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Sermon preached by Mr. J. K. Popham
on Sunday morning, 17th. March 1935

Text: Isaiah 35 v. 4

"Say to them that are of a fearful
heart, Be strong, fear not: behold,
your God will come with vengeance,
even God with a recompence; He
will come and save you."

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In the preceding chapter and in this chapter, we have two striking examples of omnipotence; - expressed first, in making a fruitful land into a wilderness, and second, in making a wilderness a fruitful land. In the first of these two chapters, God says He will pour out His indignation on the nations, and in this chapter, He promises great and everlasting blessing. "The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them;" who are found there, "and the desert," arid, dry, barren, incapable of itself, of being fruitful, "shall rejoice and blossom as the rose. It shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice even with joy and singing: the glory of Lebanon shall be given unto it, the excellency of Carmel and Sharon, they shall see the glory of the Lord, and the excellency of our God." Ah, if any of us participate in this blessing, turning our wilderness hearts into rejoicing in the gospel plan as the garden of Eden, we shall need eternity to thank and praise God for it.

"Strengthen ye the weak hands, and confirm the feeble knees." Some of you will remember that this was our text last Wednesday evening, and I ventured to say, that the glory of the church of God is here in these first verses; and in this third verse, the commission given to a minister of the gospel to do this great work ministerially, "Strengthen ye the weak hands." One endeavoured to show what weak hands meant, and what it was, to have them strengthened, - for ministers to strengthen them by their preaching; - and what feeble knees are, and how these are to be confirmed. Weak hands; hands to be used for handling, but too weak to do it;

weak through sin, - to be strengthened by grace. Faith is that hand that lays hold of God. Faith is suitable to the nature of God. Nothing in us by nature is suitable to Him. We are carnal, sold under sin and dead in trespasses and sins; but faith being a spiritual grace is suitable to God as He reveals Himself in the gospel. Faith will never really let go of what God put into the hand; but, it may be, apparently given up - "We ought," says the Apostle Paul to the Hebrews, "to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip." Knees tottery, legs unsteady in movement, unsafe in walking; knees too feeble in the spiritual sense to bow down before the Almighty God; these are to be confirmed, and can be confirmed, only by the gospel.

Now the text is, this morning, "Say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not." What makes the heart fearful? Do not let us turn away from this, but look at it carefully. What is it that makes any heart fearful? Then, what is this fearfulness? First, conviction of sin; real spirit-wrought conviction of sin; - what Rutherford would call, hell felt and feared in the conscience. It is a solemn thing to be a sinner and it is unspeakably solemn and fearful to believe and feel that you are a sinner. The light of God penetrating your heart and conscience, discovering to you something of your heart's wickedness and deceitfulness, will make you very fearful. The law of God, expressed to you in your conscience, will make you fearful, for the law says this, "Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them." You know you have not done them, yet you can live comfortably in that naked knowledge; but not if God speaks to you in the law, "for by the law is the knowledge of sin." Guilt follows sin. We cannot sin and not be guilty; guilt always follows sin. They are near to each other. Different in an important sense, and yet one, really. Guilt!. . . Oh, a guilty conscience in the sight of God! You will find guilt to be a very sore companion. It will sometimes keep you awake. It will make your bread like ashes; it will spoil all your pleasures; it will interfere with your duties: and this will be a fearful thing. A fearful heart is a heavy thing to carry. The Word of God, in some particulars, may be a fearful word to you, giving you fearfulness of heart. Some threatening, that says in your conscience, 'That

belongs to me.' Some declaration of hell in Holy Scripture may meet your eye and may touch your heart and make you fearful. Providence may make your heart fearful. Even pleasant providence may, because it will swallow you up; take you away from God; take you away from His word; take you from the throne of grace; fill you with ashes: yet, pleasure to you. Adverse providence will make you of a fearful heart. Some heavy trouble comes and a legal, unbelieving heart says, 'This is against you, - God is against you - this is proof of it!' And you need a great deal of heavenly wisdom to rebut that. Oh, it is dreadful when you fear God is against you, in some providence. The devil, may make your heart fearful. Either by some deceitful working which will turn you away from God - make you fear His wrath; or by violent temptations to infidelity, to blasphemy, to all sorts of impurity; and you will be afraid. The thought of eternity, will make your heart fearful. Where shall I spend it? And you have not, perhaps, clear evidences in your soul's experience, of being a child of God, and so you are fearful at the thought of eternity. We must spend eternity somewhere. There are two places only, and two states only, in eternity. Heaven; a wonderful place. Oh, to get there! To be made, "meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light." Hell; how dreadful. The rich man opened his eyes in hell. He wanted a drop of water to cool his tongue.

What is this fear? . . . I have named the things to make you fearful. What is the fear? . . . It is the fear of God's curse! "Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them." You cannot avert that curse from yourself. You cannot avoid it, if you are in sin, - if you die in sin. The fear of God's anger; the indignation of the Almighty; the hot displeasure of God: oh, it will spoil the whole world to you. Your world will be a poor world indeed, when you have this fear of the wrath, the indignation, of God. Is this fearful heart here? . . . You know, and God knows. . . . Now, what is to be done? God is no indifferent spectator of a fearful heart. God looks upon men. As it is in Job's book, "He looketh upon men, and if any say, I have sinned and perverted that which was right," - what does He add? - "He is gracious unto him." The gospel is here, or I am greatly mistaken. "Say to them," - ministers, say to this people, - "Be strong." Say to these fearful hearts, "Be strong." Tell them there is no real need

for this fearfulness of heart. Tell them there is a remedy, a physician, a balm, a Spirit, a truth, a gospel, - the everlasting gospel. Tell them of that! "Be strong." 'How can I?' says one. "Be strong," says the Apostle Paul to Timothy, "in the grace that is in Christ Jesus." And a minister, commissioned to preach, is to say this . . . 'You are not to judge of your case entirely as you see it now. You are not to judge of your state wholly as you now feel somewhat of it. Look to the Lord Jesus!' Look to Him in some particulars, - first, as He is the representative of God to His people. What does He represent? The love of God! God is love, and all that love which flows to sinners in the channel of eternal election, is expressed in the person of Christ. In His incarnation, in His life, in His fulfilling the law. He came not to destroy the law, but to fulfil, and this is expressed by and in Christ, as if a minister should say, 'Now you fearful people - fearing God; fearing to live; fearing to die; fearing your sins; fearing the wrath of God: there is a Mediator between God and man, - the Man Christ Jesus.' Of all the positions in the world, that of the minister, is the most solemn, the highest, and the most important. For he is commissioned to speak in the name of God. He is commissioned to say to people who are afraid of hell, 'There is a heaven, freely given to the worst of men. There is a Mediator between God and man, the Man Christ Jesus.' To people naked in their own consciences before a heart-searching God, he is to say, 'There is a Shield,' and they are to pray, - "Behold, O God our Shield, and look upon the face of Thine Anointed."

"Be strong" . . . How? First, in casting believing looks, in the midst of your great, grave fears, on the Mediator, the High Priest, Jesus Christ. Blind eyes are to be opened to see this great sight - the "High Priest of our profession," - and when they are opened, they look on Him. "Be strong" in this, dear friends, though the devil says there is no Christ to look on, no God to believe in; no gospel to listen to; look though stung to death; look though the poison be rankling in your veins; look to this blessed Jesus. "Be strong" in prayer.-

"Pray, if thou canst or canst not speak;
But pray with faith in Jesus' name."

And may I again repeat what I have said about faith, it comes in

here. Faith is suitable to the nature of God. Being spiritual, it suits the spirit. God is a Spirit and when you have faith to pray, you pray to Him whose ear is opened, and bowed down to hear the cry of the needy. He will not despise that cry - a great and a good God. "Be strong" in prayer. Call upon His name. Follow His own blessed word. Call upon the Lord in the day of trouble. "Trust in Him at all times; ye people, pour out your heart before Him." "Be strong" in these particulars. But why should I be? ... Because of Christ in His wonderful suitability to people. Mortise and tenon never were so suitable to each other in their fitting, as Christ is suitable to a sinner. He is the Friend of Sinners. A Friend, loving at all times; the brother born for adversity. One whose heart is touched with the feeling of the infirmities of His people. 'But,' one objects, 'I am a sinner.' Was Christ never acquainted with sin? He did no sin. It was impossible for Him to sin, but His Father "made Him to be sin." Was Christ never tempted? He was "led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted." Did He never die? He "poured out His soul unto death." What for? ... To make the feeblest sinner cry for mercy. "Strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus." What He is as Christ; what He did as Christ; what He is doing as Christ: suitable - unutterably suitable! No minister, nor all the gospel ministers that have been, and that are now in the world, put into one, could express adequately the fulness of Jesus Christ. It is infinite, therefore it is eternal. He obtained eternal redemption. Say then, O minister, say to the fearful in heart, "Be strong, fear not." You fear God's wrath - Christ endured it. You fear hell - He endured it. Not into the place did He go, but into the state He went. Yes, justice poured its wrath out into the very soul of Jesus Christ. And God gives a reason here which His ministers are to deal with. Behold, see through your tears if you can. Look through your sorrows, if you can, at this. Behold, you see yourselves, you look intently on yourselves, you search into yourselves, you dig into your lives past, and all these things make you afraid. There is something greater, something greater! One greater than you, whose merit is greater than your demerit.

"Your God will come - Your God will come with vengeance." You cannot think He is your God, but He says so, and what He says, is true. 'That, is what I fear,' says one with a fearing heart, vengeance is what I am afraid of.' It does not mean that. This word is not intended as you think. - "Come with vengeance, ... even

God with a recompense!" You have enemies - He will come against them. You have sins; you are an alien to God by nature: what will this vengeance be? ... The slaying of your enmity - of your enemies. He came to destroy the works of the devil; to make an end of sin: to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to effect reconciliation for iniquity. And when He comes to a sinner in His conscience, He does this great work. He destroys sin. How can He? ... By His blood. He removes it. He destroys the death that is there. He is the plague of death there. It is very remarkable what the blood of Christ effects in the conscience; so defiled that you cannot bear even to look at it for a moment, yet His blood takes all that away. So guilty, that you think He can only condemn and cast you away from His glorious presence for ever. That very guilt, His blood removes. When this is done, the person in whom it is done, will never forget it really. I shall never forget when this was done in me, when I was a young man. Conscience - that had been my plague - kept me awake night after night. That, spoiled all my days. That conscience was made clean. Why, what cannot Christ do! He comes. Shall I see Him? Yes, you will see Him when He comes. It will not be in the flesh that you will see Him. "Though we have known Christ after the flesh," says Paul, "yet now --- know we Him no more," - in that particular regard, but, you will see Him by faith. Yes, faith gets a sight of the King in His beauty and a wonderful sight it is. Christ, the Son of God incarnate. To see Him; is to feel an attraction to Him, a love for Him; an opening of your heart to Him: and really, a boldness to ask Him to come in. Oh yes, men getting a sight of Christ, long to have Him within them. "Christ in you," says the Apostle Paul, "the hope of glory." "Your God will come" Oh, but my desolation! That is nothing to Him. "The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them." The church is nothing but a wilderness in herself and never can be anything better, but God says, "The desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose, it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice even with joy and singing." This must be the case when Christ comes, as all know, to whom He has come and paid a love visit, and you who want Him, and cannot be happy without Him, one day shall say, "We have found Him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth."

"He will come." If God will, who can hinder Him? "He will come." 'Oh, but the briers and thorns of my sins.' And you have

set them up against Him. Who has not, under conviction? "Who would set the briers and thorns against Me in battle? I would go through them, I would burn them together. Or let him take hold of My strength, that he may make peace with Me, and he shall make peace with Me." "He will come." We have many difficulties in attempting to approach God. There are no difficulties in His way when He will come to sinners. Ah, what a day this would be to some of you if He would come. If this, should be the favoured hour for Him to say, "I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee." - "He will come."

And, what will He do? "And save you." ... The very thing that you want - that for which you have cried, many-a-day. "Remember me, O Lord, with the favour that Thou bearest unto Thy people: O visit me with Thy salvation; That I may see the good of Thy chosen, that I may rejoice in the gladness of Thy nation, that I may glory with Thine inheritance." "He will come and save you." Salvation is a relative term. It means, there is something from which a person is saved. What is a sinner saved from? From himself. The man who has often cried and exclaimed with Rutherford, "O that I had not a myself;" - Jesus comes and saves him from himself. The man dies. The man hates his life, and so, he finds it while he has lost it. He hates it and he loves it. "He will come and save you" from yourself. Save you from your weakness. Paul was weak with the thorn in the flesh, and he thrice besought the Lord to remove it. He got what was better than that. It was better for him in his own estimation to have the strength of Christ, than to have the thorn taken out of his flesh. A great mercy that is, and a great salvation. "He will come and save you" - from your rebellion. When you are in trouble, - you have rebelled against His holy will in some providence, - He saves you from it. He saves you from your barrenness. A heart that could bring nothing forth that could please God, now is "filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God." He saves you from your ignorance. Ignorance ... Wise men have a great deal of trouble to become ignorant. One of the hardest things a wise man can do, is to be ignorant. That is to say, to find he has no wisdom that will help his soul; no wisdom that will teach him how to go to God: no wisdom that will enable him to order his conversation aright. God comes, and with the light of the gospel, does what the Apostle says, "God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in

our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face," or person, "of Jesus Christ." And all this is for sinners who are fearful. Let me, for a moment, draw your attention to the original reading of this word, 'fearful'. The margin gives the literal rendering of the Hebrew word which is used, Well, people get very 'hasty' in their souls at times. Hasty in their judgement of God; in their judgement of themselves; in their judgement of providence; hasty in their conclusion about their state: and in their conclusion about God. Oh, but He makes them strong against this haste. "He that believeth shall not make haste," but will wait on God. "Wait on the Lord: be of good courage, and He shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the Lord."

So here, we have two things. I close with just naming them to you. First, a sinner in trouble; distress of heart; fearfulness of mind: hastiness of spirit. A barren sinner. A wicked person, and he is fearful: he is afraid. Grace is in him and he is afraid that he is wrong, and will be wrong throughout eternity. Fearfulness is here. The next thing, is the remedy to all this; that which is above all this. So, O ministers, hesitate not to proclaim the gospel. "Say to them that are of a fearful heart," a hasty heart, "Be strong." Give not way to unbelief. - "Courage, soul, there yet is room!" O ministers, tell them of the King having provided a supper, and invited guests who in the first instance, would not come, - did not want to come. 'Now,' says the King, 'go into the highways and hedges, bring the poor, and the maimed and the halt and the blind, - bring them.' But they object. 'What, I am not fit to go. I am covered with rags, I am lame, I have lost a limb. I am lame, I cannot walk. I am poor.' "Compel them to come in." - Which is, listen not to their objections. Do not allow their objections. Tell them that their objections are all met in the gospel of Jesus Christ. - "Say to them, ---- Be strong, fear not: behold," - see this great, this grand, this divine, heavenly sight, - "your God will come with vengeance, even God with a recompense; He will come and save you."

Amen.

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