

The Warnings of Scripture Are in the Best Manner Adapted to the Awakening and Conversion of Sinners

by Jonathan Edwards

The warnings of God's Word are more effective in awakening sinners and bringing them to repentance than the warning of one risen from the dead.

Scripture: Isaiah 1:2

Topics: "Repentance And Salvation", "Divine Warning"

Description

Jonathan Edwards preaches about the warnings of Scripture being more effective in awakening sinners and leading them to repentance than extraordinary signs or messages from the dead. He emphasizes that God's Word, through Moses, the prophets, and the gospel, provides the most suitable and powerful means for salvation. Edwards highlights the importance of God's warnings, the certainty of divine testimony, the majesty of God as the speaker, and the wisdom of God in choosing the best means for our salvation. He concludes by urging listeners to diligently use the means God has provided for repentance and salvation.

Transcript

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Luke 16:31

And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.

WE here have an account how the rich man in hell -- after he had in vain begged of Abraham to send Lazarus to his relief-prays that Lazarus may be sent to his brethren to warn them, that they might take care for their salvation, and escape that place of torment. By the way, it may be proper to remark, that we cannot from this conclude, that the damned will have any workings of natural affection to their near relations in this world, or any concern for their salvation. The design of Christ was only parabolically to represent what different thoughts worldly and wicked men will have of things, when in hell, from what they

have while on earth. The rich man, when he was upon earth, only minded his honor, ease, and pleasure, and did not think it worth while to take care of his soul, and to be at much pains to escape hell. But now he is of another mind, and is sensible that if his five brethren, who live in the same careless neglect of their souls as he did, knew what hell is, they would take more care.

But this seems to be put into the parable chiefly to introduce what follows, the reply which Abraham made to him, They have Moses and the prophets, let them hear them. As much as to say, they have already abundant warning and instruction, which God himself hath provided for them, let them make use of that.

The rich man replies, Nay, Father Abraham, but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent. Then come in the words of the text, And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead. By Moses and the prophets is meant the whole Old Testament, which was the whole canon of Scripture which they had in those times. The hearing of them implies, attending to what they say, believing them, and obeying them -- they would not be persuaded -- that is, they would not be persuaded to take thorough care of their souls, to forsake their sins and turn to God, so as to avoid this place of torment -- though one rose from the dead; though one should go from the invisible world, either from heaven, where they see the torments of the damned, or from hell, where they feel them.

DOCTRINE

The warnings of God's Word are more fitted to obtain the ends of awakening sinners, and bringing them to repentance, than the rising of one from the dead to warn them.

In this passage, Moses and the prophets seem not only to be equalized to the warnings of one from the invisible world, but to be preferred before them. They have Moses and the prophets, let them hear them. They have already those means which God in his infinite wisdom hath seen to be fittest for them, and more suitable to their nature and circumstances, than the rising of one from the dead. -- But whether there can be any more than an equality necessarily inferred or not; yet if only the warnings of the Old Testament have an equal tendency to bring men to repentance, as the rising of one from the dead; then surely these, together with the much clearer revelation under the gospel-dispensation by Christ and his apostles -- wherein we are abundantly more plainly told of another world, and wherein life and immortality are brought to light -- must have a much greater tendency and fitness to obtain these ends.

Sinners are apt to find fault with the means of grace which they enjoy, and to say with themselves, If I had ever seen hell, or had ever heard the cries of the damned, or had ever seen a person who had felt hell-torments, or had seen them at a distance, that would awaken me; then I would for sake all my sins, and would do whatever I could to escape hell. But now I am only told of hell in the Bible and by ministers; and there never was any in this world that saw or felt it: so that I am ready to think it is mere delusion and fancy. How do I know that there is any hell? How do I know but that when I die there will be an end of me?

But it is the indisposition of sinners to this great work, to which they are directed, which makes them find fault with their means and advantages. The slothful and negligent, who hate to bestir themselves, are they who object. "The way of the slothful is as a hedge of thorns." -- Sinners know not what they would have. They are fixedly averse to breaking off their sins by righteousness. And to make the matter the more excusable, they object against the sufficiency of their means, and so they will not believe, except they see hell, or see some person who has seen it.

But God, who knows our nature and circumstances, knows what is most adapted to them. He who made the faculties of our souls, knows what will have the greatest tendency to move them, and to work upon them. He who is striving with us, to bring us to repentance and salvation, uses the fittest and best means. In contriving and appointing the means of our salvation, he chooses better for us than we should for ourselves.

Suppose a person should rise from the dead to warn sinners, either from heaven, where they see the misery of the damned, or from hell, where they feel it; and should tell how dismal those torments are, having seen or felt them; and suppose he should confirm what he said, by declaring that he had seen the smoke of their torments, the raging of the flames, the dreadful crew of devils and damned souls together, and had heard their dismal cries and shrieks; or suppose he should say that he had felt them, and should express by words and actions the doleful state of the damned and the extremity of their torments; this would probably greatly fright and terrify many sinners who were not terrified by reading the Bible, nor by hearing preaching about hell-torments. But it would be very much because of the unusualness and strangeness of the thing. Men are apt to be much affected with strange things, and to be much affrighted by specters in the dark, because they are unusual. But if they were as common as preaching is, they would lose their effect.

It might be that on such an unusual occasion, as the rising of one from the dead, for a while men would reform their lives, and possibly some might be so affected as never to forget it. But we are to consider which would have the greatest tendency to awaken us, if both were alike new and unusual, to be warned of the misery of hell by the great God himself, declaring as it were from heaven how dreadful hell is, and abundantly warning us about it; or to be warned only by a man coming from the invisible world, who had either seen or felt these miseries. It is in this view that we shall consider the matter; and we shall show what advantages the former mode of warning has above the latter; or how the warnings of God's Word have a greater tendency to awaken sinners and bring them to repentance, than the rising of one from the dead to warn them.

I. God, in many respects, knows better what belongs to the punishment of sinners than departed souls. Departed souls doubtless know what hell-torments are, much better than any on earth. The souls of the wicked feel them, and the souls of the saints see them afar off. God glorifies his justice in the punishment of ungodly men, in the view of the saints and angels, and thereby makes them the more admire the riches of his goodness in choosing them to like. As the rich man saw Lazarus in heaven afar off, so Lazarus saw the rich man in hell. He saw hell-torments. And therefore the rich man desires he may be sent to warn his brethren. -- And if one should rise from the dead to warn wicked men, if it would at all awaken them, it would be because he knew what hell-torments were by his own knowledge, and could describe them to others, as having seen and felt them.

But surely the all-seeing God knows as well as any of the dead, what the present sufferings of the damned are. He is everywhere present with his all-seeing eye. He is in heaven and in hell, and in and through every part of the creation.. He is where every devil is; and where every damned soul is, he is present by his knowledge and his essence. He not only knows as well as those in heaven, who see at a distance; but he knows as perfectly as those who feel the misery. He seeth into the innermost recesses of the hearts of those miserable spirits. He seeth all the sorrow and anguish that are there; for he upholds them in being. They and all the powers of their spirits, whereby they are capable of either happiness or misery, are in his hands.

Besides, it is his wrath they endure. He measures out to them their several portions of punishment. He makes his wrath enter into them. He is a consuming fire to them. His anger is that fire, in which they are tormented. He therefore is doubtless able to give us as clear and distinct, and as true, an account of hell, as the damned themselves, if they should rise from the dead. He needs not any to inform him.

He knows far better what the eternity of these torments is than any of them, He can better tell us how awful a thing eternity is. He knows better what the future judgment of sinners will be, when the Lord Jesus shall come in flaming fire to take vengeance on them that know not God, and obey not the gospel. He knows far better than they how much the torment of the wicked will then be increased.

II. We have the truth upon surer grounds from God's testimony than we could have it from the testimony of one rising from the dead. Suppose one should rise from the dead, and tell us of the dreadfulness of hell-torments. How precarious a foundation would that be to build upon, in a matter of such importance, unless we consider it as confirmed by divine testimony. We should be uncertain whether there were not some delusion in the case. We know that it is impossible for God to lie. And we may know that the matter is just as he declares it to us. But if one should come from the dead, we could not be so sure that we were no way imposed upon. We could not be so sure that he who testified was not himself subject to some delusion. We could not be sure that the matter was not strained too high, and represented greater than it really is.

One coming from the dead could not, merely by force of his own testimony, make us sure that we should come to that place of torments if we did not repent and reform. And if there should come more witnesses than one from the dead, if there should be ever so many, yet there is no authority equal to that of God. There is no testimony of spirits from the invisible world which would be so indisputable and unquestionable as the divine testimony. How could we know, unless by some divine revelation, that they who should come from the dead had not come to deceive us. How could we know how wicked, or how good they were, and upon what views they acted?

Whereas we have the greatest ground to be assured, that the First Being, and the Fountain of all being and perfection, is nothing but light and truth itself, and therefore that it is impossible he should deceive or be deceived.

III. The warnings of God's Word have greatly the advantage, by reason of the greatness and majesty of him who speaks. The speeches and declarations of those who are great, excellent, and honorable, have a greater tendency to move the affections, than the declarations of others who are less excellent. Things spoken by a king affect more than the same things spoken by a mean man.

But God is infinitely greater than kings; he is universal King of heaven and earth, the absolute Sovereign of all things. Now, what can have a greater tendency to strike the mind and move the heart, than to be warned by this great and glorious Being? Shall we be unmoved when he speaks who made heaven and earth by the word of his power? If his immediate speeches, declarations, and warning, will not influence us, what will? Isa. 1:2, "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth, for the Lord hath spoken." -- That is to the present purpose which we have in Mat. 21:37, "But last of all he sent his son, saying, They will reverence my son." He sent his servants before, but they did not regard them. He therefore, sent his son, who was a much greater and more honorable messenger, and said Surely they will regard him.

What if God should send messengers from the dead to warn us, even many in succession, and men should reject them. We should justly argue, that it would have a much greater tendency to make men

regard and obey the counsel, if he would send his Son, or come himself. But God has sent his Son, and therein he hath come himself. He came down from heaven, and took upon him our nature, and dwelt among us, teaching and warning us concerning hell and damnation.

In the Bible, we not only have those warnings which were given by inspiration of the prophets, but we have God's own words, which he spake as it were by his own mouth. In the Old Testament is his voice out of the midst of the fire and the darkness, from mount Sinai; and the New Testament, we have God speaking to us, as dwelling among us. He came down from heaven, and instructed us in a familiar manner for a long while. And we have his instructions recorded in our Bibles. -- Now, which has the greatest tendency to influence men, to have one of the departed spirits sent back into its body to warn them, or to have God himself assume a body and warn them?

IV. It more evidently shows the importance of the affair, that God should immediately concern himself in it, than the coming of one from the dead would do. Those things about which kings most immediately concern themselves are commonly matters of the greatest importance, while they leave less concerns to be managed by their officers. And surely that must be a matter of very great moment, in which God shows himself so much concerned as he does in our salvation. God, in all ages of the world, hath showed himself very much concerned in this matter. How abundantly hath he warned us in his holy word? How earnest hath he shown himself in it! How many arguments and exhortations hath he used, that we might avoid the way to hell!-This evidently argues, that what we are warned about is a matter of the utmost concern, and proves it much more than if we were only warned by one risen from the dead.

V. God warning us of our danger of damnation hath a greater tendency to have influence upon us, because he is our Judge. Damnation is a punishment to which he condemns and which he inflicts. What he warns us of is his own wrath and vengeance. In his word we have his threatenings against sin denounced by himself. He tells us, that if we go on in sin, he will destroy us, and cast us out of his sight, and pour out his wrath upon us, and hold us eternally under misery. He tells us so himself; and this hath a much greater tendency to influence us, than to be told so by another, who is not to be our judge, who hath not in his hands the power of making us miserable. -- When a king immediately threatens his own displeasure, it has a greater tendency to terrify men, than when another man threatens it, or warns them of the danger.

VI. God is infinitely wise, and knows better how to speak to us so as to persuade us, than one risen from the dead. He perfectly knows our nature and state, and knows how to adapt his instructions and warnings to our frame and circumstances in the world. And without doubt that method which God has chosen, is agreeable to his infinite wisdom, and most adapted to our nature.

If one should come from hell to warn sinners, it may be he would tell them of hell in such a manner as would have more of a tendency to drive men into despair, and set them a blaspheming as they do in hell, than to excite them to strive for salvation, and diligently to use the means which God hath appointed. But God knoweth what revelation of hell we can bear, and what hath the most tendency to do us good in this our infirm, dark, and sinful state. -- The declarations of one come from hell might more tend to drive us from God than to bring us near to him. It is best for us to be warned and instructed by God, who knows best how to do it.

These are some of the reasons why the warnings of God's Word have more of a tendency to bring us to repentance, than the warning of one risen from the dead.

APPLICATION

I. It is a natural inference from this doctrine, that if these means which God hath appointed do not answer to lead men to repentance and reformation, no others would. -- Although this be not an absolutely necessary consequence from the words of the doctrine; yet it seems to be Christ's aim to teach us, that if God's means will not answer, none will. Our own means, those which we can devise, however they may seem more likely at a distance to be effectual, if brought to the trial, will not prove to be better. The rich man thought that if his brethren were warned by one rising from the dead, they would surely repent. But Abraham tells him, he is mistaken.

If one rising from the dead would not answer the purpose, we may rationally conclude that no other kind of means, different from those appointed by God, would. For what can we think of, which seems to have more tendency to awaken men, and lead to repentance, than one coming from the dead to them; except those means which we enjoy. -- Indeed men can think of many means, which they may imagine, if they enjoyed them, would make them believe and repent. But they deceive themselves.

It may be they think, if they could see some prophet, and see him work miracles, that this would awaken them. But how was it then when there were prophets? There has rarely been a more degenerate time than that of Elijah and Elisha, who wrought so many miracles. The people did not regard their prophecies nor their miracles; but walked in their own ways, and served their own gods, so that Elijah thought there was none left of the true worshippers of God. And how did they treat the prophet Jeremiah, solemnly warning them from God of their approaching destruction? And how often do the prophets complain that all their prophecies and warnings were neglected and despised!

Would it be sufficient if you could hear God speak from heaven? How was it in Moses's time, when they heard God speak out of the midst of the fire, and heard the voice of words exceeding loud and full of majesty, so that they exceedingly trembled; when they saw mount Sinai all covered with smoke, and shaking exceedingly? How did they behave themselves? Did they all turn from their sins, and after that walk in the ways of God? It is true, they were very much affected at first, while it was a new and strange thing to them; but how hard-hearted and rebellious were they soon after! They did not scruple to rebel against this same great and glorious God. Yea, they made a golden calf while Moses was in the mount conversing with God, just after they had seen those dreadful appearances of divine majesty.

Thus they rebelled against the Lord, although they had seen so many miracles and wonders in Egypt at the Red sea, and in the wilderness; although they continually saw the pillar of cloud and of fire going before them, were continually fed in a miraculous manner with manna, and in the same miraculous manner made to drink water out of the rock.

Men are apt to think, that if they had lived in Christ's time, and had seen and heard him, and had seen his miracles, that they would have effectually convinced and turned them from sin. But how was it in fact? How few were there brought to repentance by all his discourses and miracles! How hard-hearted were they! Some were very much affected for a little while; but how few constant steady followers had he! He was, notwithstanding his miracles, rejected, despised, and even murdered by the people among whom he dwelt. And they were men of the same natures as sinners in these days.

The Scripture is full of instances, sufficient to convince us, that if the Word of God will not awaken and convert sinners, nothing will. -- And we see enough in these days to convince us of it. Men sometimes meet with those things by which we should not imagine, if we did not see it, and were not used to it, but

that they would be thoroughly awakened and reformed. -- They sometimes hear the warnings of dying men expecting to go to hell. One would think this would be enough to awaken them; and it may be they are affected with it for the present. But it only touches them. It vanishes away, and is gone like a puff of wind.

Sometimes sinners themselves are laid upon beds of sickness, and their lives hang in doubt before them. They are brought to the sides of the grave, and to the very mouth of hell, and their hearts are full of terror and amazement. Yet if they recover, they soon forget it, and return to the ways of folly and wickedness. -- Sometimes this is repeated; they are taken sick again, are again in extreme peril of death, their hearts are full of amazement, and they make many promises and vows; yet being recovered, they again soon forget all, and return to sin and folly. Such things are enough to convince us, that if the Word of God be not sufficient to convince men, and make them break off their sins, no external means would be sufficient.

Perhaps some may yet be ready to think, that if sinners should see hell, and here the cries of the damned, that would be effectual, though nothing else would. But if we duly consider the matter, we shall see reason to think, that it would not have so great a tendency to turn men from sin, as the Word of God. Such a thing would doubtless be effectual to terrify and affright men, and probably to death.. Such a mean is not at all suitable to our nature and state in the world. If it should not fright men to death, it would not have so great a tendency to them to make them diligently use means for their salvation as the warnings of Scripture. It would probably drive them to despair; or so take away their spirits that they would have no heart to seek God. Instead of driving them to God, it would probably make them hate him more. It would make them more like devils; and set them a blaspheming as the damned do. For while the hearts of men are filled with natural darkness, they cannot see the glory of the divine justice appearing in such extreme torments.

Therefore, the means which God hath instituted for us, are doubtless the best, and most conducive to lead men to repentance and salvation. They are doubtless far better than any other which we can devise.

II. Hence we learn the dreadful hardness of men's hearts, since the Word of God hath no more influence upon them, and they are no more moved and wrought upon by those means which infinite wisdom hath provided. The warnings of the Word of God are, as you have heard, better and more powerful means than if one should rise from the dead to warn us, and tell us our danger, and the dreadfulness of the wrath of God. You have also heard, that if these means will not answer the end of awakening and leading sinners to repentance, no other will; neither the working of miracles, nor the hearing of God speak with an audible voice from heaven, nor anything else. -- Yet how few are there who are effectually wrought upon by the Word of God! They are very thinly sown; there is but here and there one.

When we read how the children of Israel conducted themselves in the wilderness, how often they murmured and offended; we are ready to wonder at the hardness of their hearts. And when we read the history of Christ, and how the Jews hated and rejected him notwithstanding his many miracles; we are ready to wonder how they could be so hard-hearted. But we have as much reason to wonder at ourselves, for we have naturally the same sort of hearts that they had. And sinners in these days manifest a hardness of heart as much to be wondered at, in that they are not influenced by the Word of God. For they who will not hear Moses and the prophets, Jesus Christ and his apostles, neither would be persuaded, if one should rise from the dead, or if an angel should come from heaven.

The best means of awakening and conversion are plentifully enjoyed by us, much more plentifully in several respects, than they were by those who had only Moses and the prophets. In the first place, we

have divine truth more fully revealed in the Bible than they had then. Light now shines abundantly clear. Gospel-truth is revealed, not in types and shadows, but plainly. Heaven and hell are much more clearly and expressly made known. We are told, that the glory of that revelation was no glory in comparison with the revelation of the gospel.

Again, we have a greater plenty of Bibles than they had under the dispensation of Moses and the prophets. Then there was no such thing as printing, and Bibles were scarce things. They seldom had any Bibles anywhere else but in their synagogues. But now we have them in our houses; we can look into them when we please. Besides Christ hath appointed the gospel-ministry, by which we have the Word of God explained and enforced every week. Yet how little influence hath the Word of God to bring men to repentance!

Let this strike conviction into those who never yet have found any such effect by the Word of God. Though you are convinced of nothing else, yet you have abundant reason to be convinced that your hearts are as hard as a stone, and that you are exceedingly stupid and sottish.

III. Hence we may learn how justly and fairly God deals with us. He gives us the best means of awakening and reclaiming us from our sins; better than if he had sent one from the dead to warn us. He gives us those means which are most suited to our nature and circumstances. He gives sinners abundant warning before he punishes them. What could he have done more than he hath done? We can devise or imagine no sort of warning which would have been better than what God hath given us. How justly therefore are ungodly men punished! How inexcusable will they be!

IV. Let all make use of the means which God hath instituted. They are the best and only means by which we may expect to obtain salvation. We shall be most inexcusable therefore if we neglect them. Let us attend to the Word of God, read and hear it carefully, consider it thoroughly, and daily walk by it. Let us be diligent in this work. The Word of God is a great price put into our hands to get wisdom and eternal salvation. Let us therefore improve it while we have it, as we know not how soon we may be deprived of it; lest Christ say to us, as in Luke 19:42, "If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! But now they are hid from thine eyes"

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