

Awaking From the Sleep of Spiritual Death

by Charles Finney

The sermon emphasizes the importance of understanding spiritual death as a state of being dead in sin, and the need for a sinner to be quickened by God through the influence of the Spirit of God, revealed truth, other men, and the sinner's own voluntary actions.

Scripture: Ephesians 2:1

Topics: "Spiritual Awakening", "Personal Responsibility"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the urgent need for spiritual awakening, describing spiritual death as a state of voluntary sin and apathy towards God. He explains that this death is self-inflicted, resulting from a choice to prioritize selfish desires over divine obedience. Finney argues that the resurrection from this state requires a conscious decision to respond to God's call and submit to His authority. He highlights that while the Holy Spirit plays a crucial role in this awakening, individuals must also actively participate in their spiritual revival. The sermon serves as a powerful reminder that spiritual life is attainable through personal responsibility and divine grace.

Transcript

"Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light."--Eph. v:14.

This text and the subject it presents will lead me to discuss the following points, in the order stated.

I. WHAT IS THIS DEATH?

II. WHY IS IT CALLED DEATH; WHO CAUSED IT, AND WHO WAS THE OCCASION OF IT?

III. THE NATURE OF THE RESURRECTION SPOKEN OF; ITS AGENCIES AND INSTRUMENTS;

IV. THE REASONS FOR THE APPEAL--"ARISE FROM THE DEAD."

I. What this death is.

This Epistle, chapter 2:1, gives us a safe and satisfactory answer. "And you hath He quickened (that is, made alive,) who were dead in trespasses and sins." This shows what sort of death is contemplated--a death in sin. The general scope of the Epistle shows that the apostle is conceiving of the state of lost sinners, fearfully depraved, as being dead; that is, he uses the term, death, by a figure of speech, to

denote their terrible apathy on the subject of their guilt and danger, and their fearful condition as exposed to the curse of God. A careful attention to the scope of this epistle will show this most fully.

Let it not be understood that this death is a state of perfect unconsciousness--by no means; nor is it a state in which all power of voluntary action is destroyed or even suspended; but it is a state in which no right moral action takes place. It is death in trespasses and sins.

We may revert to Rom. 8:6, for a more specific description of this spiritual death. In this passage Paul says--"To be carnally-minded is death, but to be spiritually-minded is life and peace." The precise sense of the original is this; "The minding of the flesh is death;" the giving up of the mind to the demands of the flesh is utter ruin to the soul; because, says verse 7th, "the minding of the flesh is enmity against God," and this enmity against God at once constitutes a state of spiritual death and must of course prove the eternal ruin of the soul.

Reverting again to the train of thought and illustration pursued in Paul to the Ephesians, we read;--"You hath He quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; wherein in time passed ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others. But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith He loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ: (by grace are ye saved:) and hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places, in Christ Jesus,"

This death, therefore, as we see, is a death in sin--not one in which the mind is sunk into utter inactivity--not a state in which no action is possible; but simply one in which the mind acts, and the individual "walks according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air"--the same Satanic agency which energizes in all those who are disobedient to God. It is a death unto God, and to his character and claims. The dead sinner is regardless of God and of God's rightful authority as one physically dead is of the natural world. The man physically dead is unconscious of what passes around him; he is borne to his grave, but he knows not by whom;--so the spiritually dead are voluntarily insensible to the great facts of the spiritual world--insensible to God, to truth, and to their own relations to both. They may be intensely alive to the things of the natural world, to everything relating to earthly pleasure; but to God and duty, they are dead.

This state, then, is called death figuratively, and yet so accurately does it describe the sinner's real case that it can scarcely be called a figure.

II. I am next to inquire, Who CAUSED this death; and what is its OCCASION?

The nature of the death spoken of, will readily answer both questions. By its very nature, it consists in being governed by the desires of the flesh and of the mind. It is being under the dominion of the appetites and passions. In language more strictly accurate, it consists in the mind's giving itself up to obey the demands of appetite and passion in opposition to the counter demands of reason, conscience, and God.

And now I ask, Who caused this death? If sinners are dead, who has killed them? Are they suicides, or has somebody else killed them? This is a vital question in our subject.

I am aware that sinners are wont to regard their depravity as their calamity and not their fault--but this point needs to be carefully considered, and thoroughly searched out. We shall have a clew to its real merits if we push the question--Who is it that has killed the sinner?

And yet when this question is pushed, there are some who will say--No matter who killed me if I am really dead. But this is by no means true or just. No suicide can stand up before God and claim that it matters not who caused his death; that it must be overlooked as his misfortune and not regarded as his fault.

Now the sinner's death is clearly proved to be a case of suicide. For, by the very nature of his death, nobody else could have caused it--no agency in the universe can be the cause of it but himself. For the cause of the death lies in his own voluntary action. He of his own free choice yields up himself to the demands of his appetites. He himself voluntarily chooses selfish good before and instead of God and of the universe, which is the very death of which we speak. In this and in this only consists his death in sin. He has made this fatal choice of pleasing self and displeasing God, not only through all the past years of his moral activity, but is making it at the present moment. In other words, he not only killed himself when he first began to act morally, but he has been repeating his suicidal acts ever since, and is repeating them even now. Now, even today, his own moral activities are altogether suicidal, so that if he had never killed himself before, the voluntary sin of this day would be the murder of his soul.

The things I now affirm follow inevitably from the very nature of moral, voluntary action. No one compels a sinner to love himself more than he loves God; no one compels him to follow his own propensities, instead of obeying the voice of his reason and his conscience. No one man ever killed another in the sense of spiritual death; no man ever did or ever can sin for another so that his sin shall be the death spiritually of his neighbor. One man may entice another to sin; may tempt him--may lead him along into sinning; this is only being the occasion; and when we ask for the occasion of the sinner's spiritual death, much may be said about the agency of others. No doubt much is to be ascribed to the influences which occasion sin; but occasion and cause are entirely distinct and should never be confounded together. The cause is the acting agent who sins; the occasion may be any influence from other agents, acting upon the sensibilities of his being, appealing to his appetites and passions, and presenting inducements to wrong moral action.

The cause of an event or act is the efficient power which does it. It always implies the exercise of force or power, adequate to the production of the effect. Now with this meaning of the terms before our minds, we see that the only cause of sin must be the sinner's own voluntary powers of choice. No other being can compel him to sin; if the thing were possible, the sin when committed would not be his own sin, but the sin of the compelling power. Just as in physical death, you may tempt your neighbor to suicide; if in his sane mind he commits it, though under your temptation, it is suicide; he has killed himself, and however great your guilt, he is still the guilty cause of his own death. So of all temptations to sin. They are the occasion of sin, and sin never takes place without occasion. There must be something presented to the sinner's mind as an inducement which leads him to choose selfishly. All sin is choice which the sinner makes and persists in--choice of the good hoped for in disobeying God before the good promised in obeying. These temptations are various. Adam's first sin became the occasion of great sin to his race--very great sin;--of this there can be no doubt. So all the intemperance that has ever existed has made the appetite more clamorous, for by a law of our physical constitution, the habits of the parent affect his constitution, and his constitution affects that of his offspring. Thus the effects of Adam's sin have passed over upon all his race.

Whether if Adam had not sinned, any or all of his race would have sinned, I do not know. Some men have thought themselves very wise on this subject; but the Bible states this fact, that Adam's sin has

occasioned the sin of all of his race. This is all the Bible affirms on this point. It does not at all assume to show what would have been the course of things in our race if Adam had not sinned. The Bible has however taught us one other fact about sin, namely, that all sin is transgression of law, and of course it implies intelligence of law, and voluntary action in stepping over it. And indeed, our own consciousness affirms that all sin is voluntary action.

It can therefore be of no use to us to speculate upon Adam's sin, and upon what would have been, or might have been, if Adam had never sinned. It is enough to know that all sin is voluntary--that temptation can only be an occasion and never a cause; and hence that however much culpability may attach to the tempter, enough of the guilt of sin will always rest upon the sinner himself to crush him under its fearful curse.

I repeat and wish it to be borne carefully in mind that this death is spiritual, not physical; and essentially consists in a voluntary subjection of the whole being to the demands of self-gratification. The voluntary agent gives himself up to the indulgence of self in just those respects in which God commands him to deny himself; that is, he goes into self-indulgence where the divine law commands him to please God and not self--or to benefit his neighbor instead of seeking to engross all benefit to self.

Now it is a radically essential element in this state of mind that it is voluntary. It can never be forced. It can never be the direct and proper effect of causation exercised by another being. If it were, we could not call it sin in the subject of such force. If any man could be made, despite of himself, to do acts which are in their own nature sinful, they could not be sin in him. This is too obvious to need proof. There is therefore no such thing as forced sin--sin done by me which another being caused and compelled, despite of my resistance.

Again, the death spoken of is not what some have designated original sin. Many old divines hold that there is such a thing as original sin, which however is not transgression of law--is not voluntary action of any sort, but is a certain sinfulness in the very substance of the soul. They hold that all the faculties, parts and powers of the soul are sinful; and this sinfulness they call original sin.

This however is not God's teaching, but man's. It is taught in human creeds and catechisms; not in the Bible. When the Bible comes to speak of man's death in sin, all is made plain, as in our context, and in its parallel passages. The whole of the matter is that man of his own free will gives himself up voluntarily to self-pleasing. The Bible fastens the guilt of this state and of all its moral activities directly upon the voluntary action of the sinning agent--not upon his created powers but upon his voluntary exercise of his powers--not upon the substance of his soul as created, but upon his own responsible action after he has been created.

It is wonderful that man should have represented this death as consisting in original sin as I have described it, while the Bible so plainly describes it as a voluntary minding of the flesh,--and as a "walking after the course of this world." Everywhere the Bible fastens the guilt of sin upon man's voluntary rebellion against God's claims. "They have loved idols." "They will not frame their doings to turn unto the Lord." They say unto God,--"depart from us for we desire not the knowledge of Thy ways."

Again, if the Bible had taught original sin as some divines have taught it, the human intelligence could never have received it. If the Bible had affirmed that this death is not voluntary, but consists in a created nature, no man could rationally admit it. What other position could an intelligent man take under this doctrine than that which a friend of mine once took. His mind had been filled with the notion that Adam's

first sin had been imputed to all his posterity and to himself among the rest; and that consequently he came into existence with a nature itself sinful;--What could he do therefore but reject these doctrines, even though he must reject the Bible with them? He was told that this original sin, committed not by himself but by Adam, became in him a death, in producing which he had no agency, and yet was condemned for it to an eternal hell. How could his intelligence admit this! He was told that from this death in sin he must rise at once, although he had no more power to do it than he had to move a world;--what could he do with such a demand!

I found him rejecting the Bible. I asked him why he should do this? He answered me--Because I know it is not true.

But, said I, how do you know this? He replied--You admit that God made my nature. Now the Bible is directly opposed to my nature; therefore it never came from God.

But, said I to him--what do you mean? He explained. "The Bible says that man came into the world, all sin--every faculty sinful--the faculties themselves actual sin; and then it holds that God commands me to come out of this state on pain of damnation, although, at the same time, He knows that I have no more power to do it than to create a world. Now such being the teaching of the Bible, I know that the God who made my mind never made that book."

Such language will perhaps shock many of you, yet it is only the simple statement of facts. In reply, he was told that the notions he had justly deemed so absurd were not God's teachings but man's. I assured him those things were drawn from human creeds and catechisms, not from the Bible. He was confounded, and thrown at once utterly out of his position of infidelity. He saw that he had been rejecting the Bible for reasons which had no basis in the real teachings of that book. In the issue of this reaction upon his mind you will rejoice to learn that on that very day he was converted to God.

And now, beloved, if you would reach the truth on this great matter of the sinner's spiritual death, you must compare scripture with scripture. You must resort to scripture to explain itself. Pursuing this method you learn that this death is a minding of the flesh, a walking after the flesh, and consequently a self inflicted death--a death of voluntary opposition to God because it is a voluntary consecration of self to sin.

III. The nature of the resurrection here spoken of, may be learned from the nature of the death to which it stands opposed. It is arising from the state of death described. Of course the rising must correspond to the death. Since therefore the death in question consists in a voluntary devotion to sin, involving a moral stupor, and an intense dislike of God and of his claims; so the rising from such a death must be a voluntary rising of the mind to a sense of its responsibilities to God and a voluntary placing of itself under God's influence, in the attitude of obedience and submission.

As to the nature of the agency employed in this resurrection, the Bible refers much of it to the Spirit of God, and no doubt with the utmost truth. Yet this like many other truths has been woefully abused, for many, observing how much is ascribed to this agency, have maintained that this agent does all the work and man himself nothing. A writer not long since attempted to prove that the work of spiritual resurrection and regeneration is wrought of God. To this it was replied that this statement tells but half the truth; for the Bible ascribes this work to the influence of revealed truth as often and as fully as it ascribes it to the divine Spirit. The Bible also ascribes it to man, for instance to Paul, who himself says, "I have begotten you through the gospel." And finally, it ascribes the work to the sinner himself.

Now, what if I should adopt the same method of proof as the writer alluded to, and try to show that this work is done by man himself and cite my proof texts and stop there. Or suppose I labor to prove that the work is wrought by the influence of other men, by gospel ministers, for instance;--cite my proof texts and stop there; or that it is done by revealed truth;--then cite my proofs and pretend that I have exhausted the subject, and stop there. Now plainly, these methods of presenting the subject all stop, having given but a part of the truth in the case. They none of them present a full view of the Bible teachings on this subject. According to the Bible, there is always a combination of agencies, the Spirit, the Truth, other men, and the agent or sinner himself.

The manner in which divine and human agencies cooperate in this spiritual resurrection we may never be able fully to explain, yet there are many things in the Bible which may throw light upon it. Take the case of healing the impotent man, Acts 3. Peter, fixing his eyes upon the cripple said--"In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk," Forthwith, the cripple begins to make effort; Peter takes him by the right hand to lift him up; his feet and ankle bones receive strength; then he, leaping up, stood, and then walked. Here was a real miracle--a supernatural exertion of physical power, yet with it, there was also an exercise of the mind and of the muscular powers of the subject. So when Christ came to the grave of Lazarus, and cried with a loud voice--"Lazarus come forth;" immediately there was motion where all was the stillness of death before. When this voice rang in his ear, he started up and came forth. These were indeed physical changes, but they may serve to illustrate the change that takes place when God says to a dead sinner, Come forth. Before this, God's servants could not get the sinner's attention. Every sense seemed locked up in the sleep of spiritual death. He heard not until God spake. When others spake to him he seemed to hear as a man will sometimes hear the cry of fire in his sleep, or the striking of a clock in his reverie, but no thorough impression is made on his mind. So in the case of the sinner; man may speak to the outward ear, but God only speaks to his mind. When the sinner hears God's voice, his ears are opened. God cries in his ear--Come forth;--then as if a peal of thunder rang in his ear, he starts up in terror and trembling. Still he sees not the bow of promise. He sees only that awful cloud of thunder and blackness. Sinking in terror, he cries out,--God has spoken to my soul and how can I rest? Then if he can only see that bow of promise, spanning the cross of Calvary, and seeming to spread its wing of love over himself, then, O then, how he leaps up from the grave of his spiritual death! He hears God saying to him, "Awake thou that sleepest;" and does he rise? Yes, at once, and without delay, he puts forth the requisite activities and comes into real life.

Of instruments, I need only say that God usually employs some third person, of which we have a beautiful description in Ezekiel 37th.; the vision of the valley of dry bones. No doubt this was intended to represent God's manner of calling men out of the death of unbelief into the spiritual life of faith. When, as is there described, God's voice, through his servants, sounds all abroad, then his power is felt.

The reasons of this command which bids the sinner arise, next require our attention.

As this death is a voluntary suicide, men would be to blame for it even if they were unable to rise from it to life again. Yet if they lay under this absolute inability, God could not require them to rise. He might hold them guilty for the suicide, and yet not hold them guilty for not raising themselves to life again. The latter would doubtless be the case if they had no power to bring themselves to life.

But the sinner has this power. His death in sin is a voluntary state of mind, and is kept up by voluntary action. In fact so strong is God's appeal to the intelligence and conscience of the sinner, that he has to exert himself to keep himself dead. It often seems as if he would rise inspite of himself, like a cork pressed

under water, struggling to reach the surface. Some of you know this in your own experience. How many of you have been almost persuaded to become Christians; the voice of God rang in your ears, and its powerful appeals to your reason and conscience pressed with mighty power upon your soul; his Spirit strove with you and you were scarcely able to resist; almost you were persuaded to forego your sins and all their pleasures; it might be said of you --"He is not far from the kingdom of God"--but you did not enter. You still held on to your beloved idols, and after them you would go. In fact, it is so far from being true that men have no power to rise from spiritual death, that they can scarcely summon power enough to keep themselves from rising. They can scarcely resist the appeal which God makes to their hearts.

Every man affirms to himself that he ought to rise from this state of spiritual death--ought to be and become a Christian. His own reason affirms to him that he has no right to remain in a state of voluntary spiritual death. He knows that the only reason why he does not rise at once out of this death is his own voluntary refusal to do so. Consequently, the sinner who listens to these affirmations of his own intelligence and conscience, can have no rational peace in his sins. Much of the stupid peace which sinners do enjoy in this state, is afforded them by those perverted notions of inability to which I have alluded. By the aid of these, the conscience relieves itself of obligation and the sinner finds a torpid quiet in his sins for which the real truth affords no justification whatever.

REMARKS.

1. Sinners are the worst of suicides. During my life I have seen but one case of physical suicide, nor would I wish to see another. I could never lose the impression of awful horror made on my mind by the spectacle. It shocked the whole community. It was indeed a most awful sight.

Yet what is physical suicide in its most awful form compared with destroying one's own soul!

There may be reasons which strongly urge a man to take his own life. There never can be any good reasons for a man's destroying his own soul. A man may labor under physical derangement, and under this influence may take utterly false views of things, which may lead him to physical suicide; but that a man should destroy his own soul--what can be more shocking? How utterly inexcusable, especially after all God has done to save the souls of lost sinners!

2. We may see in what sense we are dependent upon God's Spirit. It is in this sense simply--to induce him to do what he ought to do of himself. With no other light than God has given to all men in his word, they ought to see their duty, and duty being seen, they ought at once to do it. And yet they are dependent upon the light of the Spirit. Why? Because they will not admit to their own minds the light of God's word without the Spirit's extra aid, and because light seen is resisted.

Take a supposition. Suppose a man has made up his mind to commit murder. He reveals his plan to his wife. She does her utmost to dissuade him from his purpose, but in vain. He still goes on in his preparations to execute his plan. She thinks of a friend who has such influence over her husband as may avail to save him. She rushes to him for help. He is successful.

Now this is a supposable case. All this might in fact occur. But in such a case as this, you cannot but see that though this man was dependent on his friend for his salvation, yet that his very dependence was his fault. He was dependent, not in the sense that he could not forbear to commit murder, but only in the sense that he would not desist from his purpose, under any influence short of this. He would have committed the murder but for the interposed influence of his friend.

So of the sinner. The Spirit's influence is needed only to make you do what you ought to do without it. Hence, so far from being an excuse for your inaction, it rebukes all inaction, and shows its damning guilt.

3. Hence the Spirit's influences are altogether gracious. They are in no sense a matter of merit on our part, or even of claim on the ground of our inability.

4. The gift of the Spirit being a matter of grace may be withholden or withdrawn at the divine option. You may expect the Spirit to leave you if you continue to resist and abuse his agency.

5. Death in sin no more involves an inability to become holy than death to sin does an inability to sin again. There is no proper inability in either case. The Christian dead to sin, has the power to return like the dog to his vomit; the sinner dead in sin, by an equally voluntary death, has the power to emerge from that state of death, by the voluntary efforts of his own mind.

6. Our text makes its pungent and personal appeal to sinners in their sins. Addressing you--all ye who are dead in sins, it cries--"Awake, awake, open your eyes and behold the light of truth; put forth your own agency and activity; come forth from that grave in which you have slept so long.["] And what do you say? Do you reply--Lord, I hear Thy voice--Lord, I come--I come to thee? Then come forth to light and life forevermore.

But are you groping about after light? Or are you caviling and resisting? Do you talk of being so dead that you have no power at all to rise? Remember, you are your own murderer. You lie in your spiritual grave because you are resolved to have earthly and not heavenly good for your portion. And now do you want the light of God upon your sealed eyes? Open those eyes and welcome the light that shines from God upon you. Feel your responsibility and meet it as becomes an accountable, immortal mind.

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