

The Benefits of an Early Piety

By George Whitefield

(Preached at Bow Church, London, before the Religious Societies.)

Ecclesiastes 12:1, "Remember now your Creator in the Days of your Youth."

The amiableness of religion in itself, and the innumerable advantages that flow from it to society in general, as well as to each sincere professor in particular, cannot but recommend it to the choice of every considerate person, and make, even wicked men, as they wish to die the death, so in their more sober intervals, to envy the life of the righteous. And, indeed, we must do the world so much justice, as to confess, that the question about religion does not usually arise from a dispute whether it be necessary or not (for most men see the necessity of doing something for the salvation of their souls;) but when is the best time to set about it. Persons are convinced by universal experience, that the first essays or endeavors towards the attainment of religion, are attended with some difficulty and trouble, and therefore they would willingly defer the beginning of such a seemingly ungrateful work, as long as they can. The wanton prodigal, who is spending his substance in riotous living, cries, a little more pleasure, a little more sensuality, and then I will be sober in earnest. The covetous worldling, that employs all his care and pains in "heaping up riches, though he cannot tell who shall gather them," does not flatter himself that this will do always; but hopes with the rich fool in the gospel, to lay up goods for a few more years on earth, and then he will begin to lay up treasures in heaven. And, in short, thus it is that most people are convinced of the necessity of being religious some time or another; but then, like Felix, they put off the acting suitably to their convictions, till, what they imagine, a more convenient season: whereas, would we be so humble as to be guided by the experience and counsel of the wisest men, we should learn that youth is the fittest season for religion; "Remember now your creator, (says Solomon) in the days of your youth." By the word remember, we are not to understand a bare speculative remembrance, or calling to mind, (for that, like a dead

faith, will profit us nothing,) but such a remembrance as will constrain us to obedience, and oblige us out of gratitude, to perform all that the Lord our God shall require of us. For as the forgetting God in scripture language, implies a total neglect of our duty, in like manner remembering him signifies a perfect performance of it: so that, when Solomon says, "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth," it is the same as if he had said, keep God's commandments; or, in other words, be religious in the days of your youth, thereby implying, that youth is the most proper season for it.

I shall in the following discourse,

FIRST, Endeavor to make good the wise man's proposition, implied in the words of the text, and to show that youth is the fittest season for religion.

SECONDLY, By way of motive, I shall consider the many unspeakable advantages that will arise from, "Remembering our Creator in the days of our youth." And,

THIRDLY, I shall conclude with a word or two of exhortation to the younger part of this audience.

FIRST, I am to make good the wise man's proposition, implied in the words of the text, and to show that youth is the fittest season for religion: "Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth." But to proceed more clearly in this argument, it may not be improper, first, to explain what I mean by the word religion. By this term, then, I would not be understood to mean a bare outward profession or naming the name of Christ; for we are told, that many who have even prophesied in his name, and in his name cast out devils, shall notwithstanding be rejected by him at the last day: nor would I understand by it, barely being admitted into Christ's church by baptism; for then Simon Magus, Arius, and the heresiarchs [heresies, maybe arch-heresies] of old, might pass for religious persons; for these were baptized: nor yet the receiving the other seal of the covenant, for then Judas himself might be canonized for a saint; nor indeed do I mean any or all of these together, considered by themselves; but a thorough, real, inward change of nature,

wrought in us by the powerful operations of the Holy Spirit, conveyed to and nourished in our hearts, by a constant use of all the means of grace, evidenced by a good life, and bringing forth the fruits of the spirit.

The attaining this real, inward religion, is a work of so great difficulty, that Nicodemus, a learned doctor and teacher in Israel, thought it altogether impossible, and therefore ignorantly asked our blessed Lord, "How this thing could be?" And, truly, to rectify a disordered nature, to mortify our corrupt passions, to turn darkness to light, to put off the old man, and put on the new, and thereby to have the image of God reinstamped upon the soul, or, in one word, "to be born again," however light some may make of it, must, after all our endeavors, be owned by man to be impossible. It is true, indeed, Christ's yoke is said to be an easy or a gracious yoke, and his burden light; but then it is to those only to whom grace has been given to bear and draw in it. For, as the wise son of Sirach observes, "At first wisdom walked with her children in crooked ways, and bring them into fear, and torments them with her discipline, and does not turn to comfort and rejoice them, till she has tried them and proved their judgment." No, we must not flatter ourselves that we shall walk in wisdom's pleasant ways, unless we first submit to a great many difficulties. The spiritual birth is attended with its pangs, as well as the natural: for they that have experienced it (they only are the proper judges,) can acquaint you, that in all things that are dear to corrupt nature, we must deny ourselves, lest, after all, when welcome to the birth, we should want strength to bring forth.

But if these things are so; if there are difficulties and pangs attending our being born again; if we must deny ourselves, what season more proper than that of youth? When, if ever, our bodies are robust and vigorous, and our minds active and courageous; and, consequently, we are then best qualified to endure hardness, as good soldiers of Jesus Christ.

We find, in secular matters, people commonly observe this method, and send their children abroad among the toils and fatigues of business, in their younger years, as well

knowing they are then fittest to undergo them. And why do they not act with the same consistency in the grand affair of religion? Because, as our Savior has told us, "The children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light."

But, **SECONDLY**, If pure and undefiled religion consists in the renewal of our corrupted natures, then it is not only a work of difficulty, but, the perfection of it, of time.

And if this be the case, then it highly concerns everyone to set about it betimes, and to "work their work while it is day, before the night comes, when no man can work."

Could we, indeed, live to the age of Methuselah, and had but little business to employ ourselves in, we might then be more excusable, if we made no other use of this world, than what too many do, take our pastime therein: but since our lives are so very short, and we are called to work our salvation with fear and trembling, we have no room left for trifling, lest we should be snatched away while our lamps are untrimmed, and we are entirely unprepared to meet the Bridegroom.

Did we know a friend or neighbor, who had a long journey of the utmost importance to make, and yet should stand all the day idle, neglecting to set out till the sun was about to go down, we could not but pity and condemn his egregious folly. And yet it is to be feared most men are just such fools; they have a long journey to take, nay, a journey to eternity, a journey of infinite importance, and which they are obliged to dispatch before the sun of their natural life be gone down; and yet they loiter away the time allotted them to perform their journey in, till sickness or death surprises them; and then they cry out, "What shall we do to inherit eternal life?" But leaving such to the mercies of God in Christ, who can call at the eleventh hour.

I pass on to the **SECOND** general thing proposed, To show the advantages that will arise from remembering our Creator in the days of our youth; which may serve as so many motives to excite and quicken all persons immediately to set about it.

And the FIRST benefit resulting from thence is, that it will bring most honor and glory to God. This, I suppose, every serious person will grant, ought to be the point in which our actions should center; for to this end were we born, and to this end were we redeemed by the precious blood of Jesus Christ, that we should promote God's eternal glory. And as the glory of God is most advanced by paying obedience to his precepts, they that begin soonest to walk in his ways, act most to his glory. The common objection against the divine laws in general, and the doctrines of the gospel in particular, is, they are not practicable; that they are contrary to flesh and blood; and that all those precepts concerning self-denial, renunciation of and deadness to the world, are but so many arbitrary restraints imposed upon human nature: but when we see mere striplings not only practicing, but delighting in such religious duties, and in the days of their youth, when, if ever, they have a relish for sensual pleasures, subduing and despising the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life; this, this is pleasing to God; this vindicates his injured honor; this shows that his service is perfect freedom, "that his yoke is easy, and his burden light."

But, SECONDLY, as an early piety redounds most to the honor of God, so it will bring most honor to ourselves: for those that honor God, God will honor. We find it, therefore, remarked to the praise of Obadiah, that he served the Lord from his youth: of Samuel, that he stood, when young, before God in a linen ephod: of Timothy, that from a child he had known the holy scriptures: of St. John, that he was the youngest and most beloved disciple: and of our blessed Lord himself, that at twelve years old he went up to the temple, and sat among the doctors, both hearing and asking them questions.

Nor, THIRDLY, will an early piety afford us less comfort than honor, not only because it renders religion habitual to us, but also because it gives us a well-grounded assurance of the sincerity of our profession. Was there no other argument against a death-bed repentance, but the unsatisfactoriness and anxiety of such a state, that should be sufficient to deter all thinking persons from deferring the most important business of their life to

such a dreadful period of it. For supposing a man to be sincere in his profession of repentance on a death-bed (which, in most cases, is very much to be doubted) yet, he is often afraid lest his convictions and remorse proceed not from a true sorrow for sin, but a servile fear of punishment. But one, who is a young saint, need fear no such perplexity; he knows that he loves God for his own sake, and is not driven to him by a dread of impending evil; he does not decline the gratifications of sense, because he can no longer "hear the voice of singing men and singing women;" but willingly takes up his cross, and follows his blessed Master in his youth, and therefore has reason to expect greater confidence of his sincerity towards God. But further, as an early piety assures the heart of its sincerity, so, likewise, it brings its present reward with it, as it renders religion and its duties habitual and easy. A young saint, were you to ask him, would joyfully tell you the unspeakable comfort of beginning to be religious betimes: as for his part, he knows not what men mean by talking of mortification, self-denial, and retirement, as hard and rigorous duties; for he has so accustomed himself to them, that, by the grace of God, they are now become even natural, and he takes infinitely more pleasure in practicing the severest precepts of the gospel, than a luxurious Dives in a bed of state, or an ambitious Haman at a royal banquet. And O how happy must that youth be, whose duty is become a second nature, and to whom those things, which seem terrible to others, are grown both easy and delightful!

But the greatest advantage of an early piety is still behind, **FOURTHLY**, It lays in the best provision of comfort and support against such time as we shall stand most in need thereof, viz. All times of our tribulation, and in particular, against the time of old age, the hour of death, and the day of judgment.

This is the argument the wise man makes use of in the words immediately following the text: "Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, wherein you shall say, I have no pleasure in them." Observe, the time of old age, is an evil time, years wherein there is no pleasure: and ask those that

are grown old, and they will inform you so. Cordials surely, then, must be exceeding proper to support our drooping spirits: and O what cordial comparable to the recollection of early piety, depending wholly on the righteousness of Christ? When the eyes, like Isaac's, are grown dim with age; when "the keepers of the house, the hands, shall tremble," as the wise man goes on to describe the infirmities of old age; when "the strong men bow themselves," or the legs grow feeble; and the "grinders," the tooth, shall cease to do their proper office, because they are few; for a person then to hear the precepts of the gospel read over to him, and to be able to lay his hand on his heart, and to say sincerely, notwithstanding a consciousness of numberless short-comings, "All these have I endeavored, through grace, to keep from my youth:" this must give him, through Christ who works all, comfort that I want words to express and thoughts to conceive. But, supposing it was possible for us to escape the inconveniences of old age, yet still death is a debt, since the fall, we all must pay; and, what is worse, it generally comes attended with such dreadful circumstances, that it will make even a Felix to tremble. But as for the godly, that have been enabled to serve the Lord from their youth, it is not usually so with them; no, they have faith given them to look upon death, not as a king of terrors, but as a welcome messenger, that is come to conduct them to their wished-for home. All the days of their appointed time have they waited, and it has been the business of their whole lives to study to prepare themselves for the coming of their great change; and, therefore, they rejoice to hear they are called to meet the heavenly Bridegroom. Thus dies the early pious, whose "path has been as the shining light, that shines more and more unto the perfect day." But follow him beyond the grave, and see with what an holy triumph he enters into his Master's joy; with what an humble boldness he stands at the dreadful tribunal of Jesus Christ; and can you then forbear to cry out, "Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my latter end, and future state, be like his?"

Need I then, after having shown so many advantages to arise from an early piety, use any more arguments to persuade the younger part of this audience, to whom, in the THIRD and last place, I address myself, to "remember their Creator in the days of their youth?"

What! Will not all the arguments I have mentioned, prevail with them to leave their husks, and return home to eat of the fatted calf? What! Will they thus requite our Savior's love? That be far from them! Did he come down and shed his precious blood to deliver them from the power of sin; and will they spend their youthful strength and vigor in the service of it, and then think to serve Christ, when they can follow their lusts no longer? Is it fit, that many, who are endowed with excellent gifts, and are thereby qualified to be supports and ornaments of our sinking church, should, notwithstanding, forget the God who gave them, and employ them in things that will not profit? O why will they not arise, and, like so many Phineas's, be zealous for the Lord of Hosts? Doubtless, when death overtakes them, they will wish they had: and what hinders them, but that they begin now? Think you that any one yet ever repented that he began to be religious too soon? But how many, on the contrary, have repented that they began when almost too late? May we not well imagine, that young Samuel now rejoices that he waited so soon at the tabernacle of the Lord? Or young Timothy, that from a child he knew the holy scriptures? And if you wish to be partakers of their joy, let me persuade you to be partakers of their piety.

I could still go on to fill my mouth with arguments; but the circumstances and piety of those amongst whom I am now preaching "the kingdom of God," remind me to change my style; and, instead of urging any more dissuasives from sin, to fill up what is behind of this discourse, with encouragements to persevere in holiness.

Blessed, forever blessed be the God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, I am not speaking to persons inflamed with youthful lusts, but to a multitude of young professors, who by frequently assembling together, and forming themselves into religious societies, are, I hope on good ground, in a ready way to be of the number of those "young men, who have overcome the wicked-one."

Believe me, it gladdens my very soul, to see so many of your faces set heaven-wards, and the visible happy effects of your uniting together, cannot but rejoice the hearts of all sincere Christians, and oblige them to wish you good luck in the name of the Lord. The

many souls who are nourished weekly with the spiritual body and blood of Jesus Christ, by your means; the weekly and monthly lectures that are preached by your contributions; the daily incense of thanksgiving and prayer which is publicly sent up to the throne of grace by your subscriptions; the many children which are trained up "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord," by your charities; and, lastly, the commendable and pious zeal you exert in promoting and encouraging divine psalmody, are such plain and apparent proofs of the benefit of your religious societies, that they call for a public acknowledgment of praise and thanksgiving to our blessed Master, who has not only put into your hearts such good designs, but enabled you also to bring the same to good effect.

It is true it has been objected, "That young men forming themselves into religious societies, has a tendency to make them spiritually proud, and to think more highly of themselves than they ought to think." And, perhaps, the imprudent, imperious behavior of some novices in religion, who, "though they went out from you, were not of you," may have given too much occasion for such an aspersion.

But you, brethren, have not so learned Christ. Far, far be it from you to look upon yourselves, as righteous, and despise others, because you often assemble yourselves together. No; this, instead of creating pride, ought to beget an holy fear in your hearts, lest your practice should not correspond with your profession, and that, after you have benefited and edified others, you yourselves should become cast-aways.

Worldly-mindedness, my brethren, is another rock against which we are in danger of splitting. For, if other sins have slain their thousands of professing Christians, this has slain its ten thousands. I need not appeal to past ages; your own experience, no doubt, has furnished you with many unhappy instances of young men, who, "after (as one would have imagined) they had escaped the pollutions which are in the world through lust," and "had tasted the good word of life," and endured for a season, while under the tuition and inspection of others; yet, when they have come to be their own masters, through a want of faith, and through too great an earnestness in "laboring for the meat which perishes,"

have cast off their first love, been again entangled with the world, and "returned like the dog to his vomit, and like the sow that was washed, to her wallowing in the mire." You would, therefore, do well, my brethren, frequently to remind each other of this dangerous snare, and to exhort one another to begin, pursue, and end your Christian warfare, in a thorough renunciation of the world, and worldly tempers; so that, when you are obliged by Providence to provide for yourselves, and those of your respective households, you may continue to walk by faith, and still "seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness;" not doubting, but all other things, upon your honest industry and endeavors, shall be added unto you.

And now, what shall I say more? To speak unto you, fathers, who have been in Christ so many years before me, and know the malignity of worldly-mindedness, and pride in the spiritual life, would be altogether needless. To you, therefore, O young men, (for whom I am distressed, for whom I fear as well as for myself) do I once more address myself, in the words of the beloved disciple, "Look to yourselves, that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but receive a full reward." Be ever mindful, then, of the words that have been spoken to us by the apostles of the Lord and Savior, "Give diligence to make your calling and election sure. Beware, lest you also being led away by the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness. Let him that thinks he stands, take heed lest he fall. Be not high-minded, but fear. But we are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation, though we thus speak. For God is not unrighteous, to forget your works and labor of love. And we desire that every one of you do show the same diligence, to the full assurance of hope unto the end: that you be not slothful, but followers of them, who through faith and patience inherit the promises." It is true, we have many difficulties to encounter, many powerful enemies to overcome, ere we can get possession of the promised land. WE have an artful devil, and ensnaring world, and above all, the treachery of our own hearts, to withstand and strive against. "For straight is the gate, and narrow is the way that leads unto eternal life." But wherefore should we fear, since he that is with us is far more powerful, than all who are against us? Have we

not already experienced his almighty power, in enabling us to conquer some difficulties which seemed as insurmountable then, as those we struggle with now? And cannot he, who delivered us out of the paws of those bears and lions, preserve us also from being hurt by the strongest Goliath?

"Be steadfast therefore, my brethren, be immovable." Be not "ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation." Fear not man; fear not the contempt and revilings which you must meet with in the way of duty; for one of you shall chase a thousand; and two of you put ten thousand of your enemies to flight. And if you will be contented, through grace, to suffer for a short time here; I speak the truth in Christ, I lie not; then may you hope, according to the blessed word of promise, that you shall be exalted to sit down with the Son of Man, when he shall come in the glory of his Father, with his holy angels, to judgment hereafter. May Almighty God give every one of us such a measure of his grace, that we may not be of the number of those that draw back unto perdition, but of them that believe and endure unto the end, to the saving of our souls, through our Lord Jesus Christ.