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Sermon preached at "Ebenezer" Clapham by Mr. J. Delves, on Sunday
morning, 12th. October, 1941

Text: Song of Solomon 8.13.

41/A

"Thou that dwellest in the gardens, the companions hearken to
thy voice: cause me to hear it."

Holy Scripture is a declaration or a revelation to us of the mind and will of God. It can be viewed as a complete whole conveying to an enlightened understanding, an awakened conscience, the Source of all essential good, revealing Him the Fountain of all goodness, showing how the streams of divine mercy flow in the Gospel to those who are brought to feel their personal need, and revealing that there is a sufficiency in the Lord Jesus Christ for every one, yea, that there is in the Gospel an infinity, that it is exhaustless and will fill the heart and soul of every vessel of mercy to all eternity. But God has different ways, means or methods to convey teaching to His people in the Scriptures. He may do it by which ever way He disposes; therefore in the reading of the Scripture we have what we might term different parts; that is to say there is the historical part wherein we have recorded things that have taken place according to the providence of God; especially is this true with regard to that particularly attractive and savoury Book of Ruth. It is a wonderful display of divine providence, showing how, even in the ordering of circumstances, and even by the mistake made in the first instance of going down into the land of Moab, God fulfilled His purposes in far-reaching events. There is also the prophetic part, that which delineates future things, things which have not yet been fulfilled; and there is the preceptive part in which we have given us guidance and direction and precepts to govern us in our conduct in this life. In all these things and overspreading them all, and interwoven in them are those glorious doctrines of the blessed God in which He reveals His attributes and shows to man the Way of salvation, laying down the foundation truths essential to our everlasting peace. But it has also pleased Him to convey teaching to His people in a descriptive way; there is what may be termed a descriptive teaching in the Word of God. That is to say the doctrines and truths are to some point conveyed

to the understanding by means of similitudes, metaphors, symbols and allegories. The Lord Jesus Christ Himself frequently spoke in parables; one thing representing another in its substance. We have too, frequently, in the Word, symbols used to set forth different things, sometimes difficult for us to follow. In this very sacred, profound and remarkable Book, we have descriptive teaching; the conjugal union between husband and wife, is used to illustrate the more sacred and profound union subsisting between Christ and His Church. In terms of endearment, closeness, affection and union, there are more or less alternate exchanges wherein each admires the beauties of the other, desires the company of the other, and cannot be happy unless in the mutual enjoyment of sacred intercourse and devotion.

This verse which I have read is expressive of the desire for such communion. "Thou that dwellest in the gardens, the companions hearken to Thy voice ; cause me to hear it." This is a verse in the Song, with some others, where it is difficult to ascertain who is speaking, and it is not a vital point whether it is, as some conclude, the language of the Church to Christ, or that of Christ to His Church. It is to some point an open question and can with some consistency be interpreted either way. Is it Christ speaking? Then He says to His beloved, dwelling in the gardens, "The companions hearken to thy voice: cause Me to hear it". Is it the Church speaking? Then she addresses her Beloved saying, "The companions hearken to Thy voice: cause me to hear it." Speak to me, do not leave me out, cause me to hear Thy voice. This, according to the marginal reference has a bearing in the second chapter where the Lord Jesus, speaking to the Church says, "O My dove, that art in the clefts of the Rock, in the secret places of the stairs, let Me see thy countenance, let Me hear thy voice; for sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely." So it may be interpreted, as it is by some divines who understand the original to be the Word of Christ to the Church, "The companions hearken to thy voice, cause Me to hear it."

First of all there is the figure which may to some profit be

considered of the dwelling place of the Church. "Thou that dwellest in the gardens". The figure of a garden is often used in this Song, sometimes in the singular and sometimes in the plural. Earlier in the Song, the Church is spoken of as a fountain of gardens, a well of living waters and streams from Lebanon. In another place in the singular, "Awake, O north wind; and come, thou south; blow upon my garden that the spices thereof may flow out. Let my beloved come into his garden and eat his pleasant fruits." Then He says, "I AM come into my garden, my sister, my spouse." Thus it is a figure used of that which is for the time being the residence or dwelling place of the Church. A garden is an attractive figure for several reasons. First it is a private or separate and enclosed piece of ground, gathered out or taken out from the waste land and appropriated for some particular purpose. A garden is not like a common; that is a high road for the general public. A garden is a private place to be used for the delight and interest of its owner. So it is in grace. The Church of God is gathered out from the wilderness, from the world that lieth in sin and iniquity; it is separated, sanctified by God the Father in the eternal decree of electing love and given to Christ to be a dwelling place; a dwelling place not only for the sons and daughters of Zion, but a dwelling place for Christ. There is what we might term here a co-habitation; each dwells in the other. The Lord has, with respect to His Church, gathered her, called her out from the world, ^{where} each member of it was before being quickened by divine grace. Thus we are exhorted to look, to reflect, to look back to the rock whence we were hewn and the hole of the pit whence we were digged, in another figure, where the members of the Church are spoken of as stones gathered from the quarry of nature, shaped and fixed into the temple of God. A garden is a separate place, not a common highway, and the Church of God is in this sense separate from the world. "A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed." Thus is the Church separated from the world and this garden may be viewed as the one Church of Christ, those gathered out from the

north, south, east and west in the decrees and purposes of God, chosen from eternity, a people formed for His praise as an act of His sovereign will, having mercy upon them, not for anything in themselves good, but simply and purely as an act of His sovereign purpose of mercy. "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy." They are gathered out, every one in the Lord's purposes in His own time, wherever they are, or whatever they have been.

"There is a period known to God,
When all His sheep redeemed by blood
Shall leave the hateful ways of sin,
Turn to the fold and enter in."

What a mercy that grace from eternity in God has separated us thus unto Himself! What a mercy if that grace has entered effectually and savingly into our hearts so that we have been separated and have been sweetly compelled to follow the direction given by the Apostle to the people of God to separate themselves from the world. "Come out from among them and be ye separate and touch not the unclean thing, and I will receive you, and be a Father unto you, and ye shall be My sons and daughters."

Then a garden is also a cultivated place. It is a place where very little, if anything, that is useful and profitable will grow of itself. Nothing will grow of itself in a garden except weeds and thorns and briars; whatever is useful for various purposes has to be planted there. It is a place of cultivation and the Lord is the Husbandman of this garden, whether it is considered of the Church as one Church, or of visible Churches in a plural sense, gathered together in the providence of God for public worship and for observing the ordinances of His house. If it is considered as individual members of the mystical body of Christ, every one individually is as a garden where the Lord comes, works, cultivates, disciplines and teaches, and so brings forth fruit to His praise. In a garden different things have to be done at different seasons of the year. There is the preparing of the ground, the sowing of the seed, planting the plants, watering and rooting up, and gathering the fruits. So the Lord says of His people that He will

watch over them to root up, to throw down, to destroy, and to build and to plant. He comes down, as it were, into His garden that is separated for Himself, appropriated for a particular use, as defined in the hymn,

"We are a garden walled around,
Chosen and made peculiar ground,
A little spot enclosed by grace,
Out of the world's wide wilderness."

The Lord deals with His people, cultivates them as one would cultivate a garden for profitable uses, for bringing forth fruit or food, and this is done according to His wisdom, judgment and discretion. The Lord has His own set times, ways and means of teaching and instructing His people in heavenly things, in sowing the seed and in putting His plants in the ground. Thus by His infinite mercy and grace He implants in the heart His holy fear and tends the life that is implanted by His grace; for no man can keep alive His own soul.

Then again a garden is a place of fruitfulness; it is for gathering fruits of different kinds; it bears different kinds of fruit. So in grace, as an effect of this gracious cultivating of the soil and of the plants and trees, different fruits are borne. The fruits of the Spirit are defined in Galatians, "Love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance; against such there is no law." No fruit is borne without this heavenly Husbandman; the fruits of the Spirit are not inherent in ourselves, we cannot yield anything profitable, cannot bring forth anything useful, cannot give birth to any spiritual good, or even a spiritual desire of ourselves. That is a true though humiliating Scripture, "Without Me ye can do nothing". Without Him we can do nothing; we are just like dead sticks apart from His communications of grace and mercy to our souls, and apart from that divine teaching which is wrought in the heart by God the Holy Ghost. It is a mercy of God's grace to be dealt with, disciplined, rooted up, to have the fallow ground of the heart broken up, to have the seed of His grace sown there, to be wounded, stripped, cut off, killed, built up and established. Where the Lord once begins His work in the heart He will never forsake it. He deals with His people sometimes by painful means such as losses, crosses, difficulties and trials. The tree has to be pruned, stripped and dealt with.

"Thou that dwellest in the gardens, the companions hearken to thy voice, cause me to hear it." The one great point here is this co-habitation as I think we may term it. The Lord brings His people out of the world and plants them in this garden. He calls them a Church, they are His people, His by divine choice, by redeeming love, by effectual calling. There they are! Some may be greater than others; some have more attraction than others; some are more fruitful than others; and the Lord knows how to deal with each one and He will fulfil His purposes accordingly. In a sense it would be right to say that there is no such thing as a fruitless christian; if we stand in union with Christ we shall bear some fruit, as we have it recorded in John's Gospel, "I AM the Vine, ye are the branches; he that abideth in Me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit." That may be a searching word to some of us, but if the Lord Jesus Christ dwells in the heart, if we dwell in this garden and are under this heavenly cultivation we shall bear some fruit to His praise. But He dwells in the gardens, that is in the gardens of visible Churches, where His presence is felt, where He puts His plants and where He comes in the discoveries of His grace, showing Himself, revealing Himself, where He is held in the galleries, where He is seen through the lattice.

A Gospel Church, if it is a living Church, is as a garden where the Lord comes and deals with His people and causes the spices of His grace, the fruits of His Spirit to flow forth. Different seasons come upon it too, the Winter season as well as the summer season. We seem to be passing through the winter season now do we not? The Church prays for the north and the south wind, "Awake, O north wind; and come, thou south; blow upon my garden, that the spices thereof may flow out." In the times in which we are living we seem to be having the cold, piercing, cutting, keen north wind; we are in much affliction, the Church is in a low condition, generally speaking, and to a great point, alas! it seems that the Lord is absent from us; it would seem that He does not dwell in the gardens as once He did. But still the truth remains; the Church is the dwelling-place of Christ and Christ is the dwelling-place of the Church. "The Lord hath chosen

Zion, He hath desired it for His habitation. This is My rest for ever, here will I dwell; for I have desired it." What an honour that is put upon the Church, upon the sons and daughters of Zion.

On the other hand the dwelling place of the Church is in Christ. "Lord, Thou hast been our dwelling-place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever Thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, Thou art God." He is a dwelling-place, a refuge, a hiding-place for His people. Christ is said to dwell in the heart by faith. "That ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend what is the length and breadth, the height and depth of the love of Christ." What an amazing mystery this is and what a mercy too! Do we bear any evidence that the Lord is thus dwelling with us? Do we bear it individually? Do you get communications from Him? Do you hear His voice? Does His love sometimes touch your heart, melting your spirit down under a sense of His goodness? It is communication that we want, do we not? But here it is He dwells, in His gardens; He comes into His garden to gather lilies. He tends the garden and delights to be in it.

Then there is the request here. If we say it is Christ speaking here to His spouse then He says to her, "O thou that dwellest in the gardens, the companions hearken to thy voice cause Me to hear it." It is as though He would say, 'You have much to say that is of little profit, you speak to one another, but speak to Me'. "Let Me see thy countenance, let Me hear thy voice." True it is that we should be more fruitful, I believe, in our souls, if we were more frequently addressing the Lord Jesus in this way. One hymnwriter speaks of the complaints we make and says,

"Were half the breath thus vainly spent
To heaven in supplication sent,
Your cheerful song would oftener be
Hear what the Lord hath done for me."

But the point is this, the Lord Jesus delights to hear the voice of His people, His spouse, His beloved. How can the voice of the Church be attractive to Christ her Beloved? I think in different ways; first in confession and prayer. There is an attraction to Christ when one of His children bends the knee before Him and from his heart sends forth

those supplications, prayers and desires for His presence. In confession of sin the voice may be heard, in repentance, in acknowledging one's unworthiness and sinfulness, and in praying for those blessings that may be felt to be so essential and that are so earnestly desired. "Cause Me to hear it." 'The companions hearken to thy voice, you speak to each other about it, cause Me to hear it, bring your case to Me.' There is such a propensity with us to speak of our difficulties, perplexities and trials to one another; but now the Lord speaks and says, 'Speak to Me, do not content yourself in laying out your troubles before one another; cause Me to hear it, bring your case to Me; you have something pressing upon you, some burden, trial, loss or cross; bring your case to Me.'

It is also a delight to Christ to hear the voice of His spouse recording His praises and acknowledging His great goodness. It behoves us to mention the loving-kindness of the Lord to us, and to mention it to Him, to render praise to Him for His goodness. Truly "The Lord is good, a Stronghold in the day of trouble, and He knoweth them that put their trust in Him." Let Him hear your voice sounding His praises, acknowledging what He has done; thank Him for it. If the Lord has done anything for your soul, acknowledge it to Him in humble thankfulness. "Cause Me to hear it". We may perhaps speak very profitably to one another about what we hope of things in ourselves; and it is good, it is strengthening, refreshing and confirming sometimes; but now the Lord comes in, the Beloved to His Church, and says, 'You talk to one another about what has been done for you, the companions hearken, cause Me to hear it; if I have done anything for you, honour Me by it; them that honour Me I will honour, cause Me to hear it.' The voice of the Church, the sons and daughters of Zion, is also attractive and delightful in the ears of Christ, when they do speak to one another with a desire for His honour and glory, of what He has done for them. "Come and hear all ye that fear God and I will declare what He has done for my soul." "Thou that dwellest in the gardens, the companions hearken to Thy voice; cause me to hear it."

You may doubt if this is a right interpretation of the words, but

it does have a consistency, and may I think be so interpreted, though it seems more to represent the language of the Church. 'Thou that dwellest in the Church, come to me; Thou dwellest with Thy people, come and dwell in my heart, others hear Thy voice, let me hear it.' There is something very sweet about this acknowledgment of the Church. She does not address Him as a stranger, for He had taken gracious knowledge of her, and has come down and is dwelling in the garden. She is in union with Him and He dwells in her heart; she enjoys His presence and bears the fruits of His Spirit. But one's own case is this, 'The companions hearken to Thy voice, I want to hear it, cause me to hear it.' That is it! Sometimes you like to hear what the Lord has done for others; they speak of good things, they have had a blessing; Thou hast spoken to them, they have something, cause me to hear, come into my heart, come to me. I know I am unworthy and not fit; I deserve only to be cut off; I am but a poor, weak, withering plant; but come with the water of Thy grace and Spirit, refresh, revive and restore me and give me to hear Thy voice. Lord, it will not do for me only to see what Thou hast done for others; I must have it.' That is it, is it not? Some of you may be like that. At one time it may be a strength, comfort and joy to hear the companions speak of what the Lord has done for them. I have known the time, and perhaps you have, when you would gladly creep into a corner, for you have nothing to say yourself, and hear what the Lord has done for His people, and see if there is any comfort in it for you. At other times you may be rebellious because the Lord favours others and leaves you out. It is good to hearken to His voice. Cause me to hear it; I want to hear it. There is ground, too for such a request, because the Lord says of His sheep, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them and they follow Me." This request made by a believer (for it is in the heart of no one else) delights Him. Cause me to hear it.

How do the Lord's people hear the voice of Christ? They hear it in three ways. They hear it in the Gospel as spoken and communicated to them by the Holy Ghost in His invitations, His directions, and

His promises. It is a still, quiet, confirming, consoling, comforting voice; effective, powerful, permeating; a still, small voice. That still, small voice did more for Elijah than all the fire and earthquake and storm. You will know it, and I believe the one who makes this request will know it when it is heard. It is sweet when in response to it He comes into your garden, the garden of your heart and speaks to you. Perhaps He speaks an invitation. 'Come to Me, weary and heavy laden.' Are you thirsty? Come to the waters. "The Spirit and the bride say, Come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely." O, you may come, come to this Fountain, poor, weary person, come to the Fountain and drink of it. "Cause me to hear it." At one time you may hear the voice in a direction, at another time in a promise, but it is very condescending on the part of Christ to speak, and a great honour conferred on any poor sinner is it not? There is no enmity here, but there is a sense of sweet unworthiness. 'Lord, come and break my heart; come and do something for me; do not speak to others and leave me out altogether.' "Let me hear Thy voice." May the Lord grant this mercy to us and it will be well with us. Amen.