

THE SAVING POWER OF THE GOSPEL

A SERMON BY

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"I am a debtor both to the Greeks and to the Barbarians, both to the wise and the unwise. So as much as in me is, I am ready to reach the Gospel to you that are at Rome also. For I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ; for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth, to the Jew first, and also to the Greek." (Romans 1:14—16.)

5T. Paul was not ashamed to preach the Gospel even at Rome; for great as was the power of Rome, the power of the Gospel was greater still. The Romans worshipped power, as the Greeks worshipped beauty. The question with them was, not so much how a thing looked, as what it could do. They wanted something strong, and despised anything weak. But the Gospel was not weak, whatever the preachers of it might be. It was not a thing to be despised, or to be ashamed of: it was a power, the greatest power that had ever appeared in the world. It could do the hardest thing in the world — change a sinner's heart.

It could do the grandest thing in the world — save a human soul. Rome had conquered the world by force of arms, and held it in unwilling subjection at her feet; but the Gospel effected its conquests without a blow, and laid its captives in willing subjection at the feet of their rightful King. Small need was there to be ashamed of preaching it anywhere and everywhere; and none felt that more strongly than the great Apostle of the Gentiles, Paul himself.

"It is the power of God unto salvation." In other words, it is the instrument through which God puts forth His power to save sinners. To understand this, we must ask, What is required for a sinner's salvation? And the answer to that question is twofold.

In the first place, the penalty of the broken law must be borne, the claims of Divine justice fully satisfied; so that He who is a righteous Judge, as well as a loving Father, may be able to carry out His gracious purpose of freely forgiving the sinner, without doing violence to His own high attributes, or abandoning His position as the moral Governor of the Universe; that He may be just and yet justify the sinner; that mercy and truth may meet together; that righteousness and peace may kiss each other. And this has been done. "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Not, as it is sometimes misrepresented, God loved the world so little, that it required all the influence of His Son to make Him willing to forgive us; but, He loved us so much, that rather than let us perish in our sins, He was willing to give up His own Son to be "made sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him" — to deliver us "from the curse of the law, by being made a curse for us." This office the Son willingly undertook. "Lo, I come, to do thy will, God." The Good Shepherd was willing to give His life for the sheep; and for the joy that was set before Him — the joy of saving them — He endured the cross, despising the shame. By that finished work, of perfect righteousness, and atoning sacrifice, the great gulf which sin had placed between us and God was bridged over, a way of access was opened, every difficulty on the ground of God's moral government was removed, and the prodigal might at any moment return to his Father's house, and be sure of such a welcome as only such a Father could give.

But is this all that is needed for man's salvation? Assuredly not. For man's ruin does not entirely consist in his having incurred the penalty of disobedience.

"In Holy Scripture sin is set before us in a twofold aspect. First and chiefly, it is a transgression against God. Secondly, it is a disease in man. As a transgression, it is opposed to God's authority. As a disease, it is opposed to man's happiness. As a transgression, it is penal guilt requiring pardon. As a disease, it is moral corruption requiring cure. Now, if we confine our views of sin to either of these, to the neglect or disparagement of the other, we make a limited and false estimate of the evil; and, as a matter of inevitable consequence, we shall embrace a correspondingly limited and false estimate of the remedy. If we look upon sin as exclusively a transgression against God, irrespective of any effect upon man's happiness, then the only remedy we look for is satisfaction made to God, that He may be just while He pardons the transgressor. On the other hand, if we look at sin as exclusively a disease in man, irrespective of any guilt in the sight of God, then all the remedy we look for is a moral change in the man, bringing him into healthy harmony with God.

In either case, we have a limited and false view of both the evil and the remedy. The one makes Christianity entirely objective — a transaction in the Divine government. The other makes Christianity entirely subjective — a transaction in the human character. Each has a truth in it, but each, if taken as a whole, is wrong, because it has only a part of the truth in it. You are both guilty and diseased; penalty guilty and morally diseased; both disobedient to God as your Sovereign, and alienated from God as your Father. Do you look to Jesus for a cure of your disease? You do well. But look to Him for the expiation of your guilt also? Do you look to

Jesus for the expiation of your guilt? You do well. But look to Him for the cure of your disease also. There is both value and virtue in Jesus — value in the Divine Government, virtue in the human character: value to procure pardon, virtue to restore health." * "The Atonement and Negative Theology:" a Communion Address. By the Reverend Dr. M'Neile, Canon of Chester. Wertheim and Company, London.

It is to accomplish this second part of a sinner's salvation — the curing of his spiritual disease — that the Gospel is the appointed instrument. Christ himself was the power of God to expiate his guilt. The Gospel of Christ is the power of God to restore him to health.

In order to see the perfect fitness of this instrument for its work, we must inquire what is the nature of that change in the sinner's heart, which St. Paul here calls "salvation." To this inquiry, no more simple or comprehensive reply can be given, than to say, that it is his restoration to the love of God. The loss of that was his ruin; the recovery of that is his salvation. When he lost that, he lost everything; when he regains that, he regains everything. For the whole law is briefly comprehended in one word — "Thou shalt love;" and obedience to that law constitutes "healthy harmony with God."

How then can a sinner be brought to love his offended Creator? How can his alienation be put an end to, and his heart be reunited to the heart of God? This is the grand question.

Let us ask first, whether any fear of punishment, or any hope of reward, can produce the required love. Our very instinct at once replies — Impossible; it is not in the nature of things, that either of them should ever produce love to any one. Suppose you were threatened with instant death, unless you would immediately love some one, whom, until that moment, you had cordially hated, could you make yourself love him, to escape the danger?

No, you could not. You could make yourself say anything, or do anything; but you could not make yourself love him, even to save your life. Or suppose, instead of being threatened with death, you were offered a million of money, if you would love him could you make yourself love him, to gain the money? No, you could not; even though you were the most covetous man that ever lived. No more could you make yourself love God, to escape hell or to gain heaven, though the horrors of the one and the glories of the other were open before your eyes. I am not saying that the fear of hell and the hope of heaven can have nothing to do with it. They may be made use of by the Spirit of God in preparing the way for your salvation; but neither of them could by any possibility save you, because neither of them could ever make you really love God.

What can, then? Only one thing! And that is — your being made to see and feel, that God loves you. "We love Him because He first loved us." No sinner ever was, or ever could be, brought to love Him because of anything else. And no sinner ever was, or ever could be, convinced of that in his heart, without loving Him.

But then comes the question — How is he to be convinced of that? What proof can be strong enough to reach his heart, and make him feel that the God, against whom he has sinned, does actually love him, even when he is dead in trespasses and sins? And the answer is — The Cross of Christ. "God so loved the world, that He gave his only begotten Son;" "God commended his love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us;" "Herein perceive we (we sinners) the love of God, because He (Christ) laid down His life for us."

And until we do perceive His love thereby, it will avail us nothing to fancy we perceive it in anything else. No other proof of His love, real or imaginary, will ever win back a sinner's heart to love his offended Creator. In his case, "Herein is love, [and herein only], not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and gave His Son to be the propitiation for our sins."

Need we say more to show how the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation? For what is the Gospel, but just the declaration of that truth — the story of the cross — the good news, that "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them!" This is the word, which, even in the foreshadow wings of the Old Testament, was "able to make wise unto salvation," and which well deserves to be called the Gospel, for no such wondrous story has ever been told in all the universe, as that which shows us, ruined sinners, "what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us" — what an effort of love He hath put forth — in order that we might be restored to our position in the family, and be called "the sons of God."

But if the Gospel be thus the power of God unto salvation, why does it not save all who come within its sound? Our text gives the reason: it is the power of God unto salvation — not to every one that hears it, but, to every one that believeth it. It can no more save those who refuse to believe it, than a medicine can cure those who refuse to take it. When a physician tells a sick man that a certain medicine is an infallible remedy for his disease, he does not mean that the patient will be cured merely by being told how it acts, or hearing marvellous accounts of the cures it has effected in other cases, however true they may be, or however firmly he may believe them.

* The word Gospel is formed from the words, good and spel — which is still sometimes used to mean a story; and therefore is an exact translation of the original, which is formed from two similar words.

All that can never do him the slightest good, unless he takes it himself. Just so, multitudes of people believe a great deal about the Gospel, without believing the Gospel for themselves, and consequently without being saved. They are not infidels in the ordinary sense of the word; they have no doubt that all the Bible says is true; but it is quite certain that they cannot believe the Gospel, because they are evidently not saved by it; for, whatever the world may say, "the children of God are manifest and the children of the devil." The fact is, they believe something, which they mistake for the Gospel, but which, not being the Gospel, has no power to save them.

If salvation by faith meant salvation as the reward of faith, we might charitably hope that a mistake as to the nature of the message received would be overlooked, and the sinner be saved, provided he really believed what he supposed to be the Gospel. But if we are to be saved by the Gospel, it becomes a matter of life and death, whether what we believe is the Gospel or not. If a sick man was to be cured as a reward for taking his medicine, we might hope that he would receive the benefit, provided he took what he supposed to be the prescribed remedy. But if he is to be cured by the medicine, then, to take the wrong medicine can do him no possible good, but may do him a great deal of harm.

Now the mistake most frequently made about the Gospel is to understand it as conveying a promise that if we will love God, then He will love us in return.*

But believing this could never save any one; because there is nothing in it to produce the required love. We are met at the outset by the demand of an impossible condition, namely, that we should make ourselves love God; which we can no more do, to gain His love, than to gain a sum of money, or to escape a threatened punishment. That is not the Gospel. The Gospel is, that God does love us, even while we are dead in trespasses and sins; that He so loved us, as to have given His Son to die for us, and, on the ground of that, asks us to love Him in return; that He is reconciled to us, and beseeches us to be reconciled to Him. In this there is saving power. In such a knowledge of God "stands our eternal life." No one can possibly believe this without being saved. Once believe in God's forgiving love to you through Christ, and you can no more help loving Him than you can force yourself to do so by any other means. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved;" not as a benefit conferred upon you for believing on Him, but as a healing work wrought in you by believing on Him.

* The promise given in John 14:23, is not the Gospel, but an assurance to those who have already been saved by believing the Gospel. The love there spoken of is approving, not forgiving, love.

"It is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth" — to every one, however good — to everyone, however bad. Nothing less is needed for the best; nothing more is needed for the worst. As regards our fall from God, "there is no difference, for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God:" but as regards the extent to which sin has been permitted to develop itself, and produce its natural effect upon the character and conduct, there is a vast difference between one and another. Was there no difference between the corpse of the young damsel whom Jesus took by the hand and lifted up, and the corpse of Lazarus, whose very grave his dearest friends shrank from approaching? Yet the one was as dead as the other, and needed the same Divine power to bid it live.

To the best, then, we say — The power of the Gospel is needed to save you. "He that hath not the Son of God hath not life." He may have anything else, but he cannot have life. He may be a lovely picture, an exquisite statue, nay, a useful machine, but he is not a living spirit. However deservedly you may have the affection and esteem of your fellow-men, however you may be deceived yourself by the same appearances which deceive them, unless "the love of God be shed abroad in your hearts, by the Holy Ghost" enabling you to believe the Gospel of the grace of God, you will inevitably die in your sins.

* Hebrews 6:17. Observe the word "wherein" — that is, with reference to the state of feeling amongst men about the sanctity of an oath. God's oath could not make His word more certain, but it conveys a stronger impression of its certainty to our minds.

And to the worst we say — The power of the Gospel is able to save you. "The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from all sin." "He saves to the uttermost all that come unto God by Him." Cannot you believe this? Why not? Do you think it impossible that God can love such a guilty, polluted sinner as you? But He says that He does! He declares, that it was because He so loved the world, (and does not that include you!) that He gave up His only begotten Son. Nay more, in condescension to the weakness of your faith, He confirms it with an oath, that by two immutable things, (His word and His oath,) in either of which it was impossible for God to lie, you might have the strongest assurance of His forgiving love. Nay, He reasons with you about it: "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." Nay, He beseeches you not to turn away from Him: "We ate ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you, in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God." And, lastly, He reminds you most solemnly, that by refusing to believe His Word, you actually "make Him a liar"!

But do you still find it hard to believe? Do you experience some strange and unaccountable difficulty in receiving God's plainest and strongest assurances? Do you feel that the Gospel only rests on your mind as a theory, which you cannot apply to yourself with realizing power? Then, here is a prayer ready made for you: "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief:" — a prayer, disturbing enough to those who have framed compact systems of their own from certain extracts out of God's Word, but instinctively expressing the deepest want of a soul just struggling into life. You know you ought to just believe: you want to

believe, and yet you cannot believe! All utterly illogical and contradictory. Never mind that! Just ask God for His Spirit, to help you to believe. "By grace are ye saved, through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God." Ask Him to bestow that gift upon you. Ask Him that the Gospel may come to you, "not in word only, but in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance;" that you may "hear the voice of the Son of God, and live."

"O Son of God, to thee I look;
For me unseal that heavenly book

Which testifies of thee;
That Spirit may I now receive,

Who teaches sinners to believe:
Blest Spirit, teach Thou me!"

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