

On Public Diversions

by John Wesley

"Shall a trumpet be blown in the city, and the people not be afraid? shall there be evil in the city, and the Lord hath not done it?" - Amos 3:6.

It is well if there are not too many here who are too nearly concerned in these words of the Prophet; the plain sense of which seems to be this: Are there any men in the world so stupid and senseless, so utterly void of common reason, so careless of their own and their neighbours' safety or destruction, as when an alarm of approaching judgments is given, to show no signs of apprehension? to take no care in order to prevent them, but go on as securely as if no alarm had been given? Do not all men know that whatsoever evil befalls them, it befalls them either by God's appointment; and that he designs every evil of this life to warn men to avoid still greater evils? that he suffers these lighter marks of his displeasure, to awaken mankind, so that they may shun his everlasting vengeance, and be timely advised, by feeling a part of it, so to change their ways that his whole displeasure may not arise?

I intend, speaking on this subject, to show, First, that there is no evil in any place but the hand of the Lord is in it.

Secondly. That every uncommon evil is the trumpet of God blown in that place, so that the people may take warning.

Thirdly. To consider whether, after God hath blown his trumpet in this place, we have been duly afraid.

I am, First, to show, in few words, that there is no evil in any place but the hand of the Lord is therein. No evil, that is, no affliction or calamity, whether of a public or of a private nature, whether it concerns only one, or a few persons, or reaches to many, or to all, of that place where it comes. Whatever circumstance occasions loss or pain to any man, or number of men, may in that respect be called an evil; and of such evils the Prophet speaks in these words.

Of such evils, we are to believe, that they never happen but by the knowledge and permission of God. And of every such evil we may say, that the Lord hath done it, either by his own immediate power, by the strength of his own right hand, or by commanding, or else suffering, it to be done by those his servants that do his pleasure. For the Lord is King, be the people never so impatient; yea, the great King of all the earth. Whatsoever, therefore, is done in all the earth, (sin only excepted,) he doeth it himself. The Lord God Omnipotent still reigneth; and all things are so subject unto him, that his will must be done, whether we agree to it or not, as in heaven, so also upon earth. Not only his blessed angels, but all things, serve him in all places of his dominion; those wicked spirits which rule the darkness of this world, and those men who are like them, he rules by constraint; the senseless and brute parts of the creation, by nature; and those men who are like God, by choice. But, however it be, with or without their own choice, they all act in obedience to his will; and particularly so, when, in judgment, he remembers mercy, and permits a smaller evil that he may prevent greater. Then, at least, we are to acknowledge the hand of God in whatsoever instruments he makes use of. It makes little difference whether he executes his purpose by the powers of heaven or hell, or by the mistakes, carelessness, or malice of men. If a destroying angel marches forth against a town or country, it is God who empowers him to destroy. If bad men distress one or more of their fellow-creatures, the ungodly are a sword of his. If fire, hail, wind, or storm be let loose upon the earth, yet they only fulfil his word. So certain it is, that there is no evil in any place which the Lord, in this sense, hath not done.

I am to prove, Secondly, that every uncommon evil is the trumpet of God blown in that place where it comes, that the people may take warning.

Every private affliction is doubtless the voice of God, whereby he calls upon that person to flee to him for succour. But if any extraordinary affliction occurs, especially when many persons are concerned in it, we may not only say that in this God speaks to us, but that the God of glory thundereth. This voice of the Lord is in power! This voice of the Lord is full of majesty! This demands the deepest attention of all to whom it comes. This loudly claims the most serious consideration, not only of those to whom it is peculiarly sent, but of all those that are round about them. This, like a voice from heaven, commands that all people should be afraid, should tremble at the presence of God! that everyone should feel and show that religious fear, that sacred awe, of the majesty of God, which is both the beginning and perfection of wisdom; that fear which should make them haste to do whatsoever the Lord their God commands them, and careful not to turn aside from it to the right hand or the left.

It is needless to use many words to prove this, after what has been proved already. For if there be no evil in any place which the Lord hath not done, and if he doth not willingly send evil on any place, but only to warn them to avoid greater evils; then it is plain, that, wherever any evil is, it is the trumpet of God blown in that place, to the end that the people may be so afraid as not to continue in anything that displeaseth him. Then it is plain, that, in every such merciful evil, God speaks to this effect: "O that there were such an heart in this people, that they would fear me, and keep my commandments always; that it might be well with them, and their children after them!"

Thirdly, What signs we have manifested of this wise and grateful fear, I am now to consider more at large.

First. Let us consider how God hath blown his trumpet in this place; and, Secondly, whether we have been duly afraid.

Let us consider, First, how God hath blown his trumpet among us of this place. And that it might never be forgotten, it were much to be wished, not only that parents would tell their children, to the intent that their posterity might know it, and the children that are yet unborn; but also, that it were written in our public register, for a standing memorial to all generations; that in the very week, and on the very day, when that diversion which hath had a considerable share in turning the Christian world upside down, was to have been brought in hither also, such a fire broke out, as neither we nor our fathers had seen in this place; a fire which soon spread itself not over one only, but over several dwelling-houses; which so went forth in the fury of its strength, that it soon prevailed over the weak resistance made against it, and left only so much standing of most of those buildings over which it prevailed, as might serve to quicken our remembrance of it. Let it be told, that those who came prepared for another prospect, were entertained with that of devouring flames! a prospect which continued during the whole time of the intended diversion, and which was but too plainly to be seen, together with the fiery pillars of smoke which increased its horror, from the very place which had been pitched upon for the scene of this diversion.

This is the bare matter of fact. And even from this, let any one, in whom is the spirit of a man, judge, whether the trumpet of God hath not sufficiently sounded among us of this place! And doth this trumpet give an uncertain sound? How would you have God speak more plainly? Do you desire that the Lord should also thunder out of heaven, and give hail-stones, and coals of fire? Nay, rather let us say, "It is enough! Speak no more, Lord; for thy servants hear! Those to whom thou hast most severely spoken are afraid, and do seek thee with their whole heart. They resolve not to prolong the time, but even now, by thy gracious assistance, to look well if there be any way of wickedness in them, and to turn their feet unto the way everlasting; to renounce everything that is evil in thy sight; yea, the sin that doth the most easily beset them; and to use their whole diligence for the time to come, to make their calling and election sure. Those to whom thou hast spoken by the misfortune of their neighbours are likewise afraid at thy tokens, and own that it was thy mere goodness, that they, too, and their substance, were not consumed. They likewise firmly purpose in themselves to make the true use of thy merciful warning; to labour more and more, day by day, to purge themselves from all sin, from every earthly affection, that they may be fit to stand in the presence of that God who is himself `a consuming fire!'"

But have we indeed been thus duly afraid? This is now to be considered. And because we cannot see the hearts of others, let us form our judgment from their actions, which will be best done by a plain relation, of which everyone that hears it can easily tell whether it be true or false.

In the day following that on which the voice of God had so dreadfully commanded us to exchange our mirth for sadness, the diversion which that had broken off was as eagerly begun anew. Crowds of people flocked out of that very town where the destruction had been wrought the day before, and rushed by the place of desolation to the place of entertainment! Here you might see the ground covered with heaps of ruins, mingled with yet unquenched fire; a little way off, as thickly covered with horses and men, pressing on to see another new sight. On this side were the mourners bewailing the loss of their goods, and the necessities of their families; on the other, the feasters delighting themselves with the sport they had gained. Surely, such a mixture of mirth and sadness, of feasting and mourning, of laughing and weeping, hath not been seen from the day in which our forefathers first came up into this land, until yesterday.

Such is the fear we have shown of the wrath of God! Thus have we been afraid after he had blown his trumpet among us! These are the signs we have given of our resolution to avoid whatever is displeasing in his sight! Hereby we have proved how we design to avoid that diversion in particular, which he hath given us so terrible a reason to believe is far from being pleasing to him! Not that this is the only reason we have to believe so. Besides this last melancholy argument against it, we have so many others, as any serious Christian would find it a hard task to answer. But I have only time to mention slightly a few of the consequences that were never yet separated from it.

Before I mention these, it is not necessary for me to say whether the diversion is sinful in itself, simply considered, or not. If anyone can find a race which has none of these consequences, let him go to it in the name of God. Only, till he finds one which does not give occasion to these or the like villanies, let him who nameth the name of Christ have a care of any way encouraging them.

One thing more I would have observed, that it is so far from being uncharitable to warn well-meaning people of the tendency of these diversions, that the more clearly and strongly anyone represents it to them, the more charitable to them he is. This may be made plain by a very easy comparison. You see the wine when it sparkles in the cup, and are going to drink of it. I tell you there is poison in it! and, therefore, beg you to throw it away. You answer, "The wine is harmless in itself." I reply, Perhaps it is so; but still if it be mixed with what is not harmless, no one in his senses, if he knows it at least, unless he could separate the good from the bad, will once think of drinking it. If you add, "It is not poison to me, though it be to others;" then I say, Throw it away for thy brother's sake, lest thou embolden him to drink also. Why should thy strength occasion thy weak brother to perish, for whom Christ died? Now let anyone judge which is the uncharitable person: He who pleads against the wine or the diversion, for his brother's sake; or he who pleads against the life of his brother, for the sake of the wine or the diversions.

All the doubt there can be is: "Is there poison in this diversion which is supposed to be harmless in itself?" To clear this up, let us, First, observe the notorious lying that is always joined with it; the various kinds of over-reaching and cheating; the horrid oaths and curses that constantly accompany it, wherewith the name of our Lord God, blessed for ever, is blasphemed. When or where was this diversion ever known without these dreadful consequences? Who was ever one day present at one of these entertainments, without being himself a witness to some of these? And surely these alone, had we no other ill consequences to charge upon this diversion, are enough, till a way is found to purge it from them, to make both God and all wise men to abhor it.

But, over and above these, we charge it, Secondly, with affording the fairest means to exercise and to increase covetousness. This it done by the occasion it gives to all who please to lay wagers with one another, which commonly brings so strong a desire of possessing what is another's, as will hardly cease when that one point is decided; but will be exceedingly likely to leave such a thirst in the mind, as not all the winning in the world will

satisfy. And what amends can the trifling sport of a thousand people make for one soul thus corrupted and ruined? Therefore, on this account too, till a way is known to secure all that frequent it from this danger, well may this sport itself be an abomination to Him who values one soul more than the whole world.

May we not well fear, that it is an abomination to the Lord because of a Third effect of it? because it is so apt to inflame those passions which he so earnestly commands us to quench? because many people are so heated on such occasions, as they never ought to be on any occasion? supposing it possible that a man might be angry, and not sin; yet hardly upon such occasions, or in such a degree as those who are angry upon such occasions commonly are. This consequence, too, let him separate from such a diversion, who would prevent its being displeasing to God.

Till this be done, let no one say, "What hurt is there in a horse-race?" But if any should still ask that question, we can answer yet more particularly, Are you a young person who desires to go to it? Then it is likely you go either to see or to be seen; to admire other fine sights, or to be admired yourself. The hurt of this is, it nourishes that friendship which is enmity with God. It strengthens those affections which are already too strong, -- the desire of the eye, and the pride of life. All such diversions as these are the noblest instruments the devil has to fill the mind with earthly, sensual, devilish passions; to make you of a light and trifling spirit; in a word, to make you a lover of pleasure more than a lover of God. Are you, who desire to go to it, advanced in years, and, therefore, less subject to such temptations? Take heed that your hearts deceive you not. But be it as you suppose, hath it not done you hurt enough, if it has hindered any of you from partaking of the blessed sacrament? if by preventing either that serious examination or that private devotion which you wisely use before you come to it, has occasioned your neglecting to come to this holy table; and so not only disobeying a plain command of God, but likewise losing all those inestimable advantages which are there reached out to them who obey him? Are you a rich man that desire to go? Then you have probably given something towards it. That is, you have thrown away that seed which might have borne fruit to eternity! You have thrown away a part of that talent, which had you rightly improved, you might have been an everlasting gainer by it! You have utterly lost what God himself, had you lent it to him, would richly have repaid you. For you have given to those who neither need, nor perhaps thank you for it; which if you had bestowed upon your helpless brethren, your blessed Redeemer would have esteemed it as done unto himself, and would have treated you accordingly at the great day. Are you a poor man, who have gone or given anything to this diversion? Then it has done you most hurt of all. It has made you throw away, for an idle sport abroad, what your wife and family wanted at home. If so, you have denied the faith, and are far worse than an infidel. But suppose it cost you no money, was it not hurt enough if it cost you any of your time? What had you to do to run after trifling diversions, when you ought to have been employed in honest labour? Surely if the rich think, God hath given them more than they want, (though it will be well if they do not one day think otherwise,) yet you have no temptation to think so. Sufficient for your day is the labour thereof.

I have but a few words to add, -- and those I speak not to them who are unwilling to hear, whose affections are set upon this world, and therefore their eyes are blinded by it; but I speak to them in whom is an understanding heart, and a discerning spirit; -- who, if they have formerly erred, are now resolved, by the grace of God, to return no more to the error of their ways; but for the time come, not only to avoid, but also earnestly to oppose, whatsoever is contrary to the will of God. To these I say, Are ye young? So much the rather scorn all employments that are useless, but much more if they are sinful; For you are they, whose wisdom and glory it is to remember your Creator in the days of your youth. Are you elder? So much the rather bestow all the time which you can spare from the necessary business of this life, in preparing yourself and those about you for their entrance into a better life. For your day is far spent, your night is at hand. Redeem therefore the little time you have left. Are you rich? Then you have particular reason to labour that you may be rich in good works: For you are they to whom much is given, not to throw away, but to use well and wisely; and of you much shall be required. Are ye poor? Then you have particular reason to work with your hands, that you may provide for your own household. Nor when you have done this have you done all; for then you are to labour that you may give to him that needeth, -- not to him that needeth diversions, but to him that needeth the necessaries of nature, -- that needeth clothes to cover him, food to support his life, or a house where to lay his head.

What remains, but that we labour, one and all, young and old, rich and poor, to wipe off the past scandal from our town and people? First, by opposing to the utmost, for the time to come, by word and deed, among our friends, and all we have to do with, this unhappy diversion, which has such terribly hurtful consequences; by doing all we possibly can to hinder its coming among us any more. And, Secondly, by showing all the mercy we can to our afflicted neighbours, according as God hath prospered us; and by this timely relief of them, laying up for ourselves a good foundation against the day of necessity. Thirdly, by our constant attendance on God's public service and blessed sacrament, and our watchful, charitable, and pious life. Thus giving the noblest proof before men and angels, that although, even after we were troubled, we went wrong, yet, upon more deeply considering how God hath blown his trumpet among us, we were afraid. We then shall say with an awakened heart, Behold, the Lord our God hath showed us his glory and his greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the midst of the fire. Now, therefore, while time is, let us put away far from us every accursed thing: "For if we hear this voice of the Lord our God any more, then we shall die."