

*Selkirk Communion, August, 1710.*

THE INSTABILITY OF HUMAN GOODNESS.

SERMON II.

HOSEA vi. 4.

*For your goodness is as a morning cloud, and as the early dew it goeth away.*

THE case of many at our communions this day is such, that when they are at them, it seems pity they should ever go from them till they sit down at the table above; and when they are from them a little while, it seems pity they should ever go to them again.—When they are at them, the smell of their communion frame is as the smell of a field which the Lord hath blessed. When they are from them, the smell of their ordinary walk is as the smell of a field which the Lord hath cursed; smelling *rank* of the root of bitterness.—Men know not what to make of them. No wonder, (with reverence be it spoken,) seeing God knows not what to do with them. “O Ephraim, what shall I do unto thee? O Judah, what shall I do unto thee?” As if a Physician despairing of his patient should say, I have tried many remedies, but none avail to perfect the cure. You still again cast yourself into the disease. Ephraim and Judah were neither made better by promises nor threatenings, so that their case was very hopeless, and nothing seemed to remain but that the Lord should leave them.

In the text we have that which made their case so very hopeless. They had at times some goodness.—Hebrew, *Kindness*. They had at times some kindness for God and his way; some warmth of affections towards good, that they seemed to be believing on Christ, and entirely to give up their idols: so that they were sometimes almost gained. Yet it was but sometimes. They remained not long in that frame. Their half kindness did not last; they even turned back again to their old bias. Their goodness was passing goodness. This instability of theirs is held forth by the similitude, first, of *a morning cloud*. A cloud which out of the remains of the night appears in the morning promising a heavy shower, to make the ground fruitful; but whenever the sun riseth the cloud vanisheth away, and disappoints the expectation of the husbandman.

Next this transitory goodness is represented by *the early dew*. The dew which falls in the morning upon the fields, and seems to be

in a fair way to bring forward the increase of the earth. But as soon as the sun is up, and beats upon it with its beams, it evaporates and is gone. He seems to allude to the morning sacrifices of both these people; at which they appeared very serious and devout; but when the sacrifices were over, and they went home, they even returned to their old trade of sin. Now if they had had no goodness at any time, their sin would have been more easily charged home upon them, and the arrows of God's threatenings would have more easily pierced their breasts. But now they had so much goodness as made them proof against threatenings, but yet not so much as could wrap them up in the promises.

*Doctrine.* Such is the instability of many in the good way of the Lord, that the goodness at which they sometimes arrive, passeth away as a morning cloud, and as the early dew.

I. I shall shew in what respects the goodness of many passeth away as the morning cloud, and as the early dew.

II. I shall give the reasons of the point. And then add some improvement. We are then,

I. To shew in what respects the goodness of many passeth away as the morning cloud, and as the early dew.

It is certain that the goodness of the saints cannot pass away totally, nor finally. "For whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God." But even the saints may lose much of the degrees of grace; and as for others they may totally lose all that they have. In one sense the point holds with respect to both.

1. Men's goodness often goes away very quickly as the morning cloud which appears only a very short while. "Then believed they his words; they sang his praise. They soon forgot his works; they waited not for his counsel." Many a time a dark cloud quickly comes over men, so that their sun seems to go down at noon-day; and their leaking vessels sometimes full are speedily run out. Their goodness is like the moon in a cloudy night, that sometimes shines forth brightly, but anon deserts the traveller: so that the strong man becomes weak as Samson without his hair. And it may be observed, That men's goodness often goes quickly away, after they have solemnly engaged themselves to the Lord. "When Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord, and all his judgments, then all the people answered with one voice and said, All the words which the Lord hath said will we do." Yet in a very short time after this it is recorded; "They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them; they have made them a molten calf and have worshipped it." This was not peculiar to them.

How quickly after the first communion was the edge of the spirit of the disciples blunted. Mark xiv. 37. They could not watch with their master one hour. Their resolutions vanished into smoke whenever the temptation appeared. The mighty men that *would die* with their master could not find their hands in the day of battle, though they found their feet to forsake him and flee away; and one of them found his tongue to deny him. At such a time Satan is most busy, for then they are better worth the catching than before. Now their sins will bring more dishonour to God and to religion, and how often do they then fall as ripe fruit into the mouth of the devourer.

The same thing also often happens, after some more than ordinary enjoyments. Immediately after the most delightful fellowship with Christ, we hear the spouse saying, *I sleep*: and in this frame refuses to open to her beloved. Satan envies the happiness of men, and tries to rob them of it: even as the pirate attacks the ship that is most richly laden. The hearts of the disciples were melted with the sight of Christ's miracle. Mark vi. But a hard frost quickly seized them. Verse 52. "They considered not the miracle of the loaves: for their heart was hardened." Our hearts are as stones, in point of receiving impressions, but as the sand for retaining them. The wind of temptation quickly obliterates them. Even then the heart is ready to swell with pride, and when it begins to rise, it will quickly, like Jordan, overflow its banks. Even Paul himself needed a thorn in the flesh to keep him from being exalted above measure by his high enjoyments.

In like manner, goodness often passes quickly away after deliverance from trouble. In a time of affliction the goodness of many is apparently great, yet it quickly vanisheth when the deliverance comes. In the time of a heavy rain every pool is filled to the brim, but in fair weather they soon dry up. Afflictions drive men to God as winter storms oblige them to keep the house. But, O! it is hard to keep at home when the earth's decayed face is renewed, and all nature again flourishes. While the excitement is at the nightingale's breast, it awakes and sings in the night, but when it is away it sleeps in the day. This was sadly exemplified in the case of Noah, Gen. ix. 20. Of Lot, Gen. xix. 31. Hezekiah, Chron. xxxii. 25. And of the Israelites, Psal. lxxviii. 34. and downwards. This is the reason why the Lord so often makes the clouds return after the rain.

2. Men's goodness often goeth away very easily, even as the morning clouds will pass away without the blustering noise of wind, and the warm beams of the sun easily exhale the early dew; but not

more easily than men's goodness goes off their spirits. The devil does not always act the part of a roaring lion when he intends to strip people of their attained goodness, but in this work advances with a soft pace. We may observe that men's goodness ordinarily goes away by degrees, almost imperceptibly. Few all of a sudden become apostates. Carnal security creeps on leisurely on men, till by it they are taken off their feet. Their goodness, like the light of day after the setting of the sun, goes away by little and little. It goes away also on very slender occasions. The voice of a maid makes Peter's goodness pass away, and instead of holding by his good resolutions, he sins grievously by denying his master. It is a piece of Satan's policy to attack people with slender temptations at first, when he designs to rob them; for then they think they are strong enough for them, therefore they grapple with them on their own strength and are foiled. A small temptation will take off the chariot wheels of the soul. An unseasonable thought has sometimes proved a wide door, by which a good frame has escaped. How great a matter does a little fire kindle.

3. Men's goodness goes off as the morning cloud, when there is most need for it to stay. The morning cloud goes away most readily in time of drought, when the earth stands most in need of it. And though the goodness of men may last while they meet not with temptations, yet when temptation comes it is often a-missing. Demas held on till the present world was laid in his way, but his goodness could not carry him over it. It is much to be feared, that if the sound of the communion sermons were once out of the heads of some of you, and you meet with your old companions, and with new temptations, you will be just where you were.

It hath often been seen, that the goodness of many passeth away in a time of persecution for the gospel.—“Because they have no root they wither away.” As the heat of summer produces many insects which are not to be seen in the frost of winter; so the time of peace in the church produces many false friends who will never stand the shock of trouble for the gospel.—There are many fair fowls that can stay with us in the summer, but depart at the approach of winter.—When Christ is riding in triumph the streets of Jerusalem will be crowded with persons crying, Hosannah; but when the scene changes they will be found on the other side, crying, crucify him.

Again our goodness is ready to pass away when we are called to duty. Paul himself found “that when he would do good, evil was present with him.” The hearts of men are never more apt to mis-give than when they have most to do with them; and never more

ready to be abroad than when they should be at home, to meet with the Lord in duties. How often when the sacrifice is offered is the heart a wanting, and this presages sad things. The public assemblies are witnesses of this. What a chill cold then often benumbs men's spiritual senses! What distractions, wandering, wearying, and deadness often seize them. The preacher often speaks to the deaf. And our churches are filled with idols which have eyes, but see not, and ears, but hear not. The word often makes stones of Abraham's children, instead of raising up of them children to Abraham. In our secret duties this appears; woful dryness suddenly unfits us for them. When the man is on the mount of God, the heart falls a roving, and with the fool's eyes, goes through the ends of the earth. Though the eyes be closed, the goodness escapes, and they see a thousand vanities. The heart leaves the tongue, and there is so little vital heat within that the word dies in our mouths. We now proceed,

II. To give the reasons of the point. The goodness of many thus passeth away. Because,

1. Many, for all their goodness, have not the living Spirit of Christ dwelling in them. They have received only some common operations of the Spirit, which, like a slight shower of rain, wets only the surface of the earth but never goes deep, and so is quickly dried up. They do not, like Caleb, follow the Lord fully, because they have not the spirit which he had. They have only awakening, not changing, and sanctifying grace; therefore it decays by little and little till it sets in darkness. Their reigning sloth is only covered, not subdued, the root of it is not struck at, hence it riseth again as weeds do in the spring. Thus it is said of the stony ground hearers, "that when the sun was up, they were scorched: and because they had no root, they withered away."

2. Because the souls of many do not unite with Christ, who is the only head of influence. "If a man, saith Jesus, abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned." Take a branch and ingraft it, bind it up; it will keep green for a time indeed; but if it take not with the stock, it will undoubtedly soon wither. And thus, though there may be a sacramental ingrafting into Christ, and the man be bound up with these holy bands about him; yet if he unite not with Christ by a lively faith, he can draw no nourishment from him; and if so, his goodness must certainly go away. Hence the goodness of many goes and is never recovered.

3. Because with many, religion is not their proper element. It is a forced matter with them, that they have any at all; either by the

power of credit, or a restless conscience. In a word, self-love is their highest principle, Psal. lxxviii. and downwards. They have no real love to the Lord, nor does the intrinsic beauty of holiness recommend it to them. Though a stone may abide a while in the air, by the strength of the person who throws it, yet its natural weight will bring it down again. And thus men, though brought into Christ's palace, yet still retaining their swinish nature, will return to their wallowing in the mire.

4. Because they have no spirit for difficulties and disappointments. Many will knock at heaven's gate that cannot endure to use violence and take it by force. "Strive, saith Jesus, to enter in at the strait gate; for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in and shall not be able." They see heaven afar off, and would fain be there, but they shrink back when they see the gulf which they have no heart to sail over. They go forward cheerfully while things are laid to their hand; but disappointments take heart and hand from them, and they are knocked in the head. "He that overcometh shall inherit all things; but the fearful and unbelieving," as well as gross sinners of every class, "shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death." They cannot wait on at Christ's gate. They know not what it is to have their appetite sharpened with disappointments; but as soon as they feel not that sweetness in religion which they imagined, they go directly to their old lusts; and find in them what they could not find in religion.

5. Another reason is, the entertaining of unmortified lusts, which are like the suckers that draw the sap from the tree and make it barren. It is hard to get wet wood to take fire, but harder to get it to keep in the fire, but hardest of all, to get a heart polluted with, and enslaved to vile affections, to retain any attained goodness. They that have many friends in the enemy's camp will find their hands sore bound up in the day of battle. It is with many as with David in the battle against Absalom. Upon the one hand it was hard to lose a kingdom: on the other, to lose a son: "therefore," said he, "deal gently with the young man for my sake." That heart will not abide with God that has secret filthy lusts to nourish.

6. The world has a great hand in this. The profits and pleasures of the world soon charm away men's goodness. Like the thorny ground hearers, when many have heard, "they go forth, and are choked with cares, and riches, and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection." If the earth once get in between us and the Sun of Righteousness, there will be a dreadful eclipse in our goodness. Cares of the world have their name from dividing and rend-

ing the mind asunder, whereby men's goodness hath a wide gate to go out at. They are tenter hooks of the soul, the black devils that draw men from God, and from that sweetness that is in the enjoyment of him, and drive them like the demoniac among the tombs in the region of the dead. They are the wasps and flies that buzz about and sting the soul when it should rest in the bosom of God. And for the pleasures of the world, when they once get a hold of the heart, they quickly run away with it. "Whoredom, wine, and new wine," says the Prophet, "take away the heart." Sensuality is a deep gulf, in which people's goodness will quickly drown. Sensual pleasures are waters that will soon put out the holy fire. But alas! many are like those amphibious birds that both fly and swim, and if they mount at any time towards heaven, they are quickly swimming again in the waters of sensuality that drown their goodness.

Lastly. Unwatchfulness over the heart and life. Our goodness is a tender bud that will easily be blasted if we do not take all possible care of it. "Keep thy heart," says the wise man, "with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life." The heart is no more to be trusted to itself than a wild ass used to the wilderness. Therefore keep it as a prison:—as a besieged city; as the priests and Levites kept the holy things intrusted to their care. He that hath no rule over his own spirit, is like a city that is broken down, and without walls. Such a city can restrain none that would depart, and prevent none that would enter. What wonder then, if in such a case our goodness goes away, when there is no watching; for such a soul is like a great fair, where some are going out, some entering, and those within are all in confusion.

*Use.*—I would exhort you then, that have attained to any thing of goodness or kindness to the Lord in his way, that you would set yourselves to hold it fast. O leave it not here! O let it not pass away with this communion. Carry it home with you and cherish it there; and let it appear in your future conversation. I hope there may be some that are going away crying, they have seen the King in his beauty; and they know that they have seen him; their eyes have beheld his beauty; they have heard his voice in the inmost parts of their souls. Perhaps they came in bonds, and the Lord has given orders, and the prisoner is loosed. Their chains of soul distress have been taken away, by a fair view of the righteousness of the Mediator, the great interpreter of the Father's mind. Job xxxiii. 23, 24, 25. God has looked their unbelief out of countenance and given them joy in believing. Well, brethren, hold fast. The highest enjoyment is liable to changes. Be thankful. Let the high praises

of God be in your mouths. Walk humbly. Though you be adorned with shining feathers, yet look to your black feet and walk softly like Hezekiah. Walk also watchfully. Watch and pray that you enter not into temptation. Glory more in the giver than in the gifts. If you would have your comfort to last, then draw your comfort more from the grace of Christ without you, than from the grace of Christ within you. "We are to rejoice in Christ Jesus, but to have no confidence in the flesh." Only beware that you do not so much fear the loss of the enjoyment, as to bind up your hands from improving this golden spot of your time. Sometimes Satan prevails so to fill the heart with fear in this case, that persons fear themselves out of ease and never cease to be jealous of Christ, till that which they fear come upon them. Rather do as Moses. "He made haste and bowed his head and worshipped. And he said, if now I have found grace in thy sight, O Lord, let my Lord, I pray thee, go amongst us, (for it is a stiff necked people,) and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for thine inheritance." Some will say, alas! we have nothing to lose. Indeed it is likely there are some that will go away as empty of goodness as they came. They looked for nothing, and they have got as little. They are the devil's obedient captives that will neither stir hand nor foot to get out of his chains. "If our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost. In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them." Such persons as these will not complain of a grieved heart. Therefore I say, if your hearts be affected with a sense of your wants; if you have any of the desires of God's children after the Lord; if you see more of your own vileness of heart and life, and have formed resolutions to be for God and none else; if it were but a conviction, it is worth your pains to keep it. And I exhort you not to overlook it, lest it pass away as a morning cloud.

1. Consider Satan will think it worth his pains to rob you of it, however little there be of it. The prince of darkness will set himself against the least ray of light. His experience tells him, that it is easiest to crush people's goodness in the bud, and not to let the flame spread.

2. Our Lord is very tender of small beginnings, where there is some good thing found in a person toward himself. "A bruised reed he will not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench." Be not you careless of that, of which he is so tender. Though you have not felt a full shower of influences, but only a few drops, yet let not these go away.



3. Great things may arise from small beginnings. The cloud like a man's hand, may soon darken the heavens if cherished. The grain of mustard seed may soon become a tree; and a little leaven will leaven the whole lump. "And then shall we know, if we follow on to know the Lord."

Lastly. The less you have, you had need take the more care not to lose it, and be the more diligent to improve it.—If you be set any way with a small stock, then double your diligence, and keep closely to your work.

*Advices* 1. Do not sit down contented with any measure that you have attained. Alas! little satisfies people in religion. He that does not exert himself to grow, will assuredly decay. "Do not think that you have already attained, or are already perfect; but follow after, if that you may apprehend that for which also you are apprehended of Christ Jesus." Labour to make *two* talents of your *one* by industry. The fire will be extinguished by withholding fuel, as well as by throwing water upon it.

2. Keep up a holy jealousy over your own hearts. You hear that the goodness of some is as the early cloud, and the morning dew, it passeth away. This should make us say, each for himself, Lord is it I? "He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool." If you be saying with Hazael, "Am I a dog, that I should do this?" Look that you be not the dog, that will be among the first to do it.

3. Put what you have in the Lord's hand. Depend upon him and wait about his hand for more influences. For this purpose be much in prayer. You may come to get that in secret, which you have not got at the table.

Lastly, And what I say to one I say to all, watch. The time is short. Watch, and ere long you shall be in that place, where the gates are not shut by day, and there is no night there. But if any man draw back, the Lord's Spirit will have no pleasure in him. Amen.