

THE GOSPEL IN EZEKIEL

Illustrated in a Series of Discourses

by

Thomas Guthrie, D.D.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

GOD GLORIFIED IN REDEMPTION

And I will sanctify my great name, which was profaned among the heathen (Ezekiel 36:23, 24).

The character of a government may be read in the condition of its subjects. Are they turbulent, in their habits lawless, in their religion superstitious? with coasts full of harbors, and mountains rich in minerals, with a genial climate and a productive soil, are they yet clothed in rags, housed in cabins, steeped to the lips in poverty?

These are the certain signs of bad government. Fields overrun with weeds—fences falling into ruins—the plough rotting in the flooded furrow—and hungry cattle bellowing on scanty pastures—these are the sure signs of bad husbandry. And yonder ragged family, who at school hours are roaming our streets—the unwashed face and tangled hair bespeaking no mother's kindness—hunger in the hollow eye, and pale, emaciated features—these are the sure and too common signs of an unhappy parentage. They suggest the picture of a home at the top of some filthy stair, or in some foul den of a cellar, where a miserable father, the neglected victim of disease and poverty, lies stretched upon the floor, or is still more likely—where a brutal drunkard lives, the tyrant of his children, and the terror of his wife. Thus we judge of a sovereign by his subjects, and thus we see the husbandman in his farm, and the father in his family.

It may be—it were indeed unfair—to apply this rule to our faith and its Founder. Yet men have done so, and will do so; and thus the cause of God and religion is made to suffer grievous injury at the hand of its nominal friends. By their coldness, their worldliness, their selfishness, their open sinfulness, the little apparent difference between them and those who make no profession at all—nay, sometimes, by their glaring inferiority to the latter in the blow and fruit of the natural virtues—professing Christians—like Tenders of a bad coinage, have exposed genuine piety to suspicion, and inflicted its deepest wounds on the cause of Christ.

Seeing how, in natural races—kindness of heart—sweetness of temper—generosity—the common charities of life; mere men of the world lose nothing by comparison with such professors, how are you to keep the world from saying, “Ah! your man of religion is no better than others; nay, he is sometimes worse?”

With what frightful prominence does this stand out in the answer—never to be forgotten answer— of an Indian chief to the missionary who urged him to be a Christian. The plumed and painted savage drew himself up in the consciousness of superior rectitude, and, with indignation quivering on his lip and flashing in his eagle eye, replied, “Christian lie! Christian cheat! Christian steal!—drink!— murder! Christian has robbed me of my lands and slain my tribe!” adding, as he turned haughtily on his heel, “the Devil, Christian! I will be no Christian.”

Let such reflections teach us to be careful how we make a religious profession; but having made it—cost what it may cost—to be careful in acting up to it, for “**It is better not to vow, than, having vowed, not to pay.**”

These remarks are suggested by the fact already adverted to in the previous discourses—that the interests of truth and the name of God suffered in Babylon, in consequence both of the miserable outward condition and still more miserable moral condition of the people of Israel. Reduced to bondage, sunk lower still— for, compared to a sinner, how free is a slave?—they exceeded their masters in crime, and went to greater excess of riot.

The heathen—who overlooked the sins of which their misery was the righteous punishment—naturally enough concluded, that the God of a people so wretched and so worthless, must be a weak—perchance a wicked one. Thus God’s name was profaned, and the Lord himself dishonored, till the time arrived, when, arising to plead the cause that was his own, God sanctified his great name in the fortunes of his people, and in the sight of the heathen.

Passing over the special application of these words to the Jews, and looking at them in their prophetic connection with the scheme of redemption, I now remark—

I. That God might have vindicated his honor and sanctified his name in our destruction.

He sanctified his name in the emancipation of his ancient people. When by one blow he struck the fetters from a nation’s limbs, baptized them with his Spirit, gave them favor in the sight of kings, and brought back these weary exiles, with songs and gladness, to Jerusalem, then God was sanctified in the midst of all the heathen.

His power, wisdom, holiness, and goodness, were illustrated in the renewed character, joyous homes, and happy fortunes of his people. Now, God might undoubtedly have sanctified himself in them otherwise—vindicating his character in such destruction upon Zion, as he here threatens upon Sidon—“**Behold, I am against thee, O Sidon, and I will be glorified in the midst of thee, and they shall know that I am the Lord when I shall have executed judgment in her, and shall be sanctified in her; I will send with her pestilence and blood into her streets; and they shall know that I am the Lord.**”

Two methods of glorifying his name are open to God. He is free to choose either; but by the one or the other way he will exact his full tale of glory from every man. In Egypt, for instance, he was glorified in the high-handed destruction of his enemies; and, in the same land, by the high-handed salvation of his people.

In the one case he proved how strong his arm was to smite, and in the other how strong it was to save. He gave Egypt's king—ere he was done with him—a terrible answer to his insolent question, "**Who is the Lord that I should serve him?**"

- God was sanctified before Pharaoh, when, hurrying to the banks of the Nile, and turning pale at the sight, he saw them filled with blood—blood brimming in every goblet, and blood flowing in every channel.

- God was again sanctified before Pharaoh, when he saw the same skies rain ice and fire,

- God was again sanctified before Pharaoh, when, startled at midnight by a nation's wail, and summoned to the bed of his heir and eldest born, he saw him, stiff and dead—smitten by the angel of death.

And God was again sanctified before Pharaoh, when—as he looked along the watery vista—he saw Moses come down in the grey of morning to the shore, and watching the last Hebrew safe on land, stretch his rod out upon the deep, whose waves, roaring on their prey, now rush from either flank on the power of Egypt, and bury pale rider and snorting horse— all that bannered army—in their whirling waters.

The sea refused God's enemies a grave. She flung them out upon her shore. Moses stands over the body of the king; and as he gazes on that glassy eye, which had lost its haughtiness, and those lips, whose insolence the waters had washed away, how might he stoop down, and say, Now you know who is the Lord! Oh! Had the seal of death been broken— removed from these blue, discolored lips—theirs had been this solemn utterance, "**Let the potsherds strive with the potsherds of the earth; woe to the man that striveth with his Maker.**"

In like manner, God sanctified his name in the plains of Sodom. He sanctified it, on the one hand, in the destruction of his enemies, and on the other, in the salvation of Lot. Ah! then the world ceased to doubt his character, and perhaps angels ceased to wonder that such wickedness was allowed on earth. The light of the city's conflagration illuminated his holiness, and his throne rose up in dread and awful majesty amid the smoking ruins.

And how was he sanctified in that wretched fugitive, who has crossed but half the plain; a wife, she comes not to a husband's calls—a mother, she stirs not to her children's piercing cry. Look at that spectral form with head turned on the burning ruins— a woman, stiffened into stone, with her cold grey eyes staring large on Sodom, and the surprise—horror—that had seized her soul, as she felt her warm flesh hardening into stone, carved on these rigid features!

"**Remember Lot's wife.**" She stands there an example of God's power to sanctify his name, and an awful lesson to the end of time. Deep on the statue's stony brow these words are engraven— "**No man having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.**"

Since there are two ways open to God, by either of which he may sanctify his great name, he might therefore, at the Pall, have vindicated his justice by swift and unsparing vengeance—by destroying the whole human family. He did so, in the ease of fallen angels.

Of these, there was no wreck or remnant saved. Not one escaped. No ark floated on the waters, to which— like Noah's, dove—a flying angel pursued by wrath might turn his weary wing. Can it be doubted, that the measure meted out to fallen angels, God might have meted out to fallen men?— sanctifying his great name in our ruin, rather than in our redemption.

Now, before I show how he sanctifies himself in the redemption of his people, let me warn you, that what God might have done with all, he shall do with some—with all indeed who despise, or refuse, or neglect this great salvation. Yes; the trees shall burn that will not bear. Be assured, that God loses nothing in the end. He will make his own use of every man, extracting glory out of all—even from cumberers of the ground. If you are not good for fruit, you shall serve for fuel. God is not willing that any should perish; willing, most willing, rather that the sinner should live, he follows him to the very gate of hell, crying, **“turn ye, turn ye, why will ye die?”**

Yet be warned in time; you cannot escape the alternative; this or that you must choose—to honor God by your active or your passive obedience. God help you, like Mary, to choose the better part! This day, I set before you **“life and death.”** Will you do his will in heaven, or suffer it in hell? How terrible the words! **“God hath made all things for himself, yea, even the wicked for the day of wrath.”**

II. God sanctifies his name, and glorifies himself in our redemption.

It is easy to destroy—to destroy character, virtue, life, anything. Falling with murderous strokes on you noble tree, the woodman's axe destroys in a few hours, what it has required centuries to raise. Look at that beautiful gourd, under whose green and grateful shade the prophet sits!

Emblem of all happiness that has its root in earth, it falls by means as weak as a worm's teeth; the poisonous east wind breathes on its leaves, the hot sun glares on them, and they wither away. An ounce of lead, one inch of steel, a drop distilled from a serpent's fang, even a grain of sand lodged in the passages of life—any one of these is fatal. They turn this living, delicate, wondrous fabric into a heap of undistinguishable dust—a handful of cold, black ashes.

In the body man destroys what God only can make, and in this more precious and immortal soul, Satan destroys what God only can save. It needs but a devil to ruin the spirit, but it needs a Divinity to redeem it. It needs but a villain to steal virtue, it needs a divine power to restore the stolen jewel. How much easier is it to kill a man than cure him?

To be an executioner than a physician? To sit robed on the bench of justice, and, assuming her fatal cap, to condemn a poor wretch to die; to draw the bolt and launch a soul into another world; to stand on the field of battle, and with leveled musket— by a motion of the finger—to dash a fellow creature into eternity—these are easier than to bless with one hour's sleep a bed of pain, It is easier to stop this pulse forever, than bring down its death gallop to the calm and measured march of health. And as, in such cases, man's glory is more illustrated by curing than by killing, so God's glory is more preeminent in our redemption than it had been in our final and everlasting ruin.

Excepting of course the preacher's—for with Paul we magnify our office—of all earthly employments it appears to me that the physician's is the noblest, and that of all arts the healing art is the highest, and offers to genius and benevolence their noblest field.

Casting no disparagement on the brave and gallant spirits who have guarded a country's shores—and some of whom falling in the ranks of battle have offered noble examples of soldiers, true both to an earthly crown and a Saviour's cross—yet we know that the aim of a warrior is ingeniously to invent, and his business effectively to use, instruments of destruction.

His greatest achievements are wrought where deadly wounds are suffered; his proudest triumphs are won where burning cities blaze over blood-stained hearths, and, horrible to think of! where fields are fattened with human gore; his laurels are watered with tears; his course, like the hurricane, is marked by destruction; and it is his unhappy lot—perhaps the unhappiest view of arms as a profession—that he cannot conquer foes but at the sacrifice of friends.

Now, in the eye of reason, and of a humanity that weeps over a suffering world, his is surely the nobler vocation—and, if not more honored—the more honorable calling who sheds blood, not to kill, but cure; who wounds not that the wounded may die, but live; and whose genius ransacks earth and ocean in search of means to save life, to remove deformity, to repair decay, to invigorate failing powers, and restore the rose of health to pallid cheeks.

His aim is not to inflict pain, but relieve it—not to destroy a father, but—standing between him and death—to save his trembling wife from widowhood, and these little children from an orphan's lot.

And if, although they be wove round no coronet, those are fairer and fresher laurels which are won by saving than by slaying; if it is a nobler thing to rescue life than destroy it, even when its destruction is an act of justice; then, on the same principle, God most glorified himself when revealed in the flesh, and speaking by his Son, he descended on a guilty world—this his purpose—“**I came not to judge the world, but to save it,**”—and this his character—“**The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth.**”

Apart, however, from this general consideration, I remark that the scheme of redemption is eminently illustrative of the attributes of the Lord. For example—

I. His power is glorified in the work of salvation.

Its path is marked, and its pages are crowded with stupendous miracles. At one time God stays the waves of the sea, at another he stops the wheels of the sun, and, now reversing the machinery of heaven to confirm his word, he makes the shadow travel backwards on the dial of Ahab.

Heaven descends to earth, and its inhabitants walk the stage of a world's redemption. Here one angel speaks out of a burning bush, and there another leaps on a burning altar, and, with wing unscorched, ascends to heaven in its flame. Here a prophet, exempted from the law of death, goes up to glory in a fiery chariot, and there another in the belly of a whale goes down into the depths of ocean.

In contradiction of the laws of nature, a body that should have gravitated to the earth, floats, from the top of Olivet, upward into the ambient air. Across a lake which frost never bound, and winter never paved with ice, walks a human form, stepping on from billow to billow.

The tenant of the grave becomes its conqueror, and, laying by its cerements as nightclothes left in bed, he walks forth on the dewy grass at the break of day; the prisoner has bound his jailer and carried off the keys. Over Bethlehem's fields, angels with the light of their wings turn night into day, and shepherds, who watch their flocks, are regaled by voices of the skies—the song of heaven over a babe, who has a poor woman for his mother, and a stable for his birthplace. Nor less remarkable, the deaf are listening to the songs of the dumb, and the blind are gazing on the dead alive; a dumb beast takes human speech and rebukes the hoary sage; ravens leave their young to cater in the fields for man; and angels abandon heaven to bold sentinel watch by the grave of One whom God forsook, his country rejected, friends repudiated, and none but a thief confessed.

And amid these wonders and thousands more, acted before men's eyes on the stage of redemption, and all so illustrative of the presence and power of God, the greatest wonder—the wonder of wonders—is He that works them; the Son of a virgin! dust and Divinity! Creator and Creature! **“the mystery of godliness, God manifest in the flesh.”** Truly, **“This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.”**

But to glance at the change wrought in redemption on man himself, what amazing power does it display! What a glorious combination of benevolence and omnipotence! Punishment is confessedly easier than reformation. Nothing is more easy than to rid society of a criminal by the hand of an executioner; but to soften his stony heart, to get him to fall in love with virtue, to make him an honest, honorable, kind, and tender man, to guide his erring steps from the paths of crime—ah! that is another thing.

Hence, by men callous of heart, and deaf to the groans of suffering humanity, the preference given to prisons over schools, to punishment over prevention. Well, then, since it is confessedly easier—easier, not better; easier, not in the end cheaper—to punish than reform, I say that God's power is more illustriously displayed in pardoning one guilty—in purifying one polluted man, than if the law had been left to take her sternest course, and our entire family had been buried in the ruins of the fall.

We honor justice when she holds the balance even, and before a land that cries for blood, brings out the murderer to hang him up in the face of the sun: **“whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed.”** Yet, like the Romans, who decreed a crown to him that saved a citizen, we would hold him worthy of highest honors who brings forth a criminal from his cell, so changed as to be worthy, not only of being restored to the bosom of society, but of holding a place in the senate, or some post of dignity beside the throne. That were an achievement of brilliant renown—a victory over which humanity and piety would shed tears of joy.

To compare small things with great, something like this—but unspeakably nobler and greater—God works in salvation.

For example—In John Bunyan, he calls the bold leader of village reprobates to preach the gospel; a blaspheming tinker to become one of England's famous confessors; and from the gloomy portals of Bedford jail, to shed forth the luster of his sanctified and resplendent genius to the farther limits of the world, and adown the whole course of time.

From the deck of a slave ship he summons John Newton to the pulpit; and by hands defiled with Mammon's most nefarious traffic, he brings them that are bound out of darkness, and smites adamantine fetters from the slaves of sin.

In Paul, the Apostle of the Gentiles, he converts his Son's bitterest enemy into his warmest friend. To the man whom a trembling church held most in dread, she comes to owe, under God, the weightiest obligations. In Paul she has her boldest champion, her greatest logician, the most gallant of her defenders, her grandest preacher, the prince of Apostles, the largest contributor to this imperishable volume. How much better for these three stars to be shining in heaven, than quenched in the blackness of darkness.

Better for the good of man—better for the glory of God. In them, and in all the sainted throng around them, has not God more illustriously displayed his power, than if he had crushed them by the thunders of his vengeance, and buried them in the depths of hell?

The power of Divinity culminates in grace. Oh, that we may become its monuments, and be built up by the hands of an eternal Spirit, to the glory of the cross! And why not? Look at these men! Think what they were; behold what they are! and, addressing your prayers to him whose ear is never heavy that it cannot hear, nor his hand shortened that it cannot save, be this your earnest, your urgent cry, **“Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord, Awake, as in the ancient days in the generations of old.”**

~ end of chapter 8 ~

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