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Surrey Tabernacle Pulpit.

SAVING CONVERSION.

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A SERMON

PREACHED ON SUNDAY MORNING, 21ST MARCH, 1869,

BY MR. JAMES WELLS,

AT THE NEW SURREY TABERNACLE, WANSEY STREET.

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“But the word of God grew and multiplied.”—Acts xii. 24.

WE have in this chapter an account of that which is a very terrible exhibition of human nature. We have here Herod slaying James the brother of John, because he thought it would please the people at large; and as he saw he had very much pleased the Jews in slaying one of the Lord's servants, he proceeded to slay another; but in that he was defeated. This is human nature, to seek to please men, the praise of men, to get men on your side, to get the world on your side. People think if they can get that, then they shall do. Little did Herod think that there was a reservoir of wrath stored up for him, that would presently fall upon him. That success which he had had in his persecutions of the people of God so elated him, that when he went down to Tyre, to be gratulated there as king, they shouted and tried to persuade him that he was not a mere man, but that he was a god. But the angel of the Lord smote him, and he was eaten of worms. See the worms in him and all over him—one of the most terrible pictures that we could witness; thus he gave up the ghost. But notwithstanding all he did, the word of God grew and multiplied. And one reason that we have not more prosperity now in the churches is, that the church and the world are so much at peace one with the other. We unhappily have not power, grace, zeal, and decision enough to disturb them, and so they do not disturb us. The wise and the foolish seem to be all slumbering together. One of old might well pray, and I hope we have a little of the same spirit of prayer, “Lighten thou mine eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death.” I do not intend by any means that we should seek to give offence, or seek persecution; but my meaning is, if the Lord were pleased to keep us, and make us more lively and devoted to him, I think it would stir up Satan, and make him a little suspicious. But while he sees us quiet, and going on very easily, he has no reason to oppose us. Nevertheless, whatever discouragements there may be, or in whatever shape or form those discouragements may present themselves, here stands the testimony of our text, that has been true in all ages, and will be to the end of time,—that the Lord hath certain arrangements, counsels, and purposes, and within the compass of these purposes and arrangements the word of God shall grow and multiply.

This morning, then, I notice *the progress of the word of God.*

“The word of God grew.” I will take a twofold view of this:—first,
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the growing of the word of God in the conversion of the soul; secondly, the growing of the word of God by its increased relative value. First, then, the growing of the word of God in the saving conversion of the soul to God. I am sure it will not be unprofitable for us once more to go over and consider the ground of real conversion to God; for without this not a soul ever was, ever will, or ever can be saved. I will take a verse from the 13th of Matthew, and then from the 8th of Luke, to help us out with this matter. Now where the word of the Lord takes root in the soul, where the conversion to God is a saving conversion, the first item given in the 13th of Matthew, in the parable of the sower, is that he on the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it. Let us take that first; but we must not have that by itself. There are three more qualities in connection with this parable that we must take; for the mere understanding by itself may leave the man where it found him. Knowledge puffeth up. But where the work is real, the man is built up. That which is puffed up, as we say, may be puffed down again; but that which is built up by God, according to his own blessed word, shall not be thrown down again; for the Lord hath said, in the last clause of the 31st chapter of Jeremiah, "It shall not be plucked up, nor thrown down any more for ever." First, then, "he that heareth the word, and understandeth it." But oh, how is this possible? It is literally and utterly impossible for any man under the heavens to understand *aright* God's word without the Spirit of God. The word of God declares what we are as sinners, especially and particularly in our nature, that we are altogether depraved, that we are altogether as an unclean thing. Hence it was that all the learning, industry, and zeal of Saul of Tarsus, and all that he could do, could not give him to understand this part of God's word. But when God began with him, the commandment came and said, "Thou shalt not covet," and it came to him in a way that showed him that his nature was after everything and anything but that which was pleasing to God, and showed to him that that which he had hitherto taken for religion was nothing but blasphemy; that instead of his being a friend of God, he had been a most dreadful enemy to God. Now he began to understand God's word concerning his sinnership. "Sin reviv'd, and wrought in me all manner of concupiscence;" as some have rendered it, "all manner of covetousness," "all manner of evil." Let us take it that way; for that is the meaning. Just look at the words,—"all manner of evil." What, have I such a heart as that? Have I such a nature as that? Is it possible that I embody in my fallen nature all manner of evil?—that there is not one element, one manner of evil, that I do not embody in myself? Is it any wonder that the Old Testament saints, who were convinced of their state should speak thus? "My loins," saith one, "are filled with a loathsome disease, and there is no soundness in my flesh." Another saith, "Rottenness entered into my bones." And another saith, "I am full of wounds, and bruises, and putrefying sores, from the crown of the head to the sole of the foot." Ah, it is only when we are brought into the light of the terrible majesty of God's holiness that this is seen and felt. This is the good ground; this prepares the heart for the seed of the gospel; this is the man that will understand the word. All he has to say concerning himself is, "O wretched man that I am!" And then in connection with that conviction and feeling, there is the solemn inquiry, "who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" The apostle did not make that inquiry then because he did not know; he did know; and he goes on to show how this should be done. Now where there is this conviction, this experience, then there will be an understanding. Here is the good ground. Why is this called good ground? Because the man's pride is humbled, his enmity slain, his self-conceit, self-righteousness, self-wisdom—it is all burnt up and gone together. There he is now, like Joshua, standing before the angel of the Lord, as it were, clothed with

filthy garments. Presently he begins to understand that nothing but the atonement of Christ can take his sins away; he begins, from knowing his own sad condition, to understand the infinite value of the atonement of Christ; he begins to see that it is by the atonement of Christ that the great God becomes his almighty, immutable, infallible friend; that it is by the atonement of Jesus Christ that he is to be held guiltless; that it is by the righteousness of Jesus Christ that he is to be held free from condemnation. He now begins to look at the Saviour. He is now just in that state described, when the Pharisees of old complained to the disciples, and said, "How is it that your Master eateth with publicans and sinners?" Ah, look at the Saviour's beautiful answer:—"The whole need not the physician," they cannot understand it;—"but the sick." Ah, "go and learn what that meaneth; I will have mercy, and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than all burnt offerings." The Saviour understood the secret; he came into the world to save sinners; and he knew how far we were sinners, he knew how far we were gone by sin; he knew how deep the dye was, he knew how crimson the colour was; he well knew that none but himself could put away sin, and present us before God without sin. Here, then, is the good ground; this is the man that hears the word; and he says,—Bless God for Jesus Christ; bless God for this free grace salvation. And then he will in the Lord's own time very much bless the Lord not only for this mercy and salvation, but for the manner of it. He will read such a scripture as that, "Abraham believed God." When God gave to Abraham the testimony of the certainty of his truth, Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness, and he was called the friend of God. This explains how it was that the thief on the cross, simply by faith, became the friend of God; for if he had not become the friend of God, he could not have gone into the paradise of God, for no enemies of God are admitted there. Wherever there is living faith there will be prayer. The prayer of the thief was the prayer of faith; he was reconciled to God, was the friend of God, understood the word, and the Saviour said unto him, "This day shalt thou be with me in paradise." This, then, is the first step towards saving conversion to God. What say we? Can we say the word has thus taken root in our hearts in a way of conviction and enlightenment; and can we say that our understanding is of that kind that it makes us value the remedy; that it conforms us to the mind of God, and makes his ways our delight?

In the 8th of Luke there are three more qualities or fruits of the Holy Spirit spoken of. "That on the good ground are they which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience." "An honest heart"—what does that mean? It means this,—if your understanding be right, you are determined not to deceive your own soul; you will be honest towards your soul; you will not be put off with anything that is human. You must pass away from the creature altogether, and look to God only; and you must pray the Lord to speak home the word to you with power; you must pray the Lord to manifest himself to you as he does not to the world. And you must not, and will not, where there is this honesty, say that you have experienced what you have not experienced. If anything under the heavens calls for honesty, surely dealing with our own souls calls for honesty. "Keep," saith the Lord, "thine heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life." And where there is this honesty of feeling towards your own soul, I am sure those beautiful words of Mr. Hart will find a complete response in your soul,—

"May we never, never dare
What we're not to say we were;
Make us well our vileness know,
And keep us very, very low."

For as John Bunyan makes his pilgrim say,—it was hard work walking down hill; but when he got down into the valley he found there was a quiet note, a solemnity, a geniality, and something exceedingly suited to his feelings. So it is that we, by honest examination, shall sink and sink in our own estimation till we come down to the feet of Jesus; there is a calm, there is a peace there which Dr. Watts has well hit upon when he says,—

“ Thus while I sink my joys shall rise
Unmeasurably high.”

For he will save the humble person.

So, then, if the word of God is growing in us, taking root, and springing upward, we shall know something of this real experience, this real honesty with our own souls. “In an honest and good heart.” What is a good heart? Now you know what a good friend is; a good friend is a loving friend, that loves at all times. You read of one that loveth at all times. So a good heart is a loving heart. And if we have this understanding and this honesty, I am sure we have a loving heart towards God’s blessed truth. Yes, the heart will love him at all times; there is not anything will be able to make us hate his truth. Hence how expressive is that beautiful scripture,—“Great peace have they that love thy law, and nothing shall offend them”! Now the many years I have known God’s blessed name, I can at any time, let it be what time it may,—that is to say, let it be a time of darkness, temptation, or rebellion against some of the dealings of God with me, because he has not answered some of my prayers in the way I wanted them answered; yet, at the worst of times, I can say that his blessed truth is dear to my heart, and that I love him as represented by that truth. I honestly confess that I could not love God by the representations which are given of him by a great many people in this world. I could not love God as represented by the Pope; I could not love God as represented by the Puseyite; and I could not love God as I do now even as represented by the Wesleyan. I must have God in the eternity and immutability of his love to me; I must have God in a sworn covenant; and such is the representation which the truth makes of him. Therefore the good heart is a heart well disposed towards God; a good feeling towards God’s truth. And you know when the dear Saviour was in this world he seemed to catch almost—I hope I am not speaking improperly in saying so—he seemed almost to catch up any little good feeling that appeared towards him; as though human nature were so utterly destitute of anything good that if there be a sign of anything good he seemed to pick it up. Hence when he was asked which was the greatest commandment, and he answered that the greatest commandment was to love God, and love our neighbour; and the lawyer said, Master, thou hast rightly spoken; for to love God and to love our neighbour, after all, is better than all the ceremonial offerings possible; the dear Saviour caught up the good feeling, and he said, “Thou art not far from the kingdom of God.” And when Nicodemus went to him, girded in a great measure with Jewish prejudices, yet there was some good feeling in Nicodemus. “No man can do these things which thou doest except God be with him.” Oh, you think God is with me? Well, I do, Master. Then you have got a little bit of good feeling; come, then, you shall bless God that you have ever come to me; and now I will tell you that you must be born again; and I will spiritualize it, and tell you all about it. Nicodemus was never after that found siding with the enemies. Therefore, I say, whenever there was a good feeling towards him, he seemed, as it were, to take it up. And he is the same now that he was then; this Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever. He is not on earth in his bodily presence, but he is in his deity; for that is the sense, I think, in which you must understand his words to the apostles: “Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of

the world." So, then, the word of God grew; gathering up sinners, giving them this understanding, this honesty, and this goodness of heart, this love to him. We all know how winning good feeling is; when people show a good feeling to you, you know how winning it is. And whenever persons show good feeling to you by anything practical, always acknowledge it; honour to whom honour is due. And if persons do me good, if they do not do any one else good, but do other people evil, others may speak against them, but I shall not. I shall speak well of the bridge that carries me over; and if the same bridge has let others fall—well, I have not fallen, the bridge carried me over, and I shall speak well of it. Never give up in these matters your individuality; let each judge for himself. It is very encouraging, then, to see what notice the Saviour took of this good feeling; and he saith—words that we have often quoted—"Blessed is he whosoever is not offended in me." Here is the goodness of heart—a loving heart. That must be a good heart that loves God. That is the sense in which the people of God are good. Hence they are spoken of as having in this loving heart a good treasure. "A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things," good things concerning that which he loves; and they are called good trees, and therefore bear good fruit; a proof that they are trees of the Lord's right hand planting.

But they are said to bring forth fruit with patience; that is, they never get out of patience with God's truth. And it is a great pity that we should ever suffer ourselves to get out of patience with anything pertaining to the cause or truth of God. But, alas! what do we see in this matter? We see perhaps a little offence given—some trifle—off they fly; out of patience with the minister, out of patience with the deacons, out of patience with the people, out of patience with the place; away they go, and perhaps end their days like wandering Arabs; and we hardly know at last what to make of such people. Ah, it is a great thing to be kept from that, and to be kept in patience with God's truth and God's cause. You must not expect churches, or ministers, or congregations to be faultless. Remember, it is the church in the wilderness. And if we have many things to try our patience in various ways, what have we after all to try us in relation to the cause of God in comparison of what Christ had to try him? Did he ever think of running away from the cause? Did he ever think of forsaking the cause? Did he ever suffer any waters to quench his love, or any mighty floods to drown it? No; he rejoiced as a strong man to run the race; and never once got out of patience with his Father's will, or with his disciples, or with God's truth; but he did indeed, in the loftiest, most magnificent sense of the word, bring forth fruit with patience. God give us more and more of the patience of Christ, that we may not get out of patience with his blessed word, nor with his blessed ways.

Let us now give another representation of this saving conversion, from the 19th Psalm. "The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul." Of course the law there means the law of faith; for as soon as ever a man begins to believe, he begins to be converted; and a man never begins to believe savingly until he begins to be convinced, as we have described this morning. As soon as he begins to believe, then he begins to be converted. "The law of the Lord is perfect." I am sure you will not doubt that this is the law of faith, because it is written that "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." And when that word is made a word of conviction to us, as soon as a man begins to believe, then he begins to be converted; for we are converted by faith, we are brought to God by faith; for he that comes to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him; for "without faith it is impossible to please God." The law of faith is perfect. Oh, how true that is! How is that? Because of that perfection that is in Christ. The

law of faith is perfect. It stands thus, and what a wonderful declaration it is! "Ye," that thus believe, "are complete in him," in him who is such a person that his completeness can never be injured, tarnished, or sullied. The completeness of angels was lost; the completeness of the first Adam was lost; but "ye are complete in him, who is the head of all principality and power."

"Where is the power can reach us there,
Or what can force us thence?"

If, then, the law of faith be thus perfect, it perfectly converts the soul to God. Here is a perfection of assimilation. What do you say to this, poor sinner, that are knocked about from time to time, and feel what a poor infidel, and atheist, and poor worm you are in yourself? what do you say? Oh, you will say, my soul is completely conformed to this perfection that is in Christ; and I can say with the poet concerning the certainty of God's eternal truth—for there is not only a perfection of completeness in Christ, but also a completeness of the certainty of truth—"All is settled, and my soul approves it well."

"The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul." "He that believeth shall be saved." It is the law of faith. "The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple." What is that testimony? Why, that that follows upon the law of faith—here it is; "He that believeth on me hath everlasting life, and I will raise him up at the last day." The Saviour unites present belief with certain resurrection to eternal glory at the last day. "The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple." I am speaking to some this morning that can look forward to that day, and can see that you shall stand among his children, see that you will be found at his right hand; you can see that there is a crown of righteousness laid up for you, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give to all that love his appearing; and as you do love his appearing, and receive the testimony of his truth, short of that crown you never, no, never can come. "Because I live, ye shall live also." "The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart." The statutes mean special laws made in their favour. You know our Parliament sometimes makes special laws in favour of certain individuals, under certain circumstances, and they call them a kind of personal statutes. And our God has made a great many special laws in favour of his people. I must not here enlarge upon them, or else they abound very much in the Holy Scriptures. I need not remind you of Joseph, and Daniel, and Mordecai, and all the rest, where the Lord interposed and, as it were, made statutes in their favour. And surely, if statutes are made in our favour, we may well rejoice therein. I will mention only one statute—it is a very comforting one—that "all things shall work together for good." Why, that is more than we can say to one another. If we put our children into business, and if we had such a control as to make everything in the process of that business work for their good, see how well they would do. We should turn their foolishness into wisdom, and their losses into gains, and their blunders into advantages. Well, this is one of God's statutes—that "all things work together for good unto them that love him, and are the called according to his purpose." And these statutes made in favour of the Lord's people rejoice the heart. Why should they be made in their favour? Because they are the Lord's friends. The apostle quotes from the classics, and I have often admired the words of the ancient Greek philosopher, when one said, "You would make a very good judge if you were not so partial," he replied. "The gods forbid that I should occupy a tribunal where I could show no more favour to my friends than to strangers." Just so our God; he will show favour to his friends. He is wonderful in counsel, and excellent in working out those eternal counsels. "The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes." What is his

commandment? Everlasting life. He gave that commandment to Christ; he commanded Christ to give us eternal life. "Thou hast given him power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as thou hast given him." "The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring for ever." I like that definition, "clean;"—it severs you from every other god. Wherever there is the fear of Jehovah, other gods are hated, despised, and rejected. "As for me and my house, we will serve Jehovah." You may serve Chemosh, and Dagon, and Ashtaroth, and Baal, if you like, but we will serve Jehovah. It keeps a man devoted to God; he feels he dares not depart from God's truth. "Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon the earth I desire beside thee." "The judgments of the Lord," his decisions, "are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold." The Lord give us grace to believe that. What hard work that is to believe, is it not? It really is. "Yea, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb." So the word does two things;—it makes a man rich, and takes all the bitters away; so it leaves the Christian at last, when he comes to die, with something better than much fine gold, something sweeter than honey and the honeycomb.

Next, I notice the growing relative value of God's word. Now the word of the Lord is always the same in value in itself, but it is not always of the same value relatively. The longer we live, if we are rightly taught, if we have come by our religion in the right way, the dearer the word of the Lord will be to us; his yea and amen promise will be dearer and dearer to us; and if it be so, he will show us yet a great many mercies and wonders by his holy word. He knows whether we want him or not. But if our religion is merely superficial, and we are somewhat getting tired of it, the Lord says,—Very well, it may go. But from the 12th to the 25th of Genesis the Lord appeared nine times to Abraham. Why so? Because Abraham so prized his blessed truth that he had revealed to him. Isaac had not quite so many revelations; but still the Lord appeared to him twice; and to Jacob six times. And he would not have appeared to the disciples with that pleasure he did unless he had known they wanted to see him; but he giveth his testimony,—“I have given them thy words, and they have received them.” And when I rise from the dead I will reappear to them, because I know they will rejoice to see me. Wherever the Lord gives this intense interest to know more of him, he will not disappoint it. He gave the apostle, having a great work for him to do, an intense thirst for him; and by and by the Lord appeared so graciously to the apostle, that in order that he should not be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations granted unto him, it was needful he should have a thorn in the flesh to keep him down; or else he would have been so carried away, as with the chariots of Ammi-nadib, that he would have flown over the heads of all of us, and we should have had nothing about the downward experiences of the people; he would only have dwelt upon the lofty settlements of eternity, rising with wings as eagles, running in the heavenly streets, and walking without fainting or being weary. Such would have been the case. But the Lord will keep his servants down, in order that they may bring the little ones up.

What a lovely testimony is that of David towards the last! Oh, how did he cleave to God's word! Christ was his light, that shone more and more unto the perfect day; Christ was his strength, and he went from one degree of strength to another, the righteousness of God, revealed from faith to faith. Now, David, you are about to be taken to the upper house, you are about to be taken home, after your mysterious and eventful life, the beautiful things you have put upon record as to downward experience, and the promise relating to the great Melchisedec, the coming Messiah; what is your testimony at the last? "These be the

last words of David. David, the son of Jesse, said, and the man who was raised up on high,"—what, a high doctrine man? Yes; raised up into oneness with Christ, into oneness with the blessed God;—"the anointed of the God of Jacob;" he had the anointings of the Holy Ghost upon him; it was by the Holy Ghost that he knew that the Lord said unto his Lord, "Sit thou at my right hand, till I make thy foes thy footstool;" he thus saw, by this anointing, the eternal triumphs of the Saviour, the pearly gates of eternity were opened to his soul, and he felt ready to depart. "The sweet psalmist of Israel." It would be to go through half the Psalms, and more than that, to show in what Psalms more especially he appears the sweet Psalmist of Israel. Where is there a Christian that does not love the Psalms? Where is there a Christian that does not sometimes find perhaps a little pasture in the Psalms when he can find it nowhere else? Some will say,—Oh, as to Ezekiel's vision, and Daniel's vision, and the Revelation, we leave some of the speculative ministers to go there; we cannot go into those things; there are some who do go there, and they may go by themselves, we will not go with them. Well, then, if we cannot get so high as that now, we shall when we get to heaven;—we shall be in Ezekiel's city then, we shall be in Daniel's kingdom then, we shall be in John's new Jerusalem then;—certainly we shall. Well, then, come, if some of these things are too high for us now, let us comfort ourselves with the thought that they will not be too high for us by and by, when we get to where the things are. Then it will be,—

"No more a stranger or a guest,
But like a child at home."

"The sweet psalmist of Israel," David, by his testimonies in the Psalms, has taken away the bitterness of many a poor tried child of God. Psalms have come with savour and with power to your soul, and you have rejoiced in the gift of such a minister as David will be in the church down to the end of time. Then he says, "The Spirit of the Lord spake by me, and his word was in my tongue." I like that exceedingly;—"his word was *in* my tongue;" not *on* my tongue, but *in* my tongue; as though he should say,—God's word and my tongue were so identified, I could never speak without it. Whenever I spoke his word, it seemed to oil my tongue, give elasticity to my tongue, eloquence to my tongue, and seemed to set my soul on fire. I like that sweet oneness. And so it is with you, bless the Lord; you do not speak the word as a strange thing; you speak it as something that seems identified with your keenest and purest taste; so that not anything tastes so sweet as the word of the Lord; "if so be ye have tasted that the Lord is gracious." "The God of Israel said, the Rock of Israel spake to me;"—God came to him in Trinitarian order;—the Spirit of the Lord, God the Father, Christ the Rock of Israel;—"He that ruleth over men must be just." There, David, don't you feel knocked down? No. Because you have not always been just, you know. No, I do not feel knocked down. I stand by faith. If I stood by human merit, that would knock me down; if I stood by fleshly perfection, it would knock me down; and if I stood by a blameless and faultless life, it would knock me down. "He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God. And he shall be as the light of the morning, when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds; as the tender grass springing out of the earth by clear shining after rain." Ah, it does not mean my house; I know where to look: I know the Just that will die for the unjust, to bring us to God;—it is Christ that ruleth over men in righteousness, and has brought in an eternal righteousness by which he can rule and does rule; grace shall reign through righteousness unto eternal life. "He shall be as the light of the morning, when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds."