

## A Sermon.

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“Say ye to the righteous, that it shall be well with him, for they shall eat the fruit of their doings. Woe unto the wicked! it shall be ill with him; for the reward of his hands shall be given him” – Isaiah 3:10-11.

The Prophet Isaiah is led by the Spirit in this part of his prophecy to intimate certain desolating judgments which the Lord had determined to send upon the people of Jerusalem and Judah for their sins. All classes of the community, both rulers and subjects, had provoked the eyes of God's glory by their idolatry and wickedness. The Lord therefore threatens to take away from them the very necessities of life, “the whole stay of bread and the whole stay of water,” as well as the human props and pillars of the nation – “the mighty man and the man of war, the judge and the prophet, the prudent and the ancient, the captain of fifty, and the honourable man and the counsellor, and the cunning artificer and the eloquent orator,” and instead of these to give “children to be their princes” and babes to rule over them. The Lord solemnly warns the people against the leaders that were causing them to err; and declares He will enter into judgment “with the ancients and the princes” for their cruelty and oppression. The sins of one generation are not quite the same as those of another, but if we have eyes to see and hearts to understand, we may easily observe that for our sins as a nation at the present day the Most High is visiting us to some extent with the same judgments as He inflicted upon ancient Israel. Our judges, prophets, and prudent counsellors have well nigh disappeared, even the eloquent orator has almost ceased from among us, while our present rulers are children in comparison with the able statesmen of former days.

In this section of his prophecy the great evangelical prophet hardly casts one ray of light or hope across the general gloom of sin and judgment. It would seem as if the whole land were under the influence of apostacy, until he comes to the words which we are about to consider, and then he gives us to understand that the righteous as well as the wicked were still to be found in Jerusalem and Judah.

It is important for us to notice, in view of our present purpose, that Isaiah here divides the people into two great classes only – the righteous and the wicked. Men may be distinguished from one another in many other and subordinate ways – by their social position, by their learning or their ignorance, their riches or their poverty, but there is one leading distinction of infinite importance observed in the Scriptures, in which they are estimated by their relation to God and are marked out as belonging to one or other of these two main classes – the righteous and the wicked. The Old Testament and the New are one on this subject as on all others. The glorious Redeemer Himself, who shall yet judge the world in righteousness, in His description of the great day of judgment, tells us that there will then be before the throne only the two classes mentioned, and that the wicked “shall go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into life eternal.”

It ought to be matter of the deepest concern to each one of us to discover which of these classes we belong to, for our eternity for weal or woe, will depend upon whether we are found among the righteous or the wicked. We shall now in dependence upon the Spirit of God, proceed to consider the words before us where we observe: –

I. A message of encouragement to the children of God.

II. A message of warning to the wicked.

I. In considering, in the first place, the message of encouragement, let me notice: –

1. The description given of those to whom it is sent. They are named “the righteous.” I need hardly say that they do not bear this name *by nature*. In their unregenerate state they are no different from the rest of mankind; they belong to the same fallen race of Adam, of which it is written “There is none righteous, no not one; there is none that doeth good, no not one.” How then, it may be asked, is the change effected? It is by grace. God, in the riches of His free grace, chose a people in Christ from before the foundation of the world, a company which no man can number, unto eternal life, and one of the elements in this life, which is begun here and consummated in eternity, is righteousness. By grace, in and through Jesus Christ, the unjust are made righteous, the sinful are made holy. The people of God are called righteous on, at least, three accounts.

(1) They are called righteous in virtue of righteousness *imputed*. “For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one many shall be made righteous” (Romans 5:19).

The Son of God became the representative of elect sinners in the covenant of grace, and so in the fulness of time assumed human nature, and was made under the law, as a covenant of works, in their room and stead. In this way He obeyed the precept of the law which they had broken, endured its penalty which they had incurred by their sins, and so by His obedience unto death wrought out an everlasting righteousness upon the ground of which, in the day of their personal union to Christ they are pardoned and justified in the sight of God as a righteous lawgiver and judge. The apostle Paul desired to be found in Christ not having his own righteousness, “but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.” The children of God are all in like manner righteous in virtue of the imputation of Christ’s glorious righteousness “received by faith alone.”

(2) They are called righteous in virtue of righteousness *implanted*. All whom the Lord justifies He also regenerates. He makes them new creatures in Christ Jesus, and renews a right spirit within them. They get a righteous nature in regeneration, and partake of the same spirit as Christ, who loves righteousness and hates iniquity. They delight in some true measure “in the law of God after the inward man,” though at the same time they see another law still in their members warring against the law of their mind and bringing them oftentimes into captivity to “the law of sin” in their members. In fact, the very presence of the new principle of life and holiness in their souls stirs up a warfare with the law of sin, a conflict that never ceases until the dissolution of soul and body. As creatures who have got a new and righteous nature, it is the chief desire and effort of their souls to give to God and man their due according to the rules of the infallible word. They desire to have “a conscience void of offence towards God and towards men.”

(3) They are called righteous in virtue of righteousness *done*. They were once the servants of sin; they are now the servants of righteousness. “By their fruits, ye shall know them.” The love of righteousness is no mere fruitless sentiment in their minds; it leads them, in the strength of grace, to endeavour to keep the commandments of the Lord in their daily life. Though delivered from the law as a covenant of works, they are “not without law to God, but are under law to Christ.” The law of God is now issued to them from the hands of the Mediator as their rule of life during their wilderness journey. Through the sin that dwelleth in them they can by no means keep the commands of God perfectly in this present life; they often come short of His glory and are beset with many imperfections; yet the main tenor of their life and conversation is towards the perfect standard of God’s revealed will, and they are moving onwards to the attainment of that complete conformity to it in heart and life which shall be theirs in the moment they pass into glory. Even now God says to them “Be ye holy, for I am holy,” and the Redeemer further says to His disciples “Be ye perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.

Thus we see that God's people are named the righteous on a threefold account. Though they are still sinners in a fallen world, yet they are called righteous on solid grounds, grounds that will stand the light of eternity and will be acknowledged in the day of judgment. Though their righteousness in all its aspects may sometimes be hid from themselves through darkness and unbelief, it is not hid from God; it is perpetually recognised in the court of heaven. Indeed, God's children at their worst are better in every way than unrenewed men at their best. The latter have never in their most devout performances any righteousness that is spiritually acceptable with God, while the former, in their greatest shortcomings, have imputed righteousness upon them and implanted righteousness within them. They have a righteous nature that at all times hates and opposes sin. The citadel of their souls is possessed by the new man, and sin's victory is only a temporary one. I say this, not for the encouragement of the flesh in any, but for the encouragement of grace and the rebuke of the Accuser of the brethren. Sinful imperfections ought to be the source of the deepest sorrow to God's people, and are so, if they are in a healthy state. The cry of the truly exercised and believing soul is – "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord."

2. The second thing I notice under this head is some reasons why the righteous have a message of encouragement sent them by the Lord.

(1) The first reason, I may mention, is their tender fear of God's judgments. The Psalmist says – "My flesh trembleth for fear of thee; and I am afraid of thy judgments" (Psalm 119:120). The prophet was commissioned at this time to proclaim God's chastisements upon a guilty nation, and the poor and needy in Zion might be afraid lest they should be consumed with the rest in the fire of righteous judgment. But they are here encouraged to know that the just Lord will deal justly, that He will not confound the righteous with the wicked, and that whatever may befall others it will certainly be well with them.

(2) A second reason is that God's people are sometimes a discouraged people. "The soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way." The children of God are often afflicted with fears, fears about the past, the present, and the future. Even the apostle Paul himself, who was so full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, says on one occasion "Without were fightings, within were fears." At another time he affirms "I keep under my body and bring it into subjection, lest that, by any means when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway." David and Job were saints that were often much discouraged with temptations and trials. True, the children of God may give way to fears and discouragements that are unwarrantable and unreasonable. But the Lord in general does not handle them severely, but like a mother with her children, tenderly directs and comforts His Jerusalem. It is in this way that he deals with them in the words before us.

(3) The true people of God are often alarmed and troubled when others, such as strong professors of religion, destitute of saving grace, are unconcerned and unmoved. The very tenderness of their consciences in respect of sin is apt to make them the subjects of fear. They may be afraid that their past experience was a delusion; they may fear they will fall one day by some Saul or other and become a reproach to the cause of Christ, or that their religion will turn out at last to be hypocrisy and delusion, and that they will spend their eternity with the lost. Many are the fears that may afflict even the true children of God, but these will all be disappointed. Fears and temptations will not alter their state for a moment. "They shall never perish," and no man or devil can pluck them out of the Father's hands.

3. The third thing to be observed is the word of encouragement itself. "Say ye to the righteous that it shall be well with him."

(1) It shall be well with the righteous *in time*. No matter what judgments may befall men in general, it will be well with the righteous. God's love will continue for ever

unchanged towards them; “the eternal God is their refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms.” He often spares them when He severely afflicts others. And, moreover, even when He mingles bitter cups of sorrow for them to drink, He does so in the purest love to their souls’ good. “Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.” There is not one drop of vindictive wrath in their sorest trials. The apostle Paul says “All things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose,” and the Psalmist, under the influence of living faith in the grace and power of Jehovah, could say “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble, therefore will we not fear though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea” (Psalm 46:1,2).

(2) It shall be well with the righteous *at death*. Death is the last enemy, and his approach is often looked forward to even by God’s people with many anxious fears. But it shall be well with them in that solemn hour when they shall meet him face to face; they shall come off more than conquerors through the grace that is in Christ Jesus. The enemy will be seen to be a conquered and disarmed foe, for Christ hath already won the victory over him and robbed him of his sting. Though he wears a dark and forbidding countenance, he will be found in reality a friend, who will usher their souls into the palace of the King of kings, there to spend a holy and a happy eternity. The Christian is encouraged even now to sing in view of Jordan the song of the apostle recorded for the comfort of all, even the weakest of God’s children, “O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?” Death will be to every living soul the door of everlasting deliverance from all sin and sorrow and the gate of entrance into eternal bliss and glory. When the wicked are leaving their heaven behind them for ever, the righteous are entering upon theirs, to go no more out through endless ages.

(3) It shall be well with the righteous *at judgment*. In that great day, when all must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, those who now bear the marks of the righteous will find themselves on the right hand of the Judge. The books will be opened, and they will be formally and finally acknowledged and acquitted before an assembled universe. Many unjust aspersions cast upon them in time that were never effectually removed from their character and fame will then be taken away for ever by the omniscient and infallible Judge and Redeemer. Should any of them happen not to be acknowledged by Abraham or Israel now or to be wholly cast out as hypocrites, they will then be owned by the great God of heaven as His true children, and welcomed to everlasting mansions. It will also be made clear before men, angels, and devils that all the sins of the righteous have been already fully answered for by the death of Christ, and that their eternal acceptance and admission to heaven take place in a way that leaves no stain upon the holiness of God’s character or the righteousness of His government, but in a way that is infinitely honourable to all His glorious perfections. They will appear “faultless before his presence with exceeding joy.”

(4) It shall be well with them *through eternity*. It is well with them now, seeing they enjoy God’s favour, and experience in some degree His fellowship in this vale of tears; but the present is only the beginning of their blessedness. They are to have an endless eternity of perfect happiness and holiness. “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.” No human mind can comprehend or tongue describe the glories of that matchless bliss which the just shall enjoy through countless ages in fellowship with a Triune God and holy angels. Sin and sorrow will have forever passed away, “And there shall be no night there and they need no candle neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light, and they shall reign for ever and ever” (Revelation 22:5).

4. Let us notice in connection with this message the special grounds on which it is stated that it shall be well with the righteous. “For they shall eat the fruit of their doings.”

(1) These may appear to some of us strange grounds for their future welfare – “their doings.” While standing in awe of God’s infallible word, we may be ready to say within ourselves “Is it not Christ’s doings, and not their own, that are the sole basis of the happiness of the righteous whether present or future?” Well, the answer seems to be that, while Christ’s finished work is the great meritorious foundation of all His people’s good, yet God has also, in infinite wisdom, established a connection between His people’s doings and their own welfare. This connection in nowise dishonours the grace of God; it only unfolds still further its excellency, while at the same time it is fitted to reflect honour on His holiness. The connection is not one of meritorious desert – the children of God cannot and do not buy heaven by their obedience – it is purchased already by the precious blood of Christ, and their ability to obey God is part of that heaven already begun on earth. But the connection is one of order and fitness. God has joined together not only righteousness imputed and the welfare of His children, but also righteousness implanted and righteousness done. The servants of righteousness shall get their reward according to the divine order, “Ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance, for ye serve the Lord Christ.” Moses had respect to “the recompense of the reward.” The Lord Jesus in His description of the day of judgment lays great emphasis upon the doings of “the sheep” in their kindness to Him and to His little ones, as contrasted with the doings of the wicked in their neglect and contempt of Him and His. “Faith without works is dead,” and living faith is proved by its works.

While it is true that many go wrong on this point who have no right understanding of the things of God, and make external works the entire basis of their salvation, let not others go wrong on the other hand by undervaluing what God Himself puts such infinite value upon. Let us be assured of this, that we will be measured at the last day, not by any human measurements whatsoever, but by God’s own holy standard, and that that Christianity, however orthodox its outward form may be, which does not manifest its genuineness by gracious actions to the glory of God will then be found wanting. “For I say unto you, Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees ye shall in no case enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20).

(2) The doings which the prophet speaks of will embrace all those deeds which the righteous perform in the strength of grace and in obedience to the divine will. Their prayers and spiritual exercises, both private and public, will come under this description. They shall eat the fruit of these both in time and eternity – partially here, but more fully hereafter. Their efforts to maintain God’s truth and righteousness, and to extend His Kingdom in a backsliding generation will get a blessed reward. “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.” It has been observed that those who have been more faithful than others to Christ in their day often obtain an easier death-bed and a more abundant entrance into the everlasting kingdom of their Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Their acts of love to Christ Himself and His brethren will also be conspicuously acknowledged, as we have already pointed out, on the great day. The widow’s mite cast into the treasury for His sake and the cup of cold water given to one of His little ones “in the name of a disciple” shall in nowise lose their reward.

We may further remark that it would appear from various parts of Scripture that those who live most to the glory of God here shall shine most brightly to His glory in eternity. All His people shall enter the same heaven through the merits of the finished work of Christ, but we are also told by the mouth of the prophet Daniel that “they that turn many to righteousness” shall shine “as the stars for ever and ever” (Daniel 12:3). Just then, as in the earthly firmament, one star differeth from another star in glory, so likewise shall it be in the heavenly firmament. Let no one imagine, however, that this will mar the happiness of the lowliest of the redeemed in the heavenly Jerusalem, for there shall be no sin and no jealousy there. All will be perfect even as their Father in heaven is perfect, and will be occupied in

casting their crowns at the feet of Him who sitteth upon the throne, and shall reign for ever and ever.

(3) Finally, it may be seen that the doctrine of rewards here taught in nowise militates against the doctrine of salvation by grace. It is grace that devised redemption in a past eternity, grace that purchased it in the fulness of the time, grace that applies it in a day of special power to the souls of God's people, grace that carries on the good work begun in regeneration, and grace that will perfect it in the day of Jesus Christ. Every living desire exercised by the righteous soul, every act of obedience done by him to the revealed will of God, is the result of grace. The "doings" of the righteous that are acceptable to God are all of grace. And it is grace, we may add, that bestows the heavenly reward of present obedience. So that the grace of a Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, is stamped upon every step of the work of redemption from first to last. Grace reigns "through righteousness, unto eternal life, by Jesus Christ our Lord."

5. The last thing to be observed is that it is the duty and privilege of the messengers of the Gospel to say to the children of God amid all their tribulations "It shall be well with you," and to commend every good word and work among them. The apostle Paul does not fail to commend the Church of the Thessalonians for their work of faith and labour of love and patience of hope under any impression that it would encourage a self-righteous disposition in them, while at the same time he shows in this as in all his other epistles that he ascribes the glory of every good thing to "the Lord Jesus Christ himself and God even our Father which hath loved us and hath given us everlasting consolation and good hope through grace." The righteous are often slow to speak comfort to themselves, and are apt to be apprehensive of coming judgment, on account of their sins, and so it is the duty of those who speak in the name of Christ, while warning them against all wrong courses, to deliver the message of encouragement the Lord designs them to get; and He is able to apply it with power and efficacy to their souls. Discouragement no less than presumption has an injurious effect upon the spiritual condition of the soul. "Say ye to the righteous, that it shall be well with him; for they shall eat the fruit of their doings."

II. We now proceed to notice the solemn message of warning in the text, and in doing so let us observe –

1. The persons to whom this message is sent. They are called "the wicked." When the word "wicked" is applied to a person or persons, apart from an immediate contrast with "the righteous," it is generally understood as referring to such as are openly or exceptionally depraved, but when it is used in connection with this contrast, brought out in the words before us, it is commonly designed to describe all sinners in their natural estate, whether moral or immoral in their lives. In respect of relation to God, there is no middle class in the human race. All must be ranged under one or other of the two great classes – the righteous or the wicked. There are no doubt varying degrees of wickedness among natural men, but all such at their best are described in God's Word as "dead in trespasses and sins." The apostle Paul himself, when unconverted, was one of the fairest samples of morality that could be found, yet he bears testimony, by the Spirit, to the fact that in time past he was among those who were dead in trespasses and sins, and children of wrath (Ephesians 2:1-3). Let me notice that the wicked are so called on, at least, three accounts.

(1) They are called wicked because they are destitute of righteousness. The Scripture, as already quoted, testifies that "there is none righteous, no, not one." God made man upright at the beginning, but in the person of his representative, the first Adam, he broke the law, as a covenant of works, and came under its curse. "By the offence of one, judgment came upon all men to condemnation." All mankind lost their original righteousness, and incurred the sentence of death. Being destitute of the Spirit and image of God, they have now no will or ability to meet the just requirements of His holy law, either in its precept or penalty. This is

sufficient to deserve the name wicked. For when men are so depraved that they neither will nor can give to God the obedience, satisfaction, and glory justly due unto His name, they are truly wicked, whether they believe it themselves or not. Not to love and serve our blessed Creator, King, and infinitely bountiful Benefactor, is as surely a crime as to positively hate and disobey Him. Sad to say, both things are too true of our fallen race. Every unrenewed sinner is filled with unrighteousness.

(2) They are called wicked because of the entire wickedness of their nature. "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked; who can know it?" This is the testimony of the divinely-inspired prophet Jeremiah in the Old Testament, and with it agrees the testimony of the equally inspired apostle Paul in the New. He says, "The carnal mind is enmity against God and is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be." (Romans 8:7). God's word in general clearly shows that the natural man is dark in his understanding, defiled in his conscience, perverted in his will, and depraved in his affections. He is destitute of all that is spiritually good, and is completely opposed to God and holiness. The sinner may be sublimely unconscious of all this, or he may deliberately disbelieve it, but our unconsciousness or unbelief will not alter the truth in the least. If we were wise for ourselves and for eternity we would seek to make haste to receive the whole testimony of God about our fallen and lost estate as sinners, for it is by the acceptance of the truth, through the Spirit, concerning both sin and salvation that we alone can be saved.

(3) They are called wicked because of the general wickedness of their works. The Lord Jesus Christ says, "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness; all these evil things come from within and defile the man." The wicked are known by their fruits; the polluted fountain bubbles forth impure water; the corrupt tree brings forth evil fruit.

One outstanding form of iniquity in Isaiah's time, and during the Old Testament dispensation, was *idolatry*. The people were prone to go after the gods of their heathen neighbours or to worship the true God in ways He had not appointed. Idolatry was a very grievous sin in Israel. God had proved His absolute being, universal government and almighty power, as well as His infinite goodness, by His wonderful works towards the chosen people, and it was the most malignant form of unbelief as well as the basest ingratitude to give any place whatsoever to the false gods of the heathen or to depart in any particular from the true worship of Jehovah. Does anyone imagine that the sin of idolatry has ceased to exist in these latter days? If anyone does he or she is greatly mistaken. The same sin continues under new forms. It is not only to be found now in the Church of Rome with all its ceremonies and mummeries, but wherever a wrong conception of God or His Son Jesus Christ is held forth and accepted. There are false gods and false Christs to-day not a few. And many people who may be otherwise moral and respectable in their lives are showing the wickedness of their hearts in practice by the idolatry of which they are guilty. Idolatry is certainly not confined to the sphere of religious worship. Every natural man is an idolater in one way or another. He gives to self, or friends, the world or lust, the place that belongs to God and Christ; he worships and serves "the creature more than the Creator," and so is guilty of a subtle but ruinous form of idolatry.

A *second* branch of evil doing is *transgression of the law*. There are only a few, a very few, of the human race that may be strictly put in the same category with the Apostle Paul, who, in his natural estate, was as "touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless." Even those persons keep the law, in the letter and not in the spirit. Their obedience is rotten at the heart, and is counted naught in the court of heaven, so far as spiritual acceptance is concerned. No man can give a true and holy obedience to God's law without regeneration. Many, on the other hand, are guilty of open breaches of the

commandments of God. They show their disobedience by such crimes as murder, drunkenness, uncleanness, blasphemy, falsehood, or theft. Sabbath desecration is also a crime, though it has come to be condoned and white-washed at the present day. The Sabbath command stands in the centre of the moral law; Christ came not to destroy the law but to fulfil it; it is of perpetual obligation. Believers are delivered from the law, as a covenant of works, but are still under the law, which embraces the whole preceptive will of God, as a rule of life; they are “not without law to God but are under law to Christ;” and so those who profess to be Christians and at the same time treat lightly the fourth or any other commandment of the law entirely call in question their Christianity. The Word clearly declares that the carnal mind, which is enmity against God, cannot be subject to His law, and there is abundant proof of its wickedness in the lives and practices of men.

A *third* and very decided way in which sinners show their wickedness is in their *disobedience to the gospel*. The prophet Isaiah in his own time was commissioned to say to a sinful people, “Come now and let us reason together saith the Lord; though your sins be as scarlet they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson they shall be as wool” (Isaiah 1:18). By his mouth the Lord exhorted sinners to turn from their evil ways and to come to Him for pardon and cleansing. In word and sacrifice Christ as the true Messiah and Saviour of sinners was constantly set before them. The gospel was preached unto them as well as unto us, though “the word preached did not profit” many of them, “not being mixed with faith in them that heard it.” And what is to be said to sinners in New Testament times? Christ came in the fulness of time and finished the glorious work of redemption by His obedience and death, and His servants are now commissioned to go forth to all the world and, “preach the gospel to every creature.” They are directed to say, “Repent ye and believe the gospel.” Disobedience to the gospel call is a very heinous form of iniquity. It implies contempt for the glory of God as surpassingly revealed in the face of Jesus Christ, and for the spiritual and eternal welfare of the precious immortal soul. “How,” exclaims the apostle, “shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation?” Unbelief is the crowning condemning sin. Thus it is written “the fearful and unbelieving” will be cast into the lake of fire.

2. The second point to which I desire to call attention in connection with this message is some reasons why the wicked need to be explicitly warned.

(1) The first, I may state, is their self-security. Though under God’s holy displeasure and righteous curse, they are at ease. As contrasted with the people of God, who are sometimes too ready to be alarmed, they are greatly disposed to speak peace to themselves when there is no peace. Though God lifts up His hand in threatening, they refuse to see it, and though He proclaims coming judgment by the mouth of His servants they refuse to believe it. If they find success in business, or enjoy social comforts, they imagine God is well pleased with them, not realising that temporal prosperity is often given with a curse and not with a blessing. The man in the parable who had goods laid up for many years is an illustration of this. He thought that all was well with him, and that he would have a good time of it in worldly pleasure, but at that very moment his soul was required of him, and he was called to a sad account. God warns self-secure sinners in our text that it shall be sooner or later ill with them.

(2) A second reason why they require to be warned is their presumption. Even when they hear the words of God’s curse they are ready to bless themselves in their hearts, saying “I shall have peace though I walk in the imagination of mine heart, to add drunkenness to thirst.” Many are disposed to presume upon the mercy of God. They choose to forget that God is righteous as certainly as He is merciful, and they concentrate their thoughts upon the fact of His longsuffering and compassion towards sinners. They reflect, perhaps, that He has pardoned great sinners at the point of death, and so they comfortably conclude that He will deal so with them. They also forget, in connection with this, that God only shows His saving

mercy to those who repent and believe the gospel, and that all who continue to the end impenitent and unbelieving will be for ever under the just wrath and curse of God. It is very few indeed that get repentance and pardon at the last moment. There is only one example given in Scripture – the thief on the Cross – teaching us that while none may entirely despair of mercy on this side of time, yet none may presume. To make the mercy of God an occasion of continuing in sin or going deeper into it is to turn His grace into lasciviousness. Such presumptuous sinners, if ever they are to be roused out of the sleep of death, must be loudly and particularly warned of their guilt and danger. And it shows the great kindness of God that He commands them thus to be spoken to by His messengers. “Awake thou that sleepest and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light” (Ephesians 5:14).

3. The third thing to be observed is the message of warning itself, “Woe unto the wicked! it shall be ill with him.”

(1) It appears from this that there is a *woe* or curse pursuing the wicked. This is not the woe of men, but of God. Men may pronounce woes and curses upon their fellow creatures for little or no reason whatsoever, but these will have no more value or effect than an empty blast of wind. We have no reason to fear anything men may say unless the authority and truth of God are behind it, though they should use the language of Scripture in abundance. Christ says “Fear not them that kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul; but rather fear him which is able to destroy both body and soul in hell” (Matthew 10:28). In the text we have God’s commission to His servants to proclaim, “Woe unto the wicked.” There is nothing more terrible in all the universe than the curse of God, which will yet overtake impenitent sinners in all its fulness. Even now, it is at their heels, and distresses them with the miseries of this life. They are here solemnly warned that the woe is their just and final portion if they continue in their sins. “And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?”

(2) Notice, further, it shall be ill with the wicked *in time*. “The way of transgressors is hard.” They do not escape pain and suffering in this world. It is very often to be observed that those who do not fear God, though they should be high in rank and rich in possessions, do not escape very severe afflictions in the present life. And even when they get off for a time, and all things seem prosperous with them, suddenly the hand of sorrow is laid on them. The impenitent have no reason to look for anything but ill even in time, and it is only of God’s infinite longsuffering that they experience so much freedom from trouble as they do. But they are here solemnly warned that if things are comfortable at present they will not be so always. And though, notwithstanding this warning, their worldly comforts should seem to be increasing, they ought to consider that it is only ill with them as long as these do not lead them to God and repentance. In any case, they do not know the day or the hour when “many sorrows” shall justly overtake them (Psalm 32:10).

(3) It shall be ill with them *at death*. At death the people of God pass into the kingdom of bliss, but the wicked fall into the abode of misery. Death seizes on them, and they “go down quick into hell” (Psalm 55:15). It is written of the rich man, who neglected Lazarus that, when he died, “in hell he lifted up his eyes, being in torments.” This is the portion of the wicked, whether rich or poor, at death. Sometimes we find that poor people who have much trouble in this present life seem to imagine that their present suffering will entitle them to heaven at last. But this is a great mistake. Poverty, of itself, will not prepare a man for heaven, nor will riches, of themselves, keep him out of it. Poverty without Christ shall go to hell, while riches with Christ will go to heaven. The matter lies deeper than outward circumstances, though these have peculiar dangers attached to them. It shall be inexpressibly ill with the unconverted sinner, whoever he be, at death. In the times in which we live almost everyone is spoken of as going to heaven at death, whatever their previous character may have been. And this fearful delusion is fostered by professed ministers of the gospel almost

universally. But though all should combine to send an unregenerate sinner to heaven that will not change the absolute certainty – let us say it with trembling – of his eternal misery. “Though hand join in hand, the wicked shall not be unpunished” (Proverbs 11:21).

(4) It shall be ill with them *at judgment*. As already indicated in connection with the righteous, “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that everyone may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad” (2 Corinthians 5:10). Sinners may escape punishment from men, but they cannot escape the righteous judgment of God. His hand will find them out at last, and they must all appear before Him to answer for their iniquities. Who can describe the awful solemnity of that day? Christ shall then come in glory with all His holy angels around Him, and shall sit on the throne of His glory. The despised and crucified Jesus of Nazareth, who was covered with the veil of humiliation in this world, will then appear in all His divine majesty to judge the world in righteousness. “The dead small and great” shall stand before Him, and while He sets the righteous on His right hand, He puts the wicked on His left. At that solemn and tremendous tribunal all who died in their sins, whatever their profession may have been in this world – some of them may have been reckoned true, yea, eminent Christians – shall hear the dread and final sentence that no power of men or devils can ever cancel, “Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.” No excuses or palliations of iniquity will then avail. The judge will give justice to each one. Kings and great men who despised the day of mercy will then have their portion with the lowest of mankind “in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone, which is the second death” (Revelation 21:8).

(5) It shall be ill with them *through eternity*. The punishment of the wicked is everlasting. Not a few attempt to deny this truth at the present day, but they are engaged in a vain and futile task. There are no stronger words in the Greek language to set forth the never-ending character of future punishment than those so used in the New Testament. Besides, such persons are landed in a dilemma out of which they cannot extricate themselves. For example, in the passage where the Redeemer Himself personally speaks, and where He declares that the wicked “shall go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into life eternal,” it is the same word that is used in connection with life as in connection with punishment. Thus such unbelievers must, on their own reasoning, limit the duration of the future happiness of the righteous as well as that of the future misery of the wicked. All such attempts to deny the eternity of future punishment we regard as due to an inadequate knowledge of the holiness of God and the sinfulness of sin, as well as a fleshly pity for the hell-deserving. Souls that have been deeply convinced of sin in their consciences have felt that hell was the only place good enough for them, and to which they deserved to go; and they were no worse than others in their lives. There is a false love as well as a true for the souls of men, and that love which overlooks the righteousness of God and the just desert of iniquity is of the devil and not of Christ. No one declared with greater clearness and solemnity the never-ending punishment of the lost than did He who was eternal love incarnate. O you, my friends, who are still without Christ, and still in your sins, turn a deaf ear to the ensnaring voice of the devil who endeavours to deceive you with false hopes for the future, and hear the voice of God saying, “Turn ye, turn ye, why will ye die!” Be assured in the very depths of your souls that there is an awful day coming, to which the Word of God bears unerring testimony, a day “when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire to take vengeance on them that know not God and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and the glory of His power; when He shall come to be glorified in His saints and admired in all them that believe” (2 Thessalonians 1:7-10).

4. The fourth point we observe in the text is the grounds on which it is declared it shall be ill with the wicked. “For the reward of his hands shall be given him.”

(1) Notice that it is sin, and not God, that is the immediate cause of a sinner's punishment. God is the just judge who must condemn transgressors, but it is our own sin that is the meritorious basis of the punishment. Sin deserves wages, and "the wages of sin is death." Many in our time; in their infidelity and blasphemy, misrepresent this doctrine as that of "a cruel God tormenting His creatures," forgetting that God is not angry with us as creatures, but as sinners. The right way of putting the matter is "a just God punishing sinners." Does not the Lord Himself with infinite tenderness and authority give this message to His servants to declare: "Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways, for why will ye die. O house of Israel?" (Ezekiel 33:11).

(2) Observe that every man will be punished according to the guilt of his deeds. The Lord Jesus says "And behold I come quickly, and My reward is with Me to give every man according as his works shall be" (Revelation 22:12). He will give justice to each one. The duration of the punishment is everlasting, but the severity of it is not equal in every case. The heathen who never heard the gospel will not be punished with the same rigour as gospel hearers in Christian countries. The greater the privileges the greater the guilt if neglected and despised. Christ said that it would be more tolerable in the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon, who had not seen His mighty works, than for Bethsaida and Chorazin who had seen them (Matthew 11:22). It is God alone who can apportion the exact guilt of every sinner that shall appear before His bar, and we may rest absolutely satisfied that no one will get greater or less punishment than he deserves. The guilt of rejecting the gospel and of a hypocritical profession will both appear terrible in that day. Christ will say unto many who made a high profession of Christianity in time, "Depart from me, I never knew you, ye workers of iniquity."

(3) Sinners will be compelled to acknowledge at last that they are to suffer the reward of their own transgressions, "The wicked is snared in the work of his own hands" (Psalm 9:16). Some are very much disposed to put on the devil or their fellowmen the guilt that belongs to themselves. Adam, at the beginning, fell into the snare of putting the blame of his sin, not only on his wife, but on the Lord Himself – "the woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat" – and his descendants have still the same spirit. But at the last day every false refuge will be swept away, and sinners will find that the burden of their eternal condemnation falls on their own shoulders. They heard the threatenings of God's holy law; they listened to the gracious invitations of the gospel; Christ, as the sinner's true and only refuge, was brought to their very door in the word of salvation; but they disregarded all their privileges. They refused to repent and believe the gospel; and now their condemnation is just. And, moreover, you, my friends, who are at this moment neglecting salvation, will find that your present total inability to repent or believe of yourselves will be no valid excuse in that day. For you will see your inability to have been your sin, and your sin, your guilt. O, sinner, "thou hast destroyed thyself."

5. Our fifth and last point from this branch of the text is that it is the duty of preachers of the Gospel to warn the wicked concerning sin and its punishment. They are to encourage the righteous and warn the unrighteous. Sometimes preachers omit the latter duty for fear of incurring the displeasure of their hearers. The fear of man only brings a snare. It is the duty of the servant of Christ to deliver His message, whether men will hear or forbear. Better to retain the favour of a holy and gracious God than that of sinful dying men. Again, preachers are to be helped to perform this weighty task by the consideration that it is often a message of mercy in disguise. The Lord may sometimes send a word of warning in judicial judgment, but He often has a gracious purpose in it; He has the purpose of awakening some soul or other out of the deep sleep of spiritual death and unconcern. Therefore, let the preacher, with all affection and solemnity, lift up his voice in faithful declaration of God's truth concerning the

end of the unconverted. The ambassadors of Christ must warn the people of the sword of divine vengeance that is coming, otherwise they will not be innocent of their blood. It is their duty and privilege to cry "Flee from the wrath which is to come." And the question may be put to hearers, who resent the voice of warning, by those who speak the Word in all love to their souls' good, "Am I therefore become your enemy, because I tell you the truth?" Surely they are indeed the enemies of precious never-dying souls, who never mention that there is such a place as hell from the pulpit. Many such preachers there are at the present day who, self-secure themselves, refuse to warn their hearers of the awful danger of being lost for ever. Such ministers and people will have a dreadful meeting in eternity. We, who speak in the name of Christ, are commanded to say, "Woe unto the wicked, it shall be ill with him; for the reward of his hands shall be given him."

### *APPLICATION*

(1) A word to the righteous. Sometimes the children of God cannot recognise themselves under this name. They are afraid when they examine themselves that they are wholly unrighteous and corrupt, no good thing in them or about them. Well, it is right to have a humble estimate of ourselves, yet if there is grace in the soul, the creature will not willingly give up all hope, yea, is at his lowest secretly cherishing a hope that will not be allowed to perish. A great man once said that there are two classes of people in the world – the righteous who believe themselves to be sinners and the sinners who believe themselves to be righteous. If you are truly among the righteous, one mark of you is that you are deeply sensible you are a sinner by nature and practice, yea, that you cannot do one thing that is spiritually good without divine grace. Another mark is that you base your hope for eternity upon the everlasting righteousness of Christ. It is His merits and not your own that afford you the hope of being able to stand with acceptance before the bar of a holy God. And a third mark is that it is the honest desire of your heart and effort of your life to do, in the strength of grace, what the Lord requires of you – His revealed will for duty. Here, no doubt, you feel you come far short of the glory of God; but, nevertheless, though you see yourself such a vain creature, ready to get giddy over any little thing you do in the name of Christ, yet cast not all away as counterfeit, but seek to give the praise to Him who is the author of all good. If you have the true marks of the righteous upon you it shall be well with you in time and eternity in spite of sin, Satan, the world, and unbelief.

(2) But what shall I say to you who are among the wicked? You know, or ought to know, in your own conscience that things are not right with you before God. Your best doings are but filthy rags in His sight. Time is short, death is near, and an endless eternity is fast approaching. If you die as you are you must inevitably be lost. You are not fit for heaven. Many want to go to heaven who know not what they want. Heaven would be worse than hell to an unconverted sinner. The heaven of the natural man is a happy place without holiness, but the heaven Christ has prepared for His redeemed is both a holy and a happy abode. There is nothing the unbeliever hates so much as holiness. O then, be warned in time of the awful eternity that awaits you if you die in your sins, and seek God now with all diligence if haply for Christ's sake, He may wash you from your sins, make you a new creature in Christ, and prepare you for the enjoyment of an eternal inheritance beyond the grave. Unless you now repent of your sins and believe the Gospel, your pleasant lusts will make eternity endlessly bitter for you. "Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon."

May the Lord bless to us His own Word!

[January and February 1904]

## A SERMON

By DR. JOHN LOVE.

Dated Hoxton, December 7, 1789.

“I am sought of them that asked not for me: I am found of them that sought me not: I said,  
Behold me, behold me, unto a nation that was not called by my name” – Isaiah 65:1.

The words principally in my view, are these in the latter part of the verse, “I said, Behold me, behold me, unto a nation that was not called by my name.”

The distressed circumstances of the Jewish church, previously to the Messiah's coming, are strongly marked in those prayers, which the prophet in the two foregoing chapters lays up in store for their use. He was far from flattering his countrymen with prospects of temporal prosperity, but warns them that their sins would be sharply chastised and their faith in God's promises severely tried before they should see the expected Redeemer. It is God's general plan, to cast down and purify before He comforts and exalts.

Besides the fervent expostulations which the prophet puts in the mouths of the afflicted Jews, while they should hang in suspense between the desolations of the typical temple and the rearing up of that eternal fabric of which Jesus Christ is the foundation; besides these expostulations (with which the former chapter concludes) he bears up and animates their faith by holding forth to them the prospect of the future glorious enlargement of the church by the admission of the Heathen nations into it, which should attend the Mediator's appearing and happy reign. For this purpose, Jehovah Himself is introduced as expressing His triumphant joy in this great event. This the apostle Paul points out as a very bold stroke on the part of the prophet, who herein spake directly in opposition to the selfish spirit and malignant prejudices of his countrymen. They, prompted by devilish pride and malice, then wished, as they do to this day, to monopolise the blessings of God's favour and to exalt themselves at the expense of the damnation of all mankind. "But," says the apostle, "Esaiah is very bold, and saith, I was found of them that sought me not: I was made manifest unto them that asked not after me. But to Israel he saith, All day long I have stretched forth my hands unto a disobedient and gainsaying people."

From this application of the words by an inspired man it appears that we sinners of the Gentiles are specially concerned in this sublime declaration of infinite grace. Our conversion, if indeed we are savingly converted, forms a part of that extensive work of mercy which God had in view when, by the mouth of Isaiah, He pronounced these words. If any of us are afraid that they still remain in the pit of an unconverted state, the cords of salvation are in this passage let down to them, that, taking hold thereof, they may, through the blood of the covenant, come up out of that pit in "which there is no water."

I have fixed on the latter part of the verse as suited to furnish proper counsels and encouragements to those who desire, agreeably to the commandment of Christ, to sit at His holy table. We may consider these words as now in the mouth of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is "Jehovah our Righteousness," the fountain of our salvation, the object, the author, and finisher of our faith. We may listen with faith, wonder, and gratitude to Him as now addressing us in such strains as these; – "Behold me, behold me:" yea, if we are already the subjects of His grace we may hear Him triumphing over it as an event already past – a triumph in which, surely, it becomes us to hold communion with Him. "I said, Behold me, behold me, unto a nation that was not called by my name."

The full illustration of these words, I apprehend, requires that we should do the three following things: –

*First* – Consider the nature of that spiritual exercise which this Divine call and exhortation points forth: "I said, Behold me."

*Second* – Explain what is signified by the pressing, pathetic manner in which the call is issued out, "I said, Behold me, behold me."

*Third* – Show the beauty and force of that which is mentioned as an aggrandizing circumstance of the call; it is addressed to those who were not called by God's name.

## I.

Let us, my brethren, consider the nature of that spiritual exercise which this Divine call and exhortation points forth; "I said, Behold me."

It is because of our estrangement from the spiritual world that objects and duties, which in their own nature are very clear and plain, seem to us intricate and unintelligible. Language must be employed therefore for illustrating them, taken from sensible objects and the familiar actions of animal life. The gracious exercise of the soul towards God, as manifested by His word, is, for this reason, here and in other places, expressed by the action of one of the bodily senses. We know what it is to fix our eyes steadily on any extraordinary or pleasing object which commands our attention and draws us off from regarding other surrounding objects. Like to this is that spiritual exercise of the soul in contemplating Jehovah, to which mankind are in the text solemnly invited. It contains in it the following things: –

1. That the understanding opens and closely applies itself to take in just, realising, and enlightened views of God, agreeably to Divine revelation. The exhortation is sometimes expressed in direct reference to this, as Psalm 100:3 – "Know ye that the Lord he is God." Job 22:21 – "Acquaint now thyself with him, and be at peace." The understanding is the leading faculty of the soul, as the eye directs the motion of the body. The other faculties cannot duly move towards God until He is presented to the view of the soul in a clear and affecting light. Conversion is therefore in Scripture expressed by "our being called out of darkness, into God's marvellous light." And though in a certain sense it may be justly said that the soul is passive in receiving this illumination, yet there is room for the soul's activity in searching for this light, in admitting, cherishing, and improving it, both before conversion, in the time of it, and afterwards. Hence men are, in general, commanded to seek the Lord. And the prophet Hosea introduces the Church, as speaking thus: – "Then shall we know, if we follow on to know the Lord." And in the verse where the text lies, the seeking and the finding the Lord are joined together.

These views of God which are to be sought for and entertained are of a large extent. What is the sum and centre of them may be learned from the following passages: Jeremiah 9:24 – "Let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the Lord which exercise loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth." John 17:3 – "This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent." 1 Corinthians 2:2 – "I determined to know nothing among you, save Jesus Christ and him crucified." Agreeably to the tenour of these and similar expressions, we may observe that this knowledge hath respect to the essential perfections of the Infinite Godhead; the relative characters of God, as the Creator, Lord, Lawgiver, and Judge of all; the distinction of Persons in the Godhead; and the distinct offices sustained by the three Divine Persons in accomplishing the salvation of lost men. But though this knowledge takes so wide a range and reaches to every revealed truth concerning God in its proper place and order, yet it peculiarly fixes itself on the justice and mercy of God as displaying their mingled glories in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Such, my brethren, is the extent and subject of this sacred knowledge which the text calls us to pursue after. But there are two things further respecting this knowledge of God which must be attended to with peculiar care, otherwise our knowledge will only serve the purpose of a dark lantern to light us down into the very depths of hell. What are these things so very important? They are these two. The kind or quality of our knowledge and its strength or influence. I mention them distinctly, though they are inseparable from each other, and go always together. It is not merely knowledge, but knowledge of a particular kind, that will save us. It must be not only a strong persuasion or conviction of the truth concerning God, but it must be a spiritual insight into the glory of the truth. In other words, he who savingly beholds or contemplates God has a perception of something in God which no human language can fully express – something which makes the whole nature and perfections of

God appear infinitely excellent. He sees a holy beauty, an amiable sweetness, a boundless glory, universally, as it were, diffused over the perfections and nature of Jehovah, but especially shining forth from the cross of Jesus Christ. And this kind of knowledge has a proper strength and influence. For it so fills the soul as to take the command of all its active powers and to set them effectually in motion towards God. This is that teaching which draws the soul to God through the Mediator. When such knowledge of God is attained by us we have such expressions as the following fulfilled in our experience: – “He endured as seeing Him who is invisible.” “God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God, in the face of Jesus Christ.” Such knowledge will not be asleep in the soul, but will rouse every principle of action into proper exertion. I have nothing farther to do on this part of the subject but briefly to point out the effect and influence of this genuine and saving light.

2. To behold God in the sense of the text is to fix the whole confidence of the soul upon Him so as thoroughly to renounce and forsake every other confidence. “They, that know thy name,” says David, “will put their trust in thee.” As soon as God shines upon the soul in His true splendour the glory of all idols is eclipsed and extinguished. The concerns of the soul and of eternity appear too vast to be rested safely any where else. A happy proportion is perceived between the boundless perfections of God displayed in Christ on the one hand and the vast capacities, wants, and miseries of the fallen creature on the other. There then appears no room for a choice between God and idols. One Infinite good is sufficient to swallow up the whole soul and to sink into contempt millions of imaginary gods.

The soul, therefore, in drawing near to this glorious object of trust, brings with it many idols, but it brings them to be sacrificed, to be disclaimed, and trampled under foot. The soul loathes its former idols, and itself for its vain dependence on them. This renunciation of other confidences stands connected with sincere trust in God in the following words: Isaiah 17:7,8 – “At that day shall a man look to his Maker, and his eyes shall have respect to the Holy One of Israel: And he shall not look to the altars, the work of his hands, neither shall respect that which his fingers have made.” Isaiah 30:22 – “Ye shall defile also the covering of thy graven images of silver, and the ornament of thy molten images of gold; thou shalt cast them away as a menstruous cloth; thou shalt say unto it, Get thee hence.” Then it appears to the soul an intolerable insult to reserve any idol to share with God the confidence of the heart. The soul echoes Amen to that curse: Jeremiah 17:5 – “Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm, whose heart departeth from the Lord.” – But the kind of false confidence which sticks closest and is renounced with the greatest difficulty is that which rests on an imaginary righteousness of our own, which the heart secretly wishes at least, as it were, to establish. I consider the expressions of the text and of other similar passages as being in this view peculiarly emphatical. For when salvation is held forth to be obtained by looking to God, our desperate situation and the entire exclusion of the works of the law, in the sense of the covenant of works, are intimated in the strongest manner. It is not said, “Do this and live.” But the way of salvation is, in such expressions, thus stated, “Despair of help by your own efforts: Look away from every thing in yourselves, excepting your guilt and vileness. Stand still like men desperate in yourselves, and cast a greedy look to me, the only Deliverer, and ye shall be saved: it shall be counted to you for righteousness.” “To him,” says the apostle, “who worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness” (Romans 4:5).

When the soul is disentangled from self and other idols, and sees the God of glory before it in the fulness of His perfection and love, how unlimited, how steadfast, how joyful is its confidence in Him! “Behold,” says the church (Isaiah 12:2), “God is my salvation: I will trust and not be afraid; for the Lord Jehovah is my strength and my song, he also is become my salvation.” The soul being thus settled on the everlasting Rock, there follows: –

3. In this beholding of God, a glorious train of holy and delightful emotions of the soul. "Faith worketh by love;" the spices flow forth; God's love, loveliness, and manifold glory draw out the supreme esteem, desire, and longing of the soul. Then, it is melted down in sweet complacency, delighting itself in the Almighty, and drinking in ineffable pleasure from His smiles and embraces. Then the fire of divine zeal is kindled, and burns partly with the fuel of sacred gratitude and partly with disinterested ardour, forgetting self and all its interests, in comparison of God Himself, and His glory, yet rejoicing inexpressibly in His love. Then to imitate God, to obey Him, to suffer for Him, to bear His chastisements, to love His creatures and children, to spread abroad the knowledge of His excellency, to hasten to His immediate presence: these, and such like, are the natural, the unforced consequences.

Thus you see, my brethren, how spiritual knowledge, faith, and love, make up that beholding of Jehovah, which the text requires. I proposed,

## II.

To explain what is signified by the pressing, pathetic manner in which the call is issued out in this text; "I said, Behold me, behold me."

I hope, my friends, you already feel the melting energy of this repetition. I am sure that if the Spirit of the Lord once touches your hearts with these words and brings them home as the voice of Jesus your beloved, you will feel in them all the sweetness, fire, and majesty of more than celestial eloquence.

I shall endeavour, however, to furnish you with some distinct ideas of the meaning, propriety, and force of this manner of address.

"I said, Behold me, behold me." This is expressive,

1. Of that Divine consciousness which the Lord hath of His own boundless excellencies, and His desire to manifest and communicate Himself to miserable, unworthy creatures. God speaks of Himself in a style which no other being can assume without being guilty of the most criminal arrogance. He speaks as one wrapt up in the sense of His own excellency, and proclaims to others His own glory. This becomes the majesty of the self-sufficient and Infinite Being. And it is equally becoming the Divine benignity and beneficence: for as He sees nothing in the universe comparable with Himself – as it is His felicity to contemplate with delight His own independent beauty and glory – so He knows that all the happiness of intelligent creatures lies in their acquaintance with Himself. More especially, in reference to the recovery of ruined men, He knows the extent of their misery, the vanity of other refuges, and the glorious worth and fulness of the preparations He hath made for their relief. Therefore He gives vent to infinite compassion and liberality in calling the attention of men to Himself as the alone Author of salvation. Such is the voice of God in many passages of Scripture besides the text. As, for example, Isaiah 55:2: "Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which satisfieth not? Hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness:" and Proverbs 9:1-5 – "Wisdom hath builded her house, she hath hewn out her seven pillars, she hath killed her beasts, she hath mingled her wine, she hath also furnished her table, she hath sent forth her maidens: she crieth upon the highest places of the city, Whoso is simple, let him turn in hither; as for him who wanteth understanding, she saith to him, Come, eat of my bread, and drink of the wine which I have mingled."

2. The manner of address in the text may be considered as set in opposition to the careless neglect on the one hand and the discouraging fears on the other which hinder our obedience to the call. He must knock and knock again; He must utter himself with vehemence and importunity to gain the attention of trifling and hard-hearted sinners. And when we begin to listen and to perceive the infinite value of the offers our guilty fears suggest a thousand

surmises and suspicions. Our hearts would misgive us and sink back did not the God of grace multiply and repeat over again the assurances and invitations of mercy which warrant our approaches to His throne. Luke 14:23: – “Compel them to come in, that my house may be filled.”

3. Hereby He intimates His readiness to interpose with His effectual grace so as to render successful the endeavours of those who attempt to obey the call. For this is our next difficulty; we feel ourselves blind, dead, and unable to believe. But the Lord insists on our making the attempt. “Behold me! why do you hesitate? I say, Behold me! I know your inability: But have not I commanded you? Am not I able to create faith? Therefore, attempt, and attempt again, to behold me.” Such was the force of the repetition in those sweet words addressed to the prophet Daniel 10:19: – “Peace be unto thee; be strong; yea, be strong;” that is, in spite of all thy weakness, depend on me, and endeavour to gather strength, and thou shalt succeed.

4. This pathetic repetition, “Behold me, behold me!” conveys the idea of the boundlessness of that glory and love which are to be seen in the Lord; and that this beholding must be continued in, repeated, and advanced from one degree to another. Look, and look again. We are called to dwell upon this glorious object. One gracious discovery makes way for another, and rises above another, like the steps of Jacob’s ladder, till it ascends to the highest heavens. So David resolved to spend his whole life in this contemplation, Psalm 27:4: – “One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple.” And the apostle in the following words marks the happy progress of believers in this exercise: – “But we all, with open face, beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image, from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.”

It now remains,

### III.

To show the beauty and force of that which the text mentions as an aggrandizing circumstance of the call. It is addressed to those who were not called by God’s name.

The entire alienation from God which overwhelmed the Gentiles is brought to remembrance to heighten the wonder excited by God’s merciful procedure. This circumstance has a peculiar beauty and force in it for that purpose. So it will appear from the following observations: –

1. The sovereignty and riches of the grace of God appear in its venting itself abundantly towards those who were altogether unworthy. The Heathen nations were, to appearance, almost already in the belly of hell when Divine mercy came upon them. They had no appearance of connexion with the true God, having wrapt themselves up for many ages in the shades of idolatrous darkness. After multitudes of them had been justly left to perish in that apostacy, God at length visited the posterity of those who had for thousands of years been peopling the abodes of misery. But why did He distinguish the children from the fathers? Not, surely, from any superior goodness on their part; for never had wickedness advanced to greater maturity among the Heathen than at the very time when the mercy of Jehovah began to triumph among them. “He hath mercy on whom He will have mercy, and whom He will He hardeneth.” “O, the depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of God; how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath first given unto Him, and it shall be recompensed to him again.”

2. The mercy which reached lost heathens was in a high degree preventing, surprising mercy. It came upon them suddenly, undesired, unsolicited by themselves, and unexpected by others, who might have better understood the counsel of God, as revealed in the Scripture.

The unknown God burst in upon them, in the splendours of His majesty, holiness, and compassion, and turned them from idols to Himself, from the horrors of hopeless condemnation to the life-inspiring hope of eternal blessedness. "I am sought," says He, "of them that asked not for me; I am found of them who sought me not;" "I said, Behold me, behold me, unto a nation that were not called by my name."

3. This circumstance of the antecedent outcast state of the Heathen leads us to observe the wonderful contrast between their gracious state and their natural misery. Who can justly conceive of this strange transition? The holy angels in heaven look back with wonder to that nothingness from which Divine power brought them, and with still greater wonder to that fall into the abyss of sin and misery, from which the distinguishing goodness of God held them back in their time of trial. But the people to whom the text relates were already lost. To all human appearance they were sunk past recovery in the depths of an entire apostacy from God. His very name and every vestige of His glory were blotted out from among them. Hell, from beneath, was moved for them to meet them at their coming. When, lo! millions of these kindled brands are plucked from the fire. The hopeless enemies of God and heirs of His wrath are called back, reconciled, washed, made kings and priests to God, initiated into the mysteries of celestial joy, and conveyed into the holiest of all to see the unveiled face of God for ever and ever. If this contrast does not strike us with wonder it is for no other reason than because Satan, the god of this world, hath blinded our minds.

#### APPLICATION

What improvement, my brethren, is to be made of this subject?

1. I infer from it – and I defy all the hypocrites in the world to gainsay on solid grounds this inference – I infer that a steady, spiritual contemplation of God, in His real and harmonious perfections, is the soul of true religion. There are many who hover, as it were, around this, who intermeddle with every thing else in religion, but the main exercise of religion in fixing the understanding, the conscience, and the heart steadily upon God; – this, they will not come near: it is too deep for them: they will talk, hear, sing, profess, rejoice as much as you please; but to sit down to think closely on God, to strive as in an agony, till they, by prayer and close attention, get into the light of the knowledge of God's glory they will not do. What is this conduct, but directly to rebel against the voice of God in the text? And will such people be saved? Shall they sit in heaven contemplating God with endless pleasure? No, verily; their doom is already written in the Scripture and will not fail to be executed if repentance prevent not: "It is a people of no understanding, therefore he that made them will not have mercy on them, and he that formed them will show them no favour."

2. Let us mourn over it that so gracious a voice should be so little regarded, so vilely contemned. How few do truly answer this sweet call? What is the reason? What have men got to spend their thoughts and their time upon? Are these better employed elsewhere? "They have moved me to jealousy with that which is not God," says the Most High, "they have provoked me to anger with their vanities." And what is the consequence? "A fire is kindled in mine anger, which shall burn unto the lowest hell, and shall consume the earth and its increase, and set on fire the foundations of the mountains. To me belongeth vengeance, their foot shall slide in due time. If I whet my glittering sword, and my hand take hold of judgment, I will render vengeance to mine enemies, and will reward them that hate me." What words are these! Words the weight of which the damned constantly feel, in whose miserable footsteps multitudes – multitudes are now hastening forward. But why, my brethren, are we so little moved with concern at the dishonours generally done to God, and at the ruin, the awful ruin bringing on myriads of souls? Is it because we are indeed much bowed down to submit to Divine sovereignty? Is it not rather because our hearts are yet too

hard and selfish, and because we do not by faith realize the certainty, terribleness, and endless duration of threatened punishment? How shall many, in a little, rave with sorrow and gnash their teeth with despairing envy who are now living at ease, while God shall justly laugh at their calamity and mock when their fear cometh! O the awful Sabbaths of London, – the woful evenings, – the tavern-haunting – the oaths – the uncleanness – the raging thirst for the world – the scornful neglect of ordinances or mock attendance on them! These things, if duly laid to heart would bring us to something like what David felt when he said, “Rivers of waters run down mine eyes, because they keep not thy law.”

3. Amidst these causes of deep sorrow let us rejoice that the sovereign God can conquer the obstinacy of the human heart; He can command attention and draw to Himself the inmost part of the soul. I hope some of us are monuments of this. What cause have they to rejoice in whom the text hath been fulfilled! You little know, my dear friends, the value of that little saving knowledge of God which you have obtained. But let us examine ourselves closely lest we be deceived. What kind of knowledge have we? Is it that holy and powerful kind of knowledge, which bears genuine marks of its coming from above? Let us bless God if such is our knowledge, though but as a grain of mustard seed.

4. Whatever our condition hath hitherto been let us now urge this call on ourselves and on each other. The Lord now utters the call to us. “Behold me, behold me!” He utters it as really and particularly to each of us as though a voice from heaven were now rending the sky and summoning each of us, by His name, to attend to the concerns of salvation. Yea, from day to day, from night to night, in every secret retreat where there is opportunity to seek God, there this voice secretly sounds forth from the Invisible Being, “Behold me, behold me!” What shall be our reckoning if we shall be found disregarding of these numberless calls? Millions of them we have already slighted. Let none venture to-day to harden his heart. Let us now look to the crucified Redeemer. Let us look and look again till, through the illumination of the Spirit, we see the cross, as it were, all in a blaze of Divine splendour, and God Himself, in the awfulness of His justice and in the sweetness of His mercy, beaming forth from the marred visage, the wounds, the blood, the unknown sorrows, the expiring groans of Jesus the Lamb of God. To Him be glory, now and for evermore. Amen.

[February and March 1904]

## Notes of a Sermon

By the late REV. JOHN KENNEDY, D.D., Dingwall.

Preached in Pulteneytown Free Church, Wick, on Monday after the Communion  
held on Sabbath, 30th November, 1862 – ED.  
(Taken by a hearer, and hitherto unpublished.)

“And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, What are these which are arrayed  
in white robes? and whence came they?” – Revelation 7:13.

The questions here asked by the elder, John could not answer, and no wonder, for it would be with difficulty he would recognise – indeed, he might utterly fail to recognise – these arrayed in white robes, and standing before the throne, as those he had known on earth. He knew them in their temptation – it may be, in their sin; and, above all, in their great tribulation. No wonder then that his recognition failed, and the answering of the questions was difficult. Let us notice: –

- I. *Whence* came these redeemed ones?
- II. *How* came they hither?

III. *Whither* are they brought? To what home and how are they occupied?

On this latter point, I remark seven particulars: –

- (1) As to position, they are before the Throne;
- (2) As to occupation, they are serving;
- (3) They are enjoying the presence of Him who sitteth upon the Throne;
- (4) They hunger and thirst no more;
- (5) They feel no heat nor light of the sun;
- (6) Jesus, the Lamb, leads them and feeds them as a shepherd; and
- (7) God wipes away all tears from their eyes.

I. In looking at the first main head, “Whence came they?” I remark that they came from earth. They were of the race of Adam, and that race a fallen, sinful one. Not the whole of Adam’s race are there; all are not forthcoming, nor ever will be; but many – very many – of them are, and will be, before the Throne, and those are from every land, and nation, and kindred, and people.

Thanks be to God, there are many from our own land, from your country, your town, your congregation, and, it may be, your home and family. And if it be so, may you not ask yourself, “What if I am left behind?” They have got to that glorious home, that everlasting home before the Throne, and what if you are the only one to be left behind? Let me tell you there is but one way of getting there, by the strait gate and the narrow way. The fear of being left behind may well be a serious one; it may well rob you of rest; sleep may be refused your eyes and slumber your eyelids. Better far it should be so than that you should stand at last and see the door shut, while others go in.

Though there was so much diversity on earth among these redeemed ones, they having come from every nation, and kindred, and people, yet in many particulars they were alike, and in none so much as this, the state in which they were first found by redeeming grace. In what condition were they when found?

They were lying under the curse of God’s law in guilt and misery, having to account for a broken covenant. They were lying at the grave’s mouth, on the brink of hell, without one thought of doing ought to escape it, with not one moment they could say belonged to them between them and everlasting burnings. The Lord knew they deserved to be cast into the grave’s devouring mouth, He knew they deserved to be plunged into these burnings. It was not because He could not be independent of these worms of the dust that He resolved to save them. It would not have cast the least shadow of a spot on His justice, mercy, or glory if He had left them to perish, but it pleased Him to save them; it pleased Him to raise the beggar from the dunghill and set him among the princes of His people.

Yes, He found them under the power of sin, entirely under its power. So completely was it their master that there was not the least possibility of a hope that they could be delivered, unless by the exercise of a power stronger, mightier than it, even the power of the Almighty. Besides, being under sin’s power, they were covered with its vile leprosy; so covered all over, so full of corruption, that hell seemed the only fit place for them. They had lost the image of God; it was entirely defaced. They were destitute of holiness, and had not the least desire after it . . . . When their meetness for hell was complete, when they were on the very threshold of it, with, as it were, but the lifting of a foot between them and it, then saving grace reached them, then redeeming love saved them. When I say they were in sin’s power, under God’s wrath, under Satan’s power, leprous, corrupt, and vile, I have not said enough; I have not said that they were willing also to remain so, not caring to be delivered. Not that they were willing to come under the punishment that their sin and vileness deserved, or that they were willing to be under the power of Satan as executioner. They served him willingly,

eagerly, as prince; they fancied themselves happy in their allegiance to Him as such; but his subjects fear much the wages that their firm allegiance gets them. And might not God have let them get the wages they had so justly earned, and might he not allow the sentence of death to be executed – that sentence they had so truly earned?

When the Lord at first approached them, as they were lying in the state I have described, I do not know, friends, but they thought He had come as an executioner, and not as a deliverer, and that, when He came to rouse them up, it was but to cast them for ever from His presence. And, moreover, poor, befooled, silly ones as they were, they thought it safer and better to be left in peace on destruction's brink than to be wakened up to a realisation of their state, which peace would only have made them feel their fall into eternal misery all the more. Yes, they raised the sluggard's cry, and pleaded the sluggard's petition, "Yet a little more sleep, a little more slumber, a little more folding of the hands to sleep," and turned them again with their face to the precipice. But God's love would not thus be set aside, nor His power be thus defeated. The time of the fulfilling of the eternal purpose had arrived, the time of effectual calling had come. He saw them lying in their blood, and then His time was a time of love. Why was it so? Is that your question? Because all He was then and thereafter to do was done to the praise of the glory of His grace.

I wish here to remark, before passing on, that the passage to hell along the course of this world is a smooth, pleasant voyage. The floating is easy. Many, the nearer they approach the end, the more they are assured of peace, and the more loudly they talk of safety. Such are drunk with the world's pleasures, never heeding warnings, that seem to them but a blast of rudeness, till at length the end is reached, and they leap into everlasting perdition.

II. We come now to the second division of our subject, "How came they hither?" What were the means the Lord employed in conducting them to their place before the Throne? As we previously saw, if any power could deliver them out of the state in which they were, it must be an Almighty power; and so it was. The Lord Jehovah stretched His hand from above, took them from below, and set them among the princes of His people. What mode did God take to accomplish His end?

First, I remark, they were washed in blood, the blood of the Lamb. None without this washing can stand in the New Jerusalem. The washing must be complete; they must part from all defilement; no spot or blemish must be found on them. Nothing unclean can go up on that way of holiness, not only nothing that is unclean but nothing that can communicate defilement. This washing, to begin with, is the washing of regeneration. There may be many differences in experience, but in this respect the resemblance is complete; they are all regenerated by one and the same Spirit. This washing never needs to be done over again. It is a washing that is kept by the power of the Lord unpolluted through time, till the redeemed take their place in eternity. A seed of *all* holiness was planted in the sinner's heart when regeneration took place. Not the seed of one particular grace, but the seed of all graces. Not one member was regenerated, but all the members; not one faculty, but all the faculties. When this washing was accomplished, it left behind it, then, a germ of universal holiness. A germ, not the full-grown flower, but yet a seed that is destined to bring forth fruit into life eternal. There is often much need of reviving the grace in the regenerate sinner's heart, but there is no need of the implantation of a new life. There is no possibility of destroying the life already implanted; it will be kept there in spite of Satan, sin, and the world.

Secondly, after regeneration, I would speak of justification. The sinner is justified freely through grace, not on the ground of regeneration, but solely on the ground of Christ's finished work. The obedience and death of Christ is as much the groundwork of the one as of the other. It is because of this, and this alone, that Jehovah can without reflection on His justice be the just God and yet the justifier of the ungodly.

The act of justification is as complete as it is free, and as sure as it is complete. It does not need to be revised or done over again, and it shall never be cancelled. It is the perfect act of Him who is the Rock, whose work is perfect. . . . In this act of justification all sins are forgiven; not only those known and remembered by the sinner, not only those felt and seen by him, when standing self-condemned and guilty, but those that the Judge saw, as He alone seeth; all, all were blotted out. It must be so, friends, in justice to Christ's righteousness. The guilt of one idle thought, one vain word, as an infringement of God's law, will expose us to His wrath. Thus, if even a word or thought were left unpardoned, it would be, as it were, a reflection on Christ's finished work, as well as it would doom us to destruction.

The believer's title to heaven is settled. There is no fear of its ever being shaken or his ever being deprived of it. God does not set sinners on the way and then leave them to themselves. He does not say, "I have given you a fair start; you must now make the rest of the way yourselves." No, the believer starts an heir of heaven, by virtue of a title God secures him, and he holds on his way by the help of the Lord, till he reaches the threshold of eternity and there presents the title-deed written and sealed in the blood of the Lamb.

Thirdly, I observe the work of sanctification. Sanctification differs from either regeneration or justification. It is a work, not an act. Justification is an act done in heaven; sanctification is a work performed on earth. There is danger of placing the one for the other. Many in idle fashion trace their hope of sanctification to Christ's righteousness, and would fain believe that they personally had little or nothing to do with the matter. Such is not the right way of looking at it. Sanctification is a divine work of the Holy Spirit in the soul, distinct from Christ's finished work, and in connection with which the soul must be exercised. Others think – and alas! this class is large – that sanctification is something to be got at when the individual is a stranger to the corruptions of his heart and to the exceeding sinfulness of his sin. Fancying they have attained to regeneration and justification, and that these entitle them to sanctification, they think they can well afford to dispense with the Spirit, and can well afford to be indifferent to a life of holiness. Such, I much fear, are yet in the bond of iniquity. The work of the Spirit in sanctification is a work that must go on, not outside, but in the believer's heart. Others again dream of holiness only after death, and look upon sanctification as a thing quite unattainable in this life. But, friends, sanctification is a work that is to be completed at death. And if this is not the case, there is no hope of it after. He that is unjust, let him be unjust still, and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still.

Don't wonder, aged Christian, thou who hast wandered in the wilderness many a day and tried to serve the Lord these many years, don't wonder now, when you are drawing near death, when your journey cannot now be much longer, if you feel you have more need of holiness than ever, and you find yourself saying, "Surely I am not meet for heaven, I who am seeing so much of my own increasing defilement and those sins and corruptions becoming more powerful; no prayer, no utterance of mine that is not steeped in this defilement. Ah, how unlikely it seems that ever I shall set foot in the New Jerusalem." Dear friend, look less at yourself and more at blessed Christ. Take the Lord at His word. He that hath begun the good work, will He give it up now, think you? He will not leave thee at the end of thy journey; even when the last step is to be taken, when in the death throes thou mayest *feel* the presence of the old man in all his entirety, yes, as strong as ever. But even in death the Lord is worth the trusting. You may depend upon it that trust will not be betrayed. He will be as good as His word. When you have passed through the valley, crossed the river and parted with the old man, nothing will appear more astonishing to you, not even the first great change of being made spiritually alive, than this wonderful parting with the old man for ever.

Again, I wish to remark that this washing we have already spoken of is a washing in the blood of the Lamb, Christ. It is only through the blood of His Son that God can extend His hand to sinners. It is only through the right of His blood that the Spirit can give them His

everlasting blessings. It is a wondrous sight, that of the Spirit bringing the sinner into God's presence and claiming sanctification through the right of Christ's righteousness. Think of Jesus putting in His claim on behalf of His blood-bought ones! Think of Jehovah's response and of the settling and sealing the sinner's title. This is indeed a sight passing wonderful. All washing, all justifying, all sanctifying, is at the expense of the blood of the Lamb. Nought out or away from this precious blood – all things in it. All, from the first moment of effectual calling till the believer reaches heaven, is done at the cost of Jesus' blood.

It is well, friends, to understand the connection between a life of holiness and the cross of Christ. How sin can be subdued, how lust can be weakened, how a soul cleaving to the dust can become heavenly, panting after the Lord and the enjoyment of His service – all this is only to be got at by dealing with the blood of the Lamb. If I knew more of the life and death of my blessed Saviour, and were I less a stranger to His precious blood, I would have less cause to complain of hardness and death. Just so much the more dealing I have with this blood, just so much the more will I experience of the blessedness of the man who enjoys sweet and uninterrupted communion with God. The truest believer, the most advanced Christian, can never afford to be independent of the blood of the Lamb. When the finishing stroke is given, when they are going down to the Jordan, never were they more dependent, and you may hear them saying with Paul the aged – “This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.”

We have now come to another point of our subject, namely, to remark that these washed, justified, and sanctified ones are brought “out of great tribulation.”

Some may ask “How can this be? We have known many go there out of great and manifold tribulations, out of much sorrow and suffering, out of the pains of martyrdom, but others have entered peacefully, having had a pleasant, and it may be, a speedy journey.” It may be so, friend, but if we knew the story of each of these redeemed ones, and if we took the accumulated stories in the aggregate, we would see how very great was the tribulation they were brought out of. But again, it may be urged, “Have not some had scarcely a journey at all? Have they not just breathed, and then been carried hence?” Yes, that may be the case too; but, friend, did they not open their eyes upon a world of misery, blighted by sin, did they not draw one breath in a polluted atmosphere? Were they not surrounded by a sea of troubles, exposed to the powers of hell and the fiery trial of Satan? In this sense they came out of great and manifold tribulation. The smallest of these troubles they passed through was great, contrasted with the joys and happiness of their present glorious home.

This question may suggest itself to many of you, and how often it has been a hard question to some of us, “Why does the Lord expose His children to so many sorrows and trials, and when they meet them on their way, why does He not give them wings *over* these troubles, or why does He not lead them *past* by a more peaceful path? He, who loved them so much as to give up His well-beloved Son to the death, and who washed them in the blood of the Lamb, one would think He would do otherwise.” I cannot answer your questions, except in this way. I am quite sure that the path the Lord leads them by is the best, and another thing I am sure of is, that He will draw glory to Himself and good to them out of what appears to us a grievous affliction and a tedious delay. If it is my Father's will that He should be glorified in me in his particular way, dare I murmur? Far be such a thing from me!

I shall now point out four ways in which the Lord has an opportunity of manifesting His glory in His people's afflictions. He manifests His faithfulness, His power, His wisdom, and His tender mercies.

(1) *His faithfulness.* How often when the Lord's people are bowed down with sorrow, assailed with many and great temptations, struck to the ground by heavy afflictions, when it seems they are surrounded on every side by a very sea of troubles, when their heart grows faint within them, and they are ready to be engulfed, when they cry “Hath the Lord forgotten

to be gracious? Is his mercy clean gone for ever?" – how often does He come mightily to their deliverance and give them cause to sing to the praise of His faithful word! And when, after all delays, trials, fears, and suspicions, how shines forth the glory of His faithfulness in their triumphal entry into glory! Then that dark cloud of trial and tribulation will appear but as a background to show off more clearly His glorified faithfulness. The promises of the Lord are yea and amen in Christ Jesus. The word of the Lord endureth for ever.

(2) The *power* of God will be glorified in the affliction of His people. Satan is the great enemy of the believer. All his powers and artifices are employed, and all the blandishments of the world are used by him for the accomplishment of the believer's destruction. The more Satan molests, the more he aims his fiery darts, the more numerous the hosts he calls into the field, the more is the power of God glorified in beating back and defeating him. Had the Lord always made the journey of His people a short one, Satan might say "Had He left them longer here, I would have easily defeated them, but I got no opportunity of trying them." But Satan has not this to say. The Lord gives him a chance of doing his worst. He leaves them forty years in the wilderness. Satan, with all his hellish hosts, tries every plan, and puts forth his utmost strength, but all to no purpose; he is vanquished. And after all, God's power triumphs, and His Israel arrive at the promised land, singing "Is there anything too hard for the Lord?"

(3) Again, God's *wisdom* is glorified in His people's afflictions. What has not the wisdom of the Lord to do in defeating iniquity and in giving a way of escape to His people from the wiles and deceit of Satan? When the believer is oftentimes in darkness and cannot see the need or wisdom of a mysterious providence, yet in the time of his deliverance he comes to see that in all the intricacies of the wheels of the machine there is written, Glory to God in the highest and good to Israel . . . I must see Jehovah's glory to be the first and great end, and that the way He takes to accomplish this end is worthy of Himself. Seeing this, it is surely well my part to be contented and to bow meekly to His wisdom, saying no longer, "Why did he do this or that? Would it not have been better if He had taken such a way or such another?"

(4) Lastly, I remark that the *tender mercies* of the Lord are glorified in the afflictions of His people. The flesh likes an easy way – no trouble, no sorrows, no wounds, no fears, it would have. But had God's way been such an easy one there would be no gracious relievings, no sweet sense of His power and love in deliverance, no precious drops of comfort in the flames.

The Lord takes His children's hearts off the loved things of earth and must have nothing coming in between Him and them. When they are crushed under affliction, there is more cause for entire dependence in Himself. Were it not for troubles, friends, we would have little knowledge of the tenderness of our Lord's loving kindness. It is those who are laden with sorrow, those with open wounds, faint hearts, moist eyes, to whom Jehovah has an opportunity of showing His tender mercies. It is they who know how to get draughts from the fountain of His love. It is a blessed tempest, dear, tried child of God, that tosses you into the bosom of Jehovah.

What good may also be got from tribulations in the way of coming to know ourselves a little better! The heat of the furnace throws up the dross and corruption of our vile hearts. Hard though the heat be, scorching though the fire be, yet the Lord brings great things to thee out of it all. Some poor tried one here may be saying "I have been in the furnace, yes, in a hot fire, but what good has it done me?" It has at least done thee this good; it has shown thee how much of dross and corruption and defilement there is still in thee, and don't say that is a small thing.

There are some of us, my friends, who would like now and then to get a little pleasure and sin out of the cisterns of this world, but God breaks them and leaves us no other resource

but to go to Himself. Rest you assured you are greatly the better of the troubles that send you oftenest on errands to the throne of grace. All furnaces are good that shut up to blessed Christ. When your journey is over, believer, will not the home seem sweeter to you, when looking back upon all the dangers and griefs and fears you have passed through? I think it will.

Two vessels left the harbour together. One of them had a pleasant and speedy voyage. No storm assailed her not an hour of the voyage, but the sea was quiet, beautiful and calm. She entered the port in safety. The other, from the moment of setting out, was storm-tossed and in danger. The wind blew fiercely, the waves raged, the hurricane roared, the waters rose like mountains; she was almost engulfed. When at last she did reach the harbour, with shattered mast and tattered sail, and hardly got in – was “scarcely saved” – which think you of the crews felt their spirits happier, or the haven sweeter? Was it they who had a pleasant voyage and an easy entrance, or they who had endured terrific storms and been in fearful dangers and had been scarcely saved? I think it would be the latter, friends. Their hearts would be fuller of thankfulness, and the repose to them would be sweeter. And just so will it be with those entering the haven above, vessels of mercy, brought “out of great tribulation.”

III. I must confess I shrink from the third point – “Whither are they brought?” It is too much, even a glimpse of this glory, for flesh to bear, unless accompanied by unction from the Holy One, and unless spiritual eyesight is given. If we push aside the veil in an irreverent manner, and if the fleshly prevail over the spiritual in our view, we shall at last come to regard those most holy things, a glimpse of which we have here vouchsafed us, with utter indifference. With becoming awe and solemnity, let us approach and look at these *seven things* that are recorded in connection with those redeemed, justified, and sanctified ones.

1. They are “before the Throne.” And is this the goal they have reached at last? They, who were lying in their guilt and misery on the brink of hell, they who suffered in the pangs of the new birth, they who passed through the wilderness fainting and weary, they who so lately trembled in the death throes on the threshold of eternity – has it come to this with them at last? Yes, it is even so. They are basking in the effulgence of the glory issuing from the Throne and Him who sitteth upon it.

I know not how it is, friends, but we cannot tell anything of that glorified body they now wear, nor how it is that they are so strengthened as to be able to endure the showing forth of that glory, nor do we know the exercise of soul they experience, which prevents their being struck down before the majesty of Him who sitteth on the Throne. All of us can know little of it, and all our talking is but poor babbling at the best. But this I venture to say, with John, “It does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he shall appear we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” What a wonder, we exclaim, that they were ever brought there. Yes, it is a marvellous thing, but it would be a greater wonder if they were *not* there. If we look first at the wonder on Mount Calvary, our surprise will be less at this latter wondrous manifestation of God’s love. When I see the Son of God pouring out His blood on the Cross, and when I think of Jehovah’s marvellous love in the gift of His Son, my wonder would be great indeed, if the love that gave such a Son to shed His blood would not bring those cleansed in that blood to Himself at last, even to a place before His Throne. The wonder on Mount Calvary, is *the* wonder after all. Nowhere is the glory of Jehovah’s love and justice combined more manifest than in the Cross; and where can the objects of this love get a more fitting place than that which they occupy before His Throne above? Kings are wont to show forth and exhibit the trophies of their power and skill. These arrayed in white robes are the trophies of Jehovah’s power and the specimens of His skill. Where can they be shown best but in that glorious place He has given them? In them is manifested, as in nothing else, the glory of His love. The reflection of that glory is cast back again from them in songs of praise and thankfulness towards the Throne and Him that sitteth upon it and the Lamb.

2. The second thing we are told of them is, “They serve him day and night in His temple.” They serve Him. Observe, they are not idle. There is rest, but no idleness in heaven. Idleness would be no rest to them . . . . I do not know, nor can any of us tell, what this temple is in which they serve God. We are told they are always there day and night. Not that there is any night in heaven; it means that they serve *continually*. Had they nothing to do but enjoy rest and repose they could not be happy. There are two classes of professors, apart from them, very common in the world. The first is the idle ones. They never do anything either in the family, church, or congregation. They do no good either to themselves or others. Another class is the noisy professors. They are always bustling about doing something all day long, making a great noise, but it is all “before men.” Their religion is entirely one-sided; there is no God side. They do much that men can see, but one hour of closet communion they are strangers to – they care not for it, and are perfectly indifferent to soul exercise. The serving of the redeemed is a joyous and cheerful service. O yes, when that glory from the throne shines upon them, and the love of God fills their hearts to overflowing, they long to respond to the manifestations of Jehovah’s beauty and desire to have an opportunity of letting out that love in serving Him day and night.

3. The third thing said of them is that “he that sitteth upon the throne shall dwell among them.” O wondrous disclosure, marvel of marvels! Even here in the wilderness He did not leave them fatherless. He vouchsafed to them oftentimes His reviving power, giving them sweet foretastes of the blessedness they now enjoy. There will be an intimacy in communion above that is unattainable here. We cannot venture far into this holy communion. We cannot tell how it is that each one among that throng will enjoy the delight of his ravishing countenance, as if that one alone was there; nor can we tell how it is that at the same time as they are enjoying the presence of Jehovah, they are receiving in their filled souls wave upon wave of the precious assurance of His love. This is beyond the tongue of man to tell, or mind to conceive.

4. We observe of them, fourthly, that “they shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more.” There is hunger here; often craving, consuming hunger and panting thirst. Not that the carnal heart craves spirituality; but the cry of the new nature is ever after holiness; it has a never-sufficed desire for spiritual life. The body is no longer below in its weariness and weakness; corruptions no longer grieve. The fire of Satan’s temptations is quenched; all defilement is removed. There was a void *here* ever to be filled up, a craving for something more, something better yet. But *there*, these washed, purified glorified souls are filled full of joy and peace and the love of God, though not to satiety. They are kept full, yet capacity remains. They are all vessels of mercy sailing in the ocean of Jehovah’s love, yet not overwhelmed in its depths. There remains, after ages of sailing, an ocean unfathomable yet to be taken in. Yes, they are filled, kept full, yet ever filling. There is a great mystery, friends, in this fulness. They have enough; there is no painful longing, yet progression is made towards the infinite.

5. We are told that “neither shall sun light on them, nor any heat.” No sun lights on them now with its painful scorching. No fierce trial nor bitter opposition of the world reaches them there. No; nor that which is more difficult still to bear, the unkindness and trouble they meet with from believers themselves, no trials, no afflictions, no grievous burdens now to bear! No heat now from Satan’s temptations, no fiery trial, no heat from the Father’s chastisements. Free from all trouble are they, nothing to annoy, nothing to discomfort. They have reached the land where “the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest.”

6. The sixth thing revealed to us is that “the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters.” He is known as the Lamb even there, the Lamb “as it had been slain,” the Lamb of Mount Calvary. Yes; and you also will know Him as the Lamb on whose very head you laid your hand in your bitter

confession of sin; the Lamb whose blood flowed to cleanse thee, whose chastisements got thee peace, whose stripes brought thee healing. You will not grudge Him His place of honour then, believer. You had a heart once in you that would have robbed Him of His glory and kept Him in the grave of Joseph. But *there* you will rejoice that His place is high in heaven, and it will fill you with happiness to see Him, the Lamb in the midst of the throne. Even in the Father's house he will feed and lead His flock. Many a day did He lead them in the wilderness, and the leading does not end when they enter the promised land. In the Father's house he is still the shepherd.

I could not bear the thought that Jesus was not there to lead me. If I thought such was the case, heaven would not be the same to me. When I stand at the gates of the New Jerusalem, and they are rolled back, and when the glory from within shines upon me in all its glorious effulgence, I would be utterly bewildered, and sink abashed with awe before the majesty of the glory, and be driven out again by the flood of brilliant light issuing from the Throne and Him that sitteth upon it, if Jesus, He, in whom I have believed in on earth, was not there to meet me. But He *will* be there; Christ, my Saviour, whom I have loved and trusted in my journey thither. He will be there to meet me on the threshold. He will take me by the hand and conduct me to the Father's presence. He will give me strength to endure the manifestations of Jehovah's beauty, of His love, and of His glory.

He leads them to fountains of living waters, in order to open up to them the beauty of holiness and the exceeding great riches of the grace that brought them there. He leads them to fountains of Jehovah's love and feeds them with the pure fresh waters. He reveals to them day by day some new glory and divine excellency, and all this He does with a man's sympathy as well as a God's bounty. In Him is seen the wondrous union of perfect humanity with all the glorious excellency and beauteous holiness of divinity. In the wilderness He sometimes gave His people just as much food as kept them alive, just as much as kept them seeking more. But there, in the Father's house, He places before them all the resources of the Godhead, without stint or reserve. What better security could they have that these resources are theirs for use, and that these reservoirs will remain inexhaustible for ever, than that it is the Lamb, who is in the midst of the Throne, that leads them to these fountains, yea, that helps them there to drink! Ah! there is a holy mystery in the Lamb feeding and leading the redeemed in heaven; and, friends, I think it is sweet to feel that I can't understand it, that its glorious height is above my comprehension. Ah, yes, they will admire and adore, and their souls will be filled with a sense of the beauty of holiness as seen in the Godhead. They will feel now, in an incomparable measure, how lovely and how ravishingly beautiful is the Lamb, Jesus, in the glory of His purity and love. There is no end to His beauty. He is the altogether lovely one, the chiefest among ten thousand.

7. "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes." This last word, how wonderful! God, the Lord Jehovah, He who sitteth upon the Throne, shall wipe away their tears. Surely, this is surpassing wondrous! Ah! there were tears through the journey. They came even to the gate, to the threshold with moist eyes, but they were soon dried. God wiped them away – and for ever. They who had known sorrow all their life on earth, they who had bent under its weight, they who for many a long day had carried a faint heart within them, they who had reached the gates of the celestial city at last, ready to give up and footsore and weary, they are those whose tears God will wipe away, and who have left sorrow and suffering behind them forever. God the Father will take away all sorrow, grief, and care from His people's hearts, and all tears from their eyes. And as sure as He does this, He will place Himself, with all His infinite resources of happiness, love, and peace, between them and the possibility of any return of their sorrow and tears. And if He will do this, and if He has pledged His truth and love to them for the performance of it, what has He not done in order to complete and perfect the joy of the redeemed?

Now that we have come to the conclusion of our subject, and have seen the redeemed reach their eternal home, and have looked at those seven things we are told of them there, let each one of us ask ourselves the question, "Are we on our way to that place before the Throne? Will we be among that throng arrayed in white robes and washed in the blood of the Lamb? Can we lay claim to an interest in that precious blood, and have we had any dealings with it? Or are we living in guilt and misery on destruction's brink?" Whatever state you are in, friends, one thing I am certain of concerning you is, you are on your way to eternity, your journey thitherward has commenced. Is it to an eternity of happiness and peace, or to one of woe and misery that you are hastening? There is a road leading to each, the broad and the narrow way. You have not much to choose between; either of these two roads you must take – yea, are taking.

Unconverted man, who art wandering on the broad road, you must *turn*. Set your face towards the strait gate and the narrow way. You must be born of God and united to Christ – sanctified by the Spirit – before you can venture to hope that that house and these joys we have been speaking of can be yours.

Let me now ask you, believer, you who profess to be such, "Is your salvation nearer than when you believed? Are you making progress Zionwards?" "Ah, that is a hard question," some person answers. "All the progress I make is but in finding out my unfitness for entering there. My progress seems only backward to the world, sin, and Satan. My progress is but to feel my utter need of finding Christ and of His becoming all and all in and for me." If there is as much light in you, dear friend, as to feel death, if there is as much life as to see your darkness, as much desire after Christ as not to be able to breathe freely without Him, don't fear that He will leave that faint desire unsatisfied. Don't fear that Christ will fail to help you. No; poor, witless, strengthless creature that thou art, though thou art weak as smoking flax, He will not quench thee, He will make His great strength perfect in thy exceeding weakness.

I would entreat all unconverted ones to come to Christ to-day. "To-day, if ye will hear my voice, harden not your hearts." Come to Him for life, for light, for healing. Come, that He may add your name to the list of His redeemed by power, those whom He has washed in His blood and clothed in the white, fair robes of His righteousness, and to whom He will give a place before His throne. Would it not be well, I ask you, would it not be well, to get this question settled? Let there be no more wavering, no more indecision. Come to the point at once. Tell me, would it not be well? "It would," you say, "but then, just think of what I am in my guilt and sin and defilement. How could I ever come with my impurity before the holiness of the Lord? How could I ever hope to appear before His throne but to be judged? No, no, it is too much for *me* to expect." Anything would be too much for thee in that sense, friend; a cup of cold water would be too much for thee on the ground of your own merits, one breath would be too much for thee. But looking to the merits of Christ's precious blood, nothing is too much for thee. Look out and away to this blood. What cannot it cleanse? What cannot the grace of God accomplish? What hard dead heart, with all its desperate wickedness, cannot the Spirit soften and quicken and renew? Will not the word of God prove good, think ye, and has He not said, "The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin"? Make then, sinner, this blood thy ground work, thy strength, thy staff, and glory is not too much for thee to win. And fitness for that glory is not too much for the Spirit to accomplish.

I am not here to-day to tell you only that you are a sinner, vile, and helpless – an outcast. That is not all my message. That I leave to your conscience and the open Bible before you. But my chief message is to tell you of a way of escape, a way of cleansing through the shed blood of the Lamb. Do not plead your inability and your wickedness. That is but an excuse for delay. If you leave the question of your salvation unsettled, leave it just where it is, and this day, this hour, is carrying you nearer destruction, and but hastening your progress to the brink of hell. "Now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation." Don't thou say then,

“Ah, my guilt is so great, my sin so heinous, my corruption so strong, I am altogether so unclean, so leprous, that I am only fit for hell; I cannot move a step or think a thought aright.” Sinner, the Lord bids me tell thee to-day that He has placed Christ within your reach in the gospel. Christ Jesus can take away thy guilt and the curse of the broken law from thee. If your sins are of a crimson dye they can be washed white in the blood of the Lamb. Your uncleanness and leprosy Christ is able to remove, and He can make you fair and beautiful, clothing thee with the pure white robes of His righteousness. He will give you a heart to love Him and strength to follow Him whithersoever He leadeth.

The Lord offers you this day Christ Jesus, His unspeakable gift. And see, Jesus stands with open arms outstretched to receive thee. Hear His blessed words, “Him that cometh unto me I will in no wise cast out.” May the Lord help thee to come to Him in whom “the fatherless findeth mercy,” who will guide thee and preserve thee here, and give thee a place with Himself at last – yea, even a place before His Throne.

[March 1904]

## Precept, Promise, and Prayer:

DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY AND HUMAN AGENCY.

[This sermon is taken from vol. 3 of “The Free Church Pulpit,” 1847. Dr. Martin was then the Rev. Hugh Martin, of Panbride. The complete title of the discourse is “Precept, Promise, and Prayer: an Illustration of the Harmony between Divine Sovereignty and Human Agency.” – Ed.]

A Sermon by the late REV. HUGH MARTIN, D.D., Edinburgh.

“Make you a new heart and a new spirit” – Ezekiel 18:31.

“A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you” – Ezekiel 36:26.

“Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me” – Psalm 51:10.

It is proposed in the following discourse to enquire into the relations which subsist among these three verses, with the view of exhibiting the helplessness and responsibility of man in connection with the sovereignty and grace of God in the matter of the new heart (and indeed in salvation generally); if by the blessing of the Divine Spirit, we may lead you to despair of “man, with whom this is impossible,” and with mingled anxiety and hopefulness to have recourse to “Him with whom all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26); “even God, who quickeneth the dead, and who calleth the things that are not as though they were” (Romans 4:17).

That these texts are closely related to each other must be obvious even on the most cursory examination. The same expressions occur in each of them, and they all clearly point to one and the same subject of momentous interest. A further attention, however, will show, that while the subject is the same in *all* it is presented in a different light in *each*. In all, the one unvaried topic of regeneration is placed before us; but in passing from one to another, the point of view from which we look upon it is changed.

In the first, it is presented to us embodied in a *command*, “Make you a new heart and a new spirit.”

In the second, it is embodied in an *offer*. “A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you.”

In the third, it is embodied in a *supplication*, “Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.”

The first comes from God the Lawgiver; the second comes from God the Redeemer; the third comes from man the suppliant.

The first is the loud and authoritative voice of Majesty; the second is the still small voice of Mercy; the third is the humble, earnest voice of Entreaty.

In the first, God presents His authority and demands His right; in the second, God presents His mercy, and makes offer of His gift; in the third, man presents to God His own offer again, and pleads for its fulfilment.

The first is an utterance from the throne of justice; the second is an utterance from the throne of grace; the third is an utterance from its footstool.

The first is a Precept; the second is a Promise; the third is a Prayer.

A true veneration for the word of the living God will at once deliver us from the sin and folly of looking on this as a random combination, the product of mere chance, and will dispose us to behold in it an exhibition of Divine wisdom, and the result of a Divine arrangement, fraught, we may well believe, with much practical instruction, and calculated to give comprehensive and satisfactory views of certain vital “truths once delivered to the saints.” It is not with the materials of a curious speculation, savouring more of ingenuity than utility, that we are furnished in these verses, and in the threefold light which they cast upon the self-same subject. On the contrary, they are replete with principles which pervade the Word of God, and the life of God in the soul, – principles which are the only real key to the harmony of Divine truth, written both in Scripture “and on the fleshy tablets of the heart.” And it may deepen this impression on our minds, if we consider that the three verses chosen as the subject of illustration are not the only three in Holy Scripture so related to each other, but an instance only of a general rule – a specimen merely of a very frequent arrangement. It might be shown by a large enumeration of cases that every duty incumbent upon us, as the sinful creatures of the Most High, may be regarded in the same threefold aspect: –

*first*, as enjoined in a command to performance,  
*secondly*, as involved in a proffer of help; and,  
*thirdly*, as acknowledged in a supplication for help.

Let the following suffice.

Is it our duty to seek a knowledge of God – an acquaintance with His name, His character, His nature? Assuredly, for “this is life eternal” (John 17:3), and thus only shall we “be at peace.” Then:

the *command* is, “Acquaint thyself with God” (Job 22:21);

the *promise* is “I will give them a heart to know Me” (Jeremiah 24:7); and

the appropriate *prayer* is that of the Psalmist, “Give me understanding according to Thy word” (Psalm 119:160). If, following his example, “thou criest after knowledge and liftest up thy voice for understanding, then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God” (Proverbs 2:3,5.)

Again, the duty of saving faith, so often neglected in *the character of a duty* is presented to us in Scripture under the same threefold aspect.

It is matter of *precept*, “This is His commandment, that we should believe upon the name of His Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 3:23);

it is matter of *promise* also, “By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8); the gift of God, promised “on the behalf of Christ,” and bestowed in answer to the intercession of the “priest,” now “upon His throne” – “I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not” (Philippians 1:29 and Luke 22:32); and

it is matter of daily *supplication* with all saints, “Lord, I believe, help mine unbelief” (Mark 9:24).

Another very interesting illustration of this principle, and one in which we do not need to bring the texts from different parts of the Word, is found in the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John, where Jesus is speaking of Himself as the true manna, the bread of life which cometh down from heaven. In the midst of this discourse He lays the following

*injunction* on His disciples, “Labour for the meat which endureth to everlasting life” (verse 27) – an injunction which He immediately follows up with the precious

*corresponding promise* – “which the Son of Man shall give unto you;” and, rightly exercised under the teaching of their Lord, the apostles hasten to offer up to Him the

*appropriate prayer*, “Lord, evermore give us this bread” (verse 33).

And not to multiply farther instances, let it be borne in mind, that not even the duty of prayer itself is exempt from this principle of triple relation. We have a

*commandment* to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17); but we have a *promise* too, “Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities, for we know not what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit itself,” even “the Spirit of grace and supplications,” maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered” (Romans 8:26 and Zechariah 12:10); and the *special prayer* applicable in these circumstances we learn from the example of the apostles, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1).

In short, the Word of God is full of this important and beautiful arrangement [Compare the following sets of texts: –

(Philippians 2:12; Philippians 2:13; 2 Thessalonians 1:11).

(1 Corinthians 16:13; 2 Corinthians 12:9; Psalm 20:2).

(Philippians 4:4; Isaiah 61:3; Psalm 51:12).

(Isaiah 1:16,18; Psalm 51:2,7).

(Ephesians 5:14; both precept and promise; Psalm 119:25, or Ezekiel 37:9).

(Jeremiah 3:22, first clause; Matthew 18:11,12; Psalm 119:176).]

You will always find a promise adapted to the precept, and a prayer grounded on, and appropriate to them both.

Our intention, then, is to lead you to contemplate somewhat of the wisdom of God in this arrangement, to enquire into the practical spiritual purposes which it subserves, in the hands of the Divine Spirit, in awakening the soul and leading it to God, making good that paradox of grace which engrafts the most joyous hopefulness upon the convicted sinner’s abject helplessness – the gracious Creator’s strength being perfected in the guilty creature’s weakness. In other words, let us examine the Divine economy of Precept, Promise, and Prayer, when brought powerfully into contact with the anxious and enquiring soul.

I. And, *first*, as to the Precept. What place does it hold in this arrangement? What is its office? What good practical purposes does it serve?

“Make you a new heart and a new spirit.” At first sight this command may appear to be worse than useless. Does it not enjoin a thorough impossibility? The practical and the possible seem to be utterly put to flight? “Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?” (Jeremiah 13:23). “Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? not one” (Job 14: 4). “In me, that is in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing” (Romans 7:18). But surely the power to make a new heart and a new spirit is a good thing – one of the best of things, the most wonderful, the most glorious, the most holy. It belongs not to me. I am “dead in trespasses and in sins” (Ephesians 2:1). I have as little power to make a new heart as I had to

create my living soul at first. My present heart can be of no use to me in this matter, for it is “deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. I cannot even know it” (Jeremiah 17:9). The law of God can be of no use to me, for it cannot accomplish this holy achievement, in that it is “weak through the flesh” (Romans 8:3), my fleshly heart being “enmity against it, not subject to it, neither indeed can it be” (Romans 8:7). The assistance of my neighbour can avail me nothing, for he cannot redeem himself, and as little he can help “by any means to redeem his brother. The redemption of my soul is precious, but it ceaseth for ever” (Psalm 49:7,8). And, oh! surely this command is but a mockery of my helplessness? Is this not a cruel triumphing over my inability? What tendency can this have to remove the evil? Surely there is no step taken here to give a practical movement to my helpless soul.

Yes, there is. Your very meditations prove it. For

1. This command has evidently *made you conscious of your helplessness*, and I call that a practical movement, a very practical movement – an invaluable result – and the indispensable prerequisite to all others. Would your thoughts ever have been directed towards your helplessness at all but for such commands as this? Would you ever have imagined it such that it cannot be mended or improved at all, but must be altogether removed and replaced, but for this injunction, “Make you a *new* heart?” Would you ever have imagined that you had wandered so far from God, but for the loud voice in the distance behind you crying, “Return, return?” Would you ever have known how thoroughly your soul is paralyzed in spiritual death but for the command, “Arise from the dead?” (Ephesians 5:14). Would you ever have known how completely your senses are sealed in spiritual sleep but for the authoritative voice of God? and even that, as you can testify, only like a dying echo, through your dream, crying, “Awake, awake, thou that sleepest” (Ephesians 5:14). Say not that the precept is useless. If you have been aroused to earnest thought at all, the precept has already done you good service. If your meditations on this impracticable commandment – this “hard saying” – are at all honest and heartfelt, they are abundant testimony to the practical worth and working of the precept on your soul. It has led you to think of your helplessness. You have one invaluable lesson already. Follow on, for “to those that have shall be given.” “Thank God and take courage.” For

2. This is not all that the precept can do for you. It will not only lead you to think of your weakness and helplessness, but it will tend to *show you how complete and thorough your impotency is, and to deepen the sense of this upon your soul*. For it will not do to have merely some vague and general idea of your inability; you must have a deep and pervading spiritual conviction of this truth. It must not be a matter of hearsay, but of actual experiment and experience. I can conceive a sick man confined to his couch, murmuring and fretting over the injunction of his physician, which prevents him from rising and walking through his chamber. He feels that he is indeed weak, but he knows not how much disease has debilitated his shattered frame; and he thinks it a hard restriction to be deprived of the liberty of trying his strength. If nothing else will convince him, let him get the proof of experience. Let permission be given him to walk across his chamber, and, as in the attempt he falls helpless into the arms of the friendly physician, whose wisdom he doubted, and whose advice he despised, he will at last acknowledge how thoroughly his strength has been prostrated. This is not to be supposed an accurate illustration in all points, for the natural man does not possess even those wretched remnants of strength which the case imagined involves – paralysis and even death itself are the favourite images of Scripture. Yet what I wish you to observe is, that in the sinner’s spiritual experience, the command, “Make you a new heart,” holds a place and serves a purpose exactly similar to the permission given to the sick man to try the measure of his bodily powers. You may have some dim notions of your helplessness. But bring it to the test of experiment. This precept gives you the opportunity: nay, lays you under the obligation to do so. Go and try to make yourself a new heart. Labour to regenerate your own soul.

“Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might.” And then tell your success. Break off every old habit, if you can. Give up every outward act of sin. Mortify the deeds of the body. But have you changed your heart? Have you given it new dispositions, new desires, new delights? In short, after labour the most painstaking, the most strenuous, the most unremitting, have you succeeded in yielding obedience to this commandment? Have you “made you a new heart and a new spirit?” No. But you have proved experimentally that it is wholly beyond your power. By the precept you have been taught experimentally what you but dimly surmised before, even your thorough, unmitigated, and hopeless helplessness. You had heard of that helplessness “by the hearing of the ear;” but now your whole soul feeleth it. You have now a far more deep and pervading and pressing conviction of this humbling truth; for the spiritual precept, and your efforts to obey it, have proved to you conclusively, because experimentally, that you are wholly “carnal, sold under sin” (Romans 7:14). Is not this another practical movement? “I had not known sin but by the law” (Romans 7:7). I had not felt my helplessness but by the precept.

3. But the precept can do you more service. It can originate another and perhaps a still more important practical movement. It may have already taught you how thoroughly helpless you are by nature. But this is not enough. Besides evoking the testimony of experience and consciousness, the precept *has power to touch the springs of conscience*; and without this it would indeed be utterly inefficient.

Let me commend the truth to your conscience in the sight of God, who searcheth the heart. With what *moral* feelings do you regard this thorough helplessness? Is it not the case that you regard it, or are at least continually tempted to regard it, more in the light of a melancholy misfortune, which makes you very much to be pitied, than as a heinous crime which makes you very much to be condemned? Is it not the case that you look upon yourselves chiefly as sufferers in this matter, and scarcely, if at all, malefactors? Do you not think that your case calls more for sympathy than for blame – that you should rather be soothed than threatened? We appeal to you if this is not very often the cast and current of your meditations. Because you cannot obey his commandment, therefore you imagine you are not responsible for disobeying it – because you are thoroughly helpless, therefore you imagine you are excusable. And thus the deceitful heart ever tender to its own sores, and plausible in its own defence, contrives to shake itself clear of the irksome feeling of obligation to keep the impracticable commandment. In such circumstances, it is strange with what wretched sophistry conscience will submit to be baffled and silenced, and with what contradictory excuses its remonstrances are put away; so much so, that out of his own mouth the sinner may be condemned “If we were only in more favourable circumstances, we might and would obey this precept; but as matters stand, with the whole head sick and the whole heart faint, with “nothing in us but wounds and bruises and putrifying sores,” surely we cannot be expected to come up to the high standard which this commandment sets before us.” Now, in giving vent to such meditations as these (and it is to be feared they are not uncommon), do you really consider what you say? *If you were in more favourable circumstances, you would obey this precept?* What do you mean by *more favourable circumstances?* Your circumstances, spiritually considered, must be such that you have within you either the old heart or the new. No possible condition can be imagined between these two; and what, therefore, does this promise – so potent in silencing the conscience, and ending all debate, and putting all anxiety to flight – what does it amount to but simply this, that if you had the new heart already, you would then “make you a new heart and a new spirit” – you would do the work after it had been fully accomplished? Truly, if by such a proffer conscience were momentarily silenced, the deceitful heart ought in its turn to be thoroughly ashamed; and if these are its wretched delusions, it is surely high time it were for ever got rid of and replaced.

Do you still suggest that your helplessness sets you free from blame and responsibility? If you have any reverence for the Word of God, the precept ought at once to cure you of such perverse imaginings? For here you have the Lawgiver Himself giving forth His deliverance on your case, and His utterance is in the form of a *command*. It is not an utterance of pity, or of sympathy, or of lamentation, over your prostrate impotency. The Lord does not say, at least *here* he does not say, Oh that you were able to make you a new heart and a new spirit. On the other hand, this is an utterance of authority. It is an unhesitating and peremptory injunction from the God who rules in righteousness. You may have begun perversely to imagine that your helplessness had removed you from under His authority, and beyond the limits of His government. But it is not so. He is still the God with whom you have to do; with whom you have to do, not as sufferers merely, but as subjects still; and, in testimony thereof, listen to the voice of His commandment, "Make you a new heart and a new spirit." He comes to deal with you, not as *sufferers* whose *disease may* issue in death as its *result*, but as *rebels* whose *crime must* issue in death as its *doom*. He comes to tell you that you have not got beyond His dominions – that still He is your lawgiver and your judge. Could He be a judge at all, if rebellion carried you beyond His right and His power of judging? Could He be a lawgiver at all, if entitled to legislate only for the righteous? Nay; "the law is not made for a righteous man," but for exactly such as you, "for the lawless" (1 Timothy 1:9), for all those who, like you, are seeking freedom from the obligation of this very law, which commands you to "make a new heart and a new spirit." Surely, then, it is miserable affectation for a guilty sinner to sorrow over his helplessness as a misfortune, and then to think that all that can be expected of him is discharged, and he is responsible for nothing more. Let him learn rather to tremble over this helplessness as a crime, the very fountainhead and cause of all crimes.

Is this demand said to be unreasonable? This might be pleaded if there could be two opinions as to the source of our inability to obey, but not if it springs from our perverse and irrepressible and willing habit of doing evil – not if we are incapable of making a new heart, because our natural hearts have not only shown symptoms of enmity to God, but are very enmity itself. Is it possible for any one to affirm that the very depth of our iniquity, and the uniformity of our criminal habits, must set us free from the charge of all crime? Is it possible that the consciences of men can be so perverted and debauched? No: not so long as they are found "the meanwhile accusing or else excusing one another" (Romans 2:14). Suppose it possible for some man, some monster in human form, to acquire the habit of murder, so that he could not refrain from assassinating every victim that crossed his path – that by habit, and a monstrous love for blood, he had become utterly incapable of obeying the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill" – would any one tell me that this man's inability to obey excused him from the penalty of disobeying? Would not the doom of death be sealed upon this human fiend, amidst the loud execrations of outraged humanity? And is the case any different, or less urgent, when the just and righteous King of Glory sits in judgment? Shall His high and righteous bar be degraded by the admission of a plea which would be scouted as insane at a human tribunal? Shall the very strength of the grasp which the law has over the rebellious heart be pleaded as a reason why the Lawgiver should abdicate His throne, and denude Himself of all His claims? Nay, verily; not to obey is a crime – not to be able to obey is a second, rivetting and fastening the first as with iron. Rather it is a habit of crime plunging the soul in a sea of guilt.

Thus, then, the office of the precept is most vital and important. It first of all informs the sinner that all is not well, and points to the seat of the disease. Then it leads him experimentally to a knowledge of his miserable condition, his thorough helplessness and inability to save himself. And lastly, it presses on his conscience a deep feeling of his responsibility and criminality. Thus he learns much of himself, and he learns much of the

God with whom he has to do. He is taught to feel his own weakness and worthlessness. He is taught, also, God's authority and power. He is led to see his thorough subjection to the heavenly Majesty, and his not less thorough incapacity to do the duties of a subject. You may have been "alive without the precept once, but when the precept comes in spiritual power, sin revives and you die" (Romans 7:9). You die to all pride, and peace, and hope. You learn two solemn truths, which, when taken together, give you no rest till they mercifully shut you up to the only remedy. You know your helplessness; but you cannot sit down contented, for you know also your obligation and responsibility. You know your obligation; but you do not become legalists, for you know also your helplessness. You feel that you cannot obey; but this does not set all at rest, because you feel that you must obey. You feel that you must obey; but neither does this settle all, for you also feel that you cannot. It is "as if a man did flee from a lion, and a bear met him" (Amos 5:9). "Fear, and the pit, and the snare, are upon thee, O inhabitant of the earth. And it shall come to pass, that he that fleeth from the noise of the fear shall fall into the pit, and he that cometh out of the midst of the pit shall be taken in the snare" (Isaiah 24:17,18). In neither can you remain. You struggle from the pit of helplessness, because you feel you are bound over to obedience. You avoid the snare of legalism, because you know you cannot render the obedience required. Oh! what a source of unspeakable spiritual agony is there here! And so must it still remain, while the "inhabitant of the earth" looks not beyond the earth for deliverance. But look up, and lift up the head, O wearied sinner – look away from thyself; long enough has that poor self of thine agonized thee – truly thou wilt find no help there. Look "up into the hills whence cometh thine aid;" and then, baffled with thy weak and helpless attempts to "make thee a new heart and a new spirit," and prostrated, too, with the thought that it must be done, turn now from the terrible precept and listen, "Be still and know that it is God." Thus saith the Lord, "A new heart also will I give thee, and a new spirit will I put within thee."

## II. We come, then, to the consideration of the Promise.

1. And, *in the first place*, it is obvious that the *wisdom* of God is wonderfully exhibited in bringing in the promise at this precise point. If it had come sooner, the soul would not have been prepared to receive it. If it had come later, the soul would have been already given over to hopeless despair. The promise cannot go before the precept, for then the soul would not feel the need of it, and consequently its value would not be appreciated; and the promise cannot come after the prayer, for then prayer would have no foundation on which to ground her supplication. But the Lord, who knoweth the spirits which He hath made, and who "knoweth what is in man, and needeth not that any should testify unto Him" (John 2:25), seeth the end of a spiritual conflict from the beginning, and all the parts thereof in their order; and He comes in with His separate dealings at the proper time, and at the proper point. Thus, when the precept has done the preparatory work in righteous authority, the promise begins to reign on the throne of meekness and of mercy. The precept, like affliction, may not have seemed joyous, but rather grievous; nevertheless it hath wrought the humbling "fruits of righteousness," preparatory to the gifts of mercy, "in them that have been rightly exercised thereby" (Hebrews 12:11). The reign of the precept, if we look not beyond it – if we regard it as an end – may have been a reign of terror. Viewed, however, as a means, as the prerequisite merely to the "better things to be revealed," it has indeed been the reign of grace begun, although the grace as yet has been concealed. But now "the better things themselves" are brought to us by the promise. If the precept could have brought these things, "if that first covenant had," in this respect, "been faultless, then should no place have been sought for the second," no room for the promise. But because the precept has a tantalising "shadow" only "of the good things to come, and not the very image of these things," because it can never "make the comers thereunto perfect" – because "the law can make nothing perfect" – therefore "there is verily a disannulling of the commandment going before, for the weakness

and unprofitableness thereof,” to make way for “the bringing in of a better hope” – “He taketh away the first that He may establish the second;” and what the precept “cannot do, in that it is weak through the flesh, God” through His own Son can do, by the “promise, which in Him is yea and amen” (Compare Hebrews 7:18,19; 8:6-13; 10:9; Romans 8:3). Is the precept then useless? No, by no means. “Is it then against the promise of God? God forbid; for if there had been” a precept “given which could have given life, verily righteousness” and a new heart “should have been by” that precept. “Wherefore then serveth the” precept? “It was added because of transgressions,” and nature’s helplessness, “till the seed should come to whom the promise was made.” And its indispensable and blessed, though painful work, is this – that it “hath concluded all under sin” and helplessness, and proved this in their own experience and to their own consciences, “that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe. But before” the promise “came we were kept under the” precept, “shut up unto the” promise “which should afterwards be revealed. Wherefore the” precept “was our schoolmaster, to bring us to” the promise, and to Him who is “the surety of a covenant established upon better promises,” “that we might be justified by faith.” (See Galatians 3:19-24).

Thus there is the economy of a Mosaic dispensation, carried on preparatory to that of a Christian dispensation, in God’s dealings with every regenerated soul, as truly and really as in the history of the collective church. This preparation in the church was not more necessary than it is in the individual heart; and just as there was a Divine wisdom seen in emancipating the Church from the “tutors and governors,” at “the time appointed of the Father,” when “He sent forth His Son,” so there is a “fulness of the time” in the history of every believing sinner, when God sends forth His promise, even the promised Spirit of His Son, into the heart, as faithfully as He sent forth His Son into the world, emancipating the despairing soul as fully in the one case from the grievous bondage of the precept as He freed His people in the other from those beggarly elements, and from that “yoke of bondage which neither they nor their fathers were able to bear.” In the days of Moses the Church was not ready for the simplicity, the liberty, the manliness, and the spirituality of the Christian dispensation. And so, at the opening of the soul’s spiritual discipline, by reason of its childish ignorance and wayward pride, God introduces a dispensation of precept first; and when this has accomplished the work whereunto He sent it, at the proper point, and at the proper time, He brings in His dispensation of promise. “Surely this also cometh forth from the Lord of Hosts, who is wonderful in counsel and excellent in working.”

2. How is the *grace* of God adored by the fainting soul, when, after the conflict with the precept, the promise comes brightly into view. The *wisdom* of God is seen in the promise, coming at the very time when it was needed. But the grace of God is glorified in bringing in the very gift which was needed. “Make thee a new heart and a new spirit,” says the precept. “Ah,” replies the sinner, “that is not in my power;” I am carnal; sold under “sin,” “dead in trespasses and in sins.” I cannot frame my heart otherwise than it hath been formed by iniquity. “I am as an unclean thing, and all my righteousness are as filthy rags. I do fade as a leaf, and my iniquities, like the wind, have taken me away” (Isaiah 64:6). “A deceived heart hath turned me aside that I cannot deliver my soul” (Isaiah 44:20). In this helpless state is it a partial promise that is given? Is it a greater earnestness to try the work ourselves that God offers to communicate? Does He promise to help us out with the laborious achievement, if we will arise and put our hand to the work ourselves? Does He engage to fill up or supplement our deficiencies? Does He offer to overlook our failures, if only our attempt shall be sincere? Oh no! These may be the doctrines of a wretched Arminianism. These may be the desires of a half-humbled soul. But they are not the promises of God. These would be boons of little value; they would tend to no practical result, no saving issue. There would indeed be mockery in promises like these; for the very condition on which such offers are supposed to

be made, never could be realised in us till the whole work were done. But the very thing that we cannot make ourselves, God promises unconditionally to bestow, freely to bestow, without condition, without money, and without price. The precept, having done its painful work, seems, as it were, recalled, and the form being annulled, but the whole substance retained, it once more returns in the form and the language of peace and hope and joy. Like the same law given to Moses a second time, not amidst thunderings and lightnings, and darkness, and tempest, but amidst light, and peace, and favour, all God's goodness passing by before His servant, sheltered now in the cleft of the rock; so here, the preceptive form, which caused the tempest and the terror in the soul, being all done away, the very same substance, in all its integrity, is restored, but now beaming in the light and lustre of a free and gracious promise, "A new heart will I give unto you, a new spirit will I put within you." It is the very thing required, without restriction, and without abatement, offered freely and without condition, without money and without price.

3. But the *grace* of God is still more wonderfully glorified by the consideration, that, while this is the very thing which we need, and which God offers to bestow upon us, it is also the very thing which we are bound to render unto Him. And here, again, the good fruits of the precept as the forerunner of the promise come clearly into view. The precept teaches that we need this, for it teaches us experimentally our want and our helplessness. But when it teaches our responsibility, our obligation to make us a new heart and a new spirit, our crime and our guilt in not doing so, then we see, not the depth of wretchedness and misery merely, but the essence of rebellion in our inability. Oh! when the responsibility is really felt, as well as the helplessness, how does the manifold grace of God grow before the view of the admiring soul! If I feel that I would be better if I had a new heart, and, at the same time, feel my utter incapacity to make me a new heart and a right spirit, how gracious is the great God to come and offer me the very thing I need – the very thing that I cannot do without! But when, besides this, I feel my deep and unchangeable responsibility to make this new heart which yet I cannot make – when I feel my criminality in delaying every moment to do it, and my criminality in being unable to do it at all, either now or at any future time, oh! how shall I speak then of that grace which pities both my weakness and my guilt, and delivers me most fully from the death-bringing consequences of both. It was much when He "looked upon me in my low estate;" but it was more when He looked upon me in my lost estate. It was great grace when He, "in due time," pitied me as a weak and helpless sufferer, "yet without strength" (Romans 5:6); but it was greater far when He pitied me as a daring rebel, "a sinner, an enemy" (verses 8-10). Grace abounded when, sympathisingly, He gave me that new heart which I was unable to make; but grace much more abounded when, forgivingly, He gave me that new heart which I was bound to make, and guilty in my inability to make it. "Bless the Lord, O my soul, for He *healeth* all thy *diseases*; He also *forgiveth* all thine *iniquities*" (Psalm 103:2,3).

4. And now the *sovereignty* of Divine grace can be obscured or concealed no longer. This also the believer is taught to feel and to acknowledge by reason of his previous discipline under the precept. In learning his obligation and responsibility, he at the same time necessarily learned the majesty and kingly authority of God. We have seen that the precept teaches not only the soul's utter helplessness, but also the soul's entire subjection to the righteous justice of the Lawgiver. We are made to feel completely in God's power. We are exposed to His righteous anger, and incapable of effecting our deliverance from threatened wrath. The Lord maintains His right to command, though we have lost our power to obey. Whatever impotency we are groaning under, He is seen to reign as King. He has the destinies of all souls at His own free, unchallenged disposal. He is the Sovereign God: righteous in forsaking all if He will – righteous in pouring out wrath unto the uttermost. What an overpowering dignity is seen in His sovereign majesty, His uncontrollable right and power!

How exalted above all created excellence! How full of uncreated, all-governing glory – a glory terrible indeed, if no grace is mingled with it! But if this high Sovereign shall give His gracious promise, then how resplendent is His *sovereign* grace? If He who is the God of all majesty, and excellency, and dignity, and sovereign glory – if He, who ruleth among the armies above, and the inhabitants of this earth below, free and uncontrolled in all His ways, and in all His purposes – if He who is the sovereign disposer of ten thousand times ten thousand angels, and who is sovereign over *me*, as His precept and commandment do fully prove – if He, who as such a sovereign hath the fullest right to execute on me wrath to the uttermost – if He shall single out and distinguish me from among the mass of helpless, dying, daring rebels, and glorying in His words, shall cry in my astonished and delighted ear, “I, even I, am He that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own name’s sake,” and as “I am that I am,” “a new heart will I give unto thee, and a new spirit will I put within thee,” – oh! how shall my grateful but too straitened soul ever realise, or comprehend with all saints this mystery of sovereign grace, all made mine in the free and gracious promise of a sovereign God! Wondrous and adorable sovereignty of my God! I quarrel with it no more – I hail it with rejoicing. The Lord is my Sovereign; “the Lord is my Lawgiver; the Lord is my King;” as such “He will save me” (Isaiah 33:22). None can deny His right. Who shall condemn when the Sovereign God hath justified? (Romans 7:33). None can resist His power. Who shall stay His hand from working? Who shall say unto Him what doest Thou? How powerful, how authoritative is the grace of this holy Judge – the Sovereign King of Zion!

Behold then, O my soul, how God, by giving thee His precept, first prepares thee for His promise – opens thine eyes to behold His wisdom, enables thee to see His grace, His multitude of tender mercies, begets in thee a deep sense of His righteous authority, which, when the promise comes, is transferred with all its sovereign majesty, to that redeeming love which then excels in glory, and shines forth in dignity and splendour. Thus the creature is abased, and the sovereign God is exalted, and no flesh can glory in His presence. Thus there is glory to God in the highest, and grace to men. The grace is compassed with sovereign glory, and the glory is full of sovereign grace. “O Lord, we beseech Thee show us Thy glory!” Fulfil to us Thy gracious promise! “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.”

III. We have already made use of the Prayer. Indeed we are brought almost insensibly to the third and last link of this beautiful chain – the last line of this threefold cord.

And now, the office which prayer performs in this divine and spiritual economy will be obvious to all. It appropriately comes last, because it is grounded on, and takes its warrant from the promise, pleading the fulfilment of the promise that thereby the object of the precept may be gained. The prayer, when offered, grows out of the promise; the prayer, when answered, satisfies the precept.

The precept teaches man that he is helpless; the promise tells him there is help; the prayer secures the help.

The precept teaches man that he is responsible and guilty; the promise tells him there is forgiveness; the prayer obtains the pardon.

The precept teaches man God’s authority; the promise tells of God’s grace; the prayer tries and tests God’s sufficiency.

The precept teaches man his dependence; the promise declares dependence in God well placed; the prayer puts dependence on God accordingly.

The precept teaches man humility; the promise gives man hope; the prayer shows man’s trust.

The precept gives scope for God’s righteous justice; the promise gives scope for God’s faithfulness; the prayer gives scope for man’s faith.

In all cases, the prayer is necessary to complete the cycle; and if the precept and the promise do but graciously exercise the soul, the prayer will and cannot but follow. He who listens to the precept and feels his need, his helplessness, his responsibility, his crime, and then listens to the promise, "counting Him faithful who hath promised, who also will do it," – that man will and must have recourse to the prayer. He is shut up to prayer by every principle in his nature, by his sin and misery, by reason and conscience, by fear and hope. He must pray. He cannot help it. He is carried captive to prayer by a blessed necessity, a willing and therefore victorious and joyful necessity.

To the prayerless, therefore, there is here very clear and simple ground for self-examination and self-condemnation. Dear brethren, matters must stand thus with you; you have received aright neither the precept nor the promise of your God; for they always bring the prayer along with them. No man can put asunder what God hath joined; and therefore if you are living to the habitual neglect of earnest prayer, it must be because you have listened proudly to the precept, faithlessly to the promise. You are quarrelling with the precept, and denying your helplessness; and herein you falsify the word of God, your own experience, and the experience of all the saints and the spirits of just men made perfect. Or you are denying your responsibility and God's authority, "casting His cords away from you," and saying "Who is the Lord, that we should serve Him?" Or you are quarrelling with the promise; either contemning His wisdom by counting His promise worthless, or contemning His faithfulness by insinuating that His truth will fail. One or other of these fearful alternatives you must choose, if you are not habitually plying the throne of grace with prayer; and perhaps the guilt of all these crimes together is cleaving to your consciences. Oh how unprovoked and how God provoking must be the sin of prayerless lives? Only think how beautifully God has prepared the way for prayer. How much wisdom has He lavished upon this gracious arrangement! How safely and how gently has He contrived to carry you step by step to His throne of grace! The precept tells you that you must obey. Even God Himself cannot release you from that. It is a painful lesson; yet is it not well to know it, while hope yet remains, that it may become a practical lesson? It is mercy in God to speak out ere all hope is gone. The precept tells you of your helplessness, convinces you of this experimentally when you attempt to obey it, and find that you cannot "make a new heart and a new spirit." Surely it is good to know this truth also. Your ignorance of it would not make it less true, and your knowledge of it will at least turn you away from a fruitless source of labour, and should make you willing to try a "more excellent way" if it can be shown to you. And that this can be done, you need not doubt; for the promise now comes in to show that all may yet infallibly be well, pledging immutable things to your full deliverance and your eternal safety. "What could have been done more to His vineyard that He hath not done to it?" (Isaiah 5:4). Will you turn it all into contempt? Nay, rather, I should say, will you yourselves become a contempt and a hissing to all passers-by, through indolence, or pride, or unbelief, or any other miserable habit of your wretched hearts, the very presence of which should only add wings to your haste, and fervour to your prayer. What! shall God do so much for miserable guilty rebels, and will you do nothing, absolutely nothing, for yourselves? Will you not even arise and call upon your God for mercy? How *can* we persuade you? What arguments remain wherewith to ply you? To the authoritative voice of the taskmaster, and the pleasant voice of the charmer, ye are alike deaf. Ye are like sullen "children in the market-place." By the precept we "have mourned unto you and ye have not lamented;" by the promise we "have piped unto you and ye have not danced." One word more, and may the Lord bless it to your souls. Your guilt is now tremendous, because your case is now made so hopeful; and your case is thus hopeful because you have so little to do. Yea, you have only to plead with God to do *all* the work to your hands. Will you cast away eternal joy and court eternal agony by refusing *that*?

How calculated are these imperfect meditations to encourage the hearts of those who are Israelites indeed, princes with God in prayer! Let the precept, and the promise, and the prayer, be alike precious to you, and have your souls disciplined by a due attention to them all. Never think you can obey the precept in your own strength. Never think that your interest in the promise sets you free from the authority of the precept. Never think that prayer can supersede either the precept or the promise. Prayer is hypocrisy except with a view to the obedience of the precept. In all thy ways diligently search for the pure precepts of thy God, crying evermore, "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?" Fear not for thy weakness to know thy duty, though it should be thine in Divine command to remove mountains. "Who art thou, O great mountain? before Zerubbabel thou shalt become a plain, for He shall bring forth the headstone with shoutings, crying, "Grace, grace, unto it" (Zechariah 4:7). "His grace shall be sufficient for thee" (2 Corinthians 12:9). His promise is, that "as thy day, so shall thy strength be" (Deuteronomy 33:25). "Yet for all this will he be enquired of by the house of Israel to do it for them" (Ezekiel 36:37). Therefore, let thy duty, and thy weakness, and thy cheering promise, send thee to the throne, for "grace is help in thy time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). "Put him in remembrance" (Isaiah 43:26), saying, "Remember the words unto thy servant, upon which Thou hast caused me to hope" (Psalm 119:49). Then "Fear not thou worm Jacob; thou shalt thresh the mountains, and beat them small" (Isaiah 41:15).

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