

God Has No Pleasure in the Sinner's Death

by Charles Finney

In this sermon, Charles Finney emphasizes that God desires the repentance and salvation of sinners rather than their death, highlighting the moral implications of divine justice and mercy.

Scripture: Ezekiel 18:23, Ezekiel 33:11, Matthew 18:14, Luke 13:3, John 3:16, Acts 3:19, Romans 6:23, 1 Timothy 2:4, 2 Peter 3:9, Revelation 3:19

Topics: "God's Compassion", "The Urgency of Repentance"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes that God takes no pleasure in the death of sinners, urging them to turn from their wicked ways to find life. He explains that the death referred to is not physical but spiritual, representing eternal separation from God. Finney argues that God's nature, which is rooted in benevolence and compassion, cannot delight in the suffering of His creation, and He desires all to repent and live. He further discusses the necessity of free will in moral governance, asserting that while God does not prevent the death of sinners, He provides the means for salvation through repentance. Ultimately, Finney calls on sinners to recognize the urgency of turning to God before it is too late.

Transcript

"Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? saith the Lord God: and not that he should return from his way and live? For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord God: wherefore, turn yourselves, and live ye."--Ezek. 18:23, 32.

"Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways, for why will ye die, O house of Israel?"--Ezek. 33:11.

In speaking upon these texts, I am to show,

1. What this death is not;
2. What it is;
3. Why God has no pleasure in it;
4. Why he does not prevent it;

5. The only way in which he can prevent it.

1. The death spoken of in our texts cannot be that of the body. "It is appointed to all men once to die, and after this the judgment." I need not say that men die a physical death none the less surely because they turn to God and live.

This cannot mean spiritual death either, for this death is nothing else than a sinful state of mind--a fixed habit and condition of sinning. If this had been the sense of the term death in these passages, they should have read--Why are ye already dead?--not, Why will ye die? The death referred to is manifestly an event yet future.

2. Positively, this death must be the opposite of that life which they would have if they would turn from their evil ways. Throughout the Bible we are given to understand that this is eternal life--life in the sense of real blessedness. By the terms, death, and life, when used of the final rewards of the wicked and of the righteous, the Bible does not mean annihilation and existence. It does not teach that one class shall cease to exist and the other shall simply continue to exist; but most obviously implies that both alike have an immortal existence, which existence, however, is, in the one case, infinite misery; in the other, infinite blessedness.

3. God has no pleasure in the death of the sinner. He avers this, and even takes his solemn oath of it. Surely, it must have been his intention to make himself believed; and certainly he ought to be believed. "When he could swear by no greater, he swore by himself." Such "an oath for confirmation should be an end to all strife" of conflicting opinions.

It is contrary to his very nature that he should take pleasure in the sinner's death. Indeed, such is the nature of all moral beings that none of them can take pleasure in the misery of others, in itself considered. If any of them could, then might devils in hell find happiness in the misery of those whom they have brought into that place of torment. But the very laws of moral nature are such, that it is painful to witness misery. Even the sufferings of the wicked in hell only aggravate, instead of lessening, the misery of the devil. He did not entice them there to enjoy their misery, but to vent his selfish spite against God. Yet, as always must happen, selfishness punishes itself, and the very thing Satan has done out of selfish hatred of God, will only augment his own eternal anguish. It is intrinsically contrary to the moral nature of any moral agent to enjoy the spectacle of suffering, apart from any other collateral source of enjoyment.

On still higher grounds is it contrary to God's nature that he should take pleasure in the sinner's death, for his benevolence forbids it. He takes infinite delight in the happiness of his creatures, and, therefore, cannot take delight in their misery--in itself considered.

It is abundantly manifest that God loves sinners with the tenderest compassion. He pities them. So his word and his nature conspire to show. Christ manifested this towards the wicked Jews in most affecting words and even with tears, when he beheld that doomed city and wept over it, saying --"If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things that belong unto thy peace! But now they are hid from thine eyes."

No doubt God will pity sinners in hell forever. He has given the highest evidence that he loves sinners. Think how long he spares them to live in their sins; at how great a sacrifice he sent his Son to die for them, even while they were yet enemies. What proof of love can be greater than this?

It must be that God regards the death of the wicked as a great evil in itself, for it surely is so, and he must regard things as they are, and according to truth. Misery is intrinsically a great evil in itself, and it must seem to him to be so. Nay, more; it must seem a greater evil to him than it can to you or to me, or to any other being besides himself, in the universe. He never could have done what he has to save men if he had not viewed it so.

Again, God can have no pleasure in the sinner's death, because, after the penalty is inflicted, he can show the sinner no more favor forever. Under any efficient administration, after the authorities have passed the sentence of the law, they must not retract. The support of government forbids it. There could be no force in penalty, and no influence in law, if its penalties could be lightly set aside, or could be set aside for any other grounds that such as would amply sustain the dignity and the principles of the administration. Hence, after God has taken the sinner's life, in the sense of our text, he can show him no more favor or mercy forever. This must be a sore trial to his feelings, mercy is so much his delight.

Sinners have had all their good things in this life. So Christ distinctly taught in the account he gives of the scenes after death, in the case of the rich man and Lazarus. He represents Abraham as saying to the rich man "Son, remember that thou, in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things." This, you will bear in mind, was said in answer to his earnest entreaty that Lazarus might be sent to him and might dip the tip of his finger in water and cool his tongue, for, said he, "I am tormented in this flame." To this Abraham replied, "Son, remember that thou, in thy life time, receivedst thy good things." It is affecting to think that he had exhausted all his good things so utterly that not one drop of water remained to be given him now--not a drop! It must be greatly trying to God's feelings, after having so much enjoyed doing good to even sinners in this world, that, after death he can do them no more good forever! Yet this is plainly the view which Christ gives of the case. It is the sinner's relations to God's government that preclude so utterly all further manifestation of mercy. He stands before that government in the relation of an enemy, one whom that government must punish, as it would protect the rights and welfare of myriads who depend on it for their happiness. It is truly an awful thought that the sinner must suffer so--so intensely and without the least possibility of mitigation forever; and that God, when the sinner cries for one drop of water, must forever reply--No, NO, I have done you all the good I ever can do. You have had all your good things, even to the last drop of water!

Another reason why God can have no pleasure in the death of sinners is, that their depravity is henceforth unrestrained. To see this working itself out intensely and without restraint, as long as they exist, is sad indeed. Yet so it must be. God has done all he wisely could do to restrain it while yet they lived on the earth, and under all his efforts, it only waxed worse and worse. Now, therefore, he desists from all further efforts forever.

God can take no pleasure in the death of sinners, because, henceforward, their sufferings must be unmitigated and endless. Can God have any pleasure at all in this? What an everlasting accumulation of woe! Sorrow upon sorrow, swelling and expanding, deepening and strengthening, beyond all our powers of estimation or expression;--verily God can take no pleasure in this, and well does he take his solemn oath to this effect--"As I live, saith the Lord, I have no pleasure at all in the death of the wicked.["]

4. Why then, I am next to ask, does he not prevent it?

The answer in one word is, because he cannot and yet be good. In fact, if God could wisely prevent it, he would have done so; else he could not be a good being. What wisdom allows to be done for the relief or

prevention of suffering, love requires--else he forfeits his claim to goodness. In order to give virtue its utmost scope for development, moral agents are left free to obey or disobey, and then take the consequences. We cannot see how else a really moral government could be administered. Besides, the fact that God does govern thus, shows what he can wisely do, and all that he can wisely do. For it must be that God acts in accordance with his own sense of what is wise and good;--else he is not wise and good, for to have wisdom and yet not act according to its dictates, is by no means to be wise. So also, to claim to be good, and yet not act according to goodness, is an absurd claim. Hence, if God is really wise and good, we know that all his acts must be in harmony with his own ideas of what is wise and good under the circumstances of every case. Hence, nothing that ever occurs under his government can be wisely prevented. If it could be, he would prevent it. No improvement can be made in his actual administration. You cannot suppose it to be changed for the better.

Hence, God cannot deal with sinners otherwise than he has without violating his own sense of what is wise and good.

Again, the death that sinners die, though so great an evil, is yet a less evil than any change in his government which might be necessary in order to prevent it. For example, it may be said that God could annihilate moral agents, instead of punishing them in hell eternally. To this, I answer, if this were a better way God would certainly have adopted it. Hence, we are driven to the conclusion that it is a less evil to let his government go on, and let penalty take its course. In fact, to annihilate moral agents, for their sin, instead of punishing them in hell, would be to abandon the idea of moral government, administered under law, by rewards and penalties. It would amount to an acknowledgment of a failure under this system.

Again, God knows he can make a good use of the sinner's death. He can turn it to good purpose. Such a manifestation before the universe of the terrible evil of sin, may be indispensable to the best interests of the masses--being the very influence they need to preserve them from falling themselves into sin. Under a government where so much depends upon developing and making all realize the idea of justice, what finite mind can fully estimate the useful results God may educe from the eternal death of sinners? This glorious idea of justice is manifestly most vital to a system of moral agents. Its importance to the universe is such as must greatly over-balance all the evil that can accrue from the punishment of sin.

These propositions I take to be altogether self-evident--so much so, that none who understand the meaning of the terms, can deny them. If you admit the attributes of God, all the rest follows by the strictest logical necessity. If God is admitted to be holy, just, wise and good, then he must govern moral agents as he does;--and must punish as he does all whom he cannot by any safe means reclaim to obedience and induce to accept of pardon.

5. How can the death of sinners be avoided? In no way that is inconsistent with the nature and character of God, or with his relations to his creatures. This is plain. You cannot expect that God will act inconsistently with his own attributes of character in order to save sinners from death, or that he will suffer any thing to be done that is thus inconsistent. Nothing can he either do or suffer to be done that shall interfere with the best interests of his government. It were the merest folly to expect this. Hence, it is plain that if the sinner would be saved at all, he must turn from his evil ways. He cannot expect God to turn from his good ways and ought not to desire it. Hence, the only alternative is--repent, or die. Every sinner must cease to sin and must meet God's conditions of life, or he must take death as his certain doom. To turn from his sin is the naturally necessary condition of being saved from eternal death. Who can doubt this? Who can rationally suppose that any sinner can possibly escape death unless he turns from his sins to

God?

That this is the only possible way of life is further evident from the fact that sinners, continuing in their sins, must be wretched from the very nature of sin. The death of the body removes them from all physical enjoyment. Sin itself will then be left to bring forth its legitimate fruits of disquiet, trouble, remorse of conscience;--so that even if there were no punitive inflictions from God, and no misery to be endured beyond the natural consequences of sin, the wicked would be only wretched.

But, let it be considered, we cannot set aside the governmental infliction of suffering, for this is a necessity of government that it should have a penalty attached to the violation of its laws, and should inflict this penalty. No government can exist which does not punish when justice demands it. Its authority is at once gone, and it ceases to be any government at all. Hence, God must punish as long as the sinner refuses to turn.

REMARKS.

1. The goodness of God is no argument against the punishment of sin, but the very reverse of this;--it is a reason why sin should be punished and will be. Men may say that God is too good to punish sin and may profess to hold that his goodness explodes the doctrine of future punishment. But really not one of these men is ever afraid that God will be unjust. Yet they fear him. And the thing they at heart fear is that he is good and too good to let sin pass unpunished. They are afraid he is good, and so good, that he cannot fail to punish sin.

2. Some will ask--Will not the great misery of sinners in hell abridge God's happiness? I answer no. God has done all he can wisely do to save them. So he solemnly avers;-- "What more could I have done to my vineyard that I have not done in it?" Why, then, should he be unhappy in the death of sinners?

3. Having done all he wisely could, he will be content with this. To do the best and the utmost that infinite love and power can do, satisfies him, and he will not be restive and uneasy, so long as this conviction reposes on his bosom.

4. He will rejoice in the realization of the great idea of justice, and in the results of its manifestation before all finite minds. He does not rejoice in the misery, but does rejoice in the other results which accrue from the sinner's death. He rejoices that the great idea of justice is brought out before the universe so that they shall see what sin is, and what an exceedingly bitter thing it is to rebel against God and goodness.

God will rejoice none the less really in this immense good resulting from punishment, because of the conditions under which it is realized. It costs something to develop the great idea of justice;--it necessarily must; it always does in any government. But the results are cheap even at such a cost. Hence, God rejoices in the use he can make of the sinner's death. Why should he not? He will be satisfied with himself in view of all he has done, and satisfied with the results as a whole. Beholding them all he will say as of his original creation--all very good. There are indeed incidental evils, but the good so indefinitely overbalances the evil that he cannot but be satisfied.

The death of the wicked will not abate the happiness of heaven. They will say that it could not have been wisely avoided. They know that every sinner richly deserves all the punishment he receives, and hence they will be content. They will not rejoice in the suffering, but will rejoice in the results of glory to God, stability to his throne--good influence over all the unfallen. According to the scriptures, they shout,

Alleuia[sic.-Ed.], as they see the smoke of their torment ascend up forever and ever.

There is a moral beauty in the display of justice and holiness that will enrapture all the inhabitants of heaven. It will seem to them so infinitely fit and right and wise that God should reign and should sustain his law by means of penalty, so as to secure the highest possible moral power to promote holiness and deter from sin;--how can they do otherwise than acquiesce and even rejoice? But they discriminate--as we also should--between rejoicing in misery and rejoicing in its results. They rejoice, not in the misery, but in those glorious results which are so signally brought out before the universe.

It will be seen in heaven and felt throughout all eternity that God could have done no other way, wisely, than to punish sinners as he does. Hence, there will be no complaining.

Their sense of the wrong and mischief of sin is so just and so deep, and their sense of its ill-desert, also, will be so intense, that it will not abate from the eternal calmness of their souls to witness the execution of the law.

They will also see that it is the least of two evils--a less evil than to use any other means, possible to God, such, for example, as annihilating the wicked. Hence, they will not regret that God should do the best he can. Any change that should set aside punishment for actual sin would only be a greater evil than the punishment it sets aside, and hence they could not desire it. They will always see that a good use is made of punishment, and that positive good is educed from it. Just as we see that good use is made of the gallows in civil government. It is made conducive to the greater influence of the law to deter men from crime. Life is rendered more secure, and thus every important interest of life is promoted.

Here it should be borne in mind that it is not the object of government to do good to the criminal who is executed. In capital executions its only object is to do justice to the government. Punishment never has for its object to do good to the criminal. In so far forth as it is punishment, it has no aim specially towards the criminal, only to make of him an example for the good of the government and of the governed. That which aims at the good of the criminal is discipline. In this world God is administering discipline towards all sinners, and even towards his own children when they sin. In the next world all his treatment of the wicked will be penal, none of it disciplinary.

It is true that in human government, punishment and discipline are often blended, as in State's prison, where the criminal is undergoing the penal sentence of law, and yet the law also aims at his good, using means so far as may be for his correction of life and manners. But in capital executions all idea of discipline is dropped--especially it is so after the fatal hour has come. After that hour, government does all it can by delay of execution, to impel the sinner to prepare to meet his God. Persons often confound discipline and punishment, failing to make those essential discriminations to which I have now adverted. It is important to notice distinctly that all those features in God's administration towards sinners which contemplate their good are discipline, not punishment.

It is a great thing under God's government to execute his law. This is immensely important in its bearings upon the sentiments and feelings of moral agents, and upon their continued obedience. It is especially in this administration of God's law that they see God revealed and learn to regard him as the great Father of his creatures, evermore watchful to secure their highest obedience and blessedness. This execution of law is indeed done at a great expense of suffering to the criminal; but the fact that they all deserve it--that there is no other way of sustaining law and its influence, and that an indefinitely great amount of good results from it,--these facts conspire to hush every murmur and will by no means allow the blessedness of

heaven to be interrupted by the execution of law on the wicked.

God will make sinners very useful in life and in death; in this world and in the next. They do not mean it; they mean only evil; but God means all the good, and will take care to insure it. He can over-rule their sin so as to bring out great good from it, all along through the whole course of their existence. He will so control it that they shall not have lived in vain; so that they shall not die in vain, and shall not make their bed in hell forever, in vain. No thanks to them. They have done nothing meritorious. No thanks to Satan that he laid the corner-stone of human salvation when he tempted Judas to betray Jesus, that he might be put out of the way. --God's plans went too deep for Satan; for, while Satan thought to frustrate those plans, he only fulfilled them. He did not understand God's scheme for saving sinners, else he had not taken a step so directly adapted to promote it. So always, God lays his plans too deep for sinners. They try to frustrate God's plans, but to their confusion, at length find that they only promoted those plans the more. It was said in reference to the plans laid by Joseph's brethren,--Ye meant it for evil, but God meant it for good, to save many people alive. God suffered their plans to go forward and seem to be fully executed; but then he put forth his hand and turned the whole to the utmost good. So God is wont to do in regard to the plans of the wicked.

But it is time that I should present distinctly before you and press on your immediate regard the great question of my text,--"Why will ye die?" To all who have not yet turned from your sins, God makes this earnest appeal. Fain would he know of you why it is that you will die. What answer will you give to this appeal?--What can you say? That there is no help for you, and therefore you must die? But that is not true, for glorious help is laid on one who is mighty to save.

Will you insist that there is none to pity you? That too, is utterly false. Does not the great God pity you? And Jesus Christ too; and every angel in heaven? And indeed all the holy in God's universe?

Or will you say, there is no mercy for me? That also is alike false. There has been most abundant mercy shown you in the gospel. Nothing can exceed that mercy and compassion; and even to-day, after so long an abuse of it, you may perhaps yet find it waiting to bless you.

Or will you say--I can't help myself? How can I turn to God? Doubtless you think you can turn at any time, or you would not so long have put it over to a convenient season. You intend at some time to turn to God; but when? Perhaps when it shall be forever too late! One day, or perhaps only one hour, too late!

I have perhaps mentioned in the hearing of some of you the case of a young man whose converted sister earnestly besought him to repent, and come at once to Christ. He put her off; she still entreated. Especially she pressed him one Sabbath, and felt that she could not be denied. At length, as he could not well do less, he said to her--I have to make a short journey on Monday, and shall return on Tuesday; when this is over, I will attend to it. On Wednesday I promise you, I will devote myself to this work. Thus he promised. Monday came, he started on horseback to accomplish his business and get all things ready to turn to the Lord. God had done waiting on him! He was thrown from his horse, brought home a corpse, and on Wednesday, his set day for repentance, his funeral was attended by sad friends, and his body committed to the grave. Alas, who shall give the history of the spirit that God summoned so fearfully away?

Many cases of a similar character I have met with, painfully showing that God is not well pleased that sinners should deliberately set aside his proposed time and adopt their own. I once heard a young lady say that she meant to be converted just before she graduated. In fact she had her plans laid very

definitely. On the Sabbath before commencement, she was to unite with the church and sit down with them to the table of the Lord. See there! how she proposed to take her own course and set aside God's earnest call to repent now! But God will surely have his way and will as surely defeat your plans. You cannot have your way against God, labor for it ever so much. It would be wrong for God to endorse your plans when they designedly disown his, and you ought not to wish him to do so. You ought rather to say--Lord, I do not wish thee to come over to my wicked schemes. Let thy perfect will be done! God forbid that I should die, if he has no pleasure in it. If thou, O God, hast no pleasure at all in my death, why should I have? Does not God know how awful a thing it is to die eternally?

Do you think, sinner, that God means to trifle with you? Ye who say that there is no danger of dying eternally for sin--say how is this,--that God should so solemnly ask you why you will die and under his solemn oath affirm that he has no pleasure in your death? Does God do all this to frighten you, when, as you insinuate, there is really no death to fear? Is the great God deceiving you, or trying to disturb you with needless alarms? Is it not rather the case that you are deceiving yourself with hopes that are baseless and that must vanish away like the giving up of the ghost?

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