

IV.

CHRIST'S DOVES ON THE WING.

“Who are these that fly as a cloud, and as the doves to their windows?”—ISA. lx. 8.

THESE words occur in a prophecy that awaits fulfilment in the latter days. They refer without doubt, in the first instance, to God's ancient people, though it is quite lawful to apply them to the ingathering of Jew and Gentile in all ages. The prophet is represented as on his watch-tower, gazing around, and witnessing many companies coming to Zion. Looking westward, towards the Mediterranean, he beholds a fleet of ships bringing home from Tarshish and the Isles such of long-exiled Israel as were in that direction. The white-sailed fleet, seen rising in perspective with their bows directed to the promised land, suggests the idea of a cloud or flock of doves high in the air, and speeding homewards to their dovecots, or, as we may interpret the language, to their nests in the crevices of the cliffs.¹ The figure employed by the prophet may be regarded as illustrative of Conversion to God,

¹ The Hebrew word is literally doves' houses.

The picture suggests :

I. *The sinner startled from his security.*

The sinner awakened is like a dove startled and rising on the wing. Why may an awakened sinner be compared to a dove? Is it because he is pure, or gentle, or harmless, or loving as a dove? Not at all; but because, like the dove, he is weak, is easily scared, and when conscience-stricken trembles with alarm. It is because he is helpless and without means of defence; because in the hour of danger his only resource is flight; and because his strength lies not in himself, but in his rock of refuge. So far from the sinner being pure, gentle, harmless, innocent, and loving as a dove, his heart is a hotbed of corruption. It teems with arrogance, pride, covetousness, lust, discontent, selfishness, cruelty, and deceit. It is filthy, frivolous, impatient, headlong in the gratification of its passions. It is full of rancour, bitterness, and revenge. Above all, it is *ungodly*.

Some people conceal their true character from their fellow-men, who only see them from a distance; but when at home they are discovered to be tyrants; their own relatives can scarcely live with them. They are rude, exacting, irritable, and unkind; they are found to be wrapped up in earthliness, and their behaviour sordid, mean, and unlovely. It is not what a man is called, but what he really is, that is supremely important. The meaning of the name Jonah is “dove,” a beautiful name, suggestive of

feathery softness ; but the man was peevish, proud, selfish, unloving, and disobedient. There are some men who remind us of that magnificent mountain in the range of the Andes in South America,¹ which rises symmetrically above the clouds in the form of a graceful cone. Its slopes are covered with snow, white, cold, unsullied, and motionless. All this is on the outside. But what is there all the while within ? The mountain in its interior glows with volcanic fire. So there are persons who in outward appearance are the picture of propriety, serenity, and purity, who are yet burning inwardly with truculent maliciousness, quivering with unhallowed passion, and smouldering with envy, degrading jealousy, and dishonest greed.

There is great need of our knowing what we really are. Many are in danger of being for ever lost, because they are at present in ignorance of their being lost. "The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was *lost*." The only people He came to save were lost sinners. If we refuse to acknowledge that we are by nature lost sinners, we are doing all we can to put ourselves apart from those He came to save.

When in the city of Philadelphia a few years ago (1878), an incident was told me which I may recount. A great assemblage of young people was being held, and as the speaker was about to address

¹ Chimborazo.

the children, a man under strong excitement entered the hall and made his way to the platform. What had happened? The stranger informed the gentleman that he and his little child were coming to the meeting, but that they had been separated on the crowded pavement, and that his little girl was lost. It was just possible that she might have found her way by herself into the hall, if not, he must give notice to the police, and have search made for her through the city. "We shall soon learn whether she is here," said the chairman, "what is the child's name?" "It is Mary Wilson." Then raising his voice loud enough for all the children to hear, he said, "*If Mary Wilson, who is lost, be in the meeting, let her stand up.*" Amid profound silence the gentleman and the stranger looked over the throng; but no one rose. Said the gentleman again, "If Mary Wilson, *who is lost*, be in the meeting, let her rise from her seat." There was no response. "She cannot be here," said the gentleman; and the sad father went hastily out to seek his child. When the service was over, and the young people had dispersed, the chairman saw a little girl sitting by herself on one of the benches. Going up to her, he inquired why she remained. The girl said, "I am waiting for some one to come and take me home." "What is your name?" inquired the gentleman. "It is Mary Wilson." "Mary Wilson! Did you not hear me say twice over this evening that 'if Mary

Wilson, who is lost, were in the meeting, she was to stand up'?" "Oh yes," said the child, "but I *wasn't lost!*" Her ignorance of being lost prevented her from being found. Are there not many much older than she who never are found by the Lord, because all their life they remain in ignorance of their being lost?

Now the sinner, when roused from his security, and awakened to a sense of his sin and danger, is like the startled dove that rises on the wing. Has the Lord roused you? Has He startled you by showing you that you are lost? Beware of settling down again into apathy and indifference.

II. *The awakened sinner fleeing to Jesus.*

Let us consider some of the reasons that warn the dove to fly homeward.

(1.) *The shadows of evening beginning to come down.*

Doves fly homeward as night approaches. Few rural sights are more attractive than that of flocks of birds hastening to their nests when daylight wanes,—as when the crows in the still evening are preparing to settle in the lofty elms; or the grey-headed daws are speeding to roost in the ivy-covered cliffs overlooking the sea; or when the starlings are wheeling in circles before going to sleep; or the rock doves are hieing to the precipices, mantled with wild plants, amid which they have their nests.

Instinct teaches the birds not to tarry an hour

too long. They do not wait till the darkness actually falls. Be it ours to act in like manner, and to remember Christ's words, "The night cometh." Are there not signs with us *that the day is closing*? What day? The day of priceless opportunity. And have you not many tokens that your day is speeding by, shown by the casualties of life; the loss, by the stroke of death, of the companions of your youth; the sudden disappearance of your darling child; the loneliness of conjugal bereavement; the sicknesses, sorrows, and disappointments of life; the grey hairs appearing on the forehead; the gathering on you of the infirmities of age? Do not all these warn you that the day of opportunity with you is fast and noiselessly wearing away? Once gone, the day will not return! All the might of the world—ay, of even the twelve legions of angels, whom Jesus spoke of in the garden of His sorrow—cannot open the door of life's opportunity when once that door is shut!

Beware of procrastination. Some time ago I was at St. Petersburg in Russia. It was in the depth of winter. Before commencing my mission-work, I was anxious to take a view of the city, and I repaired to the banks of the Neva, the noble river on which the capital is built. But I could not obtain a glimpse of it, for it was covered with clear ice, three feet in thickness, and the ice itself was carpeted with snow. I walked on the ice across the river. What struck

me was, that alongside of the quays there was a fleet of ships and steamers of all sizes, held fast in the ice. I suppose there were two hundred of them, all fixed and motionless. Were these ships there intentionally? Not one of them. They were held there, at great cost to their owners, at vast inconvenience to their officers and crews; nay, with no little risk to themselves from the pressure of the ice ever forming around them. Not one of these ships but had expected to be steering long ere that through the Baltic, or over more distant seas. Why then, were they there? It happened that in that winter¹ the frost had set in some days earlier than usual, and, by a little *undue delay*, all these ships were in one night caught, to be imprisoned from the latter part of October till the middle of May.

Ah! take you care, lest, with full intention to repent at some early time and turn to God, you allow your priceless opportunity to lapse, and you be unexpectedly gripped by Death's icy hand, and chained up *in your sins*, not for a lifetime merely, but for ever!

(2.) *The approach of the tempest.*

Before the hurricane there are commonly indications of the coming storm, such as the sighing and moaning of the wind, the fluttering of the leaves, unnatural stillness and sultriness of the atmosphere, sudden gusts, and the rack scudding through the

¹ 1880-81.

upper air. The instinct of the dove warns it of the approaching gale, as the Psalmist has it speaking of the dove, “the windy storm and tempest.”¹ The mariner at sea is similarly weatherwise. He recognises by the tokens that a tempest is at hand. The pale yellow light on the horizon, the fitful squalls, the wild motions of sea-birds, the sudden lull or dead calm, the fall of the barometer in the saloon or companion, tell him that the hurricane is hurrying down. Instantly the sailors are sent aloft to take in canvas, to brail up, furl, or haul down the sails, brace and bring round the yards, lower the topmasts; orders are given to clear the decks of movable articles, to secure the boats from being swept overboard, and get them put in readiness for emergency, to make all fast and tight, so that the ship is ready for the outburst, and rides in safety through the cyclone.

Now, is there not a tempest ready to break on us, from which we all need shelter and protection? To what but such a tempest did John the Baptist, and Paul after him, refer when both spoke of the “wrath to come.” Are the men of our day, who tell us there is no occasion for alarm, wiser than they? Have any of you as yet failed to recognise the signs of the approach of that dread hurricane? What are some of these? For one thing, there are many plain utterances in the Scriptures themselves,

¹ Psalm lv. 6-8.

on the subject of coming judgment. But have you not had tokens of another kind? Has not *conscience* made you quail? Have there not been at times blinding flashes of light within you, that have made you start and wince? Have not secret stings and arrows galled your spirit and wounded you? Have you not groaned under the pangs of remorse? Have not drops of liquid fire (as the great Greek,¹ though a heathen, describes) fallen on your bosom? Have you not been made over and over again to turn pale and tremble? Have you not at times, in your extremity of mental anguish, wished you were dead?

I believe there is no worldling, sceptic, or raving atheist, no ruthless and unprincipled despot, not even the heathen African, no man or woman so riotous or fallen, who has not at some time or other his qualms of conscience. What have you done with those sins that have again and again pierced your sensibilities? Have these sins been put away? Have they been pardoned? Are you sure they will trouble you no more? Have not long-buried and forgotten sins suddenly and without a moment's warning started up before you, and taken the spirit out of you? These fitful spasms of an uneasy conscience are themselves enough to rouse you to prepare for the coming danger, and to hasten your escape ere the horrible tempest burst on you.

¹ Æschylus (Agamemnon).

(3.) *The appearance of the bird of prey.*

The dove is a sweet morsel for the bird of prey, and, being utterly defenceless, has many enemies. When the bird of prey appears aloft in the distance, the dove waits not for further warning, but does its utmost to flee away. I remember, many years ago, when at Mount Sinai, and while standing in front of Horeb's granite precipice, observing a number of little birds hopping about and chirping in a stony valley. Suddenly there appeared eastward a large hawk, which with expanded and seemingly motionless wing swept towards the spot where the little chirpers were. The birds knew their mortal enemy full well. Their instinct told them that to rise in the air would be their destruction, so they became suddenly silent, and all cowered down beside the stones in the valley. As the hawk can only seize its prey while on the wing, the great bird, after vainly wheeling in circles over the spot for a time, turning westward, glided off behind the projecting cliff, and I saw it no more. Have we not to-day such a bird hovering above, with his keen eye resting on us, spreading his huge and dusky wings between us and the sun? What bird is that? It is Death! We are familiar with the cold, deep, and baleful shadow which this dread bird projects with his wings over the populations of earth, so that those who are in it are said to be in the region of the shadow of death.

Death, with quicker than the eagle's vision, has at this moment his eye on every one of us. Some who were eagerly looking forward to this very visit of mine have had their youthful eyes closed for ever, ere I have come.¹ He is waiting to swoop down and bear us in his talons ruthlessly away from loving kindred, from the busy city, from the crowded congregation. Every week some terrible calamity by land or sea shocks us with a lesson of the uncertainty of life. While at Vienna lately (November 1887), I visited the spot where the Ring Theatre took fire and was burned. I remember the stun we in a distant city received when the tidings came that seven hundred hapless human beings had within an hour in the blazing theatre become charred and almost unrecognisable corpses.

Death meets us when and where he is least expected. If you are heedless about yourselves, oh, think how suddenly death may carry off your children! See that they be converted in time. You may say, "But, do what we may, we cannot escape death."² True in one sense, but not in another. Does not Jesus say, "If a man keep my saying, he shall never taste of death;"³ and again, "Whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die;"³ "He that eateth of this bread shall live for ever" ?⁴

¹ Nairn, Mission to the Highlands, 1886-87.

² John viii. 52.

³ John xi. 26.

⁴ John vi. 58.

But death is not the only bird of prey we have to fear. As the great Abyssinian traveller tells us there are birds that occupy loftier regions in the air and dominate over the scene; so there is another bird, in our case, that takes a higher flight than death. He that has the power of death, that is the devil, "the prince of the power of the air" himself. Oh, do not wait till the terrible spoiler come, ere betaking yourself to the one strong refuge!

Now it is time to consider what that true refuge is. It is not enough that the sinner be awakened. It is of the last importance that he knows, and betakes himself to the one shelter where safety can be found. Are you sure that you have found it? Many there are who are unhappy from a sense of sinfulness and danger, who make most melancholy mistakes as to the Divine method of deliverance. The great enemy employs many artifices, some very cunningly devised, to lead the sinner away from the true refuge. What is that refuge? It is Christ—Christ crucified. It is the Rock of Ages¹ alone. There, and in its deep clefts,² the poor trembling dove, alarmed and pursued, finds security and rest. It is not by going about to establish your own righteousness, however scrupulously sincere, that you can find safety or possess true peace. It is only by wrapping your-

¹ See Isa. xxvi. 4, margin.

² Song of Sol. ii. 14.

selves up in the righteousness of another—and He the Son of God—that your guilty soul can find a covering, or your agitated heart attain to tranquillity and repose. Not till then shall you even begin to walk with God, or enter on a life of holiness and dutiful obedience.

In the wide prairies of America, the huntsmen go forth in quest of the wild animals inhabiting those regions. It sometimes happens that while the hunters have dismounted, and are taking their midday meal, or are smoking as they lie stretched on the ground, they descry an ominous appearance to windward. A dense and dark cloud is moving towards them along the plain with startling rapidity, and spires of flame rise high above the terrible cloud, while the noise of crackling vegetation strikes the ear. Through some incautious spark dropped elsewhere, the prairie has caught fire. Buffaloes, antelopes, and other wild animals rush past to avoid destruction. The huntsmen, exchanging looks, mount their horses and speed on, to outrun, if possible, the rapidly advancing flames. In order to escape, the hunters strain to reach some stream, or creek, as it is called, and put it, if broad enough, between them and the fire. When such a stream is interposed, the flames are checked, and the horsemen are safe, and it is by a stream being similarly interposed between you and the fiery cloud that your safety will be provided for. Blessed be God, though

such dividing streams are oftentimes absent in the American plains, there is a stream broad and deep that runs from one end to the other of the prairie of this sin-blighted world. That river is no other than the stream of Immanuel's precious and atoning blood. If that blood be between you and God's retributive justice, then, like the blood sprinkled on the doorposts of Israel in Egypt, it will avail to shield you from death and danger, and the flame of Divine wrath will immediately subside. But let us suppose that there is no such creek or stream within reach of the huntsmen. What are they to do? Their horses being tired out and blown, the men dismount, and one of them, striking a match, applies it to the dry blades of grass at his feet. Gradually he succeeds in kindling a feeble flame. He blows on it with his lips, fans it with his cap, and soon the herbage before him is ablaze. And now, a little wind being produced by the kindled grass, the flame gathers strength and moves onward. The huntsmen are now between two fires,—the wild moving furnace behind them, and the blaze of burning herbage in front. But when the conflagration comes up, the hunters step forward on the blackened, and perhaps still smoking ground over which the fire they kindled has already passed. And so it is that the flames behind, having no longer any fuel to feed on, at once die down, and the huntsmen remain unharmed. Thus you see the deliverance

of the huntsmen is affected by the space in front having been already scorched by the fire. Even so, it is because the fire of God's wrath has already passed on the person of Christ, because He has been made sin for us, and has been made a curse for us, that there is safety for all who, renouncing all other confidences, repair to Him alone. There is no salvation but by Christ. No one that I ever heard of offers to save us but Himself—"Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved;"¹ and no religion other than the Christian tells us of a saviour at all. Indeed, other religions do not even tell us that we need one. Christ is the Rock of Ages. Trifle not with your day of opportunity. Lose no time. To-morrow may prove too late.

When at Natal in 1883, I lodged in the house of a lady whose husband had perished some time before; and how? It was by a conflagration such as I have described, that suddenly seized the trees and herbage amid which he was working at the time. The flames came rapidly towards him, and he knew that his only expedient for escape was that of setting fire to the vegetation in front of him. But he was *too late!* The roaring flames made up to him while he was in the act of kindling the fire, and ere the ground before him could be cleared,

¹ Acts iv. 12.

by being only a minute or so too late, he was scorched, and died in agony! This I heard from the widow herself.

"Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation."¹

III. *The convinced sinner, weary and at the mouth of the cleft of safety.*

It not infrequently happens that the sinner convinced of sin, when brought to the cleft in the rock, refuses or hesitates to enter. It is as if the dove, having reached the rock after its long flight, instead of folding its wings and passing into the crevice, were to perch on some twig or jutting projection at the entrance, and were to flutter about, unwilling for some reason to go in. Why is this? Is it because the cruel snake has crept up the rock, and is coiled within the crevice, its forked tongue vibrating, and its fascinating eye watching for the prey on its return? Or is it the leer of the cunning fox that has descended into the cleft from above, which the dove detects, and that scares the little bird away? Ah well, let me tell you, sinner, who are hesitating, you are scared from the Lord Jesus without any just cause for alarm. Alas! there may be not a few now listening to me who are most unhappy. They are convinced of sin; they know full well all the doctrines of grace, that there is no other Saviour but Jesus. Yet they have

¹ 2 Cor. vi. 2.

no comfort, no peace; and Christ, after all, seems to be nothing to them. They are at the very entrance of salvation, but for some false reason they hesitate, they cannot decide, they scruple to enter in. They cannot make up their minds to confide in the Lord Jesus for their personal salvation, and they are living useless lives while the world is crying aloud for their aid.

Let me give rein here for a few moments to my imagination. What is that I see rolling on the face of the dark and troubled waters? A strange craft! It should be a ship, yet it has nothing about it that characterizes a ship,—no mast, no sail, no sheet, no oar, no rudder, no deck, no ladder, no cable, no anchor, no steersman, no sailor, no captain, no port-hole, no boat, no flag. As I look, I see high in the air a little bird flying rapidly towards the craft. It makes its way to what I had not noticed before, a sort of window in the sloping roof of the strange vessel. The window is open, and the little bird is about to enter. But how is this? The dove suddenly hesitates and halts. The little bird perches, now on the lintel of the window, now on the covered roof close by. It flutters about, it flutters about, it flutters about, but will not go in. A venerable face and head appear at the window. It is Noah himself, whose name means “rest.” The patriarch speaks: “My little dove, thou art weary, weary. Why not come in?” The

dove looks wistfully, as if it would say, "Yes, I am weary, flying during the long day over the dark and interminable waters, and not finding any rest for the sole of my foot. I feel as if I must fall into the waters and be drowned." "Then why not come in?" But the bird flutters about, flutters about, flutters about, and will not enter. And now I perceive that Noah from one side cautiously reaches forth his hand, and quickly grasps the dove. "And Noah took her, and pulled her in unto him into the ark."¹ Then he folds the dove to his breast, and, stroking its feathers, closes the window. Stepping backward he descends, and calls for Shem, Ham, and Japheth, and the four ladies. "Here is our little bird come back to us again," he says; and all the seven take up the dove in succession, making some remark about it. Then, being let go, the bird flies upward to its nest amid the rafters of the ark.

Now, you are like that dove to-day. You, too, have come to-day to the very window of the ark, and are weary enough with sin and sorrow, with wandering, waiting, and dispeace. But, instead of entering the ark of refuge, you flutter about! flutter about! flutter about! Who is He that so benignly looks at you from the window? It is the true "Noah" Himself—"the Rest for the weary." Listen to His pathetic voice as it sounds over the deep. "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are

¹ Gen viii. 9.

heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Ah, rest ! Rest is what you need. Well, this day decide to accept of Christ, to make Him your own, to take Him at His word, and to place in Him your personal confidence. I ask you earnestly, cannot you, will not you, put your trust in Him to-day ? You say, "I will try to do so." "Try" will not avail. "Well, I will trust in Him." "Will trust" won't do either. Say, Lord, by the grace of God, I *do* trust in Thee now. Let this be the last day of your hesitation, of your indecision. You have waited uselessly for years, expecting some sign of fitness in yourself, some warrant to encourage you, other than Christ's word. Why should you hold aloof, either by harbouring suspicion of Christ's willingness to save you, or by vainly waiting till you can bring some worthiness of your own to recommend you to Him ? May the gracious arm of the Lord be now stretched out, and amid your fluttering fetch you in. And will the Lord Jesus not fold you to His heart ? Nay, He will show you as His own to the angels, and bid them rejoice with Him over your recovery. Yea, more, will He not confess your name before His Father ? and there will be gladness indeed throughout all the Father's house. Jesus will rejoice over you with joy ; the angels will rejoice over you ; and God the Father will rejoice over you. It will be as in the father's house in the parable when the long-lost prodigal came home.

One thing remains to be said. Isaiah does not in our verse to-day speak of one dove, but of a multitude. It is a “cloud” of doves, with wings outspread, which, in the light of prophecy, he sees flying to their windows, or houses. Now the conversion of even one sinner is a precious and notable event; but we look for the conversion, not of one, but of many. Let me say that even if one sinner be awakened, repent, and be forgiven, we may reasonably expect that soon other conversions will take place, either in the family or in the congregation.

Have you not, while standing behind a low wall, observed a flock of birds feeding among the stubble in the field? They busily pick up seed or other food, heedless of your gaze. Suddenly one bird rises in the air. The others pay no regard, but continue feeding. Soon another rises, and then another, and then, as if one impulse had on the instant seized them all, the whole covey rise together, and with a whirring noise speed away beyond the field to find food elsewhere.

The five disciples, John, Andrew, Peter, Philip, and Nathanael, rose one by one at Jordan; but in a little while the three thousand at Pentecost, roused by one of them, rose at once as a flock of doves, whose wings were covered with silver, and their feathers with yellow gold,¹ and, following their example, were gathered in. So may it be again. If

¹ Psalm lxviii. 13.

only one or two of you were to-day to decide for Jesus, and find peace in believing, we might expect that from these pews there would arise a whole flock of anxious sinners.

When lately in Londonderry, I spoke from this text, putting the matter in this light. A fine young man of nineteen, impressed by what he heard, was going homeward, when a friend, who along with him had listened to the sermon, urged him to receive Christ Jesus. He did so there and then. Writing to me three weeks afterwards, he said that that night he had been born again on the way, and that now eleven persons in his neighbourhood had found the Lord, and that others had been awakened. Let one or two of you receive Jesus, and then others, your companions, will take heart and hope, so that this day might be as the beginning of days among you, and a whole multitude be gathered home. Amen.