

SURREY TABERNACLE PULPIT.

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SAVING FAITH.

A Sermon

BY MR. JAMES WELLS.

PREACHED ON SUNDAY MORNING, 13TH MARCH, 1870.

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"Unto you therefore which believe he is precious."—1 Peter ii. 7.

THE apostle here speaks of Jesus Christ as a stone; therefore the first idea of the word "precious" here is, that Jesus Christ is a precious stone, that he is the pearl of great price, that he is of infinite value. And upon the latter part of our text I must not attempt to say much, because there is in the priceless value of the Saviour such a depth, and breadth, and height, and length, and weight, and infinity of worth, that one knows not what to say upon a truth so delightful; so that I must leave that part of the text in a great measure to speak for itself as we go along. And it is remarkable that whenever men have attempted to explain to us wherein the preciousness of Christ lies, to give us something like a correct view of the same, they have generally been very poor in so doing, in comparison of the subject itself. We have some good hymns in our book, and I do think one of the poorest is that which begins with saying,—

"Jesus is precious, saith the Word;
What comfort doth this truth afford!"

That is a very good hymn, but it is rather poor; it does not enter much into the deeps of this subject, and therefore I shall not attempt to do so either. If you take the word "precious" to mean that which is valuable, then where will you stop? If you take the word "precious" to mean endearment, then where will you stop? You meet, in connection with this, with the delightful testimony that God is love. And if we take it to be precious because of its lasting duration, in that, as in every other view, it does indeed surpass all that we can either ask or think. So that if I were to

attempt this morning to preach a sermon upon that part of the text, I suppose I should be like a good brother minister who said he preached five times in one day upon the latter part of this text, the preciousness of Christ, and made *nothing* of it; and that, I suppose, is what I should do if I trusted myself in such a deep.

So our discourse this morning will consist chiefly in describing what it is savingly to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. And then the other truth I am sure will be self-evident,—namely, “unto you which believe”—in the way we will try very carefully to describe—“he is precious.” Not but we may speak of the preciousness of Christ very largely indeed, for the Scriptures furnish us with a great many materials by which we can at least enter somewhat upon the bounds of this great subject of divine value, divine endearment, and lasting treasure, pleasure, joy, peace, and glory.

We notice, then, *true believers*,—“Unto you therefore which believe.” Everything turns upon this point;—if we are believers, then well with us; if we are not, then woe be unto us. But then there are so many forms of belief; how shall we distinguish the true from the false? This is a matter of vast and essential importance. I will therefore try to give a threefold representation of saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. First, the description given by the apostle Peter in connection with our text. He saith of Jesus Christ, “To whom coming as unto a living stone.” This appears to refer to the Israelites in the wilderness; when they were brought into a state of destitution, where it appeared to them that they must die of thirst, and water flowed from the rock; and they from two things—first, from the thirst they had; and secondly, from the knowledge of where the living waters were—came unto this rock, this living stone. “This rock,” the apostle saith, “was Christ;” so that we have the authority of divine inspiration to take a spiritual view of the same. Where there is true faith in Christ, there there will be a thirst for God. It was their thirst that brought them to the rock, connected with the fact that they knew where the living waters were flowing. It was not any external law, it was not any rule of duty, it was not any human persuasion; it was simply their thirst that brought them. Let us come down to our own consciences and feelings upon this matter. Can we look back at the time when we began to desire to be Christians, when we began to desire that the Lord would teach us and guide us in the good and right way; and when we thus began to desire to be Christians, and to desire to know the Lord? Did that desire increase until it came to what is described in a great many places in the word of God as a thirst for God? “My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God; when shall I come to appear before

God?" Nothing but believing from this internal experience will keep you firm in believing, because, if you are persuaded that certain things are your duty, and you follow them as a duty, some one may come and persuade you that not that course of things, but another course of things is your duty; and thus while you think one line of things to be your duty to-day, you may think another line of things entirely opposite to be your duty to-morrow. Hence the many theories we have of religion; and if you think it your duty to be after the Calvinistic order to-day, you may think it your duty to be after the Wesleyan order to-morrow; and then after some other order. Thus what uncertainty there is in a mere duty religion! But when you come into a conviction of your lost and ruined condition, what will be your feeling? Just as the Israelite saw and felt, and had not a single shadow of a doubt, but was as sure as he was of his existence, that if the Lord did not interpose and give them water to drink they certainly must perish,—let this be expressive of your spiritual experience; for where there is this you are brought to feel and know that without that mercy that flows by the Rock, Christ Jesus (and ever remember that the rock carries with it the idea not only of stability, but of perfection; "he is a Rock, and his work is perfect") you are as convinced as you are of your own existence that without that mercy of God that comes by the perfect work of Christ, without that grace of God that comes by the perfect work of Christ, without that promise of God that comes by the perfect work of Christ, and without the power of the Spirit of God to pour water upon him that is thirsty and floods upon the dry ground,—that without this you shall as surely be lost as that you exist. Are you got thus far? Are we all got thus far? If we have not yet drunk of the river of God's pleasures, if we have not yet been favoured to realize the fulfilment of that scripture, "I will satiate the weary soul, I will replenish every sorrowful soul, and the soul shall be as a watered garden, whose waters fail not;" and again, "The water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life,"—if we are not brought thus far, do we know what I have described? If so, it is not a mere duty concern; your own experience tells you it must be by grace, it must be by the perfect work of Christ; but it is not by human might, for you have none, or by human power, for you have none, "but by my Spirit, saith the Lord." Now unto you, then, which thus believe from a sight and sense of need, from a full assurance that you must perish without that mercy that comes by the Rock of Ages, the perfect work of the Lord Jesus Christ,—unto you that believe, as this rock, sending forth the living waters to the thirsty and perishing Israelite, was precious naturally and temporally so the Lord Jesus Christ in your estimation will be precious; and

you will find out you can need no mercy, no blessing, which is not treasured up in Christ Jesus the Lord. Let us hear the Holy Scriptures to encourage us ; for the whole drift of our discourse this morning, while it will insist upon vital godliness, will nevertheless, I hope, be as encouraging to you as it has been in secret to me before a heart-searching God. "When the poor and needy seek water," and they say, Oh, there is none in the sermon, none in the Bible, none in Christ, none in God, that I can get at; well, but there is the Lord's word;—"When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue faileth for thirst, I the Lord will hear them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them. I will open rivers in high places, and fountains in the midst of the valleys." The rock shall send them forth these living waters. Thus, then, if thou art athirst, if thou hast the thirst. As I just now said, the Israelite came from two feelings ; first, his thirst, and secondly, from a knowledge of the rock sending forth these living waters. The Saviour bears upon this very point when he saith, "If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is,"—ah, "who it is;"—why, those words must endear him to you ;—"who it is;"—ah, the sinner's almighty, eternal, and immutable Friend, who came into the world after poor sinners. "If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith unto thee, Give me to drink, thou wouldest have asked of him, and he would have given thee,"—he would not have made any objection to *thee*. You are saying to me, the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans ; but I should not have said to you that a Saviour hath no dealings with sinners ; for he hath dealings with none others. "Thou wouldest have asked him, and he would have given thee living water, which should be in thee a well of water springing up into everlasting life." Here, then, is coming to this living stone, from a consciousness of need, a thirst, and a knowledge of Christ Jesus in his stability and the perfection of his work. "To whom coming as unto a living stone." Now that is real faith, because it is vital. You do not believe as a duty, you believe as a living principle ; you believe because God himself has wrought this conviction in you, to make you know your need, and to thirst for free grace waters, new covenant waters, according to the scripture, "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money ; come ye, buy, and eat ; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price." And I know what you are thirsting for, and so "incline your ear, and come unto me ; hear, and your soul shall live ; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David." "Unto you which believe." No believing short of this will stand. How do you know whether you are right or wrong if you believe anything upon hearsay ? But if you are conscious in your

own soul of your need of Christ, and see that by the word of the Lord all the blessings are by him, it is not hearsay. If every other professor of the truth under the heavens were to turn away from it, that would not turn you away if you have this experience. Men may beat you to atoms with argument; you may be brought perhaps into connection with some sophistical, clever, highly intellectual man, and he may use a great many sophistries, and you cannot argue so as to maintain your ground; but you can maintain your ground as one of old did against men of learning, intellect, and acquirements,—Well, gentlemen, I cannot meet your arguments, but this I can say; once I was blind, and now I see—you can't beat me out of that. And so the Christian says, Once I did not feel my need, but now I do—you can't beat me out of that; once I did not see the perfect work of Christ, and the mercy of God by him; but I do see it now,—you cannot beat me out of that. This is the way that the Lord causeth “the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, and the weak things to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are, that no flesh should glory in his presence;” but that “he that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.” It is as much the work of God to begin and carry on the work of faith in the soul of a sinner as it was the work of God to create the world; and so the apostle would give us to understand when he speaks of the enemy blinding the minds of men:—“But God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined.” By the same fiat he said, “Let there be light, and there was light;” or as some like to read it, “Let light be, and light was;” and so he said concerning thy soul, “Let there be light, and light was;”—he commanded the light to shine into our hearts, to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in Christ Jesus, “where the waters freely flow.” Here is faith, here is the work of the blessed God. Our faith stands in the power of God, as to the origin of it, as to the strength of it, as to the objects of it, as to the achievements of it, and as to the final triumph;—it is all of God from first to last; or else why is it called the faith of God's elect, the faith of the operation of God? why is it declared that “by grace ye are saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God”? The Lord help us to look into this matter. Unto you that thus believe, I am sure—taking the idea of value—Christ is precious; he is in your estimation of infinite and eternal value; and that goes on, of course, into endearment. The Israelites, then, came to the rock because they thirsted. Ah, it is a nice thing for you to go to the house of God and say, Well, I do hope I shall get something this morning; I do

hope I shall get something this evening ; I do hope the Lord will speak a word to my poor beclouded, benumbed, weak, miserable mind and heart ; I do hope I shall see Jesus ; I do hope I shall be able to drink in a little of his spirit and his love. Ah, if you have those convictions and feelings and desires, you are not dead in sins.

“Those feeble desires, and wishes so weak,
’Tis Jesus inspires, and bids you still seek ;”

and he will be found in his own time.

We will now go to another item of faith. “Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house.” Here the simile is changed ; the stone is retained, but the position altered. Just now he was the rock, sending forth living waters ; now he becomes the foundation upon which the people of God are to build. “Behold, I lay in Zion a stone ;” there is the stability ; “a tried stone ;” and no person under the heavens was ever tried as the dear Redeemer was. In all his trials did he ever show one symptom of weakness, so as to sink ? Never. How impregnable did he prove to be ! how sound in all parts ! He was a tried stone. The Old Testament saints had to look for eternal salvation by him that had not yet been actually tried. He had not yet been actually tried as to whether he could or would magnify the law or not ; he had not yet been actually tried as to whether he could bear the sins of countless millions of sinners, put those sins away, rise triumphant from the dead, and ascend to heaven. But the time came, and he was tried, and came off more than conqueror. “A precious corner stone, a sure foundation ;”—there is a certainty about it. But the point we want is the building upon it. What is meant by digging deep, and building your house upon the rock ? It is this,—that all of us, until divinely taught and severely tried, have some false confidence or another, and we are pretty sure to build upon this foundation by our duties, our morality, soundness of moral character ; various materials men use, and they seem pretty good in their eyes ; and we are damned almost to eternity if we have not something perfectly solid and sound of our own with which to build. That is their way of looking at it. The dear Saviour tells us to build a tower, and then directly saith, “Except a man forsake all that he hath, he cannot build.” What do you think of that ? You are to build, and yet you are to forsake everything you have, or else you cannot build ; you are to build a tower, and yet unless you leave everything you cannot build. Isaiah understood this secret ; we will take his account, and see what it is to build aright upon this foundation. The Lord saith, by Isaiah, “Judgment also will I lay to the line, and righteousness to the

plummet." If you asked Saul of Tarsus the meaning of that, he would tell you the line and plummet there mean the law of God; and when the Lord came to try Saul of Tarsus by the righteous law of God, and the Lord let the plummet have its proper swing, so as to show whether the work was upright, Saul found out he was as crooked as sin could make him, as Satan could make him, and as far from being right as the devil himself. What do you think of it now, Saul? how is it you have deluded yourself so long? The Lord says, "I will lay righteousness to the plummet," and let the plummet have its proper swing. But Saul laid hold of the plummet, and pushed it, as it were, against the wall, and made it appear straight;—as some of you clever builders, if I were to come to you and say, Is that building really upright? you take the plummet and push it against the wall:—There, sir, it is quite upright. Perhaps I should not have sense enough to see that if the plummet had its proper swing, it would demonstrate that your building was crooked; but I am only a poor parson, and know nothing about it. I come back a few days afterwards, and this building that you pretended to be upright has all tumbled down: you did not put it to the proper test of the plummet: it was crooked, and would not stand. The Lord will have none of that; he will let the law take its natural bearing; and when the law with a poor sinner takes its proper bearing, he finds out that, like the tower of Pisa, he is leaning on one side with a vengeance. Ah, he will say, it may well be said that God made man originally upright, but he has sought out many inventions; I am crooked in life, in conscience, in soul, in everything: I cannot stand thus. "And the hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies." Human merit is a lie; free-will is a lie; Puseyism is a lie; Catholicism is a lie; all creature goodness, holiness, and pretension, are lies; God will sweep the whole away, and leave you with nothing of your own to build with, and the waters of soul-trouble shall overflow the false hiding-place. If you build with the best of your duties, and morality, it will prove to be but hay, wood, straw, and stubble. What am I to build with, then? Nothing but faith,—you are simply to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. That is Isaiah's plan; for he saith, "Whosoever believeth in him shall not make haste." You must forsake all you have, all your own righteousness and strength and wisdom, and have nothing left, but simply a poor sinner, believing in Christ, resting upon Christ, upon this foundation, by the promise of the blessed God; your convictions must be deep enough to destroy all fleshly confidence. That is digging deep. You build simply by faith;—believing on him as the stone—there is the stability: the tried stone, the precious corner-stone, the sure founda-

tion. Here, then, all false confidence is swept away : believe what God saith concerning him ; and by faith in the promise of God build upon him. You must forsake all you have. See the difference between the way in which men would lead us to build and the way in which the Holy Ghost teacheth us. “ He that believeth on him shall not make haste.” Everybody who understands different languages understands how difficult it is sometimes to translate a word into another language, and to give the precise meaning of the original. Our translators have given the word there, “ shall not make haste.” It appeared to them to be the best word they could use. One idea there intended is this,—he that believeth on him shall not be put to flight ; because when people are put to flight they make haste and run away. He that believeth on him shall not be put to flight. They will not be able to frighten you away from this refuge, away from God’s truth ;—they will not be able to put you to flight. You may instrumentally put ten thousand to flight, but you shall never be put to flight. When the Roman proconsul said to Cyprian, “ I will banish you,” he replied,—“ You cannot banish me ; you cannot put me to flight.” Put me wherever you may, God is there, and where he is, I am at home ; and he will take care of me. As though Cyprian had said, Even if you could put me into hell, God is there, and would have me out again. If you cast me into the fire, he can quench the violence of fire, as he did with the three worthies ; those that cast me in should feel the fires of hell ; while, as did the three worthies, I should come out of the fire unhurt, not so much as a hair of my head singed. He that believeth shall not be put to flight :—it is a blessed truth. You must, then, forsake all you have in order to build upon him. Ah, but your house will not stand, say they, unless you have this, and that, and the other of creature duties. I am very glad, in accordance with my discourse lately upon the words, “ Absent from the body, present with the Lord,” that the Old Testament saints got to heaven when they did ; for if they were on earth now, and had to go there, they would stand a very poor chance with the gospels of the day. Says one, I have no materials I can trust in ; and so another. Well, what do you say, David ? “ He hath made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and sure.” What about your duties ? Oh, my duties lie in another department altogether. “ This covenant is all my salvation.” Don’t your doings form any part of it whatever ? No, “ this is all my salvation.” Wouldn’t you like to have something of your own ? Not from a thread to a shoe-latchet ; “ this is all my desire.” Well, but suppose you don’t enjoy it, and it does not flourish ? What signifies that ? it is there all the same. And so David died full of days, not full of nights ; full of riches, not of poverty ; full of honour, not of dis-

honour,—he lost all his dishonour by this wondrous Person. “Unto you which believe he is precious.” To dig deep, then, is to go down beneath nature’s confidences altogether. Hence, “the hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies; and the waters shall overflow the hiding-place.” The Lord will cause the waters of tribulation to overwhelm the false hiding-place, so that you shall say, not as a matter of mere form, but of practical reality,—

“Other refuge have I none,
Hangs my helpless soul on thee.”

Here, then, is coming to Christ from necessity, and here are the lively stones, built upon Christ as the foundation; these are a spiritual house. But if creature doings are to form a part of the cement or the building, how can it be a spiritual house? We are blessed with all spiritual blessings in Christ Jesus. It is by life, and light, and faith, that we build upon this foundation, and who can move that man? The rains may descend, what of that? They won’t make you run away from Christ; you have nowhere else to build; “to whom shall we go?” The floods may rise;—never mind, “the Lord’s voice is upon the waters,” the Lord on high is mightier than the mighty waves of the sea;—the floods will not move you. The winds may blow;—is not that David moved yet? no. Is not that Paul moved yet? no;—“none of these things move me.” I am sure the rains descended upon him pretty heavily; and the floods rose around him pretty heavily; and the winds blew from all quarters upon him pretty heavily, “but,” saith the apostle, “none of these things move me;” he was founded upon a rock. By the grace of God I am where I am, and what I am. “Unto you which believe he is precious,” as the living stone, as the sure foundation God has laid in Zion.

And to show that I am perfectly in order, in the 4th of Zechariah you get the plummet again in the hands of Zerubbabel. And as the Lord tries a man by the law, and proves he is crooked, he will try the Christian by the line of gospel truth, by the plummet of the gospel; and the building that Christ shall build shall indeed be upright. But look at the character of the building. “The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house; his hands shall also finish it;” “and he shall bring forth the headstone thereof with shoutings,” of human duty, and human effort unto it? no!—“Grace, grace unto it.” It does not matter what there is in the way;—“who art thou, O great mountain? before Zerubbabel thou shalt become a plain.”

Let us notice the next representation the apostle gives us of this faith. “An holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.” The holy priesthood goes before the

not to devils, not to fallen angels, but unto man. "Unto you, O men, I call, and my voice is unto the sons of men; and my delights," saith Wisdom, "were with the sons of men." "He passed by the nature of angels, and took upon him the seed of Abraham." He did not take the nature of fallen angels, or unfallen angels, but he hath taken upon him human nature, soul of our soul and body of our body;—Immanuel, God with us. We ought not, therefore, to tremble with black despair, because the voice is unto man, came unto men; God became man,—a great mystery! God manifest in the flesh; "and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten Son of the Father." It was not in the angelic nor lower world, it was in this world that Christ was born, because he came to save men; you must not despair. It was in this world that he obeyed and magnified God's law; you must not despair. It was in this world that he died, and put away sin, to bring us to God; you must not despair. It was in this world that he rose from the dead; his sacred body was not translated from the tomb to some other world, in order to be reanimated and raised from the dead, but he rose from the dead there and then,—it was in this world he rose from the dead, it was in this world he gave the mission, "Go and preach the gospel to every creature; he that believeth shall be saved." It was from this world that he ascended up on high; it was unto this world that he sent his Holy Spirit; it was men that he sent out with the glorious tidings of the gospel of God. Ah, then, the voice of God is to man, "My delights are with the sons of men,"—infinite and eternal delights God takes in men. Ah, this is wonderful, but so it is,

"That worms of earth should ever be,
One with Incarnate Deity."

That is one reason, then, while you thus tremble and fear, why you must not despair as Satan does; for the voice of mercy is not to him, but to man. The second reason why you must not despair is because the mercy of God is to sinners. Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners; he hath saved sinners, and he saves them in that free, sovereign, and glorious way that he would not even name their sins to them were it not just to show they are forgiven—that is all; and in some cases you have him saving sinners without making the slightest reference to their sins. Look at the thief on the cross;—did the Saviour say a word about his sins? "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom." We all know what the Lord might have said, and we all know what he did say. "This day"—not a word about his sins; why not? because Christ was putting them away—"shalt thou be with me in paradise." So you must not despair. I need not remind you of the Old Testament. Why, when the Lord appeared to Isaiah, in his 6th chapter, he would not

have named Isaiah's sins only just to show they were forgiven. "Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged." He would not have named his sins to Joshua if it had not been to show they were forgiven;—"I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee." And did the father throw out the lest hint to the prodigal of his sin? The father said, "This thy brother was dead, and is alive again." Is that all you have got against him? Yes. "He was lost, and is found." Is that all you have against him? Yes. "It was meet, therefore, that we should make merry." What! over a wretch like that? Yes. The prodigal is the very man that would be merry too; he did not dream of such mercy, such favour, such acceptance;—I venture to say, if it were possible, he would be the merriest of them all. Ah, the language of every saved soul is—

"Mine, of all the saved by grace,
Was the most dreadful, desperate case."

Nor would the Saviour have mentioned the sins of the woman at his feet were it not for two reasons: first, to show that he forgives the greatest of sinners; and secondly, to show that her sins were forgiven. The Saviour and the poor sinner were very well till old Simon came in;—those Pharisees, what mischief-makers they are! "If this man were a prophet," "Ah!" says the woman, "you want to persuade me he is not a good man even; and I know he is God as well as man." And then he wanted to persuade the Saviour of the badness of this woman's character:—"This woman is a sinner." And you know what the Saviour saith upon the difference of conduct of the two. "I entered thine house, and thou gavest me no kiss;"—No; I am a duty man, don't like so much of your love;—"and no water for my feet, no oil for my head;"—hardly the common courtesies. No; as though Simon should say, "I have heard that thou art a very high doctrine man, and I was rather shy of thee; now I am confirmed." "But," saith the Saviour, "this woman hath not ceased to kiss my feet, to wash them with her tears, and wipe them with the hairs of her head, and anoint them with costly ointment." I say unto thee, after these expressions of love to me, whatever she has been, if she has been a devil of devils, "I say unto thee that her sins, which are many"—I know how many they are, and that is more than she knows, for she could not number them; and it is more than you know, Simon; and from what little you know of her you think she is too bad to be saved;—"I say unto thee, her sins, which are many, are forgiven her;" and he turned to the woman, and said unto her, "Thy sins are forgiven thee." And again, "Thy *faith* hath saved thee, go in peace." You must not despair; his voice is unto the sons of men, and he hath saved, and doth and will save sinners.