

2 Corinthians Chapter 6 PAUL'S TESTIMONY ABOUT SALVATION

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"Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be you reconciled to God." 2 Cor. 5: 20.

The apostle has given us his testimony about trial and victory, about his ministry and his own physical life. He now comes to the theme he loves best of all, the Gospel of our reconciliation, the great salvation for which God had made him an ambassador to men.

I. A New Creation

"If any man be in Christ Jesus he is a new creation, old things have passed away, behold, all things are become new. And all things are of God." Paul's remedy for the world's need was no mere scheme of social reform, educational progress, ethical culture or fine arts. He had seen the failure of mere culture in Greece and Rome, and had turned away from the world's noblest monuments of art with disgust and horror as he saw the city of Athens wholly given to idolatry. The Augustine age of Roman literature was only just closing, but it had failed to lift man higher than the earthly plane of cultivated selfishness and moral degradation. No higher school of ethics was ever known than the teaching of Moses and the Jewish law. But Paul had found the utter worthlessness of the righteousness of the law and the powerlessness of the highest ideals to lift man above his fallen nature. And so he came to his fellow men to tell them that our fallen race must have, not an evolution, but a revolution. Humanity is too far gone for self-improvement or any principle of recuperation. There must be a new creation. "Except a man be born again, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

This was the first principle of his great message of salvation. Dear friend, have you seen its utter and imperative necessity? You are trying to be good with a bad heart. You are trying to serve God with a nature utterly depraved and fallen. You are trying to bring a clean thing out of an unclean. As well might you try to develop a dove out of a hawk, or a fawn out of the groveling swine. The best gift that Christ has brought to fallen man is a new heart and an automatic salvation that works spontaneously from a living principle that loves the good and hates the evil because of the law of the fitness of things as strong as the law of gravitation and the will of God. We all know how in our modern industrial life the old clumsy methods of doing things have been superseded by automatic machinery that simply needs to be started and then it works out all the complicated processes of our manifold manufacturing enterprises by a law inherent in itself. This is God's great secret of the new life. He puts in us a vital principle and sets in operation an automatic process that makes it as easy to be humble and holy as once it was easy to be wicked and vile. Have you come to Christ for this great gift, a heaven born heart, a new nature, a spirit born from above? You cannot develop it by education. You cannot create it by will power. It is the gift of God. It is eternal life begun on earth and made perfect in the skies. And it comes to every yielded soul that recognizes its absolute necessity and accepts it from Jesus Christ as the gift of His grace. "If any man be in Christ Jesus, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new."

II. A Divine Reconciliation

"All things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself by Jesus Christ, and has given to us the ministry of reconciliation; to wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and has committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be you reconciled to God. For He has made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him."

The new creation which we have just described cannot begin until a previous process of reconciliation has been effected. There were barriers in the way which had to be removed before the life and love of God could become operative upon the hearts of men. It was like the week of creation. The sun was made in the beginning, but it was the fourth day before his radiance reached the earth and established the beautiful order of day and night, light and heat, vegetable and animal life. Vast obstacles in the earth's atmosphere intervened and made the surface of our globe and made the earth a seething chaos. All this had to be cleared away and a firmament and atmosphere created before the sun could pour its beams upon the earth and create a world of beauty and of bloom. So, before God could reach the human heart with the renewing influence of His holy Spirit, it was necessary that the great work of preparation should be accomplished. This is described by the apostle as "reconciliation." It includes three stages.

1. Revelation. God had to be revealed to man in His true character and beneficence. Our sinful hearts and the lies of our adversary, the devil, had so distorted our conception of the Father that it was impossible for us to

love and trust Him. To the natural man, God is an object of terror and not of love. This is because they do not know Him, for to know Him is to love Him. It was necessary, therefore, for God to reveal Himself as a Father, a Friend and a Restorer. He did this through the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself." That life of gentleness, unselfishness, sacrifice and ceaseless service was just an object lesson of God. "He that has seen Me, has seen the Father." And when at last He hung upon that cross "bearing in His own body" the sins and the curse of men, a spectacle was presented of the Father's heart toward the sinner, which, when rightly understood and accepted by simple faith, is fitted to put to shame our unworthy thoughts of our loving Father and inspire our hearts with confidence and love. Instead of an avenging fury, waiting to destroy us, we see Him taking our sins upon Himself, and by a plan of mercy as marvelous in its wisdom as in its grace, satisfying every claim against the righteousness of the law and opening the way for our forgiveness and salvation. This was the first object of Christ's coming, to bring God to us. The second is to bring us to God. But He must first come down and show us the Father and then go back and take us with Him to the Father.

So sublimely beautiful is this conception of Christ's work that in many minds it has crowded out altogether the other and equally important aspect of His work as a sacrifice for sin. Many can only see the benevolence and heroic aspect of His life and death as a sublime example of love, and they leave out the deeper meaning of the precious blood. Both are true, and let us not in our zeal for the doctrine of the atonement forget the other aspect of Christ's work as a revelation of a Father's heart toward His rebellious children.

The apostle's conception reminds us of the familiar story of the Scottish maiden who had left her mother and her home and had fallen into the depths of sin partly through severe Scottish discipline, which had shown her the harder side of that mother's justice, rather than the gentler side of her love. When she found her child was gone, her whole nature changed, and her love sought far and wide for the wandering daughter. At last she devised the ingenious idea of hanging up her photographs in many of the dance halls of the great city, with a loving message and her own autograph at the foot of the picture. One night the eyes of the lost one suddenly fell upon the picture and the message inviting her home, and a new vision of her mother came to her heart. She saw her now, not as the severe parent, restraining, disciplining, punishing her rebellious child, but with a heart of love and breaking with sorrow and waiting to forgive. As she recovered from her swoon, she cried, "Take me home," and the rest of the story can better be imagined than told. Jesus Christ came down to this world of sin to hold up before God's rebellious children the picture of the Father's face and the vision of the Father's love. We love to think of all this in connection with Jesus, but let us not forget that other Face behind the Savior, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself."

2. Propitiation. More was needed, however, than the revelation of God's love. There were real barriers to overcome. There were tremendous facts of Sin, Righteousness and Law and only infinite wisdom could have devised a way to meet all these contradictions of the problem and enable God to be at once "a just God and a Savior."

This is where propitiation comes in, and the apostle has not left it out of his Gospel. "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing unto men their trespasses." But this was not a whitewashing of humanity; this was not an erasure of the records in God's eternal books; but it was a mighty settlement in which every claim was met and every attribute of God was satisfied. Here is the solution of the problem, "For He has made Him to be sin for us who knew no sin!" There in the most explicit terms is the doctrine of the atonement, God's great settlement for the sins of men. Jesus Christ, a Man, the Head of our race, and thus fitted to be our Representative, takes our place, assumes our liabilities, meets our penalties, satisfies all the demands of infinite justice and law and then passes this all over to every man who is willing to accept it as the ground of a settlement with God and constituted Jesus Christ his Attorney for this settlement. This last is indispensable. While His atonement is sufficient for the race, it only becomes efficient for every one who personally commits himself to it by an act of appropriating faith.

3. Justification. The result of all this is the justification of the sinner. "He has made Him to be sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him." The position in which all this places us is "righteousness." We are not merely forgiven and our guilt overlooked, but we are "justified"; we are put in the same position as if we had never sinned, or, as if having sinned, we had made the full settlement for our sin which Christ has made for us. If you have ever been in the position of a debtor, and know the humiliation of being repeatedly dunned for the claim, you know something of the difference between offering your creditor an apology or a check; asking from him either his forbearance or his receipt. There is nothing that more fully establishes your sense of manhood than to be able to meet your creditor and look in his face without embarrassment as you hand him a settlement of his account and ask him to please write out a receipt in full. This is the happy situation which God has prepared for every saved soul who accepts the atonement of Jesus

Christ. Your sin is so completely settled by Christ Jesus and His righteousness so effectually imputed to you that you become "the righteousness of God in Him." Looking in the face of earth and heaven and hell, you can say with humble heart and yet triumphant faith, "Who is He that condemns? It is Christ that died. Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifies."

III. The Human Agency

In this great salvation, God has provided for the ministry of men. "Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead be you reconciled to God."

Later in the first verse of the next chapter, he adds, "As workers together with Him, we also beseech you that you receive not the grace of God in vain."

1. The messenger of the divine mercy must first be himself reconciled. "God has reconciled us to Himself by Jesus Christ, and has given to us the ministry of reconciliation." We cannot lead others until we first have found the way ourselves; and the first duty and instinct of the saved soul is to save others. God takes us from the depths of sin that we may be able to reach the people that are in the very same place where we once were. Your salvation is a trust as well as a privilege.

2. The messenger must be specially baptized with the spirit of soul winning. The word "committed" here in verse 18 has been more literally translated, "has put into us." It suggests the idea of a new instinct and passion for soul saving, being given to the Christian worker so that it becomes the very impulse of his nature to seek and save the lost. Just as certain animals have an instinct that fits them for the hunt and with the power of an absorbing passion for pursuing a special game which they are fitted to hunt, so the love of souls becomes the master-passion of those who give themselves wholly up to it, and they can say as the apostles said, "We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard." Dear reader, has God given to you this intense love of souls, and this divine instinct to seek and to win them for Christ?

3. There is a place in all this for human sympathy and tact. God will use the things that are strongest in your nature to reach men and women. He will especially use you with the class that you are best fitted to reach and attract. If you are to be made a blessing to the unsaved, He will take from you the stiffness, selfishness and exclusiveness which would naturally indispose you to put yourself to the trouble of reaching others, and He will give you the tact, the wisdom and the personal magnetism which will make it easy for you to attract men to Christ. What a wonderful object lesson we have of this gift in the ministry of our Lord. How marvelously He found His way to the heart and conscience of that woman at Jacob's well; how promptly He brought Zaccheus from the sycamore tree like a skillful hunter by a single shot, and how effectually He won the very policemen that went to arrest Him, but came back confounded, crying, "Never a man spoke like this Man."

4. But above all this, the real power of the ministry of soul-winning must come from God. "We are ambassadors for Christ as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead." We must come to men not with our love, but with Christ's. We must attract them not to ourselves, but to the Savior. We must make them realize that our message is one of authority and that they are dealing not with us, but with their God. This is what Paul meant when he spoke of "commending himself" to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

The story is told of a little child that was once brought into contact with a brutal criminal in a railway station, where the man was waiting between two policemen to be taken to a State's prison. He looked so sad that the little child crept up to him and looking into his face, said, "Poor man, I'm so sorry for you." The sudden revelation to him of that little touch of love seemed for a moment to wake up in him all his worst nature and bring back to him the memory of what he himself had lost and for a moment he became so excited that it seemed as if he would strike her. Her father drew her away, but as the train waited for some time, the little thing managed once more to steal unobserved to where he sat, and once more looking up in his face, she said, "Poor man, Jesus is so sorry for you." It was a child's Gospel, but it broke his heart. He burst into tears, and just then the train came up and he was hurried away. But years afterwards, as a reclaimed convict and a Christian evangelist, he told the story himself, how that revelation of the Savior and His love had brought him to repentance and salvation. Let us give to men the vision of the message of the Savior and ever hide behind our Master and His cross.

IV. The Sinner's Response and Responsibility

There is something for the sinner to do.

1. It is possible for him "to receive the grace of God in vain." All the kind provision of God's reconciling love, all the precious blood of Christ's atonement may be lost. God will force salvation on no one. He has left the human will free to choose or to refuse, and the blood of every lost sinner shall be upon his own head.

2. God commands the sinner to be reconciled. It is in the imperative mood, "Be you reconciled to God." God is reconciled and offers His mercy through Jesus Christ to every man and commands him to accept it. There is a moment in every life when that great decision must be definitely made, and nobody can make it but you. It is the crisis hour and a solemn responsibility. Oh, that someone who is reading these lines might this moment accept that responsibility and meet that simple, everlasting responsibility which settles the question for his immortal soul, and say: "God helping me, I will, I do, I now believe."

3. And it must be done now. The first two verses of the next chapter belong to this paragraph. "For He says, 'I have heard you in a time accepted and in the day of salvation have I comforted you. Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.'" When God has entered the human heart, convicted it of sin and brought it face to face with the Savior, then it is Now or Never. Perhaps it is Now or Never with some one to whom this message has just come.

How easy it is to be saved, but, Oh, how easy it is to be lost. The story is told by a distinguished minister, and has been published in tract form, that just after the war of the Union, he was summoned to the front to see his son, who was believed to be dying of a mortal wound. Arriving at the hospital, the doctors told him that his boy could live only about an hour, and that his seeing him might even lessen that little hour. But the father, after earnest prayer, resolved that he must see him. Coming into the ward, the lad looked up into his face with deep earnestness and said, "Papa, they tell me I cannot live and I am not ready to die. Could you tell me in just two minutes how I can be saved, for I haven't time or strength for more," and the father said, "Yes." Taking the clammy hand of his boy, he added, "Do you remember the time when you disobeyed me and for hours I punished you by refusing to speak to you or even let you kiss me or come upon my knee? And how at last you could stand it no longer and came with trembling feet and voice and said, 'Father, I'm sorry; forgive me'? Do you remember how quickly I opened my arms and took you to my heart and sealed that forgiveness by the kiss of love and how happy you felt as you lay there? My dear boy, that is just the way to come back to God, and that is all."

The boy looked up with wonder. "Is that all?" he said, "then I will try," and closing his eyes and covering his face with the sheet, he prayed for a few moments, and the bed shook with his emotions, while the father silently waited and prayed. Then there was a little cry and that face looked up smiling through its tears as he said: "Papa, I have done it and I feel it's all right."

That was all, but that was enough. Enough to save him and enough to heal him, for the uplift of that new joy gave him the strength that carried him through the crisis and he recovered, and was for many years the honored official in one of the department of the United States Government.

Dear Reader, that is all. God help you also to say, "I have done it and it is all settled." "Be you reconciled to God."