

An Assembly Convoked Against Sinners.

by Edward Payson

The sermon emphasizes the importance of showing sinners that a great assembly is against them, and encourages them to turn to God through repentance.

Scripture: Nehemiah 5:7, Matthew 12:50, Matthew 25:34, Ephesians 5:27, Hebrews 10:31, Hebrews 12:1, 1 Peter 1:16, Revelation 5:11

Topics: "Repentance", "Eternal Judgment"

Description

Edward Payson preaches about Nehemiah's firmness in correcting evils among the Jews by setting a great assembly against the guilty, leading to their repentance and restitution. He parallels this with the need to show impenitent sinners the disapproval of a greater assembly against them, including all the good men on earth and in heaven, the holy angels, the inspired writers of the Bible, and ultimately, the Lord Jesus Christ and God the Father. Payson urges sinners to leave their unholy ranks and join the assembly of the truly good for eternal happiness, while reminding believers of the honor and obligations of belonging to such a glorious assembly.

Transcript

"And I set a great assembly against them"

Nehemiah 5:7

Nehemiah came to Jerusalem, with a commission from the Persian monarch, appointing him governor of Judea, after the return of the Jews from captivity, he found that many evils and abuses had crept in among them, which it required all his wisdom and firmness to rectify. But as he was a man whom nothing could daunt or discourage, he exerted himself vigorously to correct these evils, and succeeded. An account of the means which he employed on one occasion, for this purpose, we have in the chapter before us.

After stating that he summoned the guilty persons before him, and reproved them for the evils to which they had been accessory, he adds, And I set a great assembly against them. He seems to have adopted this measure, partly, because the persons implicated were numerous and powerful, and it was necessary to show them that still greater numbers disapproved of their conduct; and partly, with a view to produce in them such a salutary shame and remorse, as might lead them to a voluntary renunciation of their criminal practices.

The measure was successful. Although the criminals, relying on their numbers, wealth, and power, might have braved the displeasure of Nehemiah alone, they could not support the disapprobation of the numerous assembly he set against them; and therefore consented to renounce the gainful, but illegal practices, of which they had been guilty, and to make restitution to those whom they had injured. My hearers, I wish to adopt, with respect to the irreligious part of this assembly, a measure similar to that which was employed by the governor of Judea.

I wish to show impenitent sinners, of every description, how great an assembly may be set against them; how numerous are the beings, who regard their conduct with most decided disapprobation. It is the more necessary to do this, because there is nothing on which sinners so much rely, nothing which so much encourages and strengthens them in their neglect of religion, as the greatness of their numbers. In this place, and indeed in every part of this revolted world, they have a great majority on their side.

They are decidedly superior to the servants of God, not only in number, but in wealth, and power, and influence; so that were the great question, what is truth? to be decided by numbers, they could easily determine it in their own favor. Now among a race of beings so much influenced by custom, fashion, and example, as men are, the evils occasioned by this fact are prodigious. The very circumstance, that so large a majority of mankind are on the side of irreligion, tends powerfully to preserve a majority on that side: for a large proportion of the youth, in each successive generation, will enlist under the banner of the strongest party.

The same circumstance operates most powerfully to weaken the force, and prevent the success of those means and arguments, which God employs for the conversion of sinners. When the man who neglects religion, looks around him, and sees wealth, rank, power and influence, all ranged on his side, he secretly says, I must be right, I must be safe; the evils with which I am threatened cannot be real; no danger can attend the path which so many pursue; the arguments which are employed to effect a change in my sentiments and conduct cannot be founded in truth, and are therefore unworthy my attention.

If I fare as well as the great mass of my fellow creatures, I shall fare well enough. This being the case, it is important to show sinners, that a great assembly may be set against them; an assembly, whose approbation is far more valuable, and whose example is far more worthy of imitation; than that of all the multitudes whom they are following. In attempting to do this, however, I shall address those, only, who assent to the truth of the Scriptures, and who acknowledge arguments drawn from them to be valid.

If we cannot show sinners of this description, a greater assembly collected against them, than they can collect on their side, we consent, that from this time, they shall follow the world wherever it leads them. Among those, my irreligious hearers, who are against you, we may mention, 1. The good men now in the world. By good men, I do not mean professors of religion; for many professors are on your side, and are perhaps more guilty than any of you. But by good men, I mean men really good, men whom God will acknowledge to be good.

Now there is not one, no, not one such man among all the multitudes on whose numbers you rely. Look through the whole host of your associates, and you cannot find one good man. Even in Sodom, there was one. But in all the ranks of those who neglect religion, there is not one. All, all good men are against you. God has not a servant, Jesus Christ has not a friend on earth, who is not against you. Their example is against you, their testimony is against you. And although their number, in any particular place, may be small, yet were they collected from all parts of the world, they would probably form the most numerous

assembly the world ever saw.

And if thus collected, they would all, with one voice, testify against you and condemn your conduct. Yes, if all the goodness which the eye of God now sees scattered in different parts of the earth, were here present, it would set itself in direct opposition to the course you are pursuing. My irreligious hearers, to have such an assembly as this against you, is not a small thing. To belong to a company, in which not a single good man can be found, is far from being desirable, however large that company may be.

But perhaps some will reply, we differ in our ideas of goodness, and of good men. There are many on our side, whom you will not acknowledge to be good men, but whom we consider as such, and in whom we may justly boast. I answer, it is of very little consequence whom I consider as good; for it is a small thing to be judged of men's judgment. But you will recollect, that I call those only good men whom the Bible, whom God pronounces to be good. And you surely will not pretend that any others have a claim to the title.

Nor will you pretend that God regards as good any man who neglects religion. I am willing, however, in this case, not to appeal to the Bible. I will meet you on broader ground, on ground where men of all religious denominations and opinions will consent to meet. I will take the due performance of one duty, the duty of prayer, as the characteristic of a good man. I mention this duty, because not only all denominations of Christians, but Jews, Mohammedans, Heathens, and even many infidels, acknowledge prayer to be a duty.

And they all acknowledge that this duty ought to be performed sincerely; and that no man, who does not thus perform it, is a good man. Allow me then to set all the persons in the world, who do pray sincerely, against those who never pray at all, or pray only in an insincere, formal manner. Those of you who neglect prayer, will still have the majority on your side, but of whom is that majority composed? Among them all, there is not one to pray, either for himself, or for his companions; not one to implore the blessing of Heaven on your numerous host.

From all that host, not one cry ascends to Heaven for mercy. All the prayer which ascends from the world, ascends from that great assembly which is set against you. My hearers, you must choose which side you please; but permit me to say, I would rather stand with only ten praying persons, against a prayerless world, than with a prayerless world, against ten men of prayer. Indeed, who, that believes the Bible, would not rather be with Noah, against an ungodly world, than with an ungodly world, against Noah?

But all the good men who are now on earth, form only a very small part of the assembly which may be collected against those of you who neglect religion. I proceed to set against you, 2. All the good men who have ever lived in the world, and whose spirits, the spirits of just men made perfect, are now in heaven. These, it is obvious to remark, compose an assembly, far exceeding in number, all the good men who are now alive. In this assembly, stands righteous Abel, the first martyr; Enoch, who was translated, that he should not see death; Noah, who walked with God, when a world rose up in arms against him; Abraham, the friend of God and the father of the faithful; Israel, who as a prince, had power with God and with men, and prevailed; Moses, who chose to suffer affliction with the people of God, rather than enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; Elijah, who ascended alive into heaven, together with a long list of other venerable names, of whom the world was not worthy.

In this assembly we also see John the Baptist, than whom a greater was never born of woman; the twelve apostles, and other immediate disciples of our Lord; the almost countless host of the martyrs, who in the first three centuries sealed the truth with their blood; the reformers, who burst the iron bands of papal

superstition; the pious fathers of New England, who forsook their country, and braved the perils of the ocean and the hardships of a savage wilderness, that they might have the liberty of serving God according to the dictates of their own consciences.

All these, and myriads more, composing an assembly which no man can number, I set against you. All the collected goodness, which for more than five thousand years has adorned the world, and saved it from destruction, I array against you. I invoke the patriarchs, the prophets, the apostles, and the martyrs; I invoke all the friends of God, and servants of Jesus Christ, now in heaven, to descend with their robes of light, their harps and crowns of gold, and repeat the testimony, which, while on earth, they bore against the sin of a God-denying world.

I invoke the fathers of New England to appear, and rebuke the folly and impiety of their degenerate sons, who neglect the God of their fathers, and practically say of the Redeemer, in whom they trusted, We will not have this man to reign over us. And now, sinner, look at the heavenly host of God's elect, purified from all earthly stains, made perfect in knowledge, in wisdom and holiness, and shining resplendent with the glories of the upper world, while with countenances full of celestial compassion, yet severe in grave rebuke, they array themselves against you, and reprove the madness of which you are guilty.

Not one of them ascended to heaven from your ranks; not one of them, should he revisit the earth, would enter your ranks. No, while they resided here as expectants of eternity, they exchanged the broad crowded road, in which you are walking, for the narrow way which has led them to heaven; and by their example, and their writings, they, though dead, still speak, and bear testimony against all who follow your path. It appears therefore, that not only all the goodness, which now exists in the world, but all that ever has existed in it since its creation, is arrayed in direct opposition to you.

In the same opposing assembly are found, 3. All the writers of the Old and New Testaments. We have indeed already mentioned them as good men, but we now speak of them as inspired men, and the fact of their inspiration is of such consequence as to entitle them to a separate notice. Indeed the authority of a single inspired man is sufficient to countervail the authority of the whole human race, for the authority of an inspired writer is, in effect, the authority of God himself.

Look then sinner, at this venerable band, which, though small in number, is more than equivalent to the more numerous host. See the eternal Spirit of God, the Spirit of truth, descending upon them, and teaching them what to say. Being taught by him they speak, and with one voice testify against you. With one voice they cry, Woe to the wicked, it shall be ill with him, for the reward of his hands shall be given him! With one voice they denounce indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish upon every soul of man that doeth evil.

To have this little band against you, is more dreadful than to face the indignation of a frowning world; for their words are the words of one, who has said, Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away. 4. Another part of the great assembly, which we array against you, is composed of the holy angels. Whether we consider the number, the character, or the intellectual rank of these pure, exalted intelligences, it will appear no small thing to have them arrayed against us.

Their number is great. One inspired writer speaks of them, as an innumerable company. Another says, that they are ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands. It is not improbable that they equal, or even exceed in number the human race. Their intellectual abilities and acquirements, are of the highest order. In comparison with the least of them, the wisest human philosopher is a child. Nor are they

less distinguished by moral excellence; for their holiness is perfect, spotless.

And they are all, sinner, arrayed against you. They have their supreme delight in executing the will of that God, whom you neglect and disobey. They veil their faces before him, whom you treat with irreverence. They ascribe wisdom and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing, to that Redeemer, whom you refuse to embrace, of whose invitations you make light. Yes, all the angels of God worship him, who was crucified on earth, and whom sinners do, in effect crucify afresh by their sins.

How groundless, then, is the often repeated boast of worldly men, that talents, wisdom and knowledge are, almost exclusively, on their side. Against all their boasted philosophers, their learned infidels, their intellectual Goliaths, who defy the armies of the living God, we array the heavenly hosts, the cherubim, and the seraphim, the thrones and dominions, the principalities and the powers, of the upper world. We cannot think it a mark either of weakness or of ignorance, to imitate their example, --we cannot think it disgraceful to echo their ascriptions of praise to God and the Lamb, nor can we think it either wise or honorable, to neglect that gospel, whose mysteries such minds contemplate with eager and delighted attention.

But why do we speak of good men, of the spirits of the just made perfect, or even of the holy angels, as arrayed in opposition to the course which sinners are pursuing? Why do we waste time in assembling creatures to support our cause? However holy or highly exalted they may be, they can give it no additional luster; it needs them not, for, 5. The Lord Jesus Christ, my irreligious hearers, is arrayed against you, and what can creatures add to the weight of his opposition? He is the leader of that numerous host, the Captain of salvation, the Lord of angels and men, the appointed Judge, who will pronounce an immutable sentence on both.

He holds the keys of death, and of hell; he possesses all power in heaven and on earth, and were all creatures on our side, it could avail us nothing while he is against us. And, my impenitent hearers, he is against you; he sets his face against the course which you are pursuing; every doctrine which he promulgated, every precept which he enjoined, every threatening which he uttered, every action of his life, is against you. Even his death bears testimony to the sinfulness of your characters, to the guilt and danger of your situation; for how sinful, guilty, and dangerous must be the state of those, whose sin rendered his death necessary!

Every part of that religion which he revealed, cries, How can they escape who neglect so great salvation? And you, my impenitent hearers, are neglecting it. The neglectors of this salvation, are the very persons whom we address, and against whom we are collecting this great assembly. And all of this description, the Lord Jesus Christ meets full in their path, and says, Pursue this path no farther, on peril of your souls. He meets all the impenitent, and says, Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.

He meets the unbelieving, and says, ye that believeth not, shall he damned. He meets all the unholy, and says, Without holiness, no man shall see the Lord. He meets all the unregenerate, and exclaims, Verily, verily, I say unto you, except ye be born again, ye cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. And if any of these characters shall continue till death in their present course, they will find him against them at the judgment day, prepared and disposed to execute upon them the sentence pronounced in his word.

Finally, my irreligious hearers, God the Father is against you. Yes, sinner, the infinite God, the ever-living, almighty, and every where present God, the high, and holy, and just, and unchangeable God, is against you. He who sitteth on the circle of the earth, and counts all its inhabitants as nothing and vanity; he who

holds all creatures and all worlds as in the hollow of his hand; He in whom you live, and move, and have your being, even he has revealed himself in direct opposition to the course you are pursuing.

Coming forth from the unapproachable light in which he dwells, arrayed in all the majesty, and terrors, and glory of self-existent divinity, he discloses himself to view, seated on the throne of the universe, with his immutable law issuing from his lips, and going forth to demand obedience from his creatures on pain of death. Casting a glance of severe and awful displeasure on the course which you are pursuing, with his own right hand he waves you back, and with his own authoritative voice of power, bids you turn, and no longer advance in opposition to your Sovereign.

Let the potsherds, he exclaims, strive with the potsherds of the earth, but woe to him who striveth with his Maker. My hearers, while you neglect religion, you are striving with your Maker, and all the laws of his kingdom, all the perfections of his nature, all the dispensations of his providence, all the contents of his word, are against you. And now survey once more and collectively, the vast assembly which is arrayed against you, an assembly composed of all the good on earth, of all the spirits of the just in heaven, of all the holy angels, with God's eternal Son, and the ever living Jehovah at their head?

Before such an assembly, what are you? And whom will you array against it? You may indeed assemble all the wicked on earth; you may call for the departed spirits of all wicked men, who have gone to their own place; and you may add the spirits of disobedience; the apostate angels, to swell the throng; but these are all whom you can assemble. No holy angels, no good man, in heaven or earth, will join your unhallowed host, or countenance you in disobeying or neglecting the Sovereign whom they love.

Surely then, those of you who acknowledge the truth of the Scriptures, will no more boast of, or rely upon the number which swells your ranks. Indeed, methinks a view of those who are with you, can scarcely be more pleasing than a view of those who are against you. To see all evil beings on your side, is little less appalling, than to see all good beings on the opposite side. And remember that what you have now heard described, you will one day see. You will see all the different classes and beings, who have been mentioned, assembled at the judgment day.

On one side, you will see all wicked men and wicked spirits; on the other, all good men, all holy angels, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the everlasting Father. And if you continue what you now are, you will see all the former arrayed on your side, and all the latter against you. And then, if not now, you will feel, that there is a great assembly against you, and that to have such an assembly against you, is indeed an evil above all things to be deprecated. I need not, my irreligious hearers, repeat remarks which I have often made respecting the pain which it gives me to address you in this manner.

Nor need I again remind you, that my only object is to promote your happiness. The use which I wish to make of the subject is, to persuade you to leave the host to which you now belong, and to join the assembly which is arrayed against it. There is not an individual in the assembly referred to, who is not prepared to receive and welcome you with cordial affection. All the good on earth, would gladly embrace you as brethren; holy beings in heaven would rejoice over you, as they do over every sinner that repenteth.

The Lord Jesus Christ is ready to receive you, and God the Father to forgive you, and adopt you as his children. All, all combine with one voice to cry, Come with us, and we will do you good. Do you reply, we would join you, were there not so many hypocrites in your number. My hearers, we are not inviting you to join us. We are inviting you to join the armies of the Lamb, the camp of God, to join an assembly

composed of none but the truly good. Surely, in such an assembly, there are no hypocrites.

All hypocrites belong to the host which we wish you to leave. They will, as inspiration assures us, have their portion with unbelievers, for unbelievers they in reality are. If you wish to be separate from them here, and hereafter, you must join those who worship God in spirit and in truth. Choose then, my hearers, choose your associates, and while choosing them, remember that you are choosing them for eternity. Remember too that all the goodness in the universe is on one side, and all the evil on the other.

There is not a good man among those you are invited to leave. There is not an evil being among those you are invited to join. The subject is well calculated to encourage and animate those of you, who are truly religious. You see to how numerous, and how glorious an assembly you belong. When you look around upon the state of the world, you perhaps sometimes feel, like the prophet, as if you were almost alone. But if your eyes are opened to see the great assembly which has been described, you will see that there are more with you, than against you, more with you, than with your adversaries.

You are come unto Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, and to an innumerable company of angels, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect. And O, what an honor and privilege is it, to compose one of such an assembly as this! What an honor and privilege would it be, were the assembly much smaller than it is! And if it be an honor and privilege now, what will it be at the great day, in which all shall be assembled before the judgment seat of Christ!

What happiness to hear him acknowledge you as his, to hear him say, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. You were not ashamed to acknowledge me in the midst of an ungodly world, and now I will not be ashamed of you. You have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things; enter ye, into the joy of your Lord. But remember, that if union to such an assembly be a great honor and privilege, it also imposes great obligations.

What ought they to be, in temper and conduct, who profess to belong to such an assembly as this! How white, how unspotted ought to be their garments! How should their whole lives testify to whom they belong! And how great and how just will be the punishment of those false disciples, who, while they pretend to belong to this holy assembly, only disgrace it by their ungodly lives, and appear as spots and blemishes in the midst of it. Not long shall they be permitted thus to dishonor it; for he, whose eyes are as a flame of fire, will come to purify his church, and to cast into outer darkness those who have assumed his name only to profane it, and professed his religion only to dishonor it.

Then he will say to his church, Rejoice, rejoice, for from henceforth there shall no more come into thee the uncircumcised and the unclean. Then he will present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or imperfection, or any such thing; but perfectly holy and without blemish. What manner of persons then ought ye to be? As he who hath called us is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation, because he hath said, Be ye holy, for I am holy.

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