

The Good Shepherd

A Posthumous Sermon

Preached at Gower Street Chapel, London, on Lord's Day Evening, July 25, 1869

"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." Ezekiel 34:15, 16

In the chapter from which I have taken my text, God brings a very heavy bill of charges against the false shepherds of Israel; and one which consists of several counts. But before I proceed to open up this bill of charges, and to state the case, I wish to observe that in so doing, I am not declaring who are the modern representatives of these false shepherds. I am not shooting arrows at any particular persons, or aiming my shafts against any well-known names. That would be unbecoming my position. I desire to speak simply and faithfully of the things which I hope God has taught me. I mean, therefore, nothing personal; I only describe characters and aim no arrows against particular persons. So that in reading and opening the bill of charges against false shepherds, I take my stand upon God's word. Whoever he be, in the church or out of the church, in high or in low places; be he bishop upon his throne, dean in his cathedral, canon in his stall, or popular preacher in a dissenting community; or even the veriest ranter who gathers a street audience, or the wealthiest enthusiast who can merely tumble forth words with foaming lips, preaching what he knows nothing of, and teaching nothing that is agreeable to the word and will of God,—I say I pass by all persons, and

simply stand upon God's word, which describes characters.

The first count in this bill of charges against the false shepherds is, that they fed themselves and not the flock; that they had no zeal for the prosperity of Zion, no desire for the edification of the people of God, and no object in the ministry but personal profit—what it might bring, what they might gain by it, and how they might support themselves in pride and self-consequence.

The next count in the bill is, that they did not feed the flock; in other words, that they did not bring before them such food as was needful for their support and nourishment, but either totally neglected feeding them, or supplied them with such provender as they could not eat—tainted with error, mixed with free-will, spoiled in the harvesting, fouled in the gathering, and therefore not food suitable for the clean, delicate, and tender family whom they were **set [sent?]** to feed, as being the flock of God's own choice.

In another count of this bill of charges against the false shepherds, the Lord says they did not take any notice of that part of the flock that required especial care: that the diseased they did not strengthen, neither did they heal that which was sick, nor bind up that which was broken, nor bring again that which was driven away, nor seek that which was lost. That portion of the flock which required special care—all the tenderness, and all the wisdom, and all the skill, and all the knowledge, and all the undeviating attention of the shepherds—they utterly neglected, and left these poor perishing creatures, so far as they could suffer at their hand, left them without ministering to their wants or doing that which was needful for their comfort and support.

And the last count in this bill of charges was that they ruled

the flock with force and cruelty. Instead of tenderly cherishing, affectionately keeping, and wisely guarding them against the intrusion of wild beasts, and anything that might hurt and injure, they ruled them with force and cruelty.

Now what was the consequence? That the sheep, for want of suitable shepherds, were scattered upon the mountains in that dark and gloomy day, with no one who seemed to take any thought for them, feel any kindness toward them, or exert himself in any measure for their benefit. "Well," the Lord says, "shall my sheep, the flock of my pasture, those whom I have eternally loved and redeemed by the blood of my dear Son,—what, shall they suffer because their shepherds are so neglectful of them? No," the Lord says: "I myself will do that for them which their shepherds have failed to do." And thus the very neglect of the shepherds, and the scattered, miserable condition of the flock, only drew out more of the Lord's tender sympathy, and engaged more of his compassionate mercy; and he comes forth out of his place, in the fulness of his wisdom and love, to do that for them and in them which their shepherds instrumentally and ministerially should have done, but which they neglected because they sought their own benefit and not that of the flock.

Then come the words of the text, which stand out in strong apposition and opposition to this bill of charges: "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."

Our text seems to fall under three heads:—

I.—*First*, we see in it a *general* description of what God does for his flock: "I will feed my flock, and I will cause them to lie down, saith the Lord God;" promising them food and rest.

II.—*Secondly*, the Lord goes on to speak of special care to *special* cases, and tells us what his kind, compassionate heart, and what his strong and powerful hand means to do in seeking that which was lost, in bringing again that which was driven away, in binding up that which was broken, and strengthening that which was sick.

III.—*Thirdly*, there comes that awful word—and there is scarcely in the book of God a more awful sentence—what he will do to the fat and the strong: "I will destroy," he says, "the fat and the strong; I will feed them with judgment."

I.—Food and rest are indispensable to the sustentation of life. We cannot live naturally without food, nor can we live without rest and sleep. And as it is with the natural life of man, so it is with his spiritual life: his spiritual life needs food and rest. And God has provided both in the words of the text: "I will feed my flock, and I will cause them to lie down, saith the Lord God." But until divine life enters a man's soul and quickens him into that state of which our Lord speaks—"Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness"—he neither has nor wants God's food. For God's food is suitable to God's sheep: "Feed me with food convenient for me." The sheep naturally and literally is a very tender and delicate animal, and very choice in its food. It cannot feed upon flesh like the dog, nor upon carrion like the jackal and vulture, nor browse upon thistles like the ass, nor climb the mountain height to feed upon wild thyme like the goat, nor leap from crag to crag like the chamois, nor live upon the scanty herbage of the desert like the camel. Things which feed a coarser animal would be starvation to the

sheep: he must have grass, and that not wiry grass, hard and tawny; but the sweet grass which grows under the clouds of heaven, springs up by the water-side, and is fed by the showers from above. Thus, there must be a similarity between the sheep and the pasture. When the shepherds took no notice of the sheep, they wandered upon the mountains, and there they picked up a little scanty herbage; but it was not food that was convenient for them, or suitable to keep them in flesh and condition; they were only one remove from starvation, just kept alive; they were but a bag of bones, with fleeces torn off by briars and thorns,—pitiable objects to look upon.

Now God gathers his sheep away from these wild mountains, on which they have roamed seeking food and finding none, and brings them into his own pastures, of which we have a sweet description in Psalm 23. And when he brings them into his own pastures, then he fulfils the word: "I will feed my flock." In this flock there are lambs, and these lambs are very delicate in their food, and very choice. They can only feed on very tender grass. Their teeth are not sufficiently strong to eat the coarser herbage. They must feed upon the tender blades of the grass as it springs up. And so in grace: these lambs of the flock need very tender food, such as sweet invitations, gracious promises, and those alluring and attracting words which are scattered up and down through the gospel, and are adapted to the taste of the lamb. They are not yet brought into the strong meat that suits the more established in the things of God, but they can sweetly nibble at the tender grass and find it healthful to their constitution, suitable to their taste, and such as they love to browse upon. You that are lambs in this flock—and I hope we have lambs as well as sheep in this congregation: for what is to become of us if there are no lambs to take the place of the sheep that are removed?—if we have lambs in this congregation, you

can feed upon the invitations of the gospel and the sweet promises scattered here and there such as "He that cometh unto me, I will in no wise cast out;" "Come unto me, all ye that are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest;" "Look unto me and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth." You can feed, and sometimes very sweetly, upon this tender grass that springs up in this pasture of the Lord, and find it very suitable to your taste, and very nutritive to your spirit, so that you find a blessed food in it from time to time as the Lord is pleased to lead you into it. And then, by-and-by, when you grow out of this lamb state and become more established in the truth of God, you will find the Lord still will fulfil his promise: "I will feed my flock." He will lead you more into the grand and glorious truths of our most holy faith; show you his divine sovereignty in the choice of a people before all worlds; lead you into the mysteries of the Person of the Son of God; open to you his incarnation, how he is God and man in one glorious Person; take you into the garden of Gethsemane and there show you the agonising Lord of life and glory sweating great drops of blood; take you on to Calvary and there show him to you bearing your sins in his own body on the tree, hanging there between earth and heaven, to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And you will find food for your soul in looking at him, mourning over him, and receiving him into your heart as made unto you wisdom and righteousness, sanctification and redemption. He will feed you by showing the fixedness of God's promises, the faithfulness of his declarations, the certainty of salvation to all who are interested in the blood of the Lamb, and that where he has begun he will certainly carry on his work to the end. And thus, from time to time, you will find food in the word, read or preached, and food such as your soul loves, because it is adapted to your hungering state, nourishes your soul, and feeds every grace of the Spirit of God in you. So he will feed your faith by giving you blessed views of Christ,

sweet discoveries of his Person, blood, and work; he will feed your hope by strengthening that which he has wrought in you, confirming the good work upon your soul by his gracious word; he will feed your love by showing you more and more how lovely the Lord is, what beauty and blessedness there is in him, and by drawing up your affections to things above will feed the love that he sheds abroad in the heart. And he will feed your patience by giving you grace to bear the weight of the daily cross, by giving you support under every load, so that you may still press on toward the mark of the prize of your high calling, in spite of every foe and every fear. And he will feed every desire that he raises up in your soul, by opening up from time to time his precious truth to your heart, and granting you the desire of your lips, so that you find in the word of his grace food sweet and suitable and convenient to your soul.

Now have you found all this or any of it? Are you in quest of that which can feed your soul? Here is a mark of a sheep: "I will feed my flock." And if we never get fed, and that by the Lord himself; if no food is ever set before us by his own gracious hand, and we have no inward reception of it, receiving it into our souls as we receive our natural food into our bodies, and finding it strengthening, and nourishing, and sweet, we bear little marks of belonging to God's flock.

"And I will cause them to lie down, saith the Lord God." We want rest as much as food. We are poor, restless beings, and the Lord hunts us out of every refuge, and every shelter, and every false place of rest. If we try to rest in the world, no happiness there; rest in sin, nothing but guilt and bondage there; rest in the law, nothing but the curse and condemnation there; rest in self, nothing but deceitfulness, hypocrisy, and sin. No rest anywhere but in the Lord, who is our rest. Now the Lord says, "I will cause them to lie down;"

not in sloth, not in fleshly ease, not in a name to live, not in an empty profession, not secure in doctrine; but the Lord will make them lie where he himself places them, the only spot where rest and peace are to be found, even in his dear Son: resting in his finished work, in his atoning blood, in his justifying righteousness, in his dying love, in his power and glory, and what he is in himself as the Son, the Christ, and the Lamb of God. And when we are brought there, there we find rest. And there God brings us from time to time, that we may lie down and find rest and peace in him. This is what David means in Psalm 23, when he speaks of "lying down in green pastures and feeding beside the still waters." Now this promise belongs to all the flock, and God will fulfil it to every sheep of the mystical fold. Every one who belongs to the mystical fold will be fed by the hand of God, and made to lie down by his power, the Spirit resting upon him, and giving him rest and peace in believing.

II.—Now the Lord takes up special cases, the same special cases which the shepherds had so grievously neglected, and for which they incurred the deep resentment of the Lord. "Well," the Lord says, "shall these special cases have no one to look after them, because those who should look after them have neglected them? No," the Lord says; "I myself will come forward and do that for them which shall be exactly suitable to their special case, I will give them that relief which they can obtain from no other source."

The first character he takes up in a special way is that of which he says, "I will seek that which was lost." The Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost. He is sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. But the "lost" here seems to have a special reference to being lost upon the mountains, like the lost sheep in the parable, which the shepherd lays upon his shoulders and brings back rejoicing.

Now this sheep ought, so to speak, to have kept to the fold, but he did not. He wandered away from the right place where the shepherd was and got upon the mountains—it might be to seek some new pasture; got tired of his companions; wanted a little novelty; not to be always hanging about after the same shepherd and tied to the same fold, nor continually herding with the same sheep. He would try a little novelty, a little change. A change, he thought, would be very agreeable. And so he is drawn aside after a life of something—he really hardly knows what it is—sufficiently strong and attractive to entangle his love and affections and draw him aside from the fold; till he gets upon some wild moor or mountain, and then he begins to find he has lost his way. And the more he wanders upon this barren moor or wild mountain, the further he is from home and the less able to find his way toward it. This may be the case with some of you. You have been drawn aside in some way by a love of novelty, the spirit of the world, some spirit of error or spirit of evil, and you have wandered you know not where, and have got lost upon some wild moor or mountain, and scarcely know how ever you can get back. Nor would you ever get back unless the Lord sought you out. But he seeks you out too often in this way: by sending some heavy affliction, which is a chastising word from himself, and brings you to see what you have wandered from, and where you have wandered to, and how you have got lost upon this wild moor or mountain side and cannot find your way home. Or he may send a word for you that shall drop upon your spirit with some degree of sweetness and power, and you begin to say, "O that it were with me as in days past! What have I got by wandering from the right paths of the Lord?—leaving his people, his service, his ways, his word, and pleasing myself with some fleshly novelty, and straying from those paths in which I once walked, so as to get so lost that I scarcely know what I am or where I am." And as the mind becomes anxious and troubled on account of

its lost state, all being darkness and confusion, there may come a strengthening word—a word of attraction; and you hear the voice behind you saying: "This is the way—walk ye in it." In this way, and others that I cannot now enter into, the Lord seeks that poor sheep that had lost itself upon the wild moor or mountain side, and brings it back to his own fold.

Now take another case. He will "bring again that which was driven away." The lost sheep had wandered spontaneously: it was not driven away by force, but entangled in some alluring snare of sin or Satan, which made it wander from right paths to get into this place of confusion and darkness. But now, we have the case of one driven away by the power of temptation in some form beating upon it; by some assaults of Satan, it may be, for we know what an enemy he is to the people of God, and how he can assail them with all manner of infidel, vile, and base thoughts, so as to drive them in their feeling at times to the very ends of the earth. And they get driven away from peace and rest, and from feeding in the pastures that God has provided for them, and lying down beside the still waters which they have lapped and felt so refreshing. They get driven away by some keen and cutting blast of temptation, or the assaults of sin and Satan; and thus contrary to their best feelings, spiritual desires, and gracious intentions, they are driven by the storm that beats upon them into a spot where they lose all sight and sense of the pasture where they once fed and of the water they once drank. Now what shall become of them? Things may have arisen perhaps in your experience which have driven you away from God's people, God's word, God's truth, and the place where his honour dwelleth; and you may have yielded to the temptation, and by the power of temptation and the assaults of Satan may have been driven away, so as for a time to withdraw yourself from the assemblages of God's

saints, from a throne of grace, from reading the word, and almost from a profession of religion. There has come such a storm upon you of guilt, or bondage, or fear, or doubt, or assaults of Satan, as to drive you away even from that which you know is the only food of your soul, and the only rest you have ever found for your weary foot. Well, such as been the power of temptation, the strength of sin, and the force of Satan, it has for a time driven you away. There may be some such case here. I am dealing with special cases. I want to lay my hand upon some special point, because by so doing I may appeal to some one who scarcely knows where he is or what he is, and thus may be God's mouth to him—to show it is a case God has noticed in his word, a case that comes under God's own eyes; and if God has marked it out, he himself will take special care of it. Now he will bring again that which was driven away. He will bring him to his throne in humbled contrition; bring him back to his house, with many an earnest desire to hear the word and live; bring him back amongst the company of his people, to have once more sweet communion with them; and bring him under his shadow, to sit there with great delight, so as to find his fruit sweet to his taste. He never could bring himself back. The pride of his heart, the rebellion of his mind, his very bondage, doubt, guilt, and fear, would all keep him away. But the Lord, by his powerful hand upon him, brings back that which was driven away, and makes it manifest that he is stronger than the sinner and has prevailed; that where he has begun he will carry on, and never leave nor forsake his own work. Has not guilt, bondage, doubt, and fear sometimes had such an effect upon you, that you have said in your feelings, "I can never go to the house of God again; I can never look up amongst his people again; I can never again go amongst the dear family of God; for I feel such storms of guilt, fear, and bondage in my bosom?" Now the Lord will bring you again under the sweet sound of gospel

mercy; he will make his word to come once more with power to your heart; he will heal your backslidings, and show you that where sin abounded, there grace doth much more abound.

And now for another character: he "will bind up that which was broken." This seems to refer to a sheep that had wandered away from the fold and fallen down some steep precipice, and there lay with a broken skin, if not with broken bones. It had climbed, it might be, beyond the safe spot where it could stand, imitating and emulating the mountain goat; but alas! it got where it could not find standing ground; and therefore, through weakness or inability to maintain its footing, it fell, and there it lay bleeding under the ledge from which it dropped. Now some of you may be just this character. You have got broken. God may have saved you from breaking a leg, but you may have the skin broken. If the limb has not suffered, you may have fallen far enough to wound and break the skin. But be it so or not, something has transpired that has certainly broken you up; and you feel in yourself a poor broken creature that nothing but mercy can save and nothing but the hand of God can heal; broken in limbs like Ephraim, broken in heart, broken in conscience, broken in spirit, broken it may be in body, and broken in soul. And there you lie, like this poor sheep that has fallen from the precipice, without power to get upon your legs, and climb up to the spot whence you fell, or find your way home through the valley. Well, now, the Lord takes special notice of this case also; for he says he will "bind up that which was broken." He will bind round it gospel swathes, pour in gospel wine and oil, bind up the broken limb if the limb is broken, bind up the broken wound if the skin only be injured, and will do for it all that the wisdom and skill of a wise physician can direct, all that his love can urge, and all his power perform.

The last special character is: he "will strengthen that which was sick." Now you may never have been lost by wandering away from the fold, never been driven away by the power of temptation or the assaults of Satan, never have fallen from the gospel ledge so as to break either skin or limb; and yet you may be one of the characters spoken of as "sick." There are many naturally who have no particular disease, nothing to threaten life, and yet carry about with them a very weak and frail tabernacle. So in divine things: there are those who have no special disease, and still are ill all over; for "the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint." And these are they the Lord takes special notice of, that he may strengthen that which was sick, by healing their wounds, speaking peace to their souls, and applying the balm of his blood to their conscience.

I have not time to enter into these special cases as I should like. But cast your eye at your leisure upon them, and if you can find yourself comprehended in any one of them, bear in mind how tender the Lord is over you, and that as he has discovered your malady, he is sure to bring, in his own time and way, his own special remedy.

III.—Now for our third point, which is what the Lord will do to "the fat and the strong." If you read the chapter, you will observe that these sheep suffered almost as much from the strong sheep as they did from the shepherds; for they pushed them away, spoiled the pastures, fouled the herbage with their feet, and left the poor sickly ones to fare as well as they could, and to eat up what they had spoiled. "The fat and the strong,"—these were the false shepherds' darlings. They took no notice of the lost, and the driven away, and the broken, and the sick: those were beneath their consideration. But O these fat and strong: they were their darlings; they were the choice sheep of the flock. To them the false

shepherds gave the best food and the best shelter, and attended to them with the greatest care, because they meant to feed themselves; and therefore the fat and the strong were the very characters that suited their covetous taste. They looked upon them as a butcher looks upon his fat stock—with an eye to the knife; with an eye to what food would come out of these well fed and strong ones. But God's thoughts are not our thoughts, nor are God's ways our ways. God did not look upon the flock as these false shepherds did—with contempt and suspicion upon the sickly and the weak, and with approbation on the fat and the strong. No; God had other thoughts. He says: "I will destroy the fat and the strong." Now who are the fat and the strong? Of course you must view the words spiritually. A man is no worse for being fat, nor worse for being lean. The whole, of course, is spiritual, and has a spiritual bearing. The "fat" is he who has nothing to make him lean, no desire about him; strong in lung and strong in liver, strong in constitution, strong in thew and sinew and muscle, without any drain upon his constitution, with nothing to take the fat off his bones and make him lean and thin. So these fat ones are they who have no inward complaint, nothing to make them sigh before God and fret the flesh off their bones from crying out continually, "My leanness, my leanness! woe unto me!" And the strong are they who never felt their weakness; who can believe when they please, and repent when they please, and fret when they please, and rejoice when they please; who know nothing of helplessness, weakness, and creature misery, but can always take the promise at their own command, always believe themselves to be the children of God, and strong because they have never been brought down by the hand of God upon them to show them their weakness. Now God says, "I will destroy them"—cut them off. And how will he destroy them? In a very terrible way. "I will feed them with judgment." "I will give them over to judicial blindness,

judicial unbelief, and judicial impenitency. As they have sowed, so they shall reap. They shall perish under the very sound of truth; they shall die in the letter to which they have cleaved, neglecting the Spirit. They shall go to perdition with the very sound of the gospel in their ears, because they were fat and strong, and never knew anything of the strength of the Lord made perfect in weakness. And therefore the Lord says, "I will feed them with judgment." "They were satisfied, and they shall be satisfied. They did not want my teaching, or my dealings, and they fought against all my intentions towards them. Well, I shall leave them to perish in their deceivings, give them up to a reprobate mind; and as they chose these ways, let them die in them and perish in them." Therefore, you who are often writing bitter things against yourselves, because you are so sick and helpless, weak and weary, see how God views the one and see how God views the other, and tremble at being fat and strong; tremble at being anything in yourself; and see how blessed it is to be nothing in yourself, that Christ may be all in all.