

IS THIS THE TRUTH?

A SERMON

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“Therefore, he has mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardens.” Romans 9:18

THERE are things in the word of God very hard to be understood, and there are many things in his judgments and dealings with men, good men and bad men, very difficult to be understood. And we need be very humble before the Lord, we need be very earnest with the Lord, to entreat him to order our steps in his word aright; for there are things in his word, and many things in his dealings with his people, that very often make them have hard thoughts of God. Why, some Christians have been so tried with hard thoughts of God, that if they had no other evils in their nature, even those evils that they have felt are enough to make them acknowledge that if ever they get to heaven it must be by the super-abounding grace of God, and that alone; that if ever they appear sinless before him, it must be by the infinite efficacy of Immanuel's blood; that if ever they appear righteous at the bar of God, it must be by the imputing to them of a righteousness that exempts them entirely from everything that they are in and of themselves. And these hard thoughts of God are no small trouble. They stop, to a great extent, the mouth of prayer; they lower, for the time being, the Savior; they lower the name of the Lord, and we can hardly get it out of the mind but that God himself is sporting with human misery, and delights in the wretchedness and condemnation of men. These are evil thoughts; these are bad thoughts; but they are such as will under certain circumstances arise, and it just shows what poor creatures we are.

Now our text stands among the great mysteries, among the great things that are hard to be understood, which some that are unlearned, that is, not taught by the Spirit of the Lord, wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction. Hence, we have some modems that declare that this chapter does not relate to eternal things at all; that the mercy and the wrath spoken of in this chapter are altogether merely temporal; and thus, they get rid of the spirit of the chapter, and get rid of the sovereignty of God. But they will never get rid of the truth of it, for here we have it before our eyes; we have the greater part of the human race to this day hardened against God, and we have none that are properly softened down and brought down to the Savior's feet, but those that the Lord himself has brought down. Why, our state must be very woeful to make it needful

that Jesus Christ should go forth, as represented in the 45th Psalm, “Your arrows are sharp in the heart of the king’s enemies.” What! must the arrow of truth be brought by an almighty power in order effectually to wound the conscience, to wound the heart, to wound the soul, to bring the sinner down; and soften him down into a concern about his own state, and make him feel, what it is right that he should feel for his own precious soul, and make him begin to seek earnestly and truly after God? How dreadful must be our condition by nature, to need the exercise of almighty power to bring the soul out of the condition it is in! Well may it be said, “Except a man be born again;” and that birth means that quickening which the Holy Spirit of God alone can bring about.

I shall this morning divide my text thus. First, *the sovereignty of God*. Secondly, *the freeness of his mercy*. Thirdly, *the sign of the presence or absence of that mercy*.

First, *the sovereignty of God*. And I enter upon this with, I was going to say, discouragement; for as far as my natural feelings are concerned I could wish that all were going to be saved; that ministers had nothing to do but preach the gospel, simply go and tell everyone that there is salvation for them, and that they are sure to have it; and that the Lord would accompany such tidings with his power, that the fact should be realized that all should be brought. But it is not so. Hence the apostle, because he held with eternal election, that there was a people to be saved and a people to be lost, they of course charged him with hardness of heart and a want of feeling, as though he did not feel for men in general. Therefore, he said, “I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost, that I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh.” He does not wish himself accursed from Christ, but he could; meaning to express the strength of the feeling he had; that if he could, by any suffering he could undergo, forward their salvation, he would be happy to do it. So it is right we should be aware that we do not hold the doctrines of salvation in a way that will make us presumptuous, that will harden us, and settle us down into a mere doctrinal profession; for if we take those doctrines in a wrong way we shall get doctrine-hardened, and our religion will be as the sounding brass and the tinkling cymbal, instead of its being a living, feeling, acting power. “I will know,” said the apostle, “not the speech of them which are puffed up, but the power.” I notice, then, first, the sovereignty of God in the creation of angels and men. I think it is needful we should have some remarks upon this to clear our way. We high-doctrine people I believe generally are charged with holding that God created man to be damned. That, say they, is what no doubt the Surrey Tabernacle people hold. I have this morning to meet that charge, and show that we do not hold that; and then I have to show what we do hold. We are charged with holding that that was the purpose for which God created at least all the non-elect. Well, my thoughts are but poor and shallow upon a subject so profound; but I do not hold that doctrine, that God created man on purpose to damn him. It is a doctrine that seems so abhorrent to nature itself that for myself I could not hold it. What do I hold, then? I hold this, that God created the angels, I refer now to the fallen angels, and the same remarks will apply to. fallen man, that God created the angels to be happy, for he made them holy, free, upright, and happy. So, when God created man, he created him to be happy; he therefore created him holy. For sin and misery are inseparable; so are holiness and happiness. He created man to be happy; he placed him in a happy state, and man was happy; he knew nothing of sorrow whatever. This is how I view the creation of angels and of men. Now comes the unfathomable sovereignty; that while I hold that he created fallen angels, angels that are now fallen, and men, to be happy, yet in the deeps of his sovereignty he was pleased to place that happiness upon a conditional

footing; so that if the angels lost their first estate they would leave all the happiness for which they were created, they would lose all the happiness that their Maker had kindly given them, and they would by their apostasy from God bring upon themselves all the penalty of that apostasy; that thus sinning against the holiness and integrity of the Most High, they would thereby subject themselves to everlasting woe, and from that woe we have no evidence that fallen angels will ever be released. Just so man. God in his sovereignty was pleased to place the happiness of man upon a conditional footing, and if man maintained the purpose of his creation, and continued in that happiness, then the original purpose of the most high God is answered. I created you to be happy, and if you continue as I have placed you, you will be happy; there will be nothing to make you unhappy; there will be no death overtake you, there will be no thorns, no briars, no sweat of the brow, no sorrow, nor anything that shall make you unhappy. But if you leave me, and adopt Satan, the serpent, as your god, if you go over to him and listen to him, "in the day you eat thereof you shall die." Thus, I hold that fallen angels and fallen men were created to be happy; that they were not created for the purpose of being damned, but that they were created to be happy. Yet I confess freely that there is an unfathomable depth; but there is the fact standing, that God placed their happiness upon a conditional footing, and they have fallen; the sin is theirs the law and the justice are God's. This is my answer, then, to those that charge us with holding that God created man to damn him. But I now come, if possible, to a more difficult matter than this. And even what I have said, you cannot understand it without admitting the sovereignty of God; he was pleased to place them upon a conditional footing. But it is a delightful truth, beyond all calculation in value, all things we can desire are not to be compared to the blessedness of it, that he has placed his people upon a standing which is unconditional. I will come to another question, a question which perhaps it is scarcely wise to touch upon; but there it is; it will arise, and it might as well be brought out, to see if we can make anything of it. It is a most awful truth; I tremble while I utter it, and it is this, I will put it in an interrogatory form. First, as there is a people chosen before the world was to eternal salvation, and they in due time shall be called, brought to God, conformed to the Savior's image, and saved; on the other hand, there is a people that are not chosen. When, therefore, we will say, a child that is not included in eternal election is born into this world, is that child born with a chance of the salvation of his soul? I put it in that form. Is it or is it not? Was Esau born with a chance of the salvation of his soul? If such can be saved, where can he be saved? Not in election, for he is not there; not in Christ, for he is not there; for there is no one manifestly in Christ that was not in Christ before. All that shall be in Christ after time were chosen in Christ before time. Is there therefore any chance for that child to be saved? I will not answer the question; It is answered in my own mind, but at present I leave it in that position; not because I myself have any hesitation about it. Then what is the chance of that child? That child must grow up; that child must be lost; but the amount of punishment that that child will undergo in a future world will depend upon its practical works in this world. When I say "child," I do not mean if it dies in infancy; because a child dying in infancy is to me an evidence of its eternal salvation. For I do not believe one infant is lost. I believe if a child's name is not in the book of life, that child must live; not a sparrow can fall to the ground without God's notice? Then that child grows up. We exhort that child as it grows up to avoid all ungodliness, and to follow the dictates of conscience and the word of God. The child does so; the consequence is that while in this world he is respected, has peace, moral peace of conscience, peace of mind, dies respected, lies in the grave; yet even at the last great day even such a character as that must be lost. Their punishment will be according to their state; their works not having been so wicked as the works of some of their fellows, their punishment will not be so great. Hence you read of its being more tolerable for some in the day of

judgment than for others, and that some shall receive a greater damnation than others. You see what I have said is the truth, that there are things hard to understand. I am not now speaking dogmatically; I am now speaking my thoughts upon these awful things. And I shall be forgiven, perhaps, if I say it would be quite as well with young people, I speak now of Christian people, if there were a little more prayer connected with their marriage, a little more meditation, a little more thought upon the vast responsibility of marriage.

It is not a trivial thing to summons a fellow-creature into the world. Remember, in that fellow-creature is an immortal soul. We need, then, when we look at the fall of angels, the fall of men, and while we must be careful to justify God, we need be solemn in all our movements; we need the Lord to guide us in everything. Satan would have us make light of these things; and some say, Well, I have nothing to do with that. You have to do with all of it. You have not a human heart, you have a monster's heart, if you are a parent and say you have nothing to do with the destiny of your children. I would not be such a parent, no. My soul shall pray for my children to my latest breath, if they are lost at last. Well, but, say you, if they are not included in election, you cannot by your prayers put them there. But I can take the fact of my having power to pray as an evidence that they are there. Let us remember that the gospel is to be preached to every creature, and that we are to pray for all that we can pray for. Therefore, if we hold these solemn truths in a way that neutralizes prayer, godly feeling, and godly concern, then we hold them wrongly. Thus, then, I hold these three doctrines, first, that man was not created to be damned, but to be happy; second, that God in his sovereignty was pleased to place that happiness upon a conditional footing; third, that although those not chosen cannot be saved, yet they may most dreadfully treasure up to themselves wrath against the day of wrath; that they may make their own hell ten thousand times worse by their own ungodliness. And what the hell of the Popes will be, God alone knows; what the hell of the persecutors of the saints will be, God alone can understand. Oh! the hottest hell, the deepest hell, the most fearful hell. O you persecutors of the people of God, know you not that it is written that he that touches one of these touches the apple of his eye? What, therefore, must it be to him when they have rushed in upon his saints with fire and sword, when they have shed their blood like water? Hence, we read in the Revelation of the woman drunk with the blood of the saints. And the saints themselves, mysterious to say, shall be made at the last so conscious of the righteousness of God's judgment, that they shall sound out the loud Alleluia of the final judgment. When her smoke shall ascend for ever and ever, then shall the loud Alleluia of all the redeemed join with the ministration of those judgments, saying, "You have judged righteously."

Are any of you disposed to quarrel because God placed angels and men upon a conditional footing, and because he has not placed all men in a position with a chance of salvation? Are you disposed to quarrel with him for it? If you are, before you do so read carefully this 9th of the Romans, and especially one part. For it is no new thing for men to be at war with the sovereignty of God. Why, there are scores, hundreds, thousands of men in our day preaching what they call the gospel; and what is it? Why, a direct testimony against God's sovereignty; God's sovereignty is thrust aside, and human sovereignty put into the place of it. Now see how the apostle meets this quarrel: "No but, O man, who are you that replies against God?" Are you your own? Your soul is not your own, your body is not your own, not a hair of your head is your own. Your house is not your own; in the temporal, in the human sense it is perhaps, but not in the divine sense. The food you eat is not your own, the clothes you wear are not your own. The sun that lightens this chapel at this moment is not ours; it is God's. "No but, O man, who are you that replies against God? Shall the thing

formed say to him that formed it, Why have you made me thus? Has not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honor, and another unto dishonor?" Now I am not the author of these words, but God himself is the author of them. Therefore, if you do not understand it, some of you, may the Lord give you grace to be silent till you can. Do not run in upon the thick bosses of his buckler, for after you have said and done all you can, there stands the testimony, it is put upon record by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit concerning our God, that "all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing, and he does according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What do you?" Thus, then, I have made these few remarks upon the purpose of man's creation, and upon the sovereignty of God in placing happiness upon a conditional footing, and upon the solemn fact that some are lost, as it appears to me, without any chance of salvation. But we know not who they are; we must therefore preach the gospel to every creature, and leave the effect with him that works all things after the counsel of his own will. I know what your answer, some of you, will be; but then that does not meet the point, namely, Well, but he created man in order that he might show in eternal ages to come the exceeding riches of his grace in the salvation of his people. That does not answer the question, because that pertains only to one part of the human race, and not to all. And our fellow-creatures are our fellow-creatures, a soul is a soul, whether in the body of one or of another, all are of equal value abstractedly speaking. Now I have made these remarks feeling that while we must hold the truth, however confounding to our judgment, we desire to hold it reverentially, we desire to hold it in righteousness, we desire to hold it in a way that we shall have to make no alteration in our dying hour, that we may hold it in a way in which we may appear at the last great day. It is a trembling testimony, God grant that if we are met with such a testimony it may be before we die, so as to be put right before we die, I mean where the Lord said unto Job's friends, "You have not spoken of me the thing that is right, as my servant Job has." He is right, but you are all three wrong. That was just the reverse of what they thought. They made sure that Job was wrong, and that they were right. Job will never come over to you. Job is established in eternal redemption, he is established in my immutability; he has declared that I am of one mind, and none can turn me; he has declared his own helplessness, he would find me, but cannot. But you have not so spoken, "you have not spoken of me the thing that is right, as my servant Job has." If any of us are in error, may God Almighty bring us out of that error, and lead us in the way everlasting; for you may depend upon it that nothing but truth, as a poet somewhere said, can appear accepted before God's throne. "You desire truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden part you shall make me to know wisdom."

I will now come, in the next place, to *the freeness of God's mercy*; "Therefore has he mercy upon whom he will have mercy." I will notice some of the forms in which this mercy appears in this chapter, in order that you may read out its adaptation to you; I mean those of you that know your condition as sinners. For after all, the gospel is the effectual and final remedy for all human woe; and I am never so happy as when I am at that part of my work, namely, setting the provisions of the gospel over against the necessities of the people. That is where I am most at home. Still we must deal with every truth as the Lord is pleased to bring the same before us. Now the mercy of the Lord in this chapter appears first in a promissory form. "In Isaac shall your seed be called." "The children of promise are counted for the seed." Now you that do not as yet understand this, do not shrink back from answering clearly the question I am about to put. Was the promise to Isaac before he was born, or was it after he was born, grew up, did some good works of his own, and entitled himself to the promise? Ask yourselves that question. And then read in the Book of

Genesis the history of Abraham. When Abraham and Sarah appear, at least, it seems so to me; it may not to you, to have thought that Ishmael was the object of the promise, was the heir of the promise; the Lord set Ishmael aside, and said, This shall not be your heir. Why, the Lord was as positive with one as he was with the other. Then comes the promise to the son of whom Sarah was to be the mother. Thus, you have the promise before the child was born. Ah, say you, that was in one particular case. Well, then, come to the New Testament in relation to promise, and look at that scripture wherein it is written, "In hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie" that is, cannot deceive, "promised before the world began." And so, grace is said to be given to us in Christ Jesus before the world began. When you and when I (if you will not think it degrading to say so; but I cannot help it if you do) were in a state of nature, we were running about like the wild ass in the desert, I mean spiritually so. Our thoughts were wild, our purposes were alien from God's truth, from God's fear, and from God's name. All that time there was a promise for us, and the period fixed when God would make us feel our need of that promise; and so, "for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when dead in sin, he has thus quickened us together." Mark that, loved us, and gave us this promise in Christ Jesus before the world was. God watched over you and over me as narrowly when we were in a state of nature as he does now.

"See how Heaven's indulgent care
Attends their wanderings here and there."

And how is it that the Lord has preserved the Jews apart? Divine predestination or promise. Jewish children, they die in infancy some of them, they are saved. And there are some few Jews on earth that know the truth, perhaps more abroad than in England; the period may come when thousands of them shall be brought to know the truth. Take away God's absolute purpose, they would not be preserved there. Take away God's purpose concerning you, never had you felt your lost condition, or sighed or cried for mercy, but would have gone on in your hardened condition until you lifted up your eyes in hell. Not, therefore, unto you, but unto him be the praise. He was pleased to constitute you in his sovereign pleasure a child of promise. There was the promise for you, the promise included you. Time travelled on the promise travelled on; you went you knew not whither. By-and-bye you and the Lord met. He knew where to meet you and how to meet you; and now you are brought to feel that if your eternal welfare did not stand entirely on his absolute promise, there could be no hope for you. He gave it to Abraham by promise. You cannot lose the promise, because the promise is absolute; there is no conditionality about it; or if you insist there are conditions, then our answer to that is, that Jesus Christ met those conditions; for he is the end of the law, and he is the completion of the promise. The promise by him is yea and amen; the word he said unto you is yea and amen. Now are we poor enough, are we needy enough, are we wretched enough, to need such a gospel as this? These are the questions we should ask. Do not quarrel about doctrine; ask your own soul whether you can do without any of these mercies. The next form of this mercy is that of election. "The children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works." Chosen to eternal life, to eternal salvation; and if that had stood of works, we know where it would have come to. The purpose would have come to nothing, our works would have failed, and heaven itself never would have been peopled. "That the purpose of God according to election;" what was that purpose? The apostle tells us, "That we should be holy," can a purpose be nobler? "without blame" can a purpose be loftier? "before him" can a position be better? "in love" can the state be exceeded? "That the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calls."

This oneness with Christ, and this calling, of which God never repents, that is another form, then, of the mercy. First the promise, then the choice, and the purpose of that choice is to stand, not by any goodness or badness of yours, but simply “of him that calls,” a faithful and unchanging God. How delightful the truth that he changes not! “therefore, you sons of Jacob are not consumed.” The third form in which this mercy appears is that of love. “Jacob have I loved.” That is a beautiful form in which this mercy appears. Their sins before his love, before the provision of his love, before the sacrificial efficacy of Christ, their sins disappear “like the baseless fabric of a vision, leave not a wreck behind.” The father received the prodigal in a fulness of love, nor could all the Pharisaism of ten thousand elder brothers have altered the father’s heart. It is my son. Ah, but he has been this, and been that, and been the other. Well, if you could write as much against him as could be written against the whole human race put together, he would still be my son. His sins are gone, forgiven with infinite delight, with infinite freedom. Why, this is one of the essentials of the loving-kindness of our God. “How fair and how pleasant are you, O love, for delights!” Love covers all sins, love hides a multitude of sins, casts them into the depths of the sea. Ah, when you look to God you look to a loving God; when you look to the Savior you look to a loving Savior; when you look to the gospel you look to a loving gospel. You very often see human love turn as sour as vinegar and as bitter as gall. I can scarcely call it love; love it may be, but it comes from beneath, not from above. Our God’s love is not like that; it is always the same. It has been tried to the very uttermost; many waters could not quench it, not the floods drown it. Here, is mercy, then, first, in the form of promise that he will never leave nor forsake us; second, in the form of absolute election, the purpose thereof standing not of works, but of him that calls; third, here is mercy in the form of love. So, you see, as you go on the better it gets. Motive, you all know, is a great thing. God’s motive in sending his Son was love; Christ’s motive in living and dying was love; his motive in coming unto you was love; his motive in abiding by you is love. “I have loved, you with an everlasting love: therefore, with lovingkindness have I drawn you.” Some good people, when they read that the Lord has mercy upon whom he will, as our text says, they look at his sovereignty in having mercy on whom he will, but pass by the mercy itself. You must not do that, if you look at the sovereignty without the mercy, in a mere doctrinal point of view, why, you may fill your head with heavenly truths, and your heart will remain as empty as the heads of some people are. We must look, then, at this mercy in its promissory form, elective form, and lovingkindness form. “Jacob have I loved,” Jacob was favored, to appreciate this love, and his love abode by it, he lived in it, walked in it, died in it. Now some of you Wesleyans, I suppose there are some of you here this morning, you come here for instruction, and we are glad to see you; may the Lord put you right. Now you will go to your own chapel this evening. Yes, that we will; we were in hopes you would not have been so high as you have this morning. I have only told you what is in the word of God. Now you will go there, and you will sing that hymn,

“Why was I made to hear your voice?”

How can you sing that? Why, according to your own account you do not believe that you had any more chance than other people, only by some good act on your part you have embraced what they have neglected. Therefore, don’t you sing that any more all the time you are a Wesleyan. And I think you have got that hymn of ours in your book, only a little altered,

“Grace is a charming sound.
Grace has kept me to this day,

And will not let me go.”

Now how can you sing that? Well, say you, I sing that with a little mental reserve. Do you? That spoils it, I should think. Well, I sing it this way, Grace will not let me go if I am careful not to let that go. Well, then, why don't you put that into your hymn? We don't like reservation; we like revelation; we don't like that crafty sort of way. Now don't you sing that hymn any more until you see and feel your poverty, and are brought to feel your need of the absolute promise, your need of the absolute election, your need of the absolute lovingkindness, otherwise your praise will not be acceptable to the Lord.

We have no more hand essentially in our salvation than we had in the creation of the world; that he loved us because he would, chose us because he would, had mercy upon us because he would, came unto us because he would; so that we can honestly, really, and truly attribute the whole of it to his dear and blessed name. Then I may mention one more form of this mercy, which is nothing in reality but a repetition of what we have had, sovereignty. Now comes pure sovereignty. “What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God?” Yes, says someone; if this be true, if he has thus sovereignly given the promise, sovereignly loved, and sovereignly shown mercy, then he is unjust. Well, you must prove it, that is all. For myself, I shall abide by the Lord's word. The apostle anticipated your objection. “Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid. For he said to Moses” as though, the apostle should say, I am announcing no new doctrine; it is a doctrine that runs all through the Bible, and it is essential to our salvation, “for he said to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.” And happy the people that have the signs of interest in this mercy.

And this brings me, lastly, to notice *the sign of the presence or absence of this mercy*. What is the sign of interest in this mercy? Look at our text. “Therefore, has he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardens.” If therefore I am blinded to this new covenant order of things, that is a sign that the mercy is not mine at present, at least. But if my eyes are opened, to see sin in God's light, and to see myself as the Lord sees me, as prophets and true Christians in all ages have seen themselves; if my eyes are thus opened, if my soul loves these eternal truths, then I am not hardened. And in this sense of the word it may be a question, you see I am a little cautious this morning, because there are plenty upon the watch, in this sense of the word it may be a question whether it is scarcely possible for a Christian to be hardened. I know I am hardened from day to day and from time to time against many of the dealings of the Lord. But then we may be hardened against many of the Lord's dealings without being hardened against the person of Christ, and against the atonement of Christ, and against the righteousness of Christ, and against the mercy of God.