

## RIGHTEOUSNESS AND STRENGTH IN THE LORD

Preached at Rehoboth, Swindon,  
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*"Surely shall one say, in the Lord have I righteousness and strength: even to Him shall men come; and all that are incensed against Him shall be ashamed. In the Lord shall all the seed of Israel be justified, and shall glory."*

Isaiah xlv, 24, 25.

In the text we are taught to see what suitability and sufficiency believing souls find in the Person and work of Christ, and their confession of His most glorious suitability to them. In the immediate connection of the text the Lord has been speaking to His ancient people in terms of reproach as well as exhortation against their proneness to idolatry. We ought not to think that the tendency to idolatry was peculiar to the Old Testament dispensation, for John evidently felt in gospel days there was a necessity for the word in his epistle, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols." Certainly there is this difference, the Jews of old worshipped a god of wood and stone, unless prevented by powerful grace, and thought themselves to be saved; whereas the people of God under the clearer light of the gospel can never think that an idol can save them. Nevertheless, some idol can steal away our affections, divide our attention, bring us into a snare, and desolate our spirits. To be kept from idols needs the gracious teaching and constant exercise of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. The Lord, by His servant Isaiah, tells the people, as He had often told them, that an idol could not save, and He challenges the idols of their false prophets to bring an instance in which they foretold tidings that afterwards came to pass. It is the prerogative of God, and of God alone, to declare what things shall come to pass even centuries after the word has gone forth out of His mouth. He refers to Himself in terms that are wonderful. He says of Himself, "A just God, and a Saviour." Generally speaking, men think that God is just and no Saviour, or, that He is a Saviour and not just to mark iniquities. Both are wrong, because God is just, and a Saviour too: as

Paul, writing to the Romans said, "The justifier of him that believeth in Jesus." Salvation is never at the expense of justice, never in defiance of what God has said: "The soul that sinneth, it shall die." Salvation is in compliance with all the requirements of God's holy law, for the Son of God, as the Saviour of His people, has satisfied every claim, rendered to the law of God what is His right, and thus becomes in salvation both just and righteous too.

Then He said, "Look unto Me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else." And the Lord's people give their assent to this; they know that there is no god beside the Lord; they want to know more of Him. What a wonderful mercy that is, when our attention and our expectation is taken from the things that are temporal, that are passing, that can never be of eternal service to us, to look by faith to the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ! What is remarkable in this word of grace is that no conditions are required; it is not that good people may look and bad people may not look, for that would be contrary to the gospel. Good people seem to have no need to look; I mean, those that are good in their own apprehension; while bad people are so unworthy that they wonder whether it is right to look or not. The thing that will put the matter right in the conscience is the gracious testimony of the Spirit of Christ in our souls. It can answer all our objections; it can take away all our sense of self-sufficiency; it can teach a poor, helpless soul to look and thus realise salvation through the blood of Christ. And this is spoken to the "ends of the earth." It is used in two senses in the Scriptures. Paul speaks to those to whom he wrote as those upon whom the ends of the earth were fallen; that is to say, those who live in the latter times. Or, it refers to the utmost part of the earth; so that a poor sinner, however far removed he may be in his soul's feelings, and at whatever period of time he may look, he is sure of this, that faith which unites to the Lamb is saving and is blessed.

Then Isaiah is led to speak the word of God directly to His people: "I have sworn by Myself." God cannot swear by a greater than Himself. He swears by Himself, as Paul says to the Hebrews. What He says about His swearing, or His oath, is "The word is gone out of My mouth in righteousness, and shall

not return." that is to say, He has revealed His purpose. There are purposes, doubtless, in God, that are not revealed; there are many purposes that are revealed, and having revealed them He has done so in righteousness. It shall not return to Him empty, or void, or fruitless, or useless. What He has confirmed with an oath shall come to pass: "That unto Me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear." The apostle, writing to the Romans, applies this to the judgment, in which, speaking to the people of God about a censoriousness among them, he said to them "Why dost thou judge thy brother? and why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall confess (or swear) to God." And in the judgment it will be so. Not only shall those that fear God bow in grateful submission to Him, and confess that Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father, but all unbelievers shall also bow before Him, acknowledging His authority, trembling beneath His power, faced as they are with the guilt of their sins and God's threatened punishment of their sins. But it is also equally true in a limited sense, or we may say in a gospel sense, of His people, that "unto Him every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear"; even as the Saviour said, "All that the Father giveth Me shall come to Me; and him that cometh to Me I will not cast out." Every vessel of mercy shall bow before Him and confess that Jesus is the Lord. Nothing can prevent it. The word has gone forth out of His lips; His word cannot be broken. The time of love must come for those that are thus interested in the work of Christ. But let not any poor sinner say, "Well, if I am to be saved I shall be saved." Just as long as you shelter beneath that idea, (and in your case it can only be an idea though in words it may express a truth) there will be no sense of salvation. It becomes poor sinners to be well exercised about their case and their state and their standing. To think of a sinner on the brink of everlasting woe and putting off his soul's case is terrible. Oh, that God would convince of sin and of righteousness and of judgment.

Now it is said that this shall come to pass; that is, the oath and purpose of God. But what shall come to pass? it is amplified in the text, "Surely, shall one say, in the Lord have I

righteousness and strength: even to Him shall men come; and all that are incensed against Him shall be ashamed. In the Lord shall all the seed of Israel be justified and shall glory."

I want to notice, as enabled, in the first place who they are that shall come and confess and say, "In the Lord have I righteousness and strength." We are told in the text, "Even to Him shall men come." Now that implies that there is in the experience of every sinner a time when they do not come, and where there is no coming to the Person and work of Christ. They do not come because they see no need to come; they are not in peril; they see no worth or excellence in the Person and work of Christ; and such is the rebellion and enmity of their depraved hearts that what the Saviour said was quite true, "Ye will not come unto Me that ye might have life." It is true of every sinner in varying degrees. But the purpose of God is that those that shall swear, they shall come. They shall come, not of themselves, for the natural man receiveth not the things of God. But they shall come by the will of God, by the power of His grace, by the force of truth, and by the gracious leadings and drawings of the Spirit of God in their souls; and they will have to come as guilty sinners. They will have to come as suppliants. "God be merciful to me a sinner." They shall come as ready to perish with the chains about their necks, distressed at what they now see to be true of themselves, for now they know their sins and are longing for an interest in the Person, blood and righteousness of God's dear Son. "They shall come;" They may be hindered and discouraged, and yet they shall come. The power that is for them as well as in them is stronger than all the power that is against them. They may be cast down again and yet again, but they shall come. As Irons says in one of his hymns, "It was 'shall come' that conquered me." And that is the only thing that can conquer and bring a poor sinner to the Person and work of Christ. It is a sovereign, irresistible, invincible grace felt in the soul, experienced through the word, and it is maintained in their experience so that as sinners they come, as sinners have ever come. While we are in this life we are never healthy in our souls except as there is a coming to the Lord Jesus Christ in supplication, with repentance, and in the exercise of faith.

But these people are described also by also by another word, and that is "The seed of Israel." It is a similar expression to "the seed of Jacob." One thought in connection with it is, the seed of Israel is a covenant seed and they are interested in the covenant of God's grace; for here the promise speaks, not of a national covenant but of a spiritual covenant, relating to a people brought into the terms of this covenant by the operations of His grace. When we speak of the seed of Israel we have to think of what is said of the seed of Jacob, for they are the same people. The Lord never says to them, "Seek ye My face in vain." So the seed of Israel is a covenant people and they are a praying people; and when we speak about praying people we do not simply mean those that have some form of prayer, but praying people who pray out of necessity; they pray as they are taught by the Spirit of God; they are troubled when they cannot pray, and they cannot rest until the Spirit of God is pleased to revive those gracious exercises in their souls.

Before we notice what these people shall say, let us pause just for a moment to ask ourselves how far our experience corresponds with the description that is here given. "To Him shall men come," even the seed of Israel. What is said to these people is, "Surely, shall one say, in the Lord have I righteousness and strength; in the Lord shall all the seed of Israel be justified." Human nature would never be willing to say this from a feeling sense of it. The words may be used of course, but the word of truth refers to realities and I say again, human nature will never submit to say, "In the Lord have I righteousness and strength;" and human sense and reason, with all their powers, will never humble themselves to admit that they cannot of themselves justify their persons, but must look to the righteousness of another. But the grace that brings a poor sinner to Christ prepares him for the sacred experience that makes these truths, not only theoretical, but matters of vital, believing experience.

Let us look, then, at what these men shall say. The first thing that they shall say is, "In the Lord have I righteousness and strength." This not the first thing they say in grace. It is more likely that the first thing that a poor sinner says is, "I am an undone sinner." But here the word is speaking of bowing the

knee, swearing to God, and confessing to Him, and what they say in this confession: "In the Lord have I righteousness." We have no righteousness in ourselves, and it is our mercy if the Spirit of God has convinced us, if He has made our self-righteousness as filthy rags and shown us out of His word, and in experience, that, apart from the righteousness of Christ, we are destitute sinners. It is a wonderful testimony that faith gives to Christ; "In the Lord have I righteousness." It is in Him. He has been appointed by God His Father, and the Father of His people in His Son, to provide this righteousness. He did not need it for Himself, but His people could not be saved without it, and therefore He was made under the law, He was made of a woman. In His incarnate state He became responsible for the sins of His people in the same nature in which His people had sinned. By His life of obedience, by His vicarious sufferings, His meritorious death, He has suffered the Just for the unjust; He has wrought out an everlasting righteousness for His people. He has been raised from the dead, and ascended up into heaven, where He is the righteousness of His people.

We are apt to make a sad mistake at times in our judgment by separating between Christ and His righteousness. We may distinguish between the Person of Christ and His righteousness, but never separate them. For his people their righteousness is in Him. Bunyan on one occasion, when depressed in his soul, had a view of this and exclaimed, "My righteousness is in heaven in the Person and work of Christ." If we have Christ, we have His righteousness; if we have His righteousness, we have Christ. But there is a distinct testimony at times to this truth in experience. How futile to attempt to save ourselves when it required nothing less than the life, the sufferings, and death of Christ to save His people! Surely the Father would have spared His Son if sinners, by their own efforts, could have saved themselves. It is a wonderful thing to be a lost sinner, because such is the character to whom Christ in His righteousness is revealed. His righteousness is necessary to save them from the guilt of their abounding sins, and to cover their guilty souls, and to give them a title to gospel blessings, and at last heaven's blessings.

What a wonderful truth it is that guilty sinners deserving of

death eternal, are justified by the imputation of Christ's righteousness to their own souls! It means that the believing sinner is acquitted from the charges of the law and relieved of the guilt of his sin, and is accounted just, or justified, in the righteousness of Christ. It is not a question of proving that we have never sinned, for that can never be done. We shall never forget that we have sinned and that we have destroyed ourselves. But justification clears the guilty in the sight of God, and they get this clearance in their own souls under the gracious witness of the Spirit of God. Jeremiah said in his day that "The iniquity of Israel shall be sought for, and there shall be none; and the sins of Judah, and they shall not be found; For I will pardon them whom I reserve," - justified by the righteousness of Christ. But how often we feel far from this; guilt and fear take possession of our souls. Let it be remembered then, this is the truth which belongs to the exercise of faith and hope and love in the Person and work of Christ. Let the Saviour but smile into our hearts and draw our affections, and we shall say, "In the Lord have I righteousness and strength." If you are exercised about your soul and are exercised to know that Christ is your righteousness you will know this, that you have no strength, no spiritual strength. How often we have to prove this to our shame, and yet it is needful. We cannot affect our hearts rightly with the shame of our sins; we cannot produce a broken and contrite heart that trembles at His word; we would, but cannot pray. We would repent, but our hearts are as hard as steel. We would be submissive, we would depend, we would be quiet, but, O, the reverse is what we feel! but to faith this is made out, "In the Lord have I righteousness and strength." It is the hope of righteousness that gives strength to the soul, and it is He Who is our righteousness, Who communicates of His fullness to us and gives us a strength which we so much need; strength honestly to confess our sins, strength to deny ourselves, and take up our cross, and follow Him; strength to hang upon His naked word of truth, and strength to plead the blood and righteousness of Christ.

You will be needing strength all your days. Spiritual strength is as necessary as our daily bread, and faith that can say, "In the Lord have I righteousness and strength." Our proud natures

would like to feel strong enough in ourselves, but that is not God's way. He will have the glory; our strength is in Him and from Him.

Remember, the Lord does not say at what period of our pilgrimage we shall be so favoured, so strengthened, so blessed, to be able to speak thus the language of faith. What He does say is "They shall say." You that fear God who know the truth of what I am saying, but who long to be able to say personally, "In the Lord have I righteousness and strength," plead this before Him: "Surely shall one say" (each one for himself) "in the Lord have I righteousness and strength."

But I want a word in the last place about the difference between the believer and the unbeliever. In the case of the believer it is thus expressed, "The seed of Israel shall be justified, and shall glory." Being justified freely by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, they shall glory; that is, they shall bow in humble, grateful submission to their God and Saviour, and crown Him Lord of all in their hearts. Their boast shall be not a carnal boast, but of the love of Christ to their souls. They shall glory in grace, rich, sovereign, omnipotent, discriminating grace that has made them to differ. They will trace it through all their lives back to its fountain in God, and glory in the grace of their dear Redeemer.

"But all that are incensed against Him shall be ashamed." It would be folly to deny that men are incensed against the Saviour. We cannot go about with our eyes open and our ears attentive without being convinced that men by nature are incensed against the Saviour. They hate His truth; they will have none of His ways; they despise His righteousness, preferring to trust their own; they spurn the mention of His precious blood; they deny the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures. Everything that is sacred is a morsel for their contempt. They are incensed against Him, and sin and Satan see to it that the fire is kept alive. But such shall be ashamed! that is true in two senses. There are sinners who have been incensed against the Lord who have been made ashamed at the throne of grace by the Saviour's mercy to them. But in the stricter sense of the Scripture here, those that are incensed against Him shall be ashamed, they shall be confounded. They may go on in their sins, come to their end,

and it may be said, "They have gone off like a lamb," - no bands in their death. But before God they will be ashamed, and there will be nowhere to hide their guilty faces, not the rocks nor yet the hills. Oh! what a difference between the end of a child of God and an unbeliever!

And there is a difference in their exercises. The unbeliever *shall* be ashamed, confounded; but a child of God prays against being ashamed, "Hold thou me up, and I shall not be ashamed." Or desires with the apostle to say, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ."

O, what a contrast, to be everlastingly put to shame! O for grace to worship God in Spirit and in truth, to bow the knee and confess the dear Redeemer to His face.

May the Lord add His blessing for His Name's sake. AMEN.