

# THE GOSPEL IN EZEKIEL

Illustrated in a Series of Discourses

by

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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### THE NEW LIFE, PART I

**I will cause you to walk in my statutes, and keep my judgments, and do them** (Ezekiel 36:37).

The Divine Being has established certain laws—some of a physical, others of a moral nature. And it is as impossible to violate with impunity a moral as a physical law; although the consequences in the former case may be more remote, and the suffering may not follow so closely on the heels of the sin. Solomon asks, “**Can a man take fire into his bosom, and not be burned?**” “**Can he touch pitch, and not be defiled?**” You at once answer no. He who walks into the fire shall certainly be burned; he who falls into the water shall certainly be drowned; and if any man were mad enough to pitch himself over a lofty bartizan, he lights not on the ground like a winged bird or angel—he shall certainly be crushed to pieces, Not only so, but a passive as well as active violation of nature’s laws is followed by suffering. He who resists her demand for sleep—he who turns a deaf ear to the calls of hunger—he who denies his body the rest and refreshment that nature needs, must die, Now, no less certainly shall he suffer who neglects or violates those moral laws which have been established by the decree of God.

It may seem a strange, and even foolish thing to assert, but it is not the less true, that it is safer to touch fire than sin, and safer in a sense to drink off a cup of poison, than quaff the cup of devils. A man stands a better chance of escape who violates a physical than a moral law. This is difficult to be believed. And why? Just because, in the breach of moral laws, judgment does not, as in the breach of physical laws, follow speedily on the transgression, nor succeed it as the peal thunders on the flash. Yet it is not more strange than true; and true, for this plain, satisfactory, and unanswerable reason, that he who made the laws which govern the physical world, may modify, may change, may even altogether repeal them. He has already done so.

Iron is heavier than water; yet did not the iron axe swim like a cork at the prophet’s bidding? Did not the unstable element of sea stand up in walls of solid crystal, till the host passed over? Did naked foot, when bathed in morning dew, ever feel the green grass cooler than those three Hebrews, when, on the floor of the burning furnace, they trod at once beneath their feet a tyrant’s power and the red hot coals of fire? Fire may not burn, and water may not drown. He who gave their laws to these elements may alter them as he sees meet; but that moral law, which is a transcript of his own mind and will, is, and must be unchangeable as himself.

- Be sure, therefore, that you cannot sin with impunity.
- Be sure that your sin will find you out.
- Be sure that what you sow you shall reap.
- Be sure, that although the cloud is long of gathering, it shall one day explode.
- Be sure that sin and sorrow are linked together by an adamant chain—a chain durable and eternal as that which binds the creature to the throne of God.

When, therefore, Satan, the flesh, or the world solicit, remember, that if your weakness yields, you are more certain of suffering, than you would be of burning the finger which you thrust into the fire. Sin is the fire that a man can not take into his bosom, and not be burned. Do you ask, by way of objection, do not God's people escape suffering—commit sin, and yet escape the penalty? True. But their exemption from future punishment forms no exception to this rule. In their case, indeed, the debtor escapes, but then the creditor is paid. The sufferings from which they are exempted were endured by their substitute, and in a suffering Saviour their sins were punished, **“He bore our griefs, and carried our sorrows. The chastisement of our peace was upon him, and with his stripes we are healed.”**

Entertaining these views, we ought not to be suspected of losing sight of the dignity and claims of the moral law in our faith in a crucified Saviour. That holy law was not buried in Jesus' sepulcher, nor left behind with the graveclothes in the tomb. We no longer hope, indeed, to be saved by the law, yet we hold with the Apostle—hold as strongly as any can do—that **“the law is holy, and the commandment holy, just, and good,”** and that these moral laws which were enshrined in the ark of Moses, and most awfully illustrated on the cross of Christ, have lost none of their authority. They remain to this day as imperative as those which regulate the tides, direct the procession of seasons, or steer the planets through the realms of space.

Obedience to the law has indeed ceased to be the condition of salvation; it is well it is so. Otherwise, who should have been saved? **“If thou, Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, Lord, who shall stand?”** **“Enter not into judgment with thy servant, for in thy sight shall no man living be justified.”** The law is not now the gate of life; yet although it has ceased to be the gate, it has not ceased, and never shall cease, to be the rule of life.

We preach, indeed, a free and fall salvation; and we glory in the theme. We say that the greatest lawbreaker may be saved; the foulest sinner washed white as snow; the basest of the base, the vilest of the vile, exalted to a throne in heaven; and that as no obedience rendered to the law since the fall of Adam can open heaven to fallen man, so since the death of Christ no disobedience can shut its gates against him.

We say with Paul, **“It is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.”** Blessed be God, the law, so stern-like in a sinner's eyes, no longer carries the keys of heaven. Purchased by his blood, they are in the custody of him who is very pitiful and of great mercy, and who—never turning a deaf ear to the cry of human distress—cheers the expiring hours' of guilt, and said even to a thief, **“To-day thou shalt be with me in paradise.”**

**“Do we then make void the law through faith?”** as Paul asks. Some have done so. Wild and wicked fanatics have risen to trouble the church, and bring a gospel of grace into contempt. They have asserted that it has set them free from the obligation of these holy commandments, and granted to believers’ a plenary indulgence to commit all manner of iniquity.

From such licentious and immoral doctrines, from doctrines not less calculated to dissolve society than to dishonor the church of Christ, child of God I shrink with holy abhorrence; this your language.

**“My soul, come not thou into their secret; unto their assembly, mine honor, be not thou united.”**

I know that Paul says, **“We are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held;”** but are we delivered that we may sin? Assuredly not. On the contrary, we are delivered that we may serve God; serve him better, serve him holier; serve him, as Paul also says, **“in the newness of the spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter.”** Addressing us not with the voice of Sinai’s thunders, but in the melting and mightier tones of a Redeemer’s love, the Gospel lays this injunction upon all, **“Be careful to maintain good works.”**

These, although not always the believer’s attainment, will always be his aim. Committing to his heart, and enshrining there those tables which Moses, in honor of their excellence, deposited in the tabernacle’s holiest shrine, he will say, **“how I love thy law, Lord;”** and he will pray that God would fulfill to him this gracious promise of the text—**“I will cause them to walk in my statutes, and they shall keep my judgments and do them.”**

In now addressing ourselves to the subject of that new life, which the believer lives in obedience to the law of God, I remark—

*I. It is a willing obedience.*

Many movements take place in the universe independent of any will but that of God. The sap ascends the tree, the planets revolve round the sun, the stars rise and set in the heavens, the tides flow and ebb upon our shores, and nature walks in God’s statutes, keeping his judgments, and doing them, moved to obedience by no will but his. So soon, however, as, leaving inanimate matter below, we ascend into those regions where mind, or even instinct and matter are united, we discover a beautiful and benevolent law, by virtue of which God at once secures the happiness and provides for the welfare of his creatures. He so orders it that their will is in perfect harmony with their work; their inclinations with their interests; and their instincts with the functions which they are called on to perform.

- The bee constructs its cell,
- The bird weaves her nest,
- The eagle among the crags above teaches her brood to fly,
- In cairn or cave below, the fox suckles her young;

And these are all labors of love—labors to which they bring a willing heart.

Thus their happiness lies in their work. And to ascend even into heaven, this is no doubt the secret of its felicity; for as the law of gravity extends itself to the most distant stars, so that that which rounds a tear-drop gives its shape to every sun, I have no doubt that this law of divine power and benignity reaches the highest and holiest existences. The will and work of angels are in perfect harmony; therefore, an angel's duty is an angel's delight.

Observe, also, how, when God changes the condition of his creatures, he accommodates their will to the change. Take, for example, that insect to which I have elsewhere alluded. It comes from the egg a creeping worm; it is bred in corruption; it crawls on the ground; its aliment is the coarsest fare. In time it undergoes its wonderful metamorphosis. The wriggling caterpillar becomes a winged and painted butterfly; and at this change, with its old skin it casts off in old habits and instincts. Now, it has a will as well as wings to fly. And with its bed the bosom of a flower, its food the honeyed nectar, its home the sunny air, and new instincts animating its frame, its will, and plays in harmony with its work. The change within corresponds to the change without. It spurns the ground; and, as you may gather from its merry, mazy dance, the creature is happy, and delights in the new duties which it is called to perform.

Even so it is in that change which grace works in sinners. The nature of the redeemed is so accommodated to the state of redemption, their wishes are so fitted to their wants, their hopes to their prospects, their aspirations to their honors, and their will to their work, that they would be less content to return to polluted pleasures than this beautiful creature to be stripped of its silken wings, and condemned to pass its days amid the old, foul garbage, its former food.

With such a will and nature as they now possess, their old life would be misery—would be hell. Would not the reclaimed prodigal, rather than leave his father's table, bosom, and love, for the company of harlots and the husks of swine troughs, embrace death and go to his grave? Even so God's people would rather not be at all, than be what once they were. Hence, oh the one hand, their unhappiness in sin; and on the other, their enjoyment in God's service; hence David's longing for the place of ordinances; hence the beauty of a Sabbath scene, and the music of Sabbath bells, and the answer of their hearts to the welcome sound, **"I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go unto the house of the Lord."**

Are you unconverted? Let this teach you what most you need. To men who are strangers to the happiness to be found in piety, and have their will set contrary to the law of God, religion seems, and cannot but seem, a very sad, demure, miserable thing, Oh! it appears a weary thing to be singing psalms!—they would sing songs rather; a dull book the Bible—a most uninteresting task to be poring over these pages—they would prefer a novel or a newspaper. Rather than sit at the communion table, they would be guests where the board groans with luxuries, bowls flow with wine, peals of laughter follow the bright flashes of wit, and thoughtless joy dances away the hours.

Earth's short Sabbaths seem long and are weary; and it is a mystery which they cannot fathom, how, when they go to heaven (and who is not hoping to get there?), they are to pass an endless Sabbath of psalms, and songs, and such listless services.

No wonder, if this is your state, that piety has no charms for you. Without the clean heart and the right spirit, your attempts to obey the law must be as unpleasant as they are unprofitable. It is hard to row against the tide, hard to swim against the stream, but harder still, under no impulse but the lash of a guilty conscience, and the terrors of a coming judgment, to attempt conformity to the will of God. And, admitting your conformity to be much greater than it is, what possible value can it have in the eyes of God? If even we would rather do the work ourselves, or want the work altogether, than have it done for us by a sullen, sulky servant—what pleasure can God have in your slavish service? I would not be served by a slave; nor will Jesus Christ. His arguments are not whips—his reasons are not blows—his servants do not walk and work in fetters. He is the beloved sovereign of a people who are free, devoted to his interests, and ready to die for his crown. He measures the value of services not so much by the work done, as by the willingness to do it. They serve that wait. Then, as the Apostle says, **“Let there be first a willing mind, and it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not.”**

In short, the union between the Saviour and the soul, like the marriage of Isaac and Rebecca, stands on a cordial assent. **“Peradventure,”** said Eleazer to his master, **“peradventure the woman will not be willing to follow me.”** **“Then,”** said Abraham, **“if the woman be not willing to follow thee, thou shalt be clear from this my oath.”** On this condition, Eleazer sets off to woo and win a wife for Isaac. He arrives at Nachor; he is introduced to Laban, and the scene in that house at Nachor excites in us these two wishes.

First, Would to God that those who hold a higher commission, and are stewards of the mysteries of the Gospel, were as intent on their office, as this steward on his. Laban presses his hospitality upon him; the savory meat appeals to his hunger; he has had a long journey, and it is reasonable surely that he take some rest, get the dust of the road washed from his feet, and refresh exhausted nature before he enters upon business! No—Pattern of fidelity! he says—**“I will not eat until I have told mine errand.”**

Second, Would to God, also, that he who dealt with Rebecca’s heart, would persuade sinners to accept a better offer—backed by tokens of better love—and give us, as ambassadors for Christ in his love suit, that maiden’s ready answer. Isaac had sent a far way for her. She saw his messenger; he stood before her, covered with the dust, and embrowned with the sun of the desert. She saw Isaac’s love in these sparkling gems—the golden tokens of his affection. Her heart was won. Fair and lovely pattern of faith!

Whom she had not seen she loved; she walked by faith, not by sight; and paying a last visit to a mother’s grave; **“her father’s house and her own people,”** the companions of her youth, and the sweet home of her early days, she turned round to her brother, and to his question—**“Wilt thou go with this man?”** with maiden modesty, but masculine firmness, she replied, **“I will go.”**

II. *This is a progressive obedience.*

To **“walk,”** is expressive of progress in grace.

Walking is an act, and one not acquired in a day; for the power to walk is not ours, in the same sense, as the power to breathe. We are born with the one power, but born without the other.

Like every other habit, walking becomes so easy by use, that we are unconscious of any effort; yet step into the nursery, and you, see that this art, acquired by labor, is the reward of continuous, conquering perseverance. In fact, our erect attitude and progressive motion over the ground—simple as they seem—are achieved by means of most delicate and dexterous balancing. The marble statue does not stand erect without foreign support; and you have no sooner raised a dead man, and set him up on his feet, than he falls at yours, a heap of loathsome mortality.

In beauty and splendor, the figure of my text may yield to other images, expressive of a believer's progress—such as that of a seed dropped into the soil, where, striking down a delicate fiber, and sending up a green and tender shoot, it first rises into a seedling, which the finger of an infant could crush, but which grows, after a hundred summers have come and gone, into a robust and lofty tree, that, with its roots moored in the rock, lifts a proud head on high, and defies the storm.

Or, such as that furnished by the birth and growth of day, from the first faint streak of dawn—when the face of morn blushes, as it were, to look on the crimes of earth—to the moment when the sun rises to bathe mountains, plain and sea, in a golden flood of light.

In so far, however, as the setting forth of one prominent and important feature of a believer's progress is concerned, the figure of my text yields the palm to none—nay, is perhaps superior to any. Other images convey the idea of progress, but this, of progress accomplished by unwearied exertion—progress, the triumph of an intelligent mind, and the reward of a determined will.

To explain this special point, let me borrow an illustration from our Lord, when he took a little child, and, presenting the blushing boy to the wondering assembly, said, Masters of Israel, doctors of the temple, priests of the altar, chiefs of the Sanhedrim, behold this pattern;

**“Whosoever would enter the kingdom of heaven must be as this little child.”**

*In this image God's people find comfort and encouragement.*

Does the infant who is learning to walk abandon the attempt, or yield to despair, because its first efforts are so feeble, and so often fail of success? If not, why then should we despond, because, in attempting to walk in God's ways, we often stumble, and not seldom fall? We—many of us, at least—are but babes in Christ; and he no more gives up hope of his people because they fall, than the fond mother her hope and confidence that this infant, who is now creeping across the floor, shall one day stand erect in the beauty of its form, balanced on firm feet, and with free and perfect command of all its limbs.

And why, then, should we despond? Every man was once a babe. Samson himself—the mighty Nazarite who burst asunder new spun ropes like flax touched with fire—who, with more than a giant's strength, wrenched the gates of Gaza from the city's port, and, heaving them on his back, climbed the steep acclivity—was once a feeble, wailing infant, who could barely carry his own head erect, and hesitated to venture from a mother's knee.

The believer takes a law of God, and tries to walk in it—he tries to resist a temptation to which he has often yielded—he fixes his eye on Jesus, and, fired with a holy ambition, attempts to imitate him. He fails. Repeated attempts and repeated failures cast him into despondency. He lies where he fell. He gives himself up to dark and distressing doubts. Satan takes advantage of his failure, and insinuates that he has never been converted—that his religious impressions are a delusion—that his fair profession has been a vile hypocrisy.

In such distressing circumstances, our children become our teachers. God ordains strength out of the mouth of babes, and the lesson of the nursery is invaluable. Learning in that school that walking is a progressive and not a sudden attainment, I get heart to say with David, “**Why art thou cast down, my soul, and why art thou disquieted within me?**” That to my soul, and this to the devil, who stands brandishing his sword over me, when I am lying with my back to the ground, but my eyes in heaven, “**Rejoice not against me, mine enemy, though I fall, I shall arise.**”

*This image stimulates to exertion, as well as comforts under failure.*

In attempting to walk, the child falls; there is blood upon its brow, and tears in its eye. Does it lie there just to weep? By no means!

Looking through these tears, and stretching out its little arms—if not by speech, yet by signs that go to a mother’s heart—for it can pray before it speaks it implores her help Nor in vain. She flies to raise it; and when she has stanchd the bleeding wound, and kissed away the tears, and soothed it in her gentle bosom, and it has there sobbed out its grief, what then?

Recovering from the alarm, and soon forgetting its wounds, it seeks the floor again. Perhaps it has been taught some caution—perhaps it has learned to cling more to a mother’s hand—perhaps it ventures less rashly from her side; yet, moved by an indomitable will, see how it returns to the attempt, tries it again and again, until, after some blows, and many falls, it earns the reward of its perseverance.

Now, with bright health on its cheek, with grace in every motion, and beauty in all its attitudes, laughing in its joy, and luxuriating in the exercise of its new-born powers, it runs “without wearying, and walks without fainting.”

We teach our children; let us here be their scholars, and take a lesson from the nursery. Why, then, do we make so little progress in grace? Why at this time of day, when some of us are bowed, wrinkled, and grey, are we so unable to walk in God’s statutes—to keep his judgments and do them? It is not because our education has been neglected. It is not because any child has a mother so fond, so kind, so quick to help, so able to raise the fallen and guide the tottering step, as He who suffered for us more than mother’s birth’s pangs, and feels for us more than a mother’s love. What child in earth’s happiest home enjoys a believer’s advantages? “**Happy art thou, Israel? who is like unto thee, people saved by the Lord? The eternal God is thy refuge, and beneath the everlasting arms.**” Why, then, is the progress of the Church so slow, compared with the progress of the nursery? Why has child after child in our families learned to walk, while the best of us are but creeping, tottering, stumbling, on our way to heaven?

There are mysteries in grace; but there is no mystery here. The reason is plain. Every hour of the day the infant is on its knees or feet; it falls, but it is to rise; it fails, but it is to begin again; its very happiness and business lie in the acquisition of this power, and the smile which lights up its beautiful face, and its proud-like air when it can stand alone, or cross the floor to throw itself laughing into a mother's arms, show that its heart and happiness are in this work. We say to God's people, "**go, and,**" by God's grace, "**do likewise.**"

Take more pains and give more prayer to learn this holy art. Let the perseverance of the nursery be imitated by the church. Let our knees be as much employed in prayer, and our powers and hours in attempting a holy life, as those of infancy in learning to walk. Oh, if we would give the same "**diligence to make our calling and election sure**"—the same diligence to "**work out our salvation,**" I am certain that we should be holier—much holier than we are. Our life would present a happy illustration of these sublime and resplendent emblems—

- "**Ye are the light of the world!**"

- "**The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day:**"

- "**They shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.**"

III. *This willing and progressive obedience is the sign and seal of salvation.*

Am I a child of God? How am I to know that I am? These are anxious questions with the believer; and yet they are questions that admit of a very simple answer. We have not, nor can we expect to have, such a testimony to our sonship as the Saviour received when he went up from Jordan, and the form as of a dove descended out of heaven on his head, still wet with the waters of baptism. By the descent of the dove, and the voice of the thunder, his Father said—"**This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.**"

And yet God's people enjoy that very same testimony. The descent of the Spirit is still the evidence of sonship—its sign, however, is not a dove perched upon their heads, but the dove nestled within their hearts. By his Spirit God creates them anew in Jesus Christ "**unto good works;**" and by these—by the fruits of a holy life, by the joys of a Holy Ghost, by the advancing stages of a holy progress—his Spirit witnesses with their spirits that they are sons of God, A witness this, as certain, and therefore as satisfactory, as the voice of the skies, or the verdict of final judgment.

The fruit is now, as it shall be hereafter, the test of the tree. There is no such thing as faith without works. Without these, your profession is a lie, your faith is dead, your hope is a delusion. It is a delusion and a snare, like the phosphoric light, the product of putrefaction which, to the terror of superstitious peasants, and the destruction of unwary travelers, gleams and burns at night, above the pool in whose dark depths life has been lost, and a body, evolving gases capable of spontaneous combustion, is going to decay.

Now as the fruit is the test of the tree, obedience is the test of love; hear our Lord—



**“He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me.”**

Do not mistake us. We do not mean to say that any man keeps these commandments perfectly.

Alas! the history of the church, and each man’s own personal history, prove to our shame and sorrow, that God’s people may, and do fall into sin; and, but for the restraining and constraining grace of God, would fall into the deepest, grossest sin. Let the conviction teach us to walk softly, humbly, circumspectly! Oh, never leave God’s side, nor let go the hand of grace. Cling to his arm, as if the storm of Galilee were beating about your head, and every footstep were planted upon a swelling wave.

I do not say that saints will not fall into sin, but I do say that, even when they are so unhappy, there will be an unmistakable difference between them and the ungodly.

- Judas sinned, and went and hanged himself;
- Peter sinned, and went out and wept.

The sins of saints are the occasion of saintly sorrows. God shall see them at the fountain weeping and washing away their guilt in the blood of Jesus; and to Jesus himself they will go, to make on their knees the confession of Peter—Lord, I know that I have sinned, I know that I am a great sinner; yet **“thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee.”**

There is one test—not any more sure in the laboratory of the chemist—by which to distinguish the godly from the ungodly when both have fallen even into the very same sin. It is worth knowing, and never fails. It is very simple, and yet a most sure criterion. A child may comprehend it, and any one may apply it. I pray you to apply it not to your neighbors’ cases, but to your own—nor reject it because it is humble, and plain, and simple, and vulgar, if you will.

It is the test by which you may know a sheep from a swine, when both have fallen into the same slough, and are, in fact, so bemired, that neither by coat nor color can the one be distinguished from the other. How then distinguish them? Nothing more easy! The unclean animal, in circumstances agreeable to its nature, wallows in the mire; but the sheep—type of the godly—bleats, and strives, and struggles to get out.

~ end of chapter 18 ~

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