

How Shall I Go to God?

by Horatius Bonar

"How Shall I Go to God?" 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 Christian 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* except 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 sense, 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 *difficulties* 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 woman? Was not all difficulty anticipated or put away—by these wondrous words of Christ, 'If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have *asked* Him—and He would have *given* you living water'?"

"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 receiving water; or is being *poor*—a hindrance to your receiving 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 did not come to call the *righteous*, but *sinners* to repentance. If you are not *wholly* a sinner—there is a barrier; but if you are wholly a sinner—there is no barrier!"

"*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 healthy do not need a physician—but only those who are sick."

"Wholly a sinner, well!—but must I not get rid 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* your sins—however many that may be! If you be not wholly a sinner—you do not wholly need Christ; for He is a complete Savior—of none but complete sinners! He does not *help you* to save yourself, nor do you help Him to save you. He does all the saving—or nothing at all. A *half* salvation will only do for those who are not *completely* lost. 'He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree!' " (1 Peter 2:24)

It was in the above way, that Martin 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 atoning sacrifice of Him who has made peace by the blood of His cross.

One of Luther's earliest difficulties, was that he thought that he must himself get *repentance* worked out within himself; and having accomplished this, he thought that he was to bring *his repentance* as a peace-offering or basis of acceptance with God. If this repentance could not be presented as a grounds of acceptance with God, at least it could be urged as a plea in mitigation of punishment.

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! No preliminary goodness, or preparatory feelings or good works—between him and pardon! He learns the Apostle's lesson, "Christ died for the *ungodly*" (Romans 4:5). All the sin that is in him cannot hinder this justification; and all the goodness that is in him cannot assist in obtaining it. He must be received as a *sinner*—or not at all. The pardon that is offered, 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* Savior?"

So spoke his venerable friend, and then added, solemnly, "Know that Jesus Christ is the Savior 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 death of Christ," was the answer, "and learn there God's gracious mind to men."

"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 at the cross; and the mighty transaction on that cross did all that was needed as a price. "It is finished!" is God's message to 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 reconciling sinners 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 substitute was once and forever accomplished. It is of that *transaction*, that the gospel brings us the "good news," and whoever believes 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 quickens the dead sinner?"

"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 way. 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 the righteousness of His own Son were actually ours.

This is what the apostle calls "imputed" righteousness (Romans 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 on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 13:14; Galatians 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*—until 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 needs 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 saving 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 graciously forgave." It was the *having nothing to pay*—which drew out God's gracious 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 to Me, all of you who are *weary* and burdened, and I will give you rest." Christ invites the weary! It is this weariness which fits you for Him, and Him for you. Here is your 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 you knew the gift of God, and who it is that says to you, 'Give Me a drink;' you would have *asked* of Him—and He would have *given* you living water" (John 4:10). You would have *asked*—and He would have *given*! That is all. How real, how true, how free; yet how simple!

Yes; pardon, peace, spiritual life—all of them are gifts, Divine gifts, brought down from heaven by the Son of God, presented personally to each needy sinner by God. 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 *received* 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.

There are not to be claimed on the ground of personal fitness or goodness—but of need and unworthiness, of poverty and emptiness.