

The Only Safe Protection, and the Only Sure Refuge

by J.C. Philpot

The sermon emphasizes the importance of knowing our own helplessness to keep ourselves and the need to be kept by God in order to avoid the enemies of our soul, including the spirit of the world and self.

Scripture: Matthew 23:37

Topics: "Divine Protection", "Spiritual Refuge"

Description

J.C. Philpot preaches about the deep experiences and heights of joy recorded in the Scriptures, emphasizing that not all God's people sink into the same depths of soul trouble or rise to the same heights of spiritual joy. He delves into the Psalmist's prayer to be kept as the apple of the eye and hidden under the shadow of God's wings, highlighting the need for divine work in the conscience to realize helplessness, the evil of sin, and God's preserving power. Philpot explores the protection, nearness, nurturing, and mutual contact found under the shadow of God's wings, urging the congregation to seek refuge and warmth in God's presence.

Transcript

Preached at Eden St. Chapel, London, on Wednesday Evening, August 21, 1844, by J. C. Philpot

"Keep me as the apple of the eye--hide me under the shadow of your wings." Psalm 17:8

The Scriptures were revealed for the instruction and consolation of the church of God in all time; and therefore, there cannot be any experience in the soul so deep, nor any so high, which may not be traced in them. But all God's people are not led into much of the experience we find recorded there; there are depths into which all do not descend; there are heights to which all do not mount. All the people of God, for instance, cannot adopt such language as we find in some of the Psalms. "My iniquities have gone over my head--as a heavy burden they are too heavy for me. My wounds stench and are corrupt because of my foolishness. For my loins are filled with a loathsome disease; and there is no soundness in my flesh. I am feeble and severely broken; I have roared by reason of the disturbance of my heart." (38:4-8.) I do not mean to say, they may not have some sensations similar to those here described; but all are not able to declare (at any rate, in some stages of their experience), that they have gone into all the depths of feeling therein expressed.

So again--"While I suffer your terrors I am in despair." (88:15.) "Deep calls unto deep at the noise of your waterfalls--all your waves and your billows are gone over me." (42:7.) I do not mean to say, that all the Lord's people do not enter into a measure of the feelings therein set forth; but all the children of God certainly do not go down into the same depths of soul trouble, that we find some of the saints experienced as set forth in the Scripture. And so likewise, we may find heights of joy, praise, and exultation experienced by the Bible saints of old, that do not find a present parallel in the hearts of many of God's people. I do not say, that the time will not come, when they may sink into those depths; or that the period will not arrive when they may rise up to those heights; I merely look at it as a matter of present observation, as an existing fact, that there are heights and depths of feeling recorded in the Scripture, to which all the children of God do not equally sink, and to which they do not all equally rise.

But there are experiences, or parts of experience, traced out in the Scriptures, which do meet, more or less, with a response in the bosom of every one taught of God--experience, which being the teaching of the Holy Spirit, is as real, as saving, and as complete as the other; and yet, not equally deep; nor equally high; but more upon a level with the average of God's people, and thus specially adapted (if I may use the expression), to "the middle classes" of God's family. There are many passages of holy writ which drop into the very heart and conscience of all who know something of divine teaching, and yet have not been plunged into the depths, nor raised up into the heights that others of God's saints are experimentally acquainted with.

Some parts, for instance, are clothed in the language of prayer; and how these express the feelings of a soul taught of God! How many of the Psalms are almost entirely taken up with breathing out the desires of the Psalmist! What a man of prayer David was! And how the Holy Spirit has seen fit to record in the Scriptures of truth the breathings of his soul, that we might, when we find similar breathings, have a testimony in our conscience that we are under the same teaching; and thus find a parallel in our hearts with what we there read as felt and experienced by one of God's saints. So that all the elect family, so far as they are living under the teachings of the Spirit, can come in, each in their own measure, with the petitions, the breathings, the longings, the sighings, the hungerings, the thirstings of the saints recorded in the Scriptures; though they cannot all mount up, or sink down, into the experience contained in other parts.

For instance, in the text, we have a petition breathed out from the soul of the Psalmist; and this petition divides itself into two branches--one, that the Lord would "keep" him; and the other, that the Lord would "hide" him. Everyone taught of God to know his own heart, and to feel his own weakness, let him have sunk into the lowest depths of conviction, or mounted up to the greatest heights of spiritual transport; or let him be weak and feeble, and know but little either of the bright side or of the dark--all the children of God, I say, who know the weakness of their own heart, and the awful sin that lurks and works there, and who feel that they have no power to keep themselves, can all come and join with one heart and one voice in these words--"Keep me as the apple of the eye." And if they know anything of the experience of being brought into a measure of nearness to God, they can also join in the latter part of the text--"Hide me under the shadow of your wings."

But you will observe, that the Psalmist not merely breathes forth a desire to be kept, and to be hidden, which is the leading branch of each petition, but he also (if I may use the expression) points out to the Lord the way in which he wishes these blessings to be communicated. He does not say simply, "Keep me;" but he adds, "as the apple of the eye;" he does not cry merely, "Hide me," but he also adds, "under the shadow of your wings;" feeling that it was not enough to be kept, unless he was kept "as the apple of the

eye," and not sufficient to be hidden, unless he was hidden "under the shadow" of the divine "wings."

With God's blessing, then, I shall endeavor this evening to trace out the experience contained in these two petitions; and show, if the Holy Spirit enables me, what it is to be "kept as the apple of the eye," and what it is to be "hidden under the shadow of God's wings."

I. "Keep me as the apple of the eye." Now, before a man can sincerely and honestly breathe out this prayer, "Keep me," he must have had a certain divine work wrought in his conscience. There is nothing easier than to take scriptural language into our lips; but whenever God the Spirit makes a man honest, he strips away from him all prayers that do not spring out of a feeling heart. He not only beats out of our hands liturgies, collects, and all formal, man-made prayers; but he also strikes out of our lips the very petitions that we find in the word of God which do not correspond with the feeling of our soul. So that, if our hearts have been touched by God's Spirit, and thus made honest and sincere before him, we can no more use scriptural prayers, nor join in with the minister when he prays, for if we have not more or less of the feeling which he or they express, than we can use written prayers or dry and dusty forms.

1. If then we would really take into our lips, with scriptural and experimental feelings in our hearts, this petition, "Keep me as the apple of the eye," there must be, as a preliminary to breathing forth this prayer, a certain, special, and particular work of grace wrought in our conscience; or we cannot say, as David does in the first verse of this Psalm, "Give ear unto my prayer, O Lord, that goes not out of deceitful lips."

1. Before then we can rightly breathe forth the prayer, "Keep me," we must have been taught spiritually something of our own helplessness to keep ourselves. We shall but mock God, if we ask him to keep us, and yet are not fully persuaded, that without his keeping we shall surely fall. Until, therefore, the Spirit of God has wrought in our conscience an experimental feeling of our complete helplessness, to use this petition, "Keep me," will but "come out of feigned lips."

But how does the Lord, for the most part, show us our helplessness? By allowing us from time to time to come into those circumstances, where we find temptation more than a match for us. The Lord is not the author of sin--God forbid; but he takes care that we shall know by painful experience we have no power to keep ourselves, except he specially interpose by his own miraculous hand. And thus, in his providence, he permits us to come into certain spots and states where we have to learn most keenly our inability to stand for a single hour, unless we are upheld by divine power. That was the way in which God dealt with Job. He had to teach him a certain lesson, his own helplessness; and to show him also the self-righteousness that was working naturally in his proud heart.

But O, what a way he took to teach Job this lesson! He permitted all those overwhelming circumstances to come upon him, which not only roused up the peevishness of his heart, of which he before was comparatively ignorant; but he showed him also how completely helpless he was to keep himself, and how unable to stand, except the Lord himself supported him by his own power. Now if we know anything of ourselves, we know this, that whenever the Lord has left us for a single moment to our own strength, we were unable to stand; that when any temptation presented itself suitable to our carnal mind, and God withheld his power to keep us, into that very temptation we fell headlong. I do not mean to say, that it was into some gross outward sin. We may learn what sin is, without falling headlong into the pit; we may draw near enough to the edge of the sewer to know its noisome smell, without tumbling into it; we may slip and stagger upon the brink, without falling actually into the filthy pool. But all God's people are made to know their natural proneness to evil; and seeing and feeling how infallibly they must fall, and how they always

have fallen, when God did not specially preserve them, they come at length to learn their helplessness, not as a matter of doctrine merely, but as a truth in inward and heartfelt experience. It is thus wrought in them as a divine conviction, that they cannot stand a single day nor a single hour, except the Lord himself miraculously and supernaturally supports them. A spiritual knowledge, then, of our complete helplessness is one prerequisite, one needful preliminary, before we can breathe forth the first branch of the petition in the text--"Keep me."

2. Another prerequisite is, to know what a dreadful thing it is NOT to be kept; and to see and feel the horrible evil of those things from which we desire to be preserved. This is produced by the Lord's raising up his fear in our hearts, and making our conscience tender before him. And when he thus gives us to see the horrible nature of sin, he causes us to groan and sigh, and at times almost bleed under the painful sensations that the guilt of sin produces when it is charged home upon the conscience. Many speak of those who contend for the life and power of God in the soul, both ministers and hearers, as though they were always indulging in, and gloating over corruption; as though all their preaching and conversation, and all they love to hear and speak about, were but the internal workings of evil; and as though they considered him the greatest Christian who knew the most of nature's depravity.

Now I say boldly, that there is no man who knows anything of the evil of sin, who desires to be kept from the power of sin, who groans and sighs under the burden of sin, and who hates sin "with total hatred," except him who has that vital experience against which so many darts are thrown. The man who merely has the doctrines floating in his head, has no inward abhorrence of evil; he has no groaning of heart under the power of sin; nor has he any desire (except for the sake of his own reputation) to be kept from falling into it. Those only who, by seeing light in God's light, know the workings of inward corruption, feel what a horrible thing sin is; and they are the only people who desire to be kept from falling into it; for they alone experimentally possess that fear of God working in their hearts which makes them to "hate evil," and which is in them "a fountain of life to depart from the snares of death." I say, then, it is a libel upon those who preach experimentally, and set forth the work of God the Spirit in the soul, to say that they encourage and indulge sin. If they are taught of God, as they profess to be, they know inwardly and painfully what a horrible thing sin is; they groan and cry, as the greater part of their daily experience, under the weight and burden of sin; and they alone are constantly and continually sighing to the Lord to deliver them from the power and dominion of it, and to purge their consciences from dead works to serve the living God. No more, the experimentally taught people of God are the only ones who in any measure are delivered from the power of sin. A man, then, must know what a horrible and hateful thing sin is, before he will cry to the Lord to "keep" him from it.

3. Again. He must also know what it is to have experienced some putting forth of the Lord's power in his conscience, upholding him from falling into those sins into which he would have tumbled headlong had not grace interposed. There is a kind of despair which seizes hold of a man's heart who has never been manifestly kept by God. Sin has come before him--he has fallen into it, and has repented of it; sin has come before him again--he has again fallen into it, and again repented of it. This alternate sinning and repenting at last produces a feeling of despair; as we find the Prophet speaking--"You said there is no hope; for I have loved strangers, and after them will I go." (Jer. 2:25.) If a man keeps falling, falling, falling, and never finds the power of the Lord put forth to uphold him, it at last breeds in him a spirit of infidelity as to whether God is really willing to keep him; every such successive fall opens up the way for another; and every repeated instance of the Lord not keeping him makes him doubt whether he has the disposition to preserve him from sin.

But on the contrary, wherever the Lord has appeared, in any manifest way, to keep a man when he has been walking upon the very brink and edge of temptation, and some portion of Scripture has been sent home to his conscience, or some special help has come from the Lord in the hour of need, it raises up a sweet hope, and encourages his soul to plead with God that he would keep him more and more; so that he can say with Paul, "Having obtained help of God, I continue unto this day." (Acts 26:22.)

So that these three things at least, not to mention others, must be wrought by a divine power in the conscience, before we can ask the Lord to keep us-

1. We must know our own helplessness to keep ourselves.

2. We must feel the exceeding evil and bitter character of sin, so as to make us groan and cry from the very bottom of our heart to the Lord to keep us from it.

3. We must have found, from time to time, that the Lord has appeared, kept, preserved, and restrained us from falling into sin, when we would otherwise have rushed headlong into the foulest and basest crimes.

2. "Keep me." But WHAT did the Psalmist want the Lord to keep him from? In breathing forth this desire, he must have seen all the enemies of his soul arrayed against him. He must have viewed the number, craft, and strength of his foes, and felt himself a poor, weak, defenseless, helpless babe before them. It is this feeling of helplessness that makes us cry to the Lord for help. As long as we think we have a grain of strength of our own, as long as we can depend in the least degree upon any supposed wisdom or righteousness in ourselves, we never can, except with "false lips," cry, "Keep me." But the more thoroughly and completely we are emptied of self-confidence, self-dependence, self-wisdom, self-strength, and self-righteousness, the more singly and simply, the more sincerely and ceaselessly, will the prayer be breathed forth--"Keep me."

1. We need to be kept from the WORLD; and we never need to be kept from it so much as when we fear it least. We need to be kept from the world daily and hourly; but we shall never ask the Lord to keep us from it until we have felt its ensnaring spirit. Now, it is not so much the society of the world, as the spirit of it, that defiles our conscience. A man may go into the midst of the world, if business or necessity calls him, and not be infected or contaminated with it; and at other times he may sit alone in his chimney-corner without speaking a word to a worldly person, and yet find the spirit of the world stealing upon and overpowering his heart. I have known, in times past, what it was to breathe out my soul to the Lord, with earnest desires after him, in the midst of worldly company.

Though we would not go needlessly into it (for who can touch pitch without being blackened?) yet it is not so much the society of the world, when we are thrown necessarily into it, as the spirit of it getting hold of a man's heart, that he has so much reason to dread. For when the spirit of the world gets within us, I am sure it will deaden our conscience, and harden our heart toward the things of eternity; it will make the Bible little else than a book which we have no interest to read; it will shorten all our prayers to God; it will put a damp upon all the pantings, breathings, and longings of our soul heavenward. Therefore, just in proportion as the spirit of the world acts upon and prevails over us, just so much is all spiritual feeling damped in the soul. These two spirits never can both be at the same time predominant; where the Spirit of the Lord reigns and rules, it overcomes the spirit of the world; and where the spirit of the world prevails, it damps, for a time, the actings of the Spirit of God.

When we feel, then, what the spirit of the world is; when we awake out of our dream, like Nabal of old from his drunkenness, and the fumes of intoxication have been dispelled, (for sometimes we get so intoxicated with it, and the spirit of the world has such possession of us, that we do not know we are under its influence,) we then see its mud and mire upon our clothes, and know painfully where we have been wallowing. Perhaps some heavy affliction, or cutting conviction, some moment of solemn meditation, or some awakening feeling created by God himself in our conscience, brings us out of that sad state of intoxication into which we have so heedlessly fallen.

We then begin to see what a dreadful, what a dreadful thing it is to be entangled with the love of the world. We perceive how insensibly its spirit has been creeping upon us; we feel how it has well near eaten out the life of God in our souls; what a crust of searedness, so to speak, it has brought over our conscience, and how it has deadened our heart to divine things. And when we get a little delivered from the spirit of the world, when the Lord indulges our souls with some sweet meditation, or some spiritual pantings and sighings after him, how we hate ourselves that we should ever have been so entangled in its spirit, and how we desire that that foul spirit should never regain possession of us!

2. But again. Of all opponents that we have most to fear, and of all enemies whose arts and arms we have most reason to dread, (I believe I shall find an echo in every God-taught bosom here) surely SELF is the greatest foe; and self is never so great a foe, as when it is most concealed. We can guard against the open enemy; it is the secret foe whose attacks we have most to dread, and against whom we have most reason to guard. We can defend ourselves against the soldier that wears the uniform of the enemy; but it is the traitor in the garrison whose insidious arts are most to be feared. So it is with respect to our own evil heart--that traitor within the camp, that secret renegade within the walls, who is continually plotting how to deliver our heart's garrison into the hands of the enemy.

For instance, this evil heart of ours will sometimes work in a way of PRESUMPTION; lifting us up to vain-confidence, inspiring proud and conceited thoughts of ourselves, damping all that humility, that godly fear, that lowliness of mind, that contrition of spirit which at times we have experienced, and lifting us up into a sort of careless, reckless, Antinomian vain-confidence. We get into this spirit of vain-confidence sometimes we scarcely know how, but it is very much connected usually with the spirit of the world; and if that spirit is working in a man's heart, if he has some sound and scriptural form of religion, some Calvinistic profession, no ground seems so good for him to take as that of vain-confidence. If he be exercised with doubts, fears, and misgivings, they will damp the spirit of the world within him; but if he takes the ground of vain-confidence, he has not a single check. The ground of eternal security in Christ, of the everlasting covenant ordered in all things and sure, of the certainty of the salvation of the elect, and of his own interest in Christ as one of the elect--a man may take all that high position, and have his heart filled with worldliness.

But when he comes to be exercised with doubts and fears and sinkings, they and the spirit of the world cannot work together; but the highest fleshly confidence will work well with the spirit of the world. The people of God sometimes begin to feel this spirit creeping over and stealing upon them. They have not had so many trials lately; things in providence have gone well with them; Satan has not thrown so many fiery darts into their minds; they have had a little ease; there has been a cessation of arms, a short truce with the enemy. Now this is the time for the soul to get lifted up into vain-confidence.

But when we awake from the dream, and see how, with this spirit, searedness of conscience came on, and how we no longer discovered the presence of evil in things wherein we saw it plainly before, we begin

to feel what a dreadful enemy to our souls this vain-confidence and Antinomian presumption is, and to cry, "Keep me, Lord, from this empty religion." Whatever doubts and fears the soul is exercised with, these are felt to be better than a calm, easy, confident state without the shinings-in of God's countenance--a state of security not springing from any divine testimony within, but resting upon the bare letter of the word, or standing in mere notions and opinions, quite distinct from the work and witness of God the Spirit in the soul.

Oh! the deceitfulness of our heart! Who can fathom the depths of our native hypocrisy? What language can paint, what tongue can describe the workings of our base heart, or the treachery of our fallen nature? When a child of God begins to take a solemn review of the past, and sees how in a thousand instances his vile heart has deceived him; how it always has betrayed him whenever he trusted in it, and never did anything else but lie; how desirous he is to be kept from being entangled and overcome by the wickedness and treachery of his depraved nature! We begin at last to look upon our hearts just as a master does upon a servant whom he finds is perpetually telling him lies; he looks upon him as an unprincipled wretch, on whom he cannot place the least dependance, and of whom he will gladly get rid as soon as he possibly can.

So when we find our heart has made such strong resolutions of amendment, put such a good face upon matters, and yet, day after day, has been telling us such awful and abominable lies; we begin after a time to look upon it, as the master does upon the dishonest servant, with a feeling that it is only seeking an opportunity to deceive and pillage us, however it may use the language of truth and honesty. And like the master who has discovered that he has been under the power of this lying servant, as we get more and more acquainted with the lies and hypocrisy of our deceitful nature, we are anxious to be kept from the power of it, that this treacherous heart may not have the dominion over us.

Sometimes, on the other hand, we are afraid of the DESPAIR that springs out of these unbelieving hearts of ours. There are two vast shoals upon one of which many gallant barks make shipwreck--the shoal of presumption, and the shoal of despair. What a course have the vessels of mercy to steer between these rocks and how continually they are edging the very brink of these reefs! What a dexterous steersman it must be to guide them safely!--Aye, none can steer them through but the Lord himself sitting at the helm. How perpetually is the frail vessel nearing the shoal of presumption or of despair! How does a vain-confident spirit one day fill our mind, and the next day a desponding spirit sink our soul! How we are towering one hour on the wings of vain-confidence, and the next hour falling into almost the lowest pit of despondency! Now the soul taught of God dreads as much to be left to despair, as it dreads to be given up to presumption. It knows there are these two shoals, on which so many noble vessels have struck; and O how it fears lest it should one day or other be wrecked on one of these rocks!

But in fact, if my ability enabled me to enumerate all the evils by which we are surrounded, all the enemies that threaten our soul's peace, all the snares spread for our feet, all the entanglements Satan is laying in the way, all the dangers felt and feared, it would be to occupy the whole evening.

3. I shall therefore pass on to consider the WAY in which the Psalmist begs the Lord to keep him--"Keep me as the apple of the eye." If I may use the expression--and I do it with all reverence--he directs the Lord how to keep him; or rather, he points out to the Lord the way in which he wishes to be kept.

But what is meant by the expression--"the apple of the eye?" I am not very fond of 'opening up what a word is in the original', whether Greek or Hebrew, because it often springs from nothing else but pride and

vanity in the speaker; and after all, those who indulge in it most are usually least acquainted with the subject. But I cannot, in this instance, forbear mentioning its original meaning. It is, literally, "the little man of the eye;" and there is something very significant in the expression. If you look into the eye of a person speaking to you, you will see your own image reflected in it in miniature; and the Hebrews, from that circumstance, call the seeing part of the eye "the little man" of the eye. "The apple of the eye" then, in the original, means, not the white, but the pupil, the seeing part of the eye. The white of the eye is, I understand, nearly insensible to pain. A person was telling me the other day, that on being operated on for cataract, he suffered scarcely any pain when the knife was passed through the white of the eye. But "the little man of the eye," the seeing part of that wonderful organ, we know, is most sensitive. Now David asked the Lord to "keep him as the apple of the eye;" that is, with all that tenderness and care which the Creator has displayed in preserving this most important organ.

In order to illustrate this figure, let me direct your attention to a few particulars connected with the structure of the natural eye; not that I am well acquainted with its anatomy; but I wish to point out how the God of nature has PROTECTED this delicate organ, that I may show from it some of his dealings in grace. Look, for instance, at the bony orbit, in which the eye is lodged. If our eye had not been lodged in a deep and bony cavity, how exposed it would have been to every blow! I myself am a standing instance of it. When I was at school, one of my school-fellows threw a clothes-brush at me with great violence, which struck me just in the corner of the eye. Had it not been for this bony arch, which received the stroke, my eye would probably have been destroyed by the violence of the blow. The God of nature, then, has lodged this important and tender organ in this strong and deep bony cavity, in order to preserve it from injury. Here we see something of being "kept as the apple of the eye."

Look also at the noble, projecting pent-house over our eye that the God of creation has constructed--how our forehead, with the jutting eyebrow, preserves the eye from injury by a downward blow, and prevents the sweat of our brow, (for "in the sweat of our face" we have to eat our bread,) from running into and annoying it. And look at the eyebrow, that to serve the same purpose the Lord has set over the eye; and observe the delicate curtain of the eye-lid, that drops over it, to preserve it from dust and other annoyances; which also keeps it moist and sensitive, and wipes away, as if instinctively, any film which might gather over it. How fringed too it is with the eyelash, which breaks the violence of the light, and acts as a network against dust and bugs! I trust to be excused hinting at these natural things, as in order to catch the beauty of the figure, it is necessary thus to see for a moment how the Lord has protected our natural eye with such a wonderful apparatus. What skill has the Architect of our frame displayed in preserving this tender and important organ.

And observe also how SENSITIVE he has made the eye! How immediately the curtain drops when danger threatens! and how, when sleep falls upon us, and we lie at rest upon our pillow, the wise Constructor of our bodies has caused that close-fitting lid to fold over the eye, that no injury may befall it in the unguarded hours of the night! Now I do not mean to say, that the Psalmist was an anatomist; for my remarks have all been connected with the outward defenses of the eye, which are open to any person's observation, and not with the inward structure, which to understand requires dissection; but, no doubt, he had a view of the carefulness and wisdom with which the Maker of the eye had preserved it, that made him breathe forth this petition--"Keep me as the apple of the eye." That is, "Lord show to me spiritually the same protection, the same tenderness, the same wisdom which you have displayed in preserving my natural eye-sight."

In what sense, then, does the Lord "keep us as the apple of the eye?"

1. Do you not observe how this bony arch that the Lord has made preserves the eye from accidents and blows that might fall upon it? This is an EXTERNAL defense. And do we not see how the Lord is perpetually hedging up our way in providence, in order to preserve our souls from being entangled in the snares into which we would otherwise fall? The Lord keeps us most wonderfully. Sometimes, when temptation comes, we have not the will; sometimes, when the will comes, we have not the opportunity. The Lord guards us specially by his providence. As in his wisdom he has guarded our eye naturally by this bony orbit, so in his providential care he has kept us from a thousand evils. If all the Lord's people could speak, and tell honestly what they had passed through, how they would trace their preservation even from open sin to some unexpected circumstance in providence! Perhaps, a knock at the door, a child coming into the room, or an unexpected visit from a friend, has broken a snare, into which they would have fallen headlong, had not that circumstance intervened.

Just as the Lord in his wisdom has preserved the eye by this bony arch, which you will observe is an outward protection, and quite distinct from the sensitiveness of that organ, so does he from time to time keep us from falling into sin by his providential dealings with us. And it is a mercy to be kept at any rate, and in any way; it is a mercy to be kept from falling, though it be as a child is kept from falling into the fire by the tall iron guard-rail; it is a mercy to be kept from falling, even though it be as a lunatic by a strait-jacket, or by the iron bars before his windows. Open sin is so dreadful a thing, that it is a mercy to be kept from it in any way, or by any means, however severe, that the Lord may employ.

2. But what the Psalmist seems chiefly to point to, is the sensitiveness of the organ. This is an INTERNAL defense. How sensitive our eye is! Directly danger threatens it, how immediately the fringed curtain drops over it! And if dust, sand, or any foreign matter gets into our eye, how uneasy, how miserable, how troubled we are until it is dislodged! So spiritually. David seems here to refer to the conscience; for as our eye is sensitive naturally, so a conscience made tender by God's Spirit is sensitive spiritually. Does a foreign body--sand or dust--annoy and irritate the eye naturally?--He would ask the Lord to keep his conscience so sensitive, that sin, temptation, and evil might distress it, just as much as any foreign body distresses the eye when it flies into it. "Keep me as the apple of the eye," let my conscience be made and kept as tender, as sensitive, as fearful of the approach of evil, as circumspect, as watchful--and if evil does come, if sin does enter, let it be as distressed, as uneasy, until the guilt of it be removed, as ever "the apple of the eye" is, under the intrusion of a foreign substance.

In being "kept as the apple of the eye," then, he desires not only to be kept with all the care that God has bestowed upon the eye--not only with all the wisdom that he has displayed in preserving it externally--but also with all that wonderful apparatus of internal sensitive tenderness, which he has endowed it with, that it may be "the light of the body."

3. If our natural eye be darkened or impaired we stumble. We have lost that which directs our feet--that light which guides us in the road wherein we are to walk. So if our conscience, which is the eye of the soul, becomes hardened, darkened, crusted over, dimmed by cataract, we are unable to walk spiritually in the path pleasing to God; we stumble headlong into sin, mistake the course, and wander out of the way, just the same as we should if we had lost the important organ of sight naturally. Therefore, when the Psalmist said, "Keep me as the apple of the eye," it is as though he said, "Lord, show forth all that power, all that wisdom, all that tenderness, which you display in keeping my natural organ of sight; for if my soul be darkened, I must go astray."

Now will not this find a responsive echo in our bosom, if our conscience be made tender in God's fear? Shall we go recklessly on, if we know anything of the prayer, "Keep me as the apple of the eye?" Shall we say "Sin cannot harm us, sin cannot damn us, sin cannot cut us out of the covenant; it does not matter what we do, think, or say, for we belong to 'the election of grace;' there is no harm in this indulgence; there is no evil in that gratification; good men have done this or that?" Will there be in our hearts or lips any such reckless, hardened language, if we know anything of the meaning of the Psalmist's prayer? Who would expose his natural eye to a blow, when he knows the consequence? Who would wish the providence of God to be removed from keeping this important organ of natural sight? Who would plunge his eye fearlessly and recklessly where angry swords are flashing on every side? Who would open it to the arrow of the archer? Who would expose it to the rifle of the marksman? Who would lay it bare to stones and darts flying around it in all directions?

Now if a man, spiritually, sees that he is surrounded with instruments of destruction; if he discovers that swords are flashing on every side, darts cast in every direction, and snares and temptations are on every hand, any one of which may darken his spiritual sight; if he knows and feels these things, can he go on in a daring way of reckless presumption? If he breathes forth the words, "Keep me as the apple of the eye," is it not an appeal to the divine wisdom, the divine care, the divine tenderness, and the earnest desire of his soul that the Lord would exert all that wisdom, care, and tenderness over him? But there is much lodged, far more than I can express, and doubtless far more than I feel, in this prayer, "Keep me as the apple of the eye."

II. "Hide me under the shadow of your wings." This is the second branch of the petition that the soul of the Psalmist breathed forth in the words of the text.

He here makes use of another figure. The former plea was to be "kept" and he told the Lord how he wished to be kept--"as the apple of the eye;" this petition was, that he might be "hidden," and he tells God how he wishes to be hidden--"under the shadow of your wings." As the first was a figure in nature, and referred to the eye; so the second is another figure in nature, and refers to the protection that a mother bird exercises over her young. The Lord uses the same figure, when he says, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered your children together, even as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings." (Matt. 23:37.) We read also (Deut. 32:11) of "the eagle fluttering over her young, and spreading abroad her wings." We have the same figure used here. "Hide me under the shadow of your wings." The soul is breathing forth in expressive language its desire to be hidden under the shadow of God's protecting wing, as a young bird, or the tender chick, is covered and hidden beneath the fostering wings of the mother hen.

1. But before we enter into the figure, we will look at the expression--"HIDE me." "Come, my people," we read (Isa. 26:20), "enter into your chambers, and shut your doors about you; hide yourself for a little moment." There is much contained in the word "hide."

1. It implies, in the first instance, separation. If a man be hidden under the shadow of God's wings, it presupposes that the Lord has separated him unto himself, and keeps him distinct from all others as one of his "peculiar people." If we are hidden naturally, it indicates a coming out from other people; for we cannot be hidden if we are in a crowd. Solitude is a hedge and a bar from the world. "Hide me," then, implies an inward separation of heart and spirit--and this is a feeling which every God-taught soul earnestly desires. How much religious gossip there is, where this inward separation of heart and spirit is never seen! How much so-called religious conversation, in which the grace of God never manifests itself!

And finding, as many of the living family do, what barrenness and death enter their conscience from this idle conversation (of which so many churches, alas, are full), it makes the greater part, or at least the most spiritual part of God's people lead a solitary and separate life. They find that they can no more go into professing company without defilement, hardness of heart, and searedness of conscience, than they can go into the profane world; no, even less so, because in the world they are more upon their guard. When in the society of worldly people, they watch their lips and guard their words; but with the professed followers of Jesus they give themselves more licence. So that when the Lord's spiritually taught family have felt and groaned under this, it brings them to desire to be "hidden," brought out of the professing world, and kept solitary and separate.

2. But "hide me" has another signification. The wrath of God is coming upon the world. The Son of Man will appear in his glory, and then the vials of divine vengeance will be poured out to the uttermost upon a guilty race. Now "hide me" is the desire of the soul to be brought under safe protection; to be delivered from this general approaching ruin, this universal, overwhelming destruction; and to be led into that spiritual knowledge of, and that spiritual communion with, the Lord of life and glory, that the soul shall find a refuge in him until the calamities are over and past.

2. But there is something more which we must enter into in order to get the full meaning of the expression--"Hide me under the shadow of your wings." "Under the shadow of your wings!" What ideas are conveyed by this figure?

1. Is not PROTECTION one? When the tender chicks see danger at hand, and flee for refuge under the wing of the mother, is not protection the leading feeling that brings them there? When the bird of prey, the hawk or the vulture, is in the sky, and about to pounce upon the chicks, does not the mother utter a peculiar cluck, at the sound of which they all run and nestle themselves under the shadow of her wings, and there are secured? Doubtless the Psalmist had some reference to this. When he said, "Hide me under the shadow of your wings," he saw dangers in prospect, he perceived "the Prince of the power of the air," that bird of prey hovering over him, that unclean vulture, about to pounce upon his soul; and feeling as defenseless from his attacks as the tender chick from the pounce of the hawk, the desire of his soul was to be brought into safe shelter, under the shadow of God's wings.

2. But it implies also NEARNESS. When the tender chicks get beneath the maternal wing, what a nearness there is between the mother and her offspring! How near her bosom is to them! and how near are they to her bosom! And no doubt, naturally, there are mutual sweet sensations connected with the nearness of the mother to the offspring, and the nearness of the offspring to the mother. As then the mother naturally feels a delight in having her child near to her breast, as the child clings to that warm shelter that it may be near to the maternal bosom; so the soul, in desiring to be "hidden under the shadow of God's wings," seeks nearness to him, and spiritual access to his presence--not to be at a distance from him, not to be shut out from his overspreading wing, not to be driven into darkness and gloominess as a forlorn outcast; but to be brought near unto, and be favored with sweet communion with the Lord. And every soul taught of God feels that there is no "hiding" short of this; that a man cannot hide himself from the presence of the Lord, though he flies unto the very ends of the earth; that all that man can do will not avail him in the day of wrath; that all his own refuges are refuges of lies; that his own righteousness will leave him unsheltered; that all mere forms, rites, and ceremonies will leave his head bare one day for the thunderbolt of divine vengeance; that there is no effectual protection from the wrath of God, except by being hidden in Christ, and thus brought into near and immediate communion and communication with the Lord of life and glory.

And as he has seen the tender chicks hiding themselves under the maternal wing, so he longs to be hidden under the shadow of God's wings, not merely to escape the coming danger, (that is but a selfish motive which all have,) but to be brought into special nearness that he may lean on the bosom of his Lord.

3. But there is also another idea connected with the figure; which is that of NURTURING, or what is called "brooding." When the tender chick comes forth from the egg, it would soon perish and die, were it not for the nurturing warmth of the mother, as she spreads her wing over it. How the little shrinking ones cower beneath those warm wings!--And as she spreads herself over them, her warmth nurtures them, diffusing itself through their whole system, and insensibly strengthening their weak and tender frame.

So spiritually. We have no warmth in ourselves; we may try to rub our evidences together, as Indians get fire by rubbing together sticks; we may obtain sparks but nothing else; a little light but no warmth. Would we be warm--would we feel our souls, our hearts, our spirits, burn with love and affection--we can only get inward and spiritual warmth by coming near its almighty Source! The consumptive patient relocates to the warm climates of the South, to get, if he may, a temporary respite from the death that threatens him; he does not relocate to the frozen climates of the north; he knows, the farther he goes from the sun, the more does ice hold the earth in perpetual chains--when he seeks for a more congenial sky, he goes towards the sun.

So the soul never can get warm by leaving the Lord, and plunging into the world--all there is chilliness, iciness, and death. Would we be warm? We can only be so by coming near to the Almighty source of life, light, and heat; by getting near unto the Sun of Righteousness, as the chick creeps under the mother's wing, and draws near her breast. Would the Lord warm our cold hearts? He brings the soul near to himself; and warmth out of his covenant fullness enters into and strengthens the heart.

4. But what an effectual PROTECTION it is! When the infant chicks are hidden beneath the maternal wing, what weapon can strike them? They are safe from every enemy; the arrow must pass through the bosom of the mother to wound them; and until she is slaughtered upon the spot, the chicks under her wing remain in a place of perfect security. So spiritually. If the soul be hidden under the shadow of God's wings, it never can be pierced there--and as long as the Lord lives, the soul must live, for it lives in nearness to and communion with him.

5. And again, how all the family are brought into mutual contact, when the mother hen spreads her wings over them! There is no foreigner, no stranger, no enemy there. She only nurtures her own chicks; she has no anxiety or solicitude for the chicks of other birds; but all the fondness of her maternal bosom is spent upon her own offspring. So spiritually. When the soul says, "Hide me under the shadow of your wings," it is longing to get into that sweet and blessed spot, where the Lord manifests himself in all the tenderness and affection of his parental relationship, and gathers together all his children into love and communion with each other. There is no pecking each other with beak and claws when they are all safe under the shadow of his wings.

What a safe and blessed spot this is! "Under the shadow of your wings!" It seems to us at times a mercy to be brought under the shadow of God's ordinances, under the shadow of the experimental preaching of the word. And I dare say, some of you, who are chafed and tormented with the cares of the week, are glad sometimes on the Lord's day, to get under the shadow of this little roof, to catch some droppings of the word of life into your hearts.

But what is all this compared with getting under the shadow of the Almighty? That is where Ruth fled--as Boaz said to her, "A full reward be given you of the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings you are come to trust!" (Ruth 2:2.) And here is safe refuge, here is sure consolation, and everything that the soul can long for or enjoy. No spot is nearer heaven, and no spot more desirable, than where the Lord "hides us under the shadow of his wings." No evil can hurt us there!

And if we get near the Lord, will there not be some communication of the Lord's presence to our souls? If we touch the marble piece, is there not a sensation of cold? and if we touch the warm stove is there not a sensation of heat? Whatever we touch, is there not sensation communicated out of it? So, would we get near the Lord?--it is to get warmth from the Lord. But to go from him, to rush into the world, to run into paths of sin, to flee to 'formal religion', to bury ourselves in the lusts of our depraved nature--what is this but to dip our hands in ice, and expect to get heat? It is by being "hidden under the shadow of God's wings," that we can alone find shelter, protection, and warmth.

How much then is contained in these words! O! I feel to have been merely like a child dipping a shell into the sea, and taking up a few drops. We can but dip, as it were, a shell into this Scripture, or into any text of Scripture. We cannot exhaust the mine of deep experience contained in any one passage like this. We are like the miner, who may extract a lump or two of tin or copper out of a vein of the mine; but how deep the mine extends itself, beyond the power of his skill or strength to penetrate! So with the Scriptures of truth; there are such veins of experience in them--veins so rich, and that lie so deep, that it requires one well and deeply taught in the things of God to be able to strike a pickaxe even into any part of them.

We have seen then but a little of what is contained in the petition of the Psalmist before us this evening. We have not had all his trials--we therefore cannot enter into the depth of feeling with which he breathed it out. We have not had all his consolation, we have not equally felt the power of divine grace--and therefore we can only glean a little, a feeble measure, just a few hints and scraps, and mere gatherings-up of the rich experience here poured forth. But still those of us who fear God can say, each in our measure, "Keep me as the apple of the eye." If we know anything of divine teaching, of the evil and misery of sin--and of the sweetness of being kept from its filth, guilt, and power--if we dread to fall before night comes on--if we know that none but Jesus can keep us--if we long to be kept by him, and feel the blessedness of it, surely we can in a measure join in with this simple cry--"Keep me as the apple of the eye."

And if we have ever felt any measure of nearness of access to the Lord--any sweet sensations communicated out of him--any sympathy from his bosom--any light from his countenance--any love from his heart--we can also breathe out, at times--"Hide me under the shadow of your wings." This is the only sure keeping, and this is the only safe hiding. And sure I am, that the words of the text (I say nothing of my exposition of them; if not agreeable to God's will and word, let all I have spoken "with stammering lips" this evening be dispersed to the winds)--but I am sure that the words of the text, which the Holy Spirit has written, will meet with a response in every God taught bosom--"Keep me as the apple of the eye--hide me under the shadow of your wings."

And will they, can they be breathed forth in vain? Is not Jesus "the same yesterday, today, and forever?" and will not the Lord, who inspired that prayer in David's bosom, and heard it too, if he has breathed the same into our hearts, hear it also?

I am sure then I cannot leave you with a better prayer than this--"Keep me as the apple of the eye--hide me under the shadow of your wings." And sure I am, it will be our prayer, and our desire, if we know

anything of divine things by divine teaching. We shall feel that there is no keeping like God's keeping, and no hiding like God's hiding--that all we have done to keep ourselves has only issued in disappointment--and all we have done to hide ourselves has only exposed us more to the thunderbolts of divine vengeance. So that being beaten out of house and home, and driven from every other refuge, we at last come to this safe and simple shelter--"Keep me as the apple of the eye--hide me under the shadow of your wings."

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