

“Redemption in Christ,” in J.W. McGarvey, *Sermons delivered in Louisville, Kentucky* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Company, no date), first published 1894. Original edition pages 28-38, later editions pages 44-55.

A sermon delivered by J.W. McGarvey at the Broadway Christian Church, Lexington, KY, 11 June 1893.

This sermon was preceded by sermons on “Sin and its Punishment” and “Sin and its Punishment: Objections Considered.” McGarvey now considers the atonement by discussing these three questions: 1. How did God pardon sin without minimizing its seriousness? 2. How did Christ's death on the cross bring about that pardon? 3. What is the practical result for our lives?

Redemption in Christ

"In whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace; wherein He hath abounded toward us in all wisdom and prudence."--EPH. I: 7, 8.

ANNOUNCED, last Lord's day, that in continuation of the connected series of discourses, my subject this morning would be Redemption from Sin, in Christ Jesus.

As sins are acts performed in the past, they cannot be undone. A man may as well attempt to snatch the sun out of the sky, as to undo a single act, good or bad, that he has ever done. And, inasmuch as suffering is the inevitable consequence of sin, it is a most serious question how it is possible for men ever to escape the penalty due to their sins. I presume that this is the most serious problem ever considered by the minds of created beings, and perhaps by the mind of God, if God stops to consider any question.

Men commit crimes against human law, and escape the punishment by outrunning the sheriff, by bribing the jury, by breaking jail; by a great variety of corrupt methods which they employ. But there is no similar way of escaping the penalties that are assessed against our sins by God. We cannot run away from Him. A part of that penalty is within our souls, and we can not run away from ourselves. We cannot deceive anybody in this matter, because the eye of Him against whom we have sinned searches us through and through. Death is a very swift messenger when he starts after us, and when God calls on the Great Day we shall all appear before Him in judgment. How then can we escape that eternal penalty for our sins, which was the subject of the two discourses last Lord's day.

Some men give very flippant and shallow answers to these questions. Why, they say, God educates us out of sin; brings to bear moralizing and elevating influences upon us through the Gospel, by which we are educated into a better and higher life, and learn to live without sin. There is no doubt that the Gospel exercises a training and educating and elevating influence upon all who are subject to it. But, suppose it were true that it educates a man entirely out of his sins, so that he lives the rest of his life pure; what has become of those sins? They are there yet, written against him. What has become of the stains of guilt within his soul, caused by those sins? They are there. And what has become of the penalty that God has pronounced against sin?

Yonder it is, still waiting for us. If a man has been a thief through ten or fifteen years of his life, and under good influence is educated out of stealing, when the grand jury gets evidence of some of those thefts, will they spare him because he has quit stealing? If a man has murdered two or three men, ten or fifteen years ago, but has now quit killing people, when the evidence of those murders come to light, will the laws of the land allow him to escape the penalty because he has not killed anybody recently? To ask these questions is to answer them, and to answer them in the affirmative would be a shock to the moral sensibilities of every human being. Well, how then must it be, in the infinite, just, and righteous judgment of God? If a man is educated out of his sins, they are there still written against him, and there is the eternal penalty still awaiting him.

Other men answer this question flippantly, by saying, Well, God can forgive our sins unconditionally, just as a father forgives his children; just as the father of the prodigal son, when he saw the boy coming home, ran out to meet him, and did not want even to hear the speech he had to make, in which he confessed himself unfit to be called a son, and wanted to be a hired servant. He forgave him at once; and why cannot God do the same without any conditions at all? A man asked me that once, and I responded "Yes, the prodigal son's father did forgive him, but it created a disturbance and a strife in his own family. His own elder son could not see that it was right. He blamed his father for it to his face. That elder son acted an ugly part, but who can say that he was censurable for thinking that the father had been too lenient to the boy who had wasted his substance in riotous living and in all kinds of iniquity, and over whose return he was now having a rejoicing in the house?" If God were to act thus, and have a large portion of His subjects rebelling against Him in the way that this older son rebelled against his father, what confusion there would be in His government.

One of the most serious things in any government is the question of pardon. How many times have you, who are older people in this audience, known the governor of our State to pardon a man out of the penitentiary, or to pardon a murderer condemned to the gallows, when you are satisfied it did good? Nearly always, when such a pardon is issued in our States, the people who are outside the circle of the immediate friends and acquaintances of the guilty man, feel that justice has been outraged--that an act has been performed by the Executive tending to the encouragement of crime. And it is because of such things as this in the administration of our government, that mobs so often rise up to put to death the murderer, for fear he will not get justice if he goes into the hands of the law. Now we can not believe that the infinitely wise God, in governing this universe, would extend pardon to any sinner, be he man or angel, in such a way as would encourage any other portion of His creatures in sin. He could not do, from the very nature of His divine being, anything that would encourage others to commit sin. An indiscriminate pardon, then, of all sinners, or any sinners, under such circumstances as would lead to an encouragement of other people to continue in sin, or of the pardoned man to renew his sin, would be no wise divine government of this universe. How then is the problem solved, of so extending mercy to men who deserve everlasting punishment on account of the enormity of their sins--of extending mercy in such a way, that while these men are relieved entirely from all of the consequences, no other man is encouraged to commit sin?

This is the grand problem of redemption. The Scriptures give a very different answer from those that I have been speaking of. It is said, "God so loved the world," sinful as it was, "that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish," as he deserves to

perish, "but should have everlasting life." And when that text says God gave His only Son for this purpose, it does not mean, He sent Him from heaven to earth merely, but, He gave Him up to die. That is the giving referred to. The same great thought is expressed in a somewhat different way in the text that I have read. "In Him we have redemption, even the forgiveness of our sins." Right here is the key-note of the whole scheme of redemption from eternal ruin and destruction--the forgiveness of sins. This can be obtained, this text declares, in Christ. Through His blood we have redemption, even the forgiveness of sins. Let me say here, my dear brethren, that if you were to study a thousand years, you would not study out any way by which you could believe that God could release us from the penalty of our sins, except by forgiveness. If they are forgiven, we will not be punished. If they are unforgiven, there is no escape from the punishment. So that forgiveness is the one thing that sinners need. The Saviour Himself expressed the same great thought, when at the Lord's Supper He took the cup of wine, and said to them, "Drink ye all of this, for this is My blood, shed for many"--what for?--for what one thing was the blood of Christ shed? Just one: "for the remission of sins." In His blood, then, and through and by His blood shed--in other words, by His death--we are to obtain redemption, even the forgiveness of sins. The Apostle Paul says, furthermore, carrying out the same line of thought, that God has set forth Jesus Christ to be a propitiation, in order that he might be just in justifying him who has faith in Jesus (Rom. 3: 25, 26), implying that God found no way to be just, and at the same time to justify the sinner (and to justify the sinner means to allow him to escape the punishment of his sins), except by sending forth His Son to be a propitiatory sacrifice for those sins. You all know very well that this is the doctrine of the Bible. You cannot have read in vain so far as this great truth is concerned.

But now, without expatiating upon these texts, the question arises in the human mind, and it has puzzled the brain of many a thoughtful man, How can this be explained? On what principle is it that God, on account, or in consequence of the death of the Lord Jesus Christ, may extend pardon to guilty sinners, when He could not have done it otherwise?

Some men have very shallow answers to this question. They say, Christ died as a martyr dies--showed Himself a true martyr to God and truth and right--and by this means, by the power of a noble example, He takes hold on the consciences of men and lifts them to a higher life. Well, there is an unspeakable power in the example of the Lord Jesus Christ; but suppose this were all; then, as I said awhile ago, what becomes of sins? There they stand; there they are, unforgiven. There they are as realities in the past. Unless there is forgiveness, there is punishment still awaiting us. This idea contradicts both the passages that I have quoted. In another place Paul says that Christ's death was for the redemption of those sins that were committed under the first covenant (Heb. 9: 15); and this shows that His blood made an atonement for the sins of men that were committed thousands of years before He died. It was not because His death had an effect on those men to lift their minds and hearts up above sin. They lived and died without ever having heard of His death. It shows that the explanation of which we are speaking is totally inadequate--far short of the reality--and contrary to the statements of the Bible.

Another explanation has been given, and it has been accepted by thousands of devout and earnest men. It is this: That Christ, in His death, actually paid the penalty that was due to the sins of the whole world. The Universalist starts out with this proposition, and draws from it his conclusion that therefore all the world will be saved. Undoubtedly, Christ tasted death for every man. If

then, in tasting death for every man, He paid the penalty due to the sins of every man, a just God cannot exact the penalty a second time, and therefore all men will escape. The Calvinist, the very opposite of the Universalian, says, Yes, the principle is true, but He paid the penalty for the elect, and therefore God will not exact the penalty a second time from them. The elect will all be saved, because Christ suffered in their stead and paid the full penalty for their sins. Now, while these are two extremes, the one starting out to save the elect, and the other to save all men, and yet starting from the same assumption, it requires only a very little thought to see that they are both wrong. What is the penalty due to sin? As set forth in the texts quoted in the argument presented last Lord's day, it is everlasting punishment. Did Christ suffer everlasting punishment on the cross? Again, an essential element in the punishment due to sin, is remorse of conscience. Did Christ suffer remorse--torture within His conscience? We have only to ask these questions in order to have them answered, and to know that Christ did not suffer the penalty due to our sins, either in the nature of it, or in the duration of it. Furthermore, if this explanation were true what would become of God's mercy, of which we read so much in the Bible? If a man owes me a debt, and a friend of his comes up and pays me the last cent of it, and I hand up his note, have I exhibited any mercy toward him? What becomes, if either of these doctrines be true, of the idea of forgiveness? If God laid the penalty of all the sins of the whole world upon Jesus Christ and let men go because the penalty has been paid, has he forgiven any sins? No more than I could be said to forgive a debt because I yield up the note of the broken man when his friend has paid me the last cent of it. Starting out, then, to show the mercy of God by showing that He saves all men, that doctrine takes all mercy out of the Bible, and out of God's dealings with the race. Or, if you take it that He saves by His mercy the elect, there is no salvation or mercy in it, because He exacted the very last amount of suffering due for their sins from Him who was the substitute. This explanation, then, can not satisfy, it seems to me, any man who looks at it without bias--with the fair judgment with which we look at other questions. It is not taught in the Bible.

What is, then, the explanation? Well, I don't know. I don't know. I don't believe any other man knows what the reasoning of God was on this subject, by which he felt compelled, according to His own infinite nature, to refuse to pardon a single sin except through the blood of His Son. I don't know. I don't know how many sermons I have heard, trying to explain it. I don't know how many pages--heavy pages--in many books, I have read, from some of the ablest men in the world, trying to set it forth; but I have never yet been able to see it; and if any of you have, I congratulate you.

God's thoughts are not as our thoughts on many things. His ways are far above our ways, as heaven above the earth, and we may not expect to understand the reasons in His mind for the wondrous works of His prudence and mercy. I think, on all such themes, we are prone to look at the subject from the wrong point of view. We try to get at God's ideas about it. It is enough for us to see the part which addresses itself to man. There are multitudes of things that God does in nature, and in the providence that He exercises over the world, the divine reasons for which it is utterly impossible for any human mind to penetrate; but it is not difficult, generally, when we look at these same inscrutable workings and ways of providence, to see their effects, and to know by their effects that there is wisdom and prudence, as the apostle says in my text, behind them all.

Let us look, then, at the effect of God's setting forth before angels and men, this great scheme of redemption through the blood of His Son, and of His declaring that this is what enables Him to justify men in the forgiveness of their sins. Has it had the effect which pardon so often has in this world, of encouraging the subjects of law to commit sin? If so, then we would not be able to see in it any wisdom. But has it had such an effect? Do you know the effect that this wondrous work of God has had upon the minds of angels in heaven? Why, it has inspired the sweetest song that they ever sang, instead of raising a feeling of rebellion. John heard that song, and he says, "I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne; and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands, saying with a great voice, worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive the power and riches and wisdom, and might, and honor, and glory, and blessing." (Rev. 6: 11-14). That is the view which the angels take of it. When from those lofty heights you look down upon the effect which it has among men, and find the men who have accepted in their hearts with profoundest faith that their redemption is through the blood of Christ, they are the men who are farthest removed from sin of all that dwell upon the earth. It has not encouraged them to commit sin, or given them any feeling of license against God. And then, when you inquire, what is it, of all the things that have ever been said in the pulpit, or been read in the New Testament, which has had the greatest power to turn sinners away from their sins, and bring them to God, to holiness and to righteousness, you find that it is the fact of redemption in the blood of Christ. The power of God to turn the hearts of men away from sin, and unto holiness, is embodied in that fact. The preaching of the Christ, says Paul, is to the Greek foolishness, and to the Jews a stumbling block; but to us that are saved, "the power of God and the wisdom of God." (1 Cor. 1: 23-24). And yet, I suppose that Paul was no more able to look in and see how God's mind worked out the problem, than you or I; for he never told us. We see by its effects that it must be wise; that it is wise; that it is good, that it is the greatest display of the wisdom and mercy of the living God that the world has known anything about, or that angels have ever seen--and that is enough for you and me.

Let me say, my dear brethren and sisters, that this redemption in Christ goes even further than I have yet intimated. It not only enables God, when we come to Christ in His appointed way, to forgive our sins, blotting out all the past, to take away the threatened penalty and grant unto us everlasting bliss and peace of mind; and, what is strangest of all, to take out of our hearts all remorse on account of the many sins we have committed; but it goes beyond that. For we are told that the whole creation travails and groans in pain, until this hour, and we ourselves, who have received the first fruits of the spirit, groan within ourselves, waiting, because there is something yet in the future that we have not obtained. What is that? "Waiting for the adoption, even the redemption of the body." (Rom. 8: 18-23). The body is to be redeemed as well as the soul, in Christ, and by His precious blood--by His death for us. The redemption of the body from the corruption of the grave. It is sown in corruption; it is to be raised in incorruption. It is sown a weak body; it is to be raised a strong body. (1 Cor. 15: 42-44). It is to be raised in the likeness of Him who will descend from heaven in glory; for when He comes, we shall be like Him, and we shall see Him as He is. (1 John 3: 2.) You and I do not know how much value there is in that. Sometimes we depreciate our bodies. Be careful how you do that, my dear friends. When God created Adam from the dust of the earth, He made him in some mysterious way in the image of God; and if Christ died to redeem our souls, He also died to redeem our bodies. Our souls will not live any longer in eternity than our raised and glorified bodies will. They will be united together, never to be separated. I do not know anything in the Bible to teach me that God thinks

any less of my body than He does of my soul. Brethren, take care of your bodies. They are the temples of the living God. Do not abuse them; do not use them for vile purposes. Preserve the health and strength of your body as long as you can, for God regards it as a precious thing; and when it is laid in the grave, although it shall become food for worms, not one particle of it shall ever be lost sight of by His divine eyes. It can not be lost, but will be raised again in glory on the Great Day; and then in a body that can never know any pain, shall dwell the soul that can no longer feel remorse on account of sin, or fear of anything in all eternity to come. The creation that is now travailing and groaning and waiting, will that day be seen in a revelation of God's power and wisdom more glorious than has ever been witnessed in this universe of which we form so small a part. This is the redemption that is in Christ.

And now, in conclusion, I want to ask one question, and impress it as deeply as I am able, upon every soul in this house.

If sin is of such a nature that God Himself, with all His infinite wisdom, and all His undying love toward our race, could find no way to redeem us from it, without the shedding of the blood of His own dear Son, the heart's blood of Him who came down from heaven to endure the ignominious death of the cross for this great end, what an awful thing sin must be! Just think of it. And let me ask you another question in connection with this. Was the evil consequence which God foresaw that sin would bring upon us, some little thing, like a scratch upon your hand? Was sin a mere peccadillo? Was it a mere mistake that could bring but little pain upon us? Would the Almighty send His own Son to suffer the agonies of the cross in order to redeem us from a little thing like that? Ah! my dear friends, it is only when we know what we endeavored to show you last Lord's day, the darkness, the gloom, the gnashing of teeth, the awful agonies of the eternal world to which sin is bearing us, that we can realise why it should cost such a price, and why God should be willing to pay such a price, to redeem us from it. Are you living in sin? Oh! tremble before your God; get down on your knees; lift up your hands and your heart, and plead with Him to have mercy on you; smite your breast, and say, "God be merciful to me a sinner." Cast yourself into the arms of this Redeemer who is so ready and so anxious to redeem you--to blot out your transgressions, and to grant you everlasting life.

Is there a poor, guilty soul here this morning who does thus repent; who does thus tremble; who desires to leap into the arms of the Saviour and escape eternal ruin and destruction? We beg you, in Jesus' name, while we sing this song--

"There is a fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Immanuel's veins;
And sinners plunged beneath that flood
Lose all their guilty stains."--

We beg you to come and cast yourselves into the deep flood of the Saviour's dying love.