

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN  
5:24-29

24. Verily, verily, I say to you, He who hears my word and believes on him who sent me has everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation, but is passed from death to life. 25. Verily, verily, I say to you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God; and they who hear shall live. 26. For as the Father has life in himself, so has he given to the Son to have life in himself, 27. and has given him authority to execute judgment also, because he is the Son of man. 28. Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves shall hear his voice, 29. and shall come forth--those who have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and those who have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.

1.--[*Verily, verily I say.*] Here, as in other places, these words are the preface to a saying of more than ordinary solemnity and importance.

[*He who hears my word.*] The "hearing" here is much more than mere listening, or hearing with the ears. It means hearing with the heart, hearing with faith, hearing accompanied by obedient discipleship. He that so hears the doctrine, teaching, or "word" of Christ, has life. It is such hearing as that of true sheep: "My sheep hear my voice" (John x.27); or as that spoken of by St. Paul: "Ye have not so learned Christ; if so be that ye have heard Him and have been taught by Him." (Eph. iv.21.)

[*Believes on Him who sent Me.*] This must not be supposed to mean that a vague faith in God, such as the Deist professes to have, is the way to everlasting life. The belief spoken of is a believing on God in Christ--a believing on God as the God who sent Christ to save sinners--a believing on God as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has planned and provided redemption by the blood of His Son. He who so believes on God the Father is the same man who believes in God the Son. In this sense, the Father is just as much the object of saving faith as the Son. Thus we read, "It shall be imputed if we believe on Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead." (Rom. iv.24.) And again, "Who by Him do believe in God, who raised Him up from the dead and gave Him glory, that your faith and hope might be in God." (1 Pet. i.21.) He who rightly believes on Christ as his Savior, with the same faith believes in God as his reconciled Father. The Gospel that invites the sinner to believe in Jesus as his Redeemer and Advocate invites him at the same time to believe in the Father, who is "well pleased" with all who trust in His Son.

Henry remarks: "Christ's design is to bring us to God. (1 Pet. iii.18.) As God is the first original of all grace, so is He the ultimate object of all faith. Christ is our way, and God is our rest. We must believe on God as having sent Jesus Christ, and recommended Himself to our faith and love, by manifesting His glory in the face of Jesus Christ."

Lightfoot remarks: "He does most properly center the ultimate fixing and resting of belief in God the Father. For as from Him as from the fountain do flow all those things that are the object of faith--namely free grace, the gift of Christ, the way of redemption, the gracious promises--so unto Him as to that fountain does faith betake itself in its final resting and repose, namely, to God in Christ."

Chemnitius remarks that the expression "believe on Him who sent Me" shows "that true faith embraces the word of the Gospel, not as something thought out by Christ alone, but as something decreed in the secret counsel of the whole Trinity."

[*Has everlasting life.*] This means that he possesses a complete title to an everlasting life of glory hereafter and is reckoned pardoned, forgiven, justified, and an heir of heaven even now upon earth. His soul is delivered from the second death. The "presentness" of the expression should be carefully noticed. Everlasting life is the present possession of every true believer from the moment he believes. It is not a thing he shall have at last. He has it at once, even in this world. "All that believe are justified." "Being justified by faith, we have peace with God." (Acts xiii.39; Rom. v.1.)

[*Shall not come into condemnation.*] The Greek word for "come" is in the present tense, and it would be more literally rendered "does not come." The meaning is, there is no condemnation for him. His guilt is removed even now. He has nothing to fear in looking forward to the judgment of the last day. "There is therefore now no condemnation to them who are in Christ Jesus." "He that believes on Him is not condemned." (Rom. viii.1; John iii.18.)

I cannot see in these words any warrant for the notion held by some, that the saints of God shall not be judged at the last day in any way at all. The notion itself is so utterly contradictory to some plain texts of Scripture (2 Cor. v.10; Rom. xiv.10; Matt. xxv.31), that I cannot understand anyone holding it. But even in the text before us, it seems to me a violent straining of the words to apply them to the judgment-day. The thing our Lord is speaking of is the present privilege of a believer. The tense he uses, as Chemnitius bids us specially observe, is the present and not the future. And even supposing that the words do apply to the judgment-day, the utmost that can be fairly made of them is that a believer has no condemnation to fear at the last day. *Judged* according to his works he shall be. *Condemned* he may certainly feel assured he shall not be. From the day he believes, all his condemnation is taken away.

Ecolampadius remarks how irreconcilable this verse is with the Romish doctrine of purgatory.

[*But is passed from death to life.*] This means that a believer has passed from a state of spiritual death to a state of spiritual life. Before he believed, he was dead legally--dead as a guilty criminal condemned to die. In the day that he believed, he received a free and full pardon. His sentence was reversed and put away. Instead of being legally dead, he became legally alive. But this is not all. His heart, which was dead in

sins, is now renewed and alive unto God. There is a change in his character as well as in his position toward God. Like the prodigal son, he "was dead and is alive." (Luke xv.24.)

We should mark carefully the strong language of Scripture in describing the immense difference between the position of a man who believes and the man who does not believe. It is nothing else than the difference between life and death--between being dead and being alive. Whatever some may think fit to say about the privileges of baptism, we must never shrink from maintaining that so long as men do not hear Christ's voice and believe, so long are they dead--whether baptized or not--and have no life in them. Faith, not baptism, is the turning point. He that has not yet believed is dead and must be born again. When he believes, and not till then, he will pass from death to life.

Ferus remarks: "Although it seems very easy to believe, and many think they do believe when they have only heard the name of believing (supposing that to believe is the same as to understand, to remember, to know, to think), yet this believing is in truth a hard and difficult thing. It is easy to fast, to say prayers, to go on pilgrimage, to give alms and the like; but to believe is a thing impossible to our strength. Let superstitious people learn that God requires of us a far higher and more difficult kind of worship than they imagine. Let pious people learn to seek faith more than anything, saying, Lord, increase our faith."

25.--[*Verily, verily, I say to you.*] This emphatic preface here begins a prophecy of the wonderful things that should yet be done by the Son of God. Did the Jews of Jerusalem desire to know what proofs of Divine power and authority the Son of God would give? Let them hear what He would do.

[*The hour is coming and now is.*] This meant that a time was coming, and in fact had already begun.

[*The dead shall hear His voice and live.*] It is thought by some that these words apply to the literal raising again of dead persons, such as Lazarus at Bethany. I cannot think it. I believe that the "dead" here spoken of are the spiritually dead. I believe that the "hearing the voice of the Son of God" means the hearing of faith. I believe that the "living" spoken of means the rising out of the death of sin to spiritual newness of life. And I believe that the whole verse is a prediction of the many conversions of dead sinners that were to take place soon, and had begun in some measure to take place already. The prediction was fulfilled when dead souls were converted during our Lord's own ministry, and was much more fulfilled after the day of Pentecost when He was preached by His apostles to the Gentiles and "believed on in the world." (1 Tim. iii.16.)

To confine the words to the few cases of miraculous raising of dead bodies which took place in the time of our Lord and His apostles appears to supply a very inadequate interpretation, and to be rendered unnecessary by the succeeding verse.

Let it be noted that it is only those who "hear" or "have heard" with faith the voice of Christ that live. Spiritual life turns on believing. "Ye

also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth." (Eph. i.13.)

Ferus and Cocceius think that the calling and conversion of the Gentiles was the principal thought in our Lord's mind when He spoke these words.

26.--[*For as the Father, etc.*] The first part of this verse needs no explanation. It is an admitted principle that God is the Author and Source of all life. He "has life in Himself." When it says further that "He has given to the Son to have life in Himself," we must not suppose it means that He has bestowed it on His Son in the same way that He gives gifts to mere men, such as prophets and apostles. It rather means that in His everlasting counsels concerning man's redemption, He has appointed that the second Person of the Trinity, His beloved Son, should be the Dispenser and Giver of life to all mankind. "God has given to us eternal life, and this life is in His Son." (1 John v.11.)

Both here and in the following verse we must remember that "giving" does not imply any inferiority in the Son to the Father, so far as concerns His Divine essence. The things "given" to the Son were things solemnly appointed, deputed, and laid upon Him when He assumed the office of Mediator, in virtue of His office.

Burton remarks: "Both the Father and the Son have the same life; both have it in themselves; both in the same degree; as the one so the other; but only with this difference--the Father from all eternity *gives* it, the Son from all eternity *receives* it."

27.--[*And has given Him authority, etc.*] This means that in virtue of His mediatorial office, the Second Person of the Trinity is specially appointed to be the Judge of all mankind. In the counsels of God concerning man, "judgment" is assigned to the Son and not to the Father or the Holy Spirit. It is undoubtedly true that God is "the Judge of all." (Heb. xii.23.) But it is also true that it is God the Son who will execute judgment and sit on the throne at the last day.

[*Because He is the Son of man.*] These words seem to imply that there is a connection between our Lord's incarnation and His filling the office of the Judge. It is because He humbled Himself to take our nature on Him and be born of the Virgin Mary that He will at length be exalted to execute judgment at the last day. It appears to be the same thought that St. Paul expresses when he tells the Philippians that *because* of Christ's humiliation, "God has highly exalted Him and given Him a name which is above every name," etc. (Phil.ii.9.)

Burton remarks: "Because of His alliance with man's nature, because of His sense of man's infirmities, because of all He did and suffered for man's sake as the Son of man, the Son is that Person of the Trinity who is most fit, as well as most worthy, to be man's judge."

The expression, "The Son of man," would be rendered more literally "a Son of man" or "Son of man." Campbell remarks that the absence of the article "the" before the words "Son of man," occurs nowhere in the Gospels except in this passage.

Both in this and the preceding verse, we should observe an example of the great truth that "order is heaven's first law." Even the Second Person in the Trinity, one with the Father, very and eternal God, does not *take on Himself* the office of giving life and executing judgment, but receives it through the solemn appointment of God the Father. Just as it is written, "Christ glorified not Himself to be made a high priest, but He that said to Him, "Thou art my Son" (Heb. v.5), so we find it written here that in taking on Him the office of Mediator, it was "*given*" to Him to have life in Himself and "*authority given* to Him" to judge. Those who take on themselves offices without either divine or human commission are very unlike our Lord.

Toletus quotes a remarkable passage from Athanasius in which he points out that such expressions as "*given* to the Son by the Father," "*received* by the Son from the Father," are purposely used in order to prevent the Sabellian heresy of supposing that the Father and the Son are one and the same Person. Such expressions are an unanswerable proof that the Father and the Son are two distinct Persons, though one God. We must never forget the words of the Athanasian creed: "Neither confounding the Persons nor dividing the substance."

28,29.--[*Do not marvel.*] These words imply that the hearers of our Lord were astonished at the things He had spoken concerning His Divine commission to give life and to judge. He proceeds to tell them that they have not yet heard all. If they wondered at what they had already heard, what would they think when He told them one thing more?

[*The hour is coming.*] This means the last day. To use the present tense of a time so distant as this, is characteristic of one who is very God, to whom time past, time present, and time to come are all alike, and a thousand years are as one day.

[*All who are in the graves...voice...forth...damnation, etc.*] These words are singularly like those in Daniel xii.2. They contain one of the most distinct statements in Scripture of that great truth--the resurrection of the dead. It shall be universal and not confined to a few only. "All" in the graves shall come forth, whether old or young, rich or poor. It shall take place at Christ's command and bidding. His "voice" shall be the call that shall summon the dead from their graves. There shall be a distinction of those who rise again into two classes. Some shall rise to glory and happiness--to what is called a "resurrection of life." Some shall rise to be lost and ruined forever--to what is called a "resurrection of damnation." The doings of men shall be the test by which their final state shall be decided. "Life" shall be the portion of those that have "done good," and "damnation" of those that "have done evil" in the resurrection day.

(a) This passage condemns those who fancy that this world is all, and that this life ends everything, and that the grave is the conclusion. They are awfully mistaken. There is a resurrection and a life to come.

(b) This passage condemns those who try to persuade us in the present day

that there is no future punishment, no hell, no condemnation for the wicked in the world to come--that the love of God is lower than hell--that God is too merciful and compassionate to punish anyone. There is a "resurrection," we are told, "of damnation."

(c) This passage condemns those who try to make out that resurrection is the peculiar privilege of believers and saints, and that the wicked will be punished by complete annihilation. Both here and in Acts xxiv. 15, we are distinctly told that both bad and good shall rise again. In St. Paul's famous chapter about the resurrection (1 Cor. xv.), the resurrection of believers only is treated of.

(d) This passage condemns those who try to make out that men's lives and conduct are of little importance so long as they profess to have faith and to believe in Christ. Christ himself tells us expressly that the "doings" of men, whether good or evil, will be the evidence that shall decide whether they rise again to glory or condemnation.

Musculus remarks that the goodness which God requires of us is not such as only begins in the next world, after the resurrection. We must have it now, and it must precede the time of judgment. It is not said, "some shall rise again that they may be made good and partakers of life," but, "they that *have done* good shall come forth to a resurrection of life." We should take care to be such in this life as we desire to be found in the day of judgment. He also remarks that our Lord does not say, "those who have known or talked about what is good," but "those who have actually *done* good," shall come forth to a resurrection of life. Those only will be found to have "done good" who are God's elect--born again and true believers. Nothing but true faith will bear the fruit of good works.

Calvin remarks that our Lord is not here speaking of the cause of salvation, but of the marks of the saved, and that one great mark which distinguishes the elect from the reprobate is good doing.

There are two different Greek words used to express the English words "they that have done," and it is difficult to say why. Precisely the same difference exists in John iii.20,21. The attempts made to explain the distinction between the two words do not appear to me very successful. For instance, Wordsworth remarks: "Good made and done has permanence forever; evil is practiced but produces no fruit for eternity." Yet I doubt whether this remark will apply to Rom. i.32, and ii.3, where both the two Greek words for "doing" are used together and applied to the same class of persons, viz., the wicked.

It is thought by some that this passage supports the doctrine of the first resurrection as the peculiar privilege of the saints. (Rev. xx.5.) But it must in fairness be remembered that there is nothing said here about distinction of time in the resurrection of the good and bad.

As to the manner in which Christ's "voice" will be heard by the dead "in the graves," we are told nothing. It is remarkable that there are two other places beside this in which a "voice" or sound is mentioned as accompanying the resurrection. In Corinthians we read of the "last

trumpet." (1 Cor. xv.52.) In Thessalonians we are told of "a shout," of the "voice of the archangel," and the "trump of God." (1 Thess. iv.16.) Nothing, however, but conjecture can be brought forward about the subject. No doubt the latent thought is that the dead bodies of men are sleeping and need to be awakened, as sleepers are roused by a voice.

As to the nature of risen bodies, we are told nothing. Enough for us to know that this passage clearly shows it will be a resurrection of "bodies" as well as souls. It is those who are "in the graves" who shall come forth.