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# HALF HOURS

WITH THE LESSONS OF 1885

CHAPTERS ON THE BIBLE TEXTS CHOSEN FOR  
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BY

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# THE GRACIOUS INVITATION.

BY THE REV. T. D. WITHERSPOON, D. D.

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Dec. 20.—Isa. 55 : 1-11.

WITH the fortieth chapter of his prophecy Isaiah enters upon a new and hitherto unrivaled department of his prophetic work. Up to this point his ministry has been one of denunciation. A prophet of woe, he seems to stand in raiment of sackcloth, pointing first to the sins of the covenant people and then to the swift judgments that should follow them; and the concluding words of the thirty-ninth chapter leave him thus with ominous finger pointing down through the vista of coming generations to a divine anger which becomes more fierce and a divine patience which becomes more exhausted, until at last all merges in the Babylonian captivity with its horrors.

But with the fortieth chapter a new era has dawned. The chosen people are to the prophet's eye already in the land of captivity. The galling yoke is upon their necks; the hard bondage has worn down their spirits; and now he comes with a ministry of comfort. The Boanerges of the earlier prophecies has been transformed into a Barnabas. The sackcloth is gone. The hand that had pointed to the period of captivity now lifts itself and points to the glorious period of restoration—to the time when across the desert a highway shall be prepared for the return of the ransomed of the Lord. And as his mind dwells upon

the promised blessings of that period of return the prophet finds himself suddenly "rapt into future times." The wilderness-voice becomes that of John, the herald of Christ. The personal ministry of our Lord, his life of humiliation, his sufferings upon the cross, the great atonement wrought out by him, with its full provision for all the wants of the guilty and suffering children of men,—these are the themes that engage his mind and fire his heart during the intervening chapters, until in the opening of this fifty-fifth chapter he breaks forth like one who has discovered a fountain in the midst of some desert waste, crying, "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price."

The connection of this chapter with those that precede it is therefore very intimate. The rich and full provisions which have been made in the atonement of Christ for the salvation of men afford a ground for the unlimited invitation to all to come and partake. The object of this chapter is to communicate this invitation and to press it upon the attention of those upon whose ears it falls. The two main topics of the lesson for to-day are, first, the invitation itself, and then the encouragements to its acceptance.

I. As to the first of these, the invitation itself, it may truly be said that nowhere in Scripture have we more beautifully represented to us the freeness and fullness of redeeming love. In this invitation, as here conveyed, there are three elements to be considered: the universality of the offer, the freeness of the gift and the fullness of the blessings bestowed. Let us examine each of these briefly.

(1) See the universality of the offer: "Ho, every one that thirsteth." There is no limitation here. Whatever

views we hold as to the original design of the atonement and its special relation to God's elect, there is nothing in our Calvinistic theology, as there is nothing in the Scriptures from which it is drawn, which at all restricts us in the offer of salvation to all men, or makes it at all inconsistent in God to pardon all without exception who will repent and believe on his Son. We take our stand equally with others by the side of the desert fountain. We lift our voice as high as the highest as we cry, "Ho, every one that thirsteth." All, absolutely all, are invited, for the Lord "will have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."

(2) See the freeness of the gift. Not only are there no barriers in the divine decrees, which mercifully secure the salvation of those given to the Son, but exclude none, but there are no barriers in the circumstances or condition of those who desire to come. "He that hath no money"—he that is in spiritual bankruptcy, that can offer no good deeds, that can plead no merit, that can make no compensating return—he is the one who is especially invited, who will be especially welcome, for it is the crowning glory of this salvation that it is "without money and without price." The water of life is like the waters which God sends down from his clouds, like the waters from the springs which he sends among the hills, like the waters of his great rivers and seas; it is free to all. All are invited to "stoop down and drink and live."

(3) See the fullness of the blessings which this salvation contains. They are represented here by the three terms water, wine and milk. A traveler discovered in a perishing condition upon some great desert waste would require for his restoration first the water which would quench the inward fires that were consuming him; then, with his raging thirst happily appeased, he would need

the stimulus of wine to rally the feeble powers of nature from their almost fatal exhaustion; and when the wine had aroused the vital forces and set the functions of nature again at play, there would be demanded the simple nourishment to be found in milk, nature's own provision for the strengthening of those enfeebled by sickness or want.

Here, then, under this threefold analogy, appears that infinite fullness which is in Christ, by reason of which he is "made of God unto us wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption." The invitation is not only world-wide and free, but it is to the possession and enjoyment of all that the soul can need. Nothing is wanting to its completeness. "It pleased the Father that in him should all fullness dwell."

II. We come now, in the second place, to consider the encouragements to accept the invitation as they are given in the subsequent part of the chapter. These are manifold and various.

(1) There is, first, the contrast between the blessings offered and those for which men are now so laboriously toiling. "Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labor for that which satisfieth not?" The world requires its sacrifices and toils as truly as does the service of God, but with this difference, that the rewards of God's service satisfy, while those of the world do not. The votary of the world toils for that which seems in anticipation to be bread, but when acquired after many disappointments and trials proves to be but

"As Dead Sea fruit, which tempts the eye,  
But turns to ashes on the lips."

The blessings of salvation, on the other hand, give permanent satisfaction and enjoyment. He who accepts the

gospel invitation "eats that which is good;" his "soul delights itself in fatness." Surely, if we must make sacrifices, we should make them for that which will yield us some adequate return in the end.

(2) The character of Him through whom the blessings are to be obtained. "Behold, I have given him to be a witness to the people, a leader and commander to the people." The character and offices of Christ afford the strongest encouragement to the sinner to accept the invitations of mercy. To have as a leader and commander such a Saviour, so omnipotent, so sympathetic, so full at once of pity and of power,—this is encouragement enough for the weakest and most faint-hearted of all the children of men. Surely we may come without fear and without doubting when we remember the character of Him upon whom our salvation depends.

(3) A third ground of encouragement is found in the present nearness of God to us and his abundant willingness to pardon. Now he may be found; now he is near; now he will not only have mercy, but will abundantly pardon. This nearness to us, as he is seated upon his throne of grace, as he waits to be gracious, as he "keepeth mercy for thousands," whilst it has an element of awful foreboding for those who neglect the great interests of their souls, reminding them of a time when God will not be near, when he cannot be found and when he will no longer as now abundantly pardon, has also an element of most precious encouragement to him who sincerely seeks the salvation of his soul, reminding him that the heavenly Father sits like the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son, waiting for the return of the erring one, ready to run forth to meet him, to fall upon his neck and to give him the kiss of forgiveness and welcome.

(4) A fourth ground of encouragement is found in the



fact that God's "ways are not our ways, nor his thoughts our thoughts." It goes hard with man to forgive a wrong, especially if the injury has been wanton, has been grievous and has been oft repeated and aggravated by previous relations or favors. Hence it is only natural for the sinner, looking at the matter in the light of human experience, to doubt God's willingness to receive him and admit him to all the blessings of salvation although he has sinned so grievously against him. Hence there is wanted just this source of encouragement, that God's thoughts are not as man's thoughts nor his ways as man's ways, but that "as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are God's ways higher than our ways, and his thoughts than our thoughts." He pardons like a God. No degree of guilt, no length of continuance in sin, no aggravations by reason of peculiar light or privilege,—none of these, nor all of them combined, shut out from the mercy of God him who comes with penitent confession of sin in the name of Christ. To him the doors of infinite mercy stand always open. He is welcome, thrice welcome, to come.

(5) A fifth source of encouragement: God's word "shall not return unto him void." Behind the instrumentalities which are employed for the salvation of men is an eternal purpose, born of electing love, by reason of which God has ordained that as the rain which comes down from heaven does not fail of its purpose, but waters the earth and makes it fruitful, so the word spoken shall accomplish that which he pleases, and shall prosper in the thing whereto he hath sent it. There is profound encouragement in the thought that back of these agencies of the gospel, which seem so weak as compared with those powers of depravity in the soul with which they must contend, lies the changeless purpose of Him who "worketh all things after the counsel of his own

will." It arms me with courage to know that whilst in great conscious weakness I am working out my own salvation, there is One who in accordance with an eternal and changeless purpose is "working in me both to will and to do of his own good pleasure."

(6) Still another source of encouragement to accept this gracious invitation is the profound interest felt by all holy beings everywhere in the salvation of the sinner. That profound sympathy with man in his efforts for salvation which our Lord so beautifully represents by the joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth, the inspired prophet here represents by the joy of inanimate nature over this return of the sinner to Him who is the Fountain of life. Such will be the joy over the ransomed of the Lord that, as they go out from this their spiritual bondage, "the mountains and the hills shall break forth before them into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands." Surely it must encourage us to seek the Lord when we thus learn that our salvation will add new joy to the already full cup of the heavenly hosts, and that they will joy over us with "the joy of harvest."

(7) The last of these encouragements is found in the beneficent results of the acceptance of this invitation: "Instead of the thorn shall come up the fir tree, and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle tree: and it shall be to the Lord for a name, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off." Divine grace works a complete transformation in the heart into which it comes. It roots out the thorns and briars of selfishness, of pride, of avarice, of unbelief, and every hurtful lust. It implants in their room all the graces that adorn the Christian character. The stately beauty of the fir tree and the modest fragrance of the myrtle tree come out under the

gardening of God. True religion works a similar transformation in the home. It roots out the briars and thorns of contention and strife, of slovenliness and sloth, of prodigality and worldliness. It causes the fir tree of piety and the myrtle tree of concord to spring up and flourish. It comes into the community, into the commonwealth, into the nation, with its transforming power. It takes hold of long-established vices and prejudices and tears them up by the root. Its tendency is to convert the whole world into a garden of the Lord.

Such is the gracious invitation of the Lord; such are the manifold and varied encouragements to its acceptance. What honor God has put upon us in entrusting this invitation to us, not only bidding the Spirit and the bride say, Come, but instructing him that heareth to say, Come, making of every man who has himself tasted of the stream a mouthpiece through which to invite others to a participation in its joys! This is the high office of the Christian ministry, to stand and in God's name plead officially with men to come to this divinely-opened Fountain. This is the delightful work of the Sabbath-school teacher, as one who has himself tasted of the sweetness of the refreshing streams, to stand by the fountain and dip up the flowing waters in measures suited to the capacity of the children and youth committed to his care. This is the service to which each one of us in his measure and in his sphere is called. And should this volume fall into the hands of any one who has never yet tasted of these waters of life, suffer the writer to take his stand yet again by the divinely-opened Fountain and lift his voice in earnest invitation, saying to one and to all, "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price."