

The Faith of God's Elect; and a Word upon Duty-Faith

A SERMON – Preached on Sunday Morning, August 30th, 1868, by

MR. JAMES WELLS

AT THE NEW SURREY TABERNACLE, WANSEY STREET

For God hath concluded them all in unbelief, that he might have mercy upon all." Rom. xi 32

One of the things which the Lord himself has undertaken to make known to sinners, is what sin is in his sight, what they are by sin; for however far natural conscience may go under the influence of the letter of the word, it never did yet, and it never will, go far enough to make a man feel his need of that provision which the Lord hath made for the eternal salvation of the soul. Hence it is the work, as we read, of the almighty Spirit of God so to convince of sin as to make way for the coming in of the Saviour in the entirety of his achievement, for the coming in of the Lord in the order of that mercy which is from everlasting to everlasting. Our text gives a twofold representation of the people, and both are complete: "God hath concluded them all in unbelief" that is all they are as sinners; and then the purpose- that he might have mercy upon all; So here is nothing but sin on the one hand, nothing but mercy on the other hand; Just as the apostle sets forth in the 5th chapter of this same epistle, showing what we are by the fall of Adam, and then showing in opposition to that what the people of God are by the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. And the same thing in substance is shown up in the resurrection of the body; on the one hand the apostle there shows what we are- mortal, corruptible; and on the other hand what we are to be in the resurrection. Our text then, this morning brings before us two things; first, God's account of us, - "God hath concluded them all under unbelief;" secondly, the purpose of this, - "that he might have mercy upon all."

First God's account of us,- "God hath concluded them all under unbelief;" Now unbelief here means, in the first place, blindness; for if a man be convinced of a truth, and see it, he must then of necessity believe it; but if he is not convinced of a truth, then he does not believe it. Unbelief, then, means blindness,- blindness to what we are as sinners in the sight of God, and blindness as to what the fiery law of God is, and blindness also as to what the threatenings of God are and blindness also as to the certainty of the judgments of God; for though the natural man may have some vague apprehensions of these terrible things yet he does not so see them as to feel the weight of them, to tremble at them, and to become more concerned about escape from them than anything else. Then the next thing meant by unbelief is hardness of heart in relation to eternal things. It is a most frightful truth that we are all of us demoniacally hard-hearted by nature towards our own souls. Hence we read that "whom he will he hardens;" that is, the Lord permissively hardens. The Christian himself feels this to be one of his burdens. How often has the Christian to mourn and say,-

"All things or feeling show some sign

But this unfeeling heart of mine"!

The Christian does see the weightiness of these things, but at the same time feels he has a heart like an adamant stone. But this is not the experience of the man dead in in; for if we are conscious of our hardness that shows there is some life in us to enable us to feel our hardness of heart, and to mourn over it. To show the blindness and hardness of heart that we are all under by nature, we may ask this question,- Has there ever been anything under the whole heavens so ridiculed by the world as the truth of God? Has anything ever been so hated as the truth of God? Has anything ever been so despised as the people of God, except the Christ of God? And we see how he was mocked and despised, we see how unfeeling the world was towards him; there was not a cruelty they had it in their power to inflict which they did not inflict. They would have inflicted a great many more cruelties upon the Lord Jesus Christ, but they were under his restraining power, and under the government of the great God; therefore the Lord said in relation to them "Hitherto shalt thou come, and no farther." Ah, when the Lord opened the eyes of Saul of Tarsus and others to what they had done, how they stood aghast at the dreadfulness of their condition as sinners before God! Just so it is to this day; the world will pursue anything and everything except God's truth and salvation. God alone can bring about that change beautifully indicated in our text-concluding them all in unbelief; meaning, I apprehend, that he will convince them of this, bring it home to them, that they are nothing by nature but unbelievers, and therefore blind and hardhearted. Time would fail me to enlarge upon the different evils implied in this term "unbelief"; but it is not my intention to say very much upon the first part of our subject. I will just name another or two. This unbelief also signifies enmity; for when that is forced on a man's attention which he does not see, and does not believe the truth of, has no concern for, it is a great interruption to him, and it raises his enmity, it stirs up the malice of his mind. But then the prophets and apostles had not to stand for this; they were to go and preach the gospel, whether men would hear or whether they would forbear. This unbelief then, means deadly enmity. Only just look at it: there is God in his eternal love, and we by nature in blindness, hardness, and unbelief. We hate the doctrine that tells us of God's love to man; that is if it be set before us really and truly, in its own beautiful character; and we hate the doctrine of Christ's mediation in the reality of it; and the doctrine of regeneration, and all the things that make up our eternal welfare. But then, of course, we hate them blindly; we know not what we do; and we hate them through our hardness of heart, through this native enmity, and through the influence of Satan, being led captive by the devil at his will. And then unbelief means also separation from the blessed God. There can be no unity with God in any way but by faith. Until our eyes are opened to see our sad condition, and to receive the only way in which God will be on our side, the only way in which we can have scriptural hope in God-all the time this disbelief of God's truth reigns we are thus kept severed from the blessed God. Now the Lord convinces his own people of this their condition, and makes them feel that truth repentance, love, and everything that accompanies salvation must be as much of God as salvation itself. He thus convinces them, and lays it home to the heart, the conscience, the mind. Let the man go where he may, he is not happy; there is a dreadful sound in his ears, there is a something lies upon his heart, a something uneasy in his conscience; and he is now more afraid of death than he ever was before, and he is more afraid of life than he ever was before, not knowing what a day may bring forth. He is bought into a wilderness state of soul, into a solitary state, and to begin to reflect, and say, what is my existence if God, my maker, be not my friend; if God, the Saviour of sinners, did not die for me, and does not save me; if I am not born of God, if I do not belong to God? Whatever I possess, whether it be health, or wealth, or friends-all is uncertain, and while one moment is passing I am not sure I shall live till the next. Thus his being without Christ, without hope, and without God in the world, becomes a solemn concern to him; and the Lord is prepared with mercy to meet him, and by and by mercy will roll in. But the Lord will first teach him that faith is his own gift, that repentance is God's own gift; that in a word, everything that accompanies salvation is as much of the Lord as salvation itself. "God," then, "hath concluded them all in unbelief;" as the apostle expresses it in the Galatians, "God

hath concluded them all under sin." He says to the man, You are under sin, and you are nothing but a sinner, nothing but an unbeliever, nothing but an enemy; and you are helpless, you are without strength! loathsome, everything that is bad. The man is convinced of this, and this prepares him for mercy.

Now I know it is said, and some hold the doctrine, that it is the duty of all men savingly to believe. This is a doctrine that was held by the majority of our old Puritans, and is held by many men still- that it is the duty of all men savingly to believe in Christ. And my subject naturally leads me to make a few remarks upon that doctrine which I believe to be a very serious error. For when the Lord convinces really and truly of sin does he not make such feel that faith is the gift of God? Hence you read of those to whom it was given to believe, that the Lord gave them power to become the sons of God. Some of you that are thus convinced of your state, and are seeking the Lord, you have not yet been endued with power from on high to cry, "Abba, Father;" you have not yet been endued with power from on high to say concerning Christ, "My beloved is mine, and I am his;" you have not been endued yet with power from on high to say that your sins have been forgiven, that he hath saved you, that this God is your God; or to take that high ground taken by one when he saith, "Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me into glory." Why you are thus kept in the dark concerning this subject? Because you have not yet had in God's estimation quite downward experience enough; you have not yet had quite soul trouble enough; you are not yet humbled down quite enough to make way for that mercy which he hath for you. How encouraging the Scriptures are unto such. "Tarry ye in Jerusalem until ye be endued with power from on high;" an again, "Wait on the Lord, and he shall strengthen thine heart; wait, I say, on the Lord." So, then, how great the mercy of being convinced, and becoming one of these seekers, and made from experience to know that the Holy Spirit as the heavenly wind bloweth where he listeth, when he listeth, and giveth unto every one severally as he will. And thus they are taught to know their need of the Lord's free, great, and eternal mercy, the particulars of which will come before us presently, after I have just observe that some hold that it is the duty of all men savingly to believe in Christ; and there is a piece of logic which is the stronghold of that system, and before I make a few remarks carefully upon it I am free to confess that there are difficulties on both sides of the question. We cannot suppose that when such men as Bunyan, and many of the great Puritans of that day-the majority of them-held the doctrine of duty-faith,-we cannot suppose but there must be something bearing in that way in the Scriptures in their estimation. They were men of mighty minds, and yet they held that doctrine. So that when we see men the reality of whose religion we cannot dispute hold a doctrine of that kind, let us handle it carefully. Let us see whether there may not be some difficulties on our side as well as on theirs. It is very easy to ridicule the sentiment of an opponent; it is very easy to be sarcastic, but it is not so easy to refute. Infidels may ridicule the Bible, but they never have been and never will be able to refute it. Now their argument, then, is this-that if faith be not a duty, unbelief is no sin. That is a very powerful declaration, and that is the stronghold of that doctrine; and I must hold with it, because it is a piece of logic as correct as possible; no man can deny it. Therefore it comes to this, that unbelief is sin, and that there must be a sense in which it is the duty of the creature to believe; for if not, then unbelief is no sin. Well, I have always held that it is the duty of the creature to believe the word of God, that it is the duty of the creature to act according to the light that God gives; that it was the duty of the old world to listen to Noah, by which they might have escaped the flood; that it was the duty of the Ninevites to listen to Jonah, which they did, and believed, and saved their city; that it was the duty of Capernaum, the cities of Judah and Jerusalem, to believe that the Saviour was the Messiah, and to bow to him, and the cities might have remained to this day, as witness the Saviour:- If these things had been done, he said, in Sodom, they would have repented long ago, and their city would have remained to this day. But then this natural belief is one thing, and the faith that God gives to his people is quite another thing. I therefore hold unbelief be sin; that is, I hold it to be sinful for a man to be an infidel; I hold it to be sinful for a man to disbelieve the Bible. But I do not hold it to be sinful for a man not to have saving faith. When I come to saving faith, I come into another region altogether. In the first

case, man's duty, there I am in the region of human responsibility. Man is a voluntary agent, and is responsible for his acts. I do not hold the atheistical doctrine of irresponsibility. All men are responsible, and there will be at the last great day a greater condemnation for the persecutors and enemies of the Lord than for others. Think you that the Popes, and those that have perpetrated the most demonical cruelties upon the saints-think you that the judgments of God will not ultimately fall upon such persons heavier than upon any other class? There is no question about it whatsoever; the wrath of God will come upon them to the uttermost. Thus, then, it is the duty of man to receive his Creator; here is his responsibility; and he is responsible in proportion as he has not done so, and will be favored with a less condemnation in proportion as he has done so. But what has this to do with saving faith? Why, just nothing at all. I will now just name three things that hinder me from receiving the doctrine that it is the duty of all men savingly to believe in Christ. First, it is a doctrine which whether those that believe it or not, rests the eternal salvation of man upon the creature, and takes it out of the hand of the Lord. Any principle that you hold that will not bear carrying out must be wrong. Now, then, let us try this question. It is my duty savingly to believe in Christ; consequently it is my duty to be regenerated; therefore it is my duty to be loved with an everlasting love; it is my duty to be chosen to salvation; it is my duty to be interested in Christ; it is my duty to have all my sin pardoned, and my soul eternally saved. So if I do my duty, then I say if it is my duty to do all this. So, then, blink it as they may-and I am not saying that they do so purposely, but let the doctrine be twisted as it may, the doctrine that it is the duty of all men savingly to believe in Christ is a doctrine that takes salvation from first to last out of the hands of the Lord, and rests it upon man. It is nothing else but Wesleyanism in disguise. The Wesleyans are plain; they will tell you at once that there is something for man to do; but the other doctrine is more deceptive, for after telling us that it is the duty of all men to believe, they will say, Not that any can believe accept the Holy Spirit quicken his soul. Well, then, if the Holy Spirit quicken the soul, it is not a duty, but a divine gift. Faith is the gift of God. So, then, I say that is the legitimate consequence of that doctrine, making it the duty of the creature to be regenerated, to be loved with an everlasting love. Say what they like about it, it is so; and their appeals to men are such as to make us fear that they in their heats think it is so- that man could be saved if he would. Whereas man is lost by original sin, not by anything that he has done. No man was ever lost yet by anything he has personally done. We are lost in the first Adam; that is where judgment has come upon all men unto eternal condemnation. The next objection I have to that doctrine is the absurdity of it. Mark, it is the duty of all men to believe; so, then, it is the duty of those that were never loved to believe they are loved; it is the duty of those that were never chosen to believe that they are chosen; it is the duty of those for whom Christ did not die to believe that he did die for them; it is the duty of those to whom the promises do not belong to believe that they do belong to them. Is not this absurd? Why, it is a doctrine that calls upon men to believe a falsehood. The third and last, and not the least objection I have to that doctrine is this, that I can find it nowhere in the Scriptures. When I come to the covenant ordered in all things and sure, pray what room is there in that covenant for any creature pretension whatever? What prophet, what apostle, ever preached such a doctrine? Not one. Did the Lord himself ever preach the doctrine? No. He preached the doctrine of moral responsibility, and pronounced a woe upon those cities that did not believe and repent. But the repentance of the Ninevites is one thing, and the repentance of the Jews on the day of Pentecost is another thing. It may be said with regard to holding this doctrine, perhaps, - Never mind, it is not of much importance. Here I must stop; here I am utterly at a loss for language to express what I feel. Of no importance! What! Doesn't it matter whether you believe satanic falsehood or God's truth? Doesn't it matter whether your soul be deceived or whether it be saved? Doesn't it matter whether you wrest the Scriptures to your own destruction or rightly understand them? Ah, shall we say it is of no importance? Who will take a pen and ink and book, and take down-though it is not possible, I know, to do it-the numbers that in our day are mere natural believers, and yet set down by this doctrine of duty-faith as spiritual believers? But those that know what soul trouble and soul-deliverance is, know that you might as well try to get blood from a post as to get any

testimony from such persons of any real soul-trouble, of any real experience, of any real cutting up, or cutting down, or wounding, or trial, or deliverance by the incoming and rising tide of God's eternal mercy. They will talk of Sunday schools, Sabbath-keeping, and tract distributing, building this, and doing that-wonderful works, as long as you please; but when you come to that vitality essential to prove the existence of life in the soul, essential to prove that you have the faith of God's elect, they have, it is true, a so called experience, but not such as to lead them to receive the truth in the true love thereof. Then, saith the apostle, "I will know not the speech, but the power of them that are puffed up. Calvin held this doctrine of duty-faith, which people in general do not know; but he did, and therefore I am called very rightly a hyper-Calvinist; that is; one above Calvin; for although I hold that he was a good man, I am not going to worship the golden calf because Aaron set it up. When Peter did not walk uprightly in Antioch, Paul did not say, Well, Peter is a good man; he is leaning rather too much to ceremony, and rather too much afraid of these Jews; but as he is a good man I will let him alone. That would be the very reason why he would reprove him and reason with him. I attribute some of the notions the old Puritans held in a great measure to the age in which they lived. For when a notion becomes popular, it is astonishing how easily people fall in with it. If it is something new, something unknown, people are astonished at it, like Nicodemus. Born again! Why, what a strange doctrine! And so Nicodemus understood it according to his own character; he was carnal, and he understood the words of the Lord carnally. Still that discourse was made the means, clearly so, of convincing Nicodemus, and of setting him out to seek the Lord; and the Lord condescended in kindness to explain to him what he meant by being born of God. There was a vitality in the religion of some of the duty-faith Puritans that you find in very few of the modern duty-faith tribe.

I will now notice the purpose, - "that he might have mercy upon all." There is a beautiful representation in this chapter of the Lord's mercy, and I cannot do better than trace it out, that we may test ourselves as we go along whether we are partakers of the same. The first representation is that of electing grace. The apostle gives us to understand that the Lord so teaches his people as to make them know their need of eternal election. When Elijah thought that he was left alone, the answer of God to him was, "I have reserved to myself seven thousand men that have not bowed the knee to the image of Baal;" and these seven thousand were acquainted with the great truth of eternal election; they traced up the origin of their salvation to the sovereign pleasure of the great Creator, God from eternity to eternity. Therefore the apostle goes on to explain to us this delightful truth, for such it is to the Christian. He says, "Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace;" and their knowledge of this election was one of the means by which they were kept from error. "And if by grace"-that is, if election be by grace, then it is "no more of works; otherwise grace is no more grace;" that is, if election be unconditional, it is no more conditional; and if it is conditional, it is no more unconditional; and if election be absolute and certain, it is no more uncertain; and if it be uncertain, it is no more certain. That is this apostle's idea; it cannot be both at one and the same time. So, then, if it be a favor, it is no more of human merit; if it be of human merit in whole or in part, then it is no more of grace. "But if it be of works, then is it no more grace; otherwise work is no more work." Then the apostle says, "What then? Israel hath not obtained that which he seeketh for;" he sought to work out a righteousness of his own, not being convinced of the state he was in, not tracing up the salvation of the sinner to the sovereignty of God. "But the election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded." Now who are the "all" in our text? It saith, "God hath concluded them all in unbelief, that he might hath mercy upon all." I take the "all" to be the whole election of grace, as represented at the head of this chapter. Now election was of grace, and it is essential you should know this, and understand your need of it, and receive it. I leave it with your own consciences; though I ought not to say this to you as a people, because, bless the Lord, some of you know the truth perhaps better than I do, perhaps led further in it than I am, perhaps more experience of it; yet I can say I delight in it, and in the living God by it. But let us hear what the apostle saith upon this matter of election. He speaks of some in 2 Thessalonians ii that are to be damned, and he points out who

they are;-they "received not the love of the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness; "and of all unrighteousness, that of setting God's truth aside, and putting creature works and conditions into its place, is certainly the worst. I will mention one act of unrighteousness in which the people had pleasure, and if you can point out a greater act of unrighteousness, then I must leave it. Here is the Lord Jesus Christ, and the people had great pleasure in saying, "Not this man but Barabbas." They preferred a murderer to the Son of God, the Mediator of the new covenant. They had pleasure in this unrighteous conduct of setting aside God's Son, and putting as it were a murderer into his place-preferring a murderer. Now if these men had known the truth would they have done that? Certainly not. Now, saith the apostle, "that they all might be damned who believe not the truth;" not because they do not receive the truth, but they're not receiving it is an evidence that they are not of Christ's sheep, not of the election of grace. He then gives us a sample of what the truth is. "But we are bound to give thanks always to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth; whereunto he called you by our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." Thus he convinces us of our condition, and we run with joy upon the shining road, and read our names recorded in the book of life. Thus, then, he hath concluded all in unbelief that he might roll in electing grace. Now I leave you to judge whether you are convinced of your state, sunk low enough, poor and needy enough to admit that it must be all of grace from first to last. If so, and if you do not yet understand the great truth of eternal election, still seek the Lord, hear and read his word, and the time will come when he who has given you a little light will give you more. You may see now men as trees walking; but in the Lord's own time you shall see every man clearly; and then you will see your need; your confidence will be in a faithful and unchanging God, and that according to the riches of his grace in Jesus Christ. The second representation is that of evidence of interest in these things. Now the Jews were broken off because of unbelief. Let us be careful upon this matter. The Gentiles were becoming a little consequential; the apostle saw that, and he says, "Thou wilt say then, the branches were broken off that I might be rafted in." No;" because of unbelief they were broken off. They did not believe in God's truth, and yet they professed to be people of God. They maintained their profession, but did not believe in God's truth; therefore though they called God their Father, they did not believe in God's truth; therefore they were broken off. I was going to say, God of heaven and earth, time and eternity, what a development there will be of this at the last day!- thousands of professors now hastening towards eternity, calling God theirs, at the same time their hearts full of enmity against God's truth. Ah, the time will come when much will be broken off, when they shall be cut off from the hope they now seem to have. The great Master will say, "Depart from me; I never knew you." They may say, "Lord, we have done many wonderful works but with all their doings they have never received his truth, they have never come into the faith as it is in Christ, and thus they have done nothing to please God; and "whatsoever is not of faith is sin." "Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God: on them which fell, severity; but toward thee, goodness, if thou continue in his goodness; otherwise thou also shalt be cut off." "Thou standest by faith; be not high minded;" beware how you become important, and look upon yourself as holier than your brethren, and more righteous and better than your brethren; that is the commencement of the working of apostasy. Beware of it. "Thou standest by faith." Therefore, toward thee goodness, if thou continue in his goodness; otherwise thou also shalt be cut off. If you cut off his truth, he will cut you off. If you begin to part with his truth, and with that truth, and with the other, by and by you will glide off, and pervert into another shape and form of the whole economy of truth, and God will cut you off. Therefore saith the apostle, "If thou continue in his goodness;"-ah, tried Christian, look at it; what do you say to this? Ah, the true Christian says, Blessed God, I have not a particle of goodness of my own, and if I continue at all, it must in thy goodness. The tried man is the man that will continue in God's goodness; he has nowhere else to go. But just as the apostle anticipated, and therefore gave the caution, this Roman church became important by degrees. By and by they chose a king, called the Pope; and so they have gone on-300 Popes one after the other; they became high-minded, and away they went. And a city further from God's truth

does not exist than the city of Rome. If you want to see the devil in his working cloths, go to Rome. I myself have seen so much of him I don't want to see him again. If you want to see him in his best clothes, you will see him in England. Here Popery puts on its best dress. We sometimes meet two beings in the street, called Sisters of Mercy: whether they are women, or whether they are priests dressed in women's clothes, I not know; they are odd sort of beings. Here, then, we see Popery in its best clothes, because it cannot put on its worst. So, then, I say the Roman church, just as the apostle anticipated, went down and down till it has become a den of wild beasts, a cage of unclean birds everything loathsome to God's truth, and to his people and to the God of heaven and earth. "Be not high minded, but fear." The Lord help us to be careful, and from time to time to examine ourselves, whether we be in the faith; and if we get a little bit proud or consequential, the Lord give us to see it, and that this pride may at once be repudiated. Such poor, loathsome worms as we are have nothing to be proud of except sin, if we can be proud of that. But what we should be proud of is God's truth; there we may be in the sacred sense, as proud as we like; there we may make our boast in the Lord. The third representation of mercy is the opening of the eyes of the Israel that still remains in darkness: "I would not, brethren that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits, that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fullness of the gentiles is come in." And it happened to be that part so essential to their salvation. The part in which they were blind was that they did not see Jesus Christ as the Son of God. But they shall not retain blindness; for the apostle says, "until the fullness of the Gentiles be come in. Now what is the fullness of the Gentiles? Christ Jesus the Lord. And when that fullness was revealed to one Jew and to another Jew, thousands of Jews in that day were brought to know the Lord by the coming in of the fullness of Christ. If you have any doubt that this is the apostle's meaning, just go to 2 Corinthians iii; the apostle there saith that the veil of ignorance is upon the Jewish hearts - as it is upon others, but he is there referring to the Jews - when Moses is read unto this day; "nevertheless when it"-the heart - "shall turn to the Lord"-to the Lord Jesus Christ,-" the veil shall be taken away. Thus, then, the Lord has mercy upon them by sovereignly choosing them, by opening their eyes, and bringing them into an acquaintance with the fullness of Christ. And now mark the next words - "And so all Israel shall be saved." What does the word "Israel" mean there? Not all the nation of Israel, because if so it is not true, they were not all saved, they are not all saved. Therefore the word "Israel" there must of necessity be taken in accordance with the antecedents of the chapter-namely, election and saving faith and the coming in of the fullness of Christ. This is the "all Israel" that shall be saved; for the Lord saith, "There shall come out of Zion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob: this is my covenant unto them when I shall take away their sins."