

# Alive Without the Law, Slain Thereby

by Charles Finney

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*The sermon explores the concept of being 'alive without the law' and the consequences of this state, highlighting the importance of recognizing God's grace and experiencing true spiritual consciousness.*

**Scripture:** Romans 7:9, Galatians 2:20, Ephesians 2:8

**Topics:** "Grace", "Spiritual Awakening"

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## Description

Charles Finney explores the profound transformation of Paul, who initially believed he was alive without the law, only to realize that the commandment revealed his true sinful nature, leading to despair and a sense of death. Finney emphasizes that Paul's ignorance of the law's spiritual meaning resulted in a false sense of righteousness and self-deception, which was shattered when the commandment came, awakening his moral and spiritual consciousness. This awakening compelled Paul to confront his selfishness and ultimately led to his conversion, illustrating the necessity of recognizing one's true state before God to embrace the grace of Christ. The sermon serves as a call for believers to examine their hearts and understand that true obedience stems from a heart transformed by God's grace, rather than mere external compliance with the law.

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## Transcript

"I was alive without the law once; but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died."--Rom. 7:9

In my remarks upon this passage, I shall pursue the following outlines:

- I. SHOW IN WHAT SENSE PAUL WAS WITHOUT THE LAW;
- II. WHAT WERE THE CONSEQUENCES OF THIS STATE;
- III. IN WHAT SENSE THE "COMMANDMENT CAME";
- IV. THE CONSEQUENCES OF THIS "COMING OF THE COMMANDMENT".

1. (1.) Paul was thoroughly a Pharisee. He had been brought up and instructed in the oracles of God according to the best teachings of his time, and therefore could not have been "without law" in the sense of not having the letter of it in his hands and before his mind. He had the law as given to Moses, the whole of it, both moral and ceremonial, and indeed he had given much of his life to the study of it, having been brought up at the feet of Gamaliel, enjoying the best advantages his country could afford for knowledge in

the Jewish law.

2. Yet Paul was really ignorant of the true meaning and spirit of the law. His grand mistake was that he regarded it only in its relations to his outward life, as if he assumed that it had no other relation, made no other demands. His moral and spiritual eyes were not open. I mean by this language that he did not see his moral and spiritual relations to God and to his fellowmen, and did not even seem to recognize the fact of the existence of any such relations.

As to his outward relations, the course of life was objectively just, while subjectively it was altogether unjust. By subjectively just, I mean just and right at heart, being and doing in reference to the law what it requires. In the state of his heart he was all wrong, for he was supremely selfish. Here lay the great error of his school of moralists. Their whole attention was directed to the objective and withdrawn from the subjective. In other words, they thought everything of the outside, nothing of the heart. Exclusively regarding the letter and the ceremony, they seemed never to ask--Is the heart honest and pure before God? Thus the moral and spiritual eye was not trained to discern or even to notice the real meaning of the law. Consequently it is not strange that Pharisees, so trained, should suppose themselves to be obeying the law, while in truth they entirely overlooked all that is really valuable. So with Paul. His spiritual consciousness was not awake.

Here let us make a distinction which is somewhat important in reference to this subject. There is a natural consciousness; a moral consciousness, and also a spiritual consciousness. The natural is exercised upon things merely natural and worldly--external and not in regard to their moral relations. The moral relates to things of a moral nature, and when distinguished from spiritual, should refer to our relations to fellow-beings, while the term spiritual may be applied to our relations to God. An active spiritual consciousness keeps the mind awake to the presence of God, as naturally, we are conscious of the presence of each other. It keeps us alive to all that is embraced in our relations to God. Moral consciousness respects moral questions, yet, in the strict sense, only as they lie between ourselves and our fellow-beings. The difficulty with Paul was that his moral and spiritual eyes being closed, he entirely overlooked his own subjective state of mind, the very thing which God's law primarily regards.

2. I am now to speak of the consequences of being in this sense "alive without the law."

(1.) Paul was in a state of both moral and spiritual delusion. He supposed himself to be performing his duty to his fellow men, when really he was doing no such thing. He had only the idea of objective justice, justice viewed in its outward relations. If he did not cheat a man, it mattered in his view little or nothing how much he coveted his goods, or how utterly void his heart might be of true love to his neighbor. Consequently he never performed the duty which the law required of him, towards his fellow men.

The same was true of his spiritual relations to God. He regarded simply what the law required externally; went round and round with the routine of his outside duties, while his heart all this time was dead and cold, and as it showed itself subsequently, bitter as hell itself, towards the lovely and innocent Son of God.

(2.) Another consequence was a false hope. Supposing himself to be complying with the law of God, he expected to be saved as much as he expected anything whatever. Yet this expectation was altogether unfounded for although he was very zealous, yet he was also very bitter in his spirit, showing that his zeal sprang from any other source, rather than real benevolence. Indeed he showed that his spirit was bitter as the bitterness of the pit. How then can it be supposed that his hope of heaven was any thing better than a delusion?

3. Another result was a self-righteous performance of all he called his religion. But there I must explain; for I am afraid many are not well aware what the Bible means by self-righteousness; certainly it is the case that many professed Christians do not well understand this matter. For explanation of the point that is most important for discrimination, take the case of Paul. When he performed what he called his duties, and thanked God, Pharisee-like, that he prayed and fasted, and paid tithes, did he feel himself so utterly lost that he ascribed all his acceptable work to Christ, working in him? Far from it. He had done all these things himself.

When he came ultimately to know himself and then to know Christ, he could speak on this subject with intelligent discrimination, and ever wakeful interest. Then he dwelt much on the fact that the Jews depended on their own works and on themselves alone, to do their own works; while on the other hand he insisted that while left to themselves they never did anything but sin. He always maintained that the energetic power of the divine Spirit wrought in them all that was ever acceptable to God. Often does he illustrate this by his own experience. Before he was a Christian, he performed religious duties as regularly as now; says "I profited in the Jews' religion above many of mine equals," but all along, he regarded his obedience as in such a sense rendered in his own strength that he made no hearty acknowledgments of dependence on sovereign grace. Of that grace which comes through divine mercy, and first moves the heart to good, he seemed to know nothing. His own righteousness was self-originating, self-performed. There was nothing else of it but what came of himself. It had no spiritual life or power in it, for the reason that there was no power of God in its origin, no influence from God, molding its character. Paul did not truly recognize God's grace in this obedience, and God did not impart his grace to subdue selfishness and beget true love in his soul.

Now here is a curious distinction which spiritually-minded persons make, but which others, if they use it, never understand. The spiritually-minded say with Paul--"By the grace of God I am what I am." With many, this language degenerates into mere cant; but really there is a world of meaning in it, and a meaning which is inexpressibly dear to the real Christian's heart. The man who truly enters into the spirit of religion never regards himself as having done it; he knows it is all of grace; nothing can offend him more than to have it assumed that it is himself and not God's grace that has wrought in him all good. He knows deep in his consciousness, that if left to himself, there never was and never will be any good thing in him. Hence he honors and praises divine grace with a fullness of meaning and an outgushing of heart, which self-righteousness never knew. This deep recognition of God's grace comes to be wrought into the very life, intertwined through all the fibers and incorporated into the substance of the soul. Through all his being he feels that all is of rich grace, and nothing of praise is due to himself.

Not that his exercises are not right, for to deny this were to impugn the efficiency of God's grace; and not that they are not his own acts, for to deny this were to set aside man's agency and responsibility, and involve the Bible doctrine of God "working to will and to do" in us, in entire confusion. The simple idea is that the Spirit of God, acting upon our minds in harmony with the laws of mind, instructs, stimulates, draws, and thus substantially causes right voluntary action on our part.

3. We are next to consider in what sense "the commandment came" to Paul.

The law was set home to both his moral and spiritual consciousness and perception. He was led to see what the law meant in its moral relations to himself and to his neighbor, that without love, all was nothing. He saw the same also in regard to prayer, to alms, to worship, that all is nothing, only a grievous abomination in the sight of God when the subjective state of the heart is wrong. He became fully aware of

this, all suddenly, as if a flash of lightning had broken upon him. He saw the reality of this spiritual meaning, and with it a purity and blessedness in the law itself which commanded his most intense regard. And what was the result of this new view of God's law? This is the point we are next to consider.

1. (1.) It quickened his selfishness. This was the first result of bringing the spirituality of the law home to his selfish heart. This new light as it flashed upon his mind found him in a most self-complacent state, altogether satisfied with himself. No sooner however did he see the spirituality of the law than one of two results must inevitably take place;--either he must break down at once, acknowledge his guilt and empty himself of all his self-righteousness, or if he resist this, his selfishness must be quickened into fresh activity. In Paul's case the latter result ensued; his selfishness was aroused and stirred up as if Ithuriel's spear had touched him. The long unnoticed enmity of his heart was developed. We are not to suppose that during all the time he was persecuting the Church, he enjoyed an easy, self-complacent state of mind, and that all was quiet until the moment when the great light from heaven broke upon him. By no means. It must not be assumed that he had no serious thought about his moral relations to God, prior to the scenes at Damascus. Doubtless his mind had been stirred up long before. He had heard of the sermon on the mount; had heard about Christ's pungent and terrible denunciations against the Pharisees; he had known that Christ had publicly rebuked and exposed their favorite interpretations of the law, and had torn up their system from its very foundations, and that the masses of the common people heard him gladly. This had greatly quickened the selfishness and stirred up the enmity of his heart against that man, so that his very soul was maddened. You recollect he says of himself--"I verily thought with myself that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth." It was obviously under color of being very zealous for the truth;--but really his selfishness was all on fire and all the malign passions of his soul were astir. It is exceedingly plain from the history that Paul was all this time warring against his own consciousness. This great fact was perfectly known to Jesus, and hence, when he came down in that flood of overwhelming light and arrested the burning persecutor, what did he say? "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks."

Here we have the secret of Saul's state of mind. He is kicking against the pricks. The sharp points of his moral sense are against him, and he is resisting and is wounding himself upon those piercing points continually. He is like a hampered animal trying to run away, while every step drives the goads into his quivering flesh. He tries to kick--he winces and shrieks, yet has too much obstinacy to yield. Sometimes perhaps he half persuaded himself that he ought to oppose Jesus of Nazareth; but the whole case shows that he was ill at ease in that impression, and that on the whole he knew better and was truly fighting against his prevailing convictions of duty.

(2.) When the law came home to his soul, it compelled reflection. This almost always supervenes when the law comes home more and more to the soul. There will be hours of deep and earnest reflection, producing first consternation--then a deep sense of shame, the mind waking up to see things in their true light. This leads to great consternation, remorse, self-condemnation, and then, often to despair. The man is stripped of all his excuses, and then, not having yet seen the great love of God, and having therefore no faith and trust, he settles down in the conviction,--I ought to be damned and I certainly must be! There can be no help for me! More than one such case have I seen where men, long time settled down in infidelity, are awakened to see themselves as they are before God and his holy law, and they cry out, I deserve eternal damnation! One such I have in my mind's eye. I shall never forget how he looked. Every feature of his countenance depicted horror. Every muscle was in a tremor. A little reflection had brought him into an attitude in which he could not stand before God. There was also the case of Dea. H. whom I well knew in

his years of infidelity. He is now in heaven, but when an infidel, he professed to be entirely satisfied that the Bible was all priestcraft, and verily thought that soon this delusion (Christianity,) would be swept from the earth. Returning at one time from the dale of infidel books, full of self-complacency, all elated with his success, he conversed freely with his wife upon his labors for the day--when all suddenly, a new view of the truth and meaning of God's word broke in upon his mind; intuitively he saw himself a sinner and undone; he could no longer shut his eyes to the fact that Jesus whom he had been opposing was truly the Savior of the world, that the Bible he had been gainsaying was really God's own revelation to lost men. Seeing all this he was in agony. His wife, alarmed, cried out, Dea. H., what is the matter with you? Still he groaned as a man in agony of body, and still she pressed her question--What's the matter? At last he broke out saying--"The stubborn oak must bow! Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world!" She was thunderstruck! It could not have surprised her more if a bolt from heaven had broken through the roof and smote him to the floor. There he was,--but how changed! Go and ask him now what Paul meant by saying--"When the commandment came, sin revived, and I died." He can doubtless tell you.

Paul had long thought on this subject and was troubled. But at last the matter came to a head. Jesus met him in the way and broke him down. He let in light upon his already troubled conscience; he made him see the purity and the spiritual meaning of his law; and now mark what follows--mark that self-condemnation, shame, that dreadful remorse! See him writing his own death-warrant in spite of himself! Nothing is more common than for despair to supervene for a season in such cases as this. In the case of Paul, this was momentary. Yet we must suppose that he utterly gave up his old hope, and this to him was like the giving up of the ghost. It was as death. No wonder, therefore, that he should say--"Sin revived, and I died." When he saw how strangely the rebellion of his heart burst forth, and sin in this sense "revived," his hope perished, his heart sank within him;--such revelations were made of himself as suddenly blighted all his hopes of being in the divine favor, and he died in the darkness of despair. This seems to be the obvious explanation of his language, and corresponds entirely with what we must infer from the laws of mind and the uniform course of similar experiences.

#### REMARKS.

1. The Pharisees generally in those days, and all Pharisees in heart in every age, are under the same delusion. Yet they were then and are often supposed to be the most pious people. It was a common saying then that if only two men were to be saved out of all mankind, one of them must be a Pharisee. But they were entirely deceived--their moral perceptions were blunted; the subjective state which alone constitutes true religion was not even apprehended in their minds. When you hear them speak, you hear nothing of religious experience, like that of David for example; they do not cry out--"O how love I the law!" "Cleanse me from secret faults;" "My soul thirsteth for God, yea, for the living God." Indeed you seldom hear any of them go farther than to pray for those states of mind which they know God requires. They do not profess to have them already, nor do they use language in the honest simplicity of their hearts which implies that they have a right subjective state of heart now. Many do nothing more than hold on to a hope. With no small difficulty they manage to do so much, and often they call into exercise the utmost pertinacity of purpose to effect even this.

2. Manifestly the teachings of Christ roused up the whole tribe of Pharisees. It deeply disturbed their peace. They were like a hive of bees as you have seen them when somebody breaks up their house, or as when they are forced to swarm, or are led out to battle. So thoroughly had he torn up their entire system, root and branch, and so fully had its great defects been laid open to the eye of the world, that they could rest no longer. This general result was produced by the lingering yet almost departing rays of the Spirit's

light upon the nation. God was giving a corrupt people their last call; here was a deep and damning delusion fastened strongly on the hearts of thousands, and if any were to be saved, this terrible delusion must be broken up by outspoken and crushing truth. It was but natural and necessary that in such an effort, many hearts should become excited, maddened, and thrown into a state of most bitter opposition.

So in our own day many professed Christians, who are living along in a legal and pharisaic state, get now and then some scattering rays of new light--glimpses of truth break in upon their minds as they hear the true gospel, faithfully preached, or as the Spirit sets home upon their souls some portions of God's word; something within says--"That is true Religion, but I have not got it--I have no such experience as that." Sometimes in seasons of searching power, the Spirit of God hurls his arrows broadcast, and many are pricked in their heart and constrained to say--"My hope is vain and I am yet in my selfishness, and know nothing yet of true religion as I must know it. I must give up this old rotten hope, or be lost!" But they resist at the moment; they cannot quite bring their minds to give it all up now and throw their naked souls on divine mercy as lost sinners; and, thus resisting, they relapse into ten fold greater hardness and delusion. If under such appeals from God they would not resist, light would increase, and they would doubtless be soon brought forth into day. I knew the case of an elder who took an honest course, unlike most persons in similar circumstances. I was preaching in the place of his residence; the Spirit was pressing truth on some minds, as I endeavored to aid his searching scrutiny into the heart by preaching on the case of Achan and the accursed thing. I was progressing in my sermon, in search after that accursed thing, when suddenly he rose in the midst of the congregation and cried out--"Mr. Finney, Mr. Finney, you need not say another word, it's found; I am the man, I am the very man!" There he stood pale as ashes. "If there were no other Achan here, said he, I am enough to curse the whole church. I did not want to disturb the congregation, he added, but I saw that I must speak. I have been brought almost to this point before, but I drew back and my soul relapsed into darkness. I knew that I must meet the demands of my conscience now, or my soul would be lost."

So with many, there are times when God lifts the veil and lets them see their naked hearts. Constrained by truth they cry out--"I am deceived, I know I am," but instead of making thorough work and acting with decision, they hesitate, lose the light God gave them, grieve the Spirit away, fall back to their old position, go on as before, and perish utterly in their own corruptions. I should not be surprised if in fact there had been hundreds in this place who have passed through this very course, doomed, unless they earnestly repent, to reach the same awful end. Influenced by your pride of character, and by the force of an old hope, you delay, and put over the thorough examination you ought to make, and thus slide on to ruin. O that everlasting spirit of DELAY! How many souls it has lured along to ruin!!

3. There are many non-professing sinners, who are laboring under this same difficulty. They have the objective but not the subjective, of religion. Externally they are upright; but alas, internally, there is no true love to God or man. Some of you here in this congregation are in just this position. I know you well; I have had business dealings with you and know you to be honest and upright in all those things;--but what shall I say of your treatment of your God and Savior! Nobody denies you the credit of being prompt in your business with men and of doing your work as you ought to do it; you would scorn to do objective wrong;--but you seem not to think that this, in itself is nothing towards real obedience. Suppose any of you, students, were as upright in externals as Saul of Tarsus himself;--you might nevertheless be as guilty a sinner as lives out of hell! What did Paul say of himself when his eyes came to be opened? Speaking of sinners he says, "Of whom I am chief." He looked upon himself as a heart-hypocrite! He did not attempt to say one good thing of his former Pharisee life, but condemned it all. You mean to do right you say, but you

think only of objective right--right as to the external only. You know that all your rightness is only this, no more. You know that all you think of when you speak of doing right is of the external and objective; you do not even inquire whether the heart, the motive, is pure before God. You know that real love to God and man is not the life and spring of your activities. Precisely here is your deep and ruinous delusion!

Suppose my wife should claim to do right in her relations as a wife, and think, like you, only of the objective, the outside appearance. She says she means to do all right, but what does she mean by that? Suppose she trims her ways to answer the demands of external propriety;--but suppose also that everybody has reason enough to know that she loves somebody else with all her heart! What would you say to that? Suppose you know that any wife is absolutely devoted to some other man than her husband; would you not abominate all her professions of doing right towards her husband? Suppose it to be your own wife,--would you not spew her out--nauseated and sick of such right-doing!

Let every mere moralist know--you never have done one thing in all your life of which God did not say--"Who hath required this at your hand?" You need not come and tell him it is all right--you mean to do right; for all is utterly wrong because your heart is after your idols and is not yielded up trustfully to God. How can all your right-doing be anything but an abomination so long as you do not give God your heart!

4. This text does not profess to give the whole of Paul's conversion. It only gives us his conviction. "I was alive without the law once--(In my self-righteous hopes) but when the commandment came--(revealing God's holy law) then sin revived, and I died--my hopes perished then. There he was till he gave himself up to the Lord Jesus Christ. Substantially this experience of being slain by the law must always precede the acceptance of Jesus Christ as our own Savior. The reason of this is--men will not accept Christ's robe while their own apparel suits them better; they will not rely on another for salvation while they are strong in their self-dependence.

5\*\*. We can see in the light of our subject what the work of the Spirit is in both conversion and sanctification.

Some are forever inquiring--What is the work of the Spirit? Others think there is no need of any divine Spirit in order to produce conviction of wrong, for they assume that natural conscience is all-sufficient for this result.

But who does not know that the light of nature and all the force of mere conscience will never slay the enmity of the sinner's heart and break him down in real penitence and humiliation? The Spirit of God must wake and rouse the moral and spiritual consciousness: the Spirit must take God's holy law and hold it up as a molten looking-glass. There the sinner must see the meaning of that law and his own awful sin in having so long trampled it beneath his feet.

The Spirit also reveals the spiritual nature of the gospel. Having with one hand held up the spiritual nature of the law, with the other he reveals in like manner the love of the gospel, unfolding the heart of Jesus till the sinner says--How can I abuse such love! How can I refuse to trust such a Savior!

6. Those of you who are not conscious of such things as these in your experience are not converted. Ye who have not had before your mind's eye this looking-glass of the law and gospel,--what do you know about the gospel? If Christ has not been revealed to your soul, what do you know about faith in Christ?

Do not some of you see that you are certainly deluded? You who are merely moralists--impenitent sinners still, have you utterly failed to see to-day the utter abomination of all your offerings and sacrifices?

What awful danger there is lest some of you should put out the light of the Holy Ghost as it shines in upon your souls! What result can be more fatal and more awful than this? How can we account for the moral state of many men except on the supposition that they have grieved away the Spirit of God? They go and come--go and come with God's people; but they seem never to see the very thing that stands right out before their eyes--their own self-deception and impending damnation!!

I have seen some of you writhe under the truth as if an arrow had struck you. And did you then at once give up all and say--I am a deceived wretch! I must repent! Did you not rather say--I will look this subject over after I get home? Several times during the last season, I thought I saw most clearly that some of you were on the very pivot of life; and I said--"Come now--come right forward and settle this matter at once for all;--but you did not come, and what was the result? Go and see--all gone back. You did not come up to the light and therefore of course fell back into deeper darkness than ever. And are you still waiting for more light? I beseech you, be not so absurd as to wait, in such resistance to God as surely grieves away the Spirit and sinks the soul into yet more fatal darkness. Have not some of you young men, waited for more light until you have lost all you had? The Bible doctrine is, Use, and you gain more; neglect and you lose. "From him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath." Why? Because the fact that he hath not proves that he has not improved.

To professors of religion let me next say--It is becoming most alarmingly true that there is a great want of discrimination in distinguishing what is essential from what is merely incidental, to a good Christian life. Often in attending examinations of candidates for admission to the church have I been pained to hear questions put which did not at all touch the real merits of the case. They might have been answered in the most favorable way and yet the answers should have afforded no decisive testimony of real conversion. The questions altogether failed to show whether the candidates had ever really felt themselves to be lost sinners, and as such had thrown themselves upon God's mercy. Did this conviction of being lost and self-ruined fasten on them, and then under its impression, did they search for the remedy and find it in casting themselves wholly on infinite grace? Where this is wanting, there can be no Christian experience.

Often and perhaps I may say always, where under gospel light true conversion does not take place, the reason is, something binds the mind. Truth adapted to wake up the consciousness, first to fear and then to love, fails to produce its effects. Do you ask the reason? Selfishness has bound up the mind all round about and it has no enlargement--no freedom, to go forth in confidence or in penitence. When they attempt to pray, it is as if something bound up the mind; no earnest going out of soul after God. When they say, I will go and seek God, they go not. It is not with them as with those whom the Spirit of God is drawing, who feel as if their very soul would go out after Christ--even almost out of the body. This going out of the soul I often compare to what you may have noticed often when you put a burning candle in a strong draft of air; the wind bears the blaze away and almost forces it entirely from the wick, yet it flickers and hangs--yet you can see it borne quite a perceptible distance from the wick--but the connection is still maintained and when you arrest the draft, the candle burns again as before. So the Christians almost goes off from the body--his soul being drawn away by the power of his ravishing views of Jesus.

Right over against this is the state which I have been noticing; no spontaneous going out of the heart after God either in prayer or in attempted consecration. Ask such an one--Do you feel your whole soul going, going, as if nothing were held back? No; I know nothing about that, yet when one really yields himself to

the drawing of the Spirit, he is as conscious of giving himself up as he ever is of giving anything to another. --A lady whom I saw last winter, said--["I went to my room to give myself to God there and as soon as I knelt down there was a spontaneous going forth of my heart to God and it seemed hardly necessary for me to say a word for my heart had already gone out to Christ. Words seemed too poor to express my mind to God, for it seemed as if my very soul had gone itself, and no words were needed." She came down from her room so wonderfully filled with the Holy Ghost that her soul was all on fire and some suggested that such a woman must be crazy. But many are utterly hard and unmoved--no going out of heart towards God and no melting of soul before Him.

Christian, do you know what it is to be slain by the law and truly made alive by the Holy Ghost? or is it the case that you are living along with a hope that does not assimilate you to Jesus Christ? Are not some of you aware that you have so long resisted God and his truth, that it will not do for you to try it again? Now is your time--you need not pause to make terms with God; for all the terms are fixed already. Let your inward heart go! Say--Lord, I come to Thee! It is long enough that I have lived on in my sins. I am ashamed to ask another hour's life in which to fight and war against God! Let it be enough that I have lived in sin so long; now and forevermore I will be the Lord's!

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