

The difficulty of the salvation of the righteous, a certain presage of the ruin of the wicked (I)

By Rev. James Webster 1659 - 1720

"And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?" 1 Peter 4:18.

This is the first of two sermons on this text, and was preached two Lord's days before the celebration of the Lord's supper.

It was never my opinion that people should be compelled and driven to a communion table, but that it should be railed [fenced] about by the Divine hedge, and persons warned to be on their guard, and to consider their danger. Though temporal judgments are not as frequent under the present as under the ancient economy, yet spiritual Judgments] are more [frequent now]. And if an irreverent look or touch of mount Sinai, that hallowed theatre, was criminal, much more profaning the Lord's table, the altar of grace, the mercy-seat, or the throne of the Lamb. I resolve to tell you today somewhat of the difficulty of holiness, and indeed to celebrate the supper of our Lord is one of the hardest parts of holiness. "If the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the sinner and ungodly appear?" All the world are ranked into these two classes, the righteous and the sinner. They have different principles, different ways, different designs, and different ends; they are every way antipodes [opposites] one to another. "If the righteous scarcely be saved," then sure, says our apostle, "the wicked will not be saved at all" for "where shall the wicked and the ungodly appear?"

First, then, we have these two classes fairly stated, the righteous, and the sinner, or the ungodly. Then, we have the different fates of those two sets of men: the one is saved, and the other not. Also, we have the great difficulty that the righteous have in arriving at heaven: they are scarcely saved. And, on the other hand, we have the certainty of the ungodly's damnation. The question here is more forcible than a simple and plain negation: I cannot find a place in the world, says he, except it be hell itself, for the sinner and ungodly.

"If the righteous scarcely be saved." There is a fourfold righteousness mentioned in Scripture. First, a hypocritical righteousness: "I came not to call the righteous to repentance. There is a generation that is pure in their own eyes, and are not

washed from their iniquity." Secondly, there is moral righteousness; that is, an external conformity to the law, for righteousness is a relative word and has respect to a rule. Of this moral righteousness many divines think the Prophet Ezekiel speaks in chapter 18 when he supposes a person may fall from his righteousness. Thirdly, there is a legal righteousness which is personal, perfect in parts and degrees, and perpetual obedience. But fourthly, there is an evangelical righteousness; that is, sincerity and gospel-holiness, and this is that righteousness in the text. "If the righteous scarcely be saved." Heaven is called salvation [under the gospel]. Had Adam persevered, he had got a heaven but not a salvation. Salvation is a deliverance from a dangerous state; it is like a man drowning and then being pulled out by the hair of the head, and thrown ashore.

Heaven is a salvation, and the name of JESUS reigns with salvation: "Thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins." But the way to arrive at salvation is very rough, hard, and difficult: "The righteous are scarcely saved." Let them pray and believe, repent and obey, and be as tender, as watchful, as diligent, as possibly they can, they shall have enough ado to arrive at glory. When there is one leg in over the threshold of heaven, they will be afraid the devil will pull them back by the other. But what is scarcely done is always done; as what is almost done, is never done. The hypocrite is almost saved, and yet really damned. The righteous, is scarcely, yet really saved.

We have likewise the inference, "where shall the sinner and the ungodly appear?" Sometimes in Scripture sinners are taken for all mankind, that are guilty either of original or actual sin: "All are sinners, and come short of the glory of God." Sometimes sensible sinners are understood: "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." Sometimes they are taken for notorious debauchees: "There was in the city a woman that was a sinner." But, lastly, by a sinner is meant one that makes a trade of sinning, that habitually commits sin, that deliberately does it, that does it with a full consent of will, or without repentance. In a word, by a sinner is meant an unconverted man: "Then shall I teach transgressors thy ways, and sinners shall be converted unto thee." The sinner and the ungodly, they signify both the same thing; unregenerate folk, profane folk. Now, says the apostle, I have been ranging through the whole creation, looking

through heaven and hell, and I see this last place only for them. If a righteous' man, with the greatest difficulty possible, can attain unto salvation, whither do ye think it possible for wilful, impudent sinners, impenitent, obstinate wretches to go? ""Where shall the sinner and the ungodly appear?"

My observation is, That the difficulty of a righteous man's attaining of salvation, is a certain presage, an uncontested evidence of the inevitable ruin of the ungodly. "If the righteous scarcely be saved," and so on. You have a Scripture, of which our text is a quotation, according to the Septuagint translators, "Behold, the righteous shall be recompensed in the earth: much more the wicked and the sinner" (Pro. 11:31)

In speaking to this doctrine, I shall,

1. Prove the difficulty of the, righteous man's attaining of salvation, or demonstrate that he is scarcely saved.
2. I shall a little more closely consider this astonishing doctrine, and let you see how awakening and rousing it should be, that even the very righteous shall scarcely be saved.
3. Show you the reasons of it, whence it is that they are saved with a great deal of difficulty.
4. Modestly inquire, why God hath chalked out a difficult path to heaven.
5. Prove that the difficulty of their salvation is a certain presage, an uncontested evidence of the ruin of the ungodly.
6. And draw some inferences.

[This sermon covers the first head and part of the second. The remaining heads are dealt with in the next sermon.]

I. The difficulty of the righteous man's salvation proved.

1. Consider the many designations the Scripture gives to the way of salvation. It is called a race. Folk must exert all the vigour, all the power, and all the agility of their body to bend forward in the race. It is a fight. Folk must summon up all the strength of nature for a strong assault. It is compared to the ancient exercises which were the most violent struggling in the world. The way is compared to the greatest toil, to keeping of a vineyard in the heat of summer. It is called a strait way, a narrow way. It is so strait, that Christ pronounceth a rich man cannot more

enter in at it, than a camel, with the bunch on his back, can pass through the needle's eye. It is an ascent, a great steep: Who shall ascend the hill of God? Many folk would be clambering up the hill of honour, but, says the psalmist, "Who shall ascend the hill of God? Folk come to the foot of the hill, they make some faint essays [attempts], there are some efforts to come at the top of the hill; but they have weights that pull them back, loads within and without, and they have not the resolution nor the courage to combat the difficulties, but fall backward, and walk no more with Him.

2. The complex pieces of exercises they have concerning their salvation, and in the way to it, prove the difficulty of their salvation. What care, what fears, what sorrows, what griefs, what doubtings, what solicitude, what irresolution, what vacillation of soul, what alternate fears and hopes! They are sometimes cast down into the valley, and other times they mount up a little and presently turn back again. Religion is a constant uninterrupted series of exercises: "Herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God and toward men." What great tossing have the saints of the first magnitude, Christians of the highest form and class! The psalmist cries out, "Is his mercy clean gone for ever? doth his promise fail for evermore?" A Heman suffers, even to a distracting of him, the terrors of God from his youth up, and yet he was the wisest man next to Solomon in his time. A Habakkuk cries out, "My belly trembles, and rottenness enters into my bones; I tremble in myself, that I may find rest." What exercises have the saints had in all ages! What a rough passage! What teeth-winds! What waves tumultuously roaring, and every billow threatening to be their grave! Does not this demonstrate the difficulty of attaining of salvation?

3. The great length that some have arrived at, who yet came short of salvation, proves the difficulty. I remember [Thomas] Shepherd speaks of nine steps of an unconverted man towards heaven; and [Matthew] Mead of twenty steps; and others likewise of a great many common steps in preparation-work in closing with Christ, and in sanctification. There is a faith spoken of, a common faith which some have, and yet Christ knew "they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God." There is a common love, common illumination, common peace,

common hopes, and except the Spirit shine upon our spirit, and witness with ours, no man can distinguish the one from the other, no more than an unskilful jeweller, a Bristol stone from a true diamond.

O what length some have arrived at! They have been not far from the kingdom, and yet never reached it. When they were just scratching upon the threshold of glory, the devil chopped off their fingers, and they plunged into the pit. This holds forth the difficulty of salvation, that folk may arrive at a great length, and yet fall short.

4. The multitude of the damned, and the paucity of the saved is a proof of the difficulty. There can no greater reason be given to prove the difficulty than this. For there is a natural appetite, a vehement thirst in every man after bliss, and could he attain it in his own way, no man would be miserable. The desire of happiness is interwoven with our very make, frame, and constitution. Why then are there so few saved, though all would be saved? Why, they have not the courage to combat the difficulty. They give over, they say, "This evil is of the Lord," "they despise the promised land." They will not be at the pains to surmount all the objections, and therefore we see there are very few saved: "One of a city, two of a family or tribe, I will take, and bring to Zion." They "are like the berries on the uppermost tops of the branches," "Israel is like the sand of the sea, yet a remnant only shall be saved." Some have been at pains to make a gross calcul [rough calculation], and to divide the world into thirty parts, whereof five [parts] only are professors of the Christian religion and of these how many Socinians, Papists, Pelagians, Quakers? We can have little charity for them, if they go to the greatest height of all their heresies and errors. But among Protestants, how many are ignorant of fundamentals, how many are profane, how many are only civilized, how many are formalists, how many are hypocrites? So that scarce a godly man can be found. This is another proof that the way is difficult.

II. It should be astonishing that even the very righteous shall I scarcely be saved.

But I come to the second thing, to fix our thoughts a little upon this astonishing doctrine, that we may be the more awakened, the righteous scarcely saved. Consider these five things.

1. Who those righteous are that can scarcely be saved.

2. What this righteousness is whereby they are designed.
3. What security they have for their salvation.
4. What privileges they have that secure their salvation.
5. What additional and singular vouchsafements, [gifts given in condescension] some attain unto.

And yet after all this they are scarcely saved.

1. Consider who these righteous are. There is a threefold righteousness; I will not say the three are here included, but two of them I think are. There is Habitual righteousness, Actual righteousness, and Imputed righteousness. The righteous in the text have inherent, or habitual righteousness. This is not that whereby we are justified before God, but by it is meant evangelic holiness. And we assert this to confute the great calumny of the Romish church who assert that we deny all real inherent righteousness. We say there is an inherent holiness, but it is not our righteousness at God's bar, whereby we satisfy the demands of the law. We must have another righteousness that must be perfect, whereby we must answer justice. But there is an inherent and habitual righteousness, which is all the graces laid in the soul. Now, it is very surprising, and almost stunning, that folk that have this should scarcely be saved. Why, thus original righteousness is retrieved; this habitual righteousness, this inherent holiness, is in very truth a part of salvation. It is the very earnest of heaven; it is proleptic [the representation of a future thing beforehand] heaven. It is truly a heaven coming to us before we go to it. "The kingdom of God consists in righteousness," and yet though it be in us, and we half in glory, we shall scarce go to it and come at consummate righteousness. These righteous are scarcely saved.

Then for actual righteousness, "they that do righteousness are righteous," says the apostle. It is amazing that they should scarcely be saved for God has promised heaven unto them, and says, whoso ordereth their conversation aright, I will shew them the salvation of God." Yet though it be so, and promised, they shall scarce ever see that salvation; they shall have enough ado with it.

Then there is the imputed righteousness that gives us our formal title i-o salvation, our formal right, so that God in justice, not to us, but to Himself and His Son, cannot deny us salvation. The salvation we must have, though it be free as to

us, it is justice in Him to perform His word to His Son, and to keep the transaction. For Christ bought it with His blood, and this blood imputed to me gives me a right to salvation. So, God, without an imputation [of wrong] on His justice, cannot deprive me of it. And yet clothed with that righteousness, I am scarcely saved.

2. Consider the qualities of this [inherent] righteousness.

(1) This righteousness is supernatural. And it would be somewhat strange, if that which comes from above, should not go back again. Ye know what is said of our Lord, "No man ascends to heaven, but he that descends," and we may say the same of righteousness, 'No righteousness shall go to heaven, but what came from heaven.' It is a heaven-born thing, it is of a Divine original, of a heavenly extract, and return back it will, it inclines and shall go, and yet shall scarce go.

(2) This righteousness is universal, as to parts, though not as to degrees. Zacharias and Elisabeth were righteous before God, "walking in all the commandments of God." Now, though a man gives universal obedience to the law of God, he shall scarcely get heaven, shall scarcely be saved!

(3) This righteousness is permanent, stated, fixed, and everlasting. The man's righteousness is not a passing cloud, a morning dew. No, it is durable and lasting. He continues to the end, and "he that endureth to the end shall be saved," says Christ. Yea but, says our apostle, he "shall scarcely be saved;" though the crown be at the end, he shall have enough ado to come to the end, and reach the crown.

(4) This righteousness upon the main, and for ordinary, is a growing righteousness: "The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day," and yet that growing light shall hardly come to be a perfect day. It is with difficulty that that dawning shall have a meridian; it must have it, but with great difficulty. The believer must have it, just as if he could imagine the sun wer struggling to ascend the heavens, to come at the meridian, and with difficulty arrives there.

3. Consider what security the righteous have from God, for their salvation; who yet shall scarce be saved. They have all the security men can have from God.

(1) They are elected to it, they are chosen to salvation. (I am not now speaking of the order of the decrees). I am far from speaking with the church of Rome and Arminians, that God in his view foresaw they would be righteous, or believe. But I

am sure that the righteous are elected, that is all I mean. They are chosen to salvation, and the decree of God is like a mountain of brass, that is eternally fixed. Chosen to salvation: God must alter His immutable counsels, before they cannot be saved; and yet they shall scarcely be saved.

(2) There is a mutual transaction between the Father and the Son, about their salvation. The Father and the Priest Christ upon the throne transact together to bring all the elect and all the righteous to glory, and yet bargain as they will, they shall scarcely be saved

(3) There is a covenant of grace, which is a copy and transcript of that grand exemplar and original, the covenant of redemption. In this covenant of grace God has done all that is proper or possible to secure their salvation, He has engaged His Word, pledged His veracity, interposed His oath. He has put His fear in them, to be a restraint and curb, that they may never go from Him. He has put His love in them, to join and unite them to Himself, and He has sworn that it is an everlasting covenant, and they shall never depart from it. Yet after all this, they shall scarcely be saved.

(4) God the Father keeps them "by His power through faith unto salvation." Our own apostle has this, "Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation." The apostle Peter tells us that heaven is kept for them, and they are kept for heaven. A man cannot keep an estate for his son, God may deprive him of it; he cannot keep his son for it, his son may die. But God has a mutual preservation; He preserves His salvation for them, and them for it. This is done by His power upon His part, and faith unites them to Him upon their part. They "are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation," and yet scarce shall they ever get this salvation. Let all the power of God, that is ordinarily interposed in behalf of the godly, be employed, they are scarcely saved. And indeed, though He can with the least nod of omnipotence make the way easy, yet, in the stated manner now of bringing folk to heaven, all the power that is exerted, does not hinder the difficulty of salvation. They are kept to salvation by power, yet scarce arrive at it.

(5) Christ Jesus by His death and intercession, hath made salvation sure. He has not only bought it but He pleads for an application: "Father, I will that where we are, there they may be also, that they may behold our glory." He is the Master of

requests. He was never denied a suit, and He interposes all His interest with a Father, and with a God, in behalf of the elect, for their salvation; and yet they shall scarcely be saved.

(6) They are sealed by the Spirit unto the day of redemption. They have got the earnest of the Spirit, the earnest of the inheritance. They have got the seal. God secures them that no affliction, no temptation, no devil, no sinning, no desertion, shall break open that seal. They are sealed to that day, and yet after all shall have enough ado to get it.