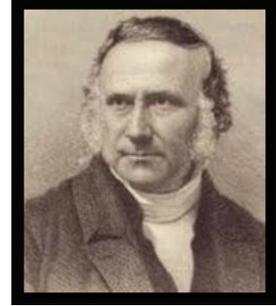


Fixed Despair



There was in my congregation, at one time, a woman about forty years of age, who was a subject of wonder to me. She was one of the most intelligent and well educated of the people; she had been brought up from her childhood in the family of a clergyman, as his daughter; she was very attentive to the observance of the Sabbath; she was never absent from her seat in the church. As the mother of a family, she had few equals. Everybody respected her. But she was not a member of the church. And whenever I had endeavored to call her attention to the subject of religion, she was so reserved, that I could not even conjecture what was her particular state of mind. I was told that she never spake to anyone, in respect to her religious feelings.

My ignorance of her views and feelings led me to be in doubt, what to say to her. I felt that I was groping in the dark, every time I attempted to converse with her. Sometimes I suspected, that she secretly indulged a hope in Christ, though she told me to the contrary. At other times, I suspected, that she was relying upon her perfectly moral life for salvation, though she denied this also.

I could not persuade her to seek the Lord; nor could I ascertain what was her hindrance. And I was the more surprised at this, on account of the profound respect which she appeared to have for religion; and her deep solemnity whenever I spoke to her on the subject. I had hoped, that by conversation with her I might get a glimpse of her heart, that the

peculiarity of her state of mind would casually become manifest; and thus I should learn what it would be best for me to say to her. But she was too reserved for this. After several trials I was still in the dark. I did not know what she thought or felt—what it was, that kept her from attending to her salvation.

I called upon her, one day, and frankly told her my embarrassment about her. I mentioned her uniform taciturnity, my motive in aiming to overcome it, my supposition that some error kept her from religion, and my inability even to conjecture what it was. I said to her, that I had not a doubt; there was something locked up in her own mind, which she never whispered to me. She seemed very much surprised at this declaration; and I instantly asked her, if it was not so. With some reluctance she confessed it was. And then, after no little urgency, she said she would tell me the whole, not on her own account, but that her case might not discourage me from aiming to lead others to Christ.

She then said, that her day of grace was past that she had had every possible opportunity for salvation—that every possible motive had a thousand times been presented to her—that she had been the subject of deep convictions and anxiety often that she had lived through three remarkable revivals of religion, in which many of her companions had been led to Christ—that she had again and again attempted to work out her salvation; but all in vain. “I know my day is gone by,” said she. “I am given over. The Holy Spirit has left me.”

She spake this in a decided manner, solemnly and coldly, unmoved as a rock! It surprised me. And as I was silently thinking for a moment, how I could best remove her error; she went on to say, that she had never before now mentioned this, for a number of years—that she fully believed in the reality of experimental religion—that she believed all that she had ever heard me preach; except when once or twice, I had spoken of religious despair—that, as her day of grace was past, she did not wish to

have her mind troubled on the subject of religion at all—and asked me to say nothing more to her about it.

I inquired how long she had been in this state of mind. She told me she had known for eighteen years, that there was no salvation for her. I inquired if she ever prayed. She said she had not prayed in eighteen years. I inquired if she did not feel unhappy to be in such a state. She said she seldom thought of it—it would do no good and she never intended to think of it again. I asked:

“Do you believe the heart is deceitful?”

“Yes, I know it.”

“It may be, then, that your wicked heart has deceived you, in respect to your day of grace.” This idea appeared to stagger her, for a moment; but she replied,

“No; I am not deceived.”

“Yes; you are.”

“No; I am not. Nothing can save me now; and I do not wish to have my mind disturbed by any more thought about it.”

“Why do you attend church?”

“Only to set a good example. I believe in religion as firmly as you do; and wish my children to be Christians.”

“Do you pray for them?”

“No; prayer from me would not be heard.”

“Madam,” said I, emphatically, “you are in an error. I know you are. And I can convince you of it. If you will hear me, lend me your mind, and speak frankly to me, and tell me the grounds on which your despair rests, I will convince you, that you are entirely deceived. I cannot do it now. It would take too long. You have so long been in this state, and have fortified your error by so many other deceptions; that it will take some days to demolish the defenses you have heaved up around you. But I can do it. If your mind will adhere to a thing once proved to you if when a thing is fixed, your mind will let it stay fixed, and not just have the same doubt after the demonstration, that it had before it; I am perfectly certain you may be led to see your error. May I come to see you again about it?”

“I had rather not see you. It will do no good. It will only make me miserable. I did not intend to tell you how I felt; but when you found out, that something was concealed, I would not deceive you. But I wish to hear no more about it. My day of grace is past forever.”

“No, it is not,” said I, most emphatically. “Your deceitful heart has only seized on that idea, as an excuse for not coming to repentance.— Allow me, at least, to come and see you.”

“I had rather not, sir.”

“Madam, you must! I cannot leave you so! I will not! I love you too well to do it. I ask it as a personal favor to myself; and I shall not think you have treated me politely, if you refuse it. May I see you a little while to-morrow?”

“I will see you,—if you so much desire it.”

“I thank you, my dear lady. You have greatly gratified me. You will yet believe what I have said to you. I know you can be saved. And you

know me well enough to know, that I am not the man to make such strong declarations rashly. All I ask is the opportunity to convince you. I will see you to-morrow.”

In all this conversation, she seemed as unmoved as a stone. She did not shed a tear, or heave a sigh. She could talk about the certainty of her eternal misery, as if her heart were ice.

The next day when I called, I asked to know the reasons or evidences on which her dreadful opinion rested. She told me one after another, referring to many texts of scripture; and did it with a coldness which made me shudder. Of the certainty of her eternal enmity to God, and her eternal misery, she reasoned. so coolly, that I almost felt I was listening to words from the lips of a corpse!

Perceiving that she would probably decline seeing me again, and wanting time to study her case more carefully, I suddenly took leave of her. I had expected the old affair of the “unpardonable sin,” or “sin against the Holy Ghost;” but I found a far more difficult matter.

I called again. Evidently she was sorry to see me. But I gave her no time to make any objections. I desired her to listen to me, and not yield her assent to what I was going to say, if she could reasonably avoid it. I then took up her evidences of being forever given over of God, beginning with the weakest of them; and in about an hour had disposed of several in such a way that she acknowledged her deception “in respect to them.”

“But,” says she, “there are stronger ones left.”

“We will attend to them hereafter,” said I. “But remember, you have found your mistake in respect to some; therefore, it is possible you may be mistaken in respect to others.”—This remark was the first thing that

appeared to stagger her old opinion. She said nothing; but evidently her confidence was shaken.

I saw her time after time, about once a week, for five or six weeks; examined all her reasons for thinking her day of grace gone by, except one, and convinced her they were false. Evidently she had become intellectually interested. There was but one point left. She had never in all this time expressed a wish to see me, or asked me to call again. I now called her attention summarily to the ground we had gone over, and how she had found all her refuges of lies swept away, save one, as she had herself acknowledged; and if that were gone she would think: her salvation possible;—and then asked her if she wished to see me again. She replied that her opinion was unchanged; but that she should like to hear what I had to say about this remaining point, which, (as she truly said,) I had avoided so often.

I called the next day. I took up the one point left—this last item which doomed her to despair; and as I examined it, reasoning with her, and asking if she thought me right, from step to step as I went on, the intensity of her thought became painful to me. She gazed upon me with unutterable astonishment. Her former cold and stone-like appearance was gone; her bosom heaved with emotion, and her whole frame seemed agitated with a new kind of life. To see the dreadful fixedness of despair melting away from her countenance, and the dawnings of inceptive hope taking its place, was a new and strange thing to me. It looked like putting life into a corpse. As my explanation and argument drew towards the close, she turned pale as death. She almost ceased to breathe. And when I had finished, and in answer to my question she confessed, that she had no reason to believe her day of grace was past,—instantly she looked as if she had waked up in a new world. The tears gushed from her eyes in a torrent—she clasped her hands—sprung from her seat, and walked back and forth across the room, exclaiming, “I can be saved! I can be saved! I can be saved!” She was so entirely overcome, that I thought she would

faint, or her reason give way. I dared not leave her. I said nothing, but remained till she became more composed, and took my leave with a silent bow.

The next Sunday evening, she was at the inquiry meeting. She appeared like other awakened sinners, nothing remarkable about her, except her very manifest determination to seek the Lord with all her heart.

In about three weeks, she became one of the happiest creatures in hope, that I ever saw. She afterwards united with the church, and yet lives a happy and decided believer.

The gospel is addressed to hope. Despair must always be deaf to it. Entire despair is incompatible with seeking God. Despair cannot pray. The last effort of the devil seems to be, to drive sinners to despair. "We are saved by hope," says the apostle.

Few errors are harmless. None are safe. Truth is never injurious. And I can have no sympathy with those ministers, who think an error may do an impenitent sinner good. Tricks are not truth.