

NOLI ME TANGERE
(TOUCH ME NOT)
NO. 2561

A SERMON
 INTENDED FOR READING ON LORD'S-DAY, MARCH 20, 1898.
 DELIVERED BY C. H. SPURGEON,
 AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON,
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“Jesus said unto her, Touch Me not; for I am not yet ascended to My Father: but go to My brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto My Father, and your Father; and to My God, and your God.”
John 20:17.

I COMMENCE my discourse by remarking that it was very wonderful that our Lord Jesus Christ, after His resurrection, should give so early and so clear a manifestation of Himself to Mary Magdalene. Out of her, He had cast seven devils; I suppose it was literally so, and that there had been in her a great deal of spiritual as well as moral defilement. It may not really be so, but it certainly was the current notion of the early Church that Mary Magdalene was not only a great sufferer who had been relieved, but a great sinner who had been purified. Yet she is the first to hear a word from the risen Christ, and to behold Him face to face. I may be addressing some great sinner at this moment. Dear friend, the greatness of your sin may not prevent you from yet occupying a first place among the saints; if you seem to be sorely beset by Satan, as though seven devils were in you, there is no reason why you should not be filled with the seven spirits of God, and become even a leader in the Church of Christ. There are first that shall be last, but there are also last that shall be first. Such a case as that of Mary Magdalene should give great encouragement to those of you who seem to be far away from Christ; if He calls you to humble penitence and childlike confidence in Himself, you may yet be one of the nearest and dearest of His disciples, and His manifestation of Himself to you may be even clearer and sweeter than to some of the more publicly known among His people.

The special thing to be noted about Mary Magdalene is that she had gone to the grave to find Christ. She had made a mistake about the condition in which she would find Him, but she had made no mistake about this point, that she must find Him somehow; and when the other disciples, having repaired to the sepulcher, and not seen Him, had gone their way, she still remained. There she stands to weep if she cannot find her Lord, for she feels that nothing else will content her; she must wait at the sepulcher until she finds Him. And, my dear Friends, if there is anyone here who *will* find Christ, it is the one who *must* find Him. When you are at such an extremity that you say, “Give me Christ, or else I die,” you shall have Christ; and when, as a child of God, your heart and your flesh cry out for Him, when you have a hungering and a thirsting after Him, that cannot be stopped, then He will manifest Himself to you as He does not to the world. It will be a happy thing for you, if, having come into this place seeking the Lord, you should all of a sudden discover Him to be here, and should even hear Him speak your name, as he said, “Mary,” and she responded at once, “Rabboni, my dear Master.” Oh, that your eyes might be opened, my brother, if they are shut! My sister, may you have given to you the spiritual perception which will discern the presence of the spiritual Christ who is in the midst of His people even now! May you, on the seat where you are sitting, feel as you have not felt of late, ravished, carried away into a holy ecstasy with this thought, “My Lord has come to me; He has spoken to me; He has revealed Himself to me; I do perceive Him, and I rejoice in Him.”

We'll then, if you are in that happy state, my text is addressed to you, for no Scripture is of any private interpretation. If true to Mary Magdalene, it is also true to all who are in the same condition as Mary Magdalene was. Right down these eighteen or nineteen centuries the voice of Christ comes sounding to persons who are like her to whom that message was first uttered. He who said to Mary, "Touch Me not: but go to My brethren," says the same thing to every Mary and every John who has suddenly discovered Him to be present with them. As far as the language of Christ on that occasion is capable of adaptation to anyone's case, so far does the Spirit of God speak it to that person now.

I. The first thing that I see in my text deserving of notice is, THE CAUTION. There stands the Lord Jesus Christ, and Mary perceives that it is the Lord; and the first impulse of her being is to grasp Him and hold Him lest He should vanish. Yet the Master keeps her from too near an approach, saying, "Touch Me not; for I am not yet ascended." What does this caution teach us?

Well, first, it teaches that *we may make mistakes even when we are nearest to our Lord*, and enjoying the most rapturous fellowship with Him. There are things which we may try to do which we are not allowed to do. O brothers, where will not sin follow us? If we lay our hands upon the horns of the altar, sin will follow us even there. We cannot shut our door so fast as to shut out Satan; neither can we be so engrossed in prayer as to be sinless even then. Our very prayers need to be prayed over; our tears need to be wept over; our repentance has something in it that needs to be repented of; our faith is mixed with unbelief; and our spiritual life itself often has much of death about it. Sin penetrates our holy things; and however near we may get to Christ, we may still make blunders and mistakes, and the Master may have to say to us, as He said to Mary, "Touch Me not."

The kind of mistake into which we may fall is indicated by the text, for we are very apt to carnalize spiritual things. When our Lord gave to His disciples the ordinance of bread and wine to be an emblem of His body and His blood, very soon even good men began to talk as if there were some kind of witchcraft or necromancy about it, so that the bread did actually become His flesh, and the cup did literally become His blood. That was carnalizing a great spiritual truth. The most of us are so unspiritual, we are so affected by our senses that we soon bring down pure spiritual truth into the groveling regions of flesh and sense. It is very possible for you to do this even when you are in communion with Christ. You may get to think of Christ according to some picture you have seen; you may even have before your mind's eye some image of Him, though you would abhor with all your heart all image worship and picture worship. Yet it is easily done by the mind; and so you may be carnalizing—making into flesh, as it were—materializing what should be pure spiritual worship. It is easy to make your love of Christ to be no longer spiritual, but sensuous, until even your enjoyment of Christ's presence may come to be no true devotion at all. I have no doubt that many a man feels very pious in the dim religious light of some old cathedral; when the organ peals forth, and tender tones are heard, when the choir, or, if you will, the whole body of the people sing, there is a feeling all over the audience which is mistaken for true religion; yet it is often precisely the same feeling which is produced by an orchestra and by good music anywhere. It would be produced if the song was in Italian, and if not a word of it was understood; and to imagine that this is true worship, is a mistake indeed. It is simply that the ear is pleased, the taste is gratified, there is a mysterious influence in the solemn aisle and vaulted roof; but that is all. Never make that blunder, dear friends, for if you do, the Savior will have to say to you, "Do not give Me material things in the place of spiritual communion." It is not to be a matter of the body of Christ grasped by the hand; soul must commune with soul, and spirit with spirit, and our fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ must be through the Holy Spirit, and not after any carnal method.

We may blunder, again, when we are very near to Christ, by seeking after that which we really do not need. Was it wrong for Mary to try to touch the Lord? Certainly not, for, He permitted Thomas to put his finger into the print of the nails, and to thrust his hand into His side. He also said to all His disciples, "Handle Me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see I have." It would have been wrong if Thomas and the other apostles had not touched the Master, yet the Lord refused that touch to Mary. She did not need it; she knew that He was the Christ, and that He was risen from the dead; Thom-

as doubted it, and the other disciples had some lingering questions, hence they were allowed to have certain signs which Mary did not need, and which the Savior did not let her have.

I have known some very feeble-minded Christians who have been cheered by a dream. It seems, to me, the most absurd thing in the world to be encouraged by a dream; yet it encouraged them. Why have not I had such a dream? Because I do not need it and it would be of no use to me. I believe there are some minds so feeble that they would scarcely get any faith at all if there were not some touch of the supernatural about them, and the Lord may permit it to them; but do not you ordinary Christians begin to crave anything of that kind, for you do not need it, and you will not have it. You should rise to the far loftier dignity of those of whom Christ said, "Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed." Cast yourself on Christ, spiritually believe in Him, and so realize Him; do not ask for what you really do not need, for these signs and tokens are not meant for you.

Once more, in our Lord's presence, we may sometimes make a mistake by *asking to have now what it will be better for us to have by and by*. See how Jesus puts it to Mary, "Touch Me not"—that is, not now—"for I am not yet ascended." There will be opportunity for all that in good time. Did you go up into your little room, the other night, and pray, "Lord, if I am indeed Your child, give me now such raptures as I have heard your servant Rutherford had"? Yet you have not had them. Well, do not worry about that; you are not fit for them yet. "Touch Me not," says Christ. "Ask not this of Me just yet; another day, this experience will be more appropriate, less dangerous, and more useful." Do you not see that you may make a mistake, even when you are with your Master, by asking what is not good for you, or at least what is not good for you just then?

I think also that the Lord said to Mary, "Touch Me not," because He meant to add, "but go to My brethren." This teaches us that *it is very easy for spiritually-minded people to get to be selfish in their enjoyments*. I have known some who spent a great part of their lives in a meditative, contemplative enjoyment of Christ; and God forbid that we should altogether blame them! But there is a more excellent way; it is sometimes better to go and tell our brethren good news from Christ than it is for us to have fellowship with Him. I have often known what it is to be enjoying my Master's presence when the time has come for preaching, and I have been inclined to wish that I might stay with Him; but it is wrong to think so. There is an old Romish story, which has a good lesson in it. A monk was in his cell, and he thought he saw a vision of Christ; but just as he was looking with rapture upon his Lord, the bell rang, and he knew that it was his turn to take his place at the monastery gate to feed the poor that were standing there. As he left his cell, he heaved a deep sigh, and said, "Ah, me! That, I should have this work to do, and lose the company of my Lord!" He took his turn of an hour or two at waiting on the poor, and when he went back to his cell, with a heavy heart, thinking that he should never see that blissful sight again, there was his Master waiting for him, and a voice said to him, "If you had stayed, I would have gone; but as you did go, I have stayed to manifest Myself to you." Take the meaning out of that legend, and you will learn that, if you shut yourself up in your room rather than go down to the Sunday school, you will make a great mistake. I am persuaded that there are some good Christian people who have two spiritual meals every Sabbath, and do not get very fat even then, who would be much stronger in soul if, after they have had their one meal, they went out among the poor and needy, seeking the lost ones for Christ, and telling them of His love. If this hint shall reach some living loving heart, and make it a little wiser in its course of action, it will bring great glory to God.

II. I have taken up so much time with the caution, that I must be very brief upon the second head which is, THE MISSION: "Go to My brethren." Mary Magdalene, instead of remaining in solitary communion with Christ, was sent upon a mission; and that was for two reasons.

First, *it was better for herself*. Hear this, dear friends; it is better for you to do good to others than to have all the enjoyment of Christ to yourself—better for you to be turned out into the cold, to go and comfort the distressed, than for you to stay in the warmth of your Master's countenance, and not do good to others.

Secondly, *it was better for the disciples*. However bright and happy Mary might be with Christ, that would not help Peter and James and John and the other disciples. They were all sorrowing, for they were all doubting; they thought their Master dead, they understood not yet the saying that He had risen from the grave. Surely Mary must not be selfish; she has seen the Lord, so she must remember that others have not seen Him; and she is therefore bidden to go and deliver to them a message from Christ.

It is very interesting to notice that Mary did not stay a minute after the Master said to her, “Go.” As soon as the Lord commissioned her, away she went. The next verse says, “Mary Magdalene came”—with swift feet, she hastened to the place where the disciples were: “Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that He had spoken these things to her.” Come, my brethren, come, my sisters; leave, for a while the happy quiet nook where you met with Jesus! Come out and tell others what you have seen; who knows but that they also will be led to see Jesus? And when you have told what you have seen, do what is still better, tell what He has said. What you have seen is good, but there may be a mistake in it; what Christ has spoken is perfection, and there is no error in that. Relate your own experience, and tell the gospel, too, to all with whom you come into contact; and cease not to do so. To see Christ, is blessed; but unless we tell what we have seen, the blessing may be like a talent in a napkin, or a candle under a bushel. I would like to come round to each one of you, and to say, “Dear brother, dear sister, do you live in the light of God’s countenance? Has Jesus Christ shone upon you? Is He your Beloved, and are you His beloved? Then come, and let Him have the use of your tongue, let Him have the use of those bright eyes of yours to tell with beaming countenance what the Lord has done for you, and what He has said that He will do for others.

III. Now, thirdly, we have to consider THE TITLE: “Go to *My brethren*.” Do you hear that? “Go to *My brethren*.” I do not remember that the Lord Jesus ever called His disciples His brethren till that time. He called them “servants”; He called them “friends”; but now that He has risen from the dead, He says, “My brethren.”

Notice then, first, *they were His brethren, though He was about to ascend to His throne*. The fact that Christ had risen from the dead did not take Him further away from His people, it even brought Him nearer, for He goes on, “and say to them, I ascend unto My Father, and your Father.” It is clear that there is no greater distance between us and Christ now that He has ascended, than there was when He had not ascended—no, that inasmuch as He did not call them brethren while He was yet among them before His death, and did call them brethren when He said, “I ascend unto My Father, and your Father,” if there is any difference, Christ ascended is nearer to us than Christ on the earth—

*“Now though He reigns exalted high,
His love is still as great;
Well He remembers Calvary,
Nor let His saints forget.”*

This is a very blessed truth, but it is a great mystery. I can understand that Christ is my Brother when I see Him, weary, sitting on the well at Sychar. When I see Him in the garden, agonizing even unto sweat of blood, I know that He is my Brother; but if my eyes could see Him as John saw Him, when “His head and His hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and His eyes were as a flame of fire; and His countenance was as the sun shines in its strength,” I think I would need great help to call Him “Brother” then; and I might not need to do so, for it is not said that the disciples called Christ “Brother,” but that He called them “brethren.” Oh, for grace to believe that the crowned, reigning, exalted Christ is the Brother of our soul! His nature in heaven is our nature. He has a sympathy in glory with His people still in tribulation. He is pleading our cause in heaven as much as ever He did on earth, and He is as truly our covenant Head, as really one with us now as ever He was when He was here. And hence, when He had risen, and was about to ascend, He said, “Go to My brethren.”

There is another side of this truth that is worth noticing; *they were His brethren, though they had forsaken Him in His shame*. I was reading, in the life of the famous Thomas Boston, the author of *The Fourfold State*, that, one day, he was very burdened and depressed in spirit, and was walking up and

down his room in great trouble about his own standing before God; for, mark you, they who lead others to Christ, and help others to confidence in Him, often have trembling in their own soul; as Boston had at that time. It happened that his little daughter was in the room, and she said to him, "Father, Jesus said, 'Go to My brethren.' They were His brethren still, though they had forsaken Him." Boston said, "In a moment, I caught at that." They were His brethren still, although there was one of them who had denied Him with oaths and curses; yet that very one was especially mentioned by the angel who said, "Tell His disciples *and Peter*." All the rest forsook Him and fled; yet Jesus said, "Go to My *brethren*." This is a tie which you cannot break. If you had a brother who had misbehaved himself, and if you had been obliged to advise him to flee the country, and he had gone far away, and you knew that he was living an evil life, yet still he would be your brother. Born of the same parents, the bond between you two must last on. I believe in the final perseverance of the saints; and I cannot make out how those get on who do not believe it. If Christ was my Brother yesterday, He will be my Brother to all eternity. I do not believe in these relationships coming to an end; they seem to me to be fixed. My child is my child forever, let him be what he may; and if I am Christ's brother, and Christ is my Brother, we are joined together by a bond which cannot be broken. "*Quis separabit?*" "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?"

Come, brothers, listen to me. Have you been getting cold in heart? Still, Christ is your Brother, and He owns it. As I have reminded you, the Master did not call His disciples "brethren" till after they had all forsaken Him. What! Does His grace seem to grow as our sin grows? It seems so: "Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound." This wondrous love ought to break your hearts. If any of you have been false to Christ, if you have been ungrateful, cold, unspiritual, will not this bring you back? Still He owns you as His; still He calls you brethren. Come along back to Him; let there be no time lost; come weeping to His feet, and say, "My Brother! I confess my transgressions, and receive of You, because You change not, and You call me Your brother still." I will not enlarge upon this theme, though it is a very sweet one. It is a sort of cluster of Eshcol; I should have liked to press and squeeze it till it filled the cup with its generous juice, but I hand it over to you; take it home, and rejoice that your Lord still says, "Go to My brethren."

IV. Lastly, we have to consider the message, THE TIDINGS: "Go to My brethren, and say to them, I ascend unto My Father, and your Father; and to My God, and your God."

Notice that *this message was far above their fears*. They thought that He was dead. "Oh, no!" He says, "I ascend." They thought His body had been taken away, and they should never have the mournful pleasure of knowing where it was. Surely the guards or somebody had broken the seal, and stolen away that blessed form; but He shows how vain were their fears, for He says, "I ascend." Now, child of God, whatever your fears are, send them all off; you have no need of any of them. If Christ is yours, and you are trusting in Him, fear not. The Lord says to you, "Fear not;" and will you keep on fearing when He bids you not to fear? I pray you, do not so; what you dread will never come to pass, there is something infinitely better than that in store for you!

In the next place, *this message was above their hopes*, for all that they hoped for was that they might find the dead body of Christ; but He talks about ascending, so He is alive, and their hopes are far exceeded. What are your hopes, dear brothers? Are you hoping to have some good thing from the Lord? There is something better than that laid up for you. "He is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think."

Further, *this message was beyond their wishes*, for I am sure that, when they knew that Christ was alive, they wanted Him to stay with them. It would have cheered them very much if Christ had said, "Go tell My brethren that I am going to stay with them for the next hundred years." No, no, no! They were to have more than they wished for, it was expedient for them that Christ should not stay with them. It was to their advantage that He should go to be with the Father, it would bring them greater blessings to have Him gone than to have Him tarry; so that the message sent to them was above their wishes, and the Lord will do for you more than you wish for. He will be better to you than your highest desire, therefore be of good cheer.

But what Mary had to say to them was also *beyond their knowledge*, their comprehension, beyond the grasp of their understanding. As yet they knew not that Christ must rise from the dead, so I am sure that they did not know what He meant by ascending. But it was true, though they did not understand it. Blessed be God, there are thousands of blessings true to you although you cannot yet get a grip of them; God will do more for you than you can understand. Your imagination may enlarge itself, yet He will go beyond that. I quoted, just now Paul's words, "He is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think." Now think some great thought, like one who lay dying, and said, "Oh, for big thoughts!" We shall not want big thoughts then, for we shall come into the region of great realities; but however great your thoughts, Christ can exceed them. He said to His disciples, "I am going up into the glory to plead for you." They did not know what He meant, yet His words brought them incalculable blessings.

I think I hear somebody say, "Well, I am so glad I can get as far as that, I can feel comfort in Christ's ascending to my Father." Yes, but I want you to go further than that, for I am to tell you that He is coming again. There is always to be something yet beyond; whatever you attain to, there is something more to be reached. That same Jesus, who went up from us into heaven, will so come in like manner as they saw Him go up into heaven. With the trumpet of the archangel and with the voice of God, He shall descend a second time upon the earth, no more to suffer, no more to invite disobedient and rebellious men who shall reject Him; but He shall come to rule the nations with a rod of iron, and to gather together His own people that He may be "admired in them that believe." This is the great hope of the Church; reach forward to it, and be not satisfied with anything that as yet you have received, or that as yet you understand. O heirs of immortality, infinite bliss opens before you, unspeakable glory awaits you! Be of good courage; and if for the present you may not have all the fellowship with Christ you really wish for, because He says, "Touch Me not," yet wait till you shall be taken up, or He shall come again to receive you unto Himself, for then, where He is, you shall be also, with all the godly company that has gone before.

As for you who have no part or lot in this matter, I am very sorry for you. I would God that you had. Whosoever believes in the Lord Jesus Christ shall have all this, and much more than tongue can tell. Oh, that you would believe in Him now, and live forever! God grant it, for Jesus Christ's sake! Amen.

**EXPOSITION BY C. H. SPURGEON:
*PSALMS 20 AND 21.***

The 20th Psalm is a prayer for the king going forth to the conflict—a prayer for David; better still, a prayer for great David's greater Son. The 21st Psalm is a song of victory for the returning conqueror, it is a *Te Deum*, as the King has triumphed, and has returned from the conflict to enjoy the congratulations of His loyal subjects.

Psalm 20 Verse 1. *The LORD hear you in the day of trouble; the name of the God of Jacob defend you;*

This is a prayer for David, a prayer for Jesus, and a prayer for every child of God: "Jehovah hear you in the day of trouble." What do you want? Remember that the Lord gives you this promise, "Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me."

"The name of the God of Jacob defend you." The God that took care of Jacob when he slept with a stone for his pillow; the God that guarded him when he was a stranger in a strange land, and brought him home again; the God that wrestled with him at Jabbok, the God that made all things work for him, instead of against him, as he feared—"the name"—the character, the attributes, the glory—"of the God of Jacob defend you;"—

2. *Send you help from the sanctuary,—*

"Help from the holy place, help from the sprinkled blood, help from the mercy seat, help from the golden pot that had the manna, help from Aaron's rod that budded, help from Him that shone between the cherubim—send you help from the Holy of Holies,"—

2. *And strengthen you out of Zion;—*

That is to say, with His own power, His own glory, which He manifests in the midst of His people.

3. *Remember all your offerings, and accept your burnt sacrifice. Selah.*

This God did to His dear Son, and this He is prepared to do to all His people. Whenever we give anything to the cause of God, we ought to do it with all that solemnity and all that willingness which was seen in God's own people in the olden time; remembering that it is to Him we bring it; and the chief point for our consideration is, "Will He accept it?"

4. *Grant you according to your own heart, and fulfill all your counsel.*

We cannot pray this for everybody. We pray it for Christ, and we pray it for the Lord's sanctified people, that He may grant them the desire of their heart, and fulfill their counsel.

5. *We will rejoice in Your salvation, and in the name of our God we will set up our banners: the LORD fulfill all your petitions.*

What a wonderful prayer this is! May it be granted to each of you! "The Lord fulfil all your petitions."

6-9. *Now know I that the LORD saves His anointed; He will hear him from His holy heaven with the saving strength of His right hand. Some trust in chariots, and some in horses: but we will remember the name of the LORD our God. They are brought down and fallen: but we are risen, and stand upright. Save, LORD:*

Or, "Hosanna."

9. *Let the King hear us when we call.*

Now turn to the Psalm of victory. It corresponds very beautifully with the litany which we have just been reading.

Psalm 21 Verse 1. *The King shall joy in Your strength, O LORD; and in Your salvation how greatly shall He rejoice!*

See how greatly Christ rejoices, how full His heart is of gladness as He sees God's power put forth, and God's salvation accomplished among men.

2, 3. *You have given Him His heart's desire, and have not withheld the request of His lips. Selah. For You prevent Him with the blessings of goodness:*

That is to say, "You go before Him," as you have seen, in pictures, some great conqueror preceded by those who strewn his path with roses, so has God strewn the pathway of Christ with innumerable blessings.

3. *You set a crown of pure gold on His head.*

Is He not of royal race? Has He not achieved a mighty conquest? Is He not King of kings and Lord of lords?

4. *He asked life of You, and You gave it to Him, even length of days forever and ever.*

"You gave Him a resurrection from the dead as our Mediator, and as such He lives."

5. *His glory is great in Your salvation:*

It is the distinguishing mark of God's salvation that Christ's glory is great in it. In the beginning, in the middle, and the end of it, everywhere you see the name of Jesus written in large letters of light. In His salvation, the Father has glorified His Son.

5-8. *Honor and majesty have You laid upon Him. For you have made Him most blessed forever: You have made Him exceedingly glad with Your countenance. For the king trusts in the LORD, and through the mercy of the most High He shall not be moved. Your hand shall find out all your enemies:*

That very hand that was nailed to the tree shall find out all the adversaries of the cross.

8. *Your right hand shall find out those that hate You.*

"Hide wherever they may, You will find them out. They may stand in the high places, and defy You; but You will hurl them down."

9. *You shall make them as a fiery oven in the time of Your anger:*

“Not only shall they be cast into the oven, but they shall themselves be as a fiery oven in the time of Your anger. They shall torment themselves, and shall be their own destruction.”

9-11. *The LORD shall swallow them up in His wrath, and the fire shall devour them. Their fruit shall You destroy from the earth, and their seed from among the children of men. For they intended evil against You: they imagined a mischievous device, which they are not able to perform.*

But that did not diminish their sin. When a man has devised an evil thing, even if he cannot carry it out, he is guilty of it.

12. *Therefore shall You make them turn their back, when You shall make ready Your arrows upon Your strings against the face of them.*

As if God would single out the enemies of Christ to be targets for His arrows, and fill them with the darts of His displeasure; who would wish to be in such a plight as this?

13. *Be You exalted, LORD, in Your own strength: so will we sing and praise Your power.*

HYMNS FROM “OUR OWN HYMN BOOK”—327, 785, 942.

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