

Truth

by William Cowper

William Cowper's sermon 'Truth' explores the significance of embracing God's truth and the dangers of pride and self-righteousness in the Christian faith.

Scripture: 2 Peter 3:9

Topics: "Predestination", "Sovereignty Of God"

Description

The preacher delves into the concept of predestination, explaining that it signifies God's predetermined destiny for each believer to be conformed to the image of Christ, bringing comfort and thankfulness. The sermon emphasizes that predestination does not mean God predestined certain individuals to eternal condemnation but rather applies to saved people. The speaker highlights various Bible verses that illustrate God's sovereign plan and the harmony between divine predestination and human responsibility.

Transcript

TRUTH.

Man, on the dubious waves of error toss'd,
His ship half founder'd, and his compass lost,
Sees, far as human optics may command,
A sleeping fog, and fancies it dry land;
Spreads all his canvas, every sinew plies;
Pants for it, aims at it, enters it, and dies!
Then farewell all self-satisfying schemes,
His well-built systems, philosophic dreams;
Deceitful views of future bliss, farewell!
He reads his sentence at the flames of hell.
Hard lot of man--to toil for the reward

Of virtue, and yet lose it! Wherefore hard?--
He that would win the race must guide his horse
Obedient to the customs of the course;
Else, though unequall'd to the goal he flies,
A meaner than himself shall gain the prize.
Grace leads the right way: if you choose the wrong,
Take it and perish; but restrain your tongue;
Charge not, with light sufficient and left free,
Your wilful suicide on God's decree.
O how unlike the complex works of man,
Heav'n's easy, artless, unencumber'd plan!
No meretricious graces to beguile,
No clustering ornaments to clog the pile;
From ostentation, as from weakness, free,
It stands like the cerulian arch we see,
Majestic in its own simplicity.
Inscribed above the portal, from afar
Conspicuous as the brightness of a star,
Legible only by the light they give,
Stand the soul-quickenings words--believe, and live.
Too many, shock'd at what should charm them most,
Despise the plain direction, and are lost.
Heaven on such terms! (they cry with proud disdain)
Incredible, impossible, and vain!--
Rebel, because 'tis easy to obey;
And scorn, for its own sake, the gracious way.
These are the sober, in whose cooler brains

Some thought of immortality remains;
The rest too busy or too gay to wait
On the sad theme, their everlasting state,
Sport for a day, and perish in a night;
The foam upon the waters not so light.
Who judged the Pharisee? What odious cause
Exposed him to the vengeance of the laws?
Had he seduced a virgin, wrong'd a friend,
Or stabb'd a man to serve some private end?
Was blasphemy his sin? Or did he stray
From the strict duties of the sacred day?
Sit long and late at the carousing board?
(Such were the sins with which he charged his Lord.)
No--the man's morals were exact. What then?
'Twas his ambition to be seen of men;
His virtues were his pride; and that one vice
Made all his virtues gewgaws of no price;
He wore them as fine trappings for a show,
A praying, synagogue-frequenting beau.
The self-applauding bird, the peacock, see--
Mark what a sumptuous pharisee is he!
Meridian sunbeams tempt him to unfold
His radiant glories, azure, green, and gold:
He treads as if, some solemn music near,
His measured step were govern'd by his ear;
And seems to say--Ye meaner fowl give place;
I am all splendour, dignity, and grace!

Not so the pheasant on his charms presumes,
Though he, too, has a glory in his plumes.
He, Christian-like, retreats with modest mien
To the close copse or far sequester'd green,
And shines without desiring to be seen.
The plea of works, as arrogant and vain,
Heaven turns from with abhorrence and disdain;
Not more affronted by avow'd neglect,
Than by the mere dissembler's feign'd respect.
What is all righteousness that men devise?
What--but a sordid bargain for the skies!
But Christ as soon would abdicate his own,
As stoop from heaven to sell the proud a throne.
His dwelling a recess in some rude rock;
Book, beads, and maple dish, his meagre stock;
In shirt of hair and weeds of canvas dress'd,
Girt with a bell-rope that the Pope has bless'd;
Adust with stripes told out for every crime,
And sore tormented, long before his time;
His prayer preferr'd to saints that cannot aid,
His praise postponed, and never to be paid;
See the sage hermit, by mankind admired,
With all that bigotry adopts inspired,
Wearing out life in his religious whim,
Till his religious whimsy wears out him.
His works, his abstinence, his zeal allow'd,
You think him humble--God accounts him proud.

High in demand, though lowly in pretence,
Of all his conduct this the genuine sense--
My penitential stripes, my streaming blood,
Have purchased heaven, and proved my title good.
Turn eastward now, and fancy shall apply
To your weak sight her telescopic eye.
The Bramin kindles on his own bare head
The sacred fire, self-torturing his trade!
His voluntary pains, severe and long,
Would give a barbarous air to British song;
No grand inquisitor could worse invent,
Than he contrives to suffer well content.
Which is the saintlier worthy of the two?
Past all dispute, yon anchorite, say you.
Your sentence and mine differ. What's a name?
I say the Bramin has the fairer claim.
If sufferings Scripture nowhere recommends,
Devised by self, to answer selfish ends,
Give saintship, then all Europe must agree
Ten starveling hermits suffer less than he.
The truth is (if the truth may suit your ear,
And prejudice have left a passage clear)
Pride has attain'd a most luxuriant growth,
And poison'd every virtue in them both.
Pride may be pamper'd while the flesh grows lean;
Humility may clothe an English dean;
That grace was Cowper's--his, confess'd by all--

Though placed in golden Durham's second stall.
Not all the plenty of a bishop's board,
His palace, and his lacqueys, and "My Lord,"
More nourish pride, that condescending vice,
Than abstinence, and beggary, and lice;
It thrives in misery, and abundant grows:
In misery fools upon themselves impose.
But why before us Protestants produce
An Indian mystic or a French recluse?
Their sin is plain; but what have we to fear,
Reform'd and well instructed? You shall hear.
Yon ancient prude, whose wither'd features shew
She might be young some forty years ago,
Her elbows pinion'd close upon her hips,
Her head erect, her fan upon her lips,
Her eyebrows arch'd, her eyes both gone astray
To watch yon amorous couple in their play,
With bony and unkerchief'd neck defies
The rude inclemency of wintry skies,
And sails with lappet head and mincing airs
Duly at clink of bell to morning prayers.
To thrift and parsimony much inclined,
She yet allows herself that boy behind;
The shivering urchin, bending as he goes,
With slipshod heels and dewdrop at his nose,
His predecessor's coat advanced to wear,
Which future pages yet are doom'd to share,

Carries her Bible tuck'd beneath his arm,
And hides his hands to keep his fingers warm.
She, half an angel in her own account,
Doubts not hereafter with the saints to mount,
Though not a grace appears on strictest search,
But that she fasts, and item, goes to church.
Conscious of age, she recollects her youth,
And tells, not always with an eye to truth,
Who spann'd her waist, and who, where'er he came,
Scrawl'd upon glass Miss Bridget's lovely name;
Who stole her slipper, fill'd it with tokay,
And drank the little bumper every day.
Of temper as envenom'd as an asp,
Censorious, and her every word a wasp;
In faithful memory she records the crimes,
Or real, or fictitious, of the times;
Laughs at the reputations she has torn,
And holds them dangling at arm's length in scorn.
Such are the fruits of sanctimonious pride,
Of malice fed while flesh is mortified:
Take, madam, the reward of all your prayers,
Where hermits and where Bramins meet with theirs;
Your portion is with them.--Nay, never frown,
But, if you please, some fathoms lower down.
Artist, attend--your brushes and your paint--
Produce them--take a chair--now draw a saint.
Oh, sorrowful and sad! the streaming tears

Channel her cheeks--a Niobe appears!
Is this a saint? Throw tints and all away--
True piety is cheerful as the day,
Will weep indeed and heave a pitying groan
For others' woes, but smiles upon her own.
What purpose has the King of saints in view?
Why falls the gospel like a gracious dew?
To call up plenty from the teeming earth,
Or curse the desert with a tenfold dearth?
Is it that Adam's offspring may be saved
From servile fear, or be the more enslaved?
To loose the links that gall'd mankind before.
Or bind them faster on, and add still more?
The freeborn Christian has no chains to prove,
Or, if a chain, the golden one of love:
No fear attends to quench his glowing fires,
What fear he feels his gratitude inspires.
Shall he, for such deliverance freely wrought,
Recompense ill? He trembles at the thought.
His Master's interest and his own combined
Prompt every movement of his heart and mind:
Thought, word, and deed, his liberty evince,
His freedom is the freedom of a prince.
Man's obligations infinite, of course
His life should prove that he perceives their force;
His utmost he can render is but small--
The principle and motive all in all.

You have two servants--Tom, an arch, sly rogue,
From top to toe the Geta now in vogue,
Genteel in figure, easy in address,
Moves without noise, and swift as an express,
Reports a message with a pleasing grace,
Expert in all the duties of his place;
Say, on what hinge does his obedience move?
Has he a world of gratitude and love?
No, not a spark--'tis all mere sharper's play;
He likes your house, your housemaid, and your pay;
Reduce his wages, or get rid of her,
Tom quits you, with--Your most obedient, sir.
The dinner served, Charles takes his usual stand,
Watches your eye, anticipates command;
Sighs, if perhaps your appetite should fail;
And, if he but suspects a frown, turns pale;
Consults all day your interest and your ease,
Richly rewarded if he can but please;
And, proud to make his firm attachment known,
To save your life would nobly risk his own.
Now which stands highest in your serious thought?
Charles, without doubt, say you--and so he ought;
One act, that from a thankful heart proceeds,
Excels ten thousand mercenary deeds.
Thus Heaven approves as honest and sincere
The work of generous love and filial fear;
But with averted eyes the omniscient Judge

Scorns the base hireling and the slavish drudge.
Where dwell these matchless saints? old Curio cries.
E'en at your side, sir, and before your eyes,
The favour'd few--the enthusiasts you despise.
And, pleased at heart because on holy ground,
Sometimes a canting hypocrite is found,
Reproach a people with his single fall,
And cast his filthy raiment at them all.
Attend! an apt similitude shall shew
Whence springs the conduct that offends you so.
See where it smokes along the sounding plain,
Blown all aslant, a driving, dashing rain,
Peal upon peal redoubling all around,
Shakes it again and faster to the ground;
Now flashing wide, now glancing as in play,
Swift beyond thought the lightnings dart away.
Ere yet it came the traveller urged his steed,
And hurried, but with unsuccessful speed;
Now drench'd throughout, and hopeless of his case,
He drops the rein, and leaves him to his pace.
Suppose, unlook'd-for in a scene so rude,
Long hid by interposing hill or wood,
Some mansion, neat and elegantly dress'd,
By some kind hospitable heart possess'd,
Offer him warmth, security, and rest;
Think with what pleasure, safe, and at his ease,
He hears the tempest howling in the trees;

What glowing thanks his lips and heart employ,
While danger past is turn'd to present joy.
So fares it with the sinner, when he feels
A growing dread of vengeance at his heels:
His conscience like a glassy lake before,
Lash'd into foaming waves, begins to roar;
The law, grown clamorous, though silent long,
Arraigns him, charges him with every wrong--
Asserts the right of his offended Lord,
And death, or restitution, is the word:
The last impossible, he fears the first,
And, having well deserved, expects the worst.
Then welcome refuge and a peaceful home;
O for a shelter from the wrath to come!
Crush me, ye rocks; ye falling mountains, hide,
Or bury me in ocean's angry tide!--
The scrutiny of those all-seeing eyes
I dare not--And you need not, God replies;
The remedy you want I freely give;
The Book shall teach you--read, believe, and live!
'Tis done--the raging storm is heard no more,
Mercy receives him on her peaceful shore:
And Justice, guardian of the dread command,
Drops the red vengeance from his willing hand.
A soul redeem'd demands a life of praise;
Hence the complexion of his future days,
Hence a demeanour holy and unspeck'd,

And the world's hatred, as its sure effect.
Some lead a life unblameable and just,
Their own dear virtue their unshaken trust:
They never sin--or if (as all offend)
Some trivial slips their daily walk attend,
The poor are near at hand, the charge is small,
A slight gratuity atones for all.
For though the Pope has lost his interest here,
And pardons are not sold as once they were,
No Papist more desirous to compound,
Than some grave sinners upon English ground.
That plea refuted, other quirks they seek--
Mercy is infinite, and man is weak;
The future shall obliterate the past,
And heaven, no doubt, shall be their home at last.
Come, then--a still, small whisper in your ear--
He has no hope who never had a fear;
And he that never doubted of his state,
He may perhaps--perhaps he may--too late.
The path to bliss abounds with many a snare;
Learning is one, and wit, however rare.
The Frenchman, first in literary fame
(Mention him, if you please. Voltaire?--The same),
With spirit, genius, eloquence, supplied,
Lived long, wrote much, laugh'd heartily, and died;
The Scripture was his jest-book, whence he drew
Bon-mots to gall the Christian and the Jew;

An infidel in health, but what when sick?
Oh--then a text would touch him at the quick;
View him at Paris in his last career,
Surrounding throngs the demi-god revere;
Exalted on his pedestal of pride,
And fumed with frankincense on every side,
He begs their flattery with his latest breath,
And, smother'd in't at last, is praised to death!
Yon cottager, who weaves at her own door,
Pillow and bobbins all her little store;
Content though mean, and cheerful if not gay,
Shuffling her threads about the live-long day,
Just earns a scanty pittance, and at night
Lies down secure, her heart and pocket light;
She, for her humble sphere by nature fit,
Has little understanding, and no wit,
Receives no praise; but though her lot be such
(Toilsome and indigent), she renders much;
Just knows, and knows no more, her Bible true--
A truth the brilliant Frenchman never knew;
And in that charter reads with sparkling eyes,
Her title to a treasure in the skies.
Oh, happy peasant! Oh, unhappy bard!
His the mere tinsel, hers the rich reward;
He praised perhaps for ages yet to come,
She never heard of half a mile from home:
He, lost in errors, his vain heart prefers,

She, safe in the simplicity of hers.
Not many wise, rich, noble, or profound
In science win one inch of heavenly ground.
And is it not a mortifying thought
The poor should gain it, and the rich should not?
No--the voluptuaries, who ne'er forget
One pleasure lost, lose heaven without regret;
Regret would rouse them, and give birth to prayer,
Prayer would add faith, and faith would fix them there.
Not that the Former of us all in this,
Or aught he does, is govern'd by caprice;
The supposition is replete with sin,
And bears the brand of blasphemy burnt in.
Not so--the silver trumpet's heavenly call
Sounds for the poor, but sounds alike for all:
Kings are invited, and would kings obey,
No slaves on earth more welcome were than they;
But royalty, nobility, and state,
Are such a dead preponderating weight,
That endless bliss (how strange soe'er it seem),
In counterpoise, flies up and kicks the beam.
'Tis open, and ye cannot enter--why?
Because ye will not, Conyers would reply--
And he says much that many may dispute
And cavil at with ease, but none refute.
Oh, bless'd effect of penury and want,
The seed sown there, how vigorous is the plant!

No soil like poverty for growth divine,
As leanest land supplies the richest wine.
Earth gives too little, giving only bread,
To nourish pride, or turn the weakest head:
To them the sounding jargon of the schools
Seems what it is--a cap and bells for fools:
The light they walk by, kindled from above,
Shews them the shortest way to life and love:
They, strangers to the controversial field,
Where deists, always foil'd, yet scorn to yield,
And never check'd by what impedes the wise,
Believe, rush forward, and possess the prize.
Envy, ye great, the dull unletter'd small:
Ye have much cause for envy--but not all.
We boast some rich ones whom the Gospel sways,
And one who wears a coronet, and prays;
Like gleanings of an olive-tree, they shew
Here and there one upon the topmost bough.
How readily, upon the Gospel plan,
That question has its answer--What is man?
Sinful and weak, in every sense a wretch;
An instrument, whose chords, upon the stretch,
And strain'd to the last screw that he can bear,
Yield only discord in his Maker's ear;
Once the blest residence of truth divine,
Glorious as Solyma's interior shrine,
Where, in his own oracular bode,

Dwelt visibly the light-creating God;
But made long since, like Babylon of old,
A den of mischiefs never to be told:
And she, once mistress of the realms around,
Now scatter'd wide and nowhere to be found,
As soon shall rise and re-ascend the throne,
By native power and energy her own,
As nature, at her own peculiar cost,
Restore to man the glories he has lost.
Go--bid the winter cease to chill the year,
Replace the wandering comet in his sphere.
Then boast (but wait for that unhop'd-for hour)
The self-restoring arm of human power.
But what is man in his own proud esteem?
Hear him--himself the poet and the theme:
A monarch clothed with majesty and awe,
His mind his kingdom, and his will his law;
Grace in his mien, and glory in his eyes,
Supreme on earth, and worthy of the skies,
Strength in his heart, dominion in his nod,
And, thunderbolts excepted, quite a God!
So sings he, charm'd with his own mind and form,
The song magnificent--the theme a worm!
Himself so much the source of his delight,
His Maker has no beauty in his sight.
See where he sits, contemplative and fix'd,
Pleasure and wonder in his features mix'd,

His passions tamed and all at his control,
How perfect the composure of his soul!
Complacency has breathed a gentle gale
O'er all his thoughts, and swell'd his easy sail:
His books well trimm'd, and in the gayest style,
Like regimental coxcombs, rank and file,
Adorn his intellects as well as shelves,
And teach him notions splendid as themselves:
The Bible only stands neglected there,
Though that of all most worthy of his care;
And, like an infant troublesome awake,
Is left to sleep for peace and quiet sake.
What shall the man deserve of human kind,
Whose happy skill and industry combined
Shall prove (what argument could never yet)
The Bible an imposture and a cheat?
The praises of the libertine profess'd,
The worst of men, and curses of the best.
Where should the living, weeping o'er his woes;
The dying, trembling at the awful close;
Where the betray'd, forsaken, and oppress'd;
The thousands whom the world forbids to rest;
Where should they find (those comforts at an end,
The Scripture yields), or hope to find, a friend?
Sorrow might muse herself to madness then,
And, seeking exile from the sight of men,
Bury herself in solitude profound,

Grow frantic with her pangs, and bite the ground.
Thus often Unbelief, grown sick of life,
Flies to the tempting pool, or felon knife.
The jury meet, the coroner is short,
And lunacy the verdict of the court.
Reverse the sentence, let the truth be known,
Such lunacy is ignorance alone;
They knew not, what some bishops may not know,
That Scripture is the only cure of woe.
That field of promise how it flings abroad
Its odour o'er the Christian's thorny road!
The soul, reposing on assured relief,
Feels herself happy amidst all her grief,
Forgets her labour as she toils along,
Weeps tears of joy, and bursts into a song.
But the same word, that, like the polish'd share,
Ploughs up the roots of a believer's care,
Kills too the flowery weeds, where'er they grow,
That bind the sinner's Bacchanalian brow.
Oh, that unwelcome voice of heavenly love,
Sad messenger of mercy from above!
How does it grate upon his thankless ear,
Crippling his pleasures with the cramp of fear!
His will and judgment at continual strife,
That civil war embitters all his life;
In vain he points his powers against the skies,
In vain he closes or averts his eyes,

Truth will intrude--she bids him yet beware;
And shakes the sceptic in the scorner's chair.
Though various foes against the Truth combine,
Pride above all opposes her design;
Pride of a growth superior to the rest,
The subtlest serpent with the loftiest crest,
Swells at the thought, and, kindling into rage,
Would hiss the cherub Mercy from the stage.
And is the soul indeed so lost?--she cries,
Fallen from her glory, and too weak to rise?
Torpids and dull, beneath a frozen zone,
Has she no spark that may be deem'd her own?
Grant her indebted to what zealots call
Grace undeserved, yet surely not for all!
Some beams of rectitude she yet displays,
Some love of virtue, and some power to praise;
Can lift herself above corporeal things,
And, soaring on her own unborrow'd wings,
Possess herself of all that's good or true,
Assert the skies, and vindicate her due.
Past indiscretion is a venial crime;
And if the youth, unmellow'd yet by time,
Bore on his branch, luxuriant then and rude,
Fruits of a blighted size, austere and crude,
Maturer years shall happier stores produce,
And meliorate the well-concocted juice.
Then, conscious of her meritorious zeal,

To justice she may make her bold appeal;
And leave to Mercy, with a tranquil mind,
The worthless and unfruitful of mankind,
Hear then how Mercy, slighted and defied,
Retorts the affront against the crown of pride.
Perish the virtue, as it ought, abhorr'd,
And the fool with it, who insults his Lord.
The atonement a Redeemer's love has wrought
Is not for you--the righteous need it not.
Seest thou yon harlot, wooing all she meets,
The worn-out nuisance of the public streets,
Herself from morn to night, from night to morn,
Her own abhorrence, and as much your scorn?
The gracious shower, unlimited and free,
Shall fall on her, when Heaven denies it thee.
Of all that wisdom dictates, this the drift--
That man is dead in sin, and life a gift.
Is virtue, then, unless of Christian growth,
Mere fallacy, or foolishness, or both?
Ten thousand sages lost in endless woe,
For ignorance of what they could not know?--
That speech betrays at once a bigot's tongue,
Charge not a God with such outrageous wrong!
Truly, not I--the partial light men have,
My creed persuades me, well employ'd, may save;
While he that scorns the noon-day beam, perverse,
Shall find the blessing, unimproved, a curse.

Let heathen worthies, whose exalted mind
Left sensuality and dross behind,
Possess, for me, their undisputed lot,
And take, unenvied, the reward they sought,
But still in virtue of a Saviour's plea,
Not blind by choice, but destined not to see.
Their fortitude and wisdom were a flame
Celestial, though they knew not whence it came,
Derived from the same source of light and grace,
That guides the Christian in his swifter race;
Their judge was conscience, and her rule their law;
That rule, pursued with reverence and with awe,
Led them, however faltering, faint, and slow,
From what they knew to what they wish'd to know.
But let not him that shares a brighter day
Traduce the splendour of a noontide ray,
Prefer the twilight of a darker time,
And deem his base stupidity no crime;
The wretch, who slights the bounty of the skies,
And sinks, while favour'd with the means to rise,
Shall find them rated at their full amount,
The good he scorn'd all carried to account.
Marshalling all his terrors as he came,
Thunder, and earthquake, and devouring flame,
From Sinai's top Jehovah gave the law--
Life for obedience--death for every flaw.
When the great Sovereign would his will express,

He gives a perfect rule, what can he less?
And guards it with a sanction as severe
As vengeance can inflict, or sinners fear:
Else his own glorious rights he would disclaim,
And man might safely trifle with his name.
He bids him glow with unremitting love
To all on earth, and to himself above;
Condemns the injurious deed, the slanderous tongue,
The thought that meditates a brother's wrong:
Brings not alone the more conspicuous part,
His conduct, to the test, but tries his heart.
Hark! universal nature shook and groan'd,
'Twas the last trumpet--see the Judge enthroned:
Rouse all your courage at your utmost need,
Now summon every virtue, stand and plead.
What! silent? Is your boasting heard no more?
That self-renouncing wisdom, learn'd before,
Had shed immortal glories on your brow,
That all your virtues cannot purchase now.
All joy to the believer! He can speak--
Trembling yet happy, confident yet meek.
Since the dear hour that brought me to thy foot,
And cut up all my follies by the root,
I never trusted in an arm but thine,
Nor hoped, but in thy righteousness divine:
My prayers and alms, imperfect and defiled,
Were but the feeble efforts of a child;

Howe'er perform'd, it was their brightest part,
That they proceeded from a grateful heart:
Cleansed in thine own all-purifying blood,
Forgive their evil and accept their good:
I cast them at thy feet--my only plea
Is what it was, dependence upon thee:
While struggling in the vale of tears below,
That never fail'd, nor shall it fail me now.
Angelic gratulations rend the skies,
Pride fall unpitied, never more to rise,
Humility is crown'd, and Faith receives the prize.

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