

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit.

JESUS, THE STUMBLING STONE OF UNBELIEVERS.

A Sermon

DELIVERED [1875AD] BY
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“Unto you therefore which believe he is precious: but unto them which be disobedient, the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner, and a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence, even to them which stumble at the word, being disobedient.”—1 Peter ii. 7, 8.

So it ever is where Jesus comes, he divides the company into believers and unbelievers, the obedient and the disobedient. But why are unbelievers here called disobedient? Is faith a matter of law, and because a man does not believe does he therefore disobey? How can it be otherwise? Is it not a natural duty for every man to believe that which is true? Let the very least among us judge in so simple a matter. It so happens that in the very form and sound of the words, in the original tongue, to believe and to obey are much the same; and certainly to disbelieve and to disobey are things of very near relationship. To disbelieve is in its very essence disobeying, for he who disbelieves the word of the king is disloyal at heart. If I doubt the veracity of God I have assailed his authority, and if when he sets forth his Son to be a propitiation for sin I refuse to accept him, disobedience is included in that rejection. As it were difficult to tell by which form of sin our father Adam fell, for all sins were wrapped up in the taking of the forbidden fruit, so unbelief contains within itself the eggs of all sins possible to men.

Moreover, unbelief of God's word is the root of all other sin. Given a man who does not believe his God and you have a man who casts off the law of God. He has already rejected his gospel, why should he respect the law? If the silken cords of love are broken asunder, how much less is the man likely to bear the bonds of law?

Now, inasmuch as it is painfully certain that a very large proportion of those who hear the gospel are unbelieving and disobedient, it becomes important to consider, What is the result of this disobedience? This disobedience leads them into violent opposition; what effect does their opposition

produce? The text tells us *the result of human opposition upon Christ himself*, and, secondly *upon the persons who offer it*.

I. Let us consider, in the first place, then, THE RESULT OF THE UNBELIEF, AND THE OPPOSITION OF MEN, UPON THE LORD JESUS CHRIST. We are told that, as far as he is concerned, “the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner”—in one word, it has not affected him at all. The opposition of mankind has by no means, and in no degree, lessened the glory which God has put upon his dear Son. The builders rejected the stone with disdain: “it shall not be builded,” said they, “in the temple of our hope;” but, God has said, “It shall be the top stone,” and the top stone it is, and shall be despite all the opposition of earth or hell. The rage of puny man shall no more defeat the Lord than the anger of a gnat can affect the sun, and human opposition shall no more thwart the divine will than a sere leaf cast into Niagara can block the cataract. He that stumbleth upon this stone shall be broken, but the stone itself will not be injured.

Observe how the Lord Jesus has been rejected of man, and yet his cause has stood against all opposition. First came *the Jew*. He had the pride of race to maintain. Were not the Jews the chosen people of God? Was not Israel set apart by the Most High? Jesus comes preaching the gospel to every creature, he sends his disciples even to the Gentiles: therefore the Jews will not have him. They have been looking for a temporal prince, he does not come with the magnificence they expected; he is a root out of a dry ground, without form or comeliness; they see nothing of Solomon’s splendour in the poor scion of the dried-up stock of David, therefore, “Away with him! Let him be crucified!” But the opposition of his countrymen did not defeat the cause of Christ; if rejected in Palestine his word was received in Greece, it triumphed in Rome, it passed onward to Spain, it found a dwelling-place in Britain, and at this day it lights up the face of the earth. The persecution of the apostles at Jerusalem hastened the spread of the gospel, for they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the Word, so that Jewish enmity was overruled for good, and the foolish builders were made subservient to the uplifting of the rejected headstone.

Next arose *the philosopher* to be the gospel’s foe. Different schools of thought held sway over the more cultivated minds of the period, and no sooner did Paul begin to preach where these philosophies were known than they called him a babbler. They heard what he had to say, and condemned him as a fool. This resurrection from the dead, this doctrine of an incarnate God who suffered for human sin—it was too simple for them, too plain to fit in with their subtle philosophies. But though philosophy made terrible inroads for a while on the church of God, in the form of the gnostic heresy, did it really impede the chariot wheels of Christ? Did it conquer the faith? Oh no, my brethren, for at this day where are these philosophies? Who now

believes in the Stoics? Who would care to be called an Epicurean? These philosophies have passed away, the stone cut out of the mountain without hands has broken them in pieces. The stone from the sling of Christ has smitten the heathen philosophy in the forehead; we see its corpse lying headless in many an ancient tome, while the Son of David goes forth conquering and to conquer.

After those days there came against the church of God the determined opposition of *the secular power*. The imperial authorities saw danger in Christianity. These peasants and boors and mechanics set up a new religion, a religion which spoke of another king, one Jesus. They met together on the first day of the week, and sang hymns in his honour as to God; moreover, they refused to keep the holy days of the gods, nor would they worship the images of the emperors, either departed or living. Everybody else paid homage to these imperial demons except these Christian people; so the secular power said, "We will put them down. Let them be dragged before the judgment-seat; let them be imprisoned, let them be stripped of their goods, and if that does not drive them out of this new doctrine, let us try the rack and such like tortures, and if that does not end them let them die. Why cannot men worship the gods of their fathers? Thus they tried to stamp out the faith of Jesus, crowding their prisons, flooding their theatres with blood, and wearying the executioners. All that cruelty could do was done; but, my brethren, what was the result? The more the Christians were oppressed, the more they multiplied; the scattering of the coals increased the conflagration. The tribunals of judgment became pulpits from which Christianity was preached, and men who stood burning at the stake commanded mighty audiences, among which they proclaimed Jesus Christ as king. The martyr's courage made men enquire, "Is there not something here, the like of which we have never seen before?" and it was not long before imperial legions bowed before the cross of Christ, and the Galilean had won the day.

Since that period the church has been attacked in various modes. The Arian *heresy* assaulted the deity of Christ, but the church of God delivered herself from the accursed thing, as Paul shook the viper into the fire. Then came popery, the antichrist, the ape of Jesus, and counterfeit of his sacrifice. Now they set up the cross of ivory, hung round with gems, to mimic the King of kings on his cross of shame; they thrust before us the crucifix of man's making instead of Jesus himself upon the tree. Now we are asked to worship saints, and relics and images, and I know not what beside, and a man is lifted into the throne of the infallible God. Some timid minds fear that Jesus Christ as a stone rejected will be cast out of sight, while high over all the vicar of Christ at Rome shall be made the head of the corner, but the Lord will not suffer it. Brethren, have faith in God and think not so. The differing modes of Popery, Roman and Anglican, shall pass away as all things else have done

that withstood the cross and cause of Jesus Christ. Even as a moment's foam dissolves into the wave that bears it and is gone for ever, so shall all these disappear: yet shall Jesus Christ's holy gospel and himself, the Saviour, be set on high as a rock defying the billows. What a day that was when Luther's rough protest broke the silence of the dark ages, when the clear teaching of Calvin followed, and the bold notes of Zwingli were heard, and a thousand voices shouted in chorus! What a day was that when the nations awoke from their long sleep to lie no longer under priestly domination, resolute to be free! Cannot God, who sent one Reformation, send another? Be of good courage, for brighter days are on the way. There shall come yet greater awakenings, the Lord the avenger of his church shall yet arise, and the stone which the builders disallowed, the same shall be the head stone of the corner.

By prophetic vision I see gathering another opposition which will be as difficult to cope with as any that has gone before. I see mustering within the ranks of the church of God men who say they hate all creeds, meaning that they despise all truth, men who would fain be ministers amongst us and yet tread under foot all that we hold sacred, not teaching at first the fulness of their infidelity, but little by little gathering courage to vent their unbeliefs and heresies. Credophobia is maddening many. They appear to fear lest they should believe anything, and to hope that there is something good to be found in atheism, or devil worship,—indeed in all religions except the only true one. We lift our earnest protest, but if it should be lost amidst the general popular clamour, and if the nations should be drunk again with the wine of this fornication and turn aside to error, what matters it to the ultimate success of the eternal cause? Yet hath Jehovah set his king upon his holy hill of Zion, and yet shall the ancient decree be fulfilled, and the throne of Christ shall stand, and the covenant sealed with blood shall be sure to all the chosen seed. Let us have comfort, for despite all that can be done by men or devils not one elect soul shall be lost, not one soul redeemed by blood shall be snatched out of the Redeemer's hand. Christ shall not lose so much as a grain of glory neither in earth nor in heaven. His people's earnest contention for the faith shall honour him, their patient suffering shall give him praise: heaven shall be the sweeter rest to them, and the brighter place of glory to him when he shall return with them from Edom, with dyed garments from Bozrah, travelling in the greatness of his strength, having trodden the winepress and overcome his foes. Then shall his rest be glorious, and his joy complete.

Thus much, then, upon the effect of human opposition. "The stone which the builders disallowed, the same has become the head stone of the corner."

II. A far more painful subject must now occupy our attention, namely, THE CONSEQUENCE OF THIS OPPOSITION TO THE OPPOSERS, and here let us dwell with great solemnity upon one or two points. When men stumble at the plan of salvation by Christ's sacrificial work, *what is it that they stumble at?*

The reply must be a somewhat wide one, but it cannot possibly comprehend all the reasons for man's wicked opposition to his best friend.

Some stumble at the person of Christ. Jesus, they will admit, was a good man, but they cannot accept him as co-equal and co-eternal with the Father. Oh, my hearer, if thou wouldst be saved, stumble not at this, for who but a God could save thee; and how could the justice of God have been satisfied unless one of infinite nature had become the propitiation for sin? My soul falls gratefully back upon the doctrine of the deity of Christ for her deepest comfort, and I pray that none of you may reject it, for be assured that apart from it there is no true ground of peace for the conscience.

Some stumble at his work. Many cannot see how Jesus Christ is become the propitiation for human guilt, and we fear that the reason why they cannot see must lie in that word of our Lord, "Ye believe not because ye are not of my sheep." We fell, my brethren, not personally, but in another. It was our first father Adam who first ruined us, not we ourselves. Perhaps it was because we so fell that it was possible for us to be restored. As we fell in another, there was a loophole for mercy, for the Lord having dealt with us under one federal head, could justly deal with us under another federal head; and thus fallen in another we now rise in another. As by the offence of one the condemnation came upon all men, so by the righteousness of one doth the forgiveness come to as many as believe in him. The doctrine of substitution or representation begins at the fountain of human history and runs through its whole course. I beseech you do not cavil at it. It is rich balm and comfort to us who have received it, it has turned our hell to heaven, the Spirit by its means has renewed our nature, and has made us other than we were, and today we have no hope apart from the vicarious sacrifice of Immanuel. Oh that you who are objectors would accept that which today ye stumble at.

Some stumble at Christ's teaching; and what is it they stumble at in that? Sometimes it is because it is too holy: "Christ is too puritanical, he cuts off our pleasures." But it is not so; he denies us no pleasure which is not sinful, he multiplies our joys; the things which he denies to us are only joyous in appearance, while his commands are real bliss. "Still," say some, "his teachings are too severe." Yet from others I hear the opposite accusation, for when we preach free grace, objectors cry, "You encourage men in sin." There is little chance of pleasing the sons of men, for what gratifies some offends others; but truly there is no just reason on either ground to stumble at the gospel, for though it does place good works where they should be placed, as fruits of the Spirit and not as things of merit, yet it is a gospel according to holiness, as those know who have proved its power.

We have found some object to the teachings of Christ, because they are too humbling. He destroys self-confidence, and he presents salvation to none but those who are lost. "This lays us too low," saith one. Yet have I heard

from the opposite corner of the house an objection to the gospel, because it makes men proud, for say some, "How dare you speak of being certain that you are saved? That is a boastful speech, and ill befits a lowly mind." Friend, do not stumble at blessed truth, for believers are certainly saved and may know it, and yet be all the humbler for the knowledge. Thou art humbled, it is true, by Christ, and laid low, but he exalts thee in due time, and when he exalts thee by his grace there is no fear of boasting, for boasting is excluded by grace.

Still I have known others object that the gospel is too mysterious, they cannot understand it, they say. While again, from the other corner of the compass, I have heard the objection that it is too plain. This being saved by simply believing in Christ is too plain for many and too hard for others. Beloved, do not cavil at it for either reason. What if there be mysteries in it? Canst thou expect to comprehend all that God knoweth? Be thou teachable as a child, and the gospel will be sweet to thee.

We have known some who have stumbled at Christ on account of his people, and truly they have some excuse. They have said, "Look at Christ's followers, see their imperfections and hypocrisies." But wherefore judge a master by his servants? I could weep while I confess how much there is of truth in your accusations, but let me beseech you, lay the fault at our door, not at our Master's, for there is nothing in his teaching that encourages our sinning, and none can be more severe towards hypocrisy than is Christ Jesus our Lord. This stumbling at his people is, however, frequently founded on another reason. The lovers of the gospel, it is said, are generally very poor, and unfashionable; to unite with them is to lose caste. Now that is true, and it always has been so; from the first day until now the gospel has flourished most where there has been least care for fashion and honour among men: but, I wot [know], if ye be men, this will be a small concern with you. Only those who are not men, but mimics of men, care for these small matters. You, if your manhood be as it should be, will feel that to follow truth barefooted through the mire is better than to ride with the lie in all her pomp. Besides, taking the great ones of the earth as a class, is their society so specially desirable? Are the rich so very virtuous? Are the great so peculiarly good? I trow [believe] not. We have noble exceptions, there are a few who wear the coronet and yet will wear a crown in heaven, but taking them as a class the honourable among men are no better than they should be. No order of men have more to answer for than kings and princes: at their will human blood has flowed like water, and nations have been consumed by famine and pestilence as the result of their wars. Why, then, account their favour to be so precious a thing? We can turn the tables upon those who sneer at Christ's servants for their lowness of rank, for before the eye of God the great ones are the meanest of all when

they become leaders in iniquity. Now, if these be your objections, I pray God to give you grace to play the man, and bear joyfully the reproach of Christ.

What does this stumbling at Christ cost the ungodly? I answer, it costs them a great deal. Those who make him a rock of stumbling are great losers by it *in this life*. Opposition to Jesus is to many men a kicking against the pricks. When the Eastern husbandman drives his bullock, and it moves amiss he goads it, and if the bullock is not broken in, it kicks against the goad as soon as it is pricked, and the consequence is it drives the goad into itself more deeply, and if it then kicks violently, the goad pierces and wounds it still more. It is so with rebellious men. Their persecutions hurt themselves, they cannot really injure our Lord. The hammer said, "I will break the anvil," and the anvil did not answer, but abode in its place, while the hammer smote it day after day. Month after month, year after year, the anvil patiently received the blows, but after awhile the hammer broke, and though it did not say so, for it was too quiet to speak, the anvil might have said, "I have broken hundreds of hammers before, and I shall break hundreds more by patient endurance." It is so with Christ, and his church, and his gospel; the persecutor may smite, and smite, and smite, the true Christian makes no reply, but patiently bears, and in the long run that patient endurance will break the persecutor down. What anger it costs ungodly men to oppose Christ! Some of them cannot let him alone, they will rage and fume. Concerning Jesus it is true that you must either love or hate him, he cannot long be indifferent to you, and hence come inward conflicts to opposers. I remember an ungodly man who was a raving hater of Christ. A Bible was brought into his house, he seized it, and destroyed it in his wrath. He did not know that when his daughter went to bed her eyes were wet with tears at what her father had done, and that the next night there was a New Testament under her head. When by-and-by he found out that she attended the house of God, there were great threats, and I do not know what of blustering, but it was done all the same for that, and his anger was patiently borne. "Well," he thought, "she is a foolish girl, it will end there, but very soon another daughter became pious, and then he was furious. He took his wife into his counsels, to help him, but by her quivering manner she betrayed that she did not like his proceedings, and after awhile he found out that she, when he was away, had slunk into the little meeting-house, too, and that she was feeling with her daughters the value of eternal things. Well, at least he had a boy left; the women were always fools, he said, but his boy he hoped would show more sense, and not be deluded. Like his father, he would never fall into superstition, would he? He would see about it and question him. What was his surprise to find the boy speak up like a man, and say, "Yes, father, I believe as my sisters do, and I go to the house of God whenever I can, and I mean to do so." To his surprise, he found all his house inclined to hear the gospel, and most of them believers in it. It did

him no good to be in a passion about it, but he used to rave horribly, and I fear he thereby shortened his days. But the thing went on for all he could do; the servants of the house also joined the people at the meeting, and his labourers went in the same way. God intended to bless the family, and the enemy was powerless to prevent it, though it cost him much anger and wrath.

Ah, what it costs some men *when they come to die!* In the days when persecution was more public than it is now, many persons were guilty of being informers against the Puritans, or the Quakers; their deaths were in many cases appalling, not because of any peculiar pains they endured, but because their persecutions came up to their memory in their last moments, and some of them could not rest for crying out and making acknowledgment of the injustice that they had done to good men in hunting them into prisons for worshipping God. If any of you do not believe in Jesus, and will not be saved by him yourselves, I would recommend you to let him and his people alone, for if you oppose him you will be the losers, he will not. Your opposition is utterly futile; like a snake biting a file you will only break your own teeth. You cannot hurt the church, nor hurt the word of God. Perhaps your very opposition is one cog in the wheel to urge it on. If the thing be of God it is in vain that you fight against it. Be as wise as Haman's wife when she warned her husband that if Mordecai was of the seed of the Jews, before whom he had begun to fall, it was no use to take up the cudgels against him. This warning he proved to be true when he was hung upon the gallows fifty cubits high. To oppose the seed royal of heaven is of no use whatever, but ensures ruin to those who engage in it.

Now, suppose a man says, "I am not going to believe that Jesus Christ came into this world and died for the guilty, neither will I have him for my Saviour; I will run the risks." Well, if you do it, it is at your own cost, recollect. Do it if you dare. Many years ago a captain was sent out in one of the Government ships, the *Thetis*, to discover a shoal, a rock, or some other obstruction said to exist in the Mediterranean Sea. The captain was an old salt, who knew little about navigation as a science, and cared less for rules, books, theories, and so on. He always sneered at scientific works. Though he sailed near the spot, he did not discover the rock, and came back; but one of his officers was persuaded that, nevertheless, there was something in the report, and some time after, when he had become himself a first officer in another vessel, he sailed near the spot, and discovered it. It was marked on the charts of the Admiralty, and he received a considerable reward for having made the discovery. The old captain cursed and swore at these new-fangled fellows who could find what he could not. He would not believe the shoal was there; one thing he would do, they might call him a liar if he did not drive the *Thetis* right over the spot where the rock was marked, and so prove it to be all nonsense. He had an opportunity some time after, when he was out upon a cruise.

He sailed close to the spot marked on the chart, and thinking he had passed over it he cried out to those who were standing round, with many expressions of blasphemy, that he had proved these whipper-snappers to be fools and liars. Just as he uttered his boast there came a crash, the ship was on the rock, and in a few minutes she was sinking. By the good providence of God all on board escaped except the captain; he was in such a desperate state of mind that when last he was seen he was on deck in his shirt sleeves rushing about as if he had gone mad. You see his firm belief that there was no rock there did not alter the case, he was wrecked for his obstinacy. There are a great many who say, "Oh, I do not believe it, I shall not bother my head about it." Well, you are warned! You are warned, remember that! There is a way of salvation by Jesus Christ, the incarnate God, and we implore you to accept it: if you do not, this rock of unbelief will be your eternal shipwreck. I pray God that every one of us may bow before Christ, and accept him as our king. He will shortly come to be our judge! Oh, let us worship him as our Mediator! Look ye to him, look ye to him, on his cross, for ye must soon look to him on his throne. Look to his wounds! Behold the atoning blood! Look to him, and find salvation; for whether ye look to him now or no, ye will have to look to him in that day when heaven and earth shall rock and reel, and the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall rise, and you among them, and the books shall be opened, and the sentence of eternal wrath shall be uttered against the disobedient and unbelieving. God save us all for Jesus' sake. Amen.

PORTION OF SCRIPTURE READ BEFORE SERMON—1 Peter ii.

HYMNS FROM "OUR OWN HYMN BOOK"—118, 2, 961.