

The Doom of Those Who Neglect The Great Salvation

Charles G. Finney:

"How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation?" Hebrews 2:3

Escape what? What can Universalists say to such a question as this? They whose first doctrine proclaims that there can be no danger--what will they say to this solemn question and its startling assumption of peril from which there shall be no escape? How shall we escape?--says the inspired author--as if he would imply most strongly that there can be no escape to those who neglect this great salvation.

Salvation;--the very term imports safety or deliverance from great impending evil. If there be no such evil, there is then no meaning to this term--no real salvation.

The writer is speaking of the salvation published in the gospel; and the idea that immediately suggested its greatness is the greatness of its author and revealer. It is because Jesus Christ by whom this gospel came is so great, compared with angels, that the writer conceives of this salvation as pre-eminently great and glorious.

This second chapter is closely connected with the first. The train of thought reverts to the fact that God had anciently spoken to their fathers by the prophets; but in these last days, by his Son--the very brightness of his own glory--the Upholder of all things, shown all through the Bible to be higher than angels, through whose ministrations also, the divine word had sometimes come to mortals. Now then, since the word so revealed by angels, carried with it the sternest authority, and every sort of transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward, how shall men escape who neglect a salvation so great that even God's glorious Son is sent from heaven to earth to reveal it! He, the Exalted Son, came down to create and reveal this salvation; he wrought it out in death, confirming his divine mission while he lived, by miracles;--must it not, then be a matter of supreme importance?

Yet the Bible has not left us to infer its greatness from the glory of its Author alone; it presents to us the greatness of this salvation in many other points of view.

It is great in its very nature. It is salvation from death in sin.

Let men talk and gainsay as they will, this one great fact is given us by human consciousness--that men are dead in sin. Every man knows this. We all know that apart from God's quickening spirit, we have no heart to love God. Each sinner knows that, whatever may be his powers as a moral agent, yet, left to himself, there is in him a moral weakness that effectually shuts him off from salvation, save as God interposes with efficient help. Hence the salvation that meets him in this weakness and turns him effectually to love and to please God, must be intrinsically great.

Again, it is great because it delivers from endless sinning and suffering.

Just think of that:--endless suffering. How long could you bear even the slightest degree of pain--supposing it to continue without intermission? How long ere you would find it unendurable? Experiments in this matter often surprise us--such for example as the incessant fall of single drops of water upon the head--a kind of torture sometimes inflicted on slaves. The first drops are scarcely noticed; but ere long the pain becomes excruciating, and ultimately unendurable.

Just think of any kind of suffering which goes on ever increasing! Suppose it to increase constantly for one year; would you not think this to be awful? Suppose it to increase without remission for one hundred years,--can you estimate the fearful amount? What then must it be if it goes on increasing forever!

It matters not how rapid or how slow this increase--the amount, if its duration be eternal, must be ineffably appalling! Nor does it matter much how great or how little the degree at the outset;--suppose it ever so small, yet eternal growth must make it beyond measure appalling! You may suppose the amount of woe endured to be represented by one drop for the first thousand years; yet let it increase for the next thousand, and yet more for the next, and ere eternity shall have rolled away, the amount will be an ocean! It would take a great while to fill up such an ocean as the Atlantic by giving it one drop in each thousand years--yet time would fill it; it would take yet longer to fill the Pacific at the same rate--but time would suffice to fill it; more time would fill up the Indian ocean; more yet would cover this globe; more would fill all the vast space between us and the fixed stars; but even this lapse of time would not exhaust eternity. It would not even begin to measure eternal

duration! How fearful then must be that woe which knows no limit save eternity!

Some deny the sufferings of the wicked to be penal inflictions, and insist that they are only the natural consequence of sinning. I shall not stop now to enter upon any argument on this point; but I ask, What difference does that make as to the amount or endurableness of eternal woe? Penal or not penal, the Bible represents it as eternal, and its very nature shows that it must be forever increasing; how then can it be essentially lessened by the question whether it be or be not penal infliction? Whether God has so constituted all moral agents that their sin--allowed to work out its legitimate results--will entail misery enough to answer all those fearful descriptions given us in the Bible, or whether in addition to all that misery, God inflicts yet more, penally, and this enlarged amount makes up the eternal doom denounced on the finally wicked, it surely can be of small consequence to decide,--so far forth as amount of suffering is concerned.

Some deny that the cause of this suffering is material fire. They may even scoff at this and think that by so doing, they have extinguished the flames of hell, and have thus annihilated all future punishment. How vain! Can a sinner's scoff frustrate the Almighty? Did the Almighty God ever lack means to execute his word? What matters is whether the immediate agent in the sinner's sufferings be fire or something else of which fire is the fittest emblem? Can your scoffs make it any the less fearful?

This fearful woe is the fruit of sinning; and is therefore inevitable, save as you desist from sinning while yet mercy may be found. Once in hell, you will know that, while you continue to sin, you must continue to suffer.

The language used in the Bible to describe the sinner's future woe is very terrible. We may call it figurative. I suppose those terms to be figures of speech, but I cannot tell. I have never been there. If anyone here has been, let him speak.

It certainly may be literal fire. No one of us can certainly know that it is not. It must be something equal to fire; for we cannot suppose that God would deceive us. Whoever else may speak extravagantly, God never does! He never puts forth great swelling words of vanity--sounding much, but meaning little. Take it then which way you please, it is an awful revelation--to die in your sins; to go away into a furnace of fire--to be among those, the smoke of whose torment ascendeth up forever and ever! How strikingly is this doom symbolized in the smoke of those doomed cities of the plain, "set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire!" Their "smoke ascended as the smoke of a great furnace." Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw it! What sort of a night did he spend after that appalling scene? He had risen early--had made his way through the morning dew to the hill-top overlooking Sodom, and then he saw the smoke of those doomed cities ascending to heaven. So may the Christian parent perhaps wend his way to the hill-tops of the heavenly city and look over into the great pit, where the ungodly weep and wail forevermore! Shall it be that any of your unsaved children will be deep in that pit of woe?

Observe again, this salvation is not merely negative--a salvation from sin and from suffering: it has also a positive side. On this positive side, it includes perfect holiness and endless blessedness. It is not only deliverance from never-ending and ever-accumulating woe;--it is also endless bliss--exceeding in both kind and degree, all we can conceive in this life. This is not the world to realize the full bliss of unalloyed purity. There will be sin around us;--there will yet be some sad traces of it within us. Yet who of us does not sometimes catch a distinct view of that purity and blessedness which we know reigns in heaven? Most blessed views there are, yet no doubt dim and weak, compared with the great reality. When that bliss shall be perfect--when nothing more is left us to desire, but every desire of our soul is filled to its utmost capacity, and we shall have the full assurance that this blessedness must increase with the expansion of our powers and with our advance in knowledge as we gaze with ever growing interest into the works of the great God;--this will be heaven! All this is only one side--the positive side of that blessedness which comes with this great salvation.

Now set yourselves to balance these two things one against the other; an ever-growing misery and an ever-growing blessedness. Find some measuring line by which you can compare them.

You may recall the figure I have more than once mentioned here. An old writer says--Suppose a little bird is set to remove this globe by taking from it one grain of sand at a time, and to come only once in a thousand years. She takes her first grain and away she flies on her long and weary course, and long, long, are the days ere she returns again. It will doubtless seem to many as if she never would return; but when a thousand years have rolled away, she comes panting back for one more grain of sand--and this globe is again lessened by just one grain of its almost countless sands. So the work goes on. So eternity wears away--only it does not exhaust itself a particle. That little bird will one day have finished her task and the last sand will have been taken away, but even then eternity will have only begun. Its sands are never to be exhausted. One would suppose that the

angels would become so old, so hoary with the weight of centuries, and every being so old, they would be weary of life, but this supposing only shows that we are judging of the effects of time in that eternal state by its observed effect in this transient world. But we fail to consider that God made this world for a transient life--that for one that shall never pass away.

Taking up again our figure of the little bird removing the sands of our globe, we may extend it, and suppose that after she had finished this world, she takes up successfully the other planets in our system--Mercury, and Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn and Herschel, each and all on the same law--one grain each thousand years, and when these are all exhausted, then the sun, and then each of the fixed stars; until the hundreds of thousands of those stupendous orbs are all removed and gone. But even then eternity is not exhausted. We have not yet even an approximation towards its end. End? There is no end! That poor old bird makes progress. Though exceedingly slow, she will one day have done her appointed task. But she will not even then have come any nearer to the end of eternity! Eternity! Who can compute it? No finite mind; and yet this idea is not fiction, but sober fact. There is no possible room for mistake--no ground for doubt.

Moreover, no truth can be more entirely and intensely practical than this. Everyone of us here--every one of all our families, every child--all these students--are included. It concerns us all. Before us, each and all, lies this eternal state of our being. We are all to live in this eternal state. There awaits us there either woe or bliss, without measure and beyond all our powers of computation. If woe, it will be greater than all finite minds can conceive. Suppose all the minds ever created were to devote their powers to compute this suffering--to find some adequate measure that shall duly represent it;--alas, they could not even begin! Neither could they any better find measures to contain the bliss on the other hand, of those who are truly the children of God. All the most expressive language of our race would say--It is not in me to measure infinite bliss or infinite woe; all the figures within the grasp of all created imaginations would fade away before the stupendous undertaking! Yet this infinite bliss and endless woe are the plain teaching of the Bible, and are in harmony with the decisive affirmations of the human reason. We know, that if we continue in sin, the misery must come upon us;--if we live and die in holiness, the bliss will come.

And is this the theme, and are these the great facts which these young men may be abroad to the ends of the world and proclaim to every creature, and which these young women also may speak of everywhere in the society where they move? Truly they have a glorious and sublime message to bear!

Again, suppose the joy resulting from this salvation to be a mild form of peace and quiet of soul. We may suppose this, although we cannot forget that the Bible represents it as being a "joy unspeakable and full of glory;" but suppose it were only a mild quiet joy. Even then an eternal accumulation of it--a prolongation of it during eternal ages, considering also that naturally it must forever increase--will amount to an infinite joy. Indeed it matters little how small the unit with which you start, yet let there be given an eternal duration, coupled with ceaseless growth and increase, and how vast the amount!

According to the Bible, this blessedness of the holy is the full fruition of God's love. Hence the bliss which it involves can be nothing short of infinite. It can have no limit. A really comprehensive view of what it will be would be overpowering. Who of you could bear the view of your future selves? Could you who are saints? Suppose you could see yourselves as you will exist ten thousand years hence. Suppose you were for a moment endowed with the power to penetrate the future and see yourself as you will be before the throne of God. If you were not apprised that it is yourself, you might fall down and worship!

Or suppose the wicked could see their future selves as they will be ten thousand years hence--could see how full of torment they will be, and what unutterable woes their souls shall bear there;--could they endure the sight?

And here does some one say--How very extravagant you are! Extravagant? Nothing can be farther from the truth than to hold these views to be extravagant. For, grant only immortality, and all that I have said must follow of necessity. Let it be admitted that the soul exists forever, and not a word that I have said is too much. Indeed, when you carry out that great fact to its legitimate results under the moral government of God, all these descriptions seem exceedingly flat--they fall so very far short of the truth.

In the next place let it be considered that neglect of this great salvation is fatal. So our text most emphatically implies--so the Bible often elsewhere most unqualifiedly affirms. No sinner, therefore, need go about to weary himself to commit iniquity--as if he would fain make sure his doom; for mere neglect is fatal. What more should he want?

But let us enquire--What is to be regarded as fatal neglect? For all have at some time been guilty of some neglect.

We shall reach the true answer to our question by asking another; viz.--What is effectual attention?

Plainly that and only that which ensures gospel repentance and faith in Christ. Only that which ensures personal holiness and thus, final salvation. That is therefore effectual attention which arouses the soul thoroughly to take hold of Jesus Christ as the offered Savior. To fall short of this is fatal neglect. You may have many good things about you--may make many good resolves and hopeful efforts; yet failing in this main thing, you fail utterly.

REMARKS

1. You need only be a little less than fully in earnest, and you will certainly fall short of salvation. You may have a good deal of feeling and a hopeful earnestness, but if you are only less than fully in earnest, you will surely fail. The work will not be done. You are guilty of fatal neglect, for you have never taken the decisive step. Who of you is he that is a little less than fully in earnest? You are the one who will weary yourself for nought and in vain. You must certainly fall short of salvation.

2. It must be great folly to do anything short of effectual effort. Many are just enough in earnest to deceive themselves. They pay just enough attention to this subject to get hold of it wrong, and do only just enough to fall short of salvation, and go down to death with a lie in their right hand. If they were to stay away from all worship; it would shock them. Now, they go to the assemblies of God's people and do many things hopeful; but after all, they fall short of entering in at the door into Christ's fold. What folly is this! Why should any of you do this foolish thing? This doing only just enough to deceive yourself and others, is the very course to please Satan. Nothing else could so completely serve his ends. He knows very well that where the gospel is generally understood, he must not preach infidelity openly, not Universalism, nor Atheism. Neither would do. But if he can just keep you along, doing little less than enough, he is sure of his man. He wants to see you holding fast to a false hope. Then he knows you are the greatest possible stumbling-block, and are doing the utmost you can to ruin the souls of men.

3. This salvation is life's great work. If not made such, it had best be left alone. To put it in any other relation is worse than nothing. If you make it second to anything else, your course will surely be ineffectual--a lie, a delusion, a damnation!

Are you giving your attention effectually to this great subject? Who of you are? Have you this testimony in your own conscience, that you seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness? And have you become acquainted with Christ? Do you know him as your Life and your Hope? Have you the joy and the peace of believing? Can you give to yourself and to others a really satisfactory reason for the hope that is in you?

This is life's great work--the great work of earth; and now, in whom of you is it effectually begun? You cannot do it at all without a thorough and right beginning. I am jealous of some of you that you have not begun right--that you have mistaken conviction for conversion. Like some of Bunyan's characters, I fear you have clambered over the wall into the palace, and did not come in by the gate. Do you ask me why I fear this of you? I will answer only by asking a question back. Don't you think I have reason to fear it? Have you the consciousness of being pure in heart, and of growing purer? Do you plan everything with reference to this great work of salvation? What are the ways of life that you have marked out for yourself? And on what principle have you shaped them? On what subjects are you most sensitive? What most thoroughly awakens your sensibility? If there is a prayer-meeting to pray for the salvation of sinners, are you there? Is your heart there?

4. It is infinite folly to make the matter of personal salvation, only a secondary matter; for to do so is only to neglect it after all. Unless it has your whole heart, you virtually neglect it, for nothing less than your whole heart is the devotion due. To give it less than your whole heart is truly to insult God, and to insult the subject of salvation.

What shall we think of those who seem never to make any progress at all? Is it not very plain that they give much less than their whole hearts to this matter? It is most certain that if they gave their whole hearts intelligently to it, they would make progress--would speedily find their way to Christ. To make no progress is therefore a decisive indication of having no real heart in this pursuit. How can such escape, seeing they neglect so great salvation?