

Timely Reflections

A sermon

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"Now is our salvation nearer than when we believed." - [Romans 13:11](#).

BUT what "salvation" is this? The question is important because we very commonly speak of "salvation" as that state of Divine Grace into which everyone that believes in Jesus is introduced when he passes from death unto life, being delivered from the power of darkness and translated into the kingdom of God's dear Son. This sweet assurance we celebrate in our hymns of praise—

"The moment a sinner believes And trusts in His crucified God, His pardon at once he receives, Redemption in full through His blood."

Salvation, so far as the forgiveness of sin, the imputation of righteousness, and the eternal safety of the soul are concerned, is given to us the moment that we are brought to trust in Jesus. But the term, "salvation," here and in some other parts of Scripture signifies that complete deliverance from sin, that glorious perfection which will not be attained by us until the day of the appearing of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Salvation here signifies entire deliverance from indwelling sin, perfect sanctification, and, as I take it, includes the resurrection of the body and the glorification of body and soul with Christ Jesus in the world to come. Salvation here means what many think it always implies, namely, eternal Glory. At this hour our perfect salvation is nearer than when we believed. Observe the date from which the Apostle begins to reckon. He does not say our salvation is nearer than when we were christened—that is a ceremony of which the Apostle never dreamed—a tradition and invention of men which had never crossed his mind!

He does not say your salvation is nearer than when you were confirmed—that also was a thing quite unknown to him. He does not reckon even from our Baptism, as if he were to say, now is your salvation nearer than when you put on Christ openly in Baptism. But he strikes at the vital point—he specifies the true indication of spiritual life, namely, "believe." What could ever come of all that is before believing? It is all death! It is not worth reckoning! No matter how studied the ceremony or how garnished with profession, up to the moment a man believes he has no spiritual life—he comes not into the happiness of the living—neither has the Apostle anything to say to him except that he is dead in trespasses and sins!

The moment of faith is the moment from which he dates his spiritual career. It is when we look to Jesus hanging upon the Cross, our Substitute, that life comes to us. As we look we live! We look and are forgiven! We look and are saved— and from that time forward

with our faces Zionward we start upon the celestial pilgrimage towards that glorious City whose Builder and Maker is God. Thus it was, then, that the Apostle measured from one fixed point to another fixed point. If you have two shifting points you cannot say that now you are nearer this or that. If the time of our believing was not a fixed and definite moment, but a thing which may be put here or there, we could not reckon from that. And if the time of our emancipation from this body and our complete salvation were unsettled, precarious—a point that moves, a sort of planetary star—we could not say we are getting any nearer to it.

But the Apostle takes a fixed point. There is a man saved. He has believed in Christ. That day he believed in Christ, yes, that very minute, he may not know which minute, but God knows, that very second—at that tick of the clock in which he trusted in Christ he became a new man—old things were passed away and all things became new. Therefore that is a fixed and definite point in that man's history from which to date. And there is another point, settled by God in the

Divine decree, never to be removed, neither to be ante-dated nor post-dated—a moment when those that believe shall be with Christ where He is and shall be like He and shall behold His Glory forever!

Now, between these two points you and I, if we have believed, are sailing! And this evening at the close of the year it seemed meet for me to haul up the log and just to note where we are on the sea that rolls between these two blessed points and to congratulate my fellow Believers that now—tonight—we are nearer the eternal port by the space of many years than when we first slipped our cable, hauled up the anchor and began to sail towards the haven of everlasting rest. "Now is our salvation nearer than when we believed."

I have been told—I have not been on the voyage—but I have been told that in going to Australia it has frequently been the custom to toast "Friends behind," till they get half-way. And then it changes to, "Friends ahead." "Here's to the helm, friends behind," and then near to the port, "Friends ahead." Well, I am going to say something tonight about things behind, and then we shall congratulate you as we talk of things ahead. "Now is our salvation nearer than when we believed."

I. THE THINGS THAT ARE BEHIND. I want you to look back a little, all of you who have started from the point of believing. Recollect—and it will do you good to recollect it—when you did believe. Oh, that blessed day! Of all the days we have ever seen, that was, in some respects, the brightest of all! Not to be compared with the day of our natural birth, for that was a day of our first weeping. But in the day of our new birth, we wept tears of sacred joy! We were thrust from death into life, from condemnation to acceptance, from everlasting peril into eternal safety—

"Happy day, happy day! When Jesus washed my sins away!"

That was the day, we may say, when we left the first shore—and you all know those who are going round the world to dwell on the other side, always look back with great satisfaction

at the day when they left. When the vessel was first tugged out of dock and safely towed down to the Nore and began to try the deep sea wave, what congratulations there were of friends—and many tears, no doubt, and waving of handkerchiefs and hurrahing, as the vessel left the port. Well, now, in our case we remember how our friends and kinsfolk in Christ rejoiced over us—how glad they were to hear us tell the tale of saving Grace! They prized us as a new-born child is prized in the household. No, not only friends below, but the angels looking down from Heaven rejoiced over us as repenting sinners! And surely, if it were worth their while to rejoice when we believed, we need not blush to go back to that period.

It is not very long with some of you—well, be grateful. It is a long time with some of you. Some of us can, no doubt, count 20 years since we first knew the Lord! Happy years they have been, too! And happy was that day when we became first enlisted in His service—when we first left the shores of earth to try and find the new country, the better land. Yes, "when we believed." We will dwell upon that time and let our souls ring the sweet silver bells of gratitude as we bless the Lord that we were not left to perish in our natural unbelief, but that we have believed in Christ Jesus.

Since then—now turn to your logs—since then we have had a good number of storms. I remember that first storm we had in that Bay of Biscay—for there is generally such a bay as that soon after the mariner gets off from shore. What a tempest it was. We had not long rejoiced before all our rejoicing was gone. We had not long found Christ before we thought that Satan himself had found us! We fancied it was all a delusion. We were ready to give up our confidence! We had thought at first that the moment we believed there would be an end of conflicts, but we discovered that it was then the conflict began! And perhaps one of the severest storms our vessel has ever had was just at the first.

You remember it. And we have had many since then, when the waves of unbelief have made us stand and tremble. You have seen one washed overboard that you thought very dear. You have yourselves suffered loss and endured great peril. You were glad to get some of your treasures. "But there," you said, "let the ingots go." Now the ship rights! Happy were you if you might, by losing earthly substances and carnal joys, find peace and safety in Christ. You remember, too, when you had to sail very slowly in the thick fog and keep the whistle always sounding, and the look-out you had to keep at the bows for fear you should run into something and come to mischief.

And you remember when you had almost gone too far and you just caught sight of the red lights, for if you had but gone a little further your soul would have been wrecked, cast away forever. But Mercy interposed at the precise moment, when there was time yet to tack about and save the vessel and rescued us in the hour of temptation, saved us as by fire. Well, now, why do I call these things to your remembrance, but to make you bless the name of your God? You have been

nearly shipwrecked, but you are not wrecked. The storm has been very furious, but above all the billows Jehovah's power has kept and preserved you! Your feet had almost gone. Your steps had well near slipped, but the Divine power interposed in everlasting Grace and to this day—a wonder unto many, but especially a wonder to yourself—you are still on the road towards the Celestial City and you are nearer to it than when you first believed.

But I would not have your recollection of what is behind be altogether saddened. Remember, Beloved, you have had a great deal of fair weather, too, since you left the port of believing. Oh, there have been happy days with us! Blessed days, as the days of Heaven upon earth! We have sailed along with a favoring breeze. All has been happy within our spirits, and peace, like a river, has abounded in our souls. Let us praise the name of God for this! Life is not the dreary thing that some men say it is. It has its sorrows, for what rose has not its thorns? Thistles spring up in it, but after all, who would not expect the thistles to grow here and there in the midst of a harvest field? But we bear our testimony that we have not had such a bad time of it after all—

"The men of Grace have found Glory begun below, Celestial fruit on earthly ground,
From faith and hope may grow."

So that behind us, since the hour we first believed, there are the storms from which we have escaped, but there are also the mercies, the loving kindnesses which we dare not and will not forget. Behind us, too, dear Brethren—and this will be a mingled thought—behind us, how many opportunities of service have we left? When we sailed ourselves, there were with us many other little ships and some of these—ah, some of these, have been cast away and shipwrecked before our eyes! In that night of storm, when we ourselves were hard beset, a companion vessel that bade fair to make as good a voyage as our own, went to pieces and was never heard of again. A great professor foundered—his hypocrisy was discovered and his profession ruined forever.

Another, who seemed to be as ardent for the cause of Christ as we, passed away, stranded on simple pleasures, broken to pieces on the rocks of worldliness and lost—and we preserved! Blessed be God, we are preserved! But we have had many opportunities of seeking out the distressed, of bringing some of the shipwrecked ones to safety. Did we always do it? Well, I hope there are many of you who, during past years, have been the means of bringing some to Christ. I know many of you have, but I fear some of you have not. Just before this sermon commenced I saw one who wished to make a profession of her faith in Christ and she traced her conversion, she said, to the prayers of one of our members. I dare say you would know him if I were to mention his name—a humble brother—and I was so thankful to think that God should bless his prayer in the family to the conversion of one who had listened to him. May all of us be looking out for others and endeavoring to bring them to Christ.

But what a sad thing it is if we have to recollect that in our sailing we have rescued none from the storm. If we are compelled to say, "I saw the signals go up. I know they were firing

minute-guns of distress, but I passed them by, I never sent aid there—and whether they were saved or lost I do not know. I had enough to do to look to myself. I never looked to them." During this year hundreds have gone to their graves. Some of your own children, perhaps, or neighbors. Are you clear of their blood? Are you clear of their blood? It would be an awful piece of brutality if a boat full of poor shipwrecked mariners, far out at sea, saw a vessel in the offing and yet that vessel would not turn aside to help them.

And that is exactly the conduct of many professors of Christ. They see others perishing, but they will not tell them the way of salvation. They neither pray for them, nor labor for them—but they let them go down to Hell unwept, unpitied and uncared for. Where are your hearts of compassion, Professors, that you have done this? Perhaps you have done it. If so, do not merely regret, but earnestly amend. We ought to recollect, again, that since we left the fixed point of believing and began to voyage onward towards the point of Glory, we have had many opportunities of serving the Lord Jesus and, I may ask, have we always availed ourselves of them?

I wish we had sung as many hymns for Christ as He deserved. O that I could have put upon His head the crown which He deserves to have of His poor servant whom He has delivered out of bondage and made to rejoice in liberty! O that I had always spoken up for His name! That I had poured a broadside into His enemies whenever I had an opportunity! We can sometimes sing—

"Is there a lamb among the flock,
I would disdain to feed?
Is there a foe before whose face,
I fear Your cause to plead?"

And though we sing it and mean it, yet I fear many of the lambs are not fed, and before many a foe we do not plead the cause of Christ. Golden opportunities of bringing glory to Christ are suffered to go by.

Alas for this! If we could weep in Heaven we might weep the loss of such opportunities! But instead of weeping, let us earnestly pray that for the future we may serve the Master with heart and soul and strength, so long as we have any being.

II. Thus much about things behind. And now, very briefly, indeed, ANTICIPATION OF THOSE WHO ARE AHEAD, AND OF THE THINGS THAT ARE AHEAD. Keeping our lookout, expecting to see other storms and soon to reach a fairer clime, what is there which we are expecting? I cannot fail to expect more storms between this and the fair haven. There shall be more blustering winds and tossing billows. It is not over yet. It was not all smooth behind—it cannot be all smooth ahead.

But there is this to be said—though there may be many more storms, they must be fewer in number than they were. There cannot be as many, for so many have already gone! As we are nearer Home, so the trials are fewer that we have to bear. You are getting through

them, Christian. Every one, as you pass it, leaves one the less. Be comforted, then, be comforted! And how few storms must remain for some of you? "I am on the better side of seventy," said one. "Why," said another, "I thought you were seventy-seven." "So I am," said he, "and that is the right side of 70—it is the nearest side

Home."

Can you not trust God for the next half-dozen years? You will not have more than that, perhaps. You cannot expect to have twenty. He has helped you for 70—will He not help you for another ten? Will He change at the last? Has he up to now taught you to trust in His name and brought you so far to put you to shame? Has He finished the house all but the last course of bricks and will He not complete it in due course? Surely He will! Be of good courage! There are few storms, after all, that are ahead, to those that have passed through many already. The further we are on the road, the less there is of it to bear. Beloved, there will be fairer winds yet, thank God. We cannot suspect it will be all storms. But it would be folly to suppose there would be none! It would be greater folly, still, to suppose it would be all boisterous weather.

Before we reach the heavenly plains, or walk the golden streets, there is a land called Beulah, which John Bunyan pictures in his "Pilgrim's Progress," and surely it is no realm of fancy. In old age God's people are often brought into a peaceable frame of mind where their confidences are always bright, their enjoyment of Christ always great—where they have not those molestations which afflicted them when they were young—they have come to perfect peace and rest. We can expect this and we will steer on towards it! There are calm days ahead!

Christ will be with us. Our communion with Him shall be sweet. Do you know, I look forward in days to come to the oft-recurring refreshment of our Sabbaths. If we are to be spared, there will always be these oases in the desert. Though we have, some of us, our hardest day's work and often wish we could sit in a pew and hear somebody else, yet there is no day like the Sabbath, after all. Oh, what a blessed help it is to Heaven! If we had not those windows, the earth would be a blank, indeed. But with these sacred windows, that which would otherwise be a hard black wall, shutting out all light, becomes a very palace and we look through these windows up to the better palace, where the eternal Sabbath shall be our portion! Well, there are these Sabbaths ahead! There is the outpouring of the Spirit! There are Covenant blessings to be participated in and there is the safety which Providential Grace can bring, all lying ahead of us. Let us, then, be comforted and pass on.

And there will be more opportunities ahead. Now, you young people, especially, should be looking out. I spoke of occasions of serving God which we had wasted. Do not let us waste any more, but gird up the loins of our lives. Let this be our prayer, that we may snatch every opportunity by the wing—take time by the forelock—and, in the service of God, contend with might and main for the Truths of God. The wheels of eternity are sounding

behind us—life must be short. To those to whom it is longest it is but brief. Work on, worker! You have scarcely time to finish your day's work! Waste not a second! Throw not away these priceless hours. Speed! Speed! Speed! As with sevenfold wing it glides forward—swifter than the thunderbolt. Oh, pause not! Trifle not!

O Christian, if you would take your crowns up to your Lord and great sheaves from the harvest, "work while it is called today, for the night comes in which no man can work." "It is high time," says our Apostle, "to awake out of sleep." Would that you would consider it! Be not as those who open their eyes in the morning only to close them again, like the sluggard with the reflection, "I need not bestir myself just yet." But start, Man, from your slumbers as one who

feels that he has slept too long and must now briskly cast off dull sloth, bestirring himself with eager haste to do his appointed task—to redeem the time, to reclaim the golden hours! For, consider this, your calling is of God and the King's business requires haste.

But looking still further ahead, let us tonight, when we remember we are nearer our salvation than when we believed, begin to think of what that salvation will be. How near it may be to some of us it were not possible for us to tell. But 24 hours may take some of us there—yes, less time than that! What is the distance between earth and Heaven? It only takes a second of time—

"One gentle sigh, the fetter breaks. We scarcely can say, 'They're gone!' Before the willing spirit takes Her mansion near the Throne."

Now, what shall we see when we get there? Well, first we shall see Jesus. And the sight of Him, oh, say no more—think of it! The vision of the Man of Sorrows! Our Beloved, who gave Himself for us—once to see Him, once to fall at His feet and speechless there to lie—bursting with gratitude, which even there shall be inexpressible! Oh, what a Heaven to be with

Him!

Then, next to Jesus, we shall be with all the bright spirits that have gone before us. Those that go to Australia begin forgetting father and mother that they left behind, because they are thinking of the brother and sister that went before. They will be at the landing place to meet them. Some of you have dear children that went Home in infancy. Some of you have a dear wife or a husband and they have been looking for you. I do not doubt they will know you. It will be one of the joys of Heaven to reunite these broken ties. I do not think Rowland Hill was at all foolish when he rode over from Cambridge, a distance of 13 miles, to see an old woman who was upon her dying bed. He said, "You are older than I am, but I am getting older and, even now, I sometimes think they have forgotten me. But in the meantime, as you are going first, take my love to the four great Johns—John who leaned on Jesus' bosom and John Bunyan and John Calvin and John Knox. Take my love to them and tell them poor old Rowly will be coming by-and-by."

I cannot doubt but that the message was delivered. I think there is such a connection between earth and Heaven that we shall see those who have gone before. How comfortable it must be to some aged ones when they think that though they are taken from that part of the family which remains on earth, they have a larger family circle probably in Heaven than here! It was so with a poor old man who accosted me the other day in a country lane and asked me for something. As I gave to him, I said, "How is it you are so poor?" "Ah," he said, "everybody is dead that ever cared for me." "But," I said, "surely there is somebody left?" "No, Sir," he said, "there is nobody. I buried my poor old wife last year. We had two or three children and they all died. My brother had five or six and they died years ago. The people that were young in my time, they are all gone. I do not know anybody now, nobody cares for me."

So, too, wrote one, who, if I am not mistaken, had been a votary of fashion in her gay circles—

"The friends of youth, manhood and age, At length are all laid in the ground. An unit I stand on life's stage, With nothing but vanity round. I wander bewildered and lost, Without impulse or interest view. And all hope of my heart is at most To soon bid the desert adieu. But this derelict state of man's lot That fate to the aged ordains, Bids the heart turn the thoughts where it ought, Nor seek worldly cure for its pains. Thus I turn from the past and the lost, Close the view my life's picture supplies And while penitent tears pay the cost, Blot the follies of mirth from my eyes."

Well, but what a comfort to such a one if he could but feel that though there is nobody here, yet there are plenty there among those that are gone before to greet and love him!

So, let us salute those that are ahead. We cannot yet see the bright light at the harbor's mouth, but we know we are on the right tack and that God's Eternal Spirit is driving us on towards the harbor. O let us still think of them and sing as Wesley did—

"Even now by faith we join our hands With those that went before And greet the blood-besprinkled bands On the eternal shore."

I shall not delay you, however, with these anticipations. There are some mournful reflections with which I will close.

The Lord Jesus, whose eyes of fire can read all hearts, knows this night that there are some of you who are not nearer your salvation than when you believed, because, first, you never did believe. And, secondly, that which you are nearer to is not salvation. Alas, Alas, alas, is it true that you have not believed? What does that mean? It means, with some of you that you have violated conscience. From your youth up you knew the beauties of godliness and the brightness of a holy life, but you have chosen evil in defiance of the inward monitor. You have elected to be an enemy of God! You have not believed and so have been a traitor to your own conscience.

And you have done it in the face of a hundred warnings—hundreds, did I say? No, hundreds of thousands of invitations! Are there not some of you who seem resolved to go to Hell over a mother's tears and prayers? You are pressing forward in the wrong way in defiance of the admonitions of a father who is now in Heaven. A godly education trained you for the sky but your own choice has doomed you to another fate. Alas, there are many in this congregation who have done violence to the Holy Spirit! There are many who have been accused, convicted, startled, made to pray— and yet tears have been brushed away—they have plunged into gaiety! They have returned to thoughtlessness! And so the hour of Divine Grace and the opportunity of mercy, they have flung to the winds.

If I knew the private history of a good many who have seats in this tabernacle, it would be a dreadful story of striving against every good principle, not for their own good, but for their own evil! You have fought not with devils, but with angels! You have fought with angels that you might be permitted to damn your own souls! You have contended with eternal mercy and not for the crown of your victory, but that you might ruin yourselves forever! If men were half as earnest to be saved as many seem to be to be lost, it were a blessed change. But, oh, the struggles of conscience, the murdering of godly thoughts, the putting of the bowstring about the neck of solemn conviction which has been committed by some who are here!

You have not believed—not believed! And here it is, the last Sunday night of 1868! Though three, four, five, six, or 10 years ago you were promising to mend and look hopeful, here you are just the same, with this label to be put upon you—not believed, confirmed unbelievers, enemies to God. Well now, there comes this horrible thought across my mind and I wish I did not feel compelled to utter it, but I must. Then, since you are not believing, your eternal destruction is nearer than ever it was. It must be so! Look at the vessel. The bows were in that direction. She is sailing that way. Cannot you see the trail she has left in the ocean? Do you not see everything indicates she is fast set towards that dreadful rock that shall grind her to pieces?

It is not merely that, the helm seems thus turned, but there is a current underneath the vessel which seems to be bearing it along swiftly. Apparently, the life of some of you is towards evil and towards Hell. Your whole tenor of life seems to bear you that way. Your inclinations, your companions, your very business seem to have acted like a gulf stream to bear you on towards ruin! Besides that, the wind is blowing that way—that wind that blew you into the theater last night, that blows you into carnal company, into the house of vice, that is drawing you fast, I say, into fierce temptations, while you grow more and more reckless of the consequences.

What with the helm set and perpetually nailed fast so that it should not be moved, a current under the vessel and the wind filling her sails—great God, how is she speeding on towards her eternal fate! But, worst of all, there is the engine within throbbing, palpitating,

helping the ship towards her ruin. Every thought, every desire you have, seems to be leading you away from Christ and onward towards mischief. See, there are others that have gone down during the past year! Others have been wrecked—wrecked on those rocks to which you are determinedly steering your soul. The wind is getting up, the tempest is howling fiercer than ever! With some of you, the sins you did not dare to do once have become

common and the things that made you shudder and your blood run cold, and you said, "Is your servant a dog that he should do this thing?" you now do them!

But the wind is still getting up, howling and blowing strong upon you and driving you onward in that evil course which must end in your eternal destruction. The wind is getting up! If you look ahead you see the iron-bound coast before you. Iron-bound, I say, not a harbor or a creek—nothing to run to—not a crack or a crevice up which a man might climb! And you have no lifeboat along that coast to rescue you and no boats in your vessel that would prove seaworthy when the vessel strikes. O that God might preserve you from ever striking upon the rocks of destruction! Some of you are steering ahead fast for them. Hard aport! Turn the vessel round, for there is yet a chance! Stop her!

Now she is right in the wind's teeth. Good mariner, hold fast to the helm and if you can, try to escape. It is too late for some of you! It is too late for all of you! Into those rocks you must drive and perish unless there shall come the ever-blessed Steersman of the Galilean Lake walking across the sea with pierced hands and feet and bid the winds to hush and turn right round and bid you believe in Him and then bid you steer to the port of Glory, where all shall be rest and peace! God grant that such mercy may come to you! Pray for it! Ask for it! Trust Jesus and you shall have it and to Him shall be the praise, world without end. Amen.

PORTION OF SCRIPTURE READ BEFORE SERMON—Psalm 49.