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A classic sermon by John Howe (1630-1705)

THE REDEEMER'S TEARS OVER LOST SOULS

And when He was come near, He beheld the city, and wept over it, saying, If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong to thy peace! But now they are hid from thine eyes.—Luke six., 41, 42.

Such as live tinder the gospel have a day, or a present opportunity, for the obtaining the knowledge of those things immediately belonging to their peace, and of whatsoever is besides necessary thereunto. I say nothing what opportunities they have who never lived under the gospel, who yet no doubt might generally know more than they do, and know better what they do know. It suffices who enjoy the gospel to understand our own advantages thereby. Nor, as to those who do enjoy it, is every one's day of equal clearness. How few, in comparison, have ever seen such a day as Jerusalem at this time did I made by the immediate beams of the Sun of Righteousness! our Lord Himself vouchsafing to be their Instructor, so speaking as never man did, and with such authority as far outdid their other teachers, and astonished the hearers. In what transports did He use to leave those that heard Him, wheresoever He came, wondering at the gracious words that came out of His mouth! And with what mighty and beneficial works was He went to recommend His doctrine, shining in the glorious power and savoring of the abundant mercy of Heaven, so that every apprehensive mind might see the Deity was incarnate. God was come down to entreat with men, and allure them into the knowledge and love of Himself. The Word was made flesh. What unprejudiced mind might not perceive it to be so? He was there manifested and veiled at once; both expressions are made concerning the same matter. The divine beams were somewhat obscured, but did yet ray through that vail; so that His glory was beheld of the only-begotten Son of His Father, full of grace and truth.

This Sun shone with a mild and benign, but with a powerful, vivifying light. In Him was life, and that life was the light of men. Such a light created unto the Jews this their day. Happy Jews, if they had understood their own happiness! And the days that followed to them (for a while) and the Gentile world were not inferior, in some respects brighter and more glorious (the more copious gift of the Holy Ghost being reserved unto the crowning and enthroning of the victorious Redeemer), when the everlasting gospel flew like lightning to the uttermost ends of the earth, and the word which began to be spoken by the Lord Himself was confirmed by them that heard Him, God also Himself bearing them witness with signs, and wonders, and gifts of the Holy Ghost. No such day hath been seen this many an age. Yet whithersoever this same gospel, for substance, comes, it also makes a day of the same kind, and affords always true tho diminished light, whereby, however, the things of our peace might be understood and known. The written gospel varies not, and if it be but simply and plainly proposed tho to some it be proposed with more advantage, to some with less, still we have the same things immediately relating to our peace extant before our eyes ...

This day hath its bounds and limits, so that when it is over and lost with such, the things of their peace are forever hid from their eyes. And that this day is not infinite and endless, we see in the present instance. Jerusalem had her day; but that day had its period, we see it comes to this at last, that now the things of her peace are hid from her eyes. We generally see the same thing, in that sinners are so earnestly prest to make use of the present time. To-day if you will hear His voice, harden not your hearts. They are admonished to seek the Lord while He may be found, to call upon Him when He is nigh. It seems some time He will not be found, and will be far off. They are told this is the accepted time, this is the day of salvation ... As it is certain death ends the day of grace with every unconverted person, so it is very possible that it may end with divers before they die; by their total loss of all external means, or by the departure of the blest Spirit of God from them; so as to return and visit them no more.

How the day of grace may end with a person, is to be understood by considering what it is that makes up and constitutes such a day. There must become measure and proportion of time to make up this (or any) day, which is as the substratum and ground fore-laid. Then there must be light superadded, otherwise it differs not from night, which may have the same measure of mere time. The gospel revelation some way or other, must be had, as being the light of such a day. And again there must be some degree of liveliness, and vital influence, the more usual concomitant of light; the night doth more dispose men to drowsiness. The same sun that enlightens the world disseminates also an invigorating influence. If the Spirit of the living God do no way animate the gospel revelation, and breathe in it, we have no day of grace. It is not only a day of light, but a day of power, wherein souls can be wrought upon, and a people made willing to become the Lord's. As the Redeemer revealed in the

gospel, is the light of the world, so He is life to it too, tho neither are planted or do take root everywhere. In Him was life and that life was the light of men. That light that rays from Him is vital light in itself, and in its tendency and design, tho it be disliked and not entertained by the most. Whereas therefore these things must concur to make up such a day; if either a man's time, his life on earth, expire, or if light quite fail him, or if all gracious influence be withheld, so as to be communicated no more, his day is done, the season of grace is over with him. Now it is plain that many a one may lose the gospel before his life end; and possible that all gracious influence may be restrained, while as yet the external dispensation of the gospel remains. A sinner may have hardened his heart to that degree that God will attempt him no more, in any kind, with any design of kindness to him, not in that more inward, immediate way at all—i.e., by the motions of His Spirit, which peculiarly can impart nothing but friendly inclination, as whereby men are personally applied unto, so that can not be meant; nor by the voice of the gospel, which may either be continued for the sake of others, or they contained under it, but for their heavier doom at length. Which, tho it may seem severe, is not to be thought strange, much less unrighteous.

It is not to be thought strange to them that read the Bible, which so often speaks this sense; as when it warns and threatens men with so much terror. For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a fearful looking for judgment, and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries. He that despised Moses's law died without mercy, under two or three witnesses; of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith He was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace? And when It tells us, after many overtures made to men in vain, of His having given them up. "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;" and pronounces, "Let him that is unjust be unjust still, and let him which is filthy be filthy still," and says, "In thy filthiness is lewdness, because I have purged thee, and thou wast not purged; thou shalt not be purged from thy filthiness any more, till I have caused my fury to rest upon thee." Which passages seem to imply a total desertion of them, and retraction of all gracious influence. And when it speaks of letting them be under the gospel, and the ordinary means of salvation, for the most direful purpose: as that, "This child (Jesus) was set for the fall, as well as for the rising, of many in Israel"; as that, "Behold, I lay in Zion a stumbling, and a rock of offense"; and, "The stone which the builders refused, is made a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense, even to them which, stumble at the word, being disobedient, whereunto also they were appointed"; with that of our Savior Himself, "For judgment I am come into this world, that they which see not might see; and that they which see, might be made blind." And most agreeable to those former places is that of the prophet, "But the word of the Lord was unto them precept upon precept, line upon line, here a little and there a little; that they might go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken." And we may add, that our God hath put us out of doubt that there is such a sin as that which is eminently called the sin against the Holy Ghost; that a man in such circumstances, and to such a degree, sin against that Spirit, that He will never move or breathe upon him more, but leave him to a hopeless ruin; tho I shall not in this discourse determine or discuss the nature of it. But I doubt not it is somewhat else than final impenitency and infidelity; and that every one that dies, not having sincerely repented and believed, is not guilty of it, tho every one that is guilty of it dies impenitent and unbelieving, but was guilty of it before; so it is not the mere want of time that makes him guilty. Whereupon, therefore, that such may outlive their day of grace, is out of the question ...

Wherefore, no man can certainly know, or ought to conclude, concerning himself or others, as long as they live, that the season of grace is quite over with them. As we can conceive no rule God hath set to Himself to proceed by, in ordinary cases of this nature; so nor is there any He hath set unto us to judge by, in this case. It were to no purpose, and could be of no use to men to know so much; therefore it were unreasonable to expect God should have settled and declared any rule, by which they might come to the knowledge of it. As the case is then, viz.: there being no such rule, no such thing can be concluded; for who can tell what an arbitrary, sovereign, free agent will do, if he declare not his own purpose himself? How should it be known, when the Spirit of God hath been often working upon the soul of man, that this or that shall be the last act, and that he will never put forth another? And why should God make it known? To the person himself whose case it is, 'tis manifest it could be of no benefit. Nor is it to be thought the Holy God will ever so alter the course of His own proceedings but that it shall be finally seen to all the world that every man's destruction was entirely, and to the last, of himself. If God had made it evident to a man that he were finally rejected, he were obliged to believe it. But shall it ever be said, God hath made anything a man's duty which were inconsistent with his felicity. The having sinned himself into such a condition wherein he is forsaken of God is indeed inconsistent with it. And so the case is to stand—i.e., that his

perdition be in immediate connection with his sin, not with his duty; as it would be in immediate, necessary connection with his duty, if he were bound to believe himself finally forsaken and a lost creature. For that belief makes him hopeless, and a very devil, justifies his unbelief in the gospel, toward himself, by removing and shutting up, toward himself, the object of such a faith, and consequently brings the matter to this state that he perishes, not because he doth not believe God reconcilable to man, but because, with particular application to himself, he ought not so to believe. And it were most unfit, and of very pernicious consequence, that such a thing should be generally known concerning others....

But tho none ought to conclude that their day or season of grace is quite expired, yet they ought to deeply apprehend the danger, lest it should expire before their necessary work be done and their peace made. For tho it can be of no use for them to know the former, and therefore they have no means appointed them by which to know it, 'tis of great use to apprehend the latter; and they have sufficient ground for the apprehension. All the cautions and warnings wherewith the Holy Spirit abounds, of the kind with those already mentioned, have that manifest design. And nothing can be more important, or opposite to this purpose, than that solemn charge of the great apostle: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling"; considered together with the subjoined ground of it; "For it is God that worketh in you to will and to do of his own good pleasure." How correspondent is the one with the other; work for He works: there were no working at all to any purpose, or with any hope, if He did not work. And work with fear and trembling, for He works of His own good pleasure, q.d., "'Twere the greatest folly imaginable to trifle with One that works at so perfect liberty, under no obligation, that may desist when He will; to impose upon so absolutely sovereign and arbitrary an Agent, that owes you nothing; and from whose former gracious operations not complied with you can draw no argument, unto any following ones, that because He doth, therefore He will. As there is no certain connection between present time and future, but all time is made up of undepending, not strictly coherent, moments, so as no man can be sure, because one now exists, another shall; there is also no more certain connection between the arbitrary acts of a free agent within such time; so that I can not be sure, because He now darts in light upon me, is now convincing me, now awakening me, therefore He will still do so, again and again." Upon this ground then, what exhortation could be more proper than this? "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling." What could be more awfully monitory and enforcing of it than that He works only of mere good will and pleasure? How should I tremble to think, if I should be negligent, or undutiful, He may give out the next moment, may let the work fall, and me perish? And there is more especial cause for such an apprehension upon the concurrence of such things as these:

1. If the workings of God's Spirit upon the soul of a man have been more than ordinarily strong and urgent, and do not now cease: if there have been more powerful convictions, deeper humiliations, more awakened fears, more formed purposes of a new life, more fervent desires that are now vanished, and the sinner returns to his dead and dull temper.
2. If there be no disposition to reflect and consider the difference, no sense of his loss, but he apprehends such workings of spirit in him unnecessary troubles to him, and thinks it well he is delivered and eased of them.
3. If in the time when he was under such workings of the Spirit he had made known his case to his minister, or any godly friend, whose company he now shuns, as not willing to be put in mind, or hear any more of such matters.
4. If, hereupon he hath more indulged sensual inclination, taken more liberty, gone against the check of his own conscience, broken former good resolutions, involved himself in the guilt of any grosser sins.
5. If conscience, so baffled, be now silent, lets him alone, grows more sluggish and weaker, which it must as his lusts grow stronger.
6. If the same lively, powerful ministry which before affected him much, now moves him not.
7. If especially he is grown into a dislike of such preaching—if serious godliness, and what tends to it, are become distasteful to him—if discourses of God, and of Christ, of death and judgment, and of a holy life, are reckoned superfluous and needless, are unsavory and disrelished—if he have learned to put disgraceful names upon things of this import, and the persons that most value them live accordingly—if he hath taken the seat of the scorner, and

makes it his business to deride what he had once a reverence for, or took some complacency in.

8. If, upon all this, God withdraw such a ministry, so that he is now warned, admonished, exhorted and striven with, as formerly, no more. Oh, the fearful danger of that man's case! Hath he no cause to fear lest the things of his peace should be forever hid from his eyes? Surely he hath much cause of fear, but not of despair. Fear in this case would be his great duty, and might yet prove the means of saving him—despair would be his very heinous and destroying sin. If yet he would be stirred up to consider his case, whence he is fallen, and whither he is falling, and set himself to serious seekings of God, cast down himself before Him, abase himself, cry for mercy as for his life, there is yet hope in his case. God may make here an instance what He can obtain of Himself to do for a perishing wretch. But if with any that have lived under the gospel, their day is quite expired, and the things of their peace now forever hid from their eyes, this is in itself a most deplorable case, and much lamented by our Lord Jesus Himself. That the case is in itself most deplorable, who sees not? A soul lost! a creature capable of God! upon its way to Him! near to the kingdom of God! shipwrecked in the port! Oh, sinner, from how high a hope art thou fallen! into what depths of misery and we! And that it was lamented by our Lord is in the text. He beheld the city (very generally, we have reason to apprehend, inhabited by such wretched creatures) and wept over it. This was a very affectionate lamentation. We lament often, very heartily, many a sad case for which we do not shed tears. But tears, such tears, falling from such eyes! the issues of the purest and best-governed passion that ever was, showed the true greatness of the cause. Here could be no exorbitancy or unjust excess, nothing more than was proportional to the occasion. There needs no other proof that this is a sad case than that our Lord lamented it with tears, which that He did we are plainly told, so that, touching that, there is no place for doubt. All that is liable to question is, whether we are to conceive in Him any like resentments of such cases, in His present glorified state? Indeed, we can not think heaven a place or state of sadness or lamentation, and must take heed of conceiving anything there, especially on the throne of glory, unsuitable to the most perfect nature, and the most glorious state. We are not to imagine tears there, which, in that happy region are wiped away from inferior eyes—no grief, sorrow, or sighing, which are all fled away, and shall be no more, as there can be no other turbid passion of any kind. But when expressions that import anger or grief are used, even concerning God Himself, we must sever in our conception everything of imperfection, and ascribe everything of real perfection. We are not to think such expressions signify nothing, that they have no meaning, or that nothing at all is to be attributed to Him under them. Nor are we again to think they signify the same thing with what we find in ourselves, and are wont to express by those names. In the divine nature there may be real, and yet most serene, complacency and displacency—viz., that, unaccompanied by the least commotion, that impart nothing of imperfection, but perfection rather, as it is a perfection to apprehend things suitably to what in themselves they are. The holy Scriptures frequently speak of God as angry, and grieved for the sins of men, and their miseries which ensue therefrom. And a real aversion and dislike is signified thereby, and by many other expressions, which in us would signify vehement agitations of affection, that we are sure can have no place in Him. We ought, therefore, in our own thoughts to ascribe to Him that calm aversion of will, in reference to the sins and miseries of men in general; and in our own apprehensions to remove to the utmost distance from Him all such agitations of passion or affection, even tho some expressions that occur carry a great appearance thereof, should they be understood according to human measures, as they are human forms of speech. As, to instance in what is said by the glorious God Himself, and very near in sense to what we have in the text, what can be more pathetic than that lamenting wish, "Oh, that my people had hearkened unto me, and Israel had walked in my ways!" But we must take heed lest, under the pretense that we can not ascribe everything to God that such expressions seem to import, we therefore ascribe nothing. We ascribe nothing, if we do not ascribe a real unwillingness that men should sin on, and perish, and consequently a real willingness that they should turn to Him, and live, which so many plain texts assert. And therefore it is unavoidably imposed upon us to believe that God is truly unwilling of some things which He doth not think fit to interpose His omnipotency to hinder, and is truly willing of some things which He doth not put forth His omnipotency to effect.

We can not, therefore, doubt but that,

1. He distinctly comprehends the truth of any such case. He beholds, from the throne of His glory above, all the treaties which are held and managed with sinners in His name, and what their deportments are therein. His eyes are as a flame of fire, wherewith He searcheth hearts and trieth reins. He hath seen therefore, sinner, all along every time an offer of grace hath been made to thee, and been rejected; when thou hast slighted counsels and warnings that have been given thee, exhortations and treaties that have been prest upon thee for many years

together, and how thou hast hardened thy heart against reproofs and threatenings, against promises and allurements, and beholds the tendency of all this, what is like to come to it, and that, if thou persist, it will be bitterness in the end.

2. That He hath a real dislike of the sinfulness of thy course. It is not indifferent to Him whether thou obeyest or disobeyest the gospel, whether thou turn and repent or no; that He is truly displeased at thy trifling, sloth, negligence, impenitency, hardness of heart, stubborn obstinacy, and contempt of His grace, and takes real offense at them.

3. He hath real kind propensions toward thee, and is ready to receive thy returning soul, and effectually to mediate with the offended majesty of Heaven for thee, as long as there is any hope in thy case.

4. When He sees there is no hope, He pities thee, while thou seest it not, and dost not pity thyself. Pity and mercy above are not names only; 'tis a great reality that is signified by them, and that hath place here in far higher excellency and perfection than it can with us poor mortals here below. Ours is but borrowed and participated from that first fountain and original above. Thou dost not perish unlamented even with the purest heavenly pity, tho thou hast made thy case incapable of remedy; as the well tempered judge bewails the sad end of the malefactor, whom justice obliges him not to spare or save.

And that thou mayst not throw away thy soul and so great a hope, through mere sloth and loathness to be at some pains for thy life, let the text, which hath been thy directory about the things that belong to thy peace, be also thy motive, as it gives thee to behold the Son of God weeping over such as would not know those things. Shall not the Redeemer's tears move thee? O hard heart! Consider what these tears import to this purpose.

1. They signify the real depth and greatness of the misery into which thou are falling. They drop from an intellectual and most comprehensive eye, that sees far and pierces deep into things, hath a wide and large prospect; takes the comfort of that forlorn state into which unreconcilable sinners are hastening, in all the horror of it. The Son of God did not weep vain and causeless tears, or for a light matter; nor did He for Himself either spend His own or desire the profusion of others' tears. "Weep not for me, O daughters of Jerusalem," etc. He knows the value of souls, the weight of guilt, and how low it will press and sink them; the severity of God's justice and the power of His anger, and what the fearful effects of them will be when they finally fall. If thou understandest not these things thyself, believe Him that did; at least believe His tears.

2. They signify the sincerity of His love and pity, the truth and tenderness of His compassion. Canst thou think His deceitful tears? His, who never knew guile? Was this like the rest of His course? And remember that He who shed tears did, from the same fountain of love and mercy, shed blood too! Was that also done to deceive? Thou makest thyself a very considerable thing indeed, if thou thinkest the Son of God counted it worth His while to weep, and bleed, and die, to deceive thee into a false esteem of Him and His love. But if it be the greatest madness imaginable to entertain any such thought but that His tears were sincere and unartificial, the natural, genuine expression of undissembled benignity and pity, thou art then to consider what love and compassion thou art now sinning against; what bowels thou spurnest; and that if thou perishest, 'tis under such guilt as the devils themselves are not liable to, who never had a Redeemer bleeding for them, nor, that we ever find, weeping over them.

3. They show the remedilessness of thy case if thou persist in impenitency and unbelief till the things of thy peace be quite hid from thine eyes. These tears will then be the last issues of (even defeated) love, of love that is frustrated of its kind design. Thou mayst perceive in these tears the steady, unalterable laws of heaven, the inflexibleness of the divine justice, that holds thee in adamantine bonds, and hath sealed thee up, if thou prove incurably obstinate and impenitent, unto perdition; so that even the Redeemer Himself, He that is mighty to save, can not at length save thee, but only weep over thee, drop tears into thy flame, which assuage it not; but (tho they have another design, even to express true compassion) do yet unavoidably heighten and increase the fervor of it, and will do so to all eternity. He even tells thee, sinner, "Thou hast despised My blood; thou shalt yet have My tears." That would have saved thee, these do only lament thee lost. But the tears wept over others, as lost and past hope, why should they not yet melt thee, while as yet there is hope in thy case? If thou be effectually melted in thy very soul, and looking to Him whom thou hast pierced, dost truly mourn over Him, thou mayst assure thyself

the prospect His weeping eye had of lost souls did not include thee. His weeping over thee would argue thy case forlorn and hopeless; thy mourning over Him will make it safe and happy. That it may be so, consider, further, that,

4. They signify how very intent He is to save souls, and how gladly He would save thine, if yet thou wilt accept of mercy while it may be had. For if He weep over them that will not be saved, from the same love that is the spring of these tears, would saving mercies proceed to those that are become willing to receive them. And that love that wept over them that were lost, how will it glory in them that are saved! There His love is disappointed and vexed, crossed in its gracious intendment; but here, having compassed it, how will He joy over thee with singing, and rest in His love! And thou also, instead of being revolved in a like ruin with the unreconciled sinners of old Jerusalem, shalt be enrolled among the glorious citizens of the new, and triumph together with them in glory.

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