

THE WILDERNESS WANDERER

Preached at Providence Chapel, Oakham, on Lord's Day afternoon, September 29, 1867

"They wandered in the wilderness in a solitary way; they found no city to dwell in. Hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted in them. Then they cried unto the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them out of their Distresses. And he led them forth by the right way, that they might go to a city of habitation." Psalm 107:4-7

Ps 107 we may briefly call an epitome of Christian experience, if we view the Psalms, collectively as a general manual of the experience of God's saints in all ages, and a record or register of the varied phases of divine life in the soul, this Psalm, in particular, we may consider as a concise and expressive abstract of the whole. It is for this reason that it always has been highly valued by, and been particularly dear to every one truly taught of God, and most especially to those who have been led most deeply into the mysteries of the divine life. Thus, though I have termed it an epitome or abstract of Christian experience, yet I should add, that it is more adapted to the advanced stages of the divine life than to its first beginnings, and is more suitable to the tried, the exercised, and the tempted of the family of God than to those who walk in an easier path and are led more gently into the ways of grace and truth.

I may observe, also, that in this Psalm there is this remarkable feature which makes it exceedingly interesting as well as instructive and edifying; that in describing various cases of Christian experience, the Holy Spirit has laid down certain marks and lineaments of the divine life which are common to all that are possessed of the fear and grace of

God, and yet has traced out other points in which there is a clear and visible difference. This gives to the Psalm two prominent features, of which the one is unity, and the other **variety**; and what is thus so beautifully and so graphically wrought out in the Psalm exactly corresponds with what observation shews us is the case in different Christians, which makes it doubly instructive, and edifying. We see in them, as we see in the Psalm itself, a unity of divine teaching and yet a variety, so that though all are taught the same truths by the same Spirit, yet not all are taught in the same manner, nor learn them precisely in the same way.

But let me bring before you this peculiar feature of the Psalm a little more fully and clearly. If we read it with a spiritual and enlightened eye, we shall see four different characters represented in it, whom I may briefly designate as, first, the wilderness wanderer; secondly, the imprisoned rebel; thirdly, the afflicted fool; and fourthly, the storm tossed mariner. At your leisure you can carefully read, as I hope you will, the Psalm through, and I think you will find the four characters which I have just named, distinctly traced in it; and in reading the experience, so beautifully described, of these four characters, you will find also these four following distinctive features stamped upon each and all, whether it be the wilderness wanderer, the imprisoned rebel, the afflicted fool, or the storm tossed mariner.

You will find,

1, that they are all brought into trouble;

2, that they all cry unto the Lord to bring them out of their trouble;

3, that they are all delivered by God's special power and interposition; and

4, that all bless and praise Him for His manifested deliverance.

It is because they all unite in these four points that there is what I have called a unity in their experience; and it is similarly because they differ in other points that the Psalm is stamped with such an interesting and instructive **variety**. I cannot at this time dwell upon these points at greater length; but you will find them full of matter for your private meditation, and as giving you an insight into the mind and meaning of the blessed Spirit in what I have called this epitome or abstract of Christian experience.

We will now, then, with God's blessing, this afternoon, look at the character whom I have briefly named as "the **wilderness wanderer**." I will begin by reading the first verses of the Psalm, for, as is often the case, they strike what I have sometimes called the key-note, and in so doing give us, as it were, a divine key to the meaning of the whole. The Psalmist calls upon God's people to praise the Lord: "O give thanks unto the Lord, for he is good: for his mercy endureth for ever." The goodness of the Lord is thus set before our eyes as the grand key to all His dealings with His people, both in providence and in grace, for in both these dominions of His hand, the goodness of the Lord forms the theme of the Psalm. But His goodness, as celebrated here, is not merely such a goodness as our Lord meant when He said to the man who called Him good, "there is none good but one, that is God;" for in this sense He is "good to all, and His tender mercies are over all His works." **Ps 145:9** He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust; is kind to the unthankful and

to the evil; and loveth the stranger, giving him food and raiment. But His goodness, as traced out in this Psalm, and as calling for the thankfulness of the redeemed, is that goodness which is connected with mercy, and is therefore a goodness of grace.

Now, in the deep trials and exercises described in this Psalm, the goodness and mercy of God would be much out of the sight of those passing through them. They both would be obscured by the temptations, afflictions, and exercises described in it; and those who were passing through them would be often tempted to say, "Is his mercy clean gone forever, and will He be favourable no more?" The Holy Spirit, therefore, stamps this grand truth in the very front of the Psalm, to stand there as its permanent headpiece; "His mercy endureth for ever." You doubtless remember the Psalm, **Psalms 136** consisting of many verses, and yet in every verse of it the Holy Spirit sounds the same trumpet note: "for His mercy endureth for ever." It is not only mercy, but enduring mercy, and that for ever and ever-enduring through all trials, temptations, afflictions, desertions, sins, and sorrows; it is, I say, because this mercy can never fail, but lives, and lasts, and stands through every thing which can most strongly try it, that it is so suitable and so precious. The Psalmist, therefore, or rather the Holy Ghost by the Psalmist, before He enters upon the trials and temptations, afflictions and sorrows of the exercised family of God, calls upon them, under a solemn review of what they have known and felt of the enduring mercy of God, as bearing them up and carrying them through all their trials, to give thanks unto a God so good, unto a God of such enduring mercy.

But observe further, how clearly this people are marked out; for who are they who are thus called upon to give thanks unto the Lord because He is good? Who are they who have a

testimony that His mercy endureth for ever? It is "the **redeemed** of the Lord." "Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, whom He hath redeemed from the hand of the enemy." I need not enter into any long explanation of who these redeemed are; for it is a point which in time past I have so often brought before you. I shall only then say, simply, that the redeemed of the Lord are those whom He has redeemed by price and redeemed by power; in other words, those whom He has redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, as the ransom price of their deliverance from sin and all its dreadful consequences, and those who have known the strength of His mighty arm, whereby

He has brought them out of the house of bondage.

But we may observe a still further description of their character: "And gathered them out of the lands, from the east, and from the west; from the north, and from the south." At a hasty glance, you might think that these words referred to God's gathering His people out of Egypt. But a second look will convince you that they were not spoken in reference to Israel of old. The words run: "gathered them out of the **lands.**" Now Israel was not scattered in the lands. Israel was in one land, the land of Egypt. It was not therefore true in their case in days of old that they were gathered out of the lands. But where is Israel now—I mean the literal Israel—Israel after the flesh? Are they not scattered in almost all the lands of the earth? God has fulfilled in their case this threatening of old: "And thou shalt become an astonishment, a proverb, and a byword, among all nations whither the Lord shall lead thee." **De 28:37** And again, "My God will cast them away, because they did not hearken unto Him: and they shall be wanderers among the nations." **Ho 9:17** How literally have these predictions been fulfilled. God's ancient Israel are now "wanderers among the nations," and,

according to His declaration, He has scattered them among all people, from one end of the earth even unto the other. **De 28:64**

There seems to be, therefore, in the words, a prophetic and prospective reference to the future gathering of God's dispersed people, when He will bring back the captivity of Zion, and then it will be literally verified. He will gather them out of the lands, "from the east, and from the west; from the north, and from the south." These words afford a further proof that the redeemed of the Lord who are gathered from the four quarters of heaven, do not represent the children of Israel as brought out of Egypt under Moses. The literal Israel, when brought out of Egypt, was not in the east nor west nor north, but in the south, and in the south only; for Egypt lay to the south, or a little to the south-west of the land of Canaan, as we find it said of Abram: "And Abram journeyed, going on still toward the south. And there was a famine in the land: and Abram went down into Egypt to sojourn there; for the famine was grievous in the land." **Ge 12:9,10** These words, therefore, cannot refer to the literal redemption of Israel out of the house of bondage, when He divided the sea, and caused them to pass through, and made the waters to stand as a heap. But viewed prophetically, with reference to the future gathering of the ancient people of God, they remarkably agree with the language of the prophet: "Fear not: for I am with thee: I will bring thy seed from the east, and gather thee from the west; I will say to the north, give up; and to the south, keep not back: bring my sons from far, and my daughters from the ends of the earth." **Isa 43:5,6** But if you recollect, I commenced with observing that the Psalm was an epitome of Christian experience, and that there were four characters spiritually represented in it. Now, you may be inclined to ask me how I reconcile that assertion with the interpretation which I have just advanced. In order to

clear up this apparent difficulty, you must bear in mind the key which Peter gives us to unlock prophecy: "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation." **2Pe 1:20** By this he means, that in interpreting Scripture prophecy, we are not to limit it to any one particular, for that is the meaning of the word "private," or peculiar interpretation. The very beauty of Scripture consists in the largeness of the interpretation; and in this is especially shewn its divine inspiration, as Peter adds: "For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost." **2Pe 1:21** "Prophecy," he tells us, that is prophecy generally, not "the prophecy," as it is incorrectly translated, but prophecy generally, "came not in old time by the will of man," **which would have tied and limited it to one particular and definite interpretation,** " but holy men of God," being as it were the mouthpiece of the Holy Ghost, for they spake as they were moved by Him, uttered words which had a meaning deeper and larger than any one peculiar and limited interpretation.

It is for this reason that the words of our text bear an experimental interpretation as well as that prospective and prophetic interpretation to which I have alluded. We are, therefore, warranted to give them an experimental interpretation, of which I may observe, as an additional proof, that it makes it harmonise more fully with the general character of the Psalm. We must give an experimental interpretation to the imprisoned rebel, the afflicted fool, and the storm tossed mariner. It would, therefore, dislocate the harmony of the Psalm if we assigned to the wilderness wanderer, and to his being gathered out of the lands, wholly a prophetic interpretation; and we seem thus confirmed in the view, that whatever reference it may have prophetically to the future, it is experimentally true in the present.

Bearing, then, this in mind, and viewing the words as applicable to the saints of God generally, is it not spiritually and experimentally true that God gathers His redeemed out of the lands? And it is often literally true also. We have a gathering here this day, and a large gathering, for instance. This is not a parish gathering: it is a gathering from east and west, from north and south. And what has gathered you together? To hear the word. This has brought you from various places, and you have come far and near this day to hear the word from the lips of your old minister and friend. May you not hear it in vain, and may the Lord bless our meeting together this day.

But it is time to come to the character on whom I shall lay principally my hand this afternoon. And I shall attempt to describe it as here drawn so graphically and beautifully by the inspired pen of the Holy Ghost. I will read my text again that you may see it in the connection to which I have referred: "They wandered in the wilderness in a solitary way: they found no city to dwell in. Hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted in them. Then they cried unto the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them out of their distresses. And he led them forth by the right way, that they might go to a city of habitation."

Observe with me, then, four features stamped upon our text with some degree of prominence.

I.—**First**, the **wanderer** himself, as straying in the wilderness, and finding there no settled habitation.

I—**Secondly**, the **hunger**, the **thirst**, and the faintness of the wilderness wanderer.

III.—**Thirdly**, his **cry** in his trouble, and the **deliverance** vouchsafed him out of his distresses.

IV.—And **lastly**, the **way** in which the Lord ultimately led him forth, which was, "by the **right** way, that he might go to a city of habitation."

I.—I have first to describe the **wilderness wanderer**, that you may have some evidence in your bosom how far the character is yours.

1. The wilderness wanderer we may briefly characterise as one whose heart grace has touched, and to whom the Lord the Spirit has communicated divine life. Now what are the feelings, the exercises, the experiences of a soul thus quickened into divine life?

One of the very first is to **find this world a wilderness**. There is no change in the world itself: the change is in the man's heart. The world is whatever it was, and whatever it will be to worldly men. He may think it altered—a different world from what he has hitherto known. His friends, his companions, his very relations, the employment in which he is daily engaged, the general pursuits of men, the cares and anxieties, hopes and prospects, amusements and pleasures, and what I may call the general din and whirl of life, all seem to him different to what they were; and for a time perhaps he can scarcely tell whether the change is in them, or in himself. This however is the prominent and uppermost feeling in his mind, that he finds himself, to his surprise a wanderer in a world which has changed altogether its aspect to him. The fair, beautiful world, in which was all his happiness and all his home, has become to him a dreary wilderness. Sin has been fastened in its conviction on his conscience, and a sight and sense of sin in himself have

shewn him sin in others. The Holy Spirit has taken the veil of unbelief and ignorance off his heart, and shewn him light in God's light. He now sees the world in a wholly different light, and instead of a paradise it has become a wilderness: for sin, dreadful sin, has marred all its beauty and happiness.

As the figure of a wilderness is of such constant recurrence in the Scriptures, and as it is so very expressive, it may be as well to look for a few moments at its character naturally, so as to gather from it what the Holy Spirit intended to convey by it spiritually. In this climate, naturally so humid and so continually refreshed with rains at almost every season of the year, giving us ever verdant fields and trees clothed in leafy green, except in the dead of winter, we have no idea of a wilderness, such as was familiar to those for whom the Old Testament Scriptures were expressly written. And yet I think I can give you a little idea of it. Many of you have been by the sea-side, and have there seen a heap of shingle or sand spreading itself as far as your eyes could reach along the beach, and as you looked at it you would have observed what a contrast there was between this far-spreading beach of shingle or sand, and such a prospect as we are familiar with in the Midland Counties, where, on every side, we see grassy meadows, green hedges, and corn fields laden with crops of grain. Now in imagination take that long tract of desolate shingle or sand into a very hot clime and spread it in all directions, so as to have nothing else before your eyes, wherever you look, to the utmost verge of the visible horizon, and then picture a burning, almost vertical sun above your head, and conceive it beating down with tremendous heat upon this wide and desolate sand, without the least shade of the smallest tree to protect you from its beams. Toiling along a dusty road in the heat of summer, without a single tree, may give you some little idea of the heat.

Now conceive the case of a man, who having been accustomed to live among corn fields and green pastures, and to walk amidst blooming hedges, finds himself unexpectedly in such a wilderness as this, with nothing but the burning sun above, and the hot, parched and glowing sand beneath. I have given you but a faint and feeble description of a desert or a wilderness, such as is known in Eastern climes, and especially in that part of the earth in which Palestine was situated. As far as regarded the land of Canaan itself, it was not a wilderness; for Moses describes it as "a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths that spring out of valleys and hills, a land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and fig trees, and pomegranates, a land of oil olive and honey." But on every side of this favoured land there stretched, especially to the east and south, what Moses calls "a terrible wilderness," a "waste, howling" desert. The figure, therefore, of a wilderness was very familiar to every Israelite.

But now, having thus gathered up what is a wilderness, literally and naturally, let us see how it bears upon the experience of a child of God when quickened by divine power, and made for the first time to feel what this world is; for you will recollect that this was the view which I took of it just now in my explanation. As I said before, it is not because the world itself is changed that he feels it to be a wilderness, but because he himself is changed. Most of us know that our happiness, even naturally, does not consist in outward things. With everything around him that is naturally gladdening and beautiful, a man may be truly miserable; and many a young heart, with blighted affections and crushed prospects, has found a gloomy pall drawn over the whole face of nature, so that the very sky above, and the very earth beneath, seemed clothed in mourning. She who once

was so gay and happy is now thoroughly miserable and the most beautiful scenes of nature cannot restore her to happiness and peace. So it is spiritually with a soul quickened into divine life. There is nothing in this world which can really gratify or satisfy it. What once was to him a happy and joyous world has now become a barren wilderness. The scene of his former pursuits, pleasures, habits, delights, prospects, hopes, anticipations of profit or happiness, is now turned into a barren waste. What once was a blooming corn field, a verdant pasture, a glorious prospect of hill and dale, trees and flowers, is now turned into sand and shingle, with the burning sun of God's wrath above, and the parched sand of his own desolate heart beneath. He cannot perhaps tell how or why the change has taken place, but he feels it, deeply feels it. He may try to shake off his trouble and be a little cheerful and happy as he was before; but if he gets a little fancied relief, all his guilty pangs come back upon him with renewed strength and increased violence.

But even assuming that he is not thus powerfully dealt with, but is led in a somewhat milder way, it still comes much to the same point. God means to make the world a wilderness to every child of His that he may not find his happiness in it, but be a stranger and a pilgrim upon earth. He has various ways of effecting this end. I will name some, that you may compare your experience with it.

1. You have perhaps married the woman or man of your affections, and, in thus obtaining the desire of your heart, imagined to yourself a long series of years of wedded happiness; and the Lord may, for a time, have allowed you a share of the happiness thus pictured to yourself. But He knows full well that the heart of man so rests in, so idolises the creature, that it must be dislodged from this nest, that it may find happiness in Him, and in Him alone. Thus it often

happens, that before the Lord quickens the soul into spiritual life, or sometimes at the very time, using it as an instrument, He brings a blight over this happiness. Sometimes, for instance, He brings the body down with ill-health, or takes away the beloved husband at a stroke, or removes the wife out of her partner's bosom. Or if He spare the root, He may cut off some of the branches; He may afflict or take away the children. Now where is all the pleasure which you once so fondly anticipated, and even for a time enjoyed? It is all broken up, fled, and gone like a dream of the night. And now, what is this world to you? A wilderness; a barren, waste, miserable wilderness.

2. Or take another case which may have been the experience of some here. The Lord may have brought you **down in circumstances**. You have taken, perhaps, a nice farm, and were expecting crops that would repay you for your outlay of capital and unwearied industry; or you have entered into business, and seemed at one time to have had good prospects; or have embarked in the exercise of some professional pursuit, where everything appeared in your favour. But after a longer or shorter time, a reverse came over the scene, and everything seemed to go wrong; your crops failed, or your business fell off, or the profits of your profession dwindled almost to a starving point; and in this, or in some such similar way, all your blooming prospects were blighted, and poverty came in like an armed man.

3. Or assume another case, for I wish to meet the varied experiences of God's people as much as I can. The Lord may have sent upon you, from different quarters, trial after trial, and affliction after affliction. All has gone seemingly wrong with you—business, family, the poor body; and a variety of other circumstances have all opened up continual sources of grief and sorrow. Now what do you learn from these

dispensations of God's hand? One of the first lessons is, that this world is not a place of corn fields and green pastures, with nothing around you but happiness and pleasures, but a barren wilderness. You begin to feel, that after all the attempts that you and others may use to make it a place of joy and happiness, it is a miserable world, and that you are a poor miserable sinner in it.

You will perceive that thus far I have been speaking of God's dealings in providence, for I have often observed, that God speaks to us in providence before He speaks to us in grace. It is often indeed true, that, as Elihu says, "God speaketh once, yea twice, yet man perceiveth it not;" but sooner or later "he openeth the ears of men and sealeth their instruction," so that they are obliged to listen. When, then, He has made them see His hand and listen to His voice in providence, then He begins to deal with their soul. It is, then, especially when the Lord speaks home conviction to the heart, applies His law with power to the conscience, lets down a sense of His displeasure into the spirit, that He turns the fruitful land into a wilderness, as the Psalmist speaks in the Psalm before us: "He turneth rivers into a wilderness, and the water-springs into dry ground; a fruitful land into barrenness, for the wickedness of them that dwell therein."

Ps 107:33,34 The wide flowing river He dries up and turns into a wilderness; the gushing water-springs He stops at their very head, and changes the pastures which they watered into dry ground, and the fruitful land He withers and parches into barrenness. And why? "For the wickedness of them that dwell therein." This, of course, is a general truth; but we may take it experimentally. When, then, he has a sight and sense of the wickedness that dwells in his heart, how it mars all earthly good; what a wilderness it makes this world to a child of God, and turns the rivers of former delight into a barren desert. Instead of the pleasure he expected to

reap from this world, all, all is marred to him; and this is the prevailing and uppermost feeling of his mind: "I have an immortal soul; I have a holy God to deal with: how shall I escape the wrath to come, the wrath to come? What shall I do? Where shall I go? What will be the end of my poor guilty soul unless I get pardon and peace?" Now, to this man the world is a wilderness. Offer him pleasures and amusements; give him money; set before him prospects of advancing himself in life, such as would make the eyes of worldly men glisten with eagerness and desire; and he would say: "What is all this to me, when my soul is at stake? The grand point, the only point which presses hard and heavy upon my mind is this: What will be my portion when death closes the scene?" This concern and anxiety about his immortal soul has turned the world into a wilderness.

Thus far I have described somewhat of the first work upon the soul, and its effect in making the world a wilderness. But we must not limit it to the first work. It is the experience of all the "redeemed;" and those of whom I have thus far spoken are only just entered on it. The wilderness wanderer is more especially he who, like the children of Israel, has had his many years of toilsome pilgrimage in the waste, howling wilderness. He is one, therefore, who has had to wade through trial after trial, affliction after affliction, and temptation after temptation. He is one whom the Lord is continually exercising and trying, for "the Lord trieth the righteous" one whom He is thus experimentally teaching that this world must and can never be to him anything but a barren wilderness. But I must not linger here, and shall therefore pass on to a further elucidation and explanation of the character in the text. I have called him a "wilderness wanderer." Let us now, then, come to his wanderings.

II. "They **wandered** in the wilderness in a solitary way." The wilderness had no roads in it of any kind, or in any direction. No beaten paths were there made, to guide the wanderers, and except from the stars they did not know north from south, nor east from west; wherever they wandered it was a wilderness still of wide, waste, barren sand, out of which it seemed scarcely possible for them ever to emerge. Taking the figure spiritually, does not this feature describe how many of the Lord's people are wandering in a wilderness world, not knowing where to direct their steps, and doubting whether they ever shall emerge out of it, often fearing that they shall die in it, and that without hope?

III. But two other marks are added:

1, That they found the wilderness "**a solitary way;**" and

2, "that they found **no city to dwell in.**" We will consider both these features, and the last first.

1. By finding "no city to dwell in," is meant that the wilderness wanderers found no place where they could take up a settled abode. A city is a place with settled inhabitants, in ancient times, and even now in most foreign countries, surrounded with walls and gates, and thronged with a populous crowd, engaged in pursuits of business or pleasure. As opposed to the wilderness, it carries with it the idea of a fixed and settled habitation; and you can easily conceive what a wide difference there must be between the inhabitants of a wilderness and of a town. Indeed, so great is this difference, that nothing can induce the Bedouin Arabs to live in towns; and on the other hand, the inhabitants of a town could as little exist in a desert. Thus the idea is, that these wilderness wanderers could find no place to obtain settled rest; they could not settle down anywhere, so as to

say: "I have now found a happy home; now I am comfortable; now I am come out of the wilderness, and here I am in a peaceful, inhabited city, where I can eat, drink, and be merry." Far better is it for them to be still wandering in the wilderness than obtain such a false peace and deceptive settlement as this.

And yet, how many of whom we once hoped well seem to be entangled in this snare. There seemed to be a time when we could feel toward them as wilderness wanderers, but now they are sunk into carnal ease and security. They have found a city to dwell in. They are resting in the form without the power; the name without the reality; the doctrine without the life and spirit of it; the shadow without the substance. Far better would it be for them to be wandering in the wilderness than to have reached and found a home in the city of the dead. O how many who once seemed exercised with wilderness trials, and to manifest in them the life of God, are now sunk into a worldly state, and appear more at home with worldly professors than with the living family of God.

2. But now let us consider another special feature that is stamped upon the true wilderness wanderer. His path **is a solitary path**. "They wandered in the wilderness in a **solitary way**." The wilderness was so wide, and they were so thinly scattered in it, that they seemed, for the most part, to be without friends or companions. One was wandering here and another there, each traversing his own path as if he were alone in the desert. How this adds to its trials and difficulties. In a literal desert, it is almost, if not wholly, death to be alone; and therefore they always travel in caravans or companies. You will recollect it was to a company or caravan, as we now call it, of Ishmaelites or Arabs, that Joseph was sold **Ge 37:25**; and so it says in **Ps 84:7**: "They go from strength to strength," where it is in the margin, "from

company to company." But in the spiritual wilderness there is not much of this company, nor do the pilgrims heavenward travel much in caravans. Theirs is for the most part a solitary way. Hart well says

Companions if we find,
Alas! how soon they're gone;
For 'tis decreed that most must pass
The darkest paths alone.

AMEN.

Now I believe that all true religion is a solitary religion—a religion carried on between God and one's own soul; and I do also believe that a saint of God can never do without solitude. He must have seasons of retirement for prayer, reading, and meditation. I pity those who are compelled from circumstances to live in houses or families where they can scarcely get an hour's solitude to meditate, to pray, to confess their sins, and to carry on that gracious and heavenly intercourse with God, without which religion soon dwindles away. The best of our religion is what we learn in solitude, in the quiet hours of the day, or the solemn seasons of the night. But as the Lord knows all our circumstances, as in trouble He can give quiet, so in a crowd He can give solitude. And thus He no doubt often deals with those of His dear people who are crowded up in their rooms or their families, even amidst crying children or a confused din of conversation. They can sometimes be, as it were, dead to all surrounding noises, and dropping their head upon their bosom, commune with God as much as if they were in the most solitary spot. Besides which, they can get away sometimes from their families into the fields; can creep under a hedge, or stand under a tree, as I have often done, and there pour out their souls before God. A mechanic, too, or a labourer who truly fears God, when engaged in his daily

work, can carry on secret dealings with God who reads the heart, when those who work at the same bench, or are labouring in the same field, are carrying on a busy intercourse with thoughts and desires of carnality and sin.

As solitude in itself cannot make a carnal man spiritual, so company, when he is thrown by necessity in it cannot make a spiritual man carnal. He may be surrounded by company, as in a railway carriage, where all manner of conversation is going on, yet sit in a corner and have solitary dealings with God. The Lord may come down and commune with him while all around him is vanity and sin. I remember when the Lord was first pleased to indulge my soul with some sense of His goodness and mercy, I have sat in a room, where I was almost obliged to be present, and when those around me were talking of all manner of worldly things, my heart was secretly going up to the Lord. It is not the place, it is not the company, though we should never go into the place or company where we cannot ask the Lord to accompany us; but at any time and at any place the soul may have solitary moments of prayer and meditation, and the Lord may commune with it from off the mercy seat.

But look at it in another point of view. A solitary way is for the most part the lot of God's people; and especially in our darkest paths, as I have just quoted from Hart, each has to walk alone. We are brought at times into circumstances where none can help us but God; into temptations out of which none but the Lord can deliver; into trials under which none but the Lord can support; afflictions in which none but the Lord can comfort; and fears in which none but the Lord can relieve. As thus walking in a solitary way, we find we are in places where God alone can do us any good. And as all the help and support we get, we get in this way, it endears to us a solitary religion. Not that we do not prize and love the

company of those who truly fear God; but the Lord is often pleased to place us in those peculiar circumstances when all our help must come direct from Him alone. We must die alone, and therefore it is good to learn to live alone.

But time admonishes me to pass on with our subject. What was the effect of their wandering in the wilderness, and journeying each in such a solitary way?

II.—"**Hungry and thirsty,** their soul fainted in them." Their wanderings produced the necessary effect of hunger and thirst; for the wilderness gave them no food to eat, no water to drink. This was a terrible state to be in. The pangs of hunger and thirst are acute enough anywhere; but in a wilderness they are little short of death. But I must not here enlarge. Let us view it spiritually. Wilderness wanderings had given them a spiritual appetite; and thus they were brought under that gracious promise, "Blessed are those that hunger and thirst after righteousness." They wanted food which the world could not give; they wanted water that the world could not supply. Having tasted that the Lord was gracious, having been fed in some small degree with heavenly manna, it put them out of taste with earthly food, They might have all the world could offer if they liked. But the world cannot give them the heavenly food which their souls long for. It cannot give sweet and precious views of Christ, cannot apply promises to their heart, cannot bestow upon them manifestations of the Person and work of Jesus, or drop one drop of His love and blood into their soul. It is the want of these divine realities which makes them hunger and thirst. It is for these testimonies, these blessings, these manifestations, this sweet assurance of pardoning love, with the witness of the Spirit to their spirit that they are God's children, that they inwardly long and pine. They are not hungering and thirsting after such earthly things as worldly hearts seek and delight in, but in the enjoyed favour and

presence of the Lord. But this is often either delayed or given in a scanty measure; and what was the consequence?

That "**their soul fainted in them.**" They hungered so long; they thirsted so long; the wilderness was so long and wearisome; the sun beat so hotly upon their head; their feet were so galled with the stones; the sand so got into their shoes, that having no food brought and no water given, the effect was that their soul fainted in them. It was in their feelings as if they must die, must languish away; as if there was nothing in them that could keep them alive, because they had not the food they longed for, nor the water their souls desired. How distressing was all this; but what blessed marks of life. Those dead in sin, or dead in a profession, are not thus hungering and thirsting after Christ. They are not crying out for Christ; not thirsting for the water of life, for the visitations of the presence of God, for a smile of Jesus' face, for a touch of Jesus' hand, for a whisper of Jesus' love.

Now have you never thus hungered for the Lord of life and glory? Have you never thus thirsted for the water of life; never thus felt faint and exhausted because no word was given, no promise applied, no blood sprinkled, no love shed abroad? If not, can you be one of these wilderness wanderers? But on the other hand, if you say, "I do hunger after Christ; I do thirst for the water of life; my soul is often very faint and weary, and I am languishing for a word from His gracious lips; but I find this to be a wilderness world, and myself a wanderer in it: mine is a solitary path, and I find no city to dwell in;" these are marks that God Himself has consecrated as evidences of life divine; these tally with the description given by the blessed Spirit of a wilderness wanderer; and the Lord has written these things in the word of His grace to encourage those who need encouragement.

III.—"Then they **cried** unto the Lord in their trouble, and he **delivered** them out of their distress."

1. What a mercy it is, that the Lord does put a sigh and a cry into the bosom of His people; what a mercy to have a spirit of prayer. I do believe when God is pleased to quicken the soul into life divine, He always gives with that life divine, a spirit of prayer; and I believe also though that spirit of prayer may sink at times very low, it never is extinguished out of a believing heart.

Now, it is by this spirit of prayer, as the blessed Spirit draws it forth, that these wilderness wanderers are enabled to plead their cause with God, to groan forth the desire of their soul, and sigh out their earnest petitions. Don't you find sometimes there is a sigh and a cry going up out of your heart, and this with great earnestness and supplication? But who has raised up this sigh and cry in your heart, and drawn it out, as it were, from your inmost soul, but the Spirit? And by what means chiefly has He wrought? Is it not by bringing you into the wilderness, making you to see and feel that this world is little else but a scene of sorrow and trouble, and thus causing you to walk in a solitary way where none can do you good but God Himself? Have you not found that these exercises have made you seek the Lord with a sincerity and earnestness that you never knew before, and that in them you have learnt the reality and power of prayer?

O what a mercy it is that there is a God to go to! a God who hears and answers prayer? And what a blessing it is to be able to unbosom before Him the burdened spirit! Observe the words: "Then they cried unto him in their **trouble.**" If you have trouble it is a sufficient warrant for you to go to God with it. Do not trouble yourself with the question, whether you are elect or non-elect. God does not put it in that shape,

and you need not. The answer will best show on which side of the line you stand. Does He not say: "Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver thee and thou shalt glorify me?" If you have a day of trouble, you have here a sufficient warrant to call upon God. Write not, then, bitter things against yourself. If you are enabled to sigh and cry unto the Lord there is life in your soul. God has quickened you by His blessed Spirit if He has put a sigh and cry into your bosom. Remember the men in Ezekiel on whom the Lord put the approving seal. It was those who sighed and cried for the abominations which they saw and felt in themselves and others. **Eze 9:4** If, then, the Lord has put a sigh and cry into your bosom on account of your felt inward abominations, you are one of those on whom He has set His seal. Sanctified troubles are some of our greatest blessings; and one of their blessed fruits is that they keep us from settling on our lees and being at ease in Zion.

Careless, worldly minded, proud, covetous professors, stink in carnality and death, where is there ever a cry in their soul? They may have a formal prayer—a morning prayer, an evening prayer, a family prayer, and all as round as a ball, and as cold as Christmas. Stiff and frozen in carnality they are ice themselves, and they bring their ice with them wherever they come. But God does not suffer His people to go on in this cold, lifeless, frozen, icy way, with mere formal devotion, lip service, and prayers worn out like an old shoe with long and continual treading. He sends afflictions, trials, and troubles upon them, takes them into the wilderness, exercises them well in the path of tribulation, and supporting them under it, raises up a cry which He is sure to hear.

2. Our text, therefore says: "And he delivered them out of their distresses." How He does this is blessedly intimated in a verse of the Psalm before us: "He sent his word and healed

them." Thus in due time He sends a healing word, gives a gracious smile, drops into their soul a sweet manifestation of His goodness and mercy, and thus delivers them out of their distresses. They had been in a very distressed state of mind because they could not see their signs; and they scarcely knew where they were or what they were. But when the Lord appears in them and for them, He delivers them out of their distresses. One smile, one touch, one soft whisper, one intimation: "I have loved thee and given myself for thee;" one breaking in of His presence and His power; one manifestation of pardoning mercy,—let the soul have but this, and it will say, "It is enough, Lord, it is enough; I want no more."

When the promise thus comes with power, and the Lord appears, every crooked thing is made straight, and every rough place plain; sins, however great or many, are cast behind God's back; and every thing made clear and right between God and the soul. Now it sees the reason why the world was made to it a wilderness; the necessity that there was for the afflictions, bereavements, losses in providence, trials in the family, difficulties in circumstances, dark clouds which so long hung over it; and it is fully reconciled to the rough and thorny path by which it has been brought. It can now say, feelingly and gratefully, "I needed every stroke; I needed to be dealt with in this painful way; I was getting into a worldly state of mind; I was hugging my idols and would not part with them. Bless God for the affliction; thank Him for His rod upon my back; honours crown His brow that He would not let me go on in my sins, but would tear my idols from my breast, and pulled me roughly along, if He could not bring me to my right mind in any other way."

IV.—But how this tallies with the last point of our text: **"He led them forth by the right way, that they might go to a city of habitation."**

1. It was He who led them forth. He was going before them, then, all the time; His sacred light in their conscience, His secret life in their soul, His inward teachings in their heart were all along guiding them, but at the time they could not see it. They were led along by a sure and powerful, yet invisible hand. They had to be brought forth out of many evils open and secret, known and unknown, seen and unseen, external and internal. And from no one of these could they deliver their own souls. How deeply were they indebted even to restraining grace. Can you not say so? What has kept you from bringing an open disgrace upon the cause? What has kept you tender in conscience, consistent in conduct, circumspect in life, desirous to adorn the doctrine, and afraid to dishonour it? Why, the grace of God and that only, and this working for the most part in and by a path of tribulation. Your exercises of mind; the various trials and temptations that have fallen to your lot; your griefs and sorrows; and especially those which have most closely touched your soul, have all worked for good, to make your conscience tender, to show you the evil of sin, and to keep you from being wrapped up in carnality and covetousness, or entangled in pride and self-righteousness. Thus, you may bless the Lord for being afflicted as well as comforted, being wounded as well as healed, emptied as well as filled, stripped as well as clothed; for all have worked together for the good of your soul.

It is much in this way that the Lord leads His people forth; and when the Lord leads, we can follow. The path may be rough, but if the Lord upholds, we can walk in it without stumbling. Whatever the Lord bids, we can do if we have but

His presence; whatever He calls upon us to suffer, we can bear if we have but the approbation of a good conscience and His approving smile. O the wonders of sovereign grace! The cross is no cross if the Lord give strength to bear it; affliction is no affliction if the Lord support under it; trial is no trial sweetened by His smile, and sorrow no grief if lightened by His love. It is our fretfulness, unbelief, carnal reasoning, rebellion, and self-pity which make a rough way a wrong way; but grace in its all-conquering power, not only subdues every difficulty without, but what is its greater triumph, subdues every difficulty within.

Now look back and see how the Lord has led you from the very first. Can you say, looking up to God, "Lord, it has all been a wrong way?" You may say, and say feelingly, "I have often done what is wrong, wrong in myself, wrong to myself; nay, I have always, left to myself, chosen the wrong way; my wicked, perverse heart has ever chosen what was pleasant and sweet to the flesh, and thence has sprung so much of my guilt and shame. But as to the way in which the Lord has dealt with me, where I can trace any of His dealings, I dare not so insult His divine Majesty, or so belie my own conscience, as to say He has led me wrong." God forbid that any saint of His should say the Lord has led them by a wrong way. He cannot do but what is right; for as He is good and doeth good, so He is right and doeth right. It is, and ever must be, one of the strongest principles of our faith, that every way must, in the end, be a right way if it be God's way.

And is it not, according to the verdict of our own conscience, a right way to lead us forth out of the world, out of sin, out of self, out of pride and self-righteousness, out of evil in every form, into everything which is good, holy, gracious, acceptable, saving, and sanctifying; everything that can

conform us to the image of Christ, who was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and make us meet for the inheritance of the saints in light?

II. And what is the end of all this leading and guiding? "That they might go to a city of habitation"—the new Jerusalem, the glorious city which hath foundations whose builder and maker is God. There, some of our friends have gone before; there they dwell as citizens of that blessed city which is all of pure gold, like unto clear glass; a city which has no need of the sun, neither of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of the Lord lightens it, and the Lamb is the light thereof. The Lord has led forth our dear friends, whom He has taken out of our midst, and some since I was here last, that they might go to this city of habitation, inhabited by the spirits of just men made perfect. This is the city of habitation where the saints will for ever dwell; and the Lord is leading forth each and all of His wilderness wanderers by the right way, that He may bring them in the same way into His eternal presence, and to the enjoyment of those pleasures which are at His right hand for evermore.