The People Who Receive the Saints' Rest

~Other Speakers A-F: Richard Baxter:

The heavenly rest is designed for "the people of God," as the text identifies them (Heb. 4:9). They are chosen by God "before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4). They are but a part of humanity. They are fewer than the world imagines, yet not as few as some narrow-minded people think.

These people are born again. It is as impossible to be the people of God without being "born again" spiritually, as it is to be children of humans without first being born. The greatest reformation of life that can be attained without this new life from God may provide us with further delusion, but it will never gain us salvation.

The people of God experience conviction. They are convinced of the evil of SIN. The sinner comes to realize that the sin which was formerly his delight, is loathsome to him and God. Before he saw nothing so bad about sin that Christ should have to die for it. Now when God opens his eyes, he sees the inexpressible vileness of sin, and he becomes willing to admit the worst about himself.

Before they read the threats of God's law as men read about foreign wars. Now they realize it is their own story. They suddenly see they are reading about their own doom! As the prophet Nathan accused King David with the words, "You are the man" (2 Sam. 12:7), so the sinner finds his own name written in the curse of the law. Before the wrath of God seemed to him to be like a storm outside his own warm home, or like the pain of a sick person to the one who is only visiting him. Now, however, he finds the disease is his own, and discovers he is himself a condemned man. This conviction is the work of the Spirit. Why would a person come to Christ for pardon if he did not first find himself guilty? "Those who are whole have no need of the physician, but those who are sick" (Mark 2:17).

The people of God are convinced of THEIR OWN INSUFFICIENCY. Our natural inclination is to be our own god. When God should guide us, we guide ourselves. When God should be our King, we rule ourselves. We find fault with the laws God gives. If we had made them, we would have made them differently. When we should depend upon God, we prefer to have our own security without having to depend on Him. When we should submit to His providence, we usually quarrel with it and think we could devise a better plan for our lives. We want popularity with other people more than we desire to please God. We want human appreciation and admiration. Thus we are by nature our own idols. But once God renews the soul, this idol falls down like the old Philistine idol Dagon which fell down broken before the Ark of God (1 Sam. 5:3).

Sometimes trouble helps a person turn to God. Sickness says, "See if your wealth or pleasures can help you! Can they keep your departing soul in your body? Cry aloud to them, and see if they can substitute for God!" O how this gets through to the sinner. Common sense admits the truth, and even the flesh is convinced of its own insufficiency.

On the other hand, the people of God are convinced of the full SUFFICIENCY OF JESUS CHRIST. As a hungry man is convinced of the necessity of food, so the sinner sees that none but Christ can satisfy him. Not gold, but food, will satisfy the starving person; and only pardon can comfort the condemned. As the sinner sees his misery, and the inability of himself or others to relieve him; he turns to the only One who can help him—the Lord Jesus Christ.

The WILL is also changed by the Christian's conviction. While sin may still appeal to the flesh, the will hates it. God causes this to happen. Convinced that Christ alone is able and willing to save him and that nothing else can be his happiness, the sinner affectionately accepts Christ as his Savior and Lord. To accept Christ without love, is not justifying faith; for faith is the receiving of Christ with the whole soul. Faith either accepts Christ as Savior and Lord, or not at all. Faith not only acknowledges Christ's sufferings, and accepts His salvation; but it acknowledges His sovereignty, and submits to His rule.

I urge you, reader, to consider whether you have these characteristics of God's people. I am not asking whether you remember the time when you became a Christian. It is not so important to know when or how you came to have these characteristics, but carefully examine yourself and see if you have been thoroughly convinced of how vile sin is and of the wickedness that saturated your life. Do you consent to the law of God, that it is true and righteous, and that you are justly condemned to death by it? Have you renounced all your own righteousness? Have you cast the idols out of your heart? Does Christ now have the highest room in your life and love, so that, though you cannot love Him as much as you wish, yet nothing else is loved as much? Have you made a sincere covenant with Him, and committed yourself to Him? Is it your endeavor to be found faithful to this covenant and to belong entirely to the Lord? If this is truly your condition, then you are one of "the

people of God" in the text (Heb. 4:9); and as sure as the promise of God is true, this blessed rest remains for you! Just be certain that you "abide in Christ" (John 15:4), and "endure to the end" (Matt. 10:22).

The Scripture promises this rest to God's people. The sacred pages are bespangled with these divine promises, as the sky is with stars. Christ says, "Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). Therefore the saints in heaven sing a new song unto him who has redeemed them "to God by his blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation" (Rev. 5:9).

Scripture assures us that the people of God have the beginnings, foretastes, guarantees, and seals of this promised rest now in this life—1 Peter 2:3; 2 Corinthians 1:22; 5:5; Ephesians 1:13-14; 4:30. "The kingdom of God is within" them (Luke 17:21). They "rejoice in hope of the glory of God" (Rom. 5:2). The Scripture also mentions, by name, those who have entered into this rest; for instance, Enoch, Abraham, Lazarus, and the thief who was crucified with Christ.

Scripture not only proves that this rest is for the people of God, but also that it is for none but them; so that the remainder of the world shall have no part in it. "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14). "The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God" (Ps. 9:17). "The Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven…in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ—who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power" (2 Thess. 1:7-9).

In hell, sinners shall forever lay all the blame on their own wills. Hell is a rational torment by conscience. If sinners could then say, "It was God's fault, and not ours," that would quiet their consciences and ease their torments. But to remember their stubbornness will feed the fire, and cause the worm of conscience "never to die" (Mark 9:44). God offered the ungodly the gift of life, but they would not accept it. The pleasures of sin seemed more desirable to them than the glory of the saints. Satan offered them the one, and God offered them the other; and they had freedom to choose which they wanted; but they chose "the pleasures of sin for a season" (Heb. 11:25), instead of the everlasting rest with Christ.

It is the will of God that this rest should remain for His people, and not be possessed until they come to heaven. All things must come to their perfection by degrees. The strongest man must first be a child. The greatest scholar must first begin with the alphabet. The tallest oak was once an acorn. This life is our infancy; do we want to be born 'full grown'? If our rest were here, most of God's providences would be useless. Should God lose the glory of His church's miraculous deliverances so that men might have their happiness here? If we were all happy, innocent, and perfect, what use would there be for sanctification, justification, and future glorification? If we lacked nothing, we would not depend on God so much, nor call upon Him as earnestly. How little would He hear from us, if we had whatever we wanted!

God would never have had such songs of praise from Moses at the Red Sea, nor from David after deliverance from enemies, nor from Hezekiah after healing from sickness, if they had been the choosers of their own condition. Reader, haven't your own highest praises to God been the result of your dangers and troubles? The greatest glory and praise God receives is for salvation through Christ, and was not man's misery the occasion of that? And where God loses the opportunity of exercising His mercies, man must lose the happiness of enjoying them. O the sweet comforts the saints have had in return for their prayers. We would never have felt Christ's compassion, if we had not felt ourselves "weary and heavy laden," hungry and thirsty, poor and repentant. It is a delight for a soldier to look back on his escapes when they are over; and for a saint in heaven to look back on his sins and sorrows upon earth; his fears and tears, his enemies and dangers, his needs and tragedies, must make his joy more joyful. Therefore the blessed, in praising the Lamb of God in heaven, mention His having redeemed them out of every nation and kindred and tongue, and so out of their misery and need and sin, and having made them "kings and priests" to God (Rev. 5:9-10). But if they had experienced nothing but contentment and rest on earth, what place would there have been for these rejoicings hereafter?

Besides, we are not capable of rest upon this earth. Can a soul that is so weak in grace, so prone to sin, have full contentment and rest in such a condition? What is soul rest but our freedom from sin and imperfections and enemies? He that observes the works of the Lord, may easily see that the purpose of these things is to break down our idols, to make us weary of the world so that we will seek our rest in Him. God will not change the course of justice, to give you rest before you have worked, nor the crown of glory until you have overcome. There is reason enough why our rest should remain until the life to come. Take heed, then, Christian reader, how you dare to desire a rest on earth, or to murmur at God for your troubles and toil in the flesh.

Do the wrongs of the wicked weary you? Do the evils of the times provoke you? It must be so while you are absent from your rest. Do your own sins and bad tempered emotions weary you? May this make you more willing to go to God for your rest. And if not, then may you become even more weary until God's rest seems more desirable.

I have just one more thing to add before I close this chapter—that the souls of believers in heaven do enjoy unimaginable blessedness and glory, even while they remain separated from their bodies until the resurrection. What can be more plain than these words of Paul—"I am in a straight between two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better—nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you" (Phil. 1:23-24). If Paul had not expected to enjoy Christ until the resurrection, why should he desire to depart? Faithful souls will no sooner leave their prisons of flesh than angels shall be their convoy. Heaven will be their residence, and God their happiness. When such die, they may boldly and believingly say, as Stephen did, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (Acts 7:59), and commend it, as Christ did, into the Father's hands (Luke 23:46).