

HOLINESS.

ITS NATURE, HINDRANCES, DIFFICULTIES, AND ROOTS.

BEING

A SERIES OF PAPERS ON THE SUBJECT.

BY

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WITH PREFACE, INTRODUCTORY ESSAY, AND SUPPLEMENTARY EXTRACTS
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PREFACE TO ENLARGED EDITION.

THE volume now in the reader's hands is an enlarged edition of a small work which appeared several years ago, and has been kindly received by the Christian public. The present volume contains so much additional matter, that it is double the size of its predecessor. In fact, the work is half new.

I venture to think that the papers contained in this volume will be found helpful by all who take interest in the subject of Scriptural holiness. I am much mistaken if they do not throw broad light on the real nature of holiness, and the temptations and difficulties which all must expect who follow it. Above all, I hope they will help to bring forward the grand truth that union with Christ is the root of holiness, and will show young believers what immense encouragement Jesus Christ holds out to all who strive to be holy.

Concerning the present position of the whole subject of holiness among English Christians, I have little to add to the introductory essay which appeared in the original edition, and now follows this preface. The older I grow the more I am convinced that real practical holiness does not receive the attention it deserves, and that there is a most painfully low standard of living among many high professors of religion in the land. But, at the same time, I am increasingly convinced that the zealous efforts of some well-meaning persons to promote a higher standard of spiritual life are often not "according to knowledge," and are really calculated to do more harm than good. Let me explain what I mean.

It is easy to get crowds together for what are called "Higher life" and "Consecration" meetings. Any one knows that, who has watched human nature, and read descriptions of American camp-meetings, and studied the curious phenomena of the "Religious affections."* Sensational and exciting addresses by strange preachers or by women, loud singing, hot rooms, crowded tents, the constant sight of strong semi-religious feeling in the faces of all around you for several days, late hours, long protracted meetings, public profession of experience,—all this kind of thing is very interesting at the time, and seems to do good. But is the good real, deeply-rooted, solid, lasting? That is the point And I should like to ask a few questions about it

Do those who attend these meetings become more holy, meek, unselfish, kind, good tempered, self-denying, and Christ-like at home? Do they become more content with their position in life, and more free from restless craving after something different from that which God has given them? Do fathers, mothers, husbands, and other relatives and friends, find them more pleasant and easy to live with? Can they enjoy a quiet Sunday and quiet means of grace without noise, heat, and excitement? Above all, do they grow in charity, and especially in charity towards those who do not agree with them in every jot and tittle of their religion?

These are serious and searching questions, and deserve serious consideration. I hope I am as anxious to promote real practical holiness in the land as any one. I admire and willingly acknowledge the zeal and earnestness of many with whom I cannot co-operate who are trying to promote it. But I cannot withhold a growing

* See the work of President Edwards on this subject.

suspicion that the great “mass-meetings” of the present day, for the ostensible object of promoting spiritual life, do not tend to promote private home religion, private Bible-reading, private prayer, private usefulness, and private walking with God. If they are of any real value, they ought to make people better husbands, and wives, and fathers, and mothers, and sons, and daughters, and brothers, and sisters, and masters, and mistresses, and servants. But I should like to have clear proofs that they do. I only know it is far easier to be a Christian among singing, praying, sympathizing Christians in a public room, than to be a consistent Christian in a quiet, retired, out-of-the-way, uncongenial home. The first position is one in which there is a deal of *nature* to help us: the second is one which can not be well filled without *grace*. But, alas, many talk now-a-days about “*Consecration*,” who seem to be ignorant of the “first principles of the oracles of God” about “*Conversion*.”

I close this preface with the sorrowful feeling that probably some who read it will not agree with me. To the young especially I can see that the great gatherings of the so-called “spiritual life” movement are sure to be attractive. They naturally like zeal, and stir, and enthusiasm, and they say, “Where is the harm?” Be it so: we must agree to differ. When I was as young as they are, perhaps I should have thought as they do. When they are as old as I am, they will very likely agree with me.

To each and all of my readers, I say in conclusion, let us exercise charity in our judgments of one another. Towards those who think holiness is to be promoted by the modern, so-called “spiritual life” movement, I feel nothing but charity. If they do good, I am thankful. Towards myself and those who agree with me, I ask them to feel charity in return. The last day will show who is right and who is wrong. In the meantime, I am quite certain that to exhibit bitterness and coldness toward those who cannot conscientiously work with us, is to prove ourselves very ignorant of real holiness.

J. C. RYLE.

CHRIST'S GREATEST TROPHY.

“And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on Him, saying, If Thou be Christ, save Thyself and us.

“But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?”

“And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this Man hath done nothing amiss.

“And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom.

“And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with Me in paradise.”—LUKE xxiii. 39–43.

THERE are few passages in the New Testament which are more familiar to men's ears than the verses which head this chapter. They contain the well-known story of “the penitent thief.”

And it is right and good that these verses should be well known. They have comforted many troubled minds; they have brought peace to many uneasy consciences; they have been a healing balm to many wounded hearts; they have been a medicine to many sin-sick souls; they have smoothed down not a few dying pillows. Wherever the Gospel of Christ is preached, they will always be honoured, loved, and had in remembrance.

I wish to say something about these verses. I will try to unfold the leading lessons which they are meant to teach. I cannot see the peculiar mental state of anyone into whose hands this paper may fall. But I can see truths in this passage which no man can ever know too well. Here is the greatest trophy which Christ ever won.

I. First of all, we are meant to learn from these verses, *Christ's power and willingness to save sinners.*

This is the main doctrine to be gathered from the history of the penitent thief. It teaches us that which ought to be music in the ears of all who hear it—it teaches us that Jesus Christ is “mighty to save.” (Isa. lxiii. 1.)

I ask anyone to say whether a case could look more hopeless and desperate than that of this penitent thief once did?

He was a *wicked* man—a malefactor—a thief, if not a murderer. We know this, for such only were crucified. He was suffering a just punishment for breaking the laws. And as he had lived wicked, so he seemed determined to die wicked—for at first, when he was crucified, he railed on our Lord.

And he was a *dying man*. He hung there, nailed to a cross, from which he was never to come down alive. He had no longer power to stir hand or foot. His hours were numbered: the grave was ready for him. There was but a step between him and death.

If ever there was a soul hovering on the brink of hell, it was the soul of this thief. If ever there was a case that seemed lost, gone, and past recovery, it was his. If ever there was a child of Adam whom the devil made sure of as his own, it was this man.

But see now what happened. He ceased to rail and blaspheme, as he had done at the first: he began to speak in another manner altogether. He turned to our blessed Lord in prayer. He prayed Jesus to “remember him when he came into His kingdom.” He asked that his soul might be cared for, his sins pardoned, and himself thought of in another world. Truly this was a wonderful change!

And then mark what kind of answer he received. Some would have said he was too wicked a man to be saved; but it was not so. Some would have fancied it was too late: the door was shut, and there was no room for mercy; but it proved not too late at all. The Lord Jesus returned him an immediate answer—spoke kindly to him—assured him he should be with Him that day in paradise—pardoned him completely—cleansed him thoroughly from his sins—received him graciously—justified him freely—raised him from the gates of hell, gave him a title to glory. Of all the multitude of saved souls, none ever received so glorious an assurance of his own salvation as did this penitent thief. Go over the whole list, from Genesis to Revelation, and you will find none who had such words spoken to him as these—“Today shalt thou be with Me in paradise.”

I believe the Lord Jesus never gave so complete a proof of His power and will to save, as He did upon this occasion. In the day when He seemed most weak, He showed that He was a strong deliverer. In the hour when His body was racked with pain, He showed that He could feel tenderly for others. At the time when He Himself was dying, He conferred on a sinner eternal life.

Now, have I not a right to say, Christ is “able to save to the uttermost them that come unto God by Him”? (Heb. vii. 25.) Behold the proof of it. If ever sinner was too far gone to be saved, it was this thief. Yet he was plucked as a brand from the fire.

Have I not a right to say, Christ will receive any poor sinner who comes to Him with the prayer of faith, and cast out none? Behold the proof of it. If ever there was one that seemed too bad to be received, this was the man. Yet the door of mercy was wide open even for him.

Have I not a right to say, By grace ye may be saved through faith, not of works: fear not, only believe? Behold the proof of it. This thief was never baptized; he belonged to no visible Church; he never received the Lord’s Supper; he never did any work for Christ; he never gave money to Christ’s cause! But he had faith, and so he was saved.

Have I not a right to say, The youngest faith will save a man's soul, if it only be true? Behold the proof of it. This man's faith was only one day old; but it led him to Christ, and preserved him from hell.

Why then should any man or woman despair with such a passage as this in the Bible? Jesus is a Physician who can cure hopeless cases. He can quicken dead souls, and call the things which be not as though they were.

Never should any man or woman despair! Jesus is still the same now that He was eighteen hundred years ago. The keys of death and hell are in His hand. When He opens none can shut.*

What though your sins be more in number than the hairs of your head? What though your evil habits have grown with your growth, and strengthened with your strength? What though you have hitherto hated good, and loved evil, all the days of your life? These things are sad indeed; but there is hope, even for you. Christ can heal you: Christ can raise you from your low estate. Heaven is not shut against you. Christ is able to admit you, if you will humbly commit your soul into His hands.

Are your sins forgiven? If not, I set before you this day a full and free salvation. I invite you to follow the steps of the penitent thief: come to Christ and live. I tell you that Jesus is very pitiful, and of tender mercy. I tell you He can do everything that your soul requires. Though your sins be as scarlet, He can make them white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. Why should you not be saved as well as another? Come unto Christ and live.

Are you a true believer? If you are, you ought to glory in Christ. Glory not in your own faith, your own feelings, your own knowledge, your own prayers, your own amendment, your own diligence. Glory in nothing but Christ. Alas! The best of us know but little of that merciful and mighty Saviour. We do not exalt Him and glory in Him enough. Let us pray that we may see more of the fulness there is in Him.

Do you ever try to do good to others? If you do, remember to tell them about Christ. Tell the young, tell the poor, tell the aged, tell the ignorant, tell the sick, tell the dying—tell them all about Christ. Tell them of His power, and tell them of His love; tell them of His doings, and tell them of His feelings; tell them what He has done for the chief of sinners; tell them what He is willing to do to the last day of time: tell it them over and over again. Never be tired of speaking of Christ. Say to them broadly and fully, freely and unconditionally, unreservedly and undoubtingly, “Come unto Christ, as the penitent thief did: come unto Christ, and you shall be saved.”

* “O Saviour, what a precedent is this of Thy free and powerful grace! Where Thou wilt give, what unworthiness can bar us from Thy mercy? When Thou wilt give, what time can prejudice our vocation? Who can despair of Thy goodness, when he, that in the morning was posting to hell, is in the evening with Thee in Paradise?”—*Bishop Hall*.

II. The second lesson we are meant to learn from this passage is this.—*If some are saved in the very hour of death, others are not.*

This is a truth that never ought to be passed over, and I dare not leave it unnoticed. It is a truth that stands out plainly in the sad end of the other malefactor, and is only too often forgotten. Men forget that there were “two thieves.”

What became of the other thief who was crucified? Why did he not turn from his sin, and call upon the Lord? Why did he remain hardened and impenitent? Why was he not saved? It is useless to try to answer such questions. Let us be content to take the fact as we find it, and see what it is meant to teach us.

We have no right whatever to say this thief was a worse man than his companion: there is nothing to prove it. Both plainly were wicked men; both were receiving the due reward of their deeds; both hung by the side of our Lord Jesus Christ; both heard Him pray for His murderers, both saw Him suffer patiently. But while one repented, the other remained hardened; while one began to pray, the other went on railing; while one was converted in his last hours, the other died a bad man, as he had lived; while one was taken to paradise, the other went to his own place—the place of the devil and his angels.

Now these things are written for our warning. There is warning, as well as comfort in these verses, and that is a very solemn warning too.

They tell me loudly, that though some may repent and be converted on their deathbeds, it does not at all follow that all will. A deathbed is not always a saving time.

They tell me loudly, that two men may have the same opportunities of getting good for their souls, may be placed in the same position, see the same things, and hear the same things—and yet only one of the two shall take advantage of them, repent, believe and be saved.

They tell me, above all, that repentance and faith are the gifts of God and are not in a man’s own power; and that if anyone flatters himself he can repent at his own time, choose his own season, seek the Lord when he pleases, and, like the penitent thief, be saved at the very last—he may find at length he is greatly deceived.

And it is good and profitable to bear this in mind. There is an immense amount of delusion in the world on this very subject. I see many allowing life to slip away, quite unprepared to die. I see many allowing that they ought to repent, but always putting off their own repentance. And I believe one grand reason is, that most men suppose they can turn to God just when they like! They wrest the parable of the labourer in the vineyard, which speaks of the eleventh hour, and use it as it never was meant to be used. They dwell on

the pleasant part of the verses I am now considering, and forget the rest. They talk of the thief that went to paradise, and was saved, and they forget the one who died as he had lived—and was lost.*

I entreat every man of common sense who reads this paper, to take heed that he does not fall into this mistake.

Look at the history of men in the Bible, and see how often these notions I have been speaking of are contradicted. Mark well how many proofs there are that two men may have the same light offered them, and only one use it; and that no one has a right to take liberties with God's mercy, and presume he will be able to repent just when he likes.

Look at Saul and David. They lived about the same time; they rose from the same rank in life; they were called to the same position in the world; they enjoyed the ministry of the same prophet, Samuel; they reigned the same number of years!—Yet one was saved, and the other lost.

Look at Sergius Paulus and Gallio. They were both Roman governors; they were both wise and prudent men in their generation; they both heard the Apostle Paul preach! But one believed and was baptised—the other cared for none of those things.” (Acts xviii. 17.)

Look at the world around you. See what is going on continually under your eyes. Two sisters will often attend the same ministry, listen to the same truths, hear the same sermons; and yet only one shall be converted unto God, while the other remains totally unmoved. Two friends often read the same religious book: one is so moved by it, that he gives up all for Christ; the other sees nothing at all in it, and continues the same as before. Hundreds have read Doddridge's *Rise and Progress* without profit: with Wilberforce it was one of the beginnings of spiritual life. Thousands have read Wilberforce's *Practiced View of Christianity* and laid it down again unaltered: from the time Legh Richmond read it he became another man. No man has any warrant for saying, “Salvation is in my own power.”

I do not pretend to explain these things. I only put them before you as great facts; and I ask you to consider them well.

* “He that puts off his repentance and seeking for pardon to the very last, in reliance upon this example, does but tempt God, and turn that to his own poison, which God intended for better ends.

“The mercies of God are never recorded in Scripture for man's presumption, and the failings of men never for imitation.”—*Lightfoot. Sermon.* 1684.

“Most ungrateful and foolish is the conduct of those who take encouragement from the penitent thief to put off repentance to a dying moment; most ungrateful in perverting the grace of their Redeemer into an occasion of renewing their provocations against Him; and most foolish to imagine that what our Lord did in so singular circumstances, is to be drawn into an ordinary precedent.”—*Doddridge.*

You must not misunderstand me. I do not want to discourage you. I say these things in all affection, to give you warning of danger. I do not say them to drive you back from heaven.—I say them rather to draw you on, and bring you to Christ, while He can be found.

I want you to beware of presumption. Do not abuse God's mercy and compassion. Do not continue in sin, I beseech you, and think you can repent, and believe, and be saved, just when you like, when you please, when you will, and when you choose. I would always set before you an open door. I would always say, "While there is life there is hope." But if you would be wise, put nothing off that concerns your soul.

I want you to beware of letting slip good thoughts and godly convictions, if you have them. Cherish them and nourish them, lest you lose them for ever. Make the most of them, lest they take to themselves wings and flee away. Have you an inclination to begin praying? Put it in practice at once. Have you an idea of beginning really to serve Christ? Set about it at once. Are you enjoying any spiritual light? See that you live up to your light. Trifle not with opportunities, lest the day come when you will want to use them, and not be able. Linger not, lest you become wise too late.

You may say, perhaps, "It is never too late to repent." I answer—"That is right enough: but late repentance is seldom true. And I say further, you cannot be certain if you put off repenting, you will repent at all."

You may say, "Why should I be afraid?—the penitent thief was saved." I answer—"That is true: but look again at the passage which tells you that the other thief was LOST."

III. The third lesson we are meant to learn from these verses is this: *The Spirit always leads saved souls in one way.*

This is a point that deserves particular attention, and is often overlooked. Men look at the broad fact that the penitent thief was saved when he was dying, and they look no further.

They do not consider the evidences this thief left behind him. They do not observe the abundant proof he gave of the work of the Spirit in his heart. And these proofs I wish to trace out. I wish to show you that the Spirit always works in one way, and that—whether He converts a man in an hour, as He did the penitent thief, or whether by slow degrees, as He does others—the steps by which He leads souls to heaven are always the same.

Let me try to make this clear to everyone who reads this paper. I want to put you on your guard. I want you to shake off the common notion that there is some easy, royal road to heaven from a dying bed. I want you thoroughly to understand, that every saved soul goes through the same experience, and that the leading principles of the penitent thief's religion were just the same as those of the oldest saint that ever lived.

(a) See then, for one thing, *how strong was the faith* of this man.

He called Jesus “Lord.” He declared his belief that He would have a “kingdom.” He believed that He was able to give him eternal life and glory, and in this belief prayed to Him. He maintained His innocence of all the charges brought against Him. “This Man.” said he, “hath done nothing amiss.” Others perhaps may have *thought* the Lord innocent—none *said* so openly but this poor dying man.

And when did all this happen? It happened when the whole nation had denied Christ—shouting, “Crucify Him, crucify Him: we have no king but Cæsar,”—when the chief priests and Pharisees had condemned and found Him “guilty of death,”—when even His own disciples had forsaken Him and fled—when He was hanging, faint, bleeding, and dying on the cross, numbered with transgressors, and accounted accursed. This was the hour when the thief believed in Christ, and prayed to Him! Surely such faith was never seen since the world began.*

The disciples had seen mighty signs and miracles. They had seen the dead raised with a word—and lepers healed with a touch—the blind receiving sight—the dumb made to speak—the lame made to walk. They had seen thousands fed with a few loaves and fishes. They had seen their Master walking on the water as on dry land. They had all of them heard Him speak as no man ever spake, and hold out promises of good things yet to come. They had some of them had a foretaste of His glory in the mount of transfiguration. Doubtless their faith was “the gift of God,” but still they had much to help it.

* “I know not that since the creation of the world there ever was a more remarkable and striking example of faith?”—*Calvin's Commentary on the Gospels*.

“A great faith that can see the sun under so thick a cloud; that can discover a Christ, a Saviour, under such a poor, scorned, despised, crucified Jesus, and call Him Lord.

“A great faith that could see Christ's kingdom through His cross, and grave, and death, and when there was so little sign of a kingdom, and pray to be remembered in that kingdom.”—*Lightfoot. Sermon*. 1684.

“The penitent thief was the first confessor of Christ's heavenly kingdom—the first martyr who bore testimony to the holiness of His sufferings—and the first apologist for His oppressed innocence.”—*Quesnel on the Gospel*.

“Probably there are few saints in glory who ever honoured Christ more illustriously than this dying sinner.”—*Doddridge*.

“Is this the voice of a thief or a disciple? Give me leave, O Saviour, to borrow Thine own words, ‘Verily I have not found so great faith, no not in Israel? He saw Thee hanging miserably by him, and yet styles Thee Lord. He saw Thee dying, and yet talks of Thy kingdom. He felt himself dying, yet talks of a future remembrance. O faith, stronger than death, which can look beyond the cross at a crown; beyond dissolution at a remembrance of life and glory! Which of Thine eleven were heard to speak so gracious a word to Thee in these Thy last pangs?’”—*Bishop Hall*.

The dying thief saw none of the things I have mentioned. He only saw our Lord in agony, and in weakness, in suffering, and in pain. He saw Him undergoing a dishonourable punishment; deserted, mocked, despised, blasphemed. He saw Him rejected by all the great, and wise, and noble of His own people—His strength dried up like a potsherd, His life drawing nigh to the grave. (Ps. xxii. 15; lxxxviii. 3.) He saw no sceptre, no royal crown, no outward dominion, no glory, no majesty, no power, no signs of might. And yet the dying thief believed, and looked forward to Christ's kingdom.

Would you know if you have the Spirit? Then mark the question I put to you this day,—Where is your faith in Christ?

(b) See, for another thing, *what a right sense of sin* the thief had. He says to his companion, "We receive the due reward of our deeds." He acknowledges his own ungodliness, and the justice of his punishment. He makes no attempt to justify himself, or excuse his wickedness. He speaks like a man humbled and self-abased by the remembrance of past iniquities. This is what all God's children feel. They are ready to allow they are poor, hell-deserving sinners. They can say with their hearts as well as with their lips, "We have left undone the things that we ought to have done, and we have done those things that we ought not to have done, and there is no health in us."

Would you know if you have the Spirit? Then mark my question.—Do you feel your sins?

(c) See, for another thing, *what brotherly love* the thief showed to his companion. He tried to stop his railing and blaspheming, and bring him to a better mind. "Dost not thou fear God," he says, "seeing thou art in the same condemnation?" There is no surer mark of grace than this! Grace shakes a man out of his selfishness, and makes him feel for the souls of others. When the Samaritan woman was converted, she left her water-pot, and ran to the city, saying, "Come, see a man that told me all things that ever I did: is not this the Christ?" (John iv. 28, 29.) When Saul was converted, immediately he went to the synagogue at Damascus and testified to his brethren of Israel that "Christ was the Son of God." (Acts ix. 20.)

Would you know if you have the Spirit? Then where is your charity and love to souls?

In one word, you see in the penitent thief a finished work of the Holy Ghost. Every part of the believer's character may be traced in him. Short as his life was after conversion, he found time to leave abundant evidence that he was a child of God. His faith, his prayer, his humility, his brotherly love, are unmistakable witnesses of the reality of his repentance. He was not a penitent in name only, but in deed and in truth.

Let no man therefore think, because the penitent thief was saved, that men can be saved without leaving any evidence of the Spirit's work. Let such a one consider well what evidences this man left behind, and take care.

It is mournful to hear what people sometimes say about what they call *deathbed evidences*. It is perfectly fearful to observe how little satisfies some persons, and how easily they can persuade themselves that their friends have gone to heaven. They will tell you when their relative is dead and gone, that “he made such a beautiful prayer one day—or that he talked so well—or that he was so sorry for his old ways and intended to live so differently if he got better—or that he craved nothing in this world—or that he liked people to read to him, and pray with him.” And because they have this to go upon, they seem to have a comfortable hope that he is saved! Christ may never have been named—the way of salvation may never have been in the least mentioned. But it matters not; there was a little talk of religion, and so they are content!

Now I have no desire to hurt the feelings of anyone who reads this paper, but I must and will speak plainly upon this subject.

Once for all, let me say, that as a general rule, nothing is so unsatisfactory as *deathbed evidences*. The things that men say, and the feelings they express when sick and frightened, are little to be depended on. Often, too often, they are the result of fear, and do not spring from the ground of the heart. Often, too often, they are things said by rote; caught from the lips of ministers and anxious friends, but evidently not felt. And nothing can prove all this more clearly than the well-known fact, that the great majority of persons who make promises of amendment on a sick bed, and then for the first time talk about religion, if they recover, go back to sin and the world.

When a man has lived a life of thoughtlessness and folly, I want something more than a few fair words and good wishes to satisfy me about his soul, when he comes to his deathbed. It is not enough for me that he will let me read the Bible to him, and pray by his bedside—that he says, “he has not thought so much as he ought of religion, and he thinks he should be a different man if he got better.” All this does not content me: it does not make me feel happy about his state. It is very well as far as it goes, but it is not conversion. It is very well in its way, but it is not faith in Christ. Until I see conversion, and faith in Christ, I cannot and dare not feel satisfied. Others may feel satisfied if they please, and after their friend’s death say, they hope he is gone to heaven. For my part, I would rather hold my tongue and say nothing. I would be content with the least measure of repentance and faith in a dying man, even though it be no bigger than a grain of mustard seed. But to be content with anything less than repentance and faith, seems to me next door to infidelity.

What kind of evidence do you mean to leave behind as to the state of your soul? Take example by the penitent thief, and you will do well.

When we have carried you to your narrow bed, let us not have to hunt up stray words, and scraps of religion, in order to make out that you were a true

believer. Let us not have to say in a hesitating way one to another, “I trust he is happy; he talked so nicely one day; and he seemed so pleased with a chapter in the Bible on another occasion; and he liked such a person, who is a good man.” Let us be able to speak decidedly as to your condition. Let us have some solid proof of your repentance, your faith, and your holiness, so that none shall be able for a moment to question your state. Depend on it, without this, those you leave behind can feel no solid comfort about your soul. We may use the form of religion at your burial, and express charitable hopes. We may meet you at the churchyard gate and say, “Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord.” But this will not alter your condition! If you die without conversion to God—without repentance, and without faith—your funeral will only be the funeral of a lost soul; you had better never have been born.

IV. We are meant, in the next place, to learn from these verses, that *believers in Christ when they die are with the Lord.*

This you may gather from our Lord’s words to the penitent thief: “This day shalt thou be with Me in paradise.” And you have an expression very like it in the Epistle to the Philippians, where Paul says he has a desire to “depart and be with Christ.” (Phil. i. 23.)

I shall say but little on this subject. I would simply lay it before you, for your own private meditations. To my own mind it is very full of comfort and peace.

Believers after death are “with Christ.” That answers many a difficult question, which otherwise might puzzle man’s busy, restless mind, The abode of dead saints, their joys, their feelings, their happiness, all seem met by this simple expression—they are “with Christ.”

I cannot enter into full explanations about the separate state of departed believers. It is a high and deep subject, such as man’s mind can neither grasp nor fathom. I know their happiness falls short of what it will be when their bodies are raised again, in the resurrection at the last day, and Jesus returns to earth. Yet I know also they enjoy a blessed rest, a rest from labour—a rest from sorrow—a rest from pain—and a rest from sin. But it does not follow because I cannot explain these things, that I am not persuaded they are far happier than they ever were on earth. I see their happiness in this very passage, “They are with Christ,” and when I see that, I see enough.

If the sheep are with the Shepherd—if the members are with the Head—if the children of Christ’s family are with Him who loved them and carried them all the days of their pilgrimage on earth, all must be well, all must be right.

I cannot describe what kind of place paradise is, because I cannot understand the condition of a soul separate from the body. But I ask no brighter

view of paradise than this—that Christ is there.* All other things in the picture which imagination draws of the state between death and resurrection, are nothing in comparison of this. How He is there, and in what way He is there, I know not. Let me only see Christ in paradise when my eyes close in death, and that sufficeth me. Well does the Psalmist say, “In Thy presence is fulness of joy.” (Psa. xvi. 11.) It was a true saying of a dying girl, when her mother tried to comfort her by describing what paradise would be. “There,” she said to the child, “there you will have no pains, and no sickness; there you will see your brothers and sisters who have gone before you, and will be always happy.” “Ah, mother!” was the reply, “but there is one thing better than all, and that is, Christ will be there.”

It may be you do not think much about your soul. It may be you know little of Christ as your Saviour, and have never tasted by experience that He is precious. And yet perhaps you hope to go to paradise when you die. Surely this passage is one that should make you think. Paradise is a place where Christ is. Then can it be a place that you would enjoy?

It may be you are a believer, and yet tremble at the thought of the grave. It seems cold and dreary. You feel as if all before you was dark and gloomy, and comfortless. Fear not, but be encouraged by this text. You are going to paradise, and Christ will be there.

V. The last thing we are meant to learn from these verses is this: *The eternal portion of every man’s soul is close to him.*

“Today,” says our Lord to the penitent thief, “today shalt thou be with Me in paradise.” He names no distant period—He does not talk of His entering into a state of happiness as a thing “far away,” He speaks of today—“this very day in which thou art hanging on the cross.”

How near that seems! How awfully near that word brings our everlasting dwelling-place! Happiness or misery—sorrow or joy—the presence of Christ or the company of devils—all are close to us. “There is but a step,” says David, “between me and death.” (1 Sam. xx. 3.) There is but a step, we may say, between ourselves and either paradise or hell.

We none of us realize this as we ought to do. It is high time to shake off the dreamy state of mind in which we live on this matter. We are apt to talk and think, even about believers, as if death was a long journey—as if the dying saint had embarked on a long voyage. It is all wrong, very wrong! Their harbour and their home is close by, and they have entered it.

* “We ought not to enter into curious and subtle arguments about the place of paradise. Let us rest satisfied with knowing that those who are engrafted by faith into the body of Christ are partakers of life, and there enjoy after death a blessed and joyful rest, until the perfect glory of the heavenly life is fully manifested by the coming of Christ.”—*Calvin’s Commentary on the Gospels.*

Some of us know by bitter experience what a long and weary time it is between the death of those we love, and the hour when we bury them out of our sight. Such weeks are the slowest, saddest, heaviest weeks in all our lives. But, blessed be God, the souls of departed saints are free from the very moment their last breath is drawn. While we are weeping, and the coffin is preparing, and the mourning being provided, and the last painful arrangements being made, the spirits of our beloved ones are enjoying the presence of Christ. They are freed for ever from the burden of the flesh. They are “where the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary be at rest.” (Job iii. 17.)

The very moment that believers die they are in paradise. Their battle is fought: their strife is over. They have passed through that gloomy valley we must one day tread; they have gone over that dark river we must one day cross. They have drunk that last bitter cup which sin has mingled for man: they have reached that place where sorrow and sighing are no more. Surely we should not wish them back again! We should not weep for them, but for ourselves.

We are warring still, but they are at peace. We are labouring, but they are at rest. We are watching, but they are sleeping. We are wearing our spiritual armour, but they have for ever put it off. We are still at sea, but they are safe in harbour. We have tears, but they have joy. We are strangers and pilgrims, but as for them they are at home. Surely, better are the dead in Christ than the living! Surely the very hour the poor saint dies, he is at once higher and happier than the highest upon earth.*

I fear there is a vast amount of delusion on this point. I fear that many, who are not Roman Catholics, and profess not to believe in purgatory, have, notwithstanding, some strange ideas in their minds about the immediate consequences of death.

I fear that many have a sort of vague notion that there is some interval or space of time between death and their eternal state. They fancy they shall go through a kind of purifying change, and that though they die unfit for heaven, they shall yet be found meet for it after all!

But this is an entire mistake. There is no change after death: there is no conversion in the grave: there is no new heart given after the last breath is drawn. The very day we go, we launch for ever: the day we go from this world, we begin an eternal condition. From that day there is no spiritual

* “We give Thee hearty thanks, for that it hath pleased Thee to deliver this our brother out of the miseries of this sinful world.”—*Church of England Burial Service*.

“I have some of the best news to impart. One beloved by you has accomplished her warfare; has received an answer to her prayers, and everlasting joy rests upon her head. My dear wife, the source of my best earthly comfort for twenty years, departed on Tuesday.”—*Venn's Letter to Stilling fleet*, announcing the death of his wife

alteration—no spiritual change. As we die, so we shall receive our portion after death: as the tree falls, so it must lie.

If you are an unconverted man, this ought to make you think. Do you know you are close to hell? This very day you might die; and if you died out of Christ you would open your eyes at once in in hell, and in torment.

If you are a true Christian, you are far nearer heaven than you think. This very day if the Lord should take you, you would find yourself in paradise. The good land of promise is near to you. The eyes that you closed in weakness and pain would open at once on a glorious rest, such as my tongue cannot describe.

And now let me say a few words in conclusion, and I have done.

(1) This paper may fall into the hands of some *humble-hearted and contrite sinner*,—Are you that man? Then here is encouragement for you. See what the penitent thief did, and do likewise. See how he prayed; see how he called on the Lord Jesus Christ; see what an answer of peace he obtained. Brother or sister, why should not you do the same? Why should not you also be saved?

(2) This paper may fall into the hands of some *proud and presumptuous man of the world*.—Are you that man? Then take warning. See how the impenitent thief died as he had lived and beware lest you come to a like end. Oh, erring brother or sister, be not too confident, lest you die in your sins! Seek the Lord while He may be found. Turn you, turn: why will you die?

(3) This paper may fall into the hands of some *professing believer in Christ*. Are you such a one? Then take the penitent thief's religion as a measure by which to prove your own. See that you know something of true repentance and saving faith, of real humility and fervent charity. Brother or sister, do not be satisfied with the world's standard of Christianity. Be of one mind with the penitent thief, and you will be wise.

(4) This paper may fall into the hands of someone who is *mourning over departed believers*.—Are you such a one? Then take comfort from this Scripture. See how your beloved ones are in the best of hands. They cannot be better off. They never were so well in their lives as they are now. They are with Jesus, whom their souls loved on earth. Oh, cease from your selfish mourning! Rejoice rather that they are freed from trouble, and have entered into rest.

(5) And this paper may fall into the hands of some *aged servant of Christ*. Are you such a one? Then see from these verses how near you are to home. Your salvation is nearer than when you first believed. A few more days of labour and sorrow, and the King of kings shall send for you; and in a moment your warfare shall be at end, and all shall be peace.