

A Time of Unusual Sickness and Mortality Improved

by Samuel Davies

Samuel Davies' sermon calls for urgent repentance and reflection on mortality in light of recent calamities and sicknesses affecting the community.

Scripture: Jeremiah 5:3, Hosea 6:1, Matthew 9:13, John 6:44, 2 Corinthians 5:17

Topics: "Repentance", "Conversion"

Description

Samuel Davies preaches about the urgent need for sinners to turn to God in the midst of afflictions and mortality, emphasizing the importance of genuine conversion and the necessity of seeking God's grace. He highlights the deep conviction of sin, the immediate necessity of repentance, the earnest endeavors required for true conversion, the reliance on the Holy Spirit for transformation, and the lasting change in disposition and conduct that accompanies a genuine return to God. Davies passionately calls on the congregation to examine their hearts, repent, and seek God wholeheartedly, warning against the dangers of delaying conversion and the eternal consequences of remaining unconverted.

Transcript

A Time of Unusual Sickness and Mortality Improved

By Samuel Davies, November 14, 1756.

"O Lord, are not your eyes upon the truth? You have stricken them--but they have not grieved; you have consumed them--but they have refused to receive correction! They have made their faces harder than a rock: they have refused to return." Jeremiah 5:3

Richard Baxter was accustomed to say:

"I preach as if I never should preach again,

And as a dying man to dying men."

And oh, that I may imbibe the same spirit, and enter the pulpit always under its influence!

My fellow mortals! So I call you, because mortality is the certain doom of us all. This is a truth at all times evident; but now, methinks, it is more striking than usual, when death has made such ravages among us; when it has made breaches upon sundry of our families, and swept off some of them almost entirely: and when we who survive are in daily expectation of a visit from this tremendous conqueror! Therefore, my dear fellow mortals! under this character would I address you this day--as a mortal, whose breath may be stopped the next day, or the next hour; I would speak with more seriousness than, alas! is usual to me, to you, mortals, about the great concerns of immortality!

If I would do anything to save myself and those who hear me, I see I must do it quickly. I have for some time been languishing and indisposed myself, and the contagious disease made its entrance into my family; but through the amazing and distinguishing kindness of God, which I desire publicly to celebrate, and, I hope, in answer to prayer--its progress has been stopped. And what better return can I make to my gracious Deliverer, than to devote that life, which he has spared, to his glory, and the service of your souls, with increasing zeal and industry.

The blind and secure world has accused me of making too great ado about true religion: and when my mind is impressed with realizing views of death and the supreme tribunal, I cannot but accuse myself: but, oh! it is upon a very different account. I never feel one uneasy thought from the excess of my zeal, or from the review of those few solemn hours, when I have delivered the messages of God to you with such pathos and earnestness that the world may have thought me mad. But I accuse myself, and would lament my many infirmities, particularly my frequent languor and coldness in the care of your souls.

Indeed, I have been made sensible of my defects in this respect: and oh! that I may be enabled to be more faithful and laborious for the future. I am more sensible than usual that I must work while the day of life lasts: for oh! it is short and uncertain; and the night of death is coming, when I cannot work. I have but little time to labor for my divine Master--but little time to warn, instruct, and edify my dear hearers. Therefore, now, while my mouth is not silent in the dust--I would address you with the utmost earnestness and solemnity.

But this is not the only reason for improving the present time. As I am mortal myself, so are my dear people: they are dying fast around me, and dropping into the grave from between my hands! Above twenty that were accustomed to mingle with us in this assembly, and to hear the word from my lips, have been hurried into the eternal world in a few days! They have now passed the grand decisive trial: their state of probation is over, and an irrevocable sentence has fixed their eternal state in the mansions of glory--or misery!

These I have done with forever. No more can I labor to warn and convince them--no more can I comfort and edify them--no more can I denounce the terrors of the Lord against their sin, nor offer the blessings of the gospel to their acceptance! The most ignorant of them are now wiser than their teacher, and know more of the great realities of the eternal world--than the wisest man upon earth! Farewell, then, to these our friends and neighbors--farewell, until we all meet in one vast assembly before the supreme tribunal!

But, blessed be God that all my dear people are not yet swept off from the land of the living! Here is still a goodly number, as yet in a state of trial for that eternal world, where our departed friends have taken their flight. Here is a goodly number who can still hear the gospel of peace, and who are still interested to hear it; and who, unless they hear it in time, must soon be miserable forever! And why, then, should you not all hear it with the most solemn attention and seriousness? Why, brethren, should you not all hear it so that

your souls may live! Alas! is it possible that there should be one vain, trifling, thoughtless mind, in a Christian assembly in such circumstances! Methinks horror must set him a-trembling, and mark out the monster to the whole congregation, as a terror to himself and all around him!

Certainly, if ever there was a time for serious thoughtfulness, this is such a time. Our nation, our country, our neighborhood, and some of our families, are in very alarming circumstances. Our nation is in danger from the victorious power of France, and the formidable conspiracy of her allies--who seem zealous to erase the name of Britons from the face of the earth. Our country has been ravaged, and bled in a thousand veins; and the posture of our affairs threatens still more gloomy times. Our neighborhood has been turned into a graveyard, and some of us are the remains of families that have been thinned by death; and we are escaped, like brands plucked out of the burning.

And what improvement should we make of these calamities? What is the will and pleasure of God in this case? Suppose you knew what the will of your Maker and Lord is, what he desires, commands, and expects you should do, in such circumstances --suppose you knew this certainly and infallibly, must I not have so much charity for you all as to presume you would pay a serious regard to it? Is it possible you should be capable of such daring wickedness, as to despise his royal pleasure, when you knew it beyond all doubt? Well, brethren, I am just going to put this matter to a trial; for I can assure you as certainly as if you heard it proclaimed with an immediate voice from heaven, what the will of God is in this case.

It is this: that you should repent, reform, and turn to the Lord, under these threatenings and chastisements. This is undoubtedly the pleasure and the command of God; and the outcome will show how much weight it will have with you. Some of you, I doubt not, have been roused by these calamities to more earnestness and zeal in the great work of your salvation. You have re-examined your past experiences, to see if you can venture upon them into eternity. You have renewed your hold of Jesus Christ, that he may be your sure support, when nature is sinking in death. You have been trimming your lamps, and putting yourselves in a proper habit to meet the bridegroom of your souls. You have been setting things in order for your last and long home: and though you may have been tossed between the alternate billows of hope and fear--yet you cannot but conclude, upon the whole, that you have not delayed the grand work of life to such a time as this; but have been so wise as to make it your main business in the time of health and prosperity.

Well, my dear friends, go on in this course, and you shall be safe, come what will; and these threatening and afflictive dispensations of Providence will, in the outcome, prove most blessed and beneficial dispensations to you. Yes: all things, even the heaviest calamities, shall work together for your greatest good.

May I not also allow myself the pleasure of hoping that some of you, who have formerly lived thoughtless about the concerns of eternity, have been awakened by these alarming providences to some proper sense of your danger, and to work out your salvation with fear and trembling? You begin to see that your former course will never do: that you are unprepared for eternity, and in the utmost need of a Savior; and you are now determined to seek him with all your might. Well, my friends, hold on in this course, and you have reason to hope it will end well. Only I must caution you against the danger of apostasy. Alas, you have reason to fear, lest, when the fright is over--all your religion come to nothing! And if so, your last state is worse than the first.

This, sirs, is a very proper time for repentance and reformation, and I am unusually desirous that it may be improved for that purpose. The calamities we have felt, and those we feel, have a direct tendency to drive us to it. This is an effectual method to make up our loss, and turn our afflictions into blessings, and our bereavements into enjoyments; and this will be the best preparative for days of distress, and the best support in them. God has also frequently set in by his Spirit at such a time, and carried on an extensive work of grace; and it is a dismal symptom, indeed, if he withdraws his Spirit from a people in such circumstances, and leaves them to groan and perish under unsanctified afflictions; or deliver their bodies from the outward calamity, without delivering their souls from the slavery of sin.

This is a melancholy case indeed; and yet I am afraid this is the case of many, perhaps of most, in this congregation. You may, perhaps, be a little damped while living, as it were, among so many graves. You may have been struck into a panic, and in a serious fit poured out a few prayers. But, alas! this is but a small part of the work to be done! And unless it be carried farther, you must perish forever. You may flatter yourselves, and make fair pretensions to others:

"But, Lord--are not your eyes upon the truth?" And do not you, who see through all their designs, and know the reality of their case--do not you see that though "you have stricken them, they have not grieved" with deep, sincere sorrows, and the kindly relentings of true repentance?

"You have consumed them--but they refuse to receive correction;" they are not made sensible of their sin, and reduced to their duty, by all your chastisements, though various and heavy; they are stiff and unyielding under your rod, and will not be made wise by it; instead of being dissolved into repentance, and purified, they grow harder and harder in the furnace of affliction.

"They have made their faces harder than a rock;" they can no more blush at their base conduct towards you--than a senseless stone; they can no more wet their faces with penitential tears--than a flinty rock.

"They refuse to return." Not that they refuse in words--not that they expressly say in so many syllables, "We will not return;" but they refuse it practically. They refuse to return by not actually returning; for not to return, in fact, is to refuse to return. They refuse to return, by not using the means necessary for their return, and by continuing their career in their old course. They refuse to return by the habitual disposition of their hearts, which struggle, and draw back, and will not return.

This was the character of the Jews, under all their calamities, in Jeremiah's time. And is not this, friends, the character of sundry of YOU? Are there not blind minds, hard hearts, and profane lips, among us still? Are there not prayerless people and prayerless families among us? Are there not some that neglect the plainest duties to God and man? Are there not some thoughtless, careless creatures, who feel no deep impressions from eternal things? Are there not some worldly-minded, groveling creatures, perpetually digging in the earth for riches? Are there not some vain, light, trifling sinners, who go on frolicking and carousing, even when the Lord Almighty calls to "weeping, and mourning, and girding with sackcloth?" Isaiah 22:12. Are there not some who have never experienced a thorough conversion, and know not what it is to repent and believe? Are there not some obstinate, incorrigible sinners, who bid defiance to all the judgments of God? Or, if they are afraid of his judgments, they are not afraid of sin, the cause of them. In a dastardly and, perhaps, unnatural manner, they keep off or fly from the contagious disorder; and helpless families may die around them, unassisted, for them; but they are not so shy of the more fatal contagion of sin, nor so solicitous to keep out of the way of temptation. If they can but live, it is enough for them; but they care not whether they live to God or not.

Alas! are there not many such among us? Does not conscience witness that this is the real character of some of you? Chastisement is thrown away upon you; you are made no better by it. You will receive no correction or warning from the death of a neighbor, or even of a parent or a child!

This, indeed, is not a singular case, which renders it still the more melancholy. It seems the general curse of the present generation, that the chastisements of the divine hand do not work kindly upon them, nor bring them to repentance. Thus it generally is in England, Scotland, and the northern colonies, though in such an alarming situation.

Mr. Bellamy, of New England, whom some of you know and highly esteem for his excellent writings, has these words, in a letter I lately received from him: "A dark cloud seems to be gathering over a sinful land. We have had a day of great grace: that is past and gone, and a day of great wrath seems to be at hand! Our northern army is sickly and likely to do nothing; our treasury is exhausted; people's spirits low; great murmurings--but no reformation. For all these things we feel and fear we do not return unto the Lord." Thus discouraging is the prospect in New England, where true religion has so long flourished.

How loud are the alarms which solemn divine Providence is sounding in our dull and heavy ears! The Lord's judgments are visibly in the earth; but where does it appear that the inhabitants are learning righteousness? In this country, infidelity and immorality of all kinds make the most provoking progress. The cup of our iniquity appears to be full to the brim--and the cup of God's wrath now ready to be poured out upon the despisers of the riches of his goodness and patience?

You hear a great deal of bad news, my friends, of the political and war-like kind; but here is bad news of a still more alarming kind. This not only endangers our country--but threatens the everlasting ruin of immortal souls: and this deprives us of that good which we might extract out of those evils, and make them pure, unmingled evils to us. But shall not this congregation be an exception from this general complaint? The Lord's voice cries unto Hanover; and will you not hear the rod, and him that has appointed it? Micah 6:9. To promote this design, in my little sphere, is the great end I now have in view; and, for that purpose:

I shall endeavor to show you what good effects afflictions should have upon us, especially on impenitent sinners. This my text naturally leads me to: for though, in express terms, it only contains a complaint of the misimprovement of afflictions, or incorrigibleness under them--yet this very plainly points out the right improvement of them.

When it is said, "Lord, you have stricken them--but they were not grieved;" this implies that they should have been grieved; grieved for their undutiful conduct towards God, which has exposed them to the scourges of his rod; grieved with a godly sorrow, with kindly, generous relentings for sin, as against God, and not merely as tending to ruin themselves.

When the prophet complains, "You have consumed them--but they refused to receive correction," it is implied that they should have received correction, that they should have submitted to the rod, as to the chastisement of a provoked, and yet indulgent father, without sullen murmuring against it, or fainting under it; that they should be made sensible of their sin, and reduced to their duty.

When the prophet complains, "They have made their faces harder than a rock," it implies that their faces should have been flushed with sincere shame and blushing, and washed with streams of penitential tears.

And when he complains, "They have refused to return," it implies that they ought immediately to have returned to him that smote them.

And hence it follows that sincere sorrow, shame, and repentance; a submissive, corrigible disposition, and a sincere conversion to God--are the effects which afflictions should have upon us, according to my text.

Indeed I know no more convictive method of showing what it is to misimprove afflictions, and be incorrigible under them, than to show positively what it is to make a right use of them, or what are their proper effects when sanctified: for if you find they have not had such effects upon you, you may be sure you have refused to receive correction.

To bring sinners to repentance, God has instituted the gospel and its ordinances, and for this end they are dispensed among you; for this end also he rouses your consciences within you, and communicates his Holy Spirit to work upon your hearts. Now afflictions are so many auxiliaries to assist these forces, to reduce you into captivity to the obedience of Christ. When the persuasions of God's Word are disregarded; when the warnings of your own consciences are slighted, and the motions of the Holy Spirit resisted, then our heavenly Father takes his rod, and either shakes it over your heads, to see if the threatening will answer the end, without the infliction; or he actually scourges you to make you sensible of your duty! The great design of all this, as I told you, is to bring you to repentance, or to turn you to him. This is the sum, the result of sanctified afflictions.

Let us, then, inquire what this is. And that I may be the more concise, and use a uniform language on this subject, I shall include all that I have to say concerning the right improvement of afflictions under this one inquiry: What is it to turn to the Lord? to which the other expression contained in my text may be reduced.

First, turning to God presupposes a deep conviction that you have gone astray, both from the way of duty and the way of safety. You never will leave your present course--until you plainly see that it leads you down to the chambers of eternal death. You never will turn to the Lord, until you are certain you are under the most pressing, absolute necessity to do so, both from duty and self-interest.

Oh, sirs, if it would please God to open your blind unconverted eyes--what strange, unsuspected, and astonishing views would open to you, concerning your past and present course and condition! Then, to your surprise, you would see that you have lived so many years in the world, without so much as earnestly attempting that work, which is the great business of your life. You would see that your hopes of heaven, in your present condition, are but a delusive dream; and that you are in every moment in the utmost danger of sinking into the depth of misery, under the heavy wrath of Almighty God! You would see what plain, reasonable, and important duties you have carelessly neglected, both towards God and man; and what a long train of known, willful sin, you have obstinately persisted in.

You would see how criminally deficient you have been, even in those duties which, as to the matter of them, you have performed; that even your good actions have not proceeded from good principles and ends; the love of God, a regard to his authority, and a view to his glory; but from some low, mercenary, selfish principles and views; and that the reason why you abstained from any act of sin, was not your love to God, and regard to his will--but because you had no temptation to it, or because you apprehended it might injure your character or temporal interests, or perhaps render you eternally miserable.

You would see that you have not such good hearts as you once flattered yourselves you had; but that they are deceitfully and desperately wicked. You would see that they are and have always been destitute of the

reality of all the Christian graces, and have imposed upon you hitherto with counterfeits and deceitful appearances; destitute of true repentance, faith, and love towards God and Jesus Christ; and full of pride, hypocrisy, ignorance, hardness of heart, disaffection to God and his government, unbelief, earthly-mindedness, sensuality, sordid and wicked lusts and passions, and an endless variety of evils too numerous to be mentioned! In short, you would see yourselves a mere mass of corruption; and you would wonder you have not sunk into hell long ago, as rotten fruits fall to the ground.

This would, no doubt, be a surprising, unexpected discovery to some of you! You have no such thoughts of yourselves--but quite the contrary. But the reason why you do not see this to be your case, in fact, is because the god of this world has blinded your minds, and because your treacherous hearts flatter you! This is, indeed, the truth of your case, while unconverted, if you believe the plainest declarations of the Word of God, or the unanimous testimony of all, in all ages, who have had their eyes open to see themselves, and have been taught that important and useful, though mortifying science, of self-knowledge! And if ever God enlightens your blind minds, you would yourselves see that this is really your case.

But oh! the astonishing ignorance and self-flattery of the heart of man! Here, alas! lies the difficulty in dealing with unconverted sinners. We cannot open their eyes to see their guilt and danger! Could we do this, a grand point would be gained, and the work would be well begun. But alas! they will not believe they are so guilty, so vile and corrupt; and hence the gospel, which is a religion for self-condemned, broken-hearted sinners, is but an idle tale, or a vain speculation to them: and to invite them to come to Christ, is but to invite the healthy to a physician.

Farther, if it would please God to bring you out of darkness this day, into his marvelous light--then you would see that SIN is not that harmless, innocent thing, or that slight, excusable foible--which you once took it to be! You would see that it is indeed the most abominable thing, the most terrible, vile and malignant evil--upon earth, or in hell. Then, instead of wondering that such a vile thing as sin should be punished with everlasting destruction by a gracious God; and instead of disputing yourselves into doubts about it, or caviling at it, as cruel and unjust; instead of this--you would rather wonder that so dreadful an evil as sin could be pardoned at all, upon any consideration whatever; and you would be more apt to question the possibility of forgiveness, than the justice of your punishment!

As the foundation of these discoveries, you would see the majesty, the excellency, the holiness, justice, and goodness of GOD; the purity and strictness of his law, and the equity and terror of its penalty. You would see your obligations to him; your numerous, strong, endearing, and sacred obligations to him--as your Creator, Preserver, and Redeemer! You would see the aggravated baseness, ingratitude, rebellion, and impiety of having lived all your days in the willful breach of such obligations.

These things, and the like, you would see, as in a new medium, and with other eyes than you were accustomed to look upon them. And you would see them with such glaring light and evidence, that you would be utterly astonished at your own sottish ignorance, which had never revealed them before. They would now appear as plain--as ever they were dark and doubtful. In consequence of this, you would be struck with wonder and horror at your former security and stupor, in such a dangerous a condition.

I really lack words to express the views and apprehensions you would then have of things. Oh that experience may be your teacher! Blessed be God, I have conversed with many a sinner formerly, upon their first receiving this conviction: formerly, I say; for, alas! now-a-days I hardly meet with one to converse

with me upon this subject! No--the generality have no such alarming views of themselves; but like the Laodiceans, they are rich in their own conceit; and know not that they are wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked! Revelation 3:17. But formerly it has been my happy employment to instruct such convinced sinners; and I can still remember, it was a very affecting conversation.

Their language still seems to sound in my ears; and methinks I hear them complaining in a flood of tears, "Oh what shall I do to be saved? I see I am upon the very brink of destruction! I see I have been all my life a poor, deceived, self-flattering sinner. Oh! I never thought I was such a monster of wickedness, and upon the slippery brink of eternal ruin! But now I see it! Now it is so evident to me, that I am amazed I never discovered it before. Oh! is there any possibility of escape, for such a wretch as I? Let me but know what is necessary, and I will attempt anything. I will deny myself in anything, if my perishing soul may be saved."

These are the affecting strains of awakened sinners. This must be your language, sinners, or at least the thoughts of your heart, before you can turn to the Lord. But oh! when shall we hear it from you? To teach you this lesson, God has sent the sword to ravage your country, and a deadly disease to spread desolation in your neighborhood. To teach you this, your neighbors, or perhaps your parent, your children, or some of your relatives have died! And shall they die in vain? Oh! hear them as it were, crying to you from the dust. Some of you have lost pious friends, who during their life labored to awaken you out of your security. And when you view their grave, methinks you may recollect the epitaph which a minister wrote for his own tomb-stone:

"If all my life I tried in vain to save,

Hear me, oh! hear me crying from the grave!"

But, alas! I know that even this alarming voice will not awaken impenitent sinners, unless God bears it home to their hearts by his almighty power. And oh! that that divine Agent would begin to work among us! Then, sinners, you would soon see, that the account I have been giving you of your guilt and danger is not at all aggravated. But,

Secondly, Turning to God supposes a full conviction of the necessity of turning to him immediately, without delay. Friends, if God should begin this work upon your hearts this day, you would no longer stand hesitating and loitering. We should no more hear from you that there is no need of so much ado, or that it is time enough as yet. You would have such clear views of your own vileness, and the disaffection of your souls to God, and holiness--that nothing could be more evident to you than that you are utterly unfit for heaven, in your present condition, and that you are fitted for destruction, and for nothing else.

You would not stand disputing, and hoping, and flattering yourselves in the matter--but you would come to this peremptory conclusion, "If I continue in my present condition, I am as certainly lost forever, as ever I was born! I shall as surely be in hell in a little time--as I am now upon earth. The matter will admit of no debate. It is as plain as that a beast cannot enjoy the pleasures of reason; or a sick man the pleasures of a feast."

This, sirs, is a very alarming conclusion; and you may be very unwilling to admit it: but terrible as it is, you will be forced to believe it, if ever you are converted. It is indeed one of the first steps towards your conversion: for can it be supposed you will turn to God, while you think it unnecessary, or while you are not convinced that you are turned from him, and going the opposite road? No, it is impossible. And

therefore, such of you as have never been convinced of this, may be assured you are so far from being converted, that you have not taken the first steps towards it!

But this is not all: you will be not only convinced of the absolute necessity of turning to God in general--but of turning to him immediately without delay. You will see, that you are so far from having time to delay, that it will wound your heart to think this work was not done many years ago. You will see, that your having delayed it so long already, was the most desperate madness in the world--and that if you put it off any longer, you may be lost beyond recovery!

For oh! you will see that you stand in slippery places, ready to be cast down into destruction every moment! You will apprehend yourselves held over the pit of hell, in the hand of an angry God, by the slender thread of life; just as we hold a spider, or some poisonous insect over the fire, ready to throw it in immediately!

Now, while I am speaking to you, you would immediately set about this great work: you would pray and hear at once. And upon your returning home, instead of trifling and chattering about the world, you would retire to cry for mercy, and meditate upon your miserable condition-- you would fly to your Bibles, and other good books for direction; and I would expect the pleasure once more of seeing you come to your poor minister, anxiously inquiring what you shall do to be saved?

Oh! when will the crowds of unconverted sinners among us be brought to this? When will they give over their delays; and see they must engage in this great business immediately! I am sure the sickness and mortality among us have a tendency to bring them to this. Can you imagine, that conversion may be put off to some future time, when you see so many in health and youth around you seized with sickness, and hurried into the grave in a few days? This has been the doom of sundry vigorous youth, and even of little children among us: and my dear surviving youth and children, shall this be no warning to you?

Alas! will you dare to sin on still as thoughtless as ever? Will you any more pretend that you may safely delay your conversion to a sick-bed or dying hour? But ask those who have made the trial, and what do they say? Do any of them tell you that that is the most proper time for this work? What do sinners say when the time comes? "Oh, (they cry out,) what a fool was I to put it off until now! Oh, how bitterly do I now repent that I did not attempt it sooner!"

What do those say who made it their business in health and prosperity? Do they repent of it as premature? No! they all cry out, "I would be in a sad case, indeed, if it were left undone until now: now I have enough to do to struggle with my pains. But blessed be God, that great work is not now to be done!" And dare any of you loiter and delay still, in opposition to the joint testimony of those who have arrived at and made trial of that period which you allot for turning to God? If the declaration of dying men has any weight of credibility, the present time is the most fit season: therefore, oh, improve it while you have it! But,

Thirdly, If afflictions should prove the happy means of turning you to God, they will rouse you to the most earnest persevering endeavors. You would immediately set about the work, and use all the means God has instituted for that purpose. You would pray without ceasing; you would pray in secret places. And if you have hitherto had prayerless families, they would be so no more: you would consecrate them to God with prayer this very evening. Nay, you would keep your souls always in a praying posture; you would waft up your desires to God while you are in business or at leisure, in solitude or in society, at home or abroad. And your prayers would not now be a dull, spiritless form: you would cry as for your life, and exert all the vigor of your souls. You would find frequent errands to the throne of grace; and you would cry there, like a

condemned criminal pleading for a pardon--or a drowning man calling for help!

When Paul was awakened, Christ himself remarks upon him, "Behold, he prays!" He had prayed many a time before; but no notice is taken of it, because there was no life in it. But now he puts life and spirit into his prayers, like one in earnest to be heard; therefore they are taken notice of in heaven. Thus, my friends, will you also pray, if ever you turn to God. You will accustom yourselves to deep and solemn meditation.

You will seriously attend to the gospel and its ordinances. Your Bibles will no longer gather dust; but you will eagerly search for the words of eternal life. You will also love and frequent the society of those who, you hope, have experienced that happy change you are seeking after; and you will catch all the instruction you can from their conversation.

In short, you will leave no means untried; you will set yourselves in earnest about the work; with as much earnestness as ever a miser pursued the world, or a sensualist his pleasures. Oh! sirs, if such a concern to turn to the Lord should spread among us, how would it change the aspect of things? How different would be the desires, the labors, the pursuits, and conversation of mankind!

Believe me, sirs, there is need for such an alteration among us: and woe, woe to many of us, if things run on as they have done--if the world continues to usurp the pre-eminence of God and eternal things--if you are still more solicitous to lay up earthly treasure, than to lay up treasure in heaven--if you abandon yourselves to business or pleasure--to the neglect of true religion and the concerns of eternity! I say, woe unto you, if things still continue in this course!

Believe me also, that it is better worth your while to labor to turn to God, and secure a happy immortality, than to lay out your labor on anything else. Need I tell you that you shall not always live here in this world, to enjoy the things of this world? Go, and learn this truth at the graves of your friends and neighbors. Need you be told that the enjoyments of this life are no suitable happiness for your immortal souls? Do you not learn it from the uncertain, transitory, unsatisfying nature of these enjoyments? You can carry none of them with you to your eternal home; and what then will you have to make you happy there?

Farther: As you will zealously use all endeavors to promote your conversion, so you will carefully guard against everything that tends to hinder it. You will immediately drop your wicked courses--you will have done forever with drinking, swearing, and all the vices you were accustomed to practice! You will moderate your pursuit of the world, and endeavor to disengage yourselves from excessive hurries, which allow you neither leisure nor composure to mind the great business of your salvation-- that business, which, whether you regard it or not, is of an infinitely greater importance than all the affairs of life, and for which alone it is worth your while to live!

You will shun the company of the wicked, the vain, and secure, as much as possible; yes, you will shun them as much as you now do the families that are infected with the epidemic disorder, and with much better reason; for they are infected with a much more fatal disease--the disease of sin, which is so deadly, and which your souls are so apt to catch!

In short, you will avoid every obstacle to your conversion, as far as you can; and until you are brought to this, it is in vain to pretend that you have any real inclination to turn to God: and such of you as have never been brought to it, may be sure you have never been converted.

Oh! when shall we see such earnest endeavors among us? When shall we see sinners thus vigorously striving to enter in at the strait gate? When will their dead sleep be over? When will the delusive dream of their false hopes vanish? When will they begin to conclude that they have sinned long enough--that they have delayed turning to God long enough--that they have been secure and careless, on the slippery brink of destruction, long enough? When will they begin to think it is high time to work out their salvation with fear and trembling?

My dear people, I long to see such a time among you once more! And unless such a time comes, I expect sundry of you, even as many as are unconverted, will perish forever! Yes, unless such an awakening time comes, and that speedily too--I fully expect that some of you will burn in hell forever! Oh! the shocking thought!

What shall be done to avoid so dreadful a doom? Come, Holy Spirit--come and work upon the hearts of these impenitent sinners; for you alone can perform the work. Oh! come speedily, or they will be removed out of the sphere of your sanctifying influences--out of the region of vitality--and into the territories of eternal death! Friends, until the Spirit is poured out upon us from on high, the work of conversion will never go on prosperously among us! We have had sufficient trial to convince us of this. We have had preaching, and all the means of grace, long enough to make us sensible that all will not do, without the Holy Spirit: therefore, let us earnestly cry for this blessing. For,

Fourthly, If afflictions are followed with so blessed an effect upon you as to turn you to God--then you will be made deeply sensible of your own inability to turn to him, by the best endeavors you can use; and of the absolute necessity of the influences of the Holy Spirit, or the power of divine grace.

While you are ignorant of yourselves, and have not put the matter to trial, you may flatter yourselves that you are able to turn to God when you please: but when you make the experiment in earnest, you will soon be undeceived. You can indeed abstain from outward acts of gross sin--you can attend upon the means of grace, and perform the outward duties of religion; and this is your duty: but, alas! this is far short of true conversion. All this you may do--and yet the heart be so far from being turned to God, that it may be strongly set against him.

You will find, when you attempt the work in earnest, that, beside the drawbacks from the world, and the temptations of Satan, your own hearts will refuse to return; they will struggle, and draw back, as if you were rushing into flames, or upon the point of a sword. They will cling fast to sin and the world, and will not let go their hold. They have a great dislike to strict holiness, and all you can do--cannot bring them in love with it. Your hearts are as hard as the nether mill-stone, and no human means can break them.

In short, you will be sensible that you are so far gone with the disease of sin, so indisposed, weakened, and corrupted, that nothing but the power of divine grace can recover you, and inspire you with spiritual life and vigor. Therefore, you will lie moaning and groaning before the Lord, waiting for his assistance, as helpless creatures, in the greatest danger, and unable to deliver yourselves. Then you will understand the meaning of that inspired prayer, "Turn me--and I shall be turned!" Jeremiah 31:18. "Draw me--and I will run after you." Solomon's Song 1:4. Then you will be convinced, by experience, of the truth of that declaration you had before heard from the mouth of Christ, and perhaps labored to explain away: "No one can come to me--unless the Father who sent me draws him." John 6:44.

Oh! when shall we see the vanity and self-confidence of sinners mortified? When shall we see them deeply sensible of their weakness and helplessness? It may seem strange--but it is undoubtedly true, that

they will never strive in earnest until they are sensible that all their strivings are not sufficient--but that God must perform the work in them. It is the high idea they have of their own ability--which keeps them easy and careless. When they see that it is God alone who must work in them both to will and to do--then, and not until then, they will earnestly cry to him for his assistance, and use all means to obtain it.

It is not the awakened sinner who feels himself weak and helpless, who lives in the careless neglect of the means of grace. No! it is the proud, presumptuous sinner, who thinks he can do great things in religion when he sets about it.

It is indeed a strange sight to see those who complain they can do nothing without Christ--laboring hard; and those who boast they can do great things--standing idle! Yes--to see those who renounce all dependence upon their good works--abounding in good works; and those that expect to be saved by their good works--living in the neglect of good works, and doing the works of the devil! This, I say, is a strange sight; but it is a general fact. And the reasons of it are, that those who feel their own weakness will earnestly seek for help from God; and God will help those who are sensible of their inability. Whereas, others are not earnestly seeking that grace, the lack of which they do not feel; and God lets them alone, to show what the vain fools can do; and will not throw away his assistance upon those who do not want, nor ask it. But,

Fifthly, If ever you return to the Lord, you will be made deeply sensible that Christ is the only way of access to God. You will be sensible, that it is only for his sake that you can expect acceptance with God; and that all your transactions with heaven must be carried on through him, as mediator. If ever you return, you will come in as obnoxious criminals, upon the footing of free grace, and not of merit; and you will see that it is only through Christ that grace can be communicated to you. You will renounce all your own righteousness. You will lie at the foot of divine mercy--and own that you deserve hell--as justly as any malefactor deserved the gallows.

Some of you, perhaps, will say, "I will never believe this concerning myself; I will never believe that I am such a guilty, obnoxious criminal!" But please do not be too positive; do not say you never will believe it; for you may believe it yet. Yes, you certainly will believe it, if ever you are converted and saved; and I hope God has not given you up.

If ever you return to the Lord, you will come in as a poor, broken-hearted, penitent rebel; and unless you come in upon this footing, you have nothing to do with Jesus, nor he with you. For he came to save sinners and to heal the sick; and until you feel yourselves such, you will never comply with the gospel, which is a method of salvation through a Mediator.

Oh! that many sinners among us might thus be mortified, humbled, and brought down to the foot of their injured Sovereign, this day! Oh! that they may be made sensible that they lie at God's mercy, and that they have not the least possible ground of hope--but only through the righteousness of Christ! But,

Sixthly, If ever you are turned to God, you will experience a great change in your disposition and conduct. Your hearts and lives will take a new bias! Your thoughts and affections will be directed towards God and holiness; your hearts will be turned to the holy Word of God, like wax to the seal, and receive the stamp of his image. They will then aspire towards heaven--there they will tend, as naturally as a stone gravitates to the earth. You will contract an evangelical turn; that is, you will delight and acquiesce in the method of salvation revealed in the gospel. Jesus will be infinitely dear to you; and you will rejoice and glory in him, and put no confidence in the flesh. You will be turned to the ordinances of the gospel, and delight to

converse with God in them.

In short, your whole soul will receive a heavenly disposition--a new divine bent, or bias, towards God and divine things. Your thoughts will run in a new channel; your will and affections will fix upon new objects, and you will become new creatures; old things will pass away, and all things will become new. 2 Corinthians 5:17. You will become fit for heaven--by having heavenly dispositions wrought in you--and thence you may infer that you shall be admitted there.

Believe me, sirs, when you are turned to God, true religion will not be such a dull, insipid thing to you, as it now is. The gospel will not be such an idle story; nor the law of God such a elastic rule, that you may bend it as you please to your own lusts. Heaven and hell will not be such dreams and trifles; but you will be habitually affected with these things, as the most important realities, and your hearts will be deeply impressed with their influence. As you will be turned TO God and holiness, so you will be turned FROM sin and all its pleasures.

Yes, friends, that pride, hypocrisy, sensuality, worldly-mindedness, and all the various forms of sin which you now indulge, will become forever hateful to you! You will abhor them, resist them, make war against them, and never more allow them a peaceable harbor in your hearts! You will see their intrinsic vileness and baseness, and their contrariety to the holy nature of God; and on this account you will hate them and fly from them--as well as because they may bring ruin upon yourselves. Oh! how will it then break your hearts to think that ever you should have lived as you now do! How bitter will your present pleasures and pursuits then be to you; and how will you bless God, that he opened your eyes and gave your minds a new turn--before it was too late!

Farther; when your minds thus receive a new and heavenly turn, your practices will be turned too. The practice follows the inward principle of action; and when the heart is set right--then the practice will be agreeable to it.

Conversion, sirs, would be an effectual restraint from those vices which you now practice, and an effectual constraint to those duties you now omit.

Conversion will cure you of your swearing, drunkenness, defrauding, contentions, and quarrelings, and other vices!

Conversion will bring you to pray, to hear, to meditate, and to endeavor to perform every duty you owe to God!

Conversion will bring you to observe the laws of justice and charity, and all the duties you owe to man

Conversion will teach you not only to pray, and perform the other duties of religion; but it will make you just, charitable, meek, compassionate, and conscientious in all the duties of morality.

Conversion will make you better members of society, better neighbors, better masters, better servants, better parents, better children; in short, conversion will better in every relation. Never pretend you are converted, unless it has this effect upon you--without this, all your religion is not worth a straw!

From hence you may see what a blessed thing it would be, even for this world, if we should all turn to the Lord. Then, what happy families would we have! What a happy neighborhood--what a happy congregation--what a happy country! Then every man would fill up his place, and make conscience of the

duties of his relation; and then Heaven would smile, and rain down blessings upon so dutiful a people.

Seventhly: If ever you are turned to the Lord, your minds will habitually retain that turn. I mean, your religion will not be a transient fit; a fleeting dreamy thing; but it will be permanent and persevering. You will never more relapse into your former voluntary slavery to sin. You will never more indulge from day to day--your old disaffection to God, and your habitual allowed indisposition to the exercises of religion. Then, farewell forever to the smooth, enchanting paths of sin! And welcome forever to the ways of holiness! From the happy moment of your return to God, to the end of your days, it will be habitually the great concern of your life to make progress in piety, and live to God; to carry on a war against all sin and temptation, and root out every evil principle from your souls.

I do not mean, that you will be perfectly free from all sin, or that you will never relapse into some degree of lukewarmness, and indisposition of spirit towards God. But I mean, you never will be entirely and thoroughly what you once were, in your unconverted state. You never will relapse into that indulged and willful love of sin and the world---that prevailing indifference or disaffection towards God and his service, and that stupid, habitual carelessness about eternal things, which now has the dominion over you. No, never more will you be able to offend your God and neglect your Savior and your souls as you now do. Never more will you be able to rest secure and thoughtless, while your eternal state is awfully uncertain, and your hearts are out of disposition for devotion.

The bent of your minds towards God may be weakened; but you can never lose it entirely. Your aversion to sin may be lessened; but you will never give up yourselves to the love and practice of it. Something within will make you perpetually uneasy--while your graces are languishing and your sin is gathering strength. There is a secret bias upon your souls, which inclines them heavenward; even while they are carried downward to the earth, by the remaining tendencies of your innate corruption. The seed of God which remains in you, will never allow you to sin as you now do. Your new nature will be searching after God by a kind of spiritual instinct, like a child for the breast, and you can never more peaceably take the world in his stead.

This, I hope, sundry of you know by experience. Since the moment of your conversion, though you have had many sad relapses and backslidings--yet you can never heartily return to sin again; and all the world cannot make you let go your hold of God! You tend towards him with a propensity which, though it be weak--yet neither earth nor hell, neither sin within, nor temptations without, can entirely overcome.

And hence such of you who once imagined that you were converted--but are now habitually careless, earthly-minded, and luke-warm towards God--hence, you may see, you never did, in reality, turn to him. No! it was all a dream! For if you had once been turned TO him with all your hearts, you would never again have turned entirely FROM him. Your conversion would have had some lasting good effects upon you; and having once turned to God, you would never again have bid him farewell, and forsaken him entirely. Such, therefore, who remain grossly sinful, should still rank themselves among the unconverted.

And now, my dear hearers, I have endeavored, with the utmost plainness, to describe to you that turning to God which should be the result of your afflictions as well as of the means of grace, and which you must experience before you can enter into the kingdom of heaven. I have had something more important at heart than to embellish my style, and set myself off as a fine speaker. I have endeavored to speak, not to an itching ear, or a curious fancy--but to your understanding and your heart; that you may both know and feel what I say. And, indeed, if I would aim at anything else--I would be at once an flagrant trifler, and a

profane mocker of God.

Now I have one serious question to put to you, upon a careful review of what I have said; and that is, Do you really hope in your consciences, after you have impartially tried yourselves as in the sight of God--that you have been converted or turned to God? Here is the work of God's grace--I have plainly described it. But where is the heart in which it has been wrought? Can you put your hand upon your breast and say, "Oh! if I know myself, here is the heart that has been the subject of it?" Pause and think upon this inquiry, and never be easy until you can give, at least, a creditable answer.

I hope this will confirm the wavering hopes of some of you, and enable you to draw the happy conclusion: "Well, if this is conversion, I think I may venture to pronounce myself a converted soul." Then happy are you indeed. I have not time to say many comfortable things to you at present; but go to your Bibles; there you will find precious promises enough for you. Live and feast upon them, and before long they will be all fulfilled to you, and you shall live and feast with your Savior in paradise.

But my main business today lies with the unconverted: and have not some of you discovered yourselves this day to be such? Well, what is to be done now? Can you go on careless and secure still under this tremendous conviction? I hardly think any of you are arrived to such a pitch of presumption and fool-hardiness as this. Must you despair and give up all hopes of salvation? No, unless you choose it--I mean, unless you choose to neglect the means appointed for your conversion, and harden yourselves in sin. If you are determined on this course, then you may despair indeed; there is not the least ground of hope for you. But should you now rouse out of your security, and seek the Lord in earnest, you have the same encouragement to hope which any one of the many millions of converts in heaven or upon earth had, while in your condition: therefore let me persuade you to take this course immediately.

But when I begin to persuade, I am in Jeremiah's perplexity: "To whom shall I speak and give warning, that they may hear?" Jeremiah 6:10.

Shall I speak to you, men of business and hurry? Alas! you have no leisure to mind such a trifle as your soul.

Shall I speak to you, men of wealth and character? Alas! this is a business beneath your notice, What, a gentleman cry for converting grace! That would be a strange sight indeed.

Shall I speak to you, old men: my venerable fathers in age? Alas! you are so hardened by a long course of sinning, that you are not likely to hear.

Shall I speak to you, you relics of those families where death has lately made such havoc? Surely you must be disposed to hear me--surely you cannot put me off so soon. I hope sickness and death have been sent among you as my assistants: that is, to enforce what I say, and be the means of your conversion.

Shall I speak to you, young people? Alas! you are too merry and mirthful to listen to such serious things: and you, perhaps, think that there is time enough as yet. Thus I am afraid you will put me off: and if you put me off, I shall hardly know where to turn; for of all the unconverted among us--I have most hopes of you. Old sinners are so confirmed in their estrangement from God, that there is but little hope of such veterans: but the habits of sin are not so strong in you, and God is accustomed to work upon people of your age. If you, then, put me off, where shall I turn? Behold, I turn to the Gentiles.

Poor negroes! Shall I find one among you that is willing to turn to God? Many of you are willing to be baptized: but that is not the thing. Are you willing to turn to God with all your hearts, in the manner I have explained to you? This is the grand question; and what do your hearts answer to it? If you also refuse--if you all refuse, then what remains for your poor minister to do--but to return home and make this lament to him that sent him: "Lord, there were unconverted sinners among my hearers; and in my poor manner, I made an honest trial to turn them to you; but, Lord, it was in vain--they refused to return; and therefore I must leave them to you--to do what you please with them!"

Oh! will you constrain me to make this lament upon any of you to my divine Master? Oh! free me from the disagreeable necessity. Come, come all, rich and poor, young and old, bond and free: come, and let us return unto the Lord; for "he has torn--and he will heal us; he has smitten--and he will bind us up, and we shall live in his sight." Hosea 6:1. Amen.

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