

Thanks for The Gospel Victory

Charles G. Finney:

"I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord." --Romans vii:25

"Thanks be to God who giveth us the victory through Jesus Christ our Lord." --1 Cor. xv:57

In both these passages Paul gives thanks for deliverance from a sinning and sinful state.

To bring this subject fully before us, I remark,

1. The Bible everywhere teaches and facts prove that unconverted men are morally and spiritually dead. They live as if there were no God. They appreciate neither his rights nor his feelings. To all intents and purposes, they are, towards God, as dead men. Considerations concerning God have no influence on them. This is one of the most obvious facts in human life. So true is it, that in fact we often find men pleading as their excuse that they have no inclinations towards God. Thus they reveal their moral death, not in their lives only, but in their very excuses; showing that they are conscious of their moral apostasy and death, and but too well aware that they have no tendencies in themselves towards God.

2. Christians, on the other hand, are represented as being alive but not in good and perfect health, and not mature in their growth. At first they are new-born babes, needing the pure milk of the word; then youth, needing counsel; then fathers and mothers in Israel, of "full age," and "having their senses exercised to discern both good and evil." Often the scriptures represent Christians as being very weak, so that they have great liability to stumble and fall. This stumbling and falling becomes a sad stumbling-block in the way of wicked men--those men who are prone to look for and seek stumbling-blocks for their excuse. They do not realize the condition of Christians, only in part reclaimed from their death in sin. They do not consider that though born, they are yet babes, or at best, but children. But they are not disposed to make allowance for these circumstances--a fact which only serves to show how unreasonable sin is.

Returning to the fact that Christians are usually weak, I remark, this weakness is moral, not natural. Natural weakness pertains to one's created faculties; moral, to one's voluntary purposes. Weakness of nature is a misfortune; weakness of moral purpose is a fault. Death in sin is simply a fault--always and altogether, a fault. This weakness in Christians is also a fault, because it results from a want of faith in Christ, and love to his name.

This weakness and moral death of sinners is a fact of experience. I have myself had but too much reason to know what it is. I found a total discrepancy between my convictions and my actions. I could say, "So I ought to do, but so I do not." When I questioned myself, asking--Why is this so? I could only say, It is wholly unaccountable. Wide awake on all other subjects, and to all other interests, yet perfectly dead to this, I found myself in a strange state, and if not a "wonder to many," I was at least to myself. In a wretched state, I knew I had no disposition to get out of it. And every sinner who reflects knows that this is just his state.

The spiritual weakness of Christians manifests itself in a conscious want of promptness to act upon, and fully up to, their convictions of duty and sense of obligation. They are more deeply conscious of these defects than sinners are, or can be, of theirs. Sinners have little anxiety or trouble about their own moral death; but not so with Christians. They recognize their obligations, and are unusually conscious of being ready, prompt, and anxious to meet them, yet painfully aware that while "the spirit is willing the flesh is weak." Sometimes they are strong in the Lord, and their sense of weakness has passed away; anon, perhaps, they trust to their own strength, and find out their weakness to their cost; they fall sadly short, and come into darkness and trouble.

This state in both saints and sinners is among the most patent and obvious facts in the world. Who can doubt that there is moral life in real Christians, and moral death in sinners? This the Bible everywhere teaches or implies. It is a fact that no man can doubt who has eyes to see, and a mind candid enough to apprehend and admit a plain fact.

I often think it strange that unconverted men allow themselves to be so stumbled by the weakness of professed Christians. I have met some impenitent men who had thought candidly on this subject, and who seemed to appreciate fully the state and difficulties of Christians, and consequently were not stumbled at all by any mistakes or errors into which they might fall. They did not at all wonder that Christians are no better. If I had not considered this matter, and had not ceased to stumble myself on the imperfections of professed Christians, I

never could have become a Christian. If I had not seen that all this is according to the Bible and reason, I could not have come into a state of mind towards God and Christianity in which my conversion from sin would be possible. Usually, in a place where there are many Christians, there will be some who stumble constantly upon them, as if utterly unable or unwilling to apologize for their failures on the score of infant piety, superinduced upon long-standing habits of sin.

3. If there be not some efficacious remedy for sin, in the soul, sinners must be either annihilated, at death, or damned. So of Christians, if there be not some efficacious remedy, giving them victory over sin, they too must be lost. In my early life I was much more ready to doubt whether any could be saved, than to believe that all would be. There seemed to me more reason to suppose all would be damned, than all saved. The great inquiry was, How can any be saved? It was never this, How can God damn any? Let any sensible man get a clear and full idea of what salvation is, and he will see it can be no easy thing. He will assume that the law must go into full execution against all, and that so, none can be saved. My mind before my conversion ran on this text--"If the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?" I could see that even Christians must have mighty help from some quarter, being only babes in Christ, and their salvation a work of many difficulties.

It has always been passing strange to me that any man could be a universalist. Even before my conversion it was a profound mystery. Why, said I then, does not everybody see that men must become holy or be lost? If the Holy Ghost does not go down into hell to convert sinners, surely they cannot be saved there. Unless there be some efficacious remedy for sin, taking effect to the full extent of actually giving the victory over it, salvation in heaven is impossible.

In Romans vii, Paul describes a state in which there is the greatest effort to get rid of this state of sinfulness. There he cries out, "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from this body of sin and death?" Then, the gospel opening on his anxious eye, he thanks God for deliverance through Jesus Christ. He saw the remedy.

This remedy is never in ourselves. Nowhere in the wide range of the material system all round us, can it be found;--nowhere outside of God. It might be demonstrated that in our own nature there is no efficacious remedy. Yet by this I do not mean to say that if any man would use his powers right, he could gain no relief; but I do mean to say that, apart from God, he never will use his own powers right for this end. His own will is committed in an opposite direction. He has fallen into the slough of his corrupt propensities. These propensities are fearful adversaries to his being holy, and must be, until they are subdued. Hence we are constantly pressed with the question--Where is the power that can subdue them and give us the victory?

Paul answers, thanking God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. In him we have it. Yet until men come to know the gospel by an inward apprehension, it is to them dark, and almost without meaning. They feel but little if any interest in it. But when the divine Spirit reveals Jesus to the mind, these dark things become precious realities. Light breaks in, and illumines the chambers, so recently in thick darkness. Under this influence gospel truth becomes intensely interesting, and even exciting. Men who have been swept away by the influence of worldly objects, who would not look at spiritual things, and were almost mad in their pursuit of objects which appeal only to the senses, are now wonderfully changed. Christ reveals himself so clearly that he overbalances and overcomes these earthly excitements. Especially is this the case when the Spirit reveals God as being truly love. This at once, takes prodigious hold on us. Said one who had long professed Christ, and had known something of the gospel in her own experience, "All at once, after so long walking in comparative darkness, the Lord showed me that I had hitherto known him but very imperfectly. I did not know God was love, before. I did not see this in its own true sun-light. I had opinions; I had notions; but it could not be said I had knowledge. I had heard of Him by the hearing of the ear; but now mine eye has seen him, and my heart has been ravished with his love."

From this time onward her whole soul seemed all glowing with love to God, and radiant with the love of God, revealed to her. So it will always be when the Spirit reveals Jesus to the soul, and we see why he died for us, and why he has in so many ways done so much for us. When these things come up from the realms of theory, into the position of fact, and of experience, apathy ceases; the sensibilities are no longer stagnant; all is wakeful; slavish fear is gone; the soul approaches God freely, and in the spirit of a child; he is no longer religious, because he must be, nor reads the Bible because he must, nor does he pray, or give in benevolence, for such reasons. All these forms of dead experience have passed away, and the mind looks back on it as a loathsome abomination. While these views of Christ are before his mind, he will make no more legal efforts--will no more strive to gain the favor of God by mere works of law. Christ, thus revealed, breaks the power of sin.

Turning now to my impenitent hearers, I ask you if you do not know and admit that I have given a fair account of your case. You know that you have no proper regard, practically, for God, no more than if your heart and intellect were separated, and all mutual influence of one over the other were broken off. Your convictions of truth are often clear and strong; but the response of your heart to this truth is utterly withheld. The state of your affections and will seems to have no correspondence to your own convictions of what they should be. Yet this strange discrepancy is altogether within your power, and you ought to put an end to it at once. You have no right to live on so, God asserting his claims, but your soul utterly disowning them. This is precisely the state of the sinner; his conscience dissevered from his heart. When his attention is turned to this, he is conscious of this utter disagreement and discordance. In my days of sin, I was just as sensible of this as of my own existence.

Do you ask, What is the reason for this? Am I ever to become self-consistent? Said one of the first lawyers in New York--"There is no use in trying to vindicate myself. I can make no defense; can offer no explanation. It avails nothing for me to argue my case, for I have nothing to plead." So you know you have no reason to offer for your course of sin. If I were to put it to you all, to say by a public expression if this be not your case, you would at once, if honest, rise to give assent. You are in a lost state. You feel, sometimes, a deep sense of this lostness. Is there a remedy for you?

Some of you who profess religion are in great doubt whether you have any spiritual life. Let me ask you if you have not been greatly tried with the fact of your own spiritual impotence, and of your having so little rallying power in yourself? Are you not surprised and troubled at your want of energy, your inefficiency in duty? Have these things pressed you, and have you been led to inquire, anxiously, whether there is a remedy? Do you want to get hold of one, if it be yet possible?

Our text gives us the true and only remedy. God in Christ is the only efficient and all-sufficient power to reach and remedy this direst of all things, sin. Everywhere else in the Bible, the condition of this victory over sin is declared to be faith in Jesus Christ. "This is the victory that overcometh the world, even your faith." Without faith the gospel never takes effect in us.

What the Bible thus declares, is true also in philosophy and in fact. Goodness revealed has attractions over even sinners. It is its very nature to attract all human hearts.

Some of you felt this attraction even when you were in your sins. Perhaps you feel it somewhat even now. In my own case I recollect the circumstance of weeping profusely at an instance of goodness. I thought then it came near to winning me over to sympathy with goodness. I could not help crying out, This is not in me; I know my heart is not in sympathy with God;--so strangely did this manifestation of goodness affect me.

You who have read Uncle Tom's Cabin will remember the story of Topsy and little Eva. Topsy seems never to have seen any manifestations of kindness and goodness towards herself. Always beaten about, every influence only driving her the farther from goodness, no wonder she became surly and morose. Little Eva approached her on one occasion as she sat, and looking her mildly and sweetly in the eye, asked her if she could not be good. Now, for the first time, she saw an interest manifested in her happiness, and saw also, in contrast with Eva's spirit, what her own was. This is represented as the first step before the great moral change.

No doubt this is true in philosophy. There is something in goodness which strongly tends to draw a moral being into sympathy with itself.

Christians are made strong by the revelations which Christ makes of himself to their minds. "Beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, (Jesus) they are changed from glory to glory." The view of his own glory, which the Lord gave to Moses when he prayed, "I beseech thee show me thy glory," and the Lord answered, "I will make all my goodness pass before thee," this strengthened Moses greatly. It seemed to cast the mantle of Jehovah upon him, and make him a new and wonderful man.

When the Lord gains the confidence of a sinner so that he can reveal himself, the first step is to reveal his goodness. So we should expect, and so it is.

But this goodness must be believed. Confidence must be reposed in Christ, else he cannot reveal his goodness in any saving manner.

A conscious victory over ourselves and sin is the only evidence of a saving change. An apparent victory is the only evidence to others of our being savingly changed. This victory consists in being saved from sin, and in

becoming like God. Nothing less than this is real salvation.

Love revealed to faith is the power of God unto salvation. Suppose one of you comes into a state in which you have not a particle of confidence in any one who tries to do you good;--all that any friend should attempt to do for you, you ascribe to some sinister motive. So long as you withhold confidence his love is not revealed to your faith, for you have no faith to which it can be revealed. In this case, by a natural law of mind, all the goodness he reveals to you only makes you more wicked and only works out a deeper ruin.

The love of God revealed to faith, is the power of God to bring the soul out of its bondage. But love manifested, yet through unbelief rejected, works ruin to the soul by a natural law; and by the same law, the clearer the revelations of that love, the more rapid and fearful the ruin wrought. The case of the Jews, taught by Christ in person, is in point, a most striking and affecting example. The way they rejected their Messiah served fearfully to deprave their hearts and to hasten the ruin of the nation. Christ himself said, "If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin, (that is, comparatively none) but now they have no cloak for their sin." When Christ went through all Judea and Galilee, manifesting everywhere the evidences of his being the Messiah, and bearing himself with so much kindness, dignity, and humility, it seems wonderful that the people in mass and their priests and scribes especially, did not open their hearts to bid him welcome. But when instead of this, they withheld their confidence, and rejected him in stern and wicked unbelief, they became fearfully hardened. Every step in the process of this rejection, worked only mischief and ruin. Suppose you have in your family a son whom you are trying to save; but the more you labor for this result, so much the more does he withhold his confidence, traduce your motives, and pervert to evil all your intended good. Such a course as this on his part throws him fearfully into the power of Satan, and he is led captive, by that arch-deceiver, at his will.

None can appreciate our texts, and other passages of this class, except those who have had experience. "Thanks be to God," cries Paul, "who giveth us the victory;"--a song in which none can truly join but those who have gained this victory, and know its power and blessedness. What can an impenitent man know of such emotions? What can he say? Can he thank God for victory of which he knows and experiences nothing? No; he has been only vanquished, and Satan sings the peans of victory over the ruin of his soul.

To the Christian, really victorious, there is the utmost occasion for gratitude and thanksgiving. He esteems this far above all his other mercies, that he finds himself lifted above the power of temptation, his old chains broken, his religious exercises and purposes become spontaneous, and religion the life and joy of his soul. How earnestly does he bless the Lord who hath given him the victory!

It is sad to see how little there is, in our day, of this thanksgiving for victory over sin. How rarely do you hear such thanks for grace received and victory obtained! We have been in the habit here of having a thanksgiving meeting, for the purpose of expressing our individual grounds of thanksgiving. When the next thanksgiving day occurs shall we hear any offerings of praise to God for giving the victory over sin? We used to hear thanks for grace received; shall we have such thanks again? It was once, more common with us than thanks for temporal mercies; shall it be so again?

If the numbers who return to give thanks for this blessing are small, what shall we infer? Is it not fearfully sad and perilous that the gospel should lose its power, in any community?

Many seem not to be aware of their real state. It is hard to convince them that they are not altogether right, yet they have no thanks for this victory. Yet if they had gained this victory they surely would acknowledge it, and express their gratitude to God for it. No other victors are more grateful than Christian victors. If they find themselves victors, they will not conceal the blessed truth, but will naturally wish to shout the praises of victorious grace!

Many professed Christians spend their time and breath in brooding over their great weakness, talking it over, praying about it, and discouraging themselves and others as if the Lord were a hard master, who imposed heavy tasks and allowed only the least possible amount of grace to help his children perform them. Yet they do not usually quite despair of help in themselves; do not cease from legal efforts; are not dead to this class of efforts, as those who have utterly renounced them, and who trust in Christ alone. They still think they shall gain the victory by some work which they shall do in themselves. By efforts made without faith, they hope to get faith, and so work out their own righteousness. But it is only when self is really despaired of that deliverance comes. When you see a sinner on the verge of despair in himself, then you may know he is near the kingdom of grace and mercy. When he has done everything he can do in himself, to save himself, and is compelled to despair of doing anything more, then he is ready to trust in Jesus. Who of us has not seen this experience in others, and felt it in ourselves? At first we thought we could get religion with little effort; we started off

self-righteously, made some ineffectual struggles to pray, and soon learned that our case was far worse than we had supposed. Before my conversion I had never prayed much. For a short time previous, I used to lock my office door, stop the keyhole, and whisper out a short prayer in the greatest perturbation lest somebody should hear my voice, or in some way learn that I was praying. But this answered no purpose; I must pray better than this. I seemed to be bound up and hemmed in on every side, and could not pray. But it occurred to me that if I could get entirely away from everybody, and could meet God alone, that then I could pray. So I went off into the woods, far beyond any danger of being overheard, or seen. But even then I could not pray. My heart refused to pray; there seemed to be no prayer in it. I felt fearfully faint--said, All is over with me; I never can pray. Despair came down on my heart for a moment; the last prop was knocked out from under me, and there was nothing more I could do but to fall helpless at Jesus' feet, and find mercy there!

Often persons talk and complain much of their weakness, but do not despair of yet further efforts in their own strength. They are not so shut up to God that they know they cannot take another step to purpose, in any other direction. They seem little aware of the fact that Jesus Christ is knocking at the door of their heart every moment, as he said, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock"--yet they do not bid him enter with welcome. In fact, they even bolt the door against him.

A lady of my acquaintance, hopefully a Christian, felt her need of sanctifying grace, and really exhausted her strength in efforts, after her own ideas of the matter, to get the command of her temper. At length she fell into despair; said she was not a Christian and could do no more, and would profess piety no longer. At this crisis Jesus revealed himself to her, and in a moment she found deliverance. She was completely saved from the power of her giant temptation. Years after this, she said to me--"I have no more expectation of committing those sins of temper than I have of committing murder."

Real despair of help in one's self does not make men careless and lead them to drop all efforts;--on the contrary, the more they despair, the more their soul reaches out on every side for help and hope.

Until the church is sanctified, the world cannot be converted. Until Christians can testify with their lips and lives, it cannot be expected that the truth will take effect.

A man of much prominence in New York had a pious wife. When the subject of sanctification came to be agitated here, some eighteen years since, she was enough of a Christian to understand it, and to feel her need. She studied it and embraced it. When her unconverted husband saw the astonishing change it wrought in her, he said, "the church must have this. When they do, the world will understand the gospel. They will have something intelligible to aim at." How true! Until the church gets the victory, and, rejoicing in this victory, can show it to the world, she need not think she is greatly recommending religion, or is likely to secure many converts.

Converts are likely to be converted only to the current standard of piety in the church where they are. Often you see this illustrated in a very striking manner. Although they have the Bible in their hand, and although they have excellent preaching, yet their practical ideas of religion are usually drawn from the observed life and spirit of their Christian friends. The living patterns have the practical power. Hence, if young converts have before them high example, it puts them upon high aims and efforts. They aspire to the standard of those whom they most esteem. O how precious to them, to have high and holy examples for their imitation!

Church members are in their own light when they reproach converts, for they only reproach themselves. They often do not consider that these converts are only themselves reproduced; a mirror in which they can see the reflection of their own faces. So, also, for the church to complain of each other is only to complain of themselves. We are every one of us responsible in our measure, for the state of the church, and to blame for its state being no better than it is. It is therefore of no use for us to recriminate.

Some professors of religion say, "All this does not apply to me, for I don't profess sanctification." A great mistake; for you have professed sanctification. Scarcely could you make a more solemn profession than you made when you joined the church. Then you publicly avouched the Lord Jehovah to be your God, Jesus to be your Savior, and the Holy Ghost to be your sanctifier. You solemnly promised to abstain from all ungodliness and every worldly lust, and if this is not a profession of entire sanctification, what is? Certainly, your promise and profession went the whole length of pledging yourself to full and whole-hearted obedience--an obedience not so complete as you may perhaps, render in after years, with more and better knowledge; for holy obedience may progress with knowledge, onward through all time and all eternity. But after such a covenant, it avails nothing to say that you have not committed yourself to a life and a state of entire consecration to God.

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Is it not the fact that some of you, instead of coming up to the gospel standard, keep shy of it, more than willing to waive the question about entire consecration, and really anxious to build up a new highway to heaven, which shall not be the "highway of holiness"? Brethren, such building of other highways for the Christian life, must be a fearful failure. There is perdition at the end of such a pathway, and there ought to be. If God's redeemed people rebel against being constrained by redeeming love, and insist that some little sin must be indulged and admitted into the standard Christian life, ought not God to give them up to their own lusts? Nay more, will He not do this as sure as he is holy, and as surely as he hates sin with utter hatred?