

XXXI.

The Hardening Operation of Love.

“Being grieved for the hardness of their heart.” — *Mark iii. 5.*

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Love may also be reversed. Failing to cherish, to uplift, and to enrich, it *consumes* and *destroys*. This is a mystery which man can not fathom. It belongs to the unsearchable depths of the divine Being, of which we do not wish to know more than has been revealed. But this does not alter the fact.

No creature can exclude itself from the divine control. No man can say that he has nothing to do with God; that he or any other creature exists independent of God; for God upholds, bears, and carries him from moment to moment, giving him life and power and all his faculties. Even Satan is not self-existing. If it pleased God to discontinue his existence, he would cease from being. Satan and all his demons and all flesh live and move and have their being in God. This apostolic word does not signify an intimate, acquaintance with the secret of the Lord, but is merely the clear and sober statement of every creature's essential relation to the Creator. Whether sinner or saint, angel in heaven or demon in hell, even plant or animal, each lives, moves, and exists in God.

Hence to withdraw oneself from God is utterly impossible. *Psalm cxxxix.* is not merely a sketch of the divine omnipresence, but much more; in holy sense, a testimony and confession from the very root of man's being, of the creature's absolute inability to withdraw himself from God's active control. The misery of the lost in hell consists in the fact that in their unholy and wicked hearts they are subject to the active, divine control. The cry which once escaped from moaning lips, “*Let me alone* before I go hence” (*Job xx. 21*), is the presentment of the unavoidable control of God, which overwhelms the ungodly as a calamitous flood. If God would let them alone, there would be no hell and no misery. The unquenchable fire would be quenched, and the worm would die. But He does *not* let them alone. He continues His hold upon them. And this causes the eternal pain, and overwhelms them with destruction and condemnation forever.

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It is represented sometimes as tho God's *material* dealings were to be continued with every man, whether good or evil, while His *spiritual* dealings are confined to the elect. But this is a mistake. It is true His sun rises upon the good and the evil, and His rain comes down upon the just and the unjust; but the same is true spiritually: There is this difference, however, that while the just and the unjust are both profited by the rain and sunshine, the radiation of the Sun of Righteousness and the rain of grace result in blessing for the elect and in destruction for the lost.

This is clearly illustrated by the effects of the rays of the sun in nature. In March they melt the snow and warm and fertilize the soil, while in August they harden the field and scorch its fruit. This is caused by the field's too close proximity to the sun in summer, while

in spring it occupies the right position in relation to the sun. And this applies to the Sun of Righteousness. Standing in the proper position regarding that Sun, one feels its fostering and fertilizing effects; but forsaking that position through self-exaltation, aspiring to loftier heights, he discovers immediately that the Sun of Righteousness no longer can bless him, but must consume him with divine fire.

The Scripture teaches this fearful truth in various, ways and under various images. St. Paul says that the same Gospel is to one a savor of life unto *life*, and to another a savor of death unto *death*. Concerning the holy Infant, Simeon prophesies that He is set for the *fall* and *rising again* of many in Israel; and the prophet declares that to the saints Messiah shall be a rock of *defense*, and to those who forsake their God He shall be an *offense* and a stone of stumbling. There are branches apparently on the same vine: yet some are cast into the fire, and others blossom and bear much fruit. It is one clay and the same potter; yet from the same lump are formed a vessel of honor and a vessel of dishonor; but in both cases it is the same power.

The Scripture introduces this operation unto death and destruction with the somber word; "*hardening of heart*"; especially when the hardening is the result of resisting eternal Love,

Not every effect, however, of the divine operation, destructive to the sinner, is in itself a hardening of heart. There is also a mere "*giving up*," or "*letting alone*." This is followed by the more gloomy "*darkening*." And only then comes the deadly operation in its proper and limited sense, "*hardening of heart*," in its worst and most fearful degree.

The mildest and yet awful form of this destruction consists in the fact that, according to the testimony of the apostle, the Lord gives the impenitent sinner over to a reprobate mind: "Wherefore God *gave them up* to uncleanness; who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshiped and served the creature more than the Creator" ([Rom. i. 24, 25](#)). Again he declares in [verse 26](#): "For this cause God *gave them up* unto vile affections." And for the third time in [verse 28](#): "And as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God *gave them over* to a reprobate mind, to do things that are not convenient, being filled with all unrighteousness."

This "*giving up*" is related to the "*darkening*," of which St. Paul speaks in the same connection ([ver. 21](#)): "They became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened." In [Rom. xi. 8](#), he describes the same thing in the words of Isaiah: "God hath given them the spirit of slumber, eyes that they should not see, ears that they should not hear." Thus the "*darkening*" and "the *spirit of slumber*" are the gradual transitions between the "*being given over to a reprobate mind*" and the "*hardening of heart*" in its proper sense.

When a sinner is given over to a reprobate mind, the Lord allows him the desire of his heart. He had opened for him another way; but the sinful heart's desires and inclinations



bend in a different direction. At first, divine Love, watching over him, prevents him from gratifying these desires. And for this he would thank God, if his heart were right. But he murmurs at this loving interference of his heavenly Father, and seeks the means to obtain what God so far denies him. A painful tension is the result: on the one hand, the sinner bent upon the execution of his evil intentions; and on the other, God, who temporarily prevents this by withholding the opportunity. But when the sinner persists in his evil course and sears his conscience, then God finally withdraws His loving care; the tension ceases; He lets the sinner have his desire; and the latter, given over to a reprobate mind, revels in the gratification of his unholy passions; and, instead of mourning in repentance before the holy God, enjoys his victory.

However, even from this awful condition return is possible. For the first joy of victory is followed by a positive and painful feeling of *disappointment*. Surely he has conquered, but his conquest is unsatisfactory: first, because every sinful gratification alarms the conscience, and this is misery to the soul; secondly, because unholy pleasure is always exhausting and disappointing, never yields what it promised, never proves to be what first it seemed. In such moments salvation is still possible. Better feelings may be aroused, and may lead the sinner to realize that God is right and loves him better than he loves himself. And, acknowledging that God is right, he may cease to justify himself. Then salvation's gates are open, and he may not be far from the heavenly kingdom.

But, overcoming the feeling of disappointment, he falls immediately into a deeper depth. Then he explains his feelings in the opposite way: disappointed not because he has already drunk too deeply from the cup of sin, but not deeply enough. He acknowledges his disappointment, but he fancies that greater boldness in sin will remedy this. And so comes the turning-point. When the fearful thought is once conceived and admitted, and the heart's demon-like desire has sprung up deeply and systematically to revel in sin's pleasures, then he is lost. Then "the vain imagination and *darkening* of a foolish heart "is added to being "given over to a reprobate mind." Then the spirit of slumber takes possession of him. He can no longer discern the real cause of his dissatisfaction and disappointment. Sin intoxicates him more and more. And the more he indulges the greater his blindness for the consequences. Things lose their forms. The phenomenal take the place of the real. He has eyes, but not for the real and the true; ears, but not for the voice of the eternal Speaker. And so he rushes on from one sin to another; dissatisfied with sin, yet thirsting after more. As St. Paul says, even anxious to see others sin.

In the way of salvation it is "Grace for grace"; but in the way of sin, it is sin for sin. To stand still is impossible. The path inclines.

Thus God lets the sinner go. He intoxicates him so that he does not see the precipice that yawns before him. And this opens the way for the hardening. Every effort to make such

a one the subject of saving grace is like casting pearls before swine; then Immanuel must hide His love, that seeing he see not, and hearing he understand not.

XXXII.

The Love Which Withers.

“Therefore hath He mercy on whom He will have mercy, and whom He will He hardeneth.”—*Rom. ix. 18.*



The idea of hardening is so awful that, with all its unsanctified pity and natural religion, the human heart rejects it as a horrible thought. Natural compassion can not bear the idea that a fellow man, instigated to evil by it, should forever ruin himself. And natural religion can not conceive of a God who, instead of persuading His creature to virtue, should give him up and incite him to sin. This entire representation of hardening is in such open and irreconcilable conflict with all the feelings of the human heart that it is impossible to suppose that it originated in the human mind.

When as children we heard of this hardening of heart for the first time, we could not receive it. Our whole nature rose up against it. And later on, when, in connection with this doctrine, we heard of the mysterious imprecatory psalms and of an unavoidable, eternal doom, then our human nature rebelled against these fearful things with such irrepressible force that we preferred temporarily to forsake our confession rather than to be forced to accept such a horrible idea. Wherefore skeptics are right when they say that, to prove the inconsistency of the Scripture, its miracles need not be attacked, for that its doctrine of hardening and cursing antagonizes the claims of the heart even more than the doctrine of miracles opposes the claims of the reason.

Hence the opposition against the Sacred Scripture always proceeds from two sides at once: on the one hand, from coldly intellectual minds that are always shocked at the Scripture's so-called absurdities and impossibilities; and on the other hand, from the emotional folk, whose feelings are ever hurt by Holy Writ. The effort to compromise can never satisfy any one. To say, “To me the Scripture is God's own precious Word; but when I come to the 'imprecatory Psalms' and the 'hardening of heart,' then I simply close my eyes and hold my tongue,” is no position at all, but mere self-contradiction.



And yet it should be remembered that the vast majority of Christians lose themselves in this unfortunate half-heartedness. The Arminian-tinted do this consciously; wilfully they erect their Dagon of the free will as often as the testimony of the Ark of the Covenant has cast him down. They are a singular people. When a doubter refuses to believe the Godhead of Christ, they are immediately ready with their Bible to prove from this text, that passage, and these recorded facts that Christ must be the Son of God and therefore God Himself. But when, with reference to the doctrine of salvation, one proves to them from the same Bible, with similar texts, passages, and facts, that there is indeed a hardening of heart wrought at times by God Himself, then there is no end to their contradiction and they refuse to