

TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE!—A PARADOX!

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A SERMON
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*“They yet believed not for joy.”
Luke 24:41*

THIS is a very strange sentence, but the Christian is a singularly complex being. He is a compound of the fallen and of the perfect. He detects in himself continually an alternation between the almost diabolical, and the divine. Man himself is a contradiction, but the Christian is that contradiction made more paradoxical.

He cannot comprehend himself, and only those who are like him can understand him. When he would do good, he finds evil present with him. How to will he often finds, but how to perform he finds not. He is the greatest riddle in the universe. He can say with Ralph Erskine,

*“I’m in my own and others’ eyes,
A labyrinth of mysteries.”*

In the case before us, the disciples saw Christ manifestly before their eyes. To a certain extent they believed in His resurrection—that belief gave them joy, and at once that very joy made them unbelieving. They looked again—they believed once more. Soon, a wave of joy rolled right over the head of their faith and then afresh their doubts returned.

What palpitations, what heaving of the heart they had! “It is too good to be true,” said they. This is the summing up of the mental process which was going on within—“It is true—how blessed it is. It cannot be true because it is so blessed.”

Tonight, I shall endeavor to address that timid but hopeful tribe of persons who have heard of the greatness and preciousness of the salvation of Christ, and have so far believed, that they have been filled with happiness on account of it, but that very enjoyment has made them doubt, and they have exclaimed—“It cannot be. It is not possible. This exceeds all my expectations. It is, in fact, too good.”

I remember to have been myself the subject of this temptation. Overjoyed to possess the treasure which I had found hidden in the field, delighted beyond all measure with the hope that I had an interest in Christ, I feared that the gold might be counterfeit, the pearl a cheat, my hope a delusion, my confidence a dream.

Newly delivered from the thick darkness, the overwhelming brightness of grace threatened to blind my eyes. Laden with the new favors of a young spiritual life, the excessive weight of the mercy staggered my early strength, and I was for some time troubled with the thought that these things must be a great deal too good to be true.

If God had been half as merciful, or a tithe as kind as He was, I could have believed it, but such exceeding riches of His grace were too much—such out-doings of Himself in goodness, such giving exceeding abundantly above what one could ask or even think, seemed too much to believe.

We will at once attempt to deal with this temptation. First of all, *I will try to account for it*. Then secondly, *to recount the reasons which forbid us to long indulge it*. And then, thirdly, *turn the very temptation itself into a reason why we should be more earnest in seeking these good things*.

I. To begin, LET ME ACCOUNT FOR IT.

It is little marvel that the spirit is amazed even to astonishment and doubt *when you think of the greatness of the things themselves*. The black sinner says—“My iniquity is great. I deserve the wrath of God. The Gospel presents me with a pardon, full and complete. I have labored to wash out these stains, but they will not disappear. The Gospel tells me that the precious blood of Jesus cleanses from all sin. Year after year have I revolted and gone astray. The Gospel tells me that He is able to forgive all my sins and to cast my iniquities behind His back.”

Bowed down with a sense of the greatness of his guilt, you may excuse the sinner if he thinks it must be impossible that ever the offenses he has committed could ever be condoned or his iniquity could be put away. “No,” says he, “a condemned sinner I am, and the promise of a free pardon is too much for me to believe.

*“Depths of mercy can there be,
Pardon yet reserved for me.”*

“Nay, more,” says the poor soul, “I am told that God is prepared to justify me, to give me a perfect righteousness, to look upon me as though I had always been a faithful servant, to regard me to all intents and purposes as though I had kept all His laws without any offense, and had obeyed all His statutes without any exception.

“According to the Scriptures, I am to be robed about with the finished righteousness of Christ, clothed in that garment which He spent His life to work, and I am in that garment to stand accepted in the Beloved. It is too good to be true,” says the soul. “it cannot be. *I*, the condemned one, accepted? *I*, who never kept God’s law, received as though I had kept it wholly? *I*, who have broken it, pressed to His bosom as though I were perfect in innocence?”

It does startle the soul, and well it may. And when the Gospel goes on to add—“Ay, and not only will I justify you, but I will adopt you. You shall be no more a servant but a son, no more a bond-slave but an heir of God and a joint-heir with Christ”—the mind cannot grasp the whole of that thought. “Adopted, received into His family! Alas,” it cries, “I am not worthy to be called God’s son.”

And as the sinner looks upon its former abject and lost estate, and looks upward to the brightness of the inheritance which adoption secures to it, it says—“It is impossible,” and like Sarah, he laughs saying, “How can this be? How can it be possible that I should attain to these things?”

And then, the Gospel adds—“Soul, I will not only adopt you, but having sanctified you entirely—your whole spirit, soul, and body—I will crown you. I will bring you to the mansions of the blessed in the land of the happy. I will put a new song into your mouth, and the palm of victory in your hand. The harp of triumph you shall play. Your soul will be deluged with delight, and your spirit shall bathe itself in everlasting and unbroken peace. Heaven is yours, though you deserve hell. God’s glory yours, though you deserve wrath.”

It is little marvel that these things, being so excessively great, the poor broken heart should be like the captives who returned from Babylon, who were “like men who dream.”

*“When God restored our captive state,
Joy was our song, and grace our theme;
The grace beyond our hopes so great,
That joy appeared a painted dream.”*

Another reason for incredulity may be found in our sense of unworthiness. *Note the person who receives these mercies*, and you will not wonder that he believes not for joy. “Ah,” says he, “if these things were given to the righteous I could believe it, but to me, an old offender—to me, a hard-hearted despiser of the overflowing love of God; to me who has looked on the slaughtered body of the Savior without a tear and viewed the precious blood of redemption without delight; to me, who has

blasphemed, who has done despite to the Spirit of His grace, and trodden underfoot His truth—oh!” says this poor heart, “I could believe it for anyone. I could believe it for the whole world sooner than for myself!”

For you must know that the repenting sinner always has a deeper view of his own sin than of the sin of others, and in this he differs from the impenitent, who have very keen eyes to see offenses in other men, but are blind to their own. He verily esteems himself the chief of sinners. He thinks that if anyone could have had the hottest place in hell that must surely have been his proper portion, and it is so wonderful to him that *he* should be saved, that his spirit laughs with a kind of incredulity.

“What, I, the man who sat in the pot-house and could sing a lascivious song? shall I sit at the right hand of God and be glorified with Christ? What, I, whose heart blasphemed its Creator—whose soul has been a very den of thieves—can I be accepted, washed, and saved?”

Brethren, when any of us look back upon our past lives, we can find enough ground for astonishment if God has been pleased to choose us. Hence, I say, it is not a strange or a singular thing that the poor heart, from very excess of joy, should be unable to believe.

Add to these *the strange terms upon which God presents these things to poor sinners*. The miracle of the manner equals the marvel of the matter. God comes to the sinner, and He says not to him, “Do penance. Pass through years of weariness. Renounce every pleasure. Become a monk. Live in the woods. Make yourself a hermit. Torture your body. Cut yourself with knives. Starve yourself. Cover yourself with a shirt of hair or wear a girdle of chain about your loins.”

No, if He did, it would not appear so wonderful. But He comes to the sinner and He says, “Sinner, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.” No works are asked of you. No ceremonies does He demand, but simply trust your soul with Christ. Oh, simple words! Oh, easy terms! They are not terms at all, for these He gives us—His Spirit enables us to trust in Jesus.

If He had bidden us do some great thing, we should have been very willing to attempt it, but when it is simply, “Wash and be clean”—“Oh,” we say, “that simple thing, that easy plan, that scheme which is as well-fitted to the beggar as to the king, as suitable to the poor abandoned prostitute as to the most moral of the Pharisees—that scheme which adapts itself to the ignorant and the rude as well as to the learned and polite,” our spirit says, “Ah, ’tis a joyous plan,” and yet, from very joy, it is unable to believe.

And add to this one more thought—*the method by which God proposes to work all this*. That is to say, He proposes to pardon and to justify the sinner instantaneously. The plan of salvation requires not months nor weeks in which his sin may be put away. It is finished. An instant is enough to receive it and in that instant the man is saved. The moment a man believes in Christ, not some of his sins, but *all* his sins are gone.

Just as when God blew with His wind, the Egyptians were all drowned at once in the waters of the Red Sea, and Moses said, “Ye shall see them no more for ever,” so, when once we believe in Christ, the breath of God’s pardoning love blows upon the waters, and our sins sink into the bottom like a stone. There is not one, not one of them left.

It is as when a man takes a bond, you are his debtor. He can imprison you, but he holds the bond over the candle, and he says, “See here!” and when it is burned, your whole debt, though ’twere ten or twenty thousand pounds, is gone in a moment.

So does faith. It sees the handwriting of the ordinances that was against us taken away and nailed to Christ’s cross. Now, this does seem a surprising thing. It is so surprising that when men have heard it for the first time, they have been willing to run anywhere to listen to it again. This was the secret of Whitefield’s popularity.

The Gospel was a new thing in his age to the mass of the people. They were like blind men who, having had their eyes opened, and being suddenly taken out at night to view the stars, could not refrain from clapping their hands for joy. The first sight of land is always blessed to the sailor’s eyes, and the men of those days felt that they saw heaven in the distance and the port of peace. It is no wonder that

they rejoiced even to tears. It was glad tidings to their spirits, and there were some then, as there are now, who could not believe by reason of their excessive joy.

Possibly John Bunyan alludes to this singular unbelief in his sweet picture of Mercy's dream wherein, like Sarai, she laughed. Let me tell it to you in his own words—"In the morning, when they were awake, Christiana said to Mercy, What was the matter that you did laugh in your sleep tonight? I suppose you were in a dream. MERCY: So I was, and a sweet dream it was—but are you sure I laughed? CHRISTIANA: Yes you laughed heartily, but prithee, Mercy, tell me thy dream.

"MERCY: I was dreaming that I sat all alone in a solitary place, and was bemoaning of the hardness of my heart. Now, I had not sat there long, but methought many were gathered about me to see me and to hear what it was that I said. So they hearkened, and I went on bemoaning the hardness of my heart. At this, some of them laughed at me, some called me fool, and some began to thrust me about.

"With that, methought I looked up, and saw one coming with wings towards me. So he came directly to me and said, 'Mercy, what ails you?' Now, when he had heard me make my complaint, he said, 'Peace be to thee! He also wiped mine eyes with his handkerchief, and clad me in silver and gold. He put a chain about my neck, and earrings in my ears, and a beautiful crown upon my head.

"Then, he took me by the hand and said, 'Mercy, come after me!' So he went up, and I followed, till we came to a golden gate. Then he knocked. and when they within had opened, the man went in, and I followed him up to a throne, upon which one sat, and He said to me, 'Welcome, daughter!' The place looked bright and twinkling, like the stars, or rather like the sun. And I thought that I saw your husband there. So I awoke from my dream. But did I laugh?" Well might her mouth be filled with laughter to see herself so favored!

II. Having thus tried to account for this state of the heart, may I have the help of God while I try to DO BATTLE WITH THE EVIL THAT IS IN IT, THAT WE MAY BE ABLE TO BELIEVE IN CHRIST!

Troubled heart, let me remind you, first of all, that you have no need to doubt the truth of the precious revelation because of its greatness, *for He is a great God who makes it to you.* Did you expect that He, the King of heaven, rich in mercy and abundant in longsuffering, would send little grace, little love, and little pity to the sons of men?

What says the Scripture of Araunah the Jebusite?—"All these things did Araunah, as a king, give unto the king." But what shall we say of God? Shall He give like a king? Ay, He is King of kings, and He gives as kings can never give.

When Alexander bade his officer demand what reward he pleased, he asked so much that he nearly emptied the treasury, and when the treasurer refused to pay it, and came to Alexander and said, "This man is unreasonable. he asks too much."—"Nay," said the conqueror, "he asks of Alexander, and he measures what he asks by my dignity."

So be it your remembrance that God will not give meanly and stingily, for that were unworthy of Him, but He will give splendidly and magnificently, for this is after His own nature. Expect, therefore, that He will save great sinners in a great and glorious way, and give them great mercies, for the Lord is a great God and a great King above all gods.

The riches of His grace are inexhaustible. He is the Father of mercies, and He begets mercies by thousands and by millions to supply His people's needs. You meet a poor man, and you are hungry. If he were hospitable, he might say, "Come in, sir, and you may have a part of my crust." You go in and you find a scanty meal upon the table, and you say, "What you have given me is all you had to give, I thank you for it."

But what would you think if you waited at the royal door and received a royal invitation, and when you went in, were fed with dry crusts and drops of water? You would think this not becoming a king. Now, if your friend has been offended, and he is willing to forgive, you are grateful to him, for he does perhaps his best, but God stands at His gate with His tables laden with a rich hospitality. "My oxen and My fatlings are killed, all things are ready, come to the supper."

Let no low thought of God come in to make you doubt His power to save you. Have thoughts of God and this snare of the fowler will be broken.

Again, let me remind you *that the greatness of God's mercy should encourage you to believe that it comes from God*. If I should take you on a sudden, blindfold you, and carry you away, you knew not whither, and then, loosening the bandage from your eyes, should say, "Look here, it is all gold on every side, thick slabs of gold, and there is a pick-axe. Take it and use it"—you begin and turn up blocks of ore—would you have any idea at the time that this was put there by men? "No," say you, "this is God's mine, the infinite bounty of the Creator, not the scanty contrivance of the creature." The abundance of the treasure proves to you that it cannot be the treasure house of man.

Now, you open your eyes in this building tonight, and you see a gas light. "Well," you say, "it is very good—a very good light in its way, but I can see it is man's light." Go out and see the moon's light—did you ever think that man made that? Or wait till tomorrow morning and look up at the sun. Wait till noonday, when he is shedding down his brightness and gilding the fields with tints of glory, and I think you will say, "Ah! I shall never mistake this for man's work. It is so exceeding bright that nothing that man can ever achieve in the way of illumination can be at all comparable to it."

Thus, the greatness of the light makes you believe in the divinity that ordained it. If you should see tomorrow a heavy shower of rain, you would not believe, I suppose, that it was made with a watering-pot. And if you saw the Thames swollen to its banks from a great flood, you would not believe that the London waterworks had filled it to its brim. "No," say you, "this is God at work in nature. The greatness of the work proves that God is here."

If you were ever in Cambridge, you might have seen a little mountain which is so small that nobody knows who made it. Some say it is artificial—some say it is natural. Now, I have never heard any dispute about the Alps—nobody ever said that they were artificial.

I never heard of any disputation about the Himalayas. No one ever conjectured that human hands piled them up to the skies and clothed them with their hoary snows. So when I read of the mercies of God in Christ, reaching up like mountains to heaven, I am sure they must be divine. I am certain the revelation must come from God. It must be true. It is self-evident.

I might enlarge this argument by showing that God's works in creation are very great, and therefore it were idle to think that there would be no great works in grace. Two works which have been made by the same artist always have some characteristics which enable you to see that the same artist made them. In like manner, to us there is one God. Creation and redemption have but one author—the same eternal power and Godhead are legibly inscribed on both.

Now, when I look at the sea, and hear it roaring in the fullness thereof, I see a great artist there. And when my soul assays the ocean of grace, and listens to the echoes of its motion as the sound of many waters, I see the same Almighty artist.

When I see a great sinner saved, then I think I see the same Master-hand which first formed man, and curiously wrought his substance, endowing him with powers so great that they baffle our understanding. But if I only met with little specimens of grace, with narrow gifts and stumped benedictions, I might say—"These may be of man, for man can do many things, and possibly as he has done things, little things in creation, he can do little things in grace."

But when we meet with astounding conversions, with marvelous forgivenesses, we are sure this must be God because it is so great and so far beyond all human comprehension.

Let me remind you again, that you may get another argument to put an end to your fears about the greatness of God's mercy *from the greatness of His providence*. Did you ever think how much food God gives to His creatures every year? How much fine wheat He lays upon the earth that we may feed thereon!

Have you remembered the vast machinery with which He feeds the thousand millions of men who are upon the face of the globe? When Xerxes led his millions from Persia to Greece, there was a very

great and cumbrous system to carry on the commissariat so that all the host might be fed—and even as it was, many of them were starved.

But here are millions upon millions and God feeds them. Nay, enlarge the thought. There are the fowls of heaven that are countless—did you ever pick up a dead sparrow that had been starved to death? I never did. Think of the sharp winters, and the birds, somehow or other, without barn or granary, find their food.

Look at the millions and millions of fish in the sea, swimming tonight and searching for their food, and your heavenly Father feeds all of them. Look at the innumerable insects creeping upon the earth, or dancing in the summer sunbeam, all supplied. Look at the behemoth who makes the deep to be hoary with roaring, look at huge leviathan, the elephant, the crocodile, and those other mighty creatures of God's strength to go through the deep or through the forests—these He supplies in providence.

And if He be so lavish here, do you think that in the masterpiece of His hands, His grace, He is stinted and narrowed? God forbid! 'Twere hard to believe in littleness of special love when we see greatness of common goodness towards the sons of man.

“Oh,” says one, “but I am thinking of my unworthiness and that this does not meet it.” Well, this will meet it. There is a country where there has been a drought, and the land is all parched and chapped. That field of corn there belongs to a good man. That field over yonder belongs to an infidel. That one over there belongs to a blasphemer. That one is cultivated by a drunkard. That other one belongs to a man who lives in every known vice.

Here comes a cloud! blessed be God, here comes a cloud, which sails along through the sky. Where will it go? It is big with rain. It will make the poor dried-up germ revive. There will yet be a harvest. Which way will it go? “Of course,” you say, “it will only go in the corner where the godly man has his field.” Nay, not so. It spreads its rich mantle over the entire sky, and the shower of mercy falls upon the just and the unjust, upon the thankful and upon the unthankful. It falls just as plenteously where the blasphemer is the possessor as where the gracious man lifts up his heart in prayer.

Now, what does this show? God blesses ungodly men, unthankful men, and I hold that as grace is always in analogy with nature, God is ready tonight to bless blasphemers, graceless men, careless men, drunken men, men who ask not His favor, but who, nevertheless, if God wills to save them, shall certainly receive His salvation, who shall have His mercy brought into their souls, and they shall live.

To turn the point a moment and argue again. Soul, you say, “I cannot believe, because the mercy is so great.” Would anything but great mercy suit your case at all? Say, would little gains serve your turn? Must you not say with Baxter, “Lord, give me great mercy or no mercy, for nothing short of great mercy can answer my desire?”

You need a great Christ. You want one that can wash away foul offenses. He is just such a one as you need. Trust Him. Trust Him. Trust Him now! Besides, what have you to do with asking questions at all? What God gives you to do, is it not yours to do? He tells you, “Trust My Son and I will save you through His blood.” Sinner, ask no questions. Be it right or wrong, the responsibility will not rest with you if you will do as God bids you do.

If the Spirit of God should now constrain you to trust Christ, should you perish, then you can say, “I perished doing as God bade me.” That can never be. You will be the first that ever did perish so. May God enable you at this very moment to take Him at His word and to trust your soul in Jesus' hands!

III. I close by USING YOUR VERY FEARS AS AN ENTICEMENT TO BELIEVE.

If it be so joyous only to think of these things, what must it be to possess them? If it gives such a weight to your spirit only to think of being pardoned, adopted, accepted, and saved, what must it be to really be washed? You cannot make a guess.

But this I can tell you, the first moment I believed in Christ, I had more real happiness in one tick of the clock than in all the years before. Oh, to be forgiven! It is enough to make a man leap. Ay, to leap three times as John Bunyan puts it and go on his way rejoicing. Forgiven! Why, a rack becomes a bed of down, the flames become our friends when we are forgiven.

Justified! No more condemnation! Oh, the joy of that! The happiness of the slave when he lands on freedom's shore is nothing compared with the delight of the believer when he gets out of the land of the enemy. We speak of the joy of the poor captive who has been chained to the oar by the oppressor and who at last is delivered—the breaking of his chain is not one-half such melodious music to him as the breaking of our chains to us.

“He took me out of the horrible pit and out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and put a new song into my mouth, and established my goings.”

*“I will praise Thee every day,
Now Thine anger's passed away;
Comfortable thoughts arise
From the bleeding sacrifice.*

*“Jesus is become at length
My salvation, and my strength;
And His praises shall prolong,
While I live, my pleasant song.”*

Talk not of the joys of the dance, or of the flush of wine. Speak not of the mirth of the merry, or of the flashes of the ambitious and successful. There is a mirth more deep than these—a joy more intense—a bliss more enduring than anything the world can give. It is the bliss of being forgiven, the bliss of having God's favor and God's love in one's soul.

The bliss of feeling that God is our Father, that Christ is married to our souls, and that the Holy Spirit dwells in us, and will abide with us forever. Let the sweetness of the mercy draw you, poor soul! Let the sweetness of the mercy, I say, entice you! But you say, “May I have it?” Come and welcome, come and welcome, sinner, come!

When you get outside of this place you will see opposite to the Elephant and Castle a fountain. If you are thirsty, go and drink. There is nobody there to say, “You must not come—you are not fit.” It is put there on purpose for the thirsty. And if tonight you want Christ, if you feel in your souls a desire to be partakers of His salvation, He stands there in the highway of the Gospel, and He is free to every thirsty soul.

No need to bring your silver cups or your golden vases, you may come with your poverty. No need, my poor friend, that you should wait until you have learned to read well or have studied the classics, you may come in your ignorance just as you are.

No need, my poor erring brother, that you should wait till you should thoroughly reform—you may come and do your reformation afterwards. Come to Jesus as you are, just as you are. He will wash the filthy, clothe the naked, heal the sick, give sight to the blind, enrich the penniless, and raise to glory those who seem to be sinking down to hell.

Oh! may God draw some tonight, some who have come in here out of curiosity to hear the strange preacher, who only hopes to be strange in seeking to win souls by telling them earnestly God's simple truth! May the Master lay hold of some tonight, yea, tonight! Had I the power to plead as Paul did, could I utter impassioned words like those of the seraphic Whitefield, O could I plead with you as a man pleads for his life, as a mother pleads for her child, so would I say to you, and beseech you that you be reconciled to God!

My strength fails, the truth has been uttered. Hear it! May you receive it! “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved”—thus spake our Lord and Master—“He that believeth not shall be damned.” Believe and make profession of your faith, for whosoever with his heart believes, and with his mouth makes confession, shall be saved.

May the Lord bless the joy of the tidings to the rejoicing of our heart, for His dear name's sake! Amen.

Taken from The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit C. H. Spurgeon Collection. Only necessary changes have been made, such as correcting spelling errors, some punctuation usage, capitalization of deity pronouns, and minimal updating of a few archaic words. The content is unabridged. Additional Bible-based resources are available at www.spurgeongems.org.