bright and clear? You cannot do it. But if God is in the midst of you, he has done it already. Your sins are pardoned, blotted out, forgiven, and cancelled: they were all laid upon the head of Jesus your Surety on the great day of atonement; he has satisfied the justice of God on your behalf, and all your sins are cast behind God's back. What you never could do God has done for you, by laying your sins upon the head of his dear Son, that by the efficacy of his atoning blood, sacrifice, and death, the sins of the Church might be for ever blotted out. Now if God is in the midst of you, you need not fear his wrath, or be under dismal apprehensions of judgment to come. You stand before God without spot or blemish, accepted in the Beloved. "Ah," but you say, "this is the very thing which I want to prove." But have you never realised the sensible presence of God, if not to bring peace and joy, yet to awe your mind, fill you with reverence of his glorious Majesty, make sin truly hateful, yourself loathed, and holiness presented to your view as something blessed and desirable? Have you never longed to be holy, hated sin with perfect hatred, mourned and sighed over your sinful self, and felt cut to the very quick that your iniquities so often, like the wind, have taken you away? God was in the midst of these prayers and desires;

and the Holy Spirit was helping your infirmities, and interceding in and for you with groanings which cannot be uttered. These movements of godly fear and holy reverence show that God is in your midst. So Jacob felt when God first appeared to him: "And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and said, Surely the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not. And he was afraid, and said, How dreadful is this place! this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." (Gen. 28:16, 17.) You may have had similar feelings in your bedroom, or in the house of prayer; if so, God is in your midst.

2. But take another view of the case. You have heavy trials, deep family afflictions, painful bereavements, dark providences, gloomy apprehensions of what may soon burst forth; and you are much tried and exercised what the issue and event of all these things may be. Fear them not, believing child of God: if God is in the midst of thee, is he not able to deliver? Who has enabled you to stand to the present hour? Who has been your kind friend and bounteous Benefactor through life? Who has again and again made crooked things straight and rough places plain, and held you up to the present moment? What! Cannot you look back and see the handwriting of God's providence from a very child, and how circumstance after circumstance and event after event have all denoted the special care which he has displayed over you? These are so many pledges that the same God who has appeared for you in time past will appear again. Your faith is so weak and your fear so strong, that you can scarcely believe it. But is he not in the midst of you? Have you not at various times realised his presence and his power? Does not this clearly prove that he is in your midst? Is he not even now in the midst of your heart, in the midst of your conscience, in the midst of your thoughts, in the midst of your desires, in the midst of your affections? Through the

long hours of the day, through the still hours of the night, how eternal things occupy our thoughts and exercise our minds. How they bubble up as from a deep well, and like springing water burst through the stones, the clay, the mud, the thick grass, moistening and softening the heart, sometimes to make it tender and contrite, and sometimes to rejoice and the bones to flourish like an herb. (Isai. 66:14.) It is thus we are kept alive from day to day, that our leaf should not wither, or we cease from yielding fruit. (Psa. 1:3; Jer. 17:8.) Now if this be your experience, be assured that your sympathising High Priest Jesus is in your midst; for if he be in the midst of your affections, he is in the midst of your afflictions. Was not the Son of God in the midst of the furnace with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, so that they took no hurt? (Dan. 3:25.) And do we not read? "In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the Angel of his presence saved them." (Isaiah 63:9.) Surely then he will come in his own time and way to deliver and save you out of all your troubles; for "many are the afflictions of the righteous; but the Lord delivereth him out of them all."

3. But perhaps your temptations are very great; Satan presses very hard; his fiery darts come so thick and fast; there are such storms of infidelity, blasphemy, and obscenity raised up against you, and as if beating upon your poor defenceless head, that you hardly know how to stand against them. Let me ask you, which is stronger, God or Satan? Is God truly and really in your midst? Can he not, will he not bruise Satan under your feet shortly? Has not Jesus "destroyed him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and delivered them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage?" Does not the promise still stand good? "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the

temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it." (1 Cor. 10:13.) James bids us even "count it all joy when we fall into divers temptations" (James 1:2); and Peter says in almost similar language, "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: but rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy." (1 Pet. 4:12, 13.) But you complain that your trials and afflictions press you down so, that you cannot rise above them. You would believe if you could; but you are so overborne with the weight of your troubles that you can scarcely look up. But so have been other saints of God before you. Hezekiah said, "Mine eyes fail with looking upward: O Lord, I am oppressed; undertake for me." (Isaiah 38:14 ) And what a mournful note Heman uttered, "Thou hast laid me in the lowest pit, in darkness, in the deeps. Thy wrath lieth hard upon me, and thou hast afflicted me with all thy waves." (Psalm 88:6, 7.) Still I will ask, Is not God in your midst? Is there no secret support? Do you not find his strength made perfect in your weakness? Does no timely word come in? Is there no breaking of the dark cloud, no access to the throne, no word of his grace that drops in to suit your circumstances? Do not so belie your God; be not such a wretched unbeliever when your God is in the midst. Do not provoke and grieve his holy Spirit by denying his work upon your heart: for as I said before, you have found God in your midst, and if so, it is nothing but giving way to Satan and unbelief to deny it. How encouraging it is to believe that God is in our midst; in our midst this evening to help me to preach, to help you to hear, and to bless the word from my lips to your heart. If God is in our midst, what need we fear? whom need we fear? and why need we fear? Let not our hands be slack: God is in our midst: he will help us right early.

ii. But is this all that God says of himself? He goes on adding word to word, and truth to truth, and promise to promise, to strengthen Zion's faith, to calm her doubts and fears, and raise up her drooping hands. He says he is "mighty."

What a mighty God we have to deal with. And what would suit our case but a mighty God? Have we not mighty sins? Have we not mighty trials? Have we not mighty temptations? Have we not mighty foes and mighty fears? And who is to deliver us from all this mighty host except the mighty God? It is not a little God (if I may use the expression) that will do for God's people. They need a mighty God, because they are in circumstances where none but a mighty God can interfere in their behalf. And it is well worth our notice that the Lord puts his people purposely into circumstances where they may avail themselves, so to speak, of his omnipotent power, and thus know from living personal experience, that he is a mighty God, not in mere doctrine and theory, but a mighty God in their special and particular behalf. Why, if you did not know feelingly and experimentally your mighty sins, your mighty trials, your mighty temptations, and your mighty fears you would not want a mighty God. O how this brings together the strength of God and the weakness of man; how it unites poor helpless creatures with the Majesty of heaven; how it communicates to feeble, worthless worms the very might of the Omnipotent Jehovah; and what a blessed realization it gives in faith and feeling of the power of God put forth in our defence and salvation. This sense of our weakness and his power, of our misery and his mercy, of our ruin and his recovery, of the aboundings of our sin and the superaboundings of his grace—a feeling sense, I say, of these opposite yet harmonious things brings us to have personal, experimental dealings with God; and it is in these personal dealings with God that the life of all religion

consists. O what a poor, dead, useless religion is that in which there are no personal dealings with God—no calling upon his holy name out of a sincere heart; no seeking of his face or imploring of his favour; no lying at his feet and begging of him to appear; no pitiable, lamentable case for him to have compassion upon; no wounds or sores for him to heal, no leprosy to cleanse, no enemies to put to the rout, no fears to dispel, and I may almost say no soul to save. And yet such is the religion of thousands. They draw near to God with their lips, but their hearts are far from him: they serve God with their bodies, but they serve sin with their souls; they attend his house whilst their mind is a den of thieves; and whilst they outwardly say, "Lord, Lord," they inwardly say, "This man shall not have dominion over us." If you differ from them, and want a God near at hand and not afar off, a mighty God in the very midst of your soul, of your thoughts, desires, and affections, you may well bless him for the grace which has made you to differ, and thankfully bow your neck to sufferings and trials, as means in his hand to bring you and him together.

iii. But the Lord gives another reason why Jerusalem should not fear, and why Zion's hands should not be slack. *"He will save."*

How firm the word! how certain the promise! "He will save." Not "he may," or "he can," or "he would if he could;" or "you must do your part to help him;" or "he has put you into a salvable state, so that if you are lost after all that he has done, it will be all your own fault." God in his holy word does not speak in such a halting, faltering, indecisive, deceptive tone. Such hesitating language would be as unworthy of the divine Majesty as unsuitable to us. Can we think that the great, immutable Jehovah suspends his eternal plans upon the fickle will and mutable mind of man? What security could



there be for poor fearful Jerusalem if salvation depended upon her doings and duties? Whom then will he save? Fearing Jerusalem and slack-handed Zion. If any think they can save themselves, let them put their eternal all upon that bottom. Let them go to sea and sail to the shores of eternity in that crazy bark—in that leaky ship. The Lord keep us from sailing with that crew in their desperate voyage, for in good truth, besides its leaky state, it sails under a rebellious flag, and will go down in the first storm. I would stand upon the pier-head with the gospel trumpet in my hand, and blow so loud a blast as would warn all within hearing against putting out to sea in any ship which is not owned, chartered, equipped, officered, and manned by the Captain of our salvation, and of which he himself is not both Commander and Pilot. Salvation, then, does not depend upon peradventures and maybes. It stands upon God's fixed purposes, firm decrees, eternal oaths, covenant engagements, and the finished work of his dear Son. Salvation is not made up of peradventures, and contingencies, and creature circumstances, as if the breath of man could create it, and the breath of man disannul it. It stands as immutable as Jehovah's eternal throne, as firm as the very being of God himself, for it rests upon "two immutable things," his word and his oath. Therefore, he will, he must, he shall save all who believe in his dear Son. "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned." (Mark 16:16.) And how sure are the words of Jesus, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand." (John 10:27, 28.) But you may say "Am I one of his sheep?" Have you heard his voice, and are you following him? Or take the evidence in our text. Is he in your midst? If you have felt his presence and known his power, he will save. He has saved you already in the Person

and work of his dear Son, for salvation is a past act, "Who *hath saved* us and called us." (2 Tim. 1:9.) But our interest in this we only know as God saves us manifestly by bringing that salvation into our heart. The great difficulty is to realise what God has already done for us. To do this is the grand province of faith: to believe and realise what has been done; not so much what remains to be done, but what has been done already. Does not the apostle declare that "God hath blessed us," already blessed us, "with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ Jesus?" (Eph. 1:3.) Faith then has to receive these blessings which are stored up in Christ Jesus in heavenly places, where he sits at the right hand of God. "It pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell." (Col. 1:19.) Out of this fulness, then, we receive by faith (John 1:16); and so far as we do this, the life which we live in the flesh, we live by the faith of the Son of God. (Gal. 2:20.) Now "in him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace." (Eph. 1:7.) Thus all is done, already done; and salvation is a perfect and accomplished act to which nothing can be added, as from it nothing can be taken away. He has saved you already who believe. Faith's work, then, the grand exploit which faith has to perform, is to believe what is already done, and to believe it was done for me; when he shed his precious blood, he shed his precious blood for me; when he said "It is finished," it was finished for me; and when he rose from the dead, triumphed over death and hell, he rose triumphant for me. This is the work of faith with power—realise that what has been done has been done for me. This, therefore, brings matters to a close issue, takes salvation out of the region of peradventures, perhapses, and uncertainties, and makes it a firm, irreversible reality, which faith fixes as her own.

But you say, "This is what I want to realise." If you have

never realised it and don't want to realise it, I should like to know what you think about your religion; I should like to know what sort of evidences you have of divine life, or what marks of grace you bear. I am very sure of this, if you have not realised it, and are not longing to realise it, you bear very few marks of having a work of grace upon your heart. But have you—for I want to bring your religion into a small but true compass—have you ever realised anything of the grace of God in your own soul? Have you ever realised that God was in your midst? Was Christ ever revealed to your soul by the power of God, and were you ever blessed with the presence of God? Then all the rest follows. Make that point sure; get your feet upon that rock; all the rest is as certain as that to-morrow's sun will rise. For "he will save." He has saved you already; all that remains to be done is to bring that salvation into your soul. To do this is the special work of the Holy Ghost, who takes of the things of Christ and reveals them to the heart. Salvation is like a river, ever flowing in streams of crystal purity, such as John saw when he was shown a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. What then is wanted? A sip and a taste of that stream, a bringing of the fulness of it into your heart. You never can be saved more than you are saved already. You may have, and I hope will have, greater openings up, sweeter enjoyments, more blessed discoveries, till your peace flows like a river. But you never can be saved more than you are saved already by the finished work of the Son of God. What you want is to realise it, enjoy it, feast upon it, and live and die under the sweet testimonies of your interest in it. But as to any other salvation than that which is already accomplished there is none. This was Peter's testimony when he spake, "filled with the Holy Ghost:" "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved." (Acts 4:12.) But this salvation

is a past act: "For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God." (1 Cor. 1:18.) Observe the expression, "unto us which are saved," that is, already saved. Bear this then firmly in mind, that we are already saved in time if we are to be saved in eternity; and stand before God without spot or wrinkle now as much as we shall stand at the last day faultless before the presence of his glory.

iv. But the Lord adds another word, for he is very kind, very gracious, as if he would still every doubt and fear. *"He will rejoice over thee with joy."*

God rejoices as much in saving your soul as you can rejoice in your soul being saved. Say I "as much?" His joy is infinite and yours is finite, his the joy of God and yours but the joy of man. Do you believe that God rejoices to save, delights in saving? Why else should he have given his dear Son? Do the angels rejoice over repenting sinners? Is there no joy then in the bosom of God to save a sinner too? How this takes us up, as it were, into the very realms of bliss, and reveals to us the wondrous character of God in his Trinity of persons and Unity of essence, that there is a rejoicing in the salvation of the Church, so that God himself, so to speak, is filled with eternal joy in the salvation of his people. When his dear Son offered himself as a sacrifice for sin, and thus put away the transgressions and iniquities of the Church by his own bloodshedding and death, overcame death and hell, and washed us in his blood from all our filth and guilt and shame, God, so to speak, rejoiced with infinite joy in the completion of the work of his dear Son. It was the fulfilment of his eternal purposes of wisdom and grace. It was the manifestation of his glory to men and angels. It was the triumph of good over evil, of holiness over sin, of mercy over judgment, of love over enmity, of wisdom over craft, of the counsels of God

over the devices of man, and, above all, of the Son of God in his weakness over Satan in his might. It was peopling heaven with an innumerable multitude of saints by whom eternal anthems of praise should be sung to God and the Lamb. Thus we may see how the God of heaven even now rejoices with holy joy over every one whom he brings to the enjoyment of a salvation so free, so great, so glorious.

v. But we have not even yet done with what the Holy Ghost reveals to us, if I may use such an expression, of the very heart of God: *"He will rest in his love."*

"God is love." When, then, he rests in his love, he rests in himself. The words imply also a holy, settled determination of God. To punish is, as it were, a going out of himself. It is, therefore, called "a strange act:" "For the Lord shall rise up as in mount Perazim, he shall be wroth as in the valley of Gibeon, that he may do his work, his strange work; and bring to pass his act, his strange act." (Isa. 28:21.) Though infinitely just, and though his justice demands the punishment of transgressors, for "he will by no means clear the guilty," yet it is not his delight: His delight is in revealing his love, in manifesting mercy, as the prophet beautifully declares: "He retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy." (Micah 7:18.) When the Lord showed Moses his glory, he passed by before him and proclaimed, as if that heaven and earth might hear, "The Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering and abundant in goodness and truth; keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." (Exodus 34:6, 7.) Thus, there is in God a solemn approbation of, a blessed resting in, the perfection of his love. It is beautifully unfolded by Moses under the parable of an eagle and her young: "As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings."

(Deut. 32:11.) The eagle is represented as "fluttering over her young," with a kind of warm, tremulous motion; brooding over them (as the word means), and as if delighting in the nearness of her eaglets to her breast, in the warmth she communicates, and the protection that she gives. May she not be said to rest in her love when she has all her callow brood safely folded under her outspread pinions? So God is said to "rest in his love." And will he not eminently do so when all his saints are gathered home into their heavenly mansions, and all are one, even as God and his dear Son are one? (John 17:22.) And may I not add, if God thus rest in his love, he cannot, he will not, so to speak, have any rest till he brings each and all into his own rest—that rest which he promised of old? "If they shall enter into *my* rest." How, too, he bids his servant put him in mind of this: "I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, which shall never hold their peace day nor night: ye that make mention of the Lord, keep not silence, and give him no rest, till he establish, and till he make Jerusalem a praise in the earth." (Isaiah 62:6, 7.) O that we might be enabled to give him no rest till he bring us into that rest which remaineth to the people of God, and into which we enter by a living faith in his dear Son.

vi. One more word before I conclude, on which I must be brief: "*He will joy over thee with singing.*"

Singing in the word of God, is always put forth as the emblem and expression of joy and exultation. How, again and again, in the Psalms we read, "Sing ye to the Lord a new song." Now this expression of thankful joy in the mouths of men is put by a strong figure into the mouth of God. It is as if the Holy Spirit would represent the joy of God in the salvation of his people to be so great that he gives it forth in the very voice of song. Of course this is a figure, but it is

meant to show us the exceeding joy of God, that he rejoices over Zion with a joy so holy, so full, so intense, that it gives itself forth in such an utterance.

The thought itself is sufficient to overwhelm us with wonder and astonishment. God, in his infinite mercy, grant that we may taste a little of that wondrous love here, so as to be eternally satisfied with its fulness hereafter, when we shall see him as he is, and know even as we are known.