

Sinners Entreated To Hear God's Voice

~Other Speakers M-R: Edward Payson:

The Holy Ghost saith, today if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts. — HEBREWS III. 7,8.

My brethren, I can think of no introduction to a discourse on this awakening passage more suitable, than that often repeated command of our Savior, He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith. You are here told what the Spirit saith. The Holy Ghost saith, Today, if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts. To sinners of all ages, in all situations, of all descriptions, to every one who hath an ear to hear, or a heart to be hardened, the Holy Ghost saith, Today, if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

The import of this language is so obvious as to need little explanation. It requires us to hear God's voice; to hear it, not merely with the external ear, but with appropriate feelings of heart, with faith, love and obedience. It commands us to do this today, immediately, without the smallest delay. The import of the language is, if you ever mean to hear God's voice, if you do not intend to die without obeying it, you must hear it now. And what is the voice of God, which we are thus commanded to hear immediately ~ it is that voice, which says respecting Jesus Christ, This is my beloved Son, hear him; that voice, which now commandeth all men, every where, to repent; that voice which says to every child of Adam, My son give me thine heart; come ye out from an unbelieving world, and be ye separate and touch not the unclean thing, and I will receive you, and be a Father to you, and ye shall be my sons and my daughters, saith the Lord Almighty. The import of all these passages is, be truly religious, and if you intend ever to be so, become so today; while yet it is called today, repent and believe the gospel.

This, then, is the great duty enjoined in our text, the command which we are now to enforce. But when God speaks to men; when the Creator speaks to his creatures; when the King eternal speaks to his lawful subjects, and the Holy Ghost saith, hear his voice and harden not your hearts against him, can it be necessary to urge upon you the duty of immediately obeying his commands? Alas, my friends, that it should be necessary. But necessary as it is, it will be in vain to attempt it unless divine grace incline you to obey. O, then, that the God, whose voice you are commanded to hear, and the Holy Spirit, who now commands you to hear it, may be present in his powerful influence, while I attempt to enforce upon you an immediate compliance with his commands, to press home upon your consciences the reasons, the motives, which should induce you to become religious today.

Before I proceed to do this let me state, particularly, whom I mean to address. It is not the fool, who says in his heart, there is no God. It is not the profane scoffer, who, disbelieving the scriptures, sneeringly asks, Where is the promise of his coming? It is not he, who, having already presumptuously hardened his heart against the truth, has been given over by the righteous judgment of God to strong delusions, to believe a lie. Such characters, if any such are present, I must leave, where they have willfully thrown themselves, in the hands of that God who is a consuming fire, who has declared, that he will deal with incorrigible offenders. It is the young, who are not hardened through the deceitfulness of sin; it is those, who, rationally convinced of the truth and importance of religion intend at some future period to embrace it; those, whose consciences, not yet seared as with an hot iron, sometimes cause them to tremble, as did Felix, when they hear of righteousness, temperance, and the judgment to come; but who, like the same Felix, are postponing a compliance with their convictions to some more convenient season. Such are the characters, whom I now address, and upon whom I would press the importance, the necessity, of immediately becoming religious.

The first motive, which I shall set before you with this view, is the shortness and uncertainty of life. I urge you to become religious today, because you are not sure of tomorrow; because today is, perhaps, the only opportunity, with which you will ever be favored. Need I enter upon a labored proof of this truth? Need I remind you, that you are mortal, that it is appointed to all men once to die? Does not the tolling bell almost daily remind you of this? Do you not see your fellow mortals borne, in rapid succession, to their long home, while the mourners go about your streets? Need I tell you, that you are frail, as well as mortal; that you must not only die, but may die soon and suddenly; that the time allotted you, when longest, is short, and may prove much shorter than you are aware; that many are swept into eternity, as in a moment, by unexpected casualties? and that those who fall victims to diseases, are in perfect health the day, nay, the hour, before it assails them; and that of course, the full possession of health, today, is no proof that you will not be assailed by fatal disease tomorrow? Who, let me ask, are the persons, that die suddenly and unexpectedly? Are they the feeble, the

infirm? No, my hearers; observation will tell you, that they are the youthful, the vigorous, the strong. She will tell you that while the former, like a reed, bend before the blast and escape, the latter, like the stubborn oak, brave its fury, and are prostrated. She will tell you, and the physician will confirm her remark, that those, who enjoy the most vigorous health, are most exposed to many of those diseases, which arrest their victims by surprise, and cut short the thread of life, as in a moment. Such is the wise appointment of him, in whose hands is our breath, that none may be tempted to abuse their health and vigor, by drawing from them encouragement to postpone preparation for death. Will you then frustrate the design of this appointment? Will you boast of tomorrow, as if it were your own, when you know not what a day may bring forth? You would pity and condemn the madness of a man, who should stake his whole fortune on the turn of a die, without the smallest prospect of gain. But, my delaying hearers, you are playing a far more dreadful and desperate game than this. You are staking your souls, your salvation on the continuance of life: on an event as uncertain as the turn of the die. You stake them without any equivalent; for if life should be spared, you gain nothing; but should it be cut short, you lose all, you are ruined for eternity. You run the risk of losing every thing dear, and of incurring everlasting misery— for what? For the sake of living a little longer without religion, of spending a few more days or years in disobeying and offending your Creator, of committing sins, which you know must be repented of. And is it wise, rather is it not madness, to incur such a risk? Let the following case furnish the reply. I will suppose that you intend to defer the commencement of a religious life for one year only. Select, then, the most healthy, vigorous person of your acquaintance; the man, whose prospects are fairest for long life, and say, whether you would be willing to stake your soul on the chance of that man's life continuing for a year? Would you be willing to say, I consent to forfeit salvation, to be miserable forever, if that man dies before the expiration of a year? There is not, I presume, a single person present, who would not shudder at the thought of entering into such an engagement, if he supposed it would be binding. My delaying hearers, if you would not stake your salvation on the continuance of any other person's life, why will you stake it on the continuance of your own? Yet this you evidently do, when you resolve to defer repentance to a future period; for if you die before that period arrives you die impenitent, unprepared, and perish forever. O, then, play no longer this desperate game; a game, in which millions have staked and lost their souls; but if you intend ever to become religious, begin today, for tomorrow is not.

Permit me to enforce these remarks by an instance in point. A person, who formerly met with you in this house, while in the full enjoyment of youth and health, became convinced of the importance of religion; and expressed a determination to attend the next weekly meeting for religious inquiry. When the day of meeting arrived, she however concluded to defer her attendance till the following week. But before the close of that week, she was in her grave. It is not for us to limit the divine mercy, or to say what was her fate; but, for ought we can tell, the delay of a week proved fatal. Permit me to remind you of another circumstance, which many of you will recollect. I observed to you on the Sabbath, I think the first Sabbath of a year, that perhaps some person might then be present in God's house for the last time. The event verified the peradventure. On the following Wednesday, one, who had been present on the Sabbath, was dead. At the ensuing Thursday evening lecture, I noticed the circumstance, and repeated the remark. Again was it verified. Before the next Sabbath, a person, who had been present at that lecture, was a corpse. On the next Sabbath, I mentioned this also, and repeated the remark a third time; and the following day, a third person, who on the Sabbath, was in perfect health, expired. My hearers, what has occurred, may occur again. No person now before me can be sure that he will be permitted to re-visit this house of prayer. If, then, you intend ever to become religious, begin today, for tomorrow is not.

This remark suggests a second reason, why you should not postpone religion to another day. You cannot properly, or even lawfully, promise to give what is not your own. Now tomorrow is not yours; and it is yet uncertain whether it ever will be. Today is the only time which you can, with the least shadow of propriety, call your own. Today, then, is the only time, which you can properly or lawfully give to God. To promise that you will give him tomorrow, or which is the same thing, to resolve that you will become religious tomorrow, is to promise what is not yours, and what may never be yours to give. If then, God deserves any thing at your hands, if you mean to give him any thing, give him what is your own, and do not mock him and deceive yourselves, by promising to give him what you do not possess. If you adopt a different course, and postpone the commencement of a religious life till tomorrow, you will, in effect, say, all the time, that is mine to give, I will give to sin and the world; but that time, which is not mine, and which I have no right or power to give, I will give to God.

A third reason why you should commence a religious life today, is, that if you defer it, though but till tomorrow, you must harden your hearts against the voice of God. This our text plainly intimates. It excludes the idea of any middle course between obeying God's voice today, and hardening our hearts; and affirms of course, that all, who neglect to do the former, will do the latter. Every sinner present then, who does, not become religious today, will harden his own heart. This is evident also from the very nature of things. God commands and

exhorts you to commence immediately, a religious life. Now if you do not comply, you must refuse, for there is no medium. Here then is a direct, willful act of disobedience to God's commands; and this act tends most powerfully to harden the heart; for after we have once disobeyed, it becomes more easy to repeat the disobedience. But this is not all. If you disobey, you must assign some excuse to justify your disobedience, or your consciences will reproach you, and render you uneasy; if no plausible excuse occurs, you will seek one. If none can readily be found, you will invent one. And when God proceeds to enforce his commands by frowns and threatenings, and to press you with motives and arguments, you must fortify your minds against their influence, and seek other arguments to assist you in doing it. This also tends most powerfully to harden the heart. A man, who is frequently employed in seeking arguments and excuses to justify his neglect of religion, soon becomes expert in the work of self-justification. He is, if I may so express it, armed at all points against the truth; so that in a little time, nothing affects him, no arrow from the quiver of revelation can reach his conscience. Urge him to what duty you will, he has some plausible excuse in readiness to justify himself for neglecting to perform it. But if, as is sometimes the case, his excuses prove insufficient, and his understanding and conscience become convinced, that he ought to hear God's voice today he can avoid compliance only by taking refuge in an obstinate refusal, or by resolutely diverting his attention to some other object, till God's commands are forgotten, or by a vague kind of promise that he will become religious at some future period. Whichsoever of these methods he adopts, the present impression is effaced, and his heart is hardened. He has engaged in a warfare with his reason and conscience, and has gained a victory over them. He has resisted the force of truth, and thus rendered it more easy for him to resist it again. In a word, he has less religious sensibility; he has become more inaccessible to conviction. and less disposed to yield to it, than before. Now this is precisely what the scriptures mean by hardening the heart. And this, my delaying hearers, is what you must do, what you will do, unless you become religious today. God now commands and exhorts you to repent, and places before you many powerful motives and arguments to induce you to obey. If you do not yield to him, you must resist him. You must, if I may so express it, brace up your minds and hearts against the force of the means which he employs to persuade you. Your spirits must resist and strive against his. Of course, you will leave this house more hardened than you entered it: salvation will be placed farther from you, and your conversion will be rendered more improbable than ever. O, then, if you intend ever to hear God's voice, hear it today, and do not, by hardening yourselves against it, render it a source of death unto death to your souls. As a farther inducement to this, permit me to remark,

First, That if you do not commence a religious life today, there is great reason to fear that you will never commence it. This is a most important, as well as a most alarming truth; and could I persuade you to believe it, I should feel strong hopes, that you would comply with the exhortation in our text; for I venture to assert, that there is no one thing, which encourages you to neglect religion today, so much as a secret hope, that you shall become religious at some future time. Could this delusive hope be destroyed, could you be made to feel, that your eternal salvation depends on your becoming religious today, you would scarcely postpone it till to-morrow. Permit me then to attempt the destruction of this hope, by showing you how groundless it is, and how many circumstances combine to render it probable, that if you do not hear God's voice today, you never will hear it. With this view I remark, that the very causes which induce you to defer the commencement of a religious life, render it highly improbable, that you will ever become religious. When this duty is urged upon you, you allege, perhaps, that you are not able to become religious, or that you cannot give your minds to it; or that you have not sufficient time for it, or you know not how to begin. Now all these causes will operate with equal force another day. You will then feel just as unable, or, to speak more properly, just as unwilling to become religious, as you do now. When to-morrow arrives you will, therefore, probably defer repentance to some future time when that time arrives, you will again defer it; and will continue to pursue this course till life is spent. Would the work be rendered more easy by delay, there might be some appearance of a reason for deferring it. But it will not. On the contrary, every day's delay will render it more difficult. Your hearts, as you have already been reminded, will tomorrow be more hard and insensible than they are now; your sinful habits also will be more confirmed; your consciences will be less tender; you will be less susceptible of religious impressions; in a word, you will have greater difficulties to overcome, and less disposition to contend with them, than you have today. It is, therefore, exceedingly improbable, that those who neglect religion today, will attend to it tomorrow.

There is another circumstance, which renders this improbability still greater. The inspired writers teach us, very explicitly, that after a time, God ceases to strive with sinners, and to afford them the assistance of his grace. He gives them up to a blinded mind, a seared conscience, and a hard heart. Thus he dealt with the inhabitants of the old world. Thus he dealt with the wicked sons of Eli. They hearkened not to the voice of their father, says the inspired historian, because the Lord would slay them. That is, God had determined, in consequence of their wickedness, to destroy them, and, therefore, he did not accompany the warnings of their father with his blessing. Thus he dealt with the Jews in the time of the prophet Isaiah, Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and

understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed. The same terrible punishment was inflicted on the inhabitants of Jerusalem in., our Savior's time. He beheld the city, we are told, and wept over it, saying, O, that thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong to thy peace; but now they are hid from thine eyes! This passage very clearly intimates that there is a time, when sinners may know the things of their peace; but that, if they suffer that time to pass without improving it, the things of their peace will then be hidden from them, and their destruction will be sure. Hence the apostle exhorts us, in the context, to take warning from the fate of the Jews, who hardened their hearts against God's voice, and thus provoked him to swear in his wrath, that they should not enter his rest. Hence, also, he informs us, that now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation; thus plainly intimating, that tomorrow the day of salvation may be past. If then you, my delaying hearers, harden your hearts today, God may seal them up in impenetrable hardness tomorrow. If you say, I will not embrace the offers of salvation today, God will say, No offers of salvation shall be made you tomorrow. Nor is there small reason to fear this; for of all the sins which men can commit, perhaps no one is more provoking to God, than that of refusing immediately to hear his voice. It is a direct and willful act of rebellion against his authority; it is a sin committed against light and conviction; it is resisting and grieving the Holy Spirit; it is crucifying Jesus Christ afresh; it is practically saying, I know that I must, at some period of life, become religious. It is true death may surprise me, or God may deny his grace, and leave me to perish, if I delay; but I choose to encounter this danger, to incur the risk of losing everlasting happiness and of suffering eternal misery, rather than hear God's voice today. I will therefore, once more, harden myself against it; I will again trifle with his commands, again make light of my Savior's invitations and walk a little longer in the broad road, sit awhile longer on the crumbling brink of perdition. This, O delaying sinner, is the plain language of thy conduct. Thus strong is the aversion, which it expresses to religion, to the service of God. That he must be exceedingly displeased with such a course must be obvious to your own mind. You have then great reason to fear, that your day of grace has almost expired that God will soon swear in his wrath you shall never enter his rest. How groundless must be your hopes of a future conversion; how small the probability, that if you refuse to hear God's voice today, you will ever become religious. You ought to feel as if this were the only accepted time, as if your day of grace would end with the setting sun, as if all eternity depended on the present hour, on your immediate obedience to the voice of God.

But once more, setting aside for a moment all that has been said, suppose that you could be sure of long life, sure of repenting at some future period, it would still be the dictate of wisdom, as it is of revelation, to become religious today. You expect, if you ever do become religious, to repent of all your past sins; for you well know, that without repentance there is no pardon, no true religion; of course, if by postponing religion today you resolve to commit a few more sins, you expect to repent of those sins. You are then, while you delay, constantly making work for repentance; you are doing what you mean to be sorry for; you are building up today, what you mean to throw down tomorrow. How irrational and absurd is this! How foolish, how ridiculous, does a rational, immortal being appear, when he says, I mean to omit some duty, or commit some sin today, but I will be very sorry for it tomorrow. I will not now hear God's voice, but I mean to mourn, to be grieved for it hereafter. My hearers, could you say this to your fellow creatures without blushing? How then can you, without shame, say it to God by your actions? What sincerity can there be in such promises? How can a man sincerely resolve that he will tomorrow repent of conduct which he loves and chooses today! It cannot be. There is not, therefore, the smallest sincerity in the delaying sinner's resolutions of future repentance and amendment. He has no real intention to become religious at any future period of his life; and all his promises are designed merely to quiet his conscience, and prevent her from disturbing him in his sinful pursuits. In every point of view then, it clearly appears to be your duty, your wisdom, your interest, to become religious today.

Thus have I stated some of the reasons, which should induce you to commence, immediately, a religious life. To crown all, permit me to remind you, that it is the express command of God. God now commandeth all men, every where, to repent; and the Holy Ghost saith, obey God's command, hear his voice today, and do not harden your hearts against it. This command, O sinner, I lay as a terror across thy path. You cannot proceed one step farther in an irreligious course, without trampling it under foot; without practically saying, God now commands me to repent, but I will not repent; the Holy Ghost saith, hear his voice today, but today I will not hear it. If tomorrow's rising sun finds you out of the narrow way of life, it will find you where God expressly forbids you to be, on pain of incurring his severest displeasure. He has said, rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as idolatry; and if you disobey his voice today, you will be guilty both of rebellion and of stubbornness. We might almost venture to say, it, would scarcely be more sinful to go away and commit murder, than to go away and defer repentance; for why is murder a sin? Because, you will reply, God has said, Thou shalt not kill. And has not the same God said, with equal clearness, Repent now, and believe the gospel? To violate this command then, is no less a direct act of rebellion against God, than it would be to take the life of a fellow creature. And will you, can you, dare you, then, be guilty of it? Have any of you already reached such a pitch of impiety and wickedness, as to dare trample on a known command of God, to commit known, willful, deliberate sin, when he has assured us that, if we sin willfully, after we have received a

knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sin; but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation? My friends, if any of you dare do this, it is too late to exhort you not to harden your hearts; for they are hardened to the utmost already. I am, however, aware, that you will not see, or at least will not acknowledge this to be the case. I am aware, that you always have many excuses in readiness, to prove that you are not guilty of willful disobedience. But what will these excuses avail at the last day? They may serve to quiet your consciences, to harden your hearts and buoy you up with deceitful hopes now; but they will answer no purpose then; nay, you will not then dare to offer them; for God has declared that every mouth shall be stopped. Besides, you cannot find a single instance in the Bible, in which God has ever paid the smallest regard to the excuses of sinners. We read of some, who, when they were invited, as you now are, to the gospel feast, began with one consent to make excuse. And what was the consequence? God declared that not one of them should taste it. We read of another who attempted to excuse himself by pretending that he was not able to do what his Lord required. And what was his Lord's reply to this excuse? Out of thine own mouth will I judge thee, thou wicked servant. This, I presume, is the excuse which most of you are now secretly making. You are saying, I do not become religious today, because I am not able; and I must wait till God assists me. Of all the excuses, that sinners can make, this is the most foolish, the most groundless, the most provoking to God. If you can make no better excuse than this, you had much better make none, and say at once, I will not obey God. Groundless and impious, however, as this excuse is, I would pay it some attention, did you really believe it yourselves. But you do not believe it. The resolutions and promises, which you often secretly make, that you will repent tomorrow, or on your dying bed, prove that you do not believe it; for none ever resolves or promises to do what he knows he cannot do. These promises and resolutions then, show that you suppose yourselves able to repent.

There is another fact, which shows still more clearly, that you do not really believe this excuse. When any important event, an event which nearly concerns your present interests, is in suspense, you always feel anxious. If you have no control over the event, you feel more anxious. You cannot rest till it is decided. Suppose, for instance, that your property, your reputation, or your lives, depended on the verdict of a jury., over which you had no control. You would not say, while they were deliberating, it will avail nothing for me to be anxious; I will therefore feel easy and unconcerned. You could not feel unconcerned; you would be anxious till the decision was known. To apply these remarks to the case before us: You know that God now commands you to repent, and threatens you with everlasting punishment, unless you obey. You profess to believe, that you cannot obey without the assistance of his grace. At the same time you must be sensible that it is altogether uncertain whether you will ever receive this assistance; that is, altogether uncertain whether you shall not perish in your sins, as thousands do, while few find the way of life. Now if you really believe this, you would be in a state of constant anxiety, until your destiny was decided; until you knew whether you should obtain divine assistance or not. Shall I be saved, or shall I perish? is a question, which you would be constantly and anxiously asking. But you do not ask this question. You do not feel this anxiety. You are habitually easy and unconcerned, a demonstrative proof that you do not believe this excuse, that you suppose salvation to be in your own power. Deceive not yourselves then, and insult not God with an excuse, which you do not really believe, and which, if it were true, would transfer all blame from sinners to God, and prove that he alone is guilty of all the wickedness which is perpetrated by his creatures. He knows what you can do, and he does command you to become religious today, and you must obey, or take the consequences. It is painful, my friends, to address you in this language; but when I deliver God's message, I must deliver it plainly: I must, to the utmost of my power, apply it to your consciences, in all its unbending, unaccommodating strictness; turn it which way we please, it will say nothing but this,—repent, or you perish. And what, after all, is there so very irksome, or disagreeable, in a religious life, that you should wish to defer its commencement? If you must begin some time, why not begin today? Will you reply, I know not how to begin? God's voice, if you listen to it, will inform you. It tells us, that there is a veil upon our hearts; a veil, which prevents us from discerning the path of duty; and it also tells us, that when our hearts turn to the Lord, that veil shall be taken away. Turn then to God Go to him, as his servants, for direction, and he will teach you what you must do. If I mistake not, many of you are like Agrippa, and for a long time have been almost persuaded to be Christians; but you hesitate, you linger, you dread to take the first step. Perhaps when you are just on the point of yielding to conviction, the question, what will the world, what will my companions say, occurs to you and causes you to fear. You fear to be thought serious; you dread the remarks, the ridicule, which it would draw upon you, and therefore do violence to your convictions, or lock them up in your own breast, till they die away. In this manner thousands gradually and insensibly harden their hearts. till the truth ceases to effect them. Let such remember, that the fear of man bringeth a snare, that Jesus Christ has said, Whosoever is ashamed of me, of him will I be ashamed at the last day. If you cannot bear the reproach of men, how will you bear his condemning sentence; and the everlasting shame and contempt which will follow it? It will then be known that you had serious thoughts, but that you banished them through fear of men; and sinners themselves will despise you as a coward, who did not dare do what he knew to be right. Dare then to do your duty, to obey your conscience and your God, to be religious; for you cannot be a Christian in disguise. You must come out and be separate, or God will not receive you. Take

Sinners Entreated To Hear God's Voice

then, at once, some decided step, and let it be known what you mean to be; and you will find that this, and all the other objects of your fear, are mere shadows, and will feel ashamed that they should ever have influenced you for a moment. If your heart still lingers, press it with the command of God; press it with the dreadful consequence of offending and provoking him to forsake you; press it with the terrors of the last day and all the awful realities of eternity. Above all, press it with the consideration, that if you ever turn to God, it must be today; that your soul, your salvation, your everlasting happiness, depends on your becoming religious today. My friends, are you not convinced that this is the case? Do you not perceive, that if you disobey, or trifle with this solemn command, it will, it must harden your hearts; and render your conversion exceedingly improbable? Do you not perceive that if with this command before you, and with all these motives to obey it, you cannot resolve to obey, you will feel still less disposed to obedience tomorrow, when the subject is forgotten and the world, with all its cares and allurements, again rushes upon you? Be persuaded then to listen and obey, while God, and Christ, and the Holy Spirit—while death, and judgment, and eternity, and heaven and hell, continually cry, today, today, hear God's voice, and harden not your hearts!