

A GOOD LIFE

A SERMON

Preached on Lord's Day Morning June 26th, 1859

By Mister JAMES WELLS

AT THE SURREY TABERNACLE, BOROUGH ROAD

Volume 1 Number 28

“Let Reuben live, and not die; and let not his men be few.” Deuteronomy 33:6

IN the most emphatic, in the most solemn sense of the word, real godliness, is a matter of life and death; and if “All that a man has will he give for his life,” what shall we say when we come to the great subject of life and death in the sense indicated in our text? when it must be everlasting death, everlasting banishment from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power, or else everlasting glorification? So that such are brought in real earnestness to the throne of grace; like the man, the captain of fifty, when he saw the other two fifties and their captains were destroyed; saw that the Almighty was not to be trifled with; saw that the threatening's of God's word must be as completely fulfilled as his promises; and therefore, he came under that conviction, in a very different spirit; “O Man of God, let our lives be precious in your sight.” And this is the prayer of every sin-convicted sinner; let me live, let my soul be precious in your sight. Happy, thrice happy, that man where these weighty matters of both judgment and mercy have sunk down into the soul; and he feels he is that poor, unhappy creature sentenced by sin, and sentenced by his conscience, and sentenced by the law, and sentenced in every way unto eternal perdition, unto death. What earnestness these matters give then to the language of our text when taken in that sense in which I shall take it, “Let Reuben live, and not die; let not his men be few.” I am sure it is with those who know something of the terror of the law; those who know something, on the other hand, of that eternal life that is in Christ; I am sure it is unto such a great trouble that they appreciate so little that life which is in Christ, and the great things embodied in that life, and which are to be therein and thereby forever realized. I need not trouble you with the historical circumstances of our text, any further than just to observe that some of the learned in their criticisms think that as the word *not* is not in the original, it ought to read, “Let Reuben live and not die; but let his men be few;” but I shall pass by these learned opinions, and take the language of the text just as it is, as it lies before us. And I shall notice it in the two main ideas in which it is presented. Here is first *that life which is eternal*; for that evidently is the ultimate meaning; and then, secondly, *that numerical increase with which the Lord will bless his people*.

First: I notice, first, then, *that life*, for it must have, and no doubt has, a spiritual meaning, that life which is in Christ Jesus the Lord. Let us then see where it is, we can live. “Let Reuben live.” Let him who is a son, for the word Reuben signifies “a son;” “the vision of a son;” “let Reuben live, and let not his men be few.” I notice, then that this life, this eternal life, where we shall live and

not die, is where sin is not remembered, in contrast to where sin is remembered. And then, secondly, I will notice that *this life is in the gospel, in contrast to the law*. These two things are presented in the history and circumstances of the text. First, then, I notice that this life is where sin is not remembered. Jacob was led on his dying bed to speak of Reuben in connection with his sins; but our text speaks of him without his sins. It is true Jacob there was speaking of Reuben personally; and Moses is here speaking of the tribe of Reuben; but still that does not for a moment alter the matter, nor alter the fact. Let us look then at what Reuben's loss was when he was dealt with in connection with his sins; and then, in contrast to this, see how he more than regains where his sins are not remembered, all he lost, where his sins were remembered. Now, Reuben, was the first-born; but by his sin, he lost his standing as the first-born. As the first-born, his place was to be near to God; for all the first-born belonged to God; and therefore, Reuben's proper place was to be near God. But by his sin he lost this birthright of nearness to God; he lost this preeminence, and became afar off from God. Here we see what he was so far, when he is spoken of where his sins are remembered; for Jacob remembers his sins, and therefore speaks of Reuben where his sins are remembered. Let us therefore take this as expressive of what we are by our first birth; what we are as creatures; what we are as sinners; namely, afar off from God; so that now, if we overcome that loss of nearness to God which we originally had, we must overcome it by the blood of the Lamb. "You who are afar off are made near by the blood of Christ." And being brought to where his atonement is, there is no more remembrance of sin. The language is, "I, even I, am he that blots out your transgressions, and will not remember your sins." There it was, then, that Reuben lost his birthright; but here in Christ Jesus the birthright of precious faith is unlosable, cannot be lost, because there is no remembrance of sin; Christ has put away sin, blotted it out; there is no remembrance of it. What a sweet position to stand in; what a precious birth, then, is this spiritual birth, this being born of God; what a precious birthright is the birthright of faith! No remembrance of sin; God the Father will not remember it; Christ will not remember it; the Holy Ghost will not remember it. The devil may bring your sins to you; and your conscience may bring them; and your brethren and sisters in the Lord, when they think they have nothing better to do, may bring them; but the Lord will not remember them. Ah, my hearer, there is no place where our sins are so completely blotted from remembrance as they are in the presence of God, and in the mind of God. Again, Reuben lost also his might, "Reuben, you are my first born, my might, the beginning of my strength." But he became weak, unstable as water, lost his standing. And so, we by nature or by the fall of Adam, and by what we are as sinners, we have lost our might; we have lost our strength with which to come before God, to meet his holy law, either as a precept or as a penalty. But Jesus Christ had strength; he came before God perceptively, and he met the law penalty; and here, therefore, we regain a better might than that which we lost; here we regain a better strength than that which we lost; for here the language is, "Trust you in the Lord Jehovah; for in the Lord Jehovah is everlasting strength." No remembrance of sin here. Then again, Reuben was to have been, but for his sin, the excellency of dignity; the dignity of holiness and righteousness, and everything delightful; but his sin destroyed it all; so that he had no dignity, but only degradation, meanness, and everything contrary to that which the law, the holiness and the justice of God approves. But here in Christ Jesus, by precious faith in him, where our sins are not remembered, here we have the excellency of dignity, here we are sons and daughters of the Almighty; here we are kings and priests unto God; here we are heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ. And so, Reuben was to have the excellency of power, but he lost it by his sin. And so, we by the fall and by our sins have lost all this; we are become weakness itself; but then in Christ Jesus we have all the power we need; he is almighty in his power; "Able to save to the uttermost all that come unto God by him."

So then, Reuben; when dealt with in remembrance of his sins, loses everything, becomes unstable, unable as it were to step over a straw, unable to stand against the least blast; whatever he puts his hand to, it somehow or another comes to nothing. But what a contrast is that to what we are in Christ Jesus: once established, rooted, and grounded in Christ, we become as iron pillars there, as a defended city there, as brazen walls there; and it matters but very little what may come against us, for whatever it be, it shall not prevail. How shall I describe the blessedness of this position? It appears to me to be beyond description; that while in the one case we are spoken of in remembrance of our sins; in the other case, in Christ Jesus, by precious faith in him, we are spoken of with the absence of our sins, with the non-remembrance of our sins. Hence the declaration, that there was a remembrance again of sin every year. "But this Man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down on the right hand of God." What a sweet gospel! What a sweet standing! This then is a part, shall I call it, of the foundation upon which the request of our text rests, "Let Reuben live." Therefore, if you and I, friends, obtain eternal life, eternal salvation, eternal bliss, and if we are found at last on the Savior's right hand, it must be in that way wherein there is no more remembrance of sin. Jacob then had to minister the law to Reuben; Jacob was constrained so to do by the Holy Ghost; but Moses had to minister the gospel. And there were two more of Jacob's sons; namely, Simeon and Levi, to whom Jacob ministered the law; spoke to them in the language of the law, in the language of rebuke and condemnation, in the language of dispersion and of destruction. But Moses had to minister the gospel, a mighty difference between the two. There is nothing to my mind so sweet, I cannot think of anything so precious, as to stand before the Lord by faith in Jesus Christ in the order of the gospel, where there is no more remembrance of sin. What, to think that I am going to die, and go into the presence of the Holy God, surely, I shall see some of my sins. Is such a thing possible? is it really possible that they will not appear there? They will no more appear than the Egyptians could rise from the bottom of the Red Sea, and lay hold upon the Israelites, and bring them back again into Egypt. They are gone, and gone forever! How blessed is it then to live where there is no remembrance of sin, to die where there is no remembrance of sin, to rise where there is no remembrance of sin, and to enjoy God for ever where there is no remembrance of sin. This, then, is the way of life. Now let me tell you all, for there may be some little ones here just beginning to enquire after these solemn matters, let me tell you all, that you will never find life anywhere but where there is a complete oblivion of sin, a complete blotting out of sin. You cannot blot out one sin; you cannot annihilate one sin; you can do nothing at all towards it; your best way is to confess the whole truth, that you are sin condemned, and law condemned, and conscience condemned, and every way condemned; that is the best way; and then when you see Jesus Christ, you will say of what he has done, Give me that, for there is nothing like it. "Let Reuben live." Are we seeking life, then, in a way in which our sins will be remembered? If so, then that is the wrong way. If we are not seeking life in that way in which our sins are all blotted out, in which there is an atonement that covers and destroys the whole, so that they are gone not as far as the mere terrestrial, for that is measurable, but as far as the celestial east is from the west, namely, to infinity, if we are not seeking life in this way, then we are seeking it wrongly. What a precious life then is this, where sin is not remembered! So, this life also is in the gospel, in contrast to God's law. Hence, this chapter is introduced in a most delightful way. It has been delightful to me a great many times. "The Lord came from Sinai;" had God stayed at Sinai we must have stayed there too; had God stayed in his holy law, we must have stayed there too; had the Great God chosen to have dwelt in this consuming fire, we must have dwelt there too; had he chosen to deal with us according to the awful majesty of his eternal law, we must have remained there too; for that is where by sin we are; that is where by nature we are. But he came from Sinai.

And how did he come? He came by sacrifice; there was a sacrifice by which he came, and by which he could have a mercy seat. And the Lord, when directing Moses to build this mercy seat, and instituting the sacrificial service pointing to the mercy seat, said, "There will I commune with you; there will I come unto you, and there will I bless you." But on Sinai there was not communion with the people; you shall not come near me there; I will not bless you there; and you shall not see my face there; no man in that sense can see my face and live. "The Lord came from Sinai." Some people have never been there yet; and if you have not been to it you cannot come from it. You cannot be saved without knowing your need of the gospel; it is no use deluding ourselves. I have no doubt that some of the Israelites were nearer the mountain than others; and that the lightning was more vivid to some than to others; and that the thunder was more terrific to some than to others; and that the trumpet awakened more intensely the feelings of some than of others and that the voice of words made some tremble more than others; but they were all near enough to see that there was no access to God that way; if ever they had access to God, it must be in some other way. And so, with you; you will be brought to see the same and know the same; I do not say when you are first awakened. Many a Christian learns this law matter after years of experience of the gospel. The Israelites had been sheltered by the paschal lamb, had experienced salvation, and come out of Egypt, before ever they knew anything of the law. And so I have met with some who have been brought to love and receive Jesus Christ, and to love the truth, and to glory therein, yet all this time have no very distinct views between law and gospel; no very distinct understanding of the difference between the two; and then by and bye they are brought into very solemn and trying circumstances; and the Lord makes them feel more deeply their need of the new covenant, their need of that way of light in which there is no darkness; then they begin to see that if they had been left under the law, if they had been left to answer for only one of their own sins, or to meet only one clause of God's eternal law, they must have been everlastingly lost. "The Lord came from Sinai; and rose up from Seir unto them;" the word Seir meaning *tempest*; he came from the tempest into the tabernacle, the mercy-seat, with the still small voice, He shined forth from mount Paran; Paran was in the wilderness. So, the Lord leaves Sinai, and comes to meet you at the mercy-seat; he leaves mount Seir; or the tempest, and comes to meet you in the calm and quiet of the mercy-seat; he leaves the wilderness of Paran to meet you at the mercy-seat. Thus; then, this life is where there is no remembrance of sin, in contrast to that order of things where there is remembrance of sin; and this life is where Christ is the end of the law, in contrast to that death that is ministered by the law.

Let us now look at the several items of the gospel which Moses goes on to give; where this life is, "Let Reuben live not where sin is remembered; but where sin is not remembered;" not by the works of the law; "For by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified." And now just notice the beautiful progressive way in which Moses speaks of the gospel. He says, "The Lord came with ten thousand of his saints;" that is the first gospel sentence. Whatever is the meaning of that? There is something of a gospel kind there, because by nature all are sinners; that is a self-evident fact; "There is none that does good, no, not one." "There is none righteous, no, not one." And yet he came with ten thousand of his saints. Where did God get them? How did they become saints? Ah, it was by their sins being imputed to Christ, and his work being imputed to them; they were included in his testamentary goodwill; constituted one with Christ, so as to be heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ Jesus. He came from Sinai with them; brought them from Sinai. Election brought us from Sinai; election saw us there, and took us up, and brought us away; predestination saw us at Sinai; took us up, and brought us away; redemption saw us at Sinai, took us up, and

brought us away; justifying righteousness saw us at Sinai, took us up, and brought us away; Christ saw us at Sinai, took us up, and brought us away; the Holy Spirit saw us at Sinai, (for that is where all are by nature; namely, under God's law, with all its curses) took us up, and brought us away. He came with the saints; first constituting them saints, and then bringing them. He made them saints before he made this world; he made his saints first, yes, he did, before the world began. The world was an after matter, he settled everything concerning his saints first, everything concerning his people first. That is where the life is; so that here is no remembrance of sin; here is the end of the law; and here is God's eternal counsel, constituting his people saints; that is the way of life. Then comes the second gospel clause; "From his right hand went a fiery law for them." Why, say you, that is not a gospel clause; that is a law clause. I contend that it is a gospel clause; Do not you know that the Lord Jesus Christ is called both a lion and a lamb? He is a lion for his people, but not a lion to them; he is a lion for them, and a lamb to them. It does not say, "From his right hand went a fiery law *against* them; but from his right hand went a fiery law *for* them." What, constitute them saints, and then send forth a fiery law against them! Never, never, the devil may try to do it, and men may try to do it; but the Lord will never do it. Then what is the meaning, say you? When you go home presently, if you will look at the 9th chapter of this very book of Deuteronomy, you will find there an explanation of this very law. "The Lord your God shall go before you as a consuming fire." It means that God has a fiery law of judgment, by which he will dash in pieces the enemy, consume their foes, be a wall of fire roundabout them, but at the same time the glory in the midst of them. He therefore, rushes in with his fiery law for their defense; he rebuked kings and kills them; he destroyed Pharaoh and all his host. Oh, for faith to trust in him. If there be a man that is going to do you a great deal of mischief, the Lord help you to remember that he has a fiery law for you, that that fiery law shall go forth in your defense; and the fire shall not touch you, but it shall defend you. That is gospel. Of all modern testimonies to the truth of what I am now saying, there is none equal to "Huntington's Naked Bow of God;" I think that little book is an awful, at the same time truthful and solemn testimony of God's heavy judgments upon those that will meddle with his people, especially with his ministers: "And from his right hand went a fiery law for them." Therefore, I call that a gospel clause. Well then, say you, you are making out that the very law of God is on the side of his people. Of course, it is. Does not the word of God say that there is no law against them? They stand complete in the eye of God's law, they stand complete in God's Christ, and they will stand by and bye complete in God's presence; and God would never institute a law against perfection, he constitutes them perfect and there is no law against them. Leave matters to the Lord, he knows where to commission judgment as well as where to commission mercy. "I," said David, taking up the two ideas, "will sing of mercy and of judgment; unto you O Lord, will I sing." "Touch not my anointed, do my prophets no harm." There is a fiery law in their behalf. So that we have the non-remembrance of sin on our side; we have eternal saintship on our side, and we have the judgment of God to defend us. Now this life is where there is the non-remembrance of sin, it is where Christ is the end of the law; and where the fiery judgment of God is on our side to defend us. Now another gospel clause, "Yes he loved the people." So, I should think, he never would have done these things for them otherwise. "Yes, he loved the people;" loved them with a love that is like himself, "I have loved you with an everlasting love therefore, in loving-kindness have I drawn you." I have thought sometimes that when the Lord takes his people, he seems to take the very worst, he takes in many cases that which the devil himself would be almost ashamed of. The Lord takes it in hand: he takes up a piece of clay, the commonest in the field, and the most unpromising appearance, and he puts eternal life into it, and makes use of that piece of clay to open the eyes of others, the poorer and the weaker the instrument,

the more conspicuous the mercy and the power of God. At the best we are but earthen vessels. And yet, bless the Lord, the more crooks there are, the more grace it takes to make them straight; the higher the mountains are, the greater grace it takes to level them; and the deeper the valleys are, the more grace it takes to fill them up. Yes, "he loved the people;" our life is in his love, and what can he safer? All creature power is limited; but God's power is almighty; and therefore, if the life of his people, their eternal life lies in his love, then that love implies his almighty power, and the life is as safe as his love is certain. "Because I live, you shall live also," Then comes the submission of this people. "They sat down at your feet;" they are to sit down at his feet. We live in a day when there is a wrong sort of transfer everywhere advocated; to transfer the sovereignty of God to man; and rest the salvation of a sinner with the sovereignty of man, instead of setting forth the sovereignty of God; and men will actually tell us, after preaching perhaps a parcel of falsehood, that it is at our peril to reject what they say; whereas it is to our peril to receive it. Nothing is left with man, all things are of God, "who has reconciled us unto himself by Jesus Christ." They shall sit down at his feet, and have what he is pleased to give, not what they are pleased to have; and they will be dealt with as he is pleased to deal with them, and not as they would wish to be dealt with; and shall be taught in the way in which he is pleased to teach them, and not in the way in which they would like to be taught. No, I know very well how they would like to be taught; they would like to be taught by nothing but that which is pleasant; but he has other means of teaching them, he will show them hard things, make them drink the wine of astonishment; and sometimes seem as though he was going to destroy them; numerous are the ways in which he tries them, to teach them what they are, and to keep them low at his feet. And then what follows? "Everyone shall receive of your words." So, they all receive the doctrines of the gospel. Now let me look at these words. First the word of non-remembrance of sin; they all receive that. Second, they receive the word of eternal saint-ship, constituted saints in the eternal counsels of eternity, that will embody election and the counsel of God together. Third, they shall receive the word of defense; a fiery law for them. Fourth, they shall receive the word of everlasting love. Fifth, they shall receive the word of submission; and it will be their solemn desire to say, "The will of the Lord be done." Thus, then we have a life where there is no sin; we have a life where there is no law against us; we have a life where sin cannot reach us, but where we are safe; we have a life where the great God defends us; we have a life in his love, we have a life in his hand, "All your saints are in your hand;" a life of submission to him; a life of fellowship forever with him.

Second. I notice now hastily the second clause, "Let not his men be few." All that I can do in this part is to show that there is nothing so desirable as to be one of these people, to be a true Israelite; nothing so desirable as to have this life spoken of in the first clause of our text, "Let Reuben live, and let not his men be few." Now here we come to a contradiction in the letter, but it will appear very clearly that there is no contradiction in the sense. Some do preach a gospel that contradicts itself, and they say they find it in the Bible. But really, even among men, if a man is called as a witness, and especially in a matter of life and death, and if one part of that testimony gives an absolute contradiction to the other part, I ask is there a jury under heaven with common sense, or a judge that would for one moment, receive such evidence as that? And so, my hearers, the Bible was composed by the Great Witness, the Holy Ghost; and are we to suppose that the blessed Spirit would contradict himself? that he would give a testimony in one part and recall it in another? This is certainly an error, and a serious error in the preaching of some. Now you read of the Israelites, that they were the fewest of all the people of the earth; that "Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, and few there be that find it;" and you read that "Many are called but few are chosen and yet

our text prays that they may not be few. Well, the two can easily be reconciled, and in this way. In all ages the people of God have been few, in a two-fold sense; there may be one or two exceptions, but I mean as a general rule. First, they have always been few, in comparison with the population of the globe. Secondly, there is another solemn fact; that except in times of most terrible persecution, Pagan times especially, except in the Apostolic and some other times, the people of God are and have been few in comparison of the main bulk of professors. Perhaps, since the foundation of the world, there never were so few as there now are, in comparison of the multitude that make a profession; perhaps there never were, except in the Apostolic age. Some have thought also in Cromwell's time, though I do not think so much of this, so many real Christians as there are in the present time. We have a great many thousands of real Christians in England, and thousands in America, and other places; still, in comparison of the great bulk that profess Christianity, the real people of God are very few. And yet this is no contradiction to the scripture that speaks of them as many; because though in this comparative sense they are few; yet if we take them in the aggregate, and especially if we take infants into consideration, infants, of course, in heathen as well as civilized nations, we shall then see the senses in which they are few, and the respects in which they are not few. I will now, therefore, in conclusion, just show from a scripture or two the blessedness of these people; to show, for that is all I can do now, that of all things most desirable is to be one of them. Look at them in Isaiah, in Jeremiah, in Revelation 7. How do they stand in Isaiah 60? Why, in a state of justification, in a state of eternal habitation, in a state of plantation, under Divine operation, and inseparably connected with glorification. "Your people shall be all righteous;" there is the justification. "They shall inherit the land for ever;" there is the eternal habitation. "The branch of my planting;" there is the plantation. "The work of my hands:" there is the Divine operation. "That I may be glorified;" that is in their eternal glorification. "A little one shall become a thousand, and a small one a strong nation." Again, in Jeremiah 30. "Behold, I will bring again the captivity of Jacob's tents, and have mercy on his dwelling places." What are these tents? Why, your poor bodies; and you may depend upon it, that by the time you get to the end of your journey, your poor tent will be pretty much shaken, the High Priest shall, take it down, and take care of it; immortality, in the Savior's image. "And have mercy on his dwelling places." The Lord had no mercy on our first dwelling places, they were in the commandments of the law; but now our dwelling places are in the truths of the gospel "There my people shall dwell in a peaceful habitation, in sure dwellings, and quiet resting places." "And out of them shall proceed thanksgiving, and the voice of them that make merry; and I will multiply them, and they shall not be few; I will also glorify them, and they shall not be small." Well then, there is eternal mirth, eternal exultation, awaiting those who are brought into this path of eternal life. Then, if you go to Revelation 7, you find the same subject there beautifully carried out, "After this I beheld, and lo, a great multitude which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and peoples, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands; and cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sits upon the throne, and unto the Lamb! They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more, neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters; and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes." "Let Reuben live and not die; and let not his men be few."

May it be our happy lot to be found every one of us in that path of life; and thus, receive a welcome into such blissful and eternal possessions.