

Why the Wicked Are Spared for a Season.

by Edward Payson

God waits until sinners fill up a certain measure of iniquity before he destroys them, but when this measure is full, execution immediately follows.

Scripture: Genesis 15:16, Psalm 95:7, Proverbs 29:1, Ezekiel 18:4, Romans 2:5, Hebrews 3:15, Hebrews 10:26, 2 Peter 3:9, 1 John 1:9

Topics: "Divine Judgment", "Repentance"

Description

Edward Payson preaches about God's patience in waiting for sinners to fill up the measure of their iniquity before executing judgment, emphasizing that every impenitent sinner is constantly ripening for destruction by filling up their sins. He explains that sinners fill up their guilt more rapidly based on their opportunities, privileges, and means of grace, and warns that the measure of iniquity fills much faster than sinners are aware. Payson urges impenitent sinners to repent and seek Jesus Christ for forgiveness, highlighting the imminent danger of delaying repentance and the necessity of having an interest in Christ for salvation.

Transcript

"For the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full"

Genesis 15:16

words were addressed by Jehovah to Abraham, when he first promised to give his posterity the land of Canaan. While giving him this promise God informed him, that it would not be fulfilled till after the lapse of a considerable number of years; and assigned the reason of this delay in the words of our text. In the fourth generation, says he, thy seed shall come into the land again; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full. As if he had said, The putting of your posterity in possession of the land of Canaan, will be attended with the destruction of its present inhabitants, the Amorites; but they are not yet ripe for destruction; for the measure of their iniquity is not yet full.

But when their iniquity is full, your posterity shall return hither, and the Amorites shall be destroyed. This passage, taken in connection with its attending circumstances, teaches us the following important truth; God waits until sinners have filled up a certain measure of iniquity, before he executes the sentence by which they are doomed to destruction; but when this measure is full, execution certainly and immediately follows. To explain, establish and improve this remark is my present design.

I. In explanation of this remark, I observe, 1. That God is under no obligation to suspend the destruction of sinners until the measure of their iniquity is full, or even to suspend it for a single hour. The life of every sinner is already forfeited. By the very first sin of which he is guilty, he transgresses the law of God; and that law pronounces sentence of death on every transgressor. Its language is, the soul that sinneth shall die. This sentence God may with the most perfect justice execute, at any moment, on every sinner.

Hence the prophet, speaking in the name of his countrymen says, It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed. This is the same as if he had said, Justice dooms us to be consumed; we deserve to be consumed; it is mercy alone which spares us. This is equally true of all sinners. There is nothing but the sovereign, unmerited mercy of God, which keeps any of them one moment out of everlasting burnings. But God is not obliged to exercise this mercy. He may, if he chooses, adhere rather to the strict rules of justice.

He may execute the sentence of a just law, whenever he pleases. He cannot, therefore, be under the least obligation to delay the punishment of any sinner, for a single moment. As in human governments, when a criminal is capitally convicted and sentenced, the supreme executive may order execution to take place immediately, or defer it for a week or a month; so God may take the sinner's forfeited life this moment, or grant him a reprieve for one or for many years. Such a reprieve he usually grants, as he did in the case of the Amorites.

We remark, 2. That when we say, God waits until sinners have filled up a certain measure of iniquity before he destroys them, we do not mean that he waits upon all, till they have filled up the same measure. In other words, we do not mean that all sinners are equal in sinfulness and guilt at the hour of their death. To assert this would be contrary to fact and daily observation. We very often see youthful sinners, and those not of the worst stamp, cut down and hurried to the retributions of eternity; while others, apparently much more guilty, are suffered to become old and hardened in sin; and to fill up a much larger measure of iniquity.

It is therefore evident, that God does not allow all sinners to live till they have filled up the same measure of iniquity. In this, no less than in other respects, he acts like a sovereign. He determines with respect to each particular sinner, how long a season of probation shall be granted him, how large a measure of guilt he shall be allowed to fill up, before sentence of death is inflicted. But when the measure; be it greater or smaller, is full, the sinner's destruction immediately follows.

I remark, 3. That every impenitent sinner is constantly filling up the measure of his iniquity; and thus constantly ripening for destruction. This is evident from the fact, that all the feelings, thoughts, words and actions, of the impenitent, are sinful. They are so, because none of them proceed from that supreme love to God, which the law requires. They are so, because none of them are prompted by a desire to promote the glory of God; at the promotion of which we are commanded to aim in every thing we do.

Agreeably, the Scriptures assert, that the ploughing of the wicked is sin, and that even the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord. Since then, impenitent sinners are constantly sinning, they are constantly filling up the measure of their iniquities. There is not a day, not a waking hour, or moment, in which the dreadful work does not advance towards its completion. Hence the apostle, addressing impenitent sinners, says, Not considering that the goodness of God, that is, his goodness in sparing thy life, is designed to lead thee to repentance, thou, after thy hardness and impenitent heart, treasurest up to thyself wrath against the day of wrath, and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to every man according to his works.

Now sinners treasure up wrath, when they fill up the measure of their iniquities; for since God will recompense every man according to his works, it follows, that those whose sins are most numerous and aggravated will suffer in the greatest degree the wrath of God. 4. Though the measure of every impenitent sinner's iniquity is constantly filling up; it fills much more rapidly in some cases, and at some seasons, than at others. Some sinners appear to sin with great eagerness, boldness and diligence; to sin with all their heart, and soul, and mind, and strength, as if they were determined to see how much guilt they can contract in a short space.

Others, who are apparently much less vicious and abandoned, fill up the measure of their sins with equal rapidity, in consequence of enjoying and abusing great religious privileges, opportunities and means of grace. Indeed, it may be laid down as a general rule, from which there are no exceptions, that the measure of every impenitent sinner's guilt fills rapidly, in proportion to the light, the conviction, and the means of moral improvement against which he sins. As the productions of the earth ripen most speedily where they enjoy in the greatest degree a rich soil, frequent showers, and the genial beams of the sun, so sinners ripen most speedily for destruction, when they are favored in the greatest degree with religious privileges and opportunities.

When a sinner is visited by some dangerous disease; is brought apparently near to death; is in consequence awakened, alarmed, and led to promise, that should his life be spared, he will devote it to God; and when, on being restored to health, he forgets his promise, and returns to his sinful courses, he adds very largely to his former guilt; more perhaps than he could have done in whole years of uninterrupted health. Similar remarks may be made respecting those who lose their possessions, their children, or near friends, without deriving any spiritual advantage from the loss.

There are, perhaps, no threatenings in the Bible, more terrible than those, which are denounced against such as do not repent when under the stroke of God's correcting hand. To some who were guilty of this conduct, God says, Surely, this iniquity shall not be purged from you till ye die. But never do sinners fill up the measure of their guilt more rapidly, than when they sin against conviction; against the remonstrances of an enlightened conscience, and the influences of the Spirit of God.

Sinners who are guilty of this conduct, who stifle or lose religious impressions, do more perhaps to fill up the measure of their iniquities, than they had previously done during the whole course of their lives. This, of all sins, approaches most nearly to the sin against the Holy Ghost, that sin for which there is no forgiveness. Having thus endeavored to illustrate, we proceed. II. To prove the assertion, which was drawn from our text. 1. The truth of this assertion may be proved from other passages of Scripture.

St. Paul informs us that the conduct of the Jews tended to fill up their sins always for, he adds, wrath is come upon them to the uttermost. By the mouth of the prophet Joel, God says, Put ye in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe, for their wickedness is great. And, using the same figure, St. John informs us that he saw an angel seated on a cloud, having in his hand a sharp sickle. And another angel came out of the temple of God, and said to him that sat on the cloud, Thrust in thy sickle and reap, for the time is come for thee to reap, for the harvest of the earth is ripe.

And he that sat on the cloud thrust in his sickle, and gathered the vintage of the earth, and cast it into the great wine-press of the wrath of God. These passages are of the same import with the remark drawn from our text. The angel with the sharp sickle, represents the instruments which God employs to execute his judgments upon sinners. This angel remained inactive until he received a command to thrust in his sickle

and reap; and the reason assigned for this command was, that the harvest of the earth was ripe; or, as the prophet expresses it, that the wickedness of men was great.

In other words, the measure of their iniquity was full; and of course they were ripe for destruction. Then, and not till then, they were cast into the wine-press of the wrath of God; a figurative expression, denoting the prison and the punishment which await impenitent sinners, when death shall remove them from the world. The same truths appear to be taught by the parable of the barren fig-tree. This tree was sentenced to be cut down, on account of its barrenness, but a reprieve of one year was granted, at the expiration of which period, if it still remained barren, the sentence was to be executed.

So sinners are sentenced to die by the divine law, but they are spared for an appointed time, till all means have been used with them in vain, and the measure of their iniquity is full. Then mercy ceases to plead for them, and death cuts them down, as fit only to serve for fuel to the fire of divine wrath. The axe, says John, is laid at the root of the tree; every tree, therefore, which bringeth not forth good fruit, is hewn down and cast into the fire. My friends, every impenitent sinner is a barren tree.

The axe of divine justice is laid at its root, and at the appointed time the sentence will go forth, Cut it down! why cumbereth it the ground? 2. The truth of the remark under consideration is further proved, by the history of God's dealings with sinful nations and individuals. Thus in the days of Noah, the longsuffering of God waited while the ark was preparing; but when the appointed limit of one hundred and twenty years was reached, when the guilty inhabitants of the world had filled up the measure of their iniquity, the flood came and swept them all away.

Another instance of the same kind we have in the history of the Israelites who came out of Egypt. They murmured, rebelled; and provoked God in various ways; but were still spared, till they reached the borders of the promised land. Then, just as they were ready to enter it, they rebelled again; and this last act of rebellion filled the measure of their iniquity to the very brim. In consequence, they were turned back into the wilderness, and all above twenty years of age were doomed there to perish, and never to see the land which they had despised; nor could any intercession prevail with God to revoke the sentence.

Many similar instances may be found in the history of succeeding generations of the Jews, and of some of their kings; and one, still more striking, occurred in the time of our Saviour. He declares that the generation then living, were filling up the measure of their fathers. Soon after this, it became full; and the nation was destroyed without mercy. I proceed, III. To make some improvement of the subject, 1. From this subject you may learn, my impenitent hearers, why God spares sinners long after their lives are forfeited, and why he spares you.

It is because the measure of your iniquity is not yet full. You may, as former generations of sinners have done, encourage yourselves in a sinful course on account of his delay. As the wise man expresses it, Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, your hearts may be fully set in you to do evil. You hear, indeed, the threatenings of God's violated law denounced against you, but you do not yet feel their execution; and like those of old, who asked, Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things remain as they were, you may be asking in your hearts, Where are any proofs of God's anger against us to be seen?

All things pursue their course. The sun shines brightly over our heads; the showers of heaven descend upon us; the earth produces food in abundance for our support, and sickness and death do not invade us. It cannot be that God is angry, while he thus loads us with favors. But remember, just in this manner were

former generations of sinners favored, and just in this manner they encouraged themselves in sin. For one hundred and twenty years before the flood, the sun rose daily, and pursued his accustomed course; the earth brought forth its fruits in abundance, and nothing in nature foretold the impending rain.

Thus too it was in Sodom; they ate, they drank, they married and were given in marriage, and knew not till the flood came and swept them all away. Remember our Saviour's declaration, that God causes his sun to shine, and his showers to descend on the evil and unthankful, no less than upon the righteous. Remember, that the wretch who is doomed to be blasted by a thunderbolt, just hears the thunder roll, and sees the vengeful lightnings spending their fury at a distance. He little thinks that the cloud which he sees, thus distantly rising, bears his fate in its bosom.

Careless and thoughtless, he pursues his way, while the cloud rises, condenses, blackens, and passes over his head. At length, the destined, fatal moment arrives; the bolt falls, his blackened corpse lies prostrate on the ground, and his naked soul stands trembling before the tribunal of God. So you, my impenitent hearers, now hear the thunder of God's threatenings murmur at a distance. Its flashes daily [to] strike some of your fellow sinners, the measure of whose iniquity is full; but as yet, they strike not you.

The measure of your guilt is, however, fast filling up; the last drop which it can contain will soon fall into it, and then death, who is now kept at a distance, will instantly find you out. God says respecting sinners, Their feet shall slide in due time. Till that due, that appointed time arrives, your feet will seem to stand firm; but then they will slide in a moment, and terrible will be your fall. Meanwhile, no sinner can form even a probable conjecture, how near the destined moment of his fall may be.

He cannot see the measure of his iniquity. He cannot know how large a measure God may spare him to fill up. He cannot know how many more sins are wanting to fill it. All respecting it is darkness and uncertainty. One thing, however, is certain; that the measure of every sinner's guilt fills much faster than he is aware. Who, says the Psalmist, can understand his errors? That is, who can know how often, or how greatly, he offends? Was there ever a spendthrift, or a man careless of his affairs, whose debts did not increase far beyond his expectations?

Much more does the guilt of careless sinners increase beyond all their erroneous calculations. Hence the inspired writers inform us, that the ruin of sinners is often most near, when they imagine it to be at the greatest distance. While they are promising themselves peace and safety, says an apostle, then sudden destruction cometh upon them, and they shall not escape. And, my hearers, have not many of you, judging even by your own imperfect knowledge, and erroneous standard, reason to fear that your measure of iniquity is nearly full?

Reflect a moment, how many days and years you have spent in constantly neglecting and offending God. Think of the sins of childhood, of youth, and of riper years; think of your sins in action, in word, in thought, and in feeling. Think of your sins of omission, as well as of those of commission; how many things you have left undone which you ought to have done. Remember, too, what privileges, opportunities and means of grace you have enjoyed; how many sermons; warnings, and invitations you have slighted; against what light and conviction you have sinned.

For many years you have been in a situation peculiarly favorable for filling up the measure of your iniquity. Many, perhaps most of you have been visited with afflictions. Some of you have been brought near to death; some of you have lost property, children and friends; and you have all seen sufficient to convince you of the transient, unsatisfying nature of every temporal object. All of you have lived in a day when

religion is reviving, and its influences greatly extending, not only around you, but through the world.

Many of you have felt the power of divine truth; your consciences have been awakened; you have been, in a greater or less degree, alarmed; the Spirit of God has invited you, and you have seen many of your relatives, friends or acquaintances, yield to his influence. Consider all this, and you will, I think, find great reason to fear that the measure of your iniquity must be nearly full. Certainly, if it is not so, your appointed measure is exceedingly large, and, of course, your punishment will be proportionally great; for the cup of wrath which every sinner must drink, will be in exact proportion to the measure of guilt which he has filled up.

To those of you who are far advanced in life, these remarks apply with peculiar force. It is certain that according to the course of nature, you cannot have many years to live; it [is] equally certain, therefore, that your measure of iniquity must not only exceedingly large, but nearly full. And O how harrowing, how terrible is the thought, that you have spent a long life in doing nothing but filling up the measure of your iniquity, and of course in treasuring up wrath against the day of wrath.

Should death come, and find you impenitent, better, far better would it be for you to have died in infancy; nay, infinitely better had it been for you never to have been born. Perhaps the younger part of my impenitent hearers may abuse these remarks. Perhaps you may infer from them that your measure of iniquity is very far from being full; and that you may therefore safely spend a few more years in the practice of 04 But remember, the young die, as well as the old. Remember that God may have determined to spare you, only till you shall have filled up a comparatively small measure of iniquity.

It is a very ancient remark, a remark which has been verified by the observations of many centuries, that God sometimes makes very quick work with sinners. Or, to use the language of inspiration, he finishes the work and cuts it short in righteousness. And should you live to old age, you may not become religious. You may live curly to fill up the measure of your iniquity. The young, then, as well as the old, have reason to tremble and to repent. 2. From this subject, my hearers; you may learn the indispensable necessity of an interest in the Lord .Jesus Christ.

Though you are constantly adding to your sins, to diminish them is beyond your power. You cannot take one drop from the cup of your iniquities. You cannot even refrain from filling it; for while you continue to neglect the Saviour, you are constantly adding sin to sin; your actions, words, thoughts and feelings are all sinful. Yet you must cease to commit new sins, and those which you have already committed must be blotted out, or you will perish forever. Christ alone can enable you to do either.

His blood cleanses from all sin; he is able to cast all your iniquities into the depths of the sea; and he can renovate your hearts, and render you holy, so that you shall no longer treasure up wrath against the day of wrath. To him, then, every motive urges you to fly without delay. The delay of a single hour may be fatal. There must arrive a time when the cup of your iniquities will be filled to the brim; when the addition of a single drop will cause it to overflow. With respect to some of you, that time may have arrived.

A neglect of this warning, the loss of this Sabbath, may be the additional drop, which shall cause the measure of your iniquities to overflow. Then it will be forever too late. Then Christ himself cannot save you, will not plead for you, but will assent to your condemnation. Now, then, while it is an accepted time and a day of salvation, look to the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world. Today, if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts. 3. There is an important sense in which many of the preceding remarks are applicable to Christians.

Those of you who have been such for any considerable time, have often, when contemplating your sins, and especially when in a religious declension, been ready to conclude that God would visit you with some severe temporal affliction, as a mark of his displeasure. But instead of this, you have found him returning to you in mercy, healing your backslidings, and putting the song of salvation into your mouths. Having often found this to be the case, you may begin to conclude that it will always be so, and thus you may be insensibly led to become careless and slothful, to think lightly of sin, and not to guard against the first symptoms of declension.

But if so, God will, in a terrible manner, convince you of your mistake, and make you to know experimentally that it is an evil and bitter thing to forsake him. He remembers, though we are prone to forget, how often he has displayed the sovereignty of his mercy in pardoning us, when we deserved correction; and sooner or later, when the measure of your backslidings shall be full, he will, by some severe temporal affliction or spiritual trial, bring all your sins to remembrance, and teach you that even his children shall not offend him with impunity.

It is to his professing people that he says, Because I have purged thee and thou wast not purged, that is, because I have often healed thy backslidings, and cleansed thee from thy sins, and yet thou didst return to them again; --therefore thou shalt not be purged from thy filthiness any more, till I have caused my fury to rest upon thee. And permit me, my brethren, to remind you, abuse the present instance of God's sovereign that should we mercy, we shall have reason to expect some such token of his displeasure.

We had often forsaken him, and he had as often restored us. But, unmindful of this mercy, we again forsook him, and departed from him farther than before. Yet he has once more restored to us the joys of his salvation, and visited us with his free Spirit. And now if we forsake him again after this, it will be strange indeed, if he does not visit our iniquities with stripes and our backslidings with a rod.

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