

THE GOSPEL IN EZEKIEL

Illustrated in a Series of Discourses

by

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CHAPTER TEN

THE MERCY OF GOD ILLUSTRATED IN SALVATION

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

Gradual development appears to be the law of nature, or, to speak, more correctly, the method of the divine government. The day does not rush into light, nor blaze upon a dazzled world with the flash of an explosion; but the sky brightens overhead, and the various features of the landscape grow more and more distinct below, as the first streaks of morning are developing into a perfect day. Nature never moves abruptly—by starts and sudden impulses—the day bursts not into light, neither do the birds into song, nor buds into leaf, nor flowers into full-blown beauty.

From her grave she comes forth at the voice of spring, but not all of a sudden, like the sepulchred Lazarus, at the call of Jesus. The season advances with a steady march—by gradual and graceful steps. From the first notes that break the long winter silence, till groves are ringing with songs; from the first bud which looks out on departing storms, till woods are robed in their varied foliage; from the first sweet flower—welcome harbinger of spring—that hangs its white bell beside the lingering snow, till gardens and meadows bloom, and earth offers incense to her God from a thousand censers; from summer's first ripe fruit, till autumn sheaves fall to the reaper's song, and fields are bare, and stockyards are full, and every farm keeps "harvest home"—all is progressive. Man himself presents no exception to this law. The cradle is shorter than the coffin; infancy outshoots its dress; the stammering tongue grows eloquent; the tottering foot follows the chase, or stands balanced on the rocking mast; and those feeble arms, which now clasp a mother's neck, shall ere long battle with difficulties, subdue the rugged soil, or lay groaning forests low.

Our minds also grow with our bodies. They open like a flower-bud; memory, fancy, reason, reflection, he folded up in an infant's soul like the leaves of an unblown rose. Bathed by night in dews, and by day with light, these open out to show their colors and shed their fragrance; so those expand under the tender influences of a mother's culture, and the dawning light of truth.

The law that reigns paramount in the worlds of matter and mind—universal as that of gravitation—extends itself into the spiritual kingdom. The God of nature is the God of grace, and as he acts outside the church, he acts within it.

In the first place, the gospel system itself was gradually developed.

The Bible was once a very little book. It grew by degrees to its present size; and, as in a house, stone is laid on stone, and story built upon story, so book was added to book—history to history—prophecy to prophecy—gospel to gospel—and one epistle to another, till the hands of John laid on the copestone, and, standing on the pinnacle of this sacred edifice, he pronounced God's wide and withering curse on all who should impair its integrity. The temple, in which "**the Lord of the temple**" appeared, took forty years to complete, but the written word was a work of two thousand, and the revealed word of not less than twice two thousand years. It was a long way between Paradise and Patmos; and a protracted dawn from the first streak of morning that rose on the Fall, till the sun introduced the perfect day. A period, of at least four thousand years elapsed between the curse of Eden and the cross of Calvary.

In the second place, while the truth was thus slowly developed and let in by degrees on a benighted world, the effect of that truth on a benighted soul is also gradual.

No man starts up into a finished Christian. The very best come from their graves, like Lazarus, "**clothed in grave clothes**"—not like Jesus, who left his death dress behind him; and in our remaining corruptions, all, alas! carry some of these cerements about with them, nor drop them but at the door of heaven. The Christian is an example of gradual development. When our growth is quickest, how slow it is! As, from some fresh stain we wash our hands in the blood of Jesus; as, from the field of daily conflict we retire at evening to seek the healing of the balm of Gilead; as, with David, we eye some eminence from which we have fallen, or, looking back on some former period, measure the little progress we have made—how often are we constrained to ask in disappointment, "When shall I be holy?"

How often are we constrained to cry in prayer, "**How long, Lord, how long?**" At times it looks as if the dawn would never brighten into day. We almost fear that our fate shall have its emblem in some unhappy flower, which withered by frost, or the home of a worm—never blows at all; but dies like an unborn infant, whose coffin is a mother's womb. This shall not happen with any child of grace. God will perform all things for his people, and perfect what concerneth them. Still, although He who has begun a good work in them will carry it on to the day of the Lord Jesus, all the figures of Scripture indicate a gradual progress. The believer is a babe who grows "**to the stature of a perfect man in Christ,**" and "**the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day.**"

These laws of development have their limit in creation. They affect not God. He has made no progress. There was room for none. His maturity, eternally as well as divinely perfect, knows neither growth nor age. His wisdom, knowledge, goodness, love, justice, truth, and mercy, were always—millions of ages ago—were what they are now. Knowing no growth, he can suffer no decay. It is the sun which rises that sets; but it is the peculiar attribute of Divinity to be "**the same yesterday, to day, and for ever.**" His being is as an infinite, ocean, that holds within its bosom all that lives and is, that has neither shore nor bottom, beginning nor end, ebb nor flow, calm nor tempest; which no changes alter, nor tributaries supply; and which, affected neither by tide nor time, has been, is, and ever shall be full.

How adorable is God! He is great, and greatly to be feared. The attributes of God, however, have been gradually revealed to the knowledge of his intelligent creatures, and their light has risen on the universe like daybreak upon our planet.

For example, when he created angels, sons, and worlds, God, in the first instance, displayed his being, wisdom, power, holiness and goodness. Then came the first Fall. Its scene was laid in heaven, where a part of the angelic host committed sin; and this event called forth the exhibition of another attribute, or—to speak with more propriety—a new display of justice.

Punitive justice was now revealed. She unsheathed her glittering sword, and it fell in vengeance on the workers of iniquity, and sheared their glory from angel's heads.

Time rolled on; how long we know not. At length our world was created—or rather brought into its present form—and became the scene of our parents' probation. Sin came; death trod on the heels of sin; for, as the Apostle tells, "**Sin entered into the world, and death by sin, and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.**" Now the culprits stand trembling before their Maker, nor is there an angel who looks on, but expects to see the sword once more unsheathed, and hear the thunders, that shook thrones and principalities in heaven, roll, and peal, and crash among the hills of earth. At this awful moment—at that eventful crisis—how unexpected the voice which came from the most excellent majesty—"**Deliver from going down to the pit; I have found a ransom.**"

To the surprise of angels, from out the light that veils the throne, a beautiful form steps forth, and Mercy, arresting the uplifted arm, turns its weapon from man on her own bared, spotless, loving bosom. In the Son of God about to become incarnate, she says—"Lo! I come to do thy will, O God." Heady both to satisfy and suffer for them, Jesus interposes for his elect as he did for his disciples, when, stepping in between them and the armed band, he said—"I am he; let these go their way."

This brings us now to remark—

I. The mercy of God is glorified in redemption.

To do justice to God, to the Saviour, and to our subject, we must be careful not to confound pity with mercy. This is no example of a distinction without a difference. Some time ago, upon a cold winter day, we passed the door of a humble abode. A venerable old woman stood in the open doorway, with a very wretched, ragged child before her. With one hand she offered a piece of bread—sharing her food with a poverty sorer than her own—while the other held up a bowl of milk to the lips of the sad, shivering, emaciated creature; and had you seen the benevolence that beamed in her aged face as she gazed on the orphan partaking of her bounty, you would have gone and done likewise—won over to humanity by such a lovely and living picture of the truth that charity is twice blessed—blest in those that give, and blest in those that get.

Now, however beautiful that scene was to the eye of humanity, it was not a display of mercy. Not mercy but pity moved that kind hand and gentle breast; and there the aged matron stood, an example of what is not uncommon among the poor—lofty charity in lowly life.

Take another example:—A man builds an asylum for the destitute—a harbor of refuge for the wrecks of fortune. This may be an honorable monument to his memory—it may be, perhaps, but a monument of his vanity; but, whether it be erected for the benefit of the poor, or to gratify the craving for posthumous fame, it is not a temple of mercy.

The wandering mendicant, into whose hand you drop your money, as he begs his way on to a grave, where, with his head sheltered beneath the sod, he shall feel neither cold nor hunger, appeals to your compassion, not to your mercy, has done you no wrong—he has not stolen your goods, nor traduced your character, nor inflicted injury on your person, nor in any way whatever disturbed your peace; and so it is but pity that is expressed in the charity which shares her bread with the hungry, and spares a corner of an ample cloak to cover the nakedness of the poor.

Mercy is a higher attribute—an act of mercy is a far nobler achievement. She sits enthroned among the divine Graces. On her heavenly wings man rises to his loftiest elevation, and makes his nearest approach and similitude to God. This distinction between compassion and mercy is clearly enunciated in the sacred Scriptures. We are told that **“like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him;”** but the Lord is merciful to them that fear him not. Not only did he so love the world as to give up his Son to die for it, but he commended his love to us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. We pity simple suffering; but let pity and love be extended to guilty suffering, and you have now the very element of mercy. Mercy is the forgiveness of an injury; mercy is the pardon of a sinner.

Smiling when justice frowns, and extending her favors out and beyond those who are merely without merit, she bestows them on those who are full of demerit.

Leaving the priest and Levite to walk on in their cold and heartless indifference, look at this good Samaritan, as, bending over a bleeding form, he binds the wounds of a man whom robbers have assaulted, and whom these hypocrites have left to die.

There, pity kneels beside suffering humanity, hears a brother’s burden, and is afflicted in all his afflictions. Now from that beautiful spectacle turn to Calvary and the cross on which Jesus dies. Here—herself wounded, and bleeding—Mercy hangs over a wicked world, and with her tears shed a blessings on the head, of murderers—**“Father, forgive them; they know not what they do.”**

In fine, the objects of pity are sufferers who have been unfortunate; the objects of mercy are sufferers who have been guilty. And now understanding mercy to be the forgiveness of a wrong, the pardon of a sinner, the kindness of the injured to the injurer, where, as in redemption—where, indeed, but in redemption—is this crowning attribute of the Godhead to be seen? save for redemption, this fairest jewel in the crown of heaven had been concealed—unknown as a pearl still shelled in depths of ocean, or any diamond that still lies bedded in the dark mines of earth.

Guilty man embraced within her arms, how visible is mercy now? Where can we turn our eyes but she meets them? Pointing to the pit of perdition, do you say, look there! Well, we look there. We see mercy there: not mercy enjoyed, but mercy rejected.

Turning with horror from the sight, do we look up? In every saint, robed in righteousness and reigning in glory, we behold a monument of mercy, and exclaim with David, **“Thy mercy, O Lord, is in the heavens.”** And as to this guilty world, are not the arms of mercy around it? They preserve it and sustain it.

Every sinner is a monument of sparing, and every believer is a monument of saving mercy.

God’s people in their creeds, catechisms, and confessions may differ in their mode of expressing some points of faith, but in this confession all concur—these words each and all adopt —**“Great is thy mercy toward me, thou hast delivered my soul from the lowest hell.”** There is mercy above the ground, aye, and beneath it. There is mercy in the very grave. You may see her form, and hear her sweetly singing on a believer’s tomb.

To that quiet harbor God has brought many a dear one before the storm burst. There, earth, like a gentle mother, has wrapped her mantle round a tender child; and, when the tempest was beating upon their own heads, have not many been thankful that some, whom they loved, wore now beyond its reach—sleeping quietly in the peaceful grave. Yes I and to believers themselves there is the kindest mercy in the grave. How can they doubt it?

Were I the tenant of an old, crumbling cottage, through whose chinks and rents the cold rain was dripping, and frosty winds blew, it were, I think, a kindness to pull down this crazy building and build me a palace in its room. Quarrel not with death’s rude hand. It pulls to pieces this frail tabernacle, that, on the day when mortal shall assume immortality, mercy may raise for me from its wreck, **“a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”**

In short, on everything I read the words, **“The earth, Lord, is full of thy mercy.”**

- Mercies arrive on the wings of every hour;
- Mercies supply our table;
- Mercies flow in life’s brimming cup.
- Mercies fall in every shower, and shine in every sunbeam.
- Mercies lie as thick around man’s tent, as desert manna in the days of old.

- Here, mercy runs to meet the returning prodigal, and opens her arms to fold him to her bosom.
- Here, she pleads with sinners, and pronounces pardon over the chief of them.
- Here, she weeps with sufferers, and dries the tear upon sorrow’s cheek.
- Here, eyeing the storm, she launches her life-boat through foaming breakers, and pulls for the wreck where souls are perishing.

It is her blessed hand which rings the Sabbath bell, and her voice which, on savage shores or from Christian pulpits, proclaims a Saviour for the lost. None she despises; she despairs of none; and, not to be scared away by foulest sin, she stands by its guilty bed, and, bending down to death’s dull car—when the twelfth hour is just about to strike—she looks into the glassy eye and cries, Believe, believe, only believe, **“whosoever believeth in the Lord Jesus shall not perish, but have everlasting life.”**

II. *In redemption, God is glorified in the complete discomfiture of all his and our enemies.*

He is glorified by Satan's defeat.

God made man in his own image, and put him on probation. But was he, could he, be indifferent to the issue? Assuredly not; for, although he does not will the death of guilt, he must, in a sense, have willed the triumph of innocence. What father ever saw his son leave for the field of battle, and did not follow him with wishes for his success? When the Spartan widow laced on the armor of her boy, and, kissing his cheek, sent him away to the fight, in handing him his father's shield, she bade him return with it or on it—dead, or a conqueror—in honorable life or not less honorable death. And I cannot but believe that the life and honor of our first parents were as dear to God—dearer, dearer far, than ever son's to mother; for, such was his love, that, even in our guilt he commended his love to us by giving up his Son to die for us.

Well; the hour of conflict came, and with it God's enemy and man's—the Adversary, the Devil, the Evil One, Satan, Prince of Darkness, the Power and Potentate of Hell. A poor drowning man will seize the swimmer's limb, clasp his arms, nor relax the death grasp, till, after a brief struggle, they go down together. Thus it has often happened, most pitifully and miserably, that the perishing has, in his unwise attempts to save himself, been the death of a generous friend. But there is in sin a deep and damnable malignity, which, without any hope of personal advantage, prompts the sinner to seize all within his grasp.

That he may drag others down into the same perdition with himself, he lays siege to honesty to conquer it, to virtue to corrupt it; and hence the danger of ungodly associates—**“A companion of fools shall be destroyed.”**

It was this evil principle which we see every day at work, that carried havoc into Eden; yet not this alone. Besides the inherent hatred that sin bears to holiness, Satan was smarting under his wounds, and, with a fire as unquenchable as that of his own hell, he burned to be avenged. Was there not a vacant throne in heaven? Had it not once been his? and still been his, but that God had hurled him into perdition? God was his enemy, and he was God's; he would be revenged; he would defeat his purposes; cross, thwart, disappoint him; and wreak his vengeance on God in the only way within a creature's reach—he would wound a father's heart through the sides of his children.

Placed on probation, man looked, lusted, ate, sinned, and fell. Satan triumphed. With the ruins of Eden around him, he stood above the grave of human hopes, and, as it seemed also, of heaven's intentions. He contemplated with proud satisfaction the triumph of his malignant subtilty. As he wrung the first tears from human eyes, I can fancy how he taunted his weeping victims with the question—**“Where is now thy God?”** Pharaoh, ere God had done with him, and he with God, got his question answered—**“Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice?”** And the is answered, too. When the fullness of time in a son of that woman Satan meets her God, to find in him not a match only, but a Master.

When his vessel has broken in the storm, and Ajax stands unsheltered on a rock in mid-ocean, he is represented as in anger with the gods, shaking his clenched hand at heaven. In Eden, for a time at least, Satan stands in a different and prouder position; he has conquered; he has won the victory; who shall pluck it from his grasp? He tramples on earth, and laughs at heaven. Although on a grander scale, and involving much grander issues, the scene reminds us of the day when—with the Philistines clustered on this mountain, and Israel on that—there stalked out into the narrow valley, Goliath, the pride of Gath, a moving tower, terrible to look on, in height six cubits and a span. High above his dancing plume, the giant shakes a spear, shafted like a weaver's beam, and thunders up this challenge to the trembling host—"Am not I a Philistine? I defy the armies of Israel this day. Give me a man that we may fight together."

So Satan stood, in bold defiance and unchallenged possession of the field; and now God might have left man to reap the full harvest of his sin and folly—to drink the cup which his own hands had filled. In the words of Scripture, He had entered into "a covenant with death;" he had been at an "agreement with hell"—let him reap as he has sowed. But what then?

Why, Satan then would at least have seemed to have the advantage—would have seemed to be a match for God; and have boasted ability and skill enough, by his own wiles, to thwart the purposes of eternal wisdom. In that event, all men should have perished; but in that event, would The Lord's power have stood out as unchallengeable, or his glory us clear, as at this day? No. God had another end in view in permitting this temporary triumph. Why does he permit it?

Observe you skillful wrestler. He embraces his antagonist, and, with athletic power, lifting him from the ground, he holds him aloft; ah! but he raises, to dash him back on the earth with a more crushing fall. So fared it with the Evil One. God permits him to scale the walls, to carry the citadel by assault, and to plant for a time his defiant standard on the battlements of this world. He does this, that from his proud eminence he may hurl him into a deeper hell; and, angels rejoicing in man's salvation, and devils discomfited in their leader's defeat—both friends and foes—might be constrained to say, "**Hast thou an arm like God, or canst thou thunder with a voice like his?**" From this, believer, when providences are of darkest, and thou canst not trace the footsteps of thy God, learn to place unquestioning confidence in his ways and wisdom.

While God is glorified by Satan's defeat, he is glorified also by the very time and manner of it.

You ask, why did four thousand years elapse between the promise and the promised One? I may reply, by asking you, why does this accomplished racer, who stands abreast of his competitor, not start along with him? Why, lingering by the starting post, does he give his opponent a long advantage? and then, Springing forward on the feet of the wind, approach him, pass him, leave him lagging far behind? Why, but to prove more plainly his own superiority, and embitter the bitterness of an antagonist's defeat.

Or, we may ask you, why, when the news of his friend's illness was carried to Galilee, did our Lord tarry there, nor, hurrying through Samaria, hasten to the relief of Lazarus? He does not even arrive just when the breath has left, and ere the form of him he loved is yet stiff and cold in death.

- He leaves Lazarus to die.
- He leaves Lazarus to be buried.
- He leaves Lazarus to lie four days rotting in the grave.

Why this strange delay? why, but that at the door of the dead man's tomb he might stand forth, not only the conqueror of death, but Lord also of the grave. On the alarm of war, the news fly through the land, beacon fires are blazing on every hill and headland, and before one hostile foot has touched the soil, hurrying from shepherd's but and peasant's cottage, lonely glens and crowded cities, freemen line the beach to fight a country's enemies on a country's shores.

In the great battle of redemption there is no such haste. Not for four days, nor even four years, but for the long period of four thousand years, Satan is left in all but undisputed possession of his conquest, God leaves him ample time to entrench himself; to found, to strengthen, to establish, to extend his kingdom. And why? but that a Redeemer's power might be the more apparent in its ignominious and total overthrow.

And in this, Christ glorified himself; just as we should do, were we to leave the sapling in possession of the soil until it grew into a tree, and then, bending on it more than a giant's strength, should lay its head, and pride, and glory, in the dust.

As a Redeemer, Jesus Christ was to show himself to be the "Power" as well as the "Wisdom" of God, This is the manner of redemption. And may I not take occasion from it to tell the oldest, hardest, most hoary sinner, to hope, and turn to God? He has left you long; He has left you till now; He has left you amid the infirmities of years to grow stronger in sin. Despair not! nor think that he has shut the door of mercy! What if he has left you so long, just to show how he can save to the very uttermost—call at the eleventh hour—and by the breath of his Spirit cause "**dry bones**" to live.

God is not only glorified in Satan's defeat, and also in the time and manner of it, but pre-eminently glorified in the instrument of it.

He was no veteran, the giant's match in years, experience, stature, or strength, who defeated Goliath. When the battle between the two nations was fought by their respective champions, fire flew not from opposing swords, nor were spears shivered on opposing shields; the valley shook not beneath the tread and collision of two giants; nor did victory hang in the balance, and anxious partisans endure the agony of suspense on confronting mountains, while the air resounded with the clash of arms, and blood gushed from gaping wounds.

Never to appearance were there two men more unequally matched.

When the lines of Israel opened, and a youth, a beardless lad, clad in a shepherd's dress, with no weapon but a sling, and no confidence but God in heaven, stepped forth to measure his strength with the giant, loud laughed the Philistine, and wit ran merrily through his countrymen's ranks. Ere one brief hour had run its course, they wept that laughed, and they laughed that wept.

He who guides the sun in his path in heaven, guided the stone as, winged with death, and winged by prayer, it shot from the whirling sling. It sung from the shepherd's hand; sank into the giant's brow; he reels, he staggers—and his armor making a mighty clash—he measures his long length upon the ground. Bounding like a young lion, David leaps upon his prey, and, leaving a headless carcass to feed the vultures, he returns to the ranks of shouting countrymen—in this hand, the giant's sword, in that other, his gory head.

Old men bless the lad, and young men envy him, and happy mothers and laughing maidens sing his fame; and ere that day's sun has set, there is music, and dancing, and feasting in the homes of Israel.

That bright day was but the type of a brighter still, on which God glorified himself, mortified and scattered his enemies, and restored a fallen house to more than its ancient honors.

Man falls; the world is lost; Satan triumphs. How does God pluck the victory from his hands? He might have discharged thunderbolts on his head; he might have overwhelmed this enemy by sending down upon him legions of embattled angels. It is not so. He meets him, matches him, masters him by a solitary Man. Beneath the heel of a Man of sorrows he crushes the serpent's head.

A Son of man is the Saviour of man; a brother rises up in our house to redeem his brethren; a Conqueror appears in the conquered family. Out of the mouth of a Suckling—by One nursed on a woman's bosom, and carried in a woman's arms—he ordaineth strength. Never was the tide of battle so strangely, so completely, so triumphantly turned. The Babe of a cradle wears the crown of the universe; and by One who died, God destroys **“death, and him that had the power of death, that is, the devil.”**

“ Give thanks then unto the Lord, for he is good; for his mercy endureth for ever. Oh give thanks unto the God of Gods; for his mercy endureth for ever.

“Oh give thanks unto the Lord of Lords; for his mercy endureth for ever; who remembered us in our low estate, and hath redeemed us from our enemies. Oh give thanks unto the God of heaven, for his mercy endureth for ever.”

~ end of chapter 10 ~

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