

POOR PRISONERS

A SERMON

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“For the Lord hears the poor and despises not his prisoners.” Psalm 64:33

THESE words, at least the first part of them, must of course be understood strictly in the spiritual sense; not that I would for one moment make light of the consolation that the Holy Scriptures contain for the literally poor of the Lord’s people, for it is the lot of many to be exceedingly tried in providence, some perhaps all their days; and even those that may not be poor, nevertheless have a great many trials. And it is pleasing to find in the word of the Lord how the Lord speaks of those that call upon him and look to him, and that he will not neglect them. Bread, even in the temporal sense, shall be given, and waters shall be sure. But our object this morning shall be chiefly spiritual in the first part of our text.

We notice then, first, *the character here described*, “the poor;” secondly, *the reasons that the Lord hears them*; thirdly, *the care that he takes of his prisoners*, “and despises not his prisoners.”

First, *the character here described*, “the Lord hears the poor,” spiritually poor. Let us notice first what this does not mean, in order to get clearly at what it does mean. I make no hesitation in saying that a consciousness of wherein our poverty consists, a consciousness of our poverty, so that it shall become that humiliating power to us, and that concern to us spiritually which literal poverty would be naturally, this consciousness of spiritual poverty is one of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, and none can understand it but those who are experimentally led into the secret. First, then, as I have already hinted, it does not mean literal poverty, for thousands of the Lord’s people in times past, and thousands now, know nothing at all of literal poverty. The Lord has placed them in what we call good circumstances, and keeps them there; they live there and serve him there, and they honor the Lord with their substance; connected with which is the promise that their barns shall be filled with plenty, and the presses burst out with new wine. Therefore, the text does not mean literal poverty. Secondly, it does not mean mental poverty. A man may have a very poor mind, and be very poor intellectually, but that is not the meaning; and thousands of graceless men have very rich minds and great intellects, and it is wonderful what things they achieve by the power and richness of their minds for the social and various improvements of this world in which we live. Nor does it mean poverty morally, because there are thousands of graceless men that have a very good moral garment and stand well all their lifetime with their fellow citizens. And Satan generally takes care to make use of these things to delude their souls. The man says, “If I were not a favorite of heaven, how should I have got on so well in the world?” Satan tries to persuade them that they are the favorites of heaven because they get on so well in the world. So, another will say, “If I were not the favorite of heaven, should I have had this rich mind, these great intellectual acquirements?” Others will think, “If I have not been a favorite of heaven, how is it I have been so moral?” Hence

when the Savior presented the commandments, what was the answer? "All these have I kept from my youth." We must therefore understand our text in the strictly spiritual sense. Let us look at the matter. We lost all we had in Adam, but in Adam we had no spiritual blessings; all the blessings we had there were natural, and we lost by the fall the whole of them. We have never lost spiritual blessings because spiritual blessings were in Christ. You will perceive, then, that we had no spiritual blessings in Adam; and as we did by the fall lose the holiness, and righteousness, and everything we had good; therefore, it is not in the intellectual nor moral sense that all men are bad. I like these distinctions; they are very important. It is strictly in the spiritual sense that all men are poor and utterly destitute of anything that is good, that is, of anything that is spiritually good. If we have lost all we had in the first Adam, what are we by nature? Why, we are dead in trespasses and sins. The apostle says, "In me, that is, in my flesh, dwells no good thing." you will thus see that we stand severed from all we had in the first Adam, and consequently we were by nature destitute of spiritual life, holiness, and righteousness, destitute of spiritual things; so that a man cannot possess any one thing that is good until something is communicated. And what is that good thing which the Lord does communicate to these destitute people? Here I must remind you that when conviction comes into the soul, and the Lord puts us to the test of his holy law, what is the result? We are convinced then that the thought of foolishness is sin, that the imaginations of the heart are only evil, and that continually; that the heart, our old nature, has in it all manner of evils, which the word of God is clear upon, and which our experience is clear upon. Now when this is felt and discovered, we see that our poverty consists in our worthlessness of character. Our poverty consists in this natural, internal, spiritual worthlessness of character, poor and destitute, nothing in us but that which is antagonistic to the holiness, and mind, and thoughts of God, and to everything pertaining to God. When thus convinced of our poverty, then we become convinced that there can be no good thing in us until something is communicated to us. And what is the first good thing which the Lord communicates? The apostle Peter says, "Being born again of an incorruptible seed, by the word of God, which lives and abides forever." Therefore, when the soul has in it that life which the Holy Spirit alone can implant, when the Holy Spirit implants this new life in the soul, then from this life arises a conviction of what we are; and when he does this, then there is in that man, for the first time in his life, some good thing. The implanting of this life in the soul is called a good work. "He that has begun the good work" he that has made you begin to live, he that truly began the good work, "will perform it unto the day of Jesus Christ." I want you clearly to see that our text must be understood spiritually, and that no man has anything in him spiritually good until it is actually implanted there by the eternal Spirit of God. He may have things good in the material, mental, and moral sense; but salvation is found in none of these, nor in all these. Salvation is a secret; it is found in God and from and by the Lord only. Here, then, we are by nature destitute of anything spiritually good. The law is spiritual, and if you attempt to meet God on the ground of the law, your nature, whether you are conscious of it or not, sends forth ten thousand evils, and that makes you obnoxious to the law, that makes you poor. It was this that humbled Saul of Tarsus when he discovered it. Thus, you see the solemn and absolute necessity of being born again. The Savior lays great emphasis upon it when he says, "You must be born again." Then when this one spiritual blessing of life is brought into the soul, the whole train follows, until you shall ultimately be filled with all the fulness of God. Then follow all the pardon, and all the sanctification, and all the justification, all the grace, all the mercy, and all the blessing you can possibly need. Thus, then, by our fall in Adam we lost all we had, and we had nothing spiritual there; all spiritual blessings are in Christ, and no man can by any possibility whatever possess a single spiritual blessing until the Holy Spirit has regenerated the soul. "You must be born again." That is a scripture that will go

with us all our days and will cause us to examine ourselves whether we have come by our religion in this way or not.

But let us look at the experience of this, where there is this life in the soul, after thus showing that by nature it is not possible to possess anything spiritual. You may be as moral as an angel, and still be destitute of spiritual life in the soul. Therefore, the soul not united to Christ is not united to that that can give it access to God; it is not united to that that can bring upon it the approbation of God; it is not united to that that can save it. "He died, the just for the unjust, to bring us to God." Therefore, while we prize good works, yet none of these things are of any use in the salvation of the soul; salvation is altogether a secret and another thing. Now what is the object of this conviction of our poverty? One object is to bring us to God's terms of salvation. It is astonishing what literal poverty will do; how it humbles, how it bows down! How many, through the pressure of poverty, have done a thousand things they thought they would never do when they were in better circumstances. I will never come to this, I will never come to that, I will never come to the other. But, my hearer, the Lord can make poor as well as make rich, and when he brings us to downright poverty, and we are in danger of being starved to death, "I perish with hunger," that man then would accept food upon any terms, that man then would accept a shelter upon any terms upon which it could be obtained; that man would accept then, as it were, the wedding garment upon any terms upon which it could be obtained; that man then would accept supply upon any terms upon which that supply could be ministered. There is no more quibbling, no more arguing, no more speculating; "I perish with hunger." That is the poor, to be brought to terms, brought to feel that without God's way of salvation we must perish. Now it is to bring us to terms; and what are the terms? I will mention several of them, just to show how this spiritual poverty brings us to those terms. The first I will mention is that which is so suited to us all; would to God we could drink very much more into the spirit of that beautiful representation of God bringing us to terms, reconciling us to himself, not imputing our trespasses unto us, having imputed them to Jesus Christ! Oh, my hearer, the rising beauty of the Savior, the rising light of substitution, for you to see that all your sins, the past, the present, and to come, without an exception, every fault, every folly, every wrong that ever did, or does, or can exist, were all imputed to him, not one shall be laid to your charge. The forgiveness is free, or you could not have it; your poverty teaches you that your nature is too vile for you to merit anything but the dreadful penalty of eternal condemnation. Thus, the substitution of the dear Savior will appear so lovely and so delightful that you will realize his own testimony, "I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto me" and so you will be one of the all drawn unto him. How welcome was Ananias with these tidings to Saul of Tarsus! He was now made conscious of his poverty, of the worthlessness of his character, as he said, "In me, that is, in my flesh, dwells no good thing." Such a one will now, say, What is Jesus Christ in his substitution? and the answer is, He is in his substitution perfection. He has not taken some sin without taking all sin; he does not justify from some things without justifying from all things; he does not save in part, he saves in whole and saves entirely, to the very uttermost. These are they that will prize the Lord Jesus Christ. And then, when we go a little further into the origin of this, how came I thus to be conscious of my poverty? how came I thus to be in trouble about it? How came the neck of my pride to be broken? How is it I am thus humbled in the dust? How is it I am made to feel I deserve the lowest hell? Whatever quibbles or thoughts may beset us at times upon, the sovereignty of God, when we come home to our own personal case each feels that he deserves hell. How came this to pass? If you look into the word of God, it traces it up to the right source, "God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, has quickened

us together with Christ (by grace you are saved,) and has raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” you will thus see that this conviction which you have, this spiritual poverty which makes you feel your need of him who is the quickening Spirit, your need of him who embodies all the blessings of life, light, pardon, and everything else, you will see that this was a matter of divine decree. It was God himself in eternity undertook thus, to quicken you, to convince you, and having loved you from eternity, he has never lost sight of you. He knew of whom you would be born and where you would be born, and where you would live, he arranged everything.

“So, the time rolled on apace,
Not to propose, but call by grace,
To change the heart, renew the will,
And turn the feet to Zion’s hill.”

And you will say, If this be it, it just suits a poor wretch like me: “O wretched man that I am” and if I am destined to heaven, how will I sing of his amazing grace that was thus beforehand!

“No sinner can be beforehand with you,
Your grace is almighty, preventing, and free.”

It is the poor and needy that shall praise his name. Then you, you will go on a little farther, and get a knowledge of God’s sworn covenant, wherein he has undertaken to do everything for you; and thus, you will see that the whole matter of your salvation is a hidden thing from the world, and was once a hidden thing from you. You that are Christians, was there not a time when you had not the least idea whatever that salvation was after this manner? but now you are convinced that you cannot by possibility, you cannot in the nature of things possess by nature anything that is spiritually good. Well, but can I not merit something? No; for if you merit something it must be by the works of the law, and the Bible declares that “by the works of the law shall no flesh living be justified;” the Bible declares that “he that offends in one point is guilty of the whole the Bible declares that “cursed is he that continues not in all things written in the book of the law to do them” Therefore, you are poor, you have done nothing, you can do nothing; all is of God from first to last. This poverty is a secret; this imputation of all your sin to Christ, and the imputation of his work to you is a secret; the origin of your salvation is a secret, the carrying it on is a secret; God’s covenant, in which he stands bound never to leave nor forsake you, that also is a secret. Well, then, “blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” This poverty, I say, is to bring us to terms. I look back at the time when the Lord, after granting me some manifestation of mercy, and making me happy, was yet determined to bring me more clearly to terms; and I shall never forget the wormwood and the gall, I shall never forget the fulness of my heart in blasphemy against God; I shall never forget the besetments I had though God kept me outwardly, yet he suffered the fountains of the great deep to be broken up within, and I literally fancied that I had more sin in my nature than all the people in the world put together. I thought, Well, black I am, a poor, miserable wretch I am. O wretched man that I am! I could see nothing in myself but wretchedness. Then the Lord discovered to me that he had made provision for just such, and that this my experience which I thought was intended to cut me off, send me to despair, and sink me to hell, was the very experience by which the Lord brought me so firmly to terms that I have been agreeable to those terms from that day to this; so that when I read, “By grace you are saved,” my experience, my

heart, my conscience, my soul, my mind, everything says Amen to that. "By grace you are saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God"

Now he has said that he "will leave in Zion an afflicted and poor people;" and this poverty being thus spiritual, it is to humble us, break the neck of our pride, bring us to God's terms of salvation, and now we are glad to be saved, I had almost said, as the apostle said, if by any means, "if by any means I may attain unto the resurrection of the dead." Well, but, Paul, there is only one means. True; but why did he say, "by any means"? To denote that he felt himself such a sinner that whatever God's way is, I shall be glad of it, if he will but save me. It is not the question with me, how will he save me? but will he save me? Here is the flood coming; it was not for Noah to stand and quibble how the Lord would save him; Will he save me? Here is the destruction coming upon the cities of the plain; it is not for Lot to stand and quibble how the Lord will deliver him; will he deliver him? Here is the sea to roll in over the Egyptians; it is not for the Israelites to have a consultation or an Ecumenical Council to know how it shall be done; but will God deliver us at all? will he give us the victory? will he confound our foes? will he be merciful to us? He knows how to bring us to terms; he knows how to make that great truth worthy of all acceptance, that "Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners." I want you to understand clearly that we cannot in the nature of things by possibility possess anything spiritually good, severed from God in the first Adam, you cannot possess anything spiritually good until it is ministered by the Holy Ghost. "You must be born again." "Every good gift and every perfect gift comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variableness, neither shadow of turning." If the Lord did not keep up this conviction of our poverty, we should forget it, and wax fat, and begin to kick at some of the truths of the gospel, if on account of those truths we were subjected to reproach or persecution. If the Lord did not keep up a conviction of this poverty, we should soon be where the Laodiceans were; they thought they were not poor; they knew not that they were poor, and blind, and wretched, and naked, and miserable. So, the Lord carries this on; I know I have found it so. I never more deeply felt my poverty and destitution than I do now. You might as well look to Satan for something good as to look to your own old nature; it must be your grief, your plague, your hindrance. These are the persons that listen to the tidings of the everlasting gospel. "The poor," the spiritually poor, "have the gospel preached unto them." Without this regeneration, then, a man possesses nothing spiritually good, and therefore cannot be accepted of God; but being thus convinced, brought to God's own terms of salvation, here we come into all that we can need.

Let us have a word here upon this subject of contrast. The dear Savior became poor; in what sense did he become poor? He became so poor that there was only one thing he had left, and what was that? The excellency of his personal character; he became so poor that he had nothing to carry him through his work but his own personal worth. Now he was carried through his work by his own personal worth, but we have no personal worth by which we can go through a law work and please God; therefore, it is that we needed this wonderful Savior. We have nothing to do now but go on receiving blessing after blessing, abide by him, and wait on earth as contentedly as we can, until he shall come and receive us. "I go to prepare a place for you; And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself that where I am, there you may be also." While as sinners we have no right to anything that is good, yet as believers in Christ, one with him, we have a right to everything on earth, to everything in life, to everything in death, to everything in heaven, to everything in eternity, to everything in God; for Christ is heir of all things, and the people are joint-heirs with him. Therefore "the Lord hears the poor;" these are the persons whose

petitions he hears. See, then, our poverty. Are we conscious of it? Have we been driven, from an experience of what we are, to God's free grace terms of sure and eternal salvation? If so, then happy the people that are thus taught and thus favored; We see that Jesus Christ thus became poor, took our poverty away, and now there is no poverty left, except in ourselves, and that before long will pass away. "Poor, but rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to them that love him."

Secondly, *the reasons why the Lord hears them*. First, because they are believers, they believe aright. The Pharisees of old believed in every letter of the Bible. The Savior says, "If you believed Moses' writings, you would believe me." Now they did believe Moses' writings in the letter thereof, but because they did not believe in the right way they might as well have not believed at all. There is such a thing as believing wrongly; there is such a thing as being deceived in our faith as well as in other respects. "I will send them strong delusion, and they shall believe a lie;" because they do not know their poverty, and therefore do not believe correctly. Whereas the publican, the poor and the needy, he believes aright; he believes if he is cleansed from all sin it must be by the blood of Christ; if he is justified before God, it must be entirely and exclusively by the righteousness of Christ. The Christian believes that if he is saved it is by grace from first to last; that he is altogether passive in every department of it, that he only works as the Lord spiritually enables him to work, and prays only as the Holy Spirit is a Spirit of grace and supplication unto him. Therefore, the Lord hears them because they believe aright; their prayer is the prayer of faith. Would the Lord hear Saul of Tarsus? Truly no, but he would hear Paul the apostle, Paul the sinner saved by grace. Would the Lord hear the Pharisees? No; he would laugh at their calamity, and mock when their fear came. What an important matter this is! for if we do not believe in the right way, then it is not the prayer of faith. To ask the Lord to bless us when we do not believe in the blessing; to ask the Lord to be with us when we do not believe in the way in which he is with poor sinners, when we do not believe in the way in which he dwells with men upon the earth, where there is not this faith it is not the prayer of faith, and he will not hear such. Therefore, one reason why he hears the poor is because they believe in the right way, and you cannot get them out of it. I have no unkind feeling towards a Roman Catholic or a Wesleyan, but you might cut me into mincemeat before you could get me to consent for one moment to their systems. I take my stand here; I say it as a dying man, in the sight of God, irrespective of partiality and prejudice, that their gospels are no use to me; they do not reach my case. You may turn around and say, You do not like good works, this, that, and the other; I do not care what you call me, you never can get me out of that one fact, that nothing but sovereign, free, entire, certain salvation by grace can reach me; nothing else is of any use to me. I must have this sovereignty in God the Father choosing as he pleases; I must have it in Christ doing as he pleases; I must have it in the Holy Ghost giving to every man severally as he will; I can no more help the Holy Ghost than I can help Christ or God the Father. Therefore, my experience binds me fast, keeps me here; no other gospel is of any use to me. The next reason he hears them is because their prayers are the cries of necessity. They ask for what they want; they want mercy, and grace, and the Lord's blessing. Where real experience is, prayer will be the cry of necessity. "For the oppression of the poor, for the sighing of the needy, now will I arise, said the Lord; I will set him in safety from him that puffs at him." I am afraid the remark will not be understood in the broad sense that I could wish, but there is not anything you can name so avails with the Lord as the needs of his people. If they need great forgiveness, there is no need, avails more with him than that; if they need great mercy, great grace, or great care, whatever they need, it is their need that so prevails with him. Time forbids my showing how the

Lord thus hears the poor and answers them; I meant to have run through the latter part of Job 5, and a scripture or two out of 1 Samuel 2, and several others, but I must leave the poor now, and go to the prisoners.

Lastly, *the care that he takes of his prisoners*. I will mention four classes of prisoners that the Lord does not despise. The first class are these same persons that are taken captive by the grace of God. Saul, you are down, where are you going to? I would go somewhere if I could, to get away from the wrath of God, and to get away from him, but I cannot. If I could rise to heaven, he is there; if I make my bed in hell, he is there; if I go to the uttermost parts of the earth, he is there.

“Whither shall I flee
To hide myself from wrath and you?”

The sinner feels he is taken captive; God has found him out; he cannot get away from him. Here is death at hand, judgment before me, eternity comes next: I cannot get away. The man is a prisoner: The Lord has taken him captive. Bless his holy name! when he thus takes a soul captive, he holds it fast. “He despises not his prisoners.” When I was under this state at the first, little did I think that this was the work of eternal love, of mercy divine. I wanted my liberty, to do just as I liked, I did not like it at the first. But by and by, when we understand the meaning of his taking us captive, we see that it is to show us where and what we are, and that he might set us free with that glorious liberty that shall make us as hinds let loose, giving goodly words, bearing testimony that he does indeed set the prisoners free. That is one class. Secondly, we go on to the literal prisoner. Some good people have been cast into prison through what other people have said about them; they have been slandered, reviled, and reproached, and it has been believed, and they have been cast into prison; but the Lord “despises not his prisoners.” Poor Joseph was slandered, he was reproached through Mrs. Judas Potiphar, cast into prison; but the Lord did not despise him; the Lord was with him. Wherever he was, he was sure to be the object of confidence. The master of the prison, not much of a one to work, says, “I shall be able to have a few holidays now. I have got this Hebrew here: he is an excellent servant. I will leave him in charge, and go out tomorrow, and the next day just call in and see how matters are; it is all right with him. And so, the Lord turned, in one sense, the dungeon into a paradise; and by and by, when Joseph interpreted the dreams, he was exalted, and realized all that his visions predicted. What a mysterious path was his! But this was the way in which he was to come to what the Lord destined for him. So, the martyrs were thrown into prison through reproach and slander; all sorts of things were laid to their charge. Those of you that are not acquainted with some of these circumstances have no idea of the things laid to their charge. Luther, I was going to say I would not pollute my lips by stating what they laid to his charge; they could not get hold of him, it is true, but they were permitted to get hold of thousands of the people of God and cast them into prison; but the Lord despised not his prisoners. Jesus Christ was cast, as it were, into prison from slander; they said he was a blasphemer, usurper, mad, and had a devil; and, of course, all the people believed it. What everybody says must be true; but the Lord despised not his Prisoner. Some of you may, in your time, have been very much injured by reproaches and slanders, for we live in a dreadfully slandering day. If a man happens to succeed in preaching the gospel, if they can manufacture anything, if they can fabricate a feasible lie, there are plenty to do it; but the Lord despises not his prisoners. Then the third class will be those that have got into prison, which will apply as well to the martyrs as others, for the Lord’s sake. Acts 5, the apostles were thrown into the common prison. We have got them now. You may think so; but

then they are the poor and the needy, and they are believers, and it is for the Lord's sake they are thus cast into prison. So, the angel came and let them out without the jailer knowing it, without the soldiers or anybody knowing it. So, the wise men went the next morning. What, have you not brought them? There were the disciples outside preaching the gospel, and the keepers standing before the prison door. What wiseacres they must have looked! I rejoice in having a laugh at them. Why, where are the apostles? Oh, they are preaching in the temple. Well, bring them down; and they brought them without violence.

“Did not we directly command you that you should not teach in this name?” “Well,” Peter said, “we ought to obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you slew and hanged on a tree. Him has God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Savior, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.” That cut them to the heart, to think that the apostles should thus speak well of their religion in the face of their enemies; and so, “when they had beaten them” of course, “they commanded them that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.” But on they went as usual: The Lord despised not his prisoners. Again, Acts 12, there is Peter in prison, sixteen soldiers to take care of him, two at a time. There he was, chained to them. The angel came in, smote the chains, brought him to the great iron gate which led to the city. The gate opened of its own accord; so, Peter was delivered; and Herod, in all meekness and humility, commanded the poor soldiers to be put to death, because they could not keep Peter when the Lord set him free. It is very difficult for men to keep that which the Lord does not intend to be kept. The Lord despises not his prisoners. And I need not remind you of the sixteenth chapter, where Paul and Silas were cast into prison at Philippi.

But there is a fourth class of prisoners, and that is those that get into prison by their own fault. Why, you are never going to say a word in favor of them, are you? Well, if not in favor of them, I can say a word in favor of the Lord; and if he is pleased to say a word in favor of them, I shall not differ from him; I shall side with him. Well, Jonah, you are got into prison, do you think you will ever get out again? You have got there by your own fault. But the Lord watched over him and took care of him, and the sea could not kill him, and the weeds could not kill him, and the whale could not kill him, and he could not kill himself. He cried unto the Lord, and the Lord heard him, answered, and delivered him, and made him accomplish his mission. So, the Lord despised not his prisoners, even when they get into prison through their own fault. This is a God worth loving, worth worshipping, worth cleaving to. As for men, as I have experienced from some of the brethren, deviate a little from them, you are sent off to Coventry for I don't know how many years. Samson got into prison by his own fault, that he did. You are not going to say a word in favor of him, are you? I would rather die Samson's death than I would die the death of the sleekest, the most polished, the most shining Pharisee under the heavens, because they die in enmity against God; but Samson died in sweet reconciliation to God, and obtained the victory God intended he should. He got into prison by his own fault: did the Lord leave him and despise him? No. When they were making sport of Samson he cried to God, for he hears the poor; he despised not his prisoner. “Let me be avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes.” He bowed with all his might; the victory was wrought, his soul saved, God glorified; and if we are ashamed of these testimonies of God's mercy, then I believe God will be ashamed of us. They are prisoners because they are his people. Let us, then, not boast one over the other, but rather bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.