

RESPONSIBILITY

A SERMON

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“And you, Capernaum, which are exalted unto heaven, shall be brought down to hell: for if the mighty works, which have been done in you, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day.” Matthew 11:23

WE learn from the 4th chapter of Matthew that the Savior dwelt some time at Capernaum; we learn from the 8th chapter of Matthew that here it was, at Capernaum, that we have set before us such a sample of gospel and of real faith in the Lord Jesus Christ in the case of the centurion, who came to the Lord on behalf of his servant; and upon that faith, that faith being a sample of that faith that stands connected with something beyond that which is temporal, the Savior said that many, that is, those blessed, like this centurion, with the same kind of faith, should come from the east, the west, the north, and the south, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. Here it was, at Capernaum, that Peter's wife's mother was restored to health. Here it was that the Savior wrought a great many miracles; and thus he said that this Capernaum, where he had wrought so many miracles, while it was exalted unto heaven, that it should be brought down to hell; and he assigns the reason; “for if the mighty works, which have been done in you, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day.” There are four things that I will aim this morning to make as clear as I can. First, *what these people at Capernaum were*. Secondly, *what they ought to have been*. Thirdly, *the corresponding judgment*. Fourthly, *the mystery of the Lord omitting to do mighty works where the people would have repented and doing mighty works where he knew they would not repent*.

We notice, then, first, *what these people at Capernaum were*. And in so doing, although I am fully aware that in that northern part of Canaan, for Capernaum was towards the north of Canaan, lying on the north-west border of the lake of Galilee; I shall, nevertheless, though they were a commingling of Jews and of others, I shall nevertheless speak of these people this morning as a kind of sample of what the Jews were altogether; because the words of our text apply not only to Capernaum, not only to that one town, but apply to the whole land of Canaan under the circumstances in which they were then placed; and the whole land of Canaan was brought down to hell in the sense intended in our text. I will notice, then, first, what the persons were; and I will take simply a twofold view of them, for the sake of seeing, at least, that is one object, what

difference there is between the real child of God and these people. Now we have in a measure a description of them in our text; they are said to be “exalted unto heaven;” that is, of course, in their own estimation. There was a twofold ground upon which they considered themselves as at the very gate of heaven, as upon the very borders of everlasting bliss, as the very favorites of heaven; that is the way, I think, in which we must view them as being exalted unto heaven, in their own estimation. First, they were the natural, for so I will take them, descendants of Abraham; on that ground they considered that whatever Abraham had, they were entitled to. So that if God were Abraham’s shield and exceeding great reward, of course God was their shield and their exceeding great reward; and if the Lord abode by Abraham, of course he would abide by them; and if the Lord takes such care of Abraham, he would take care of them; and if Abraham was now sitting down in the kingdom of heaven, why, of course, as a matter of course, they his descendants would sit down in the kingdom of heaven also. These were the views they took. So that not knowing Abraham in his faith, but only in the flesh; not knowing Abraham in the new covenant, but only in the old covenant; not knowing Abraham as the spiritual patriarch, but only as the natural patriarch, the natural ancestor; not distinguishing between these two characters of Abraham, for Abraham had two classes of descendants; the one literal, the other spiritual; the spiritual, as the apostle argues, includes both Jews and Gentiles; the father spiritually both of the Circumcision and of the Uncircumcision; “for they that be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham.” Thus, then, these people were on fleshly grounds exalted unto heaven, they were so in their own eyes; but they were to be brought down unto hell. And we live in a day, though time does not permit me to attack that part much this morning, but we live in a day when the ground of the confidence of most professors is fleshly and delusive; and that while they are in their own estimation near to heaven, on the road to heaven, and exalted all but to the very gate of heaven, it is evident to those whose eyes are opened that they are on their way to hell, and not on their way to heaven. Now as Abraham was their father, they on that ground claimed God as their Father. “We have one father, even God.” And even to the very last, when the Romans invaded their city, to the very last they held out; and a great many prophets among them declared that God would never suffer his temple to be destroyed, never suffer the city to be destroyed, never suffer the people to be destroyed. And so, their confidence held out to the very last; their courage through this conflict, in their sufferings, certainly was wonderful.

See, then, the solemn truth that Satan is the great deceiver in ten thousand ways. And when the last day shall come, it will be found that vast numbers, by a false religion, false confidence, have been deceived. It will indeed then be manifest, however much men are offended with it now, it will then be manifest that “strait is the gate and narrow is the way that leads unto life, and few there be that find it.” That is one feature of their character. Now is this the character of any of you? Do you suppose that because your parents were good people, that you on that ground conclude that you are Christians; or that you were dealt with by a purely human ceremony, and then you went through some of those mere formalities, and you conclude upon these grounds that you are a Christian; or that you have lived as you ought to, and conclude on that ground that you are a Christian? Now all these are delusions. If you are on any of these grounds concluding that you are near heaven, or going to heaven, then I say, so far from that being the case, you are embodied in our text, and will be brought down to hell. The next feature of their character I shall notice is that of direct opposition to the truth of God. Their religion led them to despise the Lord Jesus Christ, and to despise his truth; and wherever a truth was introduced, these people had an antagonism to that truth. I will give you just a sample of this, not to be too long upon this part of my subject. Now

there was self-conceit, then, on fleshly grounds; false confidence on fleshly grounds; second, deadly enmity against the truth of God. And wherever the Lord set forth a truth, they had an error that stood in direct opposition to that truth. This I have reminded you of before.

I will just refer this morning to two or three of these antagonisms and leave you to read out the rest for yourselves. There is a sinner spiritually poor, needing Jesus Christ as his sanctification, and needing Jesus Christ as his salvation, and needing the grace of God in all the freeness, and fulness, and certainty of it by Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ pronounces that man blessed, that that man enters into the kingdom of God by faith in the perfect work of Christ, for Christ says, "I am the door; by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved." That man enters in, I say, into the kingdom of God simply by faith in the perfect work of the Lord Jesus Christ; so that that man will say before God, honestly, "By the grace of God I am what I am, and by the grace of God I am where I am." Now these people took away this key of knowledge; they took away the new covenant truth of the blessed God. "Woe unto you, scribes and lawyers! for you take away the key of knowledge." And thus, in so doing, they shut up the kingdom of God against men; entered not in themselves, and suffered not those that were entering, so far as they could hinder them, from entering in. Thus, then, if there be salvation for a poor sinner, these people had a doctrine that stood opposed to that and insisted upon going to heaven in a way different from that. And if the Savior found a poor, miserable creature under a sight and sense of guilt, and misery, and wretchedness, and mourning after the mercy of God, and if Jesus said, "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted" then these people had an antagonism for this, for while their aim was worldly aggrandizement, by devouring widows houses, nevertheless they made long prayers, they made very long prayers. And so, these men would teach us the same now; get us to look to their long prayers and their formalities for consolation. All this must be laid aside, and you must become too miserable to derive any comfort from anything short of the eternal mercy of God by Christ Jesus; you must become too miserable to derive any comfort from anything short of the eternal salvation that is by Christ Jesus; you must become so miserable as to feel that nothing short of a revelation to your soul of the immutability of God's counsel can be any comfort to you. But these things these people of Capernaum hated, the Jews hated and despised, just the same as people do now. Thus, then, their character; they were puffed up first by fleshly confidence, exalted unto heaven in their own estimation; very different from the man that is taught of God; the man that is taught of God lies low in the dust of humiliation before God, and there he remains until mercy shall lift him up; and then, when mercy lifts him up, then comes the testimony. "You are my glory, and the lifter up of my head." But he who is self-lifted up, his soul is not upright in him; but the just shall live by faith. You will observe, then, that the religion of these Jews commenced with shutting up the kingdom of God, taking away the key of knowledge; that is, the new covenant, for that unlocks everything, nothing unlocked without that; it is all embodied in God's good-will. Their religion commenced with taking away the key of knowledge, then shutting up the kingdom of God against men; and their religion terminated in the damnation of hell. "You serpents, you vipers, how can you escape the damnation of hell?" Ah, think me not severe upon these matters; we must belong to those that are puffed up with self-conceit, or else to those that are humbled down, and that shall be raised up by the grace and mercy of the Lord; we must belong either to those that know the truth and love it, or else to those that hate the truth. Thus, then, the people were exalted to heaven on fleshly grounds, and haters of God's truth.

Secondly, I will now notice *what they ought to have been*. “If the mighty works, which have been done in you, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day.” Shall I tell you what they ought to have been? Yes. They ought to have been like the Ninevites. These people ought, as rational beings, creatures, to have repented of their willful enmity and malice against the miracles and against the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ did demonstrate to all men that he was of God, and therefore they ought to have repented of their wickedness, they ought to have repented of their malice, they ought to have repented of their hatred, and they ought to have let the Savior alone; and if they could not understand his truth spiritually, yet they could understand the miracles literally; and they did by their willful malice sin against light and against knowledge, they did hereby entail upon themselves that greater judgment and that greater wrath I shall presently have to notice. Now these people ought to have said one to the other, Let us be quiet; this work, peradventure, is of God, and one natural man did say so, and if it be of God it will stand. Another man did repent; he said, I can go no farther; here is a man working miracles, here is a wonderful person, here are wonderful works; here the dead are raised, clear to all; lepers are cleansed, clear to all; the eyes of the blind are opened, clear to all; the ears of the deaf are unstopped, the palsied man made strong; the miracles are clear to all. Said one, I repent of my conceit, I repent of my enmity, and I will seek, though I will do it privately, for I should not like to be one of his followers exactly, I should not like for it to be known that I am silly enough to become one of these Nazarenes; but it is only now a week or two, and the moon will be gone off, and the evenings will be dark, and I will creep up some evening where he is, and just get a little private information about it. And he very ingeniously, when he came to the Savior, said, “Master, we know that you are a teacher come from God” we know it, we all know it; I must confess it, we all know it, “for no man can do these miracles except God be with him.” And instead of the Savior telling Nicodemus what he ought to have been or letting him rest in that repentance referred to in our text, the dear Savior introduced to him quite a new subject altogether. “Verily, verily, I say unto you, You must be born again.” Not telling Nicodemus what he ought to be quite another thing altogether, as we hope presently more plainly to show; but it was telling Nicodemus that, in order for a man to be saved, he must be something which God alone can make him, for “except a man be born again, he cannot enter,” that is, not spiritually, not savingly; he may morally and externally, but spiritually, and vitally, and savingly, “he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” Well, now, these people, then, ought to have repented; they ought to have acted according to the light which they had. Men are capable of so doing. If you do away with this principle of responsibility, and if you say that man has no moral power, I deny that man is destitute of moral power or of physical power. What is moral power? Moral power is this, to know right from wrong, morally so, naturally so, socially so. And the word of God came to these people and demonstrated to them that Jesus Christ was God; and by their natural powers they not only could perceive, but they did perceive it. Why, when the Savior spoke the word of God touched them, they perceived it. I admit their light, their visual power was, in a sense, like the visual sense of bats, and owls, and moles, of that kind that made them hate the truth; but there it was. And, therefore, the natural man has this capability of knowing right from wrong. Why, the moral power of the Bible is really wonderful; I say, it is really wonderful. We see it everywhere; we see it in families, we see it in nations, we see it in districts, we see it in our country.

The drunkard says, Why, if I become a sober man; and the negligent man says, If I become an industrious man; and the pleasure-taking man says, If I become a devoted man to my business, I can see I shall have ten times more happiness, taking that view of it, in that path, than I shall in

any other. And therefore, these men really do repent, and they get the reward of their repentance, there is no question about that. But then this repentance of reformation, and that repentance essential unto salvation, are as different as, what? Why, I may just say here what it is true I have stated before, the difference between the repentance of reformation and the repentance essential to salvation is this, the clearest illustration I can give. There is a man ill, mind that, he is ill, he is not dead; presently he is restored to health, goes about his work comfortably. That I will call the repentance of reformation. There is a man dead in trespasses and sins; or, if you like to keep up the simile, literally dead. A voice calls him out of the grave; there is a vital change undergone, and the word *repentance* means *change*; there is a vital change undergone. That I will call the repentance that needs not to be repented of; that I will call the repentance unto life, the repentance unto salvation. In our day the repentance of reformation is made to take the place of the repentance essential unto salvation; in our day creature reformation is made to take the place of divine new creation in the soul; in our day natural faith is made to take the place of supernatural faith; and hereby we have plenty of ministers that are to the living soul as sounding brass and the tinkling cymbal; they sound well, but there is no vitality, there is no real experience; there is no going either into the real condition of the sinner, or into those mysteries by which alone we can be saved. Thus, then, you will see, we high-doctrine people hold responsibility, but hold it in its proper place. And they tell us, with all the assurance imaginable, that it is the duty of men savingly to believe in Jesus Christ. My answer is simply this, I feel it my duty to obey the laws of the land in which I live, so far as those laws do not call upon me to deny any part of God's truth. I feel it my duty to honor the Queen; but I do not feel it my duty to believe that I am of the royal household; I certainly do not feel it to be my duty to believe that. But because I do not feel it to be my duty to believe that I am of the royal household, does it therefore follow that I do not feel it my duty to obey the laws of the realm, and to be loyal as a citizen of the country? And just so does it follow that because it is not the duty of man savingly to believe in Christ, that therefore it follows that in no sense is he under responsibility; that he is to call his Maker a liar, despise the Bible, despise the sabbath day, the seventh portion of the time which it is right in which God should be honored, and homage done to his name? Does it follow that because it is not my duty to believe I am of the royal household therefore it is not my duty to obey the laws of the realm? Only let us put the duty into its right place. Now, if adoption were as customary now as it was in ancient times, and I happened to be adopted into the royal family, and that adoption was demonstrated to me, I really then should not think the word *duty* a good term to express my belief in that adoption; no, because if the adoption were demonstrated to me, I could not do otherwise than believe, certainly not; it is demonstrated. Let me just remind you of a scripture wherein this very subject is handled. The apostle says, in allusion to human practice, "Whom he did foreknow." Now he has an allusion in that verse to a great man that goes into the slave market, and he has made up his mind to emancipate, and, we will say for the sake of argument, adopt into his family, as joint heirs with his son of his inheritance, a certain number of these slaves. He takes their names down, and there and then determines them to this freedom. These slaves know nothing at all about it as yet. He has taken their names down, and he has determined them to be conformed to his son, that they shall come into the same inheritance, be arrayed in the same kind of array, and have the same privileges, be called by the same name, live in the same mansion, be treated with the same treatment. Now, then, the apostle goes on, "Whom he did foreknow," thus determine, "them he also called." By-and-bye, this same man comes into the slave market, and he says, "I want you, and I want you, and I want you." They don't know the reason of it; can't make it out. By-and-bye they are called out; this man that has called them out takes them before the magistrate; their slave clothes are taken away, and their

emancipation is legalized, the price of their redemption is paid, everything is paid, and this adopter gets a legal, and rightful, and proper possession of them; the redemption is paid, he pays the price, their slave clothes taken away, beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning; they are arrayed in the citizenship robe, and now they walk at large. And thus, he brings them home, and he says, There is your mansion, there is your inheritance. And thus, whom he did foreknow, he did determine, them he called, them he justifies, and them he glorifies. Now here is a process in which the creature had no hand in it. Now would you say to that emancipated slave, that adopted slave, It is your duty to believe that he has adopted you? He would not like that term; he would say, Don't talk about duty to us; it is a term too mean, too paltry. We never thought we should live to see the day in which we should have the happiness of believing the thing; but the matter is demonstrated, and here it is. And so, I know a writer, when arguing in favor of the doctrine of election he says, "Election is called adoption; and," he says, "I have a right to adopt whom I please into my family." But this same writer holds the doctrine of universal invitation, and yet he says, "No one has a right to impose children upon me." But then, if he has a right to adopt whom he pleases, according to his own showing all others are invited. He also says that election is spoken of as choosing a bride. "Now," this same writer says, "I am at liberty, surely, to choose my own spouse." True; but then, according to the doctrine held by the same writer, others are invited as well. Solomon had a thousand wives; and if this writer chose one, and he holds the doctrine of universal invitation, carry it out, why, all the women in the world, if they will come, would be his wives. What would the lawful wife say to this? And so it is, if you carry the doctrine out, hold election on the one hand, and universal invitation on the other; only see what monstrosities these abominable doctrines of men lead to; when they are brought into the light and put to the test, they all break down together. Now, then, these people were lifted up with pride, despised Jesus Christ; they ought, as men, to have repented; that repentance would have preserved their nation, lengthened their tranquility, and been a great advantage to them. But the advantages of that repentance, and the repentance essential to salvation, are infinitely different the one from the other.

Thirdly, *the corresponding judgment*. "It shall be more tolerable in the day of judgment for Sodom. Why so? Because the people of Sodom had not the opportunity of persecuting the Lord Jesus Christ and despising his miracles and truths in the way that these people did. "The Ninevites shall rise in judgment against them," for they did do as men ought to do, as men considered. The queen of the south heard about Solomon, and what did she do? Deal in a succession of assumptions, and act upon those assumptions? No. I will go and see for myself. And she, as a wise woman, went and saw for herself; and when she saw for herself, she saw that that which she had heard was not to be despised, that which she had seen was to be revered and to be respected. Go you and do likewise. It would take away nine-tenths of the evil-speaking of the world if people would lay aside assumptions and go upon sure grounds. Now, then, at the last great day these Jews, as well as the Popes and all persecutors, will be dealt with, not merely as common sinners, but in addition to that the heaviest wrath of God shall to eternity rest upon them for their willful malice, determined enmity against God. It shall be more tolerable for any people than for that people who have thus despised and persecuted the truth and people of God. There cannot be any question, at least there is not to my mind, but that Saul of Tarsus well understood this. Oh, how deep was his feeling after he was called by grace! He saw what an awful hell his hell must have been; he saw that the lowest hell was the hell to which he must have been brought; he saw that the heaviest damnation that Omnipotence could lay upon a daring wretch must have been his destiny, if almighty grace had not prevented. "Blasphemer, persecutor, injurious;" yes, as though he should say, My common

sins were passing shadows in comparison of my blind yet willful and deadly enmity against the saints and truth of the blessed God. "But," he says (and he speaks in a way that we can all join with him, for are we better than he? not in our nature), "by the grace of God I am what I am." Perhaps I need not say more, then. First, here is a people that willfully despise the Lord Jesus Christ. Second, that they ought to have repented with the repentance of reformation, and that such a repentance would have preserved Sodom until this day, if the mighty works had been done there; such a repentance would have preserved the Jewish nation. But no; God gave them over to the worst kind of reprobate mind, and they rushed on from bad to worse; they first despised the Savior; they then slandered him; they then personally reviled him; they mocked him; they crucified him; they said, "Away with him; his blood be upon us and our children." Thus, they perfected their damnation, and thus their nation is destroyed. And fearful are the reservoirs of wrath reserved to burst forth at the last upon all slanderers and persecutors of the saints of the most high God. He that touches them touches the apple of Jehovah's eye.

I now come, fourthly, to the mystery. And now, if what I am going to say does not make you ashamed of the doctrine of duty-faith, then I will say no more. Here are cities, Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom, which would have repented if these mighty works had been done in them. Now mark, those that hold it is the duty of all men savingly to believe in Christ, their interpretation must stand like this, that the people of Tyre and Sidon and Sodom would have repented and got to heaven, but through these works not being done there, they are gone to hell. And then, according to duty-faith, some that God loved are gone to hell; some that Christ died for are gone to hell; some that Christ is exalted a Prince and a Savior to give repentance to are come short, and are gone to hell. And God went to a people that would not repent. Does not this look like bad policy, for the Lord not to go to a people that would repent and go to heaven, but to a people he knew would not repent and go to heaven? Why, you see, here are two chances; in the first place, some would have been gathered in and taken to heaven, that chance is lost; in the next case, they will not repent and they cannot be saved, and that chance is lost. And this is your duty-faith, is it, that insists upon it that the repentance here spoken of is saving repentance? This is your duty-faith, is it? After all, you may say what you like, and if you all run away from me, and I never preach another sermon, I cannot help it, but I believe that I shall stand farther from duty-faith and every other abominable error the longer I live: you may say what you like about it, but duty-faith is nothing else but Arminianism in disguise, and duty-faith brings in election only because it appears in the letter of the word, and not because it is understood, received, loved, and adored. That is what I solemnly believe. How do we high-doctrine people explain this mystery of not going to where they would have repented, and going to where he knew they would not repent? We are not at a loss for a moment; we have the key that unlocks the mystery of God's omitting to go to people that would repent, and going to people that would not repent; but I shall not bring the key just a moment. Now do you not see, I want you to see, that if the repentance here spoken of be saving repentance, those who are gone to hell from Sodom, Tyre, and Sidon, would have gone to heaven if God would have vouchsafed to have done a few mighty works there? You duty-faith people, with all your pretension to election, still, according to your own doctrine, acknowledging that some are in hell for whom Christ died, and certainly throwing a sad reflection-upon the most high God. There is the duty-faith God stands at the door; and shivers and trembles there because you would not come; and yet here is a people he knew would come, and yet he would not go to where they were; and here is a people that would not come, and yet he went to where they were. Why, it is a doctrine hardly, fit for a foggy day, much less for the clear daylight. But if you take the repentance to mean the

repentance of reformation, all is clear then, God was not pleased to do the works in those cities that would have reformed them and preserved them. And though he knew that those works would not reform these Canaanitish cities, and preserve them, why then did he omit the one and go to the other? Answer, For the elect's sake, sir; that is the secret of it all. God does not go to those cities because he has no people there. Lot was there, and he brought him out; and none of the rest were, his, so he went not there. But notwithstanding Bethsaida, Corazon, and Capernaum would not repent, yet God had some people there; Andrew and Peter were natives of Bethsaida. Bethsaida would not repent, as it ought to have done. The reason God did not go to the one was because he had not a people there; the reason he went here was because he had a people here. Andrew and Peter, both of them, were natives of Bethsaida; and we know there were many that were called by grace at Capernaum. So, then, here lies the secret. God omits that place, though it would have a good effect upon them morally, but then he has no people there; he goes to that abominable place (though it will have no good effect upon them) because yet he has a people there, and having a people there, out that people must come. That is the key, and that is the secret of it all. "For the elect's sake, whom he has chosen, he has shortened the days." Of all the cities of ancient Greece or of the Roman provinces, I suppose not one was sunk so low, morally, socially, circumstantially, in every sense, as the city of Corinth, and we have no reason to believe that the preaching of the apostle had any particular effect upon that city. Why, then, was the apostle kept there three years? Because God had much people in that city. "Fear not, Paul, for I have much people in this city." What, Lord, in this den of swine, in this Satanic den? Yes, I have much people here. Ah, my hearer, so it is; let the people of God be where they may, God will go to them; he will find them out, and if he pass by and omit ten thousand repentances of reformation, he will pass by them all for the sake of one of his sheep. He will rejoice more over the one sheep that is saved than over the ninety and nine that never went astray, or that may repent with the repentance of reformation. If you take the repentance, then, to be the repentance of reformation, the duty of man, and not that repentance which God gives, then all is clear. See, then, how the real Christian differs from all other men. First, he is brought into the daylight; secondly, he loves the truth; third, he has the Repentance, not only of reformation, but that repentance that lets him into the new covenant, lets him into God's good-will, lets him into God's counsels, and lets him see and know where his eternal life is, where his salvation is; and he will stand, therefore, and repudiate all others. And I feel persuaded that the faith insisted upon in our day is a faith that thousands and thousands possess and will be damned at the last. May the Lord help us, then, to distinguish between that repentance which is the duty of man, and that which is the gift of God.