

## **PLEASANT PLANTS AND DESPERATE SORROW**

Preached at North Street Chapel, Stamford, on Lord's Day Morning, 23rd December, 1860.

"Because thou hast forgotten the God of thy salvation, and hast not been mindful of the Rock of thy strength: therefore shalt thou plant pleasant plants, and shalt set it with strange slips:" "In the day shalt thou make thy plant to grow, and in the morning shalt thou make thy seed to flourish; but the harvest shall be a heap in the day of grief and of desperate sorrow." Isaiah 7:10, 11

Ever since the fall, sorrow and disappointment have been the decreed lot of man; for on that sad and evil day when Adam sinned and fell, God cursed the ground for his sake, and declared that in sorrow he should eat of it all the days of his life. Thorns also and thistles—emblems of vexation and disappointment—was it to bring forth to him, and in the sweat of his face he was to eat bread until he returned unto the ground from whence he was taken. "Dust," said God to him, "thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." (Gen. 3:17-10.)

Sorrow, therefore, and disappointment being, by God's decree, the determined lot of man, no exertion of human skill or subtle contrivance of earthly wisdom can possibly avert them. As, then, a sailor putting out to sea, however softly the wind may blow, feels sure of encountering storms before the end of his voyage, and makes provision accordingly, so it will be our wisdom, however fair may be our present sky, to anticipate stormy winds and rough seas before we reach our destined harbour. But of all sorrows, the most cutting is that which we bring upon ourselves; and of all disappointments, the most keen is that of which we feel ourselves to be the

main and miserable authors. There is not a more true nor a more stinging reproof from the mouth of God to one under his chastening hand than this, "Hast thou not procured this unto thyself, in that thou hast forsaken the Lord thy God?" nor a severer sentence against a disobedient child than, "Thine own wickedness shall correct thee, and thy backslidings shall reprove thee: know, therefore, and see, that it is an evil thing and bitter that thou hast forsaken the Lord thy God, and that my fear is not in thee, saith the Lord God of hosts." (Jer. 2:19.)

Let me illustrate this point, for it is one of much importance, by one or two figures. When a ship leaves the harbour on a foreign voyage, it is naturally expected that she will be tossed by wind and wave; and no skill or care of the captain can always preserve her from being cast upon the rocks. But if the captain of a ship, from sheer wilfulness or drunkenness, when he hears the cry "Breakers ahead!" still holds on his course without slackening his sail or shifting his helm, and thus rushes on to destruction, although the eye of pity may drop a tear over the loss of vessel and crew, yet it can scarcely compassionate the case of the author of the calamity as perishing by his own madness and folly. But you will perhaps say, "We do not dispute your figure, but we think that such a fact must be most improbable, if not utterly impossible." I will not admit its improbability, still less its impossibility, for it is what many a drunken captain has done. But were it even so, literally and naturally, it is too possible, may I not say too frequent in grace. Hart, with all his deep experience, never wrote a truer verse than this, in which he expresses, with contrition of heart, his own mad folly in having so acted:

O what a fool have I been made,  
Or rather made myself!

That mariner's mad part I played  
Who sees yet strikes the shelf.

But take another figure to illustrate the same point, which shall also be borrowed from melancholy facts. Among those who have been condemned in these last few years to penal servitude for life, have been some who occupied at one time respectable if not high positions in society, and as such were intrusted with sums of money to a large amount. Seduced by the love of gain or a passion for pleasure, they were tempted to commit the crime of forgery, or in some way embezzle money entrusted to their charge. Detection, the almost invariable consequence of crime, followed. They were arrested, tried, and condemned, and are now in penal servitude. Now when clothed in the prison dress, he has none other for his daily and hourly companions but the vilest felons that by their conduct or conversation can disgrace human nature—would not such a man feel this to be the deepest aggravation of his miserable case, that he had brought upon himself that intolerable weight of woe, and that none but himself had been the guilty cause of all his ruin? So in grace: there is no sorrow so keen, no disappointment so cutting, as to reflect that whatever we may suffer under God's chastening strokes, even were he to visit us with his eternal displeasure, we ourselves have been the authors of our own misery.

But you may say, "What has all this to do with the text? I do not see any connection between it and the truth which you have been seeking by your figures to impress upon our minds." Allow me to say that I do. I see a connection between the text and the rueful consequences of our own madness and folly, and that is the reason why I have given you this introduction; for I see in the words before us that in them the Lord sharply reproveth his people for "forgetting the

God of their salvation and not being mindful of the Rock of their strength." I see also that He tells them the consequences of their forgetfulness, that though they had planted pleasant plants and had set strange slips; that though in the day they had made their plant to grow, and in the morning had made their seed to flourish; yet, instead of reaping as they expected a bountiful crop, they should find the harvest to be "a heap in the day of grief and of desperate sorrow."

I have thus given you a plain sketch, a simple outline, of the meaning of the text, which I shall, with God's help and blessing, now proceed more largely to fill up; and in endeavouring to do so, I shall bring before your notice these four leading features:

1.—**First, our sin in forgetting the God of our salvation, and being unmindful of the Rock of our strength.**

II.—**Secondly, the consequence of this forgetfulness and of this unmindfulness; that in our folly and madness, we plant pleasant plants and set our garden with strange slips.**

III.—**Thirdly, that a temporary success often attends this planting and setting, "In the day shalt thou make thy plant to grow, and in the morning shalt thou make thy seed to flourish."**

IV.—But **fourthly, what is the harvest?** A crop or a failure? Alas! Miserably, most miserably of the latter. For it is but "**a heap in the day of grief and of desperate sorrow.**"

I.—The Lord in our text speaks to his people: it is to them in fact and for them, speaking generally, that the whole Bible is

written. Not but what God does speak in his holy word in many passages to men generally, that he may, clear himself of all injustice, and leave without excuse those who neglect so great a salvation as he has there brought to light. (Heb. 2:3). But viewed as a divine revelation, the Bible is written, for the most part, for the saints of God, for they really are the only persons who can read it with enlightened eyes, believe its promises, obey its precepts, and live under its sanctifying power and influence. Here certainly, whatever other parts he may address generally to the sons of men, he speaks to his people, and this not in love but in displeasure; for he brings against them a heavy charge, of which the import is, that they have **"forgotten the God of their salvation, and not been mindful of the Rock of their strength."** Let us examine this charge, and weigh well the words of this indictment, for they are addressed to us as much as to Israel of old, and in them, if we have but ears to hear, we may find the Lord speaking to our consciences.

But before I draw the bill of indictment and bring the contents to bear upon your consciences, I must shew you how it is aggravated by the character of Him from whom it comes. Were He only **great** we might tremble at his authority without being smitten into contrition at his mercy; but he is **good** as well as great; and as this aggravates our offence, so it magnifies his grace. The title which he gives himself, is "the God of our salvation." This part then of God's character I have to unfold; and as he gives a prospective glance to the Son of his love, the Lord Jesus Christ, **for he is spoken of here** as the "Rock of our strength," I must also direct your thoughts to the Lord of life and glory as that Rock on which the church is built. In speaking thus, I speak in the fullest harmony with the oracles of God, for the Bible, first and last, ascribes all salvation to Him, not only in its manifestation in the Person and work of the Lord Jesus

Christ, and in its eternal issue in deliverance of all that fear his name from everlasting destruction, but in that original contrivance in which infinite wisdom combined with infinite grace to save millions of sinners through the blood of the everlasting covenant. Thus, because all salvation is in, and from, and of him, he is called here and elsewhere "the God of our salvation;" for He so took the whole of salvation into his own hands that he is the very God of it, as calling it all his own and appropriating to himself its beginning and end, its design and execution, all its grace on earth and all its glory in heaven.

But to establish this more plainly and clearly, I shall endeavour to show that he is "the God of our salvation" in four distinct particulars:

**i** First, he is so as the **eternal designer** and **planner** of it. Thoughts how the church should be saved, occupied the divine mind from all eternity. Not that God knew not what to do; not that he had to take long and laborious counsel with himself before he could originate or fix the plan. I mean not that; but I see that in the Scripture the way of salvation, as originated in the mind of God, is ever spoken of as the highest display of God's wisdom. Thus the Apostle speaks: "To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God, according to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Eph. 3:10, 11.) So again, "But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the world unto our glory." (1 Cor. 2:7.) And filled, as if fired with a gracious admiration of this infinite wisdom, the same blessed man of God cried out, as in an ecstasy of holy wonder, "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God." (Rom. 11:33.) The difficulty, so to speak, was to harmonise

the jarring claims of justice and mercy. If mercy triumphed, justice must be violated. If sin be not punished, every perfection of God might be violated with impunity. If justice be avenged, what escape is there for the criminal? To harmonise then these jarring claims, that mercy and justice might meet together, and righteousness and peace might kiss each other, was indeed a task beyond the united wisdom of men and angels. But God contrived a way, and in the gift of his dear Son as a sacrifice for sin designed a plan for the salvation of sinners, by which they might be everlastingly saved, and he himself eternally glorified.

**ii** But secondly, not only was this salvation to be devised and its foundations laid deep in the eternal counsels, but it **had to be executed**. An architect may have in his mind a beautiful plan, and with much thought and care may have designed a noble structure: but whilst it is yet in his mind or only on paper, it is a shadow without a substance. It must be executed that it may be seen, erected that it may be admired, constructed that it may be a monument of his ability, as well as a permanent object of beauty and use. So the plan of salvation which had been contrived in the mind of God, had to be executed by the hand of him from whom it originated. Its execution commenced on the day that the Son of his love came into this world and took our nature into union with his own divine Person. And as its execution then commenced, so it was gradually carried on during the time that our blessed Lord sojourned here below, for during that time he was ever doing the will of God. Thus he said "I must work the works of him that sent me while it is day" (John 8:4); and again, "My meat is to do the will of him that sent me and to finish his work." (John 4:34.) When, then, that blessed God-man went about doing good; when that man of sorrows and acquainted with grief sweat great drops of blood in Gethsemane's gloomy garden; when he bare our sins in

his own body on the tree; when by his active and passive obedience he wrought out and brought in a glorious righteousness, then God's eternal plan of salvation was fully executed. Did not the blessed Lord himself attest this with his dying lips, when he cried in a loud voice, that heaven and earth might hear, "It is finished!" As though he should say "The work is done; salvation is accomplished; my people are ransomed; justice is satisfied; every perfection of God glorified, and all his attributes harmonised. It is enough. I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do." Then he bowed his dying head and gave up the ghost, committing his departing spirit into the hands of his heavenly Father.

**iii** But there is, thirdly, **the application** of this great salvation to the heart; for though we may hear of this salvation as being planned in the mind of God, or read in the scriptures what Jesus did and suffered in its execution; yet until that salvation is brought near to our heart, revealed and applied to our conscience, what do we really know of it as designed or executed for us? Are there not thousands who live and die without any personal knowledge of, or saving interest in this great salvation? And will not this be our case also, unless it be brought with a divine power into our soul? As, then, he is the "God of our salvation," the same God who designed it in his own eternal mind, and executed it in the Person and work of his dear Son, reveals it, manifests it, and brings it near to believing hearts, according to his own words, "I bring near my righteousness." And it is the personal experience of this which alone can assure us that we are saved in the Lord Jesus Christ with an everlasting salvation.

**iv** But fourthly, as being the God of our salvation, he has to **maintain** this salvation, as well as to apply it; because we are ever backsliding from it, forgetting it, and becoming



unmindful of it. Is not this the very charge that he brings against his people in the words of our text, "Because thou hast forgotten the God of thy salvation?" But because we forget him does he forget us? Does he not rather say, "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? Yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee" (Isa. 49:15); and do we not also read, "I will heal their backslidings, I will love them freely, for mine anger is turned away from him?" (Hos. 14:4.) Where would be the temple of mercy if the same hands of the spiritual Zerubbabel which laid the foundation should not finish it? And where would be the shoutings of eternal joy if he did not bring forth the head stone amidst the universal cry, "Grace, grace unto it?" (Zec. 4:7.)

But before I proceed to the main object of my discourse, I must drop a word upon the title given in our text to the Lord Jesus Christ, for he is here spoken of under the name of "the Rock of our strength." He is often called a "Rock" in Scripture, and we may therefore well ask what ideas does the name thus given to him convey? It conveys several. The leading idea is that of a **fortified** place, for as in Palestine they were much exposed to hostile incursions from the border nations, rocky hills were strongly fortified, and were thus made great use of as places of defence against the enemy. We thus read of the "munitions of rocks?" that is places not merely steep and mountainous, but so artificially fortified and strengthened by walls and bulwarks, that the enemy was not able to carry them, except by siege, which in those days, at least by the border tribes, was but rarely employed. Thus David says, "The Lord is my rock and my fortress." In this sense, then, Christ is "the Rock of our strength," as being the refuge of our soul, in whom we may take shelter from every foe, as the Benjamites in the rock Rimmon (Jud. 20:47): as Samson in the top of the rock Etam

**Jud 15:8:** and David in the rock cave of Adullam. But another idea conveyed by the term rock, is that of a solid foundation. Thus, as being the foundation on which God has built his Church, Jesus is indeed "the Rock of ages" that God has laid in Zion, for he is "a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation." (Isa. 28:16.) Did not he himself say to Peter "On this rock I will build my Church?" (Matt. 6:18.) And what is this rock but he himself in his glorious Deity, eternal Sonship and suffering humanity?

But it is not my present object so much to dwell upon the points I have just brought before you, as to show you the miserable consequences of **forgetting** "the God of our salvation," and becoming **unmindful** of "the Rock of our strength." This is indeed a heavy charge, but there are few of the family of God to whom it is not, in greater or less measure, applicable.

When the Lord is first graciously pleased to bless the soul with some manifestation of his great salvation, and to reveal, by the unction of his grace and the teaching of his Spirit, the Rock of our strength, then we cleave to him with purpose of heart; we worship him in spirit and in truth. His yoke is then easy and his burden light; and we run with patience the race set before us, looking unto Jesus as the author and finisher of our faith. But after a time, when the Lord begins to withdraw his presence, deadness, coldness, darkness, and a general stupidity and lethargy gradually come over the mind. And if we give way to this spirit of slumber, and we often do give way—for even the wise virgins as well as the foolish slumbered and slept in the absence of the bridegroom—what is the consequence? We forget the God of our salvation, and become unmindful of the Rock of our strength.

II.—But as one sin is almost sure to draw on another, the blessed Spirit in our text has pointed out **the consequence**, the miserable consequence, of this backsliding from the Lord; which I proposed to unfold as the second point of my bill of indictment this morning, and which springs out of the Lord's judicial displeasure for our sad forgetfulness of the God of our salvation. **"Therefore shalt thou plant pleasant plants, and shall set it with strange slips."**

The Church is compared in the song of Solomon to a garden: "A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse." (Song 4:12.) And this garden the Holy Ghost represents in that sacred Book, as planted with trees of the greatest fragrance and beauty, such as "Pomegranates, camphire, spikenard, and saffron; calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes, with all the chief spices." The climate of the east is for the most part too dry and scorching for flowers such as deck our English gardens. Trees therefore, such as the vine, the pomegranate, and the citron, and fragrant shrubs, of which we here know little but the names, occupy their place. Spiritually viewed, these are the graces of the Spirit, which not only give forth a fragrant odour to gladden, but food also to feast the heavenly Bridegroom; for he delights in the fruits and graces of his own Spirit. This made the Bride say, "Let my beloved come into his garden, and eat his pleasant fruits;" to which he answers, "I am come into my garden, my sister, my spouse; I have gathered my myrrh with my spice." (Song 4:16; 5:1.)

But not only is the Church, viewed generally, a garden in which the Lord takes supreme delight, but each individual soul in which he works by his Holy Spirit may be represented by the same figure; for it is thus that general truths are brought home to particular cases, and what is true of the Church as a whole is true of each member of it as an

individual. This seems to be the garden referred to in the text, in which we unhappily too often plant our pleasant plants and set it with strange slips. Now this garden should have nothing in it, as the garden of the Lord, but the graces and fruits of the Spirit. Weeds will spring up; scarce any amount of careful culture can keep them down; for as charlock and thistles will grow in the field, so chick-weed and groundsel will start up in the most carefully cultivated garden. But this is not the charge brought against the Church here. The Lord does not reprove her for neglect of her garden, nor for the weeds that spring up in the borders. This were fault enough, but there is a much greater; that with her own hand she plants pleasant plants in the Lord's borders, and sets strange slips in those beds in which he himself had planted myrrh, and aloes, and all the chief spices. This, of course, has a mystical and spiritual meaning, and what this is I have now, with God's help and blessing, to open; and first I have to consider what are these pleasant plants.

Every man has his **peculiar propensity**, which, even after he is called by the grace of God, still clings closely to him, and as being that in which he naturally takes delight it is to him "a pleasant plant." This delight in what is not of God, this seeking of pleasure and happiness out of him, first broke forth in our nature in Paradise. Tempted by Satan, Eve, our first parent, was taken with the appearance of that tree of good and evil which she was forbidden to touch or taste. For we read that "when the woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof and did eat." The lust of the flesh and the lust of the eye combined to seduce her from the path of innocency, and not only did she eat herself, but gave also unto her husband with her, and he did eat (Gen. 3:6); and thus they plunged themselves and all their future race into sin and woe. Now

we have all this propensity. Eve's blood runs in our veins. Our fingers itch to touch what Eve took; and as no tree of good and evil grows up before our eyes, we plant instead thereof our pleasant plants, and by them bring ourselves into misery and trouble. But look at this in a variety of instances.

¶ A person may be called by the grace of God early in life, before the cares and anxieties of this present evil world may have come upon him; and being blessed and favoured with spirituality of mind, his affections may be strongly fixed upon the Lord, and be much set upon things above. He has then no pleasant plants to draw away his heart from heavenly things, and can thus serve the Lord without distraction. But after a time he sees good to change his situation in life, and to take to himself a partner of his sorrows and joys. None can object to this, for marriage is honourable in all. But what is often the result? That the **wife or husband** becomes the pleasant plant; the affections which were once fixed upon the Lord are in a measure withdrawn from him, and rest too much upon the partner of the bosom; and this becomes a snare which entangles the feet and often casts the believer down into carnality and death. But it may please the Lord, after a time, to crown the union with children as a heritage of the Lord, and then there may arise a succession of pleasant plants.

Now there is no objection to our loving our wives and children, for the Scripture bids husbands love their wives, and wives love their husbands. This is Scriptural precept and Gospel practice; but the Scripture has not bidden us set them as idols in the very bosom where God has erected his throne. If then, these pleasant plants draw away the affections from God, are they not snares and traps? Is it not full of danger to idolise wife and children? How the wives of Solomon drew him into idolatry and befooled the wisest of men! What a

snare was Hagar even to Abraham, and Michal all but proved the ruin of David! What a snare too were the sons of Eli to their indulgent Father! And when Jacob set his Joseph, and David his Absalom as pleasant plants in their garden, what trouble and sorrow did they bring upon their heads! It would argue want of common affection if children were not pleasant plants to their parents. At this time of the year especially, do not parents love to see the olive branches round the Christmas table! But though the branches may hang round the table, the roots must not twine round the heart where Jesus should be supreme, lest they hide the beams of the Son of Righteousness, by surrounding his altar with their rank stem and overshadowing leaves.

ii But all who fear God have not wives or children, or may love them without idolatry, yet may they have pleasant plants no less dangerous to their soul's profit and peace. There is, for instance, your **business**, your farm, your profession, your daily occupation, and in carrying on this you are and should be diligent. "Not slothful in business" is a Gospel precept; but you may make it a pleasant plant far beyond the requirements of diligence and industry. I well know that in these times it is almost impossible for a man to pay his way who does not throw his whole mind into his business. But the whole mind is one thing and the whole heart another. It is through the avenue of these pursuits that sin comes in, and too often like a flood. You may take so much pleasure in your business or occupation that it may steal away well nigh every thought from God, and morning, noon, and night your heart may be in it so as to engross your affections, and fill you with darkness, barrenness, and deadness to everything that is spiritual and godly. And if your business increase, if your farm be prosperous, if money come rolling in, how easily you may make of this a Christmas tree! As you hang upon its branches the gains of the year, it may

be to you the pleasantest plant that your eyes ever rested upon; and yet it may not be one of God's own planting. We shall see before we have done what may become of this pleasant plant that you have taken such care to plant and water, and which under such care is every day growing in your admiring eyes more and more vigorous and beautiful.

**iii** But all good men are not in business, or even if they are do not make it their idol; yet each may still have his **natural propensity**, which may be to him his pleasant plant. Take the figure naturally, how widely tastes differ even in such a matter as flowers in a garden! To some there is no flower like the rose; others see no beauty but in a geranium, and others say, "Give me the fuchsia." So each may have his pleasant plant to which he gives his chief thoughts and attention. I have my pleasant plant, and perhaps more than one, and you have yours. I believe if God had not called me by his grace, I should have spent my life in study, in reading books, acquiring languages, and devoting my whole mind to various branches of human knowledge, for there is scarcely one to which I have not a strong natural inclination. This was my pleasant plant which I cultivated up to the very time when eternal realities, impressed upon my mind by divine power, turned me from it to fall in love with the Rose of Sharon. But I still find that the pleasant plant, from long cultivation, has struck a deep root into my natural being, and I have carefully to guard against it to this day, or it would soon spread into the borders of my spiritual garden, and fill up those beds which should alone be occupied by the trees of frankincense planted in them by the blessed Spirit. Your pleasant plant may not be my pleasant plant, nor my pleasant plant your pleasant plant. My pleasant plant may look very ill in your eyes, and be considered rather a noxious weed than a blooming flower: and so your pleasant plant may in my eyes be but a thorn or a thistle, and better rooted up by your own

hand than allowed to grow.

But time will not suffice to point out the various pleasant plants, which, when we forget the God of our salvation and become unmindful of the Rock of our strength, we set in our border. They may be innocent in themselves: they might be planted and cultivated in some back border where the sun might never shine upon them, and where we should rarely walk except by constraint. The sin is planting them in the Lord's borders placing them in the beds appropriated to the Owner of the garden. It is the forgetting the God of our salvation, who has done so great things for our souls, and setting up an idol in his place, that makes the sin so grievous. Thus the Lord remonstrates with his people by the prophet Jeremiah, and calls upon the very heavens to be astonished at their sin in this matter. "Be astonished, O ye heavens, at this, and be horribly afraid, be ye very desolate, saith the Lord. For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water." There was no sin in having cisterns, but the sin was in forsaking for them the fountain of living waters. Thus, then, whatever we love more than God; whatever be our besetment or propensity, if indulged and delighted in; whatever occupies our mind as an object of eager pursuit; whatever we give our late and early thoughts to; whatever through the day steals in, catches our affections, and draws away our heart from the Lord, so as to love it more than Him who is the altogether lovely—**this** is a pleasant plant that we have planted in God's border, and by doing so have in heart departed from the Lord our God.

But there is worse behind than this, a still more grievous, a still further departure from the Lord; for one sin is almost sure to draw on another, and the farther we go from the



Lord, the worse we become. There is "a setting of **strange slips.**" You know that in a garden there are beds open to view, and there are back places out of sight. In the beds and borders open to view, we have our geraniums, our roses, and our verbenas, with other many-hued flowers to please the eye. But then there are back borders in what we call the kitchen garden, where the cabbages and potatoes grow, besides out-of-the-way places under the hedge, or in the dark shrubbery, where henbane and hemlock, and poisonous weeds may thrive out of sight. So in the garden of the soul, there are the "pleasant plants" open to view, which we are not ashamed that our friends should see, and there are "the strange slips" set in the back borders, which we are glad enough to put out of sight.

But why are these out of sight productions, called "strange?" The word "strange" in Scripture often means what is ungodly, and carries with it the idea of wickedness. The reason why it bears this signification arose from the peculiar position of the children of Israel. They were a nation separated unto the Lord from every other. They were God's peculiar people, consecrated by external covenant, and therefore God said to them, "Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people; for all the earth is mine, and ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation." (Ex. 19:5, 6.) Therefore, all foreign customs, foreign dresses, and foreign ways were ungodly, as breaking down that peculiar relationship in which they stood as a separate people to God. For this reason, the word "strange" came to signify anything unholy or ungodly. Thus, Nadab and Abihu "offered strange fire before the Lord" (Lev. 10:1); that is, fire which had not been kindled by God himself upon the altar. So we read of "strange incense" (Ex. 30:9); of "a strange vine" (Jer. 2:21); of "strange wives" (Ezra 10:2); and of "strange women,

whose mouth is a deep pit." (Prov. 22:14.) In this sense, therefore, "strange slips" mean any thing set in the Lord's garden of an ungodly nature—what, in one word, we may term poisonous plants.

But the question arises at once in your mind, "Can any one who really and truly fears God ever set strange slips in his garden?" Let me answer this question by another. Are there no back borders? Are there no hedge-banks or ditches, no secret corners and low shrubberies out of sight, and yet still a part of the garden? Are there no dark corners, no hidden spots in your heart, in which you have at various times set strange slips; and have set them perhaps by night, as being ashamed of doing so in open day? If you say, "No; my garden may have a few weeds in it; but I have never been so base as to set poisonous plants in the back borders;" either your case is singular, or what is more probable, you have never taken a thorough and complete view of the garden; you have overlooked those hidden spots of your heart that the eye of God scans, or may be so ignorant as not to know a weed from a flower. Does not our text address itself to the people of God? For to whom else is he "the God of their salvation," and to whom else is Jesus "the Rock of their strength?" How, too, can they "forget" him, or be "unmindful" of him who never was in their hearts? Thus we have God's own testimony that even those who fear his great and glorious name, do, when they forget him, plant their pleasant plants and set their strange slips.

And has conscience no voice in your bosom here? Is there no **secret sin** that you want to indulge—no **base lust**: no filthy desire; no vile passion; no craving after iniquity? Are these vile weeds always torn up the moment that they peep out of the soil? To let them grow is the same thing as to set them; for where is the difference between letting a noxious weed

grow when it might be pulled up and planting another by its side? Every time, then, that you secretly indulge the movement of any sin, you are setting a strange slip, fostering a poisonous plant in the garden of God.

But again, if free from such sins as these, have you no **self-righteousness** shooting and growing up in your heart: Are there no liftings up of Pharisaic pride? Do you never think, if not say, "Stand by thyself; I am holier than thou?" Are you never pleased with your prayers and performances; with your good feelings and intentions? Do you never look with complacency upon a consistent life, and not having been entangled like so many others in slips and falls? What is this but a strange slip, for I am sure that the blessed Spirit never planted it in your heart?

Have you never feelings of **enmity against the saints of God?** Have you no malice, no suspicion, no jealousy, no envy, no unkind thoughts, no vile workings against those whom you can hardly deny to be the children of God, if any strife or division has broken out between you and them; or if they have given you real or supposed cause of offence? Are not these strange slips? And where have you set them? Out of sight; under the hedge behind the shrubbery. You can show your roses, geraniums, and verbenas, and even be pleased that they should be admired; but you won't show the dark hemlock, the stinking henbane, the pricking brier, the stinging nettle, all of which are growing so strongly, and tendered and nurtured so secretly, yet so carefully, in this back-border of yours. But you will say, "I do not cultivate them. I know they are there; but I do not foster them." Why then do you not pull them up; why do you suffer them to grow unchecked? But you must be conscious that often you even do cultivate them by indulging them as much as you dare.

But these strange slips are so many that I cannot enumerate them. I must, therefore, take them as they grow, thick and rank in the border. Have you, then, no pride, no self-exaltation, no presumption, no vain confidence, no unbelief and infidelity, no hardness, carelessness, recklessness, darkness, and deadness of spirit? Have you made your heart wholly clean? Can you stand before God, the holy, heart-searching Jehovah, and say that your hands, eyes, ears, lips, and every member of your body are free from iniquity? These, then, are the strange slips that you have been planting in the back borders. We are all guilty here. I do not stand before you as if I were free from iniquity and sin. I know what my heart is, and I know that I have, when left to myself, been verily guilty in this matter; for I have again and again planted pleasant plants and set strange slips. Such, too, should I plant and set every day of my life, except as kept back and held up by the mighty power of God. Nay, I believe that every man that knows his own heart must with me plead guilty here, for none are altogether free from these charges: and he that knows most of himself will acknowledge that he thus sins, and that just in proportion as he forgets the God of his salvation and is unmindful of the Rock of his strength.

III.—But it is time to pass on to our next point, which is the **temporary success** which seems to crown this planting and setting. "In the day shalt thou make thy plant to grow, and in the morning shalt thou make thy seed to flourish."

I wish to observe that all the way through the Lord is speaking as if judicially. When, then, he says, "Therefore shalt thou plant pleasant plants, and shall set it with strange slips," it is not that he either compels his people to plant or approves of their setting, but denounces against them this as

the threatened consequence and punishment of their departing from him. In a similar way, when he says "In the day shalt thou make thy plant to grow," he neither compels nor commends such a course, but predicts it as the judicial result. Thus for a time the Lord seemingly winks at all these evils; nay more, he allows them a season of passing prosperity; for having lost the light of his countenance, the planters and setters do not seem to be conscious of the evil of which they are guilty. Their eyes have become so blinded, their hearts so hardened, and their judgment so obscured by forgetting the God of their salvation and being unmindful of the Rock of their strength, that they have lost in good measure that tenderness of conscience which would have shown them the snares in which they were being entangled and the temptations by which they were being overcome.

But such, unhappily, is the power of sin, the strength of temptation, and the subtlety of Satan, that a man may be grievously entangled in many evil courses, or be much given up to carelessness and carnality, and yet scarcely see or feel, from sheer stupor of mind and callousness of conscience, into what a state of backsliding and alienation of heart from God he has fallen. Thus Ephraim is said to have been "broken in judgment"; and "strangers" are declared to "have devoured his strength and he knew it not; yea, grey hairs were here and there upon him and he knew not." (Hos. 7:9.) This was the reward and the consequence of his backsliding. He had left God, and therefore for a time God left him. When a man falls into this sad state of soul, "in the day he makes his plant to grow, and in the morning he makes his seed to flourish."

Have you not done this? and have you not been very much pleased when you have got your plant to grow? When you have a pleasant wife, or an affectionate husband, healthy and handsome children, a comfortable house, good furniture,

with money coming in so as to afford you every comfort and indulgence consistent with your situation in life; when, too, you can look around you and see all these pleasant plants before your eyes, and that you have been successful not only in planting them but in making them to grow, do you not feel very comfortable, and indulge at times in no small amount of self-complacency that such a measure of success and prosperity attend you? If you are in business, are you not very pleased if a growing number of customers come to your shop: and if your business should increase, your profits be augmented, and if day by day you should become better off in worldly circumstances, are you not tempted to increase your establishment, and thus make your pleasant plant to grow larger and larger and look handsomer and handsomer?

As, then, you look sometimes at your prospects, are you not tempted to think and say, "How pleasant everything is around me! What a wonder-working God he is to give me all this prosperity! I wonder there is so much poverty and discontent in the world! Why are not people more industrious and happy?" Or say that you are a farmer, and that circumstances **not this year, I fear, but there are times when they are so** are flourishing and things looking up. Is there not such a thing as standing upon a hill and looking around with complacency, "Here I have a good farm, good land, good crops, a good landlord, and I hope to leave all this to my son by and by?" Or if not in business, you may still look round you and say, "What an excellent wife I have, or good husband, what a pleasant home, and how much I am generally respected! I have health and strength and every worldly comfort, and how happy and pleasant things seem to be just now!" Now is not this happy, easy life, this health and success, just what your carnal heart loves? Is not this prosperous and comfortable state just the very thing that suits your natural mind?

But this is the very thing upon which God puts his finger, in the text. This is the very carnal ease, to which he is giving you up, that you may one day rue its miserable consequences. This is in the day making your plant to grow; for you keep watering your plant; you want it to grow larger and larger, till it overtop all your neighbour's trees. It is nothing to you, that the fowls of the air rest in its branches, so long as your tree bears more abundant crops of fruit. Do you want your pleasant plant cut down, or even a single branch lopped off? No. You don't want any disappointment, any vexatious law-suit, any secret drain upon your gains, any heavy losses, any short crops, failing business, bad debts, an uncomfortable home, sickly children, an invalid wife, or a dying husband. **That** would be indeed a reverse; **that** would be death to your pleasant plant; **that** would be a worm at the root of your gourd. You want no path of trial and tribulation, but to sit under your spreading fig tree. You want still to enjoy a strong, healthy body, plenty of food and raiment, money at command, everything pleasant at home, everything prosperous in business, and everything successful in life.

And so you keep watering, watering, watering your pleasant plant, and the more you can make it grow, and the more you can bring it up in the sun, and the better and healthier it looks, the more you are pleased. The stronger the root, the longer the stem, the larger the leaves, and the more abundant the fruit, the more you admire the pleasant plant which you have set in your garden. Alas! You little care what becomes of the myrrh and aloes, and all the chief spices which this pleasant plant of yours has so overgrown, so starved, so stunted, and so overshadowed, till all their scent is gone, and they themselves scarcely seen. The Lord seems to let you go on; and you may even so forget the God of your

salvation, and be so unmindful of the Rock of your strength—that smitten Rock who sweat blood and agonised on the cross to save your soul—that you may take all this prosperity as a mark in your favour, and put God's providences in the place of God's graces.

But there is worse even than this, for there is **making your seed to flourish**; for this **seed** is "the strange slips" before spoken of as set by your own hand in the back borders. It is bad enough to be ever watering your pleasant plant and making it grow, but it is far worse to make the "strange slip" to flourish. But even this you do. Let me appeal to your conscience. Have you never nurtured your pride, your self-righteousness, your vain confidence? Have you never swathed and swaddled your bosom idol, as misshapen and ugly a god as ever Hindoo worshipped? Have you never fed your jealousy, your enmity, your suspicion, your revengeful thoughts, your unkind feelings, and the flame that has burnt in your bosom against an enemy, or even against a brother? Have you not nurtured these devilish feelings, and done all that you could to make them flourish, thinking all the time, perhaps, what a wonderful Christian you were, while God looked at all this abomination, and hated what he saw going on?

Have you not built your airy castles, planted visionary paradises, and thought what you would do and how you would act, if ever they were realised? Though you may not have had money or opportunity to build a new house, or even leave your old one; yet you have built a castle every day, though it has been a castle in the air; and though you may not have an inch of ground to call your own, you have had a garden within, which you have planted with all care, and watered morning and evening. O, if a man does but take a faithful view of his own heart, of what is continually passing



in his own mind, he will not think this an overdrawn picture! He will not start back with horror from the portrait, and cry out "What base wretch are you describing? Can such a man live and move, and yet have the fear of God in his heart?" If I dip my brush into God's own book and use no other colours than are spread on God's own palette, you must not say I paint man too black; and if I dip it also into my own heart, I believe that from mine I can pretty well describe yours. Instead of finding fault with my portrait, you had better view it as your own; you had better first look into your own garden and examine the pleasant plants and the strange slips, and then you will be a better judge whether it be wholly a paradise of God's planting, or whether many a rank weed does not grow there which his hand never set in its beds and borders.

IV.—But we now come to our fourth and last point, which is the harvest reaped from all this planting and setting. This of course is the grand, the expected, and long looked-for consummation of the whole. Is not the farmer ever fixing his eye upon his harvest? What else is to pay him for all his cost and trouble? This with him is the crowning of the year. So you all have your harvest. You are not, it is true, all of you farmers; but you have all a harvest in prospect or in possession; for the harvest, in our text, is the success of your pleasant plants, and the crop which you should reap from your strange slips.

The harvest may at present be but in your own brain—merely in that busy, active, speculating imagination of yours which would fain have, not only one harvest in a year, but a harvest every month. You have not been engaged all this time in planting pleasant plants and setting strange slips, without expecting you are to get something from it. And what you are to get from it is to be your "harvest"—a harvest

of pleasure, of enjoyment, of delight, of profit, or of something of which you can say, "I shall fill my barns with it; and when I have filled my barns and there bestowed all my fruits and my goods, I shall say to my soul, Take thine ease; eat, drink, and be merry."

But God's thoughts are not our thoughts, neither are his ways our ways; he has other thoughts concerning the harvest than what you have been dreaming of, and other intentions respecting it than those which you have been speculating upon, and in prospect almost insured. **"But the harvest shall be a heap in the day of grief and of desperate sorrow."**

These words seem this year to have been literally fulfilled. I heard a cry this autumn which I hope I shall never hear again, and that some of you young people may never hear for the whole of your lives; for I heard the farming boys with the last load of corn cry "Harvest home" in the month of November, and this may not occur again for another century. And as to the harvest being "a heap," I saw with my own eyes acres of mown barley lying in the fields in October, that seemed to my unpractised gaze more fit for the dunghill than to be gathered into the rick. So literally and naturally, through the rainy season, the harvest to many a farmer has been but "a heap;" and to those already crushed by preceding bad times and heavy losses, instead of finding in it a means of extrication, it has been but a "day of grief and of desperate sorrow."

But view it spiritually, for I speak to spiritual people, and desire, as a servant of the Lord, to handle the subject with spiritual fingers. Where then is the harvest which you have been expecting to reap from your pleasant plants and strange slips? Has it not been to you spiritually what the

harvest has been literally to many a poor farmer this year,—ruined by incessant rains, swept away by floods, or tossed into a heap, and carried away to the dunghill?

Where are your "pleasant plants" that you planted years ago? Where the "strange slips" that you watered and cultivated and took such care of? What has been the harvest? You who married early in life, have things turned out just as you expected? You expected to go down to the grave without trouble in your families, sickness in your houses, affliction in your bodies, poverty in your circumstances, or those deep and heavy trials that have made all your harvest to be "a heap;" a heap of wet straw, instead of ripe and rich and full ears.

O, the wisdom, and may I not add, the goodness and mercy of a wonder-working God, to confound all our prospects, pull down our airy castles, root up our pleasant plants and strange slips, and with his own fingers throw them into a heap, and make them fit only for the dunghill! How many bosom idols you have indulged; how many sins you have fostered; how much pride you have nursed; how many envious suspicions, cruel jealousies, and bitter feelings have you warmed in your bosom! What care you have taken of your pleasant plants! How you have in winter put a hand-glass over them to keep the frost out, and watered them in summer lest they should die of drought! Nor have you taken less care of your strange slips! How often and how long you have harboured unkindly feelings against some offending brother, and nursed your wrath to keep it warm!

But let us see in what way the harvest is made "a heap." The Lord works in various ways, but they all tend to the same end. Thus He may lay you upon a sick bed, bring trouble and distress into your soul, set before you your grievous

backslidings, and lay the guilt of them so upon your conscience as almost to sink you into despair. The day of reckoning is now come, when the Lord brings to light the secret thoughts of the heart, and lays His chastening hand upon the backslider, filling him with his own ways. Where, and what is now your harvest? What has become now of your pleasant plants that you took such delight in, and those strange slips that you cultivated with such care? Why, nothing but a heap.

We reap what we sow. "If we sow to the flesh, of the flesh we reap corruption." Here is the end of all idols; here is the termination of all prospects of happiness independent of God. Here is the fruit of carnal ease, worldly security, spiritual pride, towering presumption, vain confidence, thinking highly of ourselves, and despising others. Look at that poor backslider, lying upon a sick bed, with the frowns of God in his soul, Jesus absent, Satan present, faith at its lowest ebb, hope scarcely lifting up its head, and love dwindled down to the lowest spark. See how he loathes what he has loved; listen to his almost despairing language of self-condemnation, "O that I had lived more in the fear of God, had walked more circumspectly and uprightly, had watched against bosom sins, mortified my lusts, crucified the flesh with its affections, not indulged every vain thought, nor nurtured every bad passion. O that I had walked, and spoke, and lived, and acted more as becometh the Gospel, and the profession which I made, and sought more to adorn the doctrine of God in all things."

Is not this now with him "the day of grief and of desperate sorrow?" And so it will be with us, if we have been planting pleasant plants and setting strange slips, and been suffered of God to do so, so as to have walked in a path of ease and carnal security. Then, indeed, shall we see what backsliders

we have been, what base wretches, when the harvest lies before our eyes "a heap," only fit for the dunghill, and we mourn before the Lord in "the day of grief and desperate sorrow."

But let me not leave you mourning here. Let me show you mercy and grace mingled with, and shining through all this. Is not God rich in mercy, in bringing all this secret backsliding to light, in making the harvest to be a heap? Is it not still His gracious hand made manifest, in bringing sickness or painful bereavements into your families, visiting you with heavy trials and painful afflictions, and by these timely chastisements, to make you feel, and that deeply, the miserable consequence of not walking more in His fear, and thus make you reap the bitter fruit of backsliding? Is not all this not in wrath, but in mercy? Is it not for the good of your soul, that you may not go on adding sin to sin and iniquity to iniquity, and die at last under the wrath of God? For by these things God brings his erring, backsliding children to their senses; and thus stops them before they have altogether given up God and godliness.

But as He afflicts for their good, and only takes away one harvest to give another, one that shall endure for ever and ever in His eternal kingdom, He will bring in due time a word of consolation to lift up their drooping spirit, and to show them that notwithstanding all their sins, he is still "the God of their salvation," and that Jesus is still "the Rock of their strength." Thus by these things men live, and in all these things is the life of their spirit. By these mingled dealings of judgment and mercy, the rod and kiss, the frown and smile, we learn to loathe ourselves, so as to remember and be confounded and never open our mouths any more because of our shame when he is pacified towards us for all that we have done, saith the Lord. (Eze. 16:63.)

Thus we learn to hate our own folly and our own sin, and to see and feel more and more the superaboundings of grace over all the aboundings of our iniquity. As, then, we are blessed with a feeling sense of the Lord's goodness and mercy in not dealing with us after our sins nor rewarding us after our iniquities, we shall learn to cleave to Him more closely with purpose of heart. Thus, though there is no excuse for us, for we must still plead guilty, all these varied dealings in the hands of God eventually work for our spiritual good: and the effect ever will be and must be to humble the sinner in the dust, and to crown Jesus Lord of all.