

GOD HAS BEEN MERCIFUL TO ME

Cornelius Elven

I don't suppose many of us are familiar with this hymnwriter, Cornelius Elven. He was one of those servants of God who worked faithfully among his own people.

I remember hearing the story of a missionary and his wife returning from a lifetime's service abroad. They had been serving the Lord under extremely barren circumstances, and in all their time, they had not seen much apparent fruit for their ministry. They were tired, and returning home. As their ship pulled into the harbour, they heard a band play ... and they wondered if someone had put together a celebration for them. Well, someone had put together a celebration, - a *great* celebration, - but it was not for them. It was for some dignity. ... When they disembarked the ship, there was no one waiting for them, no band playing, no smiles to greet them. ... But then the words of Paul came into their minds, **II Tim. 4:7** *I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: ⁸ Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.*

We thank the Lord for great men and women of the faith, such as the David Livingstones, the Mary Slessors, and the Charles Spurgeons ... but most of us are just relatively ordinary.

Who is Cornelius Elven? He was born in 1797 ... when three of the stones at Stonehenge fell due to heavy frosts ... when the last invasion of Britain began, when French armies landed near Fishguard, only to surrender two days later ... the year Admiral Nelson lost an arm ... It was a year when nothing really significant took place, but it was the year another child of God was born to serve.

He was from a good home, attended one of the best schools in West Suffolk. His trade was as a tanner and a leather-seller. He belonged to an Independent Chapel, and then attended a Particular Baptist church in Bury St. Edmunds where he was baptised. Then, there developed within him a calling to preach. This calling had to be examined and recognised by the elders.

Initially, he was authorised to preach for a stipulated period, after which, - on 26th May 1822, - the elders decided, "Brother Elven having fulfilled his engagement, Mr Beddow (the pastor) proposed that he be sent forth to preach the Gospel wherever it might please God in His providence to call him."

Two months later, in July, the pastor intimated his intention to resign in six months. Cornelius Elven had made such an impression, he was offered an invitation to preach for three months. He wasn't sure, and he said as much in his reply, "I can at present say nothing, I must wait the leadings of Providence; at present, it does not appear that I should be able to settle in Bury".

The following summer (29th July 1823), Providence *had* led him and he became the pastor of the Baptist Church in Bury St. Edmunds, he wrote, "a day which we hope will long be remembered with gratitude to our Covenant God, for appearing for us and blessing us in our low estate, and our earnest prayer is that the union now formed may be crowned with the Divine blessing". . . . And from 1823 to 1873, - in a place where he did not think he was going to settle, - *that* is where he served the Lord.

The Lord blessed his ministry with a reported thousand people coming to hear him preach the Word every week, - they built a new church in 1834 . . . and they also planted other fellowships in the region. At his funeral service, one of the loveliest comments about him was this, "Mr. Elven was born to preach the Gospel, and to exert an influence upon the hearts and lives of his fellow-men. It is also to be observed that in the midst of his arduous work and manifold labours at home and abroad, he did not neglect to cultivate his own personal piety, and to live in constant and intimate fellowship with Christ".

He served the Lord so faithfully, but the years began to 'leave their toll' on him, and he had to 'slow down'. His health was on the decline. On one occasion he wrote, "Lord's Day, June 23 1867, - Still a Prisoner of Hope, by indisposition. A severe attack of rheumatic fever, as well as my bad leg. This morning I could hear from my garden the voice of joy and praise from the sanctuary, and God made my heart soft, when I remembered Zion".

His health was deteriorating, and he developed sciatica, "with excruciating pain". He preached his last morning and evening sermons on 5th May 1872. It broke his heart. When his leg improved sufficiently, he would walk for seven-and-a-half minutes up and down his room . . . as if he was making his way to the church for that was how long it would have taken him to walk there.

On 3rd February 1873, he wrote in his diary, "the three R's are my creed and my support - Ruin by the Fall, Redemption by Christ, Regeneration by the Holy Spirit". Four days later he added, "I have been taking stock. I find I am bankrupt,

but Jesus paid it all. I find the Gospel I have been preaching all my life my only consolation now". ... He thought his time to meet the Lord was fast approaching.

He often said he wanted to die on the Lord's Day morning. ... On 10th August 1873, a Sunday morning when the Church was gathered, and the preacher was preaching from Rev. 14, ¹³ [And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them](#) ... The message came across to the congregation their minister, Cornelius Elven, had been taken into Glory to be with his Lord.

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| <p>1. With broken heart and contrite
sigh,
A trembling sinner, Lord, I cry.
Thy pardoning grace is rich and
free, -
O God, be merciful to me!</p> | <p>But Thou dost all my anguish
see, -
O God, be merciful to me!</p> |
| <p>2. I smite upon my troubled breast,
With deep and conscious guilt
oppressed:
Christ and His cross my only
plea, -
O God, be merciful to me!</p> | <p>4. Nor alms nor deeds that I have done
Can for a single sin atone.
To Calvary alone I flee, -
O God, be merciful to me!</p> |
| <p>3. Far off I stand with tearful eyes
Nor dare uplift them to the
skies;</p> | <p>5. And when, redeemed from sin and
hell,
With all the ransomed throng I dwell,
My raptured song shall ever be,
O God, be merciful to me!</p> |

- Trembling (v.1), Troubled (v.2), Tearful (v.3)
- Broken heart and contrite sigh (v.1), oppressed (v.2), anguish (v.3)
- I cry (v.1), I smite (v.2), I stand (v.3) – I sing (v.5)
- Pardoning grace (v.1) – deep and conscious guilt (v.2)
- Christ and His cross my only plea (v.2) – pardoning grace is rich and free (v.1) – to Calvary alone I flee (v.4)
- Redeemed (v.5), Ransomed (v.5), Raptured (v.5)

... Those other Three R's he wrote in his diary ...

RUIN BY THE FALL

He faithfully preached the Gospel. He preached about sin, - about the transgression of the law of God, and rebellion against Him. He preached about how men and women would rather go their own way than turn to Christ and be saved. He knew, from personal experience, the fear of sin, - he speaks of “a trembling sinner”, - for he knew without Christ there was no salvation.

When our first parents turned away from God, they left behind the intimacy they had previously enjoyed. From they got up in the morning until they lay down at night, they were in the presence of God, - under the cover of His care ... They were always at His bidding, and doing what He created them to do. But, when the opportunity was cunningly presented to them, they chose another route which had been introduced to them by Satan, and that route was in total contradiction to the directing of God.

They did not hunger for God, as once they did ... and for which they were created to do. Instead, the serpent fed their appetite for freedom to make their own decisions, and as they listened to his charming seductions, they freely made the decision to pursue their own passions ... and that decision brought them into sin and out of favour with God.

They fell into the clutches of the enemy, and they were powerless to deliver themselves. The will that once was free, - says Martin Luther, - fell into bondage. The privileges they previously enjoyed were withdrawn. Their physical bodies changed in a moment, from perfection to imperfection, from holiness and into sin ... and illness and death were to follow. ... Through their own actions, they fell from God’s grace, **Gen. 3:24** *So he drove out the man* from His presence in the garden.

Sin is the wrecker of lives. It never achieves anything good, only evil. It is not a plaything, - it is dangerous for it enslaves for time and eternity. There are no excuses to be made for sin. It is evil in every shape and form, and it always *has* been evil. It has always been wrong. It has always been contrary to God.

It is not something we need to work at for sin comes naturally, - we are born in it. We don’t have to be introduced to it, and shown how to do it. It shapes how we are and how we think. It has polluted our attitude towards God. And sin perverts His justice ... and from almost the beginning of time, - since sin entered this world, - sin provokes God to wrath. And ultimately, sin undealt with receives no mercy.

And that is the first heading Cornelius Elven referred to in his diary for 3rd February 1873, - **Ruin by the Fall**. Secondly ...

REDEMPTION BY CHRIST

It is very straightforward, - Cornelius Elven preached the simple Gospel message *Jesus saves*, - the same Gospel message we preach, and is preached in many places throughout the country, and across the world today that Jesus Christ died on Calvary for sinners ... people who did not deserve He should die for them ... people who would pass on by and not give Him a moment's thought.

And yet, the sins of those for whom He would ultimately die were all laid upon Him on the cross. It was not so much the nails which held Him there, but it was obedience to His Father so that we would be saved. Our sinful state took such a toll on God's only-begotten Son!

There was none of our sins too great for Him to bear, - and neither was there any of our sins too small, - for He has covered all our sins by the cleansing power of His precious blood. ... He did not 'pick and choose' which sins He would die for ... He did not die for *some* of them, and we had to answer for the rest ... No, when Jesus Christ died for us on the cross, every sin we ever committed was laid upon Him, and He dealt with their punishment forever! We have nothing to answer for, for He washed all our sins away!

The worst sinner is not beyond God's grace for Christ has saved and can save the most heartless individuals who have besmirched this planet! ... That is because when Jesus died on the cross, He didn't die for 'good' people, - those who don't believe they need God's pardon, - He said it Himself, **Mt. 9:13 I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance**. ... He died for those who in repentance would acknowledge their need of His saving power, "a trembling sinner, Lord, I cry".

While the Pharisee in the temple 'crowed', - "God, I thank Thee I'm not like anybody else for I'm far better", - the sinner, the tax-collector, cried,

"Thy pardoning grace is rich and free, -
O God, be merciful to me! ...
Christ and His cross my only plea."

Outside of the Lord Jesus, there is no salvation. Beyond Him, there is no hope for eternity. No other religion saves. No philosophy saves. No sacraments save. Having a Christian mother or father doesn't save. The Church has never done

for you what Christ has done. Your attempts to match His work on Calvary can never succeed for the only Gospel of salvation is that Jesus Christ died for sinners, and there is none other Name under Heaven given among men, other than His Name, through which we can be saved. ...

“Nor alms nor deeds that I have done
Can for a single sin atone”

... Nothing can wash my sins away, - wrote Cornelius Elven, except this ...

“To Calvary alone I flee, -”,

for it is only at Calvary the sinner’s prayer is answered,

“O God, be merciful to me!”

Ruin by the Fall, Redemption by Christ, and the third point Cornelius Elven made was this ...

REGENERATION BY THE HOLY SPIRIT

When you trust in Christ to save you through His work on the cross, you are born again, “redeemed from the curse of sin and hell”. ... Two of the worst words in the vocabulary, and yet they are no longer a threat to the child of God for they have both been eternally dealt with by our Saviour.

Jesus died for us almost two thousand years ago. Many actions taken back then have been forgotten. They are of no relevance any longer, - they are finished with, over, done! To the understanding of many, even Jesus’ death on a cross has no significance today. If you must preach, - they say to us, - tell us what we want to hear, and then we’ll listen!

It is only through the work of God the Holy Spirit that anyone will truly listen, sufficient for salvation. It is only through the work of God the Holy Spirit coming upon you and showing your need of the Saviour that you begin to realise you *do* need Him. When the Holy Spirit is working, you begin to acknowledge how impossible it is for you to reach the perfect bar of God’s salvation on your own, and you need for Someone to reach their hand down into the miry pit of clay, and lift you out. You cannot do it on your own for you slip further into the muck ... but God the Father sent His Son to lift you out from that place which was leading you in your sin towards Hell ... And He breathed into you the new life of the Holy Spirit, and you became a living creature in the Lord Jesus Christ, **Eph. 2:1** you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins ... ⁵ Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved).

You have been *regenerated* ... born again ... saved, through the mercy of God, as He applied to you His free Gift of saving and keeping grace. And you have been *redeemed*, - He purchased you at Calvary for His Father, - when His Father could not look at Him, for His Father's face was turned away, - and He paid the *ransom* price for your eternal salvation.

Regenerated, redeemed, ransomed ... and *raptured!* ... Transported from sin to the Saviour! The dictionary defines 'rapture' as "the experience of being carried away by overwhelming emotion". ... And that is what it is like when you realise there is no more sin recorded against your name, - 'the slate has been wiped clean'. Jesus loved you, - how do you know? You know because the Bible tells you so ... Jesus died for you, and He is coming back again for you, "my raptured song shall ever be: God has been merciful to me!" ... Another hymn, - written by the blind hymn writer, - says, "But purer, and higher, and greater will be, Our wonder, our rapture, *when Jesus we see*" ... **I Thess. 4:16** For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: **17** Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. ... "God has been merciful to me!"

The sermon preached on the Lord's Day Cornelius Elven died in 1873 was this, **Rev. 14:13** And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them. ... On that morning, God called His servant unto Himself, - His servant for whom His Son died on Calvary.

When God 'pulls the curtain down' upon our lives here, where is to be our destination, our eternity? I know when He calls, He will take me unto Himself ... And immediately I must say I do not deserve it, and I never will ... But because of what the Lord Jesus did for me at Calvary, I know that His blood, - the blood of God's Son, and my Saviour, - has washed my sin away and He counts me as guiltless ... Again, I do not deserve it, and I never will, but I'm saved because "Christ and His cross [*is*] my only plea". ...

And that is the blessed hope of every born-again believer, as Cornelius Elven wrote, "God has been merciful to me!" ... If you are not saved, or if you are not sure, believe in this same Lord Jesus Christ Who died on the cross for you, ... and be ready for that day when He comes again to take His people unto Himself. Amen.