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SERMON PREACHED BY MR. C. HEMINGTON, AT GOWER STREET
CHAPEL, LONDON, ON SUNDAY MORNING, 4th OCTOBER, 1891

Text: " And David said unto Gad, I am in a great strait;
let us fall now into the hand of the Lord; for His mercies
are great: and let me not fall into the hand of man"
(II Sam.xxiv.14).

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You are aware that this chapter refers to David's numbering of the people of Israel. There is some difficulty connected with this circumstance. For instance, it is said at the beginning of the chapter: "The anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and He moved David against them to say: Go, number Israel and Judah." Yet it was a sin. The act is recorded as being a great sin on the part of David; yet it is said that the Lord moved him to do it. If it was a sin, how could the Lord move him to do it? (James i.13). Here is one difficulty.

Again, we know from Scripture that Moses numbered the children of Israel, and it was no sin in the sight of God; for he only did what God had commanded him to do. We as a nation have, during this present year, been doing the same thing - numbering the population of our country. Why, then, should David's numbering of the people have been a sin? We must understand that the Lord left David: He permitted him to do it. Just as it is said, "The Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart," where the meaning is that the Lord left Pharaoh to pursue his course according to his own wicked heart (Exod. x.20). We are not to understand that the Lord, in a direct way, put forth His power to harden Pharaoh's heart.

Further, we also read: "And Satan stood up against Israel, and provoked David to number Israel" (I Chron.xxi.1), referring to the same circumstance. So you see it is here said that Satan provoked, but in Samuel it is said, "the Lord moved" him - that is, the Lord left him, permitted the devil to come upon him to drive him on to do that which was a sin in the sight of the Lord.

Then, again, very different opinions have been advanced as to why David numbered the people. What was his object? Wherein lay his sin in doing it? Some have thought the sin consisted in this - that he did not demand the half-shekel for the service of the sanctuary which was required on such an occasion according to the commandment of the Lord (Exod. xxx.11-16).

But I have no doubt that the sin lay here - it was the pride of his heart, just as when that blessed servant of the Lord, Hezekiah, took his treasures and exhibited them before a foreign ambassador. That was a great offence in the sight of the Lord (II Kings xx.13). He ought to have been humbled on account of the prosperity which God had bestowed upon him; instead of which his heart was lifted up with pride. (II Chron. xxxii, 25,26). And so David, being influenced by the deceitfulness of his own heart, prided himself in the vast numbers which he had under his command.

Now let us come to something more spiritual, if the Lord will help me to speak from the verse which I have read. I would take it up under three headings. You must read the whole chapter if you wish to be acquainted with all the circumstances of the text.

I. God will be sure to bring His people's sins home to them, will humble them greatly for their sins, and will lead them by His Spirit to offer unto Him sacrifices which shall cost them something - not sacrifices which cost them nothing at all.

II. There are many straits in which God's dear people at different times find themselves, and in which, like David, they know not what to do; and here, again, they will be led by the Spirit of the Lord to act precisely as David acted.

III. The reason of this.

First, then, God will be certain to bring His people's sins home to them. We have no idea, sometimes, when we sin against God, how we shall have to suffer for it in after days. It does not enter our thoughts how the sins will be brought home to us - now and then in a most unlooked-for and heart-piercing way. It has been so in my experience. I find that sin after sin committed by me many, many years ago, iniquity after iniquity rise up like the dead from the grave; and I have often to say with David, in the bitterness of my spirit: "I have sinned greatly in that I have done: and now, I beseech thee, O Lord, take away the iniquity of thy servant; for I have done very foolishly" (verse 10).

Carnal Security. What reason we have to pray against carnal security! In going about from place to place, I see a great many people who, I fear, are being drawn more and more into carnal security. I think I can say this: I have never, during all the years I have made a profession, been made to dread, in my very conscience before my God, carnal security more than I have done of late. But what wickedness God makes His own living and exercised children to see in sin that

plunged them into the deep! What straits, humblings, and distress of mind a holy, sin-hating God makes His children to pass through in order to keep them from carnal security! What an abomination to the Lord it is to see any of His own redeemed children walking in pride!

Again, a prayerless state of soul is sometimes experienced: the form may be complied with, and with great regularity - observing it in the family, going to the chapel on a prayer-meeting evening, answering to the call of the deacon, standing up to pray and yet having week after week very little life, very little of the spirit of prayer, very little real access to God; having been for years accustomed to pray, to quote the old Scriptures and the old hackneyed expressions - these are sure to come out and they help the man, but there is not much of the Spirit.

And what notice God takes of this - for a child of God not to be strictly honest, strictly upright and truthful in acts of business!

Again, it is a great offence to the Lord, very grievous to the Spirit of God, for a child of God to permit things in his own family when the sons and daughters are getting out of their teens, and are manifesting less desire to attend the chapel where the truth of God is proclaimed. And then sometimes the son will say: "Father, I don't care about going to that chapel twice every Sunday. I like to go sometimes to hear Dr. So-and-so or Mr. So-and-so; there is nothing erroneous there." The father says: "Well, John, if you like to go, you must; I don't want to control you." And the father deliberately lets him go - no parental authority. Really, at times I scarcely know what to say. I see it to be now as it was in old Eli's day. He saw many things in his sons which were very discreditable and contemptible. But, instead of reproofing them with parental authority, with sternness and kindness, he just lets them go on in their own way. But the Lord brought a terrible judgment upon his house. Old Eli had to suffer greatly for his sins.

So I would say to every child of God here this morning, if my coming to Gower Street once more should be made the means, in the hand of God, of my hitting any nail on the head and of doing you good in that way, I shall not be here in vain. Many of you here this morning are conscious, whilst you hear me make these remarks, that there are decidedly wrong things in your walk and things that you would be positively ashamed of if, as a member of the church, you had to come here and make an honest confession of what has gone on since you were received as a member. Well, if there should be such things,

depend upon it, God will have a reckoning with you. If you have the life of God in your soul, you will be brought to see that your walk and practice are covered with sin, It is not once, twice, or thrice, but repeatedly, that we have to say, "I have done very foolishly."

The effects of sin are of a hardening nature. Do you feel that? Were it not for the humbling operations of God upon our hearts, we should soon get too hard to feel, too hard to pray, too hard to repent, too carnal for anything of Christ to be seen in us. David would not have acknowledged his sin in numbering the people, in the light in which he saw it and felt it when his heart smote him, if God had not smitten his heart by His infinite and almighty power.

The Power of Conviction. Look again at verse 10: "And David's heart smote him after that he had numbered the people. And David said unto the Lord, I have sinned greatly in that I have done: and now, I beseech Thee, O Lord, take away the iniquity of Thy servant; for I have done very foolishly." Do your hearts smite you for your sins? Does the smiting bring you down in spirit? Does it make you miserable? Does it make you feel what a guilty, vile wretch you are before God? Does it bring you to repentance? Does it make you confess your sins, sometimes with tears, to the Lord? If you know nothing of this experience, I care not who you are, you are very much locked up in spiritual death and carnal security.

Then I said that the Lord will humble His people for their sins. He will not let them hide, cover, or conceal their sins, or to attempt to make their sins good by coming before Him and saying, "Lord, there are others quite as bad as I am." No; the Lord will make His living children speak just as David spoke. "David spake unto the Lord when he saw the angel that smote the people, and said, Lo, I have sinned, and I have done wickedly: but these sheep, what have they done? let Thine hand, I pray Thee, be against me, and against my father's house." This is true humility, when you can take the trials and bitters of life, the threatening dispensations of Providence - the sick body, death in the family, temporal difficulties, sore temptations, severe afflictions of soul - and, upon your knees and in the spirit of meekness, say: "Lord, let Thine hand, I pray Thee, be against me." I have known, during the last month, what it is to be in that spot; I am no stranger to that.

Sacrifice. I also said that the Lord will make His people to bring unto Him sacrifices which cost them something - not sacrifices which cost them nothing at all. David was

commanded by the Lord through Gad to go up and rear an altar. He was to take oxen for burnt sacrifice and to present an offering unto the Lord. You see, he had got wrong with the Lord, and had brought guilt upon his soul by sinning against the Lord. He makes confession of it, but there must be sacrifice acceptable to God through Christ. Araunah wished to present oxen and threshingfloor to David as a gift. But David said: "Nay, but I will surely buy it of thee at a price: neither will I offer burnt offerings unto the Lord my God of that which doth cost me nothing" (verse 24).

Now, if you pray from day to day, and from week to week, with a quiet and easy mind, without an exercised soul, without conflicts, without temptations, without any groanings within which cannot be uttered (Rom.viii.26), you offer unto God that which costs you nothing. Any man can do that. So, if you go on in a profession of religion, as thousands connected with our denomination do - holding the doctrines of grace, yet walking in carnal security, being in no way exercised unto godliness, having no real heart in the profession they make - your profession as a sacrifice costs you nothing.

So, also, a man may go into the pulpit and preach good sermons from Sunday to Sunday, nothing but the truth; and his congregation may say, as soon as they come out of chapel: "What an excellent discourse! What a good sermon we have had this morning!" But if that minister is not a tried and exercised man; if he is not made to go into the depths to get the things that he preaches to the people; if the Word of God does not make him groan, and at times cause him to feel a real burden - that man's ministry costs him nothing.

But God will make His real servants and His real people to offer Him sacrifices that cost them something. I believe that, in the present day, there is an incredible amount of preaching and observance of ordinances and outward forms which are just lame sacrifices in the sight of God (Mal.i.8,13). And people rest in this: that what is wrong, God will make up, and that they will be saved.

My argument is this: the living children of God shall not be suffered of God to go on in this way. If the life of God is in your soul, the Lord will lay your inconsistencies upon your conscience and bring you to your knees. You will appear as a beggar, and from the bottom of your heart you will be made to expect punishment for your iniquity (Amos iii.2). And when the Lord smites, He may take away one of the family, or perhaps smite the wife with affliction, or maybe your own body. And when He does this, there will be such a reminder of your own waywardness, inconsistency, coldness, death, and formality,

that this smiting will bring you into meekness and into a state of deep humility; and you will say: "Lord, let Thine hand, I pray Thee, be against me." You will not say, "Lord, take away all these trials, Why hast Thou smitten me? What have I done to deserve these things?" No, you will say just the reverse.

II. There are many straits in which God's dear people at different times find themselves, and in which, like David, they know not what to do; and here, again, they will be led by the Spirit of the Lord to act precisely as David did.

"For when David was up in the morning, the word of the Lord came unto the prophet Gad, David's seer, saying, Go and say unto David, Thus saith the Lord, I offer thee three things; choose thee one of them, that I may do it unto thee. So Gad came to David, and told him, and said unto him, Shall seven years of famine come unto thee in thy land? or wilt thou flee three months before thine enemies, while they pursue thee? or that there be three days' pestilence in thy land? now advise, and see what answer I shall return to Him that sent me. And David said unto Gad, I am in a great strait" (verses 11 to 14).

Now sometimes the strait will be temporal, sometimes it will be circumstantial, more particularly it will be spiritual. Sometimes a child of God will be up to his very eyes in difficulties, so that he will not know what to do. God will sometimes use that strait to bring His child to say, "Lord, I have sinned, I have done foolishly."

Look at Job: his cattle, his children, all gone! A man more upright than Job there was not. We do not know of a moral blot upon his character. He could say, "Till I die I will not remove mine integrity from me" (Job xxvii.5). I believe he could rightly say that. He has been charged with a want of integrity, but I think his words have been greatly misunderstood. The Lord brought him into a great temporal strait, and brought him to say, so to speak: "Lord, let Thine hand, I pray Thee, be against me. My camels are gone, my oxen are gone. Here is my poor body all boils." "Then said his wife unto him, Dest thou still retain thine integrity? curse God, and die. But he said unto her, Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil? In all this did not Job sin with his lips" (ii.9.10). He had already said (i.21): "Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." And, later, he said, "I know that my Redeemer liveth" (xix.25).

David was in a great strait when Ziklag was taken, until the Lord gave him an answer to his inquiry: "Shall I pursue after this troop? shall I overtake them? And He answered him, Pursue; for thou shalt surely overtake them, and without fail recover all" (I Sam.xxx.8).

Look at the poor woman with but a very little meal in the barrel and oil in the cruse, and the prophet unexpectedly turns in and requires of her a little of what she prepares from this little pinch of meal and drop of oil. She was just going to dress it for herself and her son, then eat it and die. But, you see, "the barrel of meal wasted not, neither did the cruse of oil fail" (I Kings xvii.16).

So when God's dear people are brought to wonder what will be the end of this calamity, this sorrow, this trial, and they say to themselves, "What shall I do?" If a financial trial, they may say: "I have nothing but a few hundred pence. Shall I fall into the hands of my creditor?" Well, the Lord will bring His child to this: "Let me fall into the hands of the Lord. Let Him do just as He pleases; let Him deliver me in His own way."

Sometimes the strait will be circumstantial. What I mean is this: a circumstance may occur to drive you right up into a corner and put you into a great perplexity. Perhaps your name and reputation are at stake through some malicious slander, probably set on foot by someone that has a spiteful feeling against you. I have known some children of God to be brought into such a spot, their moral integrity seriously injured by the false report of some gross conduct. Such a child of God will feel himself to be in a very great strait.

I have known some of my friends to be in such a strait as this (I know one at the present time): a man has two or three sons, and wants to set them up in business; he desires to do them justice, to help them, and do what he can to please them. He does not want one to think he has been favoured more than another or has had better opportunities than another. The man is in a great strait to know what to do for the best.

But, more particularly, as I said, the straits of God's people will be of a spiritual nature: such as great darkness of mind, heavy temptations, and so on. There may be here this morning some poor, tried, down-trodden children of God who are feeling just like this, and saying: "Well, really, I can scarcely see where I am; I do not seem to know whether I am under the law or under the gospel. A threateneing of the word arises against me, some terrible portion weighs heavily on my mind." There is thus wrought within you a great deal of fear,

supposing that you are not right with God (Amos iii.8). The child of God will wonder whether it comes from God for the purpose of showing him that he is not right with God, or whether it is to awaken him to a spirit of real prayer. He will be in a great strait.

On the other hand, when the Lord has come sweetly into my heart and given me gracious promises, I have known what it is to be in a great strait about this. I did feel the word to come so very sweetly, but did it really come from the Lord? Was it the mouth of the Lord that spoke it? Now, haven't you sometimes been in that state in reference to the gentle touches of God upon your spirit? Dear James Bourne, in his letters, over and over again counsels his correspondents not to slight these little touches of the Spirit, not to put away or to reject the little hints and whispers which were so greatly needed - not to turn away from them because they do not come up to what we want. Sometimes, when these little gracious operations of God come, we have so much unbelief that we fear it did not come from the Lord, that it may have been a mere impulse of nature, a little ebullition of one's own spirit. So that we may be in a strait about that.

Again, I have now and then been in a great strait when in much darkness, not knowing whether the troubles or conflicts I was in were meant by the Lord Himself to be an indication of His anger, or whether they were to serve as a humbling process. I have been in a great strait to get the Lord's mind.

Here, then, the children of God, in all these straits, will be led to do just as David did. You see, he did not make any choice of either of the three things which were mentioned to him as a punishment, but he left it with the Lord. "Let us fall now into the hand of the Lord." The Holy Spirit will lead God's living children in the same way, into whatever difficulty, temptation, or straits they may be brought - temporal, circumstantial, or spiritual. By the grace of God, they will say: "Let Thine hand be against me." and at the same time: "Let me not fall into the hand of man, but into the hand of God."

III. The reason of all this. Though God is inexorably just, and it sometimes seems as though He would crush His dear people by His fatherly chastisements, yet His mercies are very great - He is God, a covenant God. He puts His elect into the furnace merely because He loves them, because He loves humility and hates pride, loves the broken heart and hates the hard and flinty heart (Isa. lvii.15, Prov. viii.13; Psa. li.17, Zech. vii.12).

Therefore He kills that He may make alive; He wounds that He may heal (Deut. xxxii.39). He has but one object - that is the good of His people and His own glory. His mercy "is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear Him" (Psa.ciii.17). And therefore, says the child of God: "Let me fall now into the hand of the Lord; for His mercies are great: and let me not fall into the hand of man." God never did, and never will, reject a poor, broken-hearted sinner - never!! Although, from the experience I have been tracing out this morning, the sinner will expect the punishment of his iniquity, and will say, "Lord, let Thine hand be against me," God will not do this. He has promised that His wrath shall never be against such poor souls (Jer.iii.12); He has bound Himself by His covenant to be the God of such through Jesus Christ for ever and ever. (Ezek.xvi. 60-63).
