

The Final Warning

by Asahel Nettleton

The sermon emphasizes the importance of reproof in the life of a believer, but warns of the consequences of an incorrigible disposition, which leads to sudden and remediless destruction.

Scripture: Leviticus 19:17, 2 Samuel 12:7, Psalm 141:5, Proverbs 9:7, Matthew 7:6, Matthew 18:15, John 16:8, 2 Timothy 3:16, Hebrews 3:13, James 5:19

Topics: "Repentance", "Divine Warning"

Description

Asahel Nettleton delivers a powerful sermon on the importance of receiving reproof with humility and the consequences of hardening one's heart against correction. He emphasizes the care God has taken to reprove offenders through various means such as His people, parents, providence, His Word, ministers, and His Spirit. Nettleton warns of the danger of hardening one's neck against reproof, leading to sudden and irreversible destruction, as seen in biblical examples like Noah's generation, Pharaoh, and the inhabitants of Sodom. The sermon serves as a solemn reminder to both the aged and the young to heed reproof, as neglecting warnings only leads to a harder heart and a more hopeless state.

Transcript

A STRONGER INDICATION OF A mind unreconciled to God can hardly be conceived than the unwillingness to receive reproof. The humble man is always thankful for admonition administered in the spirit of meekness and prompted by a sincere desire for the welfare of the offender; while the haughty sinner, whose ways are always right in his own eyes, indignantly rejects it. Hence the reasonable precaution which our Saviour addressed to His disciples: "Give not that which is holy unto dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you" (Matthew 7:6).

It is not the best policy to reprove offenders of every description and on all occasions. Prudence and judgment ought ever to be exercised in the discharge of this duty. Otherwise, the well-meant endeavors of the man who undertakes the unwelcome task of a censor will meet with a sad recompense. Few, when faithfully reminded of their offenses, will evince the placid temper of the pious David, who (doubtless in allusion to the plain and pointed reproof administered to him by the prophet Nathan) exclaimed, "Let the righteous smite me, it shall be a kindness; and let him reprove me, it shall be an excellent oil which shall not break my head!" (Psalm 141:5). Most persons, on the contrary, when closely pressed as he was, and to whose conscience crimes are sent home with a clearness which cannot be mistaken, "Thou art the

man" (Second Samuel 12:7), will give free vent to their rage; and will not scruple to accost their reprovers in the libertine language ascribed to the wicked by the Psalmist, "With our tongues will we prevail; our lips are our own: who is Lord over us?" (Psalm 12:4).

The spirit which is discerned in the disdainful carriage of individuals of this sort, when reminded of their faults, is a striking commentary on the just maxims of the wise man, "He that reproveth a scorner getteth to himself shame: and he that rebuketh a wicked man getteth himself a blot" (Proverbs 9:7). "Reprove not a scorner, lest he hate thee; rebuke a wise man, and he will love thee" (Proverbs 9:8).

Such is the difference which marks the demeanor of the righteous and the wicked when reminded of their faults. From the passage which has been selected, it is purposed to contemplate:

First, The Care Which God Has Taken For the Reproof of Offenders -- It Is Often Administered.

Second, The Effect of This Reproof--He Hardens His Neck.

Third, The Consequence of An Incurable Disposition--Sudden and Remediless Destruction.

THE CARE WHICH GOD HAS TAKEN FOR THE REPROOF OF OFFENDERS--IT IS OFTEN ADMINISTERED.

God has made it the duty of His people to deal faithfully with each other. "Exhort one another daily ... lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin" (Hebrews 3:13). And again, "Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thy heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbor, and not suffer sin upon him" (Leviticus 19:17). And says our Saviour, "If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone; if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican" (Matthew 18:15-17). "Brethren," says James, "if any do err from the truth, and one convert him; let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins" (James 5:19,20).

Further, God has provided for the reproof of offenders by making it the duty of parents towards their children. To attend to the spiritual concerns of children and to restrain their wickedness is the most important of a parent's duty. "We have fathers of our flesh," says the Apostle, "which corrected us, and we gave them reverence" (Hebrews 12:9). Most persons can adopt his language in relation to their own experience, Yes, and what a load of guilt will rest upon the head of that ungodly child who has despised all the warnings, the entreaties, and tears and prayers of a pious father or an affectionate mother, who travailed in birth again that Christ might be formed in their souls, the hope of glory, when their own bodies slumber in the dust.

God also reproves sinners by His providence. He sends His judgments abroad in the earth that the inhabitants may learn righteousness. By the pains we feel, we are admonished that we are sinners and warned to flee from the wrath to come. We are admonished by His Word. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness; that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (Second Timothy 3:16,17). All the invitations, commands, threatenings, and warnings in the Bible are so many admonitions to

sinner.

Ministers reprove us. "Son of man, I have made thee a watchman to the house of Israel; therefore hear the word at My mouth, and give them warning from Me" (Ezekiel 3:17). "Show My people their transgressions, and the house of Jacob their sin" (Isaiah 58:1). Hear the injunction of Paul to Timothy, "I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom; preach the Word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables" (Second Timothy 4:14). It seems as if, in uttering this prediction, the Apostle had an eye upon sinners of our own day.

But woe to those ministers who do not feel the weight of this charge, and woe to those wincing hearers, who, having itching ears that will not endure sound doctrine, heap to themselves teachers that prophesy smooth things and say "peace, peace" to the wicked when God hath expressly declared that there is no peace for them. Against such preachers and hearers, the anger of the Lord and His jealousy will smoke and all the curses that are written in this Book shall lie upon them and the Lord shall blot out their names from under heaven.

"When I say unto the wicked, O wicked man, thou shalt surely die; if thou dost not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity: but his blood will I require at thine hand;" is the warning given by the Lord through the prophet (Ezekiel 33:8). Mark: the consequence of withholding the warning is the destruction of both the preacher and the hearer.

We are likewise reprov'd by His Spirit. "And when He is come, He will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment" (John 16:8). The Spirit is sent to admonish. His language is, "Sinner, where are you going, and what will be the end of your sinful course? Prepare to meet your God!"

God sometimes reproveth one sinner by the conviction and conversion of another. Here is one who has been your intimate friend and companion. Your views and feelings and pursuits and objects of delight, and I might add, your sins too, have been the same. Yesterday he thought and spoke and acted in all respects like yourself. Today he is alarmed at his awful condition. He trembles in view of a judgment to come. Hitherto he has been moving merrily along with you, side by side; but he dares follow you no further. He has quit your company and fled. But why? Alas, he finds himself a sinner. He has a soul to be saved or lost forever. This, my hearer, is strong preaching to some of you. When near and dear friends begin to forsake and shun you, it is time for you to begin to look about yourself. This is a silent but a solemn warning to you to flee from the wrath to come. When you see or hear of a hardened sinner, alarmed at his awful condition, sight or sound carries with it this solemn admonition: see the end to which you are coming. Though you may think to hold out, yet you cannot endure long. Your stout heart will soon tremble, and all your boasted courage will prove to be mere cowardice. Here you can see the fearful end to which you are fast approaching. You must repent or perish!

THE EFFECT OF THIS REPROOF--HE HARDENS HIS NECK

Allusion is made to the bullock which has repeatedly felt the galling yoke. At length his neck becomes hardened, and he can bear it without flinching or feeling. The sinner never hears a galling reproof without it producing some effect. If his heart is not subdued and changed, he becomes altogether more hardened. The child which is often corrected but not subdued becomes more hardened.

The sinner, under the afflictive hand of divine providence, is always made better or worse. If sickness and pain and the death of friends do not wean him from the world and drive him to God, they harden his heart. This is the effect of all the judgments of heaven and of all the calamities and miseries of human life. This is strikingly illustrated in the case of Pharaoh, King of Egypt. "Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil" (Ecclesiastes 8:11). Thus despising the riches of divine goodness and forbearance and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads him to repentance, after his hardness and impenitent heart and with a stiff neck, he perseveres in his course of rebellion, treasuring up unto himself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God (Romans 2:4,5).

Oh, the awful reckoning that awaits such offenders!

It is wholly impossible that a person should be frequently and faithfully admonished for his crime, and yet experience no alteration in his condition. His rancorous pride will be augmented, and his conscience seared as with a hot iron. "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 briars is rejected, and is nigh unto cursing; whose end is to be burned" (Hebrews 6:7,8).

On this work, the sinner may make rapid advances. He may acquire the faculty of silencing the remonstrances of his conscience and, with a stoic apathy, proudly boast that he is superior to the thunders of Sinai. He may resist the mild accents of mercy and do despite to the Spirit of grace. He may spurn the offers of a bleeding Saviour. The darkened heavens, the rending rocks, and the quaking earth may have no effect; to all these, he may render himself impervious. But the day comes that shall burn as an oven. Then his stiff neck and his stout heart will not exempt him from the terrors that shall overtake the soul of every guilty culprit that shall stand at the judgment seat of God.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF AN INCORRIGIBLE DISPOSITION--SUDDEN AND REMEDILESS DESTRUCTION.

"He, that being often reprov'd hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy." He "shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power" (Second Thessalonians 1:9). This is the doom of the incorrigible sinner.

His punishment shall have no end. "Where the worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:44). "The smoke of their torment ascendeth up forever and ever" (Revelation 14:11). "The rich man also died, and was buried; and in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and he cried and said... Father Abraham, have mercy on me... But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented." And to cut off from Dives the last hope of relief in his torments, Abraham added, "And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence" (Luke 16:22-26). The redemption of the soul is precious for the soul lives forever; but its destruction is eternal.

It is sudden. "...Shall suddenly be destroyed." Thus the Psalmist said, "How are they brought into desolation, as in a moment! They are utterly consumed with terrors" (Psalm 73:19). "As the fishes that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are caught in the snare; so are the sons of men snared in an evil time, when it falleth suddenly upon them" (Ecclesiastes 9:12). When sinners lose their souls, they always lose them unexpectedly, especially those who have been hardened offenders. "When they shall say,

Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape" (First Thessalonians 5:3).

This sentiment is verified in the providence of God. The fact is common that it has become a proverb. The text itself is the result of a wise observation of the conduct of divine providence. It embodies the wisdom of the ages. Thus was it with the inhabitants of the old world. They were often reprov'd by the preaching of Noah and by the strivings of the Spirit; but they hardened their necks and heeded neither. "They were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, and knew not until the flood came and took them all away" (Matthew 24:37-39). They were suddenly destroyed and that without remedy.

Thus it was with Pharaoh who was so often reprov'd by Moses and by the judgments of God. Conscience was aroused; but as often did he silence her voice and harden his neck. At length he was suddenly drowned and went down quickly into hell.

Thus it was with the inhabitants of Sodom. Righteous Lot warned them of their danger. The very evening before their destruction, the men of Sodom compassed the house of Lot around, both old and young, all people from every quarter; and Lot went out and reprov'd them for their wickedness; but they were too far gone to bear it, and they said, "Stand back." This unwillingness to take reproof marked them out as ripe for destruction. The same night Lot went out and delivered his last warning to his sons-in-law, "Up, get ye out of this place, for the Lord will destroy this city" (Genesis 19:14). And what was the effect of this alarm? Why they felt just as sinners now feel; he seemed as one that mocked. So hardened were they that Lot appeared like a fool, and his message like an idle tale. They were not to be frightened by him. They saw no signs of an approaching storm and heard no distant thunder roar. The morning arose fair as ever; and all was peace and safety. "They did eat, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they builded; but the same day that Lot went out of Sodom, it rained fire and brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all" (Luke 17:28,29). They were suddenly destroyed and that without remedy.

Ah! Methinks, it is enough to curdle the blood in our veins to consider how suddenly the most stupid and hardened sinner in the house may lose his soul. He may, and doubtless will, sleep until he is awakened by the voice of God, "Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee" (Luke 12:20).

For there is no remedy. The sinner who continues to harden his neck under reproof cannot be saved. He shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy, because it cannot be prevented. Here is a sinner who will not take reproof. The question arises, what shall be done to prevent the loss of his soul? The answer is, Nothing! He is marching forward to eternity and to the pit of destruction with a proud heart and with a stiff neck, and nothing can stop him in his mad career. Such a sinner must go to destruction, and no means can prevent it. This is the meaning of our text. There is no remedy. The only remedy which can be applied for the salvation of sinners is the Gospel, and this remedy never takes effect without alarming and arousing the guilty conscience. But when warned to break off his sins and to flee from the wrath to come, the hardened sinner says, I will not be frightened to heaven."

Thus was it with the old world. "Noah, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house, by the which he condemned the world, and became heir of the righteousness which is by faith. (Hebrews 11:7). By his preaching, and by his example, he warned the wicked world of the coming flood. But they were not to be frightened. Thus was it with the inhabitants of Sodom. The preacher applied the most powerful means, the only remedy to prevent their destruction, "Up, get ye out of this place, for I will destroy the city" (Genesis 19:14); but they were not frightened. He seemed as one that mocked. They would not be

alarmed, and so there was no remedy. What could the preacher do more? Nothing! Sinner, if you cannot be alarmed, you cannot be saved' If you do not believe that you are under sentence of death from God's holy law, then you do not feel your need of pardon, and "Ye will not come to Christ that ye might have life" (John 5:40). "He that believeth not is condemned already" (John 3:18), and "the wrath of God abideth on Him" (John 3:18, 36). The sinner who does not feel the awful conviction of this truth cannot be pardoned or saved.

The language of the Gospel is "Except ye repent ye shall all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3). But no sinner ever repented without conviction of sin. Even the Spirit of God never interposes to rescue the sinner from destruction in any other way than by arousing his guilty conscience to perform its office. His genuine effects on the heart are thus described, "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 16:8-11). But you are not to be frightened! "When they heard this they were pricked in their hearts, and exclaimed, men and brethren what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). But you are not to be frightened! "When the commandment came, sin revived, and I died" (Romans 7:9). But you are not to be frightened! The sinner who talks in this strain is either an infidel or ignorant of the contents of the Bible.

For such a sinner, with such views and such feelings, the Gospel contains no remedy. To such a sinner the Spirit of God offers no remedy. "He, that being often reprov'd hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy." The sinner who will not take reproof must be destroyed. The physician who has exhausted his skill and tried every experiment upon his patient can only look on and see him die. So fares it with the incorrigible sinner. You may soothe him in his sins; you may flatter his vanity; but this is only hastening the work of destruction. The only salutary application is conviction of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment to come; but this his proud heart will not endure. Every attempt to rescue him from destruction will be resisted. It will only exasperate. "He that reproveth a scorner getteth to himself shame, and he that rebuketh a wicked man getteth to himself a blot" (Proverbs 9:7). Therefore, says the wise man, "Reprove not a scorner lest he hate thee" (Proverbs 9:8).

But if such be the effect of reproof, methinks I hear someone say, "Then I will not hear the Gospel. I will shun all reproof." Answer: A resolution not to take reproof proclaims yourself to be one of the very persons described in the text. Whoever objects in this manner shows his determination to harden his neck at all events; for no one can shun reproof, or a preached Gospel, without hardening his neck in the most effectual manner. He voluntarily places himself beyond the reach of hope. The man who has drunk poison may say, "I will run, I will shun it!" But he is too late! You have heard the Gospel and can never rid yourself of its everlasting obligations. "If they escaped not who refused him that spake on earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from Him that speaketh from heaven" (Hebrews 12:25). "They would none of my counsel: they despised all my reproof Therefore shall they eat of the fruit of their own way, and be filled with their own devices. For the turning away of the simple shall slay them" (Proverbs 1:30-32).

From this subject we make the following reflections:

REFLECTION ONE. The equity of the sinner's punishment. He hardens his neck against reproof and brings destruction on himself. When the Spirit of God comes and with a still small voice whispers conviction to his guilty conscience and he feels some concern for his soul, he tries not to be alarmed but to appear above it. He shuns the light of divine truth. He loves darkness, and now he shall have darkness enough. God says, "Let their eyes be darkened that they may not see" (Psalm 69:23).

The sinner says, "Peace and safety, let us alone." God says, "He is joined to idols, let him alone" (Hosea 4:17). The sinner says, "Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee." (Acts 24:25). God says, "I go My way. My Spirit shall no longer strive."

The sinner chooses not to be under conviction, and now suppose God's choice and the sinner's choice should happen to coincide? All can see the equity of the sinner's punishment. If he will not lay up treasures in heaven, then he must lay up treasures in hell. This is done by hardening his own heart. After his hardness and impenitent heart, man treasures up unto himself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God (Romans 2:5).

When sinners are lost, their consciences will forever reprove them for destroying themselves. They are made to eat of the fruit of their own ways, and are filled with their own devices. They utterly perish in their own corruption. By hardening his neck, the sinner, with his own hand, doses the door of heaven against himself.

REFLECTION TWO. Our subject is full of alarms to the aged sinner. My aged fathers, how long have you lived without God in the world? How many warnings have you heard and lost? You have lived so many years and have heard so many warnings and have lost them all!

I now appeal to your own experience. Do you not find that the longer you live, the harder are your hearts? Can you not bear testimony to the truth of our text? Where are you now? Once you enjoyed a season of youth, but alas it is over and gone forever! Your sun is almost down. I address you on the very brink of the grave. You are just ready to launch into eternity; and if you are not suddenly saved, you will be suddenly destroyed and that without remedy. You now live in an interesting crisis, the season of a revival. It has an important bearing on the aged in this congregation. Oh, how many younger than yourselves have hopefully entered the kingdom of God before you! In this you have often been reprov'd. And are you still out of Christ? Your case is becoming more and more hopeless. The probability, oh fear, is a thousand to one that you will be lost. You have no prospect of witnessing another revival in your day. Let the present season slip, and where are you? This very warning, if neglected, will render your case more hopeless still.

REFLECTION THREE. Our subject contains a warning to the young. If he, that being often reprov'd hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy, then beware how you feel and how you conduct yourself under reproof. How often have you been reprov'd by preaching, by conversation, by the conviction and conversion of your companions, by the admonition of conscience and by the voice of the Holy Spirit? How is this revival season likely to leave you? Certainly not as it found you! if you do not profit by all these warnings, you will be seven-fold harder than when it commenced. What improvement have you made of all the warnings you have heard? Where are you now. If my preaching does not prove a savor of life, it will be a savor of death unto death to your souls.

Every warning you neglect is rendering your salvation less and less probable. It is making the work of repentance more and more difficult. You are wandering farther and farther from God and plunging deeper and deeper into misery at every step which you advance. With your own hands you are now forging those chains which will bind you down in darkness and despair.

To you the Saviour calls, "Turn you' Turn you at My reproof!" "Because I have called, and you have refused; I have stretched out My hand, and no man regarded; but you have set at naught all My counsel, and would none of My reproof: I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh; when your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind; when distress and anguish

cometh upon you. Then shall they call upon Me, but I will not answer; they shall seek Me early, but they shall not find Me: for that they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the Lord; they would none of My counsel; they despised all My reproof. Therefore shall they eat of the fruit of their own way, and be filled with their own devices" (Proverbs 1:23-31). Today then, if you will hear His voice, harden not your hearts.

REFLECTION FOUR. The more stupid and hardened the sinner, the nearer to destruction he is. Thus was it with the inhabitants of the old world. They never were more thoughtless than before the flood came. It came when they least expected it. "They knew not until the flood came and took them all away' (Matthew 24:39). Never was Sodom more stupid than the very night before it was destroyed. The preaching of Lot seemed like an idle tale. They were doubtless making themselves merry with it until the very moment when the flames of hell took hold of them.

Thus was it with the rich fool: "Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry" (Luke 12:19). And thus it has been with all who have gone to hell from under the light of the Gospel. They cried peace and safety until they were lost. Death came too soon, and they dropped into hell as into a snare, and it closed suddenly upon them.

Those sinners are commonly nearest destruction who think and care the least about it. Hell is truth learned too late. Stop, poor sinner! Stop and think!

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