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Surrey Tabernacle Pulpit.

LAW AND GOSPEL

A SERMON

PREACHED ON SUNDAY MORNING, 25TH APRIL, 1869,

By MR. JAMES WELLS,

AT THE NEW SURREY TABERNACLE, WANSBY STREET.

“Ye shall serve God upon this mountain.”—Exodus ii. 12.

PERHAPS we can hardly think of a declaration more advantageous to man or more glorifying to God than such a declaration as this, for the Lord to say concerning any man, even before the man knows it, “Ye shall serve God.” And God knows how to make his service acceptable above all other services. But it was not so with the majority of the Israelites that came out of Egypt; they did not appreciate God, nor his service, nor his ways: in a word, they did not see God. But there were, as there are now, some among them that did recognise the name, the counsel, the salvation, and the goodness of God; they recognised, no doubt, the spiritual meaning of that relationship which the Lord declared when he said, Israel is my son, even my firstborn; let him go, that he may serve me.” So it was because the Lord loved us that he would not let us stop where we were; it was because he had chosen us that he caused us to draw near unto him; it was because he had planned and devised and meant to carry into effect a salvation for us that he would not allow us to stop where we were; and it is because he hath a kingdom, a promised land, a glory for us, for all these and many other reasons the Lord interposes, and opens the eyes of one and of another. And how pleasing is the thought that any man that hath a desire to serve God, let that man be as ignorant as he may, or let him have been what he may, if he hath a feeling in his mind to say, While hitherto I have served myself, and the world, and sin, and Satan, but I have never thought of my Maker, in whose hand is my breath and destiny; I have never thought seriously or abidingly of that Saviour that came into the world to save sinners; I have always read the Bible with more carelessness than I have read any other book, and if I have read the Bible sometimes, it has been only a sort of form to keep my conscience somewhat quiet, but when I got hold of a rubbishy book, I have read that with all the avidity imaginable, and I have never remembered my Creator;—now when these reflections come, if they arise from life in the soul, such will continue to desire to serve God, and such will soon begin to see that there is but one people in the world that truly can be called a happy people, and that is true Christians, the people whose God is the Lord. “Happy art thou, O Israel,” and only Israel; there is no other people happy: for “the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now,” even the

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whole world. Not one man nor one woman since the fall has ever found satisfaction to the soul except those that are called by grace, and are brought to know the truth as it is in Jesus. These are they that shall eat in plenty and shall be satisfied, and shall praise the name of the Lord their God, that hath dealt wondrously with them.

Taking the circumstances connected with our text to guide me, it will divide itself into three parts. First, *the service of God*; secondly, *the way in which they came into this mountain*, in other words, the way in which they came into the service of God; and thirdly, *the perfect satisfaction which all the right-minded Israelites realized, as all the people of God ultimately shall.*

First, *the service of God.* This declaration means that there was a two-fold sense in which they were to serve God; first, as witnesses of his terrible majesty, and secondly, as partakers of his discriminating favour. First, they were to serve God as witnesses of his terrible majesty, as shown at Sinai. The circumstances at Sinai are very instructive. And I may, before I enter into that matter, just state that the world is as ignorant of God's law, as to what it really is, as it is of the mystery of godliness; as unacquainted with the real majesty and force of the law as of the mystery of the gospel. It is not needful that any soul should be brought under any particular terrors of the law in order to be saved; but still there are three sources from which the people of God are to be made acquainted with God's law, and they will come to this conclusion, that the law tests every man by what he is by nature. And the worst, the most profligate, the most revolting character that ever lived upon the earth, was not so bad in his practice as he was in his nature. Satan himself is not so bad in his practice, awful as the murders and the mischiefs have been which he has done, as he is in his nature, for the simple reason that he cannot carry it out. Therefore the people of God shall be led to see that God puts men to the test by what they are by nature. There are three sources from which they shall know the law:— first, from their own experience. They shall be brought to feel what the apostle felt when the law came home with power; he saith, "The law is spiritual, and I am carnal, sold under sin." This is one source from which they shall know what the law is, for the apostle saith, "We have the sentence of death in ourselves;" that is, you have such a conviction of your state as to feel that the law puts a negative upon you; that as a sinner considered you are in the eye of the law like a piece of stubble, or an autumnal leaf, or altogether as an unclean thing; there is not any part sound. This is one source from which you must become witnesses of the terrible majesty of God. We can never understand the gospel so well without a knowledge of the law as we do with a knowledge of the law. The next source from which you must know the law are the declarations that are made concerning it. I will mention only one, and it is this, that "cursed is every one that continueth not in all things written in the book of the law to do them." From this source we shall also learn that there is something very terrible in the law. And then we are also to learn something concerning the law by our understanding. I hope we shall be able this morning, as we go along in this solemn matter, in some measure to realize the scene of Sinai, and let us read out the several things which we are taught, and see whether we are witnesses of the terrible majesty of God; for the Israelites did in that, as well as in the next respect we have to name, serve the Lord, and were witnesses of his terrible majesty. Let us look, then, at three or four of the things which impress themselves upon the mind upon this matter of Sinai. First, the utter impossibility of access to God by the law. You see that there was a commandment which the people could not endure, there were fires and thunderings and lightnings and the sound of the trumpet, which the people could not meet; it could produce nothing but trembling. And yet

there were gracious purposes in bringing them to this. One of the purposes was, perhaps, including every one, that they might fear the Lord their God, and see what he was in the terrible majesty of the law; and while not even one jot or tittle of the law shall fail, he carries that same faithfulness over into the gospel, and saith, "The heavens and the earth may pass away, but my words shall not pass away." The first thing, then, is the utter impossibility of access to God by the law. He hears no prayer, he answers no prayer, he accepts no repentance, he accepts no humiliation,—do whatever you may, there is nothing there but death. "The law is the ministration of death." What do we learn here? We learn our need of the Lord Jesus Christ. He came in and met the law; he came in and met what none but such a person could endure. Let us ask, then, before we go any further, are we far enough acquainted with God's law to see our need of a law fulfiller?—not forgetting that that law must not fail; not a jot nor tittle shall fail; it must be fulfilled in its penalty in the destiny of the sinner, or else in a surety for the sinner. Jesus Christ is that surety. We see that there was a law necessity, if I may so speak, as well as other deep and solemn necessities, for the Lord Jesus Christ to come. See then how it makes way for the coming in of Christ. This is one thought—that we cannot endure that which is commanded; that is, not when brought home to the heart: for when brought home to the heart, it finds in the heart all manner of concupiscence. What does it find? It finds a heart that is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked; who can know it? So, then, we break down here in self-despair. But we look at the blessed Redeemer, and I never seem weary of repeating those words, he is the end of the law. Ah, my hearer, if thou art a stranger even to terrors and tremblings and fearings, yet if thou seest how thou art shut out by the law, that the law is the strength of sin, and if thou seest that Jesus, and he only, can bring thee acceptably to God;—if thou knowest enough of the law for this, this is knowing the law in a way you once did not, and this is seeing your need of Christ in a way you once did not. Hence the apostle saith, "I speak to them that know the law." Then the next thought is that boundaries were set, and if they overstepped those boundaries, they would place themselves upon the ground of sure destruction. If even so much as a beast touched the mountain, he should be slain or thrust through with a dart. If you overstepped the boundaries, if you went there, you would be as sure to be destroyed as that you existed. Let us apply this to ourselves. We must be standing this morning either on law ground or on gospel ground—one or the other. The whole human race by nature, or in the fall, stands upon law ground. Hence it is written, "Their way is a way of destruction, and the way of peace they have not known." Can we say that the Lord has so convinced us of sin that we have stepped off from law ground, and feel and see that there is no standing before God only just where the apostle points out? And what a beautiful scripture that is!—"Being therefore justified by faith." Here you see we step off from law ground; we cannot stand there. Christ stood there, and he was everything that the law required; Christ never stumbled, Christ never took a wrong step, Christ never said a wrong word, Christ never did a wrong thing. He could appeal to God and say, "I always do those things that please him." And I am sure if we are blessed enough in our souls to say it with reverence, we may look up to God and say just the reverse;—O God, such a sinner am I that while thy dear Son always did those things pleasing to thee, I have never done anything pleasing to thee;—that is, taking ourselves on law ground. "Nothing but sin I thee can give,"—a sinner from first to last. Ah, then, let us turn away from that; let us step off from all human works, all human worth, and all human merit, and take our stand here,— "Therefore being justified by faith," by believing in Jesus Christ, by re-

ceiving him, "we have peace with God," because every sin is forgiven, every fault and spot is taken away, mercy and truth are met together, righteousness and peace embrace each other; "and not only so," saith the apostle, "but by whom," that is, by Jesus Christ, "we have access into this grace;"—that is, we stand upon the gracious promise of God, for that is where the grace of God is—in the promise,—and the promise is in Christ, and the grace is in Christ,—and rejoice in hope of the glory of God." Come, now, can we say that we have been led so far to serve God that we are sensible of our degradation on the one hand, and of the terrible majesty of the Most High on the other? The third thing I notice is the statute, if I may so call it, of limitation;—that while the Israelites were not to step over the boundaries, see how the Lord confined the fires, see how he limited the lightnings, the thunders, the terrible tempest. Ah, if that tempest at Sinai had passed beyond its limits, if the statute of limitation had been withdrawn, forgive me for saying that the whole hosts of Israel would have been swept away as so many autumnal leaves; they would have had no more power to resist the progress of such a tempest than you would have to resist the fires of hell. See, then, how he limited these lightnings, and this tempest, that they should not go beyond that. Just so with us. Here were these fires, when we were in a state of nature, burning against us, but we saw them not; here were these thunders rolling over our heads, but we heard them not; here was the blackness, the darkness, the clouds of our sins, but we saw them not; we were dead, we cared nothing at all about it. But now we are brought to see that all these tempests and clouds, all this scene, was reserved for Christ, and that therefore, while we were sinning against God, and despising everything that belonged to him and godliness, he would not cut us down, he would not let the fire break forth, would not let the earth open her mouth and swallow us up, would not let the thunder confound us, would not let the tempest carry us away;—no, preserved even then. You sing those words sometimes, which have been engraved upon my very heart for many years, when looking back to our state by nature,—

" See how Heaven's indulgent care
Attends our wanderings here and there."

So, then, it is because of Jesus Christ that these fires were limited, that this tempest was limited, these curses were limited. Let me go a little further here. For the same reason—namely, Jesus Christ, for his sake—your troubles also are under the statute of limitations. "Thou shalt have tribulation ten days,"—taking the ten days, of course, figuratively. "Hitherto shalt thou come, and no farther." See how death is limited. Death may take your body, but it cannot take your soul; death may take your mortal life, but it cannot take your life as you stand in Christ. Let us then bless our God that while he himself is unlimited, he has limited his judgments, they all being reserved for Christ; and has limited our tribulations, limited death, limited all our enemies; so that we may put our trust with perfect safety in the Lord our God.

The fourth thing is that they saw no similitude. That is also a very instructive matter. "Ye saw no similitude." Moses impresses this upon their minds very much. I am aware that one object he had in view was to show that they were not to make to themselves any graven image in imitation of anything there, because there was no similitude. But then it has a deeper meaning than that; and what is it? I will tell you what it appears to me to be,—that there is nothing in the law as a pattern to which we can by possibility be conformed. I laboured when I was first concerned for eternal things in ignorance for months to conform myself to the law. Why, I said, here is holiness, and I will be holy; here is goodness, and I will be good; here is spirituality, and I will be spiritual;

here is a just law, and I will be just ; here is an infallible law, and I will be perfect. I tried and tried, but never succeeded. There is no similitude, no pattern, there is no way there in which you can please God. But when we come to Zion, then we meet with a similitude, and what is it? Here it is;—"After the similitude of Melchisedec there ariseth another priest." Melchisedec represents the eternity, perfection, and royalty of the priesthood of Christ. Ah, poor sinner, here is blood to take away thy sin, righteousness to present thee to God ; here is a similitude to which thou canst conform, and to which, if we are taught of God, we shall be conformed ; for herein is the great decree of the Most High ;—he hath predestinated the people to be conformed to the image of his dear Son ; and to receive him is to be conformed to him ; if you receive him, then you are conformed to him—receiving his Spirit, receiving him.

The last thought I will notice here is this,—that that glory was to be done away. How was that glory to be done away? We all know it was a glory of terrible majesty, of legislative authority, of wrath, of indignation, and to us must have been tribulation, anguish, and woe to eternity. But by Jesus Christ this glory is done away. Therefore, saith the apostle, "If that which was done away was glorious, much more that which remaineth is glorious." Just look at it. If the Lord had sent a Saviour, and then altered his mind, and said, Well, I have altered my mind ; the gospel glory shall be done away, and the law glory shall continue ;—but no, no ; our God is of the same mind yesterday, to-day, and for ever. Therefore the glory of the law—I mean as the ministration of death—in its terrible majesty is done away. Now, saith the apostle, "that had no glory by reason of the glory which excelleth." If that which was done away was glorious, much more that which remaineth is glorious ; so that here, in the gospel, we behold as in a glass the glory of the Lord, and are changed into the same image as from glory to glory, by the Spirit of our God. You will find in all ages that people never have truly appreciated Christ until they found out their sinnership. Some of you perhaps that are Christians, at first you simply saw you were a sinner, but you did not understand clearly how you were shut out by the law, you did not see clearly what the majesty of the law was ; and terrible as the law was at Sinai, it is more terrible still in hell ; because, as we have said, that at Sinai was to be done away, but the glory of the law in hell is never to be done away ; there it is a fire, a stream of brimstone, the breath of the Lord doth kindle it. My hearer, this may seem perhaps rather doctrinal, and yet I hope it is not merely so, because it is such an important matter that we should understand why it was needful that Christ should die, what there was for Christ to meet, and how Christ has met it, and how he was made sin and a curse for us, and how he hath redeemed us from the curse of the law. You will never be spiritually minded without this knowledge ; it is this knowledge that will make you spiritually minded, and make you prize the righteousness of Jesus Christ, and his atonement, and the promises that are by him ; it will make you cleave to the gospel. And Moses himself speaks of immoveability upon this matter. He says, "Take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes have seen, and lest they depart from thy heart all the days of thy life ; but teach them thy sons and thy sons' sons, specially the day when thou stoodest before the Lord thy God in Horeb." Let me now sum this matter up. Can we truly say that we do see so clearly what the law of God is, and what we are as sinners by that law, as thereby to understand the infinite value of the Lord Jesus Christ? If so, then Sinai becomes dead to us, and we become dead to that ; there is a complete separation, and we come away from it ; we are come to Mount Zion, where everything is in our favour, and where we can never be moved,

because we are placed there by the work of Christ and by the immutable counsel of God. That is the reason it is said, "They that trust in the Lord shall be as Mount Zion, that cannot be removed," because there is no reason why they should be removed. You are placed there, in this hope of eternal life, by the mediatorial work of Christ, and it is that that keeps you there; the Lord keeps you in the faith; and there will therefore be no reason why you should be removed. Then, secondly, we are there by the immutable counsel of God; for there he hath commanded the blessing, even life for evermore. Now these are a people that do the Lord in the world a great service. They can bear testimony of the majesty of God's law, of their need of Christ, of the infinite value of Christ, of the truth that "it is not by works of righteousness that we have done, but according to his mercy he hath saved us." Saul of Tarsus thought he did God great service before the Lord called him by his grace; but when the Lord called him by his grace, and gave him to see what the law was, and thus made way for the coming in of Christ, then Saul of Tarsus became a very useful servant of God, accepted both of God and of the people, and he himself was glad to say, "By the grace of God I am what I am." This is one sense in which we are to serve God. There is not anything you can name that has much value in it where there is no necessity for it. It is the necessity of a thing that gives it so much value. Hence a man in a solitary desert, dying of thirst, if you were to take bags of gold to him, that would not be of so much value to him in the circumstances as would a cup of cold water. And so you see the Lord teaches his people their necessity, their infinite need of a Saviour, and his infinite and eternal value.

But, secondly, I notice that these people are to serve God as partakers of his discriminating favour. I do not know anything that I enter upon with more pleasure than upon the gospel service of God. The Lord immediately, we find, established a gospel service. And the first thing was, the priest was to offer sacrifice. After they had witnessed that terrible scene at Sinai, there is an altar, a sacrifice, and the people stand and look on, and presently the fire descends upon this sacrifice, consumes the sacrifice, and the people every one escape. The Israelite would say, "There goes the fire, the tempest, the wrath, the curse,—it is all upon the sacrifice. And as the sacrifice was thus accepted, the fire ceased; the people's sins are forgiven, blotted out, atoned for, and there is not a cloud between them and God. This is the antitypical meaning of that sacrifice. Ah, the substitution of Christ is a delightful theme. I pity that minister that is weary of preaching the substitution of Christ; I pity that hearer that would prefer anything to listen to to the substitution of Christ, for that includes everything. And what are all your doubts and fears, your weaknesses, downward experiences and rebellions, your besetments from time to time, the ten thousand sins that you have in your poor old fallen nature? Ah, you gain the advantage of this downward experience, for there is no real growing up without it. What does it do? It endears beyond all description the substitutional work of the Lord Jesus Christ. The law is gone, sin is gone, death is gone, God is come, and is with you in all the living and dear relations by which you are saved in the Lord with an everlasting salvation. Then the next thing was the mercy-seat. How did the people have access to that mercy-seat? It was entirely and exclusively by the high priest. The high priest carrying the blood into the holy of holies, and presenting the people what his sacrifice had made them, their business was to believe in this order of things, and there to stand waiting until the high priest came out and pronounced the blessings recorded. So that if they had faith in God, their access to God was by the high priest. Just so now:—"We have boldness by the blood of Jesus to enter into the holy of holies." And yet some of you perhaps come sometimes to the house of God full of Pharisaism, full of self, full

of your own disguised conceit. Why, say you, what ever do you mean by that? I do not say you come wilfully so; but it is thus:—Well, I am such a poor creature, I don't think I shall get anything this morning; I have been so rebellious and so wretched, and I am such a poor stumbling creature that I have a great mind not to go at all. What is that? It is all Pharisaism—that is all; all infidelity—that is all; disguised self-righteousness. You think yourself a very humble creature; but pride can take any shape, and humility is one of the most conspicuous shapes that pride generally takes. Hence there is not a prouder man in the world than the Pope, yet he calls himself “the servant of servants.” So that pride will very often take the humblest shape possible, and nothing but pride all the time. What does all this arise from? From our not making that use of the substitutional work of Christ that we should make of it. And when you think you shall get nothing, because you are all this, that, and the other, shall I show you what logical sort of reasoning yours is? I will try and show it. Well, I did think of going to the physician; I felt a little queer; but really there is so much the matter with me, I am ill in so many places, I have so many complaints, and really from top to toe I seem—I don't know what is the matter with me; I am so very, very bad that I don't think I will go now; really I am too bad. Well, say you, we should be silly to reason like that. But that is just the way we do reason in gospel matters, and reason ourselves into nice bondage. “The whole need not the physician, but they that are sick.” Ah, says one, but I am afraid of presumption. Is there any presumption in saying with the Church, “I am black”? Is there any presumption in falling down at the footstool of mercy, and pleading a Saviour's blood, and saying, “Surely I am more brutish than any man; I am as a beast before thee; can there be mercy for me?” Yes, there is, for mercy is everywhere promised to the poor, the wretched, the miserable, the sinful, the cast down, and the cast out. Therefore your access to the mercy-seat is by the blood of Immanuel, the righteousness of Immanuel, by the Spirit of Christ, by the authority of the great God, by his promise, by his mercy, and his grace; and none but these have access to him. All these experiences are to mortify our pride, to bring us into the dust, and make *hypers* of us, whether we would be *hypers* or not; make high doctrine, free grace people of us, whether we would or not; and make us earnest in our profession, whether we would be earnest or not. Oh, it is wonderful what these downward experiences will do, how they will drive us out of every fleshly hope, and make us sing in a way we never did before,—

“None but Jesus
Can do helpless sinners good.”

And then mark the mercy-seat. The Lord saith concerning this mercy-seat, “There will I meet with thee.” It is the mercy-seat, and the Lord will bring with him his mercy. You may bring your sins, and which are the more numerous,—his mercies or your sins? He will bring his mercy, and you may bring your sin, and which is the greater of the two,—his mercy or your sin? You may bring your guilt, and he will bring his grace, and which is the greater of the two,—your guilt or his grace? And you may bring your troubles, and which is the greater of the two,—your troubles or the triumphs of Christ? And you may bring your necessities; but which is the greater of the two,—your necessities or God's infinite ability to supply those necessities? “My God shall supply all your needs according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.” Those of you that know the law will be glad with all your souls for this substitution, this way of access to God. “I am the door,” saith Jesus; “by me if any man enter in he shall be saved.”

Let me go a little further with this service of the Lord. Why, even the very dress of the priest preaches the gospel to us. Who can read of

the shoulder-pieces, and the two precious stones, one on each shoulder, and on them the names of the twelve tribes,—who can read that without seeing that the people of God rest upon the shoulders of Christ, upon the omnipotent and eternal power of Christ? and when Christ breaks down, then I shall break down, not before; when Christ shall fail, then I shall fail, not before; when Christ is rejected, I shall be rejected, not before; when the dear Saviour shall change, then all my prospects will be changed, but not before; when our God shall cease to love his dear Son, he will cease to love me, but not before. Then you go to the breastplate of the priest, and that breastplate was square by which he was to present the people, to denote that he presented them under circumstances in which, by the sacrifice, everything was made square, everything was made right;—he presented them thus before God on his heart. And just look at it,—this breastplate is called “the breastplate of judgment,” that Aaron was to bear on his heart. And pray you, what kind of judgment, think you, will love pass upon its objects? what kind of judgment, think you, will electing grace pass upon its objects? What kind of judgment, think you, will our great Mordecai, Christ Jesus, pass upon his brethren? The breastplate of judgment, because the people are to be judged by the sacrifice of Christ, “Gather my saints together, that have made a covenant with me by sacrifice.” Ah, if I am to be judged by his sacrifice, it sets me free as he is free; if I am to be judged by his righteousness, I am regarded righteous as he is righteous. “So speak, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty.” Ah, Christian, look at your privileges, look at the substitution of Christ, look at your access to God, look at the power that bears you up; look at your presentation,—presented as precious stones, to denote that the people of God are his peculiar treasure. Then, again, let us go to the robe, the golden bells and pomegranates encircling the robe; and Aaron dared not to be without these golden bells; he was to have them on when he went in to the Lord, and when he came out to the people. Do you not know what the 89th Psalm saith upon this?—“Blessed is the people that know the joyful sound.” The golden bells evidently spiritually mean the testimonies of the priesthood of Christ, and the testimonies of the grace and mercy of God that are by Jesus Christ; and it is a pleasing sound in the ears of the most high God,—that is to say, the testimonies borne by the Saviour. And so when he came out among the people, the same golden bells. Does it not preach to us the joyful sound? The golden bells and the pomegranates; so that there was a fruit to every bell—alternate, you see. And just so it is now. If the testimony of God’s everlasting love be one of the golden bells, then the fruit is, I love him because he has loved me. If election be another of the golden bells, then I choose that good part,—that is the fruit,—because that good part hath chosen me. And hath the Lord determined me to eternal life—is that another golden bell? Then the fruit is that I desire and seek after that that he has ordained me to;—“I apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus.” And did the Lord Jesus Christ bear all my sins, and die for me? The fruit of that is that I would die for him rather than part with him and his blessed truth. So we may go on enumerating the blessed truths of the gospel, and see that the very dress of the high priest preaches the gospel to us. I will name one more,—the holy plate on the mitre,—“Holiness to the Lord.” What was that for? That he should bear the iniquity of the holy things, and that the people might be accepted of God. And so the sins of the people were ceremonially, as you know, transferred to the sacrifices, there called the holy things; and the priest being called “holiness to the Lord” was expressive of his consecration to God, and a type of Christ, who presents us to God, and we are accepted by his sacrifice.