

The Fainting Soul Revived

A Sermon

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"When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the Lord."—[Jonah 2:7](#).

WHEN man was first made, there was no fear of his forgetting God for it was his highest privilege and delight to have communion with his Maker. "The Lord God walked in the garden in the cool of the day," and Adam was privileged to hold fellowship with God, closer, perhaps, than even the angels had in heaven. But the spell of that sacred harmony was rudely broken by man's disobedience and his dreadful fall. Ever since our first parent tasted of the forbidden fruit, which brought death into our world, and all its train of woes, his mortal race has been naturally prone to forget God. The evil propensities of flesh and blood have made it impossible to persuade man to remember his Creator. The complaint of God against the Jews is true as an indictment against the whole human family. "Hear, O heaven, and give ear. O earth: I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me; the ox knoweth its owner, and the ass its master's crib, but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider." Man is foolish; he flies from the highest good. Man is wicked; he turns his back upon supreme holiness. Man is worldly: he forgets the kingdom of God and the world to come. Man is wilful; he follows his own vain imaginations, and, with head-strong rebellion, opposes himself to his God, that he may pursue his own wayward course, and gratify his wanton passions.

To convince a man of his error, to arrest him in his evil pursuits, to reclaim him to the paths of righteousness—this is seldom accomplished without dire trouble and deep affliction. Some men, it is true, are brought to God by gentle means; they are drawn by soft but mighty bonds; still, a much larger class of persons remains, upon whom these silken cords would exert no influence. They must not be handled softly, but must be dealt with heavily. The picklock will never open their hearts; there must be the crowbar, and even the battering ram, to give a furious cannonade. Some hearts can never be captured for God and for truth except by storm. Sword in hand, God's law must scale the ramparts. With thundering report, God's Word must dash down the walls of their confidence, and make breach after breach in the bastions of their pride, and even then they will fight it out, and never yield, until, driven to an awful extremity, they see that they must either yield at once, or else be lost for ever. It is with such persons that I now particularly want to deal. There are those who have forgotten God after having once known him, and they are not likely to be brought back

without great trouble; and there are others who never did know God, and they never will enquire after him, unless they are driven to their wits' end by calamity, as when a great famine in the land where he dwelt compelled the prodigal for very lack of bread to seek his Father's house. So I have first to remonstrate:—

I. WITH THE BACKSLIDER.

Let me, however, before I go into the matter with you, describe a little more minutely the individuals I wish to address. There is no need to call out your names; it will suffice if we portray your character and describe your conduct. There are some of you who used to be members of Christian churches years ago, but you have gradually declined, and so reckless has your career at length become, that it is a wonder that you have not utterly perished in your sin. You seemed to run well on the outset, and for a time you held on in the way; but where are you now? Well, you happen at this present to be in God's house, and I do trust that God's own hour has come, when he will meet you and bring you back. What we have to say of Jonah, I do entreat you to apply to yourselves; if the cap seems to fit you, put it on and wear it, even though it should be a fool's cap: wear it till you are ashamed of yourselves, and are led to confess your folly before the God who is able to remove it, and to make you wise unto salvation.

Observe, dear friends, that though Jonah remembered the Lord, it was not till he got into the whale's belly, nor even then till his soul fainted within him. He did not remember the Lord all the time he was going down to Joppa to find a ship, nor yet when he got on board that ship. His Master had said to him, Jonah, go to Nineveh," but Jonah was a strong-willed, head-strong fellow. Though a true servant of God, and a prophet, yet he fled from the presence of the Lord. To Nineveh, he resolved within himself, he would not go. He could foresee no honour to himself out of the journey, no increase of his own reputation, no deference that would come to him amongst those proud Assyrians, so, in direct defiance of the divine command, he set off to Joppa, to take a ship and to flee from God's presence. Into the ship he got, paid the fare, and went sallying down the sea to go to Tarshish; but all this while he never thought of God. Not unlikely in this assembly there may be a woman who used to be a member of a Christian church, but she married an ungodly man; after that there was no going to the house of God, much less anything like keeping up her church membership. The shop was kept open on Sunday, or there was a pleasure party to be entertained at home, or an excursion taken into the country. All this seemed very pleasant. The disquietude of conscience she might feel at first wore off as habit made it familiar, until, year after year, this woman, who once seemed to be a true servant of Christ, lives in carelessness and indifference, not to say profanity, with hardly any thoughts of God. Perhaps she has not quite given up prayer; she could not absolutely become an enemy of Christ, or entertain a dislike to his people. Still, God was forgotten. So long as the business prospered, the husband was in good health, and the world smiled, God was never thought of. Can I be mistaken in sup-

posing that there is a man here who in his youth was a loud talker, a vehement professor of religion, and a companion of those that fear the Lord? But after a time there seemed to be a way of getting money rather faster than the ordinary methods of honest labour or simple merchandise; so he entered into, a speculation, which soon ate out the vitals of his piety. His new projects involved new companions; in their fellowship he stifled his old convictions, and, as he would not play the hypocrite, he ceased to make any profession at all. Perhaps months have passed since he has been in a place of worship; even now he would rather be unrecognised, for he has only come here because a friend from the country asked him company to me the place and to hear the preacher. Ah! my dear sir, it is strange indeed, if you be a child of God, that you could have walked so contrary to God as you have. Yet so did Jonah. Do I, then, hold up his case before your eyes to comfort you? Nay; but let me hope that you will apply the bitter rebuke to your own soul, and be led to do as Jonah did. All the while the ship sailed smoothly over the sea, Jonah forgot his God. You could not have distinguished him from the veriest heathen on board. He was just as bad as they were. Yet was there a spark of fire among the embers, which God in due time fanned into a flame. Happy for you if this better part of his experience should tally with your own.

Such, too, was Jonah's blank forgetfulness, that he does not appear to have thought upon his God *all the while the storm raged*, the billows rolled, and the ship was tossed with tempest. The poor heathen sailors were all on their knees crying for mercy, but Jonah was asleep in the vessel, till the superstitious captain himself was amazed at his apathy: "What meanest thou, O sleeper; carest thou not that we all perish?" He went down and upbraided him, and asked him how it was that he could sleep while the passengers and crew were all crying. "Arise," said he, "and call upon thy God." He was stirred up to his danger and his duty, even by a heathen! Now maybe there are some here who have had a host of troubles. Is husband dead? Are you a lone woman with a family to provide for? Or are you a widower, looking on your children with pity, whom you once regarded with a homely pride? Possibly you may have another form of trial. Your business has gone to the bad; you expected to have realised large profits by it, but you encountered loss upon loss, till your little capital has been scattered. Still, all this while you have not thought about God. Mayhap that child after child has been taken from you, and yet you have not remembered God. Is it really so, that the Lord loves you, and, because he loves you, therefore chastens you? Mark my word, you will continue to suffer loss upon loss, till you have lost all you have and all you count dear, and you will be brought to death's door yourself, but he will save you at last. If you ever were his, he never will let you sink into hell; but, oh! it will be hard work for you to get to heaven. You will be saved, but it will be so as by fire. You will be saved as by the skin of your teeth—scarcely saved, and the way in which you are saved will be a most terrible one to you. Oh! friend, I wish you would turn while God is smiting you gently, for know of a certainty if rods will not do, he will come to scourges, and if the scourge will not do, he will take the

knife, and if the knife will not do, he will take the sword, and you shall have to feel it, for, as sure as God is God, he will never lose his child, and he will cut that child, as it were, into pieces, but he will save his soul. He will undermine your constitution by disease, and make you toss upon the bed of anguish, but he will bring you back. Oh! that you had grace to come back by gentler means before these terrible actions are tried!

So, then, Jonah did not think of God all this time. Now at length the vessel begins to creak, and seems as if she must go to pieces. Then they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah. He is about to be thrown into the sea. At that moment a pair of huge jaws open wide, shut again, and swallow him up. "Where am I now?" says Jonah, as he is taken down deep by the motions of this monstrous fish, till the weeds come into the fish and wrap about his head, and his life is only preserved by a miracle. Then, oh! then Jonah thinks upon his God. "When my soul fainted within me." Now why did his soul faint within him? Was it not because he thought, "Now I am in a hopeless case; I shall never come out of this; it is a wonder I am not drowned; it is a marvel I was not snapped in pieces by those huge jaws; what a hopeless case I am in! I will but linger a little while, then perish I must in this horrible prison of a whale's belly." I dare say he thought that never was man in such a plight before; never a person that was alive inside a fish; and how comfortless he must have felt with nothing but the cold deep round him. Instead of garments, weeds were wrapped about his head. How his heart throbbed, and his head ached, with no cheer, no light, no friendly voice, no succour, no help; faraway from dry land, out on the boundless deep, without a comrade to sympathise with his strange plight.

Now when a child of God goes astray, it is not at all unusual for God to bring him into just such a state as that, a condition in which he cannot help himself; forlorn and friendless, with no one that can relieve or minister to him. This dreary thought will meanwhile ever haunt his mind, "I brought it all upon myself!" Hast thou not procured this unto thyself? Like a woman who has left her husband's house, deserted her home, and betrayed her kind and tender protector, what fruit can she expect to reap of her wickedness? When she is ready to starve, when the wind blows through her tattered raiment, when her face is swollen with weeping, and her soul is full of anguish, she has only herself to upbraid, as she cries, "I have brought this upon myself; would God I had never left my cheerful homestead, however humble the lodgings might have been; would God I had never deserted the husband who loved me, and spread his aegis over me, however roughly he sometimes spake! Oh! that I had been more scrupulously obedient, and less prone to discontent!" The afterthought of sin—I think they call it remorse. Thus it was that Jonah thought upon his God, when the shame of his transgressions overwhelmed him.

Oh! how merciful our God is to allow us to think about him, and turn to him when in so pitiable a plight! "Yes," said a tradesman once to a customer for whose favours he felt little cause to be grateful, "you come to me, I know why; you have been to every other shop

in the town for the article you require, and you could not obtain it; and now you come back to me whom you had no good cause ever to leave, I shall not serve you." This is not how the Lord speaks to us. He does not resent our ingratitude. "My child, my poor child," says he, "though you have gone and spent your substance; though you have been feeding swine: though you are all black, and foul and filthy, yet you are my dear child still, and my heart yearns towards you." Without a word of rebuke, or even a taunting look, so soon as ever a poor sinner comes back to the Father's house, the Father's arms are round about his neck, and the kiss of pardon is pressed on his cheek. "I remember thee well," says he; "I have blotted out thy sins like a cloud, and like a thick cloud thine iniquities." Now if there be a backslider here—and I know there are several—I can only hope that God will bring you into Jonah's peril. You shall have no pity from me if he does; I will rather be thankful to God that he has brought you there, because I shall know then that he has some designs of love towards you. But when you get into the regions of despair, do as Jonah did—think upon your God. What, do any of you objects? Do you imagine that to think about God would make you worse? Well, think that you were once his child, and think again that he has found you out, and knows where you are. Jonah felt that God knew where he was, because he had sent the fish. God knows your whereabouts, my good woman; he knows what quarters you are now in, my fellow-sinner. Remember, too, that you are yet alive! what a wonder it is that you are still permitted to hear the voice which says, "Return, return; oh! backslider, return." God is immutable; he cannot change; his covenant is steadfast; he will not alter it. If he has loved you once, he loves you now. If I bought you, I will have you. Come back to him, then; he is your husband still. Return! return! he is your Father still—return! return! But, oh! my hearer, perhaps you have no pretensions to be a child of his! Perhaps you may have played the hypocrite and made a profession in your own strength. You turned back from the company of those who fear the Lord, because you never were truly converted. If it be so, let the mercy, which God shows to sinners, embolden you to cry to him. And may he break you to pieces now with the hammer of his Word. So may he save you, and so shall his praise be exceedingly great in your salvation.

Though I have tried thus to reach the backslider, it is likely enough that I have missed my mark, honest as my intention has been. Oh! it seems so dreadful that any of you should perish in your sins, who know the way of hope! Some of you were candled on the knees of piety. There are those now in heaven who look down upon you, and could they weep, you might feel their tears dropping on your brow. You know very well that time was when the hope of a better world yielded you some kind of comfort and joy. You do not think, at any rate, that you were feigning piety then, but you did account yourself, a sinner. By the compassion of the Most High, by the love of God, I pray you stop! Do not drink the cup of devils after having drank the cup of the Lord, and give not that soul to damnation which once seemed to bid fair for salvation. Eternal life is too rich a prize to trifle with. May the

Spirit of God do what I cannot. May he send home these things to the persons for whom they are intended.

And now we have, in the second place, to deal with the careless, the thoughtless, the profligate—with:—

II. THOSE WHO NEVER WERE AWAKENED—moral or immoral in the world's reckoning. Jonah did not remember God till his soul fainted within him; and the reckless sinner, as a rule, never does remember God till under the stress of law, or the distress of pain and penalty; *his* soul is ready to faint within him. Now I hope some of you will be brought to feel this faintness.

What kind of faintness do persons who are under the saved discipline of the Spirit of God generally feel?

There is faintness of *horror at their present condition*. I can imagine a person lying down on the edge of a cliff and falling asleep. On suddenly waking up, having moved during his sleep, he finds himself within an inch of the precipice, and looks down and sees, far beneath him, the jagged rocks and the boiling sea. How his nerves would quiver as he realized his position and his jeopardy! Many a sinner has thus opened his eyes to discern his terrible hazard. He has suddenly waked up to find that he is on the brink of eternal wrath, standing where an angry God is waving a dreadful sword, and certain to plunge it into his heart before long. Every unconverted person here is poising over the mouth of hell upon a single plank, and that plank is rotten; he is hanging over the jaws of perdition by one rope, and the strands of that rope are snapping every moment. If a man does but apprehend this and feels it, I do not wonder that he faints.

Faintness, moreover, arises from *a dread of horrors yet to come*. Who can conceive the heart-sinking of those poor passengers on board that vessel which so lately foundered in the open sea, at the prospect of being swallowed up alive, and sinking they knew not whither! It would be no easy thing, one would think, to keep from fainting at a time when such a doom was imminent. So when God awakens the soul by the noise of the tempest, it looks out and sees the ocean of divine wrath about to engulf it. The cries of lost spirits appal it, and it says to itself, "I shall soon mingle with those shrieks; my voice will aid the wailings of their dolorous company ore long; I shall be driven from his presence with a fiery sword at my heels before many hours are over." Then the soul faints with alarm at the thought of judgment to come.

Faint, too, is the soul of the sinner through a sense of *weakness*. "I cannot do anything to avert the catastrophe" seems to be the leading idea of a person when he has fainted. Over the awakened sinner there comes this sense of weakness. When a sinner does not know himself, he thinks that being saved is the easiest thing in the world. He supposes that to come to Christ to get peace is a matter that can be done just as readily as one snaps his fingers. But when God begins to deal with him, he says, "I would believe, but I cannot"; and he cries

out, "Oh! God, I find that faith is as impossible to me as keeping thy law, except thou help me!" Once he thought he could reform himself, and become as holy as an angel; but now he can do nothing, and he cries out for very faintness, "Oh! God, what a poor, helpless, shiftless creature I am!"

And then there will sometimes come over him faintness of such a kind as I must call *horrible*. Well do I remember when I was in that state! I thought I would give up prayer, because it seemed of no use to pray, and yet I could not help praying; I must pray, and yet I felt that I did not pray. I thought I would not go to hear the gospel any more; there was nothing in it for me, and yet there was a fascination about the preaching of the gospel that made me go and hear it. I heard that Christ was very gracious to sinners but I could not believe that he would be gracious to me. Little did it matter whether I heard a promise or a threatening. I liked the threatening best. Threatenings appeared to me to be just what I deserved, and they provoked some kind of emotion in my breast. But when I heard a promise I shuddered with a gloomy feeling that it was of no use to me; I felt condemned already. The pains of hell got hold upon me, so tortured was my soul with the forebodings of an endless doom. I heard, the other day, of a young minister becoming an infidel, and I prayed for him. What, think you, was the burden of my petition? I prayed *that God would make him feel the weight of his hand*; for I cannot imagine that a man who has once felt the weight of God's hand can ever afterwards doubt his being, his sovereignty, or his power. Believe me, brethren, there is such an unutterable anguish, as a man could not long endure without becoming absolutely insane, which God makes some people feel in order to crush their love of sin, to purge them of their self-righteousness, and bring them to a sense of their dependence on himself. Some men can never be brought in any other way. I may be addressing the patients I am describing. I sincerely hope I am. You are feeling God's hand. The whole weight of it rests upon you, and under it you are crushed, as a moth is crushed beneath one's finger. Now I have a message from God for you. When Jonah was in your case he remembered his God. Tell me, what sayest thou, poor heart—what sayest thou to remembering thy God?

The case I am going to describe is not exactly that of John Newton, but it is from his experience that I gather my picture. There is a young man with a very good father, a holy father. As the young man grows up he does not like his trade: he cannot bear it, no he says to his father, "While I succumb to your government I mean to have my own way; other people enjoy themselves, and so will I; and as I cannot do it under your roof. I will follow my fancy elsewhere." He goes to sea. When he is at sea he discovers that all is not quite to his taste; the work he has to do is very different from what he had been accustomed to; still, he doesn't flinch. At the first port he reaches he gives loose to his passions. "Ah!" says he, "this is a jolly life! This is far better than being at home with my father, and being kept tied to my mother's apron-strings all my days. I say a merry life is the thing to suit me, sir." He goes on board again, and wherever the vessel puts in, each port becomes an outlet for his

vices. He is a rare boy to swear and drink, and when he comes back to England he has no words too bitter to utter against religion in general, and against his father's scruples of conscience in particular. It so happens that one day there comes on a dreadful storm. He has to take a long spell at the pumps, and when that is over he must begin to pump again, for the ship is ready to founder, and every man must keep hard at it hour after hour. There is a driving wind and a heavy tempest. At last they are told that nothing can save them; there are breakers ahead, and the vessel will be on shore! He lashes himself to the mast and floats about all night, and the next day, and the next, with faint hope of life. He has some twitches of conscience now; he cannot help thinking of his father and mother. However, he is not going to be broken down by a trifle. He has a hard heart, and he will not give way yet. He is crashed on shore, and finds himself among a barbarous people. He is taken care of by the barbarians; they give him food; albeit his meal is scant, and he is presently set to work as a slave. His master proves harsh to him, and his master's wife especially cruel. He gets but little to eat, and he is often beaten. Still, he bears up, and hopes for better days. But, half-starved and hard worked, his bodily health and his mental energy are reduced to a low degree. No marvel that fever overtakes him. Who has he to nurse him? What friend to care for him? The people treat him as a dog, and take no notice of him. He can neither stir nor move. In vain he pines for a drop of water in the dead of the night; he feels that he must die of thirst. He lifts his voice, but there is nobody to hear him. To his piteous appeal there is no answer. Then it is he thinks, "Oh! God, if I might but get back to my father!" Then it is, when he is at the last extremity, that he thinks of home.

Now what did happen in the case of John Newton will happen, and has happened, in the case of many a sinner. He never would come back to God, but at last he felt that it was no use trying anywhere else. He was driven to utter desperation. In this dilemma his heart said, "Oh! that I might find the Lord." Hark, now: I will tell you a tale. A lot of sailors were going to sea. When about to start, the owner said, "There! I have bought a lifeboat; put it on board." They reply, "No, never! We don't believe in lifeboats; they are new-fangled things. We do not understand them, and we shall never use one." "Put it on board, and let it bide there," says the captain. "Well, captain," says the boatswain, "a tom fool of a boat—isn't it? I cannot think what the owner meant by putting such a thing as this on board." Old tars, as they walk along the deck say to themselves, "Ah! I never saw such a thing in all my life as that! Think of old Ben Bolt taking a lifeboat with him! Don't believe in such gimcracks!" Presently a stiff breeze springs up, it comes to a gale—a hurricane—a perfect tornado! Now let down the lifeboat, captain. "No, no, no; nonsense!" Let down the lifeboat! No; the other boats are got out, but they are stove in, one after another, and capsized. They bring out another; she cannot ride out the storm. There she goes, right up on the crest of the waves and she has gone over, bottom uppermost. It is all over with them! "What shall we do, captain?" "Try the lifeboat, boatswain." Just so; when every spar is gone, when every other boat is

washed overboard, and when the ship is going down, they will take to the lifeboat. So be it. The Lord wash all your boats overboard. May it please God to wreck your vessel; may he shiver every timber, and make you take to the lifeboat. I fear me some of you will never take counsel till you reach the crisis. May there come, then, such a storm that you will be driven to take to Christ. That done there is no storm you need ever fear. That done, let the loudest tempest roar, you are safe; you have Christ in the vessel with you. Two or three more words, and I have done. God has been pleased to give his dear Son, his only-begotten Son, to die a most dreadful death, not for righteous ones, but for sinners. Jesus Christ came into the world to seek and to save that which was lost. If you are a sinner, you are the sort of person Christ came to save. If you are a lost one, you are the sort of man that Jesus Christ came to seek. Let your present sorrow comfort you, because it is an indication that you are the kind of person that Christ will bless. Let your despair deliver you from despair, for when you despair there is hope for you. When you can do nothing, God will do everything. When you are empty of your own conceits, there is room for Christ to enter your heart. When you are stripped, Christ's garments are provided for you. When you are hungry, the bread that cometh down from heaven is provided for you. When you are thirsty, the water of life is yours. Let this broken-heartedness, this terror, this alarm, this faintness, this weakness of yours, only lead you to say, "I am such as Christ invited to himself. I will go to him, and if I perish, I will perish only there"; and if you trust Jesus, you shall never perish, neither shall any pluck you out of his hand. May you trust him here and now. Amen.