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Surrey Tabernacle Pulpit.

THE BETTER COVENANT.

—
A SERMON

PREACHED ON SUNDAY MORNING, 24TH MAY, 1868,

By MR. JAMES WELLS,

AT THE NEW SURREY TABERNACLE, WANSEY STREET.

“Understand, O son of man, for at the time of the end shall be the vision.”—DANIEL viii. 17.

DANIEL was not one of those who could not steadfastly look to the end of that which is abolished. Daniel was favoured to see that the dispensation under which he lived was only temporary, and that it pointed to another covenant, to another dispensation, even to that eternal settlement of things wherein is manifest the immutability of God's counsel. And this very subject that we have to treat of this morning that few in that day entered into, and I fear not very many in the day in which we live. Hence Moses lamented this in his day, and put a veil over his face as a symbol of the blindness of the people, for “they could not steadfastly look to the end of that which is abolished.” They looked to those sacrifices themselves, but did not and could not so understand matters as to look beyond them to another sacrifice, another altar, and another covenant. Therefore the apostle saith that the veil is upon their hearts when the Old Testament is read, which veil is done away in Christ; that is, as soon as a man becomes acquainted with Jesus Christ in what Jesus Christ really is in the eternal salvation of the sinner, then the command is obeyed, “Understand, O son of man,” what this vision is. And the end spoken of in our text is the end of that dispensation, including of course that wondrous termination of things to which the Saviour came by his atonement. Then the apostle goes on to show that this veil is not only taken away by the revelation of Jesus Christ, but that there is something else, for he says, “When the heart shall turn to the Lord;” when the Lord turns the heart to himself, that is, to Jesus Christ; when the heart is turned towards him in a way of confidence and desire, then, the veil is taken away, the ignorance is removed, and the scene is changed, and this is done by divine teaching; but there must be a divine experience, there must be a consciousness of our need of Christ, and a consciousness of our hearts being turned to the Lord in a way of faith, of understanding, of approbation, of desire, and of decision. “When it shall turn to the Lord, the veil shall be taken away. Now the Lord is that Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty;” that is

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such a one is brought to know what Jesus Christ hath really wrought out, and the state of entire freedom from all sin which Christ has brought in before God. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, to show us our need of this and the truth of it. And then he saith, "We all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord"—the glory of the Lord means, of course, the salvation that Jesus Christ hath wrought, for all the glory of the Lord is included in that one item—"are changed into the same image from glory to glory"—from one degree of glory to another—"even as by the Spirit of the Lord." That is a very beautiful description of Christian experience, that beholding as in a glass—that is, in God's word—God's salvation, we are changed into the same image, that is, our sentiments, thoughts, feelings and desires are nicely assimilated to God's thoughts and ways, for his ways are better than our ways, and he brings us into his better ways; and his thoughts are higher, that is, better, than our thoughts, and he brings us out of our poor, weak, mean thoughts concerning salvation into his own better thoughts. And "from glory to glory," it saith; that is, from one degree of glory to another, so that we ought to see old Christians glorying in the Lord more than young Christians; we ought to see the man who has professed the Saviour's name for many years more and more taken up with the glory of the Lord; for it is the work of the Holy Spirit that we should go on from one degree of glory to another—that is, from one degree of manifestation of this glory of God to another. Daniel, I say, saw this, and he saw a wonderful mystery in that transition, and though he could see it clearly yet he saw that he knew only in part; and therefore said, "What shall be the end of these things?" Show me a little more of the depth of this mystery; show me a little more of this coming Messiah; show me a little more of thyself. And the Lord answered his prayer; he said, "Go thy way, Daniel, for the words are closed up and sealed to the time of the end;" that is, to the end of that dispensation, or the coming of Christ. And then the Lord reveals a little more to Daniel, and says, "Many shall be purified;" and so they were in the Messiah's day, "and made white and tried;" and so they were, for persecutions fell upon them immediately; "but the wicked"—the wicked Jews there referred to primarily—"shall do wickedly, and none of the wicked shall understand," and so the Jews did not understand the ministry of Christ, nor the work of Christ, nor the ministry of the apostles, but they slew him, and went on wickedly persecuting his followers; "but the wise shall understand," and so there were some that were made wise to salvation, and they were favoured to understand.

Now, it is the one word "vision" that we shall dwell chiefly upon this morning; but the note of time will interweave itself as we go on. "Understand, O son of man, for at the time of the end"—the end of the Jewish dispensation—"shall be the vision." I will, therefore, take a three-fold view of the vision. First, *the covenant which was then to be confirmed*; secondly, *the work by which that covenant was confirmed*; thirdly, *the two opposite characters—the man that doth not and the man that doth understand these things.*

First, *the covenant which was to be confirmed.* In order to get at the matter, then, it stands thus—that there is a covenant called the new covenant, and that new covenant means the testamentary will of God,—that God had willed eternal life to sinners; that God had willed that his dear Son should come and abolish death, and bring that life and that immortality to light; that he willed the eternal blessedness of his people, and that he himself undertook the whole work from first to last. Now, this was God's covenant. And, remember, the Old Testament saints saw that this covenant must be confirmed by the death of a testator; and that testator was Christ Jesus the Lord, he being one of the Eternal Three. This covenant was not yet confirmed, and had there been any uncertainty about it being confirmed, not one of the Old Testament saints could have had any spiritual

life; nor could one of the Old Testament saints have had any pardon, or sanctification, or justification:—Hence it was on the ground of the certainty of its being confirmed by Jesus Christ, that Abel, and all you read of after him, were favoured as they were to have direct fellowship with the great God, and to know of their interest in this everlasting covenant. Now, do not let us lose sight of it, if we can help it, that this covenant, wherein is salvation, and by which alone we can be saved, could be confirmed only by a sacrifice that could put away sin, that could swallow up the curse of God's law, that could meet his almighty wrath, and quench the same; only by a sacrifice that could bruise the serpent's head, that could take away the sting of death, that could swallow up death in victory. They saw this. And we cannot say everything in one sermon, or else many Scriptures come to my mind here in relation to the Old Testament saints. Take one, for instance, when contemplating this—he saith, “Who hath ascended up into heaven?” Agur describes what he was in his own eyes—that he was more brutish than any man, that he had not the wisdom of a man, neither had he learned the knowledge of the holy; he saw what a poor creature he was, and he remembered that all other men were just as he was, though they knew it not; for while he says, “Surely I am more brutish than any man,” it is only the language of every one that is convinced of what he is in his own fallen nature. Every one so convinced will say, “This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.” And the language of each taught of God is, “O wretched man that I am!” Then Agur says, with an eye to the confirmation of this covenant, “Who hath ascended up into heaven?” Why; no one. Why; say you, Enoch did. No; Enoch was taken there by the power of God, on the ground of a righteousness to be wrought by another—on the ground of the atonement to be wrought by the coming Messiah; Elijah on the same ground. No man hath ascended with that about him that could deliver the people, and plead their cause. “Who hath gathered the wind in his fists? who hath bound the waters in a garment? who hath established all the ends of the earth? What is his name, and what is his son's name; if thou canst tell?” This Agur found, and that he himself could do nothing, and therefore fell back; as every Christian shall do, upon God himself. You see what an infinitely important matter this is. Is it any wonder that the old Testament saints should long for the coming of Christ? Now, let us go carefully through this covenant. Hebrews viii.—Jesus Christ is “become the mediator of a better covenant, which was established upon better promises.” Let us keep up the idea that a covenant there means a testamentary will. God willed that to the Jews to which they were brought—that was one will; but his other will is that good, that perfect, that acceptable will that willed our eternal welfare. This is the better covenant of which Jesus Christ is the mediator, established upon better promises—better, because the new covenant promises better things, and because it promises them after a better order; and the old covenant promised temporal things after a conditional order; but the new covenant promises eternal things after an absolute, an unconditional order. The more I dwell upon this matter, the more I see the propriety of the Scriptures dwelling upon that one little word; *faith*. What a vast number of times the holy scriptures mention the words *faith*, *belief*; and so on. Everything is there. The Holy Spirit's work is to convince us of our need, and to lead us to the Saviour. “For if that first covenant had been faultless, then should no place have been sought for the second.” The meaning is, the Lord meant to have a covenant that should be faultless. Not one part of the new covenant ever did break down, or ever will. Moses was the mediator of the old covenant, but he was not faultless; but Jesus Christ, the Mediator of the new covenant, is faultless, and the people, by the obedience and the

atonement of Christ, stand before God faultless; and the gospel is faultless. Hence we read, "presented before his throne without fault." "For finding fault with them,"—implying that I will make a covenant where I shall not find fault with them; nor does he, for here, in this new covenant, he will not behold iniquity in Jacob, nor see perverseness in Israel. We never should have had such a book as Solomon's Songs, but for this faultless covenant. "For finding fault with them, he saith, Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah." Judah and Israel there, of course, must be taken, not in the Jewish, but in the Christian sense, meaning true believers. "I will put my laws into their mind." And you know what the laws are; they are all summed up in the one law of faith spoken of in the Romans; the law of faith will include everything, for "he that believeth hath eternal life," and "he that believeth shall be saved." It is the law of faith that the Lord puts into the mind, and that man becomes a believer in these blessed truths. And then, that they may continue there, "I will write them in their hearts, and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people." Then, again, the Lord reminds us of the old covenant again. "Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt." I took them by the hand,—it was external; I led them by my providence. But in this new covenant it is an internal work; the Holy Spirit quickens the souls of the people, and he dwells in them and walks in them; not to bring them out of temporal bondage merely, but to bring them out of the bondage of sin, and of the curse, and of death, and of hell, and of destruction. See the difference between the two. "Because they continued not in my covenant," but in this new covenant they shall continue. Peter was favoured with a beautiful representation of this new covenant. The vessel was let down three times, and very significantly it saith, "All were drawn up again into heaven." Now divines have thought, and Christians have thought, and I have no better thought,—it is a very good thought,—that the vessel was let down three times to bring before us the three essential causes of our eternal salvation. The first cause is the love of God; he loved because he would. "God who is rich in mercy, and for his great love wherewith he loved us when dead in sin," and "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son;" that is the first cause. The second cause of our salvation is the mediation of the dear Saviour; his wondrous life, and his still more wondrous death, glorious resurrection, and universal prevalency on our behalf. And the third cause is the efficient cause, the work of the Holy Ghost quickening the soul from death, and bringing it into life. And thus Peter saw that these creatures, ugly as they were in themselves, continued in this covenant. Now, speaking of the old covenant, the Lord says, "They continued not in my covenant." Why, I do not know, I cannot imagine anything which a man that understands this new covenant stays with more willingly than he does this covenant. Oh! it is entwined all round my soul; it is interwoven with the very existence of my soul; I am one with it; my soul responds to it, vibrates to it; I am at home with it, happy with it. Oh, how willingly the soul cleaves to this blessed covenant! and it says, Ah, blessed God, if thou hadst not in this wondrous covenant undertaken the case of a wretch like me, I could have no more hope than they that are now in hell; but since thy mercy is thus sovereign, rich, and free, such a poor sinner may safely trust in thee. Oh, how willingly the soul taught of God continues in this new covenant! May I tarry there? May I stop there? O yes; for that covenant is so misunderstood and so hated, that the Lord, I was going to say, looks with great pleasure on the man that is brought into it. "Also the sons of the stranger, that join themselves to the Lord, to serve him and to

love the name of the Lord, to be his servants, every one that keepeth the sabbath from polluting it,"—that is, Christ,—“and taketh hold of my covenant,”—comes into my covenant;—“even them will I bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be accepted upon mine altar.” In no other way can we or our services be acceptable to God. And the Lord says, “I regarded them not.” Mark that; but shall it ever be said in the new covenant that he regards us not? Why, look at the regard he has for you; the very hairs of your head are numbered; your sorrows are measured, numbered and weighed; the path you are to go is mapped out, marked out, and decided upon; the afflictions that are to overtake you are all arranged, and the innumerable mercies that are to be the remedy, for the Lord saith, “For a small moment have I forsaken thee,”—that is, in a way of communion; and then when he hides his face, alas, the soul wanders in a solitary way;—“but with great mercies will I gather thee.” He regards you and everything that pertaineth to you, and he will bring you to respect him and regard him. “And they shall not teach every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord,” like the Israelites. You may hear one Israelite saying to another, Do you know Jehovah? No, I cannot say I do; I know Dagon very well, I know Chemosh very well, and I know Baal very well, I know the golden calf very well;—I have seen all these; but as for this Jehovah, I have never seen him, and I do not know him. That is the old covenant. They could tell you all about their gods, but they could tell you nothing about Jehovah. “As for me and my house,” said Joshua, you may serve whom you like, but “we will serve Jehovah,” the one true God. Now, “they shall no more teach every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord.” Do you know the Lord? That is the only God I do know, saith the Christian; I do not know any other; that is to say, I will not know any other. The voice of the true Shepherd is the only voice I will know; I will not follow any other. “Whom have I in heaven but thee;” and there is none upon the earth I desire beside thee. “For all shall know me, from the least to the greatest,” from little faith to great faith. However little the faith is, that man of little faith shall know that if he be saved it must be by this everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and sure. “All shall know me,” whereas of the old covenant people very few knew him, and the Lord said, “For forty years I was grieved with this generation, they do always err in their hearts, for they have not known my ways.” But his own people shall know him, they shall know the truth, and the truth shall make them free. And then comes another item, which is very much pharisaized in the day in which we live, namely, “I will be merciful to their unrighteousness.” Some of our preachers tell us this, and then before they get to the end of their sermon they turn out so very holy that really you would not think they ever had a sin. You must not have a wrong thought, you must not have this, or that, or the other; they graciously give us to understand that they have very little unrighteousness of their own. Now what is all this? It is the old leaven of the Pharisee put in the Christian name. Whereas the man that is taught of God will feel that he is compassed with unrighteousness, that he is the subject of unrighteousness, yea, that after the flesh he is full of all unrighteousness and abomination. The Christian feels that in his flesh dwelleth no good thing, and he says to himself, not as a mere form, but as an experimental fact,—If the Lord were to deal with me even chastisingly according to my sins, and reward me even chasteningly according to my sins, I should never have another moment's peace while I live. But he is merciful to my unrighteousness. Ah, he saith, the flesh is weak, but the spirit is willing. And such shall realise at last in full extent the declaration that the new creature shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the

sons of God. "For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more." He remembered them when Christ suffered for them, and now by him he saith, "I will remember them no more." There is no danger when you meet him of his bringing up old grievances; there is no danger of the Lord saying, Well, you have got into heaven, as some have said, dragged in by the hair of the head;—they tell us that some, in consequence of not doing their part, will be dragged into heaven by the hair of their heads. Well, that is a very pretty doctrine, I think,—a man marries, and on his wedding-day if his wife is five minutes behindhand, he drags her in by the hair of her head. An awkward beginning that—very awkward indeed. Ah, but the Saviour—he is more likely to send an escort of angels to bear the soul to Abraham's bosom,—he is more likely to rise from his seat. When Stephen, under the violence of men, is about to depart, the heavens are opened, and he sees the Son of man standing at the right hand of God. Good old Simeon saw that God's salvation would carry him into eternity in all the welcome, and kindness, and tenderness, and glory that should accord with the love wherewith God hath loved us. So that "thy gentleness hath made me great." This then is the vision, and it could be confirmed only by the death of Christ. You can understand this covenant, can you not? There is nothing out of it that can do you good; there is nothing inside of it but what will do you good; there is nothing can do you any harm; the whole of it will do you good, and not evil, all the days of your life.

Secondly, let us notice *the circumstances by which the covenant was confirmed*. Let us trace out some of the items wherein the apostle represents the confirming of this covenant. Hebrews ix.: "Christ being come an high priest of good things to come." One good thing he brought by his priesthood was this everlasting covenant; he brought in this testamentary will of God. "This is my blood in the New Testament, shed for you." So then, by his priesthood, and by his priesthood only, could this covenant come in. It is very profitable sometimes to notice little scripture points and turns. So in Genesis xii., I have often felt instructed and delighted with the idea I will mention. You are aware in the 3rd verse of that chapter the Lord reveals the new covenant to Abraham; but Abraham did not build an altar to the Lord. There is more in that than you may think. But in the 7th verse of that same chapter the Lord revealed to him the temporal covenant, and said, "Unto thy seed will I give this land;" then Abraham built an altar to the Lord—in connection with the old covenant. But when the Lord made a new covenant, Abraham did not build an altar to the Lord. What does that mean? It means this—that Abraham was so well taught as to see that into God's new covenant he must not bring a single thing, not from a thread to a shoe latchet. He saw that in that covenant was everything, and he must not bring anything, sacrifice nor anything else, but simply receive God's testimony. He knew that the greater sacrifice, and that only, belonged to, and could confirm this new, this eternal covenant. And a little further on; when he received in another form this same testimony; it was imputed to him for righteousness, and he was called "the friend of God." So nothing could be taken from it; that Abraham could not do, for he knew there was nothing superfluous; nothing could be added to it; that Abraham could not do, for he knew it was complete. Thus, then, this covenant came by Jesus Christ. What is the grace that came by Jesus Christ but this testamentary will? What is the life, and what indeed is everything that came by Jesus Christ but all the blessings of this everlasting covenant? But let us hear the apostle trace it out. Aaron was a priest by whom the temporal tabernacle was supplied; but Christ, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle; that is to say, by the priesthood of Christ we have a dwelling-place not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. The apostle leads us along in this everlasting covenant very gradually, but very beau-

tifully. What is done with sin will presently appear. "Neither," he saith, "by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained," by paying, in a way of obedience and suffering all there was to pay, "eternal redemption for us." Hereby the covenant is brought in, confirmed, and established. Then the apostle leads us on another step, and he saith, "If the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh; how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God;"—I hardly know anything, except the deep mystery of the Trinity itself, that astonishes and delights me more than that one fact—that Jesus Christ, after the life that he had lived, and after what he had endured, and in all he was to endure, came off at last spotless—offered himself without spot to God. Oh, what an entire contrast there is between what the Saviour was and what we are by nature; purify your conscience from dead "works to serve the living God." Now how is the conscience purified? First, by reconciliation to God; secondly, by the manifestation to you of this covenant, or this eternal mercy, purifying your visual power from darkness, and slaying your enmity, so that you see and understand these matters, and purifying the conscience from terror;—you say, Why should I be afraid? why should I give way to terror? Here is an everlasting consecration to God; for if it be by Jesus Christ that we are consecrated to God, the consecration is everlasting. What can keep us away from God? He died the just for the unjust, to bring us to God; and it is by our faith in him that we are thus consecrated to God, and kept close to the Lord our God. Then the apostle saith, "That by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament;" that is, those good men that lived under the first covenant that were transgressors under that covenant, Christ hath redeemed those transgressions; that is, hath redeemed them from those transgressions; that "they which are called might receive the promise," the yea and amen promise "of eternal inheritance." Then he goes on to show that "where a testament is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator," because all the time a man lives he may alter his will; but if the will be legally everything that is proper, then it cannot be altered after a man's death; his death gives the stamp and the seal to it, so that it cannot now be altered. And just so the apostle would represent this covenant—that all the time this covenant remained unconfirmed by the death of the testator, if God had not been what he is—namely, immutably and infallibly faithful, the sins of the people might have provoked him to have changed or withdrawn that will or covenant, as is done sometimes among men. There are some men have made as many wills, pretty well, as there are years in their life; they have willed certain amounts of property to certain persons; those persons give offence in some way or other; Very well, I will go to my lawyer's to-morrow, and have you cut off, and so-and-so put in your place. So that certain persons that have been waiting, as we say, for old shoes, have been at the last dreadfully disappointed. Now the sins of the people could not provoke the Lord to alter his will; it remained unaltered through all the thousands of years that rolled over. By and by the great testator appears; Jesus Christ dies; and what did he do by his death? Sealed and confirmed the covenant, so that now it cannot be altered; the sufferings of Christ, as we say, cannot be recalled. Now, saith the apostle, "once in the end of the world," that is, the Jewish world, or, as some have preferred rendering it, "the end of the age,"—"once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself; and now as sin is put away, this new covenant stands clear, firm, and immoveable, and that for ever and ever. See, then, the blessedness of this covenant, and see how the dear Saviour hath, by his wondrous work, confirmed it.

Now as to the prospects of the people; the prospects of the people are founded in this covenant, and in the Saviour having thus put away sin. Hence it saith, "Unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation." You must look for him in what he is. If you look for him in what he is not, you will be disappointed, and you will not be received; but if you look for him in what he is, then he will appear on your behalf without sin unto your eternal salvation. The Jews looked for the Messiah as a temporal prince, and they looked for him in what he was not, and so they knew him not. But if you look for him in what he is, in the characters that he bears, then he will appear for you.

Let us, in conclusion, just glance at *the two opposite characters*, the one that does not understand these things, and the one that does. The people of old trusted in the traditions of the elders; and how many in our day trust in the traditions of men! What is the language of the Roman Catholic priests to their disciples? You must obey the church; we must teach you the laws of the church. What do they mean by the church? Why, they mean what a paper well calls an elderly clergyman at Rome, called the Pope, and the cardinals and priests, whatever they are pleased to command, they are the laws of the church. And the Puseyite says, We want to bring people to obey the church. Do not you see the devil in all this? All this is human tradition. Now, then, "Cursed is the man that trusteth in man"—human tradition, human invention,—"that maketh flesh his arm, whose heart departeth from the living God." If the priest forgive my sins, he is entitled to my affections, and not God. If the Pope turn my destiny from hell to heaven, why, then he must be my God. I may try to deny that, but it is a fact that it is so; and God will esteem it as such. Now cursed is such a one. "He shall be like the heath in the desert," he shall be thought nothing of; the people of God will understand that such people are nothing in matters that are spiritual, and God will account such as nothing. "He shall not see when good cometh;" he cannot see what the experience of the people of God is; he cannot see what Jesus Christ is, as representing to man the infinite and eternal goodness of God; "but shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness;" all his comforts shall be burnt up, as it were, and he himself be lost at last. But the man that understands these things, of him it is said, "Blessed is the man that trusteth in the Lord, and whose hope the Lord is," in that order of things by Jesus Christ. "For he shall be as a tree planted by the waters, and that spreadeth out her roots by the river, and shall not see when heat cometh." Everything else shall be scorched up, but the Christian's hope can never be burnt up; the Christian can never be destroyed. "Her leaf shall be green," saith one, "I am like a green olive tree in the house of my God, because I trust in the mercy of God for ever and ever;" "and shall not be careful in the year of drought;" the fig-tree may cease, and everything else may pass away; but there is still a river, a spiritual river, that shall make glad the city of God, when everything else shall fail;—"neither shall cease from yielding fruit," such an one shall last for ever and ever.

I will say, in conclusion, then, that this covenant is a blessed covenant; I will say that the dear Saviour hath confirmed it, and confirmed it for ever, and a wonderful work it was; and a wonderful transition it is from what we are by nature into the bond of this covenant; and I will say that there is no consolation to equal the consolation that springs up from the deeps of the immutability of the counsels of the blessed God. Amen.