

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit.

REVELATION AND CONVERSION.

A Sermon

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C. H. SPURGEON,

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“The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul.”—Psalm xix. 7.

WHEN he spoke of “the law of the Lord”, David did not merely mean the law as it was given in the ten commandments, although that also is perfect, and is used, to some extent, in the conversion of souls. The term includes the entire doctrine of God,—the whole divine revelation; and though, in David's day, there was not so full and clear a revelation as we have,—for the New Testament was not then given, nor much of the Old Testament, yet the text has lost none of its former force, but has rather gained more; so I shall use it as applicable to the entire Scriptures,—to the law and to the gospel, and to all that God has revealed; and speaking of it in that sense, I may truly say that it is perfect, and that it converts the soul.

A tree is known by its fruit, and a book must be tested by its effects. There are some books which bear their fruit for the hangman and the jail; and such books are very widely spread nowadays. They are frequently embellished with engravings, and put into the hands of boys and girls, and a crop of criminals is constantly the result of their publication and circulation. There have been books written which have spread moral contagion throughout centuries. I need not mention them; but if it were possible to gather them all together in one heap, and burn them as the Ephesians burnt their books of magic, it would be one of the greatest blessings conceivable. Yet, if that were done, I fear that other wicked brains would be set to work to think out similar blasphemies, and that other hands would be found to scatter their vile productions.

The Word of God must be tested, like other books, by the effect which it produces; and I am going to speak upon one of its effects to which many of us here present can bear personal witness. The old proverb says, “Speak as you find;” and I am going to speak of the

Bible as I have found it,—to praise the bridge that has carried me over every difficulty until now, and that has carried a great many of you over also. We know that the law of the Lord is good because it converts the soul; and, to our mind, the best proof of its purity and power is that it has converted our soul.

My first object will be to show *how the Word of God converts the soul*; then to show *the excellence of the work of conversion*; and, therefore, thirdly, *the excellence of that Book which produces conversion*.

I. First, then, I am to show HOW THE WORD OF GOD CONVERTS THE SOUL.

Man's face is turned away from his Maker. Ever since the fatal day when our first parents broke the law of God, we have been, all of us, guilty of the same great crime. We stand as men who have their backs to the light, and we are going the downward road, the road which leads to destruction. What we need is to be turned round, for that is the meaning of the word "converted"—turned right about. We need to hear the command, "Right about face," and to march in the opposite direction from any in which we have ever marched before. Our text truly says that the Word of God turns us round. It does not mean that the Word alone does that apart from the Spirit of God, because a man may read the Bible through fifty times, and, for fifty years, hear sermons that have all come out of the Bible, and yet they will never turn him unless the Spirit of God makes use of the Word of God or the preacher's sermons. But when the Spirit of God goes with the Word, then the Word becomes the instrument of the conversion of the souls of men.

This is how the work of conversion is wrought. First, *it is by the Scriptures of truth that men are made to see that they are in error*. There are millions upon millions of men, in the world, who are going the wrong way, yet they do not know it; and there are tens of thousands, who believe that they are even doing God service, when they are utterly opposing him. Some who, as far as it is in their power, are even slaying Christ, know not what they are doing. One of the pleas that our Saviour used upon the cross was, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." To take my own case, I know that, for years, I was not conscious of having committed any great sin. I had been, by God's restraining grace, kept from outward immoralities, and from gross transgressions, and therefore I thought I was all right. Did I not pray? Did I not attend a place of worship? Did I not do what was right towards my fellow-men? Did I not, even as a child, have a tender conscience? It seemed to me, for a time, that all was well; and, perhaps, I am addressing someone else who says, "Well, if I am not right, I wonder who is; and if I have gone wrong, where must my neighbours be going?" Ah, that is often the way we talk! As long as we are blind, we can see no faults in ourselves; but when the Spirit of God comes to us, and reveals to us the law of God, then we perceive that we have broken the whole of the ten commandments, in the spirit, if not in the letter of them. Even the chastest of men may well tremble when they remember that searching word of Christ,

“Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.” When you understand that the commandments of God not only forbid wrong actions, but also the desires, and imaginations, and thoughts of the heart, and that, consequently, a man may commit murder while he lies in his bed,—may rob his neighbour without touching a penny of his money or any of his goods,—may blaspheme God though he never uttered an oath, and may break all the commands of the law, from the first to the last, before he has put on his garments in the morning;—when you come to examine your life in that light, you will see that you are in a very different condition than you thought you were in. Think, for instance, of that solemn declaration of our Lord, “I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.” It is by bringing home to the heart such truths as these that the Spirit of God, through the Word, makes a man see that he is in error, and in danger; and this is the beginning of his conversion. You cannot turn a man round as long as he believes he is going in the right way. While he has that idea in his head, he goes straight on, marching, as he supposes, safely; so the very first thing to be done to him is to let him see that there is a terrible precipice right before him, over which he will fall if he goes on as he is going. When he realizes that, he stops, and considers his position.

Then the Word of God comes in, in the next place, *to take the man off from all attempts to get round by wrong ways.* When a man knows that he is going wrong, his instinct should lead him to seek to get right; but, unhappily, many people try to get right by getting wrong in another direction. A good man sent me a volume of his poems, the other day. As soon as I looked into it, I saw that there was one line of the verse that was too short, and the good brother evidently felt that it was, so he tried to set the matter right by making the next line too long, which, as you see at once, made two faults instead of one. In like manner, you will find that men, who are wrong in one direction with regard to their fellow-men, often become very superstitious, and go a great deal further in other directions than God asks them to go, and so, practically, make a long line towards God in order to make up for the short line towards men, and thus they commit two errors instead of one. Here is a sheep that has gone astray; it has wandered so far to the East that, in order to get right, it tries to go just as far to the West; and if convinced that it is in the wrong road, all it does is to stray just as far to the North; and, by-and-by, to the South. It is wandering all the while in a different way, with the intent to get back to the fold; and, in this respect, sinners are just as silly as the sheep. Now, the Word of God tells a man that, by the works of the law, he cannot be justified; it tells him that his heart is defiled, that he himself is condemned already, that he is shut up under condemnation for having broken God's law, and indicates to him that, whatever he may do, or however much he may struggle, if he does not seek salvation in God's way, he will only make the bad worse, and be like a drowning man who sinks the faster the more he struggles. When the Word of God

shows a man that, and makes him feel as though he were hopeless, helpless, shut up in the condemned cell, it has done a great deal towards turning him round.

The next thing the Word of God does is *to show the man how he might get right*. And, oh, how perfectly it shows him this! It comes to the man, and says to him, "Your sin deserves punishment. God has laid that punishment upon his only-begotten Son; and, therefore, he is ready to forgive you freely for Christ's sake, not because of anything good in you, or anything you ever can do, but entirely of his free mercy. He bids you trust yourself in the hands of Jesus that he may save you." Come, then, and rely upon what Christ has done, and is still doing for you, and believe in the mercy of God, in Christ Jesus, to all who trust him. Oh, how clearly the Word of God sets Christ before us! It is a sort of mirror in which he is revealed. Christ himself is up in heaven, and a poor sinner, down here on earth, cannot see him however long he looks; but this Word of the Lord is like a huge looking-glass, better even than Solomon's molten sea; and Jesus Christ looks down into this mirror, and then, if you and I come and look into it, we can see the reflection of his face. Blessed be his holy name, it is true, as Dr. Watts sings,—

"Here I behold my Saviour's face
Almost in every page."

There is scarcely one chapter in which Christ is not, more or less clearly, set forth as the Saviour of sinners. So the Word of God, you see, shows the man that he is in the wrong, takes him away from wrong ways of trying to get right, and then puts him in the way to get right, namely, by believing in Jesus.

But the Word of the Lord does more than that. In the power of the Holy Spirit, *it helps the man to believe*; for, at the first, he is quite staggered at the idea of free salvation,—instantaneous pardon,—the blotting out of sin all for nothing,—pardon for the worst and vilest freely given, and given now. The man says, "Surely, it is too good to be true." He is filled with amazement, for God's thoughts are as high above him, and as far out of his reach, as the heavens are above the earth. Then the Word comes to him, and says, "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." The Word also says to him, "All manner of sin and of blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men." The Word says, "The mercy of the Lord endureth for ever." "He delighteth in mercy." "I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and, as a cloud, thy sins." I need not go on repeating the texts with which I hope many of you have long been familiar. There is a great number of them,—precious promises, gracious invitations, and comforting doctrines; and, as the sinner reads them, with trembling gaze, the Spirit of God applies them to his soul, and he says, "I can and I do believe in Jesus. Lord, I do gladly accept thy pardoning mercy. I look unto him who was nailed to the cross, and I find in him the cure for the serpent-bites of sin. I do and I

will believe in Jesus, and venture my soul upon him." It is thus that the Word of God converts the soul, by helping the man to believe in Jesus.

And when it has done that, *the man is converted*; for when a man looks to Christ alone, he has turned his face towards God. Now, he has confidence in God, and out of this grows love to God, and now he desires to please God because God has been so very gracious in providing such a Saviour for him. The man is turned right round; from rebelling against God, he has come to feel intense gratitude to his Redeemer, and he seeks to live to God's glory as he would never have thought of doing before.

I ask you, who are the people of God, whether you have not felt, since your conversion, the power of the Word of God *in sustaining you in your converted condition*. Do you not often feel, as you hear the gospel preached, your heart grow warm within you? Some time ago, when I went away for a week's holiday, I was more than a little troubled about many things. I had been, for a long while, preaching to others, and I thought I should like to feel the power of the Word in hearing it myself. I went to a little chapel in the country, and there I heard a lay brother—I think he must have been an engineer—preach a sermon. There was nothing very grand in it, except that it was full of Christ; and as I listened to it, my tears began to flow. I wish that, sometimes, some of you, my brethren, would preach, and let me take my turn at listening. Well, on that occasion, my soul was melted as I heard the gospel proclaimed very simply, and I thought, "After all, I do feel its power; I do enjoy its sweetness;" for, while I listened to it, my heart overflowed with joy and delight, and I could only sit still and weep as I heard the simple story of the cross.

And have not you, beloved, often found it so, in your experience, as you have been reading the Word of the Lord? If you ever get dull in the things of God, it is not the Bible that has made you so. If ever your heart grows cold, it is not the promises of God that have made you cold. If ever you cannot sing, and cannot pray, it is not the searching of the Scriptures that has brought you into that condition; and if you ever have the misery of hearing a sermon that deadens your spiritual life, I am quite certain that that sermon is not in harmony with the mind of God, and not according to the teaching of the Word of God. But when you hear the gospel fully and faithfully preached, if your heart is at all capable of feeling its power, it stirs your spirit, it wakes you up, it produces holy emotions,—love to God, love to your fellow-men, heart-searching, deep humiliation, ardent zeal, and all the Christian graces in full exercise. The Word of the Lord is perfect, and its effect is continually to restore and revive the soul of the Christian.

This has been to me one of the great evidences of the truth of inspiration. Standing alone at night, and looking up to the starry vault of heaven, I have asked myself, "Is this gospel, which I have believed, which I have preached to others for so many years, really true?" Being absolutely certain that there is a God,—for none but a fool can doubt that,—I have said, "Well, this gospel has made

me love God. I know I love him with all my heart and soul. And whenever it exerts its rightful power over me, it makes me try to please him. Whenever I am under its influence, it makes me hate all wrong, and all meanness, and all falseness. Now, it would be a very strange thing if a lie could lead a man to act like that, so it must be true." The moral effect of the Word of God upon one's own nature, from day to day, becomes, in the absence of all other proof,—even if we had no other,—the surest and best evidence to a man that "the law of the Lord is perfect," for it converts his soul.

I once heard a charming story of Robert Hall,—that mightiest of our Baptist orators,—perhaps one of the greatest and most eloquent ministers who ever lived. He was subject to fits of terrible depression of spirits; and, one night, he had been snowed up, on his way to a certain place where he was going to preach. There was such a great depth of snow that he was obliged to stay for the night at the farmhouse where he had stopped. But he must preach, he said, he had got his discourse ready, and he must deliver it; so they fetched in the servants, and the farm people, and he preached the sermon he had prepared,—a very wonderful one to be delivered in a farmhouse parlour; and after the others had all gone, he sat down by the fireside with the good man of the house, and he said to him,—a plain, country farmer, "Now tell me, Mr. So-and-so, what do you think is the sure evidence of a man being a child of God, for I sometimes am afraid I am not one?" "Oh!" said the farmer, "my dear Mr. Hall, how can you talk like that?" "Well, what do you think is the best evidence that a man is really a child of God?" "Oh!" replied the farmer, "I feel sure that, if a man loves God, it must be all right with him." "Then," said the farmer, as he told the story, "you should have heard him speak. He said, 'Love God, sir? Love God? If I were damned, I would still love him; he is such a blessed Being,—so holy, so true, so gracious, so kind, so just!' He went on for an hour, praising God, the tears running down his cheeks as he kept on saying, 'Love him! I cannot help loving him; I must love him. Whatever he does to me, I must love him.'" Well, now, I have felt just like that sometimes, and then I have said to myself, "What made me love the Lord thus? Why, this that I have read about him in this blessed Book; and this that I believe that he has done for me, in the person of his dear Son; and that which brings me into such a state that I love him with all my nature, must be a right and a true thing."

The Word of God is perfect, converting the soul. You will find it to be so the longer you live, and the more you test and try it. Whenever you go astray, it is because you get away from the Word of God; and as long as you are kept right, it is because you are drinking in the precious truth concerning Jesus as it is revealed in the Bible. That is the one perfect Book in the world, and it will make you also perfect if you will yield to its gracious influence. Only submit yourself to it, and you will, one day, become perfect, and be taken up to dwell where the perfect God, who wrote the perfect Book, will reveal to you the perfection of bliss for ever and for evermore. God grant to you, dear brethren and sisters, to know the

power of this converting Book! If any of you have backslidden, I pray that this same blessed Book may bring you back. I had a letter, the other day, from the backwoods of America, that did my heart good. It was from a man, who was one of my first converts at New Park Street Chapel. He had been for years a member of the church, but he grew cold, and ceased to attend the means of grace; and, at last, he had to be excommunicated from the church. He went out to America; and there, far away, he began to examine himself, and the Spirit of God brought home to his heart the old texts which he used to hear. He writes that he was brought to his knees, and now he is actively engaged in the service of God, endeavouring to bring other backsliders and sinners to the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the Word of God that will restore you, backslider; I hope it will do so this very hour, and that, soon, you will come to us, and say, "Take me into the church again, for the Lord has restored me to fellowship with him through his blessed Word."

II. I must be very brief upon the second part of my subject, which is, THE EXCELLENCE OF THIS WORK OF CONVERSION. That is a boundless theme, but I must be content just to touch upon a few points of this excellence.

When the Word of God converts a man, *it takes away from him his despair, but it does not take from him his repentance.* He does not think now that his sin will cast him into hell, but he does not therefore think that his sin is a trifle. He hates the sin as much as if he feared that it would destroy him for ever. That is a grand kind of conversion,—that the man, who had been in despair because of his sin, is made to know that his sin is forgiven, and yet he is not led to trifle or tamper with sin. By faith, he sees the wounds of Jesus, and he knows how Christ bled to set him free from the bondage of sin, and that makes him for ever hate sin. Is not that an excellent conversion?

True conversion also *gives a man pardon, but does not make him presumptuous.* His past transgression is all forgiven him, but he does not, therefore, say, "I will go, and transgress in the same fashion again. If pardon be so easily obtained, why should I not sin?" No truly converted man ever talked like that; or, if such a thought ever occurred to him, he must have said at once, "Get thee behind me, Satan, for thou savourest not the things that be of God." Such talks as that would be diabolical. "Shall we sin, that grace may abound? God forbid!" Though the man is pardoned, he hates sin as the burnt child dreads the fire. He is afraid lest, by any inadvertent step, he should grieve his Lord, who has blotted out the past.

Further, true conversion *gives a man perfect rest, but does not stop his progress.* He knows that the work that has saved him is the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ, and that he has not to add even one thread to the robe of righteousness which has been given to him; yet he desires to grow in grace, to become holier and holier, more like his Lord and Master. While he perfectly rests in Christ, he spreads the wings of his soul that he may fly higher and higher towards his Lord and Master.

Again, true conversion gives a man security, but it does not allow him to leave off being watchful. He knows that he is safe, and that he shall never perish, neither shall any pluck him out of Christ's hands; but he is always on the watch against every enemy,—against the world, the flesh, and the devil. One of our hymn-writers puts this double truth very sweetly,—

“ We have no fear that thou shouldst lose
 One whom eternal love could choose ;
 But we would ne'er this grace abuse,
 Let us not fall. Let us not fall.”

True conversion also gives a man strength and holiness, but it never lets him boast. He glories, but he glories only in the Lord. He knows that a great change has been wrought in him, but he still sees so much of his own imperfections that he mourns over them before the Lord. He has no time for boasting because all his time is taken up with repenting for his sins, believing in his Saviour, and seeking to live to the praise and glory of God.

True conversion likewise gives a harmony to all the duties of Christian life. It makes a man love his God better, and love his fellow-men better. I have no opinion of that religion which consists in a so-called profession of religion which makes a young woman leave her father and mother, and all her family, and go and shut herself up in a convent, or become a sister of misery of some sort or other. If my child, when he says that he is converted, leaves off loving his father, I have very grave doubts about his conversion; I think it must be a conversion wrought by the devil, not by God. But wherever there is true love to God, there is sure to be love to our fellow-men also. The same God, who wrote on one table certain commands in reference to himself, wrote on the other table the commands with regard to our fellow-men. “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God,” is certainly a divine command; and so is the other, “and thy neighbour as thyself.” True conversion balances all duties, emotions, hopes, and enjoyments.

True conversion brings a man to live for God. He does everything for the glory of God,—whether he eats, or drinks, or whatsoever he does. True conversion makes a man live before God. He used to try to fancy that God did not see him; but, now, he desires to live as in God's sight at all times, and he is glad to be there,—glad even that God should see his sin, that he may blot it out as soon as ever he beholds it. And such a man now comes to live with God. He has blessed communion with him; he talks with him as a man talks with his friend; and, by-and-by, he shall dwell with God, throughout eternity, in the palace above. This ought to convince you what an excellent thing true and real conversion is.

III. I have no need to say much, in the third place, concerning THE CONSEQUENT EXCELLENCE OF THE WORD OF GOD. The law of the Lord, which accomplishes such an excellent work, must be itself excellent. I will, therefore, only make one or two brief remarks, and then close.

“The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul,” *right away*

from the beginning of conversion to the end. Whenever we want to have converts,—and I hope that is always,—the best thing for us to do is to “preach the Word.” There is nothing better; there can be nothing more; there must be nothing less. I do not wonder that, in some churches and chapels, there are no conversions, because the sermons that are preached there are not adapted to that end. They are like a book I reviewed, the other day, of which I said, that there was, possibly, one person in the world who understood it, and that was the writer of the book; and that, if he did not read it through every morning, he certainly would not know, the next day, what he meant by it. In some such fashion as that, there are sermons that are so involved, perplexing, metaphysical, and I know not what besides, that I do not see how any souls can ever be converted by them. The people need to have a dictionary in the pew, instead of a Bible; they need never turn to any Biblical references, but they need someone to explain to them the meaning of the hard words which the preacher is so fond of using. Have I not also read sermons, which were very highly polished, and which, I daresay, were preceded by a prayer that God would convert souls by them? But it was morally impossible that the Lord should do anything of the sort, unless he reversed all his usual methods of procedure, for there was nothing in the sermon that could have been made the means of the conversion of a soul. But, my dear brother, if you preach the Word of God, if you lift up the crucified Christ on the pole of the gospel, you need not be very particular about the style of your speech. You need not say, “I must be a first-class speaker; I must be a trained rhetorician.” I believe that a great deal of that first-class speaking is simply the means of veiling the cross of Christ, and that fine talk about Jesus Christ is about the last thing that poor sinners need. I sat at a hotel table, in Mentone, one evening at dinner, and I wanted to speak to a friend who was sitting opposite to me, but someone had put a most magnificent bouquet of flowers in a very splendid vase between us. I was grateful that those flowers bloomed in the middle of winter, and I was pleased to see and to smell them; but, by-and-by, I moved them on one side because they stood in the way of my view of my friend’s face. So, I admire fine language, nobody enjoys it more than I do in its proper place; I even think that I could manage a little of it myself if I were to try. But whenever it stands between a poor soul and Christ, I should like to say, “Break that vase into a thousand pieces, fling those flowers into the fire; we do not want them there. for we want the poor sinner to see Christ.” It is the Word of God that converts the soul; not our pretty figures about the Word; not our fine talk about it, but the Word itself. So, dear teachers, and dear brother-ministers, let us give them the Word. Yes, that is a very handsome scabbard; but, if you are going to fight, you must pull it off; and there is nothing like the naked blade, the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God, to cut, and hew, and hack, and kill, in a spiritual sense; that same Word will, by God’s almighty grace, make men alive again, so we must “preach the Word” if we want to have conversions.

There is another thing that I feel I must say to you. *We must not think that, in order to have conversions, it is necessary to leave out any part of the gospel.* I am afraid that some people think that, if you stand and shout, "Believe, believe, believe, believe, believe, believe, believe," you will convert any number of people; but it is not so. You must tell your hearers what they have to believe; you must give them the Word of God, the doctrines of the gospel; for the people, who are said to be converted without being taught from the Scriptures, will very soon need to be "converted" again. There must be shot and shell in our guns if any real execution is to be done; blowing off a lot of powder, and making a great noise, may sound very well for a time, but it comes to nothing in the end. Just the same gospel—adapted as to its tone and method, but the same gospel—that I preach in this place, I would preach in a thieves' kitchen, or to the poorest of the poor, and the most illiterate of mankind. It is the gospel, and only the gospel, that will convert the soul.

Now, dear friends, you who are not converted, my closing word is to you. If you really wish for strength, life, salvation, you will get it through hearing the Word of God, or through reading this precious Book. "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God." Eyegate is not usually the way by which Immanuel rides into the city of Mansoul. The lifting up of the host, the pretty decorations on the priest's robe, the crucifix, the stations of the cross, and all that Romish mummary, will save nobody. That is not God's way of salvation; but Christ comes into Mansoul through Eargate. "Incline your ear, and come unto me; hear, and your soul shall live." Whenever the gospel is preached, dear hearer, do really hear it. Remember how our Lord Jesus Christ said, "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear." Some people do not hear. I have often been thankful, when I have heard some people talk, that I have two ears, because, though their conversation goes in at one ear, I thank God I can let it go out of the other, and so it does me no hurt. But if you are hearing the gospel, mind that you do not act like that. Then let your two ears be two entrances for the Word. Do not have one for entrance, and the other for exit; but "let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom." Let it go in at both ears, and remain in your memory until it reaches your heart. I do not believe that anybody is an earnest and attentive hearer, longing to hear to his soul's profit, without his so hearing if the gospel is preached to him. As I have already told you, the promise is, "Hear, and your soul shall live;" and if you come with a willing mind,—willing to judge, and weigh, and then to believe the Word,—the moment you do believe it, you are saved. That Word of God, which leads you to believe, has already converted you; so, come out, and confess what God has done for you, and then go on your way rejoicing. May God bless every one of you, without a single exception, for his name's sake! Amen.