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“WHERE ARE THE NINE?”

LUKE XVII. 17.

AN ADDRESS TO PERSONS RECOVERED FROM SICKNESS.

“WERE there not ten cleansed? where are the nine?”

This was the inquiry of the Lord Jesus. He had wrought a remarkable miracle on the lepers who had cried to him for cleansing. “Go,” said he, “show yourselves unto the priests.” As they went they were cleansed. One only turned back to render praise for his cure, and he not a Jew, but a Samaritan. Well might our Lord ask, with seeming wonder, “Where are the nine?” Was not my power as manifest in those nine as in this one? How is it that he alone has returned to give glory to God? His loud voice of praise condemns their ungrateful silence. They have the outward benefit, he the inward blessing also. The leprosy has left their bodies, but his spiritual leprosy shall be taken away from his soul. Arise, thou Samaritan; “go thy way; thy faith hath made thee whole.”

Such seems a natural comment on our Lord’s words. It is not unlikely that you, reader, may feel astonishment at the conduct of the nine. And yet it is possible that their conduct may have found its fellow in yours. Do not be offended; it may be that you resemble the nine in unthankfulness more closely than the one in gratitude. You look, perhaps, with some feeling of anger upon the nine ungrateful ones; and yet the Lord who searcheth the hearts may view the like conduct in you, and say, “Thou art the man.”

If you are recovering, or have recovered from sickness, you are one who has received great mercies at the hand of God. Perhaps you will be startled to hear that most of those who live without any regard to religion before illness comes, reap no lasting good from it when it passes away.

THE RELIGIOUS TRACT SOCIETY, INSTITUTED 1799;
56, PATERNOSTER ROW, AND 65, ST. PAUL’S CHURCHYARD.

Alarm is a very different thing from conversion; resolutions made in our own strength are but so many bubbles, which the first breath of temptation bursts. Where the mind had been under serious impressions before sickness came, the writer has witnessed some deeply interesting proofs of the blessed effects of sanctified affliction; but where the afflicted person was careless and worldly before, however greatly he may have been distressed and alarmed by the illness, his convictions have generally passed away with his sickness, and he has gone back again to the world with as much delight as ever. No doubt there are exceptions to this, as Manasseh and others. Still it is to be feared that these exceptions are few, and that what has been stated is usually true.

What effect then has your sickness had upon you? Are you to be found amongst the nine, or are you like the one?

Review the state in which you were the other day before your illness. You were living a careless life, it may be an immoral one; at any rate you had not thought much about the concerns of your soul. Like the rest of the world you had a great deal to do. Perhaps you were occupied in business, your farm, or your merchandise; perhaps you had to labour hard in the workshop or the field; you were taken up with the care of providing for your family, so much engaged in the concerns of life, that you hardly ever gave a thought to sickness, and death, and eternity. Everything spoke to you of many years to come, and it seemed unnecessary for you to think much of those things which were apparently so far off. Or it may be that pleasure was the chief subject of your thoughts. Gay and trifling, without a thought beyond present gratification, you were fluttering on like a butterfly in the sunshine. Full of life, you were all absorbed in your amusements, and these, it is not impossible, far from harmless. Sometimes an uncomfortable reflection would rise up in your mind; but it passed away like the summer cloud, and you were as much without God as ever.

Then came your bed of sickness. Your illness was

severe, alarming. Perhaps it was a fever, perhaps a dangerous accident. You were surprised to find how short was the distance between health and the grave. A few days had wasted your strength, and you were helpless as a babe. The axe seemed to be laid to the root of the tree, and you could almost hear the voice of God saying, “Cut it down, why cumbereth it the ground?” How terrified you were! You looked backward, and what could you see but opportunities neglected, mercies despised, provocation upon provocation? You looked forward, and death stared you in the face; you understood what was meant by his name, “the king of terrors.” “After death the judgment:” you had to give an account of yourself to God, and you were utterly unprepared to give it. Eternity!—Eternity!—a boundless prospect of hopeless misery; this was the most dreadful of all. What could you do? You tried to pray, and scarcely knew how; you were too much frightened to pray, or too much in pain, or it seemed hopeless for you to try. Perhaps you could not conceal your terror, and spoke of it to all around you; perhaps you kept it hid in your own bosom, and this was almost more dreadful than telling it. What resolutions you made; openly, it may be; if not, in secret! “Oh! if God will but spare me this time, what a different life I will live in future! How could I have been so foolish as to waste the precious time which he gave me for repentance! I am quite determined to live another kind of life. I will read my Bible, I will attend public worship; will give up my worldliness, my covetousness, my amusements, my sins; I will be another man.” Then you tried to pray: “Lord! have mercy upon me! Oh spare me a little, that I may recover strength! Cut me not off in my sins!” God heard your prayers. You have been raised up; you are in health again.

When first you began to leave your bed, you thought, perhaps, you should never be thankful enough for God’s goodness; you were ready to weep like a child at the remembrance of it. You could not help telling those about you how thankful you were; it seemed that you could

never forget the mercy of God. So were your first hours of recovery spent. A few days saw you once again in your family. By and by you went for the first time to the house of God; there was a measure of seriousness about you, but you were, perhaps, rather inclined to wonder that it was not deeper. You began to get about in your usual occupations. There were many things which your illness had thrown into disorder, especially if you are the father or mother of a family; it was necessary for you to bestir yourself to put them to rights. You had little time for thought; a passing remembrance of God's goodness sometimes crossed your mind like a shadow, but the world soon occupied you entirely. You are now quite well, and with your sickness your serious impressions are all gone. The love of the world is as strong as ever. Nay, it may be, that if you were a gay companion before your illness, you are as gay a companion again. If you were taken up with amusements before, you are as much taken up with them now. Or what is worse still, if you lived in the indulgence of known sin before, you have, perhaps, already plunged as deeply into sin as formerly. What is become of your promises, your repentance, your prayers? They are all gone. The world has wiped out every impression from your heart. You are as much the child of the evil one as ever; and those affecting words spoken of Israel may be uttered over you: “O Ephraim, what shall I do unto thee? O Judah, what shall I do unto thee? for your goodness is as a morning cloud, and as the early dew it goeth away,” Hosea vi. 4. And now, which of the ten cured by our Lord do you most resemble, the nine or the one? Let conscience speak. You are not found returning to give glory to God.

Learn from your own case that *conviction is not conversion*. Surely you had deep convictions when you lay on your bed of sickness; if you had not, it was only a more affecting proof of the dangerous state of your soul. It may be that your mind was seriously impressed. You were convinced that carelessness about the soul was an

awful sin, and that God would surely visit it with his judgments. That was the true view of the case. Sickness lifted up the curtain of the world to come, and you saw things in some measure as they really are. Now if convictions could have saved you, you would be in the way of being saved. But it is plain that they could not: they have left no abiding trace upon your soul, you are quite as much unconverted as ever. Your fears were excited, but your heart was not touched. Opportunity for sin was taken away, but the love of sin was not slain. You would have been glad of pardon that you might not be driven into hell: you had no desire for that renewal of heart which always accompanies pardon. You wished for heaven only as a refuge from sufferings, and not as the place where a holy God is the satisfying portion of heart-renewed sinners. You may be convinced a hundred times; many things will convince: you can be converted only by the powerful grace of God the Holy Ghost. O fellow sinner, seek for that grace which alone can convert your soul.

Learn that *illness has not left you as it found you*. God sends affliction for our profit. It is a solemn warning from him: it speaks aloud to the soul. If it has not done you good, it has certainly done you harm. The sun softens some things, and hardens others. Fire bakes clay, and melts lead; neither of the two comes out of the furnace in the same state as it went in. Now if your affliction have not softened your heart, it is to be feared that it has only hardened it. You know that there are many medicines which lose their effect upon the constitution by being often taken: so far as regards that medicine, the constitution becomes medicine-proof. So it may be that you are becoming affliction-proof, hardened against benefit from affliction. So far as man can judge, this illness which has now passed away has only brought you the nearer to this condition. Ah! “an affliction lost, is a loss indeed.” Perhaps the Lord may send another, and it may pass away as this has done. By and by the word may go forth, “He is joined to idols: let him alone,” Hos. iv. 17. Oh that

the dread of this may be the means of arousing you to pray, “Anything rather than this, Lord; anything rather than this! Oh, let not thy chastisements and thy mercies pass away unheeded! Oh, say not of me, ‘Let him alone!’”

Learn the *desperate evil of your own heart*. What! has affliction done you no good, after all the sight of eternity which it gave you? Has recovery done you no good, though you cried to God for it, and promised that if he would grant it, you would change your whole course of conduct? What a desperately evil heart must yours be! It is not meant that it is worse than the hearts of others in their natural state, for that word is true of every human heart, so far as it is unrenewed by the Spirit of God, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked,” Jer. xvii. 9. But what is meant is this: this unimproved affliction, this unheeded mercy, may by the grace of God show you this solemn truth in a way you have never seen it before. You have been ready in your thoughtlessness and vanity to say, “My heart is good enough notwithstanding my practice; temptation, and not badness of heart, is the cause of my neglecting God’s commands.” But this may perhaps convince you that it is not so good a heart as you have vainly thought. It is an ungrateful heart, a heart that forgets God’s judgments, and sets no store by his mercies. It is a hard heart, which will neither break nor melt. It is an unbelieving heart, which puts away from it all the solemn truths of God’s sacred word. It is a false heart, which does not keep its serious promises. It is an unholy heart, which loves darkness rather than light, and sin rather than holiness. It is a heart which indulges secret enmity against God and Christ, and says in its deep inward recesses, “I will not have this man to reign over me.” Oh that God may teach you this lesson from your hitherto unimproved affliction! To be aware of the depth of your spiritual disease, may, through his mercy, be one step towards the only true method of obtaining a cure.

Learn to *admire the long-suffering mercy of God*. How wonderful it is! He has not yet said, "Cut him down." Your neglect of God might have provoked this, but he has not done so yet. He is giving you further opportunities, richer mercies. Perhaps you have more checks of conscience than formerly; you are not quite so much at ease as formerly. God is dealing with you as the gardener in the parable is described as dealing with the tree: "Let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it; and if it bear fruit, well; and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down," Luke xiii. 8, 9. Now why is this long-suffering shown to you? Pray that it may lead you to repentance; pray that it may not be in vain. Oh! if you improve not his long-suffering mercy, hear the solemn words addressed to you: "Despise thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and long-suffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance? But after thy hardness and impenitent heart treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath, and revelation of the righteous judgment of God," Rom. ii. 4, 5. That long-suffering has an end: it may be near its close. When once the door of mercy is shut against you, the door of judgment will be open, and what then will remain for you but "weeping and gnashing of teeth?"

Lastly, learn to *cry to God for mercy*. This is your only hope. You have seen that affliction of itself cannot soften your heart, and that recovery of itself cannot do it, for your heart is as much unsoftened as ever, notwithstanding both. Great terrors cannot do it, for you have experienced them, and are unchanged. Your own resolutions cannot do it, nor any efforts made in your own strength. What then can soften and renew your heart? The free and sovereign grace of God alone. If he take it in hand, it will be done. That stubborn will of yours will fall at once; that unsanctified heart will be subdued; repentance will burst forth from your inmost soul, and stream down from your eyes. A godly sorrow will begin

to discover itself, 2 Cor. vii. 10. The love of Christ will begin to exercise a constraining power upon your heart. Yes, it is the love of Christ revealed by the Holy Spirit to your soul which will do the deed. A bleeding Saviour seen by the eye of faith will be death to your sins, peace to your conscience, life to your soul. You will be a new man in Christ Jesus. Perhaps you have never seriously thought of the sufferings and death of Christ. You have never regarded him as enduring the wrath of God, that guilty sinners might be saved from it. You have never considered him as crying out, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” in order that such as you are might know the blessedness of his Father’s tender compassion and eternal favour. God the Holy Spirit can reveal all this to your soul, and his quickening influence can make you alive to the power of it. What a depth will this give to your repentance! what a reality to your views of eternal things! It will be a source of holy, persevering, self-denying obedience, of peace and hope and joy. All this is the free gift of God; he has promised to bestow it upon the soul that earnestly seeks it. May you from this time be found seriously entreating these mercies! Perceiving your guilt and danger, may you be brought to your knees in earnest prayer! “Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon,” Isa. lv. 6, 7. Think over these words, pray over them, and may God of his infinite mercy so lead you to himself that by and by you may be enabled to look back and say, “Before I was afflicted I went astray; but now have I kept thy word,” Psa. cxix. 67.

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