

## XXXII.

**The Love Which Withers.**

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

584

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.

585

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

submit themselves to the Word. They do not seem to notice the unreasonableness and dishonesty of this course. It only shows that, when people propose to decide arbitrarily which portion of the Scripture is true and which is spurious, they betray inward disloyalty and a culpable lack of conviction.

For it is either the Scripture which decides what is true, or I decide. If it is the Scripture, then I must accept its statements concerning the Godhead of the Lord Jesus and of the hardening of the heart. But if I decide according to my own ideas, then I presume to make myself a judge of the Scripture, and, in the very nature of the case, its authority as being a divine and absolute testimony fails to affect me.

We do not stop to consider those who deny the hardening *wilfully*. They have departed from the Scripture and from the divine truth. But we notice those who *practically* deny this doctrine, partly by ignoring it, partly by refusing to acknowledge it as part of their confession relating to the divine Being. They rehearse the Scriptural statements regarding this doctrine faithfully and correctly; if need be, they are ready to defend, rather than for the sake of human sensitiveness to deny it. On the contrary, their orthodoxy even on this point is above reproach. What the Scripture teaches they teach, the doctrine of the hardening included. But they only *rehearse* it. They know not how to use it. It leaves them cold; they are not in touch with it. While they never neglect to give it a place in their inventory, they do not work with it. And this is the serious part of their position, for it is *inconsistent*. He who treats holy things honestly and sincerely must consider that the acceptance or rejection of this doctrine necessarily affects his representation of the divine Being. The representation of our own heart naturally excludes the hardening. From this it follows that the God of Scripture who effects the hardening, and from whom it can not be separated, does not agree with our heart's representation of Himself, and therefore requires that we adopt another.

And this is the difficulty with these practical doubters. While they record the doctrine as a memorial in their books, they never apply it: partly because they never consider the fearfulness of the thought, and therefore speak of it unfeelingly; partly—and this deserves special attention—because they never consider how the earnest confession of the doctrine necessarily affects their representation of the divine Being.

This last point is of greatest importance. According to the representation of our natural heart, it is immaterial who or what God is really and essentially if He only loves us, whatever we are, and to such extent as ever to restore what we destroy. Hence God Himself is of no account. Man is the principal thing; and the highest aim of divine love is to bring man sooner or later to the highest enjoyment of bliss, whatever his conduct, even tho to his last breath he should kick against the pricks. Such a God would exactly suit us: a God without a character; who in matters great and small counts for nothing; who by reason of His ill-proportioned love is insensible to any insult that we may offer Him. Hence, however wicked



a man may be, however insolent his treatment of the Holy One, the good and benevolent Father will find a way eventually to lead him to eternal bliss; if not in this life, then in the life to come. From that follows that in proportion as God *decreases*, in that proportion His love *increases*. His love will be perfect and all-excelling only when He Himself becomes nothing and utterly discounts Himself.

Such representation of God is the result of a natural process. To man, love means self-denial and self-sacrifice. He is egotistic; and love can not have full sway within and around him unless he first deny himself, count himself nothing, mindful only of the neighbor's needs. His human love requires that he more and more ignore himself, and make the salvation of others the only object of his existence. And since love so works in *him*, he imagines that it must so work in *God*. Unconsciously he applies to God the same human conception of love; and finally he fancies that the love of God rises higher and higher as His grace becomes more universal.

When one may say that there can be no sinner so wicked and dishonorable but divine Love will eventually receive him in perfect felicity, and another, "You are right, altho I would make Judas and those like him an exception," then the former appears the more plausible. He alone who includes even Judas among the blessed has the most worthy idea of the Love of God. The least doubt about it disparages that Love. And the measure of that disparagement is determined by his estimate both of the numbers of the blessed and of the lost.

The point at issue is the *Being of God*. If the human conception of love is applied to God, then all men must be saved, and God has no right to be anything in relation to the creature. But if we confess that of all beings God is the Source, to whom therefore the conception of creaturely love can not be applied, for then He would cease from being the Supreme Being, then the whole objection becomes invalid. For then we *ignore* our own ideas concerning this mystery, and acknowledge that they can not but lead us astray. We also distrust the teachings of others, knowing that no more their heart than our own can teach us anything in this respect. And, from the nature of the case, we are made to see that on this subject God alone can enlighten us.

Hence either we must deny that there is a revelation concerning divine Love, so that therefore we can neither deny nor confirm anything concerning it; or we must confess that the Scripture offers us such revelation, and then must also acknowledge as true all that Scripture teaches regarding it.

We do not deny that we ourselves feel the antagonizing influence of the doctrine, and we confess that it does not at all agree with our creaturely conception of love. Neither skeptic nor Arminian need remind us of it. We are much too human and free and untrammelled to deny it. But we absolutely deny our own heart and feelings the right to decide



this matter, or even to have any voice in it, and claim that we and our opponents should unreservedly submit to all that God in His Word has revealed in this respect.

While the human heart contends that God can not harden any man's heart, Scripture meets us, whether we like it or not, with the awful testimony: "And whom He will He hardens." And let us reverently believe it, tho it be with inward trembling of soul.



### XXXIII.

#### The Hardening in the Sacred Scripture.

“He hath hardened their heart.” — *John xii. 40.*



The Scripture teaches positively that the hardening and “darkening of their foolish heart” is a divine, intentional act.

This is plainly evident from God’s charge to Moses concerning the king of Egypt: “Thou shalt speak all that I command thee; and I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and multiply My signs and wonders in the land of Egypt. But Pharaoh shall not harken unto you, and I will lay My hand upon Egypt, and the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord” (*Exod. vii. 3-5*). Before this the Lord had said to Moses: “When thou goest to return unto Egypt, see that thou do all those wonders before Pharaoh, which I have put in thine hand; but I will make his heart stubborn, that he shall not let the people go” (*Exod. iv. 21*).

The principal person in the Scripture in whom this awful truth obtains its clearest revelation is Pharaoh. Why in him we can not tell. And, instead of looking down on him from the heights of our own imagined piety, we should rather remember the word of the apostle: “And whom He will He hardens.”

However, the subject of this terrible judgment of hardening is not the individual Pharaoh in his private life, but the king, the mighty prince and sovereign, the ruler and despot, who in the majesty of his crown and scepter represented the supremacy of the first great world-empire over the nations of the earth.

In those days Egypt occupied the position subsequently attained by Nineveh, Babylon, Macedonia, and Rome; it was the embodiment of all the luster and glory which the natural, sinful, and God-rejecting world could create. In the cities of Upper and Lower Egypt men reveled in the refined pleasures of life. From all the surrounding countries gold came pouring into Egypt. The rulers built themselves great cities and strong fortresses, sphinxes and mountain-like pyramids. Cities of the dead were hewn out of the rocks. Magnificent sarcophagi were chiseled out of exquisitely beautiful marble. In a word, the world’s proud and majestic creations of those days were found on the shores of the Nile. The Pharaoh of Egypt was the mightiest man of the earth.



And as such he is the subject of the hardening. That St. Paul views the conflict between Jehovah and Pharaoh in this light is evident from his quotation of *Exod. ix. 16*, where it is expressed in strongest and plainest language: “For I will at this time send all My plagues upon thine heart, and upon thy servants, and upon thy people; that thou mayest know that there is none like Me in all the earth. And *in very deed for this cause have I raised thee up, for to show in thee My power; and that My name may be declared throughout all the earth*” (*Rom. ix. 11*).