

THE SEASON OF DIVINE MERCY.

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“Behold, now is the accepted time! Behold, now is the day of salvation.”—2 COR., VI. 2.

Soldiers of the Army of the Confederate States:

Allow me to address you on a subject of infinite moment to you. Compared with the interests involved in this subject, all others are insignificant and mean. I refer to the salvation of the soul. The blessed Jesus, who made both the world and the soul, and who knew perfectly well the relative value of each, in the form of an interrogation, which is even more significant and impressive than a positive affirmation, teaches us that a man would be an almost infinite loser if he should gain the world and lose his soul. “For what is a man profited,” says He, “if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?” But this priceless soul is in imminent danger of being eternally lost. It is already condemned and adjudged to hell. It only awaits the execution of the penalty which it has incurred to consign it to remediless ruin and despair. It is consoling, however, to know that for the direst exigencies of the soul a complete remedy has been provided. “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved.”

Now, what I wish to impress upon your minds in this address—is the solemn fact that THERE ARE SEASONS AND OPPORTUNITIES PECULIARLY FAVORABLE FOR THE PROTÉC-

TION AND SECURITY OF THE SOUL; AND IF THESE BE NOT PROPERLY IMPROVED, THE RUIN OF THE SOUL MUST INEVITABLY ENSUE. Let us seriously consider this subject.

1. *There are times and opportunities peculiarly favorable to the protection and security of the soul.* This may be proved, first by *analogy*. "In almost every pursuit of life, there are occasions and opportunities which afford peculiar aid in the prosecution of an enterprise. The judicious selection of these as the crises for action, is what usually gives one man an advantage beyond another. 'Riches do not come to the man of understanding, nor success to the man of might, but *time* and *chance* happen to all.' That is, there are certain opportunities in the course of human affairs which no wisdom of man can foresee, which no power of man can control, which being *apparently* matters of *chance* are yet under the direction of God, and on these depends the success or failure of every enterprise. The man of business is aware of this and therefore places himself in a posture which may enable him to watch all the occasions and incidents that may admit of improvement. As these escape him, notwithstanding his watchfulness, he is often heard to express his regrets when too late, that he had not taken advantage of the lost opportunity.— "Now," says he, "I perceive the point from which I erred. Why could I not see it at the very time? Why was I so dull of apprehension as not to have seized that idea which now appears so obvious, that I might have matured it into important results? Alas! it is now too late! I have lost the favoring tide of circumstances and must be content to see others sharing the advantages which my supineness has caused me to lose."

The same may be said of almost every human avocation. The men of the world have no doubt of the existence of such a disposition in the course of human events. They keep it perpetually in view. They regulate all their actions by a regard to it. They make their

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calculations with a special reference to the controlling influence of what the wise man styles "*time and chance*."

Now, the same disposition in divine things possesses an influence of the same kind, but as much more important as the things of eternity are more important than those of time. There are harvest times and summer seasons to the soul. Every sinner has a time of "*merciful visitation*." So *analogy* teaches.

2. But the truth of this important doctrine does not rest upon analogy alone. It is emphatically a doctrine of *the Sacred Scriptures*. We cannot turn to that unerring page, on which is written out all wisdom and all truth, without making out a certainty for this doctrine. The Old Testament Prophets inculcated it; and the teachings of Christ and his Apostles confirm it.

In alluding to this doctrine, Solomon says: "Man also knoweth not his time." And he recognizes the doctrine still more distinctly when he says to the young, "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, when the evil days come not nor the years draw nigh in which thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them." Isaiah says: "Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near." This language is obviously intended to mark the existence of intervals and times in which effort may be crowned with success. But if these auspicious seasons be not improved at the proper time all subsequent effort will be unavailing. Jeremiah says: "The harvest is past, the summer is over and we are not saved." The Prophet here utters very distinctly an intimation that the wretched circumstances of that unhappy people had been caused by their neglect of favorable opportunities of amendment.

The Saviour, the great unerring Teacher, also distinctly recognizes this doctrine. The reason which he assigns for the awful overthrow of Jerusalem is, that "she knew not the time of her merciful visitation." "If thou hadst

known, even thou, in this thy day, the things that belong to thy peace, but now they are hidden from thy eyes." This lamentation of the Saviour clearly involves the doctrine of special opportunity in religious concerns. They had had a day of merciful visitation; when the providence of God conveyed to them opportunities to be saved; when the smile of benignant Heaven seemed to rest upon them and invite them to honor and happiness; when numerous unsolicited aids to salvation were in actual attendance upon them. But these auspicious seasons had passed over; the favoring tide of circumstances was lost; and the things that belonged to their peace were hidden from their eyes. The opportunity for being saved was thus completely lost. The Apostles also taught this doctrine. Paul says, "Behold, now is the accepted time! Behold, now is the day of salvation!" And again, "To-day, if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts." Is it not clear then that the doctrine of special opportunity, in relation to the salvation of the soul, is most emphatically a Bible doctrine?

3. There is yet one other source of evidence to which we may refer in support of this doctrine. It is that of PERSONAL CONSCIOUSNESS. We know it is so. There is an innate consciousness of the truth of this doctrine in every rational mind. We have an illustration of the correctness of this remark in the case of the thoroughly awakened sinner. Go to such a sinner and endeavor to comfort him, and how soon he betrays his apprehensions on this very point. "Oh! I fear it is too late. I fear I have sinned away my day of grace. I fear that all is now lost and lost forever!"

And so it is with the dying sinner. I never shall forget the impressions made on my mind by the exclamations of a dying man, while yet the dew of youth was on my brow. I had been sent for to converse and pray with him in his last moments. As I entered the chamber of death, the poor man reached out his cold hand to me and exclaimed, "Oh! sir, I fear it is now too late!" Poor fellow, it was "too late" in his case; for he soon afterwards died in dreadful

despair. And if we follow the lost soul down to perdition, we shall there find a confirmation of this important doctrine. In that world of woe and despair, the wretched inhabitants constantly but unavailingly deplore their neglect of all opportunities to be saved, and their delinquency in this regard constitutes a frightful source of their inexpressible misery. Hear them exclaim, "how have we hated instruction and despised reproof." Now, "the harvest is passed, the summer is ended and we are not saved."

Here, then, we reach the climax of the argument. Let us pause for a moment and solemnly consider the conclusion to which we are thus conducted. Is it not clearly this?—Oh! listen to it—is it not that the impenitent sinner is every moment, and by every step he takes, advancing towards that awful line beyond which mercy never travels and hope is never found? How true it is, that

"Mercy knows the appointed bound
And turns to vengeance there."

Dr. Alexander very touchingly inculcates this truth in a number of stanzas from which we select the following:

"There is a time, we know not when,
A point, we know not where,
That marks the destiny of men
To glory or despair.

There is a line, by us unseen,
That crosses every path;
The hidden boundary between
God's patience and his wrath.

Oh! where is that mysterious bourne
By which our path is crossed,
Beyond which God himself hath sworn
That he who goes is lost?

How long may men go on in sin?
How long will God forbear?
Where does hope end, and where begin
The confines of despair?

An answer from the skies is sent :
 Ye that from God depart,
 While it is called to-day, repent,
 And harden not your heart."

O, reader! art thou still living in unrepented sin? Art thou still rejecting Christ and dashing down at thy guilty feet the proffered cup of salvation? Beware! Thy steps take hold on hell! Thou art already tottering on the brink of ruin! To-morrow thou mayest be lost, and lost forever! "Behold, now is the accepted time! Behold, now is the day of salvation." "TO-DAY if thou wilt hear his voice harden not thy heart."

II. But I shall leave my task incomplete if I do not endeavor to point out to you, my dear soldier friends, some of those times and occasions which are most favorable for the protection and security of the soul. Hence I remark,

1. That of all the seasons for securing the salvation of the soul, the youth-time of our existence is the most important. This might be proved by mental philosophy, by Bible encouragements, and by indisputable facts. The mind at that season is less cumbered with worldly cares; the heart is less indurated by sin; and the soul is more susceptible to divine impressions. The Scriptures, too, afford peculiar encouragement to the young. Mercy personified says, "I love them that love me, and they that seek me early shall find me." Numerous facts also attest the truth of this proposition. The great majority of those who are ever converted to God, are converted in the morning of their days. The period of youth, then, is an important "harvest-time and summer season" to the soul. O, young man, lay this truth to heart. Thou art now enjoying the most precious opportunity to be saved. "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, when the evil days come not nor the years draw nigh in which thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them."

2. Another of those occasions most favorable for the protection and security of the soul is a season of religious

revival. At such times ministers usually preach more plainly and more earnestly; Christians pray more fervently and with greater faith; sinners feel more deeply; and the Holy Spirit operates more mightily. O, soldier friends, heed the divine admonition, and "Repent and be converted when the times of refreshing come from the presence of the Lord."

3. Another of these auspicious occasions occurs when a special interest is evinced by God's people in the spiritual welfare of particular individuals, or of particular classes of unconverted persons. The doting parent is anxious now about his dear son. The pious wife breathes out her importunate prayers for the salvation of her beloved husband. And the affectionate sister is found in wrapt communion with her God in behalf of her impenitent brothers. Is not this a "harvest-time and summer season" to the soul? And when, too, the whole christian community is deeply concerned for the spiritual welfare of the soldiers in our various armies, is it not "an accepted time" and a "day of salvation" to them? How much interest is felt, how much emotion has been excited in pious hearts, and how many fervent prayers have been offered for absent loved ones in the army by their friends at home, the developments of the judgment will alone disclose. O, my soldier friends, disregard not this interest in your behalf, and tread not the tears and prayers of the friends that love you under your heedless feet! Think! Perhaps at this very moment your honored father or loving mother or youthful wife may be praying for your salvation! Shall they pray in vain?

4. I have space to mention but one other auspicious season to the soul; and that is, *when God speaks in the thundertone of his judgments to the people*. When his judgments are abroad in the land, surely the people should learn righteousness. And is not this a time? Was there ever a people more severely chastised than ours? And though our sufferings may be inflicted by the hand of an implacable foe, yet God is none the less concerned in our afflictions. He often uses the wicked as the instruments of chastisement to his people. Talk not of our calamities as the product of accident or of any fortuitous concurrence of secondary causes. They all proceed from the benevolent Sovereign of the universe, and are designed expressly for our spiritual good. Happy for us if we heed his voice in his desolating judgments! Happy for us if this last agency

which he resorts, when all the resources of goodness and forbearance have been expended in vain, shall produce in our bosoms a salutary compunction! But if this solemn rebuke of Jehovah shall not lead us to repentance and salvation, then what hope is there that anything in the whole circle of moral influences will ever bring us into cordial obedience to the Cross of Christ? What reason have we to conclude that we are not of that unhappy number "who have trodden under foot the Son of God; counted the blood of the covenant wherewith he was sanctified an unholy thing; and done despite to the spirit of his grace?" May we not justly fear that we are "past feeling," and that the season of divine mercy is to us clean gone forever?

Soldier friends, I am now done. What will you do with this important-subject? Will you still neglect the "GREAT SALVATION?" Will you still *postpone* attention to this chief interest? Remember, God has said, "My Spirit shall not always strive with man." Will you delay another day? *To-morrow* it may be too late! O, then, hasten to the cross of Christ! "Remember Lot's wife!" Embrace proffered mercy *to-day*! *To-day* make your peace with God! *Now*, this hour, this very MOMENT, give your heart, in confiding trust, to the blessed Jesus! Let nothing deter you! Your all for eternity is at stake! Your destiny will soon be fixed! Your day of grace will soon close! What you do must be done quickly! O, do it *TO-DAY*! do it *NOW*!

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