

"I will break in pieces the gates of brass,  
and cut in sunder the bars of iron."

- Isaiah xlv, 2

Isaiah xlv, 1, 2, 13-19

John xvii, 1-15

Psalm 48

New Book of Worship, Psalm 48, pp. 57, 58

The children of Israel have been carried away captive to Babylon, and are represented as being hidden away behind gates of brass and bars of iron in the land of their exile. Now the days of captivity are drawing to a close, and through the instrumentality of Cyrus, a just and gentle prince, they are to be set free to return to their native land. Cyrus was raised up for a special mission, namely, to subdue the Chaldean oppressor and to let the oppressed go free. So Cyrus is told that the Lord will be with him and give him might. Let him not fear.

The Lord came into the world to redeem men from the power of evil. The prisons cannot be locked up so fast, the doors and bars cannot be so strong but that the work of this redemption will succeed. "I will break in pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron."

Two cities, Jerusalem and Babylon, are connected with this Scripture. Jerusalem in their native land from which the Israelites had been exiled, and Babylon in which they were now held captive. These cities were at either end of a long caravan road, and they represent the life of the spirit and the life of the flesh, the spiritual and the natural. "Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, is mount Zion... the city of the great King... Walk about Zion, and go round about her: tell the towers thereof. Mark ye well her bulwarks, consider her palaces... For this God is our God forever and ever: he will be our guide even unto death." How perfectly this describes the beauty, richness, and security of the spiritual life, the life which sets before itself heavenly ideals and strives to live in accordance with them. The Lord's ever-watchful care will be over them. "As the mountains are round about Jerusalem, so the Lord is round about his people from henceforth even for ever."

But set off against this holy city on the mountain is Babylon, a city of the plain. Babylon is the world - the world with its idolatries, its splendors, its gayeties, its love of place and fortune and power and beauty; the world with its fascinations, but with its selfishness; with its mighty achievements, and also its temptations and snares. We have to live in the world as it is, and yet be kept from its evil. This must be the experience of all of us; so the Lord said, "I pray not that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil."

The Scriptures are of ever-present application. So they apply to the generation of which we are a part and to the conditions under which we live. We

are surrounded with blessings of every kind - material, civil, and intellectual - moving about in a civilization of vast privileges and wonders. We need to be on our guard lest "the cares of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful."

It is this imprisonment and degradation of the higher life that is represented by the children of Israel's being shut in behind gates of brass and bars of iron.

The Bible frequently uses three metals as expressive of different qualities of human life: gold, brass, and iron. Gold stands for that highest quality of human life - love, love for God and man. Hence the golden reed by which the city was to be measured. The streets of the holy city New Jerusalem were of gold, signifying that men should walk together in the ways of love. So, too, the Christian law of love - "As ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them" - is called the "Golden Rule."

Brass represents a quite different quality. Brass looks something like gold, but it is inferior to it. There is a principle which looks a little like this law to do unto others as we would be done by, but which is essentially different. It is the principle of external or apparent good. Will this which I propose be of benefit to me? Will this or that law benefit my trade or occupation? Such considerations are natural. If not pressed too far, they are legitimate. But the mistake is in making self first. It is common to speak of a man who is filled up with self-importance as "full of brass," and we speak also of "brazen impudence." The text teaches us that it is imprisoning to judge constantly of things by this standard of worldly benefit. If one does this, his higher nature will become shut in - shut in behind these great prison gates of brass.

And then there are the bars of iron. When any rule or custom is inflexible and severe, we call it a "cast-iron regulation." To be governed by "cast-iron rules" is to be governed by the law of necessity. This is a hard law. The man who works without interest, without desire or intention to do good, but simply because he must, the man who lives because he must, the man who is just because he does not dare to be otherwise is surrounded by bars of iron. He is cramped and confined by the laws of necessity. And this has its effect. There is no large, happy development. He is controlled by the fear that if he breaks any of these laws, he will suffer the consequences. So the iron bars shut him in. His spirit does not venture out into any of the ways of unselfish love. He does not think of living for the sake of the good that he may do. Everything with him is governed by necessity.

It is a hard way in which to live. It is a wearisome way in which to work.

It makes work drudgery. These iron bars! We should pray that they will not get into the walls of our homes, our occupations, or our religion. They make everything such a drudgery. And there is a nobler, a freer way open to us all. "I will break in pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron." It is an expression of the Divine longing to free those of us who are living in this kind of servitude, who act sometimes from the law of expediency, and sometimes from sheer necessity, doing what we do merely because we feel that we must - an expression of the Lord's desire to have us come forth into a larger and freer life, the life of Christian love with its enthusiasm and courage and patience, and its loving allegiance to Him who said, "Henceforth I call you not servants... but friends."

There is a saying that keeps reappearing throughout the writings of our church: "It is freedom to be led by the Lord." To do evil when we choose to do it may seem to us to be freedom, but it is really slavery, because this kind of freedom is from the love of self and the world, and these are the loves which rule the hells. It is freedom to be led by the Lord, but it is slavery to be led by self-love. The writings put it in these words: "To serve the Lord by doing according to His commandments, and thus by obeying, is not to be a servant but is to be free; for the veriest freedom of man consists in being led by the Lord; because the Lord inspires into the man's will the good from which he is to act; and although it is from the Lord, it is perceived as being from himself, thus from freedom. This freedom is possessed by all those who are in the Lord; and it is conjoined with happiness unspeakable."

In hell all are slaves. This the Lord teaches in the words, "Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin. And the servant abideth not in the house forever: but the Son abideth forever. If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed."

The Lord is always watching over us for our good and makes use of many means in accomplishing His purposes for us. A bereavement may come, and the man who had become hard and selfish grows more sympathetic. Sometimes a great love, a great happiness, or a great responsibility will do it. A new power comes into a man's life and stirs him, arousing thoughts and emotions and abilities which before were locked fast in selfishness.

"If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed." This is the message of the Bible, and this is what the Lord came into the world to do.

So it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound."

Amen