

THE GOSPEL OF GOD

A SERMON

Preached on Sunday Morning, February 10th, 1867

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At the New Surrey Tabernacle, Wansey Street

Volume 9 Number 429

“It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.” 1 Corinthians 1:21

WE cannot for a moment suppose that the apostle here speaks otherwise than in solemn irony, to deal out a solemn reproof to those who were ignorant of and blindly at the same time despised the gospel, calling both the gospel and the preaching thereof “foolishness.” To deal out a solemn reproof to such he uses this solemn irony, that “the foolishness of God,” as men call it, “is wiser than men; and the weakness of God,” as men call it, for that I take to be the meaning, “is stronger than men.” And so “it pleased God by” what men call “the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.” Better anything be foolishness unto us than the gospel of God should be as foolishness unto us; for unless the gospel of God be unto us the power of God and the wisdom of God, we cannot be saved.

Now we have three things to notice here this morning. The first will be *that kind of gospel which the carnal mind calls foolishness, and looks at as a system of weakness*. Secondly, *the object gained*, salvation. Thirdly, *the persons who are thus favored*, they that believe.

And I will mention four things for the sake of discriminating the people of God from other people. I shall not dwell much upon the estimation in which men hold it, I shall merely state these four things which are foolishness to the natural man; but unto us, who are called, they are the power of God and the wisdom of God; and we may bless God that we are brought to see wisdom where we once saw none, and that we are brought to feel a saving power where we once knew nothing of it. That is the reason the apostle was not ashamed of the gospel of God, because it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believes. First, the work of the Holy Spirit is foolishness to the natural man. Secondly, the substitution and suretyship character of the Savior are foolishness to the natural man. Thirdly, the sovereignty of God is foolishness to the natural man. Fourthly, the certain and final prevalence of all the people of God is a doctrine also of foolishness to the natural man. But then we have to see this morning what it is to us. First, the work of the Holy Spirit. As, when Peter was sinking in the sea, he was saved by the Lord actually taking hold of him, holding him, and carrying him to the ship; just so the gospel must take a spiritual, personal hold of us in order to save us; for if it does not take this vital hold of us and save us now, then it does not save

us at all. Let us therefore be careful in this matter. I will trace out very concisely the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart, and leave you to judge whether you are brought under this divine discipline and teaching, into this heavenly discipleship, wherein such are made wise to eternal salvation. And we cannot do better than be guided, as usual, by the word of the Lord. Let us, therefore, take a few contrasts which the apostle gives us upon this matter, not merely contrasting the law and the gospel, but contrasting the workings of the law and of the gospel in the hearts and souls of the people. And the first contrast that I notice is that of death and life: "If the ministration of death was glorious" now one part of the work of the Holy Spirit is to make us feel that God's holy law puts a negative upon all we are, and that God's holy law recognizes in us nothing but sin, that it recognizes in us nothing but that that is as contrary to itself as Satan is to the Savior, or as hell is to heaven. When there is this conviction, and a person feels these two things, first, that he is thus condemned to death in the most emphatic and awful sense of the word by the law of God, and then convinced that not one jot nor tittle of this law can fail, then begins real soul-trouble. Ah, he says, whatever human law may be in pursuit of me, it could not have in it such a terribleness as this law of God. "Prepare to meet your God." And the apostle, when describing this, said, "The law came, sin revived, and I died." He was led into his own heart, into his own nature, into his own state, and he felt he was a poor, dead, miserable creature. And I can tell you this, that wherever this work begins it will turn the world into a gloomy desert to you; this experience will throw the shadow of death over everything. You will say, That creature must die, and that creature must die, and that creature must die, and that hope must die, and that comfort must die, that pleasure must die, that advantage must die, that privilege must die, that possession must die, and I must die. There is a deep solemnity more or less felt under this apprehension, and though such a one may at the first in ignorance try to settle matters with the law, yet the law will follow him up: He that offends in one point is guilty of the whole "Cursed is the man that continues not in all things, written in the book of the law to do them." We may delude ourselves, but you may depend upon it, faith that has not in it this divine conviction, that has not in it this root, this power, is not the faith of God's elect. "You must be born again." In this regenerating work of the Spirit there is this conviction of our total condemnation as sinners. Then comes the contrast. Now this law makes God appear glorious in the terrific, in the trembling, in the awful sense of the word, and you begin to see now where God is terrible. And then the contrast is "Shall not the ministration of the Spirit be rather glorious?" You begin to look about and say, How shall I get away from this? Presently you read what you never saw the excellency of before, that the Lord Jesus Christ is the end of this law, that the Lord Jesus Christ himself, by what he has done, he himself is, in what he has done, the entire and the final end of sin; that he has completely finished transgression; that he has made perfect and eternal peace with God, made reconciliation for iniquity. And the Lord says to such a one, "Let him take hold of my strength, that he may make peace with me, and he shall make peace with me." And you will see that Jesus Christ is God's strength in this salvation matter; that he is thus, as the apostle expresses it in this same chapter, the power of God unto us. You lay hold of what he has done, and you will say, Dear Savior, what a deliverance, what a life is this! Here I see eternal life; here I see my way of escape; here I see how the law is magnified and established, and I can be saved. What will all this be? Why, this will be the feeling of the soul as described in the 32nd Psalm, when David describes the operations of conviction. He says, "My moisture is turned into the drought of summer; day and night your hand was heavy upon me." And that made him feel about after the blessedness of the man whose transgression is forgiven, to whom the Lord will not impute sin. This experience is by the natural man reckoned foolishness. But what would you be without it? What were you before you were brought under this conviction? What were you before you were

led to see that Jesus Christ, and he only, could be your remedy? Why, you were dead, and you were blind. Now you may say, "Whereas I was blind, now I see."

The next contrast the apostle gives us is between condemnation and justification. "If the ministration of condemnation be glory, as attesting the terrible majesty of God, as attesting his integrity, his righteousness, and his holiness, "much more does the ministration of righteousness exceed in glory." You will be brought to see that there is nothing but condemnation belonging to you apart from Christ. And there is not a Christian under the heaven, notwithstanding the peace he may enjoy with God, notwithstanding he may be brought to where the apostle describes when he says, "Being justified by faith, we have peace with God;" and notwithstanding you may be brought to where the apostle describes when he says, "Thanks be to God, that always causes us to triumph in Christ;" and notwithstanding the love of God may be shed abroad in your heart; and notwithstanding you may be exalted to walk in the light of his countenance; favored wherever you may, you will never cease while you live to carry with you the sentence of death. What does the apostle say of this? Now let us be careful. I am coming this morning into your own souls, your own consciences, that matters may be more and more, in the manifestation thereof, right with us; because we know not the hour when we shall be called to cross the Jordan. What does the apostle say upon this condemnation? He says, "We had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves." No, we must not trust in good self, bad self, religious self, irreligious self; we must not trust in self at all. You will carry with you this sentence of condemnation; you will feel that you are a condemned creature apart from that justification. And I am inclined to think that the more enjoyment you have of eternal things, the more clearly you will see your condemnation as a sinner. So, then, we have the sentence of death in ourselves. I really feel this morning, and I do every day of my life, an assurance that if I am justified from my sins it must be by the blood of Jesus Christ, and that only; that if I am justified from the law, it must be by the righteousness of Jesus Christ, and that only. So that if I cannot as a condemned sinner trust in God by Jesus Christ, if I could get rid of this assurance that I am a condemned sinner, and fancy myself something good, and then trust in God, if that is the way I am to be saved, I have no hope whatever. But the apostle's was a different spirit, "That we should trust not in ourselves, but in God which raises the dead;" has raised his dear Son, and raises us up with him; "who delivered us from so great a death, and does deliver, in whom we trust;" when we look at the greatness of his love, when we look at the righteousness of his dear Son, when we look at the promise thereby, when we look at the great ends he has in view, "in whom we trust that he will yet deliver us." Was there not a time when this experience was foolishness to us? So that we carry with us these two sentences; first, of death, feeling assured that there is nothing in self in which to trust; and, on the other hand, feeling a full assurance, no wavering, no doubting, no suspecting, no unbelieving. Unbelief cannot come where I have got into now. Doubts and fears may show themselves, but not here, not where I am coming to now; no doubting, no fearing, everything clear as the sun, namely, that you are as sure as you are of your existence that the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ can save you. You have no doubt about it. You may have a thousand doubts about your interest in it, but you carry these two assurances with you, on the one hand, that you are totally condemned; on the other hand, when the question comes from the Savior which came upon another point, if brought to bear upon this point, you will answer as the answer was then given, "Believe you that I am able to do this?" He did not say, Believe you that I am willing to do this? because the leper could not say, Yes, Lord, I believe you are willing, until that will was revealed. But the Savior said, "Believe you that I am able to do this?" able to save unto the very uttermost all that come to God by me? Now, then, what will this

do? Why, this will make you cleave to Jesus Christ; this will make you rest upon him and look to him, and be decided for him. Oh, happy those of you that have these experiences, conviction of the death you are under, and thereby preparing you for that life that is by Jesus Christ; conviction of the condemnation you are under, thereby preparing you for eternal justification by Jesus Christ, and leading you to put your trust in God! And I might as well say to you all, and especially to the younger portion of this assembly, that you will have great occasion and great necessities before you die to trust in God. Ah, you will have some wilderness work, you will have some crooks, you will have some losses, you will have some burdens, you will have some trials, you will have some fire, you will have to go through some deserts and some woods. I say not this to discourage you, but merely to remind you that the more you know of the Lord the better, and the closer you are kept to him the better, and the more you have of this work of the Holy Spirit the better, for if any man has not this Spirit of Christ, he is none of his. Yet this experience is that that to the natural man is foolishness; "the natural man receives not the things of the Spirit, neither can he know them, for they are spiritually discerned."

Let us have another contrast in this work of the Holy Spirit, inferiority and superiority, "For even that which was made glorious had no glory in this respect, by reason of the glory that excels." Now the Christian can see that the law brings a great deal of God to us. It brings God to us in his holiness, justice, majesty, power, eternity, supremacy, and integrity, for not one jot nor tittle of the law can fail. But the glorious gospel brings the same God to us in altogether another form. God in the law all wrath, in the gospel all love; in the law all fire, a consuming fire, in the gospel all mercy and grace; in the law all threatening, in the gospel all promise; in the law all bondage, in the gospel all freedom; in the law not one sin forgiven, in the gospel not one sin laid to the account of him that believes. It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that are thus led to believe by the power of the eternal Spirit. Now it is said of Apollos, and I myself see no necessity for such an expression if the work of the Holy Spirit be not so special that the faith that saves the soul differs from all other things, "He helped them much which had believed through grace." The apostle well knew that many naturally believed by the force of the letter of the word, by connection, by education, by persuasion, and by various things; and he therefore well knew that some might believe in vain. But "he helped them much which had believed through grace." Now, my hearer, how is it with you? Has your heart been thus ploughed up? Have you thus seen and felt yourself to be this poor, outcast, unclean, withered thing, even as an autumnal leaf; for "we all do fade as a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, have carried us away." Let us have another contrast between fear and boldness. The apostle, when looking at this eternal life by Jesus Christ, this righteousness, the superiority of the gospel, said, "Seeing, then, that we have such hope, we use great plainness," or, as the meaning is, "boldness of speech." I hardly know what to say to this part. I can think about it better than I can speak about it. Under the law there is nothing but weakness, fear, terror; no boldness, not a particle of boldness. Nothing can embolden you there. There are your sins to discourage you, hell to discourage you, death to discourage you, the threatening's of God's word to cast you down, and the certainty of those threatening's taking effect upon all that are found under the law; "for what the law says, it says to them that are under the law." There is no boldness there. In the morning, "Would to God it was evening!" and in the evening, "Would to God it was morning!" Would to God I were a beast, a reptile, a worm, anything but a sinner, responsible to the great Judge of all! But bring in the gospel; bring in this eternal life, this eternal righteousness, this glorious gospel of the blessed God by Jesus Christ; then there is no trembling; the Lord takes out of your hand the cup of trembling; there is no sin to fear, it is gone; there is no death, it is gone;

there is no wrath, it is gone; there is no terror. You need not be afraid of life, for "I am with you always;" you need not be afraid of death, for that is swallowed up in victory; you need not be afraid of God, for he is your own Father, that has in his abundant mercy begotten you again to a lively hope by the resurrection of his dear Son. You need not be afraid of Jesus Christ, for he is your Elder Brother, flesh of your flesh, bone of your bone. He loves you intensely, he loves you constantly, he loves you eternally. You need not be afraid of the Holy Spirit; he comes as the holy Dove. You need not be afraid of God; there is no fury, there is no terror, there is nothing unpleasant. The winter is past, the rain is over and gone, the flowers appear on the earth, the time of the singing of birds is come, everything paradisiacal, everything calm, everything pleasant. "When you pray, say, Our Father." And he is a Father that, as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. He is a Father that knows our frame; he remembers we are dust. He is a Father whose compassions fail not; whose mercies are new every morning. He is our Father, and he enters into an eternal oath never to leave nor to forsake us. Here then, you may boldly say, I will not fear what man can do unto me. I will not fear what life can do unto me. I will not fear what losses and afflictions can do unto me. I will not fear what death can do unto me. I will not fear what hell can do unto me. I will not fear what Satan can do unto me; for my Father has said, and what he has said must be fulfilled, "I will never leave you, nor forsake you." Here, then, we have boldness. Hence the apostle goes on, and carries this out a little farther: "But we all with open face," that open face stands in contrast to guilt, as you see in the case of Haman; he proved to be a murderous enemy to the Jews, and when that guilt was brought home to him his face was covered, to denote his guilt. And therefore, when the apostle says, "We behold with open face," he means that our guilt is gone, that Mordecai's sackcloth is taken away. "We all with open face beholding, as in a glass, the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image," that is, God's covenant shape and form; that is what is meant by being changed into the same image. There is a great deal said in our day about being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ, but there is a question that ought to precede that, What is the image of Christ? What is it like? Oh, say they, holy, just, and good. That is only a part of it, sir. There is a certain covenant shape in which he stands. He is a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek, and there stands the immutable oath of God; and that he has by his one offering, in accordance with the eternity of his priesthood and the immutability of God, he has perfected forever them that are sanctified. To be conformed to his image is to fall in with that covenant, to feel that you are one with it, that you could not lower it, nor lessen it, nor part with it. That is conformity to Jesus Christ. There you have all the holiness, righteousness, stability, and conformity to him that shall carry you triumphantly into the regions of the blest. "Changed into the same image." We get sometimes very far from this image, at least in our feelings, and whenever a sermon revives this conformity in us, that is a good sermon. "Changed into the same image from glory to glory," from one degree of glory to another; for I am a believer in degrees of glory on earth among the people of God, but I am not a believer in degrees of glory in heaven. I believe all are alike there. But there are degrees of glory here. One Christian knows more of Christ than another, and one Christian glories in him more than another. There are some of you that are more highly favored in this respect than others. And I believe if I were to preach from Sunday to Sunday almost exclusively upon the substitution of Christ, you would like it all the better, some of you. Well, you are so favored. But then I must leave you strong ones sometimes, and go down and pick up the weak ones, help the lame ones, heal the sick ones, and strengthen the diseased ones. So, another says, Well, I wish he would dwell almost always upon experience. So it is that there is great variety, yet it all centers in one, making Christ everything. Here, then, on the one hand is a sense of fear and trembling; on the other hand, the blessedness we

have when we can recognize the Lord on our side. Now why do you doubt and fear, some of you, under crooked circumstances? I know why it is; it is because you are afraid the Lord is not on your side. If I had a thousand times more crooks than I have, if I could see, that is, if the Holy Spirit would bring home the word with power, so that I should not delude myself, if I could see and feel that the Lord is on my side, then I could say, as David did when he saw and felt this, "I will not fear, though ten thousand should encamp against me." Why, I should fear if one shadow encamped against me if I could not see he is on my side. But when we see he is on our side we do not fear, for we know that he can and will defend us. Here, then, is the secret path, the path which the vulture's eye has not seen, by which the Lord brings his people into acquaintance with himself. This is that foolishness of preaching by which it pleased God to save them that thus believe through grace, by the quickening power of the Spirit, from a sight, and sense of their need of the mercies in which they believe.

But just a word or two now upon the substitutional character of the Savior. Almost universally professed that is now, but I am sure when I make a few remarks upon it you will admit that it is not very generally received in its real character. Now as to the substitution of the Savior, you have this one view to take of it, that he stood entirely in your law place, in your sinner-ship place. And your separation from your place as a sinner is described as powerfully as it can be described, it is described by a death. We are by the body of Christ dead, to the law; where there is no law, there is no transgression. The law kills; we are dead to it. So that there is an entire separation takes place by the substitutional work of Christ between us and our law condition. He stood in our place under the law. And are we wanted there now? What for? He did all that there was to do; he magnified the law and honored it; he has ended our sin, so that we become entirely dead to the law. "You shalt forget your misery; remember it as waters that pass away." It is very profitable to meditate upon what and where we are as sinners considered, if we can do so in connection with what Jesus Christ has done; so that the life you are to live you are to expect the Lord to appear for you every day simply by what the Savior has done in standing in your law place. But he did not remain in your law place, he did not stop there, because it had nothing more for him to do. Zechariah, what a lovely view he gives us! I have enjoyed that scripture many times in the course of my pilgrimage: "He shall grow up out of his place." Now we know there are persons in the world so deficient in natural gifts that if you put them into a certain position today, if they should live forty years you will find them much about the same, no energy, determination, skill, or perseverance to raise themselves at all. Now the Savior stands in contrast to this. He was put into a rough place, but he worked his way out of it. He was put under our sin, but he worked his way from under it. He was put under the curse, but he worked his way from under it. "He shall grow up out of his place." The law could not hold him, death could not hold him, Satan could not hold him, our sins could not hold him. He is the hind let loose, that gives goodly words, satisfied now with favor in God's presence, and full of the blessing of the Lord, for himself and his people, and he means them to be as free as himself. Hence said one, "He makes my feet like hinds' feet, and sets me upon my high places." The Lord preserve you from in any way tarnishing the substitutional perfection of Christ. Then there is another thing included in this. Not only is this doctrine of eternal and infallible completeness in Christ to the natural man foolishness, but to the real Christian the wisdom of God and the power of God; but there is also his suretyship responsibility in relation to the people. You observe that the suretyship responsibility of Christ was twofold. First, it related to the substitutional work which he had to do; second, it relates to the people that he stands engaged to; so that the same truths which were received into his pure mind shall be received into the minds of all his brethren,

to depart from them again no more forever. Upon this part I will have only two scriptures, First, the last verse of the 59th of Isaiah. You have there these beautiful words, referring to the stability of the covenant: "As for me," said God the Father, and of course he is there speaking to his dear Son, because in the preceding verse he is there spoken of as the Redeemer, "this is my covenant with them; my spirit that is upon you, and my words which I have put in your mouth," and if you take the 17th of John as a sample you see what the words are, "shall not depart out of your mouth;" and did they? When he rose from the dead, and reappeared to his disciples, did he preach another gospel? No, the same gospel; he came to the same disciples in the same name, with the same gospel, with the same love, the same grace. "Nor out of the mouth of your seed;" I take the seed there to mean the apostles. And did they? Did not the apostle say he counted not his life dear unto him that he might finish his course with joy, to testify of the gospel of the grace of God? "Nor out of the mouth of your seed's seed" all good people in all ages, "from henceforth and forever." Here is the stability then, of the truth. Now hear what the Savior personally said upon this same thing: "Other sheep I have;" I have them in my Father's choice, in my Father's love, in my Father's gift, in my mediatorial achievement, in my eternal purpose, I have them in the sworn covenant; "them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice," they shall hear it. Why, out of the thousands of professed Christians of our day there are comparatively few that are willing to hear the voice of the true Shepherd of Israel, blindly calling it dangerous doctrine, high doctrine, and I don't know what. "They shall hear my voice, and there shall be one-fold and one Shepherd." This, then, is the very substance of the gospel. Bless the Lord for such a Substitute and such a Surety. Now there are two more parts, which perhaps I had better only just name; the sovereignty of God, that is looked upon as foolishness; and the final triumph of the people. But the man taught of God, and that knows his own weakness, feels that he could not do without them.

Secondly, I notice *the object gained, salvation*. There are some men and women that never solemnly ask themselves the question, What will my Maker finally do with me? What will the great Judge of all finally do with me? What will become of me, even before I die, for circumstances are very uncertain? and what will become of me when I die? and what will become of me at the last? Now our text comes in, where such inquiries are solemn, and answers them, that this preaching is "to save", "to save." Ah, you will say, that is the best thing that could be done with me, for the Lord to save me now, manifest himself to me now, show his love to me now, save me from an ungodly world, from the law, from error and delusion, and bring me to know him now, that I may now go into these spiritual fields and glean ears of heavenly corn after him in whose sight I shall find grace. Oh, can any object be so magnificent as this, so glorious as this, that the dear Savior came into the world to seek and to save that which was lost, to save sinners? And the gospel has the same object. When I look back over my ministry, if there is one thing I regret more than another, it is that I have taken so much notice of what my enemies have said of me; for it is all so insignificant in comparison of the weighty matter of negotiating between God and man the grand concerns of judgment and of mercy. The salvation of the soul, costing the Savior what it did, surely this is weighty enough to outweigh everything else, surely this is an object important enough, magnificent enough, glorious and wondrous enough, to employ all our thoughts, all our purposes, and all the ends we have in view. I think the object of every sermon that is preached should be the salvation of the soul. Because, if you are saved spiritually, that gives you a special interest in God providentially, for there is a special providence over his own people; there is a providence over them, though others may not see it, that there is not over any besides? Their losses, the heart-rending experiences that they may go through, are made to them blessings that others are

strangers to. I look back at some of the terrible trials I have had, and yet I can see that some of my greatest usefulness has come up from those low dungeons, from those horrible pits, from those gloomy prisons, from those deserts. It gives solidity, and makes a man in earnest. I have often thought of the Savior when it is said of him that "being in an agony he prayed the more earnestly." And the reason that we do not preach more earnestly and hear more earnestly is for the want of that soul-agony and soul-trouble, soul-sighing and soul-thirsting, that will keep us solemnly in earnest to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling, God working in us to will and to do of his own good pleasure. Ah, then, call the gospel foolishness who may, call preaching foolishness who may, and that there is a great deal of foolish preaching we fear there is; indeed, we do not doubt there is; but then the gospel when preached scripturally is the wisest thing under the sun; there is nothing that displays so much wisdom, grace, and mercy. So, then, call the gospel foolishness who may, unto them that believe it is the power of God and the wisdom of God, even the salvation of their souls. You will perceive, the people of God in all ages have very much delighted in this character of God, salvation. "Behold," said one, with great rapture, "God is my salvation." Said another, "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels."

But lastly, "It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe." All of you that have any of the experience that I have described this morning are believers. I will therefore just drop a word or two in conclusion upon one aspect of believing, and that is the continuation of it. I will give you some awful apostasies; and then the contrast may lead us to pray that we may not be like unto them. Here is the Israelite believing in the paschal lamb; but, alas! alas! soon loses sight of that, and goes after another god. Here is an Israelite, passes through the Red Sea, saved from Egypt; but, alas! alas! soon loses sight of that, and wishes to return, in his blindness and madness, to Egypt again.