PART FOURTH.

The proper Season for Repentance.

SUCH persons as are but superficially acquainted with the credulity of man, and the artifice of Satan; as have taken but little notice of the workings of their own hearts, and made but little observation of what passes around them, may be apt to conclude this part of our subject needless: yet, I trust, it will be found to be of great importance, and essentially necessary to discourse concerning the proper season of repentance.

The words of the Psalmist, quoted by the Apostle, comprise what I shall urge on this head: “To-day, if ye will hear his voice, harden not your heart.” The present time alone is ours: yesterday is irrecoverably gone; to-morrow we may be in eternity! Were then all of you in the prime of youth, I would endeavour to enforce on all the necessity of *early* repentance.

To such then I first address myself. Consider, *young sinner,* that custom is second nature: thy innate depravity forges the chains which hold thee in bondage, but custom rivets them upon thee. This is not mere speculation,—it is the language of inspiration. “Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may he, who is ACCUSTOMED to do evil, learn to do well.”

Repentance may be considered either as the work of divine grace in us, or as our own work by the assistance of divine grace. “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God that worketh in you to will and to do of his good pleasure.” Doubtless it is always alike easy to al­mighty God, to change the heart and renew the sinner; yet the sinner, when thus influenced to will, and to do, may find vastly more difficulty in some cases and circumstances than he would in others. When worldly interests, cares, and projects, together with customary indulgences, have added strength to your lusts, you will find repentance vastly more arduous than at present. You will then find it vastly more difficult to “cease to do evil, and to learn to do well,” to separate from the ungodly, and to habituate our appetites and passions to control. If you now delay, and *should* hereafter repent, you will bitterly know what it is to “pluck out a right eye, and to cut off a right hand.” When to the opposition to lusts grown ungovernable by gratification, and remorse for sins which exceed calculation, bitter reflection**[[1]](#footnote-1)** on the irreparable mischief which you have been doing all your lifer: you add what it will cost you to renounce the friendship, to withstand the persuasions and enticements, to resist the arguments, to face the scorn and bear the reproach of those comrades in iniquity, with whom you are hitherto happily unconnected: whilst perhaps your own children, trained up in wickedness, or the wife or husband of your bosom, whom you have ignorantly espoused, may be among the number of those, who are an offence unto you. Are you therefore in youth, in early youth, yea, in childhood! You are not too young to be sinners, both by nature and practice; evil dispositions and evil actions render repentance both needful and reasonable; and without it you must perish in your sins. Even now, therefore, I call upon you in the name of God, to repent and turn to God, and to do works meet for repent­ance. Listen not to your corruptions, to your companions, to the cruel mur­derer of souls, who would persuade you that it is soon enough yet. Millions are now in outer-darkness, who on earth intended some time to repent, but imagined they had time enough before them. Perhaps there are scarcely any who did not once think as you are now thinking, and flatter themselves as you do. Will you also trifle with the Almighty, till his patience be wearied out, and he cut you off, as he hath those who thus provoked him before you; and send you to be their companions whose example you would imitate?[[2]](#footnote-2)

Do you imagine you shall find less difficulty, or have more resolution to break through difficulties, hereafter? Alas! your difficulties will daily both be multiplied and gather force; and you will find less and less inclination, or resolution to encounter them. Fear, shame, and conscience will make gradually more feeble resistance; restraints of education will wear off, and you will grow bolder in iniquity. Finding respite from punishment, you will grow more secure and hardened in sin, till perhaps God will give you over to incurable obstinacy.

Do you imagine that sinful pleasures can afford you more satisfaction, than is to be found in serious godliness: Poor deluded souls! I compassionate your case, whilst I abhor the blasphemous supposition. Once I thought the same; I bless God for undeceiving me, and beg of him to grant you the same mercy. “There is no peace, saith my God, for the wicked.” “Vanity and vexation” are stamped upon all created enjoyments; they consist of eager expectations; continual anxiety, disappointments, and mortifications; a few turbulent short-lived gratifications, insipid amusements, and fatiguing pur­suits of pleasure. The mind of the poor deluded man who thus seeks hap­piness where it is not, is uneasy in waiting for the season of enjoyment; sur­feited and dissatisfied even with the moment he longed for; pained at the retrospect; alarmed when he looks forward to death and judgment; and he can find no respite from anxiety, but by banishing reflection, and foregoing the noblest privilege of the rational nature. Your smiles, ye Votaries of pleasure! are hypocritical; your mirth affectation; your heart is heaviness in the midst of your loudest peals of laughter; remorse of conscience and foreboding fears often disturb even your most jovial hours, and extort the unwilling sigh; but they render solitude and reflection bitterness: whilst the least remembrance of death, or symptom of its approach, excite a horror I have felt but cannot describe.

This is earthly, ungodly pleasure, even when health, affluence, and all conceivable advantages concur to add relish to it: but when sickness seizes the poor wretch who knows no other joy; when poverty and adversity de­press, and death approaches, his case is so miserable, and his anguish so in­tolerable, that no words can sufficiently express it.

But true religion is the source of the sweetest serenity, the most refined delight, the most exquisite enjoyment. From conscious integrity, peace with God, submission to his will, and reliance on his providential and gracious care, spring calm content with the present, and serene expectation of the future: and these form a “peace of God, which passeth all understanding.” Victory over the fear of death, and a well-grounded and lively hope of eternal happiness, support the soul in adversity, and increase the enjoyment of prosperity. Contemplation on the glories of the divine character, and the wonders God hath wrought, issuing in admiring love, adoring gratitude, and fervent praises, inspires the soul, at some seasons, “with joy unspeakable, and full of glory.” A life of communion with God, an uniform walk in his pleasant ways, an increasing assurance and experience of his love, fill the Christian’s peaceful soul with an abiding satisfaction; which nothing greatly interrupts, but the stirrings of corruption, the force of temptation, and the imperfection of his obedience. By these, at times, guilt burdens his mind, and sorrow oppresses his heart: yet even godly sorrow itself rather increases than lessens his enjoyment: and if he for a season be unhappy, it is not because he is reli­gious, but because he is no more so. Nor is there any rational satisfaction which he doth not enjoy, with more real relish, because with more modera­tion, than others do: for real religion abridges us of no enjoyment, but that which is irrational, debasing, or inordinate. In short, a flash of lightning, which for a moment interrupts, and then increases the midnight gloom, bears more comparison to the cheerful genial light of the sun, than the most exquisite gratifications of sin, to those joys which the real diligent Christian experiences from day to day. “Come, taste, and see how gracious the Lord is, and how blessed they are who trust in him.”

But doth Satan persuade you, that you shall have time enough hereafter? Alas! can you be the dupes of so bare-faced an artifice? You know that you have no lease of your lives, nor are sure of beholding to-morrow’s light. Many as young, as healthy, as vigorous as you, are followed to the tomb. Dare you risk eternal happiness or misery on such a peradventure! Reflect, also, that your lives are in the hands of that God, whom your sins have greatly provoked, and your presumptuous impenitency still more. May he not, even at this moment, be saying, “thou fool, this night shall thy soul be re­quired of thee?” Hast thou not, deluded sinner, done enough already to provoke him to it? And shouldst thou slight the present warning, and rush into forbidden pleasure; seriously consider whether thou mayest not reason­ably fear, lest in the midst of some daring provocation, he should “cut thee off with a stroke,” and “then a great ransom cannot deliver thee.”

Dare you flatter yourselves with the presumption of repenting, if not be­fore, yet on a death-bed! Alas! how many are cut off by sudden death! how many bereft of reason by the violence of disease! how many are seized with madness, incurable madness! how many, I say, perish without one cry for mercy, and eternally curse their folly, in being the dupes of such a de­lusion! “Surely in vain is the net spread in the sight of any bird.” You evidently see the design of Satan in his temptation: he aims only to lull you into security, till he can plunge you into despair; and then he will insult over you. But even should you have a space given you before death, can you reasonably hope that God will then give you his grace, which you have so long refused? Are you sure you shall improve those hours? Can you at last in your own strength, when you are languishing under a violent dis­order, overcome all those difficulties which you have considered as next to insurmountable, even with the assistance of divine grace, all the days of your health? Will you need any additional anguish, when your bones are full of strong pain, and nature is even sinking under the load? Can you then be sure that your repentance is real and genuine, when you have no opportunity of bringing it to a trial by the fruits which it produces? One instance indeed is recorded of a dying penitent, to show that repentance, even in those circumstances, is neither impossible nor unavailing; and but one, to teach us that such cases are very rare. To-day, then, make sure of this important concern. “Give not sleep to thine eyes, nor slumber to thine eye-lids: deliver thyself as a roe from the hand of the hunter, and as a bird from the snare of the fowler.”

“Remember therefore your Creator in the days of your youth.” Re­member your obligations and relations to him, and your offences against him: remember, repent, and seek forgiveness without delay, through that Saviour who hath promised, that “they who seek him early shall find him.”

But indeed this best season is already elapsed with many; and it is too late to exhort them to early repentance. Perhaps some are dolefully la­menting, “My youth hath been spent in vanity and ungodliness; yea, the prime of life is irrecoverably past, and I am growing hoary in the ways of wickedness: what must I do? Is there nothing for me, but a certain fear­ful looking for of judgment, and fiery indignation? Indeed, my fellow-sinner, thy case is very deplorable: the day is almost spent: the night, wherein no man can work, is swiftly approaching: thy work is not begun; yea, all thou hast been doing, during the whole course of thy life, must be as it were undone. Thou must travel back again, with weeping and supplication, all the way which thou hast trodden for so many years. Death, judgment, and eternity, press upon thy unprepared soul: the grave is yawning for thy enfeebled body: and should death seize upon thee ere repentance hath taken place, it had been good for thee hadst thou never been born. Still, however, thy case is not desperate: though provoked by thy impenitency, the Lord yet renews his compassionate invitations. If then thy heart begin to relent; if remorse embitter thy soul: if thou art at length willing to acknowledge thy offence, and seek his face; come, and cast thyself at his feet, and venture upon his mercy and truth, who sayeth, “Him that cometh unto me I will *in no wise* cast out.” If *indeed thou art renewed* to repentance, though “at the ninth or eleventh hour, thou shalt be equalled with those who have borne the heat and burden of the day.” Herein lies the danger and the dif­ficulty: but with God all things are possible; he “can change the Ethiopian’s skin and the leopard’s spots; and by his power, even thou who hast been long accustomed to do evil, mayest learn to do well.” Admire then his long-suffering, who hath borne with thy impenitent disregard of his precepts and promises, his authority and invitations, for forty, fifty, sixty or seventy years, and has neither cut thee off by death, nor deprived thee of thy much abused reason, nor left thee to utter insensibility! This is distinguishing patience!

Methinks, aged sinner, I see thy relentings, hear thy groans, and witness thy tears, confusion, and despondency; whilst the crimes of a long life pass in review before thee, the sword of divine justice is brandished against thee, conscience reproaches, and Satan insinuates that it is now too late. Yea, thou art even inclined once more to listen to his insinuations; and to con­clude that there is no hope, and that after such a life, thy late repentance and worthless services will never meet with acceptance. But reject this dis­honourable thought, resist the lying tempter; when he persuaded thee, here­tofore, that it was too early in life to repent, he led thee to the brink of an awful precipice: if he prevail in persuading thee it is now too late, he pushes thee headlong into everlasting ruin. In both he acts in character, “a liar and a murderer from the beginning.”

“God’s ways are above our ways, and his thoughts above our thoughts,” and “his mercies are higher than the heavens,” else the case of the aged sinner would be desperate. But though he will not accept the late repent­ance, and the feeble obedience of one hour, because they merit such a fa­vour; yet for his own name’s sake, and through the atonement and inter­cession of Jesus, he will pardon, justify, and save all those who truly repent and believe the gospel. This discovery of the unspeakable riches of divine love, whilst it gives encouragement to the drooping heart, ought to increase the sinner’s remorse for having so neglected and provoked a God of such ex­cellency and mercy, and to quicken his diligence in availing himself of the divine patience, by fleeing for refuge to the hope still set before him. “To­day, if ye will hear his voice,” before tomorrow, embrace his proffered mercy, and harden not your hearts. And whatever stage of human life you are now arrived at, I can only inculcate the same exhortation: “behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation;” and suggest the same petition: “So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.” Psalm xc. 12. “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it” speedily, and “with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor know­ledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.” Eccles. ix. 10. I have shown you, that this, of all others, is the most necessary and important work you can find to do: make then no delay, lest “he swear in his wrath, that you shall never enter into his rest.”

1. Consider in this place, what has been urged, of the necessity of restitution, Part Second. He who repents early, escapes that difficulty. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jer, xiii.—Woe unto thee, 0 Jerusalem! *will* thou not be made clean? When shall it *once* be? [↑](#footnote-ref-2)