

Preparations Before Conversion: Part I

by Samuel Rutherford

The sermon emphasizes that salvation is a gift of God's free grace, and we cannot earn it through merit or good works.

Topics: "Salvation By Grace", "True Repentance"

Description

Samuel Rutherford delves into the topic of preparations or qualifications before conversion, refuting the idea that one can earn grace through their own efforts. He emphasizes the impossibility of obtaining salvation through natural abilities or works, highlighting the necessity of God's mercy and grace. Rutherford stresses that even common grace cannot produce true conversion, as it is only through Christ's free grace that souls are saved. He also addresses the role of desires, faith, and repentance in the journey to Christ, emphasizing the need for a genuine heart transformation and reliance on Christ alone for salvation.

Transcript

Excerpts from Samuel Rutherford, *Christ Dying and Drawing Sinners to Himself*, London 1647, pp. 239-61.

Question. But are there no preparations either of nature or at least of grace going before saving grace, and the soul's being drawn to Christ?

Answer. That we may come to consider preparations or previous qualifications to conversion, let us consider whether Christ coming to the soul hath need of an usher.

Assertion. No man but Pelagians, Arminians, and such, do teach, If any shall improve their natural abilities to the uttermost, and stir up themselves in good earnest to seek the grace of conversion and Christ the wisdom of God, they shall certainly and without miscarrying find what they seek. 1. Because no man, not the finest and sweetest nature, can engage the grace of Christ, or with his penny of sweating earn either the kingdom of grace, or glory, whether by way of merit of condignity or congruity. Rom. 9:16: So then, it is not in him that willeth, nor in him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy. I Tim. 1:9: Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began. So Eph. 2:1-5, Titus 3:3-5, Ezek. 16:4-10. 2. Because there is no shadow of any engagement of promise on God's part, or any word for it: Do this by the strength of nature, and grace shall be given to you.

3. Nor are we ashamed to say with the Scripture, it's as impossible to storm heaven, or make purchase of Christ, by the strength of nature, as for the dead man to take his grave in his two arms, and rise and lay death by him and walk. Nor does this impossibility free the sinner from guiltiness and rebukes. 1. Because it is a sinfully contracted inability, except we would deny original sin. 2. It's voluntary in us, and the bondage that we love. 3. The Scripture both calls it impossibility, and also rebukes it as sinful. John 6:44, Rom. 8:3 and 7-8, Eph. 2:1-3 and 11-13, 4:17-19, 5:8.

Assertion. All preparations, even wrought in us by the common and general restraining grace of God, can have no effective influence to produce our conversion, from the Scriptures alleged; for then should we be called, saved, and quickened, when we are dead in sin, foolish, disobedient, and enemies to God, contrary to Eph. 2:1-5 and 11-13, II Tim. 1:9, Titus 3:3. Then common, general gifts might also engage Christ's free grace. Men might anticipate grace, and forestall Christ and his merits, which overturns the foundation of the gospel, and cries down Christ and free grace.

Assertion. All these foregoing endeavors and sweatings, being void of faith, cannot please God, Heb. 11:6. These who act in the strength of them are yet in the flesh, and not in the Spirit, and so can do nothing acceptable to God, being yet out of Christ, Rom. 8:8, John 15:4-6. And the tree being corrupt, the fruit must be sour, and naught; humiliation, sorrow for sin, displeasure with ourselves, that go before conversion, can be no formal parts of conversion, nor any essential limbs, members or degrees of the new creature, nor so much as stone or pin of the new building. For parts of the building remain in the building; when the house is come to some perfect frame, all those bastard pieces, coming not from the new principle - the new heart, Christ formed in the soul - are cast out as unprofitable. Paul, when he meets with Christ, casts off his silks and satins that he was lordly of while he was a Pharisee, as old rags, loss and dung, and acts now with far other principles and tools. It's all new work, after another sampler; heaven works in him now.

Assertion. Those are not moral preparations which we perform before conversion, nor have they any promise of Christ annexed to them, as, He that is humbled under sin shall be drawn to Christ, or He that wisheth the Physician, shall be cured and called to repentance. We read of no such promise in the word. A man not in Christ is without the sphere or element of Christ, at the wrong side of the door of the sheepfold; he is not in Emanuel's land. All the promises of God are in Christ yea and amen, II Cor. 1:20; the whole stock of gospel promises are put in Christ, as the first subject, and believers have them from Christ, at the second hand. Christ keeps, as the true ark, the book of the New Testament, the believer's Bible. It's true, the new heart is promised to the elect, even while they are not in Christ, but they cannot make claim to that promise till they be first in Christ. But those promises are made, in a special manner, to Christ as the head of the redeemed, to be dispensed by Christ to those only whom the Father gave him before time. And as the promises are peculiar to Christ, so the persons and grace promised, both the one and the other, are due to Christ, and result from the head, to those who in God's decree only shall be members.

Many run, and obtain not, I Cor. 9:24-26. Many strive to enter in, and shall not be able, Luke 13:24. Many lay a foundation, and are not able to finish, Luke 14:29. Many hunt, and catch nothing. Many have storms of conscience, as Cain and Judas, who go never one step further. When, therefore, Antinomians impute to us that we teach, That to desire to believe is faith, or desire to pray is prayer, they foully mistake. For raw desires, and wishes after conversion and Christ, are to us no more conversion, and the soul's being drawn to Christ, than Esau's weeping for the blessing was the blessing, or Balaam's wish to die the death of the righteous was the happy end of such as die in the Lord. But the sincere desires and good will of justified persons are accepted of the Lord, for the deed; and when Christ pronounceth such blessed as hunger for

righteousness, we say, in that sense, a sincere desire to pray and believe is materially, and by concomitancy, a neighbor, and near of kin to believing and praying. A virtual or seminal intention to pray, believe, love Christ, do his will, is, in the seed, praying, believing, when the intention is supernatural, and of the same kind with the act, as the seed is the tree. We say not so of natural intentions and desires. As Abraham's sincere intention to offer his son was the offering of his son, the widow's casting in her mite was, in her honest desire, the casting in of all that she had. Single desires, unfeigned aims, weigh as much with Christ, as actions, in their reality. So we say many are, in affections, martyrs, who never die nor suffer loss for Christ, because nothing is wanting on the part of such saints, thus disposed, but that God call them to it. So Abraham offered his son Isaac to God, because Abraham did all on his part, and he was not the cause why he was not offered and made an actual sacrifice to God, but God's countermand and his forbidding was the cause and nothing else.

Assertion. The humiliation and sorrow for sin, and desire of the Physician, by way of merit, or having the favor of a gospel promise, do no more render a soul nearer to Christ and saving grace, than the want of these dispositions. For as a horse, or an ape, though they come nearer to some shadow of reason, and to man's nature, than the stork, or the ass, or than things void of life, as stones and the like, yet as there is required the like omnipotency to turn an ape into a man as to make a stone a son of Abraham, so the like omnipotency of grace is required to turn an unhumiliated soul into a saved and redeemed saint, as to turn a proud Pharisee into a saint. And merit is as far to seek in the one as the other. So an unconverted sinner, though some way humbled, if the Lord of free grace should convert him were no less obliged to free grace, and no less from laying any tie or bands of merits or obligation, on Christ for his conversion, than a stone made a believing son of Abraham should be in the same case of conversion.

And the humbled soul, for ought he knows (I speak of legal humiliation), hath no more any gospel title or promise that saving grace shall be given to him, even of mere grace, upon condition of his humiliation, or external hearing, or desire of the Physician, than the proud Pharisee. Yet as the body framed and organized is in a nearer disposition to be a house to receive the soul, than a stone or a block, so is an humbled and dejected soul, such as cast-down Saul, and the bowed-down jailer, and those that were pricked in their heats, Acts 2, in the moment before their conversion, nearer to conversion, and, in regard of passive and material dispositions made by the law-work, readier to receive the impression and new life of Christ formed in them, than the blaspheming Jews, Acts 13, and the proud Pharisees who despised the counsel of God and would not be baptized, Luke 7:30. There be some preparatory colors in dying of cloth, as blue, that dispose the cloth for other colors more easily; so it is here. And a fish that hath swallowed the bait, and is in the bosom of the net, is nearer being taken, than a fish free and swimming in the ocean. Yet a fish may break the net, and cut the angle, and not be taken. A legally fitted man may be not far from the kingdom of God, Mark 12:34, and yet never enter in. And those same dispositions, in relation to God's end in saving the elect, are often means and disposing occasions, fitting souls for conversion. Though some be like a piece of gold lying in the dirt, yet it is both true metal, and hath the king's stamp on it, and is of equal worth with that which goeth current in the market. So, in regard of God's eternal election, many are in the way of sin, and not converted as yet, notwithstanding all the luster of foregoing preparations, though they be as truly the elect of God as either those that are converted, yea or glorified in heaven; yet their preparations do lead them, in regard of an higher power (that they see not) to saving grace.

And for anything revealed to us, God ordinarily prepares men by the law, and some previous dispositions, before they be drawn to Christ. I dare not peremptorily say that God useth no prerogative royal, or no privileges of sovereignty, in the conversion of some who find mercy between the water and the bridge;

yea, I think that Christ comes to some like a roe, or a young hart, skipping and leaping over hills and mountains, and passeth over his own set line, and snatcheth them out of hell, without these preparations; at least, he works them suddenly. And I see no inconvenience, but as in God's ways of nature he can make dispensations to himself, so in the ways of grace we cannot find him out. However, sure of crabbed and knotty timber he makes new buildings; and it is very base and untoward clay that Christ, who maketh all things new, cannot frame a vessel of mercy of. To change one specie or kind of creature into another, a lion into a lamb, and to cause the wolf and the lamb dwell together, and the leopard lie down with the kid, and the child to lead them, is the proper work of omnipotency, whatever be the preparations, or indisposition of sinners.

Assertion. Not any Protestant divines, I know, make true repentance a work of the law, going before faith in Christ. The law speaks not one word of repentance, but saith, either Do, or Die. Repentance is an evangelic ingredient in a saint. Christ was made a Prince, and exalted to give repentance, Acts 5:31, and the law as the law hath not one word of Christ, though it cannot contradict Christ, except we say that there be two contradictory wills in Christ, which were blasphemy.

Objection by Saltmarsh. But to bid a troubled soul be humbled for sin, and pray, and set upon duties, and speak nothing of Christ to them, whereas poor souls cannot pray in that condition, is to teach them to seek righteousness in themselves.

Answer. Satan cannot say that we teach any to set on duties, and to silence Christ's strength and grace, by which only duties may be done. To bid them set on duties, as their righteousness before God, and as the way to find rest and peace for their souls, and that speaking nothing of Christ, we disclaim as Antichristian and Pharisaical. It is no argument, but the Arminian objection against free grace, not to bid a troubled soul pray, because he cannot pray without the Spirit, for Peter, Acts 8, bids Simon Magus, who was in the gall of bitterness, pray, yet without the Spirit he could not pray. Antinomians exhort troubled souls, though not converted, to believe in Christ. Yet they are as unable to believe without the Spirit, as to pray without the Spirit. To bid them set on evangelic duties, without trusting in them, that is, to feel their lost condition, to despair of salvation in themselves, to look afar off to Christ, to desire him, are the set way that Christ walks in, to fit us for saving grace.

Objection. Despair of salvation in myself is a part of faith, so you exhort the troubled in mind at first to believe.

Answer. Not so: Judas and Cain both despaired of salvation in themselves, yet had they no part of saving faith. It's impossible that any can rely on Christ while they continue resting on false bottoms. Faith is a sailing and a swimming; ships cannot sail on mountains, it's impossible to swim on dry land. As it is impossible to have a soul and not to have a love, so we cannot have a love to lie by us as useless, but a lover we must have. And Christ's work of conversion is orderly, as first to plow and pluck up, so then to sow and plant, and first to take the soul off of old lovers. We are on a way of gadding to seek lovers, Jer. 2:36, on a high and lofty mountain to set our bed, Isa. 57:7. God must straw thorns and briars in our love-bed, and take Ephraim off his idols, Hos. 14:6, and from riding on horses, and make the soul as white and clean paper, that Christ may print a new lover on it. Therefore it's young mortification in the blossom to give half a refusal to all old lovers; this is Christ's aim, Cant. 4:8: Come from the lion's dens, and the mountains of leopards, with me.

Objection by Saltmarsh. Desires to pray and believe, being sometimes cold, sometimes none at all, cannot satisfy a troubled soul. I must have besides desires, endeavors. And desires to desire, and sorrow because I cannot sorrow for sin, are but legal works, not such as are required in a broken heart.

Answer. Desires going before conversion are not such as can calm a storming conscience. He knows not Christ who dreams that a wakened conscience can be calmed with anything less than the blood of Jesus Christ, that speaks better things than the blood of Abel. Never Protestant divines promise soul rest in preparations that are wrought by the law. If Antinomians can give soul rest to troubled consciences by all the promises of the gospel, and raise up the spirits of Judas or Cain to sound comfort, let them be doing. Sure there is a lock on a troubled conscience that the gospel letter, or the tongue of man or angel can be no key to open. Christ hath reserved a way of his own to give satisfaction to afflicted spirits. But the question is now, supposing ye deal with unconverted men, whether or no ye are not first to convince them of the curses of the law to come on them, to humble them, and so to chase them to Christ. And if to bid them be humbled, and know their dangerous condition, the state of damnation, and set to these preparatory duties, be to teach them to seek righteousness in themselves, we answer no.

Objection by Crisp. If we preach wrath to believers, we must either make them believe they lie under that wrath, or no. If they be not under that wrath, we had as good hold our tongues. If we say, if they commit these and these sins, they are damned, and except they perform such and such duties, and except they walk thus and thus holily, and do these and these good works, they shall come under the wrath, or at least, God will be angry with them, what do we in this but abuse the Scriptures? We undo all that Christ hath done, we belie God and tell believers that they are under a covenant of works. I would have wrath preached to believers, that they may abstain from sin because they are delivered from wrath, not that they may be delivered from wrath. For God hath sworn, Isa. 54, as the world shall be no more destroyed with waters, so he will be no more wrath with his people.

Answer 1. We are to make believers know if they believe not, and walk worthy of Christ, in all holy duties, their faith is a fancy, and a dead faith, and the wrath of God abides on them, and they are not believers. 2. Though they be believers, wrath must be preached to them, and is preached to them everywhere in the New Testament, as death, Rom. 6:21-22, damnation, Rom. 14:23, the wrath of God, Eph. 5:6, condemnation, II Thess. 1:8, perdition, flaming fire, eternal fire, I Cor. 3:17, 11:32 and 34, Jude 7-8, I Tim. 6:9, I Cor. 16:22, to the end they may make sure their calling and election. 3. What is this but to make a mock of all the threatenings of the gospel? For by this argument, the threatenings are not to be preached to the elect before their conversion, except we would make them believe a lie, that they are reprobates and under wrath, when they are under no wrath at all, but from eternity were delivered from wrath, nor should the gospel-threatenings be preached to reprobates. Why? Show me one word where pastors are bidden tell men they are to believe, or they are reprobates and under eternal wrath, peremptorily, except we know them to have sinned against the Holy Ghost. 4. Nor is deliverance from wrath to be believed as absolutely by us, whether we believe and walk worthy of Christ, or do no such thing, but walk after the flesh. Then by this reason, whether men believe on Christ or no, there is no condemnation or wrath to be feared. The contrary is expressly, John 3:18 and 36. I take the mystery to be this: Antinomians would have no moral, no ceremonial law preached at all, and therefore one of them writeth expressly: That there be no commandments under the gospel, no threatenings or penalties at all, and that the whole law of Moses, moral as well as ceremonial, is abrogated under the gospel. That is a merry life.

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