

The Everlasting Arms

A sermon preached at Galeed Chapel, Brighton, by Mr James K. Popham, on
Lord's Day evening, 29th December, 1918

'The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms: and he shall thrust out the enemy from before thee; and shall say, Destroy them.' Deuteronomy 33:27

We shall never be able to thank God sufficiently for any saving knowledge which he may give to us of himself. The dealings of the Spirit of God with elect sinners – in giving them the new birth, opening their eyes to see God, and then sin, making known Christ in the heart – are such mercies as we shall never be able sufficiently to bless God for. If God should deal with us, we shall have to deal with him. The Psalmist, realising this, said: 'Be not silent to me: lest if thou be silent to me, I become like them that go down into the pit.' (Psalm 28:1) He felt that the life of his soul, the exercise of his mind Godward, all depended on some communication made to him by the Lord. Do you follow that? Everything that goes from our hearts to God comes from him first. Prayer that goes to heaven, first comes from heaven. Faith that goes to Christ, first comes from Christ. He is the giver of prayer. He is the author of faith, and the touchstone of vital religion is the possession of faith. The acting of faith upon God stands in the power of the eternal Spirit. It is in this gracious way that the Lord's people come to know that he is their refuge.

'Thou art my hiding-place,' one said, 'Thou shalt preserve me from trouble.' (Psalm 32:7) For the Lord's people, trouble may make a noise like a dog round about the city (Psalm 59:6), as the Psalmist says, but it cannot enter, it cannot work destruction. Blessed be God, this refuge secures all who are in it from real harm. They get many a fright, but they receive no death blow. The eternal God has designed this great mercy, to be the refuge of his children, and he calls them to come into it. 'Come, my people, enter thou into thy chambers.' (Isaiah 26:20)

Faith brings you in to this refuge. When you are in trouble, faith will take you there. You may struggle often and not get there, but faith will always be pointing out the way, in its exercise. If you notice the things that go on in your believing hearts, you will find one direction – Godward. That is the bent of the mind, that

is the trend of the spirit. The beauty the soul, by faith, sees in God draws out the necessity the soul has in itself for God, and impels it to go to him for refuge. Faith points out the road. O what a mercy to possess faith! In the bleeding Lamb, faith finds scope, and centre, and satisfaction, and safety. Well, dear friends, it is a great thing to be at a point about a refuge, a great thing to be at a point that we need it, and a great thing to be inside the refuge provided.

In the case of homicide without intention, without malice, God provided in Israel these cities of refuge, three on one side of Jordan, and three on the other side of it. These cities were typical of the refuge provided in the gospel. It would seem that their positions were also typical; that whichever way you turned, there was, facing you, so to speak, a city of refuge. Pursued by the law, pursued by sin, faith gives, in the Spirit's power, a blessed energy to run into that city, that sure refuge and hiding-place, the Lord Jesus, the eternal God.

Every case you have, you will find will bring you into some necessity for this refuge, and every exercise of mind Godward will bring you into some necessity for this refuge, and blessed be God, this refuge always answers our cases. Can you do without Jesus Christ? No! If you are taught of the Spirit, you can say, honestly, 'No.' Nor would you wish to do without him. What you have been singing is true of every believing soul here:

I seek, and hope to find
A portion for my soul. (John Berridge)

And a refuge also – we may add – even the Son of God. What would you do if there were no refuge?

The Apostle Paul invites poor sinners to this refuge. He says 'Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.' (Hebrews 4:16) Jeremiah speaks of the same refuge when he says, 'A glorious high throne from the beginning is the place of our sanctuary.' (Jeremiah 17:12) O happy he who gets into this sanctuary, this refuge!

The second part of the text, to which I would direct your attention, is this, 'And underneath are the everlasting arms.' As the Lord being 'a refuge' is figurative, so the expression, 'the arm of the Lord' is figurative. It is a much used expression in the Scripture, 'the arm of the Lord'. Moses in this book of Deuteronomy constantly refers to it when he tells the Israelites that they came out of Egypt by a mighty

power and an outstretched arm. As if he would constantly attribute weakness, witheredness, and death, to the arm of Israel, and then exalt the great and wonderful power of God under the figure of an arm. What the 'arm' is intended to express is that the power of God is underneath a sinner, and these arms are 'everlasting' to express the unchanging power of God, the abiding omnipotence of God, God in Christ.

Look at what the arm of the Lord has done! What the power of God has effected! He destroyed the enemies of his people. What did he come to do but to destroy the works of the devil, to destroy death, and him that had the power of death, that is the devil. That was his great mission. When Christ destroyed death, he put sin away. If sin had not been put away, death could not have been destroyed, for sin brought death, nothing else. 'By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin.' (Romans 5:12) And as death came by one man, by man comes also the resurrection from the dead, and the resurrection from the dead can only be when sin no longer holds the dead. If Christ had died and been buried with sin on him, he could not have risen. Just think of this. He was buried after he had put away sin, and he rose to die no more because he had no more sin to bear. This holds good with respect to the church too. Sin is removed and therefore their souls rise, and their bodies shall rise too. And all this putting away of sin was by the arm of the Lord, the outstretched arm of the Lord. Nothing less than omnipotence could have made an end of sin. Nothing but omnipotent love, and pity, and grace, could have put an end to sin. And so the saints were delivered from their bondage, all of them, when Christ said on the cross, 'It is finished,' and bowed his head and gave up the ghost. This is what the arm of the Lord did.

I want to bring before you two points. First, what the arm of the Lord has accomplished in our redemption, so that, if it please God so to bless you in it, you may see what Christ's death accomplished and the refuge it makes known to sinners. Then I shall try to show that the arm of the Lord, having done this, having effected such an amazing change in the state of the church, now sustains her in that change, and holds her up.

I. The arm of the Lord accomplished redemption.

What a great thing the arm of the Lord accomplished in redemption! The Redeemer came to be a sin-bearer. He came to bear the sin of his children on the cross. This was a mighty work suitable for God alone. You can increase your

sinfulness by your conduct, but you can never reduce it by religion. You can make yourselves worse, but you can never make yourselves better, but Christ came. 'Then said I, Lo, I come: in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart.' (Psalm 40:8) And you know according to the prophet Isaiah what that was that he came to do. He came to bear the sin of many, and make intercession for the transgressors. He came to take all the sin of the whole church away from her. That is what the arm of the Lord did. His fury upheld him in the great work of treading the winepress of God's wrath alone. (Isaiah 63:3) He came from Edom, with dyed garments, and brought this great thing – 'It is finished' – into the light. He finished transgression, made an end of sin, and brought in everlasting righteousness.

Now, beloved friends, this work of omnipotence clears for ever and ever the church of Christ. By that work he put the church into another state, and this is illustrated by Israel's coming out of Egypt and being brought into the land of promise. When Israel came out of Egypt she came out from the house of bondage, and the yoke of bondage was removed, broken, and taken away. And the land of promise sets forth that condition which the Lord's people are brought into by the redeeming power of God; their state is changed.

What Christ did on the cross bears fruit in the soul. When he said, 'It is finished,' he left nothing to do. The application of what he did is committed to the Holy Ghost, who fulfils his office by quickening the dead, and applying the atonement.

II. The arm of the Lord is underneath his redeemed people to sustain them.

Then, with this before us, let us look at the second thing, that the arm of the Lord sustains his people in that state into which his gracious power on the cross brought them. It is a state that is most wonderful. Says Moses to the people, 'Now that you are redeemed, and have been brought into the goodly land (or brought at least to its border as you are about to enter into it), underneath you, to sustain you in that state, are the everlasting arms. You are to enter upon my worship and the arms of my power shall sustain you. You are to be a separate people, being separated, and my power shall preserve you.' 'Underneath are the everlasting arms.'

The Holy Ghost begins the gracious work and carries it on. There are two or three points only that I would desire particularly to mention, and insist upon this evening in this word.

(a) Underneath faith are the everlasting arms.

First of all, every new born soul has faith. That is a real point in religion. The lack of it denotes death in a person. The possession of it denotes life. But faith is a supernatural grace. It is the spiritual work and gift of God. And too, it has to do with supernatural things, that is, to do with God – with the Father, with the Son, and with the Holy Ghost. Faith has to do with the sinner’s condition. It speaks, as it were, in the heart of the sinner on behalf of God, and tells the sinner again and again what course to take, to whom to go. This was what it did in Peter and the apostles: ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life.’ (John 6:68)

Now if you have faith you will certainly go this way. You cannot read the Scriptures properly without seeing that the whole trend of faith is Godward. It is in the heart like Ezekiel’s house (Ezekiel 41:7), it expanded as it went upward; it widened as it grew upward. Faith is just like that. It begins in little motions, it leads a sinner in confession, brings him to the throne of grace, tells him that there is a God who forgives iniquity, and transgression, and sin, and in the teaching of the Spirit it grows, and increases, as it winds round about upward. It says to God in the heart at times, ‘I will not let thee go, except thou bless me.’ (Genesis 32:26) ‘I can no denial take.’ ‘I know not what to do, but my eyes are up unto thee.’ Says a gracious man, ‘I have enemies, I have troubles, I have difficulties. I know not what to do with them, but my eyes are up unto thee.’ That is the language, that is the motion, of faith. If you observe, if you have it, what its workings are in your hearts, you will be sure to find this out at times, that faith moves towards God. ‘As the hart panteth after the waterbrooks’ (Psalm 42:1) – it must have water or die – so faith pants after God, it must have God or die.

Must you have him? Says sin in you, ‘Well, but there is no such thing as true religion.’ It blasphemes, it ridicules, it sneers, it mocks at every solemnity. But says faith, ‘There is a God. I have seen him. There is a Saviour. I believe in him. There is a fountain, I want to have a plunge into it. There is a righteousness, I would fain receive it.’ And these two things in a person make up his life, that is, he dies here, and he lives there. He dies in himself, to himself. He dies to his wisdom, and his

strength, and says, 'I am a poor, lost thing, I am a dead thing.' But he lives to God, by his precious faith. 'The just shall live by faith.' (Romans 1:17) He lives on the atonement. He lives at the throne of grace, he lives by praying, he lives on begging. The trade thrives sometimes. He is a beggar by trade. An empty handed sinner goes in faith and begs, and begs, till he gets.

God sustains this faith in great energy sometimes. Underneath faith are everlasting arms. This you see in plain language in 1 Corinthians where Paul says, speaking of faith, that it stands in the power of God, and not in the wisdom of men. (1 Corinthians 2:5) O what a thing it is to have faith standing in that power! Indeed, how could it stand otherwise? How could you stand up against indwelling sin, against temptation, against ignorance, against aversion to all things that are godly, if your faith were not sustained by an unseen hand, and kept up by a secret prop?

Underneath a sinner's faith are the everlasting arms. I understand this to mean, underneath you is the omnipotence of God, and beneath the fainting heart of the believing child of God are the everlasting arms, keeping his faith moving, looking, longing; keeping it hankering after God.

Now this is one thing, and I do beg your earnest attention to it, you who have faith, and who perhaps at times feel you have a great deal more unbelief than faith, so that at times you may think you have much more ignorance than knowledge, and more death than life. What keeps you at prayer? What keeps you at the Scripture? What keeps you looking to Christ? What keeps you feeling, 'O if he would but bless me; if he would but look on me as he does on some; if he would but reveal in me his beloved Son; all would be well.' I would answer for you; it is faith in the bleeding Lamb. 'Underneath are the everlasting arms.'

(b) Underneath are the everlasting arms in affliction.

In the next place, underneath an afflicted sinner are the everlasting arms of divine support, so that he does not faint, he does not give up. God does support people. There is a gracious maintenance of their standing in Christ when they are in trouble and may be feeling anything but united to him. If you look steadily at any point of the gospel doctrine, as for instance, union with Christ, and begin to examine yourself about it, you may – and if the Lord prevent it not, I believe you will – begin to question whether you have any union with him at all. But seek to be enabled to look at it this way – 'My soul cannot do without God. In this trouble

I find I am following after him. Though often very dead, I cannot live without him. I want him to sanctify this trouble to me, to help me to bear it properly, in a Christian spirit of true submission to the will of God. I want to be one of the people of whom we read, they shall be fat and flourishing in the courts of the Lord, to shew that the Lord is upright: he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him (Psalm 92:15).’ If you can look at things this way, you may find yourself one of those who are sustained. ‘Underneath are the everlasting arms.’ The Father holds you up in your union with Christ, holds you up in your desires to gain by all things you pass through, and holds you up in your longings to be right with God by whatever means it may please him to use.

Underneath the Christian in trouble are the everlasting arms. The soul is sustained, kept. As long as God sustains a sinner in this matter he is well kept, ‘Kept,’ as Peter speaks, ‘by the power of God through faith unto salvation,’ (1 Peter 1:5) and through no other way of keeping. O it is a great thing to be sustained in divine ways. ‘In the world ye shall have tribulation.’ (John 16:33) That is depressing, weakening, in itself distracting. Says Christ, ‘In me ye might have peace.’ ‘I will sustain your religion, I will keep your faith, I will maintain your love, I will hold you up in your understanding.’ ‘Underneath are the everlasting arms.’ O bless God for holding up such poor creatures as some of us find ourselves to be. Who could hold us up but God?

(c) Underneath are the everlasting arms in worship.

He sustains his people in their worship. There is no part of vital religion more solemn, more important, than worship, and when I say worship I do not mean only when we meet together, but rather more particularly, when we are alone. When you have not the sound of your own voice to help you, when you find yourself in a particular condition in secret. When the enemy would make you turn aside, and fill you with distraction, distracting thoughts and cares, then, then to have your faith held up for a few minutes in looking to God, and your soul engaged in real worship, you must have underneath you the everlasting arms. These arms will keep you, will hold you up, worshipping God in spirit and in truth, worshipping him in the beauty of holiness. In these ways and in many others, the everlasting arms are underneath the Lord’s people.

(d) Underneath every grace are the everlasting arms.

I might speak of other various graces, such as love, and patience, and humility, and the fear of God, and the submission to his will in affliction. In all these things we need to be as truly sustained by the power of God as our bodies must be sustained by daily bread. And this is a point that will be impressed upon every child of God more or less, that he cannot stand in one single thing that is good and godly for a minute without the Lord. You will learn it more and more as you get older, and you will believe it more firmly, that you must be sustained by the power of God in every act of your soul toward himself. O bless God then for being sustained, kept by his power, even until now.

Finally, we notice that the Lord will thrust out the enemy. ‘And he shall thrust out the enemy from before thee.’ Literally the Canaanites were thrust out of the land which the Lord himself had given to Abraham by promise, and Israel had to learn that they got not the land in possession by their own sword, nor by their own arm, but because God had a favour toward them, and that must be so spiritually. Just as these Hittites, and Perizzites, and Gergashites, and the many enemies that the Lord cast out, had to go before divine power, so the living family of God find that their hardness, their unbelief, their miserable wickedness, never fly before them but before the power of God alone. He shall thrust out thine enemies from before thee.

The Apostle Paul makes a great promise, as inspired by the Holy Ghost; he says, ‘Sin shall not have dominion over you.’ (Romans 6:14) Now you look at your experience and probably you will say sometimes, ‘Why such and such a sin has a good deal of dominion over me. My temper has, my hard, ungrateful heart prevails over gratitude, and tenderness, and the world has a great deal of dominion over me, for I think about it and I hanker after it, in this, and in that particular. And my pride has a good deal of dominion for I am often not in the least humble before the Lord.’ Yes, it is too true. But now here is a gracious word, ‘And he shall thrust out thine enemies before thee.’ They shall go.

Affliction is a means the Lord uses. He sends death upon this, and death upon that, and he sanctifies the death, the painful experience you have, and causes you to set your heart toward the highway, toward himself. You cannot express how he gives you to see the awful emptiness of your nature, and the emptiness, and unsatisfying nature of the world, the world you have to do with, and that, through grace, brings you to seek himself. That is one of the ways in which he thrusts out

the enemies before his children. 'He shall thrust out thine enemies from before thee,' and not allow them to have that place which they seek, which they often have had, and which they are most unwilling to yield.

'And shall say, Destroy them.' What?! Yes, 'Destroy them.' And this sets a prospect before every child of God that their enemies are not to live and prevail for ever. The expectation of the poor shall not perish, their hope shall not be cut off, for their God is their God for ever and ever, and he will be their Guide even unto death. O what a God we have my dear friends! What a God we have! He shall say, 'Destroy them.' What did Christ come to do? To destroy death, to destroy the works of the devil. Where did he do it? On the cross. Where will he next do it? In the soul. And where will he last of all do it? In the body. In the body. There shall be no trace of death in the soul or body in heaven. Nothing that defileth or maketh a lie shall enter there. He shall say, 'Destroy them.'

Well, may the Lord help us to bless his holy Name for all his great goodness in such a promise as this. Now I must leave off. I have no more strength. May the Lord make these hints useful.

Amen