

Village Sermons on the Baptismal Service  
by John Keble

SERMON XIX.

November 18, 1849.

JEREMIAH vii. 23.

“This thing I commanded thee, saying, Obey My Voice, and I will be your God, and ye shall be My people.”

WE are now come to the last, and in some respects the most awful portion of the covenant we made in our Baptism. When the person to be baptized has said, I desire to be baptized in this faith, the priest asks, “Wilt thou then obediently keep God’s holy will and commandments?” As if he should say, “you cannot be baptized, unless you seriously engage yourself to be a true servant of God, doing His will from the heart, in all respects, as long as you live.” Now, this is a great, a wide, and a deep promise, and I have known people before now, who were afraid to make it in the child’s behalf; and when they were asked at the Font, have said instead of the two little words, “I will,” “I will endeavour myself so to do, the Lord being my helper,” or “That is my desire,” or some other like form of words. I do not blame such persons, if they do so in a reverent spirit, not as finding fault with the words which the Church puts into their mouth, but simply as expressing their deep sense, how weak and unworthy we all are through sin. I do not blame them; I do not wonder that at first they inclined to shrink from the promise, considering how great a promise it is, and how sadly, alas, it is broken and profaned to their knowledge. For it reaches through the whole of life, childhood, youth, middle age, old age—and it extends to every part of duty, to God, to our neighbour, and to ourselves, binding us both to do what ought to be done, and to leave undone what ought not to be done. And they see and know how many persons, having made this vow, live in open neglect and defiance of it, and (what is still sadder) their own hearts and consciences tell them how many things they have done, and still perhaps are doing from time to time, very contrary to this Christian obedience. For these reasons, some good sort of people, naturally enough, shrink from this solemn promise; saying, they know not how the child may turn out, and how can they engage that he will be good? But they need not so draw back, any more than, if they were grown-up heathens, they would draw back on the same account from receiving Holy Baptism themselves. You know that, if you were born and bred among the Pagans and unbelievers, and Christ had mercifully called you to the true Faith, you could not come to Him without making this profession. By the act of entering into His service and family, you do in reality promise to obey Him, whether you make the promise in words or no. For what is the sense, or use, or goodness of calling yourself the servant of such and such a Master, if you do not mean that you will do as he bids you, or owning yourself the child of such and such a Father, if you do not intend to be dutiful to Him? Therefore if you came to be baptized in your riper years, you would feel that you must not shrink from this engagement; you must intend, and, being called on by the Lord, you must promise to keep obediently God’s holy will and commandments, and to walk in the same all the days of your life. And as you would promise it for yourself if you were grown up, so you need not fear to promise it for the child, who cannot speak for itself.

The child is quite entirely bound by the promise, whether you make it for him in words or no, it is only speaking out a duty which would be put upon the child by the very act of Baptism (as indeed it is when a child is privately baptized) without a word being said about it.

If you ask the reason, why the child or person need not shrink from so large and serious an engagement, the reason is, the great help which is given in Baptism, and which is continued to every baptized person, until he has finally cast himself away. You know that I mean; the help of God's Holy Spirit. Suppose a child were asked, "Will you engage yourself to be at such a place to-morrow?" it being well known that the place was far too distant for the child to reach in the time by its own strength; still, if the child knew that he had a kind and strong father, on whom he might entirely depend, and who had promised to be with him, and carry him in his arms for the whole of the journey that he could not perform alone; there would be no presumption, nothing wrong, (would there?) in the child's promising and making the engagement. So it is with us in Holy Baptism. We have a great, a long, a dangerous journey before us, the journey from this sinful world to heaven. Of ourselves we have no strength to perform it; yet we are called upon to promise that we will perform it. Why are we not wrong in making that promise? Because our Father in Heaven has promised, for Christ's sake, to be with us by His good Spirit, and to help us along every step of the way; we being members of Christ, and not breaking off from His holy comfort and guidance. That gracious offer of His makes all the difference. It is no longer presumption nor boasting, but plain faith and duty, for every the simplest Christian to say in his heart, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me;"<sup>1</sup> without Him I can do nothing, but with Him all things are possible.

I say then, Let Christian people look their own condition boldly in the face. Let us all for once lay to heart this most serious, yet most certain truth, We are: Whether we will or no, we exist: we are in God's world, and we cannot resist His Will. We are; and in spite of what the Evil One may sometimes whisper to us, we very well know in our hearts, that we shall be for ever. What if a person, having the choice, were to refuse Baptism altogether, and to say, I had rather remain heathen and unregenerate; perhaps I shall have less to answer for? Would that do him any good? Would it save his soul, or abate his punishment? We cannot dream of such a thing; the imagination is too profane; although indeed, my Brethren, it is too fearfully like what many Christians say and do in respect of the other Holy Sacrament, that of the Body and Blood of Christ. They decline coming to God's Altar, in the thought, that perhaps they shall have less to answer for. I am sure they will find one day that they have made a great and inexcusable mistake: I only wish their conviction may come in good time. Yes indeed, I most sincerely wish that all my brethren and sisters who now hear me, and to whom God's Providence has in any way brought the knowledge of His holy Sacrament of Communion, would seriously consider in their hearts, that, having once heard of it, they cannot be as if He had never said anything to them about it. Put it fairly to your own consciences. Would it not be very wicked to refuse to offer your child to Baptism, in order that it might go on by and by with less guilt in sin and ungodliness? and is it not the same kind of profaneness to stay away from the Supper of the Lord, in order that you may yourself with less danger abide in wrong ways? Believe me, my friends, you cannot do so and be safe. You cannot put away from you the yoke and the burthen which your Creator has laid on your shoulders,

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<sup>1</sup> Philippians 4:13

the yoke and burthen of your duty to Him and to your neighbour. You may, by His grace, cause the yoke to become easy and the burthen light; but you cannot put it away from you. You cannot bury your talent, or hide it in a napkin, and hear no more of it; an account is sure to be demanded of you. You are fairly embarked on the great Ocean of Eternity; you cannot stop, you cannot draw back; on and on you must sail for ever and ever. A great prize is set before you, or a great and unspeakable loss: you have a soul to save or to lose, an immortal soul, and you cannot say, you had rather decline doing either: it is a hazard which *must* be run: your soul *must* be either saved or lost.

Make up your mind to this at once, I beseech you. One choice or other must be made. If you say, you had rather not choose yet, this is in reality, for the time choosing amiss, it is choosing Hell before Heaven. Hear what He says, Who cannot lie; He Who holds you in His Hand, both body and soul, and Who can do what He will with you; though He most mercifully wills only your good, He says, "Behold, I have set before you this day life and good and death and evil; therefore choose life."<sup>2</sup> Choose you must, one or the other; you cannot avoid *that*; therefore choose life. Choose life, my brethren, and lose no time in choosing it; for why should you pour out the best of your cup on the ground, and offer the dregs only to your God and Saviour? Why should you of set purpose affront Him by giving Him only a few of your latter years, the years of which it is said, "There is no pleasure in them;" whereas He counted nothing too much for Him to give up to you? Why should you wantonly throw away so much of this life's sweetness and comfort? For, depend on it, all the days and years that we put off turning to God, are so much sweetness and comfort thrown away. O believe this, now while you have time. Wait not to learn it by bitter experience. Fear not to devote yourself at once. Now, without waiting any longer, turn towards the bright and glorious Light which freely and graciously offers to shine in your hearts. You ought to have done so, on the very first ray which you perceived; your not having done so is your great loss, and may be your loss for ever. The good Angels, we may well believe, did so at once. On the first moment of their creation, they turned themselves in adoring love towards Him Who made them, and began that glorious exercise in which they now go on, and will go on to all Eternity. They began at their first Creation, and since then they have never rested, day nor night, saying, "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty, which was and is, and is to come." Is not theirs all perfect happiness? Is not the Lord infinitely gracious, Who allows your children, in their measure, the same happiness, by inviting them to meet Him at the Font at the beginning of their life? He invites them to turn to Him, He will not have them forbidden. You would think it cruel to keep them back, and you are right in thinking so. But how are you behaving to the same gracious goodness, no less freely offered to yourself? On you too that glorious Light has risen, and is even now waiting to shine into your heart, if you will let Him, if you will at once obediently give yourself up to the fulfilment of *all* His holy Commandments. How can you think you should lose anything by this? Is it not what the most affectionate parents have always most longed for in their children? Remember what Hannah did for Samuel, her only and dearly beloved Infant, when she was most earnestly bent on making him happy. She even parted with him herself, that he might appear before the Lord, and there abide for ever. Why should it be so very hard to get Christians to care for their own souls, as much as Hannah cared for Samuel?

If you say, "Samuel was a child, and so are those whom we see continually

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<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 30:19

devoted to Christ in Holy Baptism; they had not other things prepossessing their hearts; but I am of such and such an age, and my heart is unhappily full of other things; how can *I* devote myself to God?" If you feel such a scruple as that, I own it is a sad thought, but not a thought to make you despond. Again I remind you, "with God all things are possible." Remember the Baptism of Saul, who was afterwards called Paul. Whose heart was ever more full of thoughts contrary to Christ than his? Yet when the Light of Christ shone upon him, he turned at once towards It, saying, "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?"<sup>3</sup> And he never afterwards turned his back upon It; never again did he look towards the world, the flesh, and the devil. His vow helped him; and if you will, by the grace of God, your baptismal vow shall help you. When you are tempted, you will say in your heart, "I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot go back."<sup>4</sup> So will hard duties become easy, pleasant sins will become hateful, and the Light towards which you have turned will shine on you more and more until the perfect Day.

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<sup>3</sup> Acts 9:6

<sup>4</sup> Judges 11:35