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→ SERMONS ←

THE REDEMPTIVE ELEMENT IN CHRISTIANITY JUSTIFIED
BY THE MORAL EXPERIENCE OF MAN.

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In whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace.—EPHESIANS i., 7.

THOSE whose minds are awake to such things will detect in this passage a certain flush of color, a throb, a peculiar intensity of phrase, which marks the passage as being autobiographical. Paul had *lived* it before he could write it. The language echoes the virgin Christian experience of a rare man, a man both intellectual and indomitable, one who dealt with Christianity at first hand, who had (what we do not always remember) no New Testament to guide him, and who gained his faith mainly out of what had happened when his own angry and haughty nature met its Master and Saviour.

This occurrence took place, as we know, on the travelled road, on the southeastern flank of Mount Hermon, a few miles southwest of the old Syrian city of Damascus; Paul being then about thirty-five years old. Conversion is not too great name for such a transformation. Paul is a friend made out of a foe, as sometimes we have seen a statue or other emblem of peace made from metal re-cast from molten cannon. Paul had been *re-cast*. He had been through the furnace and what had issued from that furnace with him was this thought of the Gospel as being a redemption; more than a code, like the Mosaic law; more than a culture, like that of the Greek literature; more

THE GREAT QUESTION.*

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Then he called for a light and sprang in, and came trembling, and fell down before Paul and Silas, and brought them out, and said: Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.—ACTS xvi., 29, 30, 31.

HE called for a light! Then he called for what he needed badly. Never had a man more reason for making such a call or for calling earnestly and loudly. It was not a sword or a staff that he needed, nor bread, but a light. It was a night of terror. We read in the twenty-sixth verse: "Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's bands were loosed."

We never had an earthquake that did any damage in Richmond, and yet the slight shock we had here when Charleston was so awfully shaken, filled the city with dread, and some were almost distracted with fear.

There are many things calculated to inspire fear in an earthquake. It comes so stealthily, so unexpectedly; nothing can prevent its coming; people are so utterly helpless when the earth is reeling and the houses are falling; there is no place where one is safe; all feel that the power which can fill the heart of the earth with muffled thunder, and make its surface rise and fall like waves of the sea, is a power which man cannot restrain or resist.

The jailer, startled from sleep—shaken from his bed—while the very foundations of the prison were shattered and all the doors burst open, rushed out not knowing what might happen next. If he could only see he might know what to do. But there he was in the blackness of darkness; ignorant of the mischief already done, and of what more might be coming, and so he shouted for a light.

But this was not all. The jailer was visited with a double terror. He felt that both soul and body were in danger. He was suddenly convicted of sin and full of dismay. He was in great spiritual darkness. He only knew he was in peril; how to escape he knew not. Ignorance covered him like a shroud; the present was full of uncertainty; the future was full of menace. If ever a man needed a light it was the jailer. The world is a dark place; the sinner's heart is a dark place without the light which comes from the Bible and the Cross.

But let us go back and look at the circumstances more closely. What brought Paul to Philippi; what did he do when he got there; how did he become acquainted with the jailer; what great question did the jailer ask; what answer did he get, and what was the meaning of the answer?

You may remember that on last Sunday night I told you of the persecutions suffered by the early Christians and of Paul's arrest and confinement

*Preached in Old Market Hall, Richmond, Va. See page 691.

in Rome under the tyrant, Nero. But that was by no means his first trouble of the kind. "In prisons oft" was his own brief account of the matter. In modern times some men spend half of their lives behind the bars; and others would also if they got what they deserved. But these are law-breakers—criminals suffering for their own misdeeds. It was not so with the early Christians, nor with their great leader, Paul. It was no disgrace to him that he was so often in prison. The disgrace belonged to those who put him there. He suffered for conscience' sake. He did not care how often he was bound provided the Word of God was not bound. We call our courts courts of justice. Those by which Paul was so often tried and sentenced were courts of injustice. As there was no fair way to stop his preaching, his enemies resorted to foul means.

When bigots and tyrants cannot deny evidence or answer arguments they resort to brute force. It is a poor way to try to stop the truth by striking the man who speaks it in the mouth; a mean way to put him in a dungeon. It is a confession of defeat. Mob law is the law of cowards and ruffians. It may put to death the innocent, but it cannot kill the cause of which innocence is the champion. Paul, therefore, was not ashamed of stripes nor afraid of fetters. He gloried even in imprisonment, when it attracted the attention of the people to the Master he served and to the Gospel he preached.

He had come on one of his great missionary journeys to Philippi, and on the first Sabbath he spent there, as there was no church in the place, he held a meeting by the river-side and talked to the people who came to hear him. A woman in the congregation heard him attentively. If people don't listen, they might as well be deaf. But Paul had one good hearer in the audience. "Faith cometh by hearing," and the Lord opened the heart of Lydia so that she believed what she heard and was saved. The first convert in Europe was a woman. One converted woman is generally worth two men, especially if she is a mother. Lydia was baptized, and her children with her. You remember the story that is told to illustrate this, but it will bear repeating—the story of the little girl when asked which she liked best, Christian or Christiana, in Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress." She said she liked Christiana best, because when Christian left the City of Destruction he went alone, but when Christiana left she took the children with her. I am glad so many mothers bring their children with them to the hall, but I want them to lead their children not only to the hall, but to Heaven. But, mothers, you must go first, and then ask God to help you take the children along.

When the Sabbath was over Paul kept on with the work so well begun, and as he went about the city with his friend Silas he was followed for several days by a poor servant girl who had brought her masters much gain by her ravings. But among the wild things she was saying there was one thing that was true. How she got the knowledge we are not told, but she was not raving when she cried, "These men are the servants of the most high God, which show unto us the way of salvation." Paul, full of pity, turned, and by the

power of his Lord, cast out the evil spirit that was in her. When her master saw that the hope of their gains was gone they seized Paul and Silas, brought them before the magistrates, and accused them of being disturbers of the peace. They had no trial, but the magistrates commanded them to be beaten, and then committed them to prison, charging the jailor to keep them safely. The hard-hearted jailor knew how to please the magistrates, and not only thrust them into the inner prison but made their feet fast in the stocks.

Now I am going to surprise those of you who are not familiar with the story. At midnight there were strange noises heard in the inner prison; sounds that never came out of it before. What would you expect to hear from men who had been cruelly whipped and laid on a dungeon floor with their feet made fast in the stocks, so that they could not even get the poor relief which comes from a change of position? What sounds? Do you say—groans and lamentations? Groans and lamentations!—no, but this: "At midnight Paul and Silas prayed and sang praises unto God, and the prisoners heard them." They had never heard anything like it before. They may have heard weeping and wailing—but now, the cold, mouldy, slimy walls of the dungeon resounded with their thanksgivings that they were counted worthy to suffer so for the cause of their dear Lord.

Once I made a visit to a young person in this city who had long been a sufferer from a disease which caused her unspeakable pain. Her kind physician stood by her with tears in his eyes, but could give her only temporary relief. After he left I tried to say a few soothing, comforting words to her, and she said: "Yes, I suffer great pain. I often lie awake all night, unable to sleep because of it, but I have one compensation." "One compensation," I asked, "what is that?" Said she, "It is this: often when I cannot close my eyes in sleep I have such a sense of God's loving and reconciled presence all about me that I have learned what David means when he talks about songs in the night."

Whether it be a fact in natural history that the nightingale pours forth her sweetest notes when she leans her bosom against a thorn, I do not know, but I do know that in the experience of many a Christian "the anguish of the singer gives sweetness to the song," and that they are the best comforters of others who "learn in suffering what they teach in song."

But something else was heard in the prison that night besides the praises of Paul and Silas. "Suddenly there was a great earthquake, and the foundations of the prison were shaken, and immediately all the doors were opened and every one's bands were loosed." The jailer thought the prisoners had fled, and as a Roman jailer was answerable with his life for such escapes, he drew his sword, and would have committed suicide had not Paul cried with a loud voice: "Do thyself no harm, for we are all here."

The effect of all this on the jailer was something tremendous. The terror of the earthquake, the calmness of the Apostles, Paul's mysterious knowledge that he had intended to kill himself, the warning not to harm his mortal body

or his immortal soul by such an act, and the remembrance, perhaps, that the soothsayer had persisted in proclaiming: "These men are the servants of the most high God, which show unto us the way of salvation"—all this came upon him like the rush of the earthquake, and filled him with such conviction of his guilt, and with such a terror of coming wrath that, trembling as Felix did before this same Paul when he reasoned of righteousness and judgment to come, the jailer fell down, utterly prostrated with anguish and despair.

Now the "light" has come in by which he saw his guilt, and now we see how much men need the divine illumination, which brings conviction of sin. The jailer was as wicked before he began to tremble as he was after he fell at the Apostles' feet, only he did not see it. Now he realizes what he did not discover until the Spirit opened his eyes. Impenitent men who do not tremble and who do not fear are just as wicked as they are when they feel and confess their guilt. It is no new sin that fills them with dismay; it is the revelation of the old sin that fills them with alarm. "He that believeth not is condemned already." If my unconverted hearers knew what that meant—if they would only remember that they are already condemned by God's righteous law, and that the only difference between those under sentence now, and those who shall be sentenced in the day of judgment is, that the present condemnation may be exchanged for pardon, while the final condemnation will be eternal, they would be as full of terror as the convicted jailer was, and they would act as he did, when tremblingly he cried, "What must I do to be saved?"

What is the next thing we are told about this man? What was the piercing question he asked—the most important question a condemned man can ask on his way to death and judgment? "What must I do to be saved?"

I wish I could stop here and announce that every unconverted person present was such an inquirer. How it would affect all Christians in this congregation to be assured that this was the case! What prayers would at once go up for the converting powers of the Holy Ghost to descend! How it would affect the preacher, and what joy would fill his heart as he gave the Apostles' answer to the inquiry! Why should this not be the inquiry of every one here present? It is a question that may be asked—a question that ought to be asked—a question that must be asked by every unconverted person before salvation can be possible.

"What must I do to be saved?" Now hear the Apostles' answer: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved." This is not the answer the jailer expected. He no doubt thought he would be told to do something very different—perhaps something very difficult. If he had been ordered to put on the chains that had dropped from the limbs of the prisoners, to be put in the stocks out of which their feet had been taken, to be scourged as they had been scourged, it might have seemed to him to be the right way to satisfy divine justice for the sins he had committed. But no; he was not told to inflict any suffering on him-

self, or to ask any one else to punish him, but to cast himself on the mercy and forgiving love of one who had suffered in his room and stead—to believe in one who had “borne his sins in His own body on the tree.” “What must I do?” The answer came short, plain, clear, and sweet, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.”

This is absolutely the only way in which a sinner can be saved. He has broken all the commandments in thought, word, or deed; violated every precept of the law which is holy, just, and good. God has said: “Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things written in the book of the law to do them;” “The soul that sinneth it shall die;” “All have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” Now how can a weak, wicked man mend what he has broken—how can he repair the ruin he has wrought? Do you say, let him be sorry for it? Yes, let him be sorry—he cannot be too sorry—but will all his grief and tears undo the mischief he has done to his own soul and to the souls of others? If I should knock off the watch that lies on the table before me, and if in falling on the floor it should break in pieces, would all my regret repair the watch and set it going again? If I were to burn down the house I live in, would all my remorse make a new house rise out of the ashes? I once knew a mother who poisoned her child. But did all the untold anguish of that wretched mother bring back life into the form that was still and cold in the embrace of death? No: sorrow, tears, grief, remorse will not atone for sin. And if all this would suffice, would all our sufferings of body and soul endured for past sins also purchase a future Heaven for us, or give a taste for its pure joys and holy employments?

We need two things—justification and sanctification; we need pardon for the past and a passport to the home of the pure in heart in the future. We cannot obtain either by any sacrifices or services of our own. It is evident, then, that every sinner must be lost, unless it pleased God to do for him what he could not do for himself. Well, it has pleased God to do that very thing. What a weak, sinful man cannot do, the strong, holy Son of God can, and did do. “He was made sin for us”—that is, was treated as a sinner because He took our place and voluntarily suffered what we deserved—that we might not have to suffer for our own sin. Sin is like a debt we owed God: Christ has paid it, paid it all, and God will not require the payment of the debt twice. If our surety has settled it, there can be no charge against us. More than this, He has not only suffered for us, but He has obeyed for us—obeyed the whole law which we had broken, and obeyed it perfectly, not for Himself, for He made the law, but for those for whom He was acting, for those whose places He took as their substitute. Righteousness means perfect obedience. Christ’s obedience was perfect, and hence His righteousness is perfect. Now suppose Christ offers to set down that righteousness to our credit and account, and to treat us as if we were as righteous as Himself, don’t you see what a passport He puts in our hands? To state it in another way: Christ, by His sufferings, atoned for our sins and shut the gates of hell; Christ, by His obedience, merited salvation for us and opened the gates of Heaven.

Now only one more thing remains. How can we get the benefit of all Christ did for us? How can we make it ours? I answer, by faith. This is the glorious truth proclaimed by the Saviour Himself. Almost at the beginning of His ministry He said, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." When He sent forth His disciples this was their commission: "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." Our Lord taught and illustrated this truth in many cases. He said to the woman who touched the hem of His garment, "Thy faith hath made thee whole." He said to the centurion, "Be it unto you according to thy faith." He said to the father of the child possessed by a devil, "If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth." He said to Jairus, whose daughter had just died, "Be not afraid, only believe"; and Paul, catching up the strain, spoke the words that sounded like music in the ear of the jailer: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved." Now if you ask what this faith is, I answer it is a saving grace whereby we receive and rest on Christ alone for salvation, as He is offered to us in the Gospel. Faith, then, means reliance, not on a doctrine, but on Christ as a person. "He that cometh unto Me shall never hunger; He that believeth on Me shall never thirst."

You say if Christ were now on the earth, and you knew where you could find Him, you could come to Him. You could see Him, hear Him, touch Him, speak to Him. But remember that when He was on the earth in the flesh it did no good to see Him, hear or touch Him, if that were all. Something more was needed. So He said: "Blessed are they who have not seen, yet have believed." When the woman who was made whole touched Him, she was not cured because she laid her finger on the hem of His garment, but because she laid her heart on His heart. You can speak to Him now by prayer as easily as men spoke to Him face to face, and He will hear you just as certainly. Faith means confidence—the confidence of love. As a little child looks up into its mother's face and sees affection there, or into its father's face and sees protection there, and as its little heart goes out in reliance in that love, in that protection, so confidence in Christ is like that dear old feeling that hallowed your childhood. Give Him that strong and tender confidence you gave your parents; give Him your heart, and let your heart find sweet repose in resting on Him, and you will be saved.

This is the one great truth which pious ministers in all ages have delighted to preach. They may have differed about other things, but they were of one accord here. This is the way of salvation loved and proclaimed by some whom you have known, and who have now gone to their rest in Heaven. This is the truth that Bishop Dogget and Father Courtney used to preach, and Bishop Johns and Doctor Empie, and Doctors Jeter and James B. Taylor, and Doctors Plummer and T. V. Moore. It is what my dear brethren of the Baptist, Methodist, Episcopal and Presbyterian Churches now preach; and if they were all here to-night, I believe they would be willing,

one by one, to rise up and say this is the truth we all alike love—the truth we want you to love and live and die by.

This is the truth that the jailer at Philippi embraced with all his heart. He did not wait for more emotion, or more worthiness, or until he understood all mysteries. But when Paul pointed him to Christ, he ran into His arms and rejoiced in the hope of a present and eternal salvation.

“ Let not conscience make you linger,
Nor of fitness fondly dream.”

Some years ago two men were riding on horseback in one of the counties of eastern Virginia. They came to a narrow place in the road, and one went before the other. The man who was riding in front began to sing an old hymn, and the one behind him caught one verse of it:

“ Let not conscience make you linger,
Nor of fitness fondly dream:
All the fitness He requireth
Is, to feel your need of Him;
This He gives you:
'Tis the Spirit's rising beam.”

At that moment he got his “light.” A ray from Heaven seemed to fall on him—fell into his dark heart—and a new hope rose over him like a star. For thirty years he had wanted to be a Christian, but he had been hindered by doubts; now it was all plain. He had nothing to do but to trust in Him who had done all, suffered all, merited all, and all for him. How easy, how delightful it was then to say:

“ Here, Lord, I give myself away,
'Tis all that I can do.”

Yes; that is all: do that and Christ will do the rest.

“ Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.”

THE PLAGUE OF THE HEART (*Which shall know every man the plague of his own heart, etc.*—I. KINGS viii., 38-40).—God will hear every man's prayer for the cure of this plague. There are many forms of this plague. I. One form is that of a terrible memory scored with blood-red lines. It may be a deep secret sin which no one knows but the guilty one himself. This can be cured. Another form of this plague is a wretched tendency to some one sin—the passion of lust or the passion for strong drink, or of an ungovernable temper or of malice. These are all fierce heats, but all can be cured by the waters of salvation. Another form of this plague is a constant dread of the future. But learn to look it in the face. Flee to Christ and then this fear is gone. II. The mode of treatment. Make a diagnosis of your case. Then spread your trouble before God—confess all and He will forgive and save. Pray with your eye on the Lord Jesus—as you look, you will believe. Rest on Him. III. Help to be expected. Free pardon. God cleans the record against you, melts the hardness of the heart, inclines it to holiness and gives grace as needed.—*Rev. C. H. Spurgeon (Baptist)*.