

A WORD TO THE IDLE CHRISTIAN AND TO THE CARELESS PROFESSOR

A SERMON

Preached on Lord's Day Morning January 2nd, 1859

By Mister JAMES WELLS

AT THE SURREY TABERNACLE, BOROUGH ROAD

Volume 1 Number 1

“How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation?” Hebrews 2:3

IF all the persons to whom the apostle was writing, had been real Christians, there would have been no necessity for this *if* in the matter, but he stood very much in doubt of some; yes, he knew that while some were real possessors, others were mere professors; and some stood as it were in his estimation, neither one thing nor the other; he hardly knew in what light to view them; and therefore, in order to deal faithfully with them, he says, after identifying himself with them, “now you make a profession of the same gospel that I do; you profess to love the same Lord Jesus Christ: you profess to look for Salvation in the same way; and yet you are in a variety of ways making light of that salvation, making light of the gospel, and setting up ceremonies, human traditions, mean and beggarly elements, in the place of the gospel. And, if under the Old Testament dispensation, the penalties of that covenant were carried out, and he that transgressed it, died without mercy; how much more, says the apostle, in another place, shall we not escape; and how, he says here, ‘how shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation?’”

Now, some may suppose that these words refer to the chastisement of the Lord's people; namely, “how shall we escape chastisement, if we neglect so great salvation?” but I do not think that this is the meaning of the apostle, I think his meaning is, how shall we, who make a profession of the gospel, escape the penalties of the law? how shall we escape the wrath of God, if we neglect so great salvation, and prove that ours is a mere profession of the truth? I believe this to be the meaning of the apostle; so that the *if* in our text, is not conditional, but discriminating; for there is no conditionality in the new covenant; all is “yea, and amen.” But these *ifs* are used for the sake of discrimination. I notice then, the subject before us, so far as the Lord shall enable me, thus: first, *I will notice what it is diligently to attend to this salvation*; I will then secondly, *show what it is fatally to neglect this salvation*; I will then, thirdly, *show the worthiness of this salvation to receive our highest attention, and our best affection.*

I notice then, first, *what it is diligently to attend to this salvation.* Now the Lord Jesus Christ came into the world to seek and to save that which was lost, therefore it is that when a sinner is brought to feel that he is in a lost condition, then it is that his eternal welfare rises in importance in his mind

infinitely beyond anything else; and he then thinks within himself, “well, what are silver and gold to me; what are human acquisitions, or pleasures, or honors to me; what is even life to me; what shall I give in exchange for my soul; if the everlasting God be eternally against me, and if I am to be lost; here is my sand glass already partly run out, and I know not how soon the last particles will be gone; and what then is life to me if I shall sink into everlasting perdition?” And feeling thus, he diligently enquires into God’s salvation. Well now, take the apostle Peter, who sets before us in the first place, that to which we are called; and then he shows in what way we become fruitful in this matter of salvation; and then he shows in the next place how we become steadfast; and then he shows in the next place what a welcome all such persons will have into the presence of God. Now he reminds us first, of what we are called to, “He has called us,” says the apostle Peter, “to glory and virtue.” Now the glory to which the Lord has called us, is two-fold. I may say three-fold, first, he calls a sinner to the glory of his law. You never saw, and I never saw, and never understood, and never felt the glory and the majesty of God’s eternal law until he opened our blind eyes; and then we saw that there was an infallibility in his holy law. And this law is spoken of as glorious; and the ministration of death is glorious; but then it is glorious only as expressive of the holiness, and justice, and integrity of the blessed God, “wherein is revealed the wrath of God from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.” I think this is one idea the apostle Peter includes when he says, “he has called us unto glory.” And then the next idea is, being brought from Sinai to Zion, when brought to where the Lord Jesus Christ is the end of the law for righteousness, when brought to know something of the gospel. This, probably, the apostle refers to when he says, “beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, we are changed into the same image, as from glory to glory.” And so, when the Lord Jesus Christ becomes manifest, the glorious gospel is opened up as being the end of the law, bringing in everlasting righteousness, bringing in eternal salvation, bringing in eternal redemption. Here the apostle says, “Beholding as in a glass, the glory of the Lord, we are changed into the same image, as from glory to glory”, from the glory of the law, to the glory of the gospel, “as by the Spirit of our God.” I think the third idea, being called to glory, will mean eternal glorification; and, therefore, we are first called to glory by a knowledge of the law; and from there to a knowledge of the gospel; and from there to that glory, which is yet to be revealed. But the apostle says we are also called to *virtue*. Now virtue as you are aware, in a woman, is chastity; and so, the soul that is married to the Lord Jesus Christ, is brought into the bond of the everlasting covenant, united to him in what he has done, and the soul made spotless by that oneness with Christ; it is united by an indissoluble bond; “there is no separation from the love of God, that is in Christ Jesus.” Let the Savior thus become once received, and he can be rejected no more; let the blessed Spirit be thus known, and he can be rejected no more; let God the Father appear here, and let the soul be brought into this fellowship with God, and the language of it is, “whom have I in heaven but you, and there is none upon earth I desire beside you.” Therefore, there is a solemn, a divine chastity in the soul that is born of God. Then, virtue, you are of course aware, in a steward, means faithfulness; and this is another feature of the Christian; he is faithful; he knows the truth, and he trades with the truth, with heaven; revealed truth, that is what he trades with; the promises, the doctrines, the precepts of the blessed God. We come before the Lord, and plead his promises; we come before the Lord, and plead the precious truths recorded in his holy word; we come before the Lord, and we confess before him, that we do in a great many respects come short of the precepts of the Gospel; and we pray to the Lord for grace whereby to live nearer to him; and we bless his holy name, that, while we come short in many instances, and while we deviate in many instances, his dear Son never did deviate: and therefore we are not called upon to plead a perfect conformity, as any part of our justification before God, for we have no perfect

conformity to plead. Here then is the chastity of the soul. Hence the Savior says to the Church, "You have dove's eyes within your locks;" expressive of the earnestness of her looks upon him, rejecting all others besides. Here is also faithfulness, the virtue of faithfulness. Know the truth and abide by it. Hence the Lord says, "My eyes shall be upon the faithful of the land, that they may dwell with me." Ah, the man that abides like an iron pillar, like a defended city, like a brazen wall, he knows where he is; he is firm to his post; he may sometimes be a little at a loss as to circumstantial and temporal things, but he always knows what to say as to the truth itself; and hence at the last, the Lord will say to him "Well done, you good and faithful servant, you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things: enter you into the joy of your Lord." And virtue, as you are aware, in a soldier, means bravery. Why, although we have not open persecution, though we have not racks, and dungeons, and the implements of torture, looking us in the face now days, we have something else. You will find the professing world have their oracles, one sect and party has its oracle, another party has its oracle, and another party has its oracle; and if you dare to deviate from them, you must be outcast. But you must take no notice of this; for if virtue in a soldier is bravery or courage, then we are to endure hardness as good soldiers of the Lord Jesus Christ. Stand, in a word, to nothing but a good conscience towards God, and towards man; and if we give offence in thus abiding by the truth, let the consequence be what it may, the Lord will see us through it all. Hence, what the Lord said to Abraham, he says virtually, and will say practically to all his offspring, "Fear not, Abraham, I am your shield, and your exceeding great reward." Then virtue also means in a remedy power to heal; and we are reminded of the virtue of a Savior's blood. Why, when the woman touched the hem of his garment, virtue went out of him, and healed her. And this will explain what I want to say; are we, my hearers, married or united to Christ in the new Covenant, or are we married to him professionally, and utterly ignorant of the terms of that marriage? Surely you would not do so in an earthly marriage; you would understand something of the terms of it, you would not go to take such a solemn step as that, a step for life, without knowing something of the terms of it. And yet so unworthy of attention is the new covenant, in the estimation of thousands of professors, that there are thousands who profess to belong to Jesus Christ and are yet as ignorant of the terms of eternal oneness between Christ and his people, as though they had never heard the word of God at all; whereas if we are diligent, if we are not neglecting the matter, we shall go on to understand it. What is meant by the covenant? Do I understand it, and do I believe it, and do I stand in it as that bond of union to the blessed God, in which my soul delights; and then as to my faithfulness; what have I to be faithful to? That is a great point. There are many persons that have their formalities prescribed, and if they are faithful to these formalities, they think that is faithfulness. But faithfulness acceptable to God, will mean faithfulness to his blessed truth, unalterable decision for his truth; and then to endure hardness will mean to bear anything and everything for the truth's sake; never give up the truth under any circumstances whatever. What examples the Lord has given us of the power of the truth. We, poor easy things, we, poor chimney corner sailors, we, poor stay-at-home soldiers, can hardly imagine how our brethren that have gone before us could endure such torture as they did. Why friends, we are not called upon to endure them, and therefore, have not the grace that they had; we have not the stamina, at least in exercise that they had. But if we were put to the test, and the Lord gave us the same grace, then we should be prepared to give up anything and everything, rather than give up God's blessed truth.

Well now, let us learn then in attending to this salvation what we are to do. The Apostle says, "add to your faith virtue." Here is something for the Christian to do. And the circumstance I have already

named explains this. "If I may but touch the hem of his garment," if I may but touch his clothes, "I shall be whole." And therefore, to add to our faith, virtue, is to seek the Lord until we realize a word of salvation, a word of liberation, a word of illumination, a word of consolation, a word of confirmation, a word of justification; it must be some word brought home with power, and when that word is brought home with power, that is adding virtue to our faith; that is seeking the Lord until he is pleased to bless us with the vitality and power of his blessed truth. And then, he says, "to virtue knowledge." Now this is the business of a soul born of God, this a matter we are to seek. You see virtue is a hidden thing; it is known only to the soul that receives it; it is not known to others, it is not a something to make a great do with before the world; it is a hidden matter, it is a secret that is with them that fear the Lord. And then he says, "and to virtue knowledge;" that follows. Why, when the word is blessed, brought home with power to you, do you know I know something I did not know before. I wanted before this to know if my name were written in heaven; and now this word is come home with power, I do know it. I wanted before to know whether I was saved; now I am saved. I wanted to know whether the Lord has loved me: now I know he has loved me; and I wanted to know whether the Lord was on my side, and now I know he is on my side, and now I know that this God is my God for ever and forever. Now then, "how shall we escape if we neglect these things?" if these be not the objects that we are seeking, if this be not the hidden path which the vulture's eye has not seen, and which the lion's whelps have not walked in; if we are not walking in this path which I am describing, we are not walking in the path of salvation; and not walking in that path referred to by the Savior when he says, "Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, and few there be that find it." But we are to add to knowledge temperance; sobriety of mind; I apprehend that to be the chief meaning here, sobriety of mind. And that is the natural effect of knowledge. There is the old, staid, steady Christian, he does not lay hands on men too suddenly, and does not, take them off very suddenly because he has not occasion to do so. But the little one, when first brought into the delights of the gospel, why, he says and unsays, judges and re-judges, does and undoes, runs backwards and forwards, and makes a thousand mistakes. But after a little more experience he will not receive persons quite as readily, on account of a few excellencies that might appear about them, nor cast a person off quite so hastily on account of some sins, and faults, and inconsistencies that may appear about them. And so, they begin to judge temperately. And therefore, this virtue, this knowledge, this sobriety of mind, will bring us to a deep sympathy with the real people of God, will bring us to a deep sympathy with the deep things of God, will bring us to a deep sympathy with the precious love of God, and will enlarge in our soul's estimation the great salvation of the blessed God. And we are to add to temperance patience; it naturally follows. Well, says one, I am afraid I shall not at all get on adding patience, for I am one of the most impatient creatures in the world. Well, I am sorry for you, and especially as I am one of that sort myself; therefore I can sympathize with you. I am one of the most impatient creatures possible; and I am sorry for myself and sorry for you. But we will let that go and let us see if we are impatient if we cannot find some patience somewhere, and add to this temperance patience. What kind of patience? Why, that patience that will patiently endure all things for the truth's sake. You can come in there, I suppose; with all your impatience, and all your hastiness, and all your fretfulness, your patience does not wear out with regard to God's truth. Well, no, say you, I cannot get out of patience with that; and that is the way in which that Scripture must be understood. "Great peace have they that love your law, and nothing shall offend them;" and the Proverb says, "make no friendship with an angry man, with an angry man you shalt not go." I take "angry man" here to mean a man that is angry with the truth. "Great peace," then, "have they that love your law, and nothing shall offend them;" they have plenty in themselves, and plenty in the world, and in

circumstances to offend them; but they shall never go beyond the range of that great descriptive blessing where the Savior says, "Blessed is he whosoever is not offended in me." Therefore, to temperance patience. And to patience godliness. The longer you serve the Lord the more you receive of his spirit, and of his love, and of his truth. I find it to be so, the longer I believe in the Lord the more I love him. And then to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness charity. "Charity," I like the word "love" better; and of course, our translators have given us those words which they thought proper; while we have as much right to read the Greek as they had; and if we prefer another English word which expresses the original, we have just as much right to use it as they had. Therefore, for *charity* I prefer the word *love*; to brotherly kindness, charity, or love; and that will naturally follow. Now the apostle says, "if these things be in you" notice it is a matter of experience, "if these things be in you, and abound, they shall make you, that you shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." Then the next part to which the apostle would have us attend is to "give diligence to make our calling and election sure; for if we do these things, we shall never fall." God the Father has saved us by fixing his love upon us, choosing us, giving us to his dear Son, imputing our sins to him and imputing Christ's work to us; the Savior has saved us by putting away our sins by the sacrifice of himself; the Holy Spirit saves us by manifesting these things to us. Therefore, I say, in this abiding fast by the truth, the apostle would have us in addition to the other things he has said, make our calling and election sure. Now, I do not think that election here means our eternal election of God. I am aware that is the way in which this Scripture is universally taken; but I cannot myself see it; because there is something so tautological and so inconsistent in the apostle's words were that the idea he wished to convey. The general way in which that Scripture is disposed of is this, make your calling sure, and I will be answerable for your election; meaning thereby, that if you are really called, if you can prove by trying yourself by the word of God that you are really called, that calling is the proof of your election; and therefore, it would make that word election tautological and unnecessary. But if it be taken in its proper sense, "make your calling sure" that is the first thing; look at it, and see if you came by your religion in the right way, have you received these truths as a matter of necessity, have you received the testimony of Christ as a matter of necessity, has it been a matter of solemn necessity? Having settled this matter, there is one thing more for you to do, that is, to make your election sure. What election? Why, your election of God's truth. The word election means choice. Now, then make your choice of God's truth, but do not make a careless choice of it. I will say here that God has been very gracious to me in this matter. Before I ever dreamt of coming into the ministry, it was my frequent custom to remain up until twelve and one, and sometimes two in the morning searching the Scriptures; and I found that there always have been many delusions and our Lord tells us that it shall be so to the end; "many shall come in my name and shall deceive many." Seeing these things, and feeling these things, I was concerned to make my choice of God's truth sure. And let me just say to you, the one great key to make your election of God's truth sure, is the new covenant! Hold fast upon that; take the Bible, take your concordance, and if you have not a concordance you can get one, they do not cost much, and then read the word "covenant" all through your concordance, and examine all those Scriptures; only distinguish between the old and the new covenant, and if the Lord be with you, I am sure you will make a sure choice of the truth. You will see that this new covenant swallows up the old, not illegally but legally; and that this new covenant magnifies the law; that it swallows up all your sins, all the curse; that this new covenant leaves nothing for you but that which you can find in the new Jerusalem; this new covenant leaves nothing for you but that which is found in Jesus; for men really talk as though salvation was partly of works, and partly of grace, and tell us it is a man's own fault if he is lost, why, there never was a

greater error propagated; it is an error that would undermine all God's truth. No, if you be once fixed in God's covenant, then your choice of God's truth is made so sure, your hold is so firm, that the apostle Peter says, (now just notice these words) "if you do these things," make your calling sure, and then make a sure election of God's truth, "if you do these things, you shall never fall;" and the reason that men fall down from their eminence, is simply because they have never made their choice of the truth sure; and therefore it is a matter of uncertainty altogether.

Well, suppose I should go on increasing in this knowledge of the Lord, what then? I will tell you what then, "for so an abundant entrance shall be ministered unto you in the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." Why, I shall die very happy, die where I may, die how I may, and die when I may. I have never yet known a man whose soul has been made virtually one with new covenant truth, and brought into the life, and light, and perfection of the gospel, die otherwise. I could give several names. Whereas on the other hand, I could give you some specimens even of the Lord's own children that have been lingering about, halting between two opinions even to the last. If then, friends, we neglect to see that we come rightly by our religion; if we neglect to make a sure choice of it, what shall we thereby prove? Prove what I must now go on to speak of, that we are mere professors; and it is to mere professors the apostle evidently refers. He says, "If the word spoken by angels was steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward: how shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation?" The word spoken by angels would mean the ministration of the Levitical covenant at Sinai, where angels attended the Lord's presence. Now, I will notice the first transgression, the first disobedience, when they came to the wilderness: and they never got rid of it. Amazing what a stubborn thing error is! Duty-faith is the golden calf of the present day; duty-faith is the fiery flying serpent of the present day. What a stubborn thing error is! What was their first transgression? Why, they never got rid of it, not until they themselves were destroyed. See the awful destruction to which that simple circumstance led. So then, if you will substitute something in the place of the perfect work of Christ, something in the place of the new covenant, something in the place of regeneration, something in the place of Him who alone can save us, how shall you escape? But I shall make this matter perhaps clearer if I should say to you that the Greek word *ameleo*, here translated "neglect" is the same word which in Matthew 22nd is translated "light;" "therefore, when they were bidden to the marriage they made light of it; one went to his farm and another to his merchandise." Now let me stop here a minute; you see these people did very well, they were all the king's servants. Are you a Christian? Oh yes, sir. Are you a Christian too? Oh yes, sir, a universal charity one. Oh yes, they all got on very well, none of them rebelled against the King until they were put to the test; but as soon as ever a new covenant was brought in, "Come to the marriage." Marriage! Oh, that means a people given to Christ before the world was that means an indissoluble relationship between Christ and the church; that means that dreadful doctrine that God saves only some and leaves others; they had light enough to see that; and, like the bat and the owl, they hated the light and avoided the light, and therefore they made light of it. So, it is now: when the sinner is brought to feel and know what he is as a lost sinner, just where that sinner rests his all, there the mere professor trifles, makes light of it. "Oh," says he, "I don't think much of election, I don't trouble myself about it; I don't think much of that covenant you talk about, I don't trouble myself much about that; holiness of heart and life is all I care about;" as if you could have that apart from God's truth, as though you could have holiness of life apart from Christ. "Practice is everything, sir." Practice is nothing, sir, except it arise from the right root; and the Lord knows whether they be the grapes of Eshcol, or whether they be the grapes of Sodom. And, therefore, if you make light of

these great truths, make light of these blessed truths, how shall we escape? How? There is no escape! there is no escape! But I think before I pass to the last head, I ought to make a remark or two to the people of God. I'm not going to let you off this morning without a word, you know. Well, I think, while the text is discriminating, it is also a truth that the people of God do sometimes get into a state not at all desirable. For instance, what a power the world will have; and how often will the Christian act as though the world were everything to him, and as though Christ was nothing. Now wherever that is the case there is a rod not far off. Looseness and carelessness of conduct will bring the soul into a wretched state, an awful state. Good people sometimes, perhaps through trade or connections, forget themselves; they can join perhaps with the ungodly unnecessarily, not absolutely in ungodliness, but still in a way not altogether right. I think there are other places where Christians may go and transact business with the world besides public houses. I think when a Christian gets into that careless state, that he can go where there are scenes, and where there is language that must harrow up the soul of a man of right mind, when he gets into that state you may depend upon it, friends, that it is a terrible calamity to the soul; there must be a rod somewhere. Oh, what a wretched thing is sin; and sympathizing with it would conform us to it, would conform us to the very devil-ism, if the Lord were to leave us to its power. And, therefore, if we get into this state how shall we escape the rod? I was going to say, God forbid we should; for he chastens and scourges every son whom he receives; and I do believe that although chastening as the apostle says, does not seem joyous, but rather grievous, yet if we be sons it is from the chastening hand of the Lord; and when he throws in bitters where we expected sweet, when he gives a wilderness, where we anticipated a Paradise, when he thwarts us here, and thwarts us there, and makes us to look east, west, north, and south, and all seems gloomy on all hands, oh, then we look to the Lord, and some sweet ray of his mercy comes to where we are; and we say with the Psalmist, "Return unto your rest, O my soul, for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you." Bless the Lord then, that he will not lay his rod aside; the sword is gone, that fell upon the Savior, but the rod is still needful, or else I am sure ministers would get very dead, the people very dead, and there would not be much done.

But lastly, *what is so worthy of our attention, of our highest affection, as this salvation?* And I must assign two reasons; first, because of the interest which the Lord shows in it; and secondly, because of the advantages we have by it. What is the interest that the Lord has shown in creation and providence? Why, it is as nothing in comparison of the interest he has shown in our eternal salvation. What was the interest that the Savior showed in anything temporal, in anything earthly, in comparison of the interest he showed to live out, work out, and die out, our salvation? What is the interest the blessed Spirit has shown in inditing the Scriptures, in raising up apostles, and still raising up faithful ministers? What is the interest he shows in things that are temporal, in comparison of the interest he shows in eternal salvation? Oh, then, would we be close to our Maker, would we enjoy much of his presence, would we walk in sweet fellowship with him? his whole heart is in salvation; there is his love, his grace, his mercy; there is his integrity, his holiness, his truth, his glory. This great matter of salvation then will supersede everything else. And so, interested were the Old Testament believers in this very truth, that they were wont to speak in this way, "God is my salvation;" "You are become my salvation, therefore I will trust and not be afraid." Why, what can be so pleasing as to have our hearts where God's heart is, to have our delights where His delight is, to have our pleasures where his pleasures are. It is a matter of infinite pleasure, a matter of eternal pleasure to him; therefore, it is of this salvation that the Savior says, "The lines have fallen to me in pleasant places, yea, I have a goodly heritage." That is one reason

then, friends; the interest the blessed God has in this matter. And then the other is the advantages, and I shall mention a few in conclusion, and leave you to run over them and equal them if you can. Just gather together thirteen or fourteen Scriptures, look at them in every light, read them over, and so learn their preciousness to you. He who receives the truth as a matter of necessity, then, blessed are you, for, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Therefore, the first advantage I get is an everlasting kingdom. The next I get, is everlasting consolation; the next is an incorruptible inheritance; the next is a fulness of righteousness on every hand; the next is mercy; the next is the full vision of the blessed God, for "Blessed are the pure in heart, they shall see God." the next is uninterrupted unruffled, eternal tranquility, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God;" peace shall be their portion; the next I get, is that great reward in heaven; the next is that we are to eat of the tree of life that is in the Paradise of God; the next is, I shall not be hurt of the second death; the next is, I shall eat of the hidden manna, and shall have the white stone of pardon, and honor, and dignity, given to me, with the name of mercy, adoption, election, salvation; the next is, that I shall be clothed with white raiment, that my name shall not be blotted out of the Book of Life; the next is, that I shall be as a pillar in the temple of my God, to go no more out for ever; and the next is, that I shall sit down on his throne, as He has overcome and sat down on his Father's throne. Then I read on towards the end of Revelation, and all that is there said is sure, all that is there said is certain. And hence if, we take away from that Scripture in Isaiah the word "salvation," and put the word "preservation" in its place, it will enable us to form an idea of the glory in the last of Revelation; "But Israel shall be preserved in the Lord with an everlasting preservation; you shall not be ashamed nor confounded, world without end."