

Sermon the Twenty-fifth.

TAKING, BRINGING, AND FEEDING.

"I will take you one of a city, and two of a family, and I will bring you to Zion: and I will give you pastors according to mine heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding.—
JER. iii. 14, 15.

THE more I read God's word, the more convinced I am of the fact that the Lord, who has scattered Israel according to His threats, will gather them according to His promises. Our text is a promise to backsliding Israel that has never been fulfilled; for although Judah returned from Babylon, the ten tribes have never been regathered. Besides, the restoration from Babylon, even of Judah, fell very far short of the fulfilment of the seventeenth verse: "At that time they shall call Jerusalem the throne of the Lord; and all the nations shall be gathered unto it, to the name of the Lord to Jerusalem: neither shall they walk any more after the imagination of their evil heart." So far from the Jews walking no more after the imagination of their evil heart, from the period of their return from Babylon, their crowning sin of rejecting the Messiah, killing the Heir that they might seize on the inheritance, was committed after that time. Nor has the eighteenth verse ever had its fulfilment: "In those days the house of Judah shall walk with the house of Israel, and they shall come together out of the land of the north to the land that I have given for an inheritance unto your fathers." For Israel is still "sifted among all nations, like as corn is sifted in a sieve."

The Scriptures tell us of four ways in which Israel will be gathered. They will, many of them, gather to Jerusalem in unbelief, and there, after a season of bitter trial, the chosen and spared third part, brought through the fire, shall have poured upon them the spirit of grace and supplication. "They shall look upon Him whom they have pierced, and shall mourn for Him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for Him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn." And in that day of mourning "there shall be a fountain opened to the

house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and uncleanness" (See Zech. xii., xiii., xiv., and Joel iii.). Others will be gathered by means of converted Gentiles: "And they shall bring all your brethren for an offering unto the Lord out of all nations upon horses, and in chariots, and in litters, and upon mules, and upon swift beasts, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, saith the Lord, as the children of Israel bring an offering in a clean vessel into the house of the Lord" (Isaiah lxvi. 20). Others, like their forefathers, will be miraculously led through the wilderness: "And I will bring you out from the people, and will gather you out of the countries wherein ye are scattered, with a mighty hand, and with a stretched out arm, and with fury poured out. And I will bring you into the wilderness of the people, and there will I plead with you face to face. Like as I pleaded with your fathers in the wilderness of the land of Egypt, so will I plead with you, saith the Lord God. And I will cause you to pass under the rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant" (Ezekiel xx. 34—37). And others will be gathered gradually, "one by one." "And it shall come to pass in that day, that the Lord shall beat off from the channel of the river unto the stream of Egypt, and ye shall be gathered one by one, O ye children of Israel" (Isaiah xxvii. 12). It is to this latter manner of gathering Israel that our text refers: "I will take you one of a city, and two of a family, and I will bring you to Zion."

But we find from Hebrews xiii. that the Lord's spiritual Israel, those people for His name gathered out from the Gentiles, have now come to Mount Zion, unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, which gives a warrant to interpret our text spiritually.

We may use the words as descriptive of conversion, and not merely of restoration from backsliding; for the prophecy of the thirty-first of Jeremiah, and thirty-first to the thirty-fourth verses, which promises restoration to backsliding Israel, is quoted in the eighth of Hebrews as applying to all the people of God now, who are brought from under the old covenant of works to be under the covenant of grace. "Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah: not

according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they continued not in my covenant, and I regarded them not, saith the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord: I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people" (Heb. viii. 8—10). I shall then endeavour to speak of our text in its spiritual meaning as describing the work of conversion on the hearts of the elect of God. The Lord promises to do three things for His people:

I. To take them: "I will take you one of a city,

and two of a family." *To bring them:* "And bring you to Zion."

II. To feed them: "And will give you pastors according to my heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding."

III. When the destined time has arrived for the "natural branches to be grafted in again," for Israel to be restored, God will prove Himself faithful to His promise, "Yet shall not the least grain fall to the ground." If there be in a city but one Israelite, He will find him, and take him. If there be but two of an Israelitish family or tribe, He will take those two, and bring them to Zion; so if there be one of God's elect in a city, or two of God's chosen in a family, He who took the thief on the cross, the centurion from among the Roman soldiers, and the jailor from among the Philippians, when the appointed moment has come, will take those elect souls. God has many ways of taking His people; as,

1. He may be said to take a soul when He seizes or apprehends him. A man may have committed a capital offence, and thus in the statute book of the realm be written to death, and yet be at large; not seized, "alive without the law." Every sinner has broken God's holy law, and has the sentence of death recorded against him in God's book: "the soul that sinneth, it shall die;" but until he is within the grasp of conviction, he is like a murderer at large; he is "alive without the law." But when the Spirit of God brings home the law to his conscience, he is like a murderer taken; and, "as the thief is ashamed when he is found," so is he filled with shame.

Imagine a man "guilty of death" sitting at ease in his apartment, perhaps quietly eating a meal. An officer of justice enters, and shows his warrant to apprehend him on a capital charge. He looks this way and that, to see if there be any way of escape, but he looks in vain; he is seized, handcuffed, and led off to prison, where he lies and plots a defence for the day of trial. But on that solemn day when he faces the tribunal of justice, all the pleas he has set up break down; his guilt is obvious, the sentence of death is passed upon him, he is remanded back to prison, laid in irons, awaiting his execution. He is indeed *taken*. It is thus the Lord takes His people. Have you ever been seized by the iron hand of justice? Have you ever stood a guilty culprit in the presence of God your righteous Judge? Have all your efforts to escape conviction—to patch up a self-righteous covering of your guilt—broken down before the searching eye of God? Has God with rebukes corrected you for iniquity, and made your "beauty to consume away like a moth?" Have you stood before His righteous tribunal a silenced culprit, and felt that by your sins you had brought yourself under His awful curse; and that no resolutions, reformations, prayers, tears, and efforts of yours could save you from death? Have you been shut in the condemned cell; condemned by conscience, law, and justice, in "the pit wherein is no water," a groaning prisoner, appointed to death? I do not ask whether this work has been done suddenly or gradually; or more or less terribly. I only ask, Have you been *taken*—so taken as to realize the truth of Toplady's lines:—

"Not the labour of my hands
Can fulfil Thy law's demands;
Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears for ever flow;
All for sin, could not atone;
Thou must save, and Thou alone?"

If so, you have been taken, or apprehended. 2. God not only takes His people in the strong hand of conviction—He not only *takes them by the throat*, but he takes them in the tender hand of His mercy. He *takes them by the heart*; He has His "cords of love" by which He "draws," as well as His chains by which He binds.

Imagine a poor condemned man as he lies in his cell, dreading the hour of his execution, receiving a kindly visit from one who tells him that the king, whose laws he has broken, has found out a way by which the rights of justice may be maintained, while his mercy is extended to guilty law-breakers, and, pulling a parchment from his bosom, he shows the prisoner, in the handwriting of the king himself, an invitation to the most heinous offenders to come and reason with him; and, though guilty of scarlet and crimson crimes, he would blot all out; to culprits burdened with guilt to come to him, and he would give them rest by a free forgiveness, and promises, indeed, in *no wise* to cast out any who come. Would not this *take* the poor prisoner's heart? Would not this melt him to tears of hope? Would not this seize his affections with cords of love, and draw them towards the throne of the sovereign? Would not the top wish of his heart now be that he might reach the throne of the king, and cast himself down there, acknowledge his offences, and seek to find fulfilment of his sovereign's gracious promises? Has the counterpart of this been made out in your experience?

"Mercy is welcome news indeed,
To those who guilty stand."

The reason why the Gospel finds so few bosoms that echo gratitude to its glad sounds, is because there are so few sinners in the world made sensible of their guilt. The bulk of men are wrapt in the grave-clothes of a deathly indifference, covered with the fig-leaves of self-righteousness, or pillowed up with false evidences. It is only those whose consciences are truly awakened, who see God and self, and law and sin, in their true colours, that find the Gospel to be Gospel indeed. These get their hearts so taken with the good news of salvation through the cross for lost sinners, that the one hungry wish of their hearts is, "Lead me to the Rock which is higher than I." The spot they long to reach, is that sacred spot, sprinkled with the falling drops of Immanuel's blood. Could they reach the cross; could they "lay hold of the hope set before us;" could they but come to Christ, and venture their souls wholly upon His atoning work, they would have the wish of their hearts. Conviction has made room in their bosoms for

Jesus; the glory of the Gospel of God's grace has filled that space with hungry longings that nothing can satisfy but the having Christ. But—

3. God not only takes His people by the *throat* to convince them, and by the *heart* to attract them, but He takes them by the *hand* to lead them. Indeed, without this, taking by the throat and by the heart would leave them, though longing, yet lost ones. He that knows his own helplessness, and the power of unbelief, guilt, and temptation, knows he must have something besides alarming convictions and alluring invitations to give him what he needs. That blessed Spirit, who has recorded the invitations, must give him power to obey them. He that bids His Lots to "escape for their life," must take them by the hand and lead them out of the doomed city. Supposing an imprisoned culprit should receive an invitation to return to his offended sovereign, and he would have mercy upon him and abundantly pardon him, this would take his heart—this would make him long to obey the invitation; but his chains, his prison walls, the gates of brass and bars of iron, would hold him where he is, and leave him lamenting his inability to reach the mercy-seat. But supposing some kind messenger from the king should, as he reiterated afresh the invitations and promises of his merciful master, take the poor prisoner by the hand, remove his irons, open his cell, and lead him forth, though with a rope upon his head, and take him into the king's presence, where he could throw himself down, acknowledge his desert of death, yet plead with faith the king's own promises of forgiveness;—would not this be just the thing the prisoner needed? So when the Holy Spirit gives power to obey Gospel invitations, makes them come "not in word only, but in power also," He enables the soul to obey them; He enables the burdened one to come to Christ for rest; the thirsty one to take freely the water of life; the sensibly wicked and unrighteous one to forsake his way and his thoughts, and to return unto the Lord, that He may have mercy upon him, and abundantly pardon him. But this *taking* is followed—

II. With *bringing*: "And I will bring you to Zion."—*Taking* here is parallel with *calling* in the eighth of Romans. But *bringing* with *justification*: "Whom He

called, them He also justified;" whom He takes by effectual calling from the world, them He *brings* by *justification* to Zion. The taken one is on the way to Jerusalem, the vision of peace. He is "asking the way to Zion, with his face thitherward." But the *brought* one "in Zion appears before God." The taken one is pushing his way through the crowd, saying, "If I may but touch the hem of His garment, I shall be made whole;" but the *brought* one has touched, and is healed. The *taken* one with weeping and supplication is led; but the *brought* one with gladness and rejoicing enters into the King's palace. It is true a called one comes to the banquet; but he comes a beggar, while the justified one comes a guest.

"I will bring you to Zion." God, in bringing him to Zion, brings the soul—

1. *To the place of victory*.—"For in this mountain shall the hand of the Lord rest, and Moab shall be trodden down under Him, even as straw is trodden down for the dunghill." The land of Moab lay on the edge of the Jordan. It was the last enemies' country through which Israel passed before entering the Canaan of rest, and may well typify that army of reasonings, doubts, and unbelieving fears that stand in the way of a coming soul entering the Canaan of Gospel rest. Imagine an army of powerful soldiers, standing in the way of a man getting his lawful inheritance, suddenly turned into straw, and trampled down like straw for the dunghill! What a complete picture of victory would this be! When the soul really reaches Zion, all that mighty host of fears and doubts, and carnal reasonings and hardness of heart, drops helpless as straw upon the ground, and is trampled under foot and triumphed over!

It is here that "death is swallowed up in victory." It is here that that great king of terrors is disarmed. It is here that the monster death loses its sting; for it is here that the soul can sing—

"If sin be pardon'd, I'm secure;
Death has no sting beside:
The law gave sin its damning power,
But Christ my Ransom died."

It is here that the victorious grave is triumphed over. It is here the soul can join the Apostle's song: "O

death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Mount Zion is ground that Satan cannot tread upon. The soul that is brought here finds that Satan is standing no longer at his right hand to resist him, for the Lord that hath chosen Jerusalem has rebuked the adversary, and plucked the saved one as a brand out of the fire; taken away his filthy garments from him; caused his iniquity to pass from him; clothed him with change of raiment, and set a fair mitre upon his head. Now he who was once a conquered one is an overcomer by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of the Gospel.

2. The Lord, in bringing a soul to Zion, bring him to the place of *feasting*: "In this mountain shall the Lord of Hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined." Before a sinner reaches this mountain, he knows what it is to be the hungry, starving, coming prodigal; but now he knows what it is to be the received and feasting prodigal. Though he may have long known what it is to *want* Christ, he never knew till now what it is to *have* Christ. He has known before this time what is meant by "hungry and thirsty, their soul fainteth within them;" but never until now has he understood "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: Thou anointest my head with oil, my cup runneth over." Now he is a "priest" whose soul is "satiated with fatness;" he has flown to the Lord "for wheat, and for wine, and for oil; and for the young of the flock and of the herd. And his soul is as a watered garden." He is now no longer "lean from day to day," but, like Naphtali, he is "satisfied with favour, and full with the blessing of the Lord;" he "eats, and his soul is satisfied;" he "drinks, and forgets his poverty, and remembers his misery no more." Do you know what it is to have an empty, hungry, sorrowing heart for Christ, and then to have your faith and hope and love fed with that "meat that endureth to everlasting life;" and to find that the Redeemer's flesh is "meat indeed, and His blood drink indeed"? If so, you have been brought to Zion.

3. In bringing His people to Zion, God brings them

within hearing of *the voice of "the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel."* When He apprehends a sinner, He brings him within the sound of Sinai's trumpet and the voice of words which fill his guilty soul with dread, and make him cry with Israel, "Let not God speak to us, lest we die." A guilty conscience, a cursing law, an accusing devil, a condemning heart, and mighty unbelief, make a terrible tempest in the sinner's soul. But let a man be brought through faith to Mount Zion, and let the lips of peace-speaking blood come in contact with the believing ear of a living faith, and the storm is hushed; "Peace, be still," is heard effectually in the tempest-tossed conscience; the storm is made a calm; the waves are still; then is the soul glad, because he is quiet, and is brought to his desired haven. Oh, has the bleeding side of Jesus ever been a haven of rest to your soul? has the voice of blood ever been to you as the voice of the Lord on high, "mightier than the noise of many waters, yea, than the mighty waves of the sea"?

4. The being brought to Mount Zion, is being brought to the place of *unveiling*: for the Lord "destroys in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the veil that is spread over all nations. As long as a man is under the law, though he be a quickened soul—though he be coming to Christ like Lazarus in response to the Saviour's "Come forth," yet his face is still "bound about with a napkin." Moses is still read in his conscience, and therefore the legal veil remaineth untaken away; but when Mount Zion is reached, the heart turns to the Lord; God is seen in Christ "well pleased for His righteousness sake," and "the veil is taken away;" with unveiled face the glory of God is seen as in a glass. "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 of Jesus Christ." God no longer appears "a swift Witness" against the sinner, or an angry Judge, but a loving Father.

Have you understood these lines—

"When faith to Sinai looks,
It fills the soul with dread,
And justifies the dreadful stroke
That strikes the sinner dead"?

And also this description of the work of faith—
 "To Him it leads the soul,
 When fill'd with deep distress,
 Flies to the fountain of His blood,
 And trusts His righteousness?"

5. To be brought to Mount Zion is to be brought to the place of *fruit-producing blessing*.—Zion is the place of refreshing dew: "As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life for evermore." Arminians, with the Papists, represent that assurance that if nothing shall separate us from the love of God, will make us indifferent about serving the Lord; will make us like the mountains of Gilboa, without dew or rain; but the truth is, the more gracious assurance, the more hearty service. The time of breaking our legal yoke is the time of taking on us the Gospel yoke. When God unbinds a man at Zion, He sets him free to serve, not to sin: they are the enemies of the cross of Christ, who go on in their trespasses, and say, "We are delivered to do all these abominations." But this is the "mercy promised" to the children of Abraham, the sons of the free woman, "that, being delivered out of the hand of their enemies, they might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness, before Him all the days of their life." The legal lash is for the children of the bondwoman; but the dew of Zion, the blessing of the Lord, the love of Christ, constraineth the children of the free woman.

Let terrors fright th' unwilling slave,
 The child with joy obeys.

But I must hasten to notice—

III. That the Lord feeds his taken and brought ones: "I will give you pastors according to mine heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding." The seeking soul is apt to think, if he could but once find the Saviour, he should be completely satisfied; but when one has found Christ, he finds that this is the period when a new series of wants commences. From this moment he begins to have new hungerings—that is, excepting, like the Hebrews, through "having children for his princes, and babes to rule over him,"

he is content to stay in "the first principles" of the doctrine of Christ, and not "go on to perfection"—remain "such as have need of milk and not of strong meat," and thus is content to be "unskilful in the word of righteousness." The need of a sinner dead in sins, is a Boanerges, a "son of thunder," whose voice the Lord makes effectual to his awakening. The need of an awakened soul is a Barnabas, an evangelist, a "son of consolation," whose Gospel proclamation the Lord will use to the leading of him to Christ; while the need of a saved soul, travelling through a wilderness of changes, wars, wants, cares, and woes, is a pastor, to "feed him with knowledge and understanding." How few of such pastors are to be found in the present day! and how little is the Church in a position to appreciate such pastors, who will bring forward *all Scripture that the men of God might be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works!* We need now, not only to pray that the Lord would "send forth labourers into His harvest," that His "other sheep" may be "brought," but teachers into His household; that His family may be "filled with knowledge and understanding"—pastors into His sheepfold; that might go before His flock, and lead them instrumentally into "the green pastures beside the still waters," and so that I am persuaded that *partiality in God's law* is one of the sins of the ministry of this day; and I should count it a sign that the Church is about to be revived in the midst of the years, if the Lord's ministers were led spiritually to bring out the whole truth, to "bring out of their treasure things new and old." And it would be a sign that such a revival had commenced, if the Church were able to receive into a believing heart all the truths of Scripture in their vast variety and beautiful harmony; instead of this, if a man were to preach the doctrines of grace as strongly as Paul does in the eighth and ninth of Romans, some would be ready to tremble lest he were somewhat fatalistic, or antinomian; or, if he were to preach the free invitations of the Gospel to perishing sinners, in the alluring terms of Isaiah lv., others would fear his leanings were rather Arminian; or, if he were to enter into all the conflicting experience of Romans vii., some would be disposed to charge him with looking into self, and grovelling in the mire; or, if he exhorted the

struggling racer to lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset him, and to run with patience the race set before him, looking unto Jesus; he would be thought ignorant of his own helplessness, if not contending for a presumptuous trust in a Christ without Him; or, should he exhort the people of God, as fully and freely as the epistles exhort, some would fear that he was for bringing them into legal bondage, and setting them to do something. When the Church could feed upon all the branches of truth brought out so graciously and fully as they were in the ministry of the Puritan divines, she then proved herself able to use the "strong meat that belongeth to them that are of full age, who, by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern good and evil."

A sincere person's utterances are the index of his heart. God has spoken His heart out in His blessed word; and he, therefore, is most like a pastor after God's heart, whose ministry most embraces spiritually the whole word of God. And they, too, are a people most after God's heart whose varied exercises, wants, and desires make them find a gracious use for every branch of God's word. I hope I do not say all this in any spirit of self-commendation, for I feel reproved before this solemn text. It would ill become me to say, "No doubt I am the man;" but I am sure it would be quite as unbecoming, and quite as untrue, if I did not say, "I want to be the man." The Lord put it into your hearts to want the whole truth, and to cry to Him that I may be enabled to feed you with the whole truth. Oh that here the Lord's *taken and bought-ones* may be the Lord's *fed* ones. And remember, the Lord feeds the heart through the understanding. He "feeds with knowledge and understanding." As Hart says—

"Faith is by knowledge fed,
And with obedience mixed;
Notion is empty, cold, and dead,
And fancy never fixed."

John says, "We have known and believed." But I am admonished abruptly to close, only expressing my desire that God will take the untaken ones, bring the taken ones, and feed the brought ones.

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