

THE ACCEPTED CALL.

A SERMON

BY THE REV. CHARLES GARRETT.

"When Thou saidst, Seek ye My face: my heart said unto Thee, Thy face, Lord, will I seek."—Ps. xlvii. 8.

THE question is often asked, How do men become the sons of God? Sometimes this question is asked sneeringly by those who do not believe in the possibility of such a transformation. Sometimes it is asked earnestly and anxiously by those who believe it possible that humanity may be so honoured, but who are bewildered as to the way in which that honour is to be obtained. They have said, "We started together, and have gone shoulder to shoulder for twenty or may be fifty years, and now there is a difference between us as wide as heaven and hell. How has this marvellous change in you been effected?" and I have replied, "Don't ask me, because I may be an impostor; go to some one of whose conversion it is impossible to doubt, and remember that when you have obtained an answer from one child of God you have in substance received an answer from all." And so to day I take you to David. Here there can be no mistake. We know that he was a sinner by nature, for he says he was "conceived in sin and shapen in iniquity." We know that he was a sinner by actual transgression, for his history is stained with records of the vilest iniquity; and we also know that he afterwards became a man after God's own heart, and has been made the leader of the Church's praise to the end of time. I ask you to listen to his own account of the way in which the great change was effected. It is brief, but full so full that we may learn from it the way of salvation. He says, "When Thou saidst, Seek ye my face, my heart said, Thy face, Lord, will I seek." That is, God spoke, and I heard Him. God called me, and I came to Him. God held out His arms, and I ran into them. "Why," many of you are saying, "this is just my experience." I know it is: I care not whether you are a Methodist, a Baptist, a Churchman or a Nonconformist, a Protestant or a Catholic—if you are a child of God, my text is your spiritual history. God's family is one, though we are called by many names, and when it comes to matters of experience our unity is at once visible manifest.

The text naturally divides itself into two parts. We have first, *God's address to man*; secondly, *Man's reply to God*.

First, we have *God's address to man*—"Thou saidst, 'Seek ye my face.'" Here we have the *origin* of all true religion. It begins with God. It was so at the outset. All who know anything about quarrels among men know that as a rule the offended party is generally the first to seek reconciliation, and it may well be so, for when a man knows he is in the right he can afford to be generous—to hold out his hand, and say as Abraham did to Lot, "Let there be no quarrel between thy herdsmen and mine." But whether this be true of the quarrels among men or not, it is gloriously true of the great quarrel between God and man. Man sinned, and God was angry with man. Did He, however, wait for man to draw near to Him with a broken and contrite heart and ask for pardon? Did He wait for man to come and confess his ingratitude and sinfulness? We know He did not. We know that if He had, our reconciliation would never have taken place, but the whole family of man would have moved on in one dark blaspheming procession to perdition. God knew this, knew it well, and "because He delighteth in mercy" He spoke first.

And has it struck you how soon He spoke? Did He wait till man had learnt by years of bitter experience the sinfulness of his sin? No, He did not. Blessed be His name! the first day of man's sin was the first day of God's revelation of mercy! He who has commanded us not to let the sun go down upon our wrath acted upon His own command, and before the end of the first day of men's transgression, He went to him, and while showing him his sinfulness and its sad results, proclaimed to him the glorious news of salvation. This God spoke first to our race: "the way of peace" is not an invention of man, but a revelation from heaven.

Do I hear some one saying, "But does God really speak to man? Can there be this direct intercourse between Him and us?" I answer, "Yes, He can and does." Cannot we speak to our children? Cannot the sheep on the hill-side speak to

their little leaping lambs. Cannot the parent bird speak to her little open-mouthed young ones? And is God the only dumb parent in the universe? He that made the tongue, can He not speak? He does not speak all day long. He speaks sometimes in tones of thunder, which are like the beginning of hell to the guilty soul, and sometimes in tones soft as a mother's blessing, which fill the eyes with tears we know not how.

Do I hear some one saying, "But I have never heard Him?" Perhaps not; that, however, may not be because He has not spoken.

I shall never forget my first visit to a woollen mill. The noise of the machinery stunned and bewildered me. The owner of the mill explained the various processes as we went on, but it was a dumb show to me—I heard nothing. Suppose when I came out I had been asked whether the gentleman spoke to me during my visit, and I had replied "No," would it have been true? Certainly not; he spoke, but I did not hear. His voice was drowned in the surrounding noise. And so it is with thousands of those around us. God speaks to them, but His voice is drowned in the hubbub by which they are surrounded. They are awakened in the morning by the postman's knock, and before they have time for a thought about God or eternity, the noise of their own mill is all around them, before the letters are finished the morning paper arrives, and the roar of the world is added to the sound which already existed; a short prayer is uttered, a hasty meal swallowed, and henceforth it is whirl and excitement till the evening; they return home worn out and weary, by the aid of stimulants they are able to spend an evening of worldly pleasure, and then a short psalm and a shorter prayer is read, and they retire to a troubled rest to be awakened again by the postman's knock, and to go through the same distracting round. This is the history year in and year out of thousands around us—and how can God's voice ever be heard in this whirl? There will, however, come an end to this. While I was in that mill the dinner hour came, and instantly the machinery stopped, and out of the silence came a hundred voices that had been speaking before, but had been drowned in the noise. And so it will be with us. This life is not to go on for ever. There will come a morning when other hands will open the letters, when the newsman will be told that the paper is needed no more, when there will be sorrow and silence in the now busy home. The noise of time will be unheard: there will be the silence of eternity, and, if we neglect the offer of mercy, out of that silence will come a voice louder than thunder which will say, "Because I have called, and ye refused; because I have stretched forth my hands, and ye have none of my reproof, I will laugh at your calamity, I will mock when your fear cometh."

The text also shows us the *nature* of religion. When God speaks to man, what does He say? The text says, "Seek ye my face." Do you ask, what does this mean? It means just this, "Come to Me." This is what God says to every man, not just "Come to My House, or My Book, or My servant," but "Come to Me." When God says this, do not the words imply that we are at a distance from Him?

Some one may say, but how can this be? Do we not live and move in God? How then can we be far from Him? How? Suppose you meet an old friend, and at once go up to him to express your pleasure at the meeting, and he receives you cordially, and passes on, would you not say you met so and so, and he was so distant—you met him, and yet he was distant? What do you mean by that? You mean that your bodies met, but that there was no union of heart, and that is what God means when He speaks to us. He says we draw near to Him with our lips, but our hearts are far off. Now it is the heart that God wants, and to offer Him any substitute is a insult.

But does not God teach us further by this passage, that though we are afar off we need not stay there? When he says, "Come to Me," does not that imply that there is a possibility of our coming? If there were no such possibility, the invitation would be a mockery. I know that when Adam was driven out of Paradise, the fiery sword was placed there to prevent his return. But there is a beautiful passage in the ninth chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews which says, "He hath put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself." There is a world of comfort for the trembling heart in this. But what does it mean? It is clear that it does not mean that He has put away sin as a fact, for it meets us everywhere. Nor does it mean that He has put it away as a thing to be punished. Many of you feel something of its punishment even now.