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Sermon preached by Mr J K Popham at Galeed Chapel
Brighton on Sunday evening 18 January, 1925

SONG OF SOLOMON 2 verse 14

"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".

We saw this morning the Lord Jesus in His blessed Person and work, in whom the Gentiles shall trust, and this evening, we have these sinners called to repentance and trusting in Him, gathered into a church. This beautiful song of loves, the love of the husband expressing itself strongly, the love of the wife expressing itself strongly. He, constant in His love, she often inconstant and faithless, but He always conquering, always conquering. The crown must be on His head. This song exhibits the love of Christ to His people. A love that no waters can quench, no gold nor silver can buy. A love that is jealous. Jealous you will know it to be if you belong to Him. Reproofs come from His jealousy. Corrections come from that. Every way in which He deals with His people manifests His love, and particularly when it is needed then He lets out the jealousy that His love has in it. I am jealous for Zion with a great jealousy. Here He speaks to His church. He speaks endearingly. He calls her His dove. He tells her where she is - in the rock, in the secret places of the stairs. He thus invites her to show Him her countenance, for it is pleasing to Him to see it. It is a comely countenance, and He cannot be content to have it always covered. "Let Me see thy countenance". He wishes to hear her voice. It is to Him a pleasing voice, sweet. "Sweet is thy voice and thy countenance is comely". As enabled one will look at this point.

First, the Lord's description of His people. I would not be offensive, nor run into many particulars, but just name one or two particulars in which we may say the church resembles the dove. She is aptly described by her Lord and Husband as the dove, because the dove is a clean creature, and this is the case with all who fear God. "The ~~fer~~ of the Lord is clean, enduring for ever." The new birth

brings holiness to everyone born again. The principal of holiness is implanted when a person is born again. Never forget that. If you are born again, one sign of it will be that your desires will be good, clean desires, and one way in which you may know that is this, that the uncleanness of the old man within you will be a grief of heart to you. It will bring you to enter into Paul's painful experience "The good that I would, I do not, the evil I would not, that I do. O wretched man that I am". Every clean soul feels that more or less, from time to time. The cleanness of this new creature will manifest itself in bringing you out of the world, for the world lieth in wickedness and you wont want to lie there, but to flee from it, and flee from the wrath to come. A worldly spirit, a worldly life, worldly connections and friendships, voluntarily chosen and indulged in and walked with, are incompatible with this clean nature. "Come out from among them" says God. O My people, forget your father's house and your own country and I will greatly desire your beauty. The world in its wickedness, the religious world in its heresies, every new born person will leave and come away from, from time to time. You will want, if born again, clean food. You will want true, plain gospel things, nothing elaborate. A healthy appetite enjoys plain food. If your appetite is diseased you will wish it to be pampered, but if you are healthy, good plain food is what you relish. So in godliness, clean provender, well winowed with the shovel and the fan. Good gospel truths, the Person of Christ, His precious love, His atoning blood, His justifying righteousness, His sanctifying grace, His sustaining power, His guiding wisdom, His prevailing intercession. These truths, as opened, brought near and into your hearts, being suitable to your cases, will be relished by you. You will have an eye to a clean, holy inheritance, as blessed with grace. "This is not your rest, for it is polluted" saith the Lord. And everyone with the grace of God, the life of God within him, has that experience, painful experience, that it is a polluted world. There is no rest in it. No rest for the mind, no rest for the soul, no rest for the thoughts, no rest for the conscience, no rest for the affections. Everything is more or less blighted where grace is. This world is our passage, only a passage. We are passing through it. It may be a stormy sea, as when people are in great afflictions, but it is not our rest, and he who is blessed with grace and tries for a time to rest in it, will find God blow upon it and he will have no rest. Not to pursue that any further, let us notice in the next place, the second

characteristic of the dove, namely, that it is a helpless, defenceless creature. So are God's people. 'Cover my head'. 'Hide me in the shadow of Thy wings'. 'Put me in the cleft of the rock.' 'Defend me against myself, against all difficulties, afflictions, enemies. Defend me.' This is the prayer of every soul conscious of its weakness and utter defencelessness. There is a place of munitions, but that is not in yourselves. "The Name of the Lord is a strong tower, the righteous runneth into it and is safe". If you feel your helplessness sufficiently, you will be running, by precious faith, to Him who defends, who covers, who helps and brings honourably through, to a grace-given victory, all His people. Self-help never enter here. Self-help is nothing better than a delusion. The arm of the Lord is strong. "The eternal God is thy refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms". He who can help himself is not characterised by prayer. Self-help and prayer for divine help are inconsistent and impossible in the same person at the same time. Pride will move us. O, who has not known this? Pride will move us to help ourselves or attempt it, but grace says 'No' and faith says 'No'. No help in self I find. Faith says, 'Go to the Lord for help' and there you go. We are helpless in many ways. In respect of understanding, we are helpless. "The Lord give thee understanding in all things". You will never get any understanding except it be given by the Lord. Helpless in prayer and truly so. "Lord teach us how to pray". Helpless as to believing. "Lord I believe, help Thou mine unbelief". Helpless as to love. "Ye are taught of God to love one another". Helpless as to anything of the ways of the Lord, which are strange and mysterious and often hidden as to our perception of them, so that we walk in the dark frequently. We are helpless in all these things, helpless in all that is good, and, may I say once more, I have often said it, I believe it in myself, I believe it in you, this, namely, that our helplessness is part of our sin. We were not created helpless. God's noble work in man, pronounced by Himself to be very good, had not helplessness in it. But we have made ourselves weak by our sins. Weak because our understandings are darkened, weak because our wills are perverted, weak because we know not what is right. We are fools. Now a dove is conscious of this, that is, the church of Christ, and she runs to Him for teaching, and for prayer. Prays for prayer, a prayer. Prays for a breath of prayer. Prays for a heart-felt sigh. She has to go to Him for these things. And then, she is utterly defenceless against

the corruptions of her own fallen nature, against the wiles of the devil, against his violent assaults. And mercifully it is written of the Prince and King, and Husband of the church "He shall redeem their souls from deceit and violence" So, 'O My dove, O My clean church, O my helpless dove,' says Jesus Christ, the loving, tender-hearted, watchful, careful, jealous husband. I bless the Lord for His jealousy, though it has brought many a stripe to my foolish back. I bless Him that He is a jealous God.

Now notice what He says concerning the place she is in. "O My dove that art in the cleft of the rock, in the secret places of the stairs." To be short here, and not to run away into a quantity of thoughts about what may be meant by the secret places of the stairs, it must mean that this dove of Christ, sensible of her ignorance, weakness, and defenceless condition, flies to Him, the Rock of Ages. He says here, she may not think or know to her comfort sometimes, that she is there, but there she is. She goes to Him. "Hide me O my Saviour hide" That fits you, does it not, O people of God. Hide me from the dangers and difficulties and temptations and enemies of the way. Hide me. She is in Him. She is in Him in several particulars. She is in Him by eternal union. She is in His heart and, so to speak, she is in His very Person. "To the church of God which is in Christ". "To the church of the Thessalonians, which is in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ". And this belongs to every church and every saint of the Most High. In God. Chosen in Him from the foundation of the world. Blessed in Him, with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ. And this is because, first of all, she is in Him as possessing His life. He who is born again possesses the life of Christ. "I am come, that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly". Ah, this union is here. This interest is here. This being in the rock is here. And there is safety here. She is in Him as being redeemed by Him and joined to Him by faith. She is in Him as being put there by His own hand, as it were. There is by Me, a cleft in the rock and I will put thee there. Thou shalt stand there, be hid there, defended there, and when I pass by, thou shalt see My back parts. This cleft of the rock, is a wounded, broken Saviour. O my dove, thou art in Me. Thou art in My person as a surety, in Me as your life. "Your life is hid with Christ in God". What a place to be in. Think of it, a poor creature, dead in himself, dead in Adam his first father, dead in a broken law, dead in sins, a worldly, and God-hating person, and yet God comes and takes him out of the fall and puts him

into Christ.. Quickens his soul, puts him into His dear Son in that way, and then speaks to him as being there. Thou art in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the stairs. You are safe there. In the secret places of the stairs may tell us this, that there is secret work done. Real religion is between God and the soul. Real labour is in secret. The kingdom of God is not with observation, either in its coming, or its working in the heart. "When thou prayest, enter into thy closet, shut thy door about thee, and thy Father, which seeth in secret, Himself shall reward thee openly" If you have no secret religion, you have nothing that will stand the test of God, the shock of temptation, the chill of Jordan's river and the scrutiny of God's holy law, But, if you are in the rock, and in secret places, in that rock you will have business in secret with the Almighty. A private religion is a good religion. Not private opinions held while you say something the opposite to those opinions, but a religion between you and the Almighty. A religion that will take you aside at times. A religion that will be in your heart, working, while you are working with your hands, that will lead you to prayer in the street and on your bed. A religion that wont let God alone, that needs Him, must have Him. "Lord help me" That religion is in secret. You will be afraid lest people should think too much about you. When you are doubtful about your case, you will be afraid if others express any confidence with respect to you. But O the work is in secret. You have to leave all opinions, and all thoughts, and all expressions about yourself. You have to leave them all and just deal with Almighty God. Just deal with Him. "Lord help me" Teach me. Do not leave me to myself. Do not leave me to my lusts and my hardness and my ignorance, nor to the devil and his temptations and his subtelties. Do not leave me. Do you know the secret work? Do you know what it is to call upon the Name of the Lord in secret? If you do not, God grant that you may yet know what that wonderful thing is, a dealing of God with you and a dealing of your soul with Him, for the two things are generally together. Now and again it would seem as if He were doing nothing for you and in you, as if it were all on one side, as if you go to Him, as if you want Him, and He does not want you. But sometimes it is otherwise. He lets you know that He wishes to hear, to see you before His heavenly majesty, and there is a secret business here. God only knows what is going on. You know what you feel. He knows what is going on, how you seek His blessed face. Lord, I have got a bad heart, save me from it. I have got a

wicked nature, deliver me from it. I am constantly defiling myself, cleanse me by the blood of Christ. Lord, I am a proud creature, bring me into true humility; a hard hearted sinner, O melt me by Thy love and mercy. I am ignorant, do teach me. "That which I see not, teach Thou me" Secret work. Then you have got a trouble, a trouble in your house, a trouble in your business, a trouble in your body, some trouble, and this brings you again into secret places. The throne of grace. O what a spot. What millions of sinners gather there and the eye of God sees each one. What myriads of thoughts are expressed there and the Lord hears each one and takes particular notice of each one, and the dear Saviour says "Let Me hear thy voice" Secret places. Mind that. A public religion may bring human admiration and nothing more. A private religion will bring God's sweet smile to your soul, and He will reward you openly. Pray to the Father which seeth in secret and your Father which seeth in secret Himself shall reward thee openly. It is sure to come if you wait, 20, 30, 40 years for it. It is sure to come. He has not said, He will not say to the seed of Jacob, seek ye Me in vain. And, sinner, if he sees you in a secret place of the stairs, in the clefts of the rock, sees that you have fled there from some danger, from some sin in your nature, from some trouble of an external nature, if He sees you there, can He ever say to you, "I never knew you". Would it be possible to Jesus Christ to say to some here "I never knew you" when He has seen you over and over again praying, begging, confessing? A good deal goes on here. A good deal goes on here. O the confessions He listens to, when you go and make a full confession of what you are. O the needs that are poured out here, when you lay before Him your various needs for the body, for the family, for the soul and for every step of the way. "O My dove, thou art in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the stairs." If you go into public places you will be seen. Men see you. Your friends may see you. Now if you go into the secret places before God, He sees you. Can any hide from God?

Let us look in the next place at the Lord's gracious invitation to His dove. "Let Me hear thy voice, let Me see thy countenance". "Let Me see thy countenance". You say "I am ashamed and I blush to lift up my face unto God" but I think there is something else here. If you go to the Corinthians, you find the Apostle Paul speaking of a veil on the heart, always on the heart of the Jew when

the scriptures are read. You hear him saying that the people of God have the veil taken from the heart. Also, that, where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. Then he continues "We all with open face, beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image, from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord". What is that open face? An unveiled heart, an honest heart, seeing to the end of the law, that Christ is the end of it, that its commandments and its curse were fulfilled and endured in and by Him. Faith sees that and sees now that there is none but Jesus, none but Jesus, can do helpless sinners good. And this open face, honest, unveiled face, is permitted and strengthened to look upon the glory of the Lord. The glory of the Lord there is opposite of the glory of the law. The law has a glory, dazzling, but condemning. The glory of the gospel is the glory of justification, a ministration of righteousness. And, when the Spirit opens these two, the sinner sees, as his eyes are thus opened, how that Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone that believeth, and he looks on this glory. "Let Me see thy countenance". Has God taught us that Christ fulfilled the law, that He is the end of the law for righteousness to us? Have we looked at the law's glory and perceived that that glory was much in a sinner's condemnation? Much of the glory of the law lies there in its strictness, that a sinner shall not escape. Have we seen that glory done away in the greater and the abiding glory of Christ and looked by faith into that glory, in the glass of the gospel? If so, some of the glory we looked upon has had the powerful effect of reflecting its own image upon our souls. "Let Me see thy countenance. Ah sinner, Christ looks with great pleasure and affection on your countenance when you look at His glory in the gospel. "Let Me see thy countenance." He sees a repenting sinner, a pardoned sinner, a justified sinner. He sees one in whom His own work is brought to some degree of perfection. He sees His own righteousness there, and that soul is so acceptable, so beautiful, and that brings this truth forth - "There is no spot in thee". Blameless, blemishless, without any wrinkle. A wrinkle that speaks of age and decay and that is not seen in the church. Without a wrinkle or any such thing. This is the countenance that is comely, which Jesus wishes to see, asks His poor bride to let Him look on. This is the countenance. Old nature is warped, wrinkled, withered, full of blemish and blameworthiness. Grace is beautiful;

righteousness is beautiful; justice is beautiful; love is beautiful, and all, all here, by the cleansing blood and the Holy Spirit's work in the soul. We all, with open face, look on this glory, and then the Lord says "Let me see thy face" Poor sinner, did you ever show it to Him? Did you ever go before Him, with some feeling that He could see you, like as the poet expresses it, and we sometimes sing it

'Tis He instead of me is seen

When I approach to God

and yet you were seen. "Let Me see thy countenance." The beauty the Lord gives, He calls His people's own beauty. Thy countenance is comely and it is comely, and here He has delight, He has delight. The wonder is to those who find it so, that He should have any delight in them, but He has. I know not how, properly to express it, but I solemnly believe that the Lord Jesus has unspeakable pleasure and delight in a sinner who comes to Him, pleading His Name, His righteousness, His blood. Looking to Him for goodness, for holiness, and for every grace that adorns the soul. He has unspeakable pleasure. O I wish this free Spirit might be in you and in me in a full measure. It is a free Spirit. The free Spirit of Christ, that does away with the awful bondage of unbelief, and the legal bondage. It does away with all that and brings a sinner to look to the Lord, to praise Him, bless Him, love Him, and hope in Him, and cleave to Him. O my friends, beg of the Lord for this free Spirit and when you get it, then you will show the Lord your countenance. "Thus though a sinner I am safe".

I dare be free. Yes, and you will feel so. You will dare to be free with the Lord when this comes. "Let Me see thy countenance."

"Let Me hear thy voice" Now you say what am I to say to the Lord? You will say, as under the teaching of the Spirit, and the moving of faith, something that will be pleasing to Him. You say, that is impossible. You say that, because of your ignorance and legality at this moment. "Sweet is thy voice" Now these things you will speak and they will be sweet to Christ. First, only acknowledge thine iniquity. Is that sweet? Yes, it is. You take that wonderful case of the publican. "God be merciful to me a sinner" Take the remarkable case of the dying thief "Lord remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom". Did Jesus perceive anything sweet in those broken petitions, those short prayers? Look at the woman before Him about her daughter "Lord help me" Look at the poor woman who had touched the hem of His garment, and

she told Him why she did it. Look at the blind men who said "Lord that we may receive our sight." These poor sinners went to Him and spoke to Him, spoke the wants of their hearts, the feelings of their minds, the distress that they were in. They were simple-hearted and free. A free spirit was in them, the spirit of faith. "Let Me hear thy voice" Take the bad case of the pharisee. He prays to be seen, and thanked God, but O what an abomination it was to the Lord. The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination. God did not want his hypocritical thanks and would not have them. There is no sweetness there. Do you justify yourself? Then there is no sweetness in whatever you say. Do you think that God ought to bless you, and do you feel as if your heart would say that before Him? There is no sweetness there. Do you say to your friends - "Why do not I get a blessing, others do?" There is no sweetness there. That is unbelief, that is pride. Perhaps hidden, but it is pride, nothing better. What then? Lord have mercy. "Remember me 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." O that will do, that will do. "Say unto my soul, I am thy salvation". So confession is one of the things that the Lord finds sweet in a sinner. Confession justifies him. Confession clears God in the conscience. You say perhaps to Him - "This trouble has come but it is not half of what I deserve. I deserve the loss of my soul in eternity." You say "Lord moderate Thy judgments. Though I deserve judgment in the extreme, moderate Thy judgments" and this is sweet. Everything that exalts Him, that abases the soul, everything that justifies Him and brings you into the dust, that has sweetness in it. Why? Because it comes from His grace, from the teaching of His Spirit, from the operations of the Holy Ghost, and the moving of faith in your soul. Let Me hear thy voice of supplication. Supplication is a great thing. Whence does it come? From heaven. Listen to the scripture on this - "I will pour upon the house of David and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplications" And again He said by Jeremiah - I will lead them. I will lead them in straight ways. As when you put a bit in the horse's mouth and lead it and turn it where you will, so when God gives the Spirit of grace and of supplication, it is leading the person, and He leads him to the right place. O yes, if you get the spirit of grace and supplication, God leading you, thereby, you will come to

the right place, the throne of grace where mercy reigns, where sweet gifts are given, where tender goodness is made manifest, where justification is spoken. You will come to that place as the Spirit of grace and of supplication is given to you. This is sweet to the Lord. It is labour to you, labour in you, and sometimes it may seem useless labour. You may even be objecting now, why I have done, or I have thought I have done, this for years, and I have got no answer. Well, did the Lord tell you when He gave you prayer, when He would answer it? Is He bound to answer just when you ask Him to? Is He bound to give you just what you go to Him for at that very moment? Nay, He is a sovereign. It was good of Him to give you grace to pray, and it will be no less good when He comes at the end of a long waiting period, no less good. Nay, perhaps you will say I see His kindness in keeping me waiting. I see His wisdom in keeping me waiting.

There is sweetness in the voice of the church when she praises Him. O that sweet song in the Psalm "I love the Lord because He hath heard my voice and my supplication". That sweet song "Bless the Lord O my soul and all that is within me bless His Holy Name". Say some of you, would that I could sing like that. Wait on

The time of love will come,
When we shall clearly see,
Not only that he shed his blood,
But each shall say "For me".

and when He says that then you will say "Bless the Lord O my soul and all that is within me bless His Holy Name" "Sweet is thy voice" O how sweet, let Me hear it. Bring your supplication, bring your humble petitions, and then bring your songs. Offer unto God the sacrifice of praise, the fruit of your lips. O, but one says, I can never rise to the height of His glory. O but listen, He says "Whoso offereth praise, glorifieth Me and to him that ordereth his conversation aright, will I show the salvation of God". So take, as well as you can, take His mercies in your hand, as Hannah took Samuel to the temple. Take His mercies in your hand and say "For this I prayed" and now I bring my poor offering and thank and praise and bless thee for giving me what Thou hast done. "Let Me see thy countenance, let Me hear thy voice"

And now a word or two in conclusion upon the encouragement that Christ here gives to the dove, to His people, to go on showing

themselves to Him and letting Him hear their voice. He says "For sweet is thy voice." Now you may judge your voice to be just what the Psalmist at one time judged to be his, namely, like the chattering of a crane or of a swallow. Not the music, the liquid note of the nightingale, but just the chattering of a crane or of a swallow. And, say you, I am ashamed of my prayers. They are so short, so broken, and my mind gets so scattered and especially when I kneel I am more troubled than at any other time. I am ashamed of my prayers. But, what you may not discover, God may hear. O the little faith, the cleaving to Him, the feeling underneath that if you are put to it, you could say "To whom shall I go; to whom shall I prefer a petition, but to Thee, the living God, the compassionate Saviour. To whom shall I go, Thou hast the words of eternal life." It is sweet, and it is sweet when a sinner prays according to the gospel. What do I mean by that? I mean this, when faith is strong enough in you to make more of the blood of Christ than of your sins. In your judgement you would not make more of your sins than of the blood of Christ, but in a legal spirit you may often be doing it. I have done it. But faith makes more of Christ's blood than of a sinner's sins and that does not take away from the awful character of sin, but it does lift the infinite merit of the Saviour's precious death in the sinner's heart and view; and that is sweet. It is sweet when you do not take your own free will and put it in the place of God's sovereign love in electing you, when you say "Remember me with the favour that Thou bearest unto Thy people. When you can say- It is His free choice of a sinner that is good, and not the sinner's choice of Him which is impossible. It is good and sweet when you say, I have not a rag but what is filthy. I have not a hope but in the pure, blessed, perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. That is sweet to Him. It lifts Him up. When you say I have no love except the Lord put His love into my heart, that is sweet. You cannot take your smokey impure love as you may call it and put it before Him. No. He said it would be a smoke in my nose. But, when you go and confess your own enmity, and tell Him that you would love Him if you could, and pray that His love may be in your heart to beget love to Him, that is sweet. and so one may go through many things in opening up that, when you pray according to the gospel. Mind the gospel. As God helps, pray according to the gospel, and if you do that, to say one word more you will pray according to the promises, "Him that cometh unto Me I will in no wise cast

out. They that seek shall find. To him that knocketh it shall be opened. This is a sweet voice. It is according to infinite love, according to the goodness of God. It is after the Spirit's teaching. It is according to the Spirit's operation. Let Me hear thy voice. It is a sweet voice. You may say yours is crooked and discordant, and there is nothing in it that can give you any pleasure, but if you pray according to the gospel, you pray with a sweet voice. And thy countenance is comely. What a commendation, and you need it. We do need the Lord to commend us. Why? Because we have nothing but condemnation in ourselves. I have nothing but condemnation in myself. I am ashamed of everything and I sin, as you cannot. I sin in the pulpit. Ministerial sins, and I am ashamed, more ashamed of my preaching than I could properly express to you. Ashamed of everything I do and touch. Well, what a wonder if the Lord says to me "Thy countenance is comely". No shame here. Why? Because it is in His dear Son in whom we have righteousness, in whom we have access and comfort and acceptance with the Father. Come this way, O come this way. The church had a comely countenance when she said "Behold O God our Shield and look upon the face of Thine anointed." That will do. It will do for time, it will do for trouble, for conflict. It will do when you have the shock of death; it will do when you enter eternity. It will do my friends. O the beauty of a sinner who is no longer a sinner in God's sight. When he is clothed with Christ, animated by the Spirit of Christ, led by the Spirit into the truth. Led to pray according to the gospel of the grace of God. So may the Lord speak to us. I think this is a beautiful scripture. It came sweetly into my mind as I closed the service this morning and it is sweet for the Lord to speak to a sinner, let Him know that He is acceptable to Him. Now if you have got this in your soul to pray and pray for, then go on and you will get one day, yea it may come even to you now, that the Lord should say to you "My Dove" and tell you that your voice is sweet to Him, that your countenance is comely in His sight. May He graciously do this for us and keep us on our knees as long as we live and if He does that we shall die well and live to praise Him throughout eternity.