

A SERMON, HOW DANGEROUS A THING IT IS TO FALL FROM GOD

Part I

The Wise Man says that pride was the beginning of our forsaking God; by it man's heart was turned from God his Maker, for pride is the fountain of all sin: he who has it shall be full of cursings, and at the end it shall overthrow him.¹ And, as through pride and sin we go from God, so shall God, and all goodness with him, go from us. The Prophet Hosea plainly affirms that those who depart from God by vicious living yet try to pacify and distract him by sacrifice are laboring in vain. Despite all their sacrifice, he still departs from them. Forasmuch, says the Prophet, as they do not apply their minds to return to God, although they go about with whole flocks and herds to seek the Lord, yet they shall not find him; for he is gone away from them.²

We can turn from God in various ways. Sometimes it is done directly by idolatry, as Israel and Judah did.³ Sometimes men turn from God by lack of faith and mistrusting of God, as Isaiah says,

Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help,
And rely on horses,
Who trust in chariots because *they are* many,
And in horsemen because they are very strong,
But who do not look to the Holy One of Israel,
Nor seek the LORD!⁴

But what follows?

When the LORD stretches out his hand,
Both he who helps will fall,
And he who is helped will fall down;
They all will perish together.⁵

Sometimes men go from God by neglecting his commandments concerning their neighbor, which require them to express hearty love towards every man, as Zachariah said unto the people on God's behalf,

'Execute true justice,
Show mercy and compassion
Everyone to his brother.

¹ Ecclesiasticus 10:12-13

² Hosea 5:4, 6

³ Hosea 4:12; 5:5

⁴ Isaiah 31:1

⁵ Isaiah 31:3

Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless,
The alien or the poor.
Let none of you plan evil in his heart
Against his brother.’

“But they refused to heed, shrugged their shoulders, and stopped their ears so that they could not hear. Yes, they made their hearts like flint, refusing to hear the law and the words which the LORD of hosts had sent by his Spirit through the former prophets. Thus great wrath came from the LORD of hosts. Therefore it happened, *that* just as he proclaimed and they would not hear, so they called out and I would not listen,” says the LORD of hosts. “But I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations which they had not known. Thus the land became desolate after them, so that no one passed through or returned; for they made the pleasant land desolate.”⁶

And, in sum, all those who, following the persuasions and stubbornness of their own hearts and going backward and not forward,⁷ do not abide the Word of God and instead turn away from God. Inasmuch that Origen says, “He that with mind, with study, with deeds, with thought and care, applies and gives himself to God’s Word, and thinks upon his laws day and night, gives himself wholly to God, and in his precepts and commandments is exercised, this is he that is turned to God.” On the other hand he says, “Whosoever is occupied with fables and tales when the Word of God is rehearsed is turned from God. Whosoever in time of reading God’s Word is diverted in thought to worldly business, money, or profit is turned from God. Whosoever is entangled with the cares of possessions, filled with covetousness of riches, whosoever studies for the glory and honor of this world, he is turned from God.” So that anyone who does not have his mind set on all that is commanded or taught of God; he who does not listen unto it, embrace, and print it in his heart, to the intent that he may duly fashion his life after it; he has plainly turned from God, even though he may continue to do other things that he considers better and more to God’s honor.

The truth of this point is seen in holy Scripture by the example of King Saul,⁸ who being commanded of God by Samuel to kill all the Amalekites and destroy them clearly with their goods and livestock, yet he, being moved partly with pity and partly (as he thought) with devotion unto God, saved Agag their king, and all the best of their cattle, to sacrifice to God. With this disobedience God was highly displeased and said to the Prophet Samuel, “I greatly regret that I have set up Saul *as* king, for he has turned back from following Me, and has not performed My commandments.”⁹

And, when Samuel asked why he had saved the cattle, contrary to God’s command, he excused the matter partly by fear, saying he dared do none other because the people wanted it; partly because he thought God would be content, seeing that this deed was done with a good intent and devotion to honor God with the sacrifice of such excellent

⁶ Zechariah 7:9-14

⁷ Jeremiah 7:24

⁸ I Samuel 15:1-24

⁹ I Samuel 15:11

animals. But Samuel, reproving all such intents and devotions because no matter how much they seem to honor God, they contradict his Word (and obedience to his Word is the only way we may be assured of his pleasure) said:

“Has the LORD *as great* delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices,
As in obeying the voice of the LORD?
Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice,
And to heed than the fat of rams.
For rebellion *is as* the sin of witchcraft,
And stubbornness *is as* iniquity and idolatry.
Because you have rejected the word of the LORD,
He also has rejected you from *being* king.”¹⁰

By all these examples of Holy Scripture we may know that as we forsake God, so shall he forsake us. And what miserable state consequently and necessarily follows thereupon, a man may easily consider by the terrible judgment of God. And even though he may be unable to fathom the depth of such misery, which is so great that it passes any man’s capacity in this life sufficiently to understand, he shall soon perceive enough that, unless he has a heart of stone, he shall fear, tremble, and quake.

First, the displeasure of God toward us is commonly expressed in the Scripture by two things: by showing his fearful countenance upon us, and by turning his face or hiding it from us. His great wrath is signified by showing his dreadful countenance; but it is signified many times more by his turning or hiding his face, for it means that he clearly forsakes us and gives us over. The same is true with the behavior of mankind. For men commonly bear a good, cheerful, and loving countenance towards those whom they favor, so that by the face or countenance of a man it is apparent what will or mind he bears towards another. So, when God shows his dreadful countenance towards us, that is to say, when he sends dreadful plagues of sword, famine, or pestilence upon us, it appears that he is greatly angry with us. But, when he withdraws from us his Word, the right doctrine of Christ, his gracious assistance and aid, which is inherently connected to his Word, and leaves us to our own wit, to our own will and strength, he declares then that he has begun to forsake us. For, while God has shown to all those who truly believe his Gospel his face of mercy in Jesus Christ, which so enlightens their hearts that if they behold it as they ought to do, they are transformed into his image, are made partakers of the heavenly light and of his Holy Spirit, and are fashioned to him in all goodness requisite to the children of God; so if they afterward neglect the same, if they are unthankful unto him, if they do not order their lives according to his example and doctrine and to the setting forth of his glory, he will take away from them his kingdom, his holy Word, by which he should reign in them, because they do not bring forth the fruit thereof that he looks for.

Nevertheless, God is so merciful and longsuffering that he does not visit us suddenly with great wrath. But when we begin to shrink from his Word, not believing it, or not expressing it in our lives, he first sends his messengers, the true preachers of his Word, to admonish us and warn us of our duty; that as He, for his great love for us, delivered his

¹⁰ I Samuel 15:22-23

own Son to suffer death so that we by his death might be delivered from death and be restored to life everlasting, to dwell with him forever and to be partakers and inheritors with him of his everlasting glory and kingdom of heaven, so again that we should walk in a godly life, as is right for his children to do. And if we still remain disobedient to his Word and will, not knowing him, not loving him, not fearing him, not putting our whole trust and confidence in him; and, on the other side, to our neighbors behaving ourselves uncharitably by disdain, envy, malice, or by committing murder, robbery, adultery, gluttony, deceit, lying, swearing, or any similar detestable works and ungodly behavior; then he threatens us by terrible warnings, swearing in great anger that whosoever does these works shall never enter into his rest,¹¹ which is the kingdom of heaven.

Part II

In the previous part of this sermon we saw how many ways men fall from God; some by idolatry, some through lack of faith, some by neglecting their neighbors, some by not hearing God's Word, some by taking pleasure in the vanities of worldly things. We also saw the depth of the misery of the man who has strayed from God; and how God of his infinite goodness, to call again man from that his misery, first uses gentle admonitions by his preachers, and afterward he sends terrible judgment. Now, if gentle admonition and threatening together do not produce repentance, then God will show his terrible countenance upon us; he will pour intolerable plagues upon our heads; and afterwards he will take away from us all the aid and assistance with which he previously defended us from all such manner of calamity. As the evangelical Prophet Isaiah, agreeing with Christ's parable, teaches us, God made an excellent vineyard for his beloved children. He hedged it, he walled it round about, he planted it with chosen vines, and made a tower in the midst of it, and therein also a winepress; and when he looked for it to produce good grapes, it brought forth wild grapes.¹² And here is what follows: "Now shall I show you," says God, "What I will do with my vineyard. I will pluck down the hedges so that it may perish; I will break down the walls so that it may be trodden under foot: I will let it lie waste; it shall not be cut, it shall not be dug, but briars and thorns shall overgrow it; and I shall command the clouds that they shall no more rain upon it."¹³

By these judgments we are warned that if we who are the chosen vineyard of God do not bring forth good grapes—that is to say, good works—which are delectable and pleasant in his sight, when he looks for them, when he sends his messengers to call upon us for them, but rather bring forth wild grapes, that is to say works that are sour, unsavory, and unfruitful, then he will pluck away all defense and allow severe plagues of famine and battle, dearth and death to light upon us. Finally, if these do not serve the purpose, he will let us lie waste; he will give us over; he will turn away from us; he will dig and delve no more about us; he will let us alone, and allow us to bring forth whatever fruit we will: brambles, briars, and thorns, all naughtiness, all vice, and so abundantly that they shall completely overtake us, and shall choke, strangle, and utterly destroy us.

¹¹ Hebrews 4:1-3

¹² From Isaiah 5

¹³ Isaiah 5:5-6

But those in this world who live not for God but for their own carnal liberty do not perceive how great God's wrath is towards them when he will not dig nor delve any more about them, when he leaves them alone. Instead, they consider it a great benefit to be left to their own devices; and so they live as though carnal liberty were the true liberty of the Gospel. But God forbid, good people, that we should ever desire such liberty, for although God sometimes allows the wicked to have their pleasure in this world, ungodly living results in endless destruction. The murmuring Israelites received what they longed for: they had quails enough, even until they were weary of them. But what was the result? Their sweet meat had sour sauce: even while the meat was in their mouths, the plague of God fell upon them, and suddenly they died. So, if we live wickedly and God allows us to follow our own wills, to have our own delights and pleasures, and does not correct us with some plague, there is no doubt that he is almost utterly displeased with us.

And, although it may be long before he strikes, many times when he strikes such persons, he strikes them at once forever. So that when he does not strike us, when he ceases to afflict us, to punish or beat us, and allows us to run headlong into all ungodliness and pleasures of this world that we delight in, without punishment and adversity, it is a dreadful sign that he no longer loves us, that he no longer cares for us, but has given us over to our own selves. As long as a man prunes his vines, digs at the roots, and lays fresh earth to them, he sees some evidence of fruitfulness that may be recovered in them. But when he ceases spending such cost and labor on them, it is a sign that he thinks they will never be good. And as long as a father loves his child, he looks angrily and corrects him when he misbehaves, but when he sees that those measures are ineffective and ceases from correction of his son and allows him to do what he wants to do, it is a sign that he intends to disinherit him and to cast him away forever.

So surely nothing should pierce our hearts so deeply, as well as put us in horrible fear, as when we know in our conscience that we have grievously offended God and continue in disobedience, and yet he strikes not, but quietly allows us to remain in the wickedness that we delight in. Then especially is it time to cry, and to cry again, as David did, "Do not cast me away from Your presence, And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me."¹⁴ "Do not hide Your face from me; Do not turn Your servant away in anger."¹⁵ "Do not hide Your face from me, Lest I be like those who go down into the pit."¹⁶ Such prayers of lamentation, as they confirm to us the horrible danger in which men remain when God turns his face from them, should move and stir us to cry out to God with all our hearts so that we may not be brought into such a state, which is so sorrowful, so miserable, and so dreadful that no tongue can sufficiently express nor any heart think. For what deadly grief may a man suppose it is to be under the wrath of God; to be forsaken of him; to have his Holy Spirit, the Author of all goodness, to be taken from him; to be brought to so vile a condition that he is suitable for no better purpose than to be forever condemned to hell! For not only do various passages written by David show that upon the turning of God's face from any persons they shall be left bare from all goodness and far from hope of remedy, but also the passage cited from Isaiah 5 indicates the same: God at length so

¹⁴ Psalm 51:11

¹⁵ Psalm 27:9

¹⁶ Psalm 143:7

forsakes his unfruitful vineyard that he will not only allow it to bring forth weeds, briars, and thorns, but also, further to punish the unfruitfulness of it, he says he will not cut it, he will not deliver it, and he will command the clouds not to rain upon it. By this is signified the teaching of his Holy Word which St. Paul expresses in terms of planting and watering,¹⁷ meaning that he will take that away from them so that they shall be no longer of his kingdom; they shall no longer be governed by his Holy Spirit; they shall be separated from the grace and benefits that they had, and might have continued to enjoy through Christ; they shall be deprived of the heavenly light and life they had in Christ while they abode in him; they shall again be as they were once, men without God in this world,¹⁸ or rather, even worse off; and, in sum, they shall be given into the power of the devil, who rules all those who are cast away from God, as he did Saul and Judas, and generally all who operate by their own will, the children of mistrust and unbelief.

Therefore, good Christian people, let us beware lest we, rejecting God's Word, by which we obtain and retain true faith in God, be not at length cast off so far that we become as the children of unbelief. They are of two sorts, which are quite different—in fact, almost total opposites—and yet both equally far from returning to God. The first sort, only comparing their sinful and detestable living with the right judgment and straightness of God's righteousness, are so without counsel and so comfortless, (as is everyone from whom the Spirit of counsel¹⁹ and comfort is gone,) that they will not be persuaded that God either can or will restore to them his favor and mercy. The second sort, hearing the loving and large promises of God's mercy, yet not understanding the true nature of faith, make those promises larger than God ever did; trusting that, although they continue in their sinful and detestable living, God will at the end of their life show his mercy upon them, and then they will return. Both of these two sorts of men are in a damnable state: and yet nevertheless God, who wills not the death of the wicked, has shown means whereby both the same, if they take heed in time, may escape.

The first, as they dread God's rightful justice in punishing sinners (whereby they should indeed be dismayed and should despair regarding any hope that may be in themselves), so if they would steadfastly believe that God's mercy is the remedy appointed against such despair and distrust, not only for them, but generally for all who are sorry and truly repentant and will cling to God's mercy, they may be sure they shall obtain mercy, and enter into the haven of safeguard. Those who enter this haven, regardless of how wicked they once were, shall be out of danger of everlasting damnation. According to God's message delivered by Ezekiel, the very moment that the wicked turns from his sin and shows earnest and true repentance, God will forget all his wickedness.²⁰

The second, as they are ready to believe God's promises, so should they be just as ready to believe the judgment of God. They should believe the Law as well as the Gospel. They should believe both that there is a hell and everlasting fire and that there is a heaven and everlasting joy. They should believe damnation to be threatened to the wicked and evildoers, as much as they should believe salvation to be promised to the faithful in word

¹⁷ I Corinthians 3:6-8

¹⁸ Ephesians 2:12

¹⁹ Isaiah 11:2

²⁰ Ezekiel 33:12, 14-16, 19

and works. They should believe God to be true in the one as much as in the other. And sinners who continue in their wicked living ought to realize that the promises of God's mercy and the Gospel do not pertain to them while they remain in that state, but only the Law and those Scriptures which speak of the wrath and indignation of God and his judgment. These passages should attest to them that as long as they presume upon God's mercy and live dissolutely, God will gradually withdraw his mercy from them. Furthermore, he is eventually so provoked to wrath that he often destroys such presumptive people suddenly. For of such St. Paul said, "When they say, 'Peace and safety!' then sudden destruction comes upon them."²¹ Let us beware therefore of such wicked boldness to sin. For God, who has promised his mercy to those who are truly repentant, even near the end of their life, has not promised to the presumptuous sinner either that he shall have long life or that he shall have true repentance at the end. For that purpose he has made every man's death uncertain, so that he should not put his hope in returning in the end, and in the meantime, to God's great displeasure, live an ungodly life.

Therefore let us all follow the counsel of the Wise Man:

Do not delay to turn back to the Lord,
and do not postpone it from day to day;
for suddenly the wrath of the Lord will come upon you,
and at the time of punishment you will perish.²²

Let us therefore turn immediately: and, when we turn, let us pray to God as Hosea teaches, "Take away all iniquity; receive us graciously."²³ And, if we turn to him with a humble and very penitent heart, he will receive us to his favor and grace for the sake of his holy Name, of his promise, of his truth and mercy promised to all faithful believers in Jesus Christ his only natural Son. To whom, the only Savior of the world, with the Father and the Holy Ghost, be all honor, glory, and power world without end. Amen.

²¹ I Thessalonians 5:3

²² Ecclesiasticus 5:7

²³ Hosea 14:2