

THE CONVERSION OF SINNERS, THE JOY OF THE CHURCH.

A SERMON

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Preached by Mr. HAZELTON,  
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AT MOUNT ZION CHAPEL, CHADWELL STREET,
CLERKENWELL,
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"And being brought on their way by the church, they passed through Phenice and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy unto all the brethren."— {Acts 15: 3}.

In connection with the text which I have read this morning, we are informed that Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem, in consequence of a vexatious question which had arisen in the church in the city of Antioch. The devil is ever busy, and a false Gospel is always introduced wherever God is pleased to send the true Gospel of His grace. If God will have a true church, the devil will have a false one; and if God will have ministers of the truth to preach His word, the devil will sometimes transform himself into an angel of light, and become a preacher too; for the devil can preach, and does so whenever he is permitted. Well, Satan got into the church of Christ at Antioch, through a number of Pharisees who said, "Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved." And this spirit is still in existence, it originated very early, and ever

mixes up law and gospel, duty and faith, and works and faith. This occurrence, we are told, caused no small dissension and disputation, and the church "determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain other of them should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question;" and being brought on their way by the church—I suppose the meaning of this is, that the church at Antioch furnished them with means,—they passed through Phenice and Samaria. They had to do so in travelling from Antioch to Jerusalem; but in going through these two places, they would visit the Christian churches which existed in them both. You remember that our Lord preached the word in Samaria, and the woman at the well of Samaria was in all probability at this time a member of the church in this place. A number of men followed the woman at the well, and they believed and said, "Now we believe, not because of thy saying; for we have heard Him ourselves;" and therefore we have reason to suppose that a considerable church had been formed in the city of Samaria. And then with regard to Phenice, history informs us that Christian churches existed in that place until the sixth or seventh century. Well, at this period of time those churches were comparatively pure, and Paul and Barnabas passed through, "declaring the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy unto all the brethren."

Having thus arrived at the text, let us make some observations on a few important points which appear to me to arise out of it. In the first place, the conversion of sinners is a matter of joy on Christ's account. They caused great joy unto all the brethren by declaring the conversion of the Gentiles. And what was it that led them to rejoice in the fact that Gentile sinners had been called by grace and saved with an everlasting salvation?

They rejoiced, I say, in the first place, on Christ's account. We must have Christ everywhere in the church, everywhere in the Christian ministry, and in the ordinances of His house; for He is "all and in all." That organization is not a Christian church, if Christ is not there; and that sermon is not a gospel sermon if Jesus is not in it; and that heart is not a Christian heart, whatever its pretensions and profession may be, if Christ has not been formed there, the hope of eternal glory. The disciples at Phenice and Samaria rejoiced at the conversion of the Gentiles, on the Saviour's account. There is something to our minds as Christians and saved sinners exceedingly sweet in the fact that our dear Lord is in heaven; that He is seated as the Lamb in the midst of the throne ; that He is at the Father's right hand, at the right hand of majesty and power; and that there are unceasingly flowing from His glorious person and His boundless resources, streams of Divine grace and mercy for poor, lost, and ruined sinners here. Try to realize the fact that there is never a moment but grace is descending from the Lord; for He has thousands of saints down here, as well as millions of happy glorified spirits before His throne; and every glorified mind there would cease to be happy, if influences failed to emanate from their Lord. Every saint down here would cease to be a saint, if grace Divine ceased to flow from our great and glorious Emanuel; and as for the work of conversion, whether it takes place in the Sabbath-school, or in the ordinary congregation, or whilst one is reading the word, or owing to a letter one has received,—the hearts of sinners would never be savingly affected or influenced, if grace did not descend from the heart of the Lord Jesus Christ in heaven; and, therefore, when a sinner is smitten, and falls before God beneath the blow—for this is how we must be saved, salvation does not consist in gliding into a public

profession of religion,—the church praises God. When the sinner falls beneath the hand, and at the feet of Him that smote him, and this becomes known to ministers and deacons and members of a Christian church, there is joy, and there are expressions of thankfulness to the God of heaven and earth on Christ's own account. The conversion of a sinner is an evidence of the reign of Christ, and of the operations of Jesus; it is an evidence of the indwelling Spirit of God, and of the fact that something out of Christ has fallen upon the heart of that individual who is in the dust of self-abasement before the Lord. Oh I wish prayerfully, deeply, and with all my heart, that this great matter in connection with the religion of heaven, were insisted upon earnestly and strenuously by every man who professes to preach the gospel of God's grace. Religion is something more than notion, something must be known and felt; and as the Lord liveth—and I have said those words with some solemn feeling—you have nothing in your hearts for heaven, or for God, unless Christ, from His own inexhaustible fullness and resources, has communicated a drop of grace to your minds; for this, and this only, is the religion of heaven. This and this only, constitutes a meetness for the inheritance of the saints in light. "God be merciful to me a sinner," the penitent who never prayed before, is heard to say. All the saints of God rejoice for Christ's sake: another victory won, another captive rescued, and the prey taken out of the hands of the mighty. The influence of Christ's death is again felt, and owing to the pleading and intercession of the Saviour, the Holy Ghost has fallen from heaven once more, upon another poor, lost and ruined one; so that in that saved sinner we see another added to the family, another gem, another pearl, another jewel for the crown of Him who is King of kings, and Lord of lords. Christ sees, in

such a person, of the travail of His soul, and is satisfied. Is it not said in the fifty third of Isaiah, "He shall His seed"? He sees them before they are made manifest as His seed. He knows them before they know Him; but He shall see them born, He shall see them brought up, He shall see them educated and trained; He shall see them living in His service with pleasure, and satisfaction, and delight. He shall see them persevering in a course of holiness, He shall see them with the world under their feet, He shall see them finally with the devil himself under their feet; for "The God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly." He shall see them conquer death, and pass victoriously through it; and He shall see them all arrive in that glory world, which God has prepared for His dear people. And is not this matter for joy? They declared to the saints at Phenice and Samaria, the conversion of the Gentiles, and they thereby caused great joy to the brethren in those places. Every conversion says, The Saviour lives. Every regeneration that takes place says, The Saviour reigns. Every poor soul that is rescued from the devil by an unseen, mysterious and powerful hand, proclaims the fact that Christ is a conqueror, that His conquests are progressing, and that He did not die in vain. Our dear Lord did not shed His blood fruitlessly, any more than He pleads and prays in heaven in vain. He shall see the purchase of His blood. He has rights which He will claim and maintain, and "He ever liveth to make intercession for all that come unto God by Him." On Christ's account, therefore, the Lord's people rejoice when the cause of God and truth is extended.

And then, in the second place, they rejoice on account of the converts themselves. Now let us tarry here. What is it that grace Divine does for the poor soul? It quickens it, and conveys a new life into it. I do not speak

without thought, when I say, principles as holy in their nature as God, and as enduring as eternity, become rooted in the heart of the man who becomes a saved sinner. But may not these principles perish? May not the man or the woman who becomes a convert and is brought to the Lord Jesus Christ, sink into hell? If so, my dear friends, I do not think we should rejoice before we get to heaven. But Paul and Barnabas gave an account of the work of God in the conversion of sinners, and the saints in Phenice and Samaria, believing in the final perseverance of the saints, proceeded to rejoice at once. Had there been any uncertainty about their future heaven, their joy would have been premature, and have ended in nothing. But "He which hath begun the good work in you, will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ and the good people of Samaria and Phenice very confidently believed that these Gentiles that had been approaching the Saviour, would be held fast by Him for ever and ever. Therefore they rejoiced on account of the converts themselves. Grace quickens the heart, and its possessor is a new creature: for "if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away, behold all things are become new." And the grace that comes into the heart of a sinner liberates him; and liberty is an unspeakable blessing, whether it be spiritual, political, religious, or social. Every sinner is by nature held fast by a power from which he has no desire and indeed cannot release himself; it is a fact that the world is in the arms of the wicked one, and there is only one Being in existence that can liberate them, or take them out of those arms, and that person is our great Lord. He does it by His Spirit. "Deliver to Me that captive, and let that prisoner go free." Satan is carrying the world down to hell, and the world lies calmly and comfortably in his hands. They love their tyrannical lord, and they love the

reign of sin, and will not realize the awful nature of their condition until they reach the place where hope never cometh, unless grace divine should open their eyes, and bring them to see themselves as sinners. The dear Redeemer meets the devil, and He says concerning Saul of Tarsus, "He is Mine, I have redeemed him;" and Paul is as a firebrand plucked from the burning. He says, concerning Magdalene, "She is Mine: I have loved her with an everlasting love, and have engaged to take her to heaven, deliver her up," and Magdalene is snatched from the tyrant's hand. How wonderful was the operation of grace which took place in the heart of the thief! I can imagine that Satan felt sure of him, and also that there was but a step between him and hell, but at the eleventh hour the hand of Christ was stretched out, the thief was snatched as a brand from the burning ; and angels rejoiced, and so did the suffering Saviour. A dead sinner made alive, a captive set for ever free. Now, what is to be done with him? Why, the grace that has made him alive and unbound him exalts and dignifies him. It does not leave him in a state of degradation and disgrace. He is now honored by being made a child of God openly; he is taken into a state of nearness to his heavenly Father, and he falls before his ransoming and liberating Lord, with—

*"Pause, my soul, adore and wonder,
Ask, oh why such love to me?
Grace has put me in the number
Of the Saviour's family."*

Surely devils see in that person a new creature, angels see in that character a new creature. A transformation, marvelous and wonderful indeed, has taken place; he has a new heart, he is a new man in a new

position, and when these facts are set forth, the people of God rejoice.

Sinners saved by grace are elevated and enriched; and how sweet it is to realize the blessedness of the words, "Things present, or things to come, all are yours; and ye are Christ's, and Christ is God's." The people of God are thus immensely and immeasurably rich. God has simplified matters wonderfully, having committed all things into the hand of His Son, and then He has given His Son, so that we have all things in Christ, and for Christ's sake. And the grace that fills the soul and liberates and dignifies it, ties it fast. The poet says:—

*"Impossible, a humble child,
That loves Thee with a flame so high,
Should ever from Thy face exiled,
Beyond the pity of Thine eye.
Impossible ! for Thine own hands,
Have tied my heart so fast to Thee,
And in Thy book the promise stands,
That where Thou art Thy friends shall be."*

And every such person possesses a meetness for the inheritance of the kingdom of God, and it is no small mercy to have been fitted for heaven, prepared for a better world than this. Why, if I possess the grace of God, I possess a meetness for the inheritance that is up there; and if I should fall down suddenly, and die in the streets, no matter as far as I am concerned. It might shock my family, and friends, for there is something exceedingly solemn in sudden death; but, "absent from the body, present with the Lord." If I possess God's grace, if Jesus is in my heart, I am in sympathy with heaven, my soul has been tied to the God of heaven, and I

should die in the everlasting arms, and be safe, although I fell in the streets, and became immediately surrounded by a crowd, none of whom might know me. Oh how sweet it is to possess a meetness for the inheritance of the saints in light!

I have sometimes thought that God's dear people have the best of it in all respects, and under all circumstances. Why, he that is saved by God is saved from this present evil world, and it is impossible for me to say how much degradation, disgrace, and misery, physical and social, the grace of God has saved me from. I know of certain individuals who are steeped in sin, taking a delight in it, gradually ruining themselves, blasting their character, and blighting all the pleasures of those that are near and dear to them; and they delight in it, and persist in such a course, rolling sin as a sweet morsel under their tongue. Oh to be brought out of that vile condition, and to hate it! Why, my dear friends, this not only constitutes a meetness for heaven, it gives dignity, a kind of present glory, to the child of God. I see a drunkard staggering in the street, and feel that I have not a stone to throw at him. I might say concerning him, There goes Hazelton, but for the grace of God. I see another individual whose means were ample, and he might have been socially happy and comfortable, but brought through sin into wretchedness, and poverty, and ruin; and I say again, There goes Hazelton, but for the grace of God. Oh, the disciples had abundant cause to be glad, when Paul and Barnabas told them that the Lord had saved Gentile sinners. We owe perhaps our health and strength, to the fact that we are saved. We owe our friends to the fact that we are interested in the Lord. And if we have a coat to wear, and some comforts at home, look at them all in connection with the goodness and the grace of the Lord.

Had it not been for grace, you might have been in degradation and disgrace, a burden to yourself, and to those that love you, a burden to society, and a pest to the world. Oh, how great is the salvation of our God! And so Paul says in his Epistle to Titus, "For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world." This present world is an evil one, morally considered; but there is a worse world than this; and the grace that saves from hell saves from this present evil world, and it gives its possessor a meetness for a better place. Thus thinking of the converts themselves "caused great joy unto all the brethren."

Then in the third place, they rejoiced on their own account; and if you and I have proper and scriptural feelings in relation to this matter, we shall rejoice in the salvation of our fellow-men. I know I can do nothing efficiently towards saving sinners. I am like the apostle Paul and his brethren in this respect, I am nothing. And yet, having gown the seed of the kingdom, we should look to see it grow. "First the blade " then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear and there are not many letters I receive more consoling, cheering, and helpful, than those Which tell me that I have been made useful to my fellow-creatures. It does my heart good to receive a letter informing me that at such a place, and such a time, having taken such a text, the word of God was divinely blessed, received into the heart, the eyes were opened, and the sensibly guilty sinner felt himself in the presence of his Maker. I do not think a minister of the gospel, who has been called to preach the Word, and whose heart is in the right

place, will regard this department of his work with indifference. That man would be indeed foolish who never looked for results from his operations. In all common and ordinary matters results are expected, and by God's people they are prayed for : and I am looking for results; and if you are in sympathy with me, and you are, as a church and congregation, well then, I may say, we are looking for results ; and we have been cheered and helped at our church meetings, when friends have come forward and told us how God met with them, and saved them, and the workings of their minds passing under the law, and then the workings of their minds under the Gospel, and how God laid His hand upon them and drew them from under the dominion of sin. They felt that sin held fast their minds; how' they longed for forgiveness, how they drank in the pardoning love of their God, When the precious blood of Jesus was first applied to their souls! You have looked at one another and at that brother or sister as the case may be, and rejoiced, and that on your own account, as well as on theirs; for the love you felt was brotherly, and emanated from the love shed abroad in your own hearts. You knew what there was before that friend, because it was a portion of your own experience which was related. The honey which you have tasted, and the liberty you have enjoyed, it gives you pleasure to know that others have partaken of and been introduced into. The religion of heaven is diffusive, the child of God does not care to shut himself up within himself, to draw a circle, to step into it, and to resolve that he will never leave it. Oh no, going to heaven myself, and occasionally happy on the road, I am so glad when another friend is brought in, and comes to me and asks

the way to Zion with his face thitherward. They caused great joy to the brethren when they related what great things the Lord had done for the Gentiles. That good brother, who has just been called by grace, we shall meet in heaven, and the prospect is cheering and does us good. Ah! He does not yet know that he is going to heaven, but you and I know he is. We rejoice in his sorrow, we see him weeping, and he tells us a tale of suffering, and we rejoice. We thank God because his sorrow will lead to joy and his suffering end in the possession of the peace of God which passeth all understanding.

And fourthly, they rejoiced on account of the devil; for is he not a tyrant, and is it not a matter of joy when he is defeated, and his works destroyed? If England were invaded, and an army came into this London of ours, or near to it, and bombarded it, and knocked half of it down, and threatened to destroy the country, would it not be matter of joy and pleasure to hear that some friendly power had appeared upon the scene, and opposed that foe and destroyed it? It would give all London joy, even though half of it had been blown down. It would give all England pleasure, and excite feelings of gratitude in the heart of every Englishman and English-woman. Hell is opposed to God and to God's church, and would overturn it if it could; but Zion's bulwarks are divine, and her foundation is a rock. But hell holds fast the souls of all men by nature. Have you heard of young friend So-and-so? Yes. Well, they tell me that he has become converted. He went to such a place, and heard a sermon, the Lord met with him, and applied the word, and he is altogether another creature. I am glad of it, for Christ's sake, for his own sake, for my

sake, and for the devil's sake. Jesus has brought to Himself another of His brethren, taken him out of the tyrant's hand, defeated the foe, and destroyed the works of the devil, a For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil." My time is nearly gone, and therefore I will hasten to the close.

It affords joy on account of the word of God. The conversion of sinners is the fulfillment of the word. My word "shall not return unto Me void; but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it and as God Himself lives to fulfill His own promise, when you hear a guilty sinner in all sincerity pour out of his heart the prayer, "God be merciful to me a sinner," rejoice in that fact as a fulfillment of the word of the eternal God. Now there is a vital power in the word of God, it strikes; a converting power, it changes; a conforming power, it makes the child of God like God Himself, it makes the Christian like Christ Himself. And what a transformation is this, the ungodly converted into a godly being; the vile, black, polluted sinner becomes like the lovely Christ of God, in character, in nature, in holiness, and in purity. Although sin is in his nature, and depravity, there is purity in his heart and he is longing for absolute deliverance from all defilement and sin. The word of God is fulfilled, and we rejoice. Then in the next place, look at the subject in connection with the consummation of all things. I rejoice that Christ is at work, that the Holy Ghost is at work, that angels are at work, and that God's great plan is being carried forward towards the consummation of all things. The vine is spreading, the family of heaven is increasing, new births are taking place, there is a new-born

babe there, a spiritual youth yonder, a young man up there, and a father or a mother in Israel sitting at the threshold of heaven, and whilst the old saint sits there new births take place here, and the intelligence is taken to that old saint near to glory. He says, " Bless God for that; I have prayed for that youth, I believed that the Lord would hear my prayer and save his soul, I feel as if I should die all the happier now I know that friend has been called by grace. Paul and Barnabas caused great joy to the brethren when they narrated the dealings of the Lord with the Gentiles in connection with their labor.

What does all this imply? Father, Son, and Holy Ghost rejoice; Angels rejoice; ministers rejoice, and saints rejoice—we all rejoice together. The Holy Spirit,

"takes delight to view

The holy soul He forms anew."

Jesus is glad when He sees His seed, and the Father rejoices with all His heart to embrace the son. He sees the new-born child, and the Spirit bringing him to Christ: Christ receives him with delight, and brings him to His Father; God the Father receives him into His arms, and puts him into His bosom, and there is joy in the Trinity, there is joy among the angels, and joy down here. Paul and Barnabas who were of those who were said to be turning the world upside down, went to Phenice and Samaria, and declared how wonderfully God was working, and a number of Spirit-taught believers said, God be praised. On what I have said may the Lord command His blessing, for Christ's sake? Amen.