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LONGING FOR COMFORT

SERMON

by

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preached on Tuesday 12th December 1939 at Priory Chapel, Maidstone

Text: Psalm 119 v. 81-2

**My soul fainteth for thy salvation: but I hope in thy word. Mine eyes fail for thy word, saying,
When wilt thou comfort me?**

This remarkable Psalm reveals somewhat of David's inner life and his exercises of soul before God. In the Psalmist's history, as recorded in Scripture, comparatively little is given of the soul exercises he underwent. Indeed, it is remarkable how little the Scriptures relate of what we term 'experimental religion' in the history of the various saints of God; relatively little is said about the work of grace in them – the most is to be found in their prayers, and especially in the Psalms, which seem to have been, all through the ages since they were penned, a favourite part of the Word of God to His exercised people, inasmuch as they find a chord touched in their hearts by the expression here and there of similar feelings and exercises in those who went before.

It is not a little mercy to find our troubles, our fears, our anxieties, our desires, our hopes expressed in the words of divine inspiration; for although the Psalmist expressed what he felt, yet what he expressed, as recorded in Scripture, is by divine inspiration. It is not for me to explain inspiration; I think it is not explicable by any natural rule; only the result of divine inspiration is that *the Bible is the Word of God*. not that the *men* themselves were inspired, as if all that David ever uttered, or all that Paul ever spoke, was absolutely infallible and inerrant, but the whole Scripture record is inspired. Inspiration is more graphical than personal. It is the Word of God that is inspired. When holy men of God penned the Scriptures, they were under that especial direction of the Spirit, whereby He carried them along in thought and in word so that they were, in producing Scripture, the penmen of the Holy Ghost. Neither does this obliterate their personality, nor invalidate the fact that in recording their own experiences and feelings, they were at the same time writing for the people of God in all ages. And indeed it cannot be doubted that many of the penmen wrote things beyond what they fully comprehended, especially when they prophesied of "the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow," as Peter speaks (1 Pet. 1 v. 11). If the

mystery of inspiration offends your carnal reason, carnal reason is wrong; divine inspiration is right. Let carnal reason bow down before the mysteries of God, and faith reign. One of the greatest mercies that can come to us as individuals (and especially to you young people I would say this), is a thorough conviction of the inspiration of divine Scripture. If this foundation be destroyed, what could we do? What standard have we? What certain foundation of doctrine have we to stand upon? What true knowledge have we of the Being, character, and works of God, or of ourselves, His creatures?

The text is the language of a believer in trouble. Faith does not make the possessor of it superior to trouble, as if he were always in the enjoyment of confidence and comfort. Faith has an Object, a Source, an Author, and an End – God in Christ. The proper work of faith is to feel after, to exercise affinity for, its Object. It is a hungry grace, an emptying grace, a needy grace. It is the hand of the soul that stretches out for God; it is the hand which receives what God places in it, and appropriates that which the Spirit brings to it. It is the response of the soul to the revelation, the teachings, and the communications of the Holy Ghost. Faith in its exercise is, as it were, an indication of the condition of the soul. If the soul is dark, faith cries out for the light; if the soul is hungry, it cries out for the Bread of life; if tempted, it runs to the Refuge to find, if it may, a place of retreat in Christ. Many people think that faith is confined to an even, constant, comfortable experience of the enjoyment of God; but it is not invariably so. Faith always looks at things as they *are*, for it sees in God's light. As stirred up into exercise by the Holy Ghost, it always makes a correct estimate of the condition of the soul. It is an honest principle.

Now says this believer, addressing God, "My soul fainteth for Thy salvation." Many people would say, 'Well, but what a strange religion, what a peculiar religion! We like a joyous, a praising religion. This is miserable, depressing.' But it is faith; the Object of faith is before this fainting, praying man. Faith in God, as possessing everything which would meet his need, preserves him from utterly fainting under the deep sense of that need. He fainted for the lack of what he knew God possessed, and what he knew he needed. There was a fainting experience in his soul, but he did not faint utterly; else he could not pray. He did not fall into utter dejection, else he would not express to God his sense of fainting. This, then, is the language of a troubled believer: "My soul fainteth for Thy salvation." You see, he wanted a *real* salvation, a substantial salvation, a salvation that would save, not a logical, imaginary, verbal salvation that would but tickle his fancy and confirm him in a false confidence. He wanted the real thing. Do you? Can an idea of salvation, a logical notion about salvation, satisfy you? Many people are quite satisfied with a symmetrical, notional, judgmental idea of the doctrine of salvation. But if you are *lost*, so lost that you must drop into utter despair unless the Lord saves you, that is a different matter. When Martin Luther was wringing his hands in agony of soul under conviction of sin, saying, "Oh my sins, my sins, my sins!" one understanding his case and the things of God said to him, "Would you be a sinner only in idea, and therefore need a Saviour only in idea?"

Better to be well convicted of sin by the Holy Ghost so as to solemnly realise that you are lost unless salvation comes to you, than to run away with an *idea* of salvation, and make a fair show in a fleshly profession of religion, to be lost at last.

“My soul fainteth for Thy salvation.” Fear may produce faintness; starvation may produce faintness; trouble may produce it; many things may produce faintness physically. This man had a sick soul. He had conviction of sin; he felt to be at the grave’s mouth, as if the pit were ready to swallow him up, as if his sins would sink him lower than the grave. Oh, what a solemn thing it is to be lost, to have a soul and to lose that soul! “What shall a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Mat. 16 v. 26) How little we think about our souls - their state before God! To have a guilty, a naked, a polluted, a depraved soul, and to appear finally before God like that, means to be lost eternally; it means to be under God’s curse for ever. But to be lost *experimentally*, so as to be unable to live without salvation, and to be in dread of dying without salvation, this is to be under the teaching of the Holy Ghost, this is to be under the teaching of the Holy Ghost. How many of the people of God in former days were distinctly brought to this point! Perhaps some of you have been brought to it – that you were not fit to live, you were not fit to die, you dreaded the thought of dying, yet you felt it was intolerable to live. Why? Because of your guilt, because of the condemnation you felt in your conscience, and because of the ruin and havoc that sin had made of your being, as if you are distorted and all awry – everything wrong: God absent, His frown on you, His condemnation pressing, no certainty of life, but a certainty of death and of the judgment day. Nor can people who are in this experience rest in a hazy hope. They want, they must have, they cannot live without, a real salvation; they must faint, if salvation be withholden from them.

“My soul fainteth for Thy salvation.” There *is* a salvation for the *lost* – a salvation that *saves*, a *Saviour* who saves. There is but one “Name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4 v. 12), the Name of Jesus. Do you believe it? Has it been made to you a saying “worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 Tim. 1 v. 15)? ‘Have you not read that before?’ some may say; ‘What a common-place Scripture to quote!’ But to some it is made a sacred, blessed, divine, encouraging truth, a saying worthy of acceptation, a saying around which the fainting heart revolves, and upon which the hand of faith attempts to lay hold: “Christ Jesus came into the world to *save sinners*.” In how much better state many mere religionists would be, if they were convinced of their sin! How many people slide into religion page 6 through education, being brought up to it, without conviction of sin! Consequently salvation does not seem to enter into the matter. Very nice people – but they are never in soul trouble; they live and die in religion, but never know Jacob’s trouble or Jacob’s deliverance. Terrible to have such a religion; better to have no religion at all than be deceived! But it is very solemn to have such a sense of ruin, to be so convicted of being a sinner, so condemned in conscience, so terrified by the claims of God’s law, and so faint and worn out with labour that you feel you must utterly fail unless the Lord saves you.

But in this difficult trying place, this urgent place, there is in the text, as there is in the experience, a secret support. David's secret support was derived from the Word of God: "My soul fainteth for Thy salvation, but I hope in Thy Word." I hang upon Thy veracity; I cleave to Thy promises; I cast myself upon Thy faithfulness to Thy Word. Not a little matter, then, is inspiration. Do not turn away from the doctrine of inspiration as if it belongs exclusively to the realm of historic dogmatic theology. Theologians may properly attempt to enunciate the doctrine of inspiration, but the vital truth of inspiration is essential to us, if we are to understand what this word means: "I hope in Thy Word." For there is a distinction in this context between certain parts of the Word of God, and the Word of God considered as a whole. I am afraid that many of us have made many mistakes, and one of them is this (it may have been through unbelief or through temptation, or from a misconstruction of things): we may have greatly disregarded many parts of the Scripture because they have never been particularly applied to us. But people thoroughly convinced of their ignorance, guilty ignorance, of their depravity, their ruin, and their helplessness, will set about doing something, not indeed to save themselves, but to obtain salvation if possible. Oh, what an anxious searching of Scripture some of you may be engaged upon at times! You may range through the Word of God like the hymnwriter says, to see if you can

"light on some sweet promise there,
Some sure support against despair,"

(I Watts; Gadsby's Sel. 761)

to find a word upon which you may hope, to see if there is any reason in the Word of God for such a sinner as you are to entertain any hope of salvation. Thus you will search the Scriptures as Christ enjoined on those professed disciples: "Search the Scriptures, for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of Me" (John 5 v. 39). And I venture to say this (I know in measure the truth of it), that if you, as convicted of sin, are enabled to search the Scriptures with gracious diligence, submission, and prayer, you will find that God the Holy Ghost will bring into your heart that instruction which will sooner or later enable you to hope in the Word of God. You will find from time to time what you could hardly explain, an influence in your heart, an instruction upon your mind, that will cause you to hope in the mercy of God through Christ. What a wonderful thing hope is to a fainting man, fainting for salvation! The doctrine of Christ, the testimony of Jesus, which "is the Spirit of prophecy" (Rev. 19 v. 10), and of which Peter speaks, is made out to those who by faith are enabled diligently to search the Scriptures. Speaking of his own experience, when he literally saw the transfigured Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration, and heard audibly the testimony of the Father, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear ye Him," Peter said, "And this voice which came from heaven we heard, when we were with Him in the Holy Mount." But then he adds, "We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the Day Star arise in your hearts" (2 Pet. 1 v. 16-9; compare Mat. 17 v. 5).

Perhaps some of you in reading the Scripture under a sense of darkness, condemnation, ignorance, and fearing you would drop into hell, have received a little light, have seen a testimony of Jesus in the prophets, in a type, in as shadow, in a ceremony; or a doctrine expressed by an apostle may have been an instruction upon your heart, causing you to hope. I remember the first time I hoped and believed that such a sinner as I then felt myself to be, could be saved. I was but in my early teens, thirteen years of age, and in trouble of soul on account of God's holiness and my sin, when the doctrines of grace in that Scripture in the Romans, quoted by a minister at a funeral, dropped upon my mind with such an illumination, such a conviction of the truth of it, that the scales fell from my eyes, and I saw in a moment how a sinner indeed could be saved consistently with the justice of God. The word was this: "Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound" (Rom. 5 v. 20). Many years passed before I had any assurance of interest, but that mark, that light, that discovery of grace superabounding over sin, as being the way whereby God saves sinners, has never been removed from my heart. It gave me what otherwise I could not have had; it was far from a comfortable hope of heaven, but a hope which just saved me from fainting and falling into despair. Despair is a dreadful thing; if some of you are brought near to it under conviction, then may there be given to you faith in that saying, which is not an empty saying, but a substantial truth – the veracity of God is in it – that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Tim. 1 v. 15), real sinners, chief sinners. Christ did not come into this world for little sinners. If your hope of salvation is based upon being little less a sinner than some neighbour of yours, then you are far from the gospel, far from Christ. But if you can say nothing more than this, and that without daring to look up to heaven, "God be merciful to me a sinner" (Lk. 18 v. 13), and if in saying that there is dropped into your heart a belief that He can, if He will, save even you without infringing His character, you will hope in that word; you will greatly lean upon it. The strength of it, while it may not bring you comfort, will save you from despair; it will strengthen you by its sacred influence. Do you know what this means? Now, do not despise it.

The enemy, I believe, watches this, and one of his fiendish delights is to overthrow the buddings of hope and to prevent a feeble believer from adhering to the doctrine of Christ. If he can but get you to impinge upon what you do not deny, but deeply feel, namely your guilt, your unworthiness, or your lacking of assurance, then he will bewilder you. But there is a power greater than the devil's, a light that enables a sinner to see something greater than sin, higher than sin, deeper than sin, and that is the merits of Christ's personal obedience and death. Faith never makes people think lightly of sin; it never makes them conclude that they have been too particular about their sins. It takes a full view of sin, so far as it is given by the Spirit's conviction, and yet it gives the sinner to see that there is a fathomless ocean of infinite merit into which, if his deep sins, his innumerable sins, were cast, they would be submerged. There is a danger in thinking too much of sin only in this point. Sin is an infinite evil, but our sins, though unfathomable and innumerable, are not infinite. The Holy Spirit brings people to look honestly at their sins, and to be very particular about them, and even in

a sense, if I may so speak, exaggerate them - that is, look at their turpitude – but never minimise them; but when you have done all that, the Word of God will show you a plenteous redemption, an illimitable store of grace, merit divine in Christ, an atonement perfectly secured by His death, that will enable you to hope and not despair. Newton speaks of it like this:

“When the wounded spirit hears
The voice of Jesu’s blood,
How the message stops the tears
Which else in vain had flowed!”

(J Newton; Olney Hymns 56)

Helpless grief, remorse, is the way to despair, but the nearer you get to Calvary, the more you believe in the Word of God’s grace which declares there is redemption through the blood of Christ, the nearer you will be to gospel hope and evangelical repentance.

“My soul fainteth for Thy salvation: but I hope in Thy Word.” Dear friends, do you know what it is, when faint through guilt, to find your heart fortified by the Word of God so that you could, as it were, breathe with a little confidence of hope? “I hope in Thy Word” - I lean upon the declaration of the gospel; I lean upon the promises; I trust in the veracity of God. But this is not complete rest; it is support; it is encouragement; it prevents the sinner sinking in despair; but it is not complete rest. So the Psalmist adds, “Mine eyes fail for Thy Word.” But he had just said, “I hope in Thy Word.” Is the man in confusion? Not at all. He has clear light to distinguish – to distinguish between (what is not to be minimised) hoping in the Word of God as written in the Scriptures, as revealing a sufficiency in the provision God has made in Christ for salvation – between that and the possession of that salvation by the Spirit of God bringing it home with application to the heart.

“Mine eyes fail for Thy Word, saying, When wilt Thou comfort me?” When shall I *know* that salvation is mine? When shall that plenteous redemption bring me into liberty? When shall that precious blood which did for sin atone be sprinkled on my conscience, preaching peace, purifying my heart, making my conscience clean, and peaceful, and tender? “Mine eyes fail for Thy Word.” It is not enough to read the Bible, good as that occupation is. Sometimes you may be searching the Scriptures with such a deep want and such a longing desire, with such aspirations after God, with such pantings for the knowledge and possession of salvation, and you may rise from the search weary with your eyes physically tired and your heart sick because the hope is deferred. That is very painful, and yet it may be a salutary lesson. Why? For this reason: though we have the Scriptures in our hands, it is not a matter of course that we should take this word or that word and appropriate it to ourselves – that would practically renounce the work of the Holy Spirit. For the Holy Spirit not only inspired the Scriptures (He *did* that), but the same Spirit who inspired the Scriptures takes here a promise, there a gracious word of assurance, or a doctrine, and makes that word the

living Word of God to a particular sinner, puts it into the hand of his faith, writes it upon the fleshy tables of his heart, and gives it to him so that he eats it and it becomes a part of that sinner; it sanctifies him; it satisfies him; it comforts him; it strengthens him; it assures him. Have you had a page 12 word made your own? Have you had a little of that plenteous redemption in your experience? Or if not, do you hope in the Word, and do you wait for it, and do your eyes fail for it, fail with looking upward, as Hezekiah said: "Mine eyes fail with looking upward: O Lord, I am oppressed; undertake for me" (Is. 38 v. 14)? Ah, they are not to be envied who never know these varied actings of faith. It is in these extremities men witness the special mercy of God, and ultimately know what it is to say, 'I cried unto the Lord, and He heard me and delivered me out of all my distresses.'¹ It is this, I believe, which really differentiates between a mere profession of religion and the possessor of divine life. If you cannot do without the Word of God, that is to say, without the vital communications of grace and mercy and salvation and love and pardon to your soul, that is a good sign. Painful it will be to be kept waiting, but you will not always be without the comfort of salvation. The Lord is not niggardly in His blessings. A crumb of mercy is infinitely more than we deserve; a syllable whispered into the heart is infinitely more than we can merit. "Mine eyes fail for Thy Word, saying, When wilt Thou comfort me?"

Is it not wonderful that a *sinner* can be comforted by a sin-hating God, that one who deserves hell may receive a comfortable assurance of heaven, that one who has merited the curse may receive a blessing from a holy God? "When wilt Thou comfort me?" Oh, it is a religion of this kind that affords comfort! The Holy Spirit is that Comforter; Christ called him "another Comforter" (John 14 v. 16), that should take the place of His bodily presence when He had ascended up on high. One of the comfortings of the Holy Spirit is when He sheds abroad in the poor sinner's heart the love of God in Christ. It is a real experience, a most sacred comfort.

"When Jesus, with His mighty love,
Visits my troubled breast,
My doubts subside, my fears remove,
And I'm completely blest."

(J Hart; Gadsby's Sel. 251)

Is that what you want, sinner? Is that it for which your eyes ache and fail in looking upward? And do you, even while your eyes thus fail, press your case, still hoping in the Word of God, in His promise, in that declaration: "I said not unto the seed of Jacob, Seek ye Me in vain" (Is. 45 v. 19)? Look for a moment at that word in Habakkuk, where the Lord says, "Though the vision tarry, wait for it."² Does that word make you hope? And

¹ "In my distress I cried unto the Lord, and He heard me" (Ps. 120 v. 1); "I sought the Lord, and He heard me, and delivered me from all my fears. This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles." (Ps. 34 v. 4 & 6). See also Ps. 18 v. 6; 118 v. 5;

² "For the vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie; though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry" (Hab. 2 v. 3).

does hope deferred make your heart feel sick at times? Well, you are within the experience of the Lord's people. Heart-sickness through deferred hope, painful though it is, is not a sign of spiritual death. But "when the desire cometh," that is, when the love of God in Christ Jesus fills your heart, when the dear Redeemer comes to you in the Spirit and brings salvation into your heart, it is like "a tree of life,"³ bringing forth new life, new comfort, lively hope, deep repentance, sweet peace, warm love. Said the hymnwriter,

"I love the Lord with mind and heart,
His people and his ways;
Envy, and pride, and lust depart,
And all His works I praise."

(J Hart, Gadsby's Sel. 251)

There is a great effect when this sweet comfort comes into the heart by the Holy Ghost. 'When wilt Thou do it, Lord?' Comfortless you may determine to be, as Goodwin speaks, and that eternally, unless Christ comes to you. Nothing can comfort a child of God but God Himself. "The Lord shall comfort Zion. He will comfort all her waste places" (Is. 51 v. 3). Can anything comfort you but the Lord, His Word spoken, His Word of kindness? How kind are the words of Christ; how kindly He looks upon a poor fearing one and says, "Fear not, thou worm Jacob. I will help thee" (Is. 41 v. 14). That will comfort you; you will not deem it an affront to be called a "worm Jacob" if Jehovah calls you that. You will say, 'Lord, how couldst Thou speak so condescendingly?' Oh the comfort of His "Fear not"! I know a little what that is – it is divine. If a kind considerate friend says you need not fear, you may say to him 'I have a thousand reasons for fearing,' and it may irritate you for him in his ease and security to say you need not fear, but if *the Lord says so*, then divine comfort comes with the Word. For He gives to His people an adequate reason not to fear: "Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God. I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness" (Is. 41 v. 10). Has that word glistened in your eyes? If that word should be spoken to you, whose eyes fail for the Word of God, if it should be brought by the Spirit and put into the hand of your faith and made your very own, and if you could look at it and say, 'The Lord came in that word to me; He really spoke to my heart by it; I felt Him; I felt the comfort of it, the authority of it, the constraint of it, the efficacy of it' – then you would *know*. And until you get this, though you get many encouragements, though you find help in the Word of God as you read it, to strengthen and help you, and hold you up and prevent you utterly fainting and despairing - until you get this nugget, as it were, in your heart, you will not be fully satisfied.

"Whereunto ye do well," says Peter, "that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts" (2 Pet. 1 v. 19). Because the Lord has not fully done all you want Him to do, yet if you have a hope in His mercy, do not deny that He has done anything for you. I would ever, by the

³ "Hope deferred maketh the heart sick: but when the desire cometh, it is a tree of life" (Prov. 13 v. 12).

Lord's help, avoid two serious errors in my ministry. I would avoid discouraging the least evidence of life, but I would on the other hand avoid hushing to sleep in false security any who seem inclined to rest short of "Christ in you the hope of glory" (Col. 1 v. 27). For that is before the Lord's people; He will come sooner or later into their hearts and be entertained by them. Though He will not always dandle His people on the knees, He does visit sinners, and when He does so, the sinners are sanctified and liberated from their sins, from the love of sin, from its guilt, and from legal bondage to fear.

"When wilt Thou comfort me?" Many who have known this comfort more than once or twice have to use the same language of David again and again. For what can allay our fears? What can comfort us in new discoveries of our depravity? What can comfort us in freshly contracted guilt? What can comfort us in new difficulties and troubles and afflictions of life, but a coming to us of a word, that is, the speaking of it home to our hearts? Now, if you walk in this path you will be saved from being dejected to despair; you will be saved from being lifted up with vain confidence or false comfort; and when you get real comfort, it will be so separating, so sanctifying, so humbling, so enriching, as you will never express: strong consolation, sweet comfort of love, enjoyed communion with God in Christ, and that even in this life. Up and down, in and out, the people of God go here, but the time is coming when all the Lord's people will enter into eternal comfort, never more to go out into cold desertion; they will enter upon eternal victory, never more to go out to battle. "He will give grace and glory; no good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly" (Ps. 84 v. 11). Do you hope in that word? Does mortality, and do the troubles of life, seem sometimes more than you can endure? Do you faint and say, 'How shall I get through?' and do you notwithstanding say, "I hope in Thy Word"? 'Thou didst say, Lord, 'I will bring you through.' Thou didst say "I will bring the third part through the fire" (Zech. 13 v. 9). Thou didst say that I should not be consumed by the fire, that Thou wouldst be with me in passing through the floods.⁴ Thou didst promise to bring me to a good end and to heaven. "I hope in Thy Word." Oh, let Thy word come afresh, and the hope of heaven be renewed; let assurance be again granted; let the light and comfort of the Holy Ghost once more shine upon the work of grace in my heart.'

These exercises will keep your souls from being stagnant. A mere theoretical idea of truth may very well comport with a stagnant religion, and so the apostle Peter, to stir up the pure minds of those believers to whom he wrote, told them they must seek to add to the faith which was given to them virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness, and charity.⁵ What did he mean? Not the addition of some creature virtue to supply a deficiency in God's salvation. No. He tells

⁴ "Surely in the floods of great waters they shall not come nigh unto him" (Ps. 32 v. 6).

⁵ "Add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; and to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity" (2 Pet. 1 v. 5-7).

us, "For if these things be in you and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 1 v. 8). As if he would say, 'The exercise will bring you into contact with Christ, and that will make you fruitful, for from Him all spiritual fruit is found.'⁶

May the Lord well exercise us in soul, keep us close to our closets and to the Bible, and to our knees at the throne of grace. That will unite us, and there will be something done, not *by* us, but *for* us and *in* us and *among* us, by the Holy Ghost. That will make us fruitful, and comfort us. May it please Him to do it. Amen.

⁶ "From Me is thy fruit found" (Hos. 14 v. 8).