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TAKE HOLD OF GOD.

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“Let him take hold of my strength, that he may make peace with me.”—ISAIAH xxvii. 5.

GOD is the speaker, and he sends us a call through this verse of Scripture. He wants us to come up to his side and touch him. We have been standing off, standing aloof, with a great stretch of territory between us and God. We have been finding fault with the Almighty. He fails to manage the universe to suit us. As a coterie of self-elected critics we have been standing away off there, harping ceaselessly the dismal clamor of our complaints. God says: “Come up closer, and you can see better. Stand beside me, and you will get a new perspective. Touch me, and your querulous complaints will change into peace.” “Let him take hold of my strength, that he may make peace with me.”

We spend so much of our time on trifles. Suppose you work out a little sum in arithmetic. Take the past week and tell us how you spent it. One-third of it went into sleep. Of the remainder, how much was spent in idle conversation that left no more behind it than the wind that whistles past you on the street? How much was spent in amusement, in the arduous effort to make leisure that would otherwise be insufferably tame pass with some degree of delight? How much was spent in that which is purely material? How much was spent in

eating and drinking and reading? How much of the past week did you devote to that which will live on after your seventy years are out and bring something at the bar of eternity? After all we are like children blowing soap-bubbles out of a clay pipe, forgetting that the bubbles burst fast and the clay is soon broken. But the process is entertaining, time passes, and the bubbles are beautiful, as a sunbeam falls upon the shining disk and paints it over with rainbows. Still the air moves and the bubbles burst; but we can blow another, and so we keep on blowing, blowing!

God says there is bigger work for us. The text calls us to spend our life on that which is not a trifle—God! Take hold of him. God is not a trifle, heaven is not a bubble, religion is not a form of amusement. Take hold of these. They dignify and ennoble life here. They invest the insignificances of time with importance, and have a durable value which eternity will not destroy, but enhance.

There is a downward drift in everything that belongs to this world. The law of the world is degeneration. You have only to let anything alone and it will go to the devil of itself. Let a ship alone and it will wreck itself. Let a house alone and it will by-and-by tumble down of its own depravity. Let a man alone and he will degenerate. God would counteract this downward drift. His whole effort is to make something out of us—the best. For degeneration he substitutes regeneration. He would put an end to our trifling and set us afire with great ambitions to amount to something in his glorious kingdom of redeemed and enthroned manhood and womanhood. He says to every one of us: “Take hold of my strength, that you may have peace.” There are three thoughts in the text: First, the human element in religion;

second, the divine element in religion; and third, the product of their union.

I. *There is a human side to religion.* Man has something to do with getting himself saved. "Let him take hold." People do not drift into heaven any more than a ship drifts up to its landing at the pier. If you want to possess yourself of God you must take him. You cannot buy salvation, to be sure; you cannot earn it, you cannot deserve it, but if it is ever yours you must take it.

There are those who believe altogether too much in divine sovereignty, or rather who frame into their creed a monstrous distortion of the doctrine of divine sovereignty. They make it synonymous with fatalism. They reason this way: "The Almighty made the universe and he is responsible for it. I shall not attempt to interfere with his prearranged plans. If he wants me redeemed, he must see to it. If he wants to send me to hell, he must bear the responsibility of it. I am here without my choice, the creature of environment and accident. If I were to fail to perform the specific part assigned to me in the economy of God's plan, I might throw the machinery of the whole universe out of gear. So I shall merely remain passive and allow whoever is at the head of this world to manipulate me to the greatest advantage."

That is the caricature of the truth of divine sovereignty, in the baldest, most repulsive, coarsest, Ingersollian form.

The same spirit comes to the front also with more subtle speech, pretending to be most humble in its submission "to the Lord's will," and prating in pious cant about its longing for "divine guidance." "God knows what I ought to do, and what I ought not to do," it says. "I am in the Lord's hands to be used as he may

see fit. If he wants me to do this, he will make me do it. If he wants me to avoid that, he will make me hate it. I have just handed over my entire personality to him, and he is responsible. I am merely a bit of driftwood floating on the great sea of divine providence, subject to the winds and tides which the Lord may send. How delicious it is not to bother about steam and chart and compass, but just to float, float, float."

Yes, and you will wake up in hell on that schedule. When God saves us he does not take from us conscience, senses, mind, or Bible. That is an awful travesty on religion. We have our part to do, we must "take hold," and if we fail to do that, all the cant and pious profession of submerging our identity in the divine purpose will not get us into heaven.

Sometimes it is charged that the Presbyterian Church, through its system of theology known as "Calvinism," teaches this doctrine of fatalism. It is said that we believe that God has foreordained one section of the human race to heaven, regardless of what they may do in the matter, and another section to hell, regardless of what they may do. "If you are going to be saved, you will be saved; lost, you will be lost, and all your efforts to the contrary cannot thwart the divine decree." It is said that we believe so mightily in the divine sovereignty of God that we have left no place for the free agency of man. Some one burrows away in his study until he unearths the spectral figure of fatalism, and calling that "Calvinism," walks out into the world and proclaims "Calvinism the disgrace of theology." Yes, it would be if the cap fit, but it does not; and I may be allowed to say in passing that Presbyterians do believe that the human element is vital. We do not believe in the decrees of God in such a way as to reduce to zero the

freedom and responsibility of the human agent. The statement of our *Confession of Faith* on this subject ought to be sufficient for all those who will take the trouble to examine it. There it says: "God hath endued the will of man with that natural liberty, that is neither forced, nor by any absolute necessity of nature determined to good or evil."*

If that is not enough to settle any doubt on this subject, a brief examination of the practical evangelism of our dear old church will amply refute the statement that her creed is fatalistic. She is in the forefront of the effort to carry the gospel to all mankind, believing that when her Lord said: "Whosoever will may come," he meant it. The Presbyterian Church has sent out and supports one-fourth of the entire missionary force of the world. She leads the world in the grace of Christian giving; and Mr. Moody was speaking from past experience when he said that if he wanted to raise \$100,000, he expected to get \$80,000 of it from Presbyterians.

We are not fatalists. There is a human element in religion, and I may say in the name of my church, no less than in the name of the Bible from which the church gets her creed, that if you are living as your fancy dictates, fast and loose, trying to shelve the responsibility for your moral inaccuracies on your Maker, and expecting some day to wake up in glory and hear him say: "Well done, good and faithful servant!" you are only preparing yourself for an awful disappointment. A man who here on earth crushes the poor, takes advantage of his neighbor's necessities, lays hold of the world and the flesh, believing that after a while he will hear the Master say: "Forasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the

* Chapter IX., Part I.

least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me; enter into the joy of your Lord," that man is hugging an empty delusion.

The Lord says, if we want all of this, we must "lay hold of him." Isn't that a rich phrase with which to express our part in the soul's salvation. "Let him take hold." We are not required to be theologians. It is not demanded of us that we exhaust the metaphysical subtleties of theosophy. We are merely to "take hold." God has prepared salvation. He offers it as a gift. We are not required to do God's part over again. We are not told to die on the cross, to make atonement, but to *take*. That is faith, and faith is our part. Faith is the open, empty hand that reaches up to lay hold of what God has provided. Faith is:

"Just to follow, hour by hour, where he leadeth,
Just to draw the moment's power as it needeth—
Just to trust him: that is all."

If you are thirsty, the rivers of the world might be flowing at your feet, but unless you dip a goblet and drink you will never slake your thirst. Salvation is the bounty of God's free grace, but before it will ever do you any good, you must take the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord.

Nor is it difficult to understand why this must be the case. You can send your boy to school, as some one has suggested, and pay all the expenses of his tuition, but you cannot give him an education regardless of the hard work which the boy must do himself. A general may promise victory to his soldiers, but they do not expect to obtain it without fighting. God may offer us salvation as a free gift, and does, but it can never become ours until we take it and experience it. Salvation is not a change of surroundings, but a new life.

Heaven is no more a harp and crown and shining robe and saintly face than education is an armful of books and a wise expression of countenance. If one wants to be saved, let him take hold of God. Have you done this? No? And yet you wonder that you are not saved. You expect God to take you by the throat and force you into his kingdom. You are drifting along, living as you please; and the meanwhile you are blaming the Almighty, and saying, "the Bible is false, the church is full of frauds, prayer is not answered, providence is all topsy-turvy." Man, quit trifling! Do your part. Lay hold of God. Then, if God fails you, you will have some just ground of complaint. And will you notice that it is not enough for you to stand away off and barely touch God with the finger-tips of a decrepit faith. "*Let him take hold.*" That means a good, strong, honest clasp. Your soul is to cleave to God as Eleazer's hand did to his sword,* until you cannot let him go. Then your God will become a great reality in all you think and do.

II. This brings us to the next part of our text—*the divine element in religion*. While there is a human element in religion, it is not all human. Indeed, that is the smallest part of it. Let him take hold—of what? Of education, and civilization, and art, and scientific research, and moral culture? It does not say that, for all that, after all, would be but the man's laying hold of some part of himself. Higher is the call. Richer is the promise. "Let him take hold of my strength." That brings God upon the scene, and introduces the divine element in religion.

There are people who call this superstition. Just as

*2 Samuel xxiii. 10.

there are those who believe altogether too much in the doctrine of divine sovereignty, or in a monstrous perversion of that doctrine, so there are those who believe entirely too much in the doctrine of human agency, or in a monstrous perversion of that doctrine. The rationalist is at the extreme swing of the pendulum from the fatalist. He says: "Man is a god unto himself. Religion is only a cult. Worship is spiritual gymnastics. The only good prayer does is the moral disciplinary effect on him who prays. What one believes about the various dogmas at issue in religion is a matter of small consequence. Believe what you please, if you are sincere. One church is as good as another. One god is as good as another. One heaven is as good as another. The only god and church and heaven you will ever know anything about are within you. You are the great reality. All else is pious fiction."

Is that all there is of religion? Is it simply a colossal temple of unmingled egoism, where God, church, heaven, priest, worship, eternity, are all but varying moods of the one and self-same "his majesty myself," who makes "self" the centre of the universe and transmutes a lie into the truth, by believing it sincerely? If that is all there is in worship, let us pitch all religion overboard, and cease chasing shadows. Religion is intended to make man happier, stronger, purer than he is naturally. It proposes, not to save him to himself, but to save him from himself; to save him to something larger and grander than he could ever otherwise attain. If it fails of this, if there is nothing above our heads, worship is only a pious pantomime; and we ourselves are but shadows playing solemn antics in holy moods.

But there is something above our heads. We are not more certain of our own existence than of that. God is

there. God! He is stronger, happier, purer than we. He is all of these in infinite perfection, and now his word to us, struggling and striving to be lifted from our low estate is, "Take hold of my strength." Take hold of God. How life mounts up when that is done. "My strength!" God's *strength!* That is a rich phrase with which to set forth the divine element in religion. Strength means certainty in the midst of doubt, wisdom in the hour of perplexity, stability when the strain comes, riches in poverty, light in darkness, serenity in storm. Christ is God's strength. Let us take hold of Christ. He will no more fail us than he did the woman in the gospel story who barely touched the hem of his garment.

God is a rock in the midst of life's great sea, standing whereon the raging flood cannot reach us. It howls and sweeps and surges at our feet, but it cannot overthrow our God, and we are safe. "Let him take hold of my strength." We do not have to understand it to measure it, to exhaust it, to follow it in all its works. We have only to take hold of it. You can do that. You cannot fathom God, but you can take hold of him. Maybe you cannot straighten out all of the theological intricacies to your satisfaction; maybe your daily shortcomings are a constant mortification to you; maybe you cannot even pray as you think you ought; but you can take hold of God's strength. You can accept Jesus. This it is to which the Saviour would have us devote life. Instead of spending time on trifles, catching at bubbles, fascinated by the glitter of empty nothings, let us drink in a deep breath of heaven's air and begin to live. Take hold of God and be saved.

III. And now we are beside the last part of our text. First the human element in religion, then the divine.

They meet, and then the product—*peace*. “Let him take hold of my strength, that he may make *peace* with me.” A human life, in its frailty and need, lays hold of God, and God comes down and dwells in the human life, invests it with the power and majesty of his presence, communicates the calm of heaven to the perturbed spirit, and there is “*peace*.” Brethren, that is religion in its effect. “That he may make peace with me.” God is anxious for us to come to that. The only safety for anything or anybody in the wide world is to be on God’s side. There is not room enough for two gods in the universe.

Peace! It is what we long most to possess. After all, it is the goal of life; and beyond our business tasks and social recreations, our toils and plans, beyond all that we strive to do here, we are looking for peace. We try to secure it in different ways.

Some attempt to obtain it by conforming to a low worldly standard and denying that anything better is possible. Others seek peace by surrendering themselves to the fullest gratification of all that is sensual and material. Still others strive to attain unto peace by stifling all anxiety with the stoic’s dogma that “what cannot be cured must be endured.” But any one who has tried it knows that all this is beggarly makeshift. Surroundings, external comforts, easy-going morals can no more bring peace to the soul than a soft couch can bring health to a fevered body.

A nation may secure peace, some one has observed, by two methods—either by conquering, or by being conquered. If it is willing to lay aside its national self-respect, to submit to insult and oppression, to submerge all prospects for national greatness and influence, it may have peace. There is a sort of peace possible to the in-

dividual on such degrading terms. If we are willing to submit to the incessant demands of the baser part of us, we may by-and-by reach a state of moral callousness, where conscience will be silenced, and we shall have peace. Who wants such peace? That is not what God offers. The Christian gets his peace, not by being conquered, but by conquering. He gets hold of omnipotence, and in the might of that defeats his adversaries and achieves peace. That is peace worth having. God lifts us above expediency. He dissipates anxiety about to-morrow, not by making to-morrow any the less a stern day, but by giving us strength to fight all of its battles successfully.

God's promises may not mature in sixty days, but they mature, and promptly at the hour of need they may be realized upon to their full face value, with compounded interest. "Wait on the Lord; be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the Lord." *

"God holds the key of all unknown,
And I am glad;
If other hands should hold the key,
Or if he trusted it to me,
I might be sad."

Let us understand that to meet life successfully it is not necessary to understand all that is before us. Away with this diet of thin gruel on the table of those whose creed is a naked interrogation point. The life of faith is ever the strongest life. Believe in God and do your best and there is always certain victory.

"The best men, doing their best,
Know, peradventure, least of what they do.
Men usefulest in the world are simply used."

* Psalm xxvii. 14.

God is responsible, to whoever trusts him, for all that life needs to make it great and good. How lines of care fade out and disappear for him who realizes that! "Let me take hold"—that is our part. "Of God's strength"—that is God's part; and the result is "peace."

You say all of this does well enough to preach about. It is a beautiful theory, but it breaks down in practice. Let us see. God has given us one perfect illustration of the text—Jesus Christ. In his earthly career the human and divine elements of religion met. In Christ human need took hold of divine strength, and the product was a life of absolutely undisturbed and unquenchable peace. Christ would reproduce his life in us. He would have us fight our battles as he fought his, and achieve the same glorious victory, for the same seraphic end. "My peace I give unto you." That is what Jesus has bequeathed to his followers from his cross. Peace! Let us take hold of God with the clasp of a fresh and living faith, and receiving into our souls something of the ineffable calm which always reigns wherever God is, let us enjoy Christ's blessed bequest of PEACE.