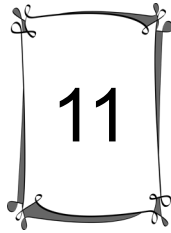


The background of the slide is a photograph of a scenic landscape. A paved road curves through a valley, bordered by a fence. To the left, a railway track with overhead power lines runs parallel to the road. The trees are in autumn, with yellow and orange leaves. In the distance, a large mountain peak is visible under a cloudy sky.

Sermons of Robert Murray M'Cheyne

**11. The Impressions of
Natural Men are Fading**

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of
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M'Cheyne



The Impressions of
Natural Men are Fading

“O Ephraim, what shall I do unto thee? O Judah, what shall I do unto thee? for your goodness is as a morning cloud, and as the early dew it goeth away” Hosea 6:4.

Doctrine — The impressions of natural men are fading.

In these words, God complains that He did not know what to do with Israel, their impressions were so fading. He says, verse 5, that he had hewed them by the prophets, and slain them by the words of His mouth: and their judgments were as the light that goeth forth. At one time He sent them severe awakening messages of coming wrath; then messages of love and grace, as bright, and as many as the beams of the sun. They were a little impressed by them; the cloud of distress began to gather on their brow — the dew of grief seemed to start on their cheek, but it soon dried up. It was like the morning cloud and early dew that goeth away. So it is with all the unconverted persons in this congregation, who will finally perish. God has sent them awakening messages — hewed them by the prophets — and slain them by the words of His mouth. He has sent them also sweet encouraging messages; His judgments have been like the light that goeth forth. They think, and are impressed for a little, but it soon dies away. “O Ephraim, what shall I do,” etc.

I. The fact that the impressions of natural men fade away.

1. *Prove the fact from Scripture.* — The Scriptures abound with examples of it.

First, Lot’s wife. She was a good deal awakened. The anxious faces of the two angelic men — their awful words, and merciful hands — made a deep impression on her. The anxiety of her husband, too, and his words to his sons-in-law, sunk into her heart. She fled with anxious steps; but as the morning brightened, her anxious thoughts began to wear away. She looked back, and became a pillar of salt.

Second, Israel at the Red Sea. When Israel had been led through the deep water in safety, and when they saw their enemies drowned, then they sang God’s praise. Their hearts were much affected by this deliverance. They sang, “The Lord is my strength and song, He also is become my salvation.” They sang his praises, but soon forgot His works. In three days they were murmuring

against God because of the bitter waters.

Third, Once a *young man* came running to Jesus, and he kneeled down, saying, “Good Master, what good thing shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?” A flash of conviction had passed over his conscience; he was now kneeling at the feet of Christ, but he never kneeled there any more; he went away sorrowful. His goodness was like the morning cloud.

Fourth, Once Paul preached before *Felix*, the Roman governor; and as he reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, Felix trembled. The preaching of the Gospel made the proud Roman tremble on his throne, but did it save his soul? Ah, no! “Go thy way for this time, when I have a more convenient season I will send for thee.” His goodness was like the morning cloud.

Fifth, Again Paul preached before *King Agrippa* and his beautiful Bernice, with all the captains and chief men of the city. The word troubled Agrippa’s heart — the tear started into his royal eye — for a moment he thought of leaving all for Christ. “Almost thou persuadest me to become a Christian.” But ah, His goodness was like the morning cloud and early dew. In all these the cloud gathered over them — for a moment the dew glistened in their eye, but it soon passed away, and left the hard rocky heart behind.

2. *Prove the fact from experience.* — Most men under a preached Gospel have their times of awakening.

If the impressions of natural men were permanent, then most would be saved, but we know that this is not the case. Few there be that find it. Perhaps I would not go far wrong if I were to say, that there may not have been ten grown up men in this congregation who have never experienced any concern for their soul, and yet I fear that there may be hundreds who will finally perish.

First, How many have had a time of awakening in childhood — when they were prayed over by a believing mother, or taught by a believing father, or taught by a faithful Sabbath-school teacher? How many have had deep impressions made at the Sabbath-school? But they have passed away like the morning cloud and the early dew.

Second, At their first communion, when they first spoke to a minister about their soul, and heard his piercing questions and

faithful warnings, when they got their token from his hand, when they first received the bread and wine, and sat at the table of the Lord — they trembled — the tear dimmed their eye — they went home to pray. But it soon wore away. The world — pleasure — cares — involved the mind, and all was gone like the cloud and the dew.

Third, A first sickness. How many, laid down on a bed of sickness, and made to look over the verge of the grave? They tremble as they think how unprepared they are to die; and now they begin to vow and resolve, if the Lord spare me, I will avoid evil companions, I will pray and read my Bible, etc.; but no sooner are they better than the resolutions are forgotten, like the cloud and the dew.

Fourth, First death in a family. What a deep impression this makes on a feeling heart. That lovely circle is broken round the fire, and never will be whole again. Now they begin to pray — to turn to Him that smites. Perhaps, kneeling beside the cold body, they vow no longer to go back to sin and folly. Or, following the body to the grave, while the big tear stands in the eye, they promise to bury all their sins and follies in the grave of their beloved one. But soon a change comes over them — the tears dry up — and the prayer is forgotten. The world takes its place again and reigns. Their goodness is as the morning cloud.

Fifth, In a time of awakening, many receive deep impressions. Some are alarmed to see others alarmed that are no worse than they. Many have their feelings stirred — their affections moved. Many are brought to desire conversion — to weep and to pray. Mr. Edwards mentions that there was scarcely an individual in the whole town unconcerned; there were tokens of God's presence in every house. So here; and yet, when the time is past, how soon they sink back into former indifference. Their goodness is as the morning cloud.

Dear friends, ye are my witnesses. I do not know, but I believe I am not wrong in stating, that by far the greater number of you have been under remorse at some time or another, and yet God and your own consciences know how fading these impressions have been. Just as the morning cloud passes off the mountain's brow, and the

dew is dried up from the rock, and leaves it a rock still, so your impressions have passed away, and left you a rocky heart still. So it is in those that perish. The way to hell is paved with good intentions, and hell is peopled with those who once wept and prayed for their souls. "O Ephraim, what shall I do unto thee?"

3. *Let us show the steps of impressions fading away.* — When a natural man is under concern, he begins to make a very diligent use of the means of grace.

First, Prayer. — When a man is under the fear of hell, he begins to pray, and often he has very melting and sweet affections in prayer. As long as his impressions last, he may be very constant in his duty. But will he always call upon God? When his concern ceases his praying in secret gradually ceases also. Not all at once, but by degrees he gives up secret prayer. Once he has been out in company, another time kept long at business, another time he is sleeping, and so by degrees he gives it up altogether. "O Ephraim," etc.

Second, Hearing the word. — When a man is first awakened, he comes well out to the preaching of the word — that it pleases God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. He is an arrested hearer; he drinks in the words of the minister; he is lively in his attendance on the word; if there be preaching in the week-evening, he puts by his work in order to be there. But when his concern wears away, he begins to weary first of the week-day service, then of the Sabbath, then perhaps he seeks a more careless ministry, where he may slumber on till death and judgment. Ah, this has been the course of thousands in this place. "O Ephraim," etc.

Third, Asking counsel of ministers. — When souls are under remorse, they often ask counsel of the under shepherds of Christ. "Going and weeping, they come to seek the Lord their God: they ask the way to Zion." They go to the watchman saying, Saw ye Him whom my soul loveth? This is one of the duties of the faithful pastor, for "the priest's lips should keep knowledge; and they should seek the law at His mouth; for He is the messenger of the Lord of hosts." But when concern dies away, this dies away. Many come once, that never come again. "O Ephraim," etc.

Fourth, Avoiding sin. — When a man is under convictions, he always avoids open sin — flees from it with all his might. He reforms his life; his soul is swept and garnished. But when his concern dies away, his lusts revive, and he goes back like a dog to his vomit, and like the sow that was washed to its wallowing in the mire. If there was any thing saving in the impressions of natural men, they would turn holier; but, on the contrary, they turn worse and worse. Seven devils enter into that man, and the latter end is worse than the beginning. “O Ephraim,” etc.

II. Reasons why the impressions of natural men die away.

1. They never are brought to feel truly lost.

The wounds of natural men are generally skin deep. Sometimes it is just a flash of terror that has alarmed them. Often it is the sense of some one great sin they have committed. Sometimes it is only sympathy with others, fleeing because others flee. They are often brought to say, I am a great sinner; I fear there is no mercy for me. Still they are not brought to feel *undone* — their mouth is not stopped — they do not cover the lip like the leper. They think a little prayer, sorrow, repentance, amendment, will do. If they could only change their way. They are not brought to see that all they do just signifies nothing towards justifying them. If they were brought to feel their utterly lost state, and their need of another’s righteousness, they never could rest in the world again.

2. They never saw the beauty of Christ.

A flash of terror may bring a man to his knees, but it will not bring him to Christ. Ah! No; love must draw. A natural man under concern, sees no beauty nor desirableness in Christ. He is not brought to look to Him whom he pierced, and to mourn. When once a man gets sight of the supreme excellence and sweetness of Christ — when he sees His fullness for pardon, peace, holiness — he will never draw back. He may be in distress and in darkness, but he will rise and go about the city to seek Him whom his soul loveth. The heart that has once seen Christ is smit with the love of Him, and can never rest nor take up with others short of Him.

3. They never had a heart-hatred of sin.

The impressions of natural men are generally of terror. They feel

the danger of sin — not the filthiness of it. They feel that God is just and true — that the law must be avenged — that the wrath of God will come. They see that there is hell in their sins; but they do not feel their sins to be a hell. They love sin; they have no change of nature. The Spirit of God does not dwell in them; and therefore the impression wears easily away, like as on sand. Those that are brought to Christ are brought to see the turpitude of sin. They cry not, Behold I am undone, but, behold I am vile. As long as sin is in their breast, they are kept fleeing to the cross of Christ.

4. *They have no promises to keep their impressions.* — Those who are in Christ have sweet promises. “I will put My fear in their hearts” Jer. 32:40. “Being confident that He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it” — Phil. 1:6. But natural men have no interest in these promises; and so, in time of temptation, their anxieties easily wear away.

III. Sadness of their case.

1. God mourns over their case.

“O Ephraim.” It must be a truly sad case that God mourns over. When Christ wept over Jerusalem, it showed it was in a desperate case, because that eye that wept saw plainly what was coming; and accordingly, in a few years, that lovely city was a ruined heap, and multitudes of those then living were in hell, and their children vagabonds. When Christ looked round on the Pharisees with anger, being grieved at the hardness of their hearts, it showed a desperate case; He would not grieve for nothing. So you may be sure the case of natural men who lose their impressions is very desperate, from these words of God, “O Ephraim.”

2. God has no new method of awakening.

God speaks as even at a loss what to do, to shew you that there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins. You have heard all the awakening truths in the Bible, and all the winning, comforting truths. You have been at Sinai, and at Gethsemane, and at Calvary: what more can I do unto thee? These have been pressed home upon you by Divine providences, in affliction, by the bed of death, and in a time of wide awakening. You have passed through a season when

it was tenfold more likely that you would be truly converted than at any other time. You are sunk back. Ah! the harvest is past, the summer is ended, and you are not saved. God has no more arrows in His quiver, no new arguments, no other hell, no other Christ.

3. *No good by your past impressions.*

When the cloud is dried up off the mountain's brow, and the dew off the rock, the mountain is as great as before, and the rock is as hard; but when convictions fade away from the heart of a natural man, they leave the mountain of his sins much greater, and his rocky heart much harder. It is less likely that that man will ever be saved. Just as iron is hardened by being melted and cooled again; just as a person recovering from a fever relapses, and is worse than before.

First, You are now older, and every day less likely to be saved; your heart gets used to its old ways of thinking and feeling; the old knee cannot easily learn to bend.

Second, You have offended the Spirit; you have missed your opportunity; you have vexed the Holy Spirit; convictions are not in your own power; the Spirit hath mercy on whom He will have mercy.

Third, You have got into the way of putting aside convictions. The eyelid naturally closes when any object is coming against it, so does the heart of a practised worldling close and shut out convictions.

Fourth, When you come to hell, you will wish you never had had convictions, they will make your punishment so much the greater.

I would now entreat all who have any impressions not to let them slip. It is a great mercy to live under a Gospel ministry; still greater to live in a time of revival; still greater to have God pouring the Spirit into your heart, awakening your soul. Do not neglect it, do not turn back — remember Lot's wife. Escape for your life; look not behind thee; tarry not in all the plain. Escape to the mountain lest thou be consumed.

