

Charles St-Onge
Holy Cross Day
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Sinners in God's Hands

In the name of Jesus, the Crucified Christ. Amen.

Introduction

Travel back in time with me, if you will, to the early 1700s. You are in the British colony of Connecticut. For years the colony had been sliding gradually into a moral decadence. Attendance at worship was dropping off. A spiritual malaise and lethargy had gripped this colony.

Into this environment comes a young preacher, a graduate of Yale, filled with the Spirit of the Lord. He comes with a young wife and young children, convinced that his people needed to learn of Christ, to know Christ, to thirst for Christ. He comes convinced, in his words, that man must become small in his own eyes to be either happy or useful to God. So he preaches. And teaches. And preaches and teaches and preaches and teaches.

He's no Billy Graham or Billy Sunday or Jimmy Swaggart. He comes into the pulpit with a steady but firm voice, eyes fixed on his sermon manuscript, written in small print in a notebook. He reads a text not unlike the one we heard tonight from 1 Corinthians –

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.” 1 Cor. 1:19

The congregation settles in, and he begins to preach...(paraphrased and condensed from his sermon, *“Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”*)

What I observe in these words is this. "There is nothing that keeps wicked men at any one moment out of hell, but the mere pleasure of God." By the mere pleasure of God, I mean his sovereign pleasure, his arbitrary will, restrained by no obligation, hindered by no manner of difficulty, any more than if nothing else but God's mere will had any hand in the preservation of wicked men one moment. The truth of this observation may appear by the following considerations.

1. God has the power to cast wicked men into hell at any moment. Men's hands cannot be strong when God rises up. The strongest have no power to resist him, nor can any deliver out of his hands.-He is not only able to cast wicked men into hell, but he can most easily do it.

Sometimes an earthly prince meets with a great deal of difficulty to subdue a rebel, who has found means to fortify himself, and has made himself strong by the numbers of his followers.

But it is not so with God. There is no fortress that is any defense from the power of God. Though hand join in hand, and vast multitudes of God's enemies combine and associate themselves, they are easily broken in pieces. They are as great heaps of light chaff before the whirlwind; or large quantities of kindling before devouring flames. We find it easy to tread on

and crush a worm that we see crawling on the earth; so it is easy for us to cut or singe a slender thread that any thing hangs by: so it's easy for God, when he pleases, to cast his enemies down to hell. What are we that we should think to stand before him, at whose rebuke the earth trembles, and before whom the rocks are thrown down?

2. Wicked men deserve to be cast into hell; so that divine justice never stands in the way, it makes no objection against God's using his power at any moment to destroy them. On the contrary, justice calls aloud for an infinite punishment of their sins. Divine justice says of the tree that brings forth such bad fruit, "Cut it down, why should it use up the ground?" (Luke xiii. 7). The sword of divine justice is every moment brandished over their heads, and it is nothing but the hand of arbitrary mercy, and God's mere will, that holds it back.

3. Wicked men are already under a sentence of condemnation to hell. They not only justly deserve to be cast down, but the sentence of the law of God, that eternal and immutable rule of righteousness that God has fixed between him and mankind, speaks against them, and stands against them; so that they are bound over already to hell. As Jesus himself said, (John iii. 18) "He that believeth not is condemned already."

4. Wicked men are now the objects of that very same anger and wrath of God that is expressed in the torments of hell. The reason why they do not go down to hell right away, is not because God, in whose power they are, is not then very angry with them; as he is with many miserable creatures now tormented in hell. In fact God is a great deal more angry with great numbers that are now on earth: not only them, but also with many that are now in this congregation, who now are at ease, than he is with many of those who are now in the flames of hell.

So it's not because God is unmindful of their wickedness, and does not resent it, that he does not let loose his hand and cut them off. The wrath of God does indeed burn against them, their damnation does not slumber; the pit is prepared, the fire is made ready, the furnace is now hot, ready to receive them; the flames do now rage and glow. The devil stands ready to fall upon them, and seize them as his own, at what moment God shall permit him. They belong to him; he has their souls in his possession, and under his dominion. Jesus himself says the wicked are the Devil's goods (Luke 11:12). The devils watch them; they are ever by them at their right hand; they stand waiting for them, like greedy hungry lions that see their prey, and expect to have it, but are for the present kept back. If God should withdraw his hand, the only thing keeping the demon hordes restrained, they would in one moment fly upon their poor souls.

7. It shouldn't comfort the wicked for one moment, that there don't seem to be visible means of death at hand. It should be no security to a man, that today's he's healthy. It should be no comfort that she does not see which way she should now immediately go out of the world by accident, or that there's no visible danger around her. The manifold and continual experience of the world in all ages, shows this is no proof that a man is not on the very brink of eternity, and that the next step will not be into another world. The unseen, unthought-of ways and means of persons going suddenly out of the world are innumerable and inconceivable. Unconverted men walk over the pit of hell on a rotten covering, and there are innumerable places in this covering so weak that they will not bear their weight, and these places are not seen. The arrows of death fly unseen at noon-day; the sharpest sight cannot discern them. God

has so many different unsearchable ways of taking wicked men out of the world and sending them to hell, that there's no reason to assume that God needs to use a miracle, or go out of the way of ordinary events, to destroy any wicked man or woman, at any moment.

8. The prudence and care of natural men and women to preserve their own lives, or the care of others to preserve them, does not secure them for a moment. Divine providence and universal experience bear testimony to this. The wisdom of the world and intelligence of the world cannot protect us from death; otherwise we'd see some difference between the wise and intelligent men of the world, and others, with regard to their liableness to early and unexpected death: but how is it in fact? As the Preach of Ecclesiastes wrote, "How dies the wise man? The same way as the fool."

9. All wicked men and women's pains and contrivances which they use to escape hell, while they continue to reject Christ, and so remain wicked men, do not secure them from hell for one second. Almost every natural man or woman that hears of hell, flatters himself that he shall escape it; he depends upon himself for his own security; he flatters himself in what he has done, in what he is now doing, or what he intends to do. Every one lays out matters in her own mind how she shall avoid damnation, and flatters herself that her schemes will not fail. They've heard that there are only a few saved, and that most people who've died before now have gone down to hell; but every one thinks that his plan of escape is better than everyone else's. "I have no intention of going to that place of torment;" he says to himself.

But the wisdom of the wise and the intelligence of the intelligent will be frustrated. If we could speak with those who have departed without Christ, and ask them, one by one, whether they expected when they used to hear about hell that they would ever to be the subjects of that misery: we doubtless, would hear everyone reply, "No, I never intended to come here: I had laid out matters otherwise in my mind; I thought I had a good plan. I intended eventually to cling to Christ and serve only him, but my death was unexpected; I hadn't expected it to come so soon. As it was, it came as a thief in the night. Death outwitted me: God's wrath was too quick for me. How stupid I was!

10. God himself is under no obligation, or any promise to keep any natural man out of hell for even one second. God certainly made no promises either of eternal life, or of deliverance from eternal death, but what are found in the promises made in Christ. But surely those who are not brothers and sisters of Christ have no interest in his promises.

So that, whatever some have imagined and pretended about promises made to natural men's earnest seeking and knocking, it's obvious that whatever pains a natural man takes in religion, whatever prayers he makes, till he believes in Christ, God is under no obligation to keep him a moment from eternal destruction.

APPLICATION

Maybe this will awaken unconverted people in this congregation. What you've heard is the case for every one of you that are not of Christ. That world of misery, that lake of burning brimstone, is extended abroad under you. There is the dreadful pit of the glowing flames of the

wrath of God; there is hell's wide gaping mouth open; and you have nothing to stand upon, nor any thing to take hold of, there is nothing between you and hell but the air; it is only the power and mere pleasure of God that holds you up.

Your wickedness makes you as heavy as lead, being pulled downwards with great weight and pressure towards hell; and if God should let you go, you would immediately sink and swiftly descend and plunge into the bottomless gulf, and your health, your own care and caution, all your best laid plans, and all your righteousness, would have no more ability to keep you out of hell, than a spider's web would have to stop a falling rock. Were it not for the sovereign pleasure of God, the earth would not bear you one moment. You're a burden to the earth; the creation groans under your weight; the animals are made subject to the bondage of your corruption, but not willingly. The sun does not willingly shine upon you to give you light so that you can serve sin and Satan. The earth does not willingly yield crops to satisfy your lusts; nor is it willingly a staging ground for your wickedness. The air does not willingly serve you for breath to maintain the flame of life in your vitals, while you spend your life in the service of God's enemies. God's creatures are good. They were made for us to use in the service of God, and are not willingly used for any other purpose, and they groan when they're abused. The world would spew you out, were it not for the sovereign hand of him who has subjected it in hope.

The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire. His eyes are so pure he can hardly bear to have you in his sight. You are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince; and yet it is nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment.

How awful are those words, Isa. 63:3, which are the words of the great God. "I will tread them in my anger, and will trample them in my fury. Their blood will be sprinkled on my garments, and I will stain all my clothes." Thus it will be with you that are in an unconverted state, if you continue in it; the infinite might, and majesty, and terribleness of the omnipotent God shall be magnified upon you, in the ineffable strength of your torments. You shall be tormented in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb; and when you shall be in this state of suffering, the glorious inhabitants of heaven shall go forth and look on the awful spectacle, that they may see what the wrath and fierceness of the Almighty is; and when they have seen it, they will fall down and adore that great power and majesty. Isa. lxvi. 23, 24. "And it shall come to pass, that from one new moon to another, and from one sabbath to another, shall all flesh come to worship before me, saith the Lord. And they shall go forth and look upon the carcasses of the men that have transgressed against me; for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched, and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh."

How dreadful is the state of those that are daily and hourly in the danger of this great wrath and infinite misery! But this is the case for everyone in this congregation that has not been born again, however moral and strict, sober and religious, they might otherwise seem to be. Consider it, whether you're young or old! We don't know who they are, or in what seats they

sit, or what thoughts they now have. We don't know if they come Sundays or Wednesdays or both. It may be they are now at ease and hearing all these things and not really being bothered. They may even be at home, taking their leisure, without a care in the world, flattering themselves that they're not the ones, promising themselves that they'll escape God's judgment. If we knew who it was, what an awful sight would it be to see such a person! How might all the rest of the congregation lift up a lamentable and bitter cry over him! But, just think! instead of one, how many is it that will remember this sermon while in the grips of hell? It's highly likely that some of them are people you've seen and known, that never deserved hell any more than you or I. But their case is past all hope; they are crying in extreme misery and perfect despair; but here you are in the land of the living and in the house of God, and have an opportunity to obtain salvation. What would those poor damned hopeless souls give for one day's opportunity such as the one you now enjoy!

But now you have an extraordinary opportunity. Today Christ has thrown the door of mercy wide open, and stands calling and crying with a loud voice to poor sinners. Are there many here who have lived long in the world, and are not yet truly believers in Christ? Do you have friends and neighbors who are taking comfort in their own preparations rather than in Christ? You need to consider yourselves, and the state of your friends and neighbors, and awake thoroughly out of sleep. You cannot bear the fierceness and wrath of the infinite God. Let every one that is yet not part of Christ, and hanging over the pit of hell, whether they be old men and women, or middle aged, or young people, or little children, now harken to the loud calls of God's word and providence.

The acceptable year of the Lord, the day of the Lord's judgment, will be a day of great favor to some, but will be a day of as remarkable vengeance to others. God seems now to be hastily gathering in his elect in all parts of the land. Today is undoubtedly the same, as it was in the days of John the Baptist. The axe is in an extraordinary manner laid at the root of the trees, that every tree which does not bring forth good fruit, will be cut down and cast into the fire.

Therefore, let every one that is out of Christ, now awake and fly from the wrath to come. The wrath of Almighty God is now undoubtedly hanging over a great part of this congregation: Let every one escape from Sodom: "Escape for your lives, don't look behind you, escape to the mountain, lest you be consumed."

Conclusion

You may now return to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and travel back to the 21st century. Let me conclude with a few comments. First, this sermon led to one of the greatest spiritual revivals America ever saw. It came to be known as the "Great Awakening." Church attendance doubled and tripled over the course of half a decade. Millions were converted, and the country was indelibly changed.

For a while.

Centuries have passed since that Great Awakening. We're back, in many ways, in the early 18th century before the time of Jonathan Edwards and his fellow watchmen. Most churches, as in Edwards

time, do not believe in damnation, sin, or the jealousy of an angry God. We mouth the words, “I a poor miserable sinner, justly deserve your temporal and eternal punishment,” but we don’t believe it.

Inside our doors and on our membership “list” are those resting safe and secure, not knowing that they have cut themselves off from Christ. An eternity of fire and torment awaits them. Do we care?

Outside our doors are tens of thousands who have not heard the Gospel, and are dangling by a thread over the fires of hell. Do we care?

Most people here are willing to allow friends and neighbors – in fact, probably tens thousands of people in Delaware County - to spend millions and millions and millions of years in eternal suffering and torment apart from God, in exchange for a decade or two of comfortable “church life.” What will those people tormented in Hell think of us? How great will be their hatred of us, that we couldn’t be bothered to warn them? How will we show them we care?

What is 80 or 90 years, even, compared to eternity? What is worth so much in this world that it’s worth the eternal suffering and torment of our friends? Is anything?

For Christ, there was nothing worth trading for our salvation. His hands were nailed, his feet were pierced, and his side was speared. His head was spit on, thrashed, and crowned with thorns. God chose to provide relief from his anger through the death of his Son. What will you trade for the cross? What will you trade for your fellow citizens’ salvation? One stain glass window? A pew? A candlestick? An acre of land? Is there anything in this world and in your short life more valuable than Christ and his cross? More valuable than an eternity of suffering and pain in hell? Anything? Anything at all?

In the name of Jesus, the Crucified Christ.
Amen.