

~Other Speakers G-L: Harry Ironside:

More than once in the Holy Scriptures we are distinctly told that God speaks to men in the wonders of creation. "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night showeth knowledge. There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard" (Psa. 19:1-3). Yet nature in itself, beautiful as it is in some things and unspeakably terrible in others, is not sufficient to bring guilty man to repentance. The marvels of the universe ought to convince any thoughtful mind that back of all this amazing machinery is a Creator and a controlling Master Hand to whom every intelligent being owes allegiance. But something more is needed to subdue the sinner's proud spirit and bend his haughty will to submission, and it is here that the work of the Holy Spirit comes in, acting in power upon the conscience of the godless soul.

We have seen that, while the goodness of God was designed to lead man to repentance, yet, experiencing all the benefits of that goodness, men drifted farther and farther along the downward way that leads eventually to everlasting ruin. It is one of the facts hardest to explain that people who are grateful to their fellows for the smallest favors can yet be recipients of God's goodness daily, and that in ten thousand different ways, and still ignore completely the Giver of all good forgetting that "Every good and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning."

We need not therefore be surprised that, on the other hand, the judgments of God expressed through what many regard simply as natural calamities also fail, in themselves, to produce repentance, even though they may fill men with fear, horror, and anxiety. Our Lord when predicting conditions that will prevail immediately before His return describes a world in chaotic upheaval, nation rising against nation, kingdom against kingdom, on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, earthquakes in many places, the sea and the waves roaring, men's hearts failing them for fear for looking after those things which are coming on the earth -- yet no intimation of repentance because of sin and a turning to God for deliverance.

It was so in olden days. The prophet Amos furnishes us with a striking picture of the dire circumstances that Israel passed through in the days of her apostasy; but the horrors of famine, the loathsomeness of the plague, and the destruction wrought by fire, storm, and earthquakes, all alike failed to produce repentance. In this connection we cannot do better than read carefully a part of his fourth chapter, verses 6-12:

"And I also have given you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and want of bread in all your places: yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the LORD. And also I have withholden the rain from you, when there were yet three months to the harvest: and I caused it to rain upon one city, and caused it not to rain upon another city: one piece was rained upon and the piece whereupon it rained not withered. So two or three cities wandered unto one city, to drink water; but they were not satisfied: yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the LORD. I have smitten you with blasting and mildew: when your gardens and your vineyards and your fig trees and your olive trees increased, the palmerworm devoured them: yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the LORD. I have sent among you the pestilence after the manner of Egypt: your young men have I slain with the sword, and have taken away your horses; and I have made the stink of your camps to come up unto your nostrils: yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the LORD. I have overthrown some of you, as God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and ye were as a firebrand plucked out of the burning: yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the LORD. Therefore thus will I do unto thee, O Israel: and because I will do this unto thee, prepare to meet thy God, O Israel."

These sore judgments are similar in character, though not nearly so severe, as those predicted to fall upon Christendom in the last days, when transgressions have come to the full. And in that day, just as when in God's long-suffering toward Thyatira, He "gave her space to repent" and she repented not, so, three times over, we find the same thing declared concerning those who shall experience the sorrows of the tribulation era. In Revelation, after we pass the third chapter, we have a series of visions in which is set forth most graphically the climax of the age-long struggle between the forces of evil and those of righteousness. Often has it seemed to the doubting and half-hearted that the victory over sin was never to be won, but that the powers of darkness grew even stronger at times than they had been before. But faith could ever look forward to the triumph of the Lamb and His hosts over the dragon and his deluded followers. In these great visions the final outcome is clear -- "A king shall reign in righteousness"; yea, righteousness shall cover the earth as the waters cover the great deep.

But ere that time there will come the last terrific struggle, when the wrath of God and of the Lamb shall be revealed from heaven, and the wrath of the devil will be manifested on the earth as never before. Ungodly men caught in the vortex of this dynamic crash of opposing forces will have to suffer indescribable anguish, if they

persist in high-handed opposition to the Kingdom of God. But all that they shall be called upon to endure will fail to work repentance in their hearts.

However one may interpret the ninth chapter of the Apocalypse, there can be no question that it is a portent of a condition unspeakably evil which will prevail upon earth for a time, inflicting terrible physical and mental suffering upon men, and destroying millions of the race. Then note the solemn words of verses 20 and 21: "And the rest of the men which were not killed by these plagues yet repented not of the works of their hands, that they should not worship devils, and idols of gold, and silver, and brass, and stone, and of wood: which neither can see, nor hear, nor walk: neither repented they of their murders, nor of their sorceries, nor of their fornication, nor of their thefts." It is evident that suffering does not necessarily produce repentance. Twice it is so stated in these two verses.

Advocates of the larger hope and universalists generally insist that all punishment is remedial and that eventually God will perfect through suffering all who now reject His grace. This passage lends itself to no such delusive dream. Those who are to endure the horrors of the judgments here depicted are not thereby brought to confess their sins and seek divine forgiveness. Instead, they harden themselves against God and persist in their immoral and ungodly behavior.

Yet it cannot be denied that suffering has had a very salutary effect on many people; but this does not refute the position taken above. When the grace of God co-operates with the trying circumstances to bring one to a sense of his personal need, his unworthiness of the divine favor, and his dependence on God for that which alone can enable him to rise above the adverse conditions in which he finds himself, suffering will be used to produce repentance. But where this is not the case it results in greater hardness of heart just as the same sun that softens the wax hardens the clay.

A kindred passage to that we have already been considering is Revelation 16:10-11: "And the fifth angel poured out his vial upon the seat of the beast; and his kingdom was full of darkness; and they gnawed their tongues for pain, and blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, and repented not of their deeds."

Here we see that the most intense anguish, instead of producing repentance, only hardens men in their sins and in fact leads them to add to the enormity of their guilt by blasphemously blaming God Himself for the distress which their own unholy ways have involved them in.

Again and again we have seen this principle exemplified in actual life. The student of history will recall how in past centuries, when wars, famines, and pestilences have decimated whole nations, the survivors in most cases have become worse rather than better. One thinks of the days of the plague in Paris in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when terror seized the populace, yet there was a turning from, instead of to, God, and the frenzied citizens plunged into all kinds of vile excesses and orgies of infamy in order to help them to forget the ever present danger.

If a small minority sought after God and recognized that the plague was His voice calling them to repentance, it was only because of His grace working in their hearts. And now that science has demonstrated the possibility of conquering such dire visitations as yellow fever, cholera, and bubonic plague by proper sanitation and extermination of vermin, the majority in place of gratefully owning the Creator's goodness in making known such things to His creatures, that they may protect themselves against disease and physical suffering, actually deride religion and scorn the Word of the Lord, supposing that increased scientific knowledge has made the concept of an intelligent Creator and an overruling Deity unnecessary, if not altogether absurd.

In view of the well attested saying, that "character tends to permanence," we may readily see what place these considerations should have as we contemplate what the Holy Scriptures reveal concerning the eternal destiny of those who leave this world impenitent and unreconciled to God. We would all like to believe that there is something cleansing in the great change called death, so that eventually all men will attain the beatific vision and become pure and holy, purged from all earth stains and fitted for fellowship with the infinitely righteous One. But the Scriptures positively declare the very opposite. There we learn of two ways to die and two destinies afterwards, according to the state of those who pass from time into eternity. The Lord Jesus Himself has said, "If ye believe not that I am he, ye shall die in your sins" (John 8:24). And in verse 21 He declares, "Whither I go, ye cannot come." In Revelation 14:13 we read: "And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors; and their works do follow them."

Observe the vivid contrasts here. Some die in their sins; others die in the Lord. Those who die in their sins never go where Christ is; those who die in the Lord enter into rest and are rewarded for their devotion to their Redeemer. There is no hint that some post-mortem method of purification will be found whereby the first class will be brought to repentance and so to turn to Christ for the salvation they spurned on earth. And those who are in the Lord will never be in danger of apostatizing from the faith and losing at last the knowledge of the divine approval.

The solemn words of the Revelation 22:11, "He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still," make this position doubly sure. Instead of death leading to a continued probation, we find that it rather settles forever the state of the saved and also of the lost. Character remains unchanged thereafter. The righteous continue righteous. The unrighteous continue in their unrighteousness. The holy remain holy for eternity. The unclean are defiled forever. And the reason is that the saved will then be fully conformed to the image of God's Son, our blessed Lord Jesus Christ, while the unsaved will, by their own refusal to heed the message of grace, have become hardened in their sin so that they will be beyond all possibility of repenting.

"Sow an act, you reap a habit;
Sow a habit, you reap a character;
Sow a character, you reap a destiny."

Our Lord's story of the rich man and Lazarus has been treated by some as a parable solely, and by others as all intensely literal; while many see in it a true story in which figurative language is employed in part when describing the unseen world. But however one may take it, the solemn figure of "a great gulf fixed" and forever impassible either by those who would go from hell to paradise, or from paradise to hell, remains suggestive. It was surely intended to teach the impossibility that anything the wicked might suffer in another world would lead them to repent of their sins and seek to get right with God. The great lesson the Lord meant to impress upon every listener was the importance of repenting here and now, and not indulging the vain hope of some after-death purgatorial cleansing that would accomplish for the one who died impenitent what the believer may know on earth when he takes God at His word. "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead." And if men now spurn the grace of God, trample on the blood of Christ, and do despite to the Holy Spirit, God Himself apparently has no other resources upon which to draw, no other means of bringing hardened sinners to repentance than are now in operation.

This accounts for the few among aged Christ-rejectors who repent ere called to give account to God. No one who has worked much in government hospitals, prisons, and other public institutions, where he has had to contact large numbers of hoary-headed sinners, can fail to realize how exceedingly difficult it is to deal with them about eternal things. Often has my very blood seemed to freeze in my veins as some aged blasphemer has cursed me for my temerity in seeking to tell him of Christ. Never have I heard such torrents of vile words poured forth from human lips as when such a one has openly expressed his hatred for God and his contempt for all things holy. One could not but realize that years of persistency in sin had hardened the heart and seared the conscience as with a hot iron, so that all desire for anything better had seemingly passed away, reminding one of the awful description of lost souls given in Revelation 18:14, where a literal translation would read, "the fruit season of thy soul's desire has gone from thee."

In the light of these considerations, how earnestly ought we who know Christ ourselves to seek after the lost and endeavor now, while the day of grace lingers, to bring men to repentance that they might come to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus, and in turn be His messengers to others. But if we would do this we must be wise evangelists, not soothing unrepentant sinners to sleep with a "simple gospel" that has no place in it for showing them their great need, ere attempting to present the Remedy.

To Jeremiah God said, as we noticed in an earlier chapter, "Break up your fallow ground, sow not among thorns." The ploughshare of God's truth must needs break up hard hearts if we would hear men crying in anxiety, "What must I do to be saved?" When they see their lost condition they will be ready to appreciate the salvation provided in grace.

This is what our forefathers in the Gospel ministry called "law-preaching." It was the application of the righteous commands of God to the souls of their hearers, in order that "sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful." We may possibly have a better understanding of "the dispensation of the grace of God" than some of them, but do we get as good results from our so-called "clear Gospel sermons" as they did from their sterner preaching? We are apt to be so occupied with the doctrinal presentation of the Biblical truth of justification by faith alone that we forget the indifference of the masses to this or any other supernatural message, and so we really fail where we hoped to help. Never be afraid to insist on man's responsibility to

glorify God, and to drive home to his conscience the fact of his stupendous failure. Where there is no sense of sin, there will be no appreciation of grace. Do not daub with untempered mortar. Do not be in such a hurry to get to Romans 3:21 that you pass lightly and hastily over the great indictment of the entire human race in the preceding chapters. There is a world of meaning in Mary's words: "He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away." It is the "poor in spirit" who appreciate the "riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints."

Our Lord Himself has told us, "They that are whole need not a physician; but they that are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." And we may be certain that only a sense of their sinfulness will lead any to avail themselves of the skill of the Great Physician. I have already said that this does not mean that men must pass through a certain amount of soul trouble or feel just so much compunction for sin ere they can be saved. But it does mean that men who have sinned with impunity, who have forgotten God, who have scoffed at His grace, or have trusted in a fancied righteousness of their own, should be brought through the Word and Spirit of God to a changed attitude that will make them eager for the salvation so freely offered.

An evangelist had noticed a careless young woman who throughout his preaching had giggled and chattered to an equally thoughtless youth. At the close an overzealous and most unwise "personal worker" stopped the girl at the door and asked, "Won't you trust in Jesus tonight?" Startled, she replied, "Yes I will." He directed her to the well known verse, John 3:16, and read it to her: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." "Do you believe that?" he inquired. "Sure, I believe it all," was the ready reply. "Then, don't you see, God says you have eternal life?" "O sure, I guess I must have," she answered with nonchalance and passed out the door. Elated the young worker hurried to the evangelist with the information that "Miss --- found peace tonight." "Peace!" exclaimed the preacher. "Did she ever find trouble?" It was a good question. Far too many are talked into a false peace by ill-instructed persons who would not know what David meant when he exclaimed, "The pains of hell gat hold upon me: I found trouble and sorrow" (Psa. 116:3). It is the troubled soul who comes to Christ for rest.

How important that such should be urged to immediate decision lest, resisting the Spirit of God as He strives with them, they at last reach the place where they are given up to hardness of heart and "find no place of repentance," though seeking it with tears. It is not that God will refuse to give repentance, but that there comes a time when it is too late to seek to change conditions that have become settled.