

THE CHRISTIAN RACE AND OTHER SERMONS

BY

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SAVING FAITH

“God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”—JOHN iii. 16.

IN this verse, beloved, we have one of those “heavenly things,” which our Lord had just spoken of to Nicodemus. Blessed indeed are the lips which spake it, and blessed are the hearts which can receive it! In this verse we find a treasury of the most precious truth, a mine of inexhaustible matter, a well of ever-flowing waters; and when we consider the simple words in which our Lord has here brought together the whole body of divinity, we must willingly confess, with those who heard Him preach, “Never man spake like this man.”

Listen, I pray you, once more—“God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” There is hardly an expression that a child could not easily explain, and yet there are doctrines here which the wisest upon earth must humbly receive, if they would enter into the kingdom of heaven and sit down at the marriage supper of the Lamb. We learn in it, what philosophers of old could never clear up—the history of God’s dealing with mankind, and the terms which He offers for their acceptance. Here is life, and here is death; here you have the deserts of man, and here you have the free grace of God; here you see what all may expect who follow their own course, and here also the way, the truth, and the life is directly pointed out.

And at this particular season of the year, when we are about so soon to commemorate the mysterious birth of Him who in mercy to our sins consented to take our nature on Him and be born of a virgin, even Christ Jesus, we cannot, I think, do better than examine the things which are herein contained. May the Eternal Spirit, through whom He offered Himself, the great Teacher whom He promised to send, be amongst us: may He rouse the careless, fix the inattentive, and make the subject profitable to all.

Now I conceive the chief things to be noticed in this verse are:

- I. The state of the world, that is, of all mankind.
- II. The love of God.
- III. The gift of His Son.
- IV. The means whereby we enjoy this gift.
- V. And the promise attached to those who believe.

I. First, then, let us inquire what the word of God has taught us respecting the world and the world’s character. Now, the testimony of Scripture upon this head is so clear and explicit, that he who runs may read, “The whole world,” says St. John, “lieth in wickedness.” Our first father, Adam, was indeed created in the image of God, pure and sinless; but in one day he fell from his high estate by eating the forbidden fruit, he broke God’s express command and became at once a sinful creature; and now all we his children have by inheritance from him a wicked and a corrupt nature, a nature which clings to us from the moment of our birth. and which we show daily in our lives and conversation. In a word, we learn that from the hour of the fall our character has been established, that we are a sinful, a very sinful world.

Beloved, does this appear a hard saying? do you think such a statement too strong? Away with the flattering thought!—We see it proved in Scripture, for every book of the Old Testament history tells the melancholy story of man’s disobedience and man’s unbelief in things pertaining to God. We read there of fearful judgments, such as the flood and the destruction of Sodom, yet men disregarded them,—of gracious mercies, such as the calling and protection of Israel, but men soon forgot them,—of inspired teachers and revelations from heaven, such as the law of Moses, and men did not obey them,—of special warnings, such as the voice of the prophets, and yet men did not believe them. Yes, beloved, we are a sinful world! Think not to say within yourselves, “It may be so, but this happened in days of old; the world is better now.” It will not avail you. We have read it in Scripture, but we see it also around us, and you will find at this time, even under your own eyes, convincing proof that the charge is literally true. Let any, for instance, examine the columns of a county newspaper, and he will see there within a month enough to make his ears tingle. I speak as unto wise men,—judge ye what I say: will he not see accounts of nearly every sin which is abominable in the sight of God? Will he not read of anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, theft, adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, emulations, variance, strife, seditions, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: “of the which,” says the apostle (Gal. v. 21), “I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.” And if such things take place in a land which is blessed with so much light and knowledge as our own, how much more should we find in countries where there is neither one nor the other! If men do these things in a green tree, oh, what shall they do in a dry?

Can you still doubt? I will go further. We see proof in ourselves. Let the best among you search his own heart; let him honestly cast up the number of evil thoughts and unholy ideas which pass through his imagination even in one single day—thoughts, I mean, which are known only to himself and the all-seeing God—and let him tell us whether it be not a most humiliating and soul-condemning calculation. Yes, dear friends, whether you will receive it or no, we are indeed a sinful world. It may be an humbling truth, but Scripture says it, and experience confirms it; and therefore we tell you that the world spoken of in our text is a world which lieth in wickedness, a corrupt world, a world which our great Maker and Preserver might have left to deserved destruction, and in so doing would have acted with perfect justice, because He has given us laws and they have been broken, promises and they have been despised, warnings and they have not been believed.

II. Such is the world of which we form a part, and such is its character. And now let us hear what the feeling is with which God has been pleased to regard His guilty creatures. We were all under condemnation, without hope, without excuse; and what could stay the execution of the sentence? It was the love of God. “God,” says our text, “so loved the world.” He might have poured on us the vials of His wrath, as He did on the angels who kept not their first estate; but no! He spared us, “God loved the world.” Justice demanded our punishment, holiness required we should be swept off the earth; but “God so loved the world.” Praised be His name, we had not to do with man’s judgment, which may not show mercy, when a crime is proved; we were in the hands of One whose ways are not as our ways and whose thoughts are not as our thoughts, and hence, “God so loved the world.” May we not well say with the

Apostle, “O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!” (Rom. xi. 33). Consider, I pray you, this incomprehensible goodness! Do not many in this world think it no harm to remember injuries, and sometimes to resent them? Do we not find it hard to love those who have given us some slight offence? or if we do profess to love them, do we make any endeavour to promote their happiness? Such, alas! is too seldom our practice; there is but little real affection in these hard hearts; but we are not dealt with according to our own ways, for the God of holiness has loved the sinful world, which has continually dishonoured and denied Him. Oh! beloved, let us dwell much on such expressions as these, for they are more precious than rubies; let us bear them continually in mind, for they will not fail us in the day of trial, when temptation is strong and faith weak; let us write them on our hearts and in our memories, and we shall find them a strong consolation in the hour of death and on the bed of sickness. God is indeed love, and God loved the world.

III. Let us next inquire in what way it pleased God to manifest this love. We had all sinned. Who then could put away this sin and present us clean and spotless before His throne? We had all failed utterly of keeping His holy laws. Wherewithal then could we be clothed for the wedding-feast of our Master? Beloved, here is wisdom! This is the very point which the learned of this world could never understand. How, they have asked, can perfect justice and perfect mercy be reconciled? How can God justify His sinful creature, and yet be that Holy One whose law must needs be fulfilled? But all is explained in this simple verse, if ye can receive it; and thus it was—“He gave His only-begotten Son.” Observe the magnitude of this gift—“His only-begotten Son.” Can anything give you a more tender idea of God’s love? Observe again the expression “He gave”: not because we had merited anything, for it was a free gift; not for our deservings, for it was all of grace. “By grace are ye saved,” says Paul to the Ephesians. “The gift of God is eternal life,” says the same apostle to the Romans.

And for what purpose was His Son given? Beloved, He was given to atone for our guilt, by the sacrifice and death of Himself, as a lamb without spot and blemish; and by so doing He made a full, perfect, and sufficient oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world. He was given to bear our iniquities and carry our transgressions upon the accursed tree, the cross; for being innocent Himself He was for our sakes accounted guilty, that we for His sake might be accounted pure. Nor is this all: He was given to fulfil the demands of that law which we have broken; and He did fulfil them. He “was tempted in all points,” says St. Paul, “like as we are, and yet without sin”: the prince of this world had nothing in Him, and thus He brought in an everlasting righteousness, which like a pure white raiment is unto all and upon all them that believe. (2 Cor. v. 21.)

IV. It would be easy to dwell upon this delightful branch of our subject, beloved, but we must pass on. How then are the benefits of this gift made our own? What are the means through which it is applied to our souls? What is the hand by which we lay hold on this remedy?

Here again our text supplies an answer. It is FAITH. Whosoever believeth (not with the head, remember: but with the heart), and believing comes to Christ with a confession of his own unrighteousness, and accepts Him as his only hope of salvation—is saved by Faith.

Consider now the beautiful simplicity of this way of life: we do not see written on the gate, Whosoever has prepared himself by long repentance—whosoever has begun to lead a new life—whosoever has done so many good works—whosoever has attended church so many times—whosoever has given so much in charity—these shall enter in here, and none else. No, dear friends; such announcements would frighten many a weary sinner, and these are fruits you will thankfully bring forth a hundredfold after you have entered: the only thing required of those who seek admission is faith, and he that approaches in simple childlike faith shall never be rejected. Hear how St. Paul speaks on this point (Rom. x. 5 to 10). And, lest any one should suppose that God is a respecter of persons, that there is one way for the rich and another for the poor, one for the learned, another for the unlearned, he adds these comfortable words: “For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon Him. For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” But remember also—and I solemnly warn every one of this—there is no other way than the way of faith. God has not left each man to choose his own road to heaven, or his own path for coming unto Christ, but He has appointed one and no more, and no man shall enter into life except by this.

“If ye will not believe,” says Isaiah, “surely ye shall not be established.” “If ye believe not,” says our Lord, “that I am He, ye shall die in your sins.” And hence we may learn this most important lesson, that although God so loved the world that He gave for it His only-begotten Son, still the benefits of that gift can never be obtained by those who will not believe.

V. It remains for us in the last place to consider the promises and consequences which our text holds forth to the faithful. We read that “whosoever believeth shall not perish, but have everlasting life.”

And is not this a promise the most acceptable to our nature that a gracious God could have devised? We know there is nothing the unconverted fear so much as death: people of the highest animal courage, who would shrink from no danger and encounter any difficulty, have been seen to tremble and turn pale at the approach of some pain or complaint which seems likely to bring their frail bodies to the grave. And why should this be so?—pain is not very bitter, and life with its cares and anxieties is not so very sweet as to account for it! No, beloved, the reason is this. Conscience tells every unconverted person, whether he likes to confess it or not, that after death shall come the judgment; conscience tells him that all shall be judged according to their works,—that he cannot abide this fiery trial, because he has sinned and not sought reconciliation, and he feels that he may one day have his part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone. Hence it is that he thinks death a most unpleasant subject, and with all his pride of life stands in cowardly fear of his last day; and hence you may understand how blessed these words should be to a sinner’s ear, that “Whosoever believeth on Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.”

Observe now the contents of this promise; look narrowly into it, for it will stand a close examination.

The believer shall not perish; this earthly tabernacle may indeed be dissolved, and laid in the grave and see corruption, but the true sting of that death is sin, and this his Saviour has taken on Him and put away. He shall not perish in the day of judgment; the second death can have no power over him; hell has no

claims upon him, and then the words of our blessed Master shall be found a truth. "This is the will of Him that sent Me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on Him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day" (John vi. 40). "I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth on Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in Me shall never die" (xi. 25, 26).

And more than this: the believer shall have everlasting life. He shall be raised body and soul at our Lord's second coming. He shall have part in that first resurrection, which belongs only to the saints, and finally shall dwell for ever in that blessed place where "there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away" (Rev. xxi. 4).

And now, beloved, judge for yourselves whether it be not true, that our text contains a treasury of precious and most consoling doctrines, and he that can hear it without feeling its value may indeed tremble for the safety of his immortal soul. Believer, let it be thy care to carry home these comfortable words on which we have dwelt, and meditate upon them as thy daily food throughout the week which is now before thee. Let them be ever in thy mind, and prepare thee for that holy sacrament which Jesus has mercifully ordained; let them add strength to thy faith and growth to thy sanctification; let them increase thy humility and thy thankfulness, thy zeal for God's glory, and thy desire to show forth His praise, thy love towards Christ and thy love towards thy brethren; for surely, dear friends, if God so loved us, it is a small matter if we love our fellow-sinners.

And you too, dear brethren, who have dared hitherto, like Gallio, to care for none of these things, you also are appealed to in this text. Learn then now, if you have not learned it yet, that this single verse, if there were no other, would be sufficient to condemn you in the last day, because it leaves you without excuse for remaining in your sins. You have deserved nothing but wrath; and yet, behold, here is God willing to save, loving, giving, promising all things. Oh! remember how great must be your guilt if you reject so great salvation. You are the very world that God has so loved; for your sakes He gave His only-begotten Son, and even now, at this minute, He is inviting you, by me, His minister, to accept the mercy which He freely offers, to be reconciled with Him who will one day be the Judge of all. (Isaiah lv. 1, 2; i. 18; Acts xvi. 31.)

Come then, I entreat you, to your Father, in the name of Christ, for through Him we have boldness and access with confidence. Resist the attempts of the world, the flesh and the devil to detain you; resist even your best friend, if he would keep you back from God and tell you there will be a more convenient season than today. "As though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God. "For He hath made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. V. 20, 21).

May God the Holy Ghost bless the words which we have spoken to the everlasting benefit of all your souls.