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~~Mr. Hope-to-be-saved~~

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# Plain Dialogues on Solemn Subjects,

FOR THIS PRESENT TIME. *K*

No. 1.

## WHAT IS THE GOSPEL OF GOD?

*Mr. Hope-to-be-saved.* Good morning, Christian, I am glad to have the pleasure of your company. There are several things I wish to talk over with you. We seem to live in strange times. A sort of feeling of uncertainty as to what is coming next.

*Christian.* There certainly is all that you say, and more; only if our minds were truly subject to God's word, we need not be in any doubt as to what is about to take place. But before we look at the *future*, suppose we ask the question, What has taken place? *What is the present state of Christendom?*

*Hope-to-be-saved.* Well, I must say, though I have been told over and over again, that things are getting better, I am compelled to say, the very things I look to—I mean man's churches—are crumbling to pieces. What do you think about it?

*Christian.* Looking at this matter in the light of scripture, the present scene presents a sad picture. But to begin at the foundation; every observant Christian must have felt that a remarkable darkness has fallen upon the people of protestant countries during these last few years. Not but that the path of the Just One, Christ, shines brighter and brighter, unto the



perfect day. And the increase of light, and blessing, is as remarkable as the darkness around. And we may say, even as to the gospel itself, if you will only visit the mass of professors, talk with them, as you travel by rail or boat, you will find that, as to man's state, and God's righteous salvation, protestant countries are fast sinking into the darkness of the middle ages, as men call them.

*Hope-to-be-saved.* You surprise me. I thought everybody, at least in England, knew what the gospel is!

*Christian.* Well, my dear friend, will you tell me what you think the gospel is?

*Hope-to-be-saved.* Why in a few words the gospel is this: we must believe in Christ, and do the best we can, you know. A man must have faith and good works too, or he never can be saved, that's clear, is it not? The best illustration I ever heard of the way to be saved, as I understand it, was this. There was a very celebrated preacher, who thought that faith in Christ was enough for salvation; and this preacher, John, was in a boat on a river, with another old preacher. "Now," says the old preacher, "John, take that oar, and pull as hard as you can." John did pull, and lo, the boat began going round and round, in a circle. "Now John," says the old preacher, "lay that oar down;" and John did so. "Now, John, take this other oar, and pull at this other side," when behold, the boat began to go round and round at the other side. "The first oar," says the old preacher, "is faith, and this second oar is works. Don't you see, John? if you have *only* faith in Christ, you can never be saved. And if you have only good works, you can never be saved. But if you have both faith and good works, then you pull, and sail gloriously up the river of salvation." From that day, Preacher John preached faith and good works, for salvation; and so do thousands of his followers; and that is what I understand

to be the gospel; and that is how I hope to be saved. Don't you think this is the gospel?

*Christian.* No doubt it may be the gospel of Preacher John. It is a fair picture of the gospel of many; of the great mass now. And it would be most difficult to shew the shade of difference betwixt it, and the gospel of Romanists. But it would be almost impossible to find anything more unlike the gospel of God.

*Hope-to-be-saved.* How? in what way?

*Christian.* In every way. Don't you see that if you could be saved in that way, then when you arrive in heaven, you could shout "Worthy am I, and Christ!" or, "Worthy the Lamb, and worthy am I." Which would you put first?

At all events, one oar had as much to do with it as the other—therefore this gospel would just exalt man one half, and rob Christ one half; only, as many say, "We must do our part, and then He will do His. The more we love God, the more He will love us." Does not this say, "I must be first, and Christ second?"

*Hope-to-be-saved.* I never thought of it in that way. I don't like the thought of robbing Christ, to exalt myself; but certainly if I pull one oar, that is, if salvation is just half my own work, it does look as if a half Saviour would do for me. But, must there not be good works?

*Christian.* Certainly; only let us look at that in its proper place. Don't you know that God has sent us a letter on this very subject—THE GOSPEL OF GOD?

*Hope-to-be-saved.* You speak so strangely—at least it seems so to me; I don't exactly know what you mean.

*Christian.* What I mean is this. Paul's letter, or Epistle to the Romans, is so distinctly the Gospel of God, written so entirely by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, that we may read it as God speaking to us

Himself. Surely I do not doubt the inspiration of all scripture, and all scripture is equally God's message to man. But if you ask what is the gospel; the Romans answers, and unfolds, that special question.

Now in this letter you will not find man a puller—able to pull either one oar or the other. But man is described as lost, under three aspects or characters.

#### MAN IS

1. A sinner under judgment.—Rom. iii.
2. Without strength.—Rom. v.
3. Shut up in unbelief.—Rom. xi.

#### God has met man's need

1. In righteousness through redemption.
2. In love: for when we were without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly.

3. In mercy. To us Gentiles, to Saul of Tarsus, and in the future, to Israel, when sunk in unbelief. As he says to Timothy, "But I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly *in unbelief*." (1 Tim. i. 13.) And the same mercy will be shewn to Israel in days to come; "For God hath concluded all [or shut all up together] in unbelief, that He might have mercy upon all." (Romans xi. 32.) Now, if we take up these three aspects of man's condition, and the way of God in His gospel in meeting each, we shall find man's gospel, of doing his best and rowing with both hands, a simple denial of God's gospel.

*Hope-to-be-saved.* Well, do make it as plain as you can find words, for I can assure you it is a matter of all importance to me. I confess, my gospel never gives me real comfort; for I may just tell you, I never feel quite sure that I do do my best. Nay, I may say, I feel I don't do my best; and so, how can I be sure I am saved? But where is the difference betwixt my gospel and God's gospel?

*Christian.* You say, "I must believe in Christ, and do my best." God begins with you on the ground that you are lost—under sin and under judgment. But

if you are able to do your best, or if you can row with both hands, you are not lost at all. Look at a man gliding through the waters, rowing so gracefully; do you call that a lost man? Is it not a very little saviour a man needs that can row with both hands to heaven? No wonder so very little is heard of the Saviour where man's gospel is preached. Preacher John could row on the river with one hand, or with both; but the fact is, man is shut up under sin, (Gal. iii. 22.) and without strength to be better. (Rom. v. 6, and vii. 14.) Yes, in this epistle, God tells you plainly, that there is no best in you—that there is no good in you; that there is no strength in you to be better; and fully describes the experience of a rower under law, utterly without strength, fairly sold under sin—under the judgment of God as guilty.

*Hope-to-be-saved.* Well, I don't know whether all this is in scripture, for I mostly take for granted what the preacher says. One thing I do say, it is uncommonly like what I have found to be true in my experience.

*Christian.* No doubt, for God says, "All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;" there is no difference. But let us now note very carefully how man denies the gospel of God.

God says, all the world is guilty before Him; or, as in the margin, Romans iii. 19, "subject to the judgment of God"—and the judgment, or wages of sin, is death. If a person told you that such a man was in prison, found guilty, under sentence of death—and you said, "Oh no, he is only on probation, and if he does his best he will never be executed"—would not this be a denial of the prisoner's true condition? Now, if man is thus found guilty before God, and under judgment, to say, "No, he is still under probation, and if he does his best he will be saved"—is not this denying, at the outset, man's true condition; and denying what God says about it?

And does not God say man is without strength? Yea, in due time, that is, when fifteen centuries had fully proved, in the history of the Jews, that man was without strength; then Christ died for the ungodly. Does not man deny all this, when he speaks of faith as a thing of his own; and as if he had strength to use it in one hand, and good works in the other? Is it not dreadful, thus to deny God's truth, and deceive man about his real condition? Think of eternal perdition; think that you are not sure of another breath; and to be deceived about a matter of such moment!

*Hope-to-be-saved.* How do you say God has met man's lost condition, shut up under sin and judgment?

*Christian.* Nay, my dear sir, what I say is nothing—the righteousness of God has been clearly revealed in His gospel. Justification is free, by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. (Rom. iii. 24.) But, again, this redemption is flatly denied in man's gospel. Let me try to illustrate this. Suppose you were a slave, shut up in slavery, as man is shut up in sin, and a real friend, though an unknown one, paid the price of your redemption—say £1,000—he sends me to tell you, and as soon as you hear the news, you say, “Well, I must do my best to get him to redeem me;” or, “I must do *my* part towards it. I must row with both hands to get redemption from slavery.” Would not all this be simply a denial that the redemption was actually accomplished?

*Hope-to-be-saved.* Well, but must I not pray for God to shew mercy to me?

*Christian.* Can the slave, I ask, pray for redemption, if the money has been paid? And has not God shewn mercy? Has not Jesus died, the Just for the unjust, to bring us to God? The plain question is this, Has redemption been accomplished? If we pray for it to be done, we then deny that Jesus has come in the flesh. Has Jesus finished the blessed work of redemption on the cross? Has God been glorified for ever about sin,

by the death of the cross; so that He has also glorified Jesus, in raising Him from the dead, and receiving Him up to glory? Can you look up to heaven, and see Jesus crowned with glory by this very death of the cross, and then say, "No, He is only worthy of half a crown, and if I do my best, the other half will be due to me?"

*Hope-to-be-saved.* I think you forget that I said we must believe in Christ, and do—dear, I am almost ashamed to say—*do our best*, after all I have heard: but we do believe in Christ.

*Christian.* Don't you know a cup of vinegar would spoil a pailful of milk? The work of Christ is absolute perfection. Is not all our doing mixed with sin? Nay, is not doing for salvation, the damning sin of unbelief; the very rejection of free pardon, through the once finished work of Christ? If you attempt to mix your sinful, imperfect works with Christ's, is it not worse than vinegar mixed with milk? Redemption is accomplished. God has raised Jesus from the dead. "Therefore, through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins: and by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses." (Acts xiii. 38.) This is the very message of God to every lost sinner. Before ever the sinner can offer one prayer, this is God's pardon, freely proclaimed through Jesus.

*Hope-to-be-saved.* And have I only to believe it? have I positively nothing to do?

*Christian.* Would you speak or reason or cavil thus, if as a poor condemned criminal, Her Majesty, the beloved Queen of these realms, were to send her free pardon? Would you cavil about only believing, or would you question her truthfulness, by saying, "Have I nothing to do?" Surely if a Queen's word is her word, God's word is His word. And if you could rest on the bare word of the Queen, you must admit, that faith can rest on the word of God.

*Hope-to-be-saved.* Oh! sir, if you knew how I have been schooled in the doctrine, that it is not enough to believe, but that man must fulfil certain conditions—that Christ did come and die for the whole world, but yet we must love God with all our hearts, and must keep His holy law, or we never can be saved. I am sure I want to be right; but what you call the gospel of God seems so free, and is all grace, and yet you say, righteousness too; I cannot tell you how different it is from all I have heard from a child; why if I really believed what you say, I should be filled with thankfulness.

*Christian.* Nay, don't say, if you believed what I say—it is simply if you believed God. It is God who speaks, who proclaims pardon, through Jesus alone. It is Satan who seeks to destroy, or at least neutralize, the gospel, by adding conditions, which man cannot fulfil. Let me give you a simple illustration—suppose a poor man, who has a garden, say a rood of land. Thomas, for so we will call him, has been long ill of spinal complaint. He leans one fine day over his garden gate, looking very sad; he has no seed to set in his garden, and he is completely without strength. Just a picture of man's spiritual condition. A farmer, driving past, pulls up his gig, and says, "Thomas, I see you have not set your garden." "No indeed, sir," says Thomas, "I have not a single potato seed left to plant it with." "Oh indeed," says the farmer. "Well, I say, Thomas, you come up to my house to-morrow, and bring a sack, and you shall have it full, and welcome." Kind-hearted farmer! what good is such a promise as this to a man who has neither a sack, nor a back that can carry a sack? The condition completely neutralizes the promise.

But now another farmer comes by. "Well, Thomas," says he, "I see you have not set your garden yet." Thomas acknowledges the fact, with a downcast look. "Which is the lowest place in your hedge, Thomas?"

says the farmer, "for I have plenty of potatoes to set your garden, and to spare, and I am just thinking I will put a sack in my light cart, and bring it down, and shoot it over your garden hedge." And the farmer was as good as his word. The next day his promise was fulfilled.

*Hope-to-be-saved.* Oh, I think I begin to see; does it not say something about the grace of God that BRINGETH salvation, and something about the *promise being sure*?

*Christian.* That is just what the faith of Abraham looked at. The promise was sure. It was God who promised in pure grace. That is, unconditional favour. Yes, the apostle shews the promise made sure in Christ, more than 400 years before the system of conditions was made known. (Gal. iii.) The promise of a sack of seed was a good thing. But who could doubt the farmer's kindness when they saw him bring the sack? The promise of God was very sure to faith. But what shall we say now that God has fulfilled the promise? Redemption is an accomplished fact. But the thought of condition must deny this; or at least leave the soul in doubt of it.

*Hope-to-be-saved.* Then have I nothing to do but to believe?

*Christian.* Why, now, what else can you do, if the work of redemption was done eighteen centuries before you were born—the whole question of sin settled and put away for ever for all who believe?

*Hope-to-be-saved.* Have I not to come to Christ?

*Christian.* Well, if you please, but would it not be more correct to say, Christ came down from heaven for you; yes, to the cross for you? and even now, by the Spirit, comes to you, bringing salvation? If you mean by coming to Christ, letting go every false hope, and finding full, everlasting rest in Christ by simple faith alone; then, God grant that you may come this moment!

*Hope-to-be-saved.* But, surely, must I not repent?

*Christian.* Oh, certainly; but you will never repent by looking at yourself. While Job looked at himself, he thought he was the best man in the gate of his city. But in Job's last chapter he says, "but now mine eye seeth thee, wherefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes." Look at Jesus on the cross; see there what sin is, and what it cost. Behold the HOLY, HOLY ONE, until like Job you judge and abhor yourself. Our blessed Jesus tells us the people of Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah. And don't you read, that they *believed God*; and then proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even unto the least? The more simply you believe God, the more deep and real will be your repentance.

*Hope-to-be-saved.* Why, Christian, I thought you did not believe in repentance. Is it true, then, that repentance must go before salvation?

*Christian.* Ah, that is the point. Let us put it thus: Must I repent, and give up my sins, in order that I may find salvation, or that God may save me?

*Hope-to-be-saved.* Yes, just so.

*Christian.* Now, my dear *Hope-to-be-saved*, have you a little more time to spare? as I should like to tell you a little story, that happened to me, a few years ago, that will illustrate this point.

*Hope-to-be-saved.* I shall be delighted to hear it; indeed this repentance gives me great perplexity.

*Christian.* Very well then, I must tell you, I went a few years ago to my native village after a long absence. I remembered there was a man of the name of Frankey, who, when I was a boy, was always talking about repentance. I called to see the (now) old man, upwards of eighty. And after a little conversation about olden times, I said, "Well, Frankey, what is your prospect of eternity?" "Well, my lad," said he, "we must begin in good earnest" (the same

as his words forty years ago). "What must we begin to do?" said I. "Why," said he, "we must repent deeply, for our sins, and weep over them." "Let us see, Frankey," said I, "how much rent do you pay for your bit of land?" "Forty pund, lad." "You seem rather bad of rheumatics, Frankey?" "Aye, lad, I can't walk across t' floor." "Well, Frankey, how much crying, and tears, would pay your rent?" "Oh lad, I might cry me een up, but crying would ne'er pay forty pund rent." "That is true," said I. "But now, Frankey, if that gentleman who lives at the top of the hill were to pay your rent, and just lift up the door sneck, and say, 'Frankey, it's done, I have paid your rent—I knew you were without strength—I have done it, and here is the receipt:' now, Frankey, what would you do then?" You should have seen how the old face brightened up. "Why, lad," said he, "I should cry for joy, to think he had done such a thing." "Yes, Frankey, and that is true repentance. It is the kindness of God, in the gift of His Son that, leads to true repentance. Oh! to think that He has done such a thing! I don't repent to get Him to do it; but because He has done it." Poor old Frankey! there was darkness of long years of false teaching upon him. Never before had he seen that the work of redemption had all been done first. And the belief of this produces repentance.

*Hope-to-be-saved.* It is plain that Jesus did not die for our sins because we repented, but because God so loved us.

*Christian.* Yes, and so loved us when we were shut up under sin, without strength to be better. "He spared not his own Son but delivered him up for us all." Can our sins be washed away with tears? Can our tears add to the value of the blood of Jesus? Do you believe Jesus to be the Son of God? Then was not His atoning death infinite in value for all who believe? Oh, for a vile sinner to think of adding any-

thing, in any way, to its value before God. Is it not an insult to the Holy One, the Just One, who died for the unjust, to bring us to God?

*Hope-to-be-saved.* You make me feel as if I had never believed God.

*Christian.* I am thankful to hear you say so. The moment you really do believe God, your name will be changed. For the present, I must leave you to ponder this question—Do I believe God?\*

C. S.

\* No. 2 (if the Lord will,) will take up the question, "Do you believe God?"

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