

**PRECEDING GRACE****NO. 656**

**A SERMON PREACHED  
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AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON.**

*“When it pleased God, who separated me from my mother’s womb and called me  
by His Grace, to reveal His Son in me.”  
Galatians 1:15.*

You all know the story of the Apostle Paul. He had been a persecutor and went armed with letters to Damascus to hail men and women and drag them to prison. On the road there he saw a light exceedingly bright—above the brightness of the sun—and a voice spoke out of Heaven to him saying, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?” By this miraculous interposition he was converted—three days he spent in darkness. But when Ananias came to tell him of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, there fell from his eyes, as it were, scales. He was baptized, became the most mighty of all Christian teachers, and could truly say that he was not a whit behind the very chief of the Apostles.

Paul’s conversion is generally considered so very remarkable for its suddenness and distinctness and truly it is. Yet, at the same time, it is no exception to the general rule of conversions, but is rather a type, or model, or pattern of the way in which God shows forth His long-suffering to them that are led to believe on Him. It appears from my text, however, that there is another part of Paul’s history which deserves our attention quite as much as the suddenness of his conversion, namely, the fact that although he was suddenly converted, yet God had had thoughts of mercy towards him from his very birth.

God did not begin to work with him when he was on the road to Damascus. That was not the first occasion on which eyes of love had darted upon this chief of sinners. Paul declares that God had separated him and set him apart even from his mother’s womb that he might, by-and-by, be called by Grace and have Jesus Christ revealed in him! I selected this text, not so much for its own sake as to give me an opportunity for saying a little this evening upon a doctrine not often touched upon, namely, that of PRECEDING GRACE, or the Grace which comes *before* regeneration and conversion.

I think we sometimes overlook it. We do not attach enough importance to the Grace of God in its dealings with men before He actually brings them to Himself. Paul says that God had designs of love towards him even before He had called him out of the dead world into spiritual life.

**I.** To begin, then, let us talk for a little while upon THE PURPOSE OF GOD PRECEDING SAVING GRACE AS IT MAY CLEARLY BE SEEN DEVELOPING ITSELF IN HUMAN HISTORY. You generally judge what a man’s purpose is by his actions. If you saw a man very carefully making molds in the sand, then watched him take several pieces of iron and melt them down. And if you further noticed him pouring the melted iron into the molds, you might not know precisely what class of machine he was making, but you would very justly conclude that he was making some part of an engine or other machinery. Perhaps you might guess a beam, or a lever, or a crank, or a wheel—and according to what you saw the molds in the sand to be you would form your idea of what the man was intending to make.

Now, when I look at the life of a man, even before conversion, I think I can discover something of God’s molding and fashioning in him even before regenerating Grace comes into his heart. Let me give you an illustration of my course of thought. When God created man—we are told in the book of Genesis—He made him “out of the dust of the earth.” Mark him beneath his Maker’s hand, the framework of a man, the tabernacle for an immortal soul—a man made of clay, fully made I suppose, and perfect in all respects excepting one and that soon followed—for after God had formed him out of the dust, then He breathed into his nostrils the breath of Life and man became a living soul.

Now it strikes me that during the early part of the history of the people whom God means to save, though they have not received into their hearts any spiritual life, nor experienced any of the work of regeneration, yet their life before conversion is really a working of them in the clay. Let us endeavor to bring this out more distinctly. Can you not perceive God’s purpose in the Apostle Paul when you think of the singular gifts with which he was endowed? Here was a man, a

rhetorician so noble that there are in his works passages of eloquence not to be equaled, much less excelled, by Demosthenes and Cicero.

As a logician his arguments are most conclusive as well as profound. Never had man such eagle eyes to pierce into the depths of a matter! Never had man such eagle wings to mount up into its sublimities! He argues out questions so difficult to understand that at all times they have been the battlegrounds of controversies! And yet he seems to perceive them clearly and distinctly and to unfold and expound them with a precision of language not to be misunderstood. All Apostles of Jesus Christ put together are not equal to Paul in the way of teaching. Truly he might have said of them all, “You are but as children compared with me.”

Peter dashes, and dashes gloriously against the adversary! But Peter cannot build up, nor instruct like the great Apostle of the Gentiles. He has to say of Paul’s writings that they, “contain some things hard to be understood.” Peter can confirm, but scarcely can he understand Paul—for where intellect is concerned, Paul is far, far above him. Paul seems to have been endowed by God with one of the most intelligent brains that ever filled human cranium and to have been gifted with an intellect which towered far above anything that we find elsewhere.

Had Paul been merely a natural man, I do not doubt but what he would take the place either of Milton among the poets, or of Bacon among the philosophers. He was, in deed and in truth, a mastermind. Now, when I see such a man as this cast by God in the mold of Nature, I ask myself—“What is God’s purpose? What is He doing here?” As every man has a purpose, so also has God, and I think I see in all this that God foreknew that such a man was necessary to be raised up as a vessel through whom He might convey to the world the hidden treasures of the Gospel. Such a man was needed so that God might speak His great things by him!

You will say, probably, that God reveals great things by fools. I beg your pardon. God did once permit an ass to speak, but it was a very small thing that he said—for *any* ass might readily have said it. Whenever there is a *wise* thing to be said, a wise *man* is always chosen to say it. Look the whole Bible through and you will find that the Revelation is always congruous to the person to whom it is given. You do not find Ezekiel blessed with a Revelation like that of Isaiah. Ezekiel is all imagination, therefore he must soar on the eagle’s wings. Isaiah is all affection and boldness and therefore he must speak with evangelical fullness.

God does not give Nahum’s Revelation to the herdsman Amos—the herdsman Amos cannot speak like Nahum, nor can Nahum speak like Amos. Each man is after his own order and a man of this masterly order of mind, like the Apostle Paul, must have been created, it seems to me, for no other end than to be the appropriate means of revealing to us the fullness and the blessing of the Gospel of peace! Mark, again, the Apostle’s education. Paul was a Jew, not half Greek and half Jew, but a pure Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, speaking the Jews’ native tongue and not a stranger to the ancient speech of Israel.

There was nothing in the traditions of the Jews which Paul did not know and understand. He was educated at the feet of Gamaliel. The best master of the age is selected to be the master of the hopeful young scholar and the school in which he is placed must be a Rabbinical one. Now, just observe in this the purpose of God. Paul’s life-long struggle was to be with Jewish superstition. In Iconium, in Lystra, in Derbe, in Athens, in Corinth, in Rome he must always be confronting the Judaizing spirit. And it was well that he should know all about it—that he should be well schooled in it. And it does strike me that God separated him from his mother’s womb on purpose that he might go forth to proclaim the Gospel instead of Law and shut the mouths of those who were constantly abiding by the traditions of the fathers, instead of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

All this, remember, was going on while as yet he was unconverted, though he was even then, as we see, being prepared for his work. Then observe the spiritual struggles through which Paul passed. I take it that mental struggles are often a more important part of education than what a man learns from his schoolmaster. What is learned here in my heart is often of more use to me than what can be put into my head by another. Paul seems to have had a mind bent upon carrying out what he believed to be right. To serve God appears to have been the great ambition, the one object of the Apostle’s life.

Even when he was a persecutor, he says he thought he was doing God service. He was no seeker after wealth—never in his whole lifetime was Paul a Mammonite. He was no mere seeker after learning—never! He was learned, but it was all held and used subject to what he deemed far more highly—the indwelling Grace of God. Even before he knew Christ he

had a sort of religion and an attachment, and an earnest attachment, too, to the God of his fathers, though it was a zeal not according to knowledge. He had his inward fights and fears and struggles and difficulties and all these were educating him to come out and talk to his fellow sinners and lead them up out of the darkness of Judaism into the light of Christianity.

And then, what I like in Paul and that which leads me to see the purpose of God in him, is the singular formation of his mind. Even as a sinner, Paul was great. He was “the chief of sinners,” just as he afterwards became, “not a whit behind the very chief of the Apostles.” There are some of us who are such little men that the world will never see us. The old proverb about the chips in porridge giving one pleasure either way, might apply to a great many people, but never to Paul. If there was anything to be done, Paul would do it—yes, and if it came to the stoning of Stephen, he says he gave his vote against him—and though he was not one of the actual executioners, yet we are told that “the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man’s feet, whose name was Saul.”

He would do all that was to be done and was a thoroughgoing man everywhere. Believing a thing to be right, Paul never consulted with flesh and blood, but girded up his loins and worked with all the powers of his being—and that was no mean force—as his enemies felt to their cost. Why, as I see him riding to Damascus, I picture him with his eyes flashing with fanatic hate against the disciples of the Man whom he thought to be an impostor—and his heart beat high with the determination to crush the followers of the Nazarene!

He is a man all energy and all determination. And when he is converted, he is only lifted into a *higher* life—but unchanged as to temperament, nature and force of character. He seems to have been naturally constituted a thoroughgoing, thorough-hearted man in order that when Grace did come to him, he might be just as earnest, just as dauntless and fearless, in the defense of what he believed to be right. Yes, and such a man was needed to lead the vanguard in the great crusade against the god of this world. No other could have stood forward as Paul did, for no other had the same firmness, boldness and decision that he possessed.

“But,” I hear someone say, “was not Peter as bold?” Yes, he was. But Peter, you remember, always had the failing of being just where he ought not to be when he was needed. Peter was unstable to the very last, I think. Certainly, in Paul’s day, Paul had to withstand him. He was a great and good man, but not fitted to be the foremost. Perhaps you say, “But there is John—would not John do?” No. We cannot speak in too high terms of John, but John is too full of affection. John is the plane to smooth the timber, but not the axe to cut it down. John is too gentle, too meek. He is the Phillip Melancthon. Paul must be the Luther and Calvin rolled into one! Such a man was needed—and I say that from his very birth, God was fitting him for this position. And before he was converted, preceding Grace was engaged fashioning, molding, and preparing the man in order that by-and-by there might be put into his nostrils the breath of Life.

Now what is the drift of all this? A practical one. And to show you what it is, we will linger a minute here before we go on to anything else. Some of the good fathers among us are mourning very bitterly just now over their sons. Your children have not turned out as you wish they would. They are getting skeptical, some of them, and they are also falling into sin. Well, dear Friends, it is yours to mourn. It is enough to make you weep bitterly! But let me whisper a word into your ears. Do not sorrow as those who are without hope, for God may have very great designs to be answered, even by these very young men who seem to be running so altogether in the wrong direction!

I do not think I could go so far as John Bunyan did, when he said he was sure God would have some eminent saints in the next generation because the young men in his day were such gross sinners! He thought they would make fine saints. And when the Lord came and saved them, by His mercy—they would love Him much—because they had had so much forgiven. I can hardly say as much as that, but I do believe that sometimes in the inscrutable wisdom of God—when some of those who have been skeptical come to see the Truth—they are the very best men that could possibly be found to do battle against the enemy.

Some of those who have fallen into error, after having passed through it and happily come up through its deep ditch, are just the men to stand and warn others against it. I cannot conceive that Luther would ever have been so mighty a preacher of the faith if he had not, himself, struggled up and down Pilate’s staircase on his knees when trying to get to Heaven by his penances and his good works. O let us have hope! We do not know but that God may be intending to call them and bless them! Who can tell, there may be a young man here tonight who will one day be the herald of the Cross in China, in Hindustan, in Africa and in the islands of the sea!

Remember John Williams wishing to keep an appointment with another young man who committed a certain sin. He wanted to know what time it was and so stepped into Moorefield's Chapel. Someone saw him so he did not want to leave, and the Word, preached by Mr. Timothy East who still survives among us, fell on his ears and the young sinner was made a saint! And you all know how he afterwards perished as a martyr on the shores of Erromanga. Why may there not be another such a case tonight? There may be some young man here who has been receiving a first class education—he has no idea what for! He has been learning a multitude of things—perhaps a great deal which it would be much better if he did not know—but the Lord is meaning to make something of him.

I do not know where you are, young Man, but O, I wish I could fire you tonight with a high ambition to serve God! What is the good of my being made at all if I do not serve my Maker? What is the use of my being here if I do not bring any glory to Him who put me and keeps me here? Why, I had better have been a piece of rotten dung strewn upon the field and bringing forth something for the farmer's use than to have been a mere consumer of bread and meat and to have breathed the air and lived upon God's bounty and yet to have done nothing for Him! O young Man! If such an army of you as we have tonight could *all* be led by Divine Grace to say with the Apostle Paul, "God forbid that I should glory, save in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ," why, there would be hope for Old England yet!

We would yet fling Popery back to the seven hills from where it came. Oh that God would grant us this blessing! But if He should not be pleased to call all of us by His Grace, yet may some here live to prove that they were separated from their mother's womb to God's work and set apart that they might have the Son of God revealed in them and might proclaim His Gospel with power! We will now leave this point, but shall continue the same subject in another form.

II. You would, perhaps, say that all I have talked about as yet has been Providence rather than Grace. Very likely, but I think that Providence and Grace are very near akin. At any rate, if Providence is the wheel, Grace is the hand which turns and guides it.

But I am now about to speak of GRACE PRECEDING, CALLING IN ANOTHER SENSE. It strikes me that it is impossible to say, concerning the elect, when the Grace of God begins to deal with them. You can tell when the quickening Grace comes, but not when the Grace, itself, comes. For know, in one sense, Grace was exercised upon the chosen—

*“Before the daystar knew its place,  
Or planets ran their round.”*

I should say that is what I cannot call by any other name than *formative* Grace exercised upon the vessels of mercy at their very birth. It seems to me to be no small mercy that some of us were born of such parents as we were and that we were born where we were. Some of us began right and were surrounded by many advantages. We were cradled upon the lap of piety and dandled upon the knee of holiness.

There are some children who are born with a constitution which cannot escape sin, and which at the same time seems as if it inevitably led them to it. Who can deny that there are some whose passions seem naturally to be so violent that, notwithstanding almost any and every restraint, they run headlong into sin? And often those failings may be distinctly traced to their parents! It is no small blessing when we can look back and thank God, that if no blue-blood of nobility flows in our veins, yet from our very childhood we have not heard the voice of blasphemy, nor strayed into the haunts of vice—but that in the very formation of our character—Divine Grace has ever been present with us!

This formative Grace, many of you, I have no doubt, can trace in the examples and influences which have followed you from the cradle through life. Why, what a blessing to have had such a Sunday school teacher as some of you had! Other children went to schools but they had not such a teacher, or such a class as yours. What a privilege to have had such a minister as some of you had, though perhaps he has fallen asleep now! You know there were others who went to places where there was no earnestness, no life—but that good man who was blessed to you was full of anxiety for your soul—and at the very first, before you were converted, his preaching helped to form your character!

Why, it strikes me that every word I heard and everything I saw while I was yet a child or a youth, had a part in the formation of my later life. Oh, what a mercy it is to be placed where a holy example and godly conversation tend to form the man in a godly mold! All this may be, you know, without Divine Grace. I am not speaking, now, of the work of effectual calling, but of that *preceding* Grace which is too much forgotten, though it so richly deserves to be remembered.

Think, too, of the prayers which brought tears to our eyes and the teaching that would not let us sin so deeply as others. Think of the light which glowed in us, even in our childhood, and seems to have dispelled something of our natural darkness. Think of that earnest face that used to look so steadily on us when we did wrong and of that mother's tear which seemed as if it would burn itself into our hearts when there had been something amiss that made Mother anxious. All this—though it did not *convert* us—yet it helped to make us what we now are and unto God let us give the Glory!

Furthermore, while there was this *formative* Grace, there seems to me to have gone with it very much of *preventive* Grace. How many saints fall into sins which they have to regret even *after* conversion, while others are saved from leaving the path of morality to wander in the morass of lust and crime! Why, some of us were, by God's Grace, placed in positions where we could not well have been guilty of any gross acts of immorality even if we had tried! We were so hedged about by guardian care—so watched and tended on every side—that we would have been dashing our heads against a stone wall if we had run into any great or open sin.

Oh, what a mercy to be prevented from sinning—when God puts chains across the road, digs ditches, makes hedges, builds walls and says to us, “No, you shall not go that way, I will not let you. You shall never have that to regret. You may desire it, but I will hedge up your way with thorns. You may wish it, but it never shall be yours.” Beloved, I have thanked God a thousand times in my life that before my conversion when I had evil desires I had no opportunities! And on the other hand, that when I had opportunities I had no desires—for when desires and opportunities come together like the flint and steel—they make the spark that kindles the fire. But neither the one nor the other, though they may both be dangerous, can bring about any great amount of evil so long as they are kept apart! Let us, then, look back and if this has been our experience let us bless the preventing Grace of God.

Again, there is another form of Grace I must mention, namely, *restraining* Grace. Here, you see, I am making a distinction. There are many who *did* go into sin. They were not wholly prevented from it, but they could not go as far into it as they wanted to do. There is a young man here tonight—he will ask how I know—well, I do know—there is a young man here tonight who wants to commit a certain sin, but he cannot. Oh, how he wishes to do it, but he cannot! He is placed in such a position of poverty that he cannot play the fine gentleman he would like.

There is another! He wants to be dancing at such-and-such a place, but thank God he is lame! There is another, who, if he had had his wish would have lost his soul—but since his blindness has come upon him there is some hope for him. Oh how often God has thrown a man on a sick bed to make him well! He would have been such as he was even unto death if he had been well—but God has made him sick—and that sickness has restrained him from sin! It is a mercy for some men that they cannot do what they would and though “to will is present” with them, yet even in sin, “how to perform that which they would, they find not.”

Ah, my fine Fellow, if you could have had your own way you would have been at the top of the mountain by now! So you think, but no—you would have been over the precipice long before this if God had you climb at all—and so He has kept you in the valley because He has designs of love towards you and because you shall not sin as others sin. Divine Grace has its hand upon the bridle of your horse. Or perhaps it is a woman and you may speak bitter words against that wife, that sister, or that mother whom God has put there to hold you back. But you cannot go on, you *shall not* go on. Another inch forward and you will be over the precipice and lost, and therefore God has put that hand there to throw your horse back on its haunches and make you pause and think—and turn from the error of your ways. What a mercy it is that when God's people go into sin to any extent, He speaks and says, “To this point shall you go, but no further. Here shall your proud sins be stopped!” There is, then, restraining Grace.

We shall get still further into the subject when we come to what Dr. John Owen calls the *preparatory* work of Grace. Have you ever noticed that parable about the different sorts of ground and the sower of the seeds? A sower went forth to sow and some of the seed fell on stony ground. You can understand that, because all men have stones in their hearts. Some fell on the thorns and thistles. You can comprehend that, because men are so given to worldly care. Another part of the seed fell on the beaten path. You can understand that—men are so occupied with worldliness.

But how about the “good ground”? “Good ground”? Is there such a thing as “good ground” by nature? One of the evangelists says that it was “honest and good ground.” Now, is there such a difference between hearts and hearts? Are not all men depraved by nature? Yes, he who doubts human depravity had better begin to study himself. Question—If all

hearts are bad, how are some hearts good? Reply—They are good *comparatively*. They are good in a *certain sense*. It is not meant in the parable that the good ground was so good that it never would have produced a harvest without the sowing of the seed—but that it had been prepared by Providential influences upon it to *receive* the seed and in *that* sense it may be said to have been “good ground.”

Now let me show you how God’s Grace does come to work on the human heart so as to make it good soil before the living seed is cast into it—so that before *quicken*ing Grace visits it, the heart may be called a good heart—because it is prepared to receive that Grace. I think this takes place thus—first of all, before quickening Grace comes, God often gives an attentive ear and makes a man willing to listen to the Word. Not only does he like to listen to it, but he wants to know the meaning of it. There is a little excitement in his mind to know what the Gospel tidings really are. He is not saved as yet, but it is always a hopeful sign when a man is willing to listen to the Truth and is anxious to understand it.

This is one thing which *preceding* Grace does in making the soul good. In Ezekiel’s vision, as you will recall, before the Breath came from the four winds, the bones began to stir and they came together bone to his bone. So, before the Spirit of God comes to a man in effectual calling, God’s Grace often comes to make a stir in the man’s mind so that he is no longer indifferent to the Truth but is anxious to understand what it means.

The next mark of this gracious work is an honest heart. Some persons will not hear you, or if they do, they are always picking holes and finding fault—they are not honest and good ground. But there are others who say, “I will give the man a fair and an honest hearing. I will read the Bible. I will read it honestly. I will really see whether it is the Word of God or not. I will come to it without any prejudices, or, if I have any prejudices I will throw them aside.” Now, all this is a blessed work of preparatory Grace making the heart ready to receive effectual calling.

Then, when this willingness and honesty are attended with a tender conscience, as they are in some unconverted people, this is another great blessing. Some of you are not converted, but you would not do wrong. You are not saints, but you would not tell a lie for the world! I thank God that there are some of you so excellent in morals that if you were proposed to us for Church membership, we could not raise any objection to you on that ground, at any rate. You are as honest as the day is long. As for the things of God, you are outwardly as attentive to them and as diligent in them as the most earnest and indefatigable Christians.

Now, this is because your conscience is tender. When you do wrong you cannot sleep at night. And you do not feel at all easy in being without a Savior—I know some of you do not. You have not come to any decision. The Grace of God has not really made you feel your thoroughly blind state—still you are not quite easy. In fact, to go farther, your affections, though not weaned altogether from earth, yet begin to tremble a little as though they would go heavenward. You want to be a Christian—when the communion table is spread, you dare not come downstairs—but I see you looking from the gallery and you wish you were with us.

You know you have not believed in Jesus Christ, and the world keeps you back from doing so—but still there is a kind of twitching in your conscience. You do not know what it is, but there is a something in you that makes you say at times, “O God, let me die the death of the righteous and let my last end be like his.” Yes, and you even go farther than this and ask to live the righteous man’s life, too. Now, remember, this will not save you—“You must be born again.” But for all this the Church of God should feel deeply grateful—for they have seen in themselves that this is often God’s preparatory work—clearing away the rubbish and rubble and digging out the foundations, that Jesus Christ might be laid there, the Cornerstone of future hope and of future happiness!

Another work of Grace is the creation of dissatisfaction with their present state. How many men we have known who were consciously “without God and without hope in the world”! The apples of Sodom had turned to ashes and bitterness in their mouth, though at one time all was fair and sweet to their taste. The mirage of life with them has been dispelled, and instead of the green fields and waving trees and rippling waters which their fevered imagination had conjured up in the desert, they can see now nothing but the arid sand and wasteness of desolation which appall their fainting spirits and promise nothing! No, not even a grave to cover their whited bones which shall remain a bleached memorial that, “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.”

Multitudes have been brought to see the deluge of sin which has covered even the high places of the earth! They find no rest for the sole of their feet, but as yet they know not of an ark, nor of a loving hand prepared to pull them in as did Noah the dove in olden times! Look at the life of St. Augustine, how wearily he wanders here and there with a death-

thirst in his soul that no fount of philosophy, or scholastic argument, or heretical teaching could ever satisfy! He was aware of his unhappy estate and turned his eye round the circle of the universe looking for peace—not fully conscious of what he wanted—though feeling an aching void the world could never fill. He had not found the center, fixed and steadfast, around which all else revolved in ceaseless change.

Now, all this appetite, this hunger and thirst I look upon as not of the devil, nor of the human heart alone—it was of God! He strips us of all our earthly joy and peace, that, shivering in the cold blast, we might flee, when drawn by His Spirit, to the “Man who is as a hiding place from the storm, a cover from the tempest, and the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.” Of course, I have not gone fully into this doctrine of preceding Grace, but I trust I have said just enough to waken the gratitude of all the saints who have experienced it and to make them sing with greater emotion than they have ever done before—

*“Determined to save, He watched over my path  
When, Satan’s blind slave, I sported with death.”*

**III.** And now we come to the last point, which is, PAUL’S ACTUAL CALLING BY DIVINE GRACE. All preparatory work of which we have spoken was not the source or origin of the vital godliness which afterwards distinguished that renowned servant of God—that came to him *suddenly*.

Beloved, there may be some here tonight who cannot discern anything in themselves of God’s work of Grace at all. I do not wonder at this. I do not suppose that the Apostle could discern it in himself, or even thought of looking for it! He was as careless of Christ as is the butterfly of the honey in the flowers. He lived with no thought of honoring Jesus and no desire to magnify Him—but with the very *reverse* passion glowing like a hot coal within his soul. And yet in a moment he was turned from an enemy into a friend! Oh, what a mercy it would be if some here tonight were turned from enemies into friends in a moment—and we are not without hope but that this will be the case!

You have hated Christ, my Friend. You have hated Him boldly and decidedly. You have not been a sneaking sort of adversary, but have opposed Him frankly and openly. Now, why did you do it? I am sorry for your sin, but I like your honesty. What is there in the Person of Christ for you to hate? Men hated Him while He was on earth and yet He died for them! Can you hate Him for that? He came into this world to gain no honor for Himself—He had honor enough in Heaven—but He gave it up for the sake of men. When He died He had not amassed a fortune, nor gathered about Him a troop of soldiers—nor had He conquered provinces—and He died naked on the Cross!

Nothing brought Him here but disinterested affection. And when He came He spent His life in deeds of holiness and good. For which of these things can you hate Him? The amazing loving-kindness of Christ Jesus towards sinners should, in itself, disarm your animosity and turn your hatred of Him to love. Alas! I know that this thought of itself will not do it—but the Spirit of God can. If the Spirit of God once comes in contact with your souls and shows you that Christ died for you, your enmity towards Christ will be over!

Dr. Gifford once went to see a woman in prison who had been a very gross offender. She was such a hardened reprobate that the doctor began by discoursing with her about the judgments of God and the punishments of Hell. But she only laughed him to scorn and called him opprobrious names. The doctor burst into tears, and said, “And yet, poor Soul, there is mercy for you, even for such as you are, though you have laughed in the face of Him who would do you good. Christ is able to forgive you, hard though you are. And I hope that He will yet take you to dwell with Him at His right hand.”

In a moment the woman stopped her laughing, sat down quietly, burst into tears and said, “Don’t talk to me in that way! I have always been told that I should be damned and I made up my mind to be! I knew there was no chance and so I have gone on from one sin to another—but oh, if there is a hope of mercy for *me*, that is another thing! If there is a possibility of my being forgiven, that is another thing!” The doctor at once opened his Bible and began to read to her these words, “The blood of Jesus Christ, God’s dear Son, cleanses us from all sin.” The greatest brokenness of heart followed.

In subsequent visits the doctor was gratified to find that she was brought to Christ. And though she had to undergo a sentence for many years at the time, yet years later the godly man saw her walking honestly and uprightly as a Believer in Jesus Christ. Sinner, I wish that thought would bring *you* to Christ! O that you would know that He has chosen *you*, that He has separated *you* for Himself, and to be His—even from your mother’s womb! Ah, you have played the harlot,

but He will bring you back! You have sinned very greatly, but you shall one day be clothed in the white robe and wear the everlasting crown!

Oh, blush and be ashamed that you should ever have sinned as you have done! You have been a thief and a drunkard. You have brought your mother's gray hairs with sorrow to the grave, but her prayers are going up even now to Heaven and you shall be brought in yet. O stubborn Sinner, my Master means to have you! Run as you will, you wandering sheep, the Shepherd is after you—yield, yield, yield now! O Prodigal, your Father's heart is open! Arise! Go to your Father! You are ashamed to go, are you? Oh, let that shame make you go faster! Let it not keep you back! Jesus bled, Jesus wept, Jesus lives in Heaven. "Ho, everyone that thirsts, come to the waters. And he that has no money, let him buy wine and milk, without money and without price." "Whoever will, let him come and take of the Water of Life freely."

There is no sinner too black to be forgiven! There are no iniquities that can damn you if you believe in Jesus! All manner of sin and iniquity shall be forgiven him who puts his trust in the shadow of Jehovah-Jesus. Look to Him! He dies! He lives! Look, He rises, He pleads above! "Look unto Me and be you saved, all the ends of the earth, for I am God and there is none else." I trust that the whole of your past mysterious life, my dear fellow Sinner, will be explained to you tonight by your believing in Jesus. That will be the golden key which will open the secret and you will say, "Now I see it. I could not tell what that mysterious hand was that kept me back from doing a certain thing. I could not understand why I was led into such a path, but now I know that it was to take me to the feet of the blessed Savior where I might be happy forever."

As you look back and think of all the dealings of Divine Grace and Providence with you throughout your life, you will sing—

*"Ah, who am I, that God has saved  
Me from the doom I did desire,  
And crossed the lot myself did crave,  
To set me even higher?"*

I must give one word of warning to those who are afflicting themselves with a notion that in order to a true, real, conversion they must have a long course of agonizing soul-conflict. You must mark that I am NOT teaching this! The new birth was instantaneous—at once! Saul of Tarsus calls Him Lord and it is only three days that darkness rests upon him. This is the longest case recorded in the Bible—and how short a time in darkness and anguish that is—compared with the experience of some whom you are regarding as models on which God must act in your case.

Remember that God is not the God of uniformity—though He is of union and peace. He may lead you at once into joy and peace, as Nathanael, who said as soon as he saw Christ, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God. You are the King of Israel." God may, and doubtless has been, blessing you through His Grace from your birth. But He needs not to plunge you many days in the cold dark waters of conviction to wash away your sin—the blood of Christ at *once* can cleanse from all sin if you confide your soul to Him. Believe, therefore, and you are at once justified and at peace with God. May the Lord bless you all, for Jesus' sake.

[This sermon was originally titled "Prevenient Grace."]

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