

GOD CONDEMNED SIN IN THE FLESH OF JESUS

You may remember that after the resurrection of Christ, he made up to two of his sorrowing disciples incognito as they walked along the road on a business errand to a distant village, and asked them why they were talking so dejectedly together. He knew well what it was that troubled them. Why then did he feign ignorance? Undoubtedly to draw them out. It was a pleasure to him to hear them unfold their feelings with reference to the terrible events of the last three days—a pleasure because he knew how soon and how effectively he was about to apply a balm to their wounds. It is probably a pleasure to every human being to overhear himself talked about, if the communications are those of appreciation. Christ, though so immeasurably above us, shared this feeling in measure. Can we doubt, then that our meeting this morning affords him pleasure? We have just been attentively reading together the very full account of his sufferings written by Matthew at the time. Though withdrawn from the earth, he is not unaware of what is going on, as his message to the seven ecclesias testifies. Have we not also his express statement:

“Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”

With the power of the universal spirit of God at his command, there is no limit to the possibility of his presence. He can fix his attention and be influentially present at any point. It all depends upon what there may be to interest him. He is interested where he is recognised and loved as the result of wisdom reigning. How can he be interested where the carnal mind is in the ascendant and men are only interested in themselves?

We are assembled expressly to do what he commanded.

“Do this (break this bread, drink this wine) in remembrance of me.”

It is his pleasure that we do this, and it is to our benefit. The meaning of it he has told us. It connects with and brings forward the very events that were sorrowfully engaging the minds of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus;

“My body broken: my blood shed” for you.

“It pleased the Lord to bruise him,” so we read in Isaiah—*“to put him to grief.”*

Yet the Lord loved him:

“My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.”

How apparently inconsistent are the two things! Why bruise him if He loved him? There is a full explanation, but we cannot see it unless we comprehensively take the whole system of wisdom of which Christ was the centre in relation to us. There was a history going before, necessitating his appearing. It is too simple for *“the wisdom of the world,”* but we need not be afraid, *“the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.”* Sin had entered, and sin had prevailed, bringing woe and death. What sin is we are told: it is *“the transgression of the law”* (1 John 3:4). It is *“disobedience”* (Rom. 5:19). And what may disobedience be? It is the doing of that which is forbidden: the omission to do what is commanded. And the terrible penalty is death. It is all very simple, and it is all very reasonable. As to the simplicity, the great verities of the universe are all simple. What’s simpler than letting fresh air in by a gullet to give us life? Choke up the gullet with a bit of tough beef, and where is your philosopher? Gone as clean as the meanest strangled rat or rabbit. The high-stepping mightinesses of philosophy are absurd. The great facts of God are simple, and it is our business to *“receive them as little children.”* As to the reasonableness, since God has given us a power of choice, and since this power is capable of being used with great mischief, is it not good and even necessary that His command in this case could be of an imperative obligation? Ought not His will to be the supreme law of life? And ought not insubordination to be insufferable? Is it not

defensible on every ground that the wages of sin should be death? There is only one answer to all these questions, and that answer brings the heartiest endorsement of the ways of God, and the severest rebuke of the shallow presumption that would criticise and disparage these ways.

“By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin, and so death hath passed upon all men for that all have sinned.”

Now, how was this state of things to be remedied? There were three ways of mending it. One way was to exterminate the whole human species. But this would have been a poor remedy. It would have been to confess failure—that God had set a-going an arrangement on this planet for His glory and could not make it work. This was impossible. God has said that He has not made the earth in vain; that He formed it to be inhabited by the righteous; and that as truly as He lives, it will be wholly filled with His glory yet. The second way would have been what might be called the toleration-of-sin method—the universal and indiscriminating pity method, by which the wickedness of disobedience should have been ignored, and mankind allowed to occupy the earth immortally for their own pleasure. But this also was impossible. It would have meant God’s abdication, and the handing over of man to eternal misery. There was a third way—a middle way, and that is the way which has been adopted—namely, to enforce the law against sin, and at the same time leave the door open for mercy to repentant and obedient sinners. How such a method could be made consistent with itself has been exhibited to us in the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ.

There has been no operation in divine wisdom so completely misapprehended and misrepresented as this. The popular preaching of the death of Christ is a complete travesty of it. It brings it down to a level with the sacrifices of idolatrous superstition, by which wrathful deities are supposed to be placated by the blood of a victim in consideration of which, the offerer is supposed to go free. Christ is represented as having paid our debts—as having died instead of us—as having stood in our room like a substitute in military service, or like a man rushing to the scaffold where a criminal is about to be executed, and offering to die instead of him (a favourite illustration in the pulpit).

All this is a complete obscuration of the divine objects in the sacrifice of Christ. Such views are contradicted by even the most superficial facts of the case, for if Christ died instead of us, then we ought not to die (which we do); and if he paid the penalty naturally due from us, he ought not to have risen (which he did) for certainly there would have been no resurrection for us had we died in darkness unredeemed. And if his death was of the character alleged, the redeeming power lay in itself and not in the resurrection that followed; the resurrection that followed was not essential to its efficacy on such a theory of its character—which renders it impossible for us to understand the declaration of Paul to the Corinthians that, notwithstanding the death of Christ,

“If Christ be not raised, your faith is vain, and ye are yet in your sins” (1 Cor. 15:17).

Further, if Christ has paid our debts, our debts are not forgiven, for it would be absurd for a creditor to talk of having forgiven a debt, which someone else has paid for the debtor—and thus is blotted out the very first feature of the Gospel of the grace of God—the forgiveness of our sins—

“Through the forbearance of God” (Rom. 3:25).

What was the meaning of the death of Christ then? It has been defined for us in the words of inspiration and the definition satisfies all the demands of the understanding, reconciling every apparently discordant element in the case. It is defined twice in the course of Paul’s letter to the Romans—in two different forms combining to exhibit the whole case. In the first, he says it was to *“declare His (God’s) righteousness for (and in order to) the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God”* (Ch. 3:25), and in the

second, he says it “*condemned sin in the flesh*” (Ch. 8:3). If we consider these two descriptions, we shall see the meaning of the whole matter.

The crucifixion of Christ as a “*declaration of the righteousness of God*” and “*a condemnation of sin in the flesh,*” must exhibit to us the righteous treatment of sin. It was as though it was proclaimed to all the world, when the body was nailed to the cross. “This is how condemned human nature should be treated according to the righteousness of God; it is fit only for destruction.” The shedding of blood was the ritual symbol of the Truth; for the shedding of the blood was the taking away of life. Such a declaration of the righteousness of God could only be made in the very nature concerned; a body under the dominion of death because of sin. It would not have been a declaration of the righteousness of God to have crucified an angel or a new man made fresh from the ground. There would have been confusion in such an operation. This is why it was necessary that Jesus should be “*made of the seed of David according to the flesh*” (Rom. 1:3), that he might partake of the very flesh and blood of man (Heb. 2:14). It was that nature that was to be operated upon and redeemed in him. It was needful that he should at the first “*come in the flesh.*” This is where the Gnostic heresy of the first century condemned by John (1 John 4:3) was so disastrous to the scheme of God’s wisdom in Christ. They denied that Jesus Christ had come in the flesh, which obscured the lesson taught and the object aimed at in the sacrifice of Christ. This also is the effect of the orthodox doctrine of substitution and the kindred doctrine of Renunciationism which has been ventilated in our day and still lingers in uninformed quarters here and there.

The object of this sacrificial declaration of the righteousness of God is also made clearly manifest in its practical applications. It was “*for (or in order to) the remission of sins that are past,*” that is, where men believe—“*remission,*” not as a legal right accruing, but as the gift of grace, “*through the forbearance of God.*” There would be no “*forbearance*” if a legal claim had been discharged. God “*forgives for Christ’s sake*” (Eph. 4:32). This is the literal issue of the whole matter. God’s supremacy having been vindicated, a foundation has been laid on which He can offer forgiveness without the compromise of wisdom and righteousness. He does not offer it or allow it apart from submission to the declaration of His righteousness in Christ crucified. There must be the most humble identification with that declaration. Baptism in our age is provided as the means of that identification. The believer is “*baptised into his death*” (Rom. 6:3), and “*buried with him in baptism*” (Col. 2:12) and receives the forgiveness of all his sins “*through the forbearance (the kindness, the graciousness) of God,*” who is pleased with our conformity to the form of humiliation He has provided. The whole sacrificial institution and our endorsement of it in baptism is comparable to a form of apology presented to the Majesty of heaven as the condition of our receiving His mercy unto life eternal. The object secured is the triumphant assertion and recognition of God’s supremacy and man’s abasement as a dependent beneficiary. Thus law and mercy are reconciled.

It may be asked, could not such a result have been achieved by the sacrificial immolation of any sinner? So far as the mere condemnation of sin was concerned, no doubt the lesson could have been thus enforced; but as in all the works of God, there were more objects than one. Not only had sin to be condemned, but resurrection had to come in harmony with the Law that made death the wages of sin; and this resurrection was not merely to be a restoration of life, but the provision of an administrator of the glorious results achieved, the raising up of one who should be a mediator between God and man, the dispenser of the forgiveness and the salvation of God through him, and the Judge also of who should be fit to receive these great gifts. All these aims required that the sacrificial victim should be a perfectly righteous man, as well as a possessor of the nature to be sacrificially condemned—who should do no sin himself, while “*made sin*” and treated as sin for us; who should be just

and holy, obedient in all things, while “*numbered with the transgressors and making his grave with the wicked.*” Consequently, it required God’s interposition in the way recorded by the apostles.

“The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, Mary: the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee. Therefore also that holy thing that shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35).

Thus God “*sent forth His Son made of a woman made under the law*” (Gal. 4:4). Being made of a woman, he was of our nature—our condemned and weak and mortal nature, but being begotten of God and not of man, he was in character spotless “*holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners.*” Sin had hold of him in his nature, which inherited the sentence of death from Adam, but it had no hold of him in his character: for he always did those things that were pleasing to his Father. When he died, “*he died unto sin once.*” But God raised him because of his obedience, and,

“Being raised from the dead, he dieth no more: Death hath no more dominion over him” (Rom. 6:9-10).

“Wherefore he is able to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25).

So we may triumphantly enquire with Paul in Rom. 8:33;

“Who shall lay anything to the charge of God’s elect? It is God that justifieth: who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea, rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.”

It is important to understand these things, because they qualify us for acceptable approach to God, and they work out the right result in character and daily life. In dealing even with great men, you are unacceptable if you do not enter into the spirit and aim of their etiquette; how much more with God who “*taketh not pleasure in fools*” and in men “*that have no understanding.*” In our approaches to Him in prayer, we must understand that though He is kind and gracious He makes no compromises of the greatness of His way, but will be “*sanctified in them that approach unto Him.*” We must also understand that we can establish no claim; this passing by of our sins is the act of His forbearance; that no debt of ours has been paid or can be paid; that what the death of Christ has done has been to declare His righteousness that we may, by taking part in it, receive God’s free forgiveness through him. Thus God in all things is glorified. The orthodox theology of the day generates an offensive spirit of presumption.

So also do wrong views on this subject interfere with a proper development of character. The idea that Christ has borne our punishment and paid our debts; and that his righteousness is placed to our credit, and that all we have to do is believe it, is demoralising. It nullifies that other most important element of the Truth, that the unrighteous shall not inherit the Kingdom of God, and that he only is righteous who doeth righteousness. It draws a veil over the truth that we have to “*work out our salvation*” by a “*patient continuance in well-doing,*” and that he only that endureth to the end shall be saved. It undermines that most important testimony of the gospel that Christ is the judge of who is fit to be saved, and that he will impartially give to every man according to his works. These blighting results are to be witnessed in all communities where the doctrine of a substitutionary sacrifice and an imputed righteousness holds sway. Where there is any robust righteousness of character exhibited, where any true holiness of life—it is where the purifying Truth is discerned, believed, and cherished in daily Bible reading and prayer. The Truth is a beautiful and perfect whole. The sacrifice of Christ, at first a mystery to the natural mind, becomes lucid and glorious as a sunbeam of life and light. Enveloped in the clouds of false thoughts and theories, it is hidden

as entirely from view as if it had never been preached. God permit us admission among the noble and gladsome throng that will at last ascribe glory and blessing—

“To him who was slain, and who hath washed them from their sins in his own blood, and hath redeemed them to God out of every kindred and tongue and people and language to reign with him for ever.”

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