

THE NORTHERN IRON AND THE STEEL

Preached at Trinity Chapel, Trinity Street, Borough, on Thursday Evening, August 22, 1846

"Shall iron break the northern iron and the steel?" Jeremiah 15:12

Some persons object very much to the use of figures in preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. They say that the truths of the gospel need no such illustration; that the use of natural figures tends rather to carnalize and debase such glorious subjects than to cast any light upon them; and that they are sufficiently clear in themselves not to need any such borrowed illumination. I admit that when figures are strained, or inappropriate, or too frequently employed, they may have this tendency. But that is their abuse, not their use. We are not allowed to argue against a thing because men abuse it. Thus I consider that the temperate use of appropriate figures tends much to explain and open up the word of God and the experience of the saints.

Two things, at any rate, to my mind, are clear. **First**, that figures cast a great light upon truths which otherwise would not be so clearly set forth; that they make an impression upon the mind, and are for the most part very retentively remembered. **Secondly**, it is, to my mind, perfectly clear that the blessed Spirit has made great use of figures in the word of truth. The language of the prophets is highly figurative. And need I mention the example of the blessed Lord Himself, who spake much in figures, and without a parable **which is but another figure** scarcely opened His lips?

We have a figure before us, and that figure in the mouth of Jehovah Himself, addressed to His servant Jeremiah under peculiar circumstances.

In considering the words of the text I shall, with God's blessing,

I.—Endeavour, **first to show their literal meaning, and their applicability to the case to which they were addressed;** and,

II.—**Secondly, their spiritual and experimental signification in a wider point of view, as comprehending the whole family of God.** The Lord give the blessing!

I.—Jeremiah, we must bear in mind, was at this time in a state of peculiar distress. The Lord had called him to the prophetic office, had put words into his mouth, and had endued him with great faithfulness to deliver a message that He Himself had given him. The discharge, the faithful discharge, of his prophetic office brought upon him great persecution. He cries out, in the very bitterness and anguish of his soul, "Woe is me, my mother, that thou hast borne me a man of strife, and a man of contention to the whole earth! I have neither lent on usury, nor men have lent to me on usury; yet every one of them doth curse me." His tender feelings sank beneath the weight of this universal enmity.

But there was more than this. The Lord delayed to appear, and hid His gracious countenance from him; and thus the corruption of his heart being stirred up, the passion and rebellion of his carnal mind burst forth into that unbecoming language, "Why is my pain perpetual, and my wound incurable, which refuseth to be healed? Wilt Thou be

altogether unto me as a liar, and as the waters that fail?" His whole bosom was one troubled sea of sorrow, and here we see the heavings and boilings of its restless waves. But how does the Lord meet this case? What are the words that He makes use of in order to pour oil upon these troubled waters? He says, "Shall iron break the northern iron and the steel?" As though He argued thus with him: 'Though thy persecutions, troubles, afflictions and all the heavings of thy tempest-tossed bosom are to thee as strong, as hard, and as invincible as iron, yet shall they break that which is stronger? Is not My almighty power, My eternal love, and My delivering hand as much stronger than the iron hand of persecution which is gone out against thee, and the iron sorrows which thou hast to endure, as the northern iron and the steel are stronger than the common metal?' And that this is the spiritual meaning of the words is evident from what we read in the 20th verse **Jer 15:20**—"I will make thee unto this people a fenced brazen wall: and they shall fight against thee, but they shall not prevail against thee: for I am with thee to save thee and to deliver thee, saith the Lord." As though the Lord had said—"Yes, thou shalt have an iron yoke to bear; thou shalt have iron persecutions to suffer; they shall fight against thee as iron fights against iron; but they shall not prevail against thee. I will make thee a fenced brazen wall. I am with thee, to save thee and deliver thee, saith the Lord." And could a more sweet and suitable promise be found? The Lord did not diminish the reality of Jeremiah's trouble. The Lord told him plainly that the trials and exercises which he had to pass through would be to him as strong, as hard, and as invincible as iron. But at the same time, he assured him that there was a stronger power, which should be put forth in living exercise to deliver him out of these things, to conquer them in him, and conquer for him.

II.—And this leads me to the **second** branch of my subject, on which I shall, with God's blessing, more particularly dwell; and I shall therefore enlarge the words by endeavouring to show, as far as the Lord shall enable me, how suitable they are not merely to Jeremiah's case, but to the Lord's people generally, and to those cases and states in which God's family continually find themselves.

This, then, will be the leading feature, if God enable, of our discourse—to show, **first**, how the trials and exercises of the Lord's family are to them as "iron;" and **secondly**, how the Lord's power, and strength, and help, are as "the northern iron and the steel," that effectually and invincibly overcome them.

I. The Lord's people are an afflicted people. This is God's own testimony concerning them: "Chosen," says He, "in the furnace of affliction." **Isa 48:10** A "third part" are to "pass through the fire." **Zec 13:9** He leaves in the midst of them "an afflicted and poor people" **Zep 3:12**; and it is they, and they only, who shall "trust in the name of the Lord." The afflictions that the Lord's people have to pass through are not meant to be light ones. The Lord lays no light burdens on His people's shoulders. His purpose is to bring them to a certain point, to work a certain work in their souls—to reduce them to that helplessness, weakness and powerlessness in which His strength is made manifest.

Thus, when the Lord would select a figure aptly to describe the afflictions of His people, He fixes on the metal **iron**; and thus compares them with the hardest, the strongest, the firmest, the most unyielding and the most tenacious of all metals.

1. Some of the Lord's people have to pass through **deep and severe trials in providence**; and these to them are often of an "iron" nature. Those trials in providence which do not weigh heavily, which do not press deeply, which are not felt to be of a nature that we cannot of ourselves overcome, are not iron trials. But those afflictions that the Lord brings upon His people, against which they find their own exertions cannot prevail, which baffle all human wisdom, laugh at creature strength, and defeat every power in man to remove or overcome, may well be compared to that hard, unbending, unyielding, tenacious metal—"iron."

2. Others of the Lord's people have **deep and severe trials in grace**. All the chosen family do not pass through the same degree of cutting afflictions in providence; but in grace none of them are exempt from trials. Are we not to suffer with Christ that we may reign with Him? to die with Him that we may live with Him? Are we not predestinated to be conformed to His likeness? And is not that likeness a suffering likeness? Are we not to be crucified with Christ here, that we may see Him as He is hereafter? Who, then, is to escape the cross? Who is to pass through life without heavy spiritual trials? Bastards—not sons.

Bastards may escape the rod,
Sunk in earthly vain delight;
But the true—born child of God
Cannot, would not, if he might.

Thus the Lord's people **though there are degrees, doubtless, of spiritual as there are gradations of temporal suffering** have to pass through an appointed measure of spiritual griefs, exercises and sorrows. And these to them are to be as "iron." If they are but wood, which I can snap asunder with my hands, they are not such trials as the

Lord Himself sends. If I have burdens, which I can myself remove; if I have trials, from which I can deliver myself; if I have temptations, out of which I can rescue my own soul, I have clear evidence that I am not walking in that path of tribulation in which the Lord's people walk. If I can exercise faith upon Christ; if I can take God at His word; if I can believe every promise; and thus shift every burden when I please and how I please, I may be sure of this, that God has never tied that burden round my shoulders—has never laid that affliction upon my heart—and that His hand is not in that trouble. But when our trials are of such a nature that to us they are as "iron;" as unable for us to bend or break as the iron pillar that supports that gallery—**then** we have some evidence that these trials are of the Lord's appointment, and that the blessed Spirit has traced out **our** case here when He compares the trials we have to pass through to this firm, yielding, and unbending metal.

Child of God, has not this been the heaviest part of your trial, the keenest edge of the cutting affliction, that you could not, by any creature exertions, remove it from you? But this very thing that so often tries your mind is the very proof that it comes from God: for when the Lord binds, none can loose; when the Lord shuts, none can open. When the Lord puts a man into a trial, none but the Lord's hand can deliver. So that the keen edge of the trial that has so often pierced your heart; the heavy burden that has so often weighed down your shoulders—that you could not deliver yourself—this very circumstance that has caused so many sighs and cries to go up out of your heart, and filled you at times with sorrow, is a proof that the affliction is from God.

3. Some of the Lord's people have to suffer under **great burdens of guilt**. The law is applied to their conscience in its spirituality, breadth, condemnation, and curse; and this is

to them indeed an "iron" yoke, which they cannot bend or break. Convictions that we can remove, and burdens of guilt that **we** can throw aside as a porter deposits his load upon a bulk—**that** is not the application of God's law to the conscience, that is not the opening up of the spirituality of the commandment to the soul. It is not of God if we can remove it, or any man remove it for us. But is not this one of the most keen and cutting things in the spirituality of God's law applied to the conscience, that we cannot remove the guilt, cannot take away the curse, cannot ease ourselves of the burden, though it sinks into the heart and presses the soul down? Yet this very mark proves that it is of God, because it is of the nature of "iron."

4. Some of the Lord's people have to pass through **keen and cutting temptations**. Satan is allowed to harass them from time to time with his fiery darts; he is permitted to work upon the evils of their fallen nature, and suffered to stir up the corruption of that depraved heart which they carry in their bosom. And these temptations they feel utterly unable to remove. When fiery darts are shot into your mind, can you remove them? When blasphemous imaginations are stirred up in your carnal heart, can you get away from them? When Satan presents to your mind everything hateful and everything horrible, can you bid him depart, or drive these thoughts away? If we could, how happy should we be. But we cannot break or bend these temptations; they are to us as "iron."

5. Again. How many of the Lord's family are **entangled in secret snares** known only to themselves! And how they cry, sigh and groan under these snares that Satan is laying perpetually for their feet! How often they are entangled with besetting lusts! How often cast down by the pride of their hearts! How often overcome by the covetousness of their

depraved nature! How continually entangled in one snare or another that they meet with in their path! But can they deliver themselves? It would not be an "iron" snare if they could break it. It would be such green withs as Samson told Delilah would bind him fast—mere tow, that bursts asunder when it sees the flame. If you and I are entangled in any snare, and we can break it, and escape out of it, would that be a snare to us? No: the very nature of a snare is to have a firm hold round the neck of the unhappy animal that is caught in it. It is the "iron" of the snare, the wire, that destroys the hapless animal that runs into it. And have not you and I found sometimes our snares to be as inextricable by creature power as the poor hare that is caught in the wire of the poacher? Yes, as unable to deliver ourselves, and requiring the hands of another to loose that snare from our necks.

6. Others of the Lord's people are held in bondage because **they have not clear manifestations of the Lord's love to them.** They are not able to cry, "Abba Father:" they cannot see their names in the book of life; they have not felt the testimony of the Spirit of God; they have not received the sweet sheddings abroad of dying love; they have not had the pardon of their sins clearly made manifest to their conscience. And they have a feeling sense in their own consciences that these things are indispensable to salvation; that they must have them brought into their hearts by the power of God, or die in their sins. Are not these "iron" trials to some of the Lord's living family? Do not these things often bow their minds, burden their hearts, and distress their conscience, because they cannot come out into the liberty of the gospel, because they cannot rejoice in the Lord as their salvation, because they cannot call God with an unwavering confidence, "Father." But if they had no trials in this matter; if there were no sharp and keen exercises connected with

these feelings in their heart; if they caused no burden, brought no distress, were not some times round their necks like a yoke, it would be no trial to them at all. But it is because these convictions of their short-comings, of their unbelief and helplessness are so keen, and so weighty, that they have in them the nature of the rigid, unyielding, unbending metal—"iron."

7. Others of the Lord's family have **to endure sharp persecutions**; the enmity of relations, the scorn of professors, the hatred of the world lying in the Wicked One. Was not this Jeremiah's portion? Did he not say, that "every one hated" him? And every one will hate you and me, if we are as faithful as Jeremiah. A minister to escape enmity, scorn and slander! Show me the man that does; and I will show you an unfaithful man, a coward in Christ's camp, and one who dares not open his mouth boldly in the Redeemer's name. But show me a faithful man, one who preaches the gospel with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven—one who fears no man's frown and courts no man's smile—who seeks only the approbation of the blessed Spirit in his own conscience—and I will show you a man hated, despised, persecuted, opposed and slandered; a man who, in proportion to his faithfulness, knows something of Jeremiah's outward path, and something also of his inward suffering.

We have a large assembly here this evening; and many professors of truth beneath this roof. How have you found religion? Some of you have professed it many years. What has your path been? You have come here from various parts of the town?' you can tell the streets through which you came, whether clean or dirty, whether wide or narrow, whether thronged with people or comparatively free. You can describe exactly the road you have come. Well; you have travelled so many years in the path of religion, and how have

you found **that?** Has it been a very rough path? a very rugged way? an up and down road? many trials and persecutions, many temptations, many sorrows, many afflictions, and many keen and cutting convictions, that have been to you as unbending and unyielding as the metal "iron?" If so, you have some evidence that the Lord has been leading you; that you are amongst His afflicted and poor people; that you have been in the furnace, where the Lord chooses His Zion. Thus you have some testimony that the Lord is leading you by a right way, though it be a rough and rugged way, to bring you to a city of habitation. And never expect any other path but an iron one; never anticipate any trials but iron trials; never look for any temptations but iron temptations; any snares but iron snares, any foes but iron foes, nor any sorrows but iron sorrows.

Well; and how are we to break them? As well might the condemned criminal in Newgate's cell break through those walls of stone, and gates of iron, as one of the Lord's tempted and tried people himself break to pieces the sorrows and trials that the Lord brings upon him. No: they would not be of the Lord's appointment, of His own bringing, if he could get himself free, if he could snap them asunder like a rotten stick; if he could by his own unassisted strength break through all, and proclaim light, life and liberty to his own soul.

II. But did the Lord leave Jeremiah here? What are the words of the text? Oh how suitable and expressive to his fainting spirit! **"Shall iron break the northern iron and the steel?"**

It would appear, that the Jews made use of "northern iron" to form their cutting instruments from; and it is a singular coincidence, that this country in which we live is supplied

with Swedish or "northern iron" to make all her cutting instruments from. The knives you have in your pockets, the scissors you have been using this day, are of "northern iron." The iron, which comes from Sweden is of such a pure, strong and tenacious nature, that it is selected for the purpose of making cutting instruments. You see that the Lord, when He is pointing out the trials His people are passing through, compares them to "iron." He does not diminish their weight; He does not at all lower their oppressive tendency. But then, in order to administer a suitable remedy to Jeremiah's soul, He brings forward something much stronger. "Shall iron," He says, "break the northern iron and the steel?" No, surely; the "northern iron and the steel" shall break through that. The common iron never can break through the northern iron, which is a metal of such a far superior nature; still less prevail against that keen well-tempered steel which can cut through everything it touches.

But how is this to be explained spiritually? In the same way as we have seen that the trials, sorrows, exercises and temptations of the Lord's people are compared to "iron;" so we must look out for something that is more than a match for these trials, temptations, exercises and sorrows, if we would spiritually open up and interpret the figure.

"The northern iron and the steel" signify the power of God—the power of God put forth in the weakness of the creature. And, in several instances, we may compare what God is and does for His people's help to this "northern iron and the steel." For instance,

1. There is **the eternal covenant**, "ordered in all things and sure." Can this eternal covenant be broken? Can this eternal covenant pass away, and become a thing of nought? Say that you are interested in this covenant, can your trials, your

temptations, your sorrows—I will add another word, your sins—break to pieces this eternal covenant which was entered into with the Three Persons of the glorious Godhead on your behalf? As well might the common iron break the "northern iron and the steel," as your trials, sorrows, griefs, exercises and temptations, break to pieces that eternal covenant which God the Father has made on your behalf with the Son and the Holy Spirit.

2. God's decrees, absolute purposes and eternal appointments, that flow out of His eternal covenant, are another branch of this "northern iron and the steel," that breaks to pieces everything before it, but which these cannot touch. I remember to have read that in our large manufactories, huge steel shears are made use of to cut to pieces plates of iron, as easily as you who have this day been employed at your needle have cut through a piece of linen, and much more easily than a child cuts through a common card. Thus, God's purposes and eternal appointments, which are here compared to steel made from "northern iron," can cut to pieces all your afflictions, trials and exercises, with the same facility as the steel shear, moved by steam, can cut through iron plates. But what else can touch them? Nothing but steel can cut through iron plates; and so nothing but the mighty power of God can cut through the trials, temptations, afflictions and sorrows that you are from time to time exercised with.

3. God's promises recorded by the blessed Spirit in the unerring word of truth—are not these also part of "the northern iron and the steel?" What so firm as they? Are not these the words of Jesus Himself? "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but My words shall not pass away." **Matthew 24:35** Will not God's promises stand forever and ever? Are they not all "yea and amen unto the glory of God by us?" **2Co**

1:20 Now the Lord has promised to bring the righteous out of trouble. He has promised to hear the sigh and cry of the mourners; to put their tears into His bottle; to remember them for good; to bow down His ear, and hear them when they call upon Him. He says, "Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify Me." **Ps**

50:15 Is not this "the northern iron?" How strong! how firm! how unable to break! how impossible to bend! How it will cut through afflictions, and rend them asunder, as the steel shears cut asunder plates of iron!

4. The blood shed for a chosen people—the propitiation and sacrifice that the Son of God once offered for sin upon Calvary's tree—is not this, too, apart of that power of God which He here compares to "the northern iron and the steel?" Say your conscience is bowed down with guilt; your sins rise up like mountains before your view; you are distressed at the evils, which are manifested to your sight. But shall these sink you to hell? Shall these iron sins and iron guilt be left round your neck to drown you in eternal perdition? Not if you are one of the chosen seed; not if the blood of Jesus was shed for you upon the cross. **That** is able, when applied, to remove the strongest chains that may surround you—**that** is able, when made known to the conscience, to purge it, however guilty you feel, or however defiled by sin and filth.

5. The glorious righteousness of the God-Man; His spotless obedience to God's holy law; His perfect fulfilment of it by doing and suffering, which He wrought out and brought in in the days of His flesh—is not this also a part of God's power, and what God manifests in the hearts of His people as a justifying robe, shielding them from deserved wrath?

6. **The love of Jesus**, "which passeth knowledge," which is "strong as death," and can never fail—is not this a part too of the "northern iron and the steel?" And if you are interested personally in the blood and love of Jesus; though you may have from time to time iron sorrows, iron sins, iron temptations; yet, if you are personally interested in the glorious work of the God-Man, it shall cut them all to pieces; it shall break to shivers "the gates of brass, and cut the bars of iron in sunder;" and bring your soul out of every trouble, every temptation and every sorrow.

But is it sufficient that the "iron and the steel" should be side by side? Must there not be some **application** of the steel to the iron before it can cut it in pieces, before it can rend it asunder? Say that you have many trials, many temptations, many sorrows, and that there is the love of God on your behalf—the eternal covenant—Christ's atoning blood, justifying righteousness and dying love—the God-Man Mediator between inflexible justice and your soul. But are you still at a distance? Have you not yet been brought near to God, and has He not been brought near to you? What can the steel shears do unless there be an **application** of them to the iron? Is it not so spiritually and experimentally in a sinner's conscience? Will the **doctrine** be sufficient? It would not do in a manufactory. The **doctrine** of steel shears cutting through iron plates would not do the work. When the master looked to see what work had been done, the workman might discuss very clearly and very learnedly what wonderful shears there were in the factory; but the employer would want to know how many iron plates they had cut asunder through the day. He would not be satisfied with the doctrine; he would want to know what had been the **experience** of the effect of the steel shears. Is it not so spiritually? Will doctrines do us any good unless there be an application of those doctrines with power to our soul? I know they cannot.

They can do us no more good than speculating upon the nature of steel compared with iron, without bringing the theory into experience and practice. And here the Lord's people are distinguished from those dead in profanity, and those dead in profession, with clear heads and unhumbled hearts. These can sit by their firesides, or sometimes over the tea table, and discourse very fluently and eloquently what virtue there is in "steel;" can enter into all the branches of it, and describe most admirably what the eternal covenant is, what the decrees of God are, what the blood of Jesus is, what His glorious righteousness. But has there ever been an **application** to their conscience of these doctrines that they can discourse so fluently and talk so scripturally about? It will do them no good to talk about them, unless there be some application of them to their heart and conscience. This is what the Lord's people want; and this is what He gives them all.

This, then, is one of the chief reasons why the Lord brings His people into such "iron" difficulties—that He may have the glorious privilege of cutting them asunder. If you have no iron trials, no iron temptations, no iron griefs, no iron sorrows, what do you want the "northern iron and the steel" for? To look at, to play with, and to admire? as you may pass by a cutler's shop window, and admire the rows of knives and scissors you see hanging therefrom? No: if your hearts are exercised with iron sorrows, temptations, trials and perplexities, I am sure you will want the almighty power of God in your souls to cut them asunder. And God can do it. Are you a poor persecuted believer? God can cut down in a moment that enemy who is persecuting you. Are you tempted of Satan? He in a moment can cut his fiery darts asunder. Are you passing through a severe trial? By the application of some precious promise the Lord can in a moment cut the trial asunder. Are you entangled in some

grievous snare that you feel and cry out under night and day, and yet are unable to extricate yourself? The Lord can in a moment, by the application of His precious word to your soul, cut that snare asunder. He has but to bring against it "the northern iron and the steel," and it is done in a moment. And how we see here the glory of God! How the Lord brings His people into those states and cases in which He will be glorified! If I feel no sin, I want no pardon. If I have no guilt, I want no application of atoning blood. If I have no burdens, I want no sweet relief. If I have no temptations, I want no precious deliverances. If I have no trials, I want no powerful application of God's word to my soul. How was it with Jeremiah? Did not he say, "Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and Thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of my heart?" Why? Because keen persecutions, sharp trials, severe temptations, had given him an **appetite**—that was the reason why the "word was found." He fell upon it as a hungry man upon a crust. It was sweet to his soul, because it brought with it a precious deliverance from the temptations and the sorrows his soul was groaning under.

Is there not then a **needs be** for your being tried, tempted and distressed? Does not the apostle say "Though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations?" **1Pe 1:6** Was not that Christ's way? And of the early Christians too? They followed Him in this path. And does not the Lord bid the Laodicean church buy of Him "gold tried in the fire?" **Re 3:18** Does not James say, "Blessed is the man that endureth temptation?" **Jas 1:12** And again; "Count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations?" **Jas 1:2** Why? Any joy in trials? any pleasure in sorrow? No, none. But in the deliverances from the Lord; in the power of God put forth to bring the soul out; there is joy **there**. And therefore, we have to walk in a dark path to make the light dear to our eyes; we have to pass through trials, to taste the

sweetness of the promises when applied with power; we have to endure temptations, that we may enjoy the sweetness of deliverance. And this is the way, be sure of it, that God deals with His people. Is your conscience made honest? Does that monitor in your bosom speak the truth? Tell me what it says? Does it not say, 'Few trials, few consolations; few sorrows, few joys; few difficulties, few testimonies from God; few sufferings, few discoveries of love and blood? Does not the Apostle say, "As the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ?" **2Co 1:5** And does he not say, "Our hope of you is steadfast, knowing that as ye are partakers of the sufferings, so shall ye be also of the consolation?" **2Co 1:7** And does not the Apostle Paul tell us to be mindful not to forget what the Lord says, when He speaks to his people that the lot of a child is to endure chastisement? He says, "My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of Him; for whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? But if ye be without chastisement," **O solemn word! O how applicable to thousands!** "whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons." **Heb 12:5-8**

The Lord leads us, by His own blessed Spirit, into right paths! They may be, they must be, paths of trial. We must be baptized into His sufferings and death, if we are to be partakers of His glorious resurrection. We must take up the cross, and deny ourselves, and follow Him in the regeneration, if we are to see Him in glory. "Ye are they which have continued with Me in My temptations. And I appoint unto you a kingdom, as My Father hath appointed unto Me; that ye may eat and drink at My table in My

kingdom, and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." **Lu 22:28-30**

Thus, we see, that in proportion as we feel the iron nature of trials and sorrows, shall we experience "the northern iron and the steel" of God's almighty power and grace to deliver. Happy are the people that are in such a case! Happy the people that have this Lord for their manifested God!