

FIRST FRUITS

A SERMON

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“And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves, groan within ourselves, wailing for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body.” Romans 8:23

THE word of the Lord assures us concerning him that while his way is in the sea, his footsteps are not known. We ourselves never knew what his footsteps were in a way of salvation until he himself brought us into those footsteps. And so, it is with this paragraph of which our text is a part. There is a very minute description given of true Christian experience; and this paragraph has been reckoned, I believe, by men generally as one of the most ambiguous and difficult scriptures in all the New Testament to understand. But I think the ambiguity and difficulty arise from want of Christian experience, its downward conviction, and its light from on high. There are sharp exercises from time to time connected with it.

“It is a point I long to know.
Do I love the Lord, or no?”

And those exercises will give us to understand and know what we cannot know without them. Religion, or the knowledge of Christ, is not obtained by mere information, it is obtained connected with sharp exercises of soul. Hence the apostle here says that “even we, which have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body.” I am quite aware that this paragraph, as I have suggested, is held to be very difficult to understand, and I will therefore speak of it carefully, in deference even to the opinions of others, though to my own mind I cannot say there is anything more ambiguous in it than in other scriptures that mark the footsteps of the flock. The Lord has led his people in all ages in paths that no others know; therefore they have tribulation experiences which none others have; and they are driven to receive testimonies or gospel truths which none others are driven to receive; and as they realize those truths, and see their origin, order, and certainty, they hold them fast as their only hope. They are blamed for what is called their creed; but what they hold, that men call a creed, they do not hold it as a mere creed; they hold every truth of the gospel as expressive of that which is essential to their

eternal welfare. They call me a hyper-Calvinist and a high doctrine man; why, I am what I am of positive necessity. I am driven thus far, that unless grace had in the first place undertaken my case, I know I could not be saved; and unless Jesus Christ (“for you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ”) had taken away my poverty, and put his riches into the place of my poverty, I could not be saved; and if the Holy Spirit be not a Spirit of grace, and does not carry on his work according to the riches of his grace independent of any merit, worth or worthiness in the creature, then there is no hope. But our God is a God of grace.

There are three things in our text we have to notice. First, *the first fruits of the Spirit*. Secondly, *the tribulation experiences of those who are thus favored*. Thirdly, *the ultimate end they have in view*, “waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body.”

First, then, what we are to understand by *the first fruits of the Spirit*? We must be very careful here to make this as clear as possible; and in order to be clear, I will just remind you of the several different respects in which the words “first fruits” must be understood. When this term is applied to Jesus Christ, and he is called the first fruits, there it means what you find described in the twenty-third of Leviticus that the sheaf of first fruits was accepted, and thereby the whole harvest was consecrated to God; so that the harvest was then safe from the locust, the cankerworm, the caterpillar, the palmerworm, safe from all danger; it was by this first fruits consecrated to God, and sure to be gathered in. Here, then, you see the first fruits mean the Lord Jesus Christ in that character described in the last chapter of the Hebrews; “Jesus, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate.” He therefore stands first as having consecrated the people to God; so that by his mediatorial work they stand eternally consecrated to God. And this is what we must be brought to know; indeed, it is the very first fruits of the Spirit, as we shall presently show, to bring us to know thus that our consecration to God is by faith in the person of Christ, by faith in God, by the obedient life and atoning death of the Lord Jesus Christ. We want to be consecrated to God as good creatures; that is the way in which we, in the legal bias of our minds, wish to be consecrated to God. Hence the Pharisee thought that by his doings he was consecrated to God; but this is all delusion. We must know our need of the atonement of Christ, and we must be brought to God simply as sinners, and to acknowledge that if we are consecrated to God it is by faith in the blood of Christ; “purifying their hearts by faith.” And we must have such confidence in the efficacy and perfection of his atonement, such confidence in his righteousness, and in the promise of God by that righteousness, as to give to God the honor from first to last of our salvation. Therefore, the apostle said, concerning Christ, “If the first fruits be holy, then the lump is holy.” There is no Bible truth more clear than this, that Christ was holy, harmless, separate from sinners; and the people being held by what he is, they are held to be righteous as he is righteous, holy as he is holy, loved as he is loved, blessed as he is blessed. This is the life we want to live, to come into these great mysteries by the mediatorial work of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is one thing intended by the first fruits, not in our text, but in other scriptures where Christ is called the first fruits; the first fruits represented the whole harvest, and so Jesus Christ represents the whole harvest; and as the first fruits were accepted, so the people are accepted by him, consecrated to God by him. Then, secondly, the people themselves are called the first fruits. Now there are two things intended there, when the people themselves are called the first fruits to God. The first thing there meant is their personal consecration to God: and in this personal consecration to God they are called the first fruits after Christ, because Christ is the first fruits, and as he consecrated himself to God, and has consecrated them to God, therefore they, named after

him, are called the first fruits, because they are consecrated to God. Let us come down to the work of the Holy Spirit upon this important matter. There are two meanings, then; the first meaning is that they are consecrated to God. And when, from an experience of the lost, ruined, and wretched state we are in by nature, we are brought to feel that we can be saved only by grace from first to last, we begin to understand what Jesus Christ has done, what he has wrought; and if our consecration to God is true, we shall be so satisfied with Jesus Christ in what he has done that we shall never seek another Savior, another hope, another Intercessor, another Mediator; but shall be perfectly content with the one Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus. And then being led also into a knowledge of the freeness and eternity of the Father's love, we become so consecrated to such a God as this that we cannot change him away. The Jews, who had not this experience, knowledge, and acquaintance with God, changed the fountain of living waters away for broken cisterns that could hold no water; not so those who are truly consecrated to God. Furthermore, we come to the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit alone can take of these things and reveal them with power unto us, so that we thus become Trinitarians, believing in the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost. Then we go one step further, and we see that God's counsel is immutable, that he is unchangeable, and we thus become consecrated to him, and no other God will do. Why, even the little one, full of doubts and fears as to whether he is interested in these things or not, even he can look up to God and say, "Whom have I in heaven," in a way of hope, "but you? and there is none upon the earth" no God, no gospel, "I desire beside you." Ah, you little ones, if you go thus far, if you are thus acquainted with the order of eternal salvation according to Christ's work, according to the Father's free love, and the blessings which he has bestowed, all these blessings embodied in the person of Christ, and according to the immutability of his counsel, if you are brought to this, and feel that you cannot listen to anything else, then what is it? Why, you are the first fruits, you are thus consecrated to God. There is about the country, and in London as well, a great tendency among some, that I hope may be good people, but they do not appear to me to be faithfully as yet consecrated to God: there is a great tendency of this kind, it matters but little to them, if a man has some religion about him what he believes, so that he believe in a Jesus Christ of some sort, and in an experience of some sort. There are some good people who say, Ah, he does not see election, but I hope he is a good man; and another says, Well, he does not see that Christ is anything more than man, but I hope he is a good man. And again, He does not see that sprinkling is not regeneration, but I hope he is a good man, for he is very sincere. Now all this lax sort of work is nothing else but self-deception; it is anything but consecration to God. For where the soul is consecrated to God, what is its language? Let me close this part by quoting one scripture as to the language of the soul that is thus consecrated to God. "Other lords beside you have had dominion over us; but by you only will we make mention of your name." Now do not lose sight of one point there, as good old Gurnel said, We must hit the same nail a great many times sometimes, in order to make it take a fast hold; and so that scripture, "By you only will we make mention of your name." That is the clause I want you to attend to; because men have in all ages made mention of God by idols, by human traditions, human ceremonies and inventions; hence the various systems of men, that do not make mention of the Lord by his own word, work, mercy, and grace; but they make mention of him by human traditions and inventions. The consequence is a misrepresentation of the gospel, which the apostle puts a solemn negative upon, "If an angel brings any other gospel, let him be accursed." Well he might say so, for it is the most serious of all things we can think of for us to be left to delusion, and be deceived at last. Now "by you only will we make mention of your name." And you will observe through the books of Moses that, whenever the Lord stated anything concerning himself, Moses never altered the words; and so, the prophets, whenever the

Lord stated anything concerning himself, his mind or will, those prophets never altered the words. Hence, when they said to Micaiah, "All the prophets speak good of the king; do you the same;" he said, "as the Lord lives, what my God says, that will I speak." Just so with the apostles; why, the apostle Paul is so particular upon this, he dwells upon it with a great deal of feeling and he says, "Which things we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teaches, but which the Holy Spirit teaches." And when the apostles and martyrs were brought unexpectedly before magistrates, rulers, and kings, they were not left to themselves there; "It shall be given you in that same hour what you shall say." While, then, Christ is the first fruits, and the whole are consecrated to God by him, and the people are called the first fruits because they are consecrated to God, let us pray for wisdom, for all things we can desire are not to be compared with that wisdom that makes us wise unto salvation. If our conscience can charge us with going after another God, in other words, after another gospel, we are then halting between two opinions. And this, to my own mind, is a very sweet thought, that while it is now pretty well half a hundred of years since I was first made concerned for eternal things, all that time, with all my doubts, and fears, and trembling's, I have never had the slightest desire to change this gospel away for another, to change this God away for another. Hence I have had sometimes a good deal of help from those words where the Savior says, "You are they that have continued with me; therefore I appoint unto you a kingdom;" and the words we noticed last Lord's day evening, "As his part is that goes down to the battle, so shall his part be that stays by the baggage; they shall share alike." So some of us poor feeble ones, that cannot get on much, yet, grace enabling us, we are determined, if we do perish, to perish at a Savior's feet, to perish in a full belief of God's truth, to perish in spite, as it were, of God's grace; but such never did so perish, and never will. This consecration to God makes it sacred; we are united to him; our Maker is our Husband, the Lord of hosts is his name, the Holy One of Israel, not only because he is holy, but because he has made Israel holy, the God of the whole earth shall he be called. Ah, what a treasure this is, then, this knowledge of our God.

Then another meaning when the people are called the first fruits is, that they stand first in God's estimation; they do not always stand first in man's estimation. If the world is to be drowned there may be very few, but still the Lord thinks it worth his while to take care of these few; and if the cities are to be destroyed, Lot stands first, and the Lord takes care of him. If the seas are to roll in, and the Egyptians are to be drowned, the Lord first takes care of the Israelites; and if the walls of Jericho are to fall down, before that shall be, the Lord takes one faithful woman into consideration, and that part of the wall upon which her house stood did not fall; she was saved, Joshua twice said, because she hid the spies, the way in which she showed her confidence in the God of the Hebrews. Ah, my hearer, if we are thus consecrated to God, and our hearts are faithful with him and decided for him, then these are the people that stand first with the Lord, these are they that dwell in the secret place of the Most High, and Christ is that secret place; as we stand there no evil can befall us. "A thousand shall fall at your side, and ten thousand at your right hand, but no evil shall befall you;" because there is no calamity that can be an evil to such; that is the reason. The enemy may stand and say, Job, you talk about no evil coming to him that dwells there; you have lost your property, your children, your health and friends, and everything; is not that a calamity? No; God turned it into a blessing, not a curse. Let the affliction, the loss, the trouble, be what it may, there is no curse in it. God himself has said, and caused it to be by the pen of infallible inspiration declared, that all things work for good to them that love God. Therefore, the people of God stand first before everything; the Lord has engraved them on the palms of his hands; he will do nothing without considering them. Now the apostle took a right view of this, when confessing that they

were like sheep slain one after the other, and all that looked like calamity, like wrath, like disadvantage. “No,” said he, “in all,” not in some, he did not say, Well, if it had not been for this, and that, and the other, which you are all of you obliged to say sometimes in relation to circumstances, I should have done very well if it had not been for this, and that; I should not have been ill if it had not been for that; I should not have made this mistake if it had not been for so and so. The apostle allows none of these weaknesses in God’s affairs; therefore, he said, “In all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.”

Now what are the first fruits of the Spirit? They are all summed up in one word; there is one word which will include the whole; but before I state that I must just remind you that the words “first fruits,” “sealing,” and “earnest,” though they are all three different, and a different figure is used in each case, yet those three words have substantially the same meaning, as I think will appear very clearly as we go on. I will use one word here as expressive of the first fruits of the Spirit, and that will include every fruit of the Spirit you can think of; and that shall be the word “knowledge;” that is the word that includes every grace of the spirit. For instance, if you come to humility and supplication, how is it we are brought into the spirit of humility and supplication? By a knowledge of our condition. The publican could not have been so humble as to stand afar off, and be afraid to look to the Majesty of heaven, he would not have been so humble as to strike his breast, and he would not have prayed as he did, without knowledge. He had a knowledge which the Pharisee had not; and what was the kind of knowledge? Why, a knowledge of himself as a sinner; and therefore, from that knowledge arose this humility, this supplication, and this earnestness; “God be merciful to me a sinner.” Then again, if you come to another fruit of the Spirit, that of love, it is included in knowledge. How is it that the woman at the Savior’s feet loved much? It was from a knowledge that her sins were forgiven her. The Lord had brought home the word with power, and peace flowed into her soul. “To give them the knowledge of salvation by the remission of their sins.” Let peace flow into your soul, and you feel that you are a pardoned sinner, you feel that you are forgiven, that your sins are blotted out; and this experience, in other words, this knowledge, endears the Lord to you in such a way that at such moments you long to be gone. I can look back now to when the Lord first met with me, and oh, how I did grieve; if a man on earth were going to take possession of an estate, and the tidings came, you are not to have it for I don’t know how many years yet; he would feel very disappointed; and it was so with me. Oh, how I did long to breathe my last to enter heaven. I had got heaven in my soul, and I wanted my soul to be in heaven. And yet, stupid creature that I am, I have doubted ten thousand times since that, and sometimes feared that my hope and my strength were perished from the Lord. Why, I have been ashamed lately almost of myself for confessing that I could get so low after such manifestations of the Lord’s mercy; but it just shows that if the Lord does not continue to take care of us, if he at all hides his face, what poor creatures we are. Now, the knowledge of this pardoning mercy makes you love much. The reason men do not love God’s truth is, because they do not know it; the reason that men do not love the Christ of God is, because they do not know him; the reason men do not love a covenant God is, because they do not know him; and the reason that I did not seek the Lord when I was in a state of nature was, because I did not know my need, and I did not know the Lord. So, you may mention every grace of the Spirit, faith and love, prayer and praise, and everything, all arising from knowledge. Hence, we find the Holy Spirit seems to include all the powers of the soul being advanced by its growing in knowledge. He says, “I will give you pastors according to my heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding.” Again, the people that do *know* their God, shall be strong and do exploits. Wherein will be your happiness in heaven? Why, a perfection of experimental

knowledge; that is where your happiness will then be, realizing personally in your soul all the blessedness of which God himself is the author, he being your exceeding joy. But let me remind you now that you must distinguish between the different meanings of some sentences and some words when different subjects are treated upon. This is, as a general rule, more important even than the context, for it is not always the context will give you light upon the scripture you have, but the subject itself. If you look at the subject treated, and let that be your guide, it will often enable you to understand, with that consideration, what you would not be able to understand without. For instance, the first fruits here will mean not only all the graces of the Spirit, including the idea of sealing, and earnest, which I shall presently have to attend to; but the first fruits were a very small part of the harvest. A sheaf is a very small part, if you range over so many hundreds or thousands of acres: and a very small part of what is indicated by the psalmist, when he says, "That our garners may be full, affording all manner of store;" Thus the first fruits were a very small part of the whole harvest. And so, it is now, our knowledge and our acquaintance with the Lord is a part of the blessing we are to have full possession of by and by, but what a small part it is. I feel how little I know; when I look at the breadth, and length, and depth, and height of the love of God. I am glad to go with the apostle in the after words when he said, "The love of Christ that passes knowledge;" it does indeed pass knowledge; and I am glad also that it is written for the encouragement of us poor little ones that "we know in part;" ah, a very small part indeed; but still, if we have faith as a grain of mustard seed, if we have just knowledge enough to renounce all confidence in the flesh, and make the Lord our hope, then we know in part, but by and by we shall have the whole harvest; "then shall we know even as we are known; now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face. And now abides faith," bless the Lord for that, for it is a sweet thing to have confidence in him, I can tell you; divinely authenticated confidence in him; there is nothing like it, pertaining to everything in this life, and that which is to come. "Now abides faith, hope, charity," or love, "these three; but the greatest of these is charity." And so it is the business of knowledge, and faith, and prayer to bring love; foreknowledge does bring love; and that is one of the reasons, out of a great many more, why I join with the apostle when he said, "That I might know him," and so he goes on to describe the respects in which he wished to know him. The more you know him the more you will love him; that is to say, where the knowledge is real; I do not mean mere theoretical, mere philosophical knowledge; I mean that experience of the preciousness of Christ that you are enabled to rejoice in him; it is that that causes our love or charity greatly to abound. Here then are the first fruits of the Spirit, called the first fruits, because these blessings are something pre-eminent. They stand with us before everything else. I do hope and trust it will be one of my comforts when I come to die, presently to know that there are hundreds here that if Jesus himself were to come and say, "What is your petition, and what is your request?" hundreds of you could solemnly, sincerely, and truly answer, above every other consideration under heaven, "That a double portion of your spirit may be given unto me," Lord, give us more of your spirit, give us more of yourself, more of your love, more of your power, more of your glory; for if we are blessed thus greatly with him, it wonderfully paralyses our troubles. You know when the apostle Paul was caught up into the third heavens, he was so happy that he did not know whether he was in the body or out of the body. I should imagine the apostle Paul was hardly ever free from pain of body; see how he was knocked about; see the privations he underwent, the stripes, the labors, the reproaches; I should think he was hardly ever free from pain of body, except when he so enjoyed the Lord's presence as to overcome it, and when he was caught up into the third heavens, and knew not whether he was in the body or out of it; and of course if he didn't know, he didn't care. Ah, when the Lord grants us a large portion of his spirit, and we behold as in a glass his glory, how it paralyses

our troubles. That trouble that just now seemed to threaten to fall upon us like a destructive avalanche now passes away like the chaff of the summer threshing-floor; that adversary that appeared raised up as it were ready for our destruction is now vanquished and gone, and we are free, our feet made like unto hind's feet; we can leave all our troubles and all our fears; for what cannot a man do by the power of the eternal Spirit of God? How was it that the disciples with great power gave testimony of Christ's resurrection? It was because great grace, the Spirit of the living God, was upon them all. This knowledge, then, stands with the Christian before everything else.

“Father, whatever of earthly bliss
Your sovereign will denies,
Accepted at your throne of grace
Let this petition rise.”

Above all things give me your Spirit, your grace, give me yourself. Some of you that have accumulated riches, what are they to you? You hardly know what to do with them; you are obliged to make your will and leave them to somebody else, and whether those persons will play the fool or not you do not know; what you have gathered in thirty or forty years perhaps they will scatter in as many months; and if you could look up from the grave you would see the fruit of all your labors gone; as Solomon said, “Who knows whether he shall be a wise man or a fool” And so you that have poverty, you are not so badly off after all, you see; the rich man is not so happy as you are, he does not eat so much as you do, his appetite is not so good; he has more to care about than you have, because you have nothing to lose, and he is afraid he shall not gain much more, and afraid he shall lose what he has. So that I think we poor people are the happiest after all; I am sure we are if we are favored with the presence of the Lord. How true it is that “the blessing of the Lord makes rich, and adds no sorrow.” The first fruits of the Spirit, let it stand before everything; let it be our first cry in the morning, our last cry at night, for an increase of God's Spirit. I hope it may be so with me, and I pray it may be so with you, for there is no blessing like it.

But I will notice also that the sealing of the Spirit is kindred to this in its meaning; and the sealing of the Holy Spirit stands connected first with the lofty settlements of heaven; so that if we are sealed by the Holy Spirit, if we possess this knowledge, these first fruits of the Spirit, then that associates the soul with the unalterable settlements of heaven. And, secondly, this sealing or first-fruits, for in substance the meaning is the same, associates the soul with brotherly kindness. Let us demonstrate these two points. In the 1st of Ephesians, the apostle approaches the subject of the soul being sealed, and first states what the settlements of heaven are, with the knowledge of which the soul is blessed. “In whom,” in Christ Jesus, “also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who works all things after the counsel of his own will.” Now notice, obtaining this inheritance in Christ, and obtaining it by the sovereign good pleasure of the Most High appointing us to it; and he, in order to bring it about, works all things after the counsel of his own will: “That we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted in Christ. In whom you also trusted, after that you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation.” What is the gospel of your salvation? Why, that you have obtained an inheritance; it is done according to the high and sovereign decree of heaven; he has predestinated us according to his own purpose; and the word of truth is that this inheritance is obtained by the decree of heaven, and that he works all things after the counsel of his own will. “In whom also, after that you believed, you were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise.” And what is the promise? Well,

whatever Scripture may be made a blessing to you, is sure to be included in the parent promise, all the after promises accord with the parent promise; the children are just like the father, they all bear his image and stamp exact. What is the parent promise? Why, "In blessing I will bless you, and in multiplying I will multiply you;" and the apostle calls this a sworn promise, "As he could swear by no greater," if there had been a greater to swear by, to demonstrate the certainty of the promise, he would have done it; but "as he could swear by no greater, he swore by himself, saying, In blessing I will bless you." That is the promise that the Holy Spirit seals home upon the soul, and he will not allow you to stagger at the promise through unbelief, but make you strong in confidence of the certainty of the promise, if you are not so strong in confidence of your interest in the promise, yet to be strong in confidence of the certainty of the promise, giving glory to God for such a promise and such an order of things. Now mark, these first fruits and this sealing are the same in substance; it is the work of the Holy Spirit, distinguishing the people of God from other people by bringing them into these things. In the very next verse, the apostle calls this sealing an earnest. "In whom also, after that you believed, you were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise, which is the earnest," so the promise sealed home is the earnest, "of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession;" that is, until the resurrection of the body. Thus, then, the first fruits of the Spirit give you a knowledge of the truth, consecrates you to God. Secondly, that it associates you with the unalterable settlements of the Most High. And then this sealing of the Holy Spirit associates us with what I should like to see a little more of in my own soul and in the people of God. The apostle, in the 4th of Ephesians, says, "Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby you are sealed unto the day of redemption;" my faith still hangs on the promise; there is the promise still. "Whereby you are sealed unto the day of redemption;" the seal shall stand good till the last enemy is destroyed, swallowed up in victory. And the apostle gives us a little idea of how we should avoid doing that which is grievous and displeasing to the Holy Spirit. "Be ye kind one to another." That is a nice doctrine. We should always remember, if we are not kind to others, we like others to be kind to us. "Tender-hearted;" be always ready to find some scriptural excuse if you can for the weakness you may see, and not too hastily interpret things by the mere surface, when you do not understand what may be the cause of what you see. Ah, but then supposing some of the brethren are faulty. Well, then, says the apostle, "forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake," not upon the ground of any good in you, but "for Christ's sake, has forgiven you." Thus, then, this sealing of the Spirit brings the soul into these unalterable settlements of heaven, brings the soul into the family spirit of brotherly love; and "we know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren."

I shall not be able to finish the subject this morning.