

That Comforts and Joys Seem to Follow Awakenings and Convictions of Conscience, in a Certain Order, Is No Sign

by Jonathan Edwards

God's manner of dealing with men involves leading them into a wilderness of conviction and humility before speaking comfortably to them.

Scripture: Genesis 15:12, Exodus 2:23, Leviticus 13:45, Deuteronomy 32:36, Jeremiah 3:23, Matthew 8:24, Matthew 15:22, Luke 8:43, 2 Corinthians 1:8

Topics: "Salvation Process", "Spiritual Awakening"

Description

Jonathan Edwards preaches about the process of salvation, emphasizing that before God delivers individuals from sin, they must first have a deep sense of the evil they are being saved from. This includes experiencing distress, helplessness, and a realization of their need for God's mercy. Edwards highlights that God often leads people through a 'wilderness' of distress before bringing them to a place of deliverance and joy. He also discusses how God's manifestations to believers often involve a progression from terror to comfort, as seen in various biblical examples.

Transcript

VIII. Nothing can certainly be determined concerning the nature of the affections, by this, that comforts and joys seem to follow awakenings and convictions of conscience, in a certain order. Many persons seem to be prejudiced against affections and experiences that come in such a method, as has been much insisted on by many divines; first, such awakenings, fears, and awful apprehensions, followed with such legal humblings, in a sense of total sinfulness and helplessness, and then, such and such light and comfort; they look upon all such schemes, laying down such methods and steps, to be of men's devising; and particularly if high affections of joy follow great distress and terror, it is made by many an argument against those affections.

But such prejudices and objections are without reason or Scripture. Surely it cannot be unreasonable to suppose, that before God delivers persons from a state of sin and exposedness to eternal destruction, he should give them some considerable sense of the evil he delivers from; that they may be delivered sensibly, and understand their own salvation, and know something of what God does for them. As men that are saved are in two exceeding different states, first a state of condemnation, and then in a state of

justification and blessedness: and as God, in the work of the salvation of mankind, deals with them suitably to their intelligent rational nature; so it seems reasonable, and agreeable to God's wisdom, that men who are saved should be in these two states sensibly; first, that they should, sensibly to themselves, be in a state of condemnation, and so in a state of woeful calamity and dreadful misery, and so afterwards in a state of deliverance and happiness; and that they should be first sensible of their absolute extreme necessity, and afterwards of Christ's sufficiency and God's mercy through him.

And that it is God's manner of dealing with men, to "lead them into a wilderness, before he speaks comfortably to them," and so to order it, that they shall be brought into distress, and made to see their own helplessness and absolute dependence on his power and grace, before he appears to work any great deliverance for them, is abundantly manifest by the Scripture. Then is God wont to "repent himself for his professing people, when their strength is gone, and there is none shut up or left," and when they are brought to see that their false gods cannot help them, and that the rock in whom they trusted is vain, Deut. 32:36, 37.

Before God delivered the children of Israel out of Egypt, they were prepared for it, by being made to "see that they were in an evil case," and "to cry unto God, because of their hard bondage," Exod. 2:23, and 5:19. And before God wrought that great deliverance for them at the Red Sea, they were brought into great distress, the wilderness had shut them in, they could not turn to the right hand nor the left, and the Red Sea was before them, and the great Egyptian host behind, and they were brought to see that they could do nothing to help themselves, and that if God did not help them, they should be immediately swallowed up; and then God appeared, and turned their cries into songs.

So before they were brought to their rest, and to enjoy the milk and honey of Canaan, God "led them through a great and terrible wilderness, that he might humble them and teach them what was in their heart, and so do them good in their latter end," Deut. 8:2, 16. The woman that had the issue of blood twelve years, was not delivered, until she had first "spent all her living on earthly physicians, and could not be healed of any," and so was left helpless, having no more money to spend; and then she came to the great Physician, without any money or price, and was healed by him, Luke 8:43, 44.

Before Christ would answer the request of the woman of Canaan, he first seemed utterly to deny her, and humbled her, and brought her to own herself worthy to be called a dog; and then he showed her mercy, and received her as a dear child, Matt. 15:22, &c. The Apostle Paul, before a remarkable deliverance, was "pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch that he despaired even of life; but had the sentence of death in himself, that he might not trust in himself, but in God that raiseth the dead," 2 Cor. 1:8, 9, 10.

There was first a great tempest, and the ship was covered with the waves, and just ready to sink, find the disciples were brought to cry to Jesus, "Lord save us, we perish;" and then the winds and seas were rebuked, and there was a great calm, Matt. 8:24, 25, 26. The leper, before he is cleansed, must have his mouth stopped, by a covering on his upper lip, and was to acknowledge his great misery and utter uncleanness by rending his clothes, and crying, "Unclean, unclean," Lev. 13:45.

And backsliding Israel, before God heals them, are brought to "acknowledge that they have sinned, and have not obeyed the voice of the Lord," and to see that "they lie down in their shame, and that confusion covers them," and "that in vain is salvation hoped for from the hills, and from the multitude of mountains," and that God only can save them, Jer. 3:23, 24, 25. Joseph, who was sold by his brethren, and therein was a type of Christ, brings his brethren into great perplexity and distress, and brings them to reflect on

their sin, and to say, We are verily guilty; and at last to resign up themselves entirely into his hands for bondmen; and then reveals himself to them, as their brother and their savior.

And if we consider those extraordinary manifestations which God made of himself to saints of old, we shall find that he commonly first manifested himself in a way which was terrible, and then by those things that were comfortable. So it was with Abraham; first, a horror of great darkness fell upon him, and then God revealed himself to him in sweet promises, Gen. 15:12, 13. So it was with Moses at Mount Sinai; first, God appeared to him in all the terrors of his dreadful Majesty, so that Moses said, "I exceedingly fear and quake," and then he made all his goodness to pass before him, and proclaimed his name, "The Lord God gracious and merciful," &c. So it was with Elijah; first, there is a stormy wind, and earthquakes and devouring fire, and then a still, small, sweet voice, 1 Kings 19. So it was with Daniel; he first saw Christ's countenance as lightning, that terrified him, and caused him to faint away; and then he is strengthened and refreshed with such comfortable words as these, "O Daniel, a man greatly beloved," Dan. 10. So it was with the apostle John, Rev. 1. And there is an analogy observable in God's dispensations and deliverances which he works for his people, and the manifestations which he makes of himself to them, both ordinary and extraordinary.

But there are many things in Scripture which do more directly show, that this is God's ordinary manner in working salvation for the souls of men, and in the manifestations God makes of himself and of his mercy in Christ, in the ordinary works of his grace on the hearts of sinners. The servant that owed his prince ten thousand talents, is first held to his debt, and the king pronounces sentence of condemnation upon him, and commands him to be sold, and his wife and children, and payment to be made; and thus he humbles him, and brings him to own the as whole of the debt to be just, and then forgives him all. The prodigal son spends all he has, and is brought to see himself in extreme circumstances, and to humble himself, and own his unworthiness, before he is relieved and feasted by his father, Luke 15. Old inveterate wounds must be searched to the bottom, in order to healing: and the Scripture compares sin, the wound of the soul, to this, and speaks of healing this wound without thus searching of it, as vain and deceitful, Jer. 7:11. Christ, in the work of his grace on the hearts of men, is compared to rain on the new mown grass, grass that is cut down with a scythe, Psal. 72:6, representing his refreshing, comforting influences on the wounded spirit. Our first parents, after they had sinned, were first terrified with God's majesty and justice, and had their sin, with its aggravations, set before them by their Judge, before they were relieved by the promise of the seed of the woman. Christians are spoken of as those "that have fled for refuge to lay hold on the hope set before them," Heb. 6:18, which representation implies great fear and sense of danger, preceding. To the like purpose, Christ is called "a hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest, and as rivers of water in a dry place, and as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land," Isa. 32 at the beginning. And it seems to be the natural import of the word gospel, glad tidings, that it is news of deliverance and salvation, after great fear and distress. There is also reason to suppose, that God deals with particular believers, as he dealt with his church, which he first made to hear his voice in the law, with terrible thunders and lightning and kept her under that schoolmaster to prepare her for Christ; and then comforted her with the joyful sound of the gospel from Mount Zion. So likewise John the Baptist came to prepare the way for Christ, and prepare men's hearts for his reception, by showing them their sins, and by bringing the self-righteous Jews off from their own righteousness, telling them that they were "a generation of vipers," and showing them their danger of "the wrath to come," telling them that "the axe was laid at the root of the trees," &c.

And if it be indeed God's manner (as I think the foregoing considerations show that it undoubtedly is), before he gives men the comfort of a deliverance from their sin and misery, to give them a considerable sense of the greatness and dreadfulness of those evils, and their extreme wretchedness by reason of them; surely it is not unreasonable to suppose, that persons, at least oftentimes, while under these views, should have great distresses and terrible apprehensions of mind; especially if it be considered what these evils are that they have a view of; which are no other than great and manifold sins, against the infinite majesty of the great Jehovah, and the suffering of the fierceness of his wrath to all eternity. And the more so still, when we have many plain instances in Scripture of persons that have actually been brought into great distress, by such convictions, before they have received saving consolations: as the multitude at Jerusalem, who were "pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?" And the apostle Paul, who trembled and was astonished, before he was comforted; and the gaoler, when "he called for a light, and sprang in, and came trembling, and fell down before Paul and Silas, and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

From these things it appears to be very unreasonable in professing Christians to make this an objection against the truth and spiritual nature of the comfortable and joyful affections which any have, that they follow such awful apprehensions and distresses as have been mentioned.

And, on the other hand, it is no evidence that comforts and joys are right, because they succeed great terrors, and amazing fears of hell.[21] This seems to be what some persons lay a great weight upon; esteeming great terrors an evidence of the great work of the law as wrought on the heart, well preparing the way for solid comfort; not considering that terror and a conviction of conscience are different things. For though convictions of conscience do often cause terror; yet they do not consist in it; and terrors do often arise from other causes. Convictions of conscience, through the influences of God's Spirit, consist in conviction of sinfulness of heart and practices and of the dreadfulness of sins as committed against a God of terrible majesty, infinite holiness and hatred of sin, and strict justice in punishing of it. But there are some persons that have frightful apprehensions of hell, a dreadful pit ready to swallow them up, and flames just ready to lay hold of them, and devils around them, ready to seize them; who at the same time seem to have very little proper enlightenings of conscience really convincing them of their sinfulness of heart and life. The devil, if permitted, can terrify men as well as the Spirit of God, it is a work natural to him, and he has many ways of doing it, in a manner tending to no good.

He may exceedingly affright persons, by impressing on them images and ideas of many external things, of a countenance frowning, a sword drawn, black clouds of vengeance, words of an awful doom pronounced,[22] hell gaping, devils coming, and the like, not to convince persons of things that are true, and revealed in the word of God, but to lead them to vain and groundless determinations; as that their day is past, that they are reprobated, that God is implacable, that he has come to a resolution immediately to cut them off, &c.

And the terrors which some persons have, are very much owing to the particular constitution and temper they are of. Nothing is more manifest than that some persons are of such a temper and frame, that their imaginations are more strongly impressed with everything they are affected with, than others; and the impression on the imagination reacts on the affection, and raises that still higher; and so affection and imagination act reciprocally, one on another, till their affection is raised to a vast height, and the person is swallowed up, and loses as possession of himself.[23]

And some speak of a great sight they have of their wickedness, who really, when the matter comes to be well examined into and thoroughly weighted, are found to have little or no convictions of conscience. They tell of a dreadful hard heart, and how their heart lies like a stone; when truly they have none of those things in their minds or thoughts, wherein the hardness of men's heart does really consist. They tell of a dreadful load and sink of sin, a heap of black and loathsome filthiness within them; when, if the matter be carefully inquired into, they have not in view anything wherein the corruption of nature does truly consist, nor have they any thought of any particular thing wherein their hearts are sinfully defective, or fall short of what ought to be in them, or any exercises at all of corruption in them. And many think also they have great convictions of their actual sins, who truly have none. They tell how their sins are set in order before them, they see them stand encompassing them round in a row, with a dreadful, frightful appearance; when really they have not so much as one of the sins they gave been guilty of in the course of their lives, coming into view, that they are affected with the aggravations of.

And if persons have had great terrors which really have been from the awakening and convincing influences of the Spirit of God, it doth not thence follow that their terrors must needs issue in true comfort. The unmortified corruption of the heart may quench the Spirit of God (after he has been striving) by leading men to presumptuous, and self-exalting hopes and joys, as well as otherwise. It is not every woman who is really in travail, that brings forth a real child; but it may be a monstrous production, without anything of the form or properties of human nature belonging to it. Pharaoh's chief baker after he had lain in the dungeon with Joseph, had a vision that raised his hopes and he was lifted out of the dungeon, as well as the chief butler; but it was to be hanged.

But if comforts and joys do not only come after great terrors and awakenings, but there be an appearance of such preparatory convictions and humiliations, and brought about very distinctly, by such steps, and in such a method as has frequently been observable in true converts; this is no certain sign that the light and comforts which follow are true and saving. And for these following reasons:

First, As the devil can counterfeit all the saving operations and graces of the Spirit of God, so he can counterfeit those operations that are preparatory to grace. If Satan can counterfeit those effects of God's Spirit, which are special, divine and sanctifying, so that there shall be a very great resemblance, in all that can be observed by others; much more easily may he imitate those works of God's Spirit which are common, and which men, while they are yet his own children, are the subjects of. These works are in no wise so much above him as the other. There are no works of God that are so high and divine, and above the powers of nature, and out of reach of the power of all creatures, as those works of his Spirit, whereby he forms the creature in his own image, and makes it to be a partaker of the divine nature. But if the devil can be the author of such resemblances of these as have been spoken of, without doubt he may of those that are of an infinitely inferior kind. And it is abundantly evident in fact, that there are false humiliations and false submissions, as well as false comforts.[24] How far was Saul brought, though a very wicked man, and of a haughty spirit, when he (though a great king) was brought, in conviction of his sin, as it were to fall down, all in tears, weeping aloud, before David his own subject (and one that he had for a long time mortally hated, and openly treated as an enemy), and condemn himself before him, crying out, "Thou art more righteous than I: for thou hast rewarded me good, whereas I have rewarded thee evil!" And at another time, "I have sinned, I have played the fool, I have erred exceedingly," 1 Sam. 24:16, 17, and chap. 26:21. And yet Saul seems then to have had very little of the influences of the Spirit of God, it being after God's Spirit had departed from him, and given him up, and an evil spirit from the Lord troubled him. And if this proud monarch, in a pang of affection, was brought to humble himself so low before a subject

that he hated, and still continued an enemy to, there doubtless may be appearances of great conviction and humiliation in men, before God, while they yet remain enemies to him, and though they finally continue so. There is oftentimes in men who are terrified through fears of hell, a great appearance of their being brought off from their own righteousness, when they are not brought off from it in all ways, although they are in many ways that are more plain and visible. They have only exchanged some ways of trusting in their own righteousness, for others that are more secret and subtle. Oftentimes a great degree of discouragement, as to many things they used to depend upon, is taken for humiliation: that is called a submission to God, which is no absolute submission, but has some secret bargain in it, that it is hard to discover.

Secondly, If the operations and effects of the Spirit of God, in the convictions, and comforts of true converts, may be sophisticated, then the order of them may be imitated. If Satan can imitate the things themselves, he may easily put them one after another, in such a certain order. If the devil can make A, B, and C, it is as easy for him to put A first, and B next, and C next, as to range item in a contrary order. The nature of divine things is harder for the devil to imitate, than their order. He cannot exactly imitate divine operations in their nature, though his counterfeits may be very much like them in external appearance, but he can exactly imitate their order. When counterfeits are made, there is no divine power needful in order to the placing one of them first, and another last. And therefore no order or method of operations and experiences is any certain sign of their divinity. That only is to be trusted to, as a certain evidence of grace, which Satan cannot do, and which it is impossible should be brought to pass by any power short of divine.

Thirdly, We have no certain rule to determine how far God's own Spirit may go in those operations and convictions which in themselves are not spiritual and saving, and yet the person that is the subject of them never be converted, but fall short of salvation at last. There is no necessary connection in the nature of things, between anything that a natural man may experience while in a state of nature, and the saving grace of God's Spirit. And if there be no connection in the nature of things, then there can be no known and certain connection at all, unless it be by divine revelation. But there is no revealed certain connection between a state of salvation, and anything that a natural man can be the subject of, before he believes in Christ. God has revealed no certain connection between salvation, and any qualifications in men, but only grace and its fruits. And therefore we do not find any legal convictions, or comforts, following these legal convictions, in any certain method or order, ever once mentioned in the Scripture, as certain signs of grace, or things peculiar to the saints; although we do find gracious operations and effects themselves, so mentioned, thousands of times. Which should be enough with Christians who are willing to have the word of God, rather than their own philosophy, and experiences and conjectures, as their sufficient and sure guide in things of this nature.

Fourthly, Experience does greatly confirm, that persons seeming to have convictions and comforts following one another in such a method and order, as is frequently observable in true converts, is no certain sign of grace.[25] I appeal to all those ministers in this land, who have had much occasion of dealing with souls in the late extraordinary season, whether there have not been many who do not prove well, that have given a fair account of their experiences, and have seemed to be converted according to rule, i.e., with convictions and affections, succeeding distinctly and exactly, in that order and method, which has been ordinarily insisted on, as the order of the operations of the Spirit of God in conversion.

And as a seeming to have this distinctness as to steps and method, is no certain sign that a person is converted; so a being without it, is no evidence that a person is not converted. For though it might be made evident to a demonstration, on Scripture principles, that a sinner cannot be brought heartily to

receive Christ as his Savior, who is not convinced of his sin and misery, and of his own emptiness and helplessness, and his just desert of eternal condemnation; and that therefore such convictions must be some way implied in what is wrought in his soul; yet nothing proves it to be necessary, that all those things which are implied or presupposed in an act of faith in Christ, must be plainly and distinctly wrought in the soul, in so many successive and separate works of the Spirit, that shall be each one plain and manifest, in all who are truly converted.

On the contrary (as Mr. Shepard observes), sometimes the change made in a saint, at first work, is like a confused chaos; so that the saints know not what to make of it. The manner of the Spirit's proceeding in them that are born of the Spirit, is very often exceeding mysterious and unsearchable; we, as it were, hear the sound of it, the effect of it is discernible; but no man can tell whence it came, or whither it went. And it is oftentimes as difficult to know the way of the Spirit in the new birth, as in the first birth; Eccl. 11:5, "Thou knowest not what is the way of the Spirit, or how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child; even so thou knowest not the works of God, that worketh all."

The ingenerating of a principle of grace in the soul, seems in Scripture to be compared to the conceiving of Christ in the womb, Gal. 4:19. And therefore the Church is called Christ's mother, Cant. 3:11. And so is every particular believer, Matt. 12:49, 50. And the conception of Christ in the womb of the blessed virgin, by the power of the Holy Ghost, seems to be a designed resemblance of the conception of Christ in the soul of a believer, by the power of the same Holy Ghost.

And we know not what is the way of the Spirit, nor how the bones do grow, either in the womb, or heart that conceives this holy child. The new creature may use that language in Psal. 139:14, 15, "I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvellous are thy works, and that my soul knoweth right well. My substance was not hid from thee, when I was made in secret." Concerning the generation of Christ, both in his person, and also in the hearts of his people, it may be said, as in Isa. 53:8, "Who can declare his generation?"

We know not the works of God, that worketh all. "It is the glory of God to conceal a thing" (Prov. 25:2), and to have "his path as it were in the mighty waters, that his footsteps may not be known;" and especially in the works of his Spirit on the hearts of men, which are the highest and chief of his works. And therefore it is said, Isa. 40:13, "Who hath directed the Spirit of the Lord, or being his counselor hath taught him?" It is to be feared that some have gone too far towards directing the Spirit of the Lord, and marking out his footsteps for him, and limiting him to certain steps and methods.

Experience plainly shows, that God's Spirit is unsearchable and untraceable, in some of the best of Christians, in the method of his operations, in their conversion. Nor does the Spirit of God proceed discernibly in the steps of a particular established scheme, one half so often as is imagined. A scheme of what is necessary, and according to a rule already received and established by common opinion, has a vast (though to many a very insensible) influence in forming persons' notions of the steps and method of their own experiences.

I know very well what their way is; for I have had much opportunity to observe it. Very often, at first, their experiences appear like a confused chaos, as Mr. Shepard expresses it: but then those passages of their experience are picked out, that have most of the appearance of such particular steps that are insisted on; and these are dwelt upon in the thoughts, and these are told of from time to time, in the relation they give: these parts grow brighter and brighter in their view; and others, being neglected, grow more and more obscure: and what they have experienced is insensibly strained to bring all to an exact conformity to the

scheme that is established.

And it becomes natural for ministers, who have to deal with them, and direct them that insist upon distinctness and clearness of method, to do so too. But yet there has been so much to be seen of the operations of the Spirit of God, of late, that they who have had much to do with souls, and are not blinded with a seven-fold vail of prejudice, must know that the Spirit is so exceeding various in the manner of his operating, that in many cases it is impossible to trace him, or find out his way.

What we have principally to do with, in our inquiries into our own state, or directions we give to others, is the nature of the effect that God has brought to pass in the soul. As to the steps which the Spirit of God took to bring that effect to pass, we may leave them to him. We are often in Scripture expressly directed to try ourselves by the nature of the fruits of the Spirit; but nowhere by the Spirit's method of producing them.[26] Many do greatly err in their notions of a clear work of conversion; calling that a clear work, where the successive steps of influence, and method of experience are clear: whereas that indeed is the clearest work (not where the order of doing is clearest, but) where the spiritual and divine nature of the work done, and effect wrought, is most clear.

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