

Signs of the Times

By David S. Petrie

I remember as a young Christian, nothing would move me like a good sermon. I'll never forget those days. After church, I would wait in line to shake the hand of my pastor, sometimes to say nothing more than these three words: "*Nothing else matters!*"- referencing my emotional orientation towards the Gospel, as compared to all else.¹

As I've gotten older, I've come to recognize the futility that Solomon describes in the Book of Ecclesiastes; "*Vanity of vanities,*" says the Preacher, "*Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.*"² And again: For "*the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same. As one dies so dies the other.*"³ Yes, I do think I'm beginning to 'get it'. All my strivings, all my pursuits of happiness and security, right down to the buck in my pocket... are a futile pursuit when compared to eternity. Jonathan Edwards 'got it' too. In his *The Religious Affections*,⁴ he opened with the question (and I paraphrase): "How can man be right with God?"⁵ Truly, we lie in the hands of a very, very, holy God. Using Edwardsian imagery, we simply are standing over the pit of hell on a rotten canvas, which is at many places so thin that it will not bear the weight of our sin.⁶

Death awaits us all. Yet, I know deep down, in my heart of hearts, that this single event will

¹ For example, Jesus said that if we did not hate our father and mother, we could not be His disciple (Luke 14:26). In the same way Christ was being hyperbolic, this statement is meant to be *comparative*... It is in this sense that *nothing* else matters compared to the Gospel. When we 'get it', it becomes crystal clear that to glorify and follow God and His agenda is the ultimate goal and pursuit in life.

² Ecclesiastes 1:2.

³ Ecclesiastes 3:19.

⁴ Jonathan Edwards, *The Religious affections*, 1746.

⁵ "*There is no question whatsoever that is of greater importance to mankind, and that it concerns every individual person to be well resolved in, is this: What are the distinguishing qualifications of those that are in favour with God, and entitled to His eternal rewards?*" -From Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, (reprint, Banner of Truth Trust 2007), 15.

⁶ Cf. Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* 1741.

transcend all that I think matters here and now. I also truly believe in my heart of hearts that death will land me blissfully into the hands of my Faithful Savior Jesus Christ.⁷

Nevertheless, Edwards' question is foolishly ignored by the multitudes. But just *how does* man become right with God? More importantly, do we even need to be? Brethren, when we truly understand the reality of eternity, to see our true, miserable spiritual condition - in its true perspective, we come to the unavoidable conclusion: we stand on the brink of eternal horror, without Christ. The problem for many, is that the truth of an eternity in hell just doesn't seem "real" to them, "*For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it*" (Matthew 7:14).

One early sermon by Jonathan Edwards summed it up nicely in the title alone:

"The Warnings of Future Punishment Don't Seem Real to the Wicked" (or, *the unregenerate*).⁸

The greatness of our sin and misery must be believed, not merely as a theoretical reality, but recognized as *truth* to the intellect, and also by our convictions - a true conviction that springs from our inner heart. Deep down at the end of the day, when all is said and done, we should know. Sadly, this is not the case for all, for our own self-centeredness becomes so overwhelming, and the world so alluring, that we all by nature can become blinded to the truth. (I know this sounds dark, but please read on...).

This day and age we are living in a world that offers little basis for hope, particularly for our young- (really... please read on!). Having raised two boys, and our youngest, my only daughter, still safely at home, I find myself troubled over the darkness blanketing her generation. Staggering statistics indicate that 88 percent of the children raised in evangelical homes are leaving the church at the age of

⁷ Petrie, D., "*Nothing Else Matters*", 9/17/2012. <http://www.corepastor.com>.

⁸ George M. Marsden: *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, (Yale University Press, 2003). 120. (Sermon date unknown).

eighteen.⁹ Postmodernism, marked by the rejection of objective truth, is alive as ever, and massive doses of technology provides easy answers for all. For some, this technology provides a welcome distraction away from the Truth, and for others, a form of insulation against it. In his treatise *On Indwelling Sin* (1668), John Owen points out that ‘sin moves by drawing the mind away from God’, so either way, once this is done, sin has the victory. Owen, here teaching from James, explains how the mind embraces the counterfeit, the affections are then enticed, and sin is then pursued by the will.

Look around. Do you see the urgency of this message? Yet this message is ignored by the multitudes... and how it breaks the heart to see a ‘sleepy’ complacency demonstrated by the very ones we so desperately try to reach! - Particularly in light of these words from John Calvin:

*There is no doubt that the more clearly the conscience is struck with awareness of its sin, the more the iniquity grows. For stubborn disobedience against the Lawgiver is then added to transgression.*¹⁰

Now back to the present, and the deceitfulness of sin and its trickery. Today we face new challenges; as ambassadors of Christ, as leaders in our homes, and as parents. Referring back to Owen, the Rev. William Timmins skillfully set the stage when he delivered these words in 2001, at the Westminster Conference with skillful precision:

To be in a fierce battle is a challenging and dangerous thing. But to be in a fierce battle, and to live as though you are not, is a desperately foolish thing. To wander carelessly through the fields as if there were no landmines, to amble aimlessly around the city like a

⁹ Statistics reported at the 2002 Southern Baptist Convention Annual Meeting, accessed March 21 2013, <http://www.sbcannualmeeting.net/sbc02/newsroom/newspage.asp?ID=261>.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.7.7.

tourist as if there were no snipers, to walk alone in enemy territory without the support and encouragement of your comrades, for a soldier to do such a thing is the height of folly. To be at war and not to make war is to court disaster. That is why Owen said, “Be killing sin or it will be killing you.”¹¹

These words should cut us *all* to the quick. But I confess like many, that the misery of sin can sometimes feel unbearable, and the pursuit of holiness and a closer fellowship with Christ can sometimes feel out of reach. Specifically, when I examine the sin in ‘*me*,’ and introspectively loathe over ‘*my*’ sin, I find myself camped with the Apostle Paul in my own Romans 7 dungeon. But, when we remember to: (1) to preach the gospel to ourselves; (2) re-visit those memorial stones we’ve set up along our journey pointing us to the many providences God has set up before us, and (3) camp in the Word of God, satiating in the promises of Christ, we can then move forward and bask in the glory of Romans 8: “*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*”¹² Oh, the sweetness of this verse! *No condemnation* for those who are *in Christ!* And there we have it: *Union with Christ.* As John Murray points out in simple words: ‘Union with Christ is the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation.’¹³ This union also provides the Christian with very precious comfort and peace from God: “*and the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*”¹⁴

So, back to our present challenges. What a day we live in!

There is hope, and from what I see personally, read and hear, God is moving - and in a direction that is

¹¹ From a paper given by Rev. William Timmins on “*John Owen and the Problem of Indwelling Sin*,” at the Westminster Conference, on December 11, 2001.

¹² Romans 8:1.

¹³ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 162.

¹⁴ Philippians 4:7.

as exciting as it is inspiring. New reformed churches are opening doors left and right. There's a growing interest in the writings of John Calvin, Charles Spurgeon, Jonathan Edwards and the great Puritans of the 17th century. Young men and women are turning on to reformed theology in droves, and what I truly think we have is an awakening! The Lord is certainly doing a great work, and of course its scope is yet to be seen.

But, with my rejoicing, come a few concerns. In a drive for autonomy, many are jettisoning the time-bound, historic creeds and confessions. Catechetical training for our kids is rapidly disappearing. Without these vital links to the past, they're left vulnerable to repeat the same problems - if not the same heresies for which most of these documents were written. There's a real danger of trying to be *too* modern in an attempt to be 'relevant,' resulting in the loss of authentic gospel truth. In an attempt to be faithful, men forget that we are called to *retain the pattern of sound words*,¹⁵ as we contend earnestly for the faith which was *once for all handed down to the saints*.¹⁶

When we sever these links to the past, we sail in dangerous waters. As Carl Trueman writes in his book, *The Creedal Imperative*:

“...creeds and confessions are, in fact, necessary for the well-being of the church, and that churches that claim *not to have them*, place themselves at a permanent disadvantage when it comes to holding fast to that form of sound words which was so precious to the aging Paul as he advised his young Protege, Timothy.”¹⁷

Then there's the growing silence regarding separation. The list could go on, perhaps best saved for

¹⁵ 2 Timothy 1:13.

¹⁶ Jude 1:3.

¹⁷ Carl R. Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative* (Crossway, 2012), 19. Emphasis mine.

another time and another forum, as I've allowed myself to get off track.

The warnings against today's new challenges certainly are very real. To heed this warning and to continue its proclamation from generation to generation is not simply a duty, but rather, a most loving gift. However, things aren't always as bleak as they sometimes appear. Jonathan Edwards' grandfather, Solomon Stoddard (1643-1729), who had pastored the same church in Northampton for 55 years (without missing one Sunday!), shines a ray of hope fit for any generation:

“When men know the excellency of God, [we] must choose Him. The glory of God is such, that it captivates the heart; where it is seen, it has a magnetic power; it irresistibly conquers the will; there is a necessity of loving God, when He is seen.”¹⁸

This may sound familiar to the Calvinist reader as ‘Irresistible Grace,’ and rightly so. Allow me to make a parabolic illustration: When Jesus called to Lazarus, four days dead in his tomb, how did he respond? The written account said, he “came forth”.¹⁹ He did not refuse and choose to remain dead; no, indeed he could not (as if he would want to!). When God quickens the dead, the dead respond, and we are all dead in our sins before being revived by the Holy Spirit.²⁰ One of the problems we have is thinking we're *more* than we are... that we have such great power over people, to convince dead men to choose Christ. Then we grow older and play the ‘*could-a, would-a, should-a*’ game (does it sound like I'm talking from experience? *-no comment...*) Let's not forget, that the Lord (by grace) entrusts us - feeble, mortal men, ‘*who are like grubs crawling upon the earth*’²¹ -with His life-giving message. In other words, our Father (I repeat: *by grace!*), actually chooses to involve us, and give us the very

¹⁸ Solomon Stoddard (grandfather of Jonathan Edwards), from: *A Treatise Concerning Conversion*, (Boston, 1719)

¹⁹ See John 11:43-44.

²⁰ Petrie, D., 6/6/2012. *Meditations on Eternity*. <http://www.corepastor.com>.

²¹ That would be from the very articulate John Calvin. (*Institutes*, 2.6.4).

undeserved privilege of participating in HIS sovereign agenda, bringing the Word of God to dying ears, eyes, and hearts.

J.I. Packer, in his introduction to John Owen's *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, lays out this part of the 'old Gospel' as follows:

That it is "...a regenerating work of God in men, 'taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them a heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and by His almighty power determining them to that which is good; and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ; yet so as they come most freely, being made willing by His grace.' Grace proves irresistible just because it destroys the disposition to resist. Where the Arminian, therefore, will be content to say, "I decided for Christ", "I made up my mind to be a Christian," the Calvinist will wish to speak of his conversion in more theological fashion, to make plain Whose work it really was..."²²

So here we have it. For those we love, and all those we try to reach with the Gospel, this is our great source of hope: the sovereignty of God, and His most beautiful and irresistible grace. If we can remember that in the end, "...it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy,"²³ we can have something solid hang our hats on.

True, this day and age we certainly do live in a *world* that offers little basis for hope. But in *reality*, there is hope in abundance. Here's a personal side note: at our last Bible Study, I commented on how I so often feel like such a hypocrite. I feel so spiritual so much of the time. Camped in the

²² From J.I. Packer's introduction to a 1958 reprint of John Owen's *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (Banner of Truth, London). Single quotation marks reference *The Westminster Confession*, 10.1.

²³ Romans 9:16.

Word, meditation, prayer... and then I get pulled away. I turn, and I feel disengaged. That's when the enemy sights in on me, accuses me, and (as he does so well), gets into my head using Scripture: "**Why are you afraid, you [man] of little faith?**"²⁴ and; "**You of little faith, why [do] you doubt?**"²⁵ and, (of course); "**stand firm in the faith, act like [a man], be strong.**"²⁶ - (But I'm *not* strong, God. Not *really*. I need You...). But in these moments - *every time*, I feel a gentle, convicting nudge.

Remember when, on the Mount of Olives, Jesus told His disciples to "*Pray that you may not enter into temptation.*"²⁷ Do you remember what they did? -They promptly fell asleep!²⁸ Paul instructs us to "**pray without ceasing.**"²⁹ This my friend, is nothing more than constant communion with the Father; or as the song goes - a kind of '*constant craving*'... But what does this really look like? Here, Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd Jones gives us some pastoral advice:

"...always respond to the impulse to pray... I would make an absolute law of this - always obey such an impulse. Where does it come from? It is the work of the Holy Spirit. This often leads to some of the most remarkable experiences... So never resist, never postpone it, never push it aside because you are busy. Give yourself to it, yield to it; and you will find not only that you have not been wasting time with respect to the matter with which you are dealing, but actually that it has helped you greatly in that respect. You will experience an ease and a facility in understanding... Such a call to prayer must never be regarded as a distraction; always respond to it immediately, and

²⁴ Matthew 8:26.

²⁵ Matthew 14:31.

²⁶ 1 Cor. 16:13.

²⁷ Luke 22:40.

²⁸ Luke 22:39-46.

²⁹ 1 Thessalonians 5:17.

Thank God if it happens to you frequently.”³⁰

In this brief piece, I’ve offered much of my own heart. I’ve been candid. Although every generation has had struggles unique to their times, the Christian’s source of strength never changes. As we navigate this new and quickly changing landscape, let us not forget the ‘riches and blessings available to us through prayer, for Christians *not* to pray, is as senseless as it would be for “a man to neglect a treasure, buried and hidden in the earth, after it had been pointed out to him.”³¹

Covering some seventy pages, one of the longest chapters in Calvin’s *Institutes* is on prayer. It is from there we will close with these Biblical words of hope:

“But if finally even after long waiting our senses cannot learn the benefit received from prayer, or perceive any fruit from it, still our faith will make us sure of what cannot be perceived by sense, that we have obtained what was expedient. For the Lord so often and so certainly promises to care for us in our troubles, when they have been laid upon His bosom. And so He will cause us to possess abundance in poverty, and comfort in affliction. For though all things fail us, yet God will never forsake us...”³²

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³⁰ D. Martyn Lloyd Jones *Spiritual Depression* (Granted Ministries Press, 1965), From the Biographical Forward discussing the Dr’s discipline of private devotion.

³¹ David W. Hall and Peter A. Lillback, *A Theological Guide to Calvin’s Institutes* (P&R Publishing, 2008), 349-350. (Referencing Calvin’s *Institutes* 3.20.1). (Emphasis mine).

³² Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.52