

THE IMMINENT DANGER
AND ONLY SURE RESOURCE
OF OUR NATION



JOHN NEWTON (1725-1807)

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*“Who can tell if God will turn and repent,
and turn away from his fierce anger
that we perish not?”*
—Jonah 3:9

I. The Imminent Danger

How great is the power of God over the hearts of men! Nineveh was the capital of a powerful empire. The inhabitants were heathens. The many prophets who, during a long series of years, had spoken in the name of the Lord to His professed people of Judah and Israel, had spoken almost in vain. The messengers were often mocked, and their message despised. The inhabitants of Nineveh, it is probable, had never seen a true prophet till Jonah was sent to them. If they had reasoned on his prediction, they might have thought it very improbable that a great city, the head of a great kingdom and in a time of peace, could be in danger of an overthrow within forty days. But it is said, they “believed God” (Jon 3:5). The awful denunciation made a general, universal impression. The king arose from his throne, laid aside his robes, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes (3:6). A sudden cessation of business and pleasure took place; he proclaimed a strict fast, the rigor of which was extended even to the cattle. His subjects readily complied and unanimously concurred in crying for mercy, though they had no encouragement but a peradventure, “Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?” (3:9).

It appears from this, and other passages of Scripture, that the most express declarations of God’s displeasure against sinners, still afford ground and room for repentance. Thus in the prophecy of Ezekiel 33:14-15, “Again, when I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; if he turn from his sin, and do that which is lawful and right...he shall surely live, he shall not die”; and again, in the prophecy of Jeremiah 18:7-8, “At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it; if that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them.”

The Lord God speaks to us by His Word in plain and popular language. He condescends to our feeble apprehensions. God cannot repent; He is of one mind. Who can turn Him? Yet when afflictive providences lead men to a sense of their sins and to an

acknowledgement of their demerits, and excite a spirit of humiliation, repentance, and prayer, He often mercifully changes His dispensations and averts from them the impending evil. Such was the effect of Jonah's message to the Ninevites. The people humbled themselves and repented of their wickedness; and God suspended the execution of the sentence which He had pronounced against them (3:10).

My brethren, may we not fear that the men of Nineveh will rise up in judgment against us and condemn us, if we do not imitate their example and humble ourselves before God? They repented at the preaching of Jonah immediately, on their first hearing him; and they sought for mercy upon a peradventure, when they could say no more than, "Who can tell, whether there may be the least room to hope for it, after what the prophet so solemnly declared?"

God does not speak to us by the audible voice of an inspired prophet; nor is it necessary. We know, or may know from His written Word, that it shall be well with the righteous and ill with the wicked. The appearance of an angel from heaven could add nothing to the certainty of the declarations He has already put into our hands. He has likewise raised up and perpetuated a succession of His ministers to enforce the warnings He has given us in the Scripture—and to remind us of our sins, and the sure and dreadful consequences, if we persist in them. Nor are we left at an uncertainty as to the event, if we humbly confess them, and implore forgiveness, in the way which He has prescribed (1Jo 1:9). The Gospel, the glorious Gospel of the blessed God, is preached unto us. Jesus Christ as crucified is set forth among us. His blood cleanseth from all sin, and they who believe in Him are freed from condemnation, and completely justified (Rom 8:1; 5:1, 8, 9; 8:30). They have also free access to a throne of grace, and like Israel they have power, by prayer, to prevail with God and with man (Heb 4:16). And shall it be said of any of us, that the Lord gave us space to repent, and invited us to repentance, and we repented not? May His mercy forbid it!

He now speaks to us by His providence. His judgments are abroad in the earth; it behooves us to learn righteousness. His hand is lifted up, and if any are so careless or obstinate that they will not see, yet—sooner or later—they must, they shall see. The great God has a controversy with the potsherd of the earth (Isa 45:9). The point to be decided between Him and many abroad—and, I fear, too many at home—is whether He be the Governor of the earth or not? His own people, to whom His name and glory are dear, will hold all inferior concerns in subordination to this. If there be no other alternative, misery and havoc must spread, men must perish by millions—yea, the frame of nature must be dissolved—rather than God be dishonored and defiled with impunity. But He will surely plead and gain His own cause; and either in a way of judgment or of mercy, all men shall know that He is the Lord. I believe there is no expression in the Old Testament so frequently repeated as this, *Ye, or they, shall know that I am the Lord*. "Hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good" (Num 23:19)?

The rivers of human blood, and all the calamities and horror which overspread a great part of the continent, the distant report of which is sufficient to make our ears tingle, are all to be ascribed to this cause. God is not acknowledged—yea, in some places, He has been formally disowned and renounced. Therefore men are left to themselves, their furious passions are unchained, and they are given up, without restraint, to the way of their own hearts. A more dreadful judgment than this cannot be inflicted on this side of hell.

And though we are still favored with peace at home, the dreadful storm is at no great distance; it seems to move our way, and we have reason to fear it may burst upon us. But I would be thankful for the appointment of this day, for I should think the prospect dark indeed, if I did not rely on the Lord's gracious attention to the united prayers of those who fear and trust Him, and who know it is equally easy for Him to save or to destroy, by many or by few (1Sa 14:6). Our fleets and armies may be well appointed, and well commanded; but without His blessing upon our councils and enterprises, they will be unable to defend us. He can take wisdom from the wise, and courage from the bold, in the moment when they are most needed. He can disable our forces by sickness or dissension. And by His mighty wind, He can dash our ships to pieces against the rocks, against each other, or sink them as lead in the mighty waters. "Who is he that saith, and it cometh to pass, when the Lord commandeth it not" (Lam 3:37)?

Our Lord and Savior, when speaking of the eighteen upon whom the tower of Siloam fell and slew them, said to the Jews, "Think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Luk 13:4-5). May the application of these words sink deeply into our hearts! We, on the contrary, were born and educated in a land, distinguished from all the nations of the earth, by the eminent degree in which we enjoy civil and religious liberty, and the light of Gospel-truth. These privileges exceedingly aggravate our sins; and no just comparison, in this respect, can be formed between us and other nations until we can find a people who have been equally favored, and for an equal space of time, by the providence of God, and have like wise equaled us in disobedience and ingratitude.

II. Humble Ourselves before God

But it is time to attend more immediately to our own concerns. The professed purpose of our meeting today is to humble ourselves before Almighty God, and to send up our prayers and supplications to the divine Majesty for obtaining pardon of our sins, and for averting those heavy judgments which our manifold provocations have most justly deserved, and for imploring His blessing and assistance on sea and land, and for restoring and perpetuating peace, safety, and prosperity. I hope these expressions accord with the language and desire of our hearts.

And now—oh, for a glance of what Isaiah saw, and has described (Isa 6:1-4)! Oh, that we, by the power of that faith which is the evidence of things unseen, could behold the glory of the Lord filling this house; that we could realize the presence and the attitude of their attendant angels! They cover their faces and their feet with their wings, as overpowered by the beams of His majesty, and conscious, if not of defilement like us, yet of unavoidable inability as creatures to render Him the whole of that praise and homage which are justly due to Him. Oh, that by faith we could enter into the spirit of their ascription, “Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isa 6:3)!

If we were all thus affected, as the prophet was, surely each one would adopt the prophet’s language. Or if a comfortable hope in the Gospel prevented us from crying out, “Woe is me! for I am undone!” (Isa 6:5a), we should at least say, as the Hebrew word might be so rendered, “I am silenced, I am struck dumb!” I am overwhelmed with confusion and shame; for “I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts” (Isa 6:5b). If we have a degree of this impression, we shall not be at leisure to perplex our selves concerning men or measures, the second causes, or immediate instruments of our calamities. The evil of sin, contrasted with the holiness and glory of God, will engross our thoughts. And we shall ascribe all the troubles we either feel or fear to our own sins, and the sins of those among whom we dwell.

1. Ourselves

Let us first look at home. “I am a man of unclean lips” (Isa 6:5), i.e., I am a sinner. This confession suits us and is readily made by all who know themselves. The Lord said of the Amorites at a certain period, “Their iniquity is not yet full” (Gen 15:16)! I hope the measure of our iniquity is not yet full, but it is filling every day, and we are all daily contributing to fill it. True believers, though by grace delivered from the reigning power of sin, are still sinners. In many things we offend all, in thought, word, and deed. We are now called upon to humble ourselves before God, for the sins of our ignorance, and for the more aggravated sins we have committed against light and experience—for those personal sins, the record of which is only known to God and our consciences; for the defects and defilements of our best services; for our great and manifold failures in the discharge of our relative duties, as parents, children, husbands, wives, masters, or servants, and as members of the community. Our dullness in the ways of God; our alertness in the pursuit of our own will and way; our differences to what concerns His glory, compared with the quickness of our apprehensions when our own temporal interests are affected—are so many proofs of our ingratitude and depravity.

The sins of the Lord’s own people are so many, and so heightened by the consideration of His known goodness, that if He was to enter into judgment with them only, they could offer no other plea than that which He has mercifully provided for

them: "If thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand? But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared" (Psa 130:3-4).

2. Others

It is easy to declaim against the wickedness of the times. But only they who are duly affected with the multitude and magnitude of their own sins can be competent judges of what the prophet meant or felt when he said, "I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips" (Isa 6:5). We ought to be no less concerned (though in a different manner) for the sins of those among whom we dwell, than for our own. We shall be so, if with the eyes of our mind we behold the King, the Lord of hosts, because His glory, which should be the dearest object to our hearts, is dishonored by them...

Will not the Lord's words to Israel apply with equal propriety to us? "What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it? wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes" (Isa 5:4)?

How is the blessed Gospel improved among us? This would be a heavy day to me, if I did not believe and know that there are those among our various denominations who prize and adorn it. If these could be all assembled in one place, I hope they would be found a very considerable number; and for their sakes, and in answer to their prayers, I humbly trust that mercy will still be afforded to us. But compared with the multitudes who reject, despise, or dishonor it, I fear they are very few. Too many hate it with a bitter hatred, and exert all their influence to oppose and suppress it. The great doctrines of the Reformation are treated with contempt; and both they who preach and they who espouse them are considered as visionaries or hypocrites, knaves or fools. The Gospel of God is shunned as a pestilence, or complained of as a burden, almost wherever it is known.

Wisdom is indeed justified by all her children (Luk 7:35). The Gospel is the power of God to the salvation of them that believe (Rom 1:16). It recalls them from error, from wickedness, and from misery; guides their feet into the ways of peace; and teaches them to live soberly, righteously, and godly in the world. But in the number of those who profess to receive it, there are too many who confirm and increase the prejudices of those who speak against what they knew not. Alas! What extravagant opinions, what fierce dissensions, what loose conversations, what open offences, may be found among many who would be thought professors of that Gospel which only breathes the spirit of holiness, love, and peace!

What then must be the state of those who avowedly live without God in the world? I need not enlarge upon this painful subject, which forces itself upon the mind if we only walk the streets or look into the newspaper. It is not necessary to inform you that infidelity, licentiousness, perjury, profaneness, and the neglect and contempt of God's Sabbaths and worship abound. The laws of God, and the laws of the land, so far as their object is to enforce the observance of His commands, are openly and customarily violated in every rank of life. In a day when the Lord of hosts calls to weeping and mourning, thoughtless security, dissipation, and riot are charac-

teristics of our national spirit. The loss of public spirit and that impatience of subordination, so generally observable, so widely diffused, which are the consequences of our sins against God, are, in themselves, moral causes sufficient to ruin the nation, unless His mercy interposes in our behalf.

It is but a brief and faint outline I have attempted to give of the present state of this nation, in the sight of Almighty God, and of the sins for which we are this day assembled to humble ourselves before Him.

III. We Deserve Judgment!

Have we not therefore cause to say, with the Ninevites, “Who can tell?” Is it not a peradventure? Is there more than a possibility, that we may yet obtain mercy?

If our sins are no less numerous, no less of a scarlet dye, than those of other nations, and exceedingly aggravated beyond theirs by being committed against clearer light and the distinguished advantages we have long enjoyed; if we I have not only transgressed the laws of God in common with others, but daringly trampled upon the gracious tenders of His forgiveness, which He has long continued to propose to us with a frequency and energy almost peculiar to ourselves; if all the day long He has stretched out His hands to a disobedient and gainsaying people (Rom 10:12), and hitherto, almost in vain; if neither the tokens of His displeasure nor the declarations of His love have made a suitable impression upon our minds—who can tell if He will yet be entreated? May we not fear, lest He should say, My Spirit shall strive with them no more (Gen 6:3). They are joined to their idols; let them alone? “When ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear” (Isa 1:15).

Where are now the mighty empires, which were once thought rooted and established as the everlasting mountains? They have disappeared like the mists upon the mountaintops. Nothing of them remains but their names. They perished and their memorials have almost perished with them. The patience of God bore with them for a time, until the purposes for which He raised them up were answered; but when the measure of their iniquity was full, they passed away and were dispersed, like foam upon the waters. What security have we from such a catastrophe? Or what could we answer if God should put that question to us, “Shall I not visit for these things...and shall not my soul be avenged on such a nation as this” (Jer 5:9)?

Where are now the churches which once flourished in Greece and Asia Minor? When the Apostle Paul wrote to the former, and when our Lord indicted his epistles to the latter, most of them were in a prosperous state. If there ever was a time when the commendations given to them were applicable to professors of the Gospel in our land, I fear we can hardly claim them at present.

Can it be justly said of us, that our faith and love are every where spoken of (Rom 1:8; 1Th 1:7), and that we are examples to all that believe? That our works and service and faith and patience are known and the last to be more than the first (Rev 2:19)? Or

rather, may it not be said of too many, that while they profess to believe in God, in works they deny Him (Ti 1:16)? That they are neither hot nor cold, that they have a name to live, and are dead, that they have at least forgotten their first love (Rev 3:15-16; 2:4)? When these defects and declensions began to prevail in the first churches, the Lord admonished and warned them; but instead of watching and repenting, they gradually became more remiss. At length their glory departed, and their candlesticks were removed out of their places (Rev 2:5). Many regions which once rejoiced in the light of the Gospel have been long over spread with Islamic darkness.

Let us not trust in outward privileges, nor rest in a form of godliness destitute of the power. It will be in vain to say, "The temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD are these" (Jer 7:4), if the Lord of the temple should depart from us. When the Israelites were afraid of the Philistines, they carried the ark of the Lord with them to battle (1Sa 4:3). But God disappointed their vain confidence. He delivered the ark of His glory into the hands of their enemies to teach them, and to teach us, that formal hypocritical worshippers have no good ground to hope for His protection.

Alas, then, who can tell? Appearances are very dark at present. Besides what we may expect or fear from the rage and madness of our foreign enemies, we have much to apprehend at home. A spirit of discord has gone forth. Jeshurun has waxed fat, and kicked (Deu 32:15). Many seem weary of liberty, peace, and order. Our happy constitution, our mild government, our many privileges, admired by other nations, are despised and depreciated among ourselves—not only by the thoughtless and licentious, and those who, having little to lose, may promise themselves a possibility of gain in a time of disturbance and confusion, but they are abetted and instigated by persons of sense, character, and even of religion. I should be quite at a loss to account for this, if I did not consider it as a token of the Lord's displeasure. When He withdraws His blessing, *no* union can long subsist!

"Because thou servedst not the LORD thy God with joyfulness, and with gladness of heart, for the abundance of all things; therefore shalt thou serve thine enemies which the LORD shall send against thee, in hunger, and in thirst, and in nakedness, and in want of all things" (Deu 28:47-48). These words of Moses to rebellious Israel emphatically describe the former and the present state of many nations who have been spoiled, insulted, and glad if they could escape (great numbers could not so escape) with the loss of their all, and at the peril of their lives, to a more hospitable shore. May their sufferings remind us of our deserts! Who can tell if the Lord may yet be merciful unto us, and exempt us from similar calamities!

IV. Our Only Sure Resource

But though we have much cause to mourn for our sins, and humbly to deprecate deserved judgments, let us not despond. The Lord our God is a merciful God! Who can tell but He may repent, and turn from the fierceness of His anger, that we perish not. If the professed business of this day be not confined to a day, but if, by His bless-

ing, it may produce repentance not to be repented of, then I am warranted to tell you from His Word that there is yet hope. You that tremble for the ark and the cause of God, whose eyes affect your hearts, who grieve for sin and for the miseries which sin has multiplied upon the earth—take courage! Let the hearts of the wicked shake like the leaves of the trees when agitated by a storm; but be not you like them. The Lord God is your refuge and strength, your resting place, and your hiding place; under the shadow of His wings you shall be safe (Psa 46:1; 119:114; 36:7).

1. What God will do

He who loved you, and died for your sins, is the Lord of glory. All power in heaven and in earth is committed unto Him. The Lord reigneth, let the earth be never so unquiet. All creatures are instruments of His will. The wrath of man, so far as it is permitted to act, shall praise Him and be made subservient to the accomplishment of His great design; and the remainder of that wrath, all their projected violence, which does not coincide with His wise and comprehensive plan, He will restrain. In vain they rage and fret and threaten. They act under a secret commission, and can do no more than He permits them. If they attempt it, He has a hook and a bridle in their mouths. When the enemies would come in like a flood, He can lift up a standard against them. As He has set bounds and bars to the tempestuous sea, beyond which it cannot pass, saying, “Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further: and here shall thy proud waves be stayed” (Job 38:11); so, with equal ease, He can still the madness of the people.

You do well to mourn for the sins and miseries of those who know Him not. But if you make Him your fear and your dread, He will be a sanctuary to you and keep your hearts in peace, though the earth be removed and the mountains cast into the midst of the sea.

2. What we must do

Your part and mine is to watch and pray. Let us pray for ourselves, that we may be found waiting, with our loins girded up, and our lamps burning, that we may be prepared to meet His will in every event. Let us pray for the peace of Jerusalem, for His church, which is dear to Him as the pupil of His eye, for the spread of His Gospel and the extension of His kingdom, till His great name be known and adored from the rising to the setting of the sun, and the whole earth shall be filled with His glory.

Many splendid prophecies are yet unfulfilled, and He is now bringing forward their accomplishment. Light will undoubtedly arise out of this darkness. Let us earnestly pray for a blessing from on high, upon our rulers, upon the counsels of government, and upon all subordinate authority in church and state—that we may lead quiet and peaceable lives in all godliness and honesty, that religion and good order may be established, and iniquity be put to shame and silence. Thus we may hope to be secured, by the sure though secret mark of divine protection.

The Lord will be our shield, though many should suffer or fall around us. The very hairs of our heads are numbered. Or if, for the manifestation of our faith and the power of His grace, He should permit us to share in common calamities, we may rely upon Him to afford us strength according to our day. He is always near to His people, a very present help in the time of trouble; and He can make the season of their greatest tribulations [into] the season of their sweetest consolations.

3. Faith

And let us pray in faith. Let us remember what great things the Lord has done in answer to prayer. When sin had given Sennacherib rapid success in his invasion of Judah, he did not know that he was no more than an ax or a saw in the hand of God. He ascribed his victories to his own prowess, and thought himself equally sure of Jerusalem, but Hezekiah defeated him upon his knees. He spread his blasphemous letter before the Lord in the temple, and prayed, and the Assyrian army melted away like snow. When Peter was shut up and chained in prison, the chains fell from his hands, the locks and bolts gave way, and the iron gate opened, while the church was united in earnest prayer for his deliverance.

The present is a very important crisis. All that is dear to us as men, as Christians, is threatened. Our enemies are inveterate and enraged. Our sins testify against us. But if we humble ourselves before God, forsake our sins, and unite in supplications for mercy, who can tell, but He may be entreated to give us that help which it would be in vain to expect from man. Yea, we have encouragement to hope that He will be for us, and then none can prevail against us. But without His blessing, our most powerful efforts and best concerted undertaking cannot succeed.

You who have access to the throne of grace, whose hearts are concerned for the glory of God, and who lament not only the temporal calamities attendant upon war, but the many thousands of souls who are yearly precipitated by it into an eternal, unchangeable state—you, I trust, will show yourselves true friends to your country by bearing your testimony and exerting your influence against sin, the procuring cause of all our sorrows; and by standing in the breach, and pleading with God for mercy, in behalf of yourselves and the nation. If ten persons, thus disposed, had been found even in Sodom, it would have escaped destruction!

V. Those Without Christ

There may be some persons in this assembly who are little concerned for their own sins, and are, of course, incapable of taking a proper part in the service of the day. Yet I am glad that you are here; I pity you, I warn you. If you should live to see a time of public distress, what will you do? To whom will you look, or to where will you flee for help? All that is dear to you may be torn from you, or you from it. Or, if it please God to prolong our tranquility, you are liable to many heavy calamities in private life. And if you should be exempted from these, death is inevitable, and may be near. My heart wishes you the possession of those principles which would support

you in all the changes of life, and make your dying pillow comfortable. Are you unwilling to be happy? Or can you be happy too soon?

Many people are now looking upon you, who once were as you are now. And, I doubt not, they are praying that you may be as they now are. Try to pray for yourself; our God is assuredly in the midst of us. His gracious ear is attentive to every suppliant. Seek Him while He is to be found. Jesus died for sinners, and He has said, Him that “come to me I will in no wise cast out” (Joh 6:37). He is likewise the author of that faith by which alone you can come rightly to Him. If you ask it of Him, He will give it you; if you seek it, in the means of His appointment, you shall assuredly find. If you refuse this, there remains no other sacrifice for sin. If you are not saved by faith in His blood, you are lost forever (Rom 3:25). Oh, “kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all they that put their trust in him” (Psa 2:12)! ❧

Prayer for Our Nation

*Lord, while Thy judgments shake the land,
Thy people's eyes are fixed on Thee;
We own Thy just uplifted hand,
Which thousands cannot, will not, see.*

*How long hast Thou bestowed Thy care
On this indulged, ungrateful spot!
While other nations, far and near,
Have envied and admired our lot.*

*Here peace and liberty have dwelt,
The glorious Gospel brightly shone;
And oft our enemies have felt
That God has made our cause His own.*

*But ah! both heaven and earth have heard
Our vile requital of His love;
We, whom like children He has reared,
Rebels against His goodness prove.*

*His grace despised, His power defied,
And legions of the blackest crimes,
Profaneness, riot, lust, and pride,
Are signs that mark the present times.*

*The Lord, displease, has raised His rod;
Ah! where are now the faithful few
Who tremble for the Ark of God,
And know what Israel ought to do?*

*Lord, hear Thy people everywhere,
Who meet to mourn, confess, and pray;
The nation and Thy churches spare,
And let Thy wrath be turned away.*