

Charles G. Finney:

"If the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?" -- 1 Peter. 4:18.

FROM the connection of this passage, some have inferred that the apostle had his eye immediately upon the destruction of Jerusalem. They suppose this great and fearful event to be alluded to in the language, For the time has come that judgment must begin at the house of God; and if it first begin at us, what shall be the end of them that obey not the gospel of God? This may refer to the destruction of the city and temple of God's ancient people, yet the evidence for the opinion does not seem to be decisive. A reference to the event is possible and even probable. We know that when Jerusalem was destroyed, not one Christian perished. They had timely notice in the signs Christ had already given them, and perceiving those signs in season, they all fled to Pella, on the east of the Jordan, and hence were not involved in the general destruction.

But whether Peter refers to this particular event or not, one thing is plain: he recognises a principle in the government of God, namely, that the righteous will be saved, though with difficulty, but the wicked will not be saved at all. It is plain throughout this whole chapter that Peter had his mind upon the broad distinction between the righteous and the wicked -- a distinction which was strikingly illustrated in the destruction of Jerusalem, and which can never lack illustrations under the moral and providential government of a holy God.

The salvation of the righteous, though certain, is difficult. Though saved, they will be scarcely saved. On this basis rests the argument of the apostle, that if their salvation be so difficult, the sinner cannot be saved at all. His salvation is utterly impossible. This is plainly the doctrine of the text. It had a striking exemplification in the destruction of Jerusalem, and the passage, as I have said, may or may not have reference to that event. All students of the Bible know that this great destruction is often held up as a type or model of the final judgment of the world. It was a great event on the page of Jewish history, and certainly had great significance as an illustration of God's dealings towards our sinning race.

In pursuing this subject, I purpose to show,

I. WHY THE SALVATION OF THE RIGHTEOUS IS DIFFICULT;

II. WHY THE SALVATION OF THE SINNER IS IMPOSSIBLE;

III. ANSWER THE QUESTION OF THE TEXT, WHERE SHALL THE UNGODLY AND THE SINNER APPEAR?

The difficulty in the salvation of either the righteous or the wicked turns not on any want of mercy in the heart of God. It is not because God is implacable and hard to be appeased: this is not the reason why the salvation of even the sinner is impossible.

Again, it is not in any lack of provision in the atonement to cover all the wants of sinners, and, even to make propitiation for the sins of the world. The Bible nowhere raises the question as to the entire sufficiency of the atonement to do all that an atonement can do or need do for the salvation of our race.

But, positively, one difficulty is found in the nature of God's government, and in the nature of free agency in this world. God has so constituted man as to limit himself to one mode of government over him. This must be moral, and not physical. It must be done by action upon mind as mind, and not by such force as applies legitimately to move matter. If the nature of the case admitted the use of physical force, it would be infinitely easy for God to move and sway such puny creatures as we are. That physical omnipotence which sweeps the heavens and upholds the universe could find no difficulty in moving lumps of clay so small and insignificant as we. But mind cannot be moved as God moves the planets. Physical force can have no direct application to mind for the purpose of determining its moral action. If it should act upon mind as it does upon matter, we certainly know there could be neither moral action nor moral character in such beings as we are. We could not have even a conception of moral conduct. How then could the thing itself possibly exist?

Men are placed under God's government with such a created constitution and such established relations to it that they must act freely. God has made them capable of controlling their own moral conduct by the free action of their own wills, and now he expects and requires them to choose between his service and rebellion. Such being the case, the great difficulty is to persuade sinners to choose right. God is infinitely ready to forgive them if they will repent; but the great problem is to persuade them to do so. They are to be prepared for heaven. For this, an entire change of moral character is requisite. This could be done with the utmost ease, if nothing more

were needful than to take them into some Jordan stream and wash them, physically, as if from some external pollution, and God should be pleased to employ physical power for this purpose. But the change needed being in its nature moral, the means employed must be moral. All the influence must be of a moral character.

Now everybody knows that a moral agent must be able, in the proper sense of this term, to resist every degree of moral influence. Else he cannot be a moral agent. His action must be responsible action, and therefore must be performed of his own free will and accord, no power interposing of such a sort or in such measure as to overbear or interfere with his own responsible agency. Hence the necessity of moral means to convert sinners, to gain their voluntary consent in this great change from sin to holiness, from disobeying to obeying God. And hence the need that this change be wrought, ultimately, by moral means alone.

God may and does employ physical agencies to act morally, but never to act physically. He may send sickness, to reach the heart, but not to purge away any sort of physical sin.

There are a great many difficulties in the way of converting sinners, and saving them when once converted: many which people are prone to overlook. Hence we must go into some detail, in order to make this matter plain.

One class of these difficulties is the result of an abused constitution. When Adam and Eve were created, their appetites were doubtless mild and moderate. They did not live to please themselves and gratify their own appetites. Their deep and all-engrossing desire and purpose to please God was the law of their entire activities. For a time, therefore, they walked in holy obedience, until temptation came in a particular form, and they sinned. Sin introduced another law -- the law of self-indulgence. Every one knows how terribly this law tends to perpetuate and strengthen itself. Every one knows the fearful sway it gains so rapidly over the whole being when once enthroned in power. Now, therefore, the beautiful order and subordination which in holiness obtained throughout all their active powers, was broken up and subverted under the reign of sin. Their appetites lost their proper balance. No longer subordinate to reason and to God, they became inordinate, clamorous, despotic.

Precisely in this does sin consist -- in the irrational gratification of the appetites and passions. This is the form in which it appeared in our first parents. Such are its developments in all the race.

Now in order to save men, they must be brought back from this, and restored to a state in which God and reason control the free action of the mind, and appetite is held in due subjection.

Now here let me be understood. The want of balance, the moral disorder of which I speak, is not this, that the will has become enslaved, and has lost its inherent power of free moral action. This is not the difficulty, but the thing is, that the sensibility has been enormously developed, and the mind accustoms itself to yield to the demands it makes for indulgence.

Here is the difficulty. Some have formed habits and have confirmed them until they have become immensely strong, and it becomes exceedingly difficult to induce them to break away. The rescue must be effected by moral, not by physical means, and the problem is to make the moral means powerful enough for the purpose.

Again, we must notice, among the difficulties in question, the entanglements of a multitude of circumstances. I have often thought it well for Christians that they do not see all their difficulties at first. If they did, its discouraging effect might be disastrous. Coming upon the mind while it is poisoning the elements of the great question -- a life of sin or a life of holiness; or, after conversion, falling in their power upon the mind while yet its purpose to serve God is but little confirmed, the result might be not only greatly trying, but perhaps fatal. But the ways of God in this, as in all things, are admirable. He does not let them see all their future difficulties at first, but lets them come up from time to time in succession, as they have strength to meet them and overcome.

The great difficulty is, living to please self rather than God. It is wonderful to see how much this difficulty is enhanced by the agency Satan and sin have had in the framework of society. It would seem that a bait is held before every man, whatever his position and circumstances may be. One cannot but be astonished at the number of baits provided and laid in the habits and usages, we might perhaps say, in the very construction and constitution, of society. See how men are interlocked in the relations of life, partners in business, associates in pleasure; attached in the more endearing and permanent relations of life, husbands and wives, lovers and loved, parents and children. How many influences of a moral sort, and often tempting to sin, grow out of each, and, oh, how many out of all these complicated and various relations! Youth of both sexes are educated --

perhaps together, perhaps apart; yet in either case there arises a host of social attractions, and in the history of the race, who does not know that often the resulting influences are evil? The troubles and cares of business -- how often do they "like a wild deluge come," and overwhelm the soul that else would "consider its ways and turn its feet unto God's testimonies"! How complicated are the sources of irritation that provoke men's spirits to ill-temper, and ensnare them thus into sin! Many times we marvel and say, What amazing grace is needful here! What power, less than Almighty, could pluck God's children from such a network of snares and toils, and plant them at last on the high ground of established holiness!

There is a man chained to a wife who is a constant source of temptation and trial to him. There is a wife who sees scarce a peaceful moment in all her life with her husband, all is vexation and sorrow of spirit.

Many parents have children who are a constant trial to them. They are indolent, or they are reckless, or they are self-willed and obstinate. Their own tempers perhaps are chafed, and they become a sore temptation to a similar state of chafed and fretted temper in their parents. On the other hand, children may have equal trials in their parents. Where can you find a family in which the several members are not in some way a source of trial to each other! Sometimes the temptation comes in an appeal to their ambition and pride. Their children have some qualities for the parents to be proud of and this becomes a snare to parents and children both. Oh, how complicated are the temptations which cross and re-cross every pathway of human life! Who but God can save against the power of such temptations?

Many children have been brought up in error. Their parents have held erroneous opinions, and they have had their moral constitution saturated with this influence from their cradle and upwards. How terrible such an influence must inevitably be!

Or, the business of their parents may have been such as to miseducate them -- as the business of rum-selling, for example, and who does not know how terribly this kind of influence cleaves to a man, even as his skin, and seems to become a part of him by pervading the very tissues of his soul!

When the mind gives itself up to self-indulgence, and a host of appetites became clamorous and impetuous, what a labour it must be to bring the soul into harmony with God! How many impulses must be withstood and overcome; how great the change that must be wrought in both the physical and moral state of the man! No wonder that the devil flatters himself that he has got the race of depraved men into his snares and can lead them captive at his will. Think how many thousand years he has been planning and scheming, studying human nature and the laws of depravity, that he may make himself fully master of the hellish art of seducing moral agents away from God and holiness. The truth is, we scarcely begin to realise how artful a devil we have to encounter. We scarcely begin to see how potent an adversary is he who, "like a roaring lion, goes about seeking whom he may devour," and who must be resisted and overcome, or we are not saved.

Many are not aware of the labour necessary to get rid of the influence of a bad education. I speak now of education in the broad, comprehensive sense -- embracing all that moulds the habits, the temper, the affections, as well as develops the intellect. Ofttimes the affections become unhappily attached, yet the attachment is exceedingly strong, and it shall seem like the sundering of the very heart-strings to break it off. This attachment may fasten upon friends, wives, husbands, or children; it may make gold its god, and bow down to such an image. Sometimes we are quite inadequate to judge of the strength of this attachment, except as we may see what strange and terrible means God is compelled to use to sever it. Oh, how does he look with careful, tearful pity upon his entangled and endangered children, marking the bands that are coiled around their hearts to bind them to earth, and contriving how he can best sunder those bands and draw back their wandering hearts to himself! We know he never does afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men -- never his people but for their profit, that they may partake of his holiness; yet who does not know how often he is compelled to bring tears from their eyes; to wring their hearts with many sorrows; to tear from them many a fond and loved object of their affections -- else he could not save them from their propensities towards sin and self-indulgence! Oh, what a work is this which Christ undertakes that he may save his people from their sins! How strange and how complicated are the difficulties! Who could overcome them but God!

Again, the darkness of nature is so great and so gross, that it must be an exceedingly great work to save them from its influence, and pour the true light of God through their intelligence. It is by no means sufficient to know the mere theory of religion, or to know all of religion that the human mind, unenlightened by the Divine Spirit, can know. Indeed, Christians never know themselves except as they see themselves in God's own light. They need to see God's character in its real nature, and then, in view of what God is, they can see and estimate themselves rightly. This is one important part of the truth on this subject; and another point is, that God himself by his Spirit becomes the teacher of the humble and trustful, and so enlightens the understanding that divine

truth can be seen in its real colours and just proportions. And now do you say, O God, show me what I am, and make me know my own heart thoroughly? Did you ever find yourself in doubt and perplexity about your own state, and then, crying for help and light unto God, has he not answered your prayer by first revealing himself and his own character, so that in the light reflected from his character you saw your own, and in the light of his principles of action you saw your own, and in the light shown you as to his heart you also saw your own? You do not see your own state of mind by simply inverting your mental eye and looking within, but by being drawn so near to God that you come into real and deep sympathy with him. Then, seeing and knowing God, you see and know yourself. You cannot help seeing whether your heart responds in sympathy and aim with his, and this very fact reveals your own heart to yourself. It is wonderful how much the Christian learns of himself by truly learning God; and it is not less a matter of wonder and admiration that Christians should experience such moral transformations by simply knowing God, and by being drawn into sympathy with him the more as the more they know him. The great difficulty is that Christians are shy of God -- shy, especially as soon as they relapse into the spirit of the world. Then they find an almost resistless inclination to keep off, to hold themselves aloof from anything like close communion with God. Hence God is compelled to draw them back, to discipline them with afflictions, to spoil their idols, and dash in pieces their graven images. Always awake and on the alert so the Bible represents it: "He that keepeth Israel shall never slumber or sleep." By day and by night he watcheth, and "keepeth them as the apple of his eye!" How wonderful is such condescension and loving kindness!

Finally, the greatness of the change requisite in passing from sin to real holiness -- from Satan's kingdom into full fitness for Christ's, creates no small difficulty in the way of saving even the converted. It is difficult, nay impossible, to make men see this all at once; and, indeed, if the Christian were to see it all at once, it would not unlikely overwhelm him in despair. Hence God wisely lets him see enough to impress strongly his need of divine aid, and enough to make him cry out, "Who then can be saved?"

REMARKS.

But I must make some remarks in application of the subject so far discussed, and reserve the consideration of our remaining points to another time.

We see why the Scriptures are so full of exhortations to Christians to run, RUN, and especially to run by rule. "He that striveth for the mastery must by all means strive lawfully," i. e., according to the rules in such cases made and provided. So let the Christian be careful not only that he runs, but that he runs the right way and in the right manner.

We see, also, why the Christian is exhorted in like manner to fight, grasping the sword, buckling on the shield, putting on the helmet of salvation, preparing himself in all points for a warlike march through an enemy's country, where fighting must be looked for day and night.

Coupled with this is the fitting exhortation to stand fast -- to plant his feet firmly and brace himself with all his strength, as if the enemies' hosts were about to charge with the deadly bayonet. Stand fast, their Captain shouteth; play the man for your king and for yourselves, for the enemy are down upon you in strength and in wrath!

Agonise too, struggle; for fierce will the conflict be. It is no contemptible foe whom you must face. The Scriptures represent that only the violent take this kingdom of God, and they do it "by force." What could be more expressive of the energy to be put forth by Christ's people if they would win the victory and wear the crown?

We see why Christians are represented as wrestling, like men in personal struggle for the mastery. They have a personal enemy to fight and to subdue.

They must, however, give all diligence. A lazy man cannot get to heaven. To get there costs toil and labour. For his will must be sanctified. The entire voluntary department of his being must be renovated. It is remarkable how the Christian warfare develops the will. Not an obstinate will -- not a self-will, do I mean, but a strong and firm will. The man, disciplined in the Christian conflict, cries out, I must and I will believe; I will trust.

The Christian is also commanded to watch -- not to close his eyes for a little more sleep and a little more slumber. His condition is one of hourly peril, and therefore, what Christ says to one, he says to all -- WATCH. We can see the reason for this in the light revealed from our subject.

We see, also, why the Christian is to pray always, as well as to agonise and watch. It is not all to be done by his

own unaided exertions. In fact, one of his chief exertions should turn upon this very point -- that he pray always, "watching thereunto," lest anything draw his heart down from the throne of his Great Helper.

We may also see why Christians are exhorted to separate themselves from the world. They are told they must hang the old man upon the cross. To this there are no exceptions. Whoever would be saved must be crucified -- that is, as to "the old man and his deeds." The crucifixion of Christ is an emblem of this, and serves, therefore, in a measure, to show what this must and should be.

Does any one suppose that the whole intent of Christ's crucifixion is to meet the demands of the violated law? Not so; but it was also to be an emblem of the work to be wrought upon and within the Christian's soul. Its old selfish habitudes must be broken up and its powerful tendencies to evil be slain.

Mark, also, why Christians are exhorted to spend the time of their sojourning here in fear, and to walk softly and carefully, as before God, through all the meanderings of their pilgrimage; in all holy conversation -- so reads his book of counsel -- being steadfast, immovable, always abounding in work -- the work, too, of the Lord, as knowing that so his labour will not be in vain in the Lord. Every weight must he lay aside; must not encumber himself with many cares; must not overload himself with gold, nor even with care and effort to get it; must be watchful most diligently on this side and on that, remembering, for both his quickening and his comfort, that Christ, too, with his holy angels, watches evermore over him, saying, I am determined to save you if I can, but I cannot unless I can first gain and then retain your attention, and then rouse up your hearts to the utmost diligence, coupled with the most simple-hearted faith. Oh, what a conflict there must be to rescue each saved sinner from the jaws of Satan and from the thralldom of his own lusts, and finally bring him home, washed and holy, to his home in the heavens! No wonder the Bible should speak of the Christian as being saved only through much difficulty.

Again, sinners, if they will only exercise a little common sense and philosophy, can readily account for the faults of Christians. See that husband with a pious wife. He treats her badly, and day after day annoys her by his ill-temper and little abuses. The children, too, trouble her, and all the more for the example her husband sets before them. Now he may very likely, in some of his moods of mind and temper, drop some reflections upon her piety, and upon the gospel she professes; but in his more rational moments he will be compelled to say, "No wonder my wife has these faults: I have never helped her at all; I have only hindered her in all her Christian course, and I know I have been a continual source of vexation and irritation to her. No wonder she has had faults. I am ashamed that I have done so much to create and multiply them, and so very little ever in any way to improve her character."

When candid men come to consider all these things, the human constitution, the tendency to unbelief, the impulses towards self-indulgence, and the strength of temptation, they cannot but see that there is abundant occasion for all those faults in Christian character and conduct which they are wont to criticise so stringently. Yet often, perhaps commonly, wicked men make no allowance for the faults of Christians, but assume that every Christian ought to be spotless, while every sinner may make so much apology for his sin as quite to shield his conscience from conviction of guilt. Nothing, therefore, is more common than for impenitent men to triumph, devil-like, over any instance of stumbling in a professed Christian. Why don't they rather sympathise with their difficulties and their great work -- as real philanthropists? That brother who has a Christian sister does not help her at all, but, on the contrary, tries to ensnare her into sin. He should rather say, "I will not be a stumbling block to my sister. If I cannot directly help her on in her Christian course, at least I will not hinder her." Let the impenitent husband say, "My dear Christian wife! I know something about her difficulties; God forbid that I should play into the devil's hands, and try to help the devil on in his devilish work." Sinner, why don't you abstain from ensnaring your Christian friend? There is One above who cares for him, who patiently toils for his salvation, and watches day and night over his progress, and who is pledged to save him at last. And can you hope to gain the favour of that Holy and just Being by trying to ensnare and offend any of his little ones?