

A GOOD MAN'S PRAYER

A SERMON

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“Forsake not the works of your own hands.” Psalm 138:8

I NOTICE our subject under three distinct parts. First, here are *the works of Gods own hands*; secondly, *that he will never forsake such*; and thirdly, if this be true, *wherein lies the propriety of praying to the Lord not to forsake the works of his own hands, if there be no danger of his doing so?*

First, then, we have *the works of the Lord's own hands*. And the works here, I think, refer to two things. First, to the formation of a good man, for I am sure that the formation of a good man is the work of God; and, secondly, to the keeping of that workmanship in order. First, then, the formation of a real Christian. And though we have travelled this same ground over so many times before, it will do us no harm again, this morning, to bring ourselves to the test of God's truth, just to see how we came by our religion, of what sort it is, whether it be the work of God or the work merely of natural conscience, whether it be Satan cast out, or the unclean spirit gone out, and so may return again, and make us what we were before we made any profession at all, or rather, worse than we were. It will do us no harm again to come to the test and see how matters are. Let us, then, hear the Lord's own account of making a Christian. And in the first place, when the Lord makes a Christian he is sure to bring him acquainted with eternal redemption, and to endear that eternal redemption; and he is sure to bring him acquainted with the Lord's name, and to identify the soul with that name; and he is sure to reveal unto him that eternal relationship subsisting between himself and those that are born of his Spirit. Hence it reads thus “Thus says the Lord that created you, O Jacob, and that formed you, O Israel, Fear not.” Now here is a sinner fearful, fearing that God is against him, fearing that God is not on his side. As David said in the former part of this verse, “That which concerns me.” Here is something that concerned the Psalmist; something he was concerned about. And so here is the sinner concerned about his soul, as to what is to become of him. Is God against him, or is God for him? Here he is, convinced of his helplessness; for not only is here conviction of his sinfulness, but also of his helplessness. Those are the two things that will make a sinner fear; because, but for his sinfulness before God he would not fear; and if he could help himself, he need not fear. But, conscious of his guiltiness before God, and of his helplessness, now let us see what the Lord's remedy is. The Lord says, “I have redeemed you.”

Now let us take this as an evidence of being born of God, this acquaintance with redemption. Look at it again, that those whom the Lord has created, that is, created in Christ Jesus, created and formed into the image of Christ, created, as the apostle says, "Put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge" mark, renewed in knowledge, and as he says in another place, "in righteousness and true holiness." Now, "I have redeemed you;" so that you will be sensible that you are by nature under the curse, and that the blood of Jesus Christ alone can redeem you from that curse; the consequence will be that your hope will be in that redeeming blood, that you are under sin, and that nothing but the blood of Jesus Christ can redeem you, "For you are not redeemed with corruptible things, such as silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot; who was truly foreordained before the foundation of the world." Sensible that we are exposed to the wrath to come, and that nothing but the blood of Christ can redeem us from that wrath; sensible that we are also hastening to death, and that nothing but the blood of Christ can redeem us from that death; sensible that we are born to trouble, as the sparks fly upward, and that our troubles can never terminate by anything we can do, so that if we are redeemed from all adversity it must be by the precious blood of Christ. I will quote the words again, because I feel deeply the importance of this part; "Thus says the Lord that created you, O Jacob." Here is evidently a new creation; what is called being quickened and born again, "and that formed you" here is not only creation, but here is the mind formed into order, brought into that order of things which the Lord has designed, "Fear not, I have redeemed you." You observe that the person who is thus created in Christ, that the person who is thus formed for God, God gives him eternal redemption. "I have redeemed you." And that redemption is by such persons as needed redemption; they feel their need of it, and they receive the testimony of that redemption in the endearment of it; as says the apostle upon this subject, after a very beautiful order, for he says it is "not by the blood of goats and of calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us." So if therefore we are the work of God's hands, if he will ordain peace for us, for he has wrought all our works in us, this is one point to which we shall be brought; we shall see the essential importance, we shall see the infinite value, we shall see the eternal certainty of the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. Here we shall see God to be our redeemer; here we shall see that ransom that delivers us from going down into the pit. Here, then, is the man that is born of God. And see how nicely this accords with what the Savior says, that "every one that has heard and learned of the Father comes unto me." "I have redeemed you." Now such, then, will pray, "Forsake not the works of your own hands." So that, if Jesus Christ as Redeemer, if he be in the infinite value of his blood, if he be in the eternal redemption that he has obtained, glorious in your eyes and dear to your heart, you are as surely born of God as that Jesus Christ is the Son of God; and God is as surely your Father as he was Christ's Father; and heaven is as surely your home, and you will as surely get there, as heaven is Christ's home, and he himself has arrived safely there; and you will be eternally welcome there, and eternally happy there, and eternally satisfied there, as sure as the dear Savior himself is comforted on every side, and must be eternally happy there. Ah, then, see how nicely the Lord opens up the pathway to eternal life; see what a nice test this is to be put to. I meet with plenty of professors that will not bear the test of eternal redemption; they do not feel their need of it; they do not understand it; they do not appreciate it, and consequently do not abide by it, nor feel any interest in its deep wonders and its eternal advantages. Again, those who are formed by the hand of the Lord, the Lord reveals to them his name. He says, "Fear not; I have called you by your name." That is, not only personally, but by the name that he has put upon them; for he puts a new name upon his people. And you know what that name is. See how it follows upon redemption: "This is the name wherewith she shall be

called, Jehovah our righteousness.” Now, what say you to this? Can you, my hearer, say that not only the precious blood of Christ, not only that eternal redemption that he has wrought, but also the righteousness that he has brought in, here, if you are born of God, you will appreciate this name that “she shall be called, Jehovah our righteousness.” You observe that the Gentiles of old who were taught of God, they were made acquainted with this name given to the church. “This is the name wherewith she shall be called, Jehovah our righteousness.” And so, it is the same name that Jesus Christ himself is called by; and so, they received his name as Jehovah their righteousness. But the Pharisees knew not this name, though they had it in the letter of their scriptures (23rd and 33rd of Jeremiah); yet they knew not this name so as to appreciate it; and therefore, being ignorant of this new name, and going about to establish their own name, for that is what they were doing, receiving praise of men, instead of seeking praise of God, they attained, not unto righteousness; but the Gentiles that were taught of God, that were created in Christ Jesus, that were formed by the hand of God, they knew this name, and that the Lord called them by this name. And so the Gentile was brought to take the following standing: By this eternal redemption, and by Jesus Christ, Jehovah my righteousness; the Gentile says, This is my standing, the blessedness of the man whose transgression is forgiven, by the blood of Christ my sins are blotted out; and then the blessedness of the man whose sins are covered, they are covered from the presence of God; they are hidden and put out of the way, and gone into a land of eternal oblivion, never to be brought to light, to reproach me, or to grieve me, or to distress me anymore; the blessedness of the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin. He will never blame us for anything we have ever done; all the blame was laid penally upon his dear Son; and he has borne the blame, though he did not bear it long, because he soon suffered it away, and by the depths of his excellency brought us up; he has put the blame away. “Blessed is the man to whom the Lord imputes righteousness without works.” That is the position of the man that is born of God. So, then, if we are formed by his hand, formed for his glory, this is the spirit, and this is the understanding, and this is the state into which we shall be brought, or are brought. And then the Lord says to these people, “You are mine.” So, then, you must understand there that that is new covenant language, “You are mine;” and the consequence is that God and the people go together. If they go into sin, Jesus Christ will come under their sin. “You are mine.” If they go under the curse, into the curse, Christ himself will come under that curse where they are. If they are in a world of tribulation, Christ will be with them in that world of tribulation. If they are in the bitterness of death, Christ will be with them in that bitterness, and take the bitterness away. If they are in Satan’s territories, Christ will be with them there. “In all their afflictions he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them.” In that sense they go together; he is with them there. And then, in the second sense, he is with them, with them by his care, and mercy, and support, through all their troubles. Hence that scripture from which I have just been quoting, 43rd of Isaiah, after the Lord has thus set before us the evidences of being born of him, namely, that this eternal redemption is revealed to us, and made dear to us, and that his name; Jehovah our righteousness, is revealed and made dear to us, “I have called you by your name: you are mine.” Then, “When you pass through the waters” sure to pass through them. You all, I am sure, all of you that are Christians, like that form of speech, “when you pass through the waters” how is it they pass through the waters? “I will be with you.” So, if you get into the waters, I am with you; then you must come out again; if you do not, then I will stop with you. And I am sure there is no flood can retain him; and if it does not retain him, it cannot retain us; for if he gets out, we shall get out, “And, through the rivers, they shall not overflow you.” You see it is always *through*. The Israelites are sure to get through the Red Sea: not so with the adversary; not so with the Egyptians. The Israelites are sure to get through the Jordan; Jonah is sure to get

through the sea. And though sometimes our circumstantial ship may be wrecked, and torn to pieces, yet it shall come to pass they shall all come safe to land; they shall get through the sea: "I will be with you." Ah, then, if you have Jesus as your Redeemer, the everlasting God, by that eternal redemption, is with you; if you have him in that name, Jehovah our righteousness, then God is with you; you are his in new covenant relationship. And when you pass through the waters: it is going *through*. It is a sweet thought that you can never get into a trouble without getting out of it again. You cannot say so of the ungodly; you cannot say so of the enemy. He brings himself into trouble; and where grace does not prevent, can never, no, never get out of trouble. The troubles of the ungodly thicken as they go on, though they are unconscious of it, until they lift up their eyes in their final trouble in the flames of hell. "When you walk through the fire" come into fiery scenes, burn up a great many of our comforts, burn up a great many of our card houses, we may not think they are card houses, burn up a great many of our cobweb garments, that we may comfort ourselves with and pride ourselves on, "when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned." Some of your wares shall be burned, perhaps, that the Lord sees are better burned than not; but you shall not be burned, though your hay, wood, and stubble, may be burned, that you may have nothing that is built upon the foundation, but a sure hope upon that eternal foundation; "you shall not be burned, neither shall the flame kindle upon you." These, then, are the works of God's hands, to whom this redemption is revealed, and to whom this name is thus made manifest.

But, again, these people that are thus made acquainted with redemption, and with the Lord's name, and with the delightful truth that he and they go together, that there is no separation, as the Lord said to Jacob, "I am with you in all places whither you go, and will bring you again unto your father's house in peace." Now these people undergo a great deal of wilderness experience. Hence in that same chapter, 43rd of Isaiah, the Lord says, "I will do a new thing." See how beautifully it describes Christian experience; in other words, how beautifully it describes the work of the Holy Spirit, "I will do a new thing: I will make a way in the wilderness." Now that is not a new thing literally; the Lord made a way in the wilderness for the Israelites; so the new thing here must be a new thing spiritually, "I will even make a way in the wilderness." So after you have been brought into the enjoyment of eternal redemption, and the enjoyment of peace with God through the righteousness of Christ, and to feel you have the Spirit of adoption, then, after this, comes the wilderness work, solitary, barren, mopish, miserable, wretched, sighing, wandering about, finding no city to dwell in, with, "O, wretched man that I am!" and "all these things are against me." I do not know how I shall get out of this wretched state. Why, the Lord says this is a new thing, and so it is. I thought so. I can look back at the time when my first, enjoyments went off. Ah! what a wretched wilderness I was in! I never saw before the meaning of those words so fully, nor recognized their force so much until that time, "O wretched man that I am!" a poor, solitary, moping thing. And the minister I heard kept telling me, You should come to the promises, come to the Lord, and come to Christ. But to me it was sound without sense; it was all of no avail. I had to mourn with Job, and say, "Oh that I knew where I might find him!" This is a new thing; it is a new experience. You stand astonished at it. We do not stand astonished at it now; we are used to it, some of us; we are old traveler's in those dreary paths, and the adversary cannot so easily frighten us as when we first came into this wilderness experience. And these people, as they go on, see what poor creatures they are, and they compare themselves to ugly things, because their own experience making them acquainted with their own hearts, they see themselves as ugly things. Hence the Lord says, "The beasts of the field shall honor me." Ah! says the poor sinner, there is little hope for me, for I am as a beast before you. "The owls." Ah! the poor sinner says, I am like

an owl of the wilderness, Lord. “and the dragons.” Why, that is a name of the devil, and I have sin enough to make me more like a devil than a saint very often. And yet these very creatures are the persons that shall honor the Lord; “because I give drink to my people.” So, then, these men, these people who, in their own estimation, are as beasts, and owls, and dragons, thus self-loathing, viewing themselves as sinners in this light, this knowledge of themselves is a proof that they are born of God, for they are called in the next verse the Lord’s people. “Because I give drink to my people, my chosen. This people,” who are brought into this wilderness state, who are thus humbled, and who thus loathe themselves in their own sight, “this people have I formed for myself; they shall show forth my praise.” How suited they are to do so! I say, how suited they are to do so! “They shall show forth my praise.” Yes, they have a clear knowledge of eternal redemption, of justification, of covenant relation; they have a clear knowledge, too, of their state as sinners; and thus their mouths are stopped, all fleshly boasting is put to silence, and then they begin to see election. There is nothing said in the first part of this chapter, you see, about election; but here, when we come to this last part, it says of the people, “chosen.” What is that to me? Ah, says the advanced Christian, I once thought little of it; but now I see, if the Lord had not chosen me, I never could have chosen him. Now I see that nothing but grace could have given me to the Lamb; now I see, if God himself had not, as an act of sovereign mercy, given me to his dear Son, there could have been no hope for me. Chosen. “This people have I formed for myself; they shall show forth my praise.”

One more scripture or two. Now, then, these people that are thus created by the Lord, that are the works of his hands, you see what is revealed to them, you see the wilderness experience into which they are brought, you see the light in which they view themselves, and you see how the Lord meets them in the wilderness, feeds, supports, and refreshes them, that their hope might be in God, that they might cease from man, whose breath is in his nostrils, and that their faith should stand, as says the apostle, not in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

Let us take one more view of them. I go on to the book of Isaiah, I meet with these people again, and there they are described like this, in entire accordance with what we have said. There is a promise there to the dear Savior, “Your people shall be all righteous;” there it is, justified by precious faith in the blest Redeemer; they shall be all righteous, righteous by Jehovah their righteousness. The righteousness must be eternal, because, it says, “They shall inherit the land forever.” What gives them possession? Christ’s work. What can take them away from that possession? The taking away from them of Christ’s work could take them away from that possession; but as God will not take them away, and sin, and Satan, and the world, and adversaries cannot, it must remain, as says the apostle, “No separation from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus the Lord,” And thus they shall be righteous, inherit the land for ever, “the branch of my planting.” Never had they been planted in free-grace ground if God had not planted them there; never had they been planted in pure gospel ground if God had not planted them there; never had they been planted in Christ’s perfect death, or death of perfection, if God had not planted them there; never had they been planted in Zion’s hill if God had not planted them there. Ministers in our day plant people anywhere and everywhere. We live in a day, I solemnly believe it, that if the Savior were to descend now, oh the thousands, the tens of thousands, I solemnly believe it, of professed Christians, that would be rooted up! “Every plant which my heavenly Father has not planted shall be rooted up.” Now, my hearer, if you are not planted by the hand of God the Father, the time shall come when you shall be rooted up; and if you are planted by the hand of God, you

are planted in the way I have described, or rather the way which I have shown the word of God describes. "The branch of my planting, the work of my hands," there it is, "that I may be glorified." And what has the Christian to glorify in his eternal welfare but the God of his salvation? Again, the people thus made acquainted with eternal redemption, and with the name of the Lord, and covenant relationship, and this wilderness work, and with eternal election, and with the land they are to inherit, and the certainty of their possessing it; these same people are by the apostle said to be created in Christ Jesus. See how that explains the whole, created in Christ Jesus. There it is. They are brought out of death into the faith of Christ Jesus, where they have life; there is the creation; they are brought out of darkness into the light they have in Christ Jesus; they are brought out of unholiness into the holiness they have in Christ Jesus; they are brought out of unrighteousness into the righteousness they have in Christ Jesus; they are brought out of the law of Sinai and brought to the law of Zion; they are brought out from all creature doings and brought into the doings of the blessed God. "Created in Christ Jesus unto good works." Now you must read my last Sunday morning sermon, I was going to say, though I preached it a week or two ago, and that will explain this part of our subject, in what way the people of God are formed for good works. I will here repeat one thing I advanced in that sermon, and that is, that the first good work must be of a remedial kind. You hear men set forth a little morality, and a few ceremonies, and call these good works. Now, my hearer, the first essential good work of a sinner must be of a remedial kind. You are a sinner; the best thing you can do is to receive the remedy for that evil you possess; and so, you are created in Christ Jesus unto good works. The first good work is to receive Christ. He is the remedy for all your woe. And then a life of gratitude to God following upon that is good; a life of sympathy with the poor, and the necessitous, and the cause of God, when you have thus received Christ Jesus, then it is good. But if you have not first done the remedial good, the ornamental good will be of no avail without the remedial. Ten thousand ceremonies devised by man, but Christ is the only remedy. "Created in Christ Jesus unto good works." And the people of God have found it in all ages a good thing to receive the remedy. He that receives you does a good work, for in receiving you he receives me, and he that receives me receives him that sent me. Rahab did a good work in receiving the spies. Thus, they are created unto good works. But this essential good work is thought nothing of in our day. There is no ostentation about it, there is no platform flattery about it, there is no public show with it. It is something so spiritual, and, to the carnal mind, so ethereal, that he thinks just nothing at all of it. And yet, let a man have what he may, if he has not Christ spiritually, if he has not the spirit of Christ, that is, Christ spiritually, he may have him professionally and in the letter of the word, but if he has not Christ spiritually, howbeit that which was first was not spiritual, but natural; the first man Adam was natural, but the last Adam is spiritual, and we must have Christ spiritually, vitally, really, and truly. That is the first good work essential to make all the rest good; for neither faith, nor prayer, nor love, nor anything else is pleasing in the sight of God apart from Christ Jesus. If, therefore, we offer the sacrifice of prayer or of praise, or whatever we do, if it be not by Christ Jesus, it is not acceptable unto God.

Well, now, having gone through the first part, we will come to the next. "Forsake not the works of your own hands." And will the Lord ever forsake such? No. His love forbids it; his love is everlasting. Forsake! why, he never thought of such a thing. And if you know your own heart, and you are here this morning with a grain of love to Christ, you may bear testimony that if it had been possible for him to forsake you, he would have forsaken you long ago. And though your love rise and fall, ebb and flow, sometimes hot and sometimes cold, yet his love no variation knows. He

will never forsake you. God will not forsake the objects, how can he? of immutable love. They are loved in oneness with his dear Son. Election forbids it. Says the apostle, "Has God cast away his people which he foreknew?" So, in that same 11th of Romans he argues, from the premises of a free-grace election, the impossibility of God forsaking his people. His love remains, his choice remains; they are his chosen still. The mediatorial work of Christ forbids it. God would never forsake his dear Son, and he has put away all reason why he should ever forsake his people. The sacredness of his oath forbids it; he has sworn that in blessing he will bless. The immutability of his counsel forbids it; yea, his own testimony again and again assures us that he will never leave us nor forsake us.

And yet the prayer in my text says, "Forsake not the works of your own hands." Well, now, says one, I cannot see the propriety of praying against that which can never take place; and you are ready to say that there must be some sense in which the Lord does forsake his people, or else why, David, pray not to be forsaken? David could not pray not to be fatally or finally forsaken; but there is a partial forsaking, and that is what David here clearly prays against. Now, for instance, before I quote Scripture to prove what I am asserting; we must be, serious with the Scriptures, and be careful with our interpretation, what we say, lest our language be vain, and thereby bring down awful reproofs upon us from his throne. Now, when there were three propositions put to David, whether it should be seven years famine, three months before the adversary, or three days pestilence, he looked upon that as a kind of Divine forsaking, that the Lord would leave him to seven years famine, or that he would leave him to three months before his adversary; and David looked at it; he saw there was something to face; and he came to a wise, as you know, conclusion. "Let me not fall into the hands of man;" might as well fall into the hands of the devil at once, just as well. What are men but devils, and women too when they set on, but Jezebels? "Let me not fall into the hands of man." He knew there was no final forsaking; but there may be a partial forsaking for a time, that might subject David to unheard of sorrow, and even that he dreaded. So, there is that; we all know it; before I come to testimony upon it, we all know it in our experience. Is it not so? Are there not times when the Lord is not so with us as he is at other times, not in the manifestation thereof? We cannot always preach alike; we cannot always hear alike. The hearer will sometimes say, Ah, I don't think the Lord is with the minister. But you must not conclude that the Lord is not with the minister because he is not with you; mind that! But the poor parson generally gets the blame. There are a great many people, if they don't get on, Ah, I don't think the Lord is with him. Well, now, it has been known that ministers have preached with a soul full of heaven, and scarcely one of the hearers got a crumb. It has also been known that ministers have preached under the hidings of God's face, and have stammered and staggered along, and have gone with agony through the sermon, and could hardly hold out to the end, and almost all the people have been wonderfully blessed. In the one case the Lord forsook the minister and was with the people; in the other case he forsook the people and was with the minister; and sometimes forsakes them all, and sometimes with them all. I, of course, speak of the manifestation thereof, "And the Lord went up, and Abraham departed to his place." Is it not so? And therefore, the prayer of our text is, in substance, like that of David; "Hide not your face from me; take not your Holy Spirit from me; restore to me the joy of your salvation." It is a prayer that, as God had formed the soul for himself, he would keep it in order. You know this workmanship gets out of order; bless God, not finally or fatally out of order; but we do get out of order. And the apostle knew this, and therefore said to Timothy, "In season, and out of season." I don't think I can preach this morning; I am not in order. Can't help that; you must go right on, in order or out of order. And so, in hearing;

cleave to God's house, and God's ways, and if we are out of order in our souls, that is the way to get in order. But let us have a scripture or two to conclude. Thirty-seventh Psalm, "The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord;" that is no small mercy; "and he delights in his way;" for Christ is the good man's way; and though he fall in public estimation, and though he fall into many circumstantial troubles, and people call him a fool for so doing, yet, mark the language; this good man, whose steps are ordered by the Lord, and the Lord delights in his way, "though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down; for the Lord upholds him with his hand." Not utterly cast down. Job is cast down for a time; he will rise again by-and-bye. There are the slaying times, when the witnesses are slain; God forsakes them, and they are slain; and they lie like dead bodies, but by-and-bye the mystic three days and a half will expire; the Holy Spirit shall set them upon their feet, put them in order again, and they shall rejoice that, while the Lord does partially, and for a time, thus forsake them, he will see them again and their hearts shall rejoice. And David says in the very next verse, "I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken:" there it is, you see, not fatally or finally forsaken: "nor his seed begging bread;" that is, spiritually so; always enough in the Father's house. "Forsake not the works of your own hands." Again, there are times when the Lord so forsakes his ministers that they seem as though they have not a word to say; obliged to take and scrape together just to get up a little something to come to table with. And I suppose David had this feeling when he was going to preach, and perhaps he had nothing to say; and he says in the 119th Psalm, "Take not the word of truth utterly out of my mouth." It is almost gone, Lord; don't seem to have much to say. And is it not so? "Take not the word of truth utterly out of my mouth." I seem to have nothing to say hardly; but don't let it go altogether. And then David says again, in that 119th Psalm, which explains our text, "Forsake me not utterly."

I therefore understand the prayer of our text to refer not to any final forsaking, which would be obviously contrary to the Scripture; but to refer to the hidings of the Lord's face, to those partial forsaking's wherewith he, for our good, hides his face; but he will see us again, and our hearts shall rejoice.