

REJOICE O YOUNG MAN!

a sermon by

Asahel Nettleton
(1783 – 1844)

EDITED BY
Jon Cardwell
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by Asahel Nettleton

“Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment.”

—Ecclesiastes 11:9

The text speaks to those who are in the morning of life. And doubtless the words have already excited their attention. Such language is expressive and solemn. It catches the native feelings of the heart and carries them onward to the highest pitch, but only to disappoint and dash the rising hopes. We have before us a lively picture of the youthful mind: cheerful and gay; and the prospect of a judgment to come: gloomy and awful. The wise man views things in their proper and most important conclusion. The preacher had an affecting view of the shortness of human life, that its pleasures at the longest are quickly over and gone forever.

Though a man live many years, and rejoice in them all; yet let him remember the days of darkness; for they shall be many. He makes a pause and declares the whole amount. All that cometh is vanity. Deeply impressed with the subject, he turns his attention to the young whose rising hopes and cheerful hearts seem to contradict the solemn truth.

Instead of calling upon them to stop a while and reason on the subject, lest they run an awful hazard and gain nothing; for a while he seems to despair of all success. High hopes of present good, and a strong attachment to the fascinating pleasures of sin, which ever pleads for all the joy it brings, baffle every argument which ought to win the soul and lead it home to God.

What then can be done? At such a crisis we tremble to hear what God will say. The sad case of a gay and thoughtless youth who sees no danger excites the tear of pity. Determined not to yield the point and quit a course so pleasant and delightful to his heart, nothing now remains, but that he make the trial and take the consequences. At the same time this pleasant and delightful course he must and will believe is safe,

innocent, and harmless. Then go on and venture the trial with the final judge, when this short course is ended. Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment.

Pain, sickness, and death are the common lot of all and no feeling heart could wish to interrupt the little joys of the present lifestyle, if there is no better portion. But if your present course is not safe, are you willing to hear it called in question? If your souls are in danger of being lost, by the alluring pleasures of what men call innocent amusements, will you now regard a warning from God? Or do you wish, like the others, to be flattered on to destruction?

The season of youth is truly interesting. Characters are now rapidly forming. And the course they bend, the path in which they now tread, in whatever direction it leads, commonly conducts through life, through death and on through eternity. In the morning sow the seeds and whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap, life and death are now depending.

Youth is also the season of joy and cheerfulness. Old age may enfeeble the limbs, and long habits of indulgence wear out the sensitive faculties of enjoyment. Such are the evils incident to old age, the years in which they say, I have no pleasure in them. But while the vigor and sprightliness of youth remain, this is the time, the only season, in which men can rejoice and be cheerful in walking in the ways of their hearts and in the sight of their eyes.

This is the time to rejoice. The season of youth can never be enjoyed but once. It is cheerful and gay, but short and quickly over; and when past it is gone, never to be recalled. But heaven, with all its glories, is now brought near at the critical moment, when the world is presenting all its charms. Here then is no standing still. A choice must and shall be made. Man is a moral agent, destined to act for eternity. He shall walk either in the strait and narrow way to life, or in the broad road to death.

But now is the time to rejoice. The youth engage in the giddy scene and rejoice with merry hearts. And not one has yet renounced the hopes of heaven —not one believes that he

shall hear the sentence from the judgment seat, depart. In their view, all is safe and all is well. Some may begin to startle at extremes and fear excess, but slacken a little the rapid progress and he will still continue the same course without disturbance. He thinks surely there can be no harm in gathering some of the delights and tasting the pleasures of the present season.

But this is not the language and the spirit of the text. It may now be asked, may we not rejoice; may we not be cheerful, must we be stripped of all at once? —It is proposed to point out the course, which has the promise of the present life and in which alone you may rejoice with safety.

Rejoice not in iniquity, but rejoice in the truth. There is a virtuous joy. The former has two distinguishing characteristics. It differs from the latter both in its nature and its object. Its nature is holy. It arises from a holy heart. And hence it is declared to be the fruit of the Spirit; which is love, joy, and peace. This is its nature. And no one who rejoices in the truth, can wish for any other recommended in a false disguise.

Whether directly or more remote it always has God for its object. And hence the people of God are frequently called upon to rejoice in the Lord. Here is a fountain—a never failing source of joy. All other sources must fail. The things of time are fast fading and will soon forever retire from our sight. We can carry nothing into the future world. That joy and delight which center in present objects is momentary and can never satisfy. Even in laughter the heart is sorrowful; and the end of that mirth is heaviness.

The cheerful countenance must fall, and their youthful and blooming bodies, on which you fondly dote, must fade and die. But God remains the same through all changes. Here our hopes may pin. On this rock our joy can firmly rest. Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice.

Is God the object of this joy? It will then arise from a sense of his all surrounding presence. In thy presence is fullness of joy. And those that remember their Creator in the days of their youth, cannot rejoice in forgetting his presence. This joy begins with believing in Christ. The jailer who just before trembled, rejoiced, believing in God. And many youths, who have been seen trembling in view of the judgment to

come, on believing in Christ have rejoiced with joy unspeakable and full of glory.

Further, there are particular seasons in which every youth who pays any regard to the glory of God and his own soul will rejoice.

The Sabbath is a peculiar season—the day is appointed by God himself for this very purpose. A day in his courts is better than a thousand. This is the day, which the Lord hath made, I will rejoice and be glad in it.

The time of a revival of religion is another season of peculiar rejoicing. I have no greater joy, says St. John, than to hear that my children walk in the truth. When Philip preached at Samaria, there was great joy in that city. At the repentance of sinners, there is joy in heaven among the angels of God and to all the friends of Zion on earth. And so it would be in this place, were the youth now returning to their Father's house. It would then be meet that they should make merry, for this my son was dead and is alive again, was lost, but now is found.

Other particulars might be named, but these are the principal, and the great occasions, on which every friend of God will exercise the most peculiar joy. —Has any youth found his own case described? Does he rejoice in God? Does he feel a spring of joy on such occasions and long for their return? Then he may walk on his way rejoicing. He has the promise of the present life, and shall shortly receive a crown of never fading joy in the life to come.

Whether this course meets the feelings of the heart, or not, the account will doubtless commend itself to every man's conscience. However insipid and worthless the pleasures of such a course may be to others; yet wisdom is justified of her children, who find her ways pleasantness and her paths peace. But if he cannot rejoice in this course in this manner and on these occasions; then there is nothing in which he can rejoice. Nothing in heaven and nothing on earth but the pleasures of sense, or those which he finds in walking in the ways of his heart and in the sight of his eyes. Let thy heart cheer thee, etc.

The same may be said of cheerfulness. This is called virtue. It may be so. You may have often heard it asserted, that there is no religion in being gloomy. So be it; and now the guilty conscience will rest easy. But be not deceived,—every

command of God is to be cheerfully obeyed. We have nothing to do but duty. And if this be not done with cheerfulness—if it be not pleasant and delightful to the soul, however much sinners may do, God condemns the whole. No duty is done to God. Youth are apt to consider religion as a gloomy subject. Indeed, it may be so to them, while impenitence and guilt cry for vengeance. But even repentance itself is accompanied with a beam of joy. Son be of good cheer, thy sins be forgiven thee. No degree of joy and cheerfulness is forbidden by the Word of God. But every youth is commanded to rejoice in the Lord, and to walk cheerfully on in the path of duty. And whatever may hinder his progress, whether brothers or sisters, or evil companions, he is freely and cheerfully to forgive all, and glory in nothing, save the cross of Christ. Such cheerfulness is a duty, and without which there is no religion.

But if while he thinks of heaven, his heart goes after the world—the company of the gay and thoughtless, and their delightful scenes, and he is sorrowful to leave them and reluctant to give them up; this is the sorrow of the world which worketh death. This is a gloom in which there is no religion. He must cheerfully leave all or be contented to take his portion in this world. He must cheerfully leave all or with the young man in the gospel, go away from Christ sad and grieved. Let those who have come out of the world, walk cheerfully on in the path of duty. In Christ, you will have peace. But many trials and difficulties may yet await you. In the world you shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, Christ has overcome the world.

Having pointed out the course in which alone you may safely rejoice and be cheerful, let us now,

Turn out attention to the youth in the text. You will now see the reason why God is angry and will bring him into judgment for rejoicing and being cheerful. The young man is not a Christian. He does not rejoice in God—nor in believing in Christ. And perhaps he would be ashamed to come forward before his companions and openly profess his name and espouse his cause. He forsakes his followers, and prefers the company of the gay and thoughtless. He is cheerful and social with his companions; but says little or nothing to them about the great things of eternity and how it will fare with them hereafter. And perhaps he is so far gone, that he is unwilling

to have them think that he has any concern with the God that made him. He does not rejoice in the employment and on the day which God has appointed; but prefers another day and a different employment.

He does not rejoice at the repentance of his fellow sinners —To see his companions bid adieu and give a parting hand to all their joy and mirth gives him no delight. Nay, perhaps he weeps a while in secret, to think he has lost his friend. For he's determined not to follow in such a gloomy path, but chooses rather to renounce his dearest friend —and take sides against him and rest contented while the world is on his side. And now since he had no pretensions to religion, he may have gone to such a pitch as to plead one sin as an excuse for another, and think to justify his present conduct, inasmuch as he has become a frank, openhearted, and avowed enemy of God. But however this may be, he is a lover of pleasure more than a lover of God. And he is unwilling to be startled from his dream of pleasure, and is determined not to be alarmed at the trial of his angry judge.

He is now standing without a Saviour, and yet he has a cheerful and a merry heart. Let thy heart cheer thee. He can easily be cheerful. He has only to follow the bent of his inclination. He is impatient and cannot endure self-denial. It makes him miserable. Is he crossed in his inclination, he feels himself injured; and will shun a faithful reprover as an enemy. —Take off restraint, and never call him to a sense of duty. Do not awaken his fear or alarm his conscience by pointing him to consequences. But let him alone. And this is all that he wants to complete his present happiness. Let thy heart cheer thee. And hence we see that his joy and cheerfulness spring from walking in the ways of his heart and in the sight of his eyes.

To do this, he has only to contemplate and pursue whatever is fair and pleasant to the eye, and on which the imaginations of his evil heart delight to dwell. Regardless of consequences, his inclination is easily caught and governed wholly by the present appearance. A stranger to the pleasures of religion, he seldom thinks of duty and hence he frequently engages in scenes, which to the Christian would have no meaning. And were he asked the reason of his joy and cheerfulness, he would either be silent or blush to tell. He only rejoices without any rational subject in view; and aside

from present gratification all would be dull and lifeless, and would cease to have any further meaning.

It is his supreme delight to forget God and this Solomon intimated by continuing his address —Remember now thy Creator. The presence of God chills the soul; and should he venture to reflect a moment, it would strike his pleasure dead. He can best amuse himself with trifles amidst the gay and thoughtless, where nothing of God is heard, expect to sport and trifle with his awful name. He can give a merry turn, and get the laugh on religion; but he intends no harm, he is only casting his arrows in sport. And perhaps he may venture to commend religion at a distance; but he would have her to know her place, and not intrude to interrupt and spoil his joy. He says to God, depart from me, for we desire not the knowledge of thy ways. All his joy and cheerfulness arise from sensual gratification, or in the indulgence of a carnal heart. And to give a loose to any of its desires is to walk not after the Spirit, but after the flesh—not by faith, but by sight. But to be carnally minded is death. And if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die. And so, notwithstanding his cheerfulness, death is inscribed by the finger of God on his very soul and on all its delights while he continues to walk in the ways of his heart.

The ways of his heart may be many. He may change and vary the objects of his delight at pleasure, but the nature of all is the same until he turns to God. But the whole may be included in the broad way to destruction; and thousands can walk together there—and no being but God can hinder their progress. The way is smooth and gently declining. And travelers may join hand-in-hand and with rapid speed march on their way rejoicing with cheerful hearts.

And parents, whose houses are safe from fear, and while the rod of God is not actually upon them, often help them onward. They send forth their little ones like a flock, and their children dance. They take the timbrel and harp, and rejoice at the sound of the organ. They spend their days in wealth, and in a moment go down to the grave. Careless and thoughtless they pass along, and seldom think of returning till their youthful days are ended. Their morning is fair and without a cloud. They see no signs of an approaching storm, and hear no distant thunders roar. And they think it strange that any of their companions should escape for life, and be so timid, as

not to run with them to the same excess of riot in such a decent and delightful path.

But the youth in the text is determined not to yield, but to make further trial of his pleasures. He is not satisfied, nor will he yet believe that all is vanity. And Solomon supposed he would not be convinced of his folly until he should come to judgment. He may experience checks of conscience at first, but when he has found his way through some difficulties, he gains strength and finds the way more easy. He wishes others would let him alone. He loves darkness and will fly from the light of conviction. But this cannot always be done; and therefore he labors not to be convinced of sin and to come to repentance, but to silence his fears, and to soothe his conscience. You may now hear him plead his cause and defend his scenes of pleasure. And as no one ever yet set himself to prove directly, that sin is a duty, he will give his conduct the soft names of harmless and innocent. He will often plead the example of others, and would be glad to prove that his scenes of pleasure are really necessary and enjoined by the word of God. He thinks himself no worse and perhaps not as bad as many others. Indeed he sees little or no cause for repentance. But will this prove his interest in the merits of a Saviour's blood? Were he assured that his pleasures would soon be over—that within a few days he must lie down in eternal sorrows—in the horrors of despair, this guilty mortal would change his scenes of mirth into the cries and shrieks of the damned. His heart would pine away in the mournful complaint. Who can dwell with devouring fire? Who can inhabit everlasting burnings? But the case is far different. What if he lives without God in the world? What though he yet stands without the ark of safety? He feels himself too young to be a Christian; and too young to die. He now believes that Christ has spilt his blood to purchase him the pleasures of sin for a season, and the joys of heaven, when his youthful course is ended. Now this and much more is often necessary to ease his conscience and help him onward to rejoice. For should guilt, death, and judgment stare him in the face, it would end his sport at once.

At first sight, one would think it madness for him to rest a moment without the ark of safety. And much more to rejoice and make merry before he has ever fled to Christ for refuge.

But he is charmed with his pleasures, and while his soul is in danger, he will, perhaps be angry if you touch his trifles, and attempt to wrest them from his hand. He is willing to regulate his amusements and to conduct them with great propriety, only suffer him to retain the thing itself which is the joy and delight of his heart. This is truly affecting. He cannot be brought to a sense of the worth of his soul, and to see that he is lost and dead in sin. And here he will rest till he views his conduct in the light of eternity.

Little does he know of the deceitfulness of sin. Were it not pleasant to his taste, it would not, it could not be committed. It is easy to see, that an attempt to regulate in a sinful course, might be soothing to the conscience—but death to the soul—gilding the path to allure him quietly down to the chambers of death. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. The preaching of the cross is foolishness to them that perish. And he must continue without a Saviour and forever perish unless he is brought to renounce and hate every evil course.

If he pleads for any joy and merriment before he comes to Christ his case is truly alarming. He is pleading for his own destruction. Now God in kindness, but in dreadful language speaks, and warns him where his danger lies. Rejoice, O young man, and be cheerful, but know thou that for this delightful conduct, I will bring thee into judgment. The pleasure taken is the very thing pointed at and condemned by the word of God. It would not be difficult to dissuade him from his present course were it not delightful to his heart. And in this the danger lies. Every step which he advances in the ways of his heart carries him farther and farther from God. The more he indulges in sinful pleasures, the less he fears, and the stronger his habits become. It is nothing strange should he continue in his present course walking in the broad and downward road. It is only walking according to the course of this world. It is nothing strange should he be more hardened in sin and more loath to return at every step which he advances. It is nothing strange should he continue on filling up the measure of his sins with a joyful and a merry heart.

When sinners have for a while defended themselves in their sinful courses, it is common for God to give them up. And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion that

they should believe a lie: that they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness. Because God has called and they have refused—now they shall eat of the fruit of their own way, and be filled with their own devices.

Now the season of his youth is over, and he has gained nothing. The evil days draw nigh, when he cannot rejoice and be cheerful in walking in the ways of his heart. But more than half of the human race die and go to judgment before the season of youth is ended. What a vast multitude is here! Take from this number the little company of pious souls, who had forsaken their youthful vanities, who chose rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season, and who have died in the Lord. And what a vast multitude of youth have gone from their scenes of merriment, to judgment with all their sins upon their heads. How solemn is the text. While their sprightliness and health remain, they will rejoice and make merry until God lays his hand upon them and brings them unto judgment.

But the youth may live after he has spent the best of his days in sin. But shall the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots; then may he also do good, who is accustomed to do evil. Taken in this light, how striking are the words of the text. Rejoice O young man, in thy youth.—Spend thy youthful days in vanity, and then you will be confirmed in your sinful course, and afterwards live only to ripen for a more dreadful judgment hereafter.

This is a general truth, with two exceptions. Let the appeal be made to the word and the providence of God and the general truth will be confirmed. The religious revivals of former and especially of later years are known to be generally confined to the young. They have been called at the very time when they were just entering on their scenes of vanity: cheerful, gay, and thoughtless. At the times when their hopes and expectations were raised to the highest pitch, suddenly were they stripped of all. But far more are left to rejoice and make merry, cheerfully filling up the measure of their sin, until wrath shall come upon them to the uttermost. Nor will they truly repent of their folly, until it is too late. But after their hardness and impenitent hearts they will continue to treasure up unto themselves wrath against the day of wrath

and revelation of the righteous judgment of God. It will then appear that their better days in which they now rejoice, were wholly spent in gathering fuel for their own eternal torments. But we leave them in the hand of God-After death, comes the judgment.

My young friends, you and I must shortly open our eyes on a world where all is new. Where every work will appear in its proper light. You have often heard that you are acting for eternity; you will then believe it.

Once more, life and death are set before you. The only course in which you can safely rejoice and be cheerful is now pointed out. And can you wish for any other? Can you wish to rest a moment without the ark of safety? God is calling. He is calling by the death of your companions, and will you not stop your sport, nor regard his voice? What can be more insulting to the majesty of heaven? Christ is calling. And will you not stop your sinful sport to hear his dying groans, and see the wounds, which your sins have made? Will you now make him the minister of sin, and trifle with his blood, because he died to save his people from their sins? Will you change the day of probation into a scene of vain mirth while your eternal state is depending on this point of time?

Yes, this you will do. But we hope not all. The Spirit of God may convince of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment. If not, we plead with you in vain.

One affecting view of the judgment to come would render other arguments useless. The ministers of God are still encouraged to speak, and hold not their peace, from the hope that God has yet much people among the youth.

Within a few years past, many of your age have been called from the height of their joy and mirth, to tremble in view of a judgment to come. Their scenes of mirth were soon turned into mourning, and their joy into heaviness. Nothing could divert them from the solemn inquiry: What must I do be saved? Not a smile of joy could be seen, as you can well conceive, while they saw that they were out of Christ and that their eternal all might be lost the next moment. The trifles of time were lost in the awful concerns of eternity.

And so could it be with you, my friends, were the still small voice of God's Spirit to whisper conviction to your consciences. You would then be convinced of sin, of

righteousness, and of judgment to come. You would then see that heaven is no place for carnal joy—that you must be born again, or there is nothing in heaven in which you can rejoice. You would then see how awful a thing it is to live without a Saviour—that God out of Christ is a consuming fire—that nothing but the brittle thread of life, supported by the hand of an angry God now holds the sinner from dropping into the flames of hell. Because sentence against an evil work is not speedily executed, therefore the hearts of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.

If you have never believed in Christ and repented of your sins, you are already under sentence of condemnation. And all the dreadful threatenings contained in God's Word, are now ready to be executed. And should the unseen hand of death suddenly approach and find you as you are, you are gone, and lost forever. Is this a time to rejoice and make merry? You must die and go to judgment.

I well know that you intend to die the death of the righteous; and so did all who are now in hell. Not one had made his calculations to lie down in eternal torments. And you are now heading in their steps. What then are your prospects? I will tell you—All your resolutions about future repentance are worth nothing. Such resolutions are a part of the ways of thine own heart, for which God will bring thee into judgment. They are necessary to quiet the conscience and to help you onward to rejoice. Such a resolution may be made by that person whose heart is now fully set in them to do evil. It is made for the very purpose of escaping the righteous judgment of God, and now he can once more rejoice in sin. Affliction will always bring men to lament it. I speak only of gospel repentance, which loathes sin for what it is in itself. Can any man, can you promise yourselves a heart to abhor the thing which is now the joy and delight of your heart? And such are the things for which God now threatens to bring you into judgment. You may mourn to think that your joyful season will soon be over; and that you are so near to the judgment. But you have no evidence to conclude that you will hereafter hate what you now love. Besides a resolution to become a Christian hereafter, and not this day, is now determinate rebellion against God. You are urged to secure your interest in Christ. And are your hearts now backward;

are you reluctant to begin the work this day? Tomorrow will find your hearts farther from God —more hardened in sin, and difficulties will certainly increase, at every step which you advance. But what is your life? Has God showed you, O young man, that he will not bring thee into judgment before another day shall arrive? At such an hour as ye think not, the Son of man will come.

But you may think to obtain the favor of God though you continue to walk in the ways of your hearts. But you will not succeed. The way to heaven is too strait. It is directly opposite, and every step advanced is gained by opposing the desires of the flesh. The righteous, who take to themselves the whole armour of God will scarcely be saved.

Where is the young man who fears the judgment to come? What is the breath of an enemy of God to the blast of the soul by the breath of the Almighty? If you fear the frowns of a fellow worm, how will you stand in judgment with an angry God?

Seek first the kingdom of God —and then your amusements will regulate themselves. But if you will not do this; while I exhort you to act as those who must give account at the judgment bar of God —suffer me as a fellow mortal bound to appear at the same tribunal, now to tell you. That all amusements which prepare the soul for the duties of religion are right, and every Christian is bound to engage in them, and those which do not, will be condemned at the bar of God. But if you do not repent of your sins and turn to God, whatever course you may take —whatever your amusements may be —turn which way you will, God is a consuming fire. You sport on the brink of ruin. —Can you amuse yourselves with trifles, while the soul is in danger of being lost? You chase a bubble, at the hazard of falling into endless torments.

It is amazing that mortals should play tricks to cheat the soul out of heaven, by calling evil good. Innocent amusements? Where can an enemy of God be innocently employed? If you really believe that you are innocently employed, then you are as willing to meet the king of terrors in this place as in any other as some have done. You can have no objection to being called from this innocent employment, in the twinkling of an eye, to the bar of God. It is both sinful and dangerous to enter on any course when death would find

us unprepared. We are as much accountable to God at one time as at another. He allows his creatures no time for vain amusements. We have just come into being, and a few moments conduct decides our eternal state. We are always to remember that God sees us—and do what we will, we can never get out of his sight, or out of his hand. God will not defer the stroke of death, lest the sinner go to judgment unprepared.

Yet many plead the example of the world, which lies in wickedness. They feel safe because they run with the multitude. Others have done so before. My friends, others have gone to hell. The world were sporting in sin, when suddenly they were not only drowned, but damned. Would you plead the example of the world? Here it is set forth for your warning.

Why are you anxious about your amusements? You cannot long retain them. You are liable to be stripped of all in a moment. Then take them away. And would you not then exclaim—all my joys are gone. Ye have taken away my gods and what have I more? If such desponding thoughts arise, your case is truly alarming. If you have now no better portion you are poor indeed—poor indeed, without a Saviour. You are now, in your lifetime, receiving your good things. And this little may be all that you will ever enjoy. Your last day, your last hour will soon come. Were this day to close the scene of your mortal life, what have you gained? Were the judgment now to open to your view, what have you been doing? Where now is the day of salvation? It is gone. Your work for eternity is ended. And the judge pronounces your final doom. But though this day may not be your last, yet all your work is yet to be done. So long as you have lived, so much is gone out of your probation—so much of the day of salvation is over—your best season is almost gone, and nothing is done for God. It will forever remain true, so much of your golden season was spent, worse than in vain. Your past conduct is now recorded in heaven—the account is gone in, and cannot be altered. It will shortly be presented to your view. The joyful scene will now be changed. Every action will now be weighed by the omniscient Judge. Every secret thing will now appear. God will bring to the light of open day the hidden works of darkness, and the secret counsels of all hearts. And

should his awful summons find you out of Christ, still the righteous Judge will proceed to the trial on the principles of strict justice. He will now demand the uttermost farthing—absolute perfection. Without pity, or allowance for the levity of youth, he will condemn and punish for every failure of perfect obedience. An idle word, an impure thought, cannot be forgiven. For all those things, O young man, how will your present gay conduct then appear? Inattention to the calls of mercy—open contempt of the voice of God. The noise of mirth in the day of salvation—sporting with the blood of the Son of God. A pleasant jest on religion—a league with the prince of darkness to block the way which leads to heaven and allure your companions onward with a smile down to hell. Woe unto you that laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.

Young man, I leave you in the hands of your final Judge. Life and death are now before you and God is witness to your choice. If a bleeding Saviour has no charms for you—if the thunder of his vengeance does not strike terror through your guilty soul; then go on. —March on your way rejoicing—Trample under foot the Son of God—Sport with eternal vengeance and deny the thunder of his power. Your fair morning will soon be turned into darkness, your course run—your bodies fall in the grave, and your souls into the hands of the living God.

A Brief Look at the Life of Asahel Nettleton

by Jon Cardwell

Perhaps one of the most anointed evangelists of the 19th century's "Second Great Awakening," Asahel Nettleton preached very solemn, reverent, dignified messages without written notes, relying on the power of the Holy Spirit through the reverent exposition of Biblical doctrines of sovereign grace through faith.

Born in North Killingworth, Connecticut on April 21, 1783, Nettleton was the second child and eldest son in a family of six children. Very little is known of his early childhood, except that his father was a farmer, and being the son of

Congregationalist parents, young Asahel was baptized as an infant and was required to memorize the Westminster Assembly's Catechism growing up. Quite often in later life, Dr. Nettleton would comment how useful the memorization of the catechism was when once his soul was awakened to the concerns of religion.

The day after attending a ball at the annual Thanksgiving in 1800, while thinking pleasurably upon the previous nights events, "the thought suddenly rushed upon his mind, we must all die, and go to the judgment, and with what feelings shall we then reflect upon these scenes!"¹ With that overwhelming thought, young Nettleton began to be anxious for his soul.

He started searching the Scriptures to see if he could find a contradiction, but he felt all the more lost and hopeless. "He prayed, and wept, and promised, but"² to no avail. He read Jonathan Edwards' narrative on revival of religion in Northampton as well as Edwards' memoir of David Brainerd, which served to deepen his conviction concerning his lost condition. "The doctrines of the Gospel, particularly the doctrines of sovereignty and election, were sources of great distress to him.... He would sometimes say to himself, if I am not elected, I shall not be saved, even if I do repent— then the thought would arise, if I am not elected, I never shall repent. This would cut him to the heart, and dash to the ground all his self-righteous hopes. For a long time he endured these conflicts in his mind. Meanwhile, he became fully convinced, that the commands of God are perfectly just, that it was his immediate duty to repent, and that he had no excuse for continuing another moment a rebel against God. At the same time he saw that such was the wickedness of his heart, that he never should repent, unless God should subdue his heart by an act of sovereign grace.... For several hours, his horror of mind was inexpressible. Not long after this, there was a change in his feelings. He felt a calmness for which he knew not how to account."³

For someone who had converted to Christ as Nettleton

¹ Bennet Tyler, D.D., *Memoir of the Life and Character of Rev. Asahel Nettleton, D.D.*, Boston, MA; Fifth Edition, 1856; pg. 16

² *Ibid*, pg. 20

³ *Ibid*, pg. 21

had, through the doctrines of sovereign grace: total depravity, unconditional election, repentance, regeneration, and etc., it would seem ludicrous to suggest that, as an evangelist, Nettleton would use tactics such as coaxing, cajoling, or charming sinners into the kingdom. Contrary to Rick Warren's erroneous assertion that Asahel Nettleton began using the "altar call" in 1817 and was popularized later by Charles Grandison Finney (*The Purpose Driven Church*, pg. 305), Nettleton loathed such gimmicks and innovations as Finney's "anxious bench," the forerunner to today's unscriptural "altar call."

Sermons such as "Ashamed of Christ" (Luke 9:26), "Total Depravity" (Genesis 6:5), and "Perseverance of the Saints" (Philippians 1:6), indicate Mr. Nettleton's method of evangelism was to preach a series of messages upon the doctrinal truths of the Bible. From this method of conveying Biblical truth with dignity, and without overzealous outbreaks, he would remain consistent until his Lord took him home. After his graduation from Yale University in 1809, Mr. Nettleton's ministry as an itinerant evangelist in New England witnessed an estimated 30,000 converted souls between 1810-1821.

Taking ill from typhus fever in 1822, Mr. Nettleton's life was spared; nevertheless, he never quite recovered and he remained in a poor state of health until his death on May 16, 1844. Dr. Nettleton never married.

Wherever the Lord is ministering revival and working powerfully and marvelously, the enemy is right there with his malicious counterfeit. During the first "Great Awakening," in the days of Jonathan Edwards and George Whitfield, a preacher from Long Island, New York, James Davenport, visited the towns and villages that were being awakened. Though Davenport was a pious young man with an apparent zeal for God, a love for souls, and a passionate desire for the advancement of God's kingdom, during his services he promoted unrestrained emotional outcries, whether of joy or distress; and after a few questions of inquiry of those whose emotions shifted from distress to delight, Davenport would pronounce them converted. Through this method, the numbers under Davenport's preaching were greatly inflated; however, those "converted" had "returned to their old way of

living —were as carnal, wicked, and void of Christian experience as they ever were. Again: [Davenport] was a great favourer of *visions, trances, imaginations, and powerful impressions* upon the mind in others; and made such inward *feelings* the rule of his conduct in *many respects*; especially if the impression came with a *text of Scripture*, which he looked upon to be *opened* to him at such a time, and in such cases pointing out his duty, which he would accordingly pursue.”⁴

Likewise, as with Davenport in the days of, and immediately following the first “Great Awakening” of the 1740’s, America’s “Second Great Awakening” the authentic and lasting conversions under Nettleton’s ministry were overshadowed by the flamboyant methods of Charles Finney.

Although Nettleton was the most outspoken critic of Finney’s “new measures,” Mr. Nettleton always addressed his opposition with charity and brotherly kindness. A July 1827 meeting between Nettleton and Finney failed to expose Finney’s methods as unbiblical largely because Mr. Nettleton never took Mr. Finney to task on doctrinal issues. Sadly, Nettleton’s poor health kept him from attending most of the appointments.

Dr. Andrew Bonar provides insights into Mr. Finney’s career in his “remodeled” work of Dr. Tyler’s original 1845 memoir of Nettleton.⁵ Dr. Bonar wrote,

“Mr. Finney’s doctrines soon deviated from the truth as much as his measures did from scriptural order and wisdom.... No doubt [Finney] published works that contained rousing and startling truths; but even truth was given forth alongside of much error which counteracted all.”⁶

Dr. Bonar also included a quote from an American

⁴ Tyler & Bonar, *Asahel Nettleton: Life and Labours*; Banner of Truth; Carlisle, PA; 1996; pg.443

⁵ Andrew Bonar, D.D., having access to more resources, such as correspondence, diaries and testimonies, &c., rewrote, added, and edited Nettleton’s memoir to produce *Asahel Nettleton: Life and Labours*, first published in 1854.

⁶ Tyler & Bonar, *Asahel Nettleton: Life and Labours*; Banner of Truth; Carlisle, PA; 1996; pg.449

minister, “whose information and character are alike such as entitle him to be depended on:—

“A class of evangelists arose, of whom the Rev. C. G. Finney was a distinguished leader, who adopted Pelagian, or Semi-Pelagian views of doctrine, and introduced a system of measures adapted to produce excitement. The consequence was, that great excitement was produced, and multitudes of converts were proclaimed. But a large proportion of these proved to be like seed sown on stony places. *Moral desolation succeeded these excitements. Some of these evangelists have lost their character, and most of them have lost, in a great measure, their influence. Very few of them would now be invited to preach in those places where their labours were said to be so remarkably successful.* This is true of Mr. Finney himself. If our English brethren who are giving Mr. Finney their countenance and support, are not making work for repentance, many of the most sound and judicious ministers of this country will be greatly mistaken. I am happy to be able to state that, in the Presbyterian and Congregational Churches generally, in our country, the “*New Measure System*,” as it has been called, has gone into disrepute, and revivals are becoming more like those which were witnessed at the beginning of the present century.”⁷

The revivals mentioned by the American minister above are, no doubt, speaking of the revivals of the Holy Spirit through the ministry of Asahel Nettleton and other like-minded brethren.

⁷ Ibid, pg.450

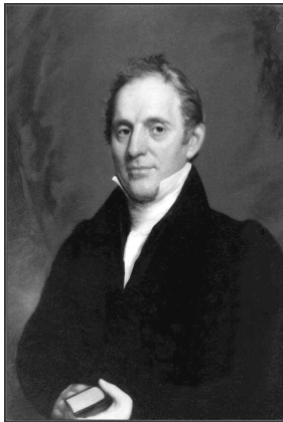
RECOMMENDED READING:

Memoir of the Life and Character of Rev. Asahel Nettleton, D.D.

By Bennet Tyler, D.D.⁸
1845

Asahel Nettleton: Life and Labours

By Bennet Tyler, D.D., Andrew A. Bonar, D.D.⁹
1854



A. Nettleton —

⁸ Dr. Bennet Tyler was President and Professor of Christian Theology in the Theological Institute of Connecticut

⁹ Dr. Andrew Bonar, younger brother of Horatius Bonar, ministered in several churches in Scotland, including Glasgow, and was close friend and classmate of Robert Murray McCheyne, writing his memoir after his death.

