

THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

NO. 178

A SERMON DELIVERED ON THURSDAY EVENING, NOVEMBER 5, 1857,
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 AT NEW PARK STREET CHAPEL, SOUTHWARK.

“Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now made perfect by the flesh?”
Galatians 3:3.

YES, we are just so foolish. Folly is bound up not only in the heart of a child but in the heart of even a child of God. And though the rod may be said to bring folly out of a child, it will take many a repetition of the rod of affliction upon the shoulders of a Christian before that folly is taken out of him. I suppose we are all of us very sound as a matter of theory upon this point. If any should ask us how we hope to have our salvation worked in us we should without the slightest hesitation declare our belief that salvation is of the Lord alone. And we should declare that as the Holy Spirit first of all commenced our piety in us, we look alone to His might to continue and to preserve and at last to perfect the sacred work.

I say we are sound enough on that point as a matter of theory, but we are all of us very heretical and unsound as a matter of practice. For alas, you will not find a Christian who does not have to mourn over his self-righteous tendencies. You will not discover a Believer who has not at certain periods in his life to groan because the spirit of self-confidence has risen in his heart—and prevented him from feeling the absolute necessity of the Holy Spirit. He has then put his confidence in the mere strength of nature, the strength of good intentions, the strength of strong resolutions, instead of relying upon the might of God the Holy Spirit alone.

This one thing I know, Brethren, that while as a preacher I can tell you all that the Holy Spirit must work all our works in us and that without Him we can do nothing, yet as a man I find myself tempted to deny my own preaching, not in my words, but to deny them in fact by endeavoring to do deeds without looking first to the Holy Spirit. While I should never be unsound in the didactic part of it, yet in that part which concerns the working of it out in common with all that love the Lord Jesus but who are still subject to the infirmities of flesh and blood, I have to groan that I repeatedly find myself, having begun in the Spirit, seeking to be made perfect in the flesh. Yes, we are just as foolish as that. And, my Brethren, it is well for us if we have a consciousness that we are foolish—for when a man is foolish and knows it—there is the hope that he will one day be wise, by God’s grace.

To know one’s self to be foolish is to stand upon the doorstep of the temple of wisdom. To understand the wrongness of any position is half way towards amending it. To be quite sure that our self-confidence is a heinous sin and folly and an offense towards God and to have that thought burned into us by God’s Holy Spirit is going a great length towards the throwing of our self-confidence away. This helps bring our souls in practice, as well as in theory, to rely wholly upon the power of God’s Holy Spirit.

This evening, however, I shall run away from my text somewhat. Having just in a few words endeavored to explain the meaning of the whole sentence, I intend only this evening to dwell upon *the doctrine which incidentally the Apostle teaches us*. He teaches us that we begin in the Spirit—“Having begun in the Spirit” I have already illustrated the whole text sufficiently for our understanding if God the Holy Spirit shall enlighten us. And I shall now, I say, confine myself to the thought that Christians begin in the Spirit—that the early part of Christianity is of God’s Spirit and of God’s Spirit only, while it is equally true that all the way through we must lean upon the same power and depend upon the same strength.

And I have selected this text for this reason. We have a very large influx of young Believers, month after month—week after week I may say. Every week we receive a considerable number of additions to the Church. Month after month these hands baptize into a profession of faith of the Lord Jesus many of those who are yet young in the faith of the Gospel. Now I am astonished to find those persons that thus come before me so well instructed in the doctrines of grace. And they are so sound in all the Truths of the Covenant, insomuch that I may think it my boast and glory, in the name of Jesus, that I know not that we have any members whom we have received into the Church who do not give their full assent and consent unto all the doctrines of the Christian religion, commonly called Calvinistic doctrines.

Those which men are likely to laugh at as being high doctrinal points are those which they most readily receive, believe and rejoice in. I find, however, that the greatest deficiency lies in this point—forgetfulness of the work of the Holy Spirit. I find them very easily remembering the work of God the Father. They do not deny the great doctrine of election. They can see clearly the great sentence of justification passed by the Father upon the elect through the vicarious sacrifice and perfect righteousness of Jesus. And they are not backward in understanding the work of Jesus, either. They can see how Christ was the Substitute for His people and stood in their place. Nor do they for one moment impugn any doctrine concerning God’s Spirit. But they are not clear upon the point. They can talk upon the other points better than they can upon those which more particularly concern the blessed work of that all adorable Person of the Godhead, God the Holy Spirit.

I thought, therefore, that I would just preach as simply as ever I could upon the work of the Holy Spirit and begin at the beginning. Hoping on succeeding evenings at different times, as God the Holy Spirit shall guide me, to enter more fully into the subject of the work of the Spirit from the beginning even to the end. But let me say, it is no use your expecting me to preach a course of sermons. I know a great deal better than that. I don’t believe God the Holy Spirit ever intended men to publish three months before hand, lists of sermons that they were going to preach.

There always will arise changes in Providence and different states of mind both in the preacher and the hearer and he will be a very wise man who has got an Old Moore's Almanac correct enough to let him know what would be the best sort of sermon to preach three months ahead. He had better leave it to his God to give him in the same hour what he shall speak and look for his sermons, as the Israelites looked for the manna, day by day. However, we now commence by endeavoring to narrate the different points of the Spirit's work in the beginning of salvation.

And first, let me start by asserting that THE COMMENCEMENT OF SALVATION IS THE HOLY SPIRIT'S WORK. Salvation is not begun in the soul by *the means of grace* apart from the Holy Spirit. No man in the world is at liberty to neglect the means that God has appointed. If a house is built for prayer, that man must expect no blessing who neglects to tread its floor. If a pulpit is erected for the ministration of the Word, no man must expect (although we do sometimes get more than we expect) to be saved except by the hearing of the Word. If the Bible is printed in our own native language and we can read it, He who neglects Holy Scripture and ceases from its study, has lost one great and grand opportunity of being blessed.

There are many means of grace and let us speak as highly of them as ever we can. We would be far from depreciating them. They are of the highest value. Blessed are the people who have them. Happy is the nation which is blessed with the means of grace. But my Brethren, no man was ever saved by the means of grace apart from the Holy Spirit. You may hear the sermons of the man whom God delights to honor. You may select from all your Puritanical divines the writings of the man whom God did bless with a double portion of His Holy Spirit. You may attend every meeting for prayer. You may turn over the leaves of this blessed Book. But in all this, there is no life for the soul apart from the breath of the Divine Spirit.

Use these means. We exhort you to use them and use them diligently. But recollect that in none of these means is there anything that can benefit you unless God the Holy Spirit shall own and crown them. These are like the conduit pipes of the market place—when the fountain head flows with water then they are full and we derive a blessing from them. But if the stream are stopped, if the fountain head does cease to give forth its current, then these are wells without water, clouds without rain. And you may go to ordinances as an Arab turns to his skin bottle when it is dry and with your parched lips you may suck the wind and drink the whirlwind but receive neither comfort, nor blessing nor instruction, from the means of grace.

Nor is the salvation of any sinner commenced in him by *a minister or by a priest*. God forgive the man that ever called himself a priest, or suffered anyone else to call him so since the days of our Lord Jesus. The other morning at family prayer I read the case of King Uzziah, who, having the kingly office, thrust himself into the tabernacle of the Lord and took the place of the priests. You remember how the priests withstood him and said, "This is not your portion, O Uzziah." And you remember how he seized the censer and would burn incense as a priest before the Lord God. And while they yet spoke, lo, the leprosy did rise in his face and he went out a leper, as white as snow, from the house of God.

Ah, my Brethren, it is no mean offense against God for any man to call himself a priest. Remember that all the saints have a priestly office through Christ Jesus. But when any man puts to the idea a specialty as applicable to himself above his fellows and claims to be a priest among men, he commits a sin before God. A sin which, even though it is a sin of ignorance, is indeed great and grievous and leads unto many great and deadly errors—the guilt of which must lie partly upon the head of the man who gave foothold for those errors by allowing the title to be applied to himself.

Well, there is no man—call him priest if you like, by way of ill courtesy—that can begin the work with us—no, not in the use of the ceremony. The Papist may tell us and the Papist masked—the devil in white, the Puseyite—may tell us that grace begins in the heart at the dropping of the water upon the child's brow. But he tells a lie, a lie before God, that has not even so much as the shadow of truth to justify the liar. There is no power in man, though he were ordained by one who could most assuredly claim succession from the Apostles—though he were endowed with miraculous gifts, though he were the Apostle Paul himself—if he did assert that he had in himself power to convert, power to regenerate, let him be accursed! He has denied the truth and Paul himself would have declared him anathema, for having departed from the everlasting Gospel, one cardinal point of which is regeneration, the work of God the Holy Spirit—the new birth—a thing that is from above.

And, my Brethren, it is quite certain that *no man ever begins the new birth himself*. The work of salvation never was commenced by any man. God the Holy Spirit must commence it. Now, the reasons why no man ever commenced the work of grace in his own heart is very plain and palpable. First, because he cannot. Secondly, because he won't. The best reason of all is because he cannot—he is dead. Well, the dead may be made alive, but the dead cannot make *themselves* alive, for the dead can do nothing. Besides, the new thing to be created as yet has no being. The un-created cannot create.

"No," but you say, "that man can create." Yes, can Hell create Heaven? Then sin may create grace. What? Will you tell me that fallen human nature that has come almost to a level with the brutes is competent to rival God? That it can emulate the Divinity in working as great marvels and in imparting as Divine a life as even God Himself can give? It cannot. Besides, it is a creation. We are *created* anew in Christ Jesus. Let any man create a fly and afterwards let him create a new heart in himself. Until he has done the less he cannot do the greater. Besides, no man will.

If any man could convert himself, there is no man that would. If any man says he would, if that is true, he is already converted. For the will to be converted is in great part conversion. The will to love God, the desire to be in unison with Christ is not to be found in any man who has not already been brought to be reconciled with God through the death of His Son. There may be a false desire, a desire grounded upon a misrepresentation of the truth. But a true desire after true salvation by the true Spirit is a certain index that the salvation already is there in the germ and in the bud and only needs time and grace to develop itself. But certain it is that man neither can nor will—being on the one hand utterly impotent and dead and on the other hand utterly depraved and unwilling—hating the change when he sees it in others and most of all despising it in himself. Be certain, therefore, that God the Holy Spirit must begin, since none else can.

And now, my Brethren, I must just enter into the subject very briefly, by showing what the Holy Spirit does in the beginning. Permit me to say that in describing the work, the true work of salvation in the soul, you must not expect me to exhibit any critical nicety of judgment. We have

heard of an assembly of Divines who once debated whether men did repent first or believe first. And after a long discussion, someone wiser than the rest suggested another question, whether in the new-born child the lungs did first heave, or the blood did first circulate. “Now,” said he, “when you shall ascertain the one, you may be able to ascertain the other.” You shall not know which comes first. They are, very likely, begotten in us at the same moment. We are not able, when we mention these things in order, exactly to declare and testify that these do all happen according to the order in which we mention them. But we only, according to the judgment of men, according to our own experience, seek now to set forth what is the usual way of acting with God the Holy Spirit in the work of salvation.

The first thing, then, that God the Holy Spirit does in the soul is to *regenerate it*. We must always learn to distinguish between regeneration and conversion. A man may be converted a great many times in his life, but regenerated only once. Conversion is a thing which is caused by regeneration, but regeneration is the very first act of God the Spirit in the soul. “What?” you say, “Does regeneration come before conviction of sin?” Most certainly. There could be no conviction in the dead sinner. Now, regeneration quickens the sinner and makes him live. He is not competent to have true spiritual conviction worked in him until, first of all, he has received life.

It is true that one of the earliest developments of life is conviction of sin. But before any man can see his need of a Savior he must be a living man. Before he can really, I mean, in a spiritual position, in a saving, effectual manner understand his own deep depravity, he must have eyes with which to see the depravity. He must have ears with which to hear the sentence of the Law. He must have been quickened and made alive—otherwise he could not be capable of feeling, or seeing, or discerning at all. I believe, then, the first thing the Spirit does is this—He finds the sinner dead in sin, just where Adam left him. He breathes into him a Divine influence. The sinner knows nothing about how it is done, nor do any of us understand it. “You understand not the wind—it blows where it lists.” But we see its effects.

Now, none of us can tell how the Holy Spirit works in men. I doubt not there have been some who have sat in these pews and in the middle of a sermon or in prayer, or singing—they knew not how it was—the Spirit of God was in their hearts. He had entered into their souls. They were no longer dead in sin, no longer without thought, without hope, without spiritual capacity—they had begun to live. And I believe this work of regeneration, when it is done effectually—and God the Spirit would not do it without doing it effectually—is done mysteriously, often suddenly and it is done in many manners. But still it has always this mark about it—that the man, although he may not understand how it is done, feels that something is done. The what, the how, he does not know. But he knows that something is done. And he now begins to think thoughts he never thought before. He begins to feel as he never felt before. He is brought into a new state, there is a change wrought in him—as if a dead post standing in the street were on a sudden to find itself possessed of a soul and did hear the sound of the passing carriages and listen to the words of the passengers. There is something quite new about it.

The fact is, the man has got a Spirit. He never had one before. He was nothing but a body and a soul. But now, God has breathed into him the third great principle, the new life, the Spirit and he has become a spiritual man. Now he is not only capable of mental exercise, but of spiritual exercise. Having a soul *before*, he could repent—he could believe as a mere mental exercise. He could think thoughts of God and have some desires after Him. But he could not have one *spiritual* thought, nor one spiritual wish or desire, for he had no powers that could educe these things. But now, in regeneration, he has got something given to him and being given, you soon see its effects.

The man begins to feel that he is a sinner. Why did he not feel that before? Ah, my Brethren, he could not, he was not in a state to feel. He was a dead sinner. And though he used to tell you and tell God, by way of compliment, that he was a sinner, he did not know anything about it. He said he was a sinner. Yes, but he talked about being a sinner just as the blind man talks about the stars that he has never seen, as he talks about the light, the existence of which he would not know unless he were told of it. But now it is a deep reality. You may laugh at him, you who have not been regenerated. But now he has got something that really puts him beyond your laughter. He begins to feel the exceeding weight and evil of transgression. His heart trembles, his very flesh quivers—in some cases the whole frame is affected.

The man is sick by day and night. His flesh creeps on his bones for fear. He cannot eat, his appetite fails him. He cannot bear the sound of melody and mirth. All his animal spirits are dried up. He cannot rejoice, he is unhappy, he is miserably downcast, distressed. In some cases he is almost ready to go mad—though in the majority of cases it takes a lighter phase and there are the gentle whispers of the Spirit. But even then the pangs and pains caused by regeneration, while the new life discovers the sin and evil of the past condition of the man are things that are not to be well described or mentioned without tears. This is all the work of the Spirit.

And having brought the soul thus far, the next thing the Holy Spirit does is, *to teach the soul that it is utterly incapable of saving itself*. It knew that before, maybe, if the man sat under a Gospel ministry. But he only knew it with the ear and understood it with the mind. Now, it has become part of his very life. He *feels* it—it has entered into his soul and he knows it to be true. Once he thought he would be good and thought that would save him. The Holy Spirit just knocks the brains out of that thought. “Then,” he says, “I will try ceremonies and see whether I cannot gain merit so.” God the Holy Spirit shoots the arrow right through the heart of that thought and it falls dead before him and he cannot bear the sight of the carcass, so that, like Abraham said of Sarah, he exclaims, “Bury the dead out of my sight.” Though once he loved it dearly, now he hates the sight of it.

He thought once that he could believe. He had an Arminian notion in his head that he could believe when he liked and repent when he liked. Now, God the Spirit has brought him in such a condition that he says, “I can do nothing.” He begins to discover his own death, now that he is made alive. He did not know anything about it before. He now finds that he has no hand of faith to lift, though the minister tells him to do it. He now discovers, when he is bid to pray, that he would, but cannot pray. He now finds that he is powerless and he dies in the hand of God like clay in the hand of the potter and is made to cry out, “O Lord, my God, unless You save me, I am damned to all eternity. For I cannot lift a finger in this matter until You first of all give me strength.”

And if you urge him to do anything he longs to be doing he is so afraid that it should only be fleshly doings and not the doings of the Spirit that he meditates and stops until he groans and cries. And feeling that these groans and cries are the real work of the Spirit and prove that he has

spiritual life, he then begins in right earnest to look to Jesus Christ the Savior. But mark, all these things are by the Spirit and none of them can ever be produced in the soul of any man or woman, apart from the Divine influence of God the Holy Spirit.

This being done—the soul being now weaned from all confidence and despairing and brought to its last standing place, yes, laid prostrate on the ground, the rope being about its neck and the ashes and sackcloth on its head—God the Holy Spirit *next applies the blood of Jesus to the soul*. He gives the soul the grace of faith whereby it lays hold of Jesus and gives it an anointing of holy consolation and unction of assurance, whereby, casting itself wholly on the blood and righteousness of Jesus, it receives joy, knows itself to be saved and rejoices in pardon. But mark, that is the work of the Spirit. Some preachers will tell their people, “Believe, only believe.”

Yes, it is right they should tell them so. But they should remember it is also right to tell them that even this must be the work of the Spirit. For though we say, “Only believe,” that is the greatest “only” in the world. And what some men say is so easy is just what those who want to believe find to be the hardest thing in all the world. It is simple enough for a man that has the Spirit in him to believe when he has the written Word before him and the witness of the Spirit in him. That is easy enough. But for the poor, tried sinner, who cannot see anything in the Word of God but thunder and threat—for him to believe—ah, my Brethren, it is not such a little matter as some make it to be. It needs the fullness of the power of God’s Spirit to bring any man to such faith as that.

Well, when the sinner has thus believed, then the Holy Spirit *brings all the precious things to him*. There is the blood of Jesus. That can never save my soul unless God the Spirit takes that blood and sprinkles it upon my conscience. There is the perfect spotless righteousness of Jesus. It is a robe that will fit me and adorn me from head to foot, but it is no use to me till I have put it on. And I cannot put it on myself—God the Holy Spirit must put the robe of Jesus’ righteousness on me. There is the Covenant of Adoption whereby God gives me the privileges of a son. But I cannot rejoice in my adoption until I receive the Spirit of adoption whereby I may be able to cry, “Abba, Father.”

So, Beloved, you see—I might enlarge, but my time fails me—you see that every point that is brought out in the experience of the newborn Christian, every point in that part of salvation which we may call its beginning in the soul has to do with God the Holy Spirit. There is no step that can be taken without Him. There is nothing which can be accomplished aright without Him. Yes, though you had the best of means, the most correct of ceremonies, the most orthodox of truths and though you did exercise your minds upon all these things—and though the blood of Jesus Christ were shed for you and God Himself had ordained you from before the foundations of the world to be saved—yet still there must be that one link always inserted in the golden chain of the plan of salvation. For without that it were all incomplete. *You must be quickened by the Spirit*. You must be called out of darkness into light. You must be made a new creature in Christ Jesus.

Now, I wonder how many of you know anything about this. That is the practical part of it. Now my Hearer, do you understand this? Perhaps, Sir, you are exceedingly wise and you turn on your heel with a sneer and you say, “Supernaturalism in one of its phases. These Methodists are always talking about supernatural things.” You are very wise, exceeding so, doubtless. But it seems to me that Nicodemus of old had gotten as far as you and you have gotten no farther than he. For he asked, “How could a man be born again when he is old?”

And though every Sunday-School child has had a smile at the expense of Nicodemus’s ignorance, you are not wiser. And yet you are a Rabbi, Sir and you would teach us, would you? And you would teach us about these things and yet you sneer about supernaturalism? Well, the day may come—I pray it may come to you before the day of your death and your doom—when the Christ of the supernaturalists will be the only Christ for you. When you shall come into the floods of death—where you shall need something more than nature—then you will be crying for a work that is supernatural within your heart. And it may be that then, when you first of all awake to know that your wisdom was but one of the methods of madness, you may perhaps have to cry in vain, having for your only answer, “I called and you refused. I stretched out My hands and no man regarded. I also will mock at your calamity and laugh when your fear comes.”

I hear another of you say, “Well, Sir, I know nothing of this work of God the Holy Spirit in my heart. I am just as good as other people. I never make a profession of religion. It is very rarely that I go into a place of worship at all, but I am as good as the saints, any of them. Look at some of them—very fine fellows certainly.” Stop, now, religion is a thing between yourself and your Maker and you have nothing to do with those very fine fellows you have spoken of. Suppose I make a confession that a large number of those who are called saints deserve a great deal more to be called sinners double-dyed and then white-washed—suppose I make a confession of that, what has that to do with you?

Your religion must be for yourself and it must be between you and your God. If all the world were hypocrites that would not exonerate you before your God. When you came before the Master, if you were still at enmity to Him, could you venture to plead such an excuse as this—“All the world was full of hypocrites?” “Well,” He would say, “what had that to do with you? So much the more reason why you should have been an honest man. If you say the Church was thus drifting away upon the quicksand through the evil conduct and folly of the members, so much the more reason why you should have helped to make it sound, if you thought you could have done so.”

Another cries, “Well, I do not see that I need it. I am as moral a man as I can be. I never break the Sabbath. I am one of the most punctilious of Christians—I always go to Church twice a Sabbath. I hear a thoroughly evangelical minister and you would not find fault with him.” Or perhaps says another, “I go to a Baptist Chapel, I am always found there, I am scrupulously correct in my conduct. I am a good father, a good husband. I do not know that any man can find fault with me in business.” Well certainly that is very good and if you will be so good tomorrow morning as to go into Saint Paul’s and wash one of those statues till you make it alive—then you will be saved by your morality.

But since you, even you, are dead in trespasses and sins—without the Spirit you may wash *yourself* ever so clean—but you cannot wash life into yourself any more than those statues. With all your washing those idols could never be made to walk, or think, or breathe. You must be quickened by the Holy Spirit, for you are dead in trespasses and sins.

Yes, my comely maiden, you that are everything excellent. You that are not to be blamed in anything. You that are affectionate, tender, kind and dutiful—whose very life seems to be so pure that all who see you think you are an angel. Even you, except you be born again, can not see the kingdom of God. The golden gate of Heaven must grind upon its hinges with a doleful sound and shut you out forever unless you are the subject of a Divine change—this knows no exception. And, O you vilest of the vile, you who have wandered farthest from the paths of rectitude,

“you must be born again.” You, too, must be quickened by a Divine life. And it is comforting for you to recollect that the very same power which can awaken the *moral* man, which can save the man of rectitude and honesty, is able to work *in you*—is able to change *you*—to turn the lion to a lamb, the raven to a dove.

O my Hearers, ask yourselves—are you the subjects of this change? And if you are, rejoice with joy unspeakable, for happy is that mother’s child and full of glory that can say, “I am born of God.” Blessed is that man—God and the holy angels call him blessed who has received the quickening of the Spirit and is born of God. For him there may be many troubles, but there is “a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory” to counterbalance all his woe. For him there may be wars and fights. But let him tarry, there are trumpets of victory, there are better wreaths than the laurels of conquerors. There is a crown of immortal glory, there is bliss unfading, there is acceptance in the breast of God forever and perpetual fellowship with Jehovah. But oh, if you are not born again this night I can but tremble for you and lift my heart in prayer to God and pray for you that He may now by His Divine Spirit make you alive, give you to know your need of Him and then direct you to the Cross of Jesus.

But if you know your need of a Savior tonight, if you are this night conscious of your death in sin, hear me preach the Gospel and I have done. The Lord Jesus Christ died for you. Do you know yourself to be guilty? Not as the hypocrite pretends to know it, but do you know it consciously, sensitively—do you weep over it? Do you lament it? Do you feel that you can not save yourself? Are you sick of all fleshly ways of saving? Can you say tonight, “Unless God shall put out the hand of His mercy, I know I deserve to be lost forever and I am”?

Then, as the Lord my God lives, before whom I stand, my Master bought you with His blood and those whom He bought with blood He will have. From the fangs of the lion and the jaws of the bear will He pluck them. He will save you—for you are a part of His bloody purchase. He has taken your sins upon His head. He suffered in your place. He has been punished for you. You shall not die—“your sins, which are many, are all forgiven.” And I am the Master’s glad herald to tell you tonight what His Word tells you also—that you may rejoice in the fullness of faith—for “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners,” and “this is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance.” May the Lord now be pleased to add his blessing for Jesus’ sake.

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