

How Shall I Go To God?

By Horatius Bonar

IT IS with our *sins* that we go to God, for we have nothing else to go with that we can call our own. This is one of the lessons that we are so slow to learn; yet without learning this we cannot take one right step in that which we call a religious life.

To look up some good thing in our past life, or to get some good thing now, if we find that our past does not contain any such thing, is our first thought when we begin to inquire after God, that we may get the great question settled between Him and us, as to the forgiveness of our sins.

"In His favor is life"; and to be without this favor is to be unhappy here, and to be shut out from joy hereafter. There is no life worthy of the name of life save that which flows from His assured friendship. Without that friendship, our life here is a burden and a weariness; but with that friendship we fear no evil, and all sorrow is turned into joy.

"How shall I be happy?" was the question of a weary soul who had tried a hundred different ways of happiness, and had always failed.

"Secure the favor of God," was the prompt answer, by one who had himself tasted that the "Lord is gracious."

"Is there no other way of being happy?"

"None, none," was the quick and decided reply. "Man has been trying other ways for six thousand years, and has utterly failed, and are *you* likely to succeed?"

"No, not likely; and I don't want to go on trying. But this favor of God seems such a shadowy thing, and God Himself so far off, that I know not which way to turn."

"God's favor is no shadow; it is real beyond all other realities; and He Himself is the nearest of all near beings, as accessible as He is gracious."

"That favor of which you speak has always seemed to me a sort of *mist*, of which I can make nothing."

"Say rather it is *sunshine* which a mist is hiding from you."

"Yes, yes, I believe you; but how shall I get through the mist into the sunshine beyond? It seems so difficult and to require such a length of time!"

"*You* make that distant and difficult which God has made simple and near and easy."

"Are there no difficulties, do you mean to say?"

"In one sense, a thousand; in another, none."

"How is that?"

"Did the Son of God put difficulties in the sinner's way when He said to the multitude, 'Come unto Me, and I will give you rest'?"

"Certainly not; He meant them to go at once to Him, as He stood there, and as they stood there, and He would give them rest."

"Had *you* then been upon the spot, what difficulties should you have found?"

"None, certainly; to speak of difficulty when I was standing by the side of the Son of God would have been folly, or worse."

"Did the Son of God suggest difficulty to the sinner when He sat on Jacob's well, by the side of the Samaritan? Was not all difficulty anticipated or put away by these wondrous words of Christ, 'thou wouldst have asked, and I would have given'?"

"Yes, no doubt; the asking and the giving was all. The whole transaction is finished on the spot. Time and space, distance and difficulty, have nothing to do with the matter; the giving was to follow the asking as a matter of course. So far all is plain. But I would ask: Is there no barrier here?"

"None whatever, if the Son of God really came to save the lost; if He came for those who were only partly lost, or who could partly save themselves, the barrier is infinite. This I admit; nay, insist upon."

"Is the being lost, then, no barrier to our being saved?"

"Foolish question, which may be met by a foolish answer. Is your being thirsty a hindrance to your getting water or is being poor a hindrance to your obtaining riches as a gift from a friend?"

“True; it is my thirst that fits me for the water and my poverty that fits me for the gold.”

“Ah, yes, the Son of Man came not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. If you be not wholly a sinner, there is a barrier; if you be wholly such, there is none!”

“Wholly a sinner! Is that really my character?”

“No doubt of that. If you doubt it, go and search your Bible. God's testimony is that you are wholly a sinner, and must deal with Him as such, for the whole need not a physician, but they that are sick.”

“Wholly a sinner, well!—but must I not get quit of some of my sins before I can expect blessing from Him?”

“No, indeed; He alone can deliver you from so much as even one sin; and you must go at once to Him with all that you have of evil, how much so ever that may be. If you be not wholly a sinner, you don't wholly need Christ, for He is out and out a Saviour; He does not help you to save yourself, nor do you help Him to save you. He does all, or nothing. A half salvation will only do for those who are not completely lost. He `His own self bare our sins in His own body on the tree“ (I Peter 2:24).

It was in some such way as the above that Luther found his way into the peace and liberty of Christ. The story of his deliverance is an instructive one, as showing how the stumbling-blocks of self-righteousness are removed by the full exhibition of the gospel in its freeness, as the good news of God's love to the unloving and unlovable, the good news of pardon to the sinner, without merit and without money, the good news of PEACE WITH GOD, solely through the propitiation of Him who hath made peace by the blood of His cross.

One of Luther's earliest difficulties was that he must get repentance wrought within himself; and having accomplished this, he was to carry this repentance as a peace-offering or recommendation to God. If this repentance could not be presented as a positive recommendation, at least it could be urged as a plea in mitigation of punishment. “How can I dare believe in the favor of God,” he said, “so long as there is in me no real conversion? I must be changed before He can receive me.”

He is answered that the “conversion,” or “repentance,” of which he is so desirous, can never take place so long as he regards God as a stern and unloving Judge. It is the *goodness of God* that leadeth to repentance (Rom 2:4), and without the recognition of this “goodness” there can be no softening of heart. An impenitent sinner is one who is despising the riches of His goodness and forbearance and long-suffering.

Luther's aged counselor tells him plainly that he must be done with penances and mortifications, and all such self-righteous preparations for securing or purchasing the Divine favor. That voice, Luther tells us touchingly, seemed to come to him from heaven: “All true repentance begins with the knowledge of the forgiving love of God.”

As he listens light breaks in, and an unknown joy fills him. Nothing between him and God! Nothing between him and pardon! No preliminary goodness, or preparatory feeling! He learns the Apostle's lesson, “Christ died for the *ungodly*” (Rom 5:6); God “justifieth the *ungodly*” (Rom 4:5). All the evil that is in him cannot hinder this justification; and all the goodness (if such there be) that is in him cannot assist in obtaining it. He must be received as a sinner, or not at all. The pardon that is proffered recognizes only his *guilt*; and the salvation provided in the cross of Christ regards him simply as *lost*.

But the sense of guilt is too deep to be easily quieted. Fear comes back again, and he goes once more to his aged adviser, crying, “Oh, my sin, my sin!” as if the message of forgiveness which he had so lately received was too good news to be true, and as if sins like his could not be so easily and so simply forgiven.

“What! would you be only a pretended sinner, and therefore need only a pretended Saviour?”

So spake his venerable friend, and then added, solemnly, “Know that Jesus Christ is the Saviour of great and real sinners, who are deserving of nothing but utter condemnation.”

“But is not God sovereign in His electing love?” said Luther; “Perhaps I may not be one of His chosen.”

“Look to the wounds of Christ,” was the answer, “and learn there God's gracious mind to the children of men. In Christ we read the name of God, and learn what He is, and how He loves; the Son is the revealer of the Father; and the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world.”

“I believe in the forgiveness of sins,” said Luther to a friend one day, when tossing on a sick bed; “but what is that to me?”

“Ah,” said his friend, “does not that include your own sins? You believe in the forgiveness of David's sins, and of Peter's sins, why not of your own? The forgiveness is for you as much as for David or Peter.”

Thus Luther found rest. The gospel, thus believed, brought liberty and peace. He knew that he was forgiven because God had said that forgiveness was the immediate and sure possession of all who believed the good news.

In the settlement of the great question between the sinner and God, there was to be no bargaining and no price of any kind. The basis of settlement was laid eighteen hundred years ago; and the mighty transaction on the cross did all that was needed as a price. "It is finished," is God's message to the sons of men in their inquiry, "What shall we do to be saved?" This *completed transaction* supersedes all man's efforts to justify himself, or to assist God in justifying him. We see Christ crucified, and God in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, *not imputing unto men their trespasses*; and this non-imputation is the result solely of what was done upon the cross, where the transference of the sinner's guilt to the Divine surety was once and for ever accomplished. It is of that transaction that the gospel brings us the "good news," and whosoever believeth it becomes partaker of all the benefits which that transaction secured.

"But am I not to be indebted to the Holy Spirit's work in my soul?"

"Undoubtedly; for what hope can there be for you without the Almighty Spirit, who quickeneth the dead?"

"If so, then ought I not to wait for His impulses, and having got them, may I not present the feelings which He has wrought in me as reasons why I should be justified?"

"No, in no wise. You are not justified by the Spirit's work, but by Christ's alone; nor are the motions of the Spirit in you the grounds of your confidence, or the reasons for your expecting pardon from the Judge of all. The Spirit works in you, not to prepare you for being justified, or to make you fit for the favor of God, but to *bring you to the cross*, just as you are. For the cross is the only place where God deals in mercy with the transgressor."

It is at the cross that we meet God in peace and receive His favor. There we find not only the blood that washes, but the righteousness which clothes and beautifies, so that henceforth we are treated by God as if our own unrighteousness had passed away, and the righteousness of His own Son were actually ours.

This is what the apostle calls "imputed" righteousness (Rom 4:6,8,11,22,24), or righteousness so reckoned to us by God as that we are entitled to all the blessings which that righteousness can obtain for us. Righteousness got up by ourselves, or put into us by another, we call *infused*, or *imparted*, or *inherent* righteousness; but righteousness belonging to another reckoned to us by God as if it were our own, we call *imputed righteousness*. It is of this that the apostle speaks when he says, "Put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 13:14; Gal 3:27). Thus Christ *represents* us; and God deals with us as represented by Him. Righteousness within will follow necessarily and inseparably; but we are not to wait in order to get it before going to God for the righteousness of His only begotten Son.

Imputed righteousness must come *first*. You cannot have the righteousness *within* till you have the righteousness *without*; and to make your own righteousness the price which you give to God for that of His Son, is to dishonor Christ, and to deny His cross. The Spirit's work is not to make us holy, in order that we may be pardoned, but to show us the cross, where the pardon is to be found by the unholy; so that having found the pardon there, we may begin the life of holiness to which we are called.

That which God presents to the sinner is an *immediate pardon*, "Not by works of righteousness which we have done," but by the great work of righteousness finished for us by the Substitute. Our qualification for obtaining that righteousness is *that we are unrighteous*, just as the sick man's qualification for the physician is *that he is sick*.

Of a previous goodness, preparatory to pardon, the gospel says nothing. Of a preliminary state of religious feeling as a necessary introduction to the grace of God, the apostles never spoke. Fears, troubles, self-questionings, bitter cries for mercy, forebodings of judgment, and resolutions of amendment, may, in point of time, have preceded the sinner's reception of the good news; but they did not constitute his fitness, nor make up his qualification. He would have been quite as welcome without them. They did not make the pardon more complete, more gracious, or more free. The sinner's *wants* were all his arguments:—"God be merciful to me a sinner." He *needed* salvation, and he went to God for it, and got it just because he needed it, and because God delights in the poor and needy. He *needed* pardon, and he went to God for it, and obtained

it without merit or money. “When he had NOTHING TO PAY, God frankly forgave.” It was the having nothing to pay that drew out the frank forgiveness.

Ah, this is *grace*. “This is *love*, not that we loved God, but that He loved us!” He loved us, even when we were dead in sins. He loved us, not because we were rich in goodness, but because He was “rich in mercy”; not because we were worthy of His favor, but because He delighted in loving-kindness. His welcome to us comes from His own graciousness, not from our loveliness. “Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Christ invites the weary! It is this weariness that fits you for Him, and Him for you. Here is the *weariness*, there is the *resting-place*! They are side by side. Do you say, “That resting-place is not for me?” What! Is it not for the weary? Do you say, “But I cannot make use of it?” What! Do you mean to say, “I am so weary that I cannot sit down?” If you had said, “I am so weary that I cannot stand, nor walk, nor climb,” one could understand you. But to say, “I am so weary that I cannot sit down,” is simple folly, or something worse, for you are making a merit and a work of your sitting down; you seem to think that to sit down is to do some great thing which will require a long and prodigious effort.

Let us listen then to the gracious words of the Lord: “If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give Me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of Him, and He would have given thee living water” (John 4:10). Thou wouldest have asked, and He would have given! That is all. How real, how true, how free; yet how simple! Or let us listen to the voice of the servant in the person of Luther. “Oh, my dear brother, learn to know Christ and Him crucified. Learn to sing a new song; to despair of previous work, and to cry to Him, Lord Jesus, Thou art my righteousness, and I am Thy sin. Thou hast taken on Thee what was mine, and given to me what is Thine. What I was, Thou becamest, that I might be what I was not. Christ dwells only with sinners. Meditate often on this love of Christ, and you will taste its sweetness.” Yes; pardon, peace, life, are all of them *gifts*, Divine gifts, brought down from heaven by the Son of God, presented personally to each needy sinner by the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. They are not to be *bought*, but *received*; as men receive the sunshine, complete and sure and free. They are not to be earned or deserved by exertions or sufferings, or prayers or tears; but *accepted* at once as the purchase of the labors and sufferings of the great Substitute. They are not to be waited for, but *taken* on the spot without hesitation or distrust, as men take the loving gift of a generous friend. They are not to be claimed on the ground of *fitness* or *goodness*, but of *need* and *unworthiness*, of poverty and emptiness.