

THE GOSPEL IN EZEKIEL

Illustrated in a Series of Discourses

by

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CHAPTER TWELVE

MAN JUSTIFIED

Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you (Ezekiel 36:25).

In the earliest peopled regions of the world, there still stand some ancient monuments, bold in plan, and colossal in dimensions, defying both time and change. Raised, as these rude structures were, in the very infancy of art, and ere the giant arms of machinery had grown into their present strength, they are objects of deep interest, both to the architect and antiquary. How came these great stones there? By what means or machinery did man, in days so rude, raise such ponderous masses?

Science has questions as inexplicable to put regarding the works of nature. We climb a mountain range, and, standing on its apex, see valley and plain stretching far away to meet the ocean, that lies, gleaming like a silver border, on the dim and distant horizon. After expatiating on the beauties of the scene around us, our eye turns downwards, and lights on a very extraordinary object—a shell—a plant—a zoophyte, whose proper habitat is the low sea-shore—or, lower still, down in the dark depths of ocean embedded in the rock. How came it here? what business has it here? We find, in fact, that, although now raised some thousand feet above the sea, the platform on which we stand had once been an ocean's bed. And he would be a stupid man, in whose mind the question would not rise, what agent, of tremendous power was that, which, upheaving the crust of earth, has turned the floor of a sea, where corals grew, and fish swam, into a mountain crag whereon eagles build their nests.

In the Providence which determines the lot of man, history presents subjects not less interesting. It is a curious thing how a sea shell came to be embedded in the summit of a mountain crag. It is even a curious thing to watch the progress of a worm, as it climbs up tree or wall to the place of its apparent death and beautiful resurrection. It is still more interesting to see a man fighting, toiling, tearing his way up from the bottom, to the sunny but often cold and stormy pinnacles of society; so that, perhaps, when dead, he, whose birth a cottage saw, lies in state within a palace. There are all manner of ways by which men rise in the world. Some, flung up by national convulsions, rise like the fire stones shot from a volcano's mouth; they flare for a little, and then are lost in night. Some, like seaweed or an empty shell, are thrown up by the wave of popular agitation, only by its reflux to be swept back again into oblivion.

Some rise in times of trouble and of turmoil, like the dust and light straws of the whirlwind; the lighter they are the more sure are they to rise. Some ascend by the foul and slippery path of crime, rising on other men's shoulders, and building dishonest fortunes on honest men's ruin. While some—being amid all the mysteries of Providence, witnesses that there is a just God upon earth—illustrate the adage of the world, "Honesty is the best policy," and the still better saying of Scripture, "**Godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.**" But there is no rising so interesting to study, or by those who are fired with a holy ambition, so blessed to emulate, as that of a sinner into a saint—of a soul to glory. That man, however, enjoys one of the charms of history, and reads one of the strangest chapters in the book of Providence, who traces the successive steps by which great actors in the theatre of this world have mounted to fame and fortune out of the deepest obscurity.

To us there are inquiries of greater interest than any of these. Few rise from cottages to be kings—nor are such giddy elevations desirable; most men fall and are crushed before they reach the top of their ambition, and the few who have reached it have learned that "uneasy lies the head that wears a crown."

It is of little moment to me, how this base-born but brave peasant reached a throne; but to me it is everything to know how this sinner became a saint, and from being the slave of Satan and very drudge of sin rose to a crown in heaven—to be a king and priest to God.

If I am engrossed with the momentous interests of eternity, and have not yet made my calling sure, but am still lying in the anxieties and darkness of spiritual distress, it will be of little importance to me, how the shell, which once lay in the depths of ocean, has been raised into the light and regions of the sunny air, but to me it is everything to know, how I, lying buried beneath the wrath of God, can be raised to the sunshine of his peace and favor. To me the question is of the highest importance, which the elder put to John, when, pointing to the multitude whom no man can number, "**who stood before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands,**" he said, "**who are these, and whence came they?**"

I am deeply interested to know by what means these, each one—originally like myself—a being of sin and guilt, escaped the wrath of God, and rose to such lofty favor? Recognizing in that company, one, and another, and yet another—who were the chief of sinners, I take heart to say, if they got up there, why should not I? The door that was wide enough and high enough for them, cannot be too strait or low for me.

These questions, in other words, how does God save the sinner? and what am I to do to be saved? —questioning, the most important which you can ask, or I can attempt to answer, are those at which, in the progress of these discourses, we are now arrived.

I intend, God helping me, to set forth the means by which He who is most willing to save sinners, accomplishes his generous and gracious purpose. I am now to show you that famous breach by which the soldiers of the cross, led on by their Captain, with banners flying and sword in hand, have taken the kingdom, and, trampling under foot the body of sin, have entered into glory with holy violence.

We are now to look upon that famous ladder which the hand of God has let down from heaven, and by which Abel, and Adam, and Enoch, and Noah, and Abraham, and Jacob, and Daniel, and Peter, and Paul, and the Marys, and Dorcas, and Phcebe—martyrs and confessors, prophets and saints—pressing on each other's heels, have scaled the walls of glory, and entered into possession of the celestial city. And now, as the angel who had blown the coal and baked the bread beside the lonely sleeper—for such things angels will do for saints—woke Elijah and said to him, **“rise and eat;”** with this ladder within, your reach—you at its foot, and heaven at its top—I say, rise and climb. What meanest thou, sleeper? What do you sleeping there? The slightest turn, and you roll over into the pit, on whose dreadful edge sinners make their bed. Rouse up, look up, rise and climb; God helping you by faith, lay hold of Him who says—**“I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.”**

In entering on the subject of a sinner's justification, I remark—

I. *God's people are not chosen because they are holy.*

They are chosen *that they may become holy*, not because they have become so. It is after God elects that God justifies, as it is after he has justified that he sanctifies. This appears—stands out—most visibly in the very terms of the text, **“then will I sprinkle clean water upon you,”** Do not, I pray you, suppose that we disparage holiness. In the doctrines of grace holiness holds a most important place; a place so important—so prominent and conspicuous—that the notion, once current, that the doctrine of a free salvation through the mercy of God and the merits of Christ alone is unfavorable to the interests of morality, can only be ascribed to the malice of the natural heart, or the grossest ignorance. These doctrines set forth the love of Christ as a believer's great motive power, and it might be a sufficient refutation of the calumny to quote the glowing exclamation of the poet—

“Thou bleeding lamb!
The best morality is love of Thee.”

But what place in the scheme of grace do we assign to holiness? what language do we hold regarding it? We say that without holiness no man shall see God. Could more be asked or said than that? We say so to all men—

- To the sovereign on his throne we say, Without holiness thou shalt never wear a crown in heaven;
- To the minister in his pulpit we say, Without holiness thou shalt never minister before the Throne—thou mayest save others, but shalt be thyself a castaway;
- To the communicant at the Lord's table we say, Without holiness thou shalt never sit at the marriage supper of the Lamb; thou mayest drink of the juice of the grape—but shalt never drink the new wine of his **“Father's kingdom;”**

We say to all, **“If any man have not the spirit of Christ, he is none of his.”** You may have his name; but that is worth nothing; unless with the name you have the nature of Him who was holy, harmless, and undefiled.

Grace may make you his; but whatever you may become, you are not so now, unless there be germinating in you the mind of Him who was holiness in the flesh—incarnate virtue. We ever echo the exhortation of the Apostle, “**Be careful to maintain good works.**”

This is surely no lax or immoral creed. So far from holding good works cheap, we say that:

- By them God is glorified,
- By them faith is justified,
- By them on the great day of judgment shall every man be tried.

You are not to be justified by your works, but you are to be tried by them. The rule of that day shall be this—“**the tree is known by his fruit.**”

“**Every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire.**” Are any of you, then, living in sin—known, habitual, cherished sin—and yet in hope? Oh, how great is your mistake! You may be saved from your sins, you cannot be saved in your sins. One sin, even one! is the “**dead fly, that maketh the apothecary’s ointment to stink;**” is the leak, however small and concealed from the public eye, which, if not stopped, fills and sinks the ship. And how will they be affected to your account on the day when spiritual rewards are meted out.

Men talk of poverty, misfortune, disease, bereavement, as evils! There is no radical evil in this world but sin; if you still persist in calling other things evils, remember sin is their mother—these her hateful progeny. No sin, no suffering; no sin, no sorrow; no sin, no sting, no death, no grave, no hell. We change the word of Paul, and, so changed, apply to sins what he spoke of the sailors. he said of the seamen, “Except these abide in the ship ye cannot be saved.” To prevail on you to abandon and cast your sins—these Jonahs—overboard, we say, if these abide ye cannot here the Master’s “**well done!**”

Now, while maintaining, to the utmost, that holiness is essential to salvation, we nevertheless regard it as of the highest importance that holiness should have a right and not a wrong place in our system. Should earthquakes shake the ground, or even rude storms the air, that pyramid must stand unsafely which, according to the poet,

“Like an inverted cone,
Wants the proper base to stand upon.”

That body would be a monster in nature, hideous of aspect, and happily of brief existence, which should have its organs and members so misplaced, that the hands should occupy the place of the feet, and whose heart should beat in the cavity of the brain. The fruitfulness, beauty, the very life of a tree, depends not only on its having roots and branches, but on these members being placed in their natural order.

Let a tree be planted upside down—the roots in the air and the branches in the earth—and I need not ask how much fruit it would yield, nor how many seasons the unhappy plant would survive such barbarous and blundering treatment.

Well, if it be of such consequence in these things not to depart from the order established in nature, it is of no less consequence not to depart from the order established in the kingdom of grace? It is not enough that men hold right doctrines—nay in a sense hold all the doctrines. The right doctrines must be, in the right places. Your astronomy may include all the bodies that enter into our solar system, but if it give a satellite the imperial position of the sun, your system passes into inextricable confusion.

The machine may have all its parts, “but, if the great wheel that moves them, or the balance-wheel that regulates them, revolve on any shaft but its own, the entire mechanism stops, or flies round in furious and destructive disorder. Even so, although all the doctrines of the gospel be present in our creed, we may commit a great, a dangerous—possibly a fatal mistake —by any mal-arrangement that would put these out of their proper place. And such is their mistake who build election upon holiness—not holiness upon election; who regard good works, not as the result, but the cause of God’s mercy; and who, mistaking the root for the fruit, think that God adopts men because they are holy; when, in point of fact, he makes them holy, just because he has adopted them.

This, believe me, is not an example of the nice and fine distinctions which theologians sometimes spin; nor of the matters about which bigots may contend, but good men need give themselves no trouble. Some small things have great effects. A slight wedge of wood or small pebble lying upon the slip, prevents the vessel from being launched on the bosom of a tide that swells to receive her in its arms.

The full tide of love flows in Jesus’ heart, his bosom is open to receive the sinner, everything conspires to his salvation, and yet in such happy circumstances, we have seen the notion, that a man must be holy before he goes to Christ, arrest a soul that had already moved, advanced, got some way in its course, and as we thought, was off for heaven. *This is a delusion of the enemy of souls.*

I believe it to be a common wile of Satan. When conscience gets so uneasy, that for all the devil’s rocking it won’t sleep, and men grow anxious about their eternal interests, and will be out of the “City of Destruction,” it is no uncommon thing with him to send them away in a wrong direction. Would you make yourselves more pure and more penitent, that you may have some right to divine mercy? You are trying to weave ropes of sand, and he who has set you to a task so impracticable knows well that you will by and bye abandon it in despair; and then, perhaps, returning to your old favorite sins, like a drunkard to his cup after a season of sobriety, you will furnish another illustration of the saying—“**The last state of that man is worse than the first.**”

With God’s help I would endeavor to disabuse your minds of such an error.

For that purpose, let me borrow an illustration from an asylum, which, in the form of a ragged school, opens its loving arms to the outcast, like the Gospel which it teaches, and seeks to train up to God and glory the poor children whom its piety and pity adopts. On entering these blessed doors—the gate of hope to many—your attention is caught by a child, who is supported there by the bounty of some generous Christian.

The boy now can spell his way through a bible—once a sealed book to him; he knows now, and, in tones fitted to melt any heart, he sweetly-sings of a Saviour, of whom once he knew not even the name. These little hands are now skillful to weave the net or ply the shuttle, which once were alert only to steal, or held out in their pitiful emaciation to plead for charity; and there is such sharp intelligence in that bright eye, and such an open air of honesty in his beaming face, and such attention to cleanliness appears in his dress and person, and such buoyancy in his whole bearing, as if hope hailed a brighter future for that poor child, that these bespeak your favor.

But do you conclude that they were the child's passport to this asylum? Do you suppose, that when he wandered, an outcast upon the winter streets, shoeless among the snow, shivering in the cold, it was what now so interests you that caught the eye of pity, or that to these habits and accomplishments, learned under a parental roof, the child owed his adoption? How great your mistake.

This were, indeed, to turn things upside down. He was adopted, not for the sake of these, but notwithstanding the want of them. It was *the very want of them*, which, if I may so speak, *carried his election*. It was his wretchedness that saved him. It was his very misery—when he stood there with beggary on his back and hunger in his looks, cold, naked, wretched, wretched—which pleaded for him, and, with more power than eloquence, melted men's hearts and gained his cause.

The clean hands, and rosy cheek, and lighted eye, and decent habits, and arts and knowledge, and all which now wins our regard *are the consequences of his adoption*, and never were nor could be its cause. Even so is it with holy habits and a holy heart in the matter of redemption—

“Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you,” says God. Blessed truth! Glad tidings, indeed, to sinners! for, since God chooses his people, not because they are holy, but to make them so, who may not be chosen? and who should not hope? To my eye hope, in that truth, bends her bright bow on life's blackest cloud, and sends a beam of light down into the guiltiest heart.

II. *In redemption, the saved are not justified by themselves, but by God.*

This is no recondite truth—one which we need to dig or dive for. The pearl lies in the dark depths of the sea, but gold commonly lies near the surface of the earth. Like the precious ore gleaming from the naked rock, this truth shines on the face of my text; a child's eye can catch it there, and a child's mind comprehend it. For how is a sinner made clean? but through the application of what is here called clean water; and by whom, according to the text, is that water applied? It is applied *to* the sinner, but not *by* the sinner.

Elisha remained in his house, and did not accompany Naaman to the banks of Jordan. Commanded by the prophet to wash, and—when pride was ready to revolt from so mean a remedy—persuaded by his servants that it were a foolish thing not to try so small a remedy for so great a curse, the Syrian descended into the water; and, going down a leper, rose at the seventh dip with a skin fresh as a new born child's. A type of salvation in one respect, that case is not so in another.

It is not so in this, that Naaman bathed himself—the sinner does not. Here, as in the sacrament of baptism, there are two parties. The baptized and the baptizer are not one. The water is applied by another's hand; and, as no man baptizes, so no man saves himself, no man justifies himself, no man ever sprinkled himself with that atoning blood, which we shall show to be symbolized by this **“clean water.”**

The bloody baptism is administered by the hand which kindled the sun, stretched out the curtain of the heavens, and sustains the universe. To God, as Author and Finisher of our faith, the whole glory of salvation belongs; for, observe how he says in my text—**“I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean.”**

Job inquires, **“How should man be just with God?”** A great question—one in which we have the deepest interest—one for which the Gospel was revealed, and the cross of Calvary raised to answer—and one to which our own merits and works furnish no satisfactory solution. It is natural, most natural, for us to trust in these. I do not deny it.

Observe what happens when the cry rises at sea—“A man overboard!” You rush to the side of the vessel; you watch the place where the rising air-bells and boiling deep tell that he has gone down. After some moments of breathless anxiety, you see his head emerge from the wave. Now, that man is no swimmer—he has never learned to breast the billows; yet, with the first breath he draws, he begins to beat the water; with violent efforts he attempts to shake off the grasp of death, and, by the play of limbs and arms, to keep his head from sinking.

His struggles may only exhaust his strength, and sink him all the sooner, nevertheless, that drowning wretch makes instinctive and convulsive efforts to save himself. So, when first brought to feel that we are perishing—when the horrible conviction rushes into our mind that we are lost, and we feel ourselves going down under a load of guilt into the depths of wrath, our first effort, also, is to save ourselves. Like a drowning man, who clutches at straws and twigs, we seize on anything, however worthless, that promises salvation.

Thus, alas! many toil and spend weary, painful, unprofitable days in attempting to establish a righteousness of their own, and to find in the deeds of the law protection from its curse.

There was a time, no doubt, when man had his fortunes in his own hand; but that time is gone—our power passed away with our purity. Impotence has followed the loss of innocence, and we have nothing now left us but a wretched pride. Amid the changes which this world presents, I have seen a man who had known better days—who had been nursed in luxury, and reared in the lap of fullness—outlive his fortune, and sink into the baseness and meanness of the deepest poverty. It seems to be in such circumstances with men as with plants.

Naturalists say that it is much more difficult to get a mountain plant to accommodate itself to a low locality, than to get one, which by birth belongs to the valleys, to live and thrive at a lofty elevation. So, there seems nothing more difficult to men than to descend gracefully, and for those who have been accustomed to a high position in society to reconcile themselves to a humble one.

And thus I have seen such an one as I have described, when he had lost his wealth, retain in his vanity what he should first have parted with, and continue proud even when he had become poor. So is it with us in our low and lost estate. Spiritually poor, we are spiritually proud—saying, **“I am rich and increased in goods, and have need of nothing,”** while we are **“wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.”**

Even when we are in some degree sensible of our poverty, and know we cannot pay, we are yet like the unjust steward, ashamed to beg. With a pride that assorts ill with the rags we wear, we will not stoop to stand at God’s door, poor mendicants, who ask for mercy. We will work out our own salvation—nor be beholden to another. Nor, sometimes, if not always, till the sinner learns, by prolonged and painful trials, that he cannot be his own savior, does this proud heart of ours allow us to stand suppliants at the gate of Mercy—our plea for pardon not our own merits—nothing, nothing whatever but Jesus’ merits and our own misery. Yet thus and there we must stand if we would be saved, Jesus is the Saviour of the lost, and of none but the lost.

Now, to bring us down to this conviction, and to draw from our lips the cry, “Lord save me, I perish,” God in mercy often leaves those, whom he calls, to try their hand at working out their own salvation, and of the rubbish and untempered mortar of their own works and vows to build up a righteousness of their own. They toil and labor at the Babel tower—a tower to reach to heaven. It rises imposingly. It grows lofty, and looks strong; until some day, conscience awakens, and there follows an earthquake of the soul which shakes it to its foundation; or some sudden gust of temptation strikes it, and lays the labor of years in ruins upon the ground. This ruin proves their redemption: for—first step in a right direction—they at least come to feel, that, notwithstanding their utmost efforts to live holily, holy they are not.

God deals with them as Jesus did on Galilee with Simon Peter. Impetuous, self-satisfied, puffed up with vanity,

Peter will walk the sea to show off his power and prove his superiority to the other disciples. His Master lets him try it. Jesus bids him come; *not that he may drown Simon, but drown Simon’s pride*. Boldly he ventures on the water. He begins to walk; but, alarmed at his new position as he rises and falls with the swell of the waves, he begins to fear, and, like a cause which is lost for want of courage, he begins to sink—lower and lower still he sinks, till the cold water rises to his heart, and kisses his drowning lip.

Painful but profitable lesson! His danger and failure have taught him his weakness; terror masters shame, and, stretching out his arms to Christ, he cries, **“Lord, save me, I perish.”**

Now, to this state, and this very confession, all who are to be saved must first be brought.

“I perish,” is a saving word. **“I perish,”** like the cry of the child in the natal chamber, is the first utterance of a new existence. He who raises his eyes to heaven to cry, **“I perish,”** **“Lord, save me, I perish,”** has planted his foot on the first round of the ladder that raises man from earth to heaven.

Have you got your foot there? from lips pale with terror, have you ever cried “**Lord, save me, I perish.**”

This confession and this petition will, sooner or later, rise to God from the man, who, through the influence of God’s grace and spirit, is intelligently, seriously, resolutely, bent on salvation. We say so, because no man ever yet tried to live without sinning and succeeded. Who that ever tried it has not failed? Who has not found, that it were as easy for a man of mortal mold and weight to walk the water, as to walk this world one day without sin? Oh, has not He who is angry with the wicked every day, reason to be angry every day with the best of us? “**In many things we offend.**”

Imagine not by your vows, and engagements, and promises, and resolutions, to restrain the corruption of your nature—to bind the limbs of “**the old man.**” That “**old man,**” although old, is ever young. To him age brings no infirmities. He grows in strength with increase of years. Vulnerable to no weapon but the “**Sword of the Spirit,**” and, entrenched within your heart, he is immortal till you pierce him there. This terrible “**old man**” laughs at your strongest bonds, and snaps them on his giant arms, as Samson in the days of old the green withes of the Philistines.

Time is precious, and you waste it in attempting to work out a righteousness of your own.

In you I see the Ethiopian, black and tawny, seated by a running stream, a laughing stock to some, an object of pity to others, who labors and toils to wash himself white, and remove the dark pigment of his skin, Rise up, throw soap and nitre into the stream, and, turning your back on these, go, seek the blood that cleanseth from all sin.

Are you engaged in the attempt to work out a righteousness of your own? Leave that loom. Are the gossamer threads of your own vows and promises ever snapping in your hand, and breaking at every throw of the shuttle? The robe of righteousness, a raiment meet for thy soul, and approved of by God, was never woven there. It was wrought upon the cross; and, of color more enduring than Tyrian purple, it is dyed red in the blood of Calvary.

Come away, and come to Jesus, Come as you are. There is neither time nor need for delay.

Imagine not that you have to do what Joseph did before he was ushered into Pharaoh’s presence. The Hebrew lies immured in a foul and lonely dungeon, when to a thundering at the gate, and the cry of “a message from the palace!” the ponderous bolts are drawn. The door is thrown open, and, guided by the jailer, the royal messengers hurry along the dreary passages and enter Joseph’s dungeon.

Pale, sad, disconsolate, far from his father and a father’s love, a slave, a captive, neglected in dress and person, the Hebrew lies before them. They strike the fetters from his limbs, and hurry him off, for Pharaoh with royal impatience frets and grieves till his dream is read; and yet, with all their haste, Joseph is not ushered into the presence of royalty till the marks of the prison are removed, and in attire and appearance he is made like one who is fit to walk the floor of a palace, and stand before a king.

We are told that **“he shaved himself, and changed his raiment, and came in unto Pharaoh.”**

I have to tell the sinner that, although he lies in a deeper and darker dungeon, although he is covered with fouler and filthier rags, and although the presence of Jesus is infinitely more august, and venerable, and exalted, than that of any mortal king, he stands in no need of preparatory holiness, of even one short hour’s delay.

You have neither to change a rag, nor remove a stain. He is ready to receive you as you are. Come then as you are. Here, this hour, the bridegroom stands by the marriage altar. It is not your wealth—nor your beauty—which has won his heart.

He loves you; he has shed his blood to wash you; at great cost he has purchased the wedding garment, a robe of righteousness, and the crown of glory. The romance which relates how a peasant maid was united to a great prince, and the turn in fortune’s wheel which gave the honors of a queen to some female slave; these but dimly shadow what thy fate might be.

Why, when Christ seeks you, should you hang back? He is ready to espouse you to himself in the marriage bonds of an eternal covenant—**“The mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed, but my kindness shall not depart, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed, saith the Lord that hath mercy on thee.”**

~ end of chapter 12 ~

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