

Five Sacramental Sermons

Sermon 3

A Preparation Sermon Before The Communion. — The Right Improvement of the Day of Grace.

John Willison

John Willison was born in the year 1680, in the neighborhood of Stirling, Scotland. Not much is know about his personal and private life, but soon after he completed his academic career, he received a unanimous call to serve as pastor from a parish in Brechin in 1703. About the year 1718 he was transferred to Dundee where he remained for the remainder of his life, serving a large congregation. He served as a faithful minister of the gospel for 47 years until his death on the 3rd of May, 1756. John Willison was a man of great piety and a staunch defender of the faith. We are indeed fortunate to have extant copies of his sermons and his polemical works, from which the above sermon is derived.

Wherefore, as the Holy Ghost saith, today if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts as in the provocation, &c.” — Heb. iii.7, 8.

IN this chapter, the apostle displays something of the Mediator's glory and excellency; he shows that he is far preferable to Moses, as much as the builder of the house is greater than the house; and that he alone is the eternal Son of God, the great prophet and teacher of his church. And having laid down several propositions to this purpose, he comes to draw an inference from them in the words of my text, Wherefore, &c. As if he had said, seeing Christ is the chief apostle and prophet of his church, a teacher sent from God to instruct the world; it is therefore our indispensable duty to hear his voice, comply with his counsels, and that without delay; and this exhortation the apostle strengthens with that of David, Psal. xcv. 7.

In the words we have, 1. The illative particle, “Wherefore,” which denotes the deduction of the ensuing exhortation from the preceding discourse. 2. We have the authority which the apostle cites for his exhortation, even that of the Holy Ghost, who of old spake by David, Psal. xcv. and now speaketh by him in the text. 3. In the exhortation we have a duty required of us, viz. hearing of Christ's voice, “Hear his voice; not the voice of a mere man, not the voice of an apostle or angel, but of the eternal Son of God, that glorious ambassador of heaven, who was sent to the world for advancing a treaty of peace; his voice we are to hear, his instructions and calls we are to comply with. 4. We have the circumstance of time, and special season when this duty is to be done, and

that is presently, "today," or in this solemn day of grace. We have in the following verse a cautionary direction to all that sit under the gospel, to beware of hardening their hearts, or stopping their ears against Christ's calls, as the obstinate and hard-hearted Jews did in the wilderness.

DOCT. I. "That the consideration of the authority of the Holy Ghost speaking in the scripture, should mightily enforce upon us the duties there exhorted." we should consider whose authority we despise, when we slight the offers, calls, and duties pressed in the gospel, even that of the Holy Ghost; and it is a fearful thing to sin against the Holy Ghost.

DOCT. II. "That the voice which we are called to hear in and by the gospel, is Christ's voice; it is not the voice of a man like ourselves, but the voice of the Son of God, and therefore should be awfully regarded." But the doctrine which I intend to handle at this time, shall be drawn chiefly from the season of pressing this duty.

DOCT. III. "That all who sit under the gospel, should be careful to improve the seasons of grace, and opportunities of hearing Christ's voice, which God allows them."

In handling this doctrine, I shall show,

- I. What is implied in hearing of Christ's voice in the gospel.
- II. That there are some special seasons for hearing of Christ's voice, and what these are.
- III. How we ought to improve these seasons.
- IV. Reasons why we should carefully improve them.
- V. I shall apply the whole.

I. As to the first, What is imported in hearing of Christ's voice in the gospel. I shall not insist on what is presupposed in it, viz. That our ears are naturally stopped against Christ; and it is only a work of his power on the soul that can open them; but show what it directly implies.

1. This hearing imports our believing the word to be Christ's voice, and not the voice of man. As long as we regard what we hear, only as the voice of a minister, or man like ourselves, it will never humble us, nor prevail with our stubborn hearts; but when we begin to take it up as the voice of God, or Christ speaking to us from heaven, then the soul hearkens, considers, and obeys. Till Samuel knew that it was the Lord's voice speaking to him, 1 Sam. i., he still took the wrong course: he went to Eli when he should have hearkened to God.

2. A close and serious attention of the mind to what we hear. The soul that hears Christ's voice stops his career in pursuing sin and the world, which always makes a buzzing noise about his ears; and applies his ear to hear what Christ saith; turns attentive to' and serious about the things of eternity.

3. The application of what Christ saith unto us in particular: as if Christ spoke to us by name and surname, and said to us as Nathan did to David, "Thou art the man." We commonly neglect what Christ saith by his word, by putting it by ourselves to others; but we hear him aright when we bring what he saith close home to our own hearts and consciences, and say, "It is to me this word is directed it is me that Christ intends, it is I that the law condemns, and that justice threatens. I am the guilty sinner that have shut out Christ, and preferred my lusts to him, and yet he now pities me, and calls me to open to him."

4. A thorough conviction of the necessity and advantage of yielding to Christ's calls; O saith the soul, Long hath my Saviour knocked, saying, "Open to me, arise and come away," yet I have sat still, and given him a deaf ear; and now I am lost, undone and condemned in my present case; if death knock before I open to Christ, I can look for nothing but the bottomless pit to open and swallow me up for ever. But if I open to Christ, I am happy, and out of the reach of wrath for ever.

5. It imports the souls cordial complying with Christ's calls, and consenting. to receive and embrace him as he is offered in the gospel; that is to say, as a prophet to teach us, a priest to atone for us, and a king to rule us. The man that hears Christ's voice goes in heartily with the gospel method of salvation, acquiesces in that noble contrivance of grace, is well content to be justified by Christ's righteousness, to be taught at Christ's school, and governed by his laws.

II. The second thing to be discoursed is, That there are some special seasons for hearing Christ's voice that should be carefully improved; and what these are. There are some advantageous opportune seasons of grace wherein God is ready to receive and entertain us, which are called in scripture "an accepted time, and day of salvation," 2 Cor. vi. 2. "An accepted time," that is, a time well pleasing to God; "a day of salvation," that is, a day wherein the improvers of it may get salvation begun in pardoning and sanctifying grace; and eternal salvation completed in heaven made sure to them. Now such times and seasons should be carefully managed, that they be not lost, as, alas! they are too many. I shall mention some of these seasons.

1st. The present time, when you have the gospel- ordinances, and health and strength to attend them. That is a season carefully to be improved; and hence the Spirit of God saith so frequently, yea, no less than three times in this third chapter of the epistle to the Hebrews, today, today, today, God cries to you, "today hear my voice;" but Satan says to you, tomorrow is time enough. But surely God's season is the best. O sinner! today thou art in health, tomorrow thou mayest be in sickness: today thou art living, tomorrow thou mayest be dying: today thou art on earth, tomorrow thou mayest be in hell: today Christ is smiling and inviting you to come unto him: but tomorrow he may be frowning, and sentencing you to depart from him, never to return again. And should not the present time, then, when you enjoy ordinances, and health to attend them, be duly improved?

2d. The time of youth is a special season of grace, Eccl. xii. 1, "Remember now thy

Creator in the days of thy youth." O young folk, this is an accepted time, and a day of salvation. It is a most advantageous opportunity for hearkening to Christ's voice; for, 1. Now the heart is more tender, and the will more pliable than afterwards. Now the heart is sooner affected and melted for sin than afterwards; for old age turns stiff and inflexible. The branches of a young tree will bow, and train up any way, but when old they will not bend. 2. Now you have not such sins to burden the conscience, harden the heart, and hinder you from coming to Christ, as you will have afterwards. :3. Now your minds and thoughts are more free of cares and anxieties about the world than they will be afterwards; and so more fit for closing and transacting with Christ in the gospel. 4. It is a season that God especially regards. Under the law, he required the first-fruits as his portion, and would have all the sacrifices that were offered to him to be young, and in their strength, Exod. xxiii. 19; Lev. ii. 14. And still he loves the season of youth, and remembers the kindness of youth long afterward, Eccl. xii. 1; Jer. ii. 2, 8. The mourning, praying, and praising of young folk is the most melodious music in God's ears: wherefore let the precious season of youth be diligently improved. Are there not some young communicants here? O! improve this day of salvation; a time of youth is tire most usual season of conversion and acquaintance with Christ. If you look through the land among the people of God, you will perhaps find scarce one of a hundred but will date his conversion and first closing with Christ from the time of youth. if a tree do not bud or blossom when young, it is a sign that it is barren, and will not bear at all afterwards. O then! now in the days of youth lay a sure foundation-stone; take heed to your first communicating; strive for heart-sincerity in hearing Christ's voice, closing with the gospel-offer, and covenanting with God.

3d. A season when people enjoy plenty and purity of gospel-ordinances with peace and safety ought carefully to be improved. And now ye have such a season, you have plenty of ministers, plenty of sermons, sacraments, solemn calls, free offers, faithful warnings, earnest intreaties, and powerful persuasions, and none to make you afraid. It is prophesied of the gospel-times, Psal. lxxviii. 11, that "the Lord shall give the word, and great shall be the company of them that publish it." Now you have many faithful labourers; in every parish you have such as publish the word, and preach the glad tidings of reconciliation. Many a time have you Christ crucified set forth before your eyes in the Lord's supper; and again, the Lord is to give you in this place a new occasion for it. These are precious seasons, which our fathers sometimes would have prized at a high rate, when they were put to seek their spiritual bread with the peril of their lives, "because of the sword in the wilderness." The Lord hath made his arm bare in behalf of the gospel: he hath disabled its enemies, settled the ark in its place, and still continues plenty of pure ordinances, notwithstanding all the contrivances and attempts of enemies for their oppression. O! for hearts to value and improve such precious opportunities.

4th. A time when God gives a people providential warnings to awaken and encite them to attend his word and ordinances, is a season to be improved. God hath often threatened us with a bloody sword; and now he is threatening us with the approaching of the pestilence; that wasting stroke that lays heaps upon heaps, makes death to ride in triumph through the streets. Many warnings of approaching judgments have we formerly misimproved; and therefore God may come upon us unawares, and surprise us

with his judgments without warning. Well, while God is taking pains on us, and giving us warning at a distance, let us improve the season by hearkening to Christ's voice in the gospel. "Let us be moved with fear," like Noah, "and provide an ark for the saving of our souls," before the flood of wrath approach. Nay, blessed be God, the ark is prepared to our hand, and there is a window opened in the side thereof for our entrance: let us take the wings of faith, and fly thither without delay.

5th. A time when the inward workings of the Spirit on the conscience, concur with the external dispensation of the word and sacraments, is a special season to be improved. It is then, that a great and effectual door is opened both to ministers and people. Paul had this door opened to him at Ephesus, amongst many adversaries, 1 Cor. xvi. 9. O if it were so with us, we needed not fear all that adversaries can do against the gospel. But we have it to regret, that though God hath outwardly restrained adversaries, yet "a great and effectual door" is not opened to us: still the door is strait both for ministers and people: God's Spirit is greatly restrained in our day. If it be asked, When is it that a wide or effectual door is opened? Ans. It is only when the Spirit of God is poured out in a plentiful way, both on ministers and people. When God's Spirit was thus poured out after Christ's ascension, then both the graces and gifts of the Spirit were communicated in a plentiful measure. Then ministers had great light of knowledge and understanding, as well as the heat of zeal and love. It was easy for them 'to study and preach; they had clear uptakings of the matters of God, and a great readiness and liberty of expression. Their hearts were enlarged, their minds enlightened, their memories were strengthened, and they had a door of utterance opened, i.e. a great facility in declaring of their minds; they were no way straitened for proper matter or fit words; their hearts indited goodly things, and their tongues were as the pen of a ready writer. Thus it is still, when the Spirit of God is remarkably poured out: then the preaching of the gospel is both pleasant and powerful; ministers' hearts are warmed, and people's hearts are melted; ministers' mouths are opened, and people's appetites enlarged. There is such a thing as the Spirit of God, his striving with the heart and consciences of hearers, in and by the word, Gen. vi. 3. And when he thus strives, it makes an effectual door, and a special season of salvation. When the Spirit moves the waters of the sanctuary, people should not neglect then to step in, and be healed. Take heed you do not slight the strivings of God's Spirit with you in any measure, lest you provoke God to pass such a dreadful sentence against you, as that, Gen. vi. 3, "My Spirit shall no longer strive with you." And if you lose the precious season of the Spirit's striving, you perhaps will never recover it again.

QUEST. *When is it that the Spirit of God strives with sinners, in and by the gospel?*

ANS. 1. When he opens his eyes, and gives the man a discovery of his sinful and miserable state by nature, and of the evil, heinousness and danger of his sins; and so rivets and fastens conviction on the heart and conscience, that the arrows of the threatenings stick, and the man is brought to thoughtfulness and anxiety about his future state; and hence is made to cry, "What shall I do to be saved? O! that is a season which ought to be carefully improved.

2. The Spirit strives by making a man wholly dissatisfied with his present state, and all

his earthly enjoyments, as long as he is in the dark about his soul's salvation. Though he may be in outward prosperity, he says, "All these things avail me nothing," while I am ready to be swallowed up by the wrath of God for sin;" surely there is no living, no abiding in this state I am in. I am shut up in the prison of unbelief, and the house is all on fire about my ears; I must break the prison, and make my escape, otherwise I am undone for ever.

3. By making the man despair of help and deliverance by any thing in himself. O, saith he, I am a poor, miserable, helpless creature! Neither my doing, nor suffering, can free me from wrath. I know no course, no contrivance of my own, that can relieve me. My relief must come from another source, for I can never work it for myself.

4 By humbling the man to the dust for sin, particularly for mispending time, neglecting prayer, misimproving sermons, profaning sabbaths and sacraments, &c. O! says he, is there any creature more vile than I? Surely there is no toad more loathsome, no carrion more offensive, no mire more unclean, than my soul before God. Can ever the arms of mercy open to embrace such a monster of sin as I have been? This is a choice season, which should be well improved.

5. By giving some light into the understanding, concerning the remedy provided for lost sinners. The soul begins, by the word, to discover something of the fulness and ability of Christ as a Saviour, so that it is made to think there is hope in Israel concerning this matter. My case, says the sinner, is not so bad as the devils, for whom no remedy was ever provided.

6. By working some purposes and inclinations in the will toward the offered remedy; so that the soul makes its aims at Christ: yea, is content to take any course for an interest in him. And therefore says often with Paul, Acts ix. 6, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" What method shall I take to "be found in Christ, not having my own righteousness?"

7. By determining the soul to a conscientious and diligent use of the means for getting Christ, and salvation through him.

8. By making a stir and commotion among the affections, and exciting earnest and passionate desires after Christ and salvation through him. So that the soul is made to say, "O that I knew where I might find him! O! when wilt thou come unto me! I will spare no pains to get a meeting with him, I will seek him through the streets and broad ways, and all the lanes of the city, crying, "Saw ye him whom my soul loveth?"

Now, when the Spirit strives with any of you, in any measure, it is a precious season of grace, that should be carefully observed and improved.

III. The third thing in my general method is, to show how these seasons of grace' ought to be improved by us.

1. By highly valuing and admiring the distinguishing goodness of God in affording us such days of grace and salvation. He deals not so with other nations: Jews, Pagans, Mahometans, and Papists, have not the gospel-light and offers of grace which you have. Be thankful to God, especially you that have more special and remarkable seasons beyond others: you that have health, and strength, and youth on your side; you that have the Spirit of God striving with you in the ordinances, your eyes opened, hearts melted, consciences awakened, affections moved; O bless God for his distinguishing mercies.

2. By believing firmly what Christ saith to you by the word, and attending carefully to it. Why? It is the word of the living God, more true, certain, and immovable, than the foundations of the earth. Nay, heaven and earth will sooner pass away, than one jot or one tittle of his word fall to the ground. Let your ears then be stopped against all the calls and solicitations of sin, Satan, and the world; and open only to precious Christ, saying with the psalmist, "I will hear what God the Lord will speak."

3. By applying closely to yourselves what Christ saith, and meditating on it afterwards. When you hear any sin threatened you are guilty of; or any duty pressed that you neglect; bring that word close home to your hearts, and say, This word is to me, let me not forget it. O let it abide with me when I go home, when I eat and drink, when I lie down and rise up, when I go out and come in. Still think you hear Christ's word sounding in your ears, and that you hear him crying, "Awake thou that sleepest, arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light." Open the door of thy heart, and let me in. "Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away. Why do you weary my patience, and let me stand so long neglected, "till my head is wet with the dew, and my locks with the drops of the night?"

4. By labouring to give kindly entertainment to the word, and the motions of Christ's Spirit on thy soul, presently striking in with conviction, submitting to reproofs, and hearkening to his counsels, saying with Samuel, "Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth." Say not to the Spirit's motions and strivings with thee, as Felix did to Paul, "Go thy way for this time, and when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee." No, no, but forthwith give ear, yield and comply with the Spirit's strivings, and Christ's voice; be content immediately to have thy sores lanced, and thy wounds searched to the bottom; and when conviction and soul-trouble for sin is begun, go not to stifle or quench it, or seek hastily to pluck God's arrows out of thy conscience; but cherish and entertain the work of God's Spirit, by meditating on thy sin, considering thy lost estate by nature, thy insufficiency to help thyself; together with the excellency and suitableness of the remedy which God has provided.

5. By frequent and fervent application to the throne of grace, begging, for Christ's sake, that God may both begin and finish his work in the soul. Acknowledge that you are able of yourselves to do nothing, and that it is by his grace only that you can be saved; and when he begins by conviction, be thankful to him, and entreat that these sparks, kindled by the breath of God, may not be smothered, but blown up into a flame: and still remember that the work is God's, though it be your duty to be casting out fuel by prayer

and meditation; yet the sparks that kindle the fire may come from God's altar, the breath that blows it comes from heaven. Pray therefore, that the fire may come down, even a live coal from the altar, and that heaven's wind may blow on thy soul. Cry with the spouse, "Awake, O north wind, and come, thou south; blow upon my garden, that the spices thereof may flow out." Let the north winds of the law come, and convince, and awaken; and the south winds of the gospel come, and refresh and comfort. Be earnest, O convinced sinner, in deprecating God's taking away his Spirit from you; make it a part of your daily prayer to cry with the psalmist, Psal. li. 11, "Lord, take not thy Holy Spirit from me. Lord, forbid the new creature be stifled in the womb. O do thou quicken and preserve it. Let these convictions terminate in my conversion here, and salvation hereafter. Lord, thou art a rock, thy work is perfect: hast thou begun, and wilt thou not also make an end? O! suffer not these tender fruits to be nipped in the bud, or blasted in the blossom, either by Satan's frost-winds, or the world's chilling blasts: but, O! preserve them to maturity, to the praise and glory of thy grace.

IV. The next thing is, the reasons of the doctrine; why we should so carefully improve our seasons of grace.

1. Because God looks for it, and expects it at our hand. When God plants trees in his vineyard, waters and takes pains on them, he looks for fruit from them, Luke xiii. We see what the Lord says of Judah, Isa. v. 1, 2, "My well-beloved," i. e. Christ, "hath a vineyard," i.e. the church of the Jews, "in a very fruitful hill;" i.e. a good soil, furnished with all possible means to make it fruitful. "And he fenced it," i. e. protected it by his providence, from the incursion of enemies; "he gathered out the stones thereof," i. e. removed out of it whatever was noxious or hurtful, perhaps the idol-gods, put these out of the land; "he planted it with the choicest vines," i. e. with pure ordinances, and institutions of worship, good government, and discipline. "He built a tower in the midst of it," i.e. for its defence, viz, the strong city of Jerusalem in midst of the land, which was built as a city compact together, whither the tribes went up for worship. "Also he made a wine-press therein:" i. e. the temple and altar continually running with the blood of the sacrifices." Now, after all, it is said, "He looked that it should bring forth grapes," which doth not import that God was uncertain of the event; but denotes what is just and equal, and what in such cases ought to be. Surely a vineyard so attended and furnished, ought to bring forth fruit, answerable to all the acts of God's care and grace towards it.

And to bring the matter home to our case, God hath been at special care to plant a vineyard in this land: we have a good soil, well fenced, the stones gathered out, idolatry and superstition removed, a choice vine planted, pure ordinances set up, enemies disabled that laid it waste. God has built towers. and made wine-presses to us viz. the sacraments, and especially the Lord's supper, where the blood of Christ, our great sacrifice, runs plentifully to us, for pardon, healing, and washing. Now, doth not God look for grapes? Is it not just that we should bring forth fruit, answerable to all these privileges? Alas! for the most part, there is nothing but wild grapes with us; little suitable fruit of our solemn communion-days. You may see what is the result of frustrating the divine expectations, Isa. v. 6. Nothing but blasting, withering, ruin, and desolation.

2. Because of the shortness and uncertainty of the season of grace: none can tell how long it will last. You cannot promise it will continue as long as your lives, though even these be most uncertain. No; your special season and day of grace may end this very day, or at this communion-occasion, though you should happen to live many years after this. It is likely, God is saying to some hearing me, "Today hearken to my voice, repent, and close with Christ my Son, or be henceforth hardened and undone for ever." O sinner, this night thy day of grace may cease; God may this day cause some of your hearts to warm by the word, others to tremble, others to mourn, others to purpose and resolve. Well, if you do not lay hold on, and improve this season, and hearken to Christ's voice you may never get the like occasion again; nay, even though you should wish for it. Christ saith, Luke xvii. 22, "The time shall come, when you desire to see one of the days of the Son of man and not see it." This may be one of the days of the Son of man to you; for now Christ is offering himself, and pressing salvation on you, and striving with his Spirit, I hope, with some of you. Well, if you neglect to open your hearts to Christ this day, God may set a seal on them tomorrow, that they shall never be opened. You may afterwards desire another of such days as this; you may wish for one of the offers of that Saviour, for one drop of that blood you slighted, for one knock of his Spirit at the door of your hart, which formerly you neglected; for one of his motions or strivings with you; and yet it may never be granted. With some the day of grace is longer, with others shorter; with some it ends in childhood, with others it ends in youth; and with some few it lasts to old age; but, O sinner! thou hast no reason to expect the continuance of it a moment after this day.

3. Because if you do not improve your day of grace, you lose your souls. You may compare the text with verse 11th of the chapter; "because they hardened their hearts, and would not hear his voice," in their day of grace, it is subjoined, "I swear in my wrath, they shall not enter into my rest." We see the sad case Jerusalem was in when they lost their day of grace, Luke xix. 41, 42, "When he was near, he beheld the city and wept over it saying, If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace; but now they are hid from thine eyes." Here it is said, "Christ wept," (orig. *Eclause*) which denotes a weeping with lamentation. "He wept bitterly," to let you all know what a sad and deplorable thing it is, for a people, city, or person, to lose their day of grace. The words he speaks are uttered in a weeping strain. Abrupt expressions come now and then from his mouth; he drops now a word, and then a tear; he would speak, but his weeping stops his voice, "If thou hadst known, even thou." Thou is reduplicate, or twice expressed, "Thou even thou." As if he had said, Thou ancient city, the city of David, thou seat of the temple, and of the sacrifices: "O if thou hadst known." Then he adds, "at least in this thy day." They had enjoyed many lesser days of grace, when they had faithful prophets dealing with them; these they persecuted and despised, and so lost these days: but these were but lesser days, which did not finally determine the state of that city; for they were to have another day, which is here called, "this their day," i.e. the day wherein the Son of God was to come among them, and preach the gospel to them, "three years and a half." That was a special day of grace, and the day that determined their state; for since they did not improve it, "the things of their peace were hid from their eyes." God would deal no more with them, but left them to destruction. O sinners! O communicants! So will it fare with you, if you let your day of

grace go over. Night will come on, wherein none can work, you will stumble in the dark, and fall headlong into the pit for ever.

4. Because God keeps a strict account of every hour and minute of your day of grace, that you trifle away; for he reckons it very precious, what ever you think of it. When God lights the candle of the gospel, he expects you should work by it; and he will not suffer this precious candle to burn without observation; nay, he counts every hour and minute it burns, and every hour and minute his Spirit strives, and will make you reckon for them at last, God takes not such strict notice of times of darkness and ignorance; for it is said, he winks at sinners living under them, Acts xvii. 30. i.e. He doth not so narrowly mark their diligence; but when he sends times of light, and of his Spirit's striving with sinners, he will not wink at one hour or minute, but exactly set down every sermon you hear, every communion you see, every call, every entreaty, every threatening, every reproof, every conviction and warning you get, whether by ordinances or providences, whether by conscience or by his Spirit. And, O! what a dreadful libel will these make up against you at the great day, if you neglect your day of grace.

V. APPLICATION.

Use I. *For information.* We may hence see that it is not the bare enjoyment of the gospel, and communion-seasons that will make us happy, but the right improvement of the day of grace which we enjoy therein.

Use II. *For lamentation.* We may hence take occasion to bewail the sad case of many that neglect and lose the day of their merciful visitation. It is said, Jer. viii. 7, "The stork knoweth her appointed times, the turtle, the crane, and the swallow, observe the time of their coming," &c. And we are bid go learn of the ant, Prov. vi. 6, "that provides her meat in summer, and gathers her food in harvest," while the weather is good and dry, and food may be had. So that we see the brutes and silly insects observe their seasons, But, alas! many men neglect and forget theirs; they let their summer and harvest-days pass, without making any provision for eternity. O! how many among us may take up that sad lamentation, Jer, viii. 20, "Our harvest is past' our summer is ended, and we are not saved!" O that we could weep over many, as Christ did ever Jerusalem, for losing their day of grace.

QUEST. *Who are these that thus lose their day of grace?*

ANS. It is hard to be very particular on this head; I shall only give some general character of such persons.

1. Those who have sat many years under pure and powerful ordinances, and were never affected thereby; but still remain dead and hardened under the most awakening calls and plainest reproofs. These seem to be given over to ruin, Prov. xxix. 1, "He that being often reproved, hardeneth his neck, shall be suddenly destroyed, and that without remedy."

2. Those who have had many secret motions and operations of the Spirit on their souls, to no effect; many purposes and resolutions to good, and all vanished many of the Spirit's strivings, and all resisted: these are likely to be given over, Ezek. xxiv. 13, "because I have purged thee, and thou wast not purged, thou shalt not be purged from thy filthiness any more, till I have caused my fury to rest upon thee." When God's Spirit offered to cleanse that people from their sin, they, like Lot's wife, still hankered after it, and would not part therewith.

3. Those who have greatly grieved the Spirit of God, by venturing on sin against the light of their consciences, and the Spirit's motions, and so are turned wilful end resolute in sinning; such have the symptoms of rejection, Hos. iv. 17, "Ephraim is joined to idols, let him alone."

4. Those who are so forward and bent upon a sinful course that they can endure no more reproof or control therein, but hate them in their hearts, who seek to reclaim them: those have the symptoms of ruin upon them, Prov. iv. 10; Amos v. 10.

5. When persons are so far hardened in sin, that God ceaseth to be a reprover to them and strikes their consciences so dumb and senseless, that they do not accuse nor challenge them: it is a sad sign of up-giving, Ezek. iii. 26; Hos. iv. 17.

6. When repentance is hid from people's eyes, so that they are not affected with the view of their sins when they are laid before them; no dispensation of providence, no token of God's anger, neither judgments, nor mercies, rods nor threatenings; nay, the flames of hell flashed in the sinner's face do not breed any remorse in their consciences, nor relenting in their hearts for sin. When people arrive at this height, it is a sad sign that they are given up to wrath, Isa. xlii. 25,

III. Next use shall be of examination. O try if ye have, improved your day of grace, so as to hearken to Christ's voice, and comply with his gracious offers. O communicants, it is highly your interest to know this that you may come with cheerfulness, and feast with your Redeemer at his table. Now try it by these marks,

1. Had you never the experience of Christ's Spirit's work in opening your ear, and inclining your heart to close with his offers in the gospel? Do you experimentally know the heinousness and multitude of your sins? Do you know something of the terribleness of God's wrath due to you for these sins? Have you seen your' soul's need of Christ, as a man pursued for his life seeth his need of a city of refuge? Have you seen yourselves lost and dead men, if you get not into Christ? Have you felt ardent desires after Christ, and been made to say, "Give us Christ, or else we die?" Have you been content to take this lovely Saviour on any terms, to part with all for this "pearl of price," and to count all but "loss and dung" to be found in him.

2. Can you say that Christ's word and ordinances where you first heard his voice speaking to you, are still precious and lovely to you for his sake? And hence you are made sometimes to cry out with the psalmist, Psal. lxxxiv. 1, 2, "How amiable are thy

tabernacles, O Lord of hosts! My heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God." Sweet sermons, sweet communion-days, lovely occasions, when the bridegroom's voice is to be heard.

3. Are you filled with low thoughts of yourselves, and all your own doings and performances, and with high thoughts of Christ and his righteousness? And do you turn out all Christ's rivals out of your hearts, and undervalue the world and all things in it besides him, who is "the chiefest among ten thousands, and fairer than the sons of men?"

4. Do you find a great alteration and gracious change on your souls since the time you heard' his voice? Doth Christ sit as a refiner with you, changing both heart and life to the better? Are "old things past away," old lusts, old thoughts, old desires, old customs, old ways? And are all things with you become new? You that formerly set light by Christ and his voice, and admired the world and its flattering pleasures, and said of Christ, "What is thy beloved more than another beloved?" Do you now value him, seek nearness to him in duties, inquire for him in ordinances, yea, meditate on him in the night-watches, and when ye awake, do you find your hearts with him? And is sin, that displeaseth him, your greatest terror? Then surely you are among that blessed company that have heard your Redeemer's voice in your day of grace, and you may come with joy to his table.

IV. Use of exhortation; And here I exhort you all, in the name of Christ, to improve your season of grace. "today, while it yet today, O hear his voice;" and tomorrow, when he invites, O come unto his table. Hearers of the gospel, "This is now the accepted time, this is the day of salvation," What do you resolve to do? Christ is not come to cry and lift up his voice to this whole congregation, to try you once more if you will hear his voice before your day of grace end. Well, his voice is to you all, I know none of you excluded, if you do not exclude yourselves.

1. O carnal earthly-minded soul, that has been a drudge to the world, and a stranger to Christ all thy days, his voice is to you this day. O come hear his voice, and close a bargain with him, it will be the best bargain ever you made.

2. O profane sinner, drunkard, swearer, liar, Sabbath-breaker, whoremonger, sinner as black as hell, hearken to Christ's voice this day, and come and be saved from thy sins. Why will you stop your ears, and choose to die in your sins?

3. O hard-hearted sinner, that never was affected all thy life for the sinfulness and misery of thy natural estate, that never had a sore heart for offending God, that never mourned for one sin, Christ's voice is this day to thee, Isa. xlvi. 12, "Hearken unto me, ye stout-hearted, that are far from righteousness."

4. O prayerless sinner, that never bowed a knee in secret, to cry for pardon of sin, and an interest in Jesus Christ to save thee from the wrath to come, lend your ear this day, and hearken to Christ's sweet voice, while he calls "Seek the Lord while he may be

found, call ye upon him while he is near Isa. lv. 6.

5. Condemned rebels in the hands of justice, sentenced to die, and ready to be taken out to execution: O hear Christ's voice this day, and your souls shall live.

6. Slaves to sin and Satan, who have many times heard the devil's voice, answered his calls, and complied readily with his temptations: will you hear the Redeemer's voice for once, and comply with his counsels before it be too late? Why will ye shut your ear against the lovely Saviour, and obey the voice of your soul-destroyer.

7. Obstinate sinner, that could never hitherto, either by the word or the rod, by ministers or providences, be prevailed upon to leave one of all thy sins, O be persuaded to hear Christ's voice this day, and no longer harden thy heart.

8. O gospel-slighter, that hast many a day refused Christ's offers, spurned against his bowels, trampled on his blood, crucified him at the communion-table: O come, hearken this day to his voice, and he will let you see, that though your case be sad, yet it is not desperate; for "he hath found a ransom."

9. Hypocrites and formalists, that have had a mask of religion, but have all your days been dissembling and dealing deceitfully with God; come, deal ingenuously and sincerely with him for once, and hearken to his voice, give him your hearts as well as your outward man.

10. Backsliders and covenant-breakers, who have broken many a vow, slighted many an engagement, and sinned against many a resolution O bear Christ's voice this day, when he calls to you, "Turn, ye backsliding children," come to me, and "I will heal your backslidings, and love you freely."

11. Poor plagued diseased souls, who are groaning under many heart-plagues and soul-distresses, such as atheism, pride, hardness, formality, &c.: come hearken to Christ's voice, and he will be your Physician.

12. Weary and heavy-laden sinners, who are like to sink with the burden of your guilt, come hearken to Christ's voice this day, and he "will give rest to your souls."

13. Pursued shelterless sinners, who are afraid of the avenger of blood, hearken to Christ's voice, and fly to the city of refuge. Many motives and, arguments might I use with you, to hear the voice of lovely Jesus, while he calls today.

I. Consider how earnest Christ is to persuade you to hear his voice; he stands at your doors, and knocks both by his word and Spirit; yea, he waits and knocks after many repulses and affronts, and promises that all former slights and refusals shall be forgiven, if ye will yet hearken and close with him. How oft doth he repeat his entreaties, Luke xiii. 34, "How oft would I have, gathered you!" Yea, he weeps for sinners' obstinacy, Luke xix 41. Strange! doth he gain anything by your hearkening to his voice? What means,

this earnestness? It is all, O sinners, on your account. For, (1.) He knows better than any the worth of your souls, and that a world cannot redeem them when lost. (2.) He knows well the miserable state of your souls without him; it is most sad and deplorable at present, and will he much more so through endless eternity: for if you hear not Christ's voice, you will die in your sins, and be tormented in them for ever. (3.) Christ is so earnest, because he knows the difficulty of winning souls He knows Satan has great power and interest with souls, to blind, harden, and delude them, and that it is not easy to undeceive them, and pull them out of his hand; and therefore he deals and strives so earnestly with souls to gain them.

II. Take a serious view of the state of your souls. While you stop your ears against Christ's charming voice; it is inexpressibly miserable. For, (1.) Your souls are destitute of all that is good, Eph. ii. 12. You are as poor and wretched creatures as ever God made; you are without life, without grace, without peace, without pardon without comfort, without righteousness, without ransom, without the favour of God, without the lovely image of God, without the Spirit of God, and without all happiness. (2.) Your souls are in the possession of Satan where Christ is shut out, the devil is let in; and where he dwells, there he hath an absolute dominion: he uses all the faculties of the soul as his tools and instruments, Eph. ii. 2. O! would not any man reckon it an unspeakable misery to be in a house shut up with the devil? (3.) Where Christ is shut out, the plague of sin rageth, and it pestilential marks daily appear; what madness is it then to refuse to hearken to the voice of this blessed, Cleanser? (4.) The fire of God's wrath is kindled there, where Christ is refused; and what distraction is it to shut out Christ, whose blood only can quench this fire? (5.) If you do not hearken to Christ, you have no way to prevent eternal destruction; for there is no advocate, no surety to interpose for you, if he be refused. Surely the thought of appearing before an angry God after death must be terrible to a Christless soul; "For who can dwell with the devouring fire? Who can abide with everlasting burnings?" I have read of a certain king of Hungary, who was a Christian; and being on a time marvellous sad and heavy, his brother, who was a brisk and gallant man, would needs know what ailed him. "O brother!" saith he, "I have been a great sinner against God, and I know not how I shall appear before him when he comes to judgment." His brother answered, "These are but melancholy thoughts," and so made light of them, as courtiers use to do. The king replied nothing at that time; but the custom of that country was, (the government thereof being absolute,) that if the executioner sounded a trumpet before any man's door, the man was presently to be led to execution. The king, in the dead time of the night, sent his executioner, and caused him sound his trumpet before his brother's door, who, hearing and seeing the messenger of death, ran quickly, and sprang in trembling into his brother's presence, falls down on his knees, and beseeches the king to let him know wherein he had offended him. "O brother," answered the king, "you never offended me, but loved me: and," said he, "is the sight of an earthly executioner so terrible to thee; and shall not I, who am so great a sinner, fear much more to be brought to the judgment-seat of an angry God." What soul can think on this without terror, that hath not hearkened to Christ's voice in the gospel?

III. If you do not hearken to Christ's voice in the gospel, it had been better for you never to have heard the gospel at all; for your guilt is dreadfully aggravated hereby, and your misery will be the greater, both here and hereafter. We may gather this from Rev. vi. where, after the "white horse," i.e. Christ with the gospel neglected, comes the "red horse" of war, the "black horse" of famine, and the "pale horse" of pestilence. Neglecting to hear Christ in the gospel, ushers in all outward miseries like a flood, Jer. vi. 8, "Be thou instructed, O Jerusalem, lest my soul depart from thee, lest I make thee desolate, a land not inhabited." Then again, how sad will your case be at a tribunal, and through all eternity! The devils, the Turks, the heathens, and your own consciences, will bitterly upbraid you in hell, for refusing to hear Christ's voice in the gospel.

IV. Christ will not hear your cries in the time of misery, if you neglect his voice in the time of mercy, Prov. i. 24-26. Now Christ's voice is sweet, and full of mercy; but remember, O gospel-slighters, the time is at hand, when you will hear Christ speaking in another tone; no more "open to me, and hearken to my voice," poor soul: but "depart from me, ye cursed, into ever-lasting fire," &c.

V. This may be the last season you will hear Christ's voice speaking to you; this may be the last communion and the last call that Christ intends to give you. This may be the last day of grace, and the last time that his Spirit will strive with you. If you stop your ear, or harden your heart this day, there may follow an eternal dead silence, and God's Spirit never strive any more with you, and so your day of grace is lost, and your soul lost for ever. O young folk, what say ye to it? A season of youth is an accepted time, and a day of salvation: for the Lord's sake do not lose it. You have now plenty of sermons, sacraments, and gospel-offers; you have Christ crucified set before your eyes to affect your hearts, and bring you to a compliance with his calls. You have also loud warnings this day from God's providence, and, I hope, some of you the inward workings of God's Spirit on your consciences, concurring with these outward means. Well, then, give kindly entertainment to Christ's voice in this season of grace; while he yet stands beseeching you, come hearken to his voice, and accept of him as your Surety; enter into covenant with him this night, and come to his table, and seal it tomorrow. O sinner, turn your back on the devil, leave your sins, and stop your course, and come and be reconciled to God through this peace-maker, who is standing waiting to be employed. Well, what answer shall I carry back to my Master, that sent me to deal with you for this end? Shall I go and complain? "Lord, they are a company of obstinate sinners thou sentest me to; I entreated them to hearken to thy voice, and leave their sins; but there was no concern, no fear, no sense of sin among them. Had I been to preach to beasts, stocks, or stones, they would have been as much moved as they. Alas! I have spent my strength in vain, my voice and lungs for 'nought; I thought thy sweet entreaties and charming voice would have melted their hearts; but neither comforts nor terrors had any effect."

Or shall I have ground to say? "Lord, I have offered sinners a Redeemer, and entreated them to close with him. Though they stood long out against thy threatenings, yet when they heard thy entreaties, their hearts began to relent, some began to sigh, others to weep, others to long after Christ; and I hope they are gone home to make a personal

covenant with him this night, and sincerely design to return and seal it tomorrow.” God grant this may be the event. Amen.

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