

THE SOUND IN THE MULBERRY TREES

NO. 147

A SERMON
DELIVERED ON SABBATH MORNING, MAY 31, 1857,
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AT THE MUSIC HALL, ROYAL SURREY GARDENS.

*“When you hear the sound of a going in the tops of the mulberry trees, that then you shall bestir yourself: for then shall the LORD go out before you, to smite the host of the Philistines.”
2 Samuel 5:24.*

DAVID had just fought the Philistines in this very valley and gained a signal victory, so that he said, “The Lord has broken forth upon my enemies before me as the breach of waters.” The Philistines had come up in great hosts and had brought their gods with them, that like Israel, when the ark of the Lord was brought into their midst, they might feel quite sure of victory. However, by the help of God, David easily put them to rout, burned their images in the fire, and obtained a glorious victory over them.

Note, however, that when they came a second time against David, David did not go up to fight them without inquiring of the Lord. Once he had been victorious, he might have said, as many of us have said, in fact, in other cases, “I shall be victorious again. I may rest quite sure that if I have triumphed once, I shall triumph yet again. Wherefore should I go and seek at the Lord’s hands?”

Not so, now David. He had gained one victory by the strength of the Lord. He would not venture upon another until he had ensured the same. He went and asked the sacred oracle, “Shall I go up against them?” And when he was informed that he was not immediately to march against them, but to encamp so as to surprise them at the mulberry trees, he did not object a single moment to the mandate of God. And when he was bidden to wait until he should hear the sound in the tops of the mulberry trees before he went to fight, he was not in an ill haste to rush to battle at once, but he tarried until the mulberry trees began to sing at the top by reason of the wind that rushed along the leaves. He would wait until God’s sign was given. He said, “I will not lift my spear nor my hand till God has bidden me do it, lest I should go to war at my own charges and lose all I have obtained.”

My brethren, let us learn from David to take no steps without God. The last time you moved, or went into another business, or changed your situation in life, you asked God’s help, and then did it and you were blessed in the doing of it. You have been up to this time a successful man. You have always sought God, but do not think that the stream of providence necessarily runs in a continuous current.

Remember, you may tomorrow without seeking God’s advice venture upon a step which you will regret but once and that will be until you die. You have been wise hitherto, it may be because you have trusted in the Lord with all your heart and have not leaned to your own understanding. You have said like David, “Let us inquire of the LORD,” and like Jehoshaphat, who said to Ahab, “I will not go up until I have inquired of the LORD.” And you have not to ask priests of Baal, but you have said, “Is there not here one prophet of the LORD, that I may inquire at his hands?”

Now, keep on in the same way do not, I beseech you, go before the cloud. If Providence tarries, tarry till Providence comes, never go before it. He goes on a fool’s errand who goes before God, but he walks in a blessed path who sees the footsteps of Providence, and reads the map of Scripture and so discovers, “This is the way wherein I am to walk.”

This may be imputed to someone here. I thought I would begin with it, for it may be I have some young man here who is unadvisedly about to take a step which may be his ruin, temporarily. I beseech him, if he loves the Lord—I speak to none but those who are already Christians—I beseech him not to venture until he has sought counsel of God, and unless he has a firm conviction that he is doing it not merely for his own advantage, but to help him in serving his God the better. Unless he can be sure that

he has God's approval of his steps let me—by the mistake that many have made, by the mischief that he will do himself unless he listens to me—let me beseech him to stop and not take so much as one half a step or lift his foot until he has sought of God and has had the answer, “Go up against them.”

Thus I have introduced the text, but now I would refer to it in another way altogether. David was not to go to battle until he heard a sound of a rustling in the tops of the mulberry trees. There was a calm, perhaps. And God's order to David was, “You are not to begin to fight until the wind begins rustling through the tops of the mulberry trees.”

Or as the Rabbis have it, and it is a very pretty concept if it be true, the footsteps of angels walking along the tops of the mulberry trees make them rustle. That was the sign for them to fight, when God's cherubim were going with them, when they should come, who can walk through the clouds and fly through the air, led by the great Captain Himself, walking along the mulberry trees, and so make a rustle by their celestial footsteps. How true that may be, I cannot tell.

My remark IS only this—that there are certain signs which ought to be indications to us of certain duties. I shall use the verse in this way.

First, *there are certain special duties, which are not duties to everybody but only to some people.* If we wish to know whether we are to perform these duties, we must seek signs concerning them and not go and rush into a duty to which we are not called unless we get a sign, even as David got the rustling among the mulberry leaves. And then I should use it, in the second place, thus, *there are certain duties which are common to all of us.* But when we see some sign of God's Holy Spirit being in motion, or some other signs, *these are seasons when we ought to be more than ever active* and more than ever earnest in the service of our Master.

I. First, then, in regard to SPECIAL DUTIES.

I shall confine myself, I think, to one. The office of the ministry is a special duty. I do not believe, as some do, that it is the business of every one of us to preach. I believe it is the business of a great many people who do preach to hold their tongues. I think that if they had waited until God had sent them, they would have been at home right now. And there are some men who are not fit to edify a doorpost who yet think that if they could but once enter the pulpit they would attract a multitude. They conceive preaching to be just the easiest thing in all the world, and while they have not power to speak three words correctly, and have not any instruction from on high and never were intended for the pulpit, for the mere sake of the honor or the salary, they rush into the ministry.

There are hundreds of men in the ministry starving for want of bread and entirely unsuccessful, and I believe in regard to some of them that the best thing they could do would be to open a grocer's shop. They would be doing more to serve God and to serve the church if they would take a business, and preach now and then as they had time to study, or else give it up altogether and let somebody come and preach to the people who had something to tell them.

For alas, alas, a preacher who has nothing to say will not only do no good, but will do a great deal of harm. The people who hear him get disgusted at the very name of a place of worship and they only look at it as a kind of stocks, where they are to sit for an hour with their feet fast, quiet and still, listening to a man who is saying nothing, because he has nothing to say. I would not advise all of you to be preachers.

I do not believe God ever intended that you should. If God had intended all His people to be preachers, I wonder how even He in His wisdom could have found them all congregations, because were preachers, where would be the hearers! No, I believe the office of the ministry, though not like that of the priesthood, as to any particular sanctity, or any particular power that we possess, is yet like the priesthood in this—that no man ought to take it to himself save he is called “hereunto,” as was Aaron. No man has any right to address a congregation on spiritual things unless he believes that God has given him a special calling to the work and unless he has also in due time received certain seals which attest his ministry as being the ministry of God. The rightly ordained minister is ordained not by the laying on of bishop's or presbyter's hands, but by the Spirit of God Himself, whereby the power of God is communicated in the preaching of the Word.

There may be some here who will say, “How am I to know whether I am called to preach?” My brethren, you will find it out by-and-by, I dare say. And if you are sincerely desirous to know when you are in the path of duty in endeavoring to preach, I must bid you do as David did. He noted the rustling in the leaves of the mulberry trees. And I must have you notice certain signs.

Do you want to know whether you can preach? Ask yourself this question, “Can I pray? When I have been called upon in the prayer meeting, have I been enabled to put my words together and has God helped me in the matter?” So far so good. “Well, then, I will go and try, I will preach in the street, for instance.” Suppose nobody listens to me? Suppose I go and take a room, or go to a chapel and nobody comes to hear? Well, there is no rustling among the mulberry trees. I had better stop.

Suppose I go to my wife and children and take a text and just preach a little wee bit to them and to the neighbors. Suppose, after I have preached to them, I should feel that they could preach a great deal better to me? There is no rustling among the mulberry trees and I had better give it up. And suppose if, after having preached for some time, I hear of none who have been brought to Christ? There is no rustling among the mulberry trees I think the best thing I could do is to let somebody else try.

For suppose I have not been called to the ministry, it would have been a fearful thing for me to have occupied the watchman’s place, without having received the watchman’s commission. He that should take upon himself to be a policeman and go and do the work of arresting others, without having received a commission, must be in danger of being taken up himself, for being a deceiver. And it may be, if I had not been called to the ministry and had no seal of it, I had better leave it alone, lest I go without God’s commission, and that would never answer my purpose, to begin without His having sent me, for if He has not sent me, it may be I shall break down in my errand and do no good.

I do not ask whether you are much instructed or learned or all that. I do not need to ask you. For I do not care about it myself. But I ask you these questions. Have you tried to address a Sunday school? Have you gained the attention of the children? Having tried to address a few people, when they have been gathered together, have you found they would listen to you after you had preached? Had you any evidence and any sign that would lead you to believe that souls were blessed under you? Did any of the saints of God who were spiritually-minded tell you that their souls were fed by your sermon? Did you hear of any sinner convicted of sin? Have you any reason to believe that you have had a soul converted under you?

If not, if you will take one’s advice for what it is good for—and I believe it is advice which God’s Holy Spirit would have me give you—you had better give it up. You will make a very respectable Sunday school teacher, you will do very well in a great many other ways, but unless these things have been known by you, unless you have these evidences, you may say you have been called and all that, I don’t believe it. If you had been called to preach, there would have been some evidence and some sign of it.

I remember, two years ago, some man wrote me a note telling me that it had been said to his heart and God the Holy Spirit had revealed it to him, that I was to let him preach in this chapel. Well, I just wrote to him and told him that was a one-sided revelation, and that as soon as ever God revealed it to me that I was to let him preach here, then he should. But until then, I did not see that the revelation was quite a square one. Why should it be revealed to him and not revealed to me? I have heard no more of him and I have not had it revealed to me either, so that I do not suppose he will make his appearance here.

I say this because, though to a great many of you it would be nothing at all, there are a large number of young men here who preach. I thank God for them—for anyone who is able to preach. But I will thank God to stop those who cannot preach, because if they go about to preach and have not the ability, and God has not sent them, they will just make fools of themselves, though that you should not be greatly surprised at, because they may not be far off already. But they will make the very Gospel itself come into contempt. If they profess to preach who have not the call from God’s Spirit, when they begin

to talk they will just bring more scandal upon the cross by a rash defense of it than would have come if they had left it alone.

Now, take care about that. I would discourage none. I would say to every young man who has a grain of ability and believes he has been called of God and everyone who has really been blessed, “So far as I can help you, I will help you. I will do so to the very uttermost, if you need my help and I pray God Almighty to bless you, and make you more and more abundantly useful. For the church needs many pastors and evangelists.”

But if there is no soul converted under you, if you are not qualified to preach at all, you shall have my equally earnest prayers for you that God may speed you—and I shall pray for you in this way, that God will speed you by making you hold your tongue. I waited till I heard the sound among the mulberry trees, else had I been uncalled and unsent. David waited. He would not go to the battle till he had heard the signal from on high, which was the signal for the battle and the signal of the commencement of warfare.

II. But now, my brethren, I come to something more practical to many of you. You do not profess to be called to preach, **THERE ARE CERTAIN DUTIES BELONGING TO ALL CHRISTIANS WHICH ARE TO BE ESPECIALLY PRACTICED AT SPECIAL SEASONS.**

First, concerning *the Christian church at large*. The whole of the Christian church should be very prayerful, always seeking the unction of the Holy One to rest upon their hearts so that the kingdom of Christ may come and that His will be done on earth even as it is in heaven. There are times when God seems to favor Zion, when there are great movements made in the church, when revivals are commenced, when men are raised up whom God blesses. That ought to be to you like “a sound of a going in the tops of the mulberry trees.”

We ought *then* to be *doubly* prayerful, *doubly* earnest, wrestling more at the throne of God than we have been likely to do. I think this is just the time that demands your extraordinary and special prayers. I look upon that great movement in the Church of England, the preaching on Sabbath-evenings in Exeter Hall, as a sign of rustling, a kind of “a going in the tops of the mulberry trees.”

My brethren, I could pity the man who would be for one moment envious, though a thousand such places should be full to the doors. I could cry out to God for mercy on the man, who could be so great a sinner against humanity and against the souls of men, as to wish that it should not prosper. With all my heart I pray that God may bless it and I exhort you just now, as there appears to be a move in the right direction, now that some of the ministers are more thoroughly roused up than they used to be, now that the ordinance of preaching is more honored, now that there is a spirit of hearing poured out among the people, I beseech you, let your prayers be *doubly* earnest.

Do as David was commanded to do—rise up and bestir yourself, not in a spirit of envy, not in a spirit of strife, do not bestir yourself, lest the Church of England shall beat Dissenters. No, brethren, let us each bestir ourselves that we may beat the devil. Let us each be earnest and let us each, when we see a movement in any section of the church, hold up the hands of faithful men and pray to God that if they are not faithful men, they may be made right, but that as far as they are right they may have a blessing.

I think the church of Christ has lived to a glorious period. I really think the day to which we have lived now is a day that ought to gladden the eyes of many of God’s people. So far from being now, as I was a little time ago, in a gloomy frame about the worshippers of the church, I seem to think I have lived now to a happy era. Even the holy Whitefield himself never stirred up such a revival of religion as God has been pleased to give now. Not by his preaching did he stir up a host of bishops and clergymen to come forth and preach to the poor.

God has been pleased of late to wake up the churches far and near. I hear the noise among the mulberry trees. Everywhere I hear of the doctrines of grace being made more prominent and the preaching of the Gospel becoming more earnest, more energetic, and more full of the Spirit. We have seen in our midst some called out of our own church whom God has blessed in the preaching of the

Word. There are in many places, and I allude especially to the Church of England just now, “the sound of a going in the tops of the mulberry trees.”

Now, my brethren, is the time for us to bestir ourselves. Oh let us cry to God more earnestly. Let our prayer meetings be filled with men who come full of vehement petitions. Let our private altars be more constantly kept burning, causing the smoke of prayer to ascend, and let our closets continually be occupied by earnest intercession. Bestir yourself, there is a “sound of a going in the tops of the mulberry trees.”

That is concerning the church at large and the same truth holds good of *any particular congregation*. One Sabbath-Day the minister preached with great unction. God clothed him with power, he seemed like John the Baptist in the wilderness, crying, “Repent you, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” He spoke with all the earnestness of a man who was about to die. He so spoke that the people trembled, a visible thrill passed through the audience. Every eye was fixed and the tears seemed to bedew every cheek. Men and women rose up from the sermon, saying, “Surely, God was in this place and we have felt His presence.”

What ought a Christian to say, as he retires from the house of God? He should say, “I have heard this day the sound of the leaves of the mulberry trees.” I saw the people earnest. I marked the minister speaking mightily, God having touched his lips with a live coal from off the altar. I saw the tear in every eye. I saw the deep, wrapped attention of many who were careless. There were some young people there that looked as if they had been impressed, their countenances seemed to show that there was a work doing.

Now, what should I do? The first thing I will do is, I will bestir myself. But how shall I do it? Why, I will go home this day and I will wrestle in prayer more earnestly than I have been likely to do, that God will bless the minister and multiply the church. Well, what next? Where do I sit? Was there a young woman in my pew that seemed impressed? When I go this evening, I will look out for her. I have heard the “sound of the leaves of the mulberry trees,” and I will bestir myself.

And if I see her there, I will speak a word to her, or what is more, if I hear another sermon like it, and I see any who seem to be impressed, I will try to find them out, for I know that two words from a private person are often better than fifty from a minister. So that if I have seen a young man impressed, I will touch him on his elbow and say, “You seemed as if you enjoyed this sermon.” “Yes, I liked it very well.” “And do you like spiritual things?” Who can tell? I may be made the means of his conversion.

At all events, I shall have this sweet consolation to go to bed with, that I heard the “sound of the leaves of the mulberry trees,” and as soon as I heard it, I bestirred myself that I might serve my God and be the means of winning souls from hell.

But alas! my brethren, much of the seed we sow seems to be lost for want of watering. Many an impressive sermon seems to lose much of its force, because it is not followed up as it should be. God’s purposes, I know, are answered, His Word does not return unto Him void. Still, I think we might sometimes ask ourselves, have we not been too dilatory, too neglectful in not availing ourselves of favorable times and seasons, when the power of the Spirit has been in our midst, and when we should have looked upon it as the signal for more strenuously exerting ourselves in the service of our Master?

The same I might say of any time of general sickness, or any time of plague or cholera, or sudden death. There are times when the cholera is raging through our streets. The people are all trembling, they are afraid to die. Mark, that is the “sound of a going in the tops of the mulberry trees.” It is the business of you and I to bestir ourselves, when people are by any means led to serious thought, when God is walking through the land, and smiting down first one and then another, and the minds of the people are all on tiptoe concerning what the end shall be. When there has been some alarming fire, when a sudden death has taken place in the street, or in the court, or in a house, it is the Christian’s business to seize upon the time and to improve it for his Master.

“Now,” said the Puritans, during the great plague of London, when the hireling parish priests had fled from their churches, “Now is our time to preach.” And all through that terrible time, when the carts,

filled with the dead, went through the streets overgrown with grass, these strong-minded Puritans occupied the pulpits and boldly preached the Word.

Brethren, that is what we should do whenever we see a time more favorable than another for telling sinners of the wrath to come. Let us seize it, just as the merchant looks out for every turn of the market, for every rise and every fall—just as the farmer looks out for a good season for sowing or planting or mowing. Let us look out for the best times for seeking to do good. Let us plow deep while sluggards sleep, and let us labor as much as possible in the best season, to make hay while the sun is shining, and serve our God when we hear the “sound of a going in the tops of the mulberry trees.”

And now permit me to go back to a thought I have given you. Keep the same idea in view in regard to *every individual* you meet with. If you have a drunken neighbor, it is very seldom you can ever say a word to him. His wife is ill. She is sick and dying, poor fellow, he is sober this time. He seems to be a bit impressed. He is anxious about his wife and anxious about himself. Now is your time. Now for the good word, put it in well, now is your opportunity.

There is a great swearer but he seems, by some terrible providence or other, to become a little abashed and he is not so profane as he used to be. You should do as the ancient slingers did. If they saw a warrior lift his helmet, in they would put the stone, before he could get the helmet down again. So if you see a man a little impressed and he is open to conviction, do what you can, as God gives you opportunity.

And if any of your acquaintance have been in the house of God, if you have induced them to go there, and you think there is some little good doing but you do not know, take care of that little, it may be God has used us as a foster mother to bring up His child, so that this little one may be brought up in the faith, and this newly converted soul may be strengthened and edified.

But I'll tell you, many of you Christians do a deal of mischief by what you say when going home. A man once said that when he was a lad he heard a certain sermon from a minister and felt deeply impressed under it. Tears stole down his cheeks and he thought within himself, “I will go home to pray.” On the road home he fell into the company of two members of the church. One of them began saying, “Well, how did you enjoy the sermon? The other said, “I do not think he was quite sound on such a point.” “Well,” said the other, “I thought he was rather off his guard,” or something of that sort. “And one pulled one part of the minister's sermon to pieces and another the other, until,” said the young man, “before I had gone many yards with them, I had forgotten all about it. And all the good I thought I had received seemed swept away by these two men, who seemed afraid lest I should get any hope, for they were just pulling that sermon to pieces that would have brought me on my knees.”

How often have we done the same! People will say, “What did you think of that sermon?” I gently tell them nothing at all and if there is any fault in it—and very likely there is, it is better not to speak of it, for some may get good from it. I do believe that many a sermon that seems nothing but perfect nonsense from beginning to end may be the means of salvation.

You and I may have more knowledge of the Scriptures. We may be more instructed and enlightened, we may say, “Dear me, I do not know how people can hear that.” You may think people are not able to hear it, but they are saved. That is all you have to look after. A Primitive minister has sometimes quite puzzled you, you have said, “I dare say the good man understands himself, but I do not understand him.” And yet he has got all those people with their attention fixed. And you have seen souls brought to God under the sermon and therefore, you must not say anything about it. You are obliged to say, “Well, it was not the sermon for me.” Never mind that, it was the sermon for someone else. It is the best way for you not to hear that man again, but let him go on. He will get some people to do good to, I dare say.

I just throw this in, in an interjunctory way. If you have got hold of people's ears, or a bit of their ear, if you have got them to say, “I think I will come again,” do not put in any word that may keep them away. But bestir yourselves, to be the means of saving souls instrumentally, when you hear these signals from on high.

And I think, my brethren, I must expressly make an appeal to you in regard to *your own children*. There are certain times in the history of my own beloved children, when they seem more impressive than at other seasons. I beseech you never lose the opportunity. Salvation is of God, from first to last, but yet it is your business to use all the means just as if you could save them.

Now there are times when your son, who is generally very merry and wild, comes home from chapel and there is a sort of solemnity about him you do not often see. When you see that, get a word with him. Sometimes your little daughter comes home. She has heard something she understands, something that seems to have struck her thoughts. Do not laugh at her, do not despise that little beginning. Who can tell? It may be the “sound in the tops of the mulberry trees.”

Your son, a boy of fourteen or fifteen, is often coming home apparently deeply interested and sometimes you have thought, “Well, I don’t know, the boy seems as if he listened rather more than others do. I think there must be a good work in him.” Do not, by any harshness of yours, put a rough hand on that tender plant. Do not say to him, for instance, if he commits a little fault, “I thought there was some good thing in you, but there is no piety in you at all or else you would not have done it.” Do not say that, that is a damper at once.

Remember, if he be a child of God, he has his faults as well as any other boy. Therefore do not be too harsh or severe with him, but if you find the slightest good, say, there is the “sound in the tops of the mulberry trees.” There may be ever such a faint rustling, never mind, that is my opportunity and now will I seek to teach him, if I can, more fully the way of God. I will try to get him alone and talk to him.

The tender plant, if it be of God, is sure to grow, but let me take care to be the instrument of fostering it and let me take my boy aside and say to him, “Well, my son, have you learned something of the evil of sin?” And if he says yes, and I find he has a little hope and faith, though it may be rather a superficial work, let me not despise it, but let me remember I was once grace in the blade, and though grace in the ear now, I would never have been grace in the ear if I had not been grace in the blade.

I must not despise the blades, because they are not ears. I must not kill the lambs, because they are not sheep, for where would my sheep come from, if I killed all the lambs? I must not despise the weakest of the saints for where should I get the advanced saints from, if I put weak ones out of the covenant and tell them they are not the children of God? No, I will watch for the least indication, the least sign of any good thing towards the Lord God of Israel, and I will pray God that these signs may not be delusive, not like the smoke that is driven away, nor like the early cloud and the morning dew, but the abiding signs of grace begun, which shall afterwards be grace complete.

And lastly, not to detain you longer, Christian, in regard to yourself there is a great truth here. There are times, you know, “when you hear the sound of a going in the tops of the mulberry trees.” You have a peculiar power in prayer. The Spirit of God gives you joy and gladness. The Scripture is open to you. The promises are applied. You walk in the light of God’s countenance and His candle shines about your head. You have peculiar freedom and liberty in devotion. Perhaps you have got less to attend to in the world and more closeness of communion with Christ than you used to have.

Now is the time. Now, when you hear the “sound of a going in the tops of the mulberry trees.” Now is the time to bestir yourselves. Now is the time to get rid of any evil habit that still remains. Now is the season in which God the Spirit is with you. Spread your sail and remember what you sometimes sing,

***“I can only spread the sail.
You, Lord, must breathe the auspicious gale.”***

Be sure you have the sail up. Do not miss the gale for lack of preparation for it. Seek help of God that you may be more earnest in duty, when made more strong in faith, that you may be more constant in prayer, when you have more liberty at the throne, that you may be more holy in your conversation, while you live more closely with Christ.

And oh, with regard to some here, who tonight, or this morning, or at any other time, have been led to think, “Oh, that I might be saved!” If you have any thought about it, any serious impression, I pray that God the Holy Spirit may enable you to look upon the impression that is made upon you as the “sound of a going in the tops of the mulberry trees,” that you may be led to bestir yourselves and seek God more earnestly.

If God the Spirit has convinced you in any degree, if He has impressed you, if He has made you tremble, if He has sent you home to pray—now, I beseech you, be in earnest about your own soul. And if God has awakened you so far, look upon that as a token of His grace and say, “Now or never.” It may be that this big wave will help you over the great bar that is before the harbor’s mouth. This may be the tide, which taken at the flood, leads on to heaven.

Oh, that God might help you to take it at the flood, that you might be carried safely over your convictions and your troubles, and landed safely in the blessed haven of faith—that haven which is protected by the atonement of Christ and by the bar of everlasting love. God bless you, for Jesus’ sake! Amen.

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