

A STRONG HOLD¹

A SERMON

Preached on Sunday Morning, January 6th, 1861

By Mister JAMES WELLS

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“This is the true God, and eternal life.” 1 John 5:20

AFTER what we advanced last Lord’s day morning upon these words, I notice this morning *the contrast or contrasts’ which are intended evidently in the declaration of our text; and then secondly, the dignity and the certainty of that life which we have by this wonderful Person, Christ Jesus the Lord.* He is evidently here set in contrast first to that which is false; and secondly to our state by nature, or to the law; and third, to that which is good in itself, yet only temporary. First, that he is here set forth in contrast to that which is false; but instead of occupying your time with describing that which is false, I will, as far as the Lord shall enable me, set before you, that which is true; and then all that is contrary to that which is true must be false. And all these things that are contrary to the dignity of the Savior as here set forth are what the apostle John closing this epistle calls idols; and so, he says to the persons to whom he was writing, “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.” Now the Lord Jesus Christ, then, is here declared to be the true God; not to the exclusion of the Father and the Holy Spirit, as perhaps we shall be able to show as we go along, after just setting before you some of the most wonderful things that we have set before us, I had almost said, by the blessed God himself. Here is a Person who is God and man in one, standing in the law place of a poor sinner; and this wonderful Person is the way of eternal salvation. And there are four scriptures to which these words seem to bear some allusion; I do not say there are not more than four scriptures; but there are four especially that I will notice, three in the Old Testament and one in the New, to which these words seem to refer.

First the Old Testament; in the 45th of Isaiah you find the Savior in the spirit of prediction speaking similarly of himself to the way in which he is here spoken of; “a just God and a Savior.” See, my hearer, how that meets one of our great troubles; namely, how shall man be justified with God? Here is a Person that is a just God and yet a Savior; he is just and having salvation, a just God; one having met the demands of the law and justice in a way that the highest archangel never could; he is, therefore, in this great matter of justice, called Jehovah our Righteousness. He thus became, in

¹ This is the second of three sermons’ Wells preached on this text. As I noted in the pervious sermon, he deals the Sonship of Christ. I would encourage the reader to read all three sermons, number 106 titled “Complexity” and 108 “Eternal Life” as well. All three, as well as most of James Wells published sermons are available at: <https://www.surreytabernaclepulpit.com/> Richard Schadle

this mediatorial sense of the word, a just God in order that he might be a Savior; for this is the way in which he is a Savior; he thus became a just God for us; taking our debt upon him, and paying the very last mite of that that; taking the law and its curse, and magnifying that law, and meeting its curse; taking upon him the bitter death which sin had entailed, himself undergoing that bitterness, and swallowing up that death in victory. Hence in the 45th of Isaiah, in allusion of our text, after he has thus declared himself a just God and the Savior, then notice the beautiful way in which he speaks; "Look unto me, and be you saved." He does not say, look unto me and do as I have done; as I have magnified the law, and have got to heaven, you must do the same; as I have that died to show my sincerity, you must shed your blood also to show your sincerity, and go to heaven too. This would be a Socinian concern; this would be that that would be no use to a sinner, no use to law and to justice; no; this Person is God, the true God and everlasting life. "Look unto me, and be you saved, all you ends of the earth." Now compare these words with the words of the dear Savior himself; "I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto me;" that as of all objects there was no object so attractive in the wilderness to the serpent bitten Israelite as the brazen serpent, that was put up as a type of Christ; looking unto that in believing in that as God's institution, as God's way, the Israelite was healed. And so, in the whole range of this wilderness world, for the world after all universally is a wilderness; there is to that convinced sinner no object that stands out so conspicuously distinct from all other objects, and becomes so attractive, as this one great object; "I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto me." And to give you an example of what he means, and to encourage us in our worst condition, there hangs the malefactor by his side; and that malefactor is blessed with the spirit of conviction, the spirit of grace and supplication; and that petition is there and then answered; and the soul of that malefactor departs on that very day into the Paradise; as though the Savior should say, "Look unto me, and be you saved;" and if you are afraid because you are a great sinner, look at the thief by my side, listened to his petition; look at the freeness of my grace; look at the ability of my arm to save; look at the efficacy of my blood; see how God my Father delights to glory glorify me in accepting me in that sinners place; see that a man who had lived the worst of lives; who had brought himself to the gallows, even that man shall be taken as a trophy of my victorious death into the realms of everlasting glory; he will not fail to join with those that would sing the loudest to "crown him Lord of all," and ascribe the honor to him that the wondrous salvation which his omnipotent arm achieved. "Look unto me, and be you saved, all the ends of the earth." That must be taken, of course, in a twofold sense; first that his precious death should save sinners east, west, north, and south, to the remotest bounds, and to the remotest ages; and then secondly that it means sinners that are driven to the end of all earthly help and all earthly hopes; a sinner that is brought so far, he has tried his own works, he has tried other people's advice and counsel, and he is driven to the very end of all earthly hope, earthly righteousness, earthly holiness, earthly wisdom, and everything earthly; he comes to this conclusion: if I am helped, my help must come from where David stated, when he said, "My help comes from the Lord that made heaven and earth;" and if I am brought to feel that, then the next words belong to me "the Lord shall bless you out of Zion," poor sinner, if you are thus driven to the ends of this earth, and brought to feel that the help that you need must come from heaven, that it must be that help which God laid upon One that is mighty, namely, the mighty God, the true God and eternal life; then the Lord shall bless you out of Zion. "Look unto me, and be you saved." Look at his ability; he is the true God; as though he should say, If I were not God Almighty; if I were not God which was, which is, in which is to come, I would not mock immortal souls by teaching them to look to me when it would be only one creature looking to another; but in looking to me you look at all my omnipotence, you look at eternity; the mighty God, the everlasting Father;

the true God and eternal life; I am God, and there is none else. I want you now, those of you that love the truth to watch me very narrowly in what I am going to say, in order to prevent our falling into a mistake that some people fall into here. They say, the Lord says, "Look unto me and be you saved, all the ends of the earth;" and men can look if they like, and that the Lord leaves it with men, and if they do not choose to look it is their fault, they might look and be saved if they liked, and if they go to hell they must go, that's all; the Lord has said, "Look," and if you won't look, it's your own fault; and there the matter is left. This is what men tell us, but, my hearer, turn to the 45th of Isaiah, and look at the very next words, and notice the language of him who says, "Look unto me, and be you saved, all the ends of the earth;" his next words are, "I have sworn by myself, the word is going out of my mouth in righteousness, and shall not return, that unto me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear." Ah, what "every knee" is this? Every knee that God the Father has given him; he shall come unto me; be he a Saul of Tarsus, be he who he may and what he may, I will bend his knee down to my throne of grace; and his tongue shall swear. Take notice of this, here is the everlasting God, the true God, enters into an immutable oath, "I have sworn by myself." God the Father has sworn, and would not repent, that Christ is a Priest forever; and here Christ as an independent person; when I say independent, I mean independent of creatures, "I have sworn by myself; the word is gone out of my mouth in righteousness." How in righteousness? On the ground of his mediatorial work, "the word has gone out of my mouth in righteousness and shall not return; that unto me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear." Ah, now come down to experience, before I bring you to the Scriptures in the New Testament. Have not some of us undergone in former years some most painful experience, that gave us such a conviction of the utter depravity of our nature, as to make us at last bow to what this incarnate God has done; bow to the accomplished the warfare, bow to the finished work, bow to the order of his covenant; he brought us down, and our tongues at last confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father; the true God and eternal life. Mark the New Testament upon this, 10th of John. Does the Savior in the Old Testament say, "I have sworn by myself, the word is gone out of my mouth in righteousness and shall not return; that unto me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear?" Does he say this in the Old Testament? Does he there speak in all the majesty of his salvation, does he there speak in all the claims of mediation, does he there speak in all the dignity of God's eternal consuls, seeing the counsels of the most High shall stand, and he will do all his pleasure, and that pleasure lies with Christ, does Christ thus speak in the Old Testament? Brethren, hear what the same Person says in the New Testament in the days of his flesh. "Other sheep I have, which are not of this fold; them also I *must* bring." In the one case he swears by himself, they shall submit to me; and the other case he declares, I *must* bring them, and they *shall* hear my voice; I will make them hear it. Well but, Lord they are dead. Then they shall hear the voice of the son of God, and live. Well but Lord, they are in bondage. Then I will say to whatever holds them, loose them and let them go. Well, Lord, they are guilty. Then I will say, Son, your sins be forgiven you. Well but, Lord, they are filthy. And I will say, be you clean. Well but, Lord, they are withered from top to toe, withered by sin. Then I will banish the palsy from them. Well but, Lord, they are bent double. Then I will bring them upright. Whatever impediment there is in the way, they shall hear my voice; my words shall not return. "The word is gone out of my mouth in righteousness and shall not return." "And there shall be one-fold." A free grace fold: the Catholic fold is a fold of the devil; so is the Mahometan fold; so are some others in my belief, but this morning I will have that little bit of faith to myself; but there shall be one-fold, and it is a free grace fold, and one shepherd. What is the one shepherd? The one shepherd is that good shepherd that laid down his life for the sheep. And when they are offended with him for his definition of his pastoral character, he as it

were saw the necessity of returning to it again and giving a second edition. What did he say? "You believe not, because you are not of my sheep, as I said unto you. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me, and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my hand. I and my Father are one." This is the true God, then, my hearer, that saves poor sinners, after this order; and he declares there shall be one-fold, and that shall be a free grace fold? What say you to this? Is Jesus, God man mediator, thus attractive to us? Do we love God in the apprehension of such an in uncalculatable gift as this? Such a great Savior he has sent unto us; one who thought it, and rightly thought it, not robbery to be equal with God. But we have not yet done with the 45th of Isaiah. I am trying now to point out to you the blessedness of your hope; if you are a poor sinner feeling your need of the Savior, this great Savior, this mediatorial suitability, greatness, and glory, 45th of Isaiah, after the Savior showing us that he is just, and yet a Savior; and then the kind invitation to the poor self-condemned sinner; and then the certainty of all given to him being brought to bow to him; then the Savior points out one of his children as a kind example to the rest; "Surely, shall one say, in the Lord have I righteousness." What, none in yourself? No. "And strength." What, none in yourself? No. You have strength in the Lord. Yes, the Lord God is my strength; and he makes my feet like hinds' feet, to walk up on high places; he brings me up to dwell among the munitions of rocks, where the bread of eternal life is given, where the water of eternal life is sure. "Surely, shall one say, even to him shall men come." You say, that is a nice picture; a poor sensible sinner, what I want is righteousness and strength; I want righteousness to make me righteous before God; and I want strength to hope in his mercy; I want strength to stand fast; I want strength to serve him; I want strength to walk in his ways; I want strength to live and to die. Ah, when that one comes and bears such a testimony as this, others hear of it; it is like the lepers of old, when they had heard of the victory the Lord had wrought, they began to hoard up for themselves; and one of them said, We do not well thus to keep it to ourselves; some evil will befall the; let us go out; we can but die if we go to the camp of Syria, and if we stay here we shall die; we must take this goodness now unto our brethren. Out they went; and there was food, and there was garments, and everything that the poor famished creatures of the city needed; they came and told the good tidings; and they went and found it was as the lepers had borne testimony, and as the prophet had predicted; that Mr. Freed will stood in in the gate and said it could not be so; the God of the Hebrews would never do like that; no; the people themselves must do it; but the people very wisely trod that free will Lord to death in the gate; and everything was plentiful and abundant, just as the prophet had said; and the people got the advantage and God got the glory. And so here, if you have found out that you have neither strength nor righteousness of your own, you will never be contented with any gospel but that gospel that brings all the righteousness that you need, and that brings all the strength you need. And all that are incised against that man whose righteousness and strength are in the Lord shall be ashamed. That is God's friend; that man that has no strength of his own, and is enabled to take hold of God strength, that is God's friend. "Abraham my friend." Abraham had no strength nor righteousness of his own; his strength and his righteousness's were in the Lord; he was God's friend. And the Savior said to certain persons, "You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you; and I call you friends; not my servants; you are my friends. "All that are incised against him shall be ashamed." Why is that declaration made? For this reason, my hearer; that all the time you are going with the tide of this world, and have a little strength of your own, and a little righteousness of your own, hidden up, not confessedly, but hidden up as it were; and you make polite reference now and then to Christ's righteousness; you might make polite references now and then to election;

you make polite references now and then to him that died on the cross; you object on the cross; mustn't say Jesus Christ, that would be vulgar; Mustn't say salvation is of grace; no, Mustn't talked like that; quite course. Hence the apostle was reckoned very rude in speech by the fine scholars of his day. Now all the time you are thus polite you will do very well; but be stripped of all that, and come right out of what you are as a sinner, and come right out with what Christ must be to you as a Savior, if he ever saved you at all; and come right out with the way in which God is everlasting strength to his people, there will then be plenty incised against you directly, plenty; depend upon it you will have plenty of enemies; because Satan knows that he has lost you. Satan cares nothing for your strength any more than he did for the sons of Sceva; he cares nothing for your righteousness, any more than he did for the righteousness of Saul of Tarsus when he was a self-righteous man; but when thus brought to know the true God, Christ Jesus, and he becomes your Savior, becomes your strength, and becomes your righteousness; then, being thus swerved from the world, men will be incised against you; but they will be ashamed, not you; you have the shame to bear that they put upon you, but they will have the shame to bear that God shall put upon them; and I am sure men are not able to put so much shame upon us as God will put upon them. Men may level their arrows at us; but they will not be able to make so sure of their mark as the blessed God shall when he shall bend his bow, direct his arrows, make sure of his prey, confound his foes, defend his friends, honor the Savior, establish counsel, fulfill his promise; for his kingdom must come, and in his will must be done. Again, now here is one; "surely shall one say;" that is a good beginning, especially if that one happens to be a minister, and he is come to that experimentally; he will stand there, he will not go over to the others, but let the others come over to him, if God brings them over. Then notice, "In the Lord shall *all*;" not *one*; I like that very much; "in the Lord shall all the seed of Israel," all of them, the spiritual seed, "be justified, and shall glory." Just now it was righteousness and strength; now it is righteousness and glory. You cannot separate righteousness and strength; for wherever God is a sinner's righteousness, there he will be that man's strength; and wherever God is a poor believers justification, there he is his glory; so strength and righteousness and then righteousness and glory. And this wonderful Person, Christ Jesus, is the true God, and eternal life. Yet the old song, that the Old Testament saints knew nothing of Christ, I wish we knew as much as they did. Can anything be clearer than the words which I have pointed out in Isaiah? There is a God just and the Savior; there is the assurance that they shall come; the 10th of John explains who the "every knee" is that shall bow and who the "every tongue" is that shall confess and swear by him; "Other sheep I have, them I must bring;" "all the Father has given me shall come unto me." And then, when all are brought into the same position, "in him shall all the seed of Israel be justified and shall glory." Would that I had language to set before you what some of my feelings are relative to God's approbation of this Person. God's delight in this complex Person is infinite, it is eternal; there is everything in him, and in infinity of fullness in him. So, my hearer, what I say to you may seem extravagant, but I am accountable to no man under heaven, and never will be, for anything I utter relative to the things of God; I say of this wondrous mediator, that if you, a personal sinner, had committed personally all the sins that have ever been committed since the creation of the world, if this Person died for you, even those sins would not be able to damn you, and how much less your sins now. The sins of an antediluvian life, 900 years, if that life for the whole 900 years had been as bad as the life of the thief on the cross up to the last, even that could not equal the greatness of this salvation, could not equal the greatness of this Person. Ah, what a Savior is ours! What a mediator is ours! What a hiding place, what a theme! We may go on contemplating his glories externally and internally, in all his varieties of adaptation;

we may go on contemplating his glories while the cycles of eternity shall roll around, and never weary and never clog.

The second scripture to which perhaps these words may bear some allusion, is the 10th of Jeremiah, where the Savior is spoken of in majestic contrast to the idols of which the prophet had been speaking; he says, "But Jehovah is the true God, he is the living God, and an everlasting King." Now compare that 10th of Jeremiah with the first of Luke, and what the angel said concerning Christ, "He shall reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there shall be no end." Then go back to Jeremiah 10, "the Lord is the true God;" in contrast to all the idols; Christ is the true God and Savior, besides him there is no Savior; and everlasting King; all other kings die, but this King lives forever; for as the margin nicely renders it there, "the King of eternity." Here is this wonderful Person then, he is the true God; he will not deceive you; if he speaks a promise once, the eternal grace is sure. Ah, the poor disciples, poor things like the rest of us, if they had that knowledge of him that they had after the day of Pentecost, they would not have staggered, and doubted, and feared, and said, "We trusted that it had been he which should have redeemed Israel!" Oh, no; they would have been as sure of his return to them as they were of his existence; but they were as yet not so enlightened; and the Lord so ordered it, and the Lord was pleased so to hide many things from them, in order that in the absence of more conspicuous revelations of divine mysteries they might learn more and more of their weakness, and thereby be prepared for that sealing of the Spirit which they should afterwards enjoy, when they should come to these abundant revelations that make doubt and fear utterly impossible, that should make them lion hearted and make one stand and say, "What mean you to weep, and to break my heart? For I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." I think, therefore, Jeremiah refers to Christ: Jehovah, the true God, and the everlasting King, the King of eternity. "At his wrath the earth shall tremble;" and so the Jewish earth did tremble when he poured out his wrath by the Roman armies upon it; that Jewish earth was the carcass, and there the eagles, the Roman Eagles were gathered together. "And the nations shall not be able to abide his indignation." Where is Assyria? Where is Babylon? Where is ancient Rome and its greatness? And where will these nations be ere long? They shall not be able to his abide his indignation. But they who are his, are freed from indignation, brought under the smiles of his countenance; they shall stand upon this immovable rock; the inhabitants of this rock shall sing when other shall lie down in eternal sorrow; they shall sing and shout victory from the tops of these heavenly and eternal mountains, where they shall enjoy the full vision of the blessed God, where they shall have fullness of pleasures for evermore.

Again, I think also our text may refer to the first chapter of Habakkuk. Habakkuk, looking at the apostacy of the Jews, and seeing a gap between them and God, and seeing no mediator, the Prophet wondered what would fill up the gap; he saw no one to stand in the gap, no one to stand in the breach; there is a vacuum; they have apostatized from God, and something must fill up that; what will that be? He looks and looks, presently he saw a mighty mountain, and that mountain was Babylon; and he saw that Babylon Empire with all its terrors would roll in like a burning mountain between them and God, would destroy them as a nation for 70 years; and as the prophet predicted, so it was. But Habakkuk at the same time saw that there was then, as now, a remnant according to the election of grace, who had not lost sight of Christ; therefore, said the Prophet, "are you not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One;" my sanctification; the way in which I am saved from sin, and death, and woe. They do not like election, Lord; we tell them of your mercy from

everlasting; they do not like that, because they think they can have no hand in it then; we tell them that you are our Redeemer from everlasting, that your councils and goings forth were from old, even from everlasting; they do not like that; they have apostatized from that. But my Holy One, are you not from everlasting? I know you are. What is the conclusion? "We shall not die." What! Can't Nebuchadnezzar kill you? No. He didn't either; for those that were guided by the Prophets of God escaped the sword of Nebuchadnezzar, went to Babylon, and the Lord said, I will be a little sanctuary unto you there; and honors eternal to his name, he never failed in one iota of his truth; he was a sanctuary there.

So, my hearer, whatever betides us, however trying the circumstances, he will be our sanctuary there, our strength, our consolation, our God. Are you not from everlasting, my Holy One? Shall I join with those that deny your eternity? Shall I deny that you did go forth from everlasting? Shall I deny the eternity of your councils, the eternity of your covenant? Shall I deny this? No, I dare not deny it; for you are from everlasting; and therefore, beforehand with my sins, and beforehand with my woes, and beforehand with my circumstances; and that being the case, we shall not die; for let there come what wreck and ruin there may, the Lord God is my strength; and while he lives, I cannot die, but must live forever. "This is the true God, and eternal life." Again, I am not sure that John, supposing of course that that is only a supposition, that he wrote this epistle after he wrote his gospel; but even if I am wrong there won't be much harm done, supposing John wrote this epistle after he wrote his gospel, I could almost imagine that our text refers to his first chapter of the gospel; and so, if John was a comparatively young man when he wrote his gospel, and an aged man, as most learned men agree when he wrote his epistles, that will teach us that he had not changed in this great matter. In our text he says of Christ, "This is the true God, and eternal life; in the first chapter of this gospel he says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. In him was life; and the life was the light of men." And "this is the true God, and eternal life." There are many more things I had to say; but I must pass by a great many that now present themselves. Now you observe that the same phrase is used relative to Christ. "This is the true God, and eternal life." And this is life eternal, to know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." Hence, the very first chapter of the blessed Spirit is the Spirit of truth; "he shall guide you into all truth." Now whatever one divine Person is by nature, that also is the other; there is no difference. There are three that bear record in the heavenly dispensation, as well as in heaven, Father, Word, and Holy Ghost, and these three are one, no difference. The apostle in Ephesians 4 presents the holy three to us in their relative position John rather declares their Godhead here when he says, "There are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word and the Holy Ghost," does not say Father, And the Son, and the Holy Ghost. I apprehend the reason that John did not say the Son instead of the Word was because his object was not to declare the Sonship of Christ, but the Godhead of Christ. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God." Some men say that the soul preexisted, and that the Word was the soul, well, but the Holy Ghost says it was God. Then another says the Word was the Son; well, but the Bible says it was God; and I must take my stand on what the Bible says; I must either set my Maker aside or else my fellow mortals; and which is the greater fault of the two judge you. But when the apostle Paul would give us a sweet apprehension of the eternal Three, he speaks of them in their beautiful relationship to us; and looks at the people of God as laying hold of this great testimony of Christ in his infinite ability to save, "Endeavoring," he says, "to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace;" the unity of the Spirit; he does not contradict himself; men may attribute self-contradiction to the Holy Ghost, and tell us that self-contradiction will be solved by and by, but I

cannot trust myself in that road; I don't know where it leads to, so would rather not go; let me abide in God's own word, "the unity of the Spirit." And then how beautifully the apostle shows the eternal Three in their relationship to the church. The apostle presents the church in its corporate position and speaks of it as a body. "There is one body, and one Spirit," the Holy Spirit is the life of that body, the life of the church. When do you hear the word profitably? When can the minister preach, I was going to say eloquently, I don't mean fine words, but find thoughts, and when is the word that he preaches blessed? Is it not when the Holy Spirit is the life thereof? "As you are called in one hope of your calling;" the Spirit gives us only one hope, and that hope is this true God and eternal life. "One Lord," the Lord Jesus Christ; "one faith," a free grace faith; from the first part of the 11th of Hebrews to the last there is but one faith, and that faith there appears in a variety of forms and acquires a variety of advantages, achieves a variety of exploits, undergoes a variety of suffering; but it is but one faith; all demonstrating the one fact, that salvation is of grace. "One baptism." There is but one ordinance of baptism; men have two; the Church of England has two; they have sprinkling, which they call baptism; and they have immersion as well. In God's way of doing things, there is but one baptism. And "one God and Father of us all." He is the Father of all that truly hope in Christ, "he is above all, and through all, and in you all;" dwells in you; and if the Father dwells in you, Christ dwells in you; and if Christ dwells in you, the Holy Spirit dwells in you; as God in unity of his essence has said, "I will dwell in them, and walk in them." May grace enable us to walk in love, and that will be walking in God.

With these few words I must close; the latter part of my text "eternal life," I must not touch upon this morning.