

THE MIDDLE PASSAGE

NO. 1474

A SERMON
 DELIVERED ON LORD'S-DAY MORNING, MAY 18, 1879,
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 AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON.

(In commemoration of the completion of the 25th year of his
 ministry over the church meting in the Tabernacle).

*“O Lord, I have heard Your speech, and was afraid; O Lord, revive Your work
 in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make known; in wrath remember mercy.”*
Habakkuk 3:2.

HABAKKUK had the sadness of living at a time when true religion was in a very deplorable state. The nation had to a great extent departed from the living God. There was a godly party in the kingdom, but the ungodly and idolatrous faction was exceedingly strong. The Lord threatened judgment on the people on account of this and it was revealed to the prophet that an invasion by the Chaldeans was near at hand. The prophet, therefore, was filled with anxiety as to the future of his country because he saw its sinful condition and knew where it must end. The book of his prophecy begins with the earnest question of intercession, “O Lord, how long?” His spirit was stirred within him at the sin of the people and his heart was broken by a vision of the chastisement which the Lord had ordained. It becomes all who bear witness for God to thus be stirred in soul when they see the name of God dishonored and have reason to expect the visitations of His wrath. A man without a heart of compassion is not a man of God.

Yet Habakkuk was a man of strong faith, a happy circumstance indeed for him in evil times, for if faith be wanted in the fairest weather, much more is it needed when the storm is gathering. And if the just must live by faith even when the morning begins to break, how much more must they do so when the shadows are deepening into night? Those who have tender hearts to weep over the sins of their fellows need also brave hearts to stay themselves upon God.

Habakkuk's name, by interpretation, is the embracer and I may say of him truly that he was one who saw the promises afar off and was persuaded of them and embraced them. He took fast hold upon the goodness of the Lord and rested there. In reading his book, one is struck by the way in which he realized the presence of God. Fitly does he entitle his book, “The burden which Habakkuk the prophet *did see*,” for in the vividness of his apprehension, he is eminently a “seer.” He perceives the presence of God and bids the earth keep silence before Him. He beholds the divine ways in the history of the chosen people and feels rottenness entering into his bones and a trembling seizing him. God was very real to him and the way of God was very conspicuous before his mental eye. Hence his faith was as vigorous as his reverence was deep. It is in his prophecy that we read that wonderful gospel sentence upon which Paul preaches many sermons, “The just shall live by faith”—and it is in this prophecy too that we find that notable resolution of faith when under the worst conceivable circumstances, she says or sings, “Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the ‘God of my salvation.’” Now, beloved, it will be well for us if we have much of Habakkuk's spirit and are grounded and settled by a strong confidence in God; for if so, while we may have somber views both as to the present and the future, we shall be freed from all despondency by casting ourselves upon Him whose ways are everlasting. His goings forth of old were so grand and glorious that to doubt Him is to slander Him. His nature is so unchangeable that to reckon upon the repetitions of His gracious deeds is but to do Him the barest justice.

In the text which I have selected this morning with an eye to the celebration of the 25th year of our happy union as pastor and people, I see three points upon which I wish to dwell. The first is, *the prophet's fear*, “O Lord, I have heard Your speech and was afraid.” The second is *the prophet's prayer*, “O Lord, revive Your work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make known.” And the third is *the prophet's plea*, “In wrath remember mercy,” coupled with the rest of the chapter in which he practically finds a plea for God's present working in the report of what He had done for Israel in the olden times.

I. First, then, I want you to NOTICE THE PROPHET'S FEAR, "I have heard Your speech and was afraid." It is the fear of solemn awe—it is not dread or terror, but reverence. Read it in connection with the 20th verse of the preceding chapter, "But the Lord is in His holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before Him. O Lord, I have heard Your speech and was afraid." All else was hushed and then, in the solemn silence, he heard Jehovah's voice and trembled. It is not possible that mortal men should be thoroughly conscious of the divine presence without being filled with awe. I suppose that this feeling in un-fallen Adam was less overwhelming because he had no sense of sin, but surely even to him it must have been a solemn thing to hear the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day. Though filled with a childlike confidence, yet even innocent manhood must have shrunk to the ground before that majestic presence. Since the fall, whenever men have been favored with any special revelation of God, they have been deeply moved with fear. There was great truth in the spirit of the old tradition that no man could see God's face and live, for such a sense of nothingness is produced in the soul by consciousness of Deity that men so highly favored have found themselves unable to bear up under the load of blessing. Isaiah cries, "Woe is me. For I am undone; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." Daniel says, "There remained no strength in me." Ezekiel declares, "When I saw it, I fell upon my face." And John confesses, "When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead." You remember how Job cried unto the Lord, "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear: but now my eye sees You. Wherefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes." Angels, who climb the ladder which Jacob saw, veil their faces when they look on God, and as for us who are at the foot of that ladder, what can we do but say with the patriarch, "How dreadful is this place"? Albeit that it is the greatest of all blessings, yet is it an awful thing to be a favorite with God. Blessed among women was the Virgin Mother, to whom the Lord manifested such high favor, but for this very reason to her it was foretold, "Yes, a sword shall pierce through your own soul also." Blessed among men was he to whom God spoke as a friend, but it was necessary that a horror of great darkness should come upon him. It is not given to such frail creatures as we are to stand in the full blaze of Godhead, even though it is tempered by the mediation of Christ, without crying out with the prophet, "I was afraid." "Who would not fear You, O King of nations?"

Habakkuk's awe of God was quickened by the "speech" which he had heard. "O Lord, I have heard Your speech," which is by some rendered, "report," and referred to the gospel of which Isaiah says, "Who has believed our report?" But surely the meaning should rather be looked for in the context and this would lead us to interpret the "report" as relating to what God had done for His ancient people when He came from Teman, cleaving the earth with rivers and threshing the heathen in anger. The prophet had been studying the history of Israel and had seen the hand of God in every stage of that narrative—from the passage of the Red Sea and the Jordan on to the casting out of the heathen and the settlement of Israel in Canaan. He had heard the speech of God in the story of Israel in the silence of his soul. He had seen the deeds of the Lord as though newly enacted and he was filled with awe and apprehension, for he saw that while God had great favor for His people, yet He was provoked by their sins. And though He passed by their transgressions many and many a time, yet He did chasten them and did not wink at their iniquities. The prophet remembered how God had smitten Israel in the wilderness till the graves of lust covered many an acre of the desert. He remembered how He had smitten them in Canaan, where tyrant after tyrant subdued them and brought them very low. He remembered the terrible judgments which the Lord had sent, one after another, thick and threefold upon His guilty people, fulfilling that ancient word of His, "You only have I known of all the nations of the earth, therefore I will punish you for your iniquities." He saw that burning text, "I the Lord your God am a jealous God," written in letters of fire all along the history of Jehovah's connection with His elect people and so he cried, "O Lord, I have heard Your speech and was afraid."

Probably, however, Habakkuk alludes to another source of apprehension, namely, the silent speech of God within his prophetic bosom, where, unheard by men, there were intimations of coming vengeance which intimations he afterwards put into words and left on record in the first chapter of his book. The Chaldeans, a people fierce and strong were coming up. They were a bitter and hasty nation, terrible and dreadful, swifter than leopards and fiercer than evening wolves. These were hastening towards Judah as mighty hunters hurry to the prey and in the spirit of prophecy; Habakkuk saw the land parched beneath the fire-hoofs of the invading horses, princes and kings led away into captivity, the garden of the Lord turned into a desolate wilderness, and Lebanon itself shorn of its forests by the hand of violence. The fear of this frightful calamity made him tremble; as well it might, for Jeremiah himself scarcely found tears enough to bewail the Chaldean woe. Now, my brethren, when the Lord leads His servants to look from their watchtowers and to guess the future by the past, we also are afraid. When we

see God's chastisement of a sinful people in years gone by and are led therefrom to prognosticate the probable future of a sinful people in the present day, and then do our hearts fail us for fear lest the Lord should avenge Himself upon the guilty nation in which we dwell. We are afraid for ourselves also with great fear, for we also have sinned.

Thus, you see, the prophet's fear was made up of these three things—first, a solemn awe inspired by the near presence of the Lord who cannot look upon iniquity, lest haply He should break forth upon the people as a consuming fire. Secondly, an apprehension drawn from the past report of God's ways which He had made known to Moses and His acts to the children of Israel, lest He should again smite the erring nation. And then, thirdly, a further apprehension which projected itself into the future, that the Lord would execute the threatenings which He had so solemnly uttered by His prophets and permit the Chaldeans to treat His people as though they were so many fishes of the sea to be taken in their net and devoured.

Putting those three things together, I advance to the prophet's special subject of fear which has been generally overlooked but is very conspicuous in the text. The prophet was afraid because of the particular period of national life through which his people were passing. They had come, if I read his prayer aright, to "the midst of the years," or the middle period of their history. Habakkuk's ministry was not exercised in the first ages when Moses and Samuel prophesied, nor yet in these latter days wherein we live, upon whom the ends of the earth have come. He probably ministered 600 years before the coming of Christ—somewhere in the very center of human history—if that history is to make a week of thousands as to its years as many have imagined. With regard to the Israelite people, they were now far removed from the day "when Ephraim was a child." They were in their middle life when the best things ought to have been developed in them. The heroic age was gone and that unpoetical, matter of fact era was come in which men labored in the very fire and wearied themselves for very vanity and therefore like a tender intercessor, the prophet cries, "O Lord, revive Your work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make known." The application to ourselves which I want to make this morning is drawn from the fact that we also as a church have reached "the midst of the years." Under the present pastorate we are like mariners in mid ocean, distant 25 leagues, or rather years, from the place of our departure and making all sail for the further shore. As to any service we may expect personally to render, we are certainly in the midst of the years if not near to their end. In the course of nature, we could not expect that more than another 25 years of service could be compassed by us [Brother Spurgeon died January 6, 1892, less than 13 years later.—eod], nor are we so foolish as to reckon even upon that. We have, at any rate, come to middle life in our church relationship now that we celebrate our silver anniversary.

Brethren, there is about "the midst of the years" a certain special danger and this led the prophet, as it shall lead us at this time, to pray, "O Lord, revive Your work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make known." Youth has its perils, but these are past. Age has its infirmities, but these we have not yet reached. It is ours then to pray against the dangers which are present with us "in the midst of the years." The middle passage of life with us as individuals and with us as a church is crowded with peculiar perils.

Have you never noticed how previous dispensations have all passed away in their prime, long before they had grown grey with years? Upon the golden age of paradise and perfection the sun went down before it was yet noon. The patriarchal period saw a few of its hoary fathers wearing the veneration of centuries, but in a few generations men with lengthened lives had grown so skilled in sin that the flood came and swept away the age before yet it had begun to fade. Then came the Jewish state with its judges and its kings—and scarcely have we read that Solomon built a great house for the Lord before we perceive that Israel has gained the zenith of her glory and her excellence declines. Even so was it in the Christian church of the first ages, so far as it was a visible organization. It began well—what did hinder it? It was in fullest health and strength when it defied the lions and the flames and laughed emperors to scorn, but before long Constantine laid his royal hand upon it and the church became sick of the king's evil—the cruelest of all diseases to the church of God. This malady, like a canker, ate into her very heart and defiled her soul so that what should have been a spiritual empire chastely wedded to the Lord Christ became the mistress of the kings of the earth. Her middle ages were a night of darkness which even yet casts its dread shade across the nations. It seems as if the middle passage of communities cannot be safely passed except by a miracle of grace. The morning comes with a dawn of bright beams and sparkling dews, but before long the sun is hot and the fields are parched or the sky is black with clouds and the glory of the day is marred. This is a matter of constant anxiety to the lover of his race who knows the

jealousy of God and the frailty of His people, lest in the midst of the years the people should turn aside from their faithfulness and forget their first love and therefore the Lord should be provoked to remove their candlestick and leave them to their own devices. O Lord, my God, grant this may not happen unto this Your church.

What, then, are the dangers of this middle passage?

First, there is a certain spur and stimulus of novelty about religious movements which in a few years is worn out. I well remember when we were called, “a nine days wonder,” and our critics prophesied that our work would speedily collapse. Such excitement had been before and had passed away—and this would be one among other bubbles of the hour. The nine days have lasted considerably longer—may nine such days follow them in God’s infinite mercy. Now, whatever detractors might say, we know that there was then a life, an energy, a freshness about everything which was done by us as a church which we could hardly expect to continue with us for all these years. Youthful novelty has certainly gone and the danger is that a community should be greatly weakened by the ceasing of that force which in some cases has been all the power possessed. Lady Huntingdon, in a letter to Mr. Berridge, deplored the fact that every new work, after a season, seemed to grow lifeless. Berridge remarked that in this the primitive churches were much like our own and that after the former rain which falls at seed-time, there is often a dry interval until the latter rain descends. I fear the good man’s remark is sadly correct. From an admirable fervor, many cool down to a dangerous chill. This is to be bemoaned where it has occurred and it is to be feared where, as yet it has not happened, for such is the natural tendency of things. Beloved brethren, I have prayed to God that when what is called the *esprit de corps* is gone from us, the *Esprit de Dieu* may still abide with us. I have prayed that when the spirit which grows out of our association with each other declines, we may be sustained by the Spirit which unites us all to the Lord Jesus.

The middle passage becomes difficult, then, because things grow ordinary and commonplace which before were striking and remarkable. I do not know that this would matter much if it were not too often the case that with the stimulus of novelty certain other excitements also vanish. We tremble lest the people who prayed mightily at first should restrain prayer before the Lord, lest those who made many self-sacrifices should think that they have done enough, and lest those who have consecrated themselves unto the Lord should imagine that they began upon too high a key and cannot keep up the music to such a pitch. A people, who have loved the souls of men and have been like mighty hunters before the Lord after sinners, may suddenly dream that they are excused from further effort and may leave others to do mission work for their Lord. It is an ill day when a feeling of satisfaction begins to creep over us, but this is one of the perils of “the midst of the years.” I pray the reliance on God in which we began should never depart from us.

It often happens in the commencement of religious movements that men are weak and few and feeble and despised and they trust in God and so they grow strong, but their strength becomes their overthrow. The tendency of our proud nature is to cease from childlike confidence in God when once it feels strong enough to rely upon itself. The Lord says not by many nor by few—and if even for a moment we should glory in our numbers and think that now we are powerful for the achievement of any work which we may undertake, we shall grieve the Spirit of God and He may in holy jealousy leave us to barrenness. This is to be dreaded beyond all things. My brethren, it is a glorious thing to be weak that we may have the strength of God resting on us. It is a glorious thing to be poor and mean and despised that the Lord may take such weak instruments and get unto Himself glory by the use of them. But it is a grievous evil if in the mid-day of prosperity, the church should vex the Spirit of God by self-confidence and cause Him to withdraw His sacred succors.

Another danger arises out of the pride of achievement. When men are beginning to work for Christ, they feel that they cannot do anything without Him and they trust in God to give them strength and He answers their humble cry and does great things by them. But when a good work is worked, we are apt to feel, “We have won our laurels. We have borne the burden and the heat of the day and we may now rest.” This is fatal to progress. We shall do no more when we imagine that we have done enough. You know the story of the painter who broke his palette and put down his brush and told his wife that he would never paint again for the artistic faculty had departed from him? When she inquired how he was aware of the sad fact, he answered, “The last picture I produced realized my ideal and satisfied me and therefore I am certain that I have lost my power as a painter.” It certainly is so that we are fit for Christ’s service only as long as we feel that we have as yet done nothing and are merely at the beginning of our purposed service. Those who pine for greater exploits have not yet spent themselves, but the danger lies in saying, “I have finished my day’s work. Soul, take your ease.” From my heart I dread the middle hour

of life's day, both for myself and you, for therein so many think it no ill, like the Italians, to take a *siesta*, or mid-day sleep, and then it is that the enemy is upon them.

There is too a pride of experience which is apt to grow upon churches and individuals, like moss upon old trees, when men are "in the midst of the years." They feel, "We are not now the young, simple, silly people that we once were. We are not now to be overcome by temptation or misled by error. We shall beyond all doubt remain sound in faith and pure in life even to the end." It is from the egg of carnal security that the canker worm of backsliding is hatched—therefore we must mind what we are doing "in the midst of the years."

Besides, I think, dear brethren, all Christians must be conscious that after a continuance in doing well we are apt to be assailed by weariness. Apart from our Lord's promised aid, we faint—we die in the long race which He has set before us. Labor leads to lassitude and suffering to impatience. Grace is needed to prevent the decays of nature. When the natural spirits sink, we grow depressed and complain that our warfare is hard and our travail bitter, and with this there is apt to mingle a sense of disappointment because we have not achieved all that our sanguine hopes expected. We scarcely rejoice that something has been done because so much remains unaccomplished. When the mind is thus wearied, the spirit faints at the prospect of a further and perhaps a heavier strain—and this makes the central regions of life wonderfully trying to Zion's pilgrims. We are apt to be slack in the service of God by reason of what we have already done, though that we must confess is little enough. Satan knows how to take advantage of our fainting moments—to make cowards of us if he can. Therefore, be aware of his devices.

If we have stood like watchmen on the walls for years, the tendency is to relax our vigilance. If we have borne a protest for many years, the thought will suggest itself that it will be folly to be singular any longer and wise to yield to the current of the times. Then the enemy sneeringly whispers, "Who are you and what have you done with all your testifying and separate walking and Puritanical precisions? All that you have accomplished is insignificant enough! The world still lies in the wicked one and error is still rampant. Give up the battle, for you cannot win." In the midst of the years, what with weariness and lack of faith, the heart is apt to yield to the infernal suggestion. Therefore, brethren, let a mighty prayer go up from the whole church to our Redeemer God, "O Lord, revive Your work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make known."

II. Thus have I indicated the prophet's fear and now I would conduct you, secondly, to consider THE PROPHET'S PRAYER, "O Lord, revive Your work." His first request is for *revival*. He means, "Lord, put new life into us. Your cause began with life, but the tendency of all around it is to make it die, therefore, Lord, quicken it anew, give it another birthday and restore all the force and energy of its first love. Give us a new Pentecost, we beseech You. Give all the spiritual endowments which came with the tongues of fire and so enrich us anew. Revive us! Help us to begin again. Start us anew in life." That is the petition and it seems to me to be one of the wisest requests that ever fell even from prophetic lips. Let us use it. Lord, now that we have been 25 years together, let us feel as fresh as if the race were now beginning. Give us back the dew of our youth that we may do our first works and something more. Let us have with the maturity of age the freshness of youth. And let us run without weariness in Your ways because Your Spirit has quickened us. Our dependence is upon You, even for life itself. Breathe on us once more.

And that life, as I understand it, is to come upon God's people themselves, "Revive Your work." What is God's work? Why, it is God's people, for we are His workmanship. True revival must first come upon the churches themselves. In all churches, there is much that is not God's work and we do not ask to have it revived, but rather that it may be put away. But wherever there is anything that is God's work—any of the mind of Christ, any sincere prayer, any faith, any hope, any love, any consecration—we earnestly cry, "O Lord, revive Your work." Living saints alone are, in the exact sense of the word, capable of revival—we can only revive those in whom life is already found. O Lord, quicken Your people!

He means God's work in each one of us, for we each need revival—may the Lord send it to us now so that if grey hairs are upon us here and there, and we know it not, we may become young again through His free Spirit. If the fountain of our life runs low, may the Lord touch the secret springs and flood us again with holy zeal. To save us from the perils of "the midst of the years" we need to have life anew imparted to us.

But the prophet also refers to God's work *by* His people as well as in them. May the Lord put new life into His cause. It is an awful thing to see a dead church. I have seen such a thing with my own eyes. I remember very well preaching in a chapel where the church had become exceedingly low and some-

how the very building looked like a sepulcher, though crowded that one night by those who came to hear the preacher. The singers drawled out a dirge while the members sat like mutes. I found it hard preaching—there was no go in the sermon—I seemed to be driving dead horses. After the sermon I saw two deacons, the pillars of the church, leaning against the posts of the vestry door in a listless attitude and I said, “Are you the deacons of this church?” They informed me that they were the only deacons and I remarked that I thought so. To myself I added that I understood, as I looked at them, several things which otherwise would have been a riddle. Here was a dead church comparable to the ship of the ancient mariner which was manned by the dead. Deacons, teachers, minister, people—all dead—and yet wearing the semblance of life—

*“The helmsman steered, the ship moved on,
Yet never a breeze up blew;
The mariners all began to work the ropes,
Where they were known to do.
They raised their limbs like lifeless tools
We were a ghastly crew.”*

May the Lord save us from becoming such a ghastly crew. Now, to prevent our getting into that state, and we easily may—so that instead of devotion there shall be routine and instead of life and energy there shall be dead orthodoxy and dull propriety—we must cry, “O Lord, revive Your work in the midst of the years.”

The prophet further asks for a fresh revelation of the Lord, “In the midst of the years make known.” When You have made us live, then shall we have power to know and therefore make Your truth known to us. Did he not intend by this petition that the Lord should make known that the work was His own? “Revive Your work; in the midst of the years make known,” that men may not say, “This was only an excitement which the spirit of the people carried on for a few years,” but may be forced to confess that this is the finger of God because it continues and abides. O Lord, in our case make the world know that it is Your work because You do not forsake it. Again convert multitudes, build up the church again, increase the people again, multiply the joy again, pour out the Holy Spirit upon Your witnesses again with signs following.

But I think he chiefly means make known Yourself. In the midst of the years make known Yourself, O Jehovah. Reveal in the midst of Your church, Your power to save. Make known the person and sacrifice of the Well-beloved in whom Your grace and vengeance strangely join. Make known the power of the Holy Spirit who convicts of sin and afterwards comforts by leading the sinner to the cross. Make known Yourself, Eternal Father, as You receive prodigals into Your bosom and kiss them with the kiss of love and make high festival concerning their return to You. The prophet longed that God would be seen in the midst of His people and this above all things is our hearts’ desire. Oh, my brethren, it is vain and idle for us to think that any good can come of human speech or human song or human worship of any kind apart from God Himself being there. There must be supernatural power put forth or men will never turn from darkness to light, nor rise from death to life. What is the church worth if the Lord is not known in the midst of her? Write Ichabod upon her walls, for the glory has departed when her God has gone.

The prophet virtually prays that God would do for His church again what He did for her in the olden times. We have just read the whole chapter—what a wonderful poem it is! We can only in a very prosaic way condense its meaning. First, with the prophet, we exult in the manifestation of the divine glory. “His glory covered the heavens, and the earth was full of His praise, and His brightness was as the light; He had horns coming out of His hands.” Thus was Jehovah seen and our heart’s prayer is, “Lord, show Yourself in this way again. Once more display Your glory. Stretch out Your hand which has the horns of power going forth out of it. Exalt Yourself in the conversion and the salvation of men that the multitude may see how glorious is the Lord our God.”

Observe how the prophet speaks of God’s power against His enemies. The Midianites came up upon Israel in such numbers that, like grasshoppers, they could not be counted. But the Lord smote them and utterly cut them off. Hear how the prophet describes their overthrow, “I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction: and the curtains of the land of Midian did tremble.” And well they might, when Jehovah came forth to smite them. Now our prayer is that the Lord would shine forth so gloriously in the midst of His church that the powers of superstition and skepticism may be made to tremble at His presence. I have looked upon their tents wherein I have seen them multiplying their idols and their gods. I have looked upon their curtains within which they have spoken proud words of carnal wisdom against the Most High

and my heart has said, “Let the Lord dwell in the midst of His people and manifest His power as in former ages and these tents shall be in affliction and utterly pass away.” Moreover, the prophet sees all nature and providence subservient to God and so he grandly sings, “Was the Lord displeased against the rivers? Was Your anger against the rivers? Was Your wrath against the sea that You did ride upon Your horses and Your chariots of salvation?”

If God is with His people, all things are on their side—the stars in the heavens fight for them—the wheels of everlasting providence full of eyes revolve with watchful wisdom, working out purposes of benediction. “All things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose.” And all this, the prophet says, was done for the saving of His people. Pharaoh and his horses were drowned in the sea, but as for Jehovah, when He went to save His people, the seas could not overwhelm Him, “You did walk through the sea with Your horses, through the heap of great waters.” Can you not see the horses and the chariot plowing through the midst of the sea, while the Eternal King darts His arrows on either side that He may deliver His people? This is the language of imagery, but the facts surpass all poetry. God can be with a people and He can leave them—but when He is with them, their horn is exalted by His power and majesty and the truth which they uphold is as a banner borne aloft to continuous victory. Only we must wait upon the Lord in prayer and seek His face in faith, crying from our hearts, “O Lord, revive Your work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make known.”

III. In the third place, let us consider THE PROPHET’S PLEA, that it may be our own this morning.

He had first this plea, “Lord, it is Your work; therefore revive Your work.” We take the words out of his mouth and pray in like manner, “Lord, if this is our work, end it. If it is man’s work, break it down. But if it is Your work, revive it.” Have we not said unto our souls that we will preach and we will believe nothing but what is revealed of God in the Scripture? But we will not yield one hair’s breadth to the opposers of revelation because of their so-called science and thought? Is it not so? We have lifted the old banner of our fathers and preached the doctrines of the grace of God whereof the very center is Christ crucified, a substitute for believing men. This has been our one theme, our staple subject in preaching and ministering at all times. Now, Lord, if this is not Your truth, for Your name’s sake, blight it and let us follow it no more. But if it is Your truth, set Your seal to it here and in every other place where the name of Jesus is proclaimed. This is good pleading. “It is Your work. We cannot do it. We will not attempt to do it, but Lord, if it is Yours, You must do it—we hold You to it by humble faith.”

But the best plea is the one he mentions, “In wrath remember mercy.” That is a plea which suits all of us. Mercy, mercy, mercy. You might well smite both the shepherd and the sheep, but have mercy! You might well take away the candlestick and leave us in the darkness, but in wrath remember mercy! You see the coldness of heart and the inconsistency of life of some of Your professed people and You might, therefore, give up Your Zion to desolation, but Lord, remember mercy! Remember it, for You know it, for mercy is a dear attribute of Yours. Remember Your mercy in the everlasting covenant when You chose Your people. Remember Your mercy in the seal of that covenant when Your only-begotten Son was given up to death. Remember all the mercy You have had upon us these many years of our provocation. Remember mercy and still favor us, not because we have any good thing in us or about us that can deserve Your love, but for Your mercy’s sake. Out of Your free rich sovereign grace, for mercy’s sake still “revive Your work in the midst of the years.” It is good pleading—be sure to use it.

One more plea is implied in the rest of the chapter, namely, “You have worked great wonders, O Lord, do this again in the midst of the years.” Here have You heard our prayers. Lord, hear our prayers in the midst of the years. Hear them now. Here have You helped the feeble against the strong. Lord, strengthen us yet again. Here have You brought the chief of sinners to Jesus’ feet. Lord, do the same again! That is our prayer. By all Your glorious marching through the wilderness when You did lead your people and scattered their foes before them, when the rocks gave them water, and the heavens dropped with bread, by all the wonders of Your grace to Your people of old, since they are still Your people, “revive Your work in the midst of the years.”

With this I finish, observing that when the prophet had pleaded and his soul was at rest, he sat down and there were three things which remained upon his mind. Peering into the future he saw the sheen of the Chaldean helmets and the brightness of their cruel swords. He saw the whole land turned into a wilderness—and as he watched, he saw that the fig trees did not blossom, the vines brought forth no fruit, the olives withered. He heard no lowing of cattle. The bleating of sheep was hushed. He saw that famine covered all the land and he said, “Lord, let it all come as I have seen; but Your ways are everlasting and in the thick darkness You have always worked Your will. You have never been defeated and You have

never failed Your people. Therefore, as for me, I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.” That is the posture in which I want you all to be found. We have been assured by people who think they know a great deal about the future that awful times are coming. Be it so. It need not alarm us, for the Lord reigns. Stay yourself on the Lord, my brothers and sisters, and you can rejoice in His name. If the worst comes to the worst, our refuge is in God. If the heavens shall fall, the God of heaven will stand. When God cannot take care of His people under heaven, He will take them above the heavens and there shall they dwell with Him. Therefore, as far as you are concerned, rest, for you shall stand in your lot at the end of the days.

And then there came over Habakkuk a second spirit. Now, he said, seeing God has worked all these wonders of old and is capable of doing them over again, I will go back to my work despite the lowering clouds, for, “The Lord God is my strength and He will make my feet like hinds’ feet”—like the gazelle’s feet upon the crags of the mountains, “and He will make me to walk upon my high places.” O for this assurance of safety and strength in the Lord! We are in the middle passage, but if we have faith in God, all is safe. We may go and leap in our duties over the mountains and the hills and not be afraid that our foot shall slip. We fall without our God, but with God our feet shall never slide. He keeps the feet of His saints and when the wicked shall be silent in darkness, then shall the strength of the Lord be seen.

Having thus felt that he could always trust God whatever might happen and that he should be upheld whatever might occur, what does Habakkuk say? He goes home about his business and what is the one business he is set upon? He indicates it in his last sentence, which is not a sentence at all, but the final words of his prayer. “To the chief singer on my stringed instruments.” He seems to say, “All that remains for me is but to love and sing and wait until the angels come to bear me to their King.” “All that I have to do, now,” he seems to say, and I want you to say the same, “is just to feel that all is safe in the Eternal hands.”

As for me—

*“I’ll praise Him while He lends me breath,
And when my voice is lost in death,
Praise shall employ my nobler powers.
My days of praise shall never be past,
While life, and thought, and being last,
Or immortality endures.”*

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