

The Certain Ruin of All Who Do Not Seek Salvation Aright

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This sermon entitled "The Certain Ruin of All Who Do Not Seek Salvation Aright" was delivered by Asahel Nettleton in America's second Great Awakening and he takes his text from Luke 13:24, "Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able."

The question was put to Christ, "Lord, are there few that be saved?" His reply to this question was, "Strive to enter in at the strait gate; for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able. Here is an interesting question, and a useful, though alarming answer.

To the question, "are there few that be saved" mankind have given different answers. It is a question above the reach of human reason. Whether few, or many, or none, will be saved, are questions which cannot be determined without a revelation from God.

Discarding the opinion of fallible mortals, we appeal to the omniscient Saviour. Whatever others may say, the Son of God has declared, "Many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able."

What proportion of the human race will finally be saved, and what proportion will be lost, it is not for me to say. But one thing is certain, "Many will seek to enter in, and shall not be able."

Let us contemplate the fact asserted in the text.

First: Many have sought, and have failed of salvation. All who pay any attention to the subject of religion, do, in some sense, seek to enter heaven. Even the heathen, who know nothing of a Saviour, are concerned about a future state, and often do much to secure their eternal interests. They build temples, worship idols, offer sacrifices, and sometimes subject themselves to the most cruel tortures. And for what? To atone for their sins, and to obtain pardon and eternal life. All these efforts, are demonstrations of anxiety and concern about a future state. Thousands and millions have sought, in this manner to enter heaven, and have not been able. Of idolaters, it is expressly affirmed, that "they shall not

inherit the kingdom of God." "Without are murderers and idolaters, and whosoever loveth and maketh a lie."

Cain, as well as Abel offered sacrifice. "He brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the Lord." The Lord had respect to the offerings of one, and not of the other. Both sought, but both were not accepted.

The Jews in the time of Isaiah, offered abundance of sacrifices. They appeared before the Lord in solemn assemblies, and made many prayers. And yet the Lord declared, "When ye spread forth your hands I will hide mine eyes from you; yea when ye make many prayers, I will not hear."

When Christ was on the earth many were diligent in their observance of the externals of religion. They prayed, and fasted, and paid tithes of all that they possessed. In this manner they sought, and yet they were excluded. "For" says the Saviour, "I say unto you, that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven."

The Jews, at the present day, although they denounce Christ as an impostor, are strict in the observance of the rites and forms of their religion. They are seeking to enter heaven; but while they reject Christ, they are in the way to hell. "If ye believe not that I am he, ye shall die in your sins."

Thus many have sought to enter heaven, and have not been able.

Second, That many will seek to enter heaven and shall not be able, is evident from plain declarations of scripture.

At the day of judgment, there will be those who will plead for admittance into heaven on the ground of their religious duties. "Many will say unto me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name, and in thy name done many wonderful works. And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you; depart from me, ye that work iniquity." The text itself is sufficient proof of the fact. "Many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able."

My hearers will notice that the Saviour is not speaking of those who do not, and who will not think of religion. He is not speaking of those who sit down in stupid indifference, and who make no efforts to secure their immortal interests. But, what renders his language peculiarly alarming, he is speaking of those who seek to enter heaven. They will seek to enter in but shall not be able. Not be able? If they seek why shall they not be able? My hearers are doubtless ready to answer, they will not seek aright. It is even so. Many shall seek to enter in, and shall not be able, because they will not seek aright. Every thing in this matter depends on the manner of seeking.

Let us then consider some of the ways in which sinners may, and do seek, and yet fail of salvation.

First: They do not seek salvation as a thing of the first importance. The divine direction is, "Seek first the kingdom of God." Let it be the first and leading object of your pursuit. Every thing else must give way, and be made subordinate to this. Whatever may come in competition with it must be instantly renounced. "The kingdom of heaven is like to treasure hid in a field, the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof, he goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field." "If thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasure, then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God." But many who attend to the subject of religion, do not seek it in this manner. They do not seek it in earnest. They do not regard it as the one thing needful, in comparison with which all other things are vanity. They do not realize its overwhelming importance. The grand maxim of many, is, seek first the world, then the kingdom of God. Although they do not altogether neglect the outward duties of religion, yet the world has the first place in their affections, and is the leading object of their pursuit. All who seek in this manner, only, will fail of salvation. All who seek in this manner, only, will fail of salvation. "No man can serve two masters; for he will either hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and Mammon."

Second: Some seek to enter heaven by attempting to establish a righteousness of their own. They will not fail of salvation for want of zeal or engagedness in religion—because they do not do more—but because they trust in what they do, and do it in a wrong manner, or with wrong motives. This was the fatal mistake of some in the days of the Apostles. "For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they, being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God." Those who thus rely on their own righteousness, compass themselves about with sparks—but they shall lie down in sorrow. They may pride themselves on their abundant good works. They may flatter themselves that they are eminently pious, although, strangers to conviction and conversion, and every feeling of the pious heart—they may thank God that they are not as other men are—but no man will enter heaven on the ground of his own righteousness. Those who will be saved, will be saved by grace through the merits of Christ. They will renounce all dependence on any thing they have ever done, or expect to do, and count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus their Lord.

Third: Many adopt sentiments which will effectually prevent the necessary preparation for heaven.

Some deny the necessity of regeneration. They intend to maintain, what is called a good moral life, but they do not believe in the necessity of a change of heart. But all who expect to enter heaven without being born again, will be disappointed. However sincere a person may be in disbelieving the doctrine— However much he may do with an unrenewed heart, it will be in vain. The Saviour has explicitly declared, that "except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Those who deny the necessity of regeneration, may seek to enter heaven; but they do not seek to enter by the strait gate. "Strive to enter in at the strait gate." The straitness of the gate is assigned as the reason why so many will be lost. "Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way which leadeth unto life and few there be that find it." Those who discard the doctrine of regeneration, instead of seeking to enter in at the strait gate, spend their time, and waste their probation in vain attempts to widen the gate, that all may enter.

Fourth: Many will not be able to enter heaven, because they do not seek in season. They may make great exertions, but they are too late. "Afterward came also the other virgins, saying Lord, Lord, open to us. But he answered and said, verily I say unto you, I know you not." "When once the master of the house is risen up and hath shut to the door, and ye begin to stand without, and to knock at the door, saying Lord, Lord, open to us;—he shall answer and say, I know you not whence ye are;—depart from me all ye workers of iniquity." Those who have been repeatedly awakened, and have resisted the strivings of God's Spirit, are in danger of being too late. "Because I have called, and ye have refused—then shall they call on me and I will not answer, they shall seek me early, but they shall not find me." Take heed lest any of you be like Esau, "who for one morsel of meat sold his birth-right; for ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected; for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears."

"But hear the Saviour's word,
Strive for the heavenly gate,
Many will call upon the Lord,
And find their cries too late."

Fifth: Many who seek to enter heaven will not be able, because they are not willing to part with all for Christ. This was true of the young ruler who came to our Saviour with the question. "Good master, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?" He imagined that he was willing to do any thing to obtain the salvation of his soul. Christ said to him, "go sell all that thou hast, and give to the poor." This tried him, and showed him his heart. It sent him away sad. It is recorded of Herod, that when he heard John, he did many things, and heard him gladly;—but he was not willing to give up his easily besetting sin. In the case of the sinner anxious for his soul, there is usually some one sin which prevents him from yielding to the terms of the gospel. Whatever it may be the sinner must renounce it. He must break off from every sin. He is required to do it on pain of eternal death. "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." "If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out." "If thy right hand offend thee, cut it off." The sinner must part with his sins, or he must part with heaven. If there is any beloved iniquity—any darling lust which he refuses to mortify, he will seek in vain to enter heaven.

The sinner may have some friend with whom he is unwilling to part, or whom he cannot bear to offend; but if he loves any earthly friend more than he loves Christ, he cannot be his disciple.

Finally. Some seek for a time, and then drop the subject. This is often the case in the time of a revival. For a season, they are alarmed. They read their Bibles and attempt to pray. They struggle with their convictions for a while; and they find their hearts so hard, and the duties of religion so irksome, that they give up the subject, and are lost forever. Those who are about to give it up, usually do it by taking offense—and they will take offense at almost any thing. Thus it was in the days of Christ. Many who followed him for a while took offense at his preaching, and from that time walked no more with him.

What inferences can we make through this?

First: We see the danger of loose sentiments on the subject of religion.

If "strait is the gate and narrow is the way which leadeth to life"; let us beware how we attempt to widen them. We may succeed in quieting our fears and silencing our consciences, but we shall do it at the peril of our souls. Every man's character will correspond with the sentiments which he embraces. There is an intimate connection between principle and practice. If a man is an atheist in principle, he will be an atheist in practice. If he believes in no God, he will worship no God. If he is a libertine, or latitudinarian in principle, he will be such in practice. If he believes there is no wrath to come; he will not flee from the wrath to come. What some men call liberality, the Bible would pronounce infidelity.

No preacher ever made the way to heaven more difficult than the Son of God. Who was it that said, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven"? Who was it that said, "Wide is the gate, and broad is the way which leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat"? And who uttered the words of the text? If any preacher attempts to show an easier way to heaven than by the strait gate of regeneration, and the narrow way of self-denial, you may know that he does not preach the gospel.

Second: If many shall seek to enter heaven, and shall not be able, then those who are now anxious for their souls, may be of the number.

My friends, do you fear that you shall be lost! I must tell you that your fears are not without foundation. Many whose souls are as precious as yours, have been lost. Many who have been as anxious as you now are, and even more anxious. Many who have cried as earnestly for mercy as you have ever done, have finally perished. It is altogether uncertain how your present convictions will terminate. There is no safety here. You have not yet repented of your sins—you have not yet believed in Christ, and there is not a promise in the Bible which you can call your own. You are yet under condemnation, and the wrath of God abideth on you. It is altogether uncertain how long the spirit may strive. You may yet lose your concern, and your last state be worse than the first.

Thirdly: If any will seek to enter heaven and shall not be able, it will not be surprising if some who are considered subjects of this revival, should ere long turn back to the world, and finally perish.

A revival of religion is well described in the parable of the sower. There are four kinds of hearers, represented by the seed which fell by the way-side—among thorns—in stony places—and on good ground.

Should a number of those who think they have experienced religion, turn back, it will not disprove the reality of religion. Because there was a Judas among the Apostles, does it prove that Christ had no true disciples? Because some seed fell on stony places, does it prove that none fell on good ground?

When those who profess to have experienced religion apostatize, how common it is for the wicked to triumph. But what does it prove?

1. That those who thus triumph have no religion, and that they are glad others are going to hell with them.
2. That they are in very great danger. If others have been deceived, they may well imagine that the danger of being lost is imminent.
3. It proves the truth of the text.
4. If many shall seek to enter heaven and shall not be able, what will become of those who do not ever seek?—those who sit down in careless indifference and make no effort to secure their salvation? If those who are anxious for their souls may fail of salvation, what will become of the stupid? If those who cry earnestly for mercy, may never receive a gracious answer, what will become of those who never pray? If those who have started to flee to the city of refuge, may be overtaken by the avenger of blood, and be slain, what will become of those who make no effort to escape? If some who have taken the alarm, and set out to escape for their lives, may after all look back and become pillars of salt; what will become of those who are still sleeping in Sodom?