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WORDS *of* WARNING

FOR THOSE WAVERING BETWEEN
BELIEF AND UNBELIEF



CHARLES H. SPURGEON

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Words of Warning – Charles H. Spurgeon

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Chapter 1

The Great World Prison and the Liberator

When I was preaching in Dover, England, the mayor of the town let us rent the old town hall for our service. As I was walking by the building, I noticed a large number of windows on the lower level with metal bars on them. These windows belonged to the prison cells where the prisoners were confined. It struck me as an unusual combination, that we would be preaching the gospel of liberty on one level of the building while there were prisoners of the law beneath us.

Perhaps the prisoners heard us when we sang praises to God, but the words of freedom above did not give them liberty, nor did the words of the song free them from their bonds. What an accurate picture this is of many people. We preach liberty to captives and proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, but how many remain year after year in the bondage of Satan, slaves to sin? We send up our songs of praise joyously to our Father

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who is in heaven, but our praises cannot give them joy because their hearts are not used to gratitude. Some are mourning because of unpardoned sin. Others are weeping because of their ruined hopes, because they have looked for comfort where it can never be found.

This little circumstance fixed itself in my mind and impressed itself upon me in my private meditations. I daydreamed that some angelic warden was leading me along the corridors of this great world prison. He asked me to look into the various cells where the prisoners were confined, and he kept reminding me, as I looked sorrowful, that it is God who sets the prisoners free. *He who does justice unto the oppressed; who gives bread to the hungry. The LORD looses the prisoners* (Psalm 146:7).

The first cell is called the common prison – the ward of sin. All people have been prisoners here. Those who today live in perfect liberty once wore the heavy chains and were confined within the dark walls. I entered the cell, and instead of hearing cries of mourning and lament, I heard loud and repeated bursts of laughter. The atmosphere was boisterous and noisy. The profane were cursing and blaspheming. Others shouted as though they had found a great treasure.

I looked into the faces of some of the criminals and saw much happiness. Their attitude was that of wedding guests rather than prisoners. Walking back and forth, I noticed prisoners who boasted that they were free. When I spoke to them of their prison and urged them to escape, they resented my advice, saying, “We were born free and were never in bondage to anyone.” *They answered him, We are Abraham’s seed, and we*

have never served anyone; how sayest thou, Ye shall be set free? (John 8:33).

They asked me to prove my words. When I pointed to the iron chains on their wrists, they laughed at me and said that the chains were ornaments that produced music as they moved. They said it was only my dull and depressing mind that made me talk of jangling shackles and jingling chains. There were men shackled hard and fast to foul and evil sins, and they called themselves free-livers, while others whose very thoughts were bound, because the iron had entered into their soul, cried out to me with proud looks that they were freethinkers.

I had never seen such prisoners before, nor any so securely bound as these. But one thing I noticed as I walked throughout this prison was that those most bound by chains and shackles thought themselves to be the most free, and those who were in the darkest part of the dungeon thought they had the most light. Those whom I considered to be the most wretched and the most to be pitied were the very ones who laughed the most and shouted most insanely and boisterously in their amusement.

I looked with sorrow, but then I saw a bright spirit touch a prisoner on the shoulder, who then withdrew with the shining one. He went out, and I knew that the prisoner had been loosed from the house of bondage, because I had read: *The LORD looses the prisoners*. As he

I noticed as I walked throughout this prison was that those most bound by chains and shackles thought themselves to be the most free.

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departed, though, his fellow prisoners laughed, pointed their fingers, and called him hypocrite, pretender, and all sorts of cruel names, until the prison walls rang and rang again with their merry contempt. I watched and saw the mysterious visitor touch another, and another, and then another, and they disappeared.

The common conversation in the prison was that they had gone crazy or that they had become slaves or miserable fanatics. But I knew that they had gone to be free forever, set free from every bond. What struck me most was that the prisoners who were touched with the finger of delivering love were often the worst of the whole crew. I saw one who had blasphemed, but the divine hand touched him, and he went weeping out of the gate. I saw another who had often ridiculed the loudest when he had seen others led away, but he went out as quietly as a lamb. I observed some whom I thought to be the least depraved of them all, but they were left behind, while many times the worst sinners of the whole group were taken first. Then I remembered that I had read these words: *The publicans and the harlots go ahead of you into the kingdom of God* (Matthew 21:31).

As I looked intently, I saw some of those men who had once been prisoners come back again into the prison, not in the same clothing which they had worn before, but clothed in white robes, looking like new creatures. They spoke with their fellow prisoners, and oh, how sweetly they spoke! They told them there was liberty available to them, that the door would open, and that they could go free. They pleaded with their

fellow men, even to the point of tears. I saw them sit down and talk with them until they wept upon their necks, urging them to escape, pleading as though it were their own life at stake.

At first, I hoped that the whole group of prisoners would rise and cry out, “Let us be free.” But no; the more these men pleaded, the harder the hearts of the others seemed to become. That is also how I found it when I myself attempted to be an ambassador to these slaves of sin.

I asked the guide where those were taken who were released from the common ward. He told me that they were taken away to be free – completely free – but before they were allowed to be released, it was necessary for them to visit a certain place of detention. He led me toward that place. It was called the *solitary cell*. I had heard a lot about the solitary system, and I desired to look inside that cell, supposing it would be a dreadful place. Over the door was written this word: *Penitence*.

When I opened the door, I found the room so clean, white, sweet, and full of light, that I thought the place was more fit to be a house of prayer than a prison. My guide told me that it was indeed originally intended to be so, and that nothing but that iron door of unbelief that the prisoners persisted in shutting securely made it a prison at all. Once that door was open, the place became a precious, small chapel, so those who were once prisoners within wanted to come back to the cell of their own accord. They begged to use it, not as a prison, but as a room for prayer for the rest of their lives. He even told me that one man who was dying

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said that his only regret in dying was that in heaven there would be no cell of remorse and sorrow. Here, David wrote seven of his sweetest Psalms, Peter wept bitterly, and the woman who was a sinner washed the feet of her Lord.

But this time, I was regarding it as a prison, and I perceived that the person in the cell also considered it a prison. I learned that every prisoner in this cell must be there alone. He had grown accustomed to mix with the crowd and to find comfort in the belief that he was a Christian because he had been born in a Christian nation; but he learned that he must be saved alone if he was to be saved at all. He had been used to going up to the house of God with others, and he thought that simply going there was enough. But now, every sermon seemed to be aimed at him, and every admonition stung his conscience. I remember to have read in the ancient book of the prophet Zechariah:

*And I will pour upon the house of David
and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem the
Spirit of grace and of prayer, and they shall
look upon me whom they have pierced, and
they shall mourn over him as one mourns
for his only son, afflicting themselves over
him as one afflicts himself over his first-
born. In that day there shall be a great
mourning in Jerusalem as the mourning of
Hadadrimmon in the valley of Megiddon.
And the land shall mourn, each family
apart; the family of the house of David*

apart, and their wives apart; the family of the house of Nathan apart, and their wives apart. (Zechariah 12:10-12)

I noticed that the repentant one, while alone and apart in his cell, often sighed and groaned, and now and then, mingled with his penitent utterances, came some words of unbelief. Truly, if it were not for these, that heavy door would have been removed from its hinges long ago. It was unbelief that shut the prisoners in, and if unbelief had been removed from this cell, it would have been an oratory for heaven instead of a place for downhearted mourning and lamentation.

It was unbelief that shut the prisoners in.

As the prisoner wept for his past, he prophesied for the future and groaned that he could never come out of this confinement, because sin had utterly ruined him and destroyed his soul eternally. It was clear that his fears were foolish, because as I looked around this clean, white cell, I saw that the door had a knocker inside, and that if the man had the courage to lift it, there was a shining one standing ready outside who would open the door at once. Yes, and even more, I perceived that there was a secret spring called *faith*, and if the man would just touch it, even though his finger might be trembling, it would make the door fly open.

Then I noticed that this door had the marks of blood on the top post and on the two side posts. Any man who looked on that blood, lifted that knocker, or touched that spring found the door of unbelief fly open, and he

came out of the cell of his solitary remorse to rejoice in the Lord who had wiped away his sin and cleansed him forever from all iniquity.

I spoke to this remorseful prisoner and asked him to trust in the blood. It may be that through my words, the Lord afterward set the prisoner free. I learned, though, that no words of mine alone could do it, because in this case, even where repentance was mingled with just a little unbelief, it is the Lord, and the Lord alone, who can set the prisoner free.

I passed that cell and stopped at another. This one also had an iron gate of unbelief, as heavy and as huge as the one before. I heard the warden coming. When he opened the door for me, it creaked horribly on its hinges and disturbed the silence. This time, I had come into the *silent cell*. The reprobate confined here was one who said he could not pray. If he could pray, he would be free. He was groaning, crying, sighing, and weeping because he could not pray. All he could tell me, as he rolled his eyes in agony, was this: "I want to, but I cannot pray. I want to plead with God, but I cannot find any words, because my guilt has made me mute." Back he went and refused to speak again, but he kept up his desolate groaning all day long.

In this place, no sound was heard except that of wailing. All was quiet except the dropping of his tears upon the cold stone, and his dreary cries for mercy in sighs and groans. There was a little table in this cell on which lay a key of promise. The key was inscribed with these fine words: *For he has looked down from the height of his sanctuary; from the heavens the LORD beheld the*

earth to hear the groaning of the prisoner; to loose those that are appointed to death (Psalm 102:19-20).

I thought that if this man cannot speak, God can still hear his groans. If he cannot plead, God listens to his sighs and sees him all the way from heaven, catching even the faintest whisper of this poor man's broken heart so that He might set him free. Even if the soul feels it can neither plead nor pray, it has still prayed, and it will prevail. I tried to catch the ear of my poor friend and talk to him for a little while, even though he would not speak. I reminded him that the Book in his cell contained instances of mute men whom Jesus had enabled to speak, and I told him that Christ was able to make him speak plainly, too.

I told the man that whether he could pray or not, he was commanded to look at the blood marks over his door. I reminded him that the publican was justified by the blood, even though he could only cry, *God, reconcile me, a sinner* (Luke 18:13). I pleaded with him to receive the Lord's own testimony, that the Lord Jesus *is able also to save to the uttermost those that come unto God by him* (Hebrews 7:25), that He was waiting to be gracious and was a God ready to pardon (Nehemiah 9:17). After all this, though, I felt that the Lord alone must set His prisoners free. Oh, gracious God, set them free now!

We moved quickly to a fourth door. The door opened and shut behind me as I stood alone. It was as dark as Egypt during the plague of darkness (Exodus 10:21-23)! This was the black hole called the *cell of ignorance*. I groped as a blind man gropes for the wall. The sounds

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of sobs and moans guided me to a spot where a man knelt in an earnest agony of prayer. I asked him what made his cell so dark. I knew the door was made of unbelief, which certainly shut out all light, but I wondered why this place was darker than the rest. Then I remembered reading about some who *sat in darkness and in the shadow of death, being bound in affliction and in irons* (Psalm 107:10).

I asked him if there were any windows in the cell. He said that he was told that there were many windows, but they had been sealed up years ago and he did not know how to open them. He was fully convinced that they could never provide him with light. I felt around for one of the old windows, but it seemed as if instead of giving light, it emitted darkness. I touched it with my hand, and it felt to me like it was a window just like others that had once given light and like those I have often looked through with delight.

He told me it was one of the doctrines of grace, called *election*, that had greatly perplexed him. The little light that fell upon the poor man led him to seek for more. Another darkened window was called *human depravity*. The man said, “Oh, there is no hope for me, because I am totally depraved. My nature is detestable and vile. There is no hope for me.”

I pulled the rags from this window and said to him, “Do you not see that your ruin prepares you for the remedy? It is because you are lost that Christ came to save you. Physicians are for the sick, robes for the naked, cleansing for the filthy, and forgiveness for the guilty.”

He said very little, but pointed to another window.

It was one I had looked through for a long time and through which I had seen my Master's glory. This was the doctrine of *particular redemption*.

"Ah!" he said. "Suppose Christ has not redeemed me with His precious blood! Suppose He never bought me with His death!"

I knocked out some old bricks that had been put in by an unskilled hand, yet still blocked out the light, and I told the man that Christ did not offer a counterfeit redemption, but one that really did redeem, because *the blood of Jesus Christ, his Son cleanses us from all sin* (1 John 1:7).

I continued on and came to another chamber. This room, marked number five, was large and had many people in it who were trying to walk back and forth. Every man had a chain around his ankle and a huge cannonball attached to it – a military punishment, they said, for deserters from the ranks of virtue. This encumbrance troubled the prisoners very much. I saw some of them trying to file their chains with rusty nails. Others endeavored to melt away the iron by dropping tears of remorse on it, but these poor men made little progress at their work. The warden told me that this was the chain of habit, and the ball that dragged behind was the old propensity to lust and sin.

The proper way to get rid of the chain of habit was, first of all, to get out of prison.

I asked him why they had not been able to get their chains knocked off. He said they had been trying a long time to get rid of them, but they could never do it the

way they were trying, since the proper way to get rid of the chain of habit was, first of all, to get out of prison. The door of unbelief must be opened, and they must trust in the one great Deliverer, the Lord Jesus, whose pierced hands could open all prison doors. After that, their bonds could be broken off upon the anvil of grace, with the hammer of love.

I saw a drunkard led out of his prison, rejoicing in pardoning grace. Prior to that time, he had tried to escape from his drunkenness, but three or four times he had broken his pledge and had gone back to his old sin. I saw that man trust in the precious blood, and he became a Christian. Once he became a Christian, he no longer loved to drink. With one stroke of the hammer, the ball was gone forever. Another man was a swearer who often took God's name in vain. He knew it was wrong to blaspheme the Most High, but he continued to do so until he gave his heart to Christ; then he never blasphemed again, because he hated that sin.

In almost all prisons where they do not want to make prisoners worse than when they entered, they have hard labor for them. In the prison I went to see, there was a *hard-labor room*. Those who entered it were mostly very proud people. They held their heads very high and would not bend. They were birds with fine feathers and thought themselves quite unfit to be confined, but being in dreadful captivity, they resolved to work their own way out. They believed in the system of human merit, and they hoped in due time to earn their freedom. They had saved up a few old counterfeit coins with which they thought they could set themselves free.

However, my bright attendant plainly declared their foolishness and mistake. It was amusing, yet sad, to see what different works these people were doing. Some of them toiled at the treadwheel. They said they were climbing to the stars, but there they were, treading with all their might; and even though they had been laboring for years and were not even an inch higher, they were still confident that they were climbing to the skies.

Others tried to make garments out of cobwebs. They turned wheels and spun at a great rate, and even though it came to nothing, they worked on. They believed they would be free as soon as they had made a perfect garment, and I believe they will.

In one place, a group of men labored to build houses of sand. When they had built up to some height, the foundations always failed, but they just started over. They dreamed that if they could build a large building, they would be allowed to go free. I saw some of them, strangely enough, attempting to make wedding garments out of fig leaves by sewing them together, but the fig leaves were of a type that shriveled every night, so that they had to start their hopeless toil all over again the next morning. Some, I noticed, were trying to pump water out of a dry well. The veins stood out upon their brows like whipcords while they worked with all their might, yet without result. As they labored like Samson when he was grinding at the mill, I could hear the crack of whips upon their backs.

I saw a ten-corded whip called the *Law* – the terrible Law – each cord being a commandment. This was laid upon the bare backs and consciences of the prisoners,

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