

# DIVINE COMPASSION

Horatius Bonar (1808-1889)

“As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?”—Ezekiel 33:10,11

It is thus that God meets Israel's hard thoughts concerning him. Instead of being provoked to anger by this most daring rebelliousness, he answers their suspicious unbelief by a reiteration of his words of grace. How patient, how long-suffering, how condescending! Instead of executing vengeance, he renews the assurances of his most unfeigned and affectionate interest in their welfare. Unmoved by their horrid taunts and charges of insincerity, he approaches them in the posture of a friend; he repeats the declaration of his gracious mind; he adds new, and larger, and fuller affirmations of his unwearied and inexhaustible compassion. Nay, in order to efface every suspicion, and anticipate every form and shade of unbelief, he adds his oath,—his oath as the living God,—that by two immutable things in which it was impossible for God to lie, they might have the most deliberate assurance of his gracious mind, and the remotest possibility of such a charge against himself as that of insincerity to be provided against.

God has thus in the most solemn way declared to us his loving intentions. He has laid bare the inmost thoughts of his heart. He tells us that these thoughts are the very opposite of ours; that his desire is not to curse, but to bless; not to destroy, but to save. And what an oath is this! It is not the oath of a man, but of the eternal God; of him who liveth for ever and ever. As if his word might be called in question, he adds his oath. He swears by himself, because he could swear by no greater: he swears by his own life,—the greatest of all realities, the most certain of all certainties. “As surely as I am,—as surely as I am Jehovah,—so certainly I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked.” What an infinite certainty is this! “An oath for confirmation is,” the apostle says, “an end of all strife.” So should this oath be to the sinner an end of all suspicion, of all doubt, as to the gracious mind of God. How anxious must Jehovah be to meet and remove all your jealous fears,—to convince you that he is not the false being which you take him to be,—that he is sincere in his desires to bless you! O sinner, what could you have more than this? If this will not make you ashamed of your unbelief, what will? If this will not convince you of God's honesty and true-hearted yearning over you, what will or can? Ah, how unfeigned, as well as how infinite, are his thoughts of grace towards you! And is there not something in this gracious commiseration, so solemnly affirmed upon oath, fitted irresistibly to attract and win the most jealous and unbelieving heart?

Let us consider now the substance of this divine declaration thus made on oath, and recorded for the sinner's use in all ages. It is a twofold declaration: In the first part of it God denies the imputation cast upon him, of seeking the sinner's death; in the second, he declares himself to be most sincerely desirous of his life.

1. He has no pleasure in their death. This does not imply that the wicked shall not die. No. The wicked shall be turned into hell. Millions have already perished; millions more shall perish. There is the second death, the death beyond which there is no life for the impenitent,—the unquenchable fire, the everlasting burnings. But still it remains true that God has no pleasure in man's death. He did not kindle hell in order to gratify his revenge. He does not cast sinners headlong into its endless flames in order to get vent to his blind fury. No. He has no pleasure in their death. He will finally condemn the unbelieving, but not because he delights to do so, but because he is the righteous Lord that loveth righteousness. Whatever your treacherous heart may say, whatever your jealous suspicions may whisper, it remains a truth for ever true,—a truth affirmed upon oath,—that God has no pleasure in your death! Are you seeking to escape eternal death? It is well. But do you think that God is trying to thwart you? Nay, he is as desirous of this as you can be, only his desires run in a righteous channel, and he can only give vent to them in a righteous way. He is not bent upon your ruin. Was the father bent upon the ruin of his prodigal? Was the shepherd intent upon the destruction of his stray sheep? Was the Son of God delighting in the desolation of Jerusalem when he wept over it? Or was the God of Israel bent upon the misery of his people when he said, “How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? how shall I deliver thee up, Israel? how shall I make thee as Admah? how shall I set thee as Zeboim? Mine heart is turned within me, my repentings are kindled together.” The God that made you is not your deadly enemy. The God in whom you live, and move, and have your being, has no pleasure in your death. He did not send his Son to destroy, but to save; he did not nail him to the tree that

you might die, but live; he did not send his Holy Spirit to seal your perdition, but to pluck you as a brand from the burning.

2. His desire is, that the wicked should turn and live. As in the first clause of this oath he denied the imputation cast upon him, that he had pleasure in the sinner's death, so, in this second part, he declares his wish that they should turn and live. This declaration is the expression of a thoroughly honest desire on the part of God. It is not the language of insincere profession, or of feigned earnestness. There is nothing here of exaggeration or random utterance. Each word bears the impress of ingenuous truthfulness. God means what he says when he affirms, "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they should turn and live." It is to life,—life everlasting,—that he points your eye, sinner. It is of life that he desires to make you partaker. And surely it is life that you need. For what one word more fully or more terribly describes your present state than death? You are dead! Dead, not like the stone or the rock; that would at least be freedom from torment. Dead, not like the withered leaf or the uprooted tree; that would at least be unconsciousness of loss, and ignorance of what might have been won. But you are dead to all that is worth living for, and yet alive to all that makes life a burden and a woe. Yours is a death whose present form is the utter absence of everything that God calls peace or blessedness, whose future form is the undying worm, the weeping, and the wailing, and the gnashing of teeth. You are dead to that which you were created for, as well as to him who created you. You live in pleasure on the earth, yet you are dead! You smile, and sport, and dance, and revel, and make merry; yet you are dead! For the life in which God is not; the life of which he is not the spring and centre, is utter death! And that is misery to you,—misery now, misery in the long, long ages to come!

Ah! surely, then, it is life that you need,—such a life as will fill that soul of yours with gladness,—such a life as shall not merely shed sunshine around you, but shall pour its joyous freshness into every region of your spirit, and fill every recess of your immortal being with the joy unspeakable and full of glory.

It is such a life that God desires you to possess. It was to bestow upon you such a life that he gave up his Son. It is that such a life might find entrance into you, that he is striving with you by his Spirit. And it is that, without another hour's delay, you might become possessors of such a life, that he sends to you once more this message of life,—so unequivocal, so genuine, so pitiful.

Do you say, If God wants me to live, why does he not at once give me life? In other words, why does he not force life upon my acceptance, and burst through every barrier? I ask in return, Is God bound to take your way in giving life? I ask again, Do you really suppose that a person is not sincere in his kindness, because he does not carry out that kindness by every means, lawful or unlawful? Is it not possible that there may be a limit to that kindness compatible with the most perfect sincerity? You admit that God does not wish you to be ungodly; yet you are ungodly; might you not as well say, God must really desire me to be ungodly, else I should not be so? Nay, you admit that God wishes you to be holy, just as he wishes all his creatures to be holy. Should you think of saying, God does not desire me to be holy, else he would make me holy; God must have pleasure in my unholiness, else he would not permit me to remain in it. Surely this would be false reasoning as well as daring profanity: not less so is it when you argue, God cannot really desire to bless me, else he would bless me; God cannot desire me to live, else he would give me life.

There may be difficulty for finite man to reconcile the two things,—our want of life and God's desire that we should possess it; but there is no difficulty and no doubt as to the blessed fact itself. God's desire is, that we should turn and live! Not all the sophistry of unbelief, nor all the malignant falsehoods of the evil one, can shake or alter this mighty, this most glorious truth. God's desire, his undisguised and cordial wish, is, that the wicked should not die, but live! He has spoken it, he has repeated it; he has sealed it with his own most solemn oath; and woe be to the sinner who, giving way to the subtle suggestions of his own jealous heart, refuses to take God at his word, hesitates to give him credit for speaking the plain truth when he lifts up his hand to heaven and swears, "As I live, saith the Lord, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but rather that he should turn from his ways and live."

The expostulation, with which all this closes, is one of the most urgent importunity on the part of God, proving yet more fully his real desire to bless. It is like one vehemently enforcing an invitation upon an unwilling listener,—making a last effort to save the heedless or resisting sinner. He lifts up his voice, he stretches out his hand, he exhorts, he commands, he expostulates, he entreats, "Turn ye, turn ye, from your evil ways; for why will ye die?" Must not he who thus reasons and remonstrates with the sinner, repeating and re-repeating his entreaties,

enforcing and urging home his message with every kind of loving argument, as well as with every form of solemn appeal,—must not he be truly in earnest? Is it within the remotest bounds of possibility or conceivability that he is insincere; that he does not really mean what he says?

The ways from which he calls on them to turn are named by him “evil ways”; and what he calls evil must be truly so,—hateful in his eyes, as well as ruinous to the soul. The end of these ways he pronounces to be death; so that sinners must either turn or die. It is the broad way which leadeth down to death on which they are walking, and there is no hope of escaping unless they retrace their steps. As certainly as their bodies shall return to dust, so certainly shall their souls have their portion in the second death, and their dwelling-place in the eternal tomb of the fiery lake; where, instead of the worm of earth preying upon their lifeless flesh, there shall be the worm that never dies, gnawing their spirits, and making them feel that all that has hitherto been known of death on earth,—its pangs, its throes, its horrors, its separations,—has been but a type of what is coming and that the reality contained in that word DEATH had never before been imagined,—nor, indeed, can be,—till the Judge’s sentence has cut them off from God for ever, and flung around them the darkness of the endless midnight; till hell has closed its gate upon them, and made damnation sure!

But then there is another way, whose end is life; and the life, which forms the termination of the one, is as certain as the death which forms the termination of the other. It is on this way that God so earnestly desires to see them walking. However wide astray they have gone, and however near the confines of the second death they may have come, he beckons them back with his gracious hand, and beseeches them with his most loving voice, “Come now, and let us reason together.” Nay, more, he commands them to turn. It is not mere liberty to retrace your steps that he gives you; he lays his command upon you; and it is at your peril if you disobey. “Am I at liberty to come to God?” you ask perhaps. At liberty to come! Is that the way you put it? At liberty to obey his direct command! Do you ask, Am I at liberty to keep the Sabbath? Am I at liberty to honour my father and mother? Am I at liberty to forbear swearing, or stealing, or coveting? Who asks such questions as these? And shall any sinner upon earth,—even the ungodliest that ever forsook God and walked in his lusts, and trampled on the cross, and quenched the Spirit,—shall any on this side of the second death presume to ask, Am I at liberty to return to God? At liberty! YOU DARE NOT DO OTHERWISE. There is all the obligation that a command can give; there is a necessity laid upon you, an immediate necessity, a necessity from which nothing can loose you, a necessity arising out of the very righteousness of that God who is commanding you to quit your unrighteousness, a necessity springing from the certain doom that awaits you if you turn not. Yes; there is a necessity, one of the greatest of all necessities, laid on you by God, to turn and live!

God expostulates with you, and asks, Why will ye die? Have you any reason to give for preferring death, or for supposing that you must just die, and that you cannot help it, and that the blame is not yours, but God’s? Must you die? Must you really die? Is there no help? There was, indeed, once a reason for your dying, a reason which made dying inevitable,—the ancient law of the universe, “The soul that sinneth, it shall die.” But now the Son of God has come, and he has taken up that law, and has so fulfilled and honoured it by dying himself, that the same inevitable necessity for your dying no longer exists. It was once only righteous that you should die; now it is as righteous that you should live. Righteous death;—that was once our doom; now righteous life is the gift which God presents to you. Life upon righteous terms; life in a way that honours righteousness; life through a channel as holy as it is free: it is this that is now announced to you, and it is in reference to this that God asks, Why will ye die?

Is life not desirable? Can a soul be in love with death? Or is death so inevitable that it is vain for you to flee from it? Or is there some barrier in your way? Or is God not really willing to remove the death, and to bestow the life? Are these the reasons? Or what answer do you mean to make to God’s question, so urgently, so importunately put and pressed home on you, “Why will ye die?”