

The Wine of Astonishment and the Banner of Truth and Love

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"Thou hast shewed thy people hard things: thou hast made us to drink the wine of astonishment. Thou hast given a banner to them that fear thee, that it may be displayed because of the truth." Psalm 60:3, 4

When the ever-living, ever-glorious Son of God left the bosom of the Father, in which from all eternity he had lain, to tread this vale of sin and sorrow, he came to do the will of him that sent him. Such was his own declaration even before he came into a time state. "Then said I, Lo, I come [in the volume of the book it is written of me] to do thy will, O God." (Heb. 10:7.) In a similar spirit, in the days of his flesh, he expressly said, "I came down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him that sent me." (John 6:38.) To understand this more clearly, it will be desirable to see what this will of God was which his only begotten Son came down from heaven expressly to do. This will, then, was, that he should obey and suffer: obey the law which we had broken, and suffer the penalty, its curse and death, its consequence, which we had incurred. But this obedience and this suffering were very closely and intimately connected, as we read "He learnt obedience by the things which he suffered." (Heb. 5:8.) And again, "He became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." (Phil. 2:8.) Now in order that our blessed Lord should be qualified to obey and suffer, it was necessary that he should take a nature capable both of obedience and of suffering. His divine nature was incapable of either. Deity cannot obey, as Deity cannot suffer. He, therefore, had to assume a nature that was capable of obedience and of

suffering, and that was a human nature; for to the full performance of the work which he undertook, to the complete execution of the will of God, three things were necessary. First, that he should assume a nature capable of obedience and suffering, such as the flesh and blood of the children; secondly, a nature absolutely without spot or blemish, for otherwise the obedience would have been imperfect and the suffering unavailable; and thirdly, that this obedience should be continuous, so that there should be no interruption to it from the beginning to the end. This necessity of continuous obedience and continuous suffering was the reason why our blessed Lord was "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;" for his sorrows as well as his obedience began from the very first. His Virgin Mother bore him as a sacred burden from Nazareth to Bethlehem, no less than seventy miles, just on the eve of her delivery, and thus he may be said to have suffered with her fatigue. When she arrived in Bethlehem there was no room for her in the inn. In a stable among the beasts, and probably unassisted by any female friend, the Virgin Mother brought forth her first-born Son. There was no cradle to lay his sacred body in. The common manger where the cattle fed was the place where the holy babe was laid, when, according to the custom of the times, she wrapped him in swaddling clothes, binding, as it were, his infant limbs even then by legal ties. We do not hear much of our Lord's sufferings during his early life, though no doubt he was obedient and suffering both as a child, a youth, and a man, for he was ever obeying the law; and surrounded as he was by sin and misery in every shape and form, his holy, spotless nature must have acutely suffered in proportion to its innate purity and his zeal for the honour and glory of God. But directly that he entered upon his public ministry the sacred record brings before us obedience and suffering. Thus, when he comes to John to be baptised of him, and John forbade him, saying, "I have need to be

baptised of thee, and comest thou to me?" what was his meek and lowly answer? "Suffer it to be so now, for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness." (Matt. 3:14, 15.) Immediately after his baptism he is "led," or, to use the stronger expression of Mark, "driven" "by the Spirit into the wilderness" amongst the wild beasts, where, after fasting forty days and forty nights, when his body was spent with hunger and thirst, weak and languishing through want of food and rest, he was set as a mark for the horrid temptations of Satan. When these were overcome, and he enters more fully into the discharge of his ministry, going about doing good, he is persecuted to that degree, that he saves his life on two occasions by a special miracle. During the whole course of his ministry, he had not where to lay his head; possessing none of this world's goods, he was maintained out of the substance of his followers. (Luke 7:3.) Not a single step did he take, scarcely a miracle perform, utter a parable, or drop a word without stirring up scorn, enmity, and opposition. Nay, in what we might term his inmost circle, he still had to suffer. One disciple denies him; another betrays him; and all forsake him and flee when "he is led as a lamb to the slaughter." And when we come to the last scenes of his holy, obedient, and suffering life, what agonies our gracious Lord endured in the gloomy garden, where his anguish of soul, under a sense of the weight of sin and the wrath of God, was so unutterably great as to force the very blood through the pores of his skin and to fall in great drops upon the ground. So intolerable was the anguish of his burdened spirit, that even he, who was sent to suffer, and who came for that express purpose, was as if compelled to cry out, "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me;" though at once obedience added the submissive words, "nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt." When, too, we pursue his suffering, obedient path to the cross, and view him by the eye of faith suffering not only intolerable agony of

body, but, what was far heavier to bear, unutterable anguish of spirit as made a curse for us, what a spectacle is presented to our view of obedience unto death when he, the spotless Lamb, endured the wrath of God, poured out without measure, and drank the wine-cup of God's anger to the very dregs. I may sum up the whole with a sentence from Dr. Goodwin, with which, reading it one day, I was much struck as a brief summary of our Lord's death upon the cross: "Of deaths it was the most accursed, at a time most solemn, in a place most infamous, and with company most wretched."

But there was one feature in our blessed Lord's suffering to which I wish to call attention, as it is in some way connected with our text; and that is, the holy meekness and uncomplaining patience with which he endured all the sufferings he experienced from God and man. Truly, "he was led as a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before her shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth." Now the Lord's people have all to be conformed to the suffering image of their crucified Head; for as they are to be conformed to his glorious image above, so must they be conformed to his suffering image below; for "if we suffer with him, we shall reign with him." "If so be that we suffer with him that we may be also glorified together." (2 Tim. 2:12; Rom. 8:17.) But there is one feature in our case which we never find in that of our adorable Lord, that we rarely suffer without *complaint*. We are not like a sheep before the shearers—dumb; or a lamb led to the slaughter—open not our mouth. We are always complaining, murmuring, or repining. Now, as an instance of this, look at the language of the church here, for it is the church which speaks in the words of the text, and puts into language the complaints that God's people so often feel in union with her: "*Thou hast shewed thy people hard things.*" You never find our Lord using such language in reference to his own sufferings. "Thou hast made us to drink

the wine of astonishment." Are not the words so couched as if in them the church would almost reproach God for dealing hardly with her, and putting into her hand this wine cup? And yet to do her justice, her language is not all complaint, for she seems, so to speak, to recollect herself, to gather up her sleeping graces, and animated by a spirit of faith, and finding the benefit of the hard dealings, to acknowledge the goodness of the Lord, even in the very midst of her trouble. "Thou hast given a banner to them that fear thee, that it may be displayed because of the truth."

Let us see, with God's help and blessing, if we cannot find in these words something that may instruct and, if it be the Lord's will, something also that may cheer and encourage our heart. In the hope of so doing I shall,

I.—*First*, as the Lord may enable, direct your attention to the Church's *mournful complaint*: "Thou hast shewed thy people *hard things*: thou hast made us to drink the *wine of astonishment.*"

II.—*Secondly*, the Church's grateful acknowledgment of a *distinctive blessing*: "Thou hast given a *banner to them that fear thee.*"

III.—*Thirdly*, her sense of the peculiar privilege of being a standard bearer of the Lord and his truth: "That it may be *displayed because of the truth.*"

I.—When we are in a state of nature, held down in the chains of ignorance, with the veil of unbelief wrapped in dense folds over our heart, we see God in nothing. Whatever befall us, whether adversity or prosperity, we neither see nor recognize the hand of God in either. If prosperity attend us, we ascribe it to luck, chance, fortune—as some one has called it "the

Devil's trinity;" or to our own skill, industry, energy, and exertion—thus fondly sacrificing to our own net, and burning incense to our own drag. If, on the other hand, matters are against us and our ambitious schemes and projects are overturned, how "unfortunate" we are, how everything is against us, is our immediate cry; and instead of ascribing the adverse stroke or cutting disappointment to the hand of God who holds the reins of government, we look at second causes, and think if we had done so and so, or had not done so and so, if we had taken the advice of this judicious friend, or had not been drawn aside by that foolish counsellor, this mishap, this misfortune, this unhappy circumstance would not have occurred. So blind and so ignorant are we, that whether God smile or whether God frown, (I speak of his providential dealings), we see his hand in neither. But grace opens the eyes, takes away the veil of ignorance and unbelief from off the heart, reveals to us the power and presence of that great and glorious God in whom we live and move and have our being; and thus as the ungodly man sees God in nothing, so the godly man sees God in everything. The one lives without God in the world; and the other lives with God in the world. The one, like an animal grazing upon a mountain, sees nothing and cares for nothing but the grass under his feet; the other, like a man endowed as with a new sight, sees the glorious prospect spread before his eyes, and the hand of an Almighty God in every mountain and vale, in the flowing river, the purling brook, the sky above, and the earth below. If things are adverse with him in providence, he sees the hand of God in taking away; and if things are prosperous, he sees the hand of God in giving. So whether the Lord bless him in providence, or the Lord distress him in providence, grace anointing his eyes as with heavenly eye salve, and giving divine light, enables him to acknowledge the hand of God in both. Is not this the very expression of our text? Does not the church here speak to the Lord as one

to whom he has given light and sight? "*Thou hast shewed thy people hard things.*" The church does not say, "What hard things are fallen to our lot; what misfortunes are our destined portion; how unlucky we are. O how unfortunate! Why could we have been so thoughtless? What could have possessed us to have made such mistakes, and brought ourselves into such difficulties?" But, though pressed down by affliction and trouble, she still looks beyond second causes and the passing events of the day, and, directing her eyes upwards to the great Arbiter of all events, the Sovereign Disposer of all circumstances, says, in the language of faith, though, as I before remarked, in the language of complaint, "Thou hast shewed thy people hard things."

i. Having thus attempted to shew you the utterance of faith in the words of our text, and the humble acknowledgment in it of the hand of God, let us now look at some of these "hard things" which God shews his people; and depend upon it if God shew them, he means that they should see them, and that so clearly that they shall make no mistake either as to the thing itself or his intention in bringing it before them.

1. The first thing which the Lord, for the most part, shews his people is his *inflexible justice*, spotless holiness, and unspeakable purity. This he does that he may convince them of their sins by the application of his holy law to their conscience, and thus bring them to his feet by cutting them off from all creature help or hope. I set this down as the first "hard thing" which the Lord shews his people, because it makes such a wonderful revolution in their feelings and gives them such different ideas about religion, and such different views of its real nature from those which they had entertained before this divine light and life broke up the darkness and death in which they were before immured, as a monk in a cell, or a collier in a mine. Our idea, in a state of

nature, about religion is, that it is something very easy and very pleasant; that all we have to do is to repent of our sins some time or other before we die, if we have not been quite so good as we ought to be; to attend with all due regularity our church or chapel; to do our duty in that station of life to which we are called; be honest and upright, kind and amiable, moral and virtuous, truthful and sincere, and then all will be well at last. It is true, we own, that we are frail and sinful, but God is merciful; and if we only try to do our best, he will accept the will for the deed, will pardon us for Christ's sake, and take us to heaven. This is the religion which is instilled into us for the most part from our very cradle, which we drink in from our religious teachers, governors and governesses, and which is so congenial to our natural feelings and so thoroughly adapted to our reasoning mind, that it grows with our growth, and at last becomes so deeply rooted in our very heart that we would almost sooner part with our life than give it up as false or deceptive. Now this Babel religion, for with all its show and glitter it is but a Babel at best—has to be thrown down; for it is in direct opposition to the truth of God, has neither state nor standing, name nor place, truth nor reality in that word of the Lord which is to endure for ever. It must, therefore, be thrown down, that the temple of mercy and grace may be built up on its ruins. And this the Lord does usually by the discovery of his holiness, purity, majesty, his strict justice and almighty power, so as to convince us not only of our sins, our positive and actual transgressions which he lays upon the conscience, but also of our deep and desperate sinfulness in heart. It is a hard thing—a hard lesson to learn, especially in some cases, where the Lord deals—I was going to say in a very rough manner with a refractory subject; for it seems as if some of God's people needed more rough dealing than others. God indeed giveth no account of any of his matters, so that we cannot always, or indeed often, ascertain the reason why the

Lord deals with the conscience of some more severely than with that of others. But it is evident from observation, and what we hear and read of the various experiences of God's people, that some sink deeper under the law than others, and continue longer under the blow of his hand. But in every case it is a "hard thing" to learn by experience the justice of God, the purity of his nature, the omniscience of his eye, the curse of his holy law, and the condemnation under it of a guilty conscience.

2. But we have another "hard thing" to learn, and that is our *inability* and *helplessness to obey* what the law sets before us. The conscience made tender in the fear of God would obey every demand of God's righteous law, and tries hard at obedience; but is every way baffled. The eyes of the spiritual understanding are opened to see that obedience must be from the heart, in the spirit and not in the letter; and that all imperfect obedience is necessarily unacceptable in the eyes of him with whom we have to do. A divine light is cast into the mind that the law requires a perfect obedience, for none other can be accepted as commensurate with its full demands. But the convinced conscience finds itself unable to render this obedience. Sin is so mixed with all we do that it stains and pollutes every word and work, and thus renders it unfit for divine acceptance. But it is a hard thing for a convinced sinner to find that he can do nothing; that all his tears, and all his strivings and exertions are utterly fruitless, and only make him worse than before. Yet it is a lesson needful to learn, that he may know afterwards the fulness of God's grace, and that salvation is not by the works of the law but by the blood and righteousness of God's co-equal, co-eternal Son.

3. The next hard thing which the Lord often shews his people is their inability not only to obey, but to *repent*. The law does

not speak of repentance. Its tenor is very simple—awfully and majestically severe—"Do and live;" "disobey and die." It never says, "If thou repent thou shalt be forgiven." This is the language of the gospel. We usually know the letter of the gospel before we know the spirit, and hear its word before we feel its power. Now, the gospel says that the way of life is "repentance towards God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ;" but we soon find, in the light of divine teaching, that we are as unable to repent as to obey, as helpless to believe the gospel as to keep the law. Is not this a "hard thing?" Does not this seem to mock our woe? Is it not something like a prisoner in a cell hearing a herald proclaim a gaol delivery and he still fast held under bolts and bars? But, besides this, many of the Lord's people in their early days have to work much in the dark, from the peculiar circumstances under which they are placed. Very few have the benefit of a gospel ministry. The freeness of gospel grace, the fulness of salvation, the benefits and blessings of the sufferings and death of the Son of God, the suitability of the promises and invitations to lost and ruined sinners, are rarely set before them; nor do they hear the gospel experimentally preached, the work of grace traced out, the feelings and exercises of an awakened soul described; and thus for want of a guide they have to "grope for the wall like the blind, and to grope as if they had no eyes."

4. But as these pilgrims heavenward still go on—for there is no turning back in the heavenly way—they meet with another thing in their path which they find indeed to be "hard," very hard—*God's sovereignty*. This peculiar feature of the divine character does not often flash before their eyes when they first set their faces Zionward; but as they advance onward, and get, as it were, like a man ascending a hill at daybreak, more fully into the blaze of the divine perfections, the sovereignty of God seems to meet them in a very solemn

manner, and by its flashing rays upon their path appears as if it would preclude all further advance in the face of him who is a consuming fire. A man may have learnt something of the holiness and justice of God in a broken law, and something also of his own helplessness and inability either to obey, to repent, or to believe, and yet not have the sovereignty of God revealed to his conscience. But sooner or later it is made known to his heart with a divine power, and then it seems to stand in the way almost as the angel stood in the way of Balaam with a drawn sword to slay him. The prophet did not see the angel till the Lord opened his eyes; but immediately that he beheld that awful sight, "he bowed down his head and fell flat on his face." At once he saw it was of the Lord to save or to destroy. The people of God would not believe in the sovereignty of God if they could help it; for it is a doctrine that seems at times to chill their very blood with terror, for upon it they see suspended their own eternal state. But in this matter they have no alternative, for the Scripture speaks so plainly, and the Holy Spirit shining upon the Scripture impresses it with such power upon their conscience that, in spite of their unwillingness to believe, in spite of the opposition made to it by reason, self-love, self-pity, and self-righteousness, they are compelled to fall down before the sovereignty of God as a truth that shines all through the sacred page; and they see in it the grand key to that enigma which, stamped upon the works and words of God, "frustrates the tokens of the liars and maketh diviners mad, that turneth wise men backward and maketh their knowledge foolish." (Isaiah 44:25.) Anointed with this eye salve, they see order where others see only confusion, and trace the hand of God where others view nothing but the hand of man. Thus when they look round upon the world with which they are surrounded—I mean the world of men—they see the sovereignty of God in calling some to a knowledge of the truth, and leaving others to perish in their sins, for they

well know that "there is no difference, for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." Being also thoroughly instructed into a knowledge of the inability of man to quicken his own soul, they see that if any are brought to believe in the Son of God, it must be by sovereign grace. When too they look at the dealings of God with them in providence, or specially in grace, they cannot help but see sovereignty stamped upon them both; that whatever they have, they have by divine donation; and whatever they are, they are by divine operation. Yet the sovereignty of God, as exercised in all matters great or small, is a "hard thing," especially when it touches them close; when it takes away idols out of their bosom, blights their schemes, withers their prospects, disappoints their hopes, and stands before them as a mountain of brass and a gate of iron, which they can neither pass over nor pass through. Still, they cannot get away from the verdict of their own conscience and the testimony of God in his word, that he is a Sovereign, and "doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, "What doest thou?" (Daniel 4:35.)

5. The doctrine of *election* is another "hard thing" which the Lord shews to his people. Some seem to learn it easily enough; but it is to be feared that those who find it so easy to learn and so easy to believe were never led into it by divine teaching. Election has two aspects—one that frowns, and one that smiles. In its hand are seen two keys—one to open, the other to shut. Now, until we are brought to know something of mercy revealed to the soul, and taste the sweetness of gospel grace, the doctrine of election wears a frowning aspect; for it seems to meet us on the road with a drawn sword and to stand right across the path; and every frown it gives stamps the conviction deep in the sinner's heart, that if he is not elected he has no interest in the blood

of Christ, no admission into the kingdom of God. Sin, Satan, and the reasoning mind take advantage of this conclusion, stirring up the enmity of the carnal heart until every vile lust begins to boil and rage against a doctrine which seems to shut them out of heaven's gate, and to consign them to a miserable doom. What a "hard thing" it seems to be to wish to be saved, and yet to find and feel the doctrine of election stand in the way as an impenetrable barrier. It is true that they are drawing wrong conclusions against themselves, for their very desires after salvation mark their interest in it; but until they are assured of their own election it is to them a hard doctrine. So, when turning from themselves, they look around and see how few, speaking comparatively, seem to be in the way to heaven, and their bowels of compassion melt over the members of their own family in whom they cannot see marks of divine life, their natural mind will rise against the doctrine, however plainly revealed in the word of truth, or with whatever power it may be sealed upon their conscience.

6. But again, the Lord's people, besides these hard lessons which they have to learn in the school of Christ, have to carry a *daily cross*; and as they are burdened and pressed down under its weight, they are made to say in substance if not in words, "Thou hast shewed thy people hard things." This daily cross may and does differ in individuals, but every one who has to be conformed to Christ's suffering image has his own, which laid upon his shoulders by an invincible hand, he has for the most part to carry down to the very grave. Thus, some of God's people are afflicted in body from the very time the Lord begins his work of grace upon their heart; or if exempt from disease are shattered in nerve, depressed in spirits, and weighed down by lassitude and languor, often harder to bear than disease itself. Some scarcely ever recover the first impressions made upon their conscience by

a sense of God's wrath, for as body and mind are closely allied, the one sympathises with the other. Some are tied to ungodly partners, meeting with opposition and persecution at every step; others have nothing but trouble in their family, either from the invasion of death into their circle, or what sometimes is worse than death—disgrace, shame, and ungodliness. Others have little else but one series of losses and crosses in their circumstances, wave after wave rolling over their heads until they think they shall lose their reason, be shut up in a madhouse, or die in a union. Others are full of doubt and fear, bondage and darkness nearly all their days, can scarcely ever get beyond a dim hope, or if ever favoured with any comfort are tried to the very quick whether it was genuine. O, view the family of God toiling homeward like the wreck of a broken army, some dragging along an afflicted body, others a wounded spirit; others carrying upon their shoulders dying children, or mourning over the slain in battle; others with scarcely a rag to their back or a crust in their hand, footsore, fearful in heart, trembling at a rustling leaf, a deep river to pass and a furious enemy in sight; and see how they all cry out as with uplifted hands, "Thou hast shewed thy people hard things. Lord, what dost thou mean next to do? Is this to be our earthly lot?"

"Are these the toils thy people know,
Whilst in this wilderness below?"

ii. But we have not yet got to the end of their complaint: "*Thou hast made us to drink the wine of astonishment.*" Let us seek to penetrate into the meaning of this complaint.

Wine in the Scriptures is often used as emblematic, and emblematic of various things which may throw light upon our text. In Palestine the vine grows abundantly, and as in other warm climates where the grape ripens under the hot beams

of the sun, wine was, during the time of the prosperity of Israel, not as with us an expensive luxury, but the common drink of the country. Judah therefore, is said to "wash his garments in wine, and his clothes in the blood of grapes"—as if wine with him were to be as free and common as water. (Gen. 49:11.) So the spouse speaks, "I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey; I have drunk my wine with my milk" (Song 5:1); as if honey, milk, and wine were equally common. Wine therefore being so familiarly known, is used through the Scriptures as an emblem of various things. Taking then a general view of it in its emblematic representation, we may say it represents in Scripture three distinct things.

The first idea represented by it is of *cheerfulness, strength, exhilaration*, that being we know a leading property of the juice of the grape. It is said, therefore, to "make glad the heart of man" (Psalm 104:15), and, by a strong figure, "to cheer God and man." (Judges 9:13.) We also read of it that "wine maketh merry." (Eccles. 10:19.) "Amnon's heart was merry within him" (2 Sam. 13:28); and king Lemuel's mother bid her son "give strong drink unto him that is ready to perish, and wine unto those that be of heavy hearts." (Prov. 31:6.)

But, secondly, it represents emblematically anything which *inflames* and sets the heart on fire, as we read of those that "rise up early in the morning that they may follow strong drink, that continue until night till wine inflame them." (Isai. 5:11.)

But, thirdly, it being the custom in those countries often to drug the wine with spices or myrrh to make it more potent and intoxicating, as the bride says, "I would cause thee to drink of spiced wine of the juice of the pomegranate;" and

we read of "men of strength to mingle strong drink:" wine in Scripture often represents that which *stupefies* and *intoxicates*, overpowering the heart and making the limbs to tremble.

1. In opening up the words of our text, I shall take the last meaning first; for the church, speaking in the language of complaint, in it says, "Thou hast made us to drink of the wine of *astonishment*," which might be rendered, "the wine of reeling," or "the wine of trembling," the idea being taken from the effect of wine in stupefying the mind and making every limb tremble as unable to sustain itself. In this sense wine in Scripture often signifies the wrath of God, under a sense of which the soul reels and staggers like a drunken man. Thus God bade Jeremiah take "the wine cup of this fury at my hand, and cause all the nations, to whom I send thee, to drink it." (Jer. 15:12.) So we read, "For in the hand of the Lord there is a cup, and the wine is red; it is full of mixture; and he poureth out of the same: but the dregs thereof, all the wicked of the earth shall wring them out, and drink them." (Ps. 75:8.) Now this wine cup of God's anger he puts sometimes in the hands of his people. So he says to the church, "Behold I have taken out of thine hand the cup of trembling, even the dregs of the cup of my fury, thou shalt no more drink it again;" which implies that she had drunk it, as he speaks in the same chapter: "Awake, awake, stand up, O Jerusalem, which hast drunk at the hand of the Lord the cup of his fury; thou hast drunken the dregs of the cup of trembling, and wrung them out." (Isa. 51:17.) It is this cup called here "the wine of astonishment," of which the church complains in the words of our text; for when the Lord puts the wine cup of his anger into the hand of his people, in other words, when he reveals a sense of his anger and indignation against sin, he makes them to drink in this sense of "the wine of astonishment;" for the soul reels and staggers

like a drunken man under the sense of God's wrath. The most dreadful feeling that a man can well be exercised with in this life is to have a sense of God's wrath revealed in his conscience: it is the very foretaste of hell. In this sense, the anger of God, like drugged wine, stupefies a man's mind. Like a drunken man, he hardly knows what he is about; all his clear views are lost and gone; his very judgment is confused upon the things of God; and as in natural drunkenness nothing is felt but the effects of the wine, so in this spiritual drunkenness nothing is felt but a sense of the wrath of the Almighty. The Lord, therefore, says to his Zion, "Therefore hear now this thou afflicted and drunken, but not with wine" (Isa. 51:21); and so Jeremiah, personating the Church, cries out, "He hath filled me with bitterness, he hath made me drunken with wormwood." (Lam. 3:15.)

Connected with this meaning, we may take the words in another sense. Wine, especially when drugged, often brings *strange* sights and visions before the eyes. Like a person under the influence of opium, there are strange thoughts in the mind, strange sounds in the ears, strange sights in the eyes. These strange sights and sounds make it "the wine of astonishment," so that a man is, as it were, a wonder to himself.

Have you not sometimes stood astonished at the evils of your heart? As Hart says,

"Lord, when thy Spirit descends to shew
The evils of our hearts;
Astonished at the dreadful view,
The soul with horror starts,"

And again,

"Shocked at the sight we straight cry out,
Can ever God dwell here?"

Have you not viewed the evils of your heart, the corruptions of your depraved nature, the vile imaginations that work up from the bottom of the yeasty deep, until you have scarcely known what to think, say, or do? Are not these strange sights? And the murmuring and fretfulness of your heart, are not these strange sounds? Could you have believed that your heart was capable of such unspeakable baseness? Is not this to be "drunken, but not with wine, to stagger, but not with strong drink?" (Isai. 29:9.)

But look at this "wine of astonishment" from another point of view. After the Lord perhaps has manifestly had mercy upon you, and revealed a sense of his goodness and love to your soul, did you not basely wander from the Source of all your mercies? Did you not insensibly fall into a state of coldness, carnality, and death; got entangled, it may be, in some of Satan's snares, so as to bring great guilt and trouble upon your conscience? Now, when brought out of your backsliding state, did not the Lord make you drink "the wine of astonishment," by giving you a spiritual view of your baseness in forsaking him, the Fountain of living waters, and hewing out to yourself cisterns, broken cisterns, that hold no water? And have not you also been astonished at his long suffering in bearing with you, and his wondrous mercy in again restoring your soul?

2. But we will look at the words in another sense. Wine, as I before pointed out, not only stupefies but *inflames*. There are those whom wine sets on fire, as there are those whom wine stupefies; for it has these two opposite effects on different constitutions. So it is spiritually. When the law of God meets with the corruptions of the human heart, it does not subdue them, bring them into obedience, alter their nature, or transmute them into grace; but rather sets them on fire, as

wine inflames the passions: "Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging." (Prov. 20:1.) So the apostle says: "When we were in the flesh, the motions of sins which were by the law did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death;" and again, "But sin taking occasion by the commandment wrought in me all manner of concupiscence. For without the law sin was dead." (Rom. 7:5, 8.) The law, then, like wine to the passions, inflames the heart's corruptions; and, as the eyes of the drunken, "behold strange women, and his heart utters perverse things" (Prov. 23:33); so, under the influence of the law, every lust and corruption are stirred up in the heart, and perverseness is conceived and uttered by it. This is being made "to drink the wine of astonishment;" for is it not astonishing that a holy law, given by a holy God, should only stir up nature's corruption; that that which is meant to produce obedience should rather stir up disobedience; and that life put into the commandment should work a sentence of death in the soul?

3. But let me now show you another effect of Gospel wine, which is, as I have already hinted, to *gladden, cheer, and exhilarate*. In this sense we may explain the passage which I have before quoted from the parable of Jotham, where wine is said "to cheer God and man." This must be the gospel; for the obedience of his dear Son, which the gospel reveals cheered, so to speak, the very heart of God; and I am sure it cheers the heart of man. In this sense, too, it is still "the wine of astonishment;" for when the Lord by his Spirit and grace makes a wondrous change, and instead of thundering forth the terrors of the law, sounds the silver notes of the gospel; instead of revealing wrath, reveals a sense of mercy; instead of sending the sinner to his justly deserved doom, drops into his heart a sense of his pardoning love and grace; this cheering draught of gospel wine makes him to drink the wine of astonishment. For is it not astonishing that the Lord

can thus "give strong drink unto him that is ready to perish, and wine unto those that be of heavy hearts," bidding him "drink and forget his poverty, and remember his misery no more?" (Prov. 31:6, 7.) Is it not astonishing to the soul how the Lord can pardon a sinner so vile; how his grace can superabound over the aboundings of his sin; and how the blood of the Lamb applied to the conscience purges it from all its guilt, filth, and dead works to serve the living God?

Thus, whether we take the wine to represent the wine that stupefies, or the wine that inflames, or the wine that cheers and exhilarates,—take the figure in all or any of these senses,—well may we say, after we have been made to drink it, even but a few drops of it, "Thou hast made us to drink of the wine of astonishment." Let this, then, ever be deeply graven upon the tablets of our heart, that all God's doings and all God's dealings are doings and dealings to fill us with holy wonder, so that we may well say, "Who is like unto thee, O Lord, among the gods? who is like thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?" (Exodus 15:11); and with the Psalmist, "Thou art the God that doest wonders." (Psa. 77:14.) In the law, he is full of holiness, justice, and majesty; in the gospel, he is full of grace, mercy, and truth: but whether in the law or in the gospel, we may well say of and to him, "Marvellous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well." (Psa. 139:14.) So whether you drink the wine of his anger or the wine of his love; whether the wine cup of the law or the wine cup of the gospel is put into your hands, you may say of each, "Thou hast made us to drink of the wine of astonishment." For take this as my closing remark on this part of our subject, that it is the Lord who makes us to drink, and that neither the wine nor the draught is our own.

II.—But it is time to pass on to the *distinctive blessing* of the

Church, as pointed out in the latter clause of our text; and I think we shall find a connection between her complaints and her blessings: *"Thou hast given a banner to them that fear thee."*

i. You will observe that the church here speaks of a banner being given to them that *fear* God. Now, do you not perceive a connection between the "hard things" which God shows his people and "the wine of astonishment" which he gives them to drink, and the fear of his great name? for these points are put into close association with each other. The connection, then, is this, that the "hard things" which the Lord's people are shown, and "the wine of astonishment" which they are given to drink, impress the fear of God very deep on their conscience. The fear of God is written as with the point of a diamond upon a man's heart by the "hard things" which he shews unto them. A stout heart, far from righteousness, needs some severe dealings with it to bring it down. A powerful impression is required upon such a conscience, so as to leave permanent marks there of the hand of God. Thus these "hard things" leave deep impressions of the majesty and greatness of him with whom we have to do. And is not this a blessing? You may have complained, as the church of old in our text, "Thou hast shewed thy people hard things." O Lord, what hard things thou hast made me to learn. How rough and rugged my path in providence; how strict, how severe my path in grace! In thy holy law; in the discovery of my helplessness and the abounding corruptions of my heart; in the daily cross that so galls my shoulder; in the darkness, guilt, and bondage with which I am so continually exercised, what hard things hast thou shewed me, O Lord, and still continuest to show. Yes; and thou hast made me drink of the wine of astonishment, when I have looked up and had a view of thee, or looked down and had a view of myself. But have I learnt nothing from these hard lessons, from these tastes

and sips of thy wondrous wine? Have they made no impression on my spirit? Have they wrought no good in my soul? Yes, I trust they have; for have they not caused the fear of God to take deeper root in my heart? Thus, the Lord's dealings, though they are "hard things" to bear, and the wine which he gives, though it is the wine of astonishment, yet they are both productive of the greatest blessing God can bestow, which is his fear planted deep in a tender conscience. Light things, easy things, smooth things, soft things, would not have made this deep impression. Milk and water would not have sometimes stupefied, sometimes inflamed, sometimes cheered you. Your religion would have been a religion of milk and water. Why are so few possessed of that heavenly treasure, the fear of God? Because religion is with them so light and easy; they can put it off and put it on; take it up and lay it down; have it or have it not, just as they please; therefore it is with them a thing by the bye, a secondary matter; a Sunday's task, an extra garment, an overcoat, sometimes to be worn, sometimes to be laid aside. But where God is pleased to teach the soul with a high hand and a stretched out arm, and shews his people "hard things" and makes them drink of "the wine of astonishment until they reel and stagger under his powerful stroke, these dealings drive the nail home; they plant the fear of God very deep in a man's conscience. But when the Lord has planted his fear deep in a man's conscience, he brings forth and communicates the distinctive blessing, which is *the banner*. "Thou hast given a banner to them that fear thee."

ii. But what is "the banner" spoken of in our text? It is, I believe, in a few words, the banner of truth and love; or, to put it together in one sentence, "the love of the truth." I think we may prove this from two passages: one shall be the words before us, "that it may be displayed because of *the truth*." Truth, then, heavenly truth, is, according to our text,

one constituent part of the banner. But we read also, "He brought me to the banqueting-house, and his banner over me was love." (Song 2:4.) So we will put the two together, so as to make one inscription, which we will trace upon our banner in letters so broad and clear that he who runs may read it. *Truth in the love of it.* Does not the device of our banner correspond with what we read, "They received not the love of the truth that they might be saved" (2 Thess. 2:10); clearly implying that those who receive the love of the truth shall be saved? My friends, it is not the truth that will save us—naked, bare truth—truth in the letter without the power. It is "the love of the truth," in other words, truth received in love by the application of the blessed Spirit to the heart, making it precious to the soul, in which salvation lies. Never be satisfied with the naked letter of truth; never rest short of the truth applied to your heart in the love and by the power of God. This, then, is our banner—the banner which God gives to those that fear his name.

But what is a banner in its literal, natural signification, for we must clearly understand that to arrive at its spiritual meaning? It is a standard, or ensign, or to use simpler language, a flag. As such it is a frequent Scripture emblem, and we may consider it emblematic of three distinct things, being three purposes for which the banner is usually employed.

1. First, it is a *distinctive mark*. The first thing that is done when an army is raised is to have a distinctive flag. When the Confederates, for instance, in America, broke off from the Union, the very first thing was to discard the stars and stripes, the old national banner, and to have a separate and distinctive flag. How could it be known on which side the soldiers were to fight, unless the flags were different? In our service, I believe, every regiment has its distinctive flag. So

a banner, as a Scriptural emblem, represents the distinctive mark of the people of God, by which they are distinguished from an ungodly world. When the Lord then makes his truth precious to their heart, he gives them a banner to separate them from all others, to make and manifest them good soldiers of Jesus Christ, and to march under his guidance to certain victory. The distinctive mark of a "disciple indeed" is to know the truth, and to find that the truth maketh free. None know the power of the truth, the preciousness of truth, the liberty of truth, and the love of truth, but the family of God. The Captain of their salvation gives them this banner when he seals them his in the love of it.

2. But a banner has another emblematic signification. In the field of battle, when the trumpets sound the charge the flag has to *advance*. It is not left wrapped up in the tent, nor thrown into the baggage waggon, nor hidden anywhere out of sight, but has to wave over the heads of the advancing troops, that they may fight valiantly under its glorious folds. How many a gallant youth of England's noble blood has borne onward the British flag in the front of the enemy. So it is in grace. The church, in the Song, is said to be "terrible as an army with banners." (Song 6:12.) But why should an army with banners be terrible? Because it is an advancing foe. Their banners glitter in the sun; they are raised on high; the gallant ensign leads the way; the soldiers move rapidly after. How beautiful their array, how terrible their advance, how serried their ranks, how dreadful their charge! When a city is to be assaulted and the breach to be stormed, the first sign of victory is to plant the flag upon the battlements. The first Roman foot that trod the British shore when Caesar invaded this island was that of the standard-bearer of the 10th legion. The bold Britons lined the shore with ferocious aspect; the sea was deep and the beach high, so that the troops held back; but the standard-bearer of the 10th-legion

leaped into the sea with the Roman eagle in his hand, bidding the soldiers follow him unless they would abandon their banner to the enemy. Animated by his example, they all rushed into the sea and put the enemy to flight. So God gives a banner to them that fear him; not to hide out of sight, not to conceal it in the tent, as Achan hid his Babylonish garment, but to bear it manfully on high in the very face of all their foes. And what so cheering, what so animating, as the love of the truth? If this will not nerve our hand and strengthen our foot, what will? I hope the Lord has put the love of the truth into my heart, and the banner of truth into my hand. When the Lord "sends among the fat ones leanness;" when he "consumes the glory of his forest and of his fruitful field both soul and body," he adds, to shew the effect of the general distress, "they shall be as when a standard-bearer fainteth." (Isaiah 10:16, 18.) If, then, the standard-bearer faint, how it discourages the rest of the army. When ministers droop their heads, or turn their backs, how can we expect but that discouragement should spread itself amongst the ranks? O, ye standard-bearers of the banner of truth and love; O, ye officers in the army of the living God, be not discouraged; let not your hands droop, still less turn your back upon the foe; but go boldly on, fighting against sin and Satan even unto the death, under the glorious banner of God's truth waving over your head.

3. But, if an army receive a temporary check, or if there be fugitives from the ranks, a banner is of great use for a *rallying point*. The Lord, therefore, says, "Lift ye up a banner upon the high mountain, exalt the voice unto them, shake the hand, that they may go into the gates of the nobles." (Isai. 13:2, 3.) When troops are broken, as they sometimes are by a hostile charge, if there were no banner, no flag, there would be no rallying point. But where they see a banner or flag raised up on high, especially their own

regimental flag, there is a rallying point. In our civil wars, wherever the king was there was his flag, first set up at Nottingham, and then from time to time at his various headquarters. This, then, served as a rallying point for every royalist, as the flag of the Commonwealth for the opposite side. So we poor fugitives, I won't call ourselves deserters—the Lord has no deserters from his army; but we poor fugitives often driven back, though never really defeated, when we see the glorious standard of God's truth waved on high, have a rallying point to bring us back once more under the Lord's own banner; for as Moses, when the children of Israel fought with Amalek, "built an altar and called the name of it Jehovah-Nissi," that is, "the Lord my banner," so "in the name of God we set up our banners." (Psa. 20:5.) Have you not sometimes been sadly scattered by sin and Satan,—thoughts, words, desires, evidences, marks, tokens, all scattered in all directions, as if by a hostile charge? Still you know something of God's truth, for you have felt the love and power of it in your heart; so that if perplexed you are not in despair; if persecuted, not forsaken; if cast down, not destroyed. Love to the truth forms then a rallying point for your scattered experience. Your desires and affections are towards the Lord and his truth. You look up, you see the banner floating on high; you come back to the camp, and once more find yourself underneath the folds of that glorious gospel flag. I have read in books of travels that nothing is so cheering to an Englishman when travelling in the East as to see England's flag flying over a Consulate, or from the mast of a man-of-war. He knows whoever assault him he is safe there, for under the folds of that time-honoured banner England's aegis is thrown over him, yea, England herself, our glorious country is present, wherever her flag flies to protect all her citizens. So it is in grace: where truth is in its love and in its power, there Christ is; there is his honour, there his gospel, there his glory. This view brings us to our next point,

III.—The *peculiar privilege* of the Church of God that this glorious banner is to be *displayed, because of the truth*.

i. If, then, the Lord has given a banner to those that fear his name, and this banner is truth and love, it is not to be concealed out of sight, carried in the pocket, folded round the waist, or thrown into the baggage waggons among the women and children of the camp. It is to be "*displayed,*" that men may read the inscription, whether friend or foe. But this requires both strength and courage. A flag is not easy to carry, especially in the face of the enemy. It requires a stout arm and a bold heart. But unless it be carried on high, who can see its distinctive character or read its inscription—truth in the love of it? May the Lord enable me ever boldly and clearly to display it, and may you and all who sit under the Gospel rejoice in the testimony that the banner over you may be love; and as the Englishman feels protection under England's glorious flag, fly where it may, so when you sit under the sound of the Gospel may you feel yourselves safe under its ample folds.

But I will tell you when it is displayed the best: when *the wind blows* upon it. On a calm day, you know, the flag hangs round the flag-post; the folds droop, and there is no reading the inscription. But let the wind blow: then how the folds are raised; the flag floats boldly forth in all its breadth and length, and the inscription can be read by every eye. So in a spiritual sense: when the heavenly gale of the blessed Spirit blows upon the heart and mouth of the standard bearer, helping him to set forth the truth in the love of it with unction and power, then the holy breeze from the everlasting hills displays the inscription to the soldiers of the cross, and every letter of it testifies to them of blood and love.

ii. But there are three things which I hope we never may be

allowed to do as regards this glorious flag. You know it would grieve the heart of every true-born Englishman—and I think sometimes I am one to the very back-bone—to see any disgrace befall, or insult poured upon our national flag. I am no politician; I therefore merely quote it as an illustration. But you remember lately how we were almost on the eve of war, on account of an insult shewn to our flag: the whole country rose up as one man to resent it. If, then, we are loyal subjects to the King of kings and Lord of lords, whose name we bear, we must feel at least as much loyalty to our distinctive flag, truth in the love of it, as ever we do to our national flag. There are, then, three things from which I hope the Lord will ever keep us. 1. First, may we never *deny* it! If you were an Englishman travelling abroad, in Turkey or any other land, you would not deny your country—the country of your birth—and repudiate her flag. You would not, for the sake of a little gain or for fear of a little contempt, conceal the fact that you were an Englishman, and born under your country's banner. Would it not, then, be very disgraceful in you, after having professed a love to the truth, for the sake of a little pelf, or for a little fear of man, to deny that precious truth under which you have enlisted, and in which at times you have taken solemn pleasure? Never, then, deny the truth, as no true-hearted Englishman ever would, even were death before him, renounce his country's flag.

2. Secondly, never *desert* it; never turn your back upon it, or go from truth to error, or from the love of truth to love a lie. Some cases occurred in the Crimea of our soldiers deserting their flag and going over to the Russians; and one of these wretched deserters, I believe, if not more, met with his just deserts, being shot down by his former comrades before he reached the enemy's lines. So may we never desert our glorious flag—love of the truth. If we do, we deserve to be shot before we reach the camp of the enemy.

3. And, thirdly, may we never *disgrace* it. It is a glorious flag, the flag of truth. It is purity itself, for "every word of God is pure." May we, then, never trail it in the dirt. May none of us who profess to love the truth, by word or deed, ever disgrace that cause which I trust we hold dear, nor dip the glorious flag into the common sewer.

Bear these things in mind. The flag is to be *displayed*, therefore don't let it be a dirty flag. It may be honorably shot through; it may even be stained with blood. This is no disgrace; but don't let it be defiled with the dirt of the street. If you were an ensign in the army, you would not like to carry before your regiment a flag which you had let fall into the mud. Then don't you, with God's help and blessing, ever disgrace the glorious banner of God's truth by letting it fall through your misconduct into the mire. The Lord alone can give us grace to adorn it. May it be our desire not only [not] to deny it, not to desert it, and not to disgrace it; but as gallant soldiers love to glorify the flag of their country, and every regiment in the service will gladly shed their blood to cover it with honour and glory, so may we, as good soldiers of Jesus Christ desire to adorn that glorious flag under which we have enlisted, and which the Lord himself has put into our hands, that it may be displayed, because of the truth.