

# THE FREE AGENCY OF CHRIST

*“And He came to Bethsaida; and they brought a blind man to Him, and begged Him to touch him. So He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the town. And when He had spit on his eyes and put His hands on him, He asked him if he saw anything. And he looked up and said, I see men as trees, walking. After that He put His hands again upon his eyes, and made him look up: and he was restored, and saw everyone clearly.”*

*Mark 8:22-25*

THERE is a very wonderful variety in the miracles of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the variety is apparent even in the way in which men come to Him to partake of His blessing. With regard to the blind men to whom our Lord gave sight, we read of some that they were brought to Christ by their friends, as in the case of this man at Bethsaida, who was almost passive all the way through. His friends appear to have had more faith than he had and, therefore, they brought him to Jesus. There were other cases in which the blind men cried to Christ and, as far as they could, came to Him of themselves. Some of them even came to Him in the teeth of stern opposition, for, when the disciples upbraided one of them for crying out so loudly, he cried out the more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me.” So that, you see, some were brought to Christ by their friends and others came to Him in spite of much opposition.

Then there is that notable case which many of you must remember, of that remarkable blind man who had been blind from his birth, to whom Jesus came uninvited. Jesus saw him and anointed his eyes with the clay which He had made, and then bade him go and wash in the pool of Siloam. “He went his way, therefore, and washed, and came seeing.” Thus, from the very commencement of our Savior’s earthly ministry, there were differences in the way in which one class of characters, the blind, came to Jesus Christ.

1. The lesson for us to learn from this undoubted fact is just this—that THERE ARE GREAT DIFFERENCES IN THE WAY IN WHICH MEN COME TO JESUS CHRIST—and differences even in their first desires. Some will begin to seek the Savior like merchantmen seeking goodly pearls and when they have found Him, He will be the Pearl of Great Price to them. Others will be like the plowman whose plow struck against a crock of gold—they will know Christ’s value as soon as they stumble upon Him, as it were, and will be ready to sell all that they have and buy the field so that the treasure may be theirs. Some of you who are here may get a blessing instantaneously, though you have not come especially seeking it. Others of you may have come here for months and years, seeking the Savior—and you may now find Him.

Some may begin to seek even while the sermon is progressing, but may not find Christ for a while—while others will no sooner seek Jesus than they will at once find Him. Some will be brought by the example of the godly. Some by the preaching of the minister. Some by a kind word from a friend. Many by parental exhortations. Some by a holy book. Some by no outward means at all. Some simply by their own thoughts in solitude, or at the dead of night—all led by the one gracious Spirit of God—but each one brought to Christ in a different way and by different means from all the rest.

I think that the same differences will be found, not only at the beginning of the Christian life, but also all the way through that life in all who are the subjects of Divine Grace. All Christians are like each other in some respects, but no one Christian is exactly like another in all points. There is, often, a great family likeness in the children in one family. Sometimes, you might go where there are 10 or twelve, and you might pick them all out and say, Yes, we are quite sure that they all belong to this family—there are certain distinctive features which evidently show that they belong to these parents.“ After you have noticed that resemblance, take the 10 or 12 children, one by one, and look at them individually. Perhaps, at first sight, you might say that you did not know one from the other, but those who see them day by day will tell you that there are distinct differences of countenance and contour about each one—and idiosyncrasies of character which distinguish them from one another—so that there is not one of them who is exactly like the rest.

Now, it would be a great pity if they should all begin to wish that they were exactly like someone in the family whom they set up as a model. It would be a right and proper ambition that every son should wish to be like a godly father, and that every daughter should seek to imitate a lovely and gracious mother, but that one girl would wish to be just like her sister, or a boy to be exactly like his brother would be absurd. Yet I have often seen that absurdity in the Church of God! One is depressed because his experience is not quite like his neighbor's. Another because he sees that there are points in his experience that are unlike anybody else's—and I have even known them go and try to remove their names from God's register and “unchristianize” themselves! And, what is worse, sometimes unchristianize one another because they are not all exactly run into the same mold—like so many shot, precisely alike in form and shape—as manufactured articles are when they come quickly from under the die! No, we fall into grievous error when we entertain this kind of idea! God's ways are diverse—from the beginning to the end, God the Father, God the Holy Spirit and our Lord Jesus Christ act sovereignly and do not choose to follow one particular mode of action in every case.

That lesson I wish to teach, first, in reference to our prayers. We must not attempt to dictate to God with regard to His answers to our prayers. Let us learn that lesson from the incident before us—“They brought a blind man to Him, and begged Him”—to open his eyes? No—that would have been a very proper prayer, but they, “begged Him to touch him.” But Christ did not do His work according to their request—“He took the blind man by the hand, and led him out of the town. And when He had spit on his eyes and put His hands on him, He asked him if he saw anything.” Now, with regard to our prayers, we may bring our children, friends and neighbors to Christ—and we may ask that they may be saved—but we must not dictate to Christ the methods by which salvation is to come to them, for it is very usual with Him not to follow those means which we would prescribe!

That plan of touching the sick person was a very common one with Christ and, therefore, the people began to expect that He must always heal by a touch. Naaman thought that the Prophet Elisha would come out to him, “and stand and call on the name of the Lord, his God, and strike his hand over the place and recover the leper.” But he was mistaken, as were those folk at Bethsaida. It was a sort of understanding among them that Christ's touch was the usual method by which His cures were worked, so they begged Him to touch their blind friend. But He would not give any support to that notion. If they thought that He worked His miracles by putting His hands upon the sick, then He would not put His hands upon them—He would let them see that He was not bound to any particular method. If He had allowed them to cherish such an idea, probably their next step in error would have been that they would have said that it was an enchantment, a kind of performance by certain passes and touches, as by a wizard or conjurer, through which Christ went in order to heal the sick.

Superstition can be very easily made to grow, and you and I, mark you, may think ourselves perfectly free from superstition, yet, all the while, it may only have taken some other form from that in which it appears in other people. For instance, if the Lord is pleased to bless a certain preacher to the conversion of souls, you may settle it in your mind that if you get your children to hear him, they will assuredly be saved. Yet it may not be the case, for the Lord has a thousand ways of saving souls and He is not tied to any one man as His agent or instrument. It may get to be a kind of superstitious notion that in some one person, alone, the power of converting others

may rest. Or it may be that you say to yourself, "I was converted by reading such-and-such a book. If I get my boy to read that book, it will convert him, too." Yet it may have no influence whatever upon him, for the Grace of God is not tied to any book, nor to any way of working that you choose to prescribe!

I would not wonder, my dear Friends, if some of you have tried to tie the Lord down to your way of working. For instance, in your class in the Sunday school, it was the reading of a certain chapter in the Bible that brought one of your scholars to Christ. So, in order to bring the rest of them to the Savior, you get them to read that chapter. That may be all right, for the Lord can bless it to them if He pleases, but, at the same time you must remember that He is a Sovereign and, therefore, He will probably use other means in other cases. You preached, dear Friend, in the street, or in a Chapel, and God blessed that sermon. So you have made up your mind that you will preach it a second time. I recommend you not to do so, for very likely it will hang fire if you do. If you begin to confide in the sermon, God will not bless it. I think it is often well to do with a good sermon as David did with Goliath's sword—he said that there was none like it, yet he did not keep it by him for constant use, but he laid it up before the Lord—then it was ready for the special occasion when it was required. When God has blessed any sermon that I have preached, I do not make it a rule to preach it again, lest I might be led to put my trust in that sermon, or to have some confidence in the way in which I set forth the Truth of God, rather than in the Truth itself—though I never hesitate to preach the same sermon again and again if I feel that the Spirit leads me to do so. We must not, in our prayers, tie the Lord down to any particular means, for He can use what means He pleases and He will do so, whatever we may say. We may ask Him to open the blind man's eyes, but it is not our place to beseech Him to touch the blind man in order to effect His cure!

Notice, also, that Christ did not answer the prayer of these people in the place where they presented it. They brought the blind man to Him and they evidently expected the Lord Jesus Christ to open his eyes there. But Jesus did not do so. "He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the town"—right away from the place where the people wanted to have the miracle performed! The Savior acted as though He could not do anything in the matter until He was out of town—and He would not speak a word to him till He got him quite away by himself. Well, now, it is very easy, in our prayers, to fix upon a certain place as the one where God will give His blessing, and to think, "The friend I am praying for must be converted in the Tabernacle, or must be converted in the little meeting that I hold in my house, or must be brought to Jesus Christ in the Church where I attend, or in the Chapel where I worship." But our Lord may, perhaps, never convert that young man in any of the places you have mentioned—He may meet with him behind the counter, or on board boat, or walking by the way, or on a sickbed. Do not be disappointed, therefore, when your place does not prove to be God's place! Take your friend to the House of God, for Christ's miracles on a Sabbath and in the synagogue are frequent—but do not try to tie Him down to the synagogue, for He must be left at liberty to work His miracles in His own way.

Neither, dear Friends, must we, for a moment, try to tie the Lord Jesus Christ down to work in our particular manner! I have no doubt that these people meant to prescribe to Christ that He should open that man's eyes directly. He had done so before and He was able to make the sightless one see in a single moment. And they, therefore, naturally expected that He would do it. But the Savior did not do so—He did not work an immediate, but a progressive cure. He opened the man's eyes a little and afterwards opened them more fully. This was a very extraordinary miracle—there is no other case like it in Scripture. All the other cures that Christ worked were immediate—but this one was progressive. So, my Brother, the Lord may hear and answer your prayer, but it may not be by a conversion in the way you expected. You thought that, all of a sudden, you would hear that your dear friend had been turned from darkness to the Light of God. You have not heard that, but you have heard that he begins to be more thoughtful than he used to be, and that he attends the means of Grace more regularly than he formerly did. Perhaps the Lord intends, in his case, to work salvation by degrees.

Do not go and run the risk of spoiling it by trying to run faster than God guides you! The daylight does not always come in a moment. I am told that in the tropics there is but slender notice of the rising of the sun—he seems to be up and shining in full glory in a few seconds! But here, in

England, you know how long a time of twilight and dawn we have before the sun has fully risen. No doubt there are conversions that are just like the tropical morning—in a moment the great deed of Grace is done! But there are many more conversions that are slow and gradual, yet they are none the less sure! The genial sun is up when he is up—even if he takes an hour in the operation of rising—quite as effectually as he is up when he seems to leap out of the sea into meridian splendor! So, if the Lord should see fit to bless your friend in a different manner from that which you had thought of, do not you quarrel with Him. Whatever He does is right—so let us never question any of His actions.

One other point, in which we must not dictate to God, is this. He may hear our prayer and grant our request, yet we may not know that it is so. I do not think that these people who brought the blind man to Christ ever saw him again after his eyes had been opened. Mark tells us that Christ “led him out of the town”—that is, away from his friends. And after He had healed him, “He sent him away to his house, saying, Neither go into the town, nor tell it to any in the town.” I suppose they found it out afterwards, but then and there, at any rate, they did not see the man’s eyes opened. If he did as Christ commanded him, he went straight away home and kept the matter quiet, so far, at least, as the general public and, perhaps, these friends of his were concerned.

Now, it is quite possible that God may hear your prayer for some dear friend in whom you are interested and yet you may never know of it till you get to Heaven. The Lord has promised to hear prayer, but He has not promised that you shall know that He has heard your prayer! A godly mother may be in Glory long before her supplications have been answered in the conversion of her son. A Sunday school teacher may go Home to be with Christ before the boys, over whom he has agonized, are brought to the Savior. Our farmers know that earthly harvests are sometimes late and it is the same in spiritual husbandry! Divine Grace ensures the crop, but even the Grace of God does not guarantee that the crop shall come up tomorrow, nor whenever we please. So, dear Friend, keep on sowing the good seed of the Kingdom of God, water it with your tears and your prayers, and then leave with God the question whether you shall see the harvest or not. He may, in your case, fulfill that gracious promise, “He that goes forth and weeps, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.” Or He may simply choose to make you the sower and another the reaper. It is for you to believe that your petitions shall be granted, even if you do not live to see them!

There have been many instances in which men’s prayers have prevailed, although they themselves have never lived to see that happy result. I think I have told you, before now, the story of a godly father whose unhappy lot it was to see his sons grow up without the fear of God in their hearts. This was a very heavy burden upon the good old man’s spirit. Day and night he wept and prayed about it before God. At last, the time came for him to die and he had not, then, one son who had found the Savior! It had been the old man’s prayer that his death might be the means of the conversion of his children if they were not brought to Christ in his lifetime—and so it was. Yet the scene at his death was very different from what he had hoped that it might be, for it was a very gloomy departure. His faith was grievously tried—he did not enjoy the Light of God’s Countenance—he was put to bed, as God often puts some of His best children to bed, in the dark. He died humbly trusting in Jesus, but not triumphing, not even rejoicing—he was in great pain of body and deep depression of spirit—and his last thought was, “This experience of mine will only confirm my sons in their infidelity. I have borne no witness for Christ as I had hoped to do. And now they will say that their father’s religion failed him at the last and so, my heart’s desire will not be granted to me.”

Yet it was granted, though he did not live to see it, for, after they had put him in the tomb and had come home from the funeral, the eldest son said to the others, “You noticed, brothers, what a struggle our father seemed to have on his dying bed and how hard it went with him. Now, we all know that he was a man of God. His conduct and example were such that we have no doubt about his being a true Christian, yet, if he found it so hard to die, what will it be for us when we come to the day of our death and have no God to help us, and no Christ to look to in the hour of our extremity?” It was remarkable that the same thought had struck all the good man’s sons—and they went to their own homes deeply impressed by their father’s gloomy death—to seek their father’s God and to find Him!

Could the old man have known what was best, he would have chosen just such a death in order that he might, thereby, be the means of bringing his children to Christ! In like manner, you may not be sure that you will see, here, the answer to all your prayers, but you will see it when you get up yonder—when God shall bid you fling up the celestial windows and you will look down and see the harvests which you never reaped, but for which you sowed the seed! You will see, springing up from the soil, the rich result of your labor, though you saw it not while here on earth—and your Heaven will be all the sweeter because, then, you will know that the Lord has heard and answered the prayers that you offered in your lifetime here below.

II. Secondly, I learn, from this narrative that WE MUST NOT ATTEMPT TO TELL THE LORD JESUS CHRIST HOW HE IS TO WORK, for He has various ways of working in the blessing of men.

For instances, when this blind man was brought to Him, He did not open his eyes with a word. Often, when the sick were brought to Him, He spoke and they were at once cured. He might have done so in this case. He might have said to the blind man's eyes, "Be opened!" The ancient fiat might have been repeated, "Light be!" and there would have been light in his darkness. But there came out of Christ's mouth—not a word—but spittle! Christ spat on the blind man's eyes. Ah, but if anything comes out of His mouth, it does not matter much what it is—whatever comes out of the mouth of the Christ of God means healing and life to those whom it reaches! He has His own ways of working. Usually, He is pleased to save men by the preaching of the Word and, sometimes, the great change is brought about through very feeble testimony. Yet, nevertheless, it is the Word of the Lord that is spoken, and it comes from the mouth of God, so He blesses it to the opening of blind men's eyes.

In this case, too, Christ did not work upon this man all at once. As I have already reminded you, He worked a gradual cure upon him. So, dear Friend, you must not dictate to Jesus Christ as to how you will be saved. I know that some of you do. One said to me, in my vestry, that she believed she had found Christ, but she was half-afraid it could not really be so. "Why not?" I asked. And she answered, "My old grandfather told me that it took him three years before he got peace and he was locked up in a lunatic asylum most of the time. I thought it was an awful affair altogether." I enquired where she could find anything in the Word of God to support that idea and then told her to simply believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and not to trouble about what her grandfather did. I have no doubt that he got to Heaven even through a lunatic asylum, but there are other and better ways of getting there!

Mr. Bunyan tells us that his pilgrim went through the Slough of Despond and did not pick the steps well, so he floundered, and it was with difficulty that he got to the other side. Mr. Bunyan pictures Evangelist as bidding the poor seeker fly towards a certain wicket gate and keep his eyes on the light within that gate. Now that was a mistake on the part of Evangelist—and it was through that mistake that the poor pilgrim got into the Slough of Despond. The Gospel does not tell you to look for wicket gates, nor to keep your eyes on any light! You remember how, at last, the poor pilgrim did get rid of his burden—it was at the Cross that the burden rolled from his shoulders and disappeared into the sepulcher so that he saw it no more! And, dear Friends, that is where your eyes have to be turned—to the Cross of Christ and to the full Atonement He has made for all who trust in Him! As for wicket gates and the Sloughs of Despond—the less you have to do with them, the better. "But is there no Slough of Despond?" someone asks. Oh, yes! Twenty of them, but it is far easier to go through that Slough with the burden off rather than on your shoulders! The best thing you can possibly do is to go to Christ, first, for then you can better go wherever you have to go. As for me, I would rather avoid the Slough of Despond altogether if I could—and keep my eyes always upon the Cross—for Christ Crucified is the one and only hope of sinners!

You must not, any of you, say, "Bunyan went through the Slough of Despond. According to his 'Grace Abounding,' he was there for years. And there is our Pastor, I have often heard him say that he was a long while in that Slough." Yes, I am sorry to say that he was, but that is no reason why you should go there. If, when I was a youth, I had heard the Gospel of Christ preached as plainly as I have preached it to you, I feel certain that I would never have been in the bog so long as I was. But I heard a mixed sort of Gospel, a mangle-mangle—a mixture of Law and Gospel—a muddling

up of Moses and Christ—something of “do” and something of “believe.” And, therefore, I was for so long a time in that sad state of bondage! In fact, the good sound doctrine people that I used to hear, said, “You must not come to Christ, for you do not know whether you are one of the elect—and you must not come until you do.” I know perfectly well that nobody can possibly tell whether he is elect, or not, till he finds it out by coming to God! And that no one ever comes to God the Father, who makes the election, except by Jesus Christ His Son! So we have first to do with the Son and afterwards with the Father. That I did not know when I was seeking the Savior. I needed an angel to tell me that I was one of the elect, but I was obliged to come to Christ as a poor, guilty sinner and just trust in Him, and so to find peace in believing. That is the plan that I recommend you adopt if you want to be saved!

Do not say, “I shall not come to Christ till I stick in the mud of the Slough of Despond. I shall not come to Him till I get laid by the heels in Giant Despair’s Castle! I shall not come to Him till I get whipped on the back with the tenthonged lash of the Law.” If you really want to have that lash, perhaps you will get it, and I hope you will like it—but the Gospel says, “Come and welcome! Come and welcome! Come to Jesus just as you are!” Never try to lay down rules and regulations for Christ, but let Him save you in His own way and be you content, just as you are, to take Him just as He is!

There is one more point about this man in which the singular Sovereignty of Christ is seen, and that is, He did not make use of the healed man, though we would have thought that He would have done so. If this miracle had been worked in the present day, we would soon have seen this man in the Salvation Army, or in some other public position. Nowadays, the rule seems to be send off a paragraph to the newspapers, “So many in the enquiry-room! So many converted on such-and-such a night! Blow the trumpets! Beat the drums! Let everybody know!” But that was not Jesus Christ’s way of working—He told this man not to go into the town. And when he did get home, not to tell anybody what had been done to him. Why was he not to tell anybody? Well, first, because the Lord wanted to do good and not to have a noise made about it. And, secondly, because there was no need to tell anybody. Suppose I had been for years a blind preacher and that my eyes had been opened—would there be any need for me to tell you, next Sunday, that my eyes were opened? You would see it for yourselves—everybody can see when a man’s eyes are opened. And, often, the best way in which a man can tell that he is converted is simply by letting other people see what a change there is in him because, if his eyes are not really open, it is of no use for him to stand up and say, “Bless the Lord! My eyes are open,” while he is still blind! I have heard people say that they were converted and I have thought that if the work were done over again, it would not hurt them much and that, indeed, six or seven such conversions would not amount to much! Oh, give us a conversion that speaks for itself! Give us a new heart that shows itself in a new life! If a man is not able to control his temper, or to speak the truth—if he is not a good servant, or a good master, or a good husband—do not let him think it necessary to proclaim what Christ has done for him, for, if he has done anything that was worth doing, it will speak for itself!

Now I must close by just noticing one fact about this man as to the early steps that Jesus Christ used with him. There is one point I want to dwell upon for a minute. Our Lord, before He did anything else with the blind man, took him by the hand and led him out of town. There are some of you here, perhaps, with whom the Lord has been thus working. You have begun to come to listen to the Gospel—through your wife, perhaps, or through some Christian friend. I am very hopeful concerning you, for, although you cannot yet see, the Lord has taken you by the hand. All the faith that this poor man had was a yielding faith—he gave himself up to be led—and that is a saving faith. My dear Friend, give yourself up to be led by Christ! If you have come under gracious, heavenly influences, yield yourself up to them!

The Master led this blind man right away from other people and it will be a good sign when you begin to feel that you are getting to be lonely. Sometimes, when the Lord means to save a man, He lays him aside by illness, or, if not, He takes him away from the company he used to keep by some other means. Or, if the man is allowed to go into the same company, he gets to dislike it. He does not feel at home with those who were once his companions—he goes in and out of the shop as if he were one by himself. He has the Lord’s arrow sticking in him and, like the wounded stag, he tries to get away to bleed alone. You feel, sometimes, as though nobody understood you. You read in

the Book of Job, or the Lamentations of Jeremiah and you say, "This is the kind of experience that I am passing through. I have a broken heart and a troubled conscience, and I feel that I am all alone."

Well, dear Friend, that is the Lord Jesus Christ leading you out of town, getting you away from everybody. And, mark you, the place of mercy is the place where a man stands alone—away from everybody except his Lord. Do not draw your hand back from the hand that is leading you away! Perhaps ungodly company has been your ruin and it is through solitude that God intends to save you. Be much alone. Think over your own case. Make a personal confession of sin. Seek for personal faith in a personal Savior. You were born alone—you will have to pass through the gates of death alone. Although you will stand in a crowd to be judged, yet you will be judged as a separate individual—and even though myriads perish with you, your loss will be your own if you are lost!

Therefore, look into your own affairs. Cast up your own account and, before the living God, stand separate from all your fellow men! I believe that if any of you have reached that point, you are where the deed of Grace shall be done. May the Lord enable you to yield yourself up completely to Him, for your safety lies there! We rightly put faith before you as a look, but now I will put it before you, if you have not even an eye to look with, as the yielding up of yourself to the guidance of the Savior. Be nothing and let Christ be everything! Give yourself entirely up into His hands and He must and will save you! For, though it is faith in its passive form, it is, nevertheless, a real and saving faith! And blessed are all they that have it! May God grant it to everyone of us now, for Jesus' sake! Amen.