

Might Have Been, or May Be

A SERMON INTENDED FOR READING ON LORD'S-DAY, JANUARY 30, 1887.

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AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON.

"And some of them said, Couldnot thisMan, which opened the eyes ofthe blind, have caused that even this man should not have died?" [John 11:37](#).

"JESUS WEPT." It does not mean that He shed a tear or two, but that His tears flowed freely. Such is to be gathered from the original word. He wept copiously and continuously till He became the observed of all observers. He was deeply affected and His tears were the fit expression of His intense emotion. Love made Him weep—nothing else ever compelled Him to tears. I do not find that all the pains He endured, even when scourged or when fastened to the cruel Cross, fetched a single tear from Him—but for love's sake—"Jesus wept." At first I feel inclined to say, "Behold, how He wept!" And then I check myself and, borrowing my language from the bystanders, I cry, "Behold, how He loved him!" The Jews recognized, even with their unfriendly eyes, that His tears were drawn from Him by love alone! From this Rock of our salvation no rod but that of love could bring forth floods of tears!

So when we have noticed the tears and the power of love which brought forth the tears, let us observe how, being such as we are, tears are towards us a fit expression of His love. When you look upon your children with love, your eyes flash joy. When they are in health and strength, your love expresses itself fitly in delight in them. But love in Christ towards us most fitly shows itself in tears. When He thinks of what we are and how we have become subject to death—and how sin has brought us under this bondage—since He loves us, He must weep. No, He must die, for even His tears cannot suffice to manifest His love! Jesus must pour out His soul, not only unto tears, but unto death, that all may see how deeply He loves us!

I should like to begin my sermon with that thought deeply fixed upon our spirits, if we are, indeed, the people of God—that Jesus loves us—loves us unto tears! Inasmuch as He loved Lazarus when Lazarus was dead and in the tomb, let us herein behold how He loved us when we were dead in trespasses and sins. See how He loves us though, perhaps, our spirits may be dull and dead—and how He will love us even when we come to die. "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints." He loves us so that He will love us when we die, even as He loved Lazarus at the grave's mouth.

Let us turn away from our preface, which we have found in the context, to look at the text itself. While there were some who thought only of the love of Christ when they beheld His tears, there were others standing by more full of reasoning, who argued, "Could not this

Man, which opened the eyes of the blind, have caused that even this man should not have died?"

Placing my text in various lights, I see, first, a vain argument. Secondly a vile argument. Thirdly, a fair argument and, fourthly, if read in connection with the verses which succeed it, a full and faithful argument.

I. But, first, I see in the text A VAIN ARGUMENT. It is an argument about what might have been if such-and-such a thing had been. It is a very common thing to hear people thus talk—"If so-and-so, then so and-so." Such talk is always vain, because it leads to no practical result. What was the use of saying, "If Jesus had been here, then Lazarus would not have died," when Lazarus was already dead? The thing is done and cannot be undone—what is the use of asking about what once might have been but now cannot be? Yet have I seen strange sorrows wrung out of these suppositions! Perhaps the most bitter griefs that men know come not from facts, but from things which might have been, as they imagine. That is to say, they dig wells of supposition and drink the brackish waters of regret!

The sisters of Lazarus did this. Each said, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother had not died." In a more unbelieving way the Jews did it and said, "Could not this Man, which opened the eyes of the blind, have caused that even this

man should not have died?" Yes and so you say, "Now, if I had gone to so-and-so, this would not have happened. And then the other might have happened and a third thing probably would have occurred. And then how different it would have been from what it is now!" You blame yourself for steps which were not only innocent, but wise and right—and now that you see the consequences of them, you begin to imagine that they were not innocent, not wise and not right! And you fret to think that you took such steps.

I have known some go a great deal further than vainly accusing themselves—they have even accused God. They say, "Why was moral evil admitted into the world? Why were men and women constituted as they are? Could not God, who is Omnipotent, have so arranged things that there should have been no sin and no sorrow?" What a fine mess we get into when once we begin arguing over those points and conjecturing what might have been under other circumstances! You see, dear Friends, these things will not be and cannot be and, therefore, what is the good of our worrying over what is not and cannot be? I will plow, but if there is no field, excuse me, I shall not plow the sea, or the mist! I will get to work on anything that is practical, but I will not break my heart over fancies!

If it is to be done and it is right to do it, let us go at it at once. But if it cannot now be done, but is only a thing that might have been, let us leave it. You may go to the "might have been," I have better work to do. This was David's method about his child, as it should be yours about all your sick ones and those that have already departed. David fasts, prays and cries to God as long as his child is alive, but when his child is dead, he washes his face and eats bread because, he says, "Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not

return to me." It is done and cannot be un-done—what is the use of fretting over it now? Oh, that you would have Grace to leave this foolish chopping of logic with yourself and Providence—and use your reason for something better! Lazarus is dead—what is the use of saying that he might not have died if Jesus had interposed?

I call this a vain argument, in the next place, because even though we raise the question about what might have been and we push it until we begin to think that it ought to have been, still, unbelief will never get an explanation of it from the Lord. In the chapter there is no explanation given to the Jews of why Jesus, being able to open the eyes of the blind man and able to keep this person from dying, yet did not keep him from dying. An explanation was given by the Lord to His disciples by His assurance that it was for the glory of God. That explanation you will get. You have received it already. If you are God's child and He has denied you what you think He might as well have given you. If He has permitted you to suffer under a calamity which you think He might have averted, He will give you no other explanation than this which He gives you now without any pressure at all, namely, that it is for His Glory!

If it is for His Glory, is it not for your advantage? What can more advantage a servant than the glory of his master? What can more profit our loving hearts than to see God glorified? If you are not satisfied with that answer, do not expect any other. "Why have I been bereaved of my children?" "Why have I been ill so many years?" "Why did I fail when I hoped to reach wealth?" "Why did I break down in the examination when I might have obtained a degree?" It is an idle piece of business to demand the reasons of unavoidable trials! It is mere dreaming to guess what would have been if such another thing had been. "What you know not now, you shall know hereafter." Let that content you.

Once again, I call this a vain argument because it cannot benefit you to pry into this thing which the Lord has hidden from you. You are fostering self-conceit in calling God's Providence to your bar. You are practically sitting upon a throne and making God to be the prisoner at your bar! You are weighing over again what He has already weighed in the scale of wisdom. This will never do! A child-like spirit is infinitely healthier as it is infinitely holier than the spirit of questioning. Brothers and Sisters, we should not even thirst to know all the things that are, for if it is the Glory of God to conceal a thing, let it be concealed—and as for the things that might have been—what have we to do with them?

If we begin lifting up these curtains, we cannot tell what we may one day see. I have known persons intrude into this sphere until at last they have stumbled on a horror which they were never intended to see and which, indeed, they never would have seen if their own unhallowed imaginations had not created it for themselves! They were ambitious to alter Providence and change the times and seasons which God had ordained—and at last they fell into such a morbid condition that if they were not positively mad, they might have been

happier if they had been—for there is a state of mind, bordering on insanity, which has still a guilt about it and is, therefore, worse than if responsibility had been destroyed.

I shall beg you, therefore, Brethren, to forbear from prying into those secret things which belong only to God. Your profit lies in the direction of abstaining from such speculations. Do not talk about what might have been, or should have

been, interfering with the good which God has given you by pining after what He has denied. Oh, could you know as He knows and then love as He loves, you would act as He acts! Believe in Him and sit still at His feet! Talk no more about what He could have done, or might have done, or what you fancy He should have done, lest evil come of it.

II. Secondly, as I have spoken upon a vain argument, I will now speak of A VILE ARGUMENT, for I believe these Jews intended a piece of evil argument against the Christ of God. They put it thus—"This Man says that He opened the eyes of the blind and all the people think that He did, but if He did so, why did He not prevent His friend, whom He evidently loved, from dying? Either He has a lack of power which will prove that He did not open the eyes of the blind, after all, but that it was an imposture, or else, if He has such power and does not use it for His friend, He does not love Him and these tears are a mere pretence! He could have saved this man's life and now He stands here and weeps because he is

dead."

Thus the adversary would put the believer in our Lord upon the horns of a dilemma. We are not gored by either horn, for we know a way of escape. Still, you see the drift, and this is often the drift of Satan's arguments. Your brother, your mother, your child, your friend—these are dead. You sent to Jesus. You cried to God. You importuned for the precious life and yet they are dead. Well, then, there must have been a lack of power on the part of God to save life! Perhaps that conversion of yours, in which you have rejoiced and of which you have said, "One thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see"—perhaps, after all, that was not a work of Divine power, but a delusion! For He that saved your soul could have saved the life of your beloved and, as He did not do so, has He any power at all? And have you ever been the subject of that power?

You see the drift of the specious reasoning—is it not a vile argument? Let us unveil the falsehood of it. Suppose that Jesus is willing to open the eyes of the blind and does open them—is He, therefore, bound to raise this particular dead man? If He does not see fit to do so, does that prove that He has not the power? If He lets Lazarus die, is it proven, therefore, that He could not have saved His life? May there not be some other reason? Does Omnipotence always exert its power? Does it ever exert all its power? May there not be some great reason why Christ should open the eyes of the blind and yet should not step in to prevent the death of Lazarus? We can see that there may be many such reasons, but it is easy, when

you wish to argue against Christ and the Gospel, to forget a good deal! You can shut your eyes where it is inconvenient to see and then you can rush on blindly like a mad bull!

On the other hand, if they say, "If Christ can prevent Lazarus dying and He does not do so, there is a lack of love in Him!" Is it so? Is that a fair argument? It is not true, as a matter of fact—nor will it be thought to be true by our faith. It may be Infinite Love that wounds, that chastens, that afflicts. There is as much love in the Father when He wields the rod as when He gives the kiss—as much love in the Savior when He permits Lazarus to die as when He raises Lazarus from the grave! Yes, and it is possible that the less pleasing deed may be the more greatly charged with love! The greatest blessings come to us in the guise of sorrows. I should not wonder if the death of Lazarus was the passing of Lazarus into a higher state of spiritual life than he had ever enjoyed. I doubt not that he was a converted man before his death, but, certainly, that wonderful passing into the region of death-shade, (which I will not picture because the Bible does not picture it), and that coming back, again, must have given him such a vivid consciousness of the power of Christ that the spiritual life that was within him must have become more strong, more clear, more supreme than ever it had been before!

I should have liked to meet that man after he had been raised from the dead by Him who said, "I am the resurrection and the life." I think he could have preached from that text very wonderfully! He would have understood it by an experience unknown to us. I should think that Lazarus rose into the higher life in the very highest degree—and so it was Christ's love to Lazarus that let Lazarus die! And it was altogether a lie that he died because Jesus had a lack of love towards him. It is Christ's love that has let some of you be ill and poor. It is Christ's love that has suffered you to be despised and down-trodden. It is Christ's love that has let you remain in affliction, because the Divine benefit that has come of it is more to your profit than the thing itself could ever be to your loss! So the vile argument may well be driven away, whatever shape it takes in our minds.

There is no justification for our distrust as to what God has done for us in the way of Divine Grace—it has been real and no dream. And there is no justification for any doubt as to what God can do for us and will do for us in the future. He that has helped us so far will help us to the end. He that has done so much for us will withhold no good thing from us, but bestow all that is necessary for this life and godliness—and for the life to come and Glory!

III. We shall now proceed very briefly to notice what is A VERY FAIR ARGUMENT. If you take the text and press the malice out of it, it is true. "Could not this Man, which opened the eyes of the blind, have caused that even this man should not have died?" Yes, it is true. Jesus Christ, by what He has done, has proved His power to do anything. I need not enlarge upon the point, but I will put it before you. There is not a life which He cannot preserve! You may cry to Him about your sick ones. You are permitted to do so. Even if

they are given over by the physician, I counsel you to go to Jesus about them, though it is far better to go to Jesus before you consult the physician. We often make a mistake about the use of medicines by using medicine first. We should first go to the Lord, that we may be guided as to what medicine shall be used, what means shall be employed—and trust in God to bless the means made use of for restoration. We may make idols out of physicians as much as the heathen make idols out of blocks of wood.

Medicines are right enough in their place for healing, even as bread is right for nourishment, but as men live not by bread, only, so are they not healed by medicine, only. Before we eat bread, we ask God's blessing on that bread—let us seek a blessing on medicines whenever we use them. We are not healed by the physician, but by God who works according to His own will and pleasure! Let us, then, believe that the Christ, who has done this and that for other sick folk, can do the same for those whom we bring to Him—and let us leave their cases in His hands.

But take the text spiritually. I want you to believe that Christ can preserve us spiritually from death. Are we forced by our employments into the society of the ungodly? Does Providence call some of you working men to toil side by side, or even at the same bench, with infidels? The Lord Jesus can cause that you shall not be injured by them. He can give you spiritual health and strength even when you seem to be under the most deadly influences. He that opened your eyes, when you were blind, can keep you alive, now that you can see! Trust in Him for your final perseverance with the same unquestioning faith with which you trusted in Him for the pardon of your sins. I say again, He that opened your eyes, when you were in darkness, can cause that you should not die even though the deadliest influences from the world, the flesh and the devil should be set in operation against you. Because He lives, you shall also live. Fly to Him in the time of your temptation! Cry to Him in the hour of your need and He will help you and deliver you! You shall not die, but live and declare the works of the Lord.

Beloved, what a mercy it is that we can look back upon Christ's having opened the blind man's eyes and see the same thing in ourselves! Here is a blind man whose eyes Christ opened. It is yourself! He was able to give you sight and can you not transfer the argument to others? If the Lord Jesus Christ could give you sight, He can give others sight. If He opened your blind eyes, He can open the blind eyes of your children, of your unconverted father, your unsaved brothers, your unsaved sisters. Believe about your friends and cry to God about them! Take the text at once and read it so—"Could not this Man, who opened my blind eyes, open the blind eyes of those about whom my heart is heavy?" Remember that the man who was blind, whose eyes Christ opened, was born blind. Christ can deal with original sin and constitutional sin! Some seem to have inherited a nature more wild than common—their heart does not appear to be a heart of flesh, but a heart of stone—yet Jesus, who dealt with this strangely blind man—blind from his birth—can deal with those strange

sinners, those sinners of a scarlet hue who develop in their lives more of desperate viciousness than you see in others! Christ can deal with the vilest of the vile! Take them to Him, believe on account of them—and be fully convinced that no case is beyond the power of the living Savior!

For my part, I never can or will despair of the salvation of one of my fellow creatures, now that I am, myself, saved. I know that there were certain traits in my character and certain elements in my disposition which made my conversion to Christ more remarkable than that of the conversion of anybody else—and so I shall have hope concerning the most blasphemous, the most obstinate, the most unbelieving! This glorious Man who, in the days of His flesh, opened the eyes of one born blind—which thing had never been known before—can come and deal with the very chief of sinners! Yes, with sinners that are dead in sin—with sinners that lie rotting in their lusts! He can make them to be saints! This is a fair argument. I am sure it is.

IV. But, now, lastly, they had never thought of THE FULL AND FAITHFUL ARGUMENT from the text. All they said was—"This Man, who has opened the eyes of one born blind, could have prevented Lazarus from dying." That was a fair argument, but it was not a full argument. It never occurred to them to go further and enquire, "Now that Lazarus is dead, cannot this Man raise him from the dead?" The first piece of argument did not go far enough to yield any comfort because it only dealt with what might have been and what could not be!

I fear a great deal of our religion is of that kind. But what a mercy it would be if God would give some Christians six-penny-worth of commonsense! Oh, if some people could but believe what I am sure is true—that true religion is sanctified commonsense—that there is about the religion of Jesus Christ that which is just as practical as if our life were to be spent in keeping shop! True, it is spiritual and Divine, celestial and sublime, but it is as accurate as if we were to be nothing but mathematicians calculating and estimating through all our days! There is a mathematical truthfulness about our holy faith as well as a lofty, eagle-winged aspiration! So then, they should have argued thus—"Jesus Christ, who opened this blind man's eyes, has come to a corpse in its grave and He is able to make it live."

Friend, is there laid upon your mind at this time some poor sinner who is dead in trespasses and sins? You cannot get at him. You do not know how to make him feel or think. There does not seem to be a vital spark anywhere about him and you know not how to deal with him. Believe that the Gospel is meant for such a case as this and that the living God, in Jesus Christ, by the Holy Spirit, can meet with this clay-cold dead heart! "Oh, it is worse than that," you say, "it is worse than that! The person I am thinking of is put out of society and is too corrupt to be spoken with." Yes, I know what you mean. Perhaps you speak of a fallen woman. We are always more eager to bury the fallen women than the fallen men. A man, of whom we must say with Martha, "By this time he stinks," may still be tolerated in

society. But if it happens to be a woman that sins, they cry, "Bury her out of sight! Roll the stone to the mouth of the tomb! We never speak to her, or mention her!" If you have an anxiety on your soul about a person who is thus shut out from society, I want you to believe that Jesus can bring out the buried and corrupt.

"Oh," you say, "but it is not merely that the person I think of is buried away, but the case is really one which may not be described. He has been dead four days. He has gone so far that his crime is unmentionable." I know the case. Yet you may mention it before the Lord—in His Presence no harm will come of it. I do not read in the Gospel narrative of anybody being distressed by the odor when the sepulcher of Lazarus was opened. When Jesus said, "Take away the stone," He knew that He had Divine disinfectants ready at hand. He knew what He did. When you seek after gross sinners, prudent people say, "Well, if you go after such people as that, your own character will be injured before long." The Lord will prevent any harm coming from it, for He can speak to the most corrupt sinner and say, "Live," and he shall live and then the corruption is no more!

Therefore let us drive out of our minds the notion that any sinner is too far gone for Christ to save him! I used to hear in my youth about a "day of Grace," and about persons having passed that day of Grace. But I do not believe it. As long as you are in this world I am bid to preach to you, for the Gospel message is to be proclaimed to every creature and I dare not draw vain distinctions about a "day of Grace." If you have a disease about you that will carry you off before the clock strikes 12 tonight, I still bid you believe in the Christ of God and live! If you are so bad in your own esteem that there never lived a worse man or a worse woman out of Hell, yet still believe in Jesus Christ! My Lord loves to save great sinners, even as He delighted to bring from the grave the long-dead Lazarus, that he might be received into the bosom of his family, to be the joy of the house and the glory of Christ!

I have not gone too far. I am sure that I have not. No, I could not go too far. The shoreless, bottomless love of my great Lord—I wish I had the tongues of men and angels to tell of it! You have not sinned beyond His power to save you! He is a great Savior, a mighty Savior! And His precious blood can remove all your death and corruption! When I think of those whom He has saved, I argue, "Could not my Lord Jesus, who opened the eyes of the blind, make these dead sinners

live?"

I will tell you something else. If you yourself, tonight, are that dead sinner, I say to you, in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, "Thus says the Lord, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved." "I cannot," says one, "I am dead." I know that you are, but if the Lord speaks to you, you will live—and He does speak to you by this voice of mine. I speak to you in His name! You careless sinner, in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, consider your ways! You dead sinner, in the name of Jesus, live! His Spirit has gone with the word which I have spoken! The thing is done in some who have heard me and will be done in

others who will read these words. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, forever and ever! Amen.