NOTES OF ADDRESSES

BY THE LATE

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MISSIONARY OF THE ENGLISH PRESBYTERIAN

CHURCH TO CHINA.

EDITED BY

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III.

THE LIMIT SET.

[*The sermon—of which the following are but fragments—was preached while Mr Burns was a guest at Bonskeid, in the church of Tenandry, which is situated in the birch wood over­hanging the Pass of Killiecrankie, on Wednesday evening, Sep­tember 9. 1840. This service lasted from five o’clock till nine, beginning early for the convenience of those who had long distances to walk home; and continued late because the hearers hung upon the preacher’s words until the sun had set and the full moon had arisen. It was a memorable night in the history of many.*]

“AGAIN, HE LIMITETH A CERTAIN DAY, SAYING IN DAVID, ‘TO-DAY,’ AFTER SO LONG A TIME; AS IT IS SAID, ‘TO-DAY IF YE WILL HEAR HIS VOICE, HARDEN NOT YOUR HEARTS.”—*Hebrews IV. 7.*

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HE words here quoted are, as we see from the text itself, from the book of Psalms. They form part of an exhortation to the church in Israel from Jehovah, the Head of the church, warning them from the fate of their unbelieving and rebellious forefathers, not to abuse His long­suffering, nor to presume upon His grace by hardening their hearts through the deceitful nature and soul-blinding influence of sin.

An offer of mercy had been made to Israel. All the day Jehovah had stretched out his hands to a disobedient and gainsaying people, who had, through unbelief, refused to enter in, having not only killed the prophets and stoned them which were sent unto them, but crucified the Holy and the Just one. And, my dear friends, having per­sisted in this, they were given over to a reprobate mind, God swearing in His wrath that they should not enter into His rest. Ah! it is a fearful thing when God gives a man over; when, while yet the short day of life in this world lasts, the day of grace has fled, fled for ever; when the long-suffer­ing Immanuel ceases to knock at the door of the heart; when the last striving of His Spirit is over.

My friends, your day of grace has lasted long; many are the offers of pardon and reconciliation, many the declarations a grace and mercy, many the proclamations of forgiveness and of peace that have been repeated in your ears—again and again. They have come by ministers, by religious friends, by conscience,—ay, and by the very Spirit of Jehovah Himself, in the hearing of your outward ear, and in the hearing of your inward heart; and yet, through unbelief, are you sitting here this very evening in your natural state, dead, unpar­doned, impenitent, unchanged; exposed to the thunders of vengeance, without a covert.

“Again, He limiteth a certain day.” The idea which these words convey is inexpres­sibly sweet and comforting in one sense, though truly awful in another. We may just suppose a case. A man is going fast along a road—a rebel and disobedient. His master says to him, “If you *stop* and turn, before you come to such and such a point, I *will* forgive you.” Yet the man refuses, persists, and runs madly on. The kind master, unwilling to see his servant ruined, in his love, as it were, extends the point of turning, stretches the limit, and places the boundary line of life further on.

So it is, beloved friends, with your God. A thousand times has he removed the line which finally excludes from his mercy; every sermon he has extended it; every Sabbath has seen it still distant. And this night again he limiteth a cer­tain day—a day of mercy and pardon, a day of love and grace. But this day may be the last. His long-suffering does know a limitation and an end. It may be that God is saying of you, im­penitent sinner, that if today you turn not, He shall swear in His wrath you shall never, never enter into his rest. “Today, after so long a time.” Ah! sinner, can you stand that? Listen how He pleads with you, *after so long a time.* You know it has been long; long has He waited, pleaded, and besought you, and yet you are keeping Him at the door of your heart.

“Today if ye *will* hear His voice.” The word “will” should be more correctly rendered “shall,” expressing merely the possibility or event of hearing God’s voice, and not, as is often thought, the inclination or willingness to hear it. For instance, thousands never hear God’s voice. These words are therefore used in the sense of, *If* ye shall hear, If ye shall be *permitted* to hear his voice. And, in a sense, these words may be addressed to all of you. Ah! there are many here who have never yet heard God’s voice. Thousands are dying daily who, though a preached gospel has rung in their ears from the cradle to the grave, have never heard in their hearts a single word of God. There is nothing which man is naturally so unwilling to listen to as to the words of God. He will listen with avidity to anything else; he will listen to his friends, listen to tales about his neighbours, listen to evil, and listen to good. Yes, he will come to the church and listen to the minister—few are unwill­ing to do that; he will come to the courts of Jehovah, saying, “I must go and hear a sermon; I wonder what the minister will say to us today.” And so long as the minister tells him something new, so long as he goes on fluently, the man will be quite pleased, and even, perhaps, talk with his family about how the minister pleased him, and what the minister said. Ay, but notice the differ­ence when the minister happens to rehearse in a people’s hearing the words of Jehovah HIMSELF, the reading of *His* word is listened to with a sleepy carelessness that shows the man regards it not; and then, if the minister happens to quote a passage from that word of God, ah! you may see by the man’s expression that it’s a sort of interrup­tion to the thread of the discourse, an uninterest­ing, though, perhaps, necessary intrusion of what is merely used to show that a fact is correct or a doctrine true. Friends, don’t your consciences tell you that what we are saying is true? Don’t deny it. You know you feel it; and yet, what madness is this!

Suppose that one of the inmates of the palace of our Queen were observed paying particular attention whenever any of the attendants or house­hold spoke, but whenever the Queen spoke, seemed inattentive and wishing the interruption were over,—such a thing was never heard of; and yet, Sabbath after Sabbath, and year after year, do you come into the house of God, and listen to his servants, but the Master of the house you will not hear. You will listen to the words of any of his creatures, but when Jehovah speaks, it’s not worth your while to pay the deference you do to a fellow-mortal. His voice may be heard by you tonight; the ears of the deafest sinner in this house may be unstopped, if he will not persist in hardening his heart against the strivings of the Spirit.

“If ye will hear His voice, harden not your hearts.” The heart of man is hard as stone. It can­not be softened by any natural process. It never can be melted. It is possible, so to speak, to break it in pieces, just as by violence you may break any hard substance; but, ah! it won’t melt, it won’t bend, it won’t yield but to the fire of the love of the gospel. The mere outward hearing of the word won’t do it. It may seem to have an effect, but the man does not hear the word as the voice of God. The heart is like the hard anvil; when struck by the hammer there is a great sound made, and some sparks are emitted, but the anvil is hard still. But still, my dear friends, hard as our hearts by nature are, it is possible to make them harder still. *Harden not your hearts.* True, we received them at the first hard as adamant as to any capability of loving God, and their nature is unchangeable but by the power which creates us anew in Christ Jesus; but then there is a second hardening of the heart already hard. There are various means which tend to this:—as,

First,*—Indifferent hearing.* We have already spoken of this, but it is so important, that we would seek to impress it still more upon you. It is an awful thing to shut the ear against the voice of God. You do not know how few may be your opportunities. There may be some before me to whom *this* is the limited period, whose day of hope is quickly sinking down to the night of despair; but to whom Jehovah is still, though for the last time, saying, *Harden not your hearts.* How do you know, sinner, that He is not saying that to you, and yet, there you are as thoughtless and as unconcerned—as deaf as ever. It is awful when a soul thus begins to harden under the repeated strivings of the Spirit, and the gracious calls of the gospel. Some of you here are in that state. Fellow-sinner, don’t harden your heart against another call. You say, “It is hard already.” I believe it well; yes, hard as these rocks under your feet, but don’t let it get harder still. Poor sinner, you remember the day when it was not quite so hard, when it could shrink from sin, when you thought it could even melt at the love of Immanuel? Ah! you say, “I remember when it was not so icy cold, and insensible as it is now. I remember when a father’s frown could move me, when a mother’s tears could make me weep, and when a mother’s prayers could touch my heart. I remember when the sermons which I heard used to impress me and fill me with alarm and sorrow; but now, the minister may say what he likes, it’s all one, you’ll never make me feel now—nothing, nothing can soften a hardened sinner’s heart.” Ah, yes! dear fellow-sinner, *something can.* If God speaks to you, *then* you will feel, and your heart will begin to break, and your eyes begin to weep. Oh! that God would speak home to your conscience. If any of you feel that He is doing so, harden not your hearts.

Again, *Sinning against light* hardens the heart. Persisting in any course of sin, or in any habits of sin, and yielding to temptation when conscience and the Word of God clearly and distinctly point out to you that what you are doing is wrong, op­posed to the will of God, and in direct *disobedience* to His law. Nothing hardens the heart more than sin, felt to be sin, and yet persisted and delighted in.

Further, *The rejection of Christ* hardens the heart. Indeed, nothing is so hardening as the rejection of Immanuel. True, it does not make *His* heart the less full of love to you, or the less willing to receive you. Ah, no! for though you have kept Him waiting long, He is waiting still. But every fresh call to come to Christ, every new offer of mercy that you reject, just adds another link to the chain with which Satan binds you, and makes it the less probable that you will ever be taken from his grasp.

Have I received Christ, or am I rejecting Him? Answer this to yourselves. You say, “Of course I am a Christian; I acknowledge Christ as my Saviour; I have always done it.” Friend! you deceive yourself. A faith *of course,* is no faith at all. Have you received Christ, or are you reject­ing Him? Perhaps you do not know what the term means. Were you offered Christ on one hand, and everything else on the other, would you take Christ before all, or part with Him and take the world? Do you love Christ or your earthly possessions, your lands, your houses, the best? Which would you part with? Would you part with your dearest companion on earth sooner than give up Christ? Would you part with father, mother, sister, brother, lands, *all,* rather than part with HIM? If you would, then you have taken Christ for your portion; you are not rejecting Him.

And are you trusting to Christ alone, or to duties half, and half to Christ? If the latter, you are rejecting Christ. Would you like, as I know some would, to have Christ for your Priest, to satisfy divine justice, without having Him for your Prophet and King? If you would, you are reject­ing Christ.

But what is it to receive Christ? To be willing to take His righteousness for your whole salvation, to take Him as your Priest to plead for you, your Prophet to instruct and guide you, in the path of His commandments, and your King to govern you, by setting His throne in your heart—*that* isto receive Christ. Are you doing this? Have you ever done it? Are you willing to do it now? Ah! how little value does the poor blind world set on Christ! Is there not something marvellous in the little value sinners have for a Saviour?

If you were told tonight that all the lands that surround your dwelling were your own, would not your heart leap for joy? And yet there is a greater treasure offered you tonight, full and free, not only for the asking, but for the mere will to receive it. Ah, yes! Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, is offered to you. He knocks tonight, He asks you to open the door, and says, “If any man hear my voice.” See the distinction again made here. *If any man hear MY voice.* Everyone in this house hears the preacher’s voice declaring in his ear the word of Jesus; but are any hearing his voice in their hearts? Is Jesus speaking to you, beloved friends? If He be, harden not your hearts; for He says, “If any man hear MY voice, *and open the door,* Iwill come in to him and sup with him, and he with Me.” Who is yielding to Immanuel’s still small voice of love? Which of you is saying, “Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly?” Your heart is ever open to words of kindness—open to the voice of parent and friend—open to the love of a wife, a husband, a child, a brother, a sister; but, oh! it is closed against Immanuel. Why is it so? For what is so natural as that the heart of the creature should be open to the Creator, the heart of the sinner to the Saviour? Are we not to get one soul for Christ from your lovely glen? We would fain get one from these mountains. The scenes you dwell among are lovely scenes. The mountains and the valleys, the rocks that surround you, are beautiful indeed; but there is a sight that is lovelier still. No sight in the universe is half so lovely as the sight of a soul fleeing to Christ—coming with its whole burden of sin, casting it on Him, and taking refuge, and finding safety in the everlasting arms. Open up to Him these sealed hearts; let them go out towards Him, and take Him for your portion now and for ever. If you reject Him now, the consequence may be, that the Spirit will no longer strive with you; or if, in infinite mercy, the offer be made to you a few times more, and you reject Him still, the consequence *must* be, that you, through unbelief, shall not enter into His rest.

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Before parting, we shall repeat in your hearing some of the words of God. Listen for once to God’s own voice. There are souls present, who to this night have never once known what it is to listen with solemn awe to Jehovah,—to that word which is law throughout the universe, law to angel and archangel, to winds, and waves, and storms, aye, and to the very devils in hell.

Believers! will you now begin to pray for the outpouring of the Spirit, that before we part it may be granted, and that many souls may yet to­night be given to Christ.

The first word of God which we shall repeat, is this—“*Ye must be born again.*”What think ye of this? Man, woman, child, are you *born again?* The words, “ye must be born again,” *mean some­thing.* What *do* they mean? They are either to be rejected as foolish, vain words, without any meaning whatsoever, or they have a meaning that some of you wish they had not, an awful meaning; for they say that you are lost. What language could Jehovah use to convince you of that truth, stronger than the language he has used,—ye *must* be born again. *You must,* old hardened sinner; *you must*, young beginner in sin; *you must*, that are rich; you that are poor; one and all, unless already regenerated. *You* *must* be born again. Now, what do you say to this? There are hun­dreds now before me that know nothing of the new birth but the name; many who rejoice that the people in this neighbourhood have too much common sense to join the weak, woman-hearted men, who in other places are weeping for their sins, and joining themselves to their Saviour; many who laugh at conversion, and call it all vain talk, and hate the very name of saint. But there is another class to which we would speak,—those who expect to be saved, because, say they, “We know we are Christians, and what more would you have?” They are good neighbours, kind to those poorer than themselves; they do their duty, and think it the height of uncharitableness in any one to hint at their not being Christians. My dear friends, have you ever known a thorough change of heart? No; and yet you are quite at *ease.* Then yours is truly an awful *case.* In danger of hell every moment, and yet you are deceived. We know not what to say to you, to convince you that you are an unsaved sinner. Christians! *you* have much to answer for, in the way you help to deceive these poor perishing souls. Ah, yes! in that day, many a one will be crying out to those Chris­tians who have lived near them, and been much with them, without ever warning them of their danger; many a poor lost soul, believer, will be crying out to *you,* “Why did you not warn me? *You* knew what my end was to be, and I didn’t know it, and yet you never told me. Why did you let me rest before you had persuaded me, or driven me to flee to Christ for shelter from this storm of wrath?” We cannot bear to think of the multitudes who are daily settling down, at peace and sure of heaven, without a single warning word from Christians. Believe me, friends, there is nothing so fatal to a poor soul as, while unre­generate, *to be set down as a Christian,—*above all,to be acknowledged as such *by* Christians.

Let no man’s opinion be your warrant for heaven. Let your only warrant be a warrant taken from the clear declarations of the Word of God. One of the plainest of these is, *ye* must be born again. How little man will be satisfied with a fellow-creature! A man happens to be stamped a Christian at some period of life; he at least be­lieves that he is one; he goes on measuring and measuring his practice, his conduct, his words, with the short crooked line of a fellow-creature’s corrupt example, or the low deficient standard set up by fallen man. He never thinks of trying himself by the measuring line of the sanctuary. You think, perhaps, that ministers are all Christ­ians; and that none require to live so much to Christ as ministers do. Leave that to Rome and the apostasy,—leave *her* to speak of priest and of pope, but give ye glory to the Lamb, who hath made you all kings and priests to God. There is not a poor saint among you, that may not join with the Redeemer in ascribing eternal praise that *he* or *she* is made a priest to the living God, to offer to Him sacrifice continually in the land where there is no temple. Ah! but *every minister* is not a priest to God. People seem to think entering the church converts a man,—that he is born again when he enters the sacred office. But it is not educating a man for the ministry,—it is not sending a man to college, and putting a gown on his back, and putting him into a pulpit, that will make him a Christian. There is many a minister that is not a Christian; many a learned expositor of Jehovah’s word, whom that word will never save; and many a one who *says* to you, “IF YE SHALL HEAR HIS VOICE,” who never yet himself heard the voice of God.

Then, by man’s way of estimating, there is much less religion needed in a rich man than in a poor man to make him a Christian. Very little, indeed, will do in a marquis, a duke, or earl; a very little *patronage to religion* from one such, sets him down to be a Christian; and how little will do in a land­lord! If a landlord sometimes saysa word to you about the fear of God, if he is known to read the Bible, and to go to church, he’s a Christian, there’s no doubt about it; indeed, to appear at a humble prayer-meeting, would be a thing too much to ex­pect from him, even as a Christian.

This is the ruin of many in the higher ranks. If a young person, for instance, has been the sub­ject of impressions, and sees it right to retire alittle from the world, and thus come under the notice of gay companions as one who is going to become a saint, he or she gets the name for a very small outward profession, and is at once marked as a Christian; and, having got the name, is received by Christians at once as such:—and, though at first the individual may be very doubt­ful as to his or her *claim* to the reality of the name, a title to it becomes so easily confirmed by the opinions of other Christians, and especially that of Christian ministers, that the individual at length becomes quite at rest on the point of his being *indeed* a Christian; and when that point is once settled in a man’s mind, and when the con­sistent discharge of outward duty appears as its fruit, I can tell you that it is not *man’s word* that will convince such an one that he is still a child of wrath. Ah, no! you cannot conceive how aman’s heart gets hedged in, and in, and in, and round, and round; while every year that is un­stained by the commission of gross iniquity,—nay, perhaps adorned by a series of actions that present a fair face to the eye of the community,—sears his deceived heart till it becomes impervious to conviction, and, as it were, sets him beyond the mark of man’s arrows. We can’t get at you, con­sistent, sober, honest, amiable professor, hypocrite at ease in Zion! We can’t say a word to you to which we shall not get a scriptural answer, every­thing we say falls on this side of you. “We like that preaching,” you say, “it’s honest, it’s plain; I hope my neighbour took that word to himself, it suited him; that sermon was well fitted to arouse the sleeping.” Oh! that we heard you saying, “It suited *me,* it suited me.” Blessed be God, the most secure among you is not out of the reach of the arrows of the Mighty One. No, sinner, if the omnipotent Spirit of Jehovah shoots at you but one arrow, you will not escape; you will quail, you will fall, and cry for mercy and pardon,—not for this man, or for that man, but to ME, a sinner.

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Do not seek to cover up your sins with the var­nish of hypocrisy,—the fine gloss that pleases men. Men-pleasers! men-followers! the flames of judgment will melt the varnish on your fair faces, and make it run down, till the black hideous deformity be made visible to an astonished uni­verse. Cast it all away now, and come as poor burdened ones, to receive mercy.

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Some of you scoff at the call to turn. All we can get from you is, “Not yet, not yet.” The oldest among you says “Not yet.” Young men say, “Not yet, not yet, not yet; we are too young to be made saints of. Life is short, we may surely take the good of our youth. You would not have us spend our bright, light-hearted days in weeping and mourning; you wouldn’t put us yet into the strait jacket of a Christian’s scruples, or oppress us with the weight of the Christian’s cross.” Dear young friends, there are many of your own age, who could tell you, that when a soul has cast its own yoke on Christ, He makes it feel His yoke easy, His burden light. There are young men and young women in other places, who, at no dis­tant period have taken up that cross, and found that Christ, as He laid it on them, at the same time, as it were, took off the weight of it, by bearing it along with them. And now they go rejoicing all the day in the God of their salvation.

You are not too young to be lost; not too young to fall into the galling, soul and body-binding, chains of Satan’s prison-house; not too young to be shut up with devils in the pit;—so that, just because life is short, I entreat you to join your­selves to Jesus. Stop and think! Stop and tremble!

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Hear now another word of God,—the last to which we shall direct your attention. “Come now, and let us reason together, saith Jehovah: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.” Have you ever believed that? Heard it you have, times without number; but have you received it—have you set to your seal, that God is true when He speaks thus? And when the devil, or your own heart, has tempted you to dis­believe this, by saying that your sins are too many to be pardoned, thus giving God the lie, have you said, “I will abide by this: let God be true, and every man—every opposer of His truth, whether man, or devil, or my own heart—*a* *liar.”*

If you have thought, that in speaking to you this night, we have been wanting in tenderness, believe that it is, so to speak, against our will. All night we could speak on to you of the love of Christ, for it is boundless, fathomless, unsearch­able, inexhaustible, an endless theme for saved sinners here, an endless theme for the glorified above; but however hard for us to speak or you to hear, we *must* tell you the whole truth, and *speak it out.* Let this word of the living God make up for all want of tenderness in man: “Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow.” Glorious words to be repeated in a poor sinner’s ear! And we would say to you, who may have been led by the Spirit for the first time this night to hear the Word of God—who can no longer hold out against the truth of the former words of God, repeated in your hearing, but who are now convinced of sin; that you must no more harden your hearts at this declaration of love, than you must when, in the light of the Spirit, you bend to the truth, that you must be born again, created anew in Christ Jesus.

No verse in this book seems more fitted to affect the heart of the sin-burdened soul, than this full, unconditional declaration of a free pardon. If terror will not move you, then cry out in wonder, “Who is a God like unto thee that pardoneth?” Nor can you bring out one sin, dear fellow sinner, which may not be completely sunk out of remem­brance in the ocean depths of love. You say your sins are many. Listen to Immanuel’s voice—“Thy sins, which are many, are forgiven.” They are of crimson dye. That shows you are the very person Jehovah invites to “Come and reason.” They rise in mountain height around you; the prospect is darkened; it is the night of death and despair! Then *you* are *the* sinner God invites. A crimson sinner, a scarlet sinner, a black sinner of the darkest shade! God knew that you would be made to feel that; He knew that no less than an invitation, a free welcome, a joyous reception, to a crimson sinner, would suffice to reassure your unbelieving, distrustful heart, and He tells you that your sins shall be made white as snow. In Christ there is merit to justify the most hell-deserving of our race.

If any among you are now so weighed down under a sense of sin, that you cannot look up, we praise God on your behalf. Happy, happy are you! Happy souls that are trying to convince God that your sins are too black to be washed out, that your load is too heavy to be removed; the God of love will convince you that He *can* justify you, and yet be just. Happy souls, that are lying at his footstool, and reasoning thus, “Lord, I cannot ask for mercy. Oh, my sins, my sins!” The God of love will open your eyes, and show you a fountain flowing on Calvary that can cleanse such as you,—a robe of righteousness that can cover you, so *cover you,* that His own eye shall rest on you with delight, as it rests on the imputed righteousness that shines upon you. Ah, yes! when the Spirit shall have fully convinced you of sin, and fully shown you the depravity of your own heart, He will convince you of righteousness, a righteousness that is divine. We leave with you, mourners, a passage in Isaiah xxx. 18, “And therefore will the Lord wait, that He may be gra­cious unto you; and therefore will He be exalted, that He may have mercy upon you: for the Lord is a God of judgment: blessed are all they that wait for Him. For the people shall dwell in Zion at Jerusalem; thou shalt weep no more: He will be very gracious unto thee at the voice of thy cry; when He shall hear it, He will answer thee.”