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Sermon Preached by Mr. J. Delves at "Ebenezer", Clapham on Sunday morning 6.5.51

"Bring my soul out of prison, that I may praise Thy Name."
Psalm 142.7

What remarkable experiences both inward and outward, the Psalmist passed through in his lifetime. Outward circumstances of trouble, affliction, persecution, falls, deliverances, sorrows, joys, difficulties, conflict, more or less, passing through continual change and that attended with inward exercises of conviction, confession, prayer, faith, hope, love and many intimations of the favour of God to him, guiding him, supporting him, and delivering him, when he was beyond the help of man. So it appears to have been in this Psalm here; in his great trouble, whatever it may have been, he appears to find solace and comfort alone in prayer to God, which has doubtless, been the case with many of the Lord's people when they have had to go away from all that pertains to this world and seek contact with God under the burdens that may press upon them, the trials that afflict them, the sorrows that pain them and the griefs that distress them.

What a wonderful mercy it is that there is one avenue that is never closed to a child of God, when he has grace to avail himself of it - and that is the Throne of Grace! So with the Psalmist here. He says, "I looked on my right hand, and beheld, but there was no man that would know me: refuge failed me; no man cared for my soul." A painful sense of desolation, loneliness and despondency filled him by reason of the painful circumstances through which he was passing, for this is said to be "A Prayer when he was in the cave" - probably when Saul sought his life. He says, "I poured out my complaint before God; I showed before Him my trouble. When my spirit was overwhelmed within me, then Thou knewest my path." He found, first of all comfort there, and this can be compared with Job 23, when Job in his affliction looked forward, backward, to the right hand, to the left hand, but it was darkness everywhere. Have any of you known anything about that? Whichever way you looked, just all dark? Dark

in body, dark in soul, and dark in circumstances, a darkness of which you are afraid; yet notwithstanding all that, there was an inward consolation and that was to be found in the fact that the Lord understood. "But He knoweth the way that I take. When He hath tried me I shall come forth as gold". So here - "When my spirit was overwhelmed within me, then" - just then - "Thou knewest my path." What a comfort this is! What a wonderful place for a poor, helpless, ruined, needy, dependent sinner, troubled, it may be, outwardly and troubled inwardly, to find access to the Lord, to breathe his sorrows there!

"Thou knewest my path". We can never get outside of that, you see. However peculiar your burden or trial or circumstances may be, the Lord understands. We can never get outside of that comfort because His eye seeth all things and readeth every thought of the heart. But under his complaint he prays urgently for the Lord to regard him and to deliver him from his persecutors. "Attend unto my cry; for I am brought very low: deliver me from my persecutors; for they are stronger than I." He was in such a case that he could not work deliverance by his own strength; his enemies rode over his head and yet those who were for David were more than those who were against him, because God was on his side. "If God be for us, who can be against us?" So he prays here, "Bring my soul out of prison, that I may praise Thy Name." Circumstantially, it may be a prayer that God would deliver him from that state of trouble and captivity he was in, when thus imprisoned in a cave; but we can go further than that and believe it refers to the bondage of his soul at that time. "Bring my soul out of prison". He does not say, 'Get me out of this cave, Lord, and then I shall be happy', but "Bring my soul out of prison, that I may praise Thy Name." How frequently, as I have hinted before, the Psalmist refers to his soul's case! Surely that was the great thing with him, the one thing that mattered above all beside - his soul - for his soul to be saved. "Say unto my soul, I AM thy salvation". "Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted in me?" This is the inner man, apart from the body although residing in it; this is that immortal, spiritual part that pertains to every

human being by God's creation, seeing that a man consists of body and soul. Moreover the soul is by far the more important consideration, though it is thought of as by far the less, because of the darkness that is upon the mind of man through sin. Yet let us remember what the Saviour said about this - "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" O what would the possession of the whole universe be to a man on his dying bed, breathing his last gasp and just about to enter an unseen, eternal world? O what an inconceivable mercy it is to be brought to know God and to have a real religion; to have in our souls that which will live eternally, the hope of eternal life and a saving knowledge of the everlasting, blessed Gospel! Hence he prays, and it may be suited to the feelings spiritually of some here in this congregation who long for the Lord's appearing and who say, "Bring my soul out of prison, that I may praise Thy Name." True faith in the heart says, 'I must have the Lord for myself, I must know Him, I must see Him, I must have a personal interest in His grace and His salvation;' and O how often secretly may the cry go up before the mercy seat, 'Say it to me, Lord, speak to my soul! "Bring my soul out of prison".'

Well, what is the prison? A prison is a place where people are put, who break the laws of the land; it is a means of punishment established by law for offenders who break it, who steal, commit murder, bear false witness, or break other laws established by our rulers. Surely it is a mercy that there is a form of punishment for offenders, otherwise whose life would be safe? And this is the case in a spiritual way, friends, because we have all broken the divine law, without exception, and are consequently in a prison state even by nature; we are shut up in the prison of unbelief and darkness and ignorance of God. So it is expressed in a way by the Apostle Peter where he speaks of the Lord preaching by His servant Noah to the spirits in prison, warning them of the terrible consequences of their persistent rejection of the truth that he preached; and they reaped the reward of their doings by going into the prison of hell. But still literally speaking, we may observe that many have been cast into

prison for conscience sake, not for any crime they have committed but for their principles and for their stedfastness to their principles. This has been the case, more or less, all through time; it was so in Bible times. Joseph was cast into prison for his fidelity and for his stedfastness and uprightness of character when tempted by Potiphar's wife. He was cast into prison by false accusation. So it was with Micaiah who prophesied faithfully before Ahab who would have had him prophesy otherwise; but he prophesied faithfully of Ahab's death in the battle of Ramoth-Gilead and so it came to pass; yet he was cast into prison and had to eat 'the bread of affliction.' So it was with Jeremiah who was cast into the dungeon of the prison but was by the kindness of Ebed-melech brought out of the dungeon by means of old rags and clouts put under his arms. This was an act of kindness for which Ebed-melech was later rewarded by the preservation of his life and the assurance that no harm should befall him. So with many in the Scriptures in New Testament times too - the Apostles and others. So it has been in the time of the early Church and the more modern persecutions; Latimer, Ridley, Cranmer and others were in prison for conscience' sake. O what great cause we have to be thankful for God's mercies and favours, notwithstanding our terrible national deserts.

There may, however, be some here who feel to be in a prison spiritually. A prison state is expressive of captivity, darkness, bondage, uncertainty and soul trouble in different ways. This is according to the Scripture which refers to such cases. In Isaiah 42 we read that the ministry of Christ will be "To open the blind eyes, to bring ^{out} the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house". So in Psalm 12, "For the oppression of the poor, for the sighing of the needy, now will I arise, saith the Lord; I will set him in safety from him that puffeth at him". "By the blood of Thy covenant I have sent forth Thy prisoners out of the pit wherein is no water." So spiritually many of the Lord's people are in a prison state, especially in these days; that is to say, they are in a state of inward bondage with regard to their souls' salvation, held

captive, held in bonds. It is a mercy where that is felt, because that is a much better state to be in than to be shut up in a prison of unbelief, dead in trespasses and sins, which is the condition of man by nature fallen and who is thereby ignorant of God and has no desire for His ways. The prison state here referred to evidently pertains to the Lord's people who pray to be brought out of their prison state of bondage. Now how can this be described? Why, it is in the first instance, I believe, the work of the Spirit of God bringing gracious conviction of sin, whereby the eyes are opened to perceive where such an one stands with respect to the holy law of God which sinners have broken. All this bondage pertains to the law, more or less, in its effect upon the conscience of a convinced sinner; it is where sin and corruption are felt by a discovery of the Spirit of God whereby a load is felt, and bondage is felt. The law of God claims perfect obedience from all creatures and pronounces a curse upon all who break it. "Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the Book of the Law to do them". We must never lose sight of the holiness and majesty of God in His law that we may be brought under a sober and real conviction of sin by its application to the conscience. What a bondage this brings, what a bondage! - a bondage that may linger month after month or year after year in some cases, with many ups and downs, little helps, tokens and encouragements and yet without the fear being taken out of this soul captivity. O, how it binds one, does it not? - like a heavy chain, and brings one into a state of mind where he is utterly miserable; he cannot enjoy the world because the stamp of death is put upon that to him; cannot enjoy the gospel and the blessings of it because he feels shut out from them; realises he has sinned against God and is held in that state of bondage like a person in a prison. God is truly sovereign in this matter in His dealings with His people. In some cases deliverances are wrought very quickly; in other cases it is a long, lingering bondage. But still, the Lord makes no mistakes and whether this state of bondage

be short or long, it will be sure to be felt where the Spirit of God has awakened the conscience and brought before the view the majesty of God, His holy claims, His righteous character, His solemn warnings and the fearful consequences of being lost and falling under the curse. This is like being in a prison. O some of you have known what this experience was in years gone by and have experienced deliverance from it, have been brought out clearly and sweetly, been blessed with the Lord's pardoning mercy, so that you have felt to be like Naphtali "satisfied with favour and full with the blessing of the Lord." But even after that you can get into a prison state again in different ways and need the same power to deliver again and again. So we have to prove the truth; whatever blessing you have had in years gone by, some of you, however clear that may have been, when you get into darkness again, into a prison state, you need the same power to bring you forth. What a mercy it is that power remains just the same, for God is that God "Who delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver: in whom we trust that He will yet deliver us".

Sometimes certain temptations may hold the soul in a prison state of captivity - temptation with respect to God, His Word, the Scriptures, and what is said concerning the future of man, of hell, of heaven, and particularly these temptations work against the exercise of God's sovereignty; these are Satan's temptations which link themselves, as it were, with unbelief and pride in the heart of man. When thus revolting, all kinds of things rise up within far too terrible to mention, and all this holds one in a prison state. You see, while these different temptations work bitterly upon you, you do not enjoy the sweet liberty of the gospel in your soul. No, you have a hard battle. O you may perhaps go to what this man says and what that man says and thinks, Perhaps they may be right after all, and you try to persuade yourself that after all, surely it must be inconceivable that there can be an endless state, that there can be such a thing as eternal punishment for the damned. O, pride, unbelief and the devil, this trinity of evil, get to work in the heart and say, O, this is inconceivable; and thus you are held in a

prison of temptation more than anyone can express. These things keep cropping up. Sometimes a sudden cross or temptation about a certain matter that may never have pricked you in the same way before, will suddenly shoot into your heart, into your thoughts, and you will find this - the devil will usually try to tempt and distract your mind about the very thing your poor little faith anchors upon, so that if he can, he will drag and tear you away from the one and only Refuge. O how often he may straddle across the path when you go to prayer or when you come to the house of God or when you read the Scriptures. O, these temptations! They are all linked up with sin in your own poor heart, which would quickly fall a prey and make you an open atheist. O yes, and what a state they bring one into, do they not? Just as Paul speaks in Romans 7, "O wretched man that I am, Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" O this prison!

There may be some here who say, "My soul is in a prison; when I try to pray He shutteth out my prayer; I seldom get access there. When I go to hear, my mind is at the end of the earth, there is no power in the preaching, and when I try to sing, the songs of praise have no concern with me. "I am as a sparrow alone upon the housetop." Well, there have been many sparrows alone upon the housetops! But here is the prison state; and what battles you may have when this bondage is upon you. What battles you may have, battles against God's sovereignty, battles against His Word, battles against certain doctrines of grace, battles against election, battles against redemption as to the means of it, battles against everything that is good. What a warfare it is! Your soul is in a prison like a man under sentence of death pacing the prison cell, pacing one way and another way and yet seeing no way of escape. Yes; but what a mercy it is that there is a way of escape from the wrath to come; there is a way of escape from this prison state for the Lord's poor tempted people. "Bring my soul out of prison, that I may praise Thy Name."

Well, who can bring you out of this prison? The Lord Himself! No one else! These prisoners are prisoners of hope, because although they feel sometimes to be in a very despairing state, like a man in the prison cell with the doors bolted and barred, yet notwithstanding all that (and this is wonderful to say) the Spirit of the Lord will keep just an inkling, a ray, a spark of hope in that poor prisoner's soul, to save him from utter despair or to save him from doing some terrible, awful, rash thing. There are "the balancings of the clouds" even in the depth of bondage and darkness. Why, if it were not so, it would be insupportable, O the cries at times when in this prison state. "Have mercy upon me. Bring my soul out of prison. Say unto my soul I AM thy salvation". A little hope rises up sometimes. 'I think I knew a little of what the minister said and sometimes I think there may be something for me.' All this rising and falling goes on in the heart, and what a battle it is! Yes, and what a wonderful mercy it is that in the Lord's good time He works deliverance. He does it Himself and yet it is linked with faith in that poor sinner's heart. These are prisoners of hope of whom we sing sometimes.

"Prisoners of hope, to Jesus turn;
He's a Strong Hold ordained for you;
Gird up your loins, and cease to mourn
And to the Lamb your way pursue."

Only Christ by His good Spirit can turn your captivity. He says so in the gospel according to John. "Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on Him, If ye continue in My Word, then are ye My disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free....If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed." You will believe that when the Lord turns your captivity. O, it is a wonderful liberty! "He shall be as the light of the morning, when the sun riseth." It is His rising that brings the liberty. When Simeon held the Babe in his arms, he said, "Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace for mine eyes have seen Thy Salvation." O, if

the Lord should come and fill you with Himself, break your heart with His love, you would say, Lord, I am willing to live, I am willing to die, and there is such a thing as falling into His hand, having no will, being moulded to His, "Thy will, not mine, be done!"

But how can this liberty come? Is it a legal bondage that holds the soul? Are you held by the fetters of the law? Do you see your guilty condition and yet can get no further? How can liberty come? Why, by a view of your Emmanuel who fulfilled the law and made it honourable for you; it is His justification imputed to you that will bring this sweet liberty. He is the Law-Fulfiller; no liberty can come but by His obedience and death. He went into the prison of the grave and into the prison of hell for you, or there could be no liberty. So we read in Isaiah 53, "He was taken from prison and from judgment: who shall declare His generation?" O be sure that if the Lord went into prison, that is into the grave, for you, there will be no prison of hell for your soul; but be sure you will know something of that prison state, and may often have to cry under it too. When your soul is set free, and that wonderful day comes when you see "One hanging on a tree, In agonies and blood" and see the law fulfilled for you in the perfect obedience of Emmanuel; when that precious atoning blood is sprinkled upon your conscience and the kiss of pardoning love brings a hope of heaven to your soul; you will know what this liberty is! And you will say, "The half was not told me." The deeper your bondage was, the more dense your darkness, the more tight your fetters and bonds, the more heavy your chains, the more fearful your apprehensions, the nearer to hell you were in your soul's feelings, the sweeter will be the sweet rays of His blessed love and grace to your heart, the sweeter will He Himself be, yea, "More precious than rubies", "The Chiefest among ten thousand," "The Altogether lovely". When your drooping faith

views Emmanuel, the Lamb of God, slain to bear away your curse for ever, and then you see Him on high, at the right hand of God, and feel as Richard Dawe said - that you have a Man in heaven - O how wonderful it is! O, the deeper you sink in the depths of despondency, in the mire of inward corruption and guilt, the higher by His mercy will you rise in love and praise and assurance. "Bring my soul out of prison." Well, what can we say of this? Is there one here who feels anything of this bondage, darkness, uncertainty and temptation and yet whose very soul is secretly reaching forth for just a touch of His mercy? O, it cannot be in vain! It cannot be in vain! The Lord help you to press on and may there be yet a day when many shall praise Him and bless Him. It is wonderful to know the Gospel. It is a hope of heaven, to have a standing for eternity and a sweet hope that one day we shall dwell where Jesus is.

Amen.

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