

## SERMON IX.

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WHAT IS THE DANGER OF A DEATH-BED REPENTANCE?

*And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.—Luke xxiii. 42.*

WE have, in this little history of the two thieves crucified with our Lord Jesus, a great instance both of man's wickedness, and of divine grace.

1. *Of man's wickedness* in both these thieves, who had spent all their time in sin, even to the last hour of their lives; but especially in the impenitent thief, whom neither bonds, nor trial, nor condemnation, had humbled or mollified, or brought to repentance; but, being still under the power of a hardened heart, we find him, at the last gasp, railing on a Saviour, instead of believing in him, and belching out his blasphemies in the very mouth of hell: "If thou be Christ, save thyself and us." (Verse 39.)

2. *Of divine grace* in the penitent thief.

First. *Converting grace.*—And that,

(1.) In the *power and efficacy* of it: for how powerful must that grace needs be which had wrought so great a change; had supplanted that heart in an instant which had been hardening in sin for so many years; overcome so many stubborn, inveterate lusts at once; and made the man all on a sudden commence one of the most eminent saints the world had ever yet had, and act faith to such a height, as might not only have become the chiefest of the apostles, but did really exceed any they had hitherto shown! The disciples of Christ, who had sat so long at their Master's feet, yet were hardly induced to believe his resurrection, even after he was risen; (Luke xxiv. 25;) when this thief, who hitherto had been a stranger to him, and now saw him hanging on a cross and dying, yet by faith sees him in his kingdom, triumphing over his cross and death too.

(2.) In the *freeness* of it; for,

(i.) God's grace did not wait for his preparations, good moods, good dispositions; (these were all over, if ever he had any;) but it takes hold of him when at the height of sin, and not only was void of grace, but seemed past grace, that is, never likely to come to it by any ordinary methods.

(ii.) It seized on him, and passed-by the other, though no worse (that we know of) than himself. Grace makes a difference where none was before: of these two, in the like case, it takes one and leaves the other.

Secondly. *Pardoning grace.*—This appears in our Lord's answer and carriage to him. (Verse 43.) He doth not upbraid him with the abominations of his forepast life, his theft, or rapine, or violence, his hardness of heart, or long impenitence; but easily, readily, gently receives him; and is so far from denying him a pardon, that he assures him of a present salvation: "To-day shalt thou be with me in Paradise."

The case of these two thieves doth in a good measure parallel the case of other dying sinners, though dying upon their beds. They were in the extremity of their lives, drawing their last breath; both full of pain and anguish in their bodies, and, very likely, full of shame and confusion in their minds, considering their death was not only cruel and grievous, but reproachful in the eyes of men, and accursed by the sentence of God. So that here was much to interrupt, disturb, and distract them in so great, so close, and serious a work as repentance is. And is it not so with others, who live in sin all their days, and pretend to repent at last? They are taking their leave of the world, groaning under their diseases, racked with pains; and have many things (though not the same the thieves had) to discompose, disquiet, and divert them from or hinder them in the like work. But if we look to the issue, the parallel will not reach so far. Here is man for man: one of the thieves humble, believing, repenting, and accordingly accepted; the other unbroken, unbelieving, impenitent, and dying like a reprobate. This equality is not to be found among other dying sinners, as hereafter we shall see. However, from the example of these two thieves we may safely infer this PROPOSITION:—

## DOCTRINE.

*That though a very late, even a death-bed, repentance may be sincere, yet it is not safe to run the hazard of it.*

Two parts there are of this proposition:

I. *That even a death-bed repentance may be sincere.* This I shall speak to by way of concession.

II. *That yet it is dangerous running the hazard of it, by deferring repentance till such a time.* This I shall handle by way of assertion.

I. *It is possible that a death-bed repentance may be sincere.*

In speaking to this I shall briefly,

(I.) *Premise something in general concerning the nature of repentance.*

(II.) *Lay down the reasons of this concession.*

(I.) For the former: repentance may be considered either,

First. *In the act or exercise of it.*—Which the scripture usually expresses by "turning" or "returning;" implying that sinners are out of the way to God and their own happiness, till by repentance they return into it.

If we speak distinctly of it, we may consider,

1. *The essence of repentance.*—Which is the turning mentioned: a turning from sin to God; that is from all sin both of heart and life, as to the love and allowance of it, and subjection to it; and a turn-

ing to God, as our Sovereign Lord from whom we had revolted, to walk with him in all known ways of obedience and holiness. And though we cannot attain to a legal perfection in this life, either as to freedom from all sin, or the practice of all duty; yet there is not merely a temporary and transient, but a peremptory, fixed, and settled, purpose for the one, and against the other: which is more than a promise *de futuro*, ["for the future,"] and amounts to a present breach with all sin, and an actual will to engage in every duty; a "respect to all God's commandments," (Psalm cxix. 6,) in the degree of our obedience to which we notwithstanding may oftentimes fail.

2. *The causes from which it proceeds* :—

(1.) *A right sense of sin, as to the guilt, defilement, and dominion of it.*—Its being offensive and odious to God, (Jer. xlv. 4,) as well as hurtful to ourselves, in the danger to which it exposeth us, the blot it leaves upon us, and the tyranny it exerciseth over us.

(2.) *An apprehension and belief of the mercy of God in Christ Jesus to them that do repent.*—This is always the principle from which evangelical repentance proceeds. Though the terrors of the law may help to drive men from sin, yet there must be gospel-attractives to draw them to God, either in a way of faith or repentance. Who will dare to trust him from whom he expects no mercy, or care for serving him from whom he looks for no acceptance? Hence it is that God's mercy is used as the grand motive to persuade men to repentance: "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matt. iii. 2.) And, "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." (Isai. lv. 7.)

From these proceed both that godly sorrow for sin, and that hatred of it, which always accompany gospel-repentance, and in a good measure promote it. Paul seems to place godly sorrow among the causes of repentance. (2 Cor. vii. 10.)

Secondly. If we consider *repentance in the habit*, I need say no more, but that it is that grace of the Holy Spirit which he infuseth into the soul, as the immediate standing principle of actual repentance, and whereby it is both enabled and disposed to it.

Now this repentance being a grace of God's Spirit, and yet inherent in man *as to the habit*, and exercised by him *as to its acts*; or, which is the same, being *God's work*, and yet *man's duty*; we are to consider what is God's part in it, and what is man's.

1. *God's work is,*

(1.) *To infuse the grace or principle, repentance in the habit.*—Which constantly is ascribed to God in scripture: "Granted repentance." (Acts xi. 18.) "If God will give them repentance." (2 Tim. ii. 25.)

(2.) *To actuate and enliven that principle when infused.*—As he doth other graces; (Phil. ii. 13;) not merely in a moral way, by suggesting such reasons and arguments as may excite and move the will to the exercise of repentance; but by the powerful and efficacious

influence of his grace drawing out the habit into that exercise, or causing the soul to act suitably to this divine principle infused into it.

2. *Man's duty is,*

(1.) *To seek and labour after repentance in the use of all means by which God is wont to work it in the hearts of men.*—Such as diligent attendance on the word, (repentance, no less than faith, comes by hearing, Rom. x. 17,) and what external means of grace are appointed in it; intension of the mind in that attendance on the means; men's applying the truths delivered to themselves, comparing their cases with it, examining themselves by it, considering their ways, &c.; which are but the actings of their reasonable faculties, and as much in their power as other moral actions are; and need not the supernatural influence of Divine Grace, but only those common assistances God affords to man in the ordinary actions of a rational life. And, in a word, these are but such kind of workings as show them to be men, not to be saints. (Isai. xlvi. 8.) To these means, in the use of which God is wont to work repentance, I refer prayer for it; which though by an unregenerate person it cannot be performed graciously, and unto acceptance; yet, we may say, it may be thus far performed successfully, as that those prayers may be heard and answered in relation to the grace they seek: and in the elect of God they are heard; though not with respect to the persons, (which, being graceless, faithless, cannot be accepted of God,) yet with respect to his own thoughts of love toward them, and his eternal purpose of conferring that grace upon them.

(2.) *To excite and stir up in himself the grace of repentance, when God hath wrought it in him, for the putting-forth acts agreeable to the principle he hath received, and to which by that principle he is both empowered and inclined.*—Unto the production of which acts he is no more to question the concurrence of God's special grace, than his common concurrence to the ordinary actings of his reason and will; it being God's usual method to work with his creatures according to their natures, and those principles of acting [which] he hath put into them. Though God quickens grace as well as works it, yet man is to use those means for the quickening [of] it in himself which God hath appointed, and with which he is wont to work.

(II.) *The reasons of this concession, or which prove that a death-bed repentance may be sincere.*

First. It appears, by the instance of this thief, *that a late repentance, and as late as one upon a dying bed, hath been sincere; and therefore the like may be again.*—He did truly repent, and therefore it is possible others may. And that his repentance was sincere, we have sufficient proof, not only from Christ's gracious acceptation of it, manifested by the preemphatic promise he gave him of admitting him into his kingdom, "To-day shalt thou be with me in Paradise;" but by the other graces [which] we here find him exercising, in concurrence with his repentance.

1. *Faith*, which is the principle of evangelical repentance, and which never fails to work it where it is itself sincere. He owns

Christ as a King, when he mentions his "kingdom," and prays him to "remember" him when he comes into it. This likewise implies his belief of and confidence in the grace and love, as well as power, of Christ, when he commits his departing soul into his hands, expecting his salvation from him. And indeed his faith was not only sincere, but strong and vigorous. God had put as much of the spirit of faith into a poor novice in religion at the very first, as he doth into many an old disciple at the last. It is a good argument of a strong faith, when it bears up against great discouragements; as we see in Abraham's faith; (Rom. iv. 19, 20;) and that of the woman of Canaan. (Matt. xv. 22—28.) Two great discouragements the thief had, which yet could not hinder his faith:

(1.) *The heinousness of his sins.*—Aggravated by long impenitence and perseverance in them to the last hour, in a manner, of his life. Well might he fear that God was so provoked by the continual rebellion of his wicked life, as totally to reject him now at his death.

(2.) *The low and despicable condition [which] he saw Christ in.*—Condemned as well as himself, and hanging upon a cross as well as himself; slighted and mocked at by so many [whom] he might look on as better and wiser than himself, no less than the governors of the church: "The rulers derided him." (Verse 35.) This might have made him think there was little hope of help from him. What was there in a crucified, dying man, that, to an eye of reason, could make him look like a Saviour? Mere nature would as soon have looked for life in death itself, nay, heaven in hell, as eternal salvation in one who not only had formerly been so mean, but now seemed so miserable.

2. *Several other graces* we find in him, as the fruits, at least the concomitants, of his repentance:—

(1.) *A free, ingenuous, and open confession of his sins* in the face of the world, and thereby giving glory to God: "We indeed justly." (Verse 41.) Nor can it be said that his confession was extorted from him by the torments he suffered, when we see his companion impenitent under the like.

(2.) *He owns the justice that had brought him to that end:* "We receive the due reward of our deeds." He neither murmurs against God, nor quarrels with men.

(3.) *He sharply taxeth the impiety and profaneness of his fellow-thief in reviling Christ, as well as his still continuing obstinate and impenitent.*—"Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?" (Verse 40.) And hereby he shows his indignation against sin, when he so heinously resents it, not only in himself, but in another. Like David, he beholds a transgressor, and is grieved. (Psalm cxix. 158.)

(4.) *He doth what he can to bring his companion to repentance.*—"Dost not thou fear God?" The reproof implies an exhortation, as well as instruction. Now the communicativeness of grace is a good argument of the sincerity of it. Had he had none himself, he would not have been so much concerned for the other's want of it.

(5.) *He makes a public profession of his faith in Christ, and owns*

him to the very teeth of his enemies ; and that too when Peter had denied him, the other disciples forsaken him, and those that had rallied after their rout, and were now come to be the spectators of the most doleful object [that] had ever been presented before their eyes, were so far from making any such public confession of him, that their faith was ready to expire with him. (Luke xxiv. 21.)

Secondly. *Repentance being God's gift, and God being a Sovereign Agent, he may give it where and when he pleaseth.*—As to whom he will,—to one, and not to another ; so at what time he will,—to one sooner, to another later. He may give it to one early in the morning of his days : to another late, and when his sun is setting. And if the great Master of the vineyard shall call some into it, not only at the sixth or ninth hour, but even at the last minute of the eleventh hour, what is that to any ? who shall call him to an account for it ?

Thirdly. *God, being not only a Sovereign Agent, but an Almighty one, can, by his power, and that in an instant, remove all hinderances on the creature's part, and whatever might obstruct his work.*—And so, with one turn of an omnipotent hand, bring about the heart of the most obdurate sinner, work repentance in the most unlikely subject, and where there is most within to make head against him, and resist his grace, suppose the most obstinate and rooted habits of sin. Grace is an infused and supernatural habit, and the power that works it a supernatural and creating power ; and we are not to confine God in his working grace to those methods whereby men acquire natural or moral habits. In these, I grant, there may need time to unlearn and extirpate those vicious habits they have so long been contracting, and to acquire new ones by a long series of, and accustoming themselves to, better actions. Custom in men may be strong, and like another nature ; and they may not be able presently to overcome it, nor on the sudden to bring themselves to a readiness and easiness in doing those things which though their reason approves, yet their boisterous appetites (strengthened too by custom) hurry them against. But let the habit of sin be never so deeply radicated in the soul, and the heart of man never so averse to holy actions ; yet God can soon make a change, soon remove the sinful disposition, and enable and incline the soul to what it was most averse and impotent. He can, even in a moment, overcome that love of sin and hatred of holiness which is either natural to a man, or contracted by him ; and both abate, lessen, weaken the power of sin in the soul, whereby it was wont to resist the workings of his Spirit, and restrain and suspend any actual resistance it might make. Let the mind of a man be as dark as darkness itself ; yet he that caused "light to shine out of darkness," can enlighten that mind when he pleases. (2 Cor. iv. 6.) Let the soul be never so dead in sin, and destitute of all spiritual life ; yet he that "quickens the dead, and calls things that are not as though they were," (Rom. iv. 17,) can quicken it, and breathe the breath of spiritual life into it ; and whatever there be in the soul to oppose him in his working, yet the same power can at once quell the opposition, and produce the grace.

Fourthly. *God, having infused the habit, can as easily enliven it, and draw it out into act, in those that are capable of exercising grace wrought in them.*—As I suppose dying sinners to be, at least when they are capable of exercising their rational faculties. For there is less to make opposition against God than in the former case, the prevailing power of sin being broken; and something in the soul to take God's part in the work, namely, grace now begun; and some habitual promptness and disposedness of the heart to spiritual good, and compliance with the will of God. It doth not require more power to awaken a vital principle, though dormant, than to infuse it where there was none before.

Fifthly. *It may be for God's honour sometimes to give repentance to dying sinners.*—The honour of his sovereignty and free grace, in showing that "he hath mercy on whom he will," (Rom. ix. 18,) and that the deepest guilt even of an old hardened sinner cannot hinder the outgoings of his grace and mercy; and the honour of his power, when it prevails over the most settled habits of corruption. Should God work only upon lesser sinners, and who are not so confirmed in evil, man might be apt to think that he could not do it, and that men's lusts might be too hard for his power, and so reflect on his omnipotence; or to think he could not find in his heart to do it, and so reflect upon his mercy.

II. By way of position or assertion. *It is a very dangerous thing to run the hazard of a death-bed repentance, or defer repentance till the approach of death.*—That is, to neglect the doing a man's own part in order to the obtaining this grace, as was above premised; namely, the seeking it of God, and using all those means by which he ordinarily works it. The danger of this neglect may appear by the following considerations:—

1. *That no man knows the time of his death, any more than the manner of it, or means by which it shall be brought about.*—Our breath is in God's hands. (Dan. v. 23.) No man hath a lease of his earthly tabernacle, but is tenant-at-will to his great Landlord. Who knows when he shall die, or how? whether a natural death, or a violent one? To how many thousand unforeseen accidents are men subject! Not only swords and axes may dispatch them, but God can commission insects and vermin to be the executioners of his justice upon them. A great prelate may be eaten up of mice;\* and a potent prince devoured by worms. (Acts xii. 23.) And who doth not carry the principles of his own dissolution perpetually within him? Death lies in ambush in every vein, in every member; and none know when it may assault them. It doth not always warn before it strikes. If some diseases are chronical, others are acute and less lingering; and some are as quick as lightning, kill in an instant. Men may be well in one moment, and dead in the next. God "shoots his arrows at them," they are "suddenly wounded." (Psalm lxxiv. 7.) How many are taken away, not only in the midst of their days, but in the midst of their sins! the lusty Israelites, with the "flesh between their

\* Hatto, archbishop of Mentz.

teeth;" (Num. xi. 33;) Julian, if historians speak truth, with blasphemy in his mouth! And how many frequently with the wine in their heads! In such cases, what place, what time for repentance, for seeking it, for using means to attain it, when they have not room for so much as a thought of it?

2. Suppose, men have time and warning given them; death knocks at the door before it enters, and besieges them before it storms them; they lie by the brink of the grave before they fall into it: yet *they may want the means of grace by which God ordinarily works, when he brings men to repentance.*—Public ordinances in such a case they cannot have, and private ones they may not have. They may have none with them that have "the tongue of the learned, to speak a word in season" to them. (Isai. l. 4.) They may lack oil, but have none that can tell them where they may buy it; none that understand the nature of repentance; none that can instruct them in it, or direct them how they may attain it. Friends may be as carnal and ignorant, and unacquainted with the things of God, as themselves; and so may ministers be sometimes. They may "seek a vision of the prophet, but the law may perish from the priest, and counsel from the ancient." (Ezek. vii. 26.) True indeed, God can work repentance in man or any grace without means, by his immediate power, or by some extraordinary means; but he never promisieth to do it; and therefore it is a bold presuming and tempting of him to expect he should. What, if God once stopped a sinner in the midst of his career, when not only running away from the means of salvation, but bidding defiance to them; and converted him in a miraculous way, by a glorious light shining about him, and the immediate voice of Christ to him? (Acts ix.) shall others hope for the like? live in sin all their days, and look for conversion by miracle at last?

3. If they have means when they come to die, yet *they may not have a heart to use them*:—

(1.) *By reason of bodily weakness, failing of natural spirits, racking and tormenting pains, which often afflict men in such a case.*—These may blunt and dull men's minds, or distract them, and draw away the intention of them from other things, and hold them only to the consideration of their present anguish. How unfit are men for [the] serious minding even of their worldly affairs when under bodily indispositions! and how much more than unfit for spiritual work! When the soul is wholly taken up with helping the body (with which it sympathizes) to bear its present burden, it is ill at leisure to think of any thing else. The Israelites "hearkened not to Moses," though sent of God to deliver them, "for anguish of spirit, and for cruel bondage." (Exod. vi. 9.) And is it any wonder if a man, groaning under a distemper, scarce able to bear his pain, or think of any thing but his pain, be in an ill case to look into his heart, consider his ways, listen to the best counsel, join with the best prayers? &c. If God's children, that have grace in their hearts, yet in time of sickness may, through present weakness, find much indisposedness in them—



selves to the actings of grace, so that they are fain to bring forth their old store, and comfort themselves with their former experiences, rather than with the present frame of their hearts; what wonder is it if they that are altogether graceless be alike indisposed to seek for grace?

(2.) *By reason of contracted hardness.*—Men are naturally backward to good, but much more when habituated to evil. For the more inclined they are to evil, the more averse they are to good; and the more accustomed they are to sin, the more inclined they are to it. The practice of sin hardens the heart, and strengthens the sinning disposition; and still the longer men continue in sin, the stronger such dispositions grow. Hence the apostle's advice to the Hebrews: "Exhort one another, while it is called To-day, lest your hearts be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin;" (Heb. iii. 13;) implying that that would follow upon their continuance in sin. We see, even in natural things, that men's being accustomed to one sort of actions unfits them for another. When men have lived in the practice of sin all their days, and their natural disposition to sin is heightened into a habit, it is not strange if they be much more averse to the contrary good. How can you "that are accustomed to evil," learn "to do well?" (Jer. xiii. 23.) If one gross sin in a believer may so debilitate and enfeeble those gracious dispositions that were before in him, as to unfit him for, and deaden him to, spiritual duties, to what a superlative hardness may a thousand and a thousand repeated acts of wilful sin bring the heart of a carnal man! and to what not only averseness to any good, but confirmedness against all!

4. *They cannot work repentance in themselves.*—Not make the means effectual for the enlightening of their minds, the changing, softening, spiritualizing their hearts, or working a vital principle in them. If they say they can, either they must assume to themselves a creating power, a power of making themselves new creatures, or creating this grace in their own hearts; there being nothing of it in them by nature, and antecedently to their making such a change; or they must say that there is some seed of grace in them beforehand, some root or stock which, being watered and cultivated by outward means, diligence, and industry, may be made fruitful: so that the working [of] repentance in them is not the infusing [of] a new principle into them, but a correcting of the old one; conversion [is] not the giving or creating in them a new nature, but only a freeing the old one from its former impediments, and setting it at liberty to its proper actions.

But this is,

(1.) *Contrary to the whole current of scripture.*—Which affirms man's will, since the fall of Adam, to be void of all saving good, and impotent to it till renewed by grace: "Without me ye can do nothing." (John xv. 5.) "When we were without strength." (Rom. v. 6.) We are "not sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves:" (2 Cor. iii. 5;) and prone to evil. Man "drinks iniquity like water;" (Job xv. 16;) "rejoiceth to do evil." (Prov. ii. 14.) He is a "servant of sin." (Rom. vi. 17.) All the "imagi-

nations of his heart are only evil continually." (Gen. vi. 5.) He is "dead in trespasses and sins." (Eph. ii. 1.) This is broadly to charge a lie upon the God of truth.

(2.) *To deprive God of the glory of one of his chiefest works, the new creation.*—In which he is said to put forth the same power which he did in creating the world at first, (2 Cor. iv. 6,) and in raising up Christ from the dead. (Eph. i. 19, 20, compared with ii. 1.) They are said to be "born of the Spirit;" (John iii. 5;) and "not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." (John i. 13.) Whereas they that assert the contrary, take God's work out of his hands, and grudge him the honour of it.

(3.) *To go contrary to the common sense of the believing world.*—Believers generally know, as having found it by experience, that they are naturally impotent to spiritual good. They find much weakness in themselves, after grace is wrought in them; and nothing but weakness, before God work it. They acknowledge, they cannot work any degree of grace in themselves when some already they have; much less could they work it in themselves when they really had none. And how come others to have more strength than they? Did not they fall in Adam? Or had his apostasy a less malignant influence upon them than upon others? How come they to have such a reserve of spiritual strength when the rest of the world hath lost it?

(4.) *If they can work repentance in themselves, why do they not do it sooner?*—Why do they defer it so long, when they cannot deny but, one time or other, it must be wrought? Is it a fit return to God for the goodness he hath shown them all their days, to live in sin all their days, and turn to him when they can live no longer in it? Or will it be an acceptable answer to him, when he calls them to a reckoning, that they had not served sin long enough, nor had their fill of their lusts, or else they would have turned to him sooner?

(5.) *And how many be there who, to encourage themselves in their present impenitency, and the enjoyments of their sinful pleasures, fancy they can turn themselves when they please!*—Yet if God open their eyes, and awaken their consciences, and they begin in good earnest to set themselves to labour after repentance, they are soon convinced of the hardness and deadness of their hearts and their utter disabilities to such a work; and are fain, in spite of all their high thoughts and conceits of themselves, to look up to God, and implore his assistance, and depend upon him for the working of that grace in them which they fondly imagined they could work in themselves.

5. *God may not give them grace to repent when they come to die.*—Admit they have time and means, yet God may not give a blessing to the means. Let it be considered,

First. *To how few God ever gives repentance at the last, even of those who have as good means and helps as their weak and dying condition will admit of.*—It is one of the saddest parts of a minister's work, to visit dying sinners. How few do they leave any better than they find them! How few give any hopes of a thorough change

wrought in them! How few can they persuade to believe in Christ, when they have a hundred times before rejected him! How few can they bring to repentance then, when they never minded it before! Ministers, even the best, are but men and not God, flesh and not spirit; and means, instructions, exhortations, are but means, whose whole efficacy depends on God's co-operation with them; and when he withholds his blessing, they are altogether ineffectual. When they judge of man's eternal state, though their judgment is not to be rash nor peremptory, yet it should be reasonable; some good grounds they should have for it. But, alas! if they keep to scripture-rules, in how few of them that never repented before do they find, when dying, so much as a foundation for a charitable judgment of their spiritual state!

(1.) If we set aside *those that die in gross ignorance of the things of God*.—Of the very first principles of religion; the nature of God, the offices of Christ, the ends of his death, the necessity of satisfaction for sin, the nature and use of faith, the terms of the covenant, &c.: ignorant indeed of those truths, some knowledge of which is necessary to the very being of saving grace. How many such do we find! And what hope can we have of the truth of their repentance, and so of their salvation? How can their hearts be holy, when their minds are so blind? What heavenly heat can there be in their affections, when there is such a hellish darkness in their understandings? Such may read their doom in Isai. xxvii. 11.

(2.) Set aside *those that die stupid*.—Without any awakenings of conscience, any sense or concernedness about their spiritual state; and so die as much like beasts as they lived.

(3.) *Those that die despairing*.—Filled with horror, and void of hope; overwhelmed with the sense of sin, the thoughts of approaching vengeance, and a fearful expectation of appearing before the tribunal of that righteous God whom they cannot escape, and dare not trust. They have not hearts to pray to him, hope in him, or commit their souls into his hands when they die, having never loved, nor served, nor regarded him while they lived.

(4.) *Those that die presuming*.—Such are the ignorant before mentioned: such are formalists, moralists, proud Pharisees, conceited self-justifiers. The innocency of their conversation, the profession they make, or the duties they perform, are the righteousness by which they expect to be justified. Nay, how many, after a life of sin, hope to be saved merely by the mercy of God, without respect to any righteousness at all, either of justification or sanctification; either imputed to them, or inherent in them; either that whereby they may have a title to glory, or meetness for it! Sure I am, such as these are void of repentance; and when the greatest part of dying sinners may be reduced to one or other of these sorts, to how few doth God give repentance at the last, of those who did not before seek it of him!

Secondly. *With how many is the day of grace past, and the time of God's patience run out!*—And then we may be sure God will not

give them repentance: they have so many times "rejected the counsel of God against themselves," (Luke vii. 30,) refused the offers of grace, turned a deaf ear to the calls of the gospel, stiffened their necks, and refused to return, that now they are past it. God, that waited on them so long, will wait no longer. They had a time of acceptance, a "day of salvation;" (2 Cor. vi. 2;) but, that being over, they are to have no more. God was nigh to them, and might have been found of them; (Isai. lv. 7;) but is now withdrawn from them; and they may "seek Christ, and die in their sins;" (John viii. 21;) they may "seek, and not find," call, and God give them no answer. (Prov. i. 28.)

Thirdly. *God may have judicially hardened their hearts, when they had sinfully hardened them before.*—And this seems to be one great cause of that stupidity and insensibleness we so often find in sinners at the time of death. True, God infuseth no sin into them; yet he may wholly abandon them to the power of the hardness they have contracted; and give them up into the devil's hands, to delude and blind, to act and manage them according to his pleasure, and their own corrupt inclinations. They may not have so much as a heart to desire to repent, or pray to God for grace to enable them to do it; all those common assistances of God's Spirit [which] they sometimes had being wholly withdrawn from them and it.

(1.) *Partly as a punishment for their former wilful impenitency.*—It is one of the most dreadful judgments God ever executes upon any on this side hell, when he punishes one sin with another, one hardness with another; which yet sometimes he doth. "But my people would not hearken to my voice; and Israel would none of me. So I gave them up unto their own hearts' lust: and they walked in their own counsels." (Psalm lxxxi. 11, 12.)

(2.) *As a terror to others, and a warning too.*—That they that hear it may fear, and not dare to live impenitently, lest they should die impenitently; God not being bound to give them the grace [which] he denies to others, who perhaps were not greater sinners than themselves.

**OBJECTION.** The great encouragement men have to embolden them in sin, and yet to hope for repentance at last, is the instance of this poor thief; which they stretch beyond the intention of the Holy Ghost in leaving it upon record, when they use it as a means to strengthen their presumption, which was designed only to prevent despair. "The thief on the cross repented at last," saith a sinner; "and why may not I?"

**ANSWER I.** *Why should not the example of the other thief's impenitency affright them, and drive them to repentance, as well as the example of the good thief encourage them to sin?*—It is but setting one against the other. And if they argue, God gave repentance to one, and therefore may give it them; why may they not as well argue, God denied it to one, and therefore may deny it to them too?

**ANSWER II.** *It is but a single instance against thousands on the*

*other side.*—And though one instance is sufficient to evert the generality of a rule; (and therefore we cannot certainly conclude, from God's not giving repentance to thousands at the hour of death, that he will give it to none, because we have the example of this thief to the contrary;) yet with what reason can men expect that God should give that to them which he gave to one, rather than that he should deny that to them which he hath denied to thousands? If general rules are to be drawn from particulars, it is much more rational to ground them on a multitude of particulars, than on any single one. The most therefore any men can infer from this example is only, that it is not impossible but God may give them repentance.

ANSWER III. *Some things seem to be singular in the case of this thief.*—Which are not to be found in the case of others, who therefore cannot reasonably argue from it.

(1.) *He was one, so far as we can judge, that had never formerly rejected Christ.*—Never saw him before his sufferings, never heard his doctrine, never was a witness of his miracles, which might convince him of the truth of it. He was one that had otherwise employed himself, than in attending on Christ's ministry; and might more likely have been found robbing on the road, than worshipping in the temple; or breaking up houses, than hearing of sermons; and therefore, though he had sin enough in him for which God might have denied him repentance, and nothing in him which might move the Lord to give it him; yet it is very probable this was the first of his being brought to the knowledge of a Saviour; and so he was not guilty of the great gospel-sin of unbelief, and refusing the offer of Christ and salvation by him, which doth so often provoke the Lord to leave men to themselves, and deny them his grace. If it be said, "The same was the case of the other thief;" I grant it. But God being a sovereign Agent, and his gifts most free, he might make use of his prerogative in dispensing them; and so grant repentance to the one, and deny it to the other, admit their circumstances were every way the same. And why then may he not deny repentance to those now that are, in some respect, worse than either, in that they have so many times resisted his Spirit, stood out against his calls, and slighted the offers of his grace made to them? And where is the sinner that lives under the means without repentance, but as he hath daily-repeated calls from God, so he daily rejects them; and thereby abundantly justifies the Lord's refusing him that grace at the last, which he did before not only never seriously seek, but wilfully reject? I should have more charitable thoughts, and better hopes, of the veriest varlets upon earth, that were never called till the last hour, than of those that are otherwise guilty of much less sin, but have abused and resisted greater grace.

(2.) *The instance of this thief seems particularly designed by God for the honour of his suffering Son.*—God would have a witness even upon the cross; one to adore him when so many despised him. He would have his Son's death honoured by his giving life to a poor wretch even at the point of death; and make him known "to be a Prince and a Saviour, to give repentance and remission of sins,"

(Acts v. 31,) by his giving both to such a sinner, and at such a time.

(3.) *Another end may be, to render them that crucified Christ inexcusable, when this malefactor made so honourable a confession of him.*—To expose and shame the unbelief and hardness of the rulers and Pharisees, by the faith and repentance of a most flagitious offender; and therewithal confirm the word of Christ spoken formerly to them, that the publicans and harlots entered into the kingdom of heaven before them. (Matt. xxi. 31.)

6. Suppose God do give them repentance at the last, yet *they may have very little, it may be, no, comfort in it.*

(1.) *They may be ready to question the sincerity of it.*—And then they can have little comfort in it. Admit [that] their condition be safe; yet comfortable it cannot be, so long as the truth of their repentance, from which their comfort should proceed, is so uncertain and questionable. To say nothing of their ignorance of the nature of repentance, and the methods of the Spirit in working it, having never found the like in themselves before, nor been acquainted with what others have felt; many things there are which sometimes may make them call what they find in themselves in question.

(i.) *The experience they have already had of the deceitfulness of their own hearts, and perhaps of others' in the like condition.*—It may be, they have known others upon a sick-bed look as like penitents as *they* now do; who yet, upon their recovery from their diseases, have relapsed into sin; and, by returning to their former lusts, have confuted their profession, and evidenced their repentance to have been unsound and hypocritical. And this may make them fear lest things may be no better with themselves, and their repentings no more real than their neighbours.' Or, it may be, they themselves formerly, when under a sentence of death, have had strong convictions of sin, been filled with horror of conscience, and dismal apprehensions of approaching damnation; it may be, they have grieved for sin, been vexed at themselves for their old follies; it may be, they have had good desires and purposes, made promises and vows of devoting themselves to the fear of God, and never again returning to their former sinful courses, if it should please the Lord to restore them; and yet no sooner were they raised up again, but they changed their purposes, brake their promises, stifled or wore-off their convictions, and grew worse than before. The devil that went out of them when they were sick, returned into them when well, and seven more with him. (Matt. xii. 43—45.) And they know not but things might be as bad with them now, if God should restore them, as they have heretofore been. They fear lest their hearts, which they have found so deceitful, fickle, slippery, should play tricks with them, and dissemble, and pretend what they never mean; and so, from the trial they have had of them, they dare not trust them, but suspect all their present relenting, mourning, confession, mortification, to be false and counterfeit.

(ii.) *It may be more difficult at such a time to discern the principle from which their repentance proceeds.*—Whether from faith in Christ,

love to God, and hatred of sin, or only from fear of wrath and hell ; whether they mourn as children under a father's hand, or only as slaves under a master's whip. When they lie upon the brink of the grave, and expect every moment to drop into it ; their souls are dislodging, leaving their bodies, and by-and-by to appear naked before their Judge ; this may affect them, fill them with fear, and fear [fill them] with sorrow for sin, whereby they have exposed themselves to the danger of damnation ; and both together put them upon resolutions against sin, which is usual in such cases. Now though there may be something else at the bottom, yet, this lying uppermost, and most obvious to their view, they may fear that it is the only prevailing argument and great cause of their repentance ; which can then be no better than merely legal, as having no better a foundation. Principles are usually latent, and discoverable only by their workings ; and that too more easily or difficultly in proportion to the inteness or weakness of these workings ; and, in this case, the more weak and feeble stirrings of faith or love may be so outdone and overtopped by the vehement and strong motions of fear, that themselves can hardly be perceived, much less the principles they flow from. A dying sinner may feel his fear when he cannot perceive his faith, and suspect he hath no faith because he is so full of fear ; and consequently question his repentance, which cannot be evangelical without an evangelical principle.

(iii.) *They are apt to doubt of the truth of their repentance, for want of seeing the fruit of it.*—And indeed, in their circumstances, when they have so little time to live, they cannot see much. The fruits of repentance in a holy, humble, mortified conversation, are the best proof of its sincerity, and so most likely to bring-in the comforts of it. But, their repentance being young, green, and unripe, they know not whether ever it might bring forth fruit ; and so may easily be induced to suspect the nature of it. How warm soever, for the present, their hearts are, yet they may question the continuance of such a frame if life should continue. As much as at present they are set against sin, yet they know not but, if they should again be in a capacity of committing it, they might be again reconciled to it. They have but newly entered upon the ways of God, and know not whether they should like them, upon further trial of them ; whether, as sickness and fear of death have begun to mortify their lusts, so the temptations of life and health might not again restore them. They never yet knew what it is to be godly in time of health and ease, in the midst of the snares and allurements of the world ; and so know not whether that appearance of godliness they now have be any more than an appearance, which, upon the approach of agreeable temptations, might easily vanish. Men seldom judge of trees but by the fruit they bear. A crab-tree may have as fair a blossom as the sweetest pippin. Here may be fair buds, and leaves, and blossoms, —sorrow for sin, resolutions against it, purposes of new obedience ; yet they may suspect all, for want of seeing the fruit of their repentance

in the acts of obedience, a settled course of walking with God, and progress in mortification.

(iv.) *The devil is most likely to be busy with them at such a time.*—He is a never-failing enemy to men's souls, and shows his enmity to their very death; and as he makes it his business to keep them from repentance, so, if he cannot do that, he labours to bereave them of the comfort of it, by making them question the truth of it. As, where it is false, he is ready to flatter them, and persuade them it is true, that he may draw them into presumption; so, where it is sincere, he labours to terrify them, by persuading them it is hypocritical, that he may run them into despair. Thus he doth with men while they live; and why may he not do the same when they die? He is likely at that time either for ever to have them, or for ever to lose them. His temptations then are his last efforts, and therefore most vigorous; and such they may be as, though, the grace of God preventing, they may not hinder the true repentance of a dying sinner, yet, the wisdom of God permitting, they may cloud and obscure it, and render it questionable, and thereby bereave him of the comfort of it.

(2.) *They may be ready to question God's acceptance of their repentance.*—And indeed that must needs be, if they question the sincerity of it, when God never accepts any but what is sincere. But besides, they may be ready to fear they have outstood their time; that the day of grace, which is the only time of God's accepting them, is at an end; or that God will not accept of them as his servants, when they cannot live to do him any service; or not accept of their returning to him now, who have forsaken him so long; not accept of their sorrow for formerly dishonouring him, when they are past time for glorifying him; and, in a word, not look upon them as his children at the last hour, who have been the devil's children all their days. Now if this be their case, how uncomfortable is a death-bed repentance, (admit it be sound,) when men know not that it is sound, but are wholly in the dark as to the sincerity and acceptance of it, and so set in a cloud and fear a storm! They may have even just so much hope as may keep them from despair, not what may cause any rejoicing in them; a secret and almost insensible support, but no enlargement. They do but (as was said of the penitent thief in the text) *steal* into heaven; and are so saved as that nobody in this world knows it, nor they themselves till they find it. And God may purposely conceal it, to prevent the folly and presumption of others. If God's children, after many years spent in serious and diligent serving him, yet, for reasons best known to the Divine Wisdom, have sometimes died in the dark; they then that spend their days in sin, and think to repent at last, should remember that the best they can reasonably expect, if God should give them repentance, must be to die between fear and hope, or, it may be, more full of fear than hope. No comfort they can expect in reflecting upon their forepast life, where they see nothing but sin; and little in the hopes of future glory, when they have not one clear evidence of their title to it.



(3.) To conclude : *May not the consideration of a man's repenting no sooner, abate his comfort in repenting at last ?*—May not, will not that gracious ingenuity God hath now wrought in such an one, make severe reflections upon his long impenitency, and not turning to God till he was past serving him ? And then may not the devil set in and maliciously aggravate it to the sinner's conscience, and hold the mind so fixed and intent upon the thoughts of repenting no sooner, as to divert it from the contemplation of that grace which hath now wrought repentance in him, and thereby diminish the comfort he might take in it ?

USE I.

FOR INFORMATION. If it be so dangerous to run the hazard of a death-bed repentance, how great is their folly that do so ! They that defer their repentance till they come to die, show themselves fools :—

1. *In putting off the greatest work till they have least time for the doing of it, if any at all.*—A man would be accounted a fool as to the concerns of this life, that should idle away the time of his youth and vigorous age, and defer seeking for an estate, and providing for his family, till he were old and decrepit, and past working. And is it not a greater work to provide for eternity than for time, to drive a spiritual trade than a civil one, and get a stock of grace than of riches ? And then what fools are they that put off such a work to the last, and leave themselves no time for it but that which is most unfit for it, as well as uncertain whether they shall enjoy it ! Repentance, as to the exercise of it, is not the work of a day, but should be the work of all a man's days ; and what folly is it to thrust that into a little corner of a man's life, which should be extended through the whole of it ! A Christian's work is not to be done all at once : it is a "walk," a "race," a "course" of holy, gracious actions ; and that requires time. Repentance, as it implies our first turning from sin to God, is but the entrance upon or beginning of that course ; and how foolish are they that think to run their race in an instant, to begin their course and finish it at once !

2. *It is a reckoning upon time which they cannot command.*—Men may, with Job, (chap. xxix. 2.) wish that they were "as in the months past ;" but they cannot make themselves [to] be so. And so likewise they may wish time back, but cannot bring it back, or stop its motion as it runs ; nor have they the least particle of it in their power. How foolish then is it to defer repentance while they have time for it, till they come to a sick-bed, where they are not secure of any ! Alas ! they can no more add one inch to their time than one cubit to their stature.

3. *It is a promising themselves the doing of that which is not in their own power to do.*—Though the exercise of repentance, as above was said, is man's duty, yet it is such a duty as he cannot practise without the grace of repentance wrought in him ; (the principle must be ere the act can be ; ) and that grace is the gift of God ; and if he

do not give it, man cannot have it; and if he will not give it, who can force him to do it? They that would command God's grace, must command God himself; and they that defer their repentance till they die, must suppose either that they can work it in themselves, which hath already been disproved; or that God will be at their beck to do it for them, which needs no disproving.

4. *It is a thinking to do the work best when they have made it most difficult and painful.*—Though, as was before said, God can by his power in an instant remove all obstructions, and work repentance in the most obdurate sinner; yet in his ordinary method he works gradually, and in the way of means,—men's attendance upon ordinances, seeking and labouring after repentance, &c.; and men have no reason to expect that God should disuse his wonted manner of working, to gratify their sloth and loitering. Now it is certain that the longer men live in sin, the more their hearts will cleave to it, and be hardened in it; and then the more loath they will be to be divorced from it, and the more averse to the use of those means whereby such a separation might be effected. The more sweetness they have tasted in sin, the more bitter will the very thoughts of repentance be. Strong affections to their lusts will make prayers cold and endeavours faint against them. Hence we see, God handles old, stubborn sinners more roughly, when he reduces them, for the most part, than others upon whom he works more early. Indeed their case requires it. They need more of "the Lord's terrors" (2 Cor. v. 11) to drive them off from sin; more law-thunder to awaken their consciences, and rouse them out of their security; and more severe means to humble and break them, to embitter sin to them, and make them heartily willing to forsake it. What pangs and tortures, horrors of conscience, soul-convulsions, do foolish sinners procure to themselves, by their lingering and delaying, which, had they been more quick and speedy in their work, might have been prevented, at least very much mitigated!

#### USE II.

**FOR EXHORTATION.** Let sinners take heed of deferring their repentance at all, much more of putting it off to the end of their lives. Consider:—

1. *Can you have the face to put God off with the worst you can give him, and the least, too, of your time, and strength, and service, when he calls for the best, and deserves all?*—Hath God given you a life of many years, and can you afford him only the service of a few days, it may be hours, it may be minutes, nay, it may be none at all? Is it fair, ingenuous, reasonable, to give the devil your strength, and God your weakness? to give the devil and your lusts your health, and God your sickness? to serve sin with your might and vigour, and God with your distempers and infirmities? not to be willing to part with your sins till you are parting with your lives, nor begin your work till your time is ending? and, in a word, to begin then only to serve

God, when you can serve yourselves, your friends, nay, your lusts, no longer?

2. *The sooner you set about the work, the more easy you will find it.*—You will have fewer sins to repent of, and mourn over, and turn from; less guilt to terrify and dishearten you; less stupor in your consciences, less hardness in your hearts, less strength of sin to be wrestled with. The dominion of sin will not be so confirmed with a long tract of time, nor the cords of your iniquity hold you so fast. Though it be true, that, how soon soever you begin and set about the work, you cannot of yourselves effect it; (God's grace must do that;) yet the sooner you begin, the less sin there will be in you to resist his grace, and the more hope that God will afford you grace to overcome that resistance which is made. And though grace can subdue and conquer the most strong, old, overgrown lusts; yet still you will be more ready to hope it will do it, when you have not the guilt of a long impenitent life, and refusing former calls, to encourage your unbelief, and check your hopes, and sink your hearts.

3. *You may expect more comfort in it.*—For the more able you will be to discern its sincerity, as having less cause to doubt of it. To turn to God when you have something to deny for him, some time to spend in his service, and which might have been spent in the service of sin, looks much more like true repentance, than to turn to him when you are immediately to appear before him. The less force and fear there is in your repentance, the more likely it is to be kindly and evangelical; when tears flow, and are not squeezed; [when] you are rather drawn than driven; and [when] your obedience is freely yielded, rather than extorted. But the further ye apprehend yourselves from death and judgment, the less there usually is to force your repentance, and so the less to make it suspicious, and hinder your enjoying the comfort of it. And so the sooner you repent, the more time you will have to prove its sincerity by its fruits; and the more "fruit" you "bring forth meet for repentance," (Matt. iii. 8,) the better satisfied ye will be as to the truth of it, and have the more comfort in it. When you cannot so well judge of it by looking to it immediately in the principle, you may be better able to judge of it by its actings; as, though the root of a tree be hidden under ground, yet good fruit will show it to be good.

4. *Consider what you lose by putting repentance off to the last.*—Beside the comfort of your death, as was above intimated, ye lose no less than all the comfort of your lives; the comfort of all the good you might have done, all the grace you might have acted, all the glory you might have brought to God. A Christian's greatest comfort is the comfort of faith and holiness; the comfort of walking with God, and communion with him in duties and ordinances; the comfort of exercising his graces, and reflecting upon his graces; of seeing his privileges, his interest in the promises, his title to his inheritance, &c.: so that where no grace is, there no true comfort can be; and where repentance is not, there no other grace can be: no faith, for

that is always the cause of evangelical repentance ; and no holiness, for that always supposeth repentance as the beginning of it. There can be no walking in the "narrow way," if there be not first an entering in at the "strait gate." (Matt. vii. 13, 14.) Wisdom's "ways are ways of pleasantness ;" (Prov. iii. 17 ;) but they only experience that pleasantness that walk in that way : and walk in it you cannot, if you do not enter into it ; and that must be by repentance, which is your very first stepping into it. Think then what comforts the saints enjoy in their lives ; what it is that makes them cheerful in their duties, courageous against their enemies, strong against temptations, patient in sufferings ; what it is [that] makes them go on "singing in the ways of the Lord," (Psalm cxxxviii. 5,) and "glorying in tribulations." (Rom. v. 3.) And remember that all this comfort you lose, by being so late ere you come into the way wherein alone it is to be found.

5. *Think what others, beside yourselves, lose by your thus deferring your repentance.*—Every saint is a public good ; the world is the better for him. But while you go on in sin, and never think of repenting till the last, who is the better for you ? nay, who are not losers by you ? Angels in heaven lose the joy they might have had in your conversion ; ministers lose the comfort of being instrumental in it ; your families lose the instruction they might have had of you ; your neighbours, the provocation they might have had to holiness by your example ; the wicked lose the convictions they might have been brought under by the power of holiness appearing in your conversation ; saints, the comfort and refreshment they might have had by your society, discourse, experience ; and all generally, what good they might have got by your prayers. And, that which is more than all, doth not God lose the glory you might have given him, had that time, that life and strength, been spent in his service, which you have spent upon your lusts ?

I need not tell you over again what you hazard : even your never repenting at all ; your being forsaken of God, given up to the devil and your lusts ; and so having your hearts hardened, your minds blinded, your consciences seared, and your souls in conclusion damned. If it be not so, no thanks to yourselves. If God be merciful to you, (and nobody in this world knows whether he will or not,) yet you do your part to bereave yourselves of that mercy, and plunge yourselves into the abyss of eternal misery.

**OBJECTION.** If you say, you are *fully resolved* to repent of your sins when you come to die, and then ask pardon for them :

**ANSWER.** Do but seriously consider :—

1. *The vanity and folly of such resolutions.*—What is more uncertain, more fickle, more variable than man's mind ? You resolve upon this to-day ; and are you sure you shall not break that resolution to-morrow ? Do you know what will be your minds two or three days hence ? If not, how can you know twenty or thirty years beforehand ? Are you sure you shall never meet with any accident, any temptation, that may change your mind ? And if you do know

your mind, what it will certainly be when you are dying; yet do you know what God's mind will be then, whether he will give you repentance when you set about it, and give you a pardon when you seek it? If you do know it, I pray, how came you by that knowledge? When did God tell you so, and where? In what text of scripture hath he revealed it? Where doth he promise you repentance and pardon at the last, when you had never seriously sought either all your days?

2. *The wickedness and profaneness of them.*—You resolve you will repent when you die, and that implies, you will not repent till then; that is, you do and resolve still to love sin as long as you live; but you intend to leave it when you can live no longer in it. You hate God now, and resolve to hate him till you die; and then you will begin to love him. You will make work for repentance now, and seek for repentance at last; offend God and provoke him, and make work for pardoning mercy all your days, and then sue to him for it. You will persevere to affront the grace of Christ, and throw his blood back into his face; and then expect to be washed in it from your sins, and saved by it, when you go out of the world.

OBJECTION. It is to as little purpose to say, you will then send for the minister to instruct you, to pray with you, &c.

ANSWER. For, what, if you do? Your case may be such, that all the good men, good ministers, good instructions, good counsels, in the world may not help you, not save you. All may come too late; and signify no more to your souls than physicians and physic at that time do to your bodies. Alas! what can ministers do for you? Can their instructions enlighten your minds, when God hath blinded them? Can their counsels soften your hearts, when he hath hardened them? Can the breath of prayer waft your souls to heaven in the last moment of your life, when you have been steering toward hell all your days? What can your spiritual physicians do for the cure of your souls, when the great Physician of all hath left you as incurable, and will never any more visit you?

OBJECTION. Do not tell me, on the other side, that repentance is God's gift, and you cannot have it till he give it you, and therefore you must tarry till he do.

ANSWER 1. For, *it is as much God's gift at last as at first.*—And you can no more have it at your death, if he do not give it you, than you can have it now.

2. *Though it be God's gift, and you cannot work it in yourselves; yet cannot you seek it of God, desire him to work it in you?*—And can you not use the means by which he ordinarily works it? And are you not as capable of so doing when you live and are in health, as when you are sick and dying? When you are sick, you cannot heal yourselves: health is God's gift as well as grace is, though of another kind. But do you then use to lie still, and say you must wait till God restore you? Or do you not rather send for your physician, and betake yourselves to the use of means by which God is wont to work it? You cannot get an estate unless God give it you; riches are his

gift. (Prov. x. 22.) Do you therefore sit still, and fold your hands in your bosom, and say you must tarry till God give you an estate? Or do you not rather engage in some honest calling or trade, as the ordinary way [which] God is wont to bless to that end? "The diligent hand maketh rich." (Prov. x. 4.) And why do you not do so here too? If you will go on in sin, and say you wait till God give you repentance, you may wait long enough; when, every day you continue in sin, so much the farther off from repentance you are, and so much the more you provoke God to deny it you.

## CONCLUSION.

To conclude: take heed especially of those things which are *the ordinary hinderances* of a timely repentance.

First. *Wrong notions of repentance.*

1. *That it is an easy thing, and so may be done at any time.*—That it is but sorrowing for sin, and crying "God-mercy" for having offended him. This prevails with too many that know not wherein the nature of it consists. Remember therefore that it is no easy thing to get a thorough change wrought in your hearts; to divorce your lusts to which you have been so long wedded; to part with those sins you love best, and engage in those ways of strict holiness which of all things in the world you hate most. The "old man" will fight hard ere he die. The flesh will never yield, and hardly be overcome. And if ever God work repentance to you, he will so work it as to make you work at it too, and labour after it, his grace using and employing your faculties. And what can you ever do either in seeking repentance before the infusion of the grace, or exercising it when infused, but you will find sin opposing you in it, and so creating difficulties in your work?

2. *That it is a sour and an unpleasant thing, made up of sorrow, and sadness, and inquietness of spirit.*—They know no delights but sensual ones; and think, if they part with the pleasure of sin, they part with the comfort of their lives. Do not therefore look merely on the dark side of repentance, or what may make it seem uneasy to you; look through it, and you will find that which will make it more pleasant. In the very sorrow you fear, if it be right, that is, godly sorrow, there will be such a mixture of love, as will make it in a good measure delightful to you. If it seem painful to you to strive against sin, and there be trouble in the combat; yet when you prevail over it, you will find comfort in the victory. You will be more pleased with having denied yourselves, than you could with having gratified yourselves. Our Saviour's promise, "Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted," (Matt. v. 4.) one would think, should reconcile you not only to any seeming trouble in the work of repentance, but to all the greatest difficulties and severities of the most strict and mortified life. If indeed your repentance be merely legal, proceeding from fear of wrath, or Popish, for the expiation of your sins, I grant, it may be a sad and unpleasant thing; but if it be a true Protestant

repentance, that is, an evangelical one, mixed with love to God, and proceeding from the faith of free grace and remission of sins through the blood of Christ, it need not be such a scarecrow to you as to make you hazard your salvation by shifting your duty.

Secondly. *Presumptuous thoughts of God's mercy.*—That God may be merciful to them, and give them repentance, and pardon their sins, at the very last. Consider therefore :—

1. As merciful as God is, yet *his will sets bounds even to that infinite mercy as to the actings and outgoings of it, and beyond those bounds it will never pass.*—There is a time, a day, a *now* of grace, which when it is once over, no mercy will be shown you. Offers of mercy, invitations made to sinners, and the acceptation of them, are but for a time. The door is open but for a time ; and when that is past, it will be “shut ;” (Matt. xxv. 10 ;) and all your calling and knocking will never prevail with God for the opening of it again. And what then shall you be the better, the nearer repentance, or nearer pardon, for all that ocean of mercy that is in God, if you seek it too late, and when he will not let out one drop of it to you ?

2. *God's justice is as great as his mercy.*—All his attributes are alike infinite ; one doth not overtop the other. And then if you delay and put-off repenting to your latter end, why may you not as reasonably fear lest he should in justice punish you for your long impenitency, as [expect that he will] in mercy give you repentance ?