

CHAPTER III

CONVICTION BY THE SPIRIT

EVERY soul-winner becomes aware, sooner or later, of the fact that the vast company of unsaved people do not realize the seriousness of their lost estate; nor do they become alarmed even when the most direct warning and appeal is given to them. They may be normally intelligent and keen to comprehend any opportunity for personal advancement in material or intellectual things; yet there is over them a spell of indifference and neglect toward the things that would secure for them any right relation to God. All the offers of grace with the present and future blessedness of the redeemed are listened to by these people without a reasonable response. They are, perhaps, sympathetic, warm-hearted and kind; they are full of tenderness toward all human suffering and need: but their sinfulness before God and their imperative need of a Saviour are strangely disregarded. They lie down to sleep without fear and awaken to a life that is free from thought or obligation toward God. The faithful minister soon learns, to his sorrow, that his most careful presentation of truth and earnest appeal produces no effect upon them, and the question naturally

arises: "How, then, can these people be reached with the Gospel?"

The answer to that question lies in a right understanding of the cause of their indifference, and in an adjustment of methods in work so that there may be co-operation with the Spirit in following the divine program in soul-winning.

One of the greatest foes to modern evangelism, which has been treated far too lightly, is described in the following passage: "And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled in them that are perishing: in whom the God of this age hath blinded the thoughts of the unbelieving, that the illumination of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should not dawn upon them" (2 Cor. iv. 3, 4, R.V. with margin).

This passage scarcely needs comment beyond a slight reference to the exact meaning of the word "gospel" as that word is here used.

That body of truth which Paul received as a special revelation (Gal. i. 12), and afterwards called "my gospel," "the gospel of Christ" and "the gospel of God" (Rom. ii. 16; Phil. i. 27; I Thes. ii. 2), is a far more limited theme than the life story of Jesus, as recorded in the Four Gospels of the New Testament. It is rather the exact grounds of salvation by the cross of Christ and through the grace of God. It is the whole revelation of the divine propitiation for sin. While this Gospel had a larger mission than the Jew could anticipate, in that it was to be a new revelation from God, and was to be extended to the Gentiles

also, it is the divine offer of all of God's provisions for man's salvation in this age; and by it life and immortality were brought to light (2 Tim. i. 10). It is simply the offer of redemption and the statement of those conditions under grace, by which a soul may "turn from darkness unto light and from the power of Satan unto God" (Acts xxvi. 18); and being the point of deliverance "from the power of Satan unto God," it is veiled by Satan and is opposed to all Satanic wisdom and strength. Satan's doctrine (I Tim. iv. 1, 2; Rev. ii. 24; cf. I Cor. ii. 10-12) has always been one of moral perfection secured by self-effort or personal works (Isa. xiv. 14; Gen. iii. 4, 5). His program of self-fitting, resulting only in self-glory, is in complete contrast to the true principle of saving faith, through which one depends on God alone for all needed transformation (Rom. viii. 29; I John iii. 2).

True to this revealed fact of Satanic blindness, we find unregenerate men unable to conceive of any relation to God other than that based on the merit of their own self-made character (John iii. 1-8; I Cor. ii. 1-16). They do not comprehend that "Christ has become the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth," and that it is only Satanic blindness which leads them to "go about to establish their own righteousness;" rather than to come under the bestowed righteousness of God (Rom. iii. 21, 22; iv. 1-6; x. 3, 4; Phil. iii. 8, 9; 1 Cor. i. 30; 2 Cor. v. 21).

Saving faith may thus be defined as a voluntary turning from all hope and grounds based on self-

merit, and assuming an attitude of expectancy toward God, trusting Him to do a perfect saving work based only on the merit of Christ. Such an attitude of anticipation toward God alone is reasonable in the light of the fact that salvation is a divine creative act, and therefore, humanly impossible. But the reasonableness of the case is of no force to one whose reason is blinded at this vital point. It is this solemn fact that evangelism must face. A divine illumination is demanded. No human power or argument is sufficient to enlighten a darkened soul concerning the necessary steps into the way of life. This is a part of the work assigned alone to the all-sufficient Spirit.

It is clear from the Scriptures that the Gospel of the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ is the only possible ground of salvation and escape from "the power of Satan unto God." It is therefore suggestive that Satan is imposing his blindness upon the unregenerate mind only at this one point. The demons in the days of Christ's earthly ministry bore faithful testimony to His deity as the Son of God; just so, Satan is now directly witnessing to the value of the only offers of salvation by thus centralizing all his blinding power upon the way of the cross.

In addition to the exercise of his own power in directly blinding the unsaved as to the value of the cross, Satan is increasingly active, through his ministers, in attempting to exclude this central truth from the Christian faith. To do this he is now, as

predicted, forcing great counterfeit religious systems and restatements of doctrine upon the world. It is also suggestive that in all these the only revealed basis of salvation is carefully omitted.

The blinding or veiling of the mind, mentioned in 2 Cor. iv. 3, 4, causes a universal incapacity to comprehend the way of salvation, and is imposed upon unregenerate man by the arch enemy of God in his attempts to hinder the purpose of God in redemption. It is a condition of mind against which man can have no power. Yet God has provided a means whereby this Satanic veil may be lifted, the eyes opened (Acts xxvi. 18), the eyes of the heart enlightened (Eph. i. 18, r.v.), and the soul come into the illumination of the Gospel of the glory of Christ. Then, after this "opening of the eyes" is accomplished, the way of life, which is the Gospel, will seem to the enlightened person to be both desirable and of transcendent import. This great work is accomplished by divine energy, and is one of the mightiest movements of the "power of God unto salvation." It is spoken of in the Scriptures as the drawing of God and the convicting of the Spirit: "No man can come unto me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him" (John vi. 44). "And when he [the Spirit] is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment" (John xvi. 8).

This individual and particular drawing and re-proving should be distinguished from the universal drawing and illuminating of all men that is mentioned in other passages: "And I, if I be lifted

up from the earth, will draw all men unto me" (John xii. 32), and "That was the true Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world" (or, "That was the true Light which coming into the world, shineth for every man")—John i. 9. The former passages refer to a special divine work to be accomplished in each individual, and they present the only sufficient means by which a Satan-ruled soul (Eph. ii. 2) may be inclined unto God, and by which, Satan-blinded eyes may receive a new vision of the Gospel of Grace.

This divine unveiling of the individual mind and heart to the Gospel is spoken of at length in Heb. vi. 4-9. While this passage is Jewish in its character, it is an important statement of a phase of the truth under present consideration. The passage is as follows: "For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame. For the earth which drinketh in the rain that cometh oft upon it, and bringeth forth herbs meet for them by whom it is dressed, receiveth blessing from God: but that which beareth thorns and briers is rejected, and is nigh unto cursing; whose end is to be burned. But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation, though we thus speak."

It would seem impossible that so much could be accomplished in any person as is here described, and yet that person remain unsaved, were it not for the phase of truth which is under consideration; for the passage states that those described have been "once enlightened," "have tasted of the heavenly gift," and have been made "partakers of the Holy Ghost." They have "tasted the good word of God" and the "powers of the world to come"; yet this is all true of unregenerate persons who have been "drawn" and "convicted" by divine power in preparation for salvation.

When the passage has been interpreted as being a description of regenerate people, it has been used as a proof text to substantiate that unscriptural and God-dishonoring theory that a saved person can "fall away" and find it impossible to renew his repentance. That the passage does not describe a true child of God is evident, for the description is wholly inadequate of a Christian. All that is said is, in a sense, true of a believer; but very much more is true of him also. The believer has received, not "tasted," the heavenly gift; he has been "sealed by the Holy Spirit," which is more than to have "partaken" of the Spirit in conviction or illumination. The "tasting of the Word of God" is a poor substitute for the believer's "washing of regeneration by the Word"; and "tasting" of the powers of the world to come is incomparable with the power of God in salvation.

But again, it is clearly stated in the closing verse of this passage that this is not a description of the

“better things” that “accompany salvation.” It is therefore a description of the condition into which a soul is brought when divinely prepared for an intelligent choice of Christ as Saviour. This condition is, to some extent, a sphere of probation (which is never the relation of a true believer to God); for, as the life-giving rain waters the earth and causes it to yield herbs or thorns, so the soul that has been thus favoured with the vision of life and salvation in preparation for yielding to the saving power of Christ, may “bear thorns and briars” by continually resisting the vision, and finally “fall away” and find no place for repentance; seeing he crucifies to himself the Son of God afresh and puts Him to an open shame. While he is rejecting God’s best gift and his only hope, there remains no more “a place of repentance.” “If therefore, the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness.”

The importance of this truth will warrant a reference to three other brief passages. In each of these this divine drawing, or calling, may be seen in its true place and order among the other aspects of “the power of God unto salvation.” In these passages, this phase of truth is mentioned by the words, “to open their eyes,” “called me by His grace,” and “called.” The passage reads:

“To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me” (Acts xxvi. 18). “But

when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace, to reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood" (Gal. i. 15, 16). "Moreover, whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified; and whom he justified, them he also glorified" (Rom. viii. 30).

Other passages which emphasize the necessary illumination of the Spirit should also be quoted: "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, And they shall be all taught of God. Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me" (John vi. 44, 45). "Wherefore I give you to understand, that no man speaking by the Spirit of God calleth Jesus accursed: and that no man can say that Jesus is Lord, but by the Holy Ghost" (I Cor. xii. 3). "He saith unto them: But whom say ye that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven" (Matt. xvi. 15-17).

This special aspect of the divine work, which has been seen in these passages already quoted, is more particularly dwelt upon in John xvi. 8-11. The whole context of this passage (xvi. 8-15) an-

nounces, in addition to the three-fold work of the Spirit for the unsaved, or "world," a special instructive and illuminative work of the Spirit for the saved, here addressed as "you." As these two classes were distinguished in connection with a previously quoted Scripture, their difference should be noted here also. In this connection it will be seen that the saved are to be led into "all truth"; while the unsaved are to be instructed along but one particular line. To the saved the "all things" of Christ and of God are to be shown; while the unsaved are to see only that which first concerns them, which is the way of life in Christ Jesus. This passage referring to the work of the Spirit for the unsaved is as follows: "Nevertheless I tell you the truth; it is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you. And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin, because they believe not on me; of righteousness, because I go to my Father, and ye see me no more; of judgment, because the prince of this world is judged." (John xvi. 7-11).

In considering this passage it may first be noted that the word "reprove" (R.V. "convict") is not limited, as is often supposed, to the first word "sin," but applies to the words "righteousness" and "judgment" as well. This suggests a much larger meaning to the word than an acute mental agony for sin, though that might follow. The

word "reprove," as here used, suggests a process of illumination concerning three distinct facts, rather than the creation of a feeling of remorse for sins that have been committed. There is no warrant for assuming that this three-fold divinely wrought vision is divisible, or in any way subject to a partial fulfilment. It would, therefore, be unreasonable to limit our thought of this ministry of the Spirit to any one aspect of this work.

A careful study of, in all, about sixteen passages where the Greek word translated "reprove" is used will reveal that it is usually descriptive of a condition of mind resulting from the impartation of truth, and that this convicting work of the Spirit for the world is identical with the enlightenment by the Spirit already considered.

At this point much depends upon an adequate understanding of the whole scope of the action of the Spirit as suggested by the three words, "sin," "righteousness" and "judgment."

OF SIN, "because they believe not on me." "Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John iii. 3). "But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (I Cor. ii. 14).

It is just this incapacity and blindness of the unregenerate mind which is stated in these passages that demands the illuminating work of the Spirit in "convincing of sin." It is evident from

the words "because they believe not on me" that they do not comprehend the way of life in Christ Jesus, nor has the light of the glorious Gospel of Christ dawned on them. The only sin to be revealed, according to this passage, is the sin of personally rejecting Christ (see also John iii. 18). The reason that there is but one sin is obvious. Christ has perfectly borne the condemnation of the individual's sins, hence God in no wise lays them back again upon the sinner; but rather holds him responsible for not believing the record of the atoning death of His Son (I John v. 10-12). Hence it is clear that present condemnation cannot result from the sins which God reckons to be covered by the blood of His Son. The issue is plainly the rejection of the Son Who bore the sins. The fact that the blinded sinner must comprehend that his sins have been borne for him by Christ, and that he has the one responsibility of receiving that Saviour and his saving work, however, demands a further illumination by the Spirit.

The Gospel demands a special revelation for its understanding; since it announces to all humanity a perfect freedom from the penalty of sin, and also presents the corresponding fact that there can be but one reason for condemnation; and that, the rejection of the Saviour, Who bore the sin. Man's relation to God on the question of sin, in the light of the cross, is so unnatural to the unregenerate mind, and is so much the object of Satanic blinding that there can be no understanding of this truth

apart from a direct and personal illumination by the Spirit.

The work of the Spirit, it will thus be seen, is to reveal the cure of sin as already accomplished, and to warn against the only remaining possible condemnation that must follow the rejection of the cross. Though the unsaved, "natural man," may be educated, gentle, refined, or gifted, he has no vision of salvation, and thus it is obvious that there can be no adequate conception of the one condemning sin of rejecting Christ as Saviour, until the Christ and His saving work as sin-bearer are made real. This the Spirit accomplishes by convincing of righteousness and judgment; for both the conviction of righteousness and of judgment are but revelations of the Christ and His salvation.

OF RIGHTEOUSNESS, "because I go to my Father and ye see me no more." "But ye denied the Holy One and the Just, and desired a murderer to be granted unto you; and killed the Prince of life, whom God hath raised from the dead; whereof we are witnesses" (Acts iii. 14, 15). "Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification" (Rom. iv. 25).

In the vision of the Righteous One Who died upon the cross it will be revealed to the unsaved by the Spirit that "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself," and that He, the Righteous One, bore the curse of the sinner's unrighteousness "in his own body on the tree." That it was the

Righteous One Who died is for ever assured by His resurrection and present place in glory. This is the all-important vision; for the Righteous One upon the cross is the sinner's only point of contact with the saving power of God. In like manner, also, as the ground work of salvation is revealed by the convicting work of the Spirit to be the death of the Righteous One, so the enjoyment of all present blessing in fellowship and security must depend upon as direct and personal a revelation by the Spirit of the present living Christ.

The problem of all human destiny is the attainment unto the righteousness of God; for without that perfection man can never hope to stand in the presence of God (Heb. xii. 10, 14). Christ was *made* sin for us, He Who knew no sin, that we might be *made* righteousness of God in Him. He, the Righteous One, bore our sins in His death, and thereby satisfied all the demands of the Father. The Christ in the flesh lived and fulfilled every requirement of God's law, and offered Himself a perfect sacrifice for imperfect humanity. In Him Who became visible, died, rose, ascended and is now invisible, but still the living Lord, "God blessed forever," the sinner is *made* "accepted in the beloved," and stands in the righteousness of God. This position of being clothed in the righteousness of God through the merit and Person of the living Christ must be recognized as wholly due to the fact that He was really *made* to be sin for us.

Hence, in convincing of righteousness, the vision is created in the unregenerate mind of the