

The Valley of Achor for a Door of Hope

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"Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfortably unto her. And I will give her her vineyards from thence, and the valley of Achor for a door of hope: and she shall sing there, as in the days of her youth, and as in the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt." Hosea 2:14, 15

The prophetic books of the Old Testament contain, stored up in them, a rich mine of instruction and edification for the Church of God. But though the mine is so rich, it is proportionately deep; though the ore is so precious, it is locked up in its darkest recesses. Thus we may say of this mine, as Job speaks of another no less deep and valuable, "The stones of it are the place of sapphires: and it hath dust of gold." But we may add, with him, "There is a path which no fowl knoweth, and which the vulture's eye hath not seen; seeing that it is hid from the eyes of all living, and kept close from the fowls of the air." (Job 28:6, 7, 21.) But, besides these inherent difficulties of the prophetic scriptures, an additional hindrance arises to the right understanding of them from this circumstance, that persons either do not know, or do not bear sufficiently in mind, that they are susceptible of various kinds of interpretation. To explain my meaning more distinctly, let me observe that the interpretation of the prophetic books of the Old Testament is frequently, if not universally, of a three-fold nature:—First, there is the *literal and historical* interpretation, which was suitable to the time, place, and circumstances under which the prophecy was first and originally delivered. Secondly, there is the *spiritual and experimental* interpretation, which

the Holy Ghost has couched in the letter for the edification of the Church of God in all time. And, thirdly, there is the *future or prophetic interpretation*, when these prophecies shall be accomplished in their full meaning, and every jot and tittle of them receive a complete fulfilment. Until, therefore, that period arrive, very much of the prophetic scriptures must lie buried in obscurity. This full accomplishment will take place in those times of which the apostle Peter speaks in the Acts of the Apostles, as, "The times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began." (Acts 3:21.) Take, as an instance to illustrate more fully my meaning, this second chapter of Hosea: it is very difficult to understand, but let us see whether we can bring to bear upon it the modes of interpretation which I have just mentioned.

View it first, then, as the language *originally* addressed by the mouth of God through Hosea to the ten tribes of Israel who had separated from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, broken off their allegiance to the house of David, and dissolved their connection with the temple and the sacrifices of God at Jerusalem. See how it bears upon their case, where the Lord says, for instance, "Their mother hath played the harlot: she that hath conceived them hath done shamefully: for she said, I will go after my lovers, that give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, mine oil and my drink." Here the Lord declares how Israel had sinned against him in the times of Jeroboam; and how that false church which had been set up had "played the harlot and done shamefully" in forsaking the true service of God to worship the golden calves at Dan and Bethel; and that this was done from worldly motives and covetous desires, for "bread and water, wool and flax, oil and drink." But, threatening her with future judgments, he adds, "I will also cause her mirth to cease, her feast days, her new moons, and her sabbaths, and all her

solemn feasts:" which prediction was literally accomplished when, first Hazael, and afterwards Tiglath-pileser invaded the land, carried away the people into captivity, and broke them up so completely as a nation that they never held up their head as a people or a church again.

But now view it in a *spiritual and experimental* sense, and see how the whole chapter bears upon the experience of the saint of God. In his forsaking the God of all his mercies, in his leaving the Fountain of living waters, and hewing out cisterns that hold no water, does he not resemble backsliding Israel of old? To him, therefore, the words apply in an experimental sense, as I shall presently more fully show.

But cast your eyes *forward* into futurity, if the Lord is pleased to touch the lids with his anointing eye-salve, and see how this chapter, at least as regards the promises contained in it, will be fully and perfectly accomplished in those glorious days when the Lord shall restore his ancient people Israel, and graft them into the true olive tree so as to partake of its root and fatness. (Rom. 11:23.)

But as the spiritual and experimental interpretation is that which chiefly concerns the Church of God, and that from which we are to draw our supplies of instruction and consolation, I shall this morning chiefly confine myself to that signification; and, in so doing, I shall, with God's help and blessing, bring before you the Lord's words in our text, and thus divide them by showing you:

I.—*First*, the way in which God *allures* his people, *by the drawings of his grace*.

II.—*Secondly*, where he brings them by means of these allurements: "*into the wilderness*."

III.—*Thirdly, what he does to them when he has brought them there: he speaks comfortably unto them; gives them their vineyards from thence; and opens in the valley of Achor a door of hope.*

IV.—*Fourthly, what is the blessed fruit and effect of these gracious dealings of God with them in the wilderness: that "they sing there as in the days of their youth, and as in the day when they came up out of the land of Egypt."*

We cannot, however, well understand these dealings of God with the souls of his people unless we first cast our eye upon the preceding part of the chapter. The Lord there lays open the sins that a soul, even a gracious soul, is capable of committing; what it does and ever will do when not restrained by his powerful grace. "Their mother," he says, "hath played the harlot: she that conceived them hath done shamefully: for she said, I will go after my lovers, that gave me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, mine oil and my drink. Here is the opening up of what we are by nature, what our carnal mind is ever bent upon, what we do or are capable of doing, except as held back by the watchful providence or unceasing grace and goodness of the Lord. These "lovers" of ours are ancient sins and former lusts that still crave for gratification. To these sometimes the carnal mind looks back and says, "Where are my lovers that gave me my bread and my water? Where are those former delights that so pleased my vile passions, and so gratified my base desires?" These lovers, then, are the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, all which, except as subdued by sovereign grace, still work in our depraved nature, and seek to regain their ancient sway. But the Lord here, for the most part, mercifully interposes, nor will he usually let his children do what they fain would do, or be what they fain would be. He says, therefore, "Behold, I will

hedge all thy way with thorns, and make a wall, that she shall not find her paths." The Lord, in his providence or in his grace, prevents the carnal mind from carrying out its base desires; hedges up the way with thorns, by which we may spiritually understand prickings of conscience, stings of remorse, pangs of compunction, which are so many thorny and briery hedges that fence up the way of transgression, and thus prevent the carnal mind from breaking forth into its old paths, and going after these ancient lovers to renew its ungodly alliance with them. A hedge of thorns being set up by the grace of God, the soul is unable to break through this strong fence, because the moment that it seeks to get through it or over it, every part of it presents a pricking brier or a sharp and strong thorn, which wound and pierce the conscience. What infinite mercy, what surpassing grace, are hereby manifested! Were the conscience not made thus tender so as to feel the pricking brier, we can hardly tell what might be the fearful consequence, or into what a miserable abyss of sin and transgression the soul would not fall. But these lacerating briers produce compunction of soul before God; for finding, as the Lord speaks, that she "shall follow after her lovers, but she shall not overtake them; and she shall seek them, but shall not find them," there comes a longing in her mind for purer pleasures and holier delights than her adulterous lovers could give her; and thus a change in her feelings is produced, a revolution in her desires. "Then shall she say, I will go and return to my first husband; for then was it better with me than now." The idea is of an adulterous wife contrasting the innocent enjoyments of her first wedded love with the state of misery into which she had been betrayed by base seducers; and thus the soul spiritually contrasts its former enjoyment of the Lord's presence and power with its present state of darkness and desertion. "Where," she would say, "are my former delights, my ancient joys, and the sweetness I had in days now passed in

knowing, serving, and worshipping the Lord? Ah! he was a kind and loving husband to me in those days. I will return to him if he will graciously permit me, for it was better with me when I could walk in the light of his countenance than since I have been seeking for my lovers, and reaping nothing but guilt, death, and condemnation." The Lord then goes on to say, "Now will I discover her lewdness in the sight of her lovers, and none shall deliver her out of my hand. I will also cause all her mirth to cease, her feast days, her new moons, and her sabbaths, and all her solemn feasts. And I will destroy her vines and her fig trees." By this is intimated the Lord's chastising hand; that as literally he punished backsliding Israel by sending her into captivity, so will he put into bondage his backsliding people, and will cause their mirth, their feast days, their new moons, and their sabbaths to cease; meaning thereby that he will deprive them of the enjoyment of his presence and of his manifested favour.

But not to detain you too long upon the introduction to our subject, this work which I have thus hastily run through is all preparatory to those gracious dealings which are more especially and particularly unfolded in the words of our text.

I.—We would, therefore, now come to the first point, "*Behold, I will allure her.*" There is a gracious word in the prophet Jeremiah, the application of which has been blessed to many a soul that truly fears God. "I have loved thee with an everlasting love; therefore with loving-kindness have I drawn thee." (Jer. 31:3.) We need not only to be driven by the law, but to be drawn by the gospel; we want not only the thunders of Mount Sinai, but the dew and rain that fall upon Mount Sion; to enjoy the smile of God's love as well as experience the frown of his anger; for there are the "cords of a man and the bands of love" whereby the Lord draws the soul near unto himself, as well as those terrors of the Lord

whereby it is distracted. (Hosea 11:4; Psa1. 88:15.) But how does God fulfil this word in the soul's happy experience, "*Behold, I will allure her?*"

1. First, he often *sets before the eyes* of the understanding and *reveals* with grace and power to the heart the Son of his love, Jesus, the Christ of God. But wherever there is a view of Jesus by faith, there is an attractive influence attending the sight, according to the words of our blessed Lord, "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me." (John 12:32.) Wherever, then, Jesus is graciously and experimentally manifested to the soul, and made known by any sweet revelation of his glorious Person, atoning blood, and finished work, a secret yet sacred power is put forth, whereby we are drawn unto him, and every grace of the Spirit flows toward him as towards its attractive centre. Thus Jeremiah speaks of the saints of God as coming and singing in the height of Zion, and *flowing* together to the goodness of the Lord. (Jer. 31:12.) And thus Isaiah speaks to the church of God, "Then thou shalt see and *flow* together, and thine heart shall fear [or, as the word rather means, shall "palpitate" with love and joy], and be enlarged." (Isaiah 60:5.) This view of Christ by faith is what the apostle speaks of to the Galatians, as Jesus evidently set forth before their eyes. (Gal. 3:1.) As thus set before our eyes, he becomes the object of our faith to look at; ("Look unto me and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth;") "the altogether lovely," to whom love flows; and the Intercessor within the veil in whom hope effectually anchors. As, then, the blessed Lord is revealed to the soul by the power of God, his glorious Person held up before the eyes of the spiritual understanding, his blood and righteousness discovered to the conscience, and his suitability to all our wants and woes experimentally manifested, the blessed Spirit raises up a living faith whereby he is looked unto and laid hold of, and thus he becomes

precious to all that believe in his name. Is not all this in strict accordance with the scriptures? for does not our Lord say, "It is written in the prophets, and they shall be all taught of God. Every man, therefore, that hath heard and hath learned of the Father cometh unto me?" (John 6:45.) And how true it is that without this heavenly teaching and this divine drawing no one can really and effectually come unto Jesus; for he himself says, "No man can come to me except the Father which hath sent me draw him." (John 6:41.)

2. But besides this—for all are not favoured and blessed with very clear manifestations of the Son of God to their souls—sometimes the Lord allures by *sending his word with power into the heart*. Thus the apostle speaks of his gospel coming to the Thessalonians, "Not in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance." (1 Thess. 1:5.) Paul came and preached the gospel to them; he set forth salvation through the blood of the Lamb; the Holy Ghost attended the word with power; it came to their heart with much assurance that it was the very truth of God; and they received it as the very voice of God speaking to them through the apostle's lips. What was the effect? "They turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God." Was not this the fruit of his all-victorious grace, and were they not thus allured into his service by the power of God?

3. But again: sometimes the Lord, without applying his word with any great and distinguishing power to the heart, makes *his truth to drop* with a measure of sweetness into the soul. This is as rain or dew, according to his own gracious declaration, "My doctrine shall drop like the rain; my speech shall distil as the dew." (Deut. 32:2.) Thus the precious ointment upon the head of Aaron is compared to "the dew of Hermon and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion, for there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life

for evermore." (Psal. 133:2, 3.) The dropping, then, of his doctrine, or, as the word means, his "teaching," as rain, and the distilling of his gracious speech as dew, kindle in the soul a love of the truth, and wherever this is felt there is salvation, for we read of those who perish that they received not the love of the truth that they might be saved. (2 Thess. 2:10.) There is a receiving of the truth, and a receiving of the love of the truth. These two things widely differ. To receive the truth will not necessarily save; for many receive the truth who never receive the love of the truth. Professors by thousands receive the truth into their judgment, and adopt the plan of salvation as their creed; but are neither saved nor sanctified thereby. But to receive the love of the truth by the truth as it is in Jesus being made sweet and precious to the soul, is to receive salvation itself. It is in this way that the gospel is made the power of God unto salvation; and therefore the apostle, speaking of "the preaching of the cross," says that "it is to them that perish foolishness, but unto us which are saved it is the power of God." Now it is impossible that this power should be felt without its having an alluring effect upon the soul, whereby it comes out from every evil thing and cleaves to the Lord with purpose of heart.

4. But sometimes the Lord allures by *applying a promise*, an invitation, a sweet encouragement, an unfolding for a moment of his lovely face, and giving a transient glimpse of his grace and glory. Whenever he puts forth this sacred power it has a drawing influence. This made the spouse say, "Draw me, we will run after thee;" feeling her need of this drawing power which God puts forth by the operations of his Spirit and grace upon a willing heart. We, therefore, read of God's people being "made willing in the day of his power" (Psl. 110:3); and to this points the ancient promise made to Japheth. "God shall enlarge [or, as it is in the margin,

"persuade"] Japheth." (Gen. 9:27.) The word "enlarge" means literally to "open," and thus persuade or entice, or, as it is rendered in our text, "allure," for it is the same word in the original in both Genesis and Hosea. In these, then, and various other ways the Lord allures his people, and by giving them a taste of his beauty and blessedness, with some sense of his dying love, allures them into the wilderness, according to his own words by the prophet Jeremiah, "Go and cry in the ears of Jerusalem, saying, Thus saith the Lord, I remember thee, the kindness of thy youth, the love of thy espousals, when then wentest after me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown." (Jer. 2:2.)

II.—But, to come to our second point, *where* does the Lord by these dealings with their consciences bring his people?—for these allurings are to bring them to a certain point. "*Into the wilderness.*" They would not go there voluntarily: it is a place too desert for them to enter except as allured in a special manner by the grace and led by the power of God. Nor do they for the most part know where the Lord is taking them to. They follow his drawings; they are led by his allurings; they listen to his persuading voice, trusting to him as to an unerring Guide. But they know not the scene of desolation into which he is bringing them: this the Lord usually conceals from their eyes. He allures and they follow, but he does not tell them what he is going to do with them, or where he intends to take them. He hides his gracious purposes, that he may afterwards bring them more clearly to light. Was not this true in a literal sense of the children of Israel in coming up out of Egypt? Were not they, in a sense, allured into the wilderness by eating the paschal lamb, by passing through the Red Sea, and being baptised in the cloud and in the sea, and especially by the cloudy pillar that went before them and led them into the wilderness? Thus the literal Israel was a type and figure of the spiritual Israel.

But look at the place whither he brings his people—*the wilderness*. This is a type and figure much used by the Holy Spirit, and conveys to us much deep and profitable instruction. Let us see if we can penetrate, with God's help and blessing, into the meaning of the emblem.

1. First, then, the wilderness is an *isolated, solitary spot*, far, far away from cities, and towns, and other busy haunts of men; a remote and often dreary abode, where there is no intruding eye to mark the wanderer's steps, where there is no listening ear to hear his sighs and cries. Adopting this idea, we may see from it how the Lord, when he puts forth his sacred power upon the heart to allure his people into the wilderness, brings them into a spot where in solitude and silence they may be separated from every one but himself. The church is spoken of in this chapter as "following after her lovers," but "she could not overtake them;" as she could not find them, they would not seek for her. No inclination have they to follow her into the wilderness: if attracted by her charms they should seek again to entangle her in their embrace, they would immediately leave her upon the edge of the desert. No earthly lover follows her into the wilderness: such cannot bear its solitude. Religion is dull work to the carnal mind; to be alone leaves it too much open to the stings of conscience. To drive dull care away by company and amusements, and shut out all thoughts of death and judgment well suits the natural mind of man. The wilderness, therefore, we take as an emblem of being alone with God, coming out of the world, away from sin and worldly company, out of everything carnal, sensual, and earthly, and being brought into that solemn spot where there are secret, sacred, and solitary dealings with God. Thus, our blessed Lord was in the wilderness forty days, and was with wild beasts. (Mark 1:13.) Far away from the haunts of men, tempted of Satan, ministered unto by angels, in the

wilderness our adorable Mediator held holy fellowship with his heavenly Father. So John the Baptist, his forerunner, was in the wilderness with his "raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loin: and his meat was locusts and wild honey." (Matt. 3:4.) All this was indicative of separation from the world, and a living in solitude, having no intercourse with any but God. Until then we are brought into the wilderness, we have no withdrawal from the creature, no solitary dealings with the heart-searching Jehovah; nor are we separated in heart and spirit from the world without, or the world within, so as to have any real spiritual intercourse with the God of heaven.

2. But look at the wilderness under another character: it is represented throughout the word of God as a *place of trial and affliction*. It was so in an especial manner to the children of Israel of old. No sooner did they enter into the wilderness than their trials began: they had no water to drink, no food to eat; a burning sun above, a parched sand below, dried up, as they complained, their very soul. They remembered the "fish which they ate in Egypt freely; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlic; but now, said they, our soul is dried away; there is nothing at all besides this manna before our eyes." (Num. 11:5, 6.) So it is in grace. The wilderness is a place of trial and affliction; but when the Lord is alluring the soul into it by his teachings and manifestations, it little dreams of the trials and afflictions into which the Lord is bringing it. In the case of the children of Israel, we see how their faith was tried by the perils and hardships of the wilderness; we also see what rebellion and murmuring and fretfulness were manifested by them under it. They were not in themselves worse than other people; but the wilderness brought to light the sins of their heart. So it is with the people of God; wilderness trials bring to light the rebellion, unbelief, and fretfulness of the carnal mind; and it

is this discovery of the evils of the heart under affliction that makes the wilderness a place of such deep and continual trial.

3. But take another idea: the wilderness *a place of temptation*. It was so with the children of Israel. The wilderness brought out the lusts of their heart; and therefore we read that "they lusted exceedingly in the wilderness, and tempted God in the desert." (Psal 106:14.) God tempted them and they tempted God: that is, God tried their faith and obedience, and they tried God's faithfulness and patience. Sometimes they were tempted by hunger; then they were tempted by thirst; hot burning winds; fiery flying serpents; wandering Arabs; pursuing enemies, such as Amalek and Edom; a mixed multitude always lusting to return into Egypt; and at last the wrath of God wearing them out till their carcasses fell in the wilderness; all these things tempted them to unbelief and rebellion. Nay, more, the curse of a fiery law; the judgments of God against transgressors; the strictness of the legal ordinances, and the condemnation and bondage of the covenant under which they were, all made the wilderness a place of temptation, so that none came out of it unharmed but the preserved of God. In a similar way the wilderness is a place of temptation to all who are brought into it. Nay, our blessed Lord himself was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, there to endure temptation, there to meet Satan face to face, and there to undergo those fiery trials by which he himself "having suffered, being tempted, is able to succour them that are tempted."

4. But take another idea, equally scriptural, which is, that the wilderness is a place in which *there is neither house nor home*. It is called "a land not sown" (Jer. 2:2); that is, not cultivated like other lands; in which therefore there is no farm or homestead, no green field or waving corn, but a

place in itself so destitute of food that the traveller must perish unless supplied from some other source. In this sense, the wilderness may spiritually represent those spots in soul experience, where there is no help, strength, or refuge in the creature; in which but for some supply, I might say some miraculous supply from heaven, we must perish. What edge this gave to the complaints of the children of Israel, "Ye have brought us forth into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." (Ex. 16:3.) Were they not naturally in a pitiable spot when they thus first came into the wilderness? But even afterwards there was no water for them but what came from the rock, no food but the manna which fell from heaven; so that even amidst their very supply, they were ever reminded that they were dependent upon God every day. So when we are taken into the wilderness, we learn through its trials and temptations, that we have neither strength nor wisdom nor righteousness; in fact, that we have nothing and are nothing, and are thus made spiritually and experimentally the neediest of all paupers, and most abject of all dependents upon the sovereign bounty of God.

You little thought, when the Lord was graciously dealing with your soul and giving you to taste something of the sweetness of manifested mercy and the blessings of his grace, that this was all intended to allure you into the wilderness where God might speak with you face to face, and there teach you lessons which are to be learnt in no other spot. It is there we learn the evils of the heart; the darkness of our understanding; the alienation of our affections; the wretched unbelief, infidelity, murmuring and fretfulness of our fallen nature; and there also we learn the wondrous long-suffering, patience, and forbearance of God.

III. But to pass on to our third point, when we come into the wilderness under these alluring drawings of God, then the

Lord *carries on a certain work*, of which he has spoken in the text as threefold, and which I shall therefore, adopting that division, now bring before you.

i. The first promise is that he will "*speak comfortably unto her.*" It is in the margin "*to her heart;*" and I shall adopt that reading as my first explanation of the meaning of the word "*comfortably.*" God speaks to the heart: that is the special characteristic of his voice. Men may speak to the ear, and they can do no more; but God speaks to the heart, for it is there that his voice alone is heard. All religion first and last lies in a man's heart. He may have his head well furnished with notions, yet a heart destitute of grace. But not so with the vessels of mercy, for they "*believe with the heart unto righteousness;*" and it is by the voice of God heard in the heart that a saving faith is raised up in the soul. There God must speak if there is to be any heart religion, any sound or saving experience, any knowledge of the truth so as to be blessed and saved thereby. But in the wilderness we learn the deep necessity there is that God should speak to our heart. We want the Lord himself to speak and the Lord alone; and to speak such words as shall reach our heart and enter with a divine power into our conscience. When you are in the wilderness, you have no friend, no creature help, no worldly comfort: these have all abandoned you. God has led you into the wilderness to bereave you of these earthly ties, of these creature refuges and vain hopes, that he may himself speak to your soul. If, then, you are separated from the world by being brought into the wilderness; if you are passing through trials and afflictions; if you are exercised with a variety of temptations, and are brought into that spot where the creature yields neither help nor hope, then you are made to see and feel that nothing but God's voice speaking with power to your soul can give you any solid ground of rest or peace. Thus in the wilderness we learn not only the most

painful, but the most profitable lessons that God can teach us. There we are stripped of all our own righteousness; there we see the end of all our own wisdom; and there all our native strength and creature confidence fail, give way, and come to nought. But as these fail, they teach us the necessity, the indispensable necessity of looking to the Lord that he may be our all in all. The thirst in the wilderness taught the children of Israel the necessity and blessedness of water out of the rock; the hunger of the wilderness taught them the necessity and the blessedness of manna from heaven. As, then, in the wilderness by every trial and temptation, our heart is more laid open to our view; as trials more deeply perplex, as afflictions more heavily press, and temptations more continually annoy, we come to this spot in our own conscience: "God himself must be my all in all: it is he and he alone that must save me; from him my hope must come; from him all my strength, happiness, and consolation; I have nothing but what he gives and am nothing but what he makes." Is not this the language of the way-worn pilgrim in the wilderness? Thus, by these teachings and operations of the Spirit of God upon your heart, you come to this point, that God himself must speak to your heart or you have nothing on which you can hang; nothing to which you can look. Is not this profitable? It may be painful; it *is* painful; but it is profitable, because by it we learn to look to the Lord and the Lord alone, and this must ever be a blessed lesson to learn for every child of God.

But take the words as they stand, "I will *speak comfortably* unto her." We have almost the same words in Isaiah 40:1, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem." It is in the margin as it is also in our text, "Speak *to the heart* of Jerusalem." But what are these comfortable tidings which are to be announced to her, spoken to her very heart? What are those things which alone

can give her true comfort? "Tell her," first says the Lord, "that her *warfare is accomplished*;" that is, that peace is now her happy portion, for her warfare is ceased, her foes defeated, her battles won, her long, hard, toilsome "appointed time" of military service [margin] fulfilled, and that now she may, at least for a season, rest in the Lord as the all-victorious Captain of her salvation. But is there no other comfortable message for her? Yes. Tell her secondly, says the Lord, "that *her iniquity is pardoned*." These are the best of all possible tidings, the most blessed as the most suitable of all good news. The manifested pardon of sin is the best gift of God's grace that can reach a sinner's heart; and indeed without it true comfort there is none. But is there no other message to Zion's heart? Yes. The Lord, thirdly, assures her that "she *hath received* of the Lord's hand *double for all her sins*." What means this "double?" I understand by it the rich superaboundings of grace over the aboundings of sin; that is, the Lord is not content simply to pardon, simply to bless with mercy and peace, but will give them so superaboundingly that they shall be double of all her past guilt and sorrow.

2. But again, the Lord speaks comfortably when he assures the soul of *its interest in the atoning blood* and justifying obedience of his dear Son. Many of the dear saints of God are often very much tried as to their interest in these precious realities. They cannot give up their hope; they cannot altogether deny what God has done for their souls; and yet many anxious doubts and fears distress their mind as to their real interest in the atoning blood and finished work of the Son of God. Satan often takes great advantage of this state of doubt and uncertainty to harass and perplex their mind, and they are thus brought to this point that the Lord alone can satisfy them, that indeed he died for them. When, then, he speaks comfortably unto them, he drops a sweet

promise or a gracious word into their heart, and thus makes their interest in atoning blood and dying love plain and clear. This may seem to fall short of a full manifestation of pardoning love, for it does not come exactly in that way; and yet it is in fact the same, for wherever there is a clear discovery of interest in atoning blood there pardon is virtually manifested, for if they have a place in the heart of Jesus and an interest in the work of Jesus, "there is no condemnation" to them as being thus manifestly "in him" (Rom. 8:1); and if no condemnation there must be justification, and, if justification, pardon and peace. (Rom. 5:1.)

3. But as the Lord's people after they have received manifested mercy are brought into the wilderness, and indeed are allured into it by the drawings of everlasting love, and as their trials and afflictions in it are usually very great, they want *words from God's own mouth* to support and comfort them under their various and severe afflictions. We have seen already that the Lord brings them into the wilderness, that in that secluded, solitary spot he may himself speak to their heart. Little was spoken by the Lord to his people when in Egypt, except to kill and eat the paschal lamb. He reserved his voice till he had got them into the wilderness, and could talk with them face to face, sometimes "in the mount out of the midst of the fire" (Deut. 5:4), and sometimes "in the cloudy pillar." (Psal. 99:7.) Thus also he speaks in Ezekiel, "And I will bring you into the wilderness of the people, and there will I plead with you face to face. Like as I pleaded with your fathers in the wilderness of the land of Egypt, so will I plead with you, saith the Lord God." When, then, the Lord is pleased to apply some gracious word or sweet promise to their mind, or to bring home a precious portion of his truth to their heart, he speaks comfortably unto them, and by thus assuring them of their interest in his love and mercy, he raises up their drooping spirit and gives

them power and strength to bear the weight of every cross laid upon their shoulders.

4. But again, as another instance of speaking comfortably unto them, the Lord from time to time *opens up his past dealings* with his people, casts a ray of light on the way that he has led them in the wilderness, renews and ratifies his former work upon their souls, and thus gives them a sweet testimony that what they experienced in times past was really wrought by his gracious hand in the depths of their conscience.

ii. But to pass on to a second wilderness blessing, he adds, "I will give her her vineyards from thence." What is it that causes many of the Lord's family to go heavily, being burdened? Their want of fruit: that they cannot live as they earnestly desire to the glory of God. They desire to walk in the fear of the Lord all the day long; to be fruitful in heart, in lip, and life. They would be spiritually minded, which they know is life and peace; they would ever be enjoying the presence of the Lord; they would glorify him in all that they say and do. But alas! they cannot be what they would, for they find evil continually working in their heart. The deep-seated corruptions of their fallen nature defile and pollute everything they think, say, and do; and this feeling sense of their innate depravity, and of their total contrariety to all that purity and holiness which they would desire to possess as followers of Christ, casts them down at times into great trouble and distress as well as bondage and confusion of mind. But the Lord still means to make them fruitful in every good word and work, to grant them the desires of their heart, and enable them to live to his praise. How, then, does he effect this? He allures them into the wilderness; thus draws them away from everything that entangles their mind and captivates their affections; brings them into that secret

spot where all without and within is a barren waste; shows them the world in its true colours as filled with thorns and briars; and that vanity and vexation of spirit are all it can give. The experience of these things makes them grieve and mourn under the workings of sin in themselves, and as touched with sympathising affections, under a view of the miseries whereby they are surrounded as the lot of all the children of God. This, then, is the fitting spot where the Lord is pleased to speak to the heart of his mourners in Zion, and reveal comforting words to their soul; and as it is under the gracious feelings thus produced, that fruit is borne to the praise and glory of God, it may be truly said that he gives them their vineyards from thence. But is not this a contradiction, or if not a contradiction, a miracle? A contradiction it is not, for it is in the fullest harmony with God's word and work; but a miracle it is, for indeed such is the nature of all God's dealings with his people. They are all miracles of mercy and grace. It may indeed be justly asked, Can we expect to find vineyards in a wilderness? Does the vine grow there naturally, or can it be made to grow there by artificial cultivation? Is not this the very character of a wilderness, that in it is neither vine nor fig-tree, field nor pasture? How, then, can vineyards be found in the rocky desert? By the same miracle that water was brought out of the flinty rock. No less a miracle is it that the place where fruit is found, is the last place where fruit would naturally or artificially grow. And yet how this enhances God's grace, and displays the greatness of his power.

But let us now see the Lord giving Zion her vineyards in the wilderness. It is by causing the fruits of his Spirit to spring up in her heart, for that is the wilderness to which our text points. Look at her then in the wilderness, bowed down by grief and trouble. *Patience* is given her to bear her afflictions with submission to the will of God. Is not this a gospel fruit?

Godly sorrow on account of her sins and backslidings is graciously communicated: there is another cluster of grapes on this fruitful branch. *Gratitude* to the Lord for his patience, long-suffering, and tender forbearance: is not this another cluster of rich and ripe fruit in this vineyard in the wilderness? *Giving up everything* to his gracious disposal with a sincere and earnest desire, that he would fulfil all his wise purposes, in perfect harmony with his own sovereign will: this is another cluster of grapes on this vine of the desert. *Blessing and praising* God even for his afflicting hand, thanking him for the furnace, for the trials and temptations which have been so mercifully and wisely overruled for the soul's spiritual benefit. Lift up the leaf which has hidden it from view, and see if you cannot find this rich and ripe cluster hanging upon the vine in the wilderness. *Separation from the world*; deadness to the things of time and sense; spirituality of mind; holy and heavenly affections fixed upon things above; here are more grapes that grow upon this vine, planted by the hand of God in the strong desert. *Walking in godly fear*; abstaining from even the appearance of evil; setting the Lord ever before our eyes; living to him and not to ourselves; doing his will from the heart, and walking before him in the light of his countenance; look under the green leaves of a consistent profession and see how these ripe grapes grow in the wilderness into which God allures his people, that he may give them vineyards from thence. How different is nature and grace! In nature the vine grows upon the sunny bank, or in our climate in the rich border, and needs much care and cultivation of human hands to bring the fruit to perfection. But in grace we do not get the vine with its clustering grapes from the rich bed, or the sunny bank; from digging, hoeing, and weeding the native soil of our own heart; but by the Lord's alluring its by his Spirit and grace into the wilderness, where nature withers and dies, but where he causes the spiritual vine to grow and

bear fruit, and the vineyards of his right hand planting, the churches of his experimental truth, to flourish and abound. Have you not often desired to live more to God's glory; to walk more in his fear; to be more spiritually minded; to have the Scriptures more deeply and experimentally opened up to you: and to enjoy more heavenly fellowship with the Father and his dear Son? Sure I am from my own experience, that such is the desire of a gracious heart. But you little thought how the Lord would work in you to will and to do of his good pleasure, and to make you fruitful in every good word and work. You did not think it would be by his alluring you into the wilderness of trial and affliction, temptation and sorrow, and that *there* he would cause the vine of his grace to take deeper root in your breast and cause the fruits of righteousness so earnestly longed for to grow upon the bough, drooping and trailing from weakness, and yet running over the wall, as was said of Joseph. (Gen. 49:22.) But can you not now see the wisdom and mercy of God in this? If we had not been previously brought down into the wilderness we should be ascribing the fruit to our own exertions, to the natural goodness of the soil, or to our skill in cultivation; but it being so purely and I may say so miraculously the especial gift and grace of God, we must acknowledge him to be the sole author of it, and confess before God and man, "From thee and thee only is our fruit found."

iii. But there is another thing which the Lord promises to do for his church in the wilderness: he will give her there "*the valley of Achor for a door of hope.*" This carries us back to ancient days when a very solemn scene took place in the valley of Achor. You recollect that before Jericho was taken, God pronounced a solemn curse upon any man that should take of "the accursed thing"—the spoil of Jericho, which was "devoted" to destruction (Josh. 6:17), as lying under the curse of God; and you will remember that a man named

Achan, despising God's command, and seduced by a spirit of greedy covetousness, took a Babylonish garment, two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold of 50 shekels weight, and hid them in his tent. You will also call to mind how the eye of God marked it all: how when the lot was cast it fell upon the guilty man; how he was taken into the valley of Achor with all that he had, and how "all Israel stoned him with stones and burnt them with fire. Wherefore the name of that place was called the valley of Achor, unto this day." (Josh. 7:26.) To this solemn transaction, therefore, the Holy Spirit makes allusion in the words of our text, where he speaks of "the valley of Achor" as a "door of hope." Achor means "confusion," and as Achan was stoned to death in it for taking the accursed thing, it may also signify "destruction." "The valley of Achor," then, is spiritually the same place as the wilderness, for that to a child of God often is the valley of confusion where his mouth is stopped through guilt and shame, as was Achan's when the lot fell upon him, and he was obliged to confess his sins before God and man. It is also often to the saint of God the valley of "destruction;" for when the accursed thing, the spoil of this doomed and devoted world, is found in his possession as loved and delighted in, a sense of God's anger falls upon him, and by this all his legal hope and fleshly righteousness are destroyed—stoned as it were with stones and burnt with fire, as a just judgment from God for loving the world which is God's enemy. Have you not sometimes feared lest the judgments of God should fall openly upon you, as having sinned against him as covetously and as wickedly as Achan sinned by taking of the accursed thing, and that your lot might be the same, to be a monument of God's wrath even before the face of man? Have you not even feared lest the people of God should rise up against you on account of your sins and backslidings, and in a spiritual sense stone you out of the camp with stones or burn you with the fire of just

condemnation? I believe that the valley of Achor is at times as needful a spot as the wilderness for a child of God: for as all must be brought into the wilderness there to have their vineyards given, so must they come down into the valley of Achor, the place of stopping of mouths, the low and humble spot of confusion and trouble, that there the door of hope may be opened up with a divine hand in their soul. As there is no fruit to be found in heart, lip, or life till God gives it in the wilderness, so till we come into the valley, the low and humble vale of confusion and destruction, there is no good hope through grace communicated. Here, then, is another miracle, for it is in this valley that God opens a door of hope. When the saint of God is sometimes almost in despair through the pressure of sin, the curse of the law, and the condemnation of an accusing conscience, the Lord in this very valley, where all legal hope sinks and dies, opens a door of hope in his desponding heart. But how does he affect this? He sends down a ray of mercy, a beam of grace, gives a view of atoning blood and dying love, or grants a gracious manifestation of his dear Son, and thus revealing the Lord of life and glory as the way, the truth, and the life, opens a door of hope, whereby the soul enters into his gracious presence by the power of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. As holy John "looked, and behold a door was opened in heaven," so there is a door of hope opened to the soul even when expecting Achan's fate in the gloomy valley of Achor. How blessed this is! As Hart says of himself,

"I looked for hell: he brought me heaven."

When you expected wrath, then to find mercy; fearing judgment, to obtain pardon; dreading punishment, to receive the declaration, "I have loved thee with an everlasting love." Is not this an opening in the valley of Achor of a door of hope?

IV.—But let me come now to our last point—*the effect* of these gracious dealings of God in the wilderness, the gracious fruit of *praise and thankfulness* for his speaking comfortably to the heart, giving the vineyards, and opening a door of hope in this gloomy valley. "She shall sing there, as in the days of her youth, and as in the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt."

I have already alluded to the prophetic aspect of this chapter, and that I believe it will be literally and spiritually accomplished in times still to come, when the children of Israel will be restored to the land of their fathers; and then as they sang upon the banks of the Red Sea, so will they again sing unto the Lord a new song, for they will be able to say in every sense of the word, "The Lord is my strength and song, and he has become my salvation." But we will give it a spiritual and experimental sense as now fulfilled in the hearts of God's saints. I have already shown you how God allures them into the wilderness. By these allurements he espouses them to himself. When, then, he speaks comfortably to them in the wilderness, gives them there gracious fruits, and opens a door of hope, he revives and renews those former days of chaste, virgin love. These days God himself remembers, for he says, "I remember thee, the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals, when thou wentest after me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown." (Jer. 2:2.) Had you not once a day of espousals when the Lord was first pleased to reveal a sense of his mercy and goodness to your soul, and thus espoused you as a chaste virgin to the Son of his love? Those were the days of early love, when we tasted that the Lord was gracious, and having a view of his beauty and blessedness, fell deeply in love with him who is "altogether lovely." But, after the days of our espousals, we had to go into the wilderness, there to learn what we are by nature;

there to have the deep secrets of the heart opened up; there to have a long succession of trials and temptations, afflictions and sorrows, that we might learn experimentally what this world is, and what we are as sinners in it. Yet the Lord is gracious still even in the wilderness, and brings his people there that he may communicate unto them the blessings of which I have spoken. Under the enjoyment of them, Zion begins to sing; and what is her song? A new song, according to those words, "O sing unto the Lord a new song" (Psal. 96:1); and yet not new, for it is the same song which she sang "in the days of her youth." Singing, in scripture, is always connected with joy and gladness, and especially after a turning of captivity; for to sing his praise is the instinctive feeling of the soul when experimentally blessed. But Zion in the wilderness had forgotten her ancient song, nor could she sing it again until the Lord spake comfortably to her heart. She could sigh and groan, weep and lament, but no joyful song could she raise, for her harp was hung upon the willows, and in that strange land she could not sing the Lord's song. (Psal. 137:2, 4.) But no sooner does the Lord begin to speak comfortably to her in the wilderness, give her her vineyards from thence, and open the door of hope in the valley of Achor, than a new song is put into her mouth, even a song of praise and thanksgiving to her God. Have you not sometimes been obliged to burst forth into a song of praise to the God of all your mercies for an unexpected visit of his gracious presence, or for some discovery of his goodness, mercy, and love? This is singing as in the days of your youth—those youthful days not only in nature but also in grace, when the Lord made himself very near, dear, and precious to your soul, and the world and sin were put under your feet. Many changes may we have seen since then; many lusts and corruptions may have been brought to light; much unbelief discovered; many backslidings and departings from the Lord have been committed, over the painful

recollection of we may have still to sigh and mourn. But the Lord, who has begun his gracious work upon the sinner's heart, never leaves or forsakes the operation of his own hands; for whom he loves he loves unto the end, and from that love not "things present nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature" shall be able to separate its favoured object. "I will see you again," was our Lord's gracious promise to his disciples, "and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh it from you." When, then, the Lord comes again in mercy and love, he enables the soul to sing once more the song of Moses and the Lamb, "as in the days of her youth, and as in the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt." It is as it were a revival and more than a revival of the blessed days of old. Under this sweet influence, the soul can say, "What have I to do any more with idols?" Then it can leave the world professing and profane, being separated from both by wilderness trials as well as by wilderness mercies. These dealings of the Lord make a deep and lasting impression upon the mind, for his teachings are to profit, and the fruit of them is to be seen in a clearer and fuller separation from all evil and all error; in greater simplicity and sincerity of spirit; in a deeper conviction of the exceeding sinfulness of sin; in increased tenderness of conscience; and in a walk before God and man in closer consistency with the precepts of the Gospel and the example of the Son of God when tabernacling here below.

Can you find anything in your heart and conscience that bears any resemblance to these gracious dealings, these divine teachings? Are you in any one part of the path which I have cast up? Is the Lord alluring you; or are you in the wilderness; or is the Lord speaking to your heart; or is he opening in the valley of Achor a door of hope; or is he putting a new song into your mouth? Compare what you hope and believe the Lord has wrought in your soul with

these marks of divine teaching as traced out by the pen of the Holy Ghost in the passage before us, and if you can find any one of these gracious evidences, bless the Lord for his distinguishing mercy.