

Refuges of Lies

by Charles Finney

Charles Finney warns against various forms of delusion that can lead people astray from true Christianity, including selfish religion, religion of impulse, religion of opinion, sectarianism, self-righteousness, Antinomianism, and Universalism.

Scripture: Isaiah 28:17, Matthew 7:21, James 2:26

Topics: "False Assurances in Faith", "True Religion vs. Delusion"

Description

Charles Finney addresses the dangers of relying on false assurances in faith, as illustrated in Isaiah 28:17, where God warns that judgment will expose the 'refuge of lies' that people create to evade accountability. He identifies various delusions, such as selfish religion, emotional impulse, mere orthodoxy, and universalism, which people use to avoid the true demands of God. Finney emphasizes that these false refuges ultimately lead to spiritual ruin, as they do not provide genuine peace or salvation. He calls for a return to true faith that is rooted in love for God and obedience to His commands, rather than self-serving beliefs. The sermon serves as a stark reminder that only through genuine faith in God can one find true refuge.

Transcript

"Judgment also will I lay to the line, and righteousness to the plummet: and the hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters shall overflow the hiding-place." --Isaiah 28:17.

If we would understand this passage, it is important that we should consider the context attentively. This will show what class of people are referred to in the text, and what position they are supposed to occupy.

"Whom shall he teach knowledge? and whom shall he make to understand doctrine? them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts. For precept must be upon precept, and precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little: for with stammering lips and another tongue will he speak to his people. To whom he said, This is the rest wherewith ye may cause the weary to rest; and this is the refreshing: yet they would not hear. But the word of the Lord was unto them, precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little and there a little; that they might go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken. Wherefore hear the word of the Lord, ye scornful men, that rule this people which is in Jerusalem. Because ye have said, we have made a covenant with death, and with hell are we at agreement; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, it shall not come unto us: for we have made lies our refuge, and under falsehood have we hid ourselves:

therefore thus saith the Lord God, Behold I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste. Judgment also will I lay to the line, and righteousness to the plummet: and the hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters shall overflow the hiding place."

The class of persons spoken of here enjoyed great religious privileges. The word of the Lord came to them, "precept upon precept," and they had most abundant means of knowing its revealed truths and enjoined duties. But they did not love these truths and would not do these duties. Consequently, restive under the unwelcome pressure of truth upon their consciences, they sought relief under some refuge of lies. It will be my present object to notice some of the many refuges of lies to which men are wont to resort when their consciences are ill at ease.

1. A selfish religion. This is one of the most common delusions among men. In this case selfishness, instead of seeking worldly good alone, elevates its aim and seeks heaven. Selfishness is usually distinguished for its grasping some earthly good, in a spirit of reckless disregard alike of others' rights and interests, and of the known will of God. But it is not the character of the good it seeks which makes it selfishness; but rather the spirit with which the good is sought.

Thus in the case of the selfish religionist, his general end is the same now as ever--personal happiness; and the spirit in which he seeks it is the same as ever--a spirit that seeks and cares for nothing but its own individual good; but the means by which he pursues his end are changed, for now he resorts to religion as his means, while heretofore he has been content to seek it from the world, with no semblance of religion in his course. Now while his ultimate end remains the same, no change of the means for attaining it can change the mans' moral character, or the moral quality of his conduct. In this case now contemplated, the individual aims at securing an interest for himself as really and as exclusively as ever. While he was careless about religion, he sought this selfish good from the world; now he seeks it from religion: before, he sought to press his fellow men and every earthly agency into his service; now he seeks to make the Almighty God his infinite servant, and to dragoon the gospel into an instrumentality for securing his own eternal interests. This form of delusion is, as I have said, exceedingly common.

It is also very subtle, often so subtle that the deluded man is not at all aware that he has not in fact the very religion of the Bible. He might indeed see the truth if he would be faithful and honest, for it would stand out most plain and palpable to the eye of honest scrutiny. Whoever will may know as to himself whether all his religion is or is not selfish;--whether or not all his seeking of heaven is a merely selfish seeking.

2. Another refuge of lies exists in a religion of impulse.

This also is a selfish religion, but of a different form from the preceding, and it manifests itself in a different way. The man of this kind of religion is governed by his sensibility, or in other words, by his feelings, and not by the law of God as revealed to his intelligence. He thinks himself very religious because he has so much feeling. He supposes himself to be very sincere, for he is conscious of having much feeling and many strong desires, and of being exercised by these feelings and desires. And as he assumes this to be religion, he infers that he has real religion, and has it in an unusual degree.

This also is a very subtle form of delusion. For it is intrinsically right that the sensibility should be affected by religious truth. That it should be, will always appear fitting and proper to the human mind. But the mistake lies in making religion consist in this, and in making this the whole of religion; whereas nothing is

more demonstrable than that religion must essentially consist in the will's allegiance to truth as revealed from God to man and apprehended by his intelligence. But more of this anon. This type of delusion is subtle because the subject of it is entirely conscious of having great feeling, and of being governed by it also. If he had no feeling, or if he had but little, he would suspect himself of being deceived as to his own piety; but having much feeling, as he very well knows, he feels quite sure of possessing most extraordinary and praiseworthy piety.

Now it should be considered that true religion carries with it deep feelings; but deep feelings may exist without religion; for true religion consists in the mind's being influenced by the intelligence and not by the sensibility. Deep feeling is in the Christian's mind, but it does not govern there. True and well-instructed Christians know that the impulses of the sensibility, however strong, are not religion. They regard these impulses as accompanying, but not as constituting real piety. They know that these feelings are the natural result of certain views presented to the mind, and hence they see at once the mistake of regarding them as in themselves either the evidence or the measure of piety.

I have often been struck with developments of this delusion in seasons of revival. Persons of naturally strong feelings will often seem to act like real Christians. They do indeed feel strongly, and for a season they are governed by these feelings. But these states and exercises do not involve the action of the will, in subservience to the demands of the intelligence, and hence in regard to their moral nature they are passive and not active, and therefore not virtuous. And yet these persons in revival appear not only religious but eminently so. But these impulses soon subside--their excitements cool off; they become no less excited on other subjects, and then they show to every one what spirit they have. Being creatures of feeling and sensibility, they follow the current of public feeling and the popular mind as sure as the straw floats down the rippling flood. Who has not seen persons of this stamp in every community? You may always expect them to be powerfully moved in every great revival, but they will just as certainly be moved by anything else that appeals strongly to their sensibility. Indeed they are constitutionally excitable and easily moved, and have not learned the solemn duty of being governed by the will and the intelligence, but float along in the uniform practice of being governed by their feelings.

Now I am not speaking against having feeling on religious subjects, but against being governed by it. I urge that it is wrong to seek supremely to gratify these feelings, irrespective of the claims of the intelligence. This is my position.

No subject more deeply interests the sensibility than religion. None with more power breaks up the fountains of the great deep of human feeling than this. Hence persons who make their excited feelings the whole of their religion, may luxuriate in their exercise and float along upon their current, deceiving and being deceived till they die. How fatally subtle oftentimes is this delusion!

3. Another refuge of lies consists in a religion of opinion--or mere orthodoxy.

It might be supposed that in this place there would be very little danger of this form of delusion. But there is danger even among us. Some even here hold in theory the doctrine of sanctification, think much of it, glory in defending it and make it a great thing, and yet seem to be very far from embracing the doctrine in the love of it, and from imbibing the spirit of it into their hearts. Now it matters not how good or how true your orthodoxy may be; if it is only opinion and theory in your head and not love and obedience in your heart, it is nothing better than sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal.

There is a great deal of this adoration of orthodoxy in the churches, and hence it is not strange that so many should practically estimate it as the chief thing in religion. Hence results a delusion which makes shipwreck of the souls of thousands.

4. Sectarian religion is another form of delusion.

But can this be found among us? Do we not all belong to one church? Can it be that we need to have sectarianism preached against here? Many even among us I fear, are in this sin who are not themselves aware of it. I fear that some who defend Oberlin, do it on sectarian grounds and in a sectarian spirit. To be sure they are not sticklish for baptism, or election, or any of the common points of sectarian controversy; but they are most zealous for Oberlin, and often may be really more zealous to make men friends of Oberlin than to make them friends of Christ.

This is a most insidious delusion, where ever it may develop itself. It is perilous out of Oberlin, and no less perilous in Oberlin. And its danger does not turn upon the question whether the points contended for are true or false. It is dangerous to contend for the best truth ever revealed from God, if your zeal for it is a selfish zeal, and if you judge yourself a Christian because you have it.

5. Another delusion to be considered, is really a form of self-righteousness. It often manifests itself in this way. Men put external right-doing in the place of real benevolence of heart. They mean to do right towards their fellow men, but confine themselves to executive acts and overlook that in which real moral character inheres. They quite overlook the heart, and seem to forget that if there be not true love to God in all they do, nothing can be right at all. Suppose a man seeks to be honest in his business; is this all that God requires? Do we need to be told that nothing can be right even in our commercial business unless done for God, unless the motive be to glorify God--unless the great end be to honor God and do good to men? And yet a man will talk about being honest in his business, as if he might have this virtue, though he has no regard for God and no religion whatever at heart. He looks upon his own moral conduct very complacently. If a man comes into his store to trade he means to deal fairly with him. He estimates the cost of his articles--add a fair profit--takes no advantage by deceiving either as to quality or quantity. Very well; so he thinks. But suppose a man should pursue this honest course his life long; is this the whole of doing right? Is it in fact even the beginning of it? Must we not go farther back and ask--for what end is all this honesty? What does this honest man really aim at? Is it his aim to glorify God, or to benefit himself? Is all this a real love to man because God requires such love, or is it a wise and far-sighted seeking of his own personal advantages?

Said an individual very sick and apparently near death, "I have always been honest in all my dealings with men; in all this I have nothing to reproach myself with; but O, as far as my God is concerned, all is dark--I have done nothing right to my God."

Now there is embodied here one of the most common forms of delusion--one of the most common and also the most perfectly fatal. It overlooks the fact that unless the mind be consecrated to God, there can be no real honesty at all; that unless a man treat his fellow men right for God, in view of the claims of God, and as obedience to God, it is no right doing at all. For how does God require you to treat your brother man? Does He ask only that you would not cheat him in business? Does God ask nothing more than this? Does not the law of God require that you should love your neighbor as yourself? And is it not also implied that you are to love him as one of God's created children, and in the spirit as to yourself of a dutiful and affectionate son towards God? Your love to him must therefore be that of a dutiful brother in the great

family of God--a brother whom God, your Father, requires you to love as yourself.

Hence the man who thinks his duty all done towards his fellow man if he has simply forborne to cheat him, is egregiously deceived. Doing duty to God is indispensable for really doing duty to man. If anyone has loved his brother man right, then has he also loved his Father, God; for there can be nothing right in this matter which does not most fully and heartily recognize this great and blessed family relation. Loving man must be done as duty to God--from love to God, and with a distinct recognition of God as the common Father of both myself and my brother.

Thus, really to love man right implies loving God also. And on the other hand a proper love to God implies loving man also. You can not be in a benevolent state of mind towards God, without being also in a benevolent state towards his creatures. The very nature of religion and love implies that if we love God we shall also love his offspring. We can not keep the first great command without keeping the second also.

It is remarkable that you may often detect the real state of your heart towards God by observing closely your state towards man; and so on the other hand you may learn your true position towards man by noticing your position towards God. For nothing can be more certain and invariable than this law of mind, namely, that if it be really in a benevolent state, its benevolence will be exercised towards both God and man, and indeed towards all known sentient beings.

Hence when a man on his death-bed says--"I have done all my duty towards man, but alas! all is wrong in regard to my duties to God," he certainly deceives himself. There can not be such a state as that which he supposes his to be. For he certainly has not done his duty towards man if his heart has at the same time been alien and apostate from God.

6. Another refuge of lies consists in an Antinomian religion. In this, men rest in a faith which is not sanctifying. They have abandoned the idea of being saved by works, and have fallen back upon faith, but yet it is upon a faith that fails to sanctify--a faith which does not lead them to consecrate their all to God. This is an Antinomian faith--the very same of which the apostle James said, "Show me thy faith without thy works, (if thou canst) and I will show thee my faith by my works." An Antinomian faith can never bear this test; for by the very supposition it begets no good works at all.

A sister in the church once said in a prayer meeting, "I used to dwell much upon faith, but had little regard for works. My mind was constantly ranging upon faith, faith, but it was a faith which never led me to duty--it only kept me waiting, and--idle."

Now this is a most dangerous delusion. This resting in a faith which acts only as an opiate; which gives no stimulus at all to the soul towards either love, or the labor which love begets; this must be a gross and most fatal delusion. You will see at a glance that this is not that Bible faith which worketh by love, and which in the ancient worthies "wrought righteousness, obtained promises, quenched the violence of fire, made the weak strong, and put to flight the armies of the aliens." O this do-nothing religion, which professes to live upon Christ, but does nothing that Christ commands--this is not the religion of our ancient Bible! It is the same which our Lord portrays only to condemn it; one in which men cry, "Lord, Lord," but do not the things which He says. What can be a more fatal delusion than this?

7. Universalism is another refuge of lies. This system varies in some of its minor points, but in one great leading feature it remains ever the same--it always denies the justice of endless punishment. However much the advocates of Universalism may differ from each other in the less important points, they all agree

that all men will ultimately be saved; that sin does not deserve an endless punishment; and that it would therefore be unjust in God to inflict it.

Hence, whatever modification this system may put on, it will practically make sin out to be a mere trifle. For example, they will tell you that men are fully punished for all their sin as they go along--that the evil necessarily incidental to sinning in this life is all the punishment it deserves. The slight compunction of conscience, more or less, that wicked men feel for sin, together with possibly some providential evils, is all that God can justly inflict upon them as a punishment!

Think of this! Look at it! What sort of religion is this? To say that all the punishment which sin deserves is a little compunction of conscience, and perhaps some providential trials in this life!--a little trouble which some men have as they go along in consequence of sinning! I want to know if this is not blaspheming God in the worst possible manner! It lifts up its brazen front before heaven and tells God--"Thou great Jehovah--sin against thee is a small matter--thy laws are a mean affair--if I trample on them and roll them in the dust, and grind my heel upon them, what is that to thee? Who art Thou that Thou shouldst take in hand to punish such things in thy creatures with any positive inflictions of suffering? Dost Thou not know that the sinner's troubles in this life are full as much punishment as his sin deserves?"

Now see in this what Universalism is. See how it spits at God! Hear it proclaim, "Who art Thou that sin against Thee should be a thing of any account?"

And what is this but an attempt to dethrone Jehovah? It would fain make sin the merest trifle in the universe. And shall not the hail sweep away this refuge of lies? If it does not, then God will have forgotten to sustain his own honor and his own glorious throne.

But you say that you don't deserve any other punishment than the natural compunctions of your conscience, and the attendant troubles of sinning in this life!

Indeed! all the time receiving good from the hand of God, cradled from your birth in his very arms--fed from his own table--every want supplied from his exhaustless bounty--and yet, though you scorn to remember God with gratitude, and though you trample his law in the dust, yet you don't deserve any other punishment for your sin than you get from your conscience and from providence, as you go along! O what outrageous abuse of God! And what a shameless perversion of human reason! I know not how to express the indignation I feel at such insults offered to God. O, to think how they are contemning their own most gracious Father! He is fattening them on the bounties of his providence, and yet they deserve, they say, no punishment for sin--no hell after death! What a ridiculous delusion is this! Was there ever a more striking proof afforded of the degree to which sin can stultify the human intelligence!

This doctrine of Universalism of course rejects salvation by Christ. Its advocates may sometimes talk about being saved by Christ; but they mean nothing by it, for they hold that men are punished all they deserve in this world as they go along. Of course if punished all they deserve in this world they are not pardoned at all. But salvation by Christ is pardon; if it mean any thing it must include the idea of forgiveness, or pardon, so that the sinner saved by Christ is not punished, but pardoned. But Universalism punishes the sinner all he deserves, and yet pardons him too! It makes him suffer the full and utmost penalty of God's law, and at the same time saves him by Christ., so that he shall be pardoned, and not punished at all! What superb nonsense is this!

And again, what curious ideas of law and government are these which make the penalty of sin only the slight evils endured here from an uneasy conscience, and from a disciplinary providence. Here, in this world, is the sinner's hell--here, where sinners are in the main happy in all their sins, and yet are suffering the full penalty of God's law! Ah, what notions of God's law must Universalists have!

This system strangely confounds justice with mercy. It punishes men to chasten and reform them, and this strange process is identical with forgiveness! Inflicting the penalty of law on principles of strict justice is with them the same thing as forgiveness and mercy! For here, in this world, on every sinner, precisely this development takes place--God punishes him all he deserves, in his justice; and yet pardons him most freely through Christ, in his mercy! Surely this is mixing up and confounding together justice and mercy--very much as if men had no just idea of either.

Again, Universalists confound the benevolence of God with mere good nature. God is in their view so good-natured that He will make no discrimination as to character. O He loves all men most comprehensively and altogether alike! So pure good-natured is He!

The favorite term with them to designate their opponents is "partialists," assuming that it would be partial in God to save one and not another. This can appear plausible only to the most short-sighted intelligence. For, consider--Is a ruler impartial who treats the righteous and the wicked alike--who treats the law-abiding and the law breaker alike? Is this impartiality? Can justice treat men of opposite character and opposite merits, just alike? There is the case of Abraham's prayer for Sodom, "O Lord," he says, "wilt thou destroy the righteous with the wicked?" Would that be right? That the righteous should be treated as the wicked are--"be this far from Thee, O Lord!" "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

Now here, with the best good sense and reason, Abraham assumes that God would be partial and unjust if He were to treat the righteous and the wicked all alike, and he pleads as if he felt most sure that the Judge of all the earth would do no such thing. Abraham was no Universalist.

Impartiality implies dealing with men according to their deserts. Therefore if God saves all men, be they righteous or wicked, he can not be impartial, but must be partial.

Again, persons who hold this delusion must count Paul a madman. Hear him: "I say the truth in Christ; I lie not; my conscience bears me witness that I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart for my brethren;" and why?

He tells us, moreover, that in one city, "by the space of three years he ceased not to warn everyone night and day with tears."

But why is all this? If Paul really believed that all men will certainly be saved, what is he warning them against? And why those tears, and that continual heaviness and agony of spirit? Is he warning them to flee from the wrath to come? O no--no; but he trembles lest they should not all become Universalists. He finds that some of them are skeptical upon this doctrine, and hence are afraid of being finally lost, and he can not endure that their minds should be disturbed by such fears for the few days of the mortal life. O he is in the greatest agony lest he shall not convert all his Jewish brethren and all the Gentiles of Ephesus to the belief of universal salvation!! He is in dreadful agony of soul lest they should be troubled with fears of being lost! Alas, lest they should never become Universalists! And this is the Universalist's version of the character of the great apostle of the Gentiles!

But what does Paul say of himself? Does he tell us that in his view of the matter, Christ saves all? Aye, he says, that for himself, "he becomes all things to all men if by any means he might save some." And this is the extent of his Universalism!

Again, this doctrine represents Christ as either full of deceit or void of sense. Hear its explanation of Christ's words: Christ says, "Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." Now look at the exposition put on this language by the Universalists. "Hell," he says, "means nothing but the grave. There is no other hell but the grave." Of course he makes Jesus Christ say this in the passage just cited--"Fear not the assassin or the executioner, who can only kill you; but I will forewarn you whom you should fear: fear him," who after you are dead can throw your soul and body into--the grave--aye, yes, fear the sexton!! Ah, consider--he has power to bury you after you are dead--I say unto you, fear him! Now if Universalism makes no other hell but the grave, then Universalism makes Christ either a consummately deceitful man, or a man sadly deficient of intellect!

I might pursue the follies and absurdities of this delusion much farther; but time forbids, and I must therefore forbear.

REMARKS.

1. These delusions are only refuges to which people betake themselves to evade the claims of God. Who does not know this? Do men resort to these refuges for any other purpose? Does any man resort to Universalism in order to make himself more holy? Does he incline towards that doctrine because he thirsts after holiness, and longs to make himself and others more like God? Whoever saw an instance of this kind?

So of all these forms of delusion. They are refuges, and nothing else. They are got up to screen the soul from the pressure of obligation to do duty, or to avert the dreaded displeasure and wrath of God against sin.

2. A hail storm is one of the most striking emblems of the wrath of God against sin, which is ever seen in this world. Have you ever seen one? Its roar is dreadful. Rolling up its dark, heavy mass of cloud, it moves along in grand and awful majesty, as if the very ocean had burst from its bed and broken over its bounds, and were ready in an instant to dash its mountain torrents over us. I have not seen a hail storm for these many years without being reminded of this passage of Isaiah: "The hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters shall overflow the hiding-place." How full of terror and sublimity is this image of Jehovah's wrath! The roaring, rushing storm of all-destructive hail! It is as if the chariots of God were coming--coming with fire and storm and terrific indignation to overwhelm the guilty sinner in ruin under the out-burstings of his wrath.

Mark also how we are taught by varied figures, that the Lord will hunt out and destroy the fleeing, hiding sinner in the day of his enkindled anger. If the sinner has built up a refuge of lies, walling it in and supporting it with toil and care, the hail shall sweep it all away. If he betakes himself to caverns or to holes of the earth, "the waters shall overflow the hiding-place"--shall search him out and engulf him in ruin even there. What the wind and storm can not batter down the overflowing waters will search out and sweep with remorseless ruin. For him who stands up against God there shall be no escape--no remedy--no hiding-place forever!

And now let me ask--Where are your hiding-places? Are you seeking to construct them with lies, and under falsehood to hide yourselves? Or are you standing firmly and calmly on the rock of eternal truth? Seek not to avoid the point of this question. Meet it I pray you in candor and honesty; for the sinner's refuge is in God alone.

Before I was myself a Christian, a man once said to me, "If Universalism is true, we are all safe; if false, all who rest on it for salvation are lost. I think it will be well to be on the safe side."

True enough, thought I, the view of the Universalist, if false, is an infinite mistake; it forfeits every thing. Why then should I try to be a Universalist? Besides, if the doctrine be true, it can not make me any better. Looking round on all the Universalists I knew, I asked myself, are they really holy men? Are they made any better men by their belief in this system? Are they made more holy by its influence? I could not even pretend that they were. Of course I must infer that the system had nothing of real value to commend it.

But aside entirely from this, I do not believe that there are many men who are able to believe in Universalism. They may be able to deceive themselves so far as to hope that the system will prove true--just as many professors of religion cannot believe themselves to be Christians, but they can gather evidence perhaps to hope that they may be. But let them be summoned to die in one hour, and they would be in utter consternation! Perhaps they do not know that they are deceived, but they are very far from knowing that they are not. They content themselves to slide along, and put over their anxieties and cares about the certainty of the matter to some unknown future.

So the Universalist has no such assurance as would make him calm in death. I well recollect the case of Dr. B., who loved to converse with me before my conversion about his favorite doctrine of universal salvation. On one occasion our conversation took a very serious turn without our being aware of it. I asked him, "Doctor, are you satisfied with Universalism as a system of religious faith?" "No," said he, "I must confess, I am not. I told Elder J. the other day (his own Universalist preacher) that I really had so many doubts that I could get no peace from the doctrine; and he told me it was just so with himself, he could get no peace of mind in the doctrine, and he did not believe that any one else could."

For myself, this shocked me beyond measure. What, indeed! a professedly gospel minister preaching what does not convince himself of its truth--what he does not believe himself!--what gives him no peace of mind! Horrible!! This put an end forever to all my desire to be a Universalist. I had no longer any desire to hide myself under such a refuge of lies.

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