

An Anxious Inquiry and a Gracious Response

Preached at North Street Chapel, Stamford, on Lord's Day Morning, Jan. 20, 1861

"Tell me, O thou whom my soul loveth, where thou feedest, where thou makest thy flock to rest at noon: for why should I be as one that turneth aside by the flocks of thy companions? If thou know not, O thou fairest among women, go thy way forth by the footsteps of the flock, and feed thy kids beside the shepherds' tents." Song of Solomon 1:7, 8

It is very beautiful, and not less profitable than beautiful, to observe the variety of ways in which it has pleased the God of all grace to reveal his mind and will to the sons of men in the scriptures of truth. Look a little closely at your Bible from this particular point of view. What a wonderful book it is! and not less wonderful for its contents, and the glorious truths which shine and sparkle as with divine lustre in every page, than for the amazing variety in which those contents are unfolded to our enlightened understanding, and those glorious truths held up to our spiritual view. This variety is not a matter of accident, or of human contrivance, but a fruit of heavenly grace, originated by divine wisdom, and designed for a special purpose, that God might instruct us more clearly into his mind and will. Let me, then, devote a few minutes to the illustration of this peculiar feature of the Scriptures, as I love to point out the wisdom and grace of God in the revelation of himself in the word of truth.

1. God instructs us, then, sometimes by *history* or sacred narrative; as we find it employed in the historical books of the Old Testament, and in the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles in the New. What should we have known of the creation and fall of man; of the destruction of the old world

by the deluge; of the preservation of Noah and his family in the ark; of the call of Abraham; of the raising up and maintenance of a peculiar people in the children of Israel from generation to generation, that from the tribe of Judah and the loins of David, as concerning the flesh, the promised Messiah should come into the world, except for the historical books of the Old Testament? Again, but for the Gospels, what should we have known, at least fully and clearly, of the holy conception, the lowly birth, the suffering life, the agonizing death, the glorious resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ? Where but for the Gospels would have been our knowledge of the surpassing miracles, the instructive parables, the precious discourses, the garden woes, the bloody sweat, the sacrifice and sufferings of our most gracious Lord? And but for the Acts of the Apostles, what should we have known of the pouring out of the Holy Ghost and the promulgation of the Gospel at Jerusalem; of the persecutions and sufferings of the Christian Churches in various places, and of the blessings that rested upon the ministry of the apostles?

2. But God has sometimes seen fit to vary his mode of instruction, and to teach us *by type and figure*, as in the paschal lamb, in the cloudy pillar, in the tabernacle and ark of the covenant in the wilderness, in the brazen serpent, in the scape-goat, and in the whole train generally of Levitical rites, ceremonies, and sacrifices.

3. But as a further instance of this variety of instruction, let me mention how God has been pleased also to teach us by *prophecy*, as in the whole range of prophetic scripture, from Isaiah to Malachi in the Old Testament, and the book of Revelation in the New. He has thus afforded us predictions of countless events, either already accomplished, as those referring to the first coming of Messiah, or yet to be fulfilled,

as in his second coming; and has thereby given us the strongest attestation to the truth and inspiration of his holy word.

4. Sometimes he has taught us by *metrical compositions* of men of God in days of old, when they poured out their complaints or recorded their joy in "psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs"—as, for instance, the songs of Miriam, Moses, and Hannah, and especially that blessed treasure-house of Christian experience, the Book of Psalms.

5. Sometimes he has seen good to teach us by *proverbs, apophthegms, and short sentences*, in which he has been pleased to couch vast depths of moral and spiritual instruction—as in the Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

6. Sometimes he has seen fit to instruct us by *letters*, as in the Epistles of the New Testament, wherein we have the grand truths of our most holy faith so blessedly set forth, and the top stone, as it were, put on of divine precept and godly practice to crown the edifice of doctrine and experience.

7. And in one instance, he has seen fit to instruct us by a *Song—a holy song*—called "the Song of Songs," or "the Song of Solomon," but which, from its general arrangement and character, we would, in all godly reverence, rather term a *holy drama, or sacred pastoral*; for in it we find a kind of dramatic picture or scenic representation of the mutual love and sacred communion of Christ and his Church under the figure of a Bridegroom and Bride, enjoying, in various scenes and places, each other's delightful company.

From this part of Holy Scripture, then, this vivid and picturesque representation of heavenly love, I shall endeavour, with God's help and blessing, to speak in your

ears this morning, taking for my text the words which I have already read.

In those words you will find two speakers—one the Bride addressing the Bridegroom in the language of inquiry, and the other the Bridegroom answering her question. This simple division then of Question and Answer will form the two leading branches of my subject.

I.—*First*, then, we have the *Anxious Inquiry* of the Bride, who desires to know where the Bridegroom's flock would rest at noon; for she could not bear the thought that she should be "as one that turned aside by the flocks of his companions."

II.—*Secondly*, the *Gracious Answer* which fell from his lips, that if she knew not the appointed place of rest and refreshment she was to go her way forth "by the footsteps of the flock, and feed her kids beside the shepherds' tents."

i. But before we address ourselves to the Anxious Inquiry of the Bride as thus stated, it will be necessary to look a little at her character; because though the Bride represents the Church of God in the aggregate, yet as there is but "one body, and one spirit" (Eph. 4:4), her sighs and songs, prayers and praises, conflicts and conquests, sorrows and joys, are but the reflections of, and intimately correspond with, the experience of every saint of God. So she stands forth in the word of truth, and specially in this sacred drama, not only as representing the whole of God's family in the aggregate, but as foreshadowing the character and experience of each child of God in the particular. You may compare yourself then personally and individually with the description which the Holy Ghost has given here of the Church of God in her inmost experience. He has taken the veil from off her face and heart that you may see the

features of the one and watch the pulsations of the other; and if, as in water, face answereth to face, you can see your features in her features and read your heart in her heart, you may so far, with God's help, take some comfort or encouragement, as having scriptural grounds to believe that you are a living member of the mystical body of the Lord the Lamb.

1. Now one feature, and a very prominent feature of the Church here is, her *humiliation; the low place* that she takes, and the language of self-condemnation which she uses. She says, "Look not upon me, because I am black, because the sun hath looked upon me." (Song 1:6.) She had a view by divine teaching of her thorough wreck and ruin in the Adam fall, and of the consequences resulting therefrom through the power and effects of temptation. In a woman, a clear, fair, fresh, soft complexion is a special beauty and a most attractive charm. But she, in her own eyes, was "black." Dark and swarthy was her skin, like that of an African negress, burnt into her by the scorching sun which had dried up all the tender juices of her once fair face and roseate complexion. She could not bear to look at her own tanned and tawny face, and therefore cried out, "Look not upon me, because I am black. I am unworthy of the least glance of thy favourable eye. The sun of temptation hath looked upon me, and meeting the foul humours and gross corruptions of my face has blackened my skin; I am not a fit bride for thee who "art fairer than the children of men;" for how can black match with white? and I am black." But to represent this feeling of her blackness more strikingly, she compares herself to "the tents of Kedar," a place in the wilderness of Edom, where the wandering shepherds dwelt in tents made of camels' hair, and therefore black not only from the original colour of the material, but additionally so by being continually beaten upon by the rays of a burning sun and

begrimed by the smoke of the tent and the dust of the desert. Such was she in her own eyes—"black" in her original colour as woven throughout with sin in the Adam fall; "black," as warped and scorched by the sun of temptation; "black," as begrimed with the daily smoke of internal corruption; "black" as ever blown upon by the dust of this ungodly world. Instead, therefore, of viewing herself fair and comely, she rather beheld herself as did Job, when he cried out, "Behold, I am vile;" as Isaiah, when he said, "Woe is me! for I am undone;" and as Daniel, when his comeliness was turned in him into corruption.

2. But with all this view of her own blackness, humbling her into the very dust, she had a sight and some experimental knowledge and enjoyment of her interest in Christ; she knew there was something more and better in herself than blackness, for she could add, "I am black, but comely"—yea, as comely "as the curtains of Solomon." We read in this book of Solomon's bed, and we have a description given of its guards: "Behold his bed, which is Solomon's: three-score valiant men are about it, of the valiants of Israel." But if we adopt the marginal reading of "bed" for "chariot" in the following verse, which seems to be more suitable to the context and to the description itself, we shall find a most glowing and picturesque account of the ornaments and furniture of this bed. "King Solomon made himself a bed of the wood of Lebanon. He made the pillars thereof of silver, the bottom thereof of gold, the covering of it of purple; the midst thereof being paved with love for the daughters of Jerusalem." Is not that last touch of the picture more suited to a bridal bed than to "a chariot," or palanquin, as some explain the word? Now "the curtains" of this bed must have been as beautiful as the four pillars of silver at each corner, the bottom, or main support, of gold, and the covering or coverlid, spread over the whole of purple—the quilt of Tyrian

dye, worn only by kings and princes. As there was in those days a great intercourse between Judea and India, Solomon's ships going from Tarshish to Ophir, there is a great probability that these curtains were formed of the most beautiful India muslin. They might even have been made of shawls from the looms of Cashmere, those costly productions which grace the very shoulders of queens and princesses.

But what a contrast to the tents of Kedar! Can you picture to your eye first "the tents of Kedar," a low, black, dusty group of shepherds' tents, nestling in the desert amidst the desert amidst the bleating flocks—something like a gipsy camp! Such was the Bride in herself. Now look into Solomon's palace and see the curtains of his royal bed. How clean, how rich, how beautiful! Such was the Bride in Christ.

3. But there are other features stamped upon her; and one of a very marked character. I shall have occasion to dwell by and by more fully upon this point; I shall therefore only just touch upon this feature of her character. She had, then, great love for Jesus, for she could say, "*O thou whom my soul loveth.*" Her tongue here expressed what her heart felt, for she could say that her very soul loved him. Now if a man has no love whatever to Jesus, he certainly has no right to think or call himself a Christian. Do I stretch the cord too tightly when I say this? Is my test too severe? Let me ask have you ever pondered over that solemn word of Paul's? "If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema"—or accursed? Is my sword sharper than Paul's, or my test more severe than his? If then a man professing to know the truth for himself by some experience of its power has never known anything of love to the Lord from some discovery of his Person and work, grace and glory, well may I ask if he has any well grounded testimony of his interest in a salvation so great, and in a Saviour so blessed?

4. But besides this love, there was another feature stamped upon her character to which I have already partially alluded—*great sincerity*. She could appeal to him as one who knew her very heart. "O thou whom my soul loveth." She felt as Peter felt, when the Lord seemed in some measure, as Peter feared, to doubt his love. Knowing his own sincerity, and conscious that the Lord knew it too, he broke out, "Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee." So the Bride not only felt the warm flame of love glowing in her breast, but was so sure it was there that she could appeal to him that she was sincere in the expression of it. It was therefore, not a love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth; not a love of lip, but a love of heart—a love which he himself had kindled in her breast, and given her to know as his own gift and work, the fruit of his own grace.

5. But now look at another feature which beams forth from her portrait under the lively handling of the blessed Spirit; she was *hungry*, for she asked him to tell her where he fed his flock, evidently showing that she was seeking heavenly food.

6. But she was *weary* also of sin and self, of the world and of everything below the skies; and yet felt that there was *rest in Christ*, for she asked him to tell her where "he made his flock to rest at noon."

7. The last feature I shall now name is her *holy jealousy and godly fear* over herself. She dreaded lest she should be led to turn aside from the strait and narrow way, from her loyalty and her love, and be beguiled in any measure to say or do anything that seemed like a departure from her willing obedience to the Lord of her heart and affections.

Now can you find any or all of these seven marks of grace in your soul—that you are self-abased; that you have any testimony of your interest in Christ; that you do love the Lord Jesus; that you are sincere; that you are hungry and long for food; that you are weary and seek for rest; and are jealous over yourself with a godly jealousy, lest you depart from the right ways of the Lord? The standard I have set up is not very high, but I believe it is true and scriptural. If, then, you can find these seven marks in your soul, wrought there by divine power, you have so far a scriptural testimony that you are one whom the Bride here represents, and will therefore be able to enter more fully and clearly into her Inquiry, and the Lord's Answer.

ii. Let us look then now at her *Inquiry*: "Tell me," she says, "O thou whom my soul loveth." You see how anxious she was to get a word from the Lord. This also I might have named as a special mark of a soul under divine teaching: its earnestness, its anxiety to be taught of God, to get a testimony from the Lord's own mouth, a witnessing word from the Lord's own lips. She could not be satisfied with the testimony of man, or be content with such instruction as she might gather from the lips of others. Nothing short of the Lord himself speaking with power to her soul could give her any solid satisfaction. Were you ever there? Do you know what it is often upon your knees to be begging of the Lord to speak to your soul with power? She then appeals to him why he should thus speak to her? for it was with her a matter of very anxious inquiry. She would not be deceived for all the world. She knew that everything was at stake, and putting her soul, its salvation and its sanctification into the balance, nothing could induce her to depart from this point, that it must be the Lord, and the Lord alone, who could satisfy her longing desires, by speaking a word to her inmost heart. And observe the ground on which she appeals to him. It is *the*

ground of love. She would say, "I do not come before thee as a stranger, as an enemy, as an alien, as one who has no knowledge of thee, or of whom thou hast no knowledge; but as one who loves thee—not in word, or tongue, or profession, but in my very soul, from some communication of thy love to my heart." Now can you go before the Lord on the very same ground of love and affection to his dear name, and say with her as sincerely, if not as warmly and as tenderly, "Tell me, O thou whom my soul loveth?" Is your answer "Yes, I can." You must have some ground for your answer. Love is easily talked about, easily professed, and perhaps no one thing is more counterfeited; but to talk about love is to love in word and in tongue; the love that is wanted is in deed and in truth. Now what forms the ground of love? for we do not love either naturally or spiritually for nothing. If we fall in love, as it is called, there is some ground for it, something attractive, amiable, winning, loveable in the beloved Object. So before you can love the Lord, you must have seen something in him to love him for. You must have had, for instance, a view by faith of his eternal Deity and Sonship, as the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. You must have had a view of his holy, suffering, and pure humanity, and seen him in some measure as "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief," in Gethsemane's gloomy garden, or on the agonising cross at Calvary; and you must have had also some discovery to your faith of his complex Person as God-man, Immanuel, God with us, at the right hand of the Father, in glory and majesty. Now I do not say that the Old Testament saints had as clear a discovery of the Person and work of the Redeemer as those have who have lived since his appearance in the flesh; yet Abraham rejoiced to see Christ's day, and saw it and was glad; and Job knew that his Redeemer lived. So the Bride, speaking under divine inspiration, and representing the Church of Christ, had, no doubt, a view of the glorious Person of her Beloved, for giving a description of

him in this holy hook, she says, "My beloved is white and ruddy, the chiefest among ten thousand." She must then have had a view of his glorious Person and surpassing beauty. Nor was she without some intimation of his love, for she says, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth; for his love is better than wine" (Song 1:2); and, after a glowing description of his Person, adds, "his mouth is most sweet: yea, he is altogether lovely. This is my beloved, and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem." (Song 5:16.) We cannot doubt, then, that the Bride, as representing the church, loved the Bridegroom, not from hearsay description, but from a gracious discovery of his heavenly beauty.

But besides this attractiveness in the Object, winning the heart and affections, there must be some intimation from his own lips that he loves us as well as that we love him. How tormenting is unrequited love, as many a poor love-stricken maiden has felt and known even to death. How galling, how mortifying to man or woman to love and not to be loved again. But spiritual love is never unrequited love. No Christian heart need bleed or break under the pangs of love being only on one side. This the Scripture has decisively settled. "We love him because he first loved us." "I have loved thee with an everlasting love; therefore, with loving kindness have I drawn thee." A child of God may fear, as many have feared, that the Lord does not love him; but there is no real ground for this fear; for our love to the Lord, if indeed we do love him, is but a faint and dim reflection of his love to us.

iii. This love, then, in the Bride's heart moved and influenced her to put up this anxious inquiry, "Tell me," she says, "where thou *feedest*." She was hungry, for she was one of those whom the Lord himself pronounces blessed, as "hungering and thirsting after righteousness;" and under the

pressure of this hunger she needed food. The Lord Jesus Christ is set forth in the word of truth as "the good shepherd." "The Lord is my shepherd," says David, "I shall not want." But a main office of the shepherd is to feed the flock: as in the psalm to which I have already referred, David says, "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures." And thus speaks the prophet, "He shall feed his flock like a shepherd." (Isai. 40:11.) So in Ezekiel the Lord himself promises, "I will feed my flock, and I will cause them to lie down, saith the Lord God." (Ezek. 34:15.) Thus viewing the Lord in the character of a shepherd, the bride here says, "Tell me, O thou whom my soul loveth, where thou feedest thy flock." It is, therefore, almost as if she said, "Lord, I am hungry; I want some food for my soul; I am starving, sinking, fainting, for want of food; I am dying for something which thou alone canst give. O tell me with thy own lips where it is thou feedest thy flock, that I may go where they are, and get some of the pasture which thou givest them." Does your soul ever want to be thus fed? Have you come up here this morning with any appetite? Do you hunger for a word from the Lord to be spoken to your heart? Are you in search of Gospel food? Are you come here this morning, saying in substance if not in word, "Tell me, O thou whom my soul loveth, where thou feedest, that I may have some food given to me by thyself?"

iv. But if the Lord feed them, he must have *something to feed them with*, and that suitable to the hunger of the soul. What does he feed them with? With various kinds of food; but all alike nourishing and satisfying to the soul—for the food he gives is not less than *himself*.

1. Sometimes, then, he feeds the soul with *his presence*. This fills up the aching void; this relieves the hunger; this satisfies the want; for to feed upon his presence is to feed upon

himself.

2. But he feeds them also with his *promises*; for he has filled the word of truth with them as so much choice provender for his flock. There is not a state or case, trial or temptation, difficulty or perplexity, grief or affliction, ache of heart or pain of mind, burden of spirit or guilt of conscience, heavy bereavement or sore disappointment, for which there is not some suitable promise in the word of his grace. As, then, these promises are laid before the sheep by the good Shepherd as their choice and suitable food, and they are enabled by his grace to feed upon them, their souls are sensibly nourished and strengthened. This is fulfilling the word of promise; "I will feed them in a good pasture, and upon the high mountains of Israel shall their fold be: there shall they lie in a good fold, and in a fat pasture shall they feed upon the mountains of Israel." (Ezek. 34:14.)

3. But he feeds them more especially with *his own flesh* and *his own blood*, for he says, "My flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed;" and again, "He that eateth me, even he shall live by me." (John 6:55, 57.) When, then, the blessed Lord is pleased to discover to the soul a sense of his dying love, what he is as a suffering Jesus, in bearing our sins in his own body on the tree, and applies this love and blood to the conscience, then there is a feeding by faith upon his flesh and drinking by faith of his blood. This is "meat indeed and drink indeed," for eternal life is in it; as the Lord himself declared, "Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me and I in him." (John 6:54, 56.) To be thus blessed and favoured is to be fed with the choicest provision of God's house and be sealed for heaven; for "he that eateth of this bread shall live for ever." (John 6:58.)

v. But the bride wanted not only food; she wanted also *rest*. As hunger made her long for food, so weariness made her long for rest. Are you never weary of the world, weary of sin, weary of self, weary of every thing below the skies? If so, you want something to give you rest. You look to self; it is but a shifting sand, tossed here and there with the restless tide, and ever casting up mire and dirt. No holding ground; no anchorage; no rest there. You look to others; you see what man is, even the very best of men in their best state, how fickle, how unstable, how changing and changeable; how weak even when willing to help; how more likely to add to, than relieve your distress; if desirous to sympathise with and comfort you in trouble and sorrow, how short his arm to help, how unsatisfactory his aid to relieve! You find no rest there. You lean upon the world: it is but a broken reed which runs into your hand and pierces you. So look where you will, there is no rest for the sole of your foot. But there is a rest; for the sacred word of truth declares, "There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God" (Heb. 4:9); and our blessed Lord says, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." (Matt. 11:28.) This rest is Christ, and especially Christ in his finished work, as the apostle declares, "We which have believed do enter into rest" (Heb. 4:3); and this by ceasing from our own works and resting on Christ's, according to the words, "For he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his." (Heb. 4:10.) Now when you can fully rest upon the finished work of the Son of God, and believe by a living faith that your sins were laid upon his head; that he bore them in his body on the tree; that he has washed you in his precious blood, clothed you with his righteousness, and is sanctifying you by his Spirit and grace, then you can rest. There is something here firm and solid for the conscience to rest on. Whilst the law thunders, whilst Satan accuses, whilst conscience condemns, there is no rest.

But you can rest where God rests. God rests in his love; in the finished work of his dear Son; in the perfection of Christ's humanity; in his fulfilment of all his covenant engagements; in the glorification of his holy Law; in the satisfaction rendered to his justice; in the harmonising of all his attributes; in the revelation of his grace and his glory to the children of men; for he is his beloved Son, in whom he is well pleased. The tabernacle in the wilderness, and afterwards the temple on Mount Zion, was a type of the pure and sacred humanity of the Lord Jesus. There God rested in a visible manner by a cloud upon the mercy seat, called by the Jewish writers, the Shekinah. This, therefore, was the place of his rest, as he speaks, "For the Lord hath chosen Zion; he hath desired it for his habitation. This is my rest for ever: here will I dwell; for I have desired it." (Psalm 132:13, 14.) As, then, the Shekinah or presence of God rested upon the ark; and as the glory of God in the cloudy pillar rested upon the tabernacle, so the glory of God rests upon the Lord Jesus Christ; and when you can rest where God rests, then you enter into rest, and cease from your own works, as God ceased from his. This is a glorious rest, for we read, "To it shall the Gentiles seek: and his rest shall be glorious" (Isai. 11:10); and "A glorious high throne from the beginning is the place of our sanctuary." (Jer. 17:12.) "The Lord giveth grace and glory" (Psal. 84:11); and this glory he gives his people when they believe on the Son of God unto eternal life, as he himself said, "And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them." (John 17:22.) Have you not often toiled and laboured to establish your own righteousness? And what was the end of all your labours, the fruit of all your toils? Bondage, guilt, fear; weariness, dissatisfaction, disappointment. And have you not sought sometimes to get a little pleasure from the things of time and sense, a little ease, a little rest, as a sick man tries a new remedy or the weary invalid a fresh posture? But no remedy for the sick

man; no rest for the weary woman. So no change of place or pursuit, no poppy of the field or drug of the laboratory could give you the rest and peace that you needed. Nor will you ever find it but in the Son of God.

But the Bride in the text was not, at that time at least, enjoying this rest, or why need she utter the anxious inquiry, "Tell me where thou makest thy flock to rest at noon." In those countries, the noon is not, as in this, the most beautiful part of the day, when, even in summer, if it is not too hot, we are glad to go abroad into the open air. In those fervid times the noon-day sun is something terrible to man and beast. All retreat to shelter, for those fervent rays beat with such terrible power that men sometimes drop down dead by what is called sun-stroke, or are seized with brain-fever. The shepherds, therefore, when the noon-day heat is about to make their flocks languish and hang out their tongues with thirst and weariness, lead them under some cool rock or the thick boughs of some umbrageous tree, like the Banyan fig tree of India, where they find shade from the heat, and can crop their food at ease. So when the burning sun of temptation blazes in the sky; when the noon-day heat of the assaults of Satan, or the hot rays of personal trouble and affliction beat upon the defenceless head of the sheep of Christ so as to make it faint, weary, and languishing, it longs for rest and shelter. "Tell me," says the bride, "where thou makest thy flock to rest at noon." She knew there was a place where the flock of Christ rested at noon; and where he himself made them rest. But this place she could not find without his guidance, or obtain rest when found unless he himself gave it. She does not say, "Tell me where the flock rests," but "where *thou makest it* to rest;" for the Lord must not only provide the green pasture and the still waters, but himself make the soul lie down in them and feed beside them. How often you have had food spread before you, and

could not eat; had the bed made, and could not sleep in it!

vi. But there is another feature in her character which as I have before pointed out, seems very marked—*her godly jealousy over herself*. "For why," she says to her most blessed Lord, "for why should I be as *one that turneth aside* by the flocks of thy companions?" There is a little difficulty here, I am free to confess it, in understanding whom these "companions" represent. If we understand these "companions" to be the same persons as are spoken of in the last chapter, "Thou that dwellest in the gardens, the companions hearken to thy voice" (8:13)—they would seem to represent those who were favoured with holy intimacy and companionship with the Lord Jesus Christ; and as they had flocks, they would shadow forth the under shepherds—pastors of churches, ministers of truth, whom the great Shepherd had set over various parts of the fold below, that they might feed them with food convenient for them. If this be the correct interpretation, the question might arise how she could turn from the Lord if she associated with the flocks of his companions, for when with them she would seem to be in her right place. Surely we can hardly be wrong or be turning aside from the Lord if we are walking in fellowship with those who are themselves walking in close fellowship with Christ. Does not John say, "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin?" (1 John 1:7.) According to this testimony, then, to have fellowship with the saints of God is closely connected with walking in the light of God's countenance and enjoying the application of atoning blood to cleanse from all sin. If, then, we interpret "the companions" as the companions of Christ—the friends of the bridegroom who, according to the Jewish custom, attended him at the marriage feast (Judges 14:11; John 3:29), we must make a little pause or inversion of the

words, and read it thus: "Why should I, by the flocks of thy companions, be as one that turneth aside?" As though she said, "Why should I, with all my privileges as being amongst the flocks of thy companions, favoured with church ordinances and church fellowship, continually hearing the servants of thine own sending, and walking in sweet union with the people of thine own choosing,—why should I, so highly favoured, be as one that turneth aside?" This interpretation, if we adopt it, would bear a good gospel sense, for there is a tendency, even amongst God's children to rest upon privileges, to build upon ordinances, and to think because they are favoured with sitting under a gospel ministry, or belong to a gospel church, that all is well between God and their soul, when there may be a great deal of secret turning aside from the Lord in their heart and affections. Your walk and conduct may be consistent; you may keep up the strictest attention to what are called the duties of religion; and yet with all this there maybe a great deal of inward departing from the Lord. True spiritual fellowship with the Lord's people, and especially with his "companions," or those who live very near to him, I have already shown, is closely connected with walking in the light of the Lord's countenance; but there may be an associating with the Lord's people, and yet borrowing no light from their lamp or getting heat from their warmth. The wise and foolish virgins went out on the same errand and for the same purpose. Even a believer may associate with the believing, and not have the same activity of faith; and a lover of truth with the loving, and not feel the same warmth of love. Taking that view of her meaning, it is as if she said, "Why should I be as one who drinks at the stream instead of drinking at the Fountain? whose wicked heart turns aside from thee even amidst the flocks of thy ministering servants—those "Happy men," those "happy servants," who, like Solomon's, "stand continually before thee and hear thy wisdom." (1 Kings

10:8.) "O how base must be my heart to be contented without enjoying thy sweet presence, resting upon some outward privileges, and going in and out amongst thy people and thy servants, and yet be secretly forsaking the Fountain of living waters and hewing out to myself cisterns, broken cisterns, which hold no water." She saw the snare, and cried to be delivered from it. In this expression of her feelings, I see the godly jealousy which the Bride has over herself. Many, I believe, rest upon their Christian privileges, their Church membership, and their general reception as partakers of grace by the people of God, without any deep searchings of heart whether they are walking near the Lord in all holy obedience to his will and word. But where the soul is sensitively alive to its own spiritual condition, and especially when it has known something formerly of sweet communion with the Lord of life and glory, it sees the snare thus spread for its feet, and says, "Though I am favoured with sitting under a sound gospel ministry; though I have joined myself to the people of God, and have been cordially received and am generally esteemed by them; though I stately meet with them, and often converse with them and the minister on the things of God, yet I know and feel that I may have all these privileges, and yet be a backslider in heart, a wanderer from the Lord in my affections, and not enjoy his sweet presence within, or have that sacred communion with him with which I have been favoured in times past. O why should I, then, if favoured with all these privileges, be as one that turneth aside from him, so that instead of using them I rather abuse them, and rest upon them instead of resting upon the Lord?"

That is one sense of the text, and affords in my judgment a sound, scriptural, experimental meaning. But take another—that these "companions" were not the real companions of Christ, but such as professed to be; and that these flocks were not really sheep of Christ, but only so in appearance,

like those spoken of in Ezekiel; "And as for you, O my flock, thus saith the Lord God; Behold, I judge between cattle and cattle, between the rams and the he goats." (Ezek. 34:17.) There the Lord declares he "will judge between cattle and cattle"—implying that there are "cattle" which are not his cattle; and "between the rams and the he goats"—the strong and vigorous goats, as distinguished from his own poor, weak, and sickly sheep. The "companions," then, who shepherd these rams and he-goats would represent the letter ministers who profess to preach the truth and to be companions of Christ; but who have never learnt of him to be meek and lowly in heart, and who have never felt the liberating, sanctifying influence and power of the very truth which they preach. When, then, a tender-hearted, humble, and simple child of God gets in any way amongst these flocks of Christ's pretended companions, and especially if he become secretly entangled with these letter ministers and these letter churches, he feels there is a being gradually drawn aside from the simplicity of the gospel. "Evil communications corrupt good manners;" and a hardness of heart and deadness or carelessness of spirit soon creep over him. As, then, he begins to feel the working of this death-dealing poison, godly jealousy is roused up as if from its drugged sheep, and seeing the snare he trembles lest he should become a backslider in heart, and be filled with his own ways. He becomes jealous over his own heart, lest he be drawn aside from the Lord, and be satisfied with a name to live. "O," he says, "why should I be as one that turneth aside by the flocks of these companions? The minister starves my soul, and the people deaden my spirit. Their conversation is of the earth earthy, and though they profess to be flocks of Christ, what marks of sheep do I see in them? I feel I am turning aside from my most blessed Lord. Why should I depart from him, the source of all my life and love, to be entangled with the flocks of his professing yet false

companions; perhaps be deceived in my profession of religion, and following their bad and corrupting example, be righteously left to take up with the form instead of the power, and substitute the letter of truth for the sweet experience of it in the heart?"

II.—But as time is running on, which stops for no man, we must pass on to the second leading point which I proposed to bring before you—the Bridegroom's *gracious Answer* to the Bride's anxious Inquiry: "If thou know not, O thou fairest among women, go thy way forth by the footsteps of the flock, and feed thy kids beside the shepherds' tents." (Song 1:8.)

i. Observe first in this gracious and wise Answer, the kind and tender language in which he addresses her. She had called herself "black;" but he will not have it so. He will not admit her description of herself, or sanction it as applicable to her. "No," he says, "thou art not black in my eyes, if black in thine own, but art the fairest among women." What sweet humility on her part; what gracious condescension on his! Not only was she fair—"thou art all fair, my love;" but she was the fairest of the fair—the very paragon of her sex. But what made her so fair in his eyes, though so black in her own? Several considerations.

1. First, he viewed her as she was originally presented to his acceptance in the councils of eternity before the foundation of the world, as a *spotless, unfallen bride*. All the saints and servants of God do not see exactly with me in this point; but my own view and belief is, that the Church was espoused to Christ not as a *fallen*, but as an *unfallen* Bride; and that as the High Priest, under the law, was not allowed to take any but a pure virgin to wife, so the blessed Lord, as the great High Priest over the house of God, espoused to himself a

virgin Bride; in other words, that the Church was presented to him, as God afterwards presented Eve to Adam, in all her unfallen purity and innocence. As such he viewed her; as such he loved her; as such he wedded her. Thus, as Milton says of our first mother,

"The fairest of her daughters, Eve,"

so was the Church in her unfallen condition, "the fairest among women." As such he took her into union with himself, and as such she was blessed in him with all spiritual blessings.

2. But she is "the fairest of women" in another sense. He viewed her as washed in his atoning blood, clothed in his glorious righteousness as her wedding garment, and sanctified and cleansed by the washing of regenerating grace, as the apostle speaks, "And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:11); and again, "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the Church, and gave himself for it; that he might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:25-27.)

3. But take another view of the words. Looking at her as she one day will be in heaven perfectly conformed to his own glorious image—"fashioned," as the apostle speaks, "like unto his glorious body" (Phil. 4:21), comely in his comeliness, and glorified with his glory, a fitting bride for the Lord the Lamb; looking beyond the narrow isthmus of time into the mighty continent of a vast eternity, he could even in a time state address her, "O thou fairest among women."

ii. But though He so calls her, he yet gives her a gentle reproof: "*If thou know not*"—as though he should say, "How comes it to pass, that after all my teaching, all my instructions, thou art still so ignorant?" "If thou know not"—surely thou oughtest by this time to know. Yet with this not unmerited yet gentle reproof, he still condescends to answer her Inquiry; as if he would say, If thou art so ignorant, as thou art not wilfully ignorant, but art willing to learn of me, "I will tell thee; I will not leave thee in thine ignorance; I will teach thee."

iii. This brings us to the instructions he gives, and they are two, by attending to which she would attain the object of her desires. She had sought for food; she longed for rest; and she would make any sacrifice to obtain them. Well knowing this, he gives her two lessons of instruction.

1. The first is, "*Go thy way forth by the footsteps of the flock.*" He showed her by these words that she was still a good deal entangled in things and circumstances out of which she must fully and fairly come. There was a measure of the spirit of the world in her which had to be purged out; she still had too much reliance upon self, and cleaved too closely to her own wisdom, strength, and righteousness: all these things were so many bonds and hindrances, clogs and fetters, which kept her back from walking in the narrow path. Her want of full separation from the world and things worldly brought a veil over her eyes, and obscured the road from her view. He says, therefore, "*Go thy way forth.*" Here is the wilderness before thine eyes, for thee to tread, not a flesh-pleasing world. Thou must go forth from the world, from sin, and from self, if thou art to find where I feed and make my flock to rest at noon. If thou art still leaning upon thine own strength, trusting to thine own righteousness, thou wilt never find the object of thy desire. Go forth; leave these things

behind, and set thy face toward the wilderness." Now this requires a strength not her own, a power which the Lord himself alone can give.

But she was to take very great care as to *the road which she took*; for the wilderness having no beaten tracks, she might lose herself therein. He adds, therefore, "I will give thee a sure and safe direction that thou mayest find the right way. Mind *the footsteps of the flock*. Go thy way forth by them; walk closely in them; depart not from them; they are the right, the only road to come to the place where I feed and where I make my flock to rest at noon." Of course this has a spiritual and experimental meaning. What, then, spiritually viewed does it signify? It is as if he said, "Look at the way in which the saints of old have ever trodden, and mark the deep footprints which they have left in the road. And observe this, that all these steps are forward, and not one of them is backward; all toward the wilderness, and not one toward the world; all toward Christ, and none toward sin; all toward life, and none toward death. As you see how the flock have walked before you, take care that you walk just in the same steps. Their steps will guide you right; they will bring you to the place of food and shelter."

But what are these footsteps of the flock? *Tribulation* is one; for "through much tribulation we are to enter the kingdom." If, then, we are to go forth by the footsteps of the flock, it will be the path of tribulation. Sorrow of mind, affliction of body, distress of soul, disappointments in providence, persecution from the profane or professing world, with many other painful trials and temptations, are the usual lot of the Lord's people. In this way, as the apostle testifies (Heb. 11.), those ancient witnesses, of whom the world was not worthy, walked of old. In this path of tribulation our blessed Lord himself walked, for he was "a man of sorrows and acquainted

with grief;" and in this path of trial and suffering all have walked since he appeared on earth and entered into his glory. To be, then, out of the way of tribulation is to be out of the way altogether. He says, therefore, "Go thy way forth from the path of ease and worldly happiness; shun not the cross; endure hardship; prepare thyself for trouble. See how the flocks have gone on before; observe what deep marks they have left, and how they have all trodden the same path of temptation and trial. By walking thus stedfastly in their footprints, thou wilt reach the quiet, secluded, and shady spot where I feed my flock, and where I make them lie down at noon."

But again, these footsteps of the flock are *footsteps of faith*; because it is only by faith that we can walk in the path of life; as the apostle says, "We walk by faith not by sight;" and again, "As ye have received Christ, so walk ye in him." By faith Enoch walked with God; and so walked Abraham, Jacob, and Isaac, Joseph, and David, and the prophets. They all lived a life of faith and died a death of faith; for God's own testimony concerning them is, "These all died in faith." (Heb. 11:13.) If, then, we wish to get into their rest, to live as they lived, and to die as they died, we must walk by faith as they walked before.

2. But he gives her another direction: "*And feed thy kids beside the shepherds' tents.*" These shepherds are the servants of God, the ministers of Christ, whom he raises up by his Spirit and grace to feed the flock of slaughter. These have their "tents," by which is intended that they at present dwell in the body of an earthly tabernacle, and are strangers and pilgrims on earth. The servants of Christ, like the servants in the wilderness, do not inhabit fixed mansions, splendid palaces, enduring cities, for "here we have no abiding city," but mere tents in which to tarry for a night; for

our life is but a vapour: it is soon cut off and we fly away.

But these shepherds, so far as they are taught of God, give the sheep the same food that the Lord gives, and spread for them the same rest at noon that he provides. He says, therefore, "Feed thy kids," the tender graces of thy soul, "beside the shepherds' tents;" look to the shepherds and where they feed and tend their flocks. Spiritually interpreted, Seek out and find a gospel ministry; see where power attends the word; bring your soul under a shepherd who can feed it and give it rest. Bring the kids of your soul, the tender graces which want special nurture, and let them feed beside the shepherds' tents. Seek every opportunity of hearing the word faithfully and experimentally preached: it may often be a feeding time to your soul, that your faith may be strengthened, your hope increased, your love nourished, and the work of grace confirmed in your heart.

But if you set no value upon a gospel ministry, have no desire to hear the word, or anxious cry that the Lord would bless that word to your soul, how are you fulfilling the Lord's direction? You say you want food and rest, to know Christ for yourself, to enjoy his presence and love. The Lord gives you two directions to attain to the enjoyment of these two blessings; 1, to tread in the footsteps of the flock, to walk in the way in which the saints of old have walked, in the path of tribulation and faith; 2, if you are favoured in any way to live within reach of the shepherds' tents, and have the privilege of hearing the gospel preached in its purity and power, to bring your kids in your arms beside the tent, and to put them down to feed on the juicy herbage. And be assured that if you come to the shepherds' tents with a prayerful spirit and a hungry soul, begging of God to open your heart to receive the word with power, and to crown it with his blessings, sooner or later you will find food and rest. But these things

go together. If you want food, you will go where it is to be got; if you want rest, you will go where it is to be obtained. You will get neither in the world. But as you get food and rest besides the shepherds' tents, you will find that it is really and truly Jesus himself who feeds, and Jesus himself who makes you lie down and rest. The shepherds are but servants. Christ is the Bridegroom and he alone has the Bride. The shepherds' joy is to bring the sheep to Christ that they may find food and rest in him. By this test you may find who are the shepherds that feed them with gospel food, with the blood and flesh of Christ, and with that provision which he has laid up in Zion. And I may add, that as your heart receives the joyful sound, and you feel the power of God's truth in your soul, there will be a doing what Christ bid as well as enjoying what Christ reveals.

Consider these things; lay them to heart; ponder over them; and may the Lord the Spirit apply them with his own divine unction to your soul, that you may see their truth, feel their reality, and know their weight and importance by a blessed experience of both in your own bosom.