

ZION'S FOUNDATIONS, WINDOWS, GATES, AND BORDERS

Preached on Lord's Day Evening, August 1, 1852, at Eden Street Chapel, Hampstead Road

"O thou afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted, behold, I will lay thy stones with fair colours, and lay thy foundations with sapphires. And I will make thy windows of agates, and thy gates of carbuncles, and all thy borders of pleasant stones." Isaiah 54:11, 12

The promises in the word of truth are exceedingly great and precious. This is God's own testimony concerning them; "Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises." **2Pe 1:4** But to **whom** are these promises "exceeding great and precious?" To the church of God. But are they exceedingly great and precious to the church of God at all times and under all circumstance? No; only at peculiar times and under peculiar circumstances. In other words, only as the church of God is brought into those circumstances to which the promises apply, are they to her either great or precious. Now what is true of the church generally is true also of each believer individually. However great and precious the promises may be in themselves, they are nothing to us, absolutely nothing, except as we are brought into those circumstances to which they are applicable. But is not something further needed? Assuredly; for I may be in the very circumstances to which the promise is suitable, and yet be as utterly unable to derive any strength or draw any comfort out of it as if there were none. What then further do I need? The application of that promise to my soul. Looking therefore at the promises generally, we may say of them that though they are all exceedingly great and precious in

themselves, yet they are really only made so as applied by the blessed Spirit with light, life, and power to the heart.

We have in the words before us a whole cluster of most precious promises; but connected with these promises we have the church of God in suffering circumstances. The Lord is here addressing his suffering Zion. "O thou afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted, behold, I will lay thy stones with fair colours, and lay thy foundations with sapphires," and so on.

In looking at these words, we may with God's blessing attempt

I. To describe a little of **the state, character, and condition of the suffering church of God** as here drawn by the pen of the Spirit; and,

II. To consider **the promises** that are addressed to her under those suffering circumstances.

Describing her suffering condition, the Lord addresses her in these tender epithets—"O thou **afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted.**" Everyone of these expressions is pregnant with heavenly meaning, and demands a separate examination.

1. "O thou **afflicted.**" **Affliction** is one of the marks that God stamps upon his people. We may call it his peculiar **sheep-mark**. "I will leave in the midst of thee an **afflicted** and poor people, and they shall trust in the name of the Lord." **Zep 3:12** Unless then we have stamped upon us by the hand of God this sheep-mark, we have, at present, but little testimony that we belong to the flock of Jesus. "**Afflicted!**" How are the Lord's people afflicted? Certainly

not all in the same way. Afflictions are of various kinds, and widely differ in nature, duration, and degree; but, viewed as proceeding from the hands of God, they are all sent by him to work a certain effect in the hearts of his people. Some afflictions, for instance, are **bodily**. Ill health is a very common gift of a Father's love, disguised under this painful rod. Many, many of the Lord's people are suffering under this affliction. An aching head, or a torpid liver, or shattered nerves, or weak chest, or rebellious stomach, or paralyzed limbs, or racked joints to many embitter life. I can speak experimentally upon this point, for I have been afflicted, more or less, with colds and coughs, and a tender chest, for more than twenty years, besides being laid aside from preaching on two different occasions for many months. But if I know the painful part of this affliction, I trust, I know something also of the blessedness connected with it; for the greatest and clearest manifestation I ever had of the Lord Jesus Christ to my soul was when I lay stretched on a bed of affliction, from which I did not rise for three weeks. I know, therefore, the misery of it by painful experience, and the blessedness of it by pleasurable experience; for often, though by no means always, when the body is most afflicted the soul is most favoured.

Others of the Lord's people, who are exempted from bodily afflictions have afflictions of another kind, such for instance as **family** afflictions. From this quarter how many gusts blow and billows swell. Into some families how often does death enter, taking away idol after idol! The buds drop before expanded into blossoms, or ripened into fruit. Or if children grow up it is but to open new sources of anxiety and sorrow, and rend the heart with deeper grief.

Others of the Lord's people are afflicted in **circumstances**. This is a very prevailing affliction amongst the people of God,

for "he hath chosen the poor of this world rich in faith." But I will not dwell upon those temporal afflictions which the church of God shares in common with the world. When the Lord says, "O thou afflicted," he seems rather to allude to those SPIRITUAL afflictions which are the peculiar lot of Zion. And, indeed, are any afflictions to be compared with spiritual afflictions? Guilt of conscience, distress of soul, fear of death, a troubled mind, anguish of spirit, the hidings of God's countenance, doubts, fears, and gloomy apprehensions, Satan's fiery darts, blasphemous suggestions, infidel insinuations—what bodily suffering, what family affliction, what poverty or temporal losses are to be compared with these draughts in Zion's bitter cup! Of this cup, each in his measure, all the Lord's people have to drink; for when the two disciples craved to sit, one at Christ's right hand and the other at his left, in his glory, he asked them whether they could drink of his cup and be baptized with his baptism; and when they replied that they could, he told them that of his cup, the cup of bitter sorrow, they should drink, and with his baptism, the baptism of suffering, they should be baptized. What he said to them he says to all, for only as we suffer with him shall we be glorified together.

2. But not to dwell too long on this part, of the subject, we will pass on to the second mark that God has stamped on his church—"**tossed with tempest.**" The Lord here compares his suffering church to a ship at sea, under bare poles, labouring in the storm, driven out of her course by contrary winds, as was Paul's case in the Adriatic, and doubtful whether she will ever reach the harbour, as the hymn says

"Half a wreck by tempests driv'n."

What a picture of a tempest-tossed soul! Sun and stars beclouded, compass lost, chart useless, pilot overboard, and

breakers ahead! Many, very many, of the Lord's dear family are thus tossed with tempest; some with a tempest of doubts and fears; others with a tempest of lusts and corruptions; others with a tempest of rebellion and fretfulness; others with a storm of guilt and despondency; others with gloomy forebodings and dismal apprehensions. Thus are they driven from their course, their sun and stars all obscured; no clear evidences, no bright manifestations: darkness above and a raging sea beneath; breakers ahead, and no harbour in sight.

3. But the Lord adds another word which seems to complete the whole, and to stamp the sheep-mark with a more vigorous hand and in broader characters upon the fleece, "**not comforted**"—that is, not comforted by, not capable of comfort from, man. This I look upon as a very decisive mark of a work of grace upon the soul. When a man is so cast down in his mind, so troubled in his conscience, and so burdened in his spirit that none but God can comfort him, we seem at once to be on the footsteps of the Spirit. We do not find hypocrites on this ground. False professors can easily take comfort: they can steal what God does not give, and appropriate what he does not apply. Zion's special mark is that she is "not comforted"—that her wounds are too deep for human balsams, her sickness too sore for creature medicines. All the gospel sermons in the world, all the gospel ministers, nay, all the invitations, promises, and declarations of the gospel itself, short of divine manifestation, cannot minister to her any solid comfort. God has reserved her comfort in his own hands; from his lips alone can consolation be spoken into her soul.

Now I do not mean to say that all the Lord's people are equally "afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted." In some measure they must be, or they are not within the scope of this promise. Still less do I mean to say that when

they are passing through this experience, they can reap any evidence from it, for if they could they would be comforted; they would see the sun and stars, the course they are steering, and the harbour fair in sight. But this is their peculiar mark, and one we always see upon them, that they cannot take comfort except as God himself is pleased to speak it into their hearts. Now, do not cut yourself off for a poor lost wretch because you cannot get comfort easily, because you are tossed with a sea of doubts and fears, temptations and corruptions, by the waves of lust and billows of sin. Do not say to yourself, 'I have come here tonight praying and groaning to get a word of comfort and cannot get any; I have now no hope!' That is the devil's conclusion, not God's. His mark is, "not comforted."—a mark he has stamped upon his sheep and lambs.

II. But we pass on to consider the blessed cluster of gospel promises that God makes to his suffering church; and indeed they are most precious. "**Behold**," he says, as though he would draw her special attention to the work that he was about to perform—"**I will lay thy stones with fair colours.**" The Lord here seems to take the figure of a building; or rather of a temple, for his people are compared to a temple, "What! know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost?" And his blessed work upon their soul he compares to the work of an architect, or a builder who lays stone upon stone until he puts on the top-stone with shoutings of grace, grace, unto it.

1. The first promise that he makes relative to this building of mercy is—"**I will lay her stones with fair colours.**" This seems to be a general description of the work of God in rearing up the spiritual building before he proceeds to nicer particulars, the other part of the text being, in my view, but a fuller explanation of what is laid down in the promise, "I

will lay thy stones with fair colours." "I myself," he says, "will build thee up," as he promises elsewhere—"Again I will build thee, and thou shalt be built, O virgin of Israel." **Jer 31:4**
And all the materials whether for foundation or superstructure shall be equally lasting and beautiful.

But what may we specially understand by these "stones," that the Lord promises to lay "with fair colours?" I think we may understand by them the blessed truths of the gospel. These are laid into the soul by the hand of God. Just as the mason takes a stone and lays it into the building, the structure itself being utterly passive in the matter, and only receiving stone by stone as the builder puts one upon another, so in the work of grace is the soul passive—God the Spirit taking precious truths out of the word, and inlaying them with his own hand into the heart. This indeed is the only way whereby Zion, afflicted, tempest-tossed, not comforted Zion, can receive the word of God. Her afflictions and tempests have beaten her off from every other mode. Nor indeed can any one in any other way rightly come at truth. It is not my coming to the word of God as to an orderly heap of building materials, selecting this or that stone, and laying this and that truth into my own conscience, and thus raising up my soul a temple for God. He alone begins, carries on, and completes. "The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house, his hands shall also finish it." **Zec 4:9**

Now as God the Spirit is pleased to lay any blessed truth into the soul, it is "a stone of fair colours." However fair or beautiful any word of God be in itself, it only experimentally becomes so as inlaid by his own Divine hand into the soul. This brings out the fair colouring. How often we read the word of God without seeing any the least beauty in it. Let that same portion come home with sweetness and power to

the soul, beauty, inexpressible beauty is seen in it immediately. It becomes at once "a stone of fair colours." Salvation full and free; the pardoning love of God; the precious blood of the Lamb; justification by Christ's imputed righteousness; wine and milk without money and without price; superabounding grace; eternal mercy, everlasting life—these, these are some of the precious stones that God the Spirit, with his own hand, lays into the conscience.

But in the words, "I will lay thy stones **with** fair colours," there seems to be a reference also to the cement in which the stones are laid, as well as to the stones themselves. What is this cement? Is it not blood and love? Are not the stones of fair colours, bright and beautiful, well laid in when thus cemented? Nor is the cement less beautiful than the stones; for it must last as long as they, and glitter and shine with equal lustre and brightness. Thus is the building compact as well as beautiful, firm in strength as it is resplendent in glory.

2. But the Lord goes on to particularize his work more distinctly and minutely. He speaks of her "foundations," her "windows," her "gates," and her "borders," and he tells us how they are all severally framed and made. Beginning at the beginning, he describes the material and laying of her **foundations**—"I will lay thy foundations with **sapphires**." Before we can stand firmly in the things of God, we must have a good foundation, something solid for our faith, our hope, our love, our all, to rest upon. We read of a foolish builder who built his house upon the sand, and of a wise builder who built upon a rock. Now, what we want is a solid foundation to rest upon as regards our eternal all. This God promises to do for his afflicted Zion—"I will lay thy foundations with sapphires." But what is a **sapphire**? Have you ever seen one? Perhaps you have. But if you have not, I

may briefly describe it as a precious stone, the distinguishing feature of which is its peculiar clear and beautiful colour—a heavenly blue. I would not press the figure too closely, but may it not fitly represent from its nature and colour **a special gift from heaven?** "A gift is a precious stone in the eyes of him that hath it." **Pr 17:8** Every testimony then that God gives to the soul, every promise brought into the heart, every manifestation of mercy, visit of love. Or application of truth, we may call, in a spiritual sense, a sapphire, for it is indeed a precious stone, radiant with heaven's own hue. When God thus lays a sapphire into the soul it affords a solid foundation for faith. When he said to Abraham—"I am thy shield and exceeding great reward;" to Joshua—"I will never leave thee nor forsake thee;" to Jeremiah—"Fear not," **La 3:57** he laid a sapphire in each of their hearts. What a mercy for you if your faith has such a sapphire for its foundation; when you do not rest upon the bare letter of God's word, upon the naked truth of the Scriptures, but upon the testimony of God laid into your soul. When there is any manifestation of Christ, any application of a promise, any visit of his mercy, any token of his love, any proof of interest in the precious blood of the Lamb, that is a foundation, a safe and solid foundation on which to rest. As they are laid by the hands of God himself they must be firm; as they are sapphires they must be indestructible. These sapphires, it is true, may every one of them be buried in the dust of carnality and worldly mindedness; the filth and sewage, the mud and slush of our fallen nature may roll over them flood after flood; but are they injured thereby? Is their nature changed, their value impaired, their hue tarnished, their lustre faded and gone? A person whom I know, indeed a relation of mine, once lost a diamond ring for a whole year, in a strawberry bed in a garden. Autumn covered it with leaves, and winter with snow; the rain fell upon it, and the mould spread over it, it was wet with dew and bound in by

hoarfrost; but did these impair its lustre? No; had it even dropped into a London sewer its value and beauty would not have been lessened. When my relation found her lost diamond ring it was as bright as ever. Thus, if God the Spirit has lodged a sapphire in your soul, all the dust and dirt of the carnal mind, nay, all the filth of sin, worse than that of a London sewer, may roll over it yet not destroy it. True, they may hide it from view, obscure the getting, and for a while dim its face; but one touch of the polisher's hand restores all its beauty. **Grace in the soul has no more communion with sin than a diamond with a dunghill.** The manifestations of Christ to the soul, and the application of God's truth to the heart, are "sapphires," in their nature indestructible, in their beauty imperishable. See to it, my friend, that you have a sapphire in your soul. That is the foundation; get that, and you can build upon it without fear; But beware of counterfeits. There are plenty of Jews about who pass off paste for diamonds and blue glass for sapphires. Examine well your testimony from heaven, and see that it be a real sapphire, just in weight, clear in colour, bright in hue, and imperishable in nature, without fracture or flaw, and specially see whether laid by the hand of God. "I will lay thy foundations with sapphires."

3. But the Lord also adds—"And I will make thy windows of agates." What is a window for? Chiefly to admit light, and air, and also to give us a prospect of the scenery without. I am a great admirer naturally of fine prospects, and I have a very pretty one from the windows of my own house, which I often look at with pleasure and admiration. Our houses would be poor, dull abodes if there were no windows to them, or if they were always closed with shutters. They would rather be prisons than dwellings. Thus the windows spoken of in our text seem to signify spiritual prospects. For has the temple of mercy no windows for light and air? And are the shutters

never thrown back to give Zion her prospects? Aye, surely, blessed prospects, glimpses of heaven, sights of Jesus, views of a triune God, glances into eternal bliss and blessedness beyond the grave.

But the windows are of "agate." Glass in those days was not used for windows; it was known for various other purposes; for it has been lately found in Nineveh, as well as in the tombs of Egypt; but its use for windows is of comparatively modern date. But why are they made of agate? Though not so clear as glass, it is what is called semi-transparent, that is, sufficiently transparent to admit a considerable amount of light. The sun shining through a window of agate might lose a portion of its brightness, but not much of its light. Upon Zion in her time-state the Sun of Righteousness does not shine in all his brightness. The windows of agate whilst she is in the flesh temper his rays. Her prospects too are not fully bright and clear. As the Apostle speaks—"We see through, or in a glass darkly!" We have not those clear views which the saints have in glory where they see Jesus face to face. We have prospects sometimes, I hope, by faith, of God, and Christ, and heavenly glory; but still these views are but semi-transparent, streaked and clouded like a window of agate, not bright and clear as a pane of plate glass. But as Daniel opened his windows toward Jerusalem, that he might see by faith what he could not see by sight, so should we aim to look towards the heavenly Jerusalem, that by faith we may see him there who is invisible. It is poor, dull, miserable work to live in a house without windows; to have no views of God, nor sights of Jesus, nor glimpses of his heavenly glory! To be shut up in a prison, or a penitentiary, where every window is darkened with shutters, and but a few air-holes left to breathe at, is indeed most miserable. But many of the Lord's family live this prison life; and this makes them "afflicted, tossed, with tempest, and not comforted." But to such the

Lord says—"I will make thy windows of agates." They shall have prospects. It may be at first only as glimmering through a lattice, but the windows of agate are ready for the framing; for "light is sown for the righteous and gladness for the upright in heart."

4. But the Lord speaks also of Zion's "gates." These gates are to give admission to the temple which he is rearing for his own habitation. But of what material are the gates? These too, like the foundations and windows, are of precious stones. "**And thy gates of carbuncles.**" Now I would not press Scripture figures too closely, and we must not be too fanciful in our interpretation of God's word; yet, doubtless, the Spirit of God chose these jewels with some peculiar meaning. The carbuncle is of a blood red colour. And why should the Lord have chosen that Zion's gates should be of this peculiar colour? May we not, without wresting the figure too closely, believe that there is some mystic allusion here to the blood of the Lamb? But what are gates for? Two purposes, entrance and exit. How did we come into the chapel this evening but through the gate or door; and the same door that gave us entrance will give us exit. Zion too has her gates of exit and entrance. She has her gates of access to God, entrance into the presence of the Most High; the door of hope opened in the valley of Achor. And who has opened the door, or rather who has not only opened it, and made it, but himself is it, is the door. "I am the door," saith Jesus; and was not the door opened through his rent flesh, as the Apostle speaks—"Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh." **Heb 10:19,20**. Through his bleeding wounds, through his pierced side, through his mangled feet and hands, there is now access to God—

A door of hope is opened wide.
In Jesus' pierced hands and side.

Is there any other access to God but through the slaughtered Lamb? "Through him we have access by one Spirit unto the Father." There is no other, for he is "the way, the truth, and the life, and no man cometh to the Father but by him." Is not this an open way? Does not the soul through this door walk in and out and find pasture, and enter into the immediate presence of God? Do you, my friends, ever find access to God, a heart to pray, a sense of acceptance in prayer, an open door and power to enter therein? What opens it? **Merit?** Set up merit and we are all damned to a man! It is not merit, great or little; it is the blood of the Lamb which alone has opened a way for poor lost sinners to draw near to God. These are Zion's gates; her gates of carbuncles, ruddy in hue, types and figures of the atoning blood of the Lamb.

But gates not only give exit but admission. Not only do prayers, supplications, petitions, cries, groans, sighs and tears, rise up with acceptance through the gates of carbuncle, and thus enter into the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth, but promises also, tokens, testimonies, and visits come down. And as every prayer, to be a prayer, is breathed through the gate of carbuncle, through the blood of the Lamb, so every answer, that is an answer, comes down through the same consecrated channel. Has it not surprised you sometimes that God ever heard your prayers? And what has been the reason of this surprise? Has it not been this? "My prayers are so polluted; my thoughts so wandering; my mind so carnal; my lusts so strong; my corruptions so powerful; my backslidings so innumerable; O, when I view these things I wonder that God can hear my prayers." And well you may wonder if you look at the matter in that way. God does not hear your prayers because there is anything

good in you! How could it be? What does God see in you? A mass of filth and folly. There is in you nothing else. Then why does God hear prayer and answer it too? Only through the gate of carbuncle. Prayer ascends through Jesus, and answers descend through Jesus. Groans through Jesus enter the ears of the God of Sabaoth, and through the same open gate of bleeding mercy do answers drop into the soul. Our poor self-righteous hearts can hardly comprehend this; and we think we must have a good frame, or bring a good deed, or a good heart to make our prayers acceptable to God. Perish the thought. This is nothing but the spawn of self-righteousness. The gates of carbuncle,—through these every prayer ascends, through these every answer comes down; if we set up anything else, or make a gate of human merit, though no bigger than a mouse-hole, we pour contempt upon the grace and blood of the Lamb.

5. But the Lord also speaks of Zion's **borders**. He tells us he will make "all her borders of pleasant stones." There shall be nothing common about her. No architect pays the same attention to the courts and outbuildings that he pays to the mansion itself. If the mansion be of stone these may be of brick. Not so with God, Zion's divine Architect. Her very Courts are to be entered in with praise. No back buildings, no barn or stables, kitchens or wash-houses, to be thrust out of sight and hidden by plantations, lest as eyesores they should disfigure the noble mansion. Zion's very borders, courts, outbuildings, are all of the same material with the mansion itself. "And all thy borders of pleasant stones," that is pleasant to the eye, as a precious stone is for its lustre and beauty. The walls that surround her, the courts within those walls, the avenues of approach, her walks and borders, every circuit and boundary whereby she is fenced off and separated from an ungodly world are made of stones pleasant to the eye and precious in value. Thus God's providential dealings,

which often form the outer setting of his inward mercies, are of pleasant stones. North, south, east, west, all Zion's borders are of precious materials. The daily events of life, the circumstances of family, station, employment, success or the contrary, the ties of domestic affection, with all those varied circumstances which seem rather the borders and outer courts than the inner sanctuary of gracious experience—yet all these are of divine material and workmanship. Viewed by faith, every event and circumstance of life, however apparently grievous, is a pleasant stone; for **all** Zion's borders are of pleasant stones.

But for whom are all these mercies? The meritorious? the diligent? the industrious? We read not so: "O thou afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted." What! are all these mercies for such as they? They are the only persons who will prize them or glorify God for them. Give them to the Pharisee, and he will tell you that he gained them by his own exertions, deserved them by his own meritorious obedience; and, therefore, as God will not give his glory to another, and a Pharisee's religion is that which he can himself build up with his own hands—the Lord bestows them on the "afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted"—in other words, when he has made Zion a heap of ruins, he takes to himself the distinguished honour of building her up with his own hands, and laying every stone in its place with his own Almighty fingers.

But this is not suitable to the palate of a Pharisee. He wants to be handling the trowel himself. His very fingers itch to get hold of the plummet and line. If he might but dabble a little in the mortar of human merit, become a co-builder with God, and then write upon the building—"This was partly built by God and partly by myself," he would be satisfied. How pleased he would be to see his own name bracketed with the

name of God, as you see in the city churches just below the organ, the twin names of the distinguished churchwardens, in whose year of office the church was repaired and decorated. Oh, if the Pharisee could but see his name thus bracketed with God's as a co-builder, how it would please his vanity and pride. It might please him, but it would not please God, and it would not please my soul, nor if you are taught of God would it please yours. Let self be nothing. Dethrone self from the seat of empire, and banish it, as it deserves, into exile and obscurity; but let God be exalted and shine forth in his own divine glory. This is sweet to every soul taught of God. He would not take to himself a grain of merit. For what does he really merit? Hell! That is what he merits, nothing more, nothing less. And as long as he only merits hell, he dares not, will not, must not, shall not merit heaven.

Now this is the reason why the Lord has, so to speak, to take such pains in thrusting Zion down, and making her a heap of ruins, that he may have all the honour and all the glory of building her up into a temple for himself, to dwell in her by his grace here, and in his glory hereafter. And he well deserves it. It is sweet to the soul that it should be so; and if we are taught, as we must be if we are taught of God, to know our own helplessness and hopelessness toward everything spiritually good, we shall give him all the praise. It is the sweetest feeling upon earth. It is a blessed foretaste of heaven to praise God for his mercy, to thank him for his grace, and to bless him for a sense of his love. It is a drop of heaven; and he who never has it here will never have it hereafter. No Pharisee ever had it. No Pharisee whilst a Pharisee ever will have it. He must become a heap of ruins before God will put forth his hand to rear him up into a temple. He must be "afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted" before the Lord lays the "stones with fair colours, and lays the foundation with sapphires;" before he makes the

"windows of agates, and the gates of carbuncles, and all the borders of pleasant stones." And if God does not do this for him, where is his hope, where his confidence, and what will be his end?