

THE BOOKS OF HOMILIES: Book 1—VIII. Of the declining from God

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[0 : 00] A Sermon, How Dangerous a Thing It Is to Fall from God Of our going from God, the wise man saith that pride was the first beginning, for by it man's heart was turned from God his maker.

For pride, saith he, is the fountain of all sin, he that hath it shall be full of cursings, and at the end it shall overthrow him. And as by pride and sin we go from God, so shall God, and all his goodness with him, go from us.

And the prophet Osi doth plainly affirm that they which go away still from God by vicious living, and yet would go about to pacify him otherwise by sacrifice, and entertain him thereby, they labour in vain, for notwithstanding all their sacrifice, yet he goeth still away from them.

For so much, saith the prophet, as they do not apply their minds to return to God, although they go about with whole flocks and herds to seek the Lord, yet they shall not find him, for he has gone away from them.

But as touching are turning to God, or from God, you shall understand that it may be done diverse ways, sometimes directly by idolatry, as Israel and Judah then did.

[1 : 08] Sometimes men go from God by lack of faith and mistrusting of God, whereof Esai speaketh in this wise. Woe to them that go down into Egypt to seek for help, trusting in horses, and having confidence in the number of chariots, and puissance or power of horsemen.

They have no confidence in the holy God of Israel, nor seek for the Lord. But what followeth? The Lord shall let his hand fall upon them, and down shall come both the helper and he that is helping.

They shall be destroyed altogether. Some time men go from God by the neglecting of his commandments concerning their neighbours, which commandeth them to express hearty love towards every man.

As Zachary said unto the people in God's behalf, Give true judgment, show mercy and compassion, every one to his brother. Imagine no deceit towards widows, or children fatherless and motherless, towards stranger or the poor.

Let no man forge evil in his heart against his brother. But these things they passed not of. They turned their backs and went their way. They stopped their ears, that they might not hear.

[2 : 13] They hardened their hearts as an adamant stone, that they might not listen to the law, and the words that the Lord had sent through his Holy Spirit by his ancient prophets. Wherefore the Lord showed his great indignation upon them.

It came to pass, saith the prophet, even as I told them, as they would not hear. So when they cried, they were not heard, but were scattered into all kingdoms which they never knew, and their land was made desolate.

And to be short, all they that may not abide the word of God, but following the persuasions and stubbornness of their own hearts, go backward and not forward, as it is said in Jeremy, they go and turn away from God.

In so much that Origen saith, He that with mind, with study, with deeds, with thought and care, applet and giveth himself to God's word, and thinketh upon his laws day and night, giveth himself wholly to God, and in his precepts and commandments is exercised.

This is he that is turned to God. And on the other part, he saith, Whosoever is occupied with fables and tales, when the word of God is rehearsed, he is turned from God.

[3 : 19] Whosoever in time of reading God's word is careful in his mind of worldly business, of money, or of lucre, he is turned from God. Whosoever is entangled with the cares of possessions, filled with covetousness of riches, whosoever studieth for the glory and honour of this world, he is turned from God.

So that after his mind, whosoever hath not a special mind to that thing that is commanded or taught of God, he that doth not listen unto it, embrace and print it in his heart, to the intent that he may duly fashion his life thereafter, he is plainly turned from God, although he do other things of his own devotion and mind, which to him seem better and more to God's honour.

Which thing to be true, we be taught and admonished in the Holy Scripture by the example of King Saul, who being commanded of God by Samuel, that he should kill all the Amalekites and destroy them clearly with their goods and cattles, yet he, being moved partly with pity and partly, as he thought, with devotion unto God, saved Agag their king and all the chief of their cattle, therewith to make sacrifice unto God, wherewithal God, being displeased highly, said unto the prophet Samuel, I repent that ever I made Saul a king, for he hath forsaken me and not followed my words.

And so he commanded Samuel to show him. And when Samuel asked wherefore, contrary to God's word, he had saved the cattle, he excused the matter partly by fear, saying he durst do none other, for that the people would have it so, partly for that they were goodly beasts, he thought God would be content, seeing it was done of a good intent and devotion to honour God with the sacrifice of them.

But Samuel, reproving all such intents and devotions, seemed they never so much to God's honour, if they stand not with his word, whereby we may be assured of his pleasure, said in this wise, Would God have sacrifices and offerings, or rather that his words should be obeyed?

[5 : 16] To obey him is better than offerings, and to listen to him is better than to offer the fat of rams. Yea, to repugn against his voice is as evil as the sin of soothsaying, and not to agree to it is like abominable idolatry.

And now, forasmuch as thou hast cast away the word of the Lord, he hath cast away thee, that thou shouldest not be king. By all these examples of holy scripture, we may know that as we forsake God, so shall he ever forsake us.

And what miserable state doth consequently and necessarily follow thereupon, a man may easily consider by the terrible threatenings of God. And although he consider not all the said misery to the uttermost, being so great that it passeth any man's capacity in this life sufficiently to consider the same, yet he shall soon perceive so much thereof that, if his heart be not more than stony, or harder than the adamant, he shall fear, tremble, and quake to call the same to his remembrance.

First, the displeasure of God toward us is commonly expressed in the scripture by these two things, by showing his fearful countenance upon us, and by turning his face, or hiding it from us.

By showing his dreadful countenance is signified his great wrath, but by turning his face, or hiding thereof, is many times more signified, that is to say, that he clearly forsaketh us, and giveth us over, the which significations be taken of the properties of men's manners.

[6 : 45] For men towards them whom they favour commonly bear a good, a cheerful, and a loving countenance, so that by the face or countenance of a man it doth commonly appear what will or mind he beareth towards other.

So when God doth show his dreadful countenance towards us, that is to say, doth send dreadful plagues of sword, famine, or pestilence upon us, it appeareth that he is greatly wroth with us.

But when he withdraweth us from his word, the right doctrine of Christ, his gracious assistance and aid, which is ever joined to his word, and leaveth us to our own wit, our own will and strength, he declareth then that he beginneth to forsake us.

For whereas God hath showed to all them that truly believe his gospel, his face of mercy in Jesus Christ, which doth so lighten their hearts that they, if they behold it as they ought to do, be transformed to his image, be made partakers of the heavenly light and of his Holy Spirit, and be fashioned to him in all goodness requisite to the children of God.

So if they after do neglect the same, if they be unthankful unto him, if they order not their lives according to his example and doctrine, and to the setting forth of his glory, he will take away from them his kingdom, his holy word, whereby he should reign in them, because they bring not forth the fruit thereof that he looketh for.

[8 : 05] Nevertheless, he is so merciful and of so long sufferance that he doth not show upon us that great wrath suddenly. But when we begin to shrink from his word, not believing it, or not expressing it in our livings, first he doth send his messengers, the true preachers of his word, to admonish and warn us of our duty, that as he for his part for the great love he bare unto us delivered his own son to suffer death, that we by his death might be delivered from death and be restored to the life everlasting, evermore to dwell with him, and to be partakers and inheritors with him of his everlasting glory and kingdom of heaven, so again that we for our parts should walk in a godly life as becometh his children to do.

And if this will not serve, but still we remain disobedient to his word and will, not knowing him, not loving him, not fearing him, not putting our whole trust and confidence in him, and on the other side, to our neighbours behaving ourselves uncharitably by disdain, envy, malice, or by committing murder, robbery, adultery, gluttony, deceit, lying, swearing, or other like detestable works and ungodly behaviour, then he threateneth us by terrible combinations, swearing in great anger that whosoever doeth these works shall never enter into his rest, which is the kingdom of heaven.

In the former part of this sermon ye have learned how many manner of ways men fall from God, some by idolatry, some for lack of faith, some by the neglecting of their neighbours, some by not hearing God's word, some by the pleasure they take in the vanities of worldly things.

Ye have also learned in what misery that man is which is gone from God, and how that God yet of his infinite goodness to call again man from that his misery, useth first gentle admonitions by his preachers, after he layeth on terrible threatenings.

Now if this gentle monition and threatening together do not serve, then God will show his terrible countenance upon us. He will pour intolerable plagues upon our heads, and after he will take away from us all his aid and assistance, wherewith before he did defend us from all such manner of calamity.

[10 : 18] As the evangelical prophet Esai, agreeing with Christ's parable, doth teach us, saying that God had made a goodly vineyard for his beloved children, he hedged it, he walled it round about, he planted it with chosen vines, and made a turret in the midst thereof, and therein also a winepress.

And when he looked that it should bring him forth good grapes, it brought forth wild grapes, and after it followeth, now shall I show you, saith God, what I will do with my vineyard.

I will pluck down the hedges, that it may perish, I will break down the walls, that it may be trodden underfoot, I will let it lie waste, it shall not be cut, it shall not be digged, but briars and thorns shall overgrow it, and I shall command the clouds that they shall no more rain upon it.

By these threatenings we are monished and warned that, if we, which are the chosen vineyard of God, bring not forth good grapes, that is to say, good works, that may be delectable and pleasant in his sight when he looketh for them, when he sendeth his messengers to call upon us for them, but rather bring forth wild grapes, that is to say, sour works, unsweet, unsavory, and unfruitful, then will he pluck away all defence, and suffer grievous plagues of famine and battle, dearth and death, to light upon us.

Finally, if these do not yet serve, he will let us lie waste, he will give us over, he will turn away from us, he will dig and delve no more about us, he will let us alone, and suffer us to bring forth even such fruit as we will, to bring forth brambles, briars, and thorns, all naughtiness, all vice, and that so abundantly, that they shall clean overgrow us, choke, strangle, and utterly destroy us.

[12 : 01] But they that in this world live not after God, but after their own carnal liberty, perceive not this great wrath of God towards them, that he will not dig nor delve any more about them, that he doth let them alone even to themselves.

But they take this for a great benefit of God, to have all at their own liberty, so that they live as carnal liberty were the true liberty of the gospel. But God forbid, good people, that ever we should desire such liberty, for although God suffers sometimes the wicked to have their pleasure in this world, yet the end of ungodly living is at length endless destruction.

The murmuring Israelites had that they longed for. They had quails enough, yea, till they were weary of them. But what was the end thereof? Their sweet meat had sour sauce.

Even whilst the meat was in their mouths, the plague of God lighted upon them, and suddenly they died. So if we live ungodly, and God suffereth us to follow our own wills, to have our own delights and pleasures, and correcteth us not with some plague, it is no doubt, but he is almost utterly displeased with us.

And although it be long or he strike, yet many times when he striketh such persons, he striketh them at once for ever. So that when he doth not strike us, when he ceaseth to afflict us, to punish or beat us, and suffereth us to run headlings into all ungodliness and pleasures of this world that we delight in, without punishment and adversity, it is a dreadful token that he loveth us no longer, that he careth no longer for us, but hath given us over to our own selves.

[13 : 37] As long as a man doth prune his vines, doth dig at the roots, and doth lay fresh earth to them, he hath a mind to them, he perceiveth some token of fruitfulness that may be recovered in them, but when he will bestow no more such cost and labour about them, then it is a sign that he thinketh they will never be good.

And the father, as long as he loveth his child, he looketh angrily, he correcteth him when he doeth amiss, but when that serveth not, and upon that he ceaseth from correction of him, and suffereth him to do what he list himself, it is a sign that he intendeth to disinherit him, and to cast him away for ever.

So surely nothing should pierce our hearts so sore, and put us in such horrible fear, as when we know in our conscience that we have grievously offended God, and do so continue, and that yet he striketh not, but quietly suffereth us in the naughtiness that we have delight in.

Then specially it is time to cry, and to cry again as David did, Cast me not away from thy face, and take not away thy Holy Spirit from me. Lord, turn not away thy face from me, cast not thy servant away in displeasure, hide not thy face from me, lest I be like to them that go down into hell.

The witch lamentable prayers of him, as they do certify us what horrible danger they be in from whom God turneth his face, for that time and as long as he so doth, so should they move and stir us to cry upon God with all our heart, that we may not be brought into that state which doubtless is so sorrowful, so miserable, and so dreadful, as no tongue can sufficiently express, or any heart can think.

[15 : 17] For what deadly grief may a man suppose it is to be under the wrath of God, to be forsaken of him, to have his Holy Spirit, the author of all goodness, to be taken from him, to be brought to so vile a condition, that he shall be left meet for no better purpose than to be for ever condemned to hell.

For not only such places of David do show that upon the turning of God's face from any persons, they shall be left bare from all goodness, and far from hope of remedy, but also the place rehearsed last before of Esai doth mean the same, which showeth that God at length doth so forsake his unfruitful vineyard, that he will not only suffer it to bring forth weeds, briars, and thorns, but also further to punish the unfruitfulness of it, he saith he will not cut it, he will not delve it, and he will command the clouds that they shall not rain upon it, whereby is signified the teaching of his holy word, which St. Paul after a like manner expresseth by planting and watering, meaning that he will take that away from them, so that they shall be no longer of his kingdom.

They shall be no longer governed by his Holy Spirit, they shall be put from the grace and benefits that they had and ever might have enjoyed through Christ. They shall be deprived of the heavenly light and life which they had in Christ whilst they abode in him.

They shall be, as they were once, as men without God in this world, or rather in worse taking, and to be short, they shall be given into the power of the devil, which beareth the rule in all them that be cast away from God, as he did in Saul and Judas, and generally in all such as work after their own wills, the children of mistrust and unbelief.

Let us beware, therefore, good Christian people, lest that we, rejecting or casting away God's word, by the which we obtain and retain true faith in God, be not at length cast off so far that we become as the children of unbelief, which be of two sorts, far diverse, yea, almost clean contrary, and yet both be very far from returning to God, the one sort, only weighing their sinful and detestable living with the right judgment and straightness of God's righteousness, be so without counsel and be so comfortless, as all they must needs be from whom the spirit of counsel and comfort is gone, that they will not be persuaded in their hearts, but that either God cannot or else that he will not take them again to his favour and mercy, the other, hearing the loving and large promises of God's mercy, and so not conceiving a right faith thereof, make those promises larger than ever God did, trusting that, although they continue in their sinful and detestable living never so long, yet that God at the end of their life will show his mercy upon them, and that then they will return, and both these two sorts of men be in a damnable state, and yet nevertheless

[18 : 08] God, who willeth not the death of the wicked, hath showed means whereby both the same, if they take heed in season, may escape. The first, as they do dread God's rightful justice in punishing sinners, whereby they should be dismayed, and should despair indeed, as touching any hope that may be in themselves.

So if they would constantly, or steadfastly, believe that God's mercy is the remedy appointed against such despair and distrust, not only for them, but generally for all that be sorry and truly repentant, and will therewithal stick to God's mercy, they may be sure they shall obtain mercy, and enter into the port or haven of safeguard, into the which whosoever doth come, be they before time never so wicked, they shall be out of danger of everlasting damnation.

As God by Ezekiel saith, What time soever the wicked doth return, and take earnest and true repentance, I will forget all his wickedness. The other, as they be ready to believe God's promises, so they should be as ready to believe the threatenings of God, as well they should believe the law as the gospel, as well that there is in hell an everlasting fire, as that there is in heaven an everlasting joy, as well they should believe damnation to be threatened to the wicked and evildoers, as salvation to be promised to the faithful in word and works, as well they should believe God to be true in the one as in the other, and the sinners that continue in their wicked living ought to think that the promises of God's mercy and the gospel pertain not unto them being in that state, but only the law and those scriptures which contain the wrath and indignation of God and his threatenings, which should certify them that, as they do overboldly presume of God's mercy and live dissolutely, so doth God still more and more withdraw his mercy from them.

And he is so provoked thereby to wrath at length that he destroyeth such presumers many times suddenly. For of such St. Paul said thus, When they shall say, It is peace, there is no danger, then shall sudden destruction come upon them.

Let us beware therefore of such naughty boldness to sin, for God, which hath promised his mercy to them that be truly repentant, although it be at the latter end, hath not promised to the presumptuous sinner either that he shall have long life or that he shall have true repentance at his last end.

[20 : 30] But for that purpose hath he made every man's death uncertain, that he should not put his hope in the end, and in the mean season to God's high displeasure live ungodly. Wherefore, let us all follow the counsel of the wise man, let us make no tawling to turn unto the Lord, let us not put off from day to day, for suddenly shall his wrath come, and in time of vengeance he shall destroy the wicked.

Let us therefore turn betimes, and when we turn, let us pray to God as Osi teacheth, saying, Forgive us all our sins, receive us graciously. And if we turn to him with an humble and very penitent heart, he will receive us to his favour and grace for his holy name's sake, for his promise's sake, for his truth and mercy's sake, promised to all faithful believers in Jesus Christ, his only natural Son, to whom, the only Saviour of the world, with the Father and the Holy Ghost, be all honour, glory, and power, world without end.

Amen.