

The Destruction of the Wicked

by Charles Finney

The sermon emphasizes the importance of heeding God's reproof and the consequences of hardening one's neck against God, which can lead to sudden and remediless destruction.

Scripture: Proverbs 29:1, Isaiah 55:6-7, Ezekiel 18:30, Matthew 24:44, Luke 13:3, Romans 2:5, 2 Corinthians 6:2, Hebrews 3:15, James 4:10, Revelation 3:19

Topics: "Consequences of Sin", "Reproof"

Description

Charles Finney delivers a powerful sermon on the consequences of hardening one's heart against God's reproof, emphasizing that persistent refusal to heed divine warnings leads to sudden and irrevocable destruction. He explains that God reproves the wicked through various means, including providence, scripture, and conscience, and that hardening one's neck symbolizes stubborn resistance to these reproofs. Finney warns that such destruction is not only sudden but also without remedy, as it is a just consequence of one's own rebellion against God. He calls for self-examination and humility, urging listeners to recognize the seriousness of their spiritual state before it is too late.

Transcript

"He that, being often reproved, hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy." --Prov. 29:1

In speaking from these words, I shall,

1. Notice some of the ways in which God reproves the wicked;
2. Show what is meant by hardening the neck;
3. Point out some of the ways in which men do harden the neck;
4. What is meant by being suddenly destroyed;
5. What, by being destroyed without remedy;
6. Why this destruction is remediless.

I. The ways in which God reproves the wicked are various. All his providences are disciplinary. Every one of them has a voice of admonition, speaking to the sinner in tones of love, and appealing to his fears, or to

his conscience, or to his heart.

His revealed word is another means of reproof. There God speaks in burning words to the sinner. What language could be more plain and persuasive! And every word teems with reproof against sinners and admonitions to cease from sinning.

God's Spirit reproves the sinner, making use for this end of both God's word and providence. Often these reproofs are felt by the sinner to be deeply solemn and searching.

Besides all these agents, God makes use of the human conscience. He has constituted the human soul with a faculty which takes cognizance of its moral acts and states. Through this, he rebukes the sinner. He also employs our friends and our enemies, availing himself of the social law of our nature to reach us through fellow-beings, and do us good.

II. What is meant by "hardening the neck?"

The figure is that of a bullock who presses against the yoke until his neck becomes callous--a figure both plain and common to denote the stubborn resistance of the sinner's will against God.

III. The ways in which sinners harden their neck are many and various.

They do it by refusing to attend to God's reproof. Nothing is more common for sinners than to divert their attention voluntarily from the reproof which God administers. For example, they go to meeting, not because they wish to hear of God and duty, but because they cannot well avoid going. Once there, if truth annoys their conscience, and they cannot divert their attention otherwise, they will leave the house, or open a book and read. Why do they refuse to attend to Gods' messages? What is this but strengthening one's self in rebellion against God.

Some of you have done this very thing to-day. Many of you know full well that you have set yourself against God's claims, and do not mean to give them even so much as your serious regard.

Sometimes, when friends seek an opportunity to converse with you, you are careful to give them no opportunity. As those who are invited to the gospel feast are represented by Christ as begging to be excused, so sinners in our times, will even try to escape hearing even the invitation to the feast.

Again, sinners harden their necks by refusing to interpret God's providences rightly. They resist the admission that God has a controversy with them. In every way they try to get rid of the idea that God has any meaning in his providences, and especially, any meaning for them. They ascribe all these events to be fixed laws, or to fate, or to chance--any form of atheism, rather than admit a present and ever-acting God!

When the finger of God's providence becomes so plain that they cannot deny it, then they refuse to justify God. Instead of yielding the point at once, saying--"I have sinned, and I have nothing to say in my own behalf, they murmur, and rebel, and think it very hard in God to single them out for such a stroke. They wonder why it is that God deals thus and thus with them--a common way of intimating that they have done nothing so very wrong as to call for such rebuke from God.

An almost universal method of hardening one's neck against God is to refuse to make self-application of the truth to one's own life and heart. Sinners can very readily apply truths to others, both bad men and

good, but they feel strongly averse to making this sort of application to their own heart and conscience. Why? Because they don't love the truth, and do not mean to yield their hearts to its claims.

When the rebukes of truth apply unmistakably to their own case, they refuse to justify God, but insist on justifying themselves. Just at this point, they reveal their real state of mind. You remember how Nathan came to David, and how he managed his application of truth so well that he drew out from David a most decisive verdict against a special case of wrong-doing before he let him see how entirely the case was his own. David's indignation was aroused and he declared that the man who had done so should die. Yet when Nathan solemnly replied to him--"Thou art the man"--what did David do? There he revealed his real character. He did not rebel--did not resist the application, but humbled himself at once, and confessed his great sin. Often, however, it happens that, when persons cannot mistake the application of rebuke to themselves, they refuse to justify God, and insist on justifying themselves.

Sometimes, when persons have done that which publicly disgraces religion and are publicly reproofed for it, instead of humbling themselves, they complain and think themselves hardly treated. Indeed, they often talk as if God's ministers had no right and no authority from their Master to reprove men for their sins. So they defend their position in sin, and, of course, harden their necks.

Often men plead some excuse to palliate their wrong, and thus harden their necks. They insist that others are to blame, and seem determined to assume that this ought to excuse them. Suppose you were laboring to enforce the truth upon one of your children, but he should dodge every point and try to cover up, and cast the blame on others; would you not feel greatly grieved that you could not reach his conscience to do him good?

Yet further, sinners harden their necks by objecting to the manner in which the reproof is administered. Instead of looking at the matter of the reproof, and asking themselves if it be not true, and if it does not involve very great guilt, they engross their minds with the manner, and complain of that as being perhaps very strange. But God is not wont to consult the taste of wicked men as to the manner in which he shall rebuke their sin. Probably he is not so fastidious as they are. It often happens that men do object to his manner when he handles them roughly, and get only the result of being thereby more fearfully hardened.

Sometimes they object against the persons who reprove them, saying--"Physician, heal thyself." Or you may hear talk loudly of impudence and impertinence. David, rebuked by Nathan, did not do so, although he had all the power a man could ask. The reason of his different course was, that he had a conscience and humbled himself before a holy God.

But let reproof come from whom it may, and in whatever manner it may, those who reject it are surely hardening their own necks. There is nothing, perhaps, which more clearly reveals a man's real character than his course and spirit under reproof. You may, perhaps, recollect the case of a minister who was so much abused in his own house, that his wife lost all patience, and said to him--"Why not show the man the door?" but who mildly answered his wife's suggestion, saying, "Let us hear all he has to say against me; we may learn some good. If the Lord suffers him to curse, who knows but he has some wise ends to answer." It is most true that God sometimes lets our enemies try us and provoke us sadly. Happy is that man who has humility enough to receive such rebukes and make the best of them. The justice of the reproof, not the manner of it, is the thing we should look at. This is the matter that most concerns us in our relations to God. If the reproof be administered manifestly in a bad spirit, then you need pre-eminently to be on your guard. Then you are in the greater danger of repelling it, and becoming thereby the more

hardened. Human nature is exceedingly prone to feel deeply, and to object strongly to the manner, or the person who reproves; but God will not hold us guiltless if we repel reproof for such reasons.

Persons often harden their own hearts by complaining of the language used in the rebukes they receive. They think us too severe, or perhaps, extravagant, while really no language can adequately describe their own great wickedness.

All sorts of excuses made for wickedness, harden the heart and stiffen the neck against God. Sometimes, when reprov'd, men will resort to recrimination, abuse and retort. Instead of receiving rebuke in humility, they hurl it back with resentment. Woe to him who does this. Nothing that he can do will more fearfully harden the heart.

Some seek relief under the sting of reproof, by indulging hard feelings against those who reprove them. These feelings tend strongly to confirm the will in its rebellious attitude against God, for as long as one indulges these feelings, he is, of course, hardening his neck against reproof.

Some, to excuse themselves, will plead their inability, or that they have other duties to perform, yet are compelled in honesty to say, "I might have done it if I had been in the spirit of religion, and had realized the value of souls.["]

Some persons excuse themselves from attending meetings, but would not, if they knew and felt the value of souls. It is entertained only as an apology for neglect. Or by allowing some prejudice to prevail, men will repel the truth and harden their neck. Or they will utterly deny the justice of the charge made against them. This spirit of self-justification is sometimes so strong that they will not confess. Press them as you may, they are still so full of the spirit of self-justification, they will not lisp a word of confession--will not come down in true humility.

These are some of the ways in which sinners harden their necks.

IV. I am next to show what is meant by being "suddenly destroyed."

This class of words--destroy, kill, etc., does not mean annihilation. We know nothing about annihilation. Who can know anything about it? We have had no observation and of course no experience of it. We certainly do not know that it is possible, save to the omnipotent power of Jehovah. This, however, we do know--namely, that the words kill, destroy, etc., never mean annihilation; but only the death of the body, leaving the soul as full of life as ever. Therefore, in using these or similar words, God does not threaten annihilation.

Nor again, can it denote a merely temporary punishment. No man would use such language in such a sense. Nor can it denote any light degree of punishment. It must mean the loss of the soul--the utter ruin of all the sinner's well-being.

It shall be sudden--that is, it will come unexpectedly. This is the usual sense of the word, sudden. In such an hour as they think not, the fearful blow will fall.

V. What is meant by its being "without remedy?"

It must mean that the threatened destruction cannot be prevented. You are sick and send for a physician; but he decides that your case is beyond a remedy. The meaning is, that he cannot avert impending death.

The threatened calamity will come, despite of every means of resistance. So the sinner, of hardened neck, must be destroyed, and nothing can prevent it. He may resist instruction, but cannot resist destruction. He may withstand the rebuke that seeks to reclaim, but the rebuke that comes to avenge God's insulted majesty, no power can withstand. When God's own right hand is lifted to destroy, there is no mightier arm than his that can deliver. Alas, the sinner may look imploringly in every direction, but no help can come!

As it cannot be prevented that it shall not come, so neither can there be any redemption from it when it has once fallen. No relief, interposing, can prevent it from being final and complete.

VI. But why is this destruction so sudden and remediless?

For the reason that it is just and righteous altogether.

Also, because it is of no use for God to spare such sinners any longer. Having reached the point where reproof only serves to harden their necks the more, it is plain that for them to live longer, would only serve to enhance their guilt, and therefore heighten their doom.

Why, then, should not God destroy them suddenly? And yet further, it is benevolent towards all other beings to make of them a public example. The public good would be in jeopardy if God's forbearance were prolonged indefinitely. And should not God take care of the interests of the holy and pure not less than of the hopelessly vile?

REMARKS.

This text is applicable to nations. When they are often reproofed, and yet still harden their neck, they may expect destruction speedily and without remedy. Of this the Jews were examples in more than one generation.

So of the visible church.

And so, also, of sinners. After great provocations of his long-suffering patience, they are left of God. In revivals, especially, we often see how God cuts them down. I could stand here and give you the names of many whom God has cut down as in a moment. They had abused his Spirit until they had become fatally hardened, and God saw there was no more hope of their turning to himself. What could he do, then, better than to cut them down where they were, ere they had swollen yet more the measure of their guilt, and the fearfulness of their retribution?

We can often predict the doom of sinners when we see them hardening themselves against God. How awful to look on and see them hardening themselves against God, and yet know assuredly that ere long they must be suddenly destroyed, unless they at once repent! Some of us have had our faces turn pale as we have seen our children hardening their necks. O, what sorrow can be like this sorrow!

It is, of all things else, most alarming, to see persons becoming so blind to their own guilt and danger, that they can rush on, reckless of God and of his righteous retribution. Hear them crying, Peace and safety! All seems well to them; they enjoy perfect health, perhaps, and think their mountain stands strong; but ere they are aware, sudden destruction cometh on them, and they shall not escape forever!

Sinner, do you wish to know when God will arise in his wrath and cut you down in your sins? It will be just when you are crying "peace and safety," and are hardening your neck against all sense of either guilt or

danger. Then, in a moment, it will burst on you like a clap of thunder out of a clear sky! Just this our Savior affirmed when he said, "In such an hour as ye think not, the Son of man cometh."

Think of the case of sinners here. In every breeze they may hear the gentle whispers of divine love; in each day's prolonged life, another appeal to their souls to render unto God the honor and gratitude which are his due; at every table, a fresh demonstration of his loving-kindness; through every Sabbath and every week, the voice of God re-echoes in their ear--but alas! they are weary of hearing so much from God! They are tired of these constant appeals to do what they hate and to honor Him for whom they care not. So they harden their necks and make their course of sin as smooth and as undisturbed as possible!

Ah, we shall see how it will be with them! We shall see whether they withstand the Most High when once he shall arise in his wrath to take vengeance on his foes! Who hath ever hardened himself against God and prospered? Just when they thought themselves on the eve of triumph over their great enemy, then sudden destruction fell on them, and there was no escape!

The infidelity of many in regard to God in providence, is to them a stumbling block. They will have it that there is no God in these events that occur. They are most averse to any recognition of his agency. "God speaketh once, yea, twice; but man regardeth it not." Nothing is so unwelcome to the sinner as to meet with manifestations of a present God. He does not love the truth taught by Christ, that "even the very hairs on your head are all numbered." O, if they could only be forever beyond the reach of this great and awful God! But they cannot!

Their pride and self-will are their ruin. Long time has God been laboring to subdue your self-will; but you resist and will not yield. You are determined this proud will of yours shall not be subdued. Has not God been making appeals to your heart and conscience to induce you to yield to his sway? Has he not in many ways sought to move you by affliction, until, perhaps, he is saying of you--"Why should you be smitten any more? Ye will revolt more and more." Reproof comes to you from the four winds of heaven; every living thing has a voice for God to use in solemn warning and affectionate entreaty; and shall it all be in vain? Will you yet make your heart hard as an adamant stone? If so, we shall see whether God will be true to his word. We shall see whether sudden destruction will or will not come, and that "without remedy!"

How fearful must such a destruction be, and especially so to those who have been so long and so well instructed as most of you have been! Some of you are from families where you have been continually reprov'd of sin from early infancy. O, how fearfully hardened must your necks have become! Will it not be most awful for you to fall into the hands of a just God!

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