

But the prophet speaks to us further, in the text, as "prisoners of hope." *Prisoners still*—in confinement still, but with the prospect of release and encouragement. Such was the case with Israel's captives. They had long been prisoners—in captivity for 70 years in Babylon, and banished from their own land. But they were "prisoners of hope." "There is hope in thine end," saith the Lord, "that thy children shall come again to their own border." Many of these captives, at the command of the king of Babylon, had already been permitted to burst their chain and to return to Jerusalem, while others were preparing to imitate their example, and rebuild and re-inhabit the waste places. Such, in a spiritual sense, is the state of all to whom life is continued and the day of grace is prolonged. They are prisoners indeed,—but they are prisoners of hope. For, remember, my friends, there are those who are prisoners *without hope*, there are those who are prisoners of despair. The fallen angels, who kept not their first estate, and are reserved in everlasting chains unto darkness for the judgment of the great day,—they, like ourselves, are prisoners; "spirits," as the apostle says, "in prison;" but they are prisoners not of hope, but of despair. No message of mercy comes to them; no assurance of deliverance is vouchsafed to them; no stronghold is pointed out to them, into which they may turn. The impenitent sinner, likewise, who has resisted the calls of mercy, who has passed into the eternal world un sanctified and unsaved, ceases, in like manner, to be a prisoner of hope, and becomes a prisoner of despair. The dark portals of death transfer him from the land of hope to the land of unutterable darkness, where the worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. But while this life endures, we are all prisoners of hope. "The grave," says Hezekiah, "cannot praise thee; death cannot celebrate thee; they that go down to the grave cannot hope for thy truth. The *living*, the *living*, he shall praise thee, as I do this day."

But more especially where the sound of the gospel comes, where the news of the Saviour is proclaimed, all who hear the message are particularly, pre-eminently the prisoners of hope. We are commissioned, my friends, to proclaim to

you a Saviour who is the hope of all the ends of the earth. We have been expressly sent to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them who are bound. Delightful is the announcement, and glad are the tidings, which we bring to every son and daughter of Adam. There is not an individual who walks this earth,—much less is there an individual who is in this house of God, who is not in this sense a prisoner of hope. Be his sin ever so great, be his transgression ever so heinous, yet let him not yield to despair. Long, it may be, he has been the prisoner of sin, the prisoner of Satan, the prisoner of his own corrupt appetites and passions; yet still may hope enter, still may the voice of mercy gain admission. Know, my friends, that Christ is exalted, a prince and a Saviour; know, sinner, for thy comfort, whoever and wherever thou art, that a door of hope is provided, that a fountain for sin is opened, and that Christ is standing at the door and knocking. Yes, the day of grace has not yet passed; the door of hope is not yet closed; you are not yet a prisoner of despair, if only you employ the present moment and the present means of grace which God has promised to bless to every sincere penitent.

But, then, further than this, those who by Divine grace have been brought back to God, who have been delivered from the power of darkness, and translated into the kingdom of God's dear Son, such are, in a still more distinct and peculiar manner, the prisoners of hope. Fettered indeed they still are with a feeble body and corrupt heart. Free they are not, while carrying about with them the body of this death; but they are cheered and comforted and animated by hope. The gospel of a crucified Saviour has brought to them hope;—a ray of hope and light and peace and joy has gleamed in, burst through, as it were, the very gratings of their prison,—that hope which is an anchor to the soul both sure and steadfast. Wherever a penitent sinner has been brought to a sense of sin, has been led to flee to Christ, has obtained an interest in Him, there is a prisoner of hope. Every promise of Scripture brings him hope; every view of the power and love and grace of Christ communicates hope; every provi-