

HENRIC SCHARTAU
AND
THE ORDER OF GRACE

Biography by Henrik Hägglund and
Fifteen Sermons by Henric Schartau

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Midsummer Day.

Introduction.

When a sinner has been awakened and the eyes of his understanding have been opened to see that he has been on an evil way, he also becomes aware that an innumerable multitude is found on that same way to perdition. When his heart has thereupon found peace, and when his soul has found assurance that he is on the way of life, then he looks about himself with a keen eye to find a few hidden Christians, and he listens attentively for the speech that might perchance betray a secret disciple of Jesus, whom he might get as his companion. He finds, however, that the multitude is concerned about earthly gains and worldly pleasures, that a great number of those who appear to be somewhat different are in error, merely having the appearance of godliness, while only a very inconsiderable number "work out their salvation with fear and trembling."

His experience, then, agrees with the words of the Saviour, that they are few that find the way of life. Indeed, he sees that the number of those who rush to perdition is even larger than he had at first supposed. His heart is moved with amazement, mortification, and pity, and he wonders why so many people are thus unfortunate. Has not the Son of God made a sufficient

payment, and are not His merits valid for all? Has not God in His Word shown Himself concerned about the salvation of all men, and has not His Word wrought mightily in those who have been moved thereby? The real reason for the deplorable state of affairs is none other than that which Jesus charged against Jerusalem, "How often would I have gathered thy children together . . . and ye would not!" Nevertheless, this contrariness appears in so many ways and in so many different conditions that we have reason to say that there are many obstacles that would hinder people from entering upon the way of salvation. I have thought of mentioning seven of the most important of them, since it is impossible to count them all, not to say, describe them all. If some one, then, has in mind to get saved, though he has not yet begun to seek salvation in earnest, it is, indeed, very important to know the obstacles which would hinder him from accomplishing his purpose. It may be that you will recognize in some of the obstacles which I am going to mention the reason why all the grace of God shown you has hitherto been fruitless. It is very necessary for you to learn to know this, in order that you may with all your heart endeavor to have this obstacle removed, lest you lose your inheritance of eternal joy.

Prayer.

O God of infinite love, it is Thy will that all men should be saved; Thou hast not laid any obstacles in the way; Thou canst and Thou wilt remove the obstacles which originate from ourselves and our spiritual foes. Teach us by Thy Word to know that which still re-

strains us, and make us deeply concerned, by Thy gracious help, to have removed the obstacle which would hinder our entrance and progress on the way of salvation. "Our Father," etc.

Exegesis.

God commands His servants to comfort His people, which He had chosen and redeemed. First, He gives the assurance that the time of deliverance was approaching from the Babylonian captivity and from sins by the fulfillment of the redemption in Jesus Christ. Secondly, He testifies that they already had the forgiveness of sins and a blessing twice as great as the curse which they had brought over themselves by their sins. Thirdly, John the Baptist, the precursor of Jesus, was to instruct the people of the New Covenant how to accept the Saviour of the world upon His coming in human flesh. To this end, the obstacles in His way must be removed, in order that Jesus might find free entrance into the hearts of sinners. Whereas it is necessary in the very first instance to know the obstacles which are to be removed, I shall present the following.

Proposition.

A FEW OF THE WORST OBSTACLES IN THE WAY OF A TRUE CONVERSION

1. Gross ignorance is as great an obstacle in the way of a true conversion as a great mountain is where a new road is to be made.

Ignorance is very great among some people. They do not know the basis of their salvation, nor how they

shall be saved, and still less how they are to rightly use the means of grace. The matter of salvation is quite foreign to them. They are not used to the Word of God. It is, then, not strange that they do not understand what is being preached, nor that they remain quite as unmoved as if they could not hear. Hence, these people live and die with the most pitiable and unreasonable conceptions of the fear of God. They depart as if by chance. They suppose that, since they do no more evil than they feel constrained to for their livelihood, and since they go to church occasionally and even participate in the Lord's Supper twice a year, they surely can go nowhere else than to heaven. But it is quite as impossible to have faith in God before one knows Him as it is to drive across steep mountains before a road is made. It is impossible to come to heaven before one knows the way thither, and to escape from hell if one has never been concerned about it.

2. Another obstacle, quite as great, arises, when a person gives way to his natural antipathy. A feeling of repugnance to religious matters is found among all people. It is subdued by the first movements of grace, but Satan is a past master in the art of quickening it anew. It could be conquered, if you carefully guarded the grace received and made room for it in your heart, if you used the power thus received to fight against yourself. Unless you do so, you will soon grow weary of the Word; its representations become repugnant and later unbearable. You will not accept them, and, for no other reason than this, that you do not wish to, that it is repugnant to you. In this way your condition will

not improve, for God does not force His grace upon any one, and no one will be converted against his will.

3. Some who have been visited by grace are immediately overcome by their sinful habits and by the power of evil desires. This obstacle is in comparison with the two former like a hill over against a mountain, but a hill can be a very ugly hindrance in the way. While sinners are being moved by the Word, their lusts are subdued and, as it were, removed, but the forces of grace are not always equally active. After a time of great activity they frequently subside, leaving a person to himself. Then new incentives and opportunities to sin make their appearance. The lusts are again awakened and rise to their former intensity. The perceptions of grace, tears, longings, and determinations disappear as though they had been mere dreams. The sinner is overcome and laid prostrate in sin, leaving not the slightest trace of the grace which had wrought so mightily in his heart, and he cannot conceive the possibility of any other condition.

4. Some are so entangled in the world that they cannot extricate themselves. Their condition is like that of one traveling over a region filled with rolling hills. There are constant ups and downs, and ere one such experience ends another begins. Sometimes they are possessed with the advantages of earthly prosperity, and then again they are busy endeavoring to overcome the difficulties of adversity. They scarcely catch sight of anything better in the Word, nor become convinced of its necessity ere something turns up, hindering them from pressing onwards. Shortly after their return home from church and, indeed, frequently before they

have time to close the book they are reading at home, something happens that must be attended to, something invites their attention from the heavenly and invisible verities back down to things visible, something occupies the room in their heart, where the Word of God was about to take root. Sometimes it is their friends and comrades in vanity who attract them back to their evil ways. The sinner finds it quite impossible to refuse to follow and in their company he soon gets far away from the narrow gate of repentance and from the true way of life which he had so nearly approached. Here is verified not only the word of Jesus concerning the rich, "How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God," but also the saying of Paul concerning those who indeed are not rich but would love to be wealthy, "They that desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and hurtful lusts, such as drown men in destruction and perdition."

5. Some are hindered by cowardly weakness. They fear the pangs of contrition, which they imagine to be very grievous. This obstacle may be compared with the valleys mentioned in our text. Those who are in this way hindered from conversion experience a sense of dizziness like those who are about to descend into a deep valley. They see only the depths, and it appears as though they were about to fall therein, though, if they proceeded, step by step, they would soon, without any harm, arrive at the bottom. This hindrance often comes from a too lenient bringing up in the home. Their parents may have spoiled them from early childhood carefully shielding them from everything which might have caused them grief. Some look upon sorrow

as the greatest calamity which can happen to them and, hence, studiously avoid everything which might make them sad. The unconverted often entertain the pre-conceived notion that conversion begins with despair and is followed by unceasing anxiety. This prejudice easily finds entrance into weak souls. If they experience any sorrow over their sins, they look upon it as the precursor of something worse. They therefore make haste to get rid of it and are very much concerned, lest they again come into such a condition. Yes, even though they know by their own experience or by information that the discipline of grace is very moderate, it nevertheless seems too grievous for them. The present is everything to them, and the future seems to them as non-existing. To escape "godly sorrow," they proceed along the way that leads to eternal "weeping and gnashing of teeth." They choose to taste the bitterness of eternal death, "where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched," rather than to endure the feeling of sinful depravity for a season.

6. Some have gotten into the habit of considering everything frivolously. They cannot entertain the first impression of grace long enough to attain stability. Their mind and behavior resemble the crooked roads in our text, which slant from one side to the other and often cause the traveler to fall. Some people do not adhere long to one thing, but grasp for something else, and they never take anything in earnest. They consider it all as trivial. Such minds are easily touched by the Word, but their emotions quite as easily vanish away. If everything pertaining to conversation could be finished during the brief moment while their emo-

tions last, they would be converted, but they cannot bear to take the matter under more serious and prolonged consideration. They scarcely have time to wipe their tears away, ere their minds take flight to something quite different and their thoughts wander far away from the kingdom of God. While they thus dance about the brink of eternity, they unexpectedly fall into its depths, pass unprepared out of time, and proceed with laughter and jesting to the place of torment.

7. Some are hindered by their egotism, false timidity and fearfulness of men. They are like men journeying along a stony road full of jutting unevenness. They constantly become hurt and wounded and eventually grow tired and weary. When the Word is preached aright it happens even to-day, as it did when Jesus himself taught, as we read in John 12. 42, "Even of the rulers many believed on Him, but they did not confess it, lest they should be put out of the synagogue." They wish to be Christians, but in such a way as cannot long endure. They do not wish to confess their Saviour's name before the world, but desire to be disciples in secret. The sneer of the world for the confessors of Jesus hurts their ambition. Hence, they wish to have their Christianity concealed in their hearts to their own satisfaction, but they do not wish to have it revealed in their outward behavior to the glory of the Saviour. They take care lest any one might see them reading the Word of God or find them engaging in prayer. They are thus frequently hindered from Scripture reading and prayer, because they do not wish to let any one see it. They are often tempted to feel ashamed of Jesus, and so they make themselves deserv-

ing of the punishment which will be their lot; for Jesus says, "The Son of man also shall be ashamed of them, when He cometh in the glory of His Father with the holy angels." Occasionally they come into quite as dangerous a position as that of Peter, when, like him, they wish to be in the palace of the high priest without being known as belonging to Jesus of Nazareth. It may then happen that, upon being addressed by the men of the world, and in order to escape from their taunts, they blush and stammer something like Peter, "I know not the man." Alas, before the secret work of grace in them can grow in power, as in the case of Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathæa, finally breaking forth in action, it may be choked to death, like an infant covered too well. At any rate, they continually become hurt and wounded on so uneven a way, and some grow weary with it all. Like Pilate they consider it quite impossible to set Jesus at liberty if they can not do this with the consent of the worldly-minded. They excuse themselves, wash their hands in water, and blame others whose behavior they imagine relieves themselves of all responsibility.

Application.

Have you among all these obstacles described recognized that which has hindered you from a true conversion, and can you nevertheless allow this hindrance to remain in your way? If so, how are you going to reach the gate of heaven? If you wish to be hindered from entering the kingdom of God, does not this imply that you wish to be lost? "No," you say, "I wish to be saved." Yes, but you wish to retain such matters as of necessity must hinder you from coming to heaven. You

are quite willing to escape from hell, but you persist in proceeding on the way that surely leads thither. You entertain the very largest and most difficult of all obstacles, namely intentional obstinacy and a persistent and willful opposition.

Are you grieved at heart in perceiving what has hindered you from repentance, and do you fear that it might continue to hinder you, then you may know that God's quickening and calling grace can overcome all obstacles. Be careful to retain this grace which is working in you. Make haste to take refuge in prayer and in the use of the Word, and consider further with yourself that you have received grace to understand your spiritual condition. As the Lord has removed the obstacles which lay in the way of your awakening, so He will also help you through all the difficulties which always meet awakened souls and keep them for some time from faith and the forgiveness of sins.

If you have passed beyond all these obstacles also, you must consider that there are many obstacles even on the way of salvation, which would hinder your progress thereon and prevent your growth in grace. You must not, then, be careless and negligent, if you are to attain to stability in grace and remain steadfast in the faith. See to it "that you may attend upon the Lord without distraction." Let nothing hinder you from hearing Him speak to you in His Word, nor let anything prevent you from speaking with Him in prayer. Let nothing exclude you from appropriating Him in Holy Communion. Then you shall, in spite of all obstacles which meet you, "in all these things be more than conqueror through Him that loved you." Amen.