

God, Man and Salvation

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IN THE last two of these talks I have spoken to you about the progress of Christian doctrine in the church; and just at the close of the talk of last Sunday afternoon, I was saying that that progress may be said to have been brought to some sort of conclusion in that great creed which consists of the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms. It is indeed perfectly conceivable that the Christian church in the future may be able to set forth, here and there, with even greater precision and fullness than is done in that creed, the teaching of the Word of God; but such future advance will hardly be comparable to that which came, for example, at the time of the great early creeds or of Augustine or of the Reformation. The general outlines of the whole Biblical system of doctrine have already, in that great creed, been set forth.

Let no one say that recognition of that fact brings with it a static condition of the human mind or is inimical to human progress. On the contrary, it removes the shackles from the human mind and opens up untold avenues of progress.

The truth is that there can be no real progress unless there is something that is fixed. Archimedes said, "Give me a place to stand, and I will move the world." Well, Christian doctrine provides that place to stand. It sets forth what God has told us in His Word about God Himself, about man and about salvation. Grounding our lives upon the solid foundation of that knowledge, we can go forward to wonderful adventures both in the world of action and in the world of thought.

Indeed, it may fairly be said that the very idea of progress implies something that is fixed. There is no progress in a kaleidoscope.

For lack of taking something to be fixed, all the boasted progress of our modern age has turned out to be an illusion. The Bible, at the beginning of that modern age, or in the course of it, was very largely given up. Nothing, it was supposed, was to be

regarded as settled. All truth was to be regarded as relative.

Well, what has been the result? I will tell you. An unparalleled decadence—liberty prostrate, slavery stalking almost unchecked through the earth, the achievements of centuries crumbling in the dust, sweetness and decency despised, dignity gone in the affairs of individuals and of nations, all meaning apparently taken away from human life!

If that is the result, what is the remedy? I will give you the answer to that question also. The remedy is a return to God's Word!

We had science for the sake of science and got the World War; we had art for art's sake and got ugliness gone mad; we had man for the sake of man and got a world of robots—men made into machines. Is it not time for us to come to ourselves, like the prodigal in the far country? Is it not time for us to seek real progress by a return to the living God?

Yes, my friends, I think it is; and to that end I am giving these talks. I am not presenting my own opinions. I am not giving you the benefit of my experience regarding the art of being religious. Anything more futile than either of those efforts on my part it would be difficult to imagine. But I am just trying to study the Bible with you to see if we can fix in our minds and hearts, a little better than we have done before, an outline of what God has told us there in His holy Word.

Let us now recall, in a word or two, that part of the outline of Biblical teaching which has been covered, in some slight measure, in the talks which we gave during the past two winters. Then we shall proceed to the subjects that remain, with a better understanding of their place in the total system of doctrine that the Bible contains.

First we spoke of the Bible itself, the Book in which the subject matter of all Christian doctrine is found.

Is there a God, we asked, and if so may He be truly known? Yes, we said, there is a God and we know

something of Him because He has been pleased to reveal Himself to us.

He has revealed Himself, in the first place, through nature and through His voice within us, the voice of conscience. These two constitute what is called general revelation. They afford real knowledge of God, and the man who does not receive that knowledge is without excuse. But men's eyes, alas, are blinded by sin. Therefore they are prevented from seeing that which they ought to see.

In order that sinners who are thus blinded may see and be saved, God has revealed Himself also in a way that is quite distinct from that general revelation. That general revelation is a revelation through nature. This other revelation, called "special revelation," is a revelation that is above nature; it is "supernatural."

There are two reasons why such supernatural revelation was necessary if sinners were to be saved. In the first place, as we have just said, though nature reveals God, man's eyes were blinded by sin. Therefore they needed to have confirmed in supernatural revelation even those things about God which they ought already to have learned from nature.

In the second place, as sinners they needed to know certain other things about God of which nature told nothing. They needed to know the way in which God was graciously pleased to show mercy to sinners and bring them again into communion with Himself. Of that, nature contained no slightest hint. That was made known by supernatural revelation and supernatural revelation alone.

Together with that supernatural revelation went a supernatural act—the gracious act of God by which He redeemed sinners through the gift of His own Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. God wrought salvation not through the course of nature but in supernatural fashion, and He explained the meaning of His saving work in a revelation that was as supernatural as was the work which it explained.

The record of that supernatural work of salvation and of that super-

natural revelation by which it is explained is found in the Bible. But it is a mistake to say merely that the Bible contains a record of supernatural revelation. No, it *is* supernatural revelation in all its parts. It does not merely contain the Word of God, but it *is* the Word of God.

It is the Word of God because of the inspiration of the Biblical writers. In addition to all their providential preparation for their task of writing the books of the Bible, the Biblical writers received a blessed and wonderful and supernatural guidance and impulsion by the Spirit of God, so that they were preserved from the errors that appear in other books, and thus the resulting book, the Bible, is in all its parts completely true in what it says regarding matters of fact and completely authoritative in its commands. That is the great basic doctrine of the full or "plenary" inspiration of the Bible.

That doctrine does not mean that the Biblical writers did not follow their own individual habits of style. On the contrary, it recognizes the individuality of the writers to the full.

It does not mean, in the second place, that the Biblical writers did not use ordinary methods of obtaining information—their own memory, the reports of eyewitnesses, and the like. On the contrary, they certainly did use such ordinary methods of obtaining information, and it is very important to insist on that fact. Even before a man believes in the plenary inspiration of the Bible he ought, if he is a good historian, to recognize the substantial trustworthiness of the history that the Bible contains.

But the point is that even when the Biblical writers were recounting the simplest matters of fact, about which they obtained information in the most ordinary ways, they were supernaturally preserved from error. Therefore even in those narrative parts of the Bible, although things are told there which could have been discovered and were discovered in natural and ordinary ways, yet the record of these things obtains in the Bible a supernatural certification that makes even such simple narrative parts of the Bible to be truly a part of God's Word.

Thus all the Bible is God's Word. Not only does the Bible contain a vast wealth of things that could never have been learned at all without supernatural revelation, but also even the

things in it which could have been learned without supernatural revelation are certified to us by the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit in keeping the writers from error.

Having thus established the fact that the Bible as a whole is the Word of God, we opened the Bible to discover what God has told us in His holy Book. If the Bible is the Word of God, we are supremely interested in the question of what the Bible says.

Theologians are accustomed to divide what the Bible says into three divisions—first, what the Bible says about God; second, what the Bible says about man; and, third, what the Bible says about salvation. If you take up some great work on theology you are apt to find that it will be in three volumes. The first will be headed "Theology," meaning theology proper, as distinguished from theology in the broader sense. Theology means "the doctrine of God." The second volume will be headed "Anthropology." That is a long word to designate "the doctrine of man." The third volume will be headed "Soteriology." That is another long word for "the doctrine of salvation."

Of these three divisions we have covered—of course, only in a summary and inadequate kind of way—the first two, and we have made a beginning on the third.

Two years ago I spoke about what the Bible says regarding God. I tried to present to you the Biblical teaching about the Trinity, including of course the great doctrine of the deity of Christ. That part, together with the preceding treatment of the inspiration of the Bible, has appeared in book form under the title, "The Christian Faith in the Modern World."¹

Then, during last winter, I spoke to you about what the Bible says regarding man. I tried to present to you especially the Biblical doctrine of sin.

Finally, last spring, I made a beginning of presenting what the Bible says about the third of these three great subjects, the subject of salvation. That is the subject that I want to treat further in the part of our series of talks in which we are now engaged.

But before we can treat intelligently the subject of salvation it is essential that we should recall to our minds what it is from which men are saved. The Biblical doctrine of salva-

¹The Macmillan Company, New York, N. Y., 1936, \$2.00.

tion is completely unintelligible unless we first understand the Biblical doctrine of sin.

That is where so many treatments of salvation go wrong today. They present a gospel which would be splendid for good people, but which is utterly futile if sin is what the Bible says it is, and if all men are, as the Bible says to be the case, under sin's guilt and power. If sin is what the Bible says it is and if we are lost in sin, we need a very different doctrine of salvation—we need, in other words, a very different gospel from that which is commonly preached in the church today.

According to the Bible, Adam was created in knowledge, righteousness and holiness. When he was created, God entered into a covenant of life with him upon condition of perfect obedience. In other words, he was placed on probation. If he had stood the probation successfully, if he had obeyed, the reward would have been eternal life. The possibility of his sinning would have been removed. He would have been not only righteous—as he was already from the beginning—but his righteousness would have become assured forever.

But he did not stand the test successfully. He transgressed the commandment of God. He fell, and by his fall he came into an estate of sin and misery.

Now that covenant of life had been made with Adam not only for himself but also for his posterity. He had been, by divine appointment, the representative of the whole human race. If he had obeyed God, all men without exception would have had eternal life. The very possibility of sinning would forever have been removed for the whole human race. What a glorious result! But, alas, he fell, and since he was, by divine appointment, the representative of all, all men sinned in him and fell with him in his first transgression. All, therefore, came into that dreadful estate of sin and misery into which he came.

Thus all men became guilty; all men are under God's wrath and curse even before they individually have done anything either good or bad. All men, moreover, are utterly corrupt, for such corruption is part of the dreadful penalty of sin. All men are totally unable to do anything that can please God; and all men, so soon as they come to years of discretion, show the inevitable fruits of this inborn corrup-

tion by individual acts of sin beyond number.

Such is the sinfulness of that estate into which all mankind fell through Adam's first transgression. But that estate is also an estate of misery. "All mankind, by that fall, lost communion with God, are under his wrath and curse, and so made liable to all the miseries of this life, to death itself, and to the pains of hell for ever."

How dreadful was the state of fallen man! But God did not leave all mankind to perish in the estate of sin and misery. From all eternity, in His eternal plan, He had chosen some for eternal life, and those whom He had thus chosen, He saved.

At that point men are prone to interpose a question. Why did not God predestine all to eternal life; why does He not save all? Why did He predestine only *some* to eternal life; why does He save only *some*?

Ah, what a difficult question that is, is it not? Whatever the right answer to it may be, one answer must plainly be rejected. The reason why God elected only *some* was certainly not that He foresaw any greater merit in those whom He elected than in those whom He did not elect. If the Bible makes anything clear at all, it makes that clear. His decree that *some* should be saved was not a matter of merit, either absolute or relative; it was a pure matter of grace.

The truth is that the question we are prone to raise about this matter is not the question that we really ought to raise. We ask why any men are lost; what we should ask, if we only looked at the matter from the Bible's point of view, is why any are saved? That is the real cause for wonder. All men, without any exception whatever, deserved to perish in their sins; justice demanded that all should die eternally. How marvellous it is, therefore, that a vast multitude are saved! We can never explain how that could be. As we contemplate it, we can only say that it is a manifestation of utterly mysterious grace.

When God had thus determined, in His mysterious grace, to save certain sinners deserving of His wrath and curse, He carried out His plan of salvation for them with sovereign power. What He did was not to make it possible for them to save themselves. No, He did far more than that. He saved them. He saved them with completely irresistible power. Every step leading to the salvation of God's elect has



Light on Prophecy

A SERIES of addresses on the importance of prophecy for today are being delivered over radio station WIBG (970 kilocycles), Glenside, Penna., on The Presbyterian Hour each Monday at 8.15 A.M. The speaker is the Rev. Professor Edward J. Young of Westminster Theological Seminary.

All who live in the vicinity of Philadelphia are urged to listen to this unusual series of studies in prophecy.



been carried out in accordance with His eternal plan. That is the central thing that we want to make clear in our whole treatment of the Biblical doctrine of salvation. Let me repeat it, and if by mere repetition I could impress it forever on your minds and hearts, I should love to repeat it a hundred times. God, I say, by His saving work *did not make it possible for sinners to save themselves; He saved them.*

That does not mean that God has ever saved anyone against his will. Far from it. What He has actually done is to change the will of those whom He saves. He has very sweetly and yet with sovereign power persuaded and enabled them to lay hold upon Jesus Christ in saving faith for the salvation of their souls. Never is a man so gloriously free as he is when the Holy Spirit, with resistless grace, works faith in him and unites him to Christ in a truly effectual calling.

There is another thing, also, which that great central doctrine of God's mysterious grace does not mean. It does not mean that any man who wants to receive Jesus Christ is re-

jected. It does not mean that any man in this life must look longingly into the warmth and joy of the household of God and say to himself, "That belongs to God's elect, but the door is shut for me, and I cannot enter in." No, indeed, thank God, it does not mean that.

The time will come, indeed, when the door will be shut, as our Lord taught in that solemn parable of the Ten Virgins; but that time has not yet come in this life. No, the door is yet open wide for all who will to come in. None is excluded. Whosoever will may come.

How broad is that gospel invitation, and what a privilege to let it ring out over all the earth! What a privilege it is to me to say this afternoon, to every man or woman or child within the sound of my voice—to say, moreover, not with any human authority, but as an ambassador of Jesus Christ—that if any one of you has not received Jesus as your Saviour you may do so at this very moment and will be received into the household of faith amid the rejoicing of the angels above. If you do receive Jesus as your Saviour, you show thereby that from all eternity you have been among the elect of God. No man comes to Jesus unless the Father draws him, and the Father draws those whom, in His eternal counsel, He has given to the Son.

As I give the gospel invitation, and give it to all without exception, I rejoice greatly in believing that acceptance of it on the part of any of you is in accordance with God's eternal plan. I rejoice greatly in believing that, despite the grip which unbelief and indifference have upon so many today, a grip that looks as though it could not be broken, God has much people in the world—much people who are to be saved in accordance with the counsel of His will. I rejoice greatly in believing that we preachers of the gospel are merely God's instruments in carrying out God's plan. I rejoice greatly that we have the inestimable privilege of seeking out God's scattered people and of bringing to them the gospel message through which it is God's will that they shall be saved. God grant that some of you within the sound of my voice today may receive the message and may show thereby that from all eternity you have been foreordained unto adoption as God's children through Jesus Christ our Lord.