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Surrey Tabernacle Pulpit.

THE BIBLE CONSISTENT WITH ITSELF.

A SERMON

PREACHED ON SUNDAY MORNING, 27TH JUNE, 1869,

BY MR. JAMES WELLS,

AT THE NEW SURREY TABERNACLE, WANSBY STREET.

"But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection; lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway."—1 Corinthians ix. 27.

I HOPE we were enabled, last Lord's day morning, to make somewhat clear the meaning of this text,—that there is nothing in it that clashes with the delightful truth of the sure and final perseverance of all the people of God. You must read the sermon to get at the full meaning. It is language that stands opposed to presumption. You find frequently in the Scriptures the language of caution used; for we are not saved merely by the covenant being ordered in all things and sure; but if the covenant be ordered in all things and sure, it must be kept in that order, and the people must be conformed to that order, or else they cannot be saved. It is not the mere receiving of the theory in the head, we must go to work and fall in with it. Hence you find again and again the language of caution. It is said of Moses, that "by faith he kept the passover and sprinkling of blood, lest he that destroyed the firstborn should touch them." It was God's work to conform them to this order; and Moses saw their escape must be in the divinely appointed order. And it sometimes so happens, even in temporal deliverances,—even when a promise is given in temporal matters, there might appear to be a danger of that promise falling to the ground; but it does not fall to the ground; yet it would if the order in which the promise was to be fulfilled were not kept up. Hence in the shipwreck of the apostle Paul, when they saw their danger they began to leave the ship in boats, but the apostle stood up and said, "Except these abide in the ship, ye cannot be saved." Now, the Lord had said to the apostle Paul that he gave unto him all them that sailed with him, but if they had had their way, instead of being saved, they would have been drowned. That, therefore, was prevented, and they abode in the ship, and though the ship was wrecked, yet it came to pass that all escaped safe to land, by being conformed to that order which the Lord had appointed. Then there was another thing that seemed almost to deny the promise, for the counsel of the soldiers was to kill the prisoners; and the apostle Paul being included among the prisoners, he then must have been slain. Where then would have been the promise? But God put it into the heart of the centurion to keep them from their purpose, in order to save Paul. You see, then, the danger to which, speaking after the manner of men, the promise was exposed, and yet it was fulfilled.

Again, the Lord had said to Paul that he must stand before Cæsar; yet, in reading the history you will see that no less than six times between the time the Lord made that promise and the time the apostle appeared in the court of Cæsar, did it appear that his life must be taken away, but it was not. So there may appear to be something like contradictions, but let us wait, and the Lord in his own time will make every crooked thing straight. We cannot be saved, therefore, without being conformed to God's own order; there must be regeneration, belief of the truth, and conformity thereto. And even those that are saved, they sometimes get so weak in their faith, so cold in their love, so tremulous in their hope, and so careless, shall I say, in their minds, that they topple over sometimes most dreadfully into the world and its attractions, so far so as to stagger some of their brethren and sisters, and they say, "Well, there was a time when he could go twice to the house of God on the Lord's day, and show a great interest in God's cause, also of a week-night; in a word, there was a time when he appeared to be following well after the Lord; but he seems now to have got into a strange state." So that, for want of more faith, hope, love, and concern for God, even good people, as it were, scarcely escape being lost. They just escape, and yet they escape as surely as though they were exposed to no danger. Therefore, the apostle saith, "If the righteous scarcely be saved," the scarcity lies in their faith, in their hope, in themselves; there is no scarcity in God's salvation, and mercy, and grace; but there must be a scarcity somewhere, or else the apostle's words would have no meaning. If the righteous—that is, those who are justified by faith in Jesus Christ, if they have just faith enough, and that is all, to exempt them from eternal condemnation, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?

There are two propositions I felt a desire to work out, this morning, arising from the language of the text, because there is an apparent contradiction between the language of our text and the certain perseverance of the saints. I think we set that right last Lord's day morning; and if any of you will drop me a note, and tell me wherein you are not quite clear about it, I will pay attention to it. It is a great privilege rightly to understand the Scriptures. I will go farther than that, and say that the understanding of the Scriptures is a matter of vast importance. It is said of the Saviour that he expounded the Scriptures unto them, and that he opened their understandings that they might understand the Scriptures, and we read also of wresting the Scriptures to our own destruction. The first proposition that I have to attend to this morning is that *the Bible is unique, and entirely harmonious with itself*,—that it never contradicts itself; secondly, *the clearness with which the Lord has declared the delightful truth of the final perseverance of all his people*.

First, that *the Bible is a book that is harmonious with itself*. Verbal contradictions there are, but contradictions in meaning there are none. The apostle saith, "Rightly dividing the word of truth;" and I think all the right dividings of the word of God may be summed up in two. First, description of character. This is one very essential dividing of the word of truth,—to bring forward the word of truth, and describe what a Christian is,—what his experience and soul-troubles are; what the deliverances are which he seeks; and what it is to realize those deliverances, and so to take forth the precious from the vile. Another right dividing of the word of truth is distinguishing between law and gospel. The word "law" is a word, let me again remind you, when used in the legal sense, of very extensive signification. When the apostle Paul quotes from what he calls the law, he does not quote from the ten commandments, but says, "Do ye not hear the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a free woman," and so on. Therefore, the word "law," when used in the legal sense, has a very extensive meaning,—in a word, it means the law that the Lord gave to Adam and

Eve in Eden, the ten commandments, the old covenant with the Jews, all the conditional promises, and all the threatenings of the Bible; that is the meaning of the word "law." Therefore the man who is one with the gospel and one with Christ, being dead to the law—that means that he is dead to every possible penalty and threatening; for there is no condemnation, no threatening, no wrath, against them who are in Christ Jesus the Lord. Now, the law changes its voice very often, or rather, did, but it never contradicts itself. For instance, "In the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt die." Well, then, they did eat thereof, and they did die; there is no contradiction in that. So the Lord, in the twenty-eighth of Deuteronomy, promised many temporal blessings to the Jews, on the ground of their obedience and conformity to his covenant; and then, when they apostatized, he changed his voice, and brought upon them the curses and penalties there written; but there is no contradiction in this. Just so the gospel. The gospel is one harmonious whole from first to last. I am almost ready to ask, how could we believe the Bible if it was a witness that contradicted itself? And, of course, if a man is called as a witness, and especially if he has to bear testimony upon a question of life and death, why, if that man contradicts in one part of his testimony what he advances in the other, how would you know which to believe, and how could you receive such a witness as this? The first verbal contradiction I will just say a word upon is a point that infidels are glad to get hold of; but the people of God read the word of the Lord reverentially, feeling it is his word. It is said of the Lord in one place, that he repented that he made man; in another place, that he repented he made Saul king; and so you read of his repenting of the good he had done to the Jews, and then repenting him of the evil he had brought upon them. The question is, what does the word "repent" in all those Scriptures mean? Well, it does not mean any change in God's mind, because we cannot admit that doctrine. God's infinite knowledge is one essential that prevents any change in his mind. The word "repent" in all those Scriptures must be understood not abstractedly, but circumstantially; that is, wherever the word is used, it always, without exception, denotes a change in God's dealings with man. When he said he repented he made man, that implied he was about to change his dealings with men; and so he did, and brought in a flood, thereby destroying the world. When it is said he repented he made Saul king, that means that he was about to change his dealings with him; and so he did, and gave Saul up, so that Saul went from bad to worse, until he wrought out his own entire destruction. And when the Lord is spoken of as repenting of the evil he had designed against the Jews, that is expressive of his change of dealings with them, that now they were made to cry to him because of their miseries, he would turn round and deal kindly with them. Therefore, whenever God is said to repent, we must not understand it in a way that contradicts what he is, but understand it in its relative and circumstantial sense. Then, on the other hand, when it is said that he is not man that he should repent, nor the son of man that he should lie, we then understand it abstractedly, as declarative of his oneness of mind and immutability. And when it is said the Lord hath sworn, and will not repent, that he will make Christ a priest for ever, there again we understand it of his immutability. And where the Saviour, in the 13th of Hosea, saith, "O death, I will be thy plagues; O grave, I will be thy destruction; repentance shall be hid from mine eyes;" there again we understand it as expressive of the unalterable nature of his mind and counsel. And when the apostle says of the Holy Spirit, that he doth not repent of his gifts and callings, there again we can understand it of the immutability of God. So then when God is said to repent, we must understand it in the circumstantial sense; when he is said not to repent, then we must understand it in the absolute sense; that he is of one mind, and none can turn him.

One way in which self-contradiction is created is by turning mere evidences into essential causes. I will give an example of each. When the Saviour saith, "Come, ye blessed, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; I was hungry, and ye gave me meat;" and the rest,—are we to understand that the people so favoured do possess the kingdom because they did these things; or are we to understand that those acts of brotherly kindness entitled them to the kingdom; or are we to understand that they are saved by those acts of brotherly kindness? If so, we should bring a contradiction into the Scriptures; we should thereby make out that salvation is at least partly of works. But the apostle, in the 4th of Romans, settles this:—he saith, "Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt;" and that man, therefore, that worketh, or thinks his works can do something towards his eternal salvation, that man is deluded. "But," says the apostle, "to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness." But if we make out that they are admitted into heaven on the ground of the works they have done, instead of taking those works merely as evidences that they were real Christians, if we make them essential causes of their salvation, then we make salvation to be partly of works, and thereby contradict the plain statement in the word of God. That I am saved by grace is a matter to me as clear from my personal experience as it is from God's word. I am as satisfied as I am of my existence that, if the Lord had not been pleased to have mercy upon me at the first, I never should have sought that mercy, at least not in the right way; and my experience demonstrates that it must from first to last be of grace. Again, "Unto them on his left hand, Go, ye cursed; I was hungry," and the rest. Now was their non doing the *cause* of their being lost? Was their non doing the cause of their being damned for ever? Certainly not; because they were condemned independent of that. They were condemned from two sources,—first, from their fall in Adam, wherein judgment came upon all men unto condemnation; secondly, from their personal sins; and while they were, it appears, or had been, professors, they did not feel a sympathy with the real children of God, so as to minister to them;—that was not a cause, but only an evidence that they did not belong to God. But if you turn these evidences into *causes*, and say the one was saved because he did so and so, and the other was lost because he did not do so and so, then the Bible contradicts itself; you then partly make eternal salvation to be of works, and bring in a contradiction. But if you take it to be mere evidence,—that faith, on the one hand, is the evidence of things not seen, and unbelief is the evidence on the other; that he that believeth shall be saved,—not saved for his believing, but his believing is an evidence that he is saved, he that believeth not shall be damned,—not damned for not having saving faith, but his non-possession of saving faith is an evidence that he is still under condemnation, and that the wrath of God abideth on him;—self-contradiction is created by turning evidences into essential causes.

Another way in which contradiction is created is by making the promises of God and the invitations of the gospel clash with each other. Let us have a sample of this. In the 10th of John, the Saviour says, "Other sheep I have, which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold and one shepherd." Now we must not view the invitations as contradicting this. Again, "Thou hast given him power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as thou hast given him." How is a contradiction created here? The majority of the old Puritans made, and many ministers now also make, the invitations of the gospel to be indiscriminate, to be universal. The promise is to those that were given to Christ, and the declaration is concerning his sheep; so if I make the invitations

universal, then I make the invitations clash with the promises. The invitations and promises of the gospel entirely accord. Whenever an invitation is given, the character is always described or implied. "Ho! every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters; he that hath no money, let him buy and eat without money and without price;"—here is the character invited. Why, this man is a partaker of the promise; he could not thirst for the waters of eternal life if he were not born of God; he is born of God. The invitation, therefore, is to those that the Lord hath quickened. Then again, in the last chapter of Revelation, "The Spirit and the bride say, Come;" but then the Spirit goes first. When the Holy Spirit quickens a soul, the bride comes in and saith, "Come." And when the Holy Spirit saith "Come," he does not say it merely in words, he says it in power. It is the Spirit that giveth severally as he will, and quickeneth whom he will. And then, when the church sees a sinner marked by conviction of sin, under a sight and sense of what he is, the church can give such the right hand of fellowship, and can say, "Come." "And let him that heareth say, Come." That refers to the minister, the friend of the Bridegroom, that stands between the bride and the Bridegroom; to give a good account to the bride of the Bridegroom, and to the Bridegroom of the bride; he would not say a word against either; if he were to give any bad tidings of the bridegroom to the bride, she would not believe it; and if he were to give any bad tidings of the bride to the Bridegroom, he would pretty soon be sent about his business; therefore let him testify that she is the Lamb's bride, that she is called by his name, Jehovah our righteousness, that she shall appear brighter at the last than ten thousand suns at his right hand. "Let him that heareth say, Come." Add then it comes down to the poor sinner himself. "Let him that is athirst come, And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely." The invitation is as adapted as the promise, "take the water of life freely." The poor sinner says, I take the water of life? I am not worthy, Lord, of the least of thy mercies; much less worthy to drink of the river of thy pleasure, much less worthy to take the promise to myself, and that promise to be in me a well of water springing up unto everlasting life, for they are waters that cannot fail. It is a promise to the soul that makes it as a watered garden, whose waters fail not. Therefore it saith "freely," as Isaiah saith, "without money and without price." So that the promise is absolute, and the invitation entirely accords therewith. But to hold out an invitation to all men would ignore the fall of man; the doctrine of inviting all is a denial of the fall of man. I do not say that ministers mean what I am going to say; but in my estimation the doctrine of inviting all to come is sinning against the counsels of God the Father, as though his counsels were not such as to secure the coming of his own; it is sinning against the Saviour, as though he could not make his people willing in the day of his power; it is sinning against the Holy Spirit, who taketh up the isles as a very little thing. Thus, then, we can reconcile this point very easily,—that the invitation accords with the promise. But once adopt the notion that all are invited, hereby you create a self-contradiction. One part of your system tells you it is all of grace, another part tells you it is of works. What is this but a contradiction? If the Bible be divided against itself, how can it stand; and if a gospel be divided against itself, how can it stand? I wonder what the apostle Paul would think of the doctrine of general invitation, he had plenty of opportunities so to do, but he did not do it. Agrippa said, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian." As Mr. Foreman has said, in his excellent work upon this question, there was a good opportunity for the apostle Paul to say, Well, Agrippa, it is your own fault if you do not; you ought to come, you will be damned for not coming. Did he so speak? He would not take the power out of the hands of

God; he said, "I would to God that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost and altogether such as I am, except these bonds." Thus the apostle appears to me to repudiate the doctrine of general invitation, because it contradicts God's eternal truth. Then again, go to the personal experience of the apostle Paul,—how was he brought? was he brought by invitation? You know how he was brought. Go to the dry bones in Ezekiel's valley, when they were quickened into life what was one of their first feelings? Our bones are dried; we are poor, dry, dead things; and our hope is lost, and we are cut off for our parts. Well, but were you not invited? No, we were never invited; God came and said, "Hear ye the word of the Lord;" and made us hear, quickened us and brought us into life; therefore not unto us, but unto his name be all the glory.

The third way in which self-contradiction is created is by not distinguishing between that faith and repentance which are the duty of the creature, and that faith and repentance which Christ alone can give. In the 11th of Matthew, the Saviour upbraided the cities because they repented not. It was their duty to leave off their persecutions of him, to believe him,—not savingly, no, ten thousand times no; it was their duty to respect him, as it is the duty of every natural man to believe the Scriptures, to revere his Maker, and to fear him as far as he knows him. But then this faith and repentance, which are the faith and repentance of reformation, are one thing; this is the duty of the creature; but that faith and repentance which the Saviour gives are the faith and repentance of regeneration. I want you to distinguish between these two principles, between the repentance of the Ninevites and the repentance of the Jews, on the day of Pentecost,—to distinguish between the repentance that was given to Cornelius, and the repentance to which Simon Magus was exhorted; "Repent therefore of this, thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee." And Simon said, "Pray ye to the Lord for me,"—what for? That I may be saved? No; but "that none of these things which ye have spoken come upon me." Thus you will see there is a mighty difference between that faith and that repentance which are the duty of the creature, and that faith and repentance which are the gift of God, and accompany eternal salvation. You say perhaps, do you hold that unbelief is no sin? No, I never did hold that. I hold unbelief is sin. I hold it is the duty of every man to believe in the Scriptures. I believe the Scriptures bring sufficient evidence for every man not given up to a reprobate mind, to feel that they are the word of his Maker, and a disbelief of the Scriptures is sin. But a non-possession of saving faith is not sin. Let me try and prove this. Men hold that it is the duty of all men savingly to believe in Christ, and that for not doing that they will be damned. Let me bring that doctrine into the clear light, and then you will understand it. Do you think when the body is buried in the grave that it is sinful in that body not to rise from the dead? For if faith be not a duty, say they, unbelief is no sin. True, natural faith is a duty, and therefore infidel unbelief is a sin;—I hold that. But will you tell me that it is the duty of the corpse to rise from the dead? I suppose no one would hold that. This is a strong way of putting it, but the soul by nature is as dead spiritually as the corpse is literally. Again to refer to the 37th of Ezekiel, our spiritual state is represented by dry bones. Therefore there is no man that I am aware of that holds the doctrine that it is the duty of the corpse to rise from the dead; that any man holds the doctrine that is very sinful for that Mr. A., who was buried so long ago, to continue a corpse. Why does he not rise? It is his duty to raise himself from the dead, at least it is his duty to pray to God to raise him up; but if he never rise until the corpse begins to pray to be raised, when will he be raised? Will Jesus Christ

come by and by and raise him up, and say, Now if you had raised yourself up I should have taken you to heaven; but as you would continue in the grave I will damn you to eternity for not praying to me to raise you up. Well, say you, this is absurd to the last degree. Not the slightest more so than holding that it is the duty of the man dead in trespasses and in sins to rise from the dead. Most of our old Puritans I know held this doctrine;—they did not distinguish between the two principles—that which is the duty of man and that which is the gift of God. I therefore hold that it is no sin in the corpse to continue in the grave. It is there because of sin, I readily grant; but the corpse does not commit sin by continuing in the grave, and not raising itself from the dead; it is not the duty of the corpse to raise itself from the dead; nor can it be the duty of the man dead in trespasses and in sins to quicken his soul into eternal life, and to raise himself spiritually from the dead. Besides, to damn men for not putting themselves into possession of that that was never intended for them does appear to me to be a dreadfully absurd and wretched doctrine. Hence “the kingdom shall be given to them for whom it is prepared.” Thus you will see how these contradictions arise.

You will say, What harm do they do? I will just mention one evil that is caused by holding the doctrine of universal invitation, and by substituting the faith and repentance of reformation for the faith and repentance of regeneration, and by making it the duty of all men savingly to believe in Christ. The natural result is *false conversions*; they are converted morally, and the morality to which they conform gives them a peace of mind; and that natural peace of mind from their reformation they take to be the peace of God; and that liking which they have to religion they take to be the love of God; whereas the conversion is only mental, only moral, only natural; there is no thorough conviction of their depraved and lost condition, no groaning, being burdened, there is no longing after the true ransom that Christ has wrought. I consider this to be the chief evil of that system,—that it brings about a great many conversions, but alas, what are they? And, besides, this false system inspires the mind with enmity against the truth. So that if I should drop in, by accident it must be, I was going to say, and hear a minister that holds this doctrine of general invitation, and its being the duty of all men savingly to believe, I hope when I am there they will not bring the cup to me, for I shall not be able to drink out of it; if they bring their duty faith cup to me I might perhaps taste it, and say, Where did you get this from? Oh, I got it out of the gospel. Well, it tastes to me as though you got it out of the Dead Sea; it is very bituminous, very nasty; it does not accord at all with my cold water taste,—with what I have been drinking; I have been drinking of the river of water of life proceeding from the throne of God and the Lamb. Ah but, he says, sir, we are to love everybody, and here you see we hold universal love. Very well, we will have a word upon that. I believe at some of your great aldermanic feasts they, at some stage of the feast, bring round to the guests what is called the loving cup. Well, the last great aldermanic feast that I was honoured, I suppose, to use a civic term, to be at, of course I took nothing but cold water; and a gentleman that sat next to me said, “Well, sir, it is very strange you drink water; this is beautiful wine; but what will you do when the loving cup comes round?” Well, being rather green, I quietly asked what was meant by that? “Well,” he said, “this cup comes round, and no one refuses that, because it indicates we are all of one heart. What will you do then? You must take the loving cup.” Well, I thought to myself, I shall not though. I said, “I hope you will kindly pass it by me to my neighbour here if he likes it; but I have been drinking water, and I am married to the pump, and mean to keep to that.” By and by the cup came, and I did smell to it—didn’t like the smell of it at all, and didn’t think I should like the taste of it at all. So

if they were to bring their universal invitation cup to me and say, This is the loving cup,—yes, but then it is an error-loving cup, and not a true Christ-loving cup; it is a carnal-loving cup, and not a brotherly-loving cup; it is not that cup that will inspire me with love to God's truth, but rather with enmity against it. Most of our old Puritans, then, held this self-contradictory gospel, this loving cup,—loving everybody; but I will tell you what it did;—it made their heads run round, and made them see double, and the consequence was they preached two gospels;—they tell us first that the Lord calls by his grace, saves by his grace,—that it is all of grace from first to last; and then, seeing double, they presently come in and say, Oh, it is the duty of you all to rise from the dead, the duty of you all to come; God has invited you all, and you will be damned for not coming. Thus they saw double; whereas the Bible says, "When thine eye is single, thy whole body shall be full of light." So then, if I have the loving cup, let it be the cup of salvation; that will make me love God's truth, and love God, and the true saints of God; not the Ishmaelites, the Esaus, the bastards;—error will make you love those that are enemies to God, and hate those that are friends to God; whereas the truth received in its vitality will make you love the Lord, and love the people that he loves, and enable you to say with truth,

"There my best friends, my kindred dwell,
There God my Saviour reigns."

So then I believe that the Bible never contradicts itself, that the gospel never contradicts itself. I hope what I have said I have said in a right spirit; I must be decided and firm. I do not mean to say that men that hold the doctrine that it is the duty of all men savingly to believe, mean any harm; but it does appear to me to be a poison that we must refuse; I believe it intoxicates the brain of man, and does an infinity of harm, which perhaps none but God himself can fully comprehend or understand. What a difference between a mere moral conversion and a vital and saving conversion; what a difference between that faith and repentance which are the duty of the creature, and the faith and repentance which are the gift of the Most High; the one is the change of mere reformation, the other is a change from death to life, from the curse of the law to the blessing of the gospel.

The next part I meant to have noticed was *the final perseverance of the saints*; but time does not allow me to touch upon that; or else I had got the latter part of the 31st of Jeremiah, the 33rd of Jeremiah, and I don't know how many Scriptures, wherein we have assurance upon assurance that this covenant God will never forsake us. Let me just say a word in conclusion. Is his love everlasting? It is. Well then, will that love part with its object? Either God must cease to love, or else his love will not part with its object. He cannot cease to love, for it is everlasting love. "I have loved thee with an everlasting love." Then is election of grace or of works? Oh, say you, there is an election of grace. Very well, then, "the children not being yet born, having done neither good nor evil, that the purpose of God, according to election, might stand not of works, but of him that calleth." That stands permanent. Is the redemption of Christ everlasting? is the work of the Holy Spirit incorruptible? is the covenant immutable and infallible? is the promise yea and amen? For myself I do not know anything more clear than the certainty of our getting safe to the end; and I do not know anything so strengthening to the people of God. If you have this precious faith, and are thus united to him, he will not leave you, neither for your sins, nor your sorrows, nor circumstances, whatever they may be. A thousand things may stagger Job's friends, and they may turn round and heap upon him all sorts of accusations; and poor Job replies pretty eloquently;—"Ye are all forgers of lies, physicians of no value, miserable comforters, and there is not a wise man among you."