

## THE GOOD SHEPHERD AND HIS WORK

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"I will feed my flock, and I will cause them to lie down, saith the Lord GOD. I will seek that which was lost, and bring again that which was driven away, and will bind up that which was broken, and will strengthen that which was sick: but I will destroy the fat and the strong; I will feed them with judgment." Ezek.34:15,16

The Lord in this chapter brings some heavy charges against the false shepherds of Israel. His accusations against them may be summed up under two leading heads: 1. Their sins of *commission*; 2. Their sins of *omission*. Greediness, selfishness, cruelty, and violence were stamped on all their actions. They fed themselves; they ate the fat and clothed themselves with the wool; they killed them that were fed and with force and with cruelty ruled the flock. These were their sins of *commission*. And to them they added, sins of *omission*. The diseased they did not strengthen, neither did they heal that which was sick, neither did they bind up that which was broken, neither did they bring again that which was driven away, neither did they seek that which was lost. And what was the consequence of these sins of commission and omission on the part of the shepherds? That the sheep were scattered; that they became meat to all the beasts of the field; that they wandered through all the mountains and upon every high hill; and that none did search or seek after them.

But the Lord does not confine himself to the false shepherds; he also files a bill of charges against a portion of the flock itself: "As for you, O my flock, thus saith the Lord GOD;

Behold, I judge between cattle and cattle, between the rams and the hegoats. Seemeth it a small thing unto you to have eaten up the good pasture, but ye must tread down with your feet the residue of your pastures? and to have drunk of the deep waters, but ye must foul the residue with your feet?" "Therefore thus saith the Lord GOD unto them; Behold, I, even I, will judge between the fat cattle and between the lean cattle. Because ye have thrust with side and with shoulder, and pushed all the diseased with your horns, till ye have scattered them abroad; therefore will I save my flock, and they shall no more be a prey; and I will judge between cattle and cattle" (verses 17,18,20-22).

But because the shepherds have neglected their duty; and because the fat and the strong amongst the flock themselves have thrust with side and with shoulder, trodden down the good pastures, and polluted the streams, shall the sheep take detriment? Shall they perish through the neglect of the one and the violence of the other? True, they are scattered upon every high hill; true, they have no shepherds to take kindly notice of them; true, they are sometimes gored and sometimes starved. But when man forsakes, the Lord takes them up. Nay, they shall derive benefit from their very loss: shall have God for their Shepherd instead of man. Blessed exchange of Creator power for creature weakness, of divine love and faithfulness for human neglect, cruelty, and worthlessness! "I will feed my flock, and I will cause them to lie down, saith the Lord GOD. I will seek that which was lost, and bring again that which was driven away, and will bind up that which was broken, and will strengthen that which was sick; but I will destroy the fat and the strong; I will feed them with judgment" (verses 15,16).

Our text falls of itself, so to speak, under two leading divisions:

I. The *promises* that God makes to his people generally, and in an especial manner to the diseased portion of them.

II. His *threatenings and denunciations* against *the fat and the strong*. I. If we look at this cluster of promises made to the flock of slaughter, (for it is to the flock of slaughter that the Lord God here speaks), we shall find that the first two have a more general and comprehensive bearing than the rest: "I will feed my flock, and cause them to lie down, saith the Lord."

1. Food and rest are needful for every sheep and every lamb; indispensable for the sustentation of life itself; and therefore promised alike to all. "His divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain to life and godliness;" and therefore food, without which there is neither life nor godliness. The shepherds did not or could not feed them. They feasted while the flock fasted; they ate the fat in the parlour, whilst the sheep could not get a nibble upon the mountain. Shall the sheep then die of the scab? Shall first wool, then fat, and then flesh waste off their bones, till at last they drop down dead under the hedge with nothing but their sunken eyes to feed the ravens? No, says the Lord, "I will feed them."

i. "*I will feed my flock.*" This implies that the flock is hungry; nay more, that it hungers after that peculiar food which alone can satisfy it. Spiritual hunger is a sure mark of life. The Lord's own words are, "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness" (Matt.5:6). Hunger, we may observe, has a peculiar relation to suitable food. The lion does not hunger for the food of the lamb, nor the dove for that of the eagle. "Feed me with food," prays Agur, "convenient for me" (Prov.30:8), literally, "*appointed*," that is, suitable to my appetite, ordained by thyself to satisfy it. Thus, a soul spiritually hungry cannot eat trash. God's own

mark against "a deceived heart" is, that it "feedeth upon ashes" (Isa.44:20). A living soul cannot, then, feed upon the ashes of its own righteousness; for ashes indeed they will be found when the lightning stroke of God's righteous law has burnt up all creature comeliness. Nor can it feed upon superstitious ceremonies, or the mummeries of Popish Paganism, either in the full court dress of the Catholic chapel, or the undress of the Puseyite church. Nor can it feed upon the, "form of godliness," upon the barren mountains of dead, dry Calvinism, any more than as it grows on the heaths and wilds of flat Arminianism. Nay, the Bible itself, that sweet and sacred record, that blessed revelation of the mind of God, even upon the letter of that the soul cannot feed unless God himself turn it into food. For the promise runs, "I will feed my flock." The food, the only real food of the soul must be of God's own appointing, preparing, and communicating. The babe on the mother's lap must be fed spoonful by spoonful, and that by the hand of the parent. The food must be put into the mouth, and such food only as is suitable for the growth of the babe. You can never deceive a hungry child. You may give it a plaything to still its cries, it may serve for a few minutes; but the pains of hunger are not to be removed by a doll. A windmill or a horse will not allay the cravings after the mother's breast. So with babes in grace. A hungry soul cannot feed upon playthings. Altars, robes, ceremonies, candlesticks, bowings, mutterings, painted windows, intoning priests, and singing men and women, these dolls and wooden horses, these toys and playthings of the Puseyitish babyhouse, cannot feed the soul that, like David, cries out after the living God (Psalm 42:23). Christ, the bread of life, the manna that came down from heaven, is the only food of the believing soul: "He that eateth me," says the Lord, "even he shall live by me." "I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will

give for the life of the world" (John 6:51). A living soul knows when it hungers as much as the babe in the mother's arms knows when it hungers; and knows too when it drinks down the pure milk of God's Word as sensibly and as truly as the natural child knows when its hunger is allayed by the mother's breast. The Lord says, "I will *feed* my flock." They shall indeed suffer first the pangs of hunger to teach them to value it; for "the full soul loatheth an honey comb" (Prov.27:7). Nay more, generally speaking, a certain painful experience is required to produce this appetite. Look at the labourer. What an appetite he has! How he relishes his food, coarse though it be! What gives him this appetite? Why, hard work. He is not your delicate invalid, or your fine lady, that lolls upon the sofa all day long, and whispers at dinner, "I think I can just pick the wing of a chicken;" but he has well earned it, for he has been working while you have been sleeping. So with the spiritual labourer, for such there are in the kingdom of God. "Come unto me, all ye that labour" (Matt 11:28); "Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life" (John 6:27); "In all labour there is profit" (Prov. 14:23). To labour under a burden of sin, against powerful temptations, a body of sin and death, and a whole host of lusts and corruptions, will make a man hunger after a righteousness better than his own. We rarely cry out for the living bread till brought down to the starving point. Then, when nothing will satisfy but Jesus, God steps in with this Word, "I will feed." Sometimes it shall be a promise; sometimes a glimpse of Jesus; sometimes a sweet assurance of interest in his blood and righteousness; sometimes a smile; sometimes a sip or taste of his mercy, goodness, and love. When any gospel truth is applied to the heart; when faith embraces it, hope anchors in it, and love flows toward it, then the soul is divinely fed. Hunger is then sensibly allayed: the Word of God tastes sweet; Jesus is received into the heart; and as the sheep lies

and chews the cud, so the soul meditates and ruminates on the truth of God, and enjoys it over and over again. Never be satisfied with the mere letter of truth. Seek to have fulfilled in your own individual and happy experience that declaration of Jesus, "The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life" (John 6:63).

ii. *"I will cause them to lie down."* Poor things! Restless indeed they were. Not a spot of soft tender grass was there on which they could repose their weary limbs. Did they seek the good pasture? The best was eaten up, and the residue trodden down. Did they long to lie down by the still waters? They were jostled away by the fat and the strong; and the little they could get was fouled. Thus were they ever on the drive, hurried to and fro, far from rest and peace. Lively emblem of a soul that, like Noah's dove, finds no rest for the sole of her foot on the floating carcasses of a ruined world! What a restless being is a tempted child of God! How unable he often is even to rest locally, to take his chair, and sit quietly by his fire-side!

It is recorded of the prisoners, who in the first French revolution were awaiting in their dungeons the summons to the dread tribunal of blood, that some passed nearly all their whole time in walking up and down their cells. So sometimes under trials and temptations, we pace up and down the room as if we sought to dissipate the exercise of our minds by the exercise of our bodies; or rush into the streets and fields to pour the heart out in sighs and groans, the restless mind acting and reacting upon the body. And as an exercised child of God often cannot rest locally, so cannot he rest spiritually. He cannot rest in his own righteousness, nor in a sound creed, nor in a form of godliness, nor in the opinions of men, nor in anything that springs from or centres in the creature. There always is something uneasy; either in himself or in the

ground on which he would repose. Sometimes it is strewn with thorns and briars; sometimes beset with sharp and rugged rocks. Sometimes the barking dog or howling wolf; sometimes the sturdy ram or butting he-goat; sometimes the goad of the savage driver; and sometimes the fears and anxieties of his own timid heart, prevent it settling down to rest and sleep. And yet, but for these restless, uneasy feelings, how many even of the Lord's own family would settle down short of gospel rest? Some would settle down in false religion; others in the world; some would make a god of their own righteousness; and others, like the foolish virgins, would securely sleep whilst their lamp was burning out. But there is that restless, painful exercise where the life and grace of God are, that the soul cannot, if it would, settle down in any rest but that of God's own providing. "There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God" (Heb.4:9). That rest is Christ; the blood, righteousness, love, and grace of the Lamb of God.

The Lord says, "*I will cause them to lie down.*" They cannot lie down then when they please. How everything is of grace! Every gracious movement is so from God, that they actually cannot lie down except he cause them. They are like the babe which cannot lay itself down in the cradle. The mother's arms are as needful to lay it down as to take it up. So the Lord is said to cause Israel to rest (Jer.31:2). And David says, "He *maketh* me to lie down in green pastures" (Psa.23:2). Thus the Lord sometimes leads his sheep in the green pastures and beside the still waters. Then he makes them to lie down. "I will give you rest," says Jesus. This rest is himself. Nay more, it is God's rest. "*My rest,*" he calls it. "If they shall enter into *my rest*" (Heb.4:5). Jesus is the true Sabbath, the rest of God and the rest of man. God rests in his love; when we can rest in that, we are of one mind with God. All rest short of this is a delusion.

Now have you ever found any rest for your soul? If you have ever felt any measure of real rest, however short it may have been, it has only been in Jesus and his finished work, and by the blessed Spirit bringing into your soul some sweet testimony of your personal interest in it. Into this rest we enter only by faith, as the apostle speaks, "We which have believed do enter into rest" (Heb.4:3). But this cannot be till we cease from self, as Paul speaks, "He that is entered into his rest ... hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his" (Heb.4:10). As long as you are trying to get some comfort from your own works, you will never enter into rest. It is by believing, not by working; by the gospel, and not by the law; by Christ, and not by self, that rest and peace are entered into and enjoyed.

2. The two promises which we have been considering, are applicable to *all* the flock, and to each individual member of it, food and rest being alike needful for all. But we now come to a series of promises, which have a special relation to particular cases. The sheep, through neglect and cruelty, had fallen into a miserable condition. Some were "lost;" others "driven" away; some "broken" in limb, wind, and constitution; and some "sick" and half dead with rot and staggers.

Must all of these perish, and feed the vulture and the jackal? No; says the Lord, "I will seek that which was lost," &c. When they are abandoned by the shepherds, and in themselves helpless and hopeless, ready to perish, the Lord steps in with his own almighty arm.

i. *"I will seek that which was lost."* In the figure of a lost sheep there is something singularly suitable and appropriate to a poor, erring, straying child of God. Of all animals the sheep is eminently the most silly; and it is usually not



wantonness, but silliness, that leads it astray. Often through mere folly, it wanders away and becomes lost. But now comes the difficulty. How shall it get home again? The dog, the ox, the very swine can find their way home. But the sheep has neither the scent of the hound, nor the sagacity of the hog. When it wanders, it loses its way altogether. But it rarely wanders without getting into some mischief. The teeth of the dog, and the tusks of the boar protect them; but the sheep is utterly defenceless. Every beast is against her. Need we go far to find the parallel? Who is so foolish and silly as regards his best interests as a child of God? Who so apt to wander? Who so unable to return? Who so exposed to a thousand enemies? Who so defenceless against them all? And indeed, a sheep may wander far; I dare not say how far! The longer I live, the more I see and know of the evils of my own heart, the more tender I should be in limiting how far it may wander. But it will never roam beyond the bounds of covenant love, will never fall out of the arms of mercy into hell; will never get beyond the eye and hand of the Good Shepherd, for he has a piercing eye and an outstretched hand, a long arm and a strong arm.

But he says, "*I will seek that which was lost.*" With the Lord, to seek is to find. The earthly shepherd may look, and look, and look in vain; down, down in some far away mountain cleft the sheep may lie. But the all-seeing eye of the heavenly Shepherd reaches the most secluded, distant spot; and one word from him finds. The sheep know the voice of the Shepherd. He never speaks in vain; however far they may have wandered, one word recalls. For, with all their folly, they have the distinguishing mark of a sheep, love of the Shepherd; and therefore, when he speaks, it drops into the heart, and brings them back. Thus he finds his poor lost sheep, lays it upon his shoulder, and brings it home rejoicing; mangled it may be and torn; sadly scratched with

thorns, bleeding in head and limbs, with its fleece rent and soiled, perhaps its wool half pulled off, but still living, warm, panting, breathing, clinging close to the bosom of its almighty Deliverer. What a mercy to be a sheep! To have any one mark of belonging to the flock of slaughter! To have one grain of grace; I say sometimes the hundredth part of a grain, how unspeakable the mercy! O, to have life in the soul; it may sometimes be at a low ebb, very low, but to have a spark of the life of God in the bosom! Worlds cannot purchase it, and worlds cannot destroy it. Do not write yourself lost, because you are tempted on every hand. Despair is one of the strong holds of Satan. His first object is to draw you away, and then to tell you there is no hope, that by plunging you into despair, he may hurl you into greater depths of sin.

ii. *"And bring again that which was driven away."* Satan does not deal with all alike. He is a master of arts; he knows how to adapt his devices to every one's constitution and disposition. He did not spread the same net for Peter and David; nor work in the same manner upon Solomon and Jonah. To some he is a serpent, and to others a lion; to this man a tempter, to that an accuser. He fires David's eyes, and swells Hezekiah's heart; sets Asaph in slippery places, and makes Job and Jeremiah curse the day of their birth. Thus some he allures into evil, and in its mazes they become for a time "lost;" others he "drives away." This he sometimes does by injecting blasphemous insinuations and suggestions; as if he would thereby drive them headlong into suicide or despair. Careless sinners he tempts to presumption; but where he sees a work of grace begun, there he tempts to despond of salvation altogether. But besides these temptations of the enemy, some seem from the very tenderness of their consciences "driven away." Their feelings are so acute and sensitive; sin is laid upon them with such

weight and power, and they see and feel themselves such monsters of iniquity, that it seems as though the very holiness and majesty of God drove them away from his presence. They dare scarcely speak lest they be cast and condemned under the Word; or pray; lest they add sin to sin. Thus, they are driven away, by the very majesty of God, by their own apprehension of him as a consuming fire, and by the terrors of his holy and righteous law. Thus it was in time of old. The children of Israel could not bear to hear "the sound of a trumpet, and the voice of words; which voice they that heard entreated that the word should not be spoken to them any more" (Heb.12:19). Bounds were set round that fiery mount, and they were thus driven away from its precincts. So whenever the law comes with condemnation to the conscience, it drives the soul away. As guilt and wrath drove Adam away from the voice of the Lord, to hide himself amongst the trees of the garden, so a sense of guilt and wrath drives the soul away from the presence of God. But, besides what takes place in the first work of grace in the soul, even afterwards, often, in after stages, a sense of guilt through having fallen into some sin, or in any way having wounded and defiled the conscience, will drive away the soul from God. Sensible of its guilt and shame, it fears to approach him, and by staying away makes the matter worse, and the breach harder to be healed. Sometimes these fears work so strong, as almost to make a man give up his very profession. He says to himself, "I cannot go among the people of God; they would shun me, if they knew what I was; I cannot, I must not go to hear the truth, for I shall only hear my own sentence; and therefore I had better stay away; nor will I ever open my mouth about religion again lest my place be among the hypocrites." Thus, by their very doubts and fears and sensitiveness of conscience, they are driven away.

But the Lord has respect unto these also. He says, "I will bring again." This shows they were formerly in the enjoyment of his comfortable presence; that they had been embraced in the arms of mercy; that they had been folded to the bosom of love; but they were driven away. Guilt, temptation, Satan, doubts and fears had driven them away from the shelter of the tabernacle. Yet the promise runs, I will "bring again that which was driven away." But how? By nothing but a sense of mercy. It is not by frowns, but by smiles. "I drew them," says the Lord, "with the cords of a man," (that is, the tender feelings that are bound up in the human heart,) "with the bands of love" (Hos.11:4). You may thunder, you may lighten, you may take the whip and flog a poor backslider. You can never flog him home. He must be drawn by mercy, by the goodness of God, which leads to repentance. How was Peter brought back? By that look which Jesus gave him, as he stood in the hall of the high priest, that look of mingled love and reproach. It was this that made Peter go out and weep bitterly. A frown would have driven him into despair, and made him hang himself by the side of Judas; but that look of mingled reproof and love wounded and healed, filled heart and eyes with the deepest grief and sorrow; and yet poured such a healing balm into his mourning soul that when Jesus was risen from the dead, and by his angel sent him a special message that he would see him again in Galilee, he leaped into the sea to meet him, when he stood on the shore of the lake Tiberias. But for that look and for that message, he would rather have leaped to the bottom with self-reproach, than leaped to the shore with love and affection. Thus was brought again poor driven-away Peter. And thus too, by the voice of pardon, was brought again poor driven-away David. For the Lord deviseth means that his banished be not expelled from him.

iii. *"And will bind up that which was broken."* Some then in

the flock are broken, broken in wind, limb, and constitution.

1. Some are *broken-winded*, asthmatic and coughing all the day long, unable to travel, and lying down at every step, with gasping mouth and panting flank. There are spiritual asthmas and winter coughs among the Lord's family. Poor feeble ones that cannot step without a sigh or a groan, wheezing at the least exertion, and dying away up every little hill.

2. Others are *broken in limb*. They have slipped down a precipice, and broken a leg. And doubtless, there are many more limbs broken than you know of. It is not everybody that shows his broken leg. Many poor children of God have had their secret slips, that have broken all their bones, and yet known only to God and themselves. Who is there that is not, more or less, guilty of slips with the eye, with the tongue, with the hand, the foot, the ear, or the heart? Sometimes this breaks the arm, so that it is not lifted up as it should be in prayer, and is, from being crippled, unable to embrace the Son of God; sometimes the leg, so that it cannot readily run the race set before us.

3. Others are *broken in constitution*. Sickness and disease have gradually drained away their native strength. Their wisdom is broken, their righteousness, their strength, their resolutions, their false hopes, their creature religion; so that "the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint" (Isa.1:5).

But the Lord says, I will "bind up that which was broken." He swathes up the tender chest, and heals the gasping, panting lung; he kindly sets the broken bone, and puts it into close apposition. It shall not be like many a limb that the doctors set which leaves a limping leg ever after, but it shall be stronger than before. And the broken constitution he renovates by the balm of Gilead, so that the soul renews its youth like the eagle.

4. But, besides broken wind, limb, and constitution, the Lord's people have *broken hearts*; and a broken and a contrite heart is in God's eyes of great price. None but he who made the heart can first break it, and then bind it up; but he can do both effectually. To this man God looks; for he has promised to look "to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word" (Isa.66:2); and with him he dwells. "For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones" (Isa.57:15). And where the Lord dwells, he binds.

5. But the same blow which breaks their heart often breaks their *confidence*. So David found it. The same Psalm which says, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit," breathes also the prayer, "Cast me not away from thy presence" (Psalm 51:17, 11). There was perhaps a time when they could speak confidently of what God had done for their souls, and believed in their very hearts that the Lord loved them, and gave himself for them. But this true confidence (for there is a true as well as a false one) is often so sadly broken that they cannot put it together again. But the Lord has promised to "bind up that which was broken;" and this he can do by one look, one word, one smile, one beaming in of his presence and grace. Every scattered bone and joint now drops into its place; and the whole is then so firmly swathed round with love as to be as strong or stronger than before. You have come sometimes to hear, perhaps with scarcely a hope in your soul; you have been so knocked about by sin and Satan, and have got into such places, that you have dreaded and feared whether there was a spark of grace in you; and yet, when all seemed utterly gone, and you at your

wit's end, a line of the hymn, or a word dropped in prayer, or something in the sermon, all of a sudden entered into your soul, and came with such overwhelming power, that your very heart was melted within you. This was binding up that which was broken; and the confidence which before was like a dislocated limb, or a foot out of joint, unable to bear any weight or pressure, leaps, like Naphtali, as a hind let loose.

iv. *"I will strengthen that which was sick."* Peculiar maladies require peculiar remedies; but here is a general remedy, a family medicine. The Lord not only has strong remedies for desperate diseases; but in the divine medicine chest he has his restoratives and cordials. "Stay me with flagons, comfort me with apples," cries the Bride, "for I am sick of love" (Song of Sol.2:5). She was in a swoon, and needed a reviving cordial to restore her. So a poor fainting soul may come to hear the preached gospel, or may open his Bible, and say, "What is here for me? When I hear any deep experience described, that seems to cut me off as too deep; and when I hear great manifestations entered into, that cuts me off as too high. So I seem to be a strange being, a peculiar out-of-the-way creature, that can neither dive nor fly, sink nor rise." Well, you are sick; you are like one in a hospital, ill of a malady that puzzles all the doctors. At last one more skilful than his brethren, says, "There is no peculiar disease. But the man, like many of our London patients, is suffering from want of nourishment, dying from sheer exhaustion. He wants better blood put into him. He must have some good meat, wine, and porter, and a nourishing diet to recruit his strength and put new life into his body." Thus acts the great Physician, Jehovah Rophi. I "will strengthen that which was sick!" The blood and righteousness of Jesus, that flesh which is meat indeed, and that blood which is drink indeed, is given to the hunger-bitten wretch to revive him as with a heavenly cordial. There is balm in Gilead; there is a Physician there; to

that balm and to that Physician sin-sick souls seek. If you have a real case, you may depend upon it, there is a remedy in the family chest. It is not found out yet, at least you may not have found it, but there is a drawer, and in that drawer there is a draught devised by infinite wisdom and compounded by everlasting love. It is indeed a remedy such as no learned physician of the school of the Pharisees ever prescribed, or an apothecary wise in his own conceit ever compounded; but yet the very thing, the very thing. And when that drawer is opened, and the draught brought out, and you take it, you will be able to say with David in the joy of your heart, "Bless the LORD, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name" (Psa.103:1).

II. But I pass on to the second part of our subject, where the Lord leaves his dear family, the sheep of his pasture and the flock of his hand, to utter a very sad and striking denunciation: "*But I will destroy the fat and the strong; I will feed them with judgment.*" Hard words! Heavy tidings! I scarcely know heavier tidings through the whole Word of God. For, look at the two characters whom the Lord threatens to destroy. They are "*the fat*" and "*the strong.*" A man, may be both this, though very, very consistent; religious, highly religious, in the common sense of the word.

1. Let us, therefore, go a little beneath the surface, and examine its spiritual meaning.

i. One thing is very evident; that the persons spoken of as "fat" and "strong," are not afflicted with any disease; if they were, it would soon pull the fat of their bones. They are in very good case; and the reason is, they have no wasting malady. Is not this a description of many, too many in the professing church of Christ? "Surely," say they, "we are not such very great sinners; and if the heart be bad, we do not



want to hear it spoken of." But if these persons had a severe malady, they would be very glad to have the symptoms of that malady described. And if they found day after day they were losing flesh, and gradually wasting, they would want to know the cause, whether it sprang from a consumption, or a diseased liver, or some internal malady. So when a child of God finds his strength and flesh going, and he is pining away for his iniquities, as the Scripture speaks (Ezek.34:23), let Pharisees speak as long as they please, he likes to hear the malady opened up as he feels it. But "the fat " and "the strong" cannot bear the sight of affliction. They are like healthy people going into the wards of an hospital. O how it disgusts them! Here is a man with an abscess; there a poor woman with a cancer; here one wretch coughing up his lungs, and there another in the very agonies of dissolution. How repugnant is every sight and smell! So it is in a religious sense. The whole the stout, the fat, and the strong never like to be amongst the sickly, the consumptive, and the cancered.

But the Lord says, he will "*destroy* the fat." There is no promise of mercy for them; no gracious intimation that the Lord will seek them, bring them again, bind up, or strengthen them. They want it not; are in good case; are fat and strong; have neither ache nor sore; and therefore need no remedy from the Physician.

ii. But hard *labour* will keep down fat. Where will you find a country labourer carrying much flesh upon his bones? Where will you find, to come lower still, a hard-worked horse carrying much fat and flesh? So in grace; labour with temptations, do a deal of hard work by fighting hand to hand against the flesh and the devil; and you will find that it will rub off your flesh.

From this, therefore, we gather, that the people against whom the woe is pronounced do not know much of heart-work nor spiritual conflict. Free from sickness and labour, the two great wasters of flesh, "their eyes stand out with fatness" (Psalm 73:7) and they "maketh collops of fat on their flanks" (Job 15:27).

2. But there are also "the *strong*." Such are those who know nothing of their own wickedness and sinfulness. "What have I to do with sin? Sin! I can keep it at arm's length; I can fell it at once with a knock-down blow." Such is the spirit, if not the language, of many. As to Satan, his temptations, they fear not. Doubts and fears? They have got miles and miles, leagues and leagues beyond them. This is wide encampment ground. Many who bitterly anathematize each other, pitch their tents on the ground of creature confidence. Papist, Pharisee, Antinomian, have all room for their manoeuvres, here.

Now, I do not say that even a child of God may not for a time be entangled in this snare; for we are poor fools, the best of us, and have all gone aside into some by-path or other. But if year after year a man go on laying on fat and strength, ignorant of sickness, sin, and sorrow, needing no support of a heavenly arm, no remedy from an almighty Physician, God has in this portion of Scripture treasured up a very hard word against him, "I will *destroy* the fat and the strong." How? By cutting them off; sending them to hell at a stroke? No. If he did, London would be at once depopulated; it would be like Lisbon after the earthquake. If the Lord struck down every presumptuous wretch, every ungodly sinner in the act of sinning, the metropolis would be a waste. Nay, I do not know how many corpses we might not have in this chapel.

But the Lord has other means of executing vengeance. He

says, "I will *feed* them." What! The Lord feed them? Yes, he will. "I will feed them." With wisdom? No! Mercy? No! The flesh of Christ? No! Gospel promises? No! "I will feed them with;" (what an awful word is coming!) "*Judgment.*" I will leave them alone. That is the meaning of it. The way, then, in which the Lord destroys "the fat and "the strong" is to give them up to their own delusions, to their own errors, to their own follies. And this judicially. God does not tempt, nor is the author of sin; but as he judicially hardened Pharaoh's heart, so judicially he feeds these with "judgment," merely by leaving them in a way of sovereign righteousness to fill up the measure of their own iniquity, and to walk after the imaginations of their own evil hearts. Now when is a man fed with "judgment?" When he is inaccessible to all reproof, beyond the reach of all admonition and of all warning; when he deliberately embraces error, and feeds upon it; when he wraps himself up in his own delusions, holds a lie in his right hand, and rejoices in it. We can scarcely credit there can be an individual professing great light and knowledge, who has arrived to that degree of presumption and confidence as to have no checks of conscience, no remorse for the past, no apprehensions for the future; no confession, no supplication, no prayer, no desire after manifested favour and mercy, but is satisfied with a form of religion, wrapped up in notions without the power, and rolled up in doctrine without the sweet application of God's truth to the soul. Yet, you may depend upon it, there are many, very many, both in town and country, ministers and people, whom the Lord is feeding thus with judgment, abandoning them to their own devices and delusions, not taking pains to strip off the veil, but leaving them to settle quietly down in the belief of a lie, or in a notional faith and profession of the truth. Examine yourselves on which side of the line you stand, if you would be honest with your own consciences. You are a professor, I presume, by your coming here. Now you must very well

know in your soul whether you are hungering at times after food, restless, lost, driven away, broken, and sick.

Now if there be any such experience in your heart, to you belong all these sweet promises. They are yours, really yours. The Lord that has made them will surely fulfil them.

But there is room, much room for holy jealousy on which side of the line we stand. Haply you may be one of "the fat and strong," and not one of the sick, or the broken, or the driven away. You may have no experience either of sorrow or joy, of trouble or deliverance; or, what is worse, may secretly despise God's tried and exercised family. But O what a mercy to have some soul experience of the bitterness of sin, the evil of the heart, and the manifestations of Jesus! The worst of all cases is, to have no experience and no desire after any, but to be satisfied with the perishing things of time and sense, or the knowledge of the truth without the power, with the form without the reality.