"I AM UNDER AUTHORITY."

BY C. H. SPURGEON.

The centurion answered and said, Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldest come under my roof: but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed. For I am a man under authority, having soldiers under me: and I say to this man, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it.—Matthew 8:8, 9.

Without any introduction, as we have just been reading Matthew's record of this notable miracle of our Lord, I shall come at once to the text, and, first of all, work out the incident itself, and then, secondly, make use of its lessons for our own practical purposes. There is much to be learned from this narrative for our guidance at the present time.

I. First, then, let me work out the incident itself.

A centurion, the commander of the detachment of Roman forces then placed at Capernaum, had a servant exceedingly ill. He was paralyzed, or palsied, but it was with that kind of paralysis which still leaves room for great pain. He was grievously tormented, and yet palsied. This man of war was evidently a good master, thoughtful of his servants; and when he heard that the great prophet, Jesus of Nazareth, had come to the town, he made the best of his way to him, and besought him to heal his servant. The centurion did not ask Jesus so come down and heal him, but the Saviour at once replied, "I will come and heal him." This was more than the centurion had asked—he had pleaded for the healing of his slave, but he had not expected the personal presence of the glorious Master.

You remember that, on another occasion, a certain nobleman went to Jesus, and besought him, saying, "Sir, come down ere my child die." Jesus did not go down to the nobleman's child, but he sent his powerful word, and healed him.

In this case, it was a servant, not a child, who was suffering; and, as if the Saviour would pay the greater attention where the rank was lower, he showed the condescension of his spirit by saying in this instance, "I will come and heal him. I myself will come and undertake the cure that you request of me." See how the Saviour grants more than we ask, and also how very tender and considerate he is to the poor and needy. He would not have them think that he despises them; and, therefore, while to the nobleman's son a gracious word is sent, to the centurion's servant the Lord proffers a gracious visit: "I will come and heal him." Jesus is very tender and pitiful. He knows the soreness of human hearts in poverty and sickness, and he will not inflict upon them any unnecessary wound. Nay, he will, as it were, go out of his way by a superior gentleness to those who are of the lowest rank that he may show that he is no respecter of persons after the manner of men.

Now see what the centurion does. He had requested the Lord to heal his servant; he is very grateful for the kindness of the Saviour in offering to come and heal him; but he is a true gentleman, so he will not put the Saviour to any personal inconvenience. He feels that it is not at all necessary that the great physician should take a journey to his house, so he says to him, "Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldest come under my roof; but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed." The refining power of faith upon the manners of men is very wonderful. Roman centurions were usually rough, bluff fellows who cared for nobody. On many a hard-fought field they received their training for future service, and they forced their way up from the ranks, not by competitive examination, but by blows, and cuffs, and bruises, and wounds. Yet this officer, being a believer in Jesus Christ, is evidently softened, more or less civilized, and cultivated, by that very fact. You can notice it often, that the roughest men, the least educated of women, will have about them some of the gentlest and sweetest traits of character when they come to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. So the centurion says, "My Lord, glad enough would I be or a visit from thine august Majesty; but I am not worthy that thou shouldest come under my roof, and it is not needful for thee to do so. Thou canst heal my servant with a single word. Therefore, I pray thee, speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed." It was this beautiful, thoughtful, gentlemanly feeling, which I cannot too highly recommend, which led him to speak in this way; and what he said is remarkably instructive.

Let me then work out the incident in detail.

Notice, first, that the centurion drew a parallel between himself and the Lord Jesus Christ. He said, "I am a man under authority, having soldiers under me."

He transfers that characteristic to the Saviour. He does not, he cannot, do the Christ the discredit of supposing that he has not his household well in hand, that he has servants who dare to trifle with his commands, that there are agencies which have broken loose from beneath his rule, and will go whichever way they please. "No," says he, "Saviour, commissioned of the Father, thou hast thy soldiers and thy servants, and I believe that thou hast them under such control and subject to such discipline that thou hast but to speak, and the act thou dost order is done, or to command, and it stands fast forever." I trust that none of us would dishonour the Saviour by questioning the truth of this parallel which the centurion so thoughtfully drew.

Once more, the centurion went a little farther, and implied that, as Christ had the power to perform the divine will, and had that power well in hand, he believed he was willing to direct all that power to the one object of healing his servant. I believe that many of you know that the Lord Jesus Christ is almighty; you do not doubt that fact, but the question is,—Is he almighty to save you? You do not doubt that, if the Saviour willed it, he can make your spirit whole, but you ask,—Will he will it? Will he turn that power in our direction? It does not enter into the centurion's head that there will be any difficulty in his case. "No," he seems to say, "King of kings, omnipotent Master and Lord, thou canst at once direct an angel to fly to my servant, or thou canst bid the disease quit my dwelling, or thou canst speak to the palsy, and palsy itself will be thy servant, and will fly away at once at thy command. Thou hast only to put forth thy power upon my servant, and he will at once be healed." I want you to believe, dear hearts, that our Lord Jesus Christ, no longer here in the flesh but risen from the dead, is clothed with power equal to that which he had in the centurion's day; nay, that he is clothed with even greater power, for after his resurrection he said, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth." And then I want you to believe that he is prepared to turn all that power in your direction, so as to work for your deliverance from spiritual death, your rescue from the power of sin, your help in the way of providence, your guidance in the way of wisdom, or whatsoever, out of ten thousand things, may happen to be the need of this present moment. Oh, that he, who gave such faith as this to the centurion at Capernaum, would give like precious faith to many of you, that you also may glorify and bless his holy name!

Now observe that there was only one thing further which was on this centurion's mind, and that was this. He looked upon Christ as a master over all kinds of powers, sufficient for all purposes; he looked at him as having them all well in hand, so that he could have his own bidding done in a moment, and he was anxious to keep his own place. You ask me how I know this. I am sure it was so, because, when the Saviour was willing to come down to the house, he shank from having such an honour conferred upon him: he seemed to feel that he was being put into a wrong position. He was himself only a servant, and he felt that, in the particular character which he was then bearing, he was not worthy that his master should come under his roof so he said, "Speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed."

I think that this is the principal thing you and I have to do. When we think about our Lord Jesus Christ, we need not worry ourselves about how he will effect his purposes, how the decrees of God will be carried out, or how his promises will be fulfilled. The principal thing we have to do is this,—to be ourselves the Lord's servants, and when he says to one of us, "Go," to mind that we do go, and when he says, "Come," to see that we do come, and when he says, "Do this," to be sure that we do it. Thou wouldst rule the sea? Thou hadst better rule myself. Thou wouldst purge the church? Thou hadst better see to it that thine own heart is purged. Thou wouldst reform the world? Out on thee! What hast thou to do with reforming the world till thou hast first washed thine own hands in innocency? Get thee to thy right place, and do thou thine own work, and it shall be well with thee. What art thou, after all, but as a tiny worker on a little ant-hill; if thou dost, at least do not fret thyself about the concerns of the ant-hill; if thou dost, at least do not fret thyself about the whole planet on which thou livest, still less about the complete solar system, for what canst thou do with it if thou dost worry thy poor antship even unto death? Nay, but do thy little share of work upon thine own ant-hill, carry thine own grain of wheat to the general store, so thou shalt have answered the purpose of thy being, and it shall be well with thee. May God, even our Lord Jesus Christ, give us the grace to set him up very high as Lord and Master, full of power, and wisdom, and love; and then to set ourselves down very low, and to ask that, as his servants, we may serve him faithfully all the days of our life!

Thus I have, as best I could, worked out the incident itself.

II. Now, secondly, I want to make use of its lessons for our own practical purposes.

First, then, dear friends, it seems to me that this little narrative should be used to urge us to believe in the power of the Lord Jesus Christ, even if he does not speedily come in the glory of the Second Advent. I am frequently talking with christian friends about these evil days in which we live, and of the mischief of the times in which our lot is cast. Certainly, it is not a very cheering subject, and generally I find that friends wind up with some such remark as this: "Well, the comfort is, that the Lord Jesus Christ will come very soon. The defections in the professing church, the blasphemies of the world—are they not among the special tokens that the end is hastening on? When our Lord comes, then all these difficult problems will be solved, and all that grieves us will come to an end." Yes, yes, all that I fully believe, and I look upon the second glorious advent of our Lord Jesus Christ as the brightest hope of his church; but, still, do you not think that a more practical and more God-honoring faith would say, without putting aside the blessed hope of the second advent, "Yet the Lord Jesus Christ can deal with the present evils of the church and of the world, without actually coming into our midst." He can say a word while yet remaining in the highest heavens, amid the splendors of the sacred worship of the New Jerusalem; he can speak a word there, and so effect his purpose here. Does not that truth seem to flow naturally out of the faith of this centurion? Our blessed Lord, there is no need that thou shouldst at present rend the heavens, and in majesty come down; there is no need that thou shouldst literally touch the hills, and make them smoke, and that the glory of thy divine presence should consume thine adversaries. If it so pleaseth thee, thou canst do thy bidding where thou art, without disturbing this dispensation, without even working a miracle, allowing things to take their usual course, and yet accomplishing thy supreme purposes.

Beloved, I want you to exercise this faith continually. You are perhaps, in a little church, and when that goes to the bad, you say, "Oh, well, we cannot make it better! We must wait till the Lord comes." Not a bit of it; begin to stir up his strength now, for he can work before that second advent, and work right gloriously, too. You turn over the newspaper, and you say, "I am weary and well-nigh sick unto death of all this evil." Yes, and so am I; but what then? "Oh!" you answer, "we had better go upstairs to bed, and wait till the Lord comes." Not at all; let us go and sharpen our swords, and attack the enemies of our Lord more earnestly than ever. We will have another battle or two yet before he does come. Who knows how long he may tarry? But, whether he tarries, or whether he comes soon, let us not be at all disquieted, as though his power could not be seen apart from his second advent. The power is given to him in heaven and in earth. Even now the name of Jesus is "high over all." He is now the great attraction to men, the great destroyer of Satan. Let us not begin, then, to think little of our absent Lord's present power, and to hang all our hopes upon his literal presence among us. I say, again, that I am not deprecating that glorious coming of his; God forbid that I should do so! It still is our grandest hope; but let us not put it out of its place so as to make us at all despondent or distrustful about what our risen Lord is able to do for us even now. He still can do "exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think."

I want you next, dear friends, to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ's unseen servants. You look around, or you look abroad, and try to find out men who shall proclaim the Gospel vigorously during the next twenty years, and you say you do not perceive them; no, nor do I. Now think a moment; when this centurion saw Jesus of Nazareth standing in the midst of his disciples, what did he see? He saw a lowly-looking man, in appearance very much like other men, but certainly not attended by any court, or guarded by any soldiery; yet he believed, concerning this man, that he was surrounded by invisible bands who, in a moment, would do his bidding. I want you to think thus of your Lord. At this day, the Christ of God on earth is attended by all the servants that he needs for his great cause. The scoffers say, "Ah, the old truth is dying out! Where can they find men of mind to preach it?" But our eyes, enlightened by faith, can see a great multitude who shall publish the same old truth until Christ shall come. The mountain is full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha; there shall yet be found myriads of burning spirits to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ until he comes again. I like that couplet—

Remember that Omnipotence
Has servants everywhere.

Thou canst not see them, but they are waiting for their Lord's orders, and he can see them. He knows where he has put them, and when he will call them to himself, and bid them do his work. Therefore, let us not be in the least disheartened or discouraged because of what we see, or what we do not see. Let us rely upon the invisible; let us expect the unexpected; ay, I was going to say, let us expect the unexpectable. That which we cannot dream of as possible or probable, let us nevertheless believe shall be done; for God must be true, Christ cannot be defeated, Calvary never will, and never can become, in any measure, a defeat. The death of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, must accomplish the purposes for which it was wrought out. Let us rest assured, then, that he has his servants waiting to do his bidding.

Now apply this subject a little more closely still. I wish that some poor soul would even now believe that the Lord Jesus Christ could save him at once with a single word. I know you are apt to think conversion of men must be wrought in some very particular and special way. Pictorial and descriptive accounts of striking conversions have been repeated so often that many people get the idea that the scenery is necessary to the effect; but I want you to put all such ideas away from your thoughts. If you needed any scenery, it is here before your eyes; but you do not want it. Else, for a preacher to stand in this dense heat in the midst of six thousand immortal souls, is scenery enough for any one who wants something striking. And if the Lord shall come to you, and in a moment save you, there will be quite enough of the special and the particular just in the mere fact that you are the subject of the Lord's mighty working. But I want you to believe that this work of divine grace upon the soul has not to do with any particular position in which a man is found. The Lord Jesus Christ can save a man when he is in bed, when he is putting on his clothes, when he is walking the street, when he is at his business, or when he is not at his business, but indulging in sin. I could give many instances to show that there is nothing wanted in the way of peculiarity of position in order for Christ to save.

Do you who are the people of God I would apply this subject in this way. If it be as I have said concerning the sinner that he must trust in Christ if he is to be saved, it is also true that you should believe for your servants, your friends, and your acquaintances. Your children are still unconverted; have you ever prayed for them, believing in the power of Jesus Christ to convert them? One said, the other day, of a certain person, "It seems no use praying for such a fellow as that." Of course, it is no use to pray such prayers as you would be likely to present if you talk like that. When you have given a person up, and you have no further hope concerning him, what prayer can you offer for him?

I wish I could drive this truth home into some who have been praying for others, but who have never prayed the prayer of faith. It is the prayer of faith that saves the sick; it is the prayer of faith that saves the sinful; it is the prayer of faith that makes everything of Christ, and takes him at his right valuation as being a master of every situation. That is what thou shouldst do; make Jesus Christ master of the situation, and plead with him in that capacity, and thou shalt not plead in vain, and thy child, thy friend, thy servant shall yet be saved.

Let the practical close of this evening's meditation be that we believe in Jesus a great deal more than we have ever believed before. If we have believed in Jesus, let us have still more confidence in him. I think it is a sad pity when a man preaches the Gospel with a doubt at the back of his throat. What good can come of his preaching? They sometimes charge us with dogmatism. We would be more dogmatic if we could be, for we speak what we do know, and testify what we have seen; and if men receive not our witness, we cannot help that. We cannot change our witness because men do not care to receive it. Go thou forth, minister of God, and preach the Gospel as a certainty, and thou shall prove it to be a certainty. If thou dost preach it as a something which may or may not be true, it will paralyze thee, and it will not profit thy hearers. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, I claim from every man to whom I preach that he should believe in him, accept his great salvation, and bow before him. If you do so, dear friends, you shall be saved; but if you will not, it is not left as a matter of choice with you, but the Lord Jesus has himself declared, "He that believeth not shall be damned." He will not allow us to trifle with him. He is a Sovereign, he is the King of kings, and Lord of lords, and he calls upon us to kiss his feet, bow down before him and own him as our Lord and God.

Our chief business just now is not so much to think of what Christ can do in the great battle of the present, or what he will do in the dread conflict of the future; but of what we have to do, and I think that what we have to do is, so to believe in Christ as to be his obedient servants. If he says "Go," let us go. If he says, "Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden," let us come unto him. If he says concerning any service, "Do this," let us do it; and if, instead of bidding us do anything, he bids us believe him, let us come and believe him, for this will be our wisdom, this will be our happiness, this will be our heaven, to be the obedient servants of him who must be Ruler over all. God has decreed that this shall be his glory; he has set him on his throne expecting till his foes be made his footstool. If you choose to be his enemies you shall choose it to your own destruction; but if you will come and bow before him, and be his servants, you shall find that heaven and earth are waiting at his back to bless you, and you shall go from strength to strength beneath his loving and unfailing care.

The Lord bless you, dear friends, for Jesus' sake! Amen.

THE RELIGION THAT SINGS.

Christianity is religion that sings itself. Atheism has no songs; agnosticism is not tuneful. We have never heard of a Brahmanic hymnal, or a Confucian psalmody. The Moslem, indeed, has his metrical exercises, rather than his music, but the airs that he chants are of the weird, labored, mournful kind. In the case of the savage of African forests or the South seas, or the Indian of the American plains, the explosive and unmelodious cries or grunts that he may periodically emit can hardly be regarded as indicative of any great degree of religious feeling, even when a vague inspiration after the things that are higher than he may occasionally breathe in his wild vocalisation.

At all events, the metres of heathendom or savagery, so far as paganism is vocal at all, are not once to be compared with the lively heartiness, with the freeness, fulness and depth of christian song. There is a spontaneity and abandon to the singing of christians, when they sing with an adequate realisation of the worth of their own religion, that is sadly lacking in any of the musical exercises of paganism. When pagans sing at all, they sing as though they ought to sing, but the believer in Jesus explains his own songfulness in the consistent question: "How can I keep from singing?"

We are, therefore, quite justified in claiming that christianity is not only a religion that sings, but also is *the* religion that sings. If it has not an absolute monopoly of all the metres it is in so much greater degree than all other religions the generator of a moral melody as to render it distinctively the source and soul of song. No other faith is so the cult of carols and the school of praise.

And the explanation is not far to seek. The christian sings because he has something to sing about, that is, a Christ, a redemptive grace and a hope of glory. Since life for the believer is lit up with a pre-paradisiacal glory, therefore, the believer's face is aglow with joy and his speech inevitably quickens into song. When Jesus Christ puts himself into the world, he puts song into it, too, not in the sense that he then and there created clefs and notes and musical vibrations, but because by his advent he gave song a spiritual substance and carolling a content. Christ made his meanings musical and music meaningful. By saving men he saved their music, too.

And so ever and everywhere the religion of Jesus is a cult of hope, of brave joy, of cheery optimism. Christian faith already puts the heaven to which it is going into its earthly phraseologies and psalmodies. It elevates song, while it quickens it. It inspires poetry which is peerless. Atheism is dumb, but there is music to christianity. Skepticism is not singable, but Christ today is leading the grandest choruses of the world. There is not even an agnostic doxology running: "Praise the Unknowable from which or possibly from whom, we do not know whether or not all blessings flow." Spencerianism and the like do not suffer the meteres and the music; and where in ostensibly non-christian quarters there may be heard now and then a struggling note of song, it will be found in many cases to be but a plagiarized praise.

But English literature is already full of the lyrics of the Christ, while the poets are still searching for new tributes to bring to his name. The sublimest oratorios have had inspiration from the Nazarene, or have been set with scriptural words which convey his ideas. Today the presses of America are putting fourth constantly new christian hymnals, and he who writes a new hymn that will sing is sure of the commendation of pious multitudes, even if he does not thereby make a worldly fortune. The heathen jest of the early centuries that "Christianity is the religion of the sorrowful," was early disproved. Christianity is a religion that can sing, and that does sing.—New York Observer.

It is not the will of Christ that we should depend merely on the hope of the future. It is not his will that any part of life should be a bleak space, an uncomforted stretch of desert through which we march to the Promised Land. The remedy for care is to realise the love of God in Christ, moment by moment, touching all existence and glorifying it—if we will—with peace and joy.—W. R. Nicoll.

There are some men born with feelings so blunt that they can hardly be said to be awake during the whole course of their lives.—Edmund Burke.

As the Sandwich Islander believes that the strength and valor of the enemy he kills passes into himself, so we gain the strength of the temptation we resist.—R. W. Emerson.

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