

Benefits of the House of Mourning

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Edited transcript of [message](#) preached January 19, 1986

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I believe that anyone possessed of any measure of spiritual discernment has been conscious that a special unction has rested upon the reading of the Word of God and upon our corporate prayer. And I trust it is God's index of His purpose to bless us with more than an ordinary portion of His presence and power in the preaching of His Word. Let us seek His face to that end.

Our Father, we cry with the Psalmist that as the young deer pants after the water brooks, so pant our souls after You, O God. We long to see Your power and Your glory. We thank You for those little tastes You give to us, even in the ordinary stated means of grace, when the reading of Your Word comes with peculiar unction, and we are led in prayer and together are conscious of being given a more than ordinary measure of largeness of heart in the things for which we seek You. And O, God, how we long that those mercy drops shall become a mighty deluge of the felt power and presence of Your Holy Spirit. To this end, we would be bold to plead that in the reading and exposition of the Word of God now, that You will come by the Holy Spirit and arrest every mind, every conscience.

O Lord, from the youngest to the oldest, so speak that some will mark this night as the night when they were shaken out of their dream world of carnal ease and began to find themselves in the way of seeking life and salvation in Jesus Christ. And may there be others, our Father, who mark this night as the night that they closed with the offers of mercy in the Lord Jesus, when they shall for the first time pillow their heads with a well-grounded peace and with a well-grounded assurance that all is well with their souls. May your people mark this night as a night when we have been stirred to renewed devotion to You and renewed commitment to serve You against a backdrop of the brevity of life. O Lord, come and speak to us with power we plead through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Most of the membership of Trinity Church are aware that during this past week we sought to obey the Biblical injunction in weeping with several of our number who have wept at the loss of a loved one. And as I sought to be sensitive to the desires of these loved ones in conjunction with the planning of the funeral service of a mother who was taken from two of our members, it was their request that I bring a brief meditation at the funeral home based upon Ecclesiastes 7:2. And since early Thursday morning, when I reflected upon that text and then later on in the morning had the occasion briefly to expound and apply it at the funeral or memorial service, the text has been with me along with the passage in Mark. They have been my meat and drink over the past days. And as I prayerfully reflected upon what I should bring this evening, this text would not let go of my mind and my spirit. And in a sense, it would have almost been impossible to preach on any other text.

And so I would direct your attention to the book of Ecclesiastes tonight, chapter 7 and verse 2. The writer of Ecclesiastes declares, "It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart." Bypassing the knotty problems of the authorship of the book of Ecclesiastes, bypassing the equally difficult matter of the overall structure and the principles of interpretation which must be present in any responsible handling of the entire book of Ecclesiastes, I'm asking you to go directly with me to this statement that is an accurate reflection of a wise man with reference to a very sensitive area of human behavior and reaction. And in the text, there is set before us, first of all, a comparison. A comparison is stated. "It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting...." And after the comparison is stated, then an explanation is given. Why is it better to go to the house of mourning than the house of feasting? Well, the explanation comes to us in two parts: "...for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart."

First of all, then, consider with me what the writer tells us in this comparison stated. In his comparison, he is contrasting two houses. One is described as the house of mourning and the other as the house of feasting. Now what are these two houses? Well, the house of mourning is nothing other than a situation that would have its closest parallel in our day in that which we would call a funeral service. Some would call it a wake. Different terms are used in differing cultures and even within different parts of a given broader cultural context. But the writer is comparing that house where people are gathered on the occasion of the death of a friend or a loved one and are entering into that spirit of heaviness and mourning in the face of the intrusion of the grim, harsh reality of death. And so the house of mourning is the place where people are forced by the very circumstances of the proximity of death to face its great reality. That's the house of mourning.

What then is the house of feasting? Well, those who are very knowledgeable in the language of Hebrew tell us that the house of feasting is literally the house of drinking, the place of banqueting, the place where, under the influence of food and wine in abundance, an atmosphere of gaiety is so pervasive that the grim realities of life and death are at least for a time forgotten or pushed very far to the background of one's thinking. If you want to be a party pooper par excel lance, introduce a discussion on the subject of death the next time you're in a banquet. You see, banquets are not a place to think sober thoughts about death. Banquets are not a place where the mindset is at all prepared to have much affinity with the realities that throb and pulse through the very climate of a house of mourning. And so in this comparison, the author is contrasting the two houses, the house of mourning and the house of feasting.

Now in considering the two houses, he says that it is better if one has his choice, to make his way to the house of mourning than to the house of banqueting or feasting. Now note, neither of the options is in itself virtuous or sinful. There is nothing sinful with going to a house of feasting. We read in the Scriptures that our Lord Jesus attended both. His first miracle was performed in a house of feasting. It was there our Lord turned the water into wine and increased the joy and the legitimate gaiety of those who were gathered at a time of feasting. Furthermore, when Matthew was converted, he throws a banquet for Jesus. And Jesus goes to the house of feasting as the guest of honor and so enters in with delight, albeit, within the bounds of moderation in his eating and drinking. But the Pharisees looking in are not only disturbed that He is in company with the riff raff of Israel, the publicans and sinners,

but they said, "Behold, a winebibber and a glutton." When He goes to a banquet, He doesn't fast. He is not a party pooper at the banquet. At a banquet of feasting, He eats and drinks with relish and delight as do all the other banqueters. So the text cannot say in light of the analogy of Scripture that there is something inherently evil in the house of feasting. Nor is there anything automatically virtuous in the house of mourning.

Now you see, in a day in which the attitude of the average person is to grab all the gusto you can ("Let's play! Let's party!" or in the teenage language, "Let's have a blast!"), surely these words sound strange: "It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting." Not only do they sound strange in the light of the prevailing climate of our day, but in the light of the prevailing teaching of the Word of God, they have a note of strangeness about them. Do not the Scriptures tell us that the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking but righteousness, joy in the Holy Spirit? Are we not told that the joy of the Lord is your strength. "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice." Are we not told that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy? Well, in the light of that Biblical teaching, how can it be said it is better, if one has the choice, to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting? What led this wise man to reflect upon human experience and to make such a statement as we find in the comparison here stated?

That moves us to our second division, an explanation given. Why is it better to go to a funeral than to a festival? Well, for two simple reasons given to us in the text. Number one: "...for that is the end of all men." What is he saying? He is saying it is better to go to the house of mourning than the house of feasting because our presence at the house of mourning reminds us forcefully of our own inevitable end. "...for that [that is, a place in the house of mourning] is the end of all men."

Picture with me a man who's out on Tuesday night. He's at a company banquet. And there at the banquet, food and drink are had in abundance, and a speaker comes and makes everyone laugh. And let's assume there's nothing rye bawled and off color and lecherous in the humor; that it's wholesome humor. Someone gives a speech on the company's future and a pep talk to the employees. There is nothing inherently sinful in that evening spent in a house of feasting at the local Holiday Inn banquet hall. During all those hours, there is little likelihood that the successful young businessman, who is there to be both rewarded and motivated to greater incentive in application of all his faculties to the company's concerns, from the appetizer until the final speech is made, will soberly reflect upon the fact that in a few short years at best he will be laid upon a slab; he will be embalmed and placed in a casket and carried to a funeral parlor. There's very little chance that that thought will enter his mind. However, the very next day at 2 o'clock in the afternoon, he and in company with his fellow employees goes to a funeral parlor to pay respects to a respected executive who was climbing his way up through the corporation ladder, and at the height of his career in his late forties was taken away by a sudden and unexpected heart attack. And he must stand by the open coffin and look at the earthly remains of that friend. And it is much more likely if he will stand there and think for even thirty seconds that he one day will lie in a casket as his friend now lies. And it's precisely that observation that caused the writer to say, "It is better to go to the house of mourning than the house of feasting, for that is the end of all men." And our presence at the house of mourning vividly reminds us of our own end.

Now the Bible tells us that all of us, in the language of Joshua 23:14, will go the way of all the earth. The Bible tells us in Hebrews 9:27, "It is appointed un to men once to die." Human observation affirms and confirms the teaching of the Word of God. We see grandfather and grandmother taken from us in death, and then father and mother and work associates. And we see on every hand the grim and inescapable reality that the only thing certain about life is our death. From the moment that little baby is taken from it's mother's womb and cries its first cry and sucks in its first lung full of the air of the outside world, only one thing can be said for certain about that life, and that is that it will end in death. That's all that can be predicted with certainty. Whether that life will be surrounded with luxury or poverty, whether that life will become a noble or a tragic life, none of these things can be predicted with certainty, but that that life will end. As surely as that child shall breathe its first air, it shall breathe its last. But O, what folly sin has wrought that we will think so little about this great reality. And therefore, the house of mourning is better than the house of feasting because our presence in the house of mourning vividly reminds us of our ultimate end.

Then he adds a second part of the explanation in these words: "...and the living will lay it to his heart." What is he saying? He is saying our presence at a house of mourning should prod us to prepare for our own death. "...and the living will lay it to his heart." Now what does that phrase mean? Well, when you lay something to your heart, you no longer allow that thing simply to have a glancing blow upon your thinking or upon your actions or your attitude. For example, you may have a neighbor that has a chronic habit of cutting short the entrance into your driveway. He runs up over your curb and messes up six inches to a foot of your lawn. And you may be so accustomed to it you never lay it to heart. It doesn't trouble you, it doesn't bother you. Well, he gets bold, and instead of his six inches to a foot, he begins to chew up a whole yard of your lawn. And when you begin to see him getting bolder and bolder, there comes a time when his carelessness and insensitivity to your property; you begin to lay it to heart. It begins to bother you. It begins to be something that concerns you enough that you're going to do something about it. You have laid it to heart. We use similar terminology all the time. And that's precisely what the writer is saying, that the house of mourning is better than the house of feasting, not only because our presence at the house of mourning reminds us vividly of our own end, but our presence at the house of mourning should prod us to prepare for our own inevitable death. It should cause us to lay to heart the great and grim reality that we shall die.

Now would to God that this text could be spoken in the absolute: "All of the living shall lay it to heart." But alas, it is not so. Some of the most light and frivolous conversation I have ever heard has been carried on in a funeral parlor. And some of the most giddy social interaction I've ever witnessed has been carried on in the home in which people gathered right after they watched a body being sunk into the dark, deep earth at a cemetery. And I have marveled and said, "O God, how blind is the blindness of sin in context where people were strangers both to the knowledge and the power of the Gospel. Such giddiness was utterly out of place. I am not talking about that kind of joy that breathes through the tears of believers at a funeral parlor or at a home at which they gathered. I am not speaking of that. But I am speaking of that irresponsible, that damning, that delusive kind of indifference and insensitivity which the house of mourning ought at least temporarily to jar and to arrest and cause men to lay to heart that they too shall die.

I can remember as a boy dreading the first time I would have to go to a funeral and witness a dead body laid out. And I was quite old before I did. I had such a dread of death, such a fear of dying in my sin, going to meet my Maker laden with all of my lies and all of my sins of every sort. And the thought of being more reminded was horrible. But then the day came when a young man in his early teens with whom I had been running and playing and jumping in the water at Long Island Sound in Stamford, Connecticut where we lived, one day did something that we often did. In jumping off the side of a canal, he jumped over several fellows who stood there with their backs bent over. It was just a way we sort of cavorted as fellows will do. But he flipped a little bit too much. And when he landed, he hit the back of his neck and snapped his neck. And by the time they pulled him out of the water, he was dead. And I can remember when I saw that lifeless body lying there. For the first time I had seen a dead person, and how I was tortured for days. Why? Because I knew if that had been me, my soul would be in company with demons and devils and all of the damned in hell. But tragically, though I laid it to heart for a time, I did everything I could to push my spirit back into the house of feasting, back into a framework of fun and games and frolic that there should be no longer the pressure of the sobering thoughts of death and the judgment to come.

It is better to go to the house of mourning, for our presence to prod us to prepare for our own death. "The living will lay it to his heart." Thank God, some will, all should, many do not. Now, that's why the writer says by way of comparison that the house of mourning is better than the house of feasting. Two reasons, and I've sought briefly to open them up. Now then, let me lay before you three very simple principles that grow out of the text, and I trust God will write them upon our hearts.

The first is this: this text indicates that none of us naturally is as sober as we ought to be about the great issues of death and judgment. The writer recognizes man's innate tendency to put off sober thoughts about death and judgment. He knew human nature. When young, we say that death is at least for middle age and old people. And when middle age, it's for real old people. And when we're old, it's for ancient people. But it's someone else out there. Death is there, inevitably I must meet it, but manana, tomorrow, some other time, some other circumstances. One of the most horrible effects of the blinding power of the devil is that he so works in us as the sons and daughters of disobedience, that none of us is as naturally sober about the great issues of death and judgment as we ought to be. And that's why the house of mourning, the funeral parlor, the graveside, the trip by the cemetery preaches to us.

How I thank God for the cemetery that presses up on both sides for acres and acres there on the Garden State Parkway in the 140 section in the Irvington area. How it has preached to me hundreds of times over these 22 years. When I've been on my way to preach somewhere, it's caused me to say, "O God, help me to preach tonight in the light of the fact that in a few more years a stone will be over my rotting remains. And O God, awaken men to the reality that every tombstone is an eloquent thundering voice from heaven concerning the devil: 'You are a liar. You are a liar.' For he said, 'You shall not surely die.'" And every grave and every tombstone is God's eloquent, thundering voice exposing the devil for what he is: a liar and the father of it.

No, none of us, saved or unsaved, is as naturally sober about the great issue of death and judgment as we ought to be. And therefore, it is better for us with our native tendency to shy away and to ignore and hope that by blinking we can remove these grim realities. Far better to go to the house of mourning where we cannot deny

the reality. The lifeless body lies before us; the mourning loved ones stand around us, and everything thunders, "it is appointed to men once to die."

But then, secondly, our text teaches us that anything that jars us to serious and concentrated attention to the issues surrounding death is ultimately our friend. If there is to be a house of mourning, someone must feel the pain of the loss of a loved one. If there's to be a house of mourning, someone must feel the sting, the stab, the wrenching lose from all of the living, present exchange of mind and thought and word and touch and all that makes human interchange a living reality. That's a sad thing. Jesus wept in the presence of death. But if it can jar us to serious and concentrated attention to this issue, the house of mourning in all of its tragedy and sadness is our great friend.

If the house of mourning can burst a bubble of giddy self-deception and carelessness and indifference--for no man, woman, boy, or girl ever came from a giddy, carefree, unconcerned state of being to being a Christian man by magic. You hear me? No one ever came, young or old, from a being a giddy, carefree, unconcerned sinner on his way to hell under the wrath and judgment of God with hell only a heartbeat away--no one ever came from such a state into one who was trusting in the Lord Jesus, one who had repented of sin, forsaken all hope of salvation in himself, laying the weight of his guilty soul upon Christ alone and in the power of that new life imparted by the living God, seeking to love and serve God out of a motive of gratitude for His free salvation--no one ever came from that state to this state by magic.

You know what had to happen first of all? A young man or woman, old man or woman had first of all had to begin to think serious thoughts about God and about himself, about God as a righteous God and about himself as an unrighteous sinner. He had to think some serious thoughts about the reality of judgment and the subsequent horror of hell and the reality of the fact that his sins deserved the judgment of God and its ultimate expression in outer darkness. No one becomes a Christian who doesn't begin to become a Christian with serious thoughts about God, serious thoughts about sin, serious thoughts about death and judgment, hell, and the meaning of life. And generally speaking, except in the case of some who come into life, as it were, like the opening of a flower before the sun (and they do so in their infancy)--I know there are such, but generally speaking, God's way is to bring us to those serious thoughts; then to bring us to serious searching of the Word of God, to serious prayer, to serious crying to God, serious attendance upon preaching. And then these lead to true repentance, true faith, open confession of Christ, taking the badge of discipleship, being placed in the way of a visible saint in the community of the people of God. That's how people become Christians.

So my friend, listen to me, if you refuse to think serious thoughts about God, about death, and about judgment, you are refusing the very first steps to salvation. If you're so determined to live in spirit in the house of feasting, though you're feet may not be there, if you're so determined that wherever you are in whatever company you are, you will not allow anything to break in upon you to sober you about death and judgment and hell and the world to come, do you see what you're doing? You're saying, "I'm determined I will never be saved." What a horrible state to be in. And that's part (not the whole story, but part of the curse) of the screeching, of the horrible, cacophonous, lawless music that wherever you go greets you in the stores, in the shop, in the factory. Why must men and woman, boys and girls have the den poured into their ears--the jogger with his Walkman, the man in his car with his

headphones and his radio. Why? He doesn't want to be quiet and think. He wants to be in the house of feasting where he can forget.

Why all the hype about Super Bowl--what is it? XX? Two weeks of hype--why? Well, one thing is the commercialism. If you were a company that stood to get over a quarter of a million dollars for a thirty minute spot ad, you'd be concerned about Super Bowl XX. But what is it that the average man and average woman are looking forward to? A Sunday when for six hours with all of the folderol surrounding the Super Bowl, they can gather in homes and bars surrounded with their bottles of beer and other booze and have a blast. Why? They want to be in the house of feasting, in the house of revelry? Why? They do not need to think sober thoughts about God and sin and death and judgment and hell. But O dear friends, listen to the text: "It is better to go to the house of mourning."

As I thought of this text and thought of next week when they estimate 70 or 80 or possibly 90 million Americans will be glued to their television sets on the Lord's Day--O, that we could somehow by force go into all the homes and all the bars and drag everyone out and make them stand by an open grave and watch a body lowered in and hear the sobs of loved ones and say, "You too shall be lowered, my friend." And your soul will have made its flight to go out into a fixed state of eternal bliss or eternal misery. Turn your Super Bowl Sunday into a house of mourning. Shut off your TV and sit and reflect upon the fact that it's appointed unto men once to die. Anything that jars us to serious and concentrated attention to these issues is ultimately our friend.

And then thirdly and finally, in my application, I want to say this: anything or any person which neutralizes the possibility of serious thoughts about death and judgment, heaven and hell should be resisted as our mortal enemy. You hear me? If it is better to go to the house of mourning, there to be reminded that's my end, and in the light of that reminder, to be stirred up to prepare for my death; if it is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting where I am forced by the very context to put off sober thoughts about God, then I say anything or any person that neutralizes the possibility of my going to the house of mourning, that neutralizes the possibility of my thinking serious thoughts about God and sin and heaven and hell and judgment, I must resist that thing or that person as my mortal enemy.

Now I know that it's pointed application that gets me in trouble, but I love your soul enough to go after it in hand-to-hand wrestling. I'm convinced that there are dear and precious young people in this congregation who, from the human side, are never going to get saved until you are willing to change a very fundamental pattern. You know what that pattern is? It's the pattern of congregating with other giddy young people after every service to talk giddy talk about giddy things and have no sober thoughts about what you heard in the preaching. Some of you have sat here under the preaching, and unless I've been grossly deceived, in spite of yourself, you've listened. In spite of yourself, you've sensed the earnestness and the love and the genuine compassion of those who preached to you, and you have, as it were, for a few minutes been pressured by the thought of judgment and heaven and hell, and you've sat there and inwardly trembled and you've said, "I must begin to think seriously about these issues. I must begin to seek the Lord. I must begin to enfold into a receptive heart every seed of divine truth." But then the pressure of your peers the moment the service was over, less than five minutes later you were gathered with your peers, each one whistling a little louder in the dark to prove that "Nothing got to

me. Anything get to you?" "Ah, of course not. It didn't get to me." Dear young person, in the name of God, what kind of friends are those that will drag you into hell? Careless, thoughtless, blind!

Dare to say tonight when they tap you on the shoulder and say, "Hey come on" (you know what they want you to say "Come on" for)--you say, "No, thanks." And you sit for a few moments and reflect. Or you talk to Mom and Dad, and you say, "Mom and Dad, I want to talk to you when we get home tonight. I see the truth of that passage. I can't deny I'm going to die, and I don't know when, and I'm not ready to die. Seek out one of us that we might take you aside in one of the many rooms here privately and speak with you and pray with you, pray for you. Dear young person, don't let peer pressure neutralize the pressure of the Word of God. For if you're ever saved, you'll be saved when you begin to lay hold of the Word of God as life itself, not until then.

What about some of you who can't be classified as teenagers or young people? What happens to you? You come, you hear the word, you sense the reality that throbs through the singing of God's people. You sense the earnestness, that tinge of spiritual reality and unction in the prayers. You know that these things are real; you can't afford the luxury of even trying to suggest to yourself for ten minutes that it's a lot of hot air. You know better. But what happens? You leave this place, and instead of going home, shutting yourself alone and taking out your Bible and turning to the text that was preached upon, that brought an impress upon your spirit, the passage that impressed you in the regular reading, what do you do? You go to the table, and light conversation follows. And then you watch the 10 o'clock news. And by the time you pillow your head, the devil has snatched away the Word. And you've gone back to the house of feasting instead of turning your bedroom into a house of mourning. O, dear people, hear me, anything, any person which neutralizes the possibility of serious thoughts about God and heaven and hell, that person or thing is your mortal enemy, and you ought to treat it as such.

Most of you are familiar at least with the broad outlines of *Pilgrim's Progress*, aren't you? And do you remember what happen when Pilgrim through reading the book of God became convinced he was in the city of destruction? And when he began to leave, so determined was he not be destroyed in that city that he placed his fingers in his ears to make himself deaf to the voices of any friends that would seek to keep him. And with fingers in his ears, he left crying, "Life, life, eternal life!" And he did not rest till he crossed the river. He did not rest till he came through the gate, came by the house of Interpreter, stood before a cross, and his burden rolled off. And after all the trials and ups and downs of his sojourn, he crosses the river and is ushered into the Celestial City. And he is home safe at last. But it all began when he got into the house of mourning long enough to have sober thoughts about hell and judgment and the world to come and set his heart upon obtaining eternal life.

For some of you, it may mean nothing less than the relinquishment of some of the toys that you've gathered around you as a grown adult, hobbies and pursuits that demand so much time and make you feel so good that they put you out of touch with the sobering realities of death and judgment. For some of you, it may mean severing a very dear relationship. You may have your heart set upon a young man or a young woman, and you know that they are not desperate to lay hold of eternal life. And you know if you become desperate, you run the risk of having them chuck you. My friend, when that person that you are thinking of exchanging for Christ has the power to present you faultless before God in the day of judgment, then cling to them. But until

God confers upon that man or woman the ability to vindicate you in the last day, you better drop them if they stand between you and Christ. Because if Christ does not stand with you in the last day to vindicate you and plead your cause, you've had it, and you've had it for eternity.

Now am I advocating a joyless Christianity that only lives in the house of mourning? Of course not! That would be contrary to the whole teaching of the Word of God. I am not advocating becoming morose. I am not in any way propagating a notion of the Christian life that simply lives continually under a dark heavy cloud of the sobering realities of death. But what I am saying is, go to the house of mourning long enough to get sober enough to seek Christ until you're in Him. Then you can afford the luxury of being a happy man or woman, because then you can say, "For me to depart from this body is to be with Christ, which is much, much better."

You see, in a real sense, the only person who has any right to be in the house of feasting is one who has learned the lesson at the house of mourning. Isn't that right? Because our feasting is not to neutralize and to stop the voice of conscience. It is not to shut out the great realities. In the midst of our feasting we can say, "If life can be so full of joy now in union with Christ--hallelujah!--what will it be to sit down at the marriage supper of the Lamb? God's true people are a happy people, but they've got grounds for their happiness and a base for their happiness that will never be removed.

My friend, it's better to go to the house of mourning. O, go there tonight. Get alone and get quiet, and picture in your mind's eye the slab on which you'll be laid, the coffin in which you'll be laid out, the ground into which you will be placed. And then think of that soul, that never-dying, immortal soul, having left the body and gone into that world from which there is no return--eternal torment, eternal joy awaiting the resurrection when that body will be joined to that spirit. And then the intensification of that state fixed at death will be ushered in eternal bliss in resurrection body and perfected soul for those in Christ; eternal torment of body and soul for those that are out of Christ.

Thank God, though it was at the price of grief and pain to some very dear among us in this assembly, He's brought us as a congregation in His providence into the house of mourning. It's better to go there than into the house of feasting. Why? For that's the end of each one of us. And those who are wise will lay it to heart. O, lay it to heart. Think soberly enough to get desperate to be in Christ. And desperate to be in Christ, rest not until you know you are in Him. Repent, believe the Gospel. Throw the weight of your guilty, vulnerable soul upon Him who is mighty to save. And find His promise true to you: "Him that comes unto Me, I will in no wise cast out."

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