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THE GOSPEL CALL.

BY G. D. ARMSTRONG, D. D.,

Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, Norfolk, Va.

“The Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.”—REVELATION xxii. 17.

NEAR the commencement of his public ministry, our Lord preached the gospel in the words: “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.) Many years afterwards, when his atoning sacrifice of himself had been accomplished upon Calvary, and God’s acceptance of that sacrifice made known by his resurrection from the dead—when he was about to close his written revelation to his church, intended to be to her ever afterwards “the only infallible rule of faith,” he again preached that gospel in the words of the text. I say, he preached, for in both of these passages alike, Jesus Christ is the preacher—John simply records what he heard.

I. ON BOTH OCCASIONS OUR LORD MAKES THE OFFER OF SALVATION, FULL AND FREE, TO THE WHOLE WORLD.

On the first, he traces God’s provision of salvation, everlasting life for the perishing, to his love for the world as its fountain head. “There is a deep sense in which God loves the world. All whom he has created he regards with pity and with compassion. Their sins he cannot love; but he loves their souls. ‘His tender

mercies are over all his works.' (Psalm cxlv. 9.) Christ is God's gracious gift to the whole world."—*Ryle*. And this gracious gift, our Lord assures us, was made that "whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

The second occasion was very different from the first, but the offer of salvation made is, if possible, more full and free than in the first. To understand its language, we must remember that it was spoken after the church had entered fully upon the discharge of her commission, "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark xvi. 15), and her labors had been crowned with abundant success through the power of the Spirit working in and with her, he who claimed for himself the title, "Jesus . . . the root and offspring of David, and the bright and morning star" (Rev. xxii. 16), appeared to the aged John, and in the words of the text gives expression to his infinite satisfaction in the work which was being done.

"*The Spirit and the bride say, Come.*" "The Spirit" here spoken of is undoubtedly "the spirit of truth" who was to come in Christ's stead and "abide with the church forever" (John xiv. 16), and whose coming and power was manifested by the wondrous work wrought in Jerusalem on the first Christian pentecost; and "the bride," the church herself (see Rev. xxi. 2, 9) through her apostles, and evangelists, and pastors, and teachers (Eph. iv. 11), given her for this very ministry.

"*And let him that heareth say, Come.*" When Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was stoned, we are told, "At that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem, and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles, . . . and they that were

scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word." (Acts viii. 1-4.) These were not regularly ordained ministers of the gospel, but, in the language of our day, "private members of the church," with hearts filled with the love of Christ and the love of souls, who, driven by persecution into places where the gospel was unknown, told the story of the cross to all who were willing to listen. And so has it been ever since, especially in seasons of great revivals of religion; not publicly and by her regularly ordained ministry alone, but privately, in the family and in the intercourse of daily life, godly men and women have been led by the Spirit to "preach the word," and here Christ gives explicit sanction to this preaching.

"*And let him that is athirst come.*" These words remind us at once of the call of God by his prophet: "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price." (Isaiah l. 1.) The man athirst for the water of life is one who simply feels his need of salvation. There may be such, even in Christian communities, to whom no Christian minister has ever especially addressed himself, and to whom no Christian friend has ever spoken about the great salvation, who, by the Spirit "who worketh, when and where and how he pleaseth," has had awakened within him a desire to make all right between God and his soul. To him, Christ himself here speaks the word of invitation: "*And let him that is athirst come.*" And then, that no man can possibly think himself forgotten or excluded from the invitation, he closes the gospel call in words which remind us at once of the terms in which he preached it near the commencement of his public ministry: "*And whosoever will, let him take*

the water of life freely.” Surely, in no words which human language furnishes could the offer of salvation be made more full and free than in those which our Lord has chosen.

II. THE PUBLICATION OF THIS GOSPEL, FULL AND FREE AS OUR LORD HIMSELF MADE IT, IS, IN THE VERSES IMMEDIATELY SUCCEEDING THE TEXT, ENJOINED UPON THE CHURCH IN TERMS OF AWFUL SOLEMNITY. “I (*i. e.*, I, Jesus) testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book; and if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.” (Rev. xxii. 18, 19.) Whether or not we understand these words, as many expositors do, as God’s solemn seal attached to the holy Scriptures, proclaiming the revelation therein made complete and unalterable, there can be no doubt that they cover the case of the gospel call, as contained in the text, in immediate connection with which they were spoken.

In the light shed upon this matter by the subsequent history of the church we can understand, in part, at least, the reason for this solemn warning. Strange and improbable as it might seem at first thought, it is just on this point—the freedom and fulness of the gospel offer of salvation—that the church to which the preaching of the gospel has been committed has shown the strongest disposition to tamper with God’s truth—to limit the freedom of the gospel offer, or add to the one condition of salvation, “belief in the only begotten Son of God,” which God has prescribed, other conditions of man’s devising.

1. Early in the history of the church in her Christian form, and while many of the apostles were yet living, we are told that, "Certain men which came down from Judea taught the brethren and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved." (Acts xv. 1) thus "adding to" the gospel as preached by Christ. It was to condemn this heresy that the "apostles and elders" came together in the council at Jerusalem. From the days of Abraham the Jews had occupied the position of God's peculiar people, and it was not without a fierce struggle that Jewish prejudice yielded to the clearly revealed truth that henceforward "in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature." (Gal. vi. 15.)

2. In later times the "church catholic," as she delights to call herself, both Greek and Roman, has taught that the reception of the sacraments, especially that of baptism, is necessary to salvation, in so doing confounding that which God has made necessary as a duty with that which he has made a condition of salvation, in the proper sense of that expression. And along with this and as an inseparable part of it, she has taught the doctrine of "baptismal regeneration," *i. e.*, that regeneration, that great spiritual change which marks the beginning of the Christian life, is wrought "*en opere operato*," by the application of water to the body, thus preaching "another gospel, which is not another, but a perversion of the gospel of Christ."

3. A perversion of the gospel, of greater practical importance for us Protestants to consider, is that which the awakened sinner often falls into when refusing to understand the gospel call in the plain sense of the words in which our Lord makes it, he insists that he must do

something to fit himself for coming to Jesus ere he can venture to approach him as the Saviour of sinners. The truth expressed in the words of Peter, addressed to the Jewish rulers, "Him," *i. e.*, Jesus, "hath God exalted with his right hand to be a prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins" (Acts v. 31), is very humbling to the pride of man's heart, and therefore hard for him to receive. Ordinarily, it is not until the sinner has tried, and tried in vain, to "fit himself for coming to Jesus," that he learns intelligently to say,

"Just as I am, without one plea
But that thy blood was shed for me,
And that thou bid'st me come to thee,
O Lamb of God, I come.

"Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind,
Sight, riches, healing of the mind,
Yea, all I need in thee to find,
O Lamb of God, I come."

III. IF THE GOSPEL OFFER IS SO FREELY MADE AND THE PROVISIONS OF GOSPEL GRACE SO FULL, THE QUESTION MAY BE ASKED, HOW COMES IT THAT SO MANY IN CHRISTIAN LANDS PERISH?

That many who have lived all their lives under the sound of the gospel faithfully preached, and have, at times, felt something of the power of that gospel, do perish, we cannot doubt, for our Lord expressly testifies, "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you; de-

part from me, ye that work iniquity." (Matt. vii. 21-23.) How is this to be accounted for? and, more especially, how is this to be reconciled with the declaration, "God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved" (John iii. 17), and with God's sincerity when he says, "As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?" (Ezek. xxxiii. 11.)

In attempting to answer these questions we must remember, (1), That the gospel is not a proclamation of universal salvation, but of salvation for "whosoever believeth in the only begotten Son of God"; and (2), That God's dealings with his creatures are always in conformity with the nature he has given them. Having made man an intelligent, free agent, he deals with him as such in matter which concern the salvation of his soul as well as in those which concern the well-being of his body. To the Jews, perishing under his perfect ministry, our Lord declares, "Ye *will not* come to me that ye might have life." (John v. 40.)

Not many months ago a man was hanged in our midst. He had been fairly tried, and convicted of cold-blooded murder. Under the laws of Virginia, as well as under the law of God, "He that sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed." A murderer, this man but suffered the righteous consequence of his own crime. He was "hanged until dead" by authority of law and by a public officer representing the Commonwealth of Virginia. In view of these facts would any one think, for a moment, of impeaching the righteousness of his execution, or of calling in question the claim on the part of the government of Virginia to be a truly paternal

government, seeking the highest good of its subjects, and with laws wisely designed to secure that end? The relation of God to the death of the sinner who perishes under this our gospel dispensation, is fairly illustrated in the conduct of our Lord, "God manifest in the flesh," when, for the last time, approaching Jerusalem, he wept over it, saying, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them that are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate." (Matt. xxiii. 37, 38.)

IV. IS NOT THE DOCTRINE OF ELECTION, ESPECIALLY IN THE PRETERITION WHICH IT NECESSARILY IMPLIES, AS TAUGHT IN "THE CONFESSION OF FAITH," IRRECONCILABLE WITH GOD'S SINCERITY IN THE GOSPEL OFFER?

If that doctrine were such as it is sometimes represented, or, rather, misrepresented, to be by those who reject it, I think it would be. Not long ago I heard of a celebrated evangelist stating the case substantially as follows, viz.: "Suppose the case of a king making a great supper and inviting many guests, and then, at supper time, as the invited guests were all coming, causing his soldiers to seize them and tie them to trees in sight of the supper table; and when this was done, sending out his steward to ring his bell and cry, 'Come to supper, come to supper.' What would be thought of the sincerity of the king's invitation in such circumstances as these?" If this were a fair representation of the case, but one answer could be made to the question. But is it a fair representation? I answer, assuredly, no. There is just enough of truth in it to make it the worst of slanders.

1. It is true in so far as its representation of the helpless condition, by nature, of the sinner to whom the gospel call is addressed is concerned. The representations of Scripture on this point are stronger than that of this evangelist. According to Scripture, the sinner is, by nature, not tied to a tree, but "dead in trespasses and sins." (Eph. ii. 1.) God himself represented the work of preaching the gospel to his prophet, Ezekiel, in terms, if possible, more striking than those quoted above: "The Spirit of the Lord set me down in the midst of the valley which was full of bones, and caused me to pass by them round about: and behold, there were very many in the open valley; and, lo, they were very dry. And he said unto me, Son of man, can these dry bones live? And I answered, O Lord God, thou knowest. Again he said unto me, Prophecy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord." (Ezek. xxxvii. 1-4.) I find no fault with the representation of man's helpless condition by nature as that of one tied to a tree. It certainly is not so strong as that of Scripture. But, then, there is a question which lies back of this which needs to be answered, viz.:

2. Who tied him there? His bonds, in part, at least, are the work of his own hands. Take the case of the drunkard, for example, and the Scriptures tell us that "no drunkard shall inherit the kingdom of God." (1 Cor. vi. 10.) His drunkenness, as long as it is persisted in, is an insuperable obstacle in the way of his "believing in the only begotten Son of God." Who made him the drunkard that he is? It is certain that God did not. His evil habit is his own work, and by its indulgence he is every day strengthening his bonds. And this which is true of drunkenness is true of all other sinful habits, *e. g.*, of covetousness, of unbelief,

and worldly lusts in all its forms. In so far as these are concerned, a man's bonds are unquestionably of his own making.

But there is something back of all this, I will be told. The man was sin-ruined from his birth, as David confesses with respect to himself: "I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." (Psalm li. 5.) True; but in no proper sense of that expression can it be said that God made him the sin-ruined creature he was born. We are all, not individuals only, but we are all members of families, and peoples, and races as well, and in many particulars God deals with us as such; and man deals with his fellow-man on the same principle. Adam, the federal as well as the natural head of our race, God made originally "in his own image, after his own likeness" (Gen. i. 26), "in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness," with ability perfectly to keep the law. But he, in the exercise of that free agency with which God endowed him, sinned against God, and as the righteous consequence of his sin, came under the curse, and this curse he has transmitted as an inheritance to all his descendants by natural generation. The Scripture record is, "And Adam begat a son in his own likeness" (Gen. v. 2), and so has it been with his descendants ever since. In this way it has come to pass that we are all "conceived in sin." In view of these facts, is it not a gross misrepresentation to speak of man as one bound to a tree by the king's soldiers, and so, virtually, by the king himself?

3. The statement we are examining contains a still more radical misrepresentation of the truth in likening the gospel call to that of the king's steward proclaiming in the hearing of men bound to trees, "Come to supper, come to supper." Carrying out the figurative represen-

tation adopted, the steward's call, if it is truly to represent the gospel call, ought to be: "Poor captive, let me loose thy bonds, that thou mayest come to the supper graciously provided for thee." One of the first records we have of our Lord's public preaching of the gospel is in the words: "And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor: he hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to *preach deliverance to the captives*, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised"—*the opening of the prison to them that are bound* (Isa. lxi. 1)—"To preach the acceptable year of the Lord . . . This day is this Scripture fulfilled in your ears." (Luke iv. 17-21.) At a later day, when discussing this very matter, he said to the Jews, in answer to their boast, "We be Abraham's seed, and were never in bondage to any man, how sayest thou, Ye shall be made free? Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant (bond-servant, Rev. Ver.) of sin. . . . If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed." (John viii. 33-35.) As our Lord himself preached the gospel, it is not a call to a bound captive, "Come to supper, come to supper," but, poor captive of sin and Satan, let me loose thy bonds that thou mayest come.

4. One of the most subtile, and therefore, most dangerous forms which self-righteousness assumes in the heart of the awakened sinner is that expressed in the words, "I AM NOT FIT TO COME TO JESUS." We must not confound worthiness with fitness to come to Jesus. Worthiness has reference to man's deservings. Jacob, on the very occasion on which God changed his name

to Israel, because, "as a prince he had power with God, and with men, and prevailed," confesses, "I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which thou hast shown unto thy servant." (Gen. xxii. 10.) Fitness has reference to what the occasion or circumstances of the case require. And never was there a more fitting occasion for Jacob to "wrestle" with God than the very occasion on which he confesses his unworthiness of the least of all his mercies, for then was he in an extremity in which God alone could help him.

Does Christ present himself in the gospel as a physician? And art thou sick? Then come to him that thou mayest be made whole. Thy very sickness makes it a fitting thing that thou shouldst come. Did Christ come "not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance?" (Matt. ix. 13.) And art thou a sinner? Then come to him, "For him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins." (Acts v. 31.) Thy very need of "repentance and forgiveness of sins" renders it a fitting thing that thou shouldst come to him.

Do not mistake the nature of the gospel grace given us in Christ Jesus, and in thy folly attempt to do that which God alone can do, and which, for Christ's sake, he stands ready to do for you. You have within you "a heart of stone," *i. e.*, a heart feeling no genuine contrition for sin, no faith in the Lord Jesus, no love to God; and by no determination of your own, by no effort of will, by no use of means can you ever change that heart of stone into one of flesh. If this work is ever accomplished, God must do it for you. And this is but a part of that which God proposes to do for you in the gospel, and what you need to come to him for. "A

new heart, also, will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you; and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them." (Ezek. xxxvi. 26, 27.)

The repentance, faith and love; the contrite spirit, the believing mind, the loving heart, which, in their beginning at the least, make up the idea of fitness in the mind of him who says, "I am not fit to come to Jesus," are all "fruits of the Spirit." (See Gal. v. 22, 23.) They are not excellences to be wrought out by the sinner in preparation for coming to Christ, but "gifts of God," bestowed through Christ and for Christ's sake upon the sinner who comes to him. Believe, then, that our Lord meant just what he said, and all that he said, when he cried: "Whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely."