

Negligence of the Highest Order

a sermon in the series
Hebrews: An Epistle of Encouragement

A sermon delivered Sunday Evening, December 3, 2000
at Oak Grove Baptist Church, Paducah, Ky.

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Hebrews 2:1-4

Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip. For if the word spoken by angels was steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward; How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him; God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will?

I invite you to turn in your Bibles again tonight to the book of Hebrews chapter two, verses one through four. We are going to speak on a different theme tonight than we did this morning. Although the text may be the same, I assure you it will not be the same message. I want to speak of negligence of the highest order.

Tonight, millions upon millions of souls find their eternal lodging in hell. The flaming incinerator we call the Lake of Fire consumes those who have rebelled against God, their Creator. Tonight, if we were given ears to hear the wails of those people in torment, we would be forever haunted by their chilling cries, as they pray for relief from the burning flames that now devour them. Hell is not a pleasant place, saying the very least of course. It is not a place where people will go and forever party with their friends. The Bible calls it a very lonely place. Jesus described it as a place of outer darkness. Not only is it a dark place, a lonely place, but also it is a place where its occupants are forever haunted with the opportunities they squandered. Every hearing of the gospel, and their subsequent rejection of it, rises up and torments them. Every memory of a gospel confrontation they had and neglected in their former lives is perhaps their chief tormentor. Whether it is negligence, or out and out defiance, the outcome is the same----an eternity separated from God. This is the just reward of such rebellion.

In light of this torment, how could some of hell's residents have missed the truth after having heard the truth? How is it possible they could have ever ended in the place of final torment after knowing the truth that Jesus Christ died on a cross and rose from the dead? No doubt many of this number professed their allegiance to Christ. Tonight, they must wonder with excruciating thoughts, how did they end up there? Suffering even more, they must be, with the haunting memory of hearing the truth and thinking they believed it with all of their hearts. Now they are relegated to existence without end to examine their own hearts and the reason for their hearing

the truth, but neglecting the truth. With that in mind, I am sure the writer of this book, in particularly these four verses, thinks of the just reward of those who are now burning in the flames of God's wrath. He gives the living another warning, another caution, a warning against negligence of the highest order.

In the text the writer of the letter to the Hebrews is actually asking one very long question. He is asking, "What will you say if you do not heed what Jesus has said?" In the words of our text, "how will you escape?" Now, there are three reasons which the writer of Hebrews gives us for accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior. He gives us three very persuasive and overwhelming arguments as to why this very night, if you have not come to know Christ personally, experientially, you ought to.

The first reason is the superiority of Christ. We have already discovered this to be one of the major themes of this book. He once again addresses the superiority of Christ and says this is an overwhelming persuasive reason why you ought to be saved. Christ's superiority should humble your heart and cause you to acknowledge Christ Jesus as your Lord. Christ has preached to us and has given us the best testament or record of God. It is far superior to anything else we have.

In chapter one, the writer of Hebrews outlines that there are two types of messengers (called men and angels) before the coming of Messiah. I could understand that perhaps one of you might present a counterargument to the apostle's proposal. You might argue that the preaching of mere men is not a sufficient basis to dedicate our entire lives to God. You reason that the message of the prophets of old is nothing more than the fabrication of men's imagination. Besides, even if they had an insight to what true religion is, you argue that they are at best hypocritical. You state, "They preach to us about being righteous when they themselves at best were sinners as we are. They too were flawed men, marred men, men of inferior abilities like the rest of us. So why should we heed any prophet of the Old Testament?" Now, I may grant you that you may have a small point. I grant you this; the message of God came through marred vessels. His revelation came through cracked conduit. But be that as it may, it does not lessen the validity of their message because the Bible says that these men spoke not of their own authority, but by inspiration. The Bible says in 2 Peter 1:21, "For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost." Here, the testimony of God is that these prophets spoke what God breathed into them. They spoke God's words by His authority and power. It was not the invention of men's imagination. They were simply the conduits, the messengers of the message of God. I accept the infallibility and inspiration of the Bible, and so I accept the message of the prophets. Yet, I grant you the unreliability of men.

Perhaps you then would say angels couldn't be relied upon either. You resist and say you cannot give your life away to God based upon the word of some imaginary creature. Your argument is, "How is it that we know there are such creatures? For who can testify here tonight that they have seen an angel?" Well, I can't say that I have seen an angel. The truth is I have never seen an angel. I have never had a winged messenger from Heaven come and address me and give me some word from the Lord. Therefore, because of the lack of empirical data regarding angels there may be some who would doubt the existence of these holy creatures. But again, the testimony of

Scriptures gives credence to the existence of these heavenly beings. Yet, for the sake of argument, I will again concede this to you.

Therefore, the arguments of some who doubt the reliability of either men or angels, or both, may have some credibility. But when we come to the testimony of Jesus Christ all arguments contrary to His message will fail. They will miserably fail. Listen to me closely, the proclamation of Christ, is beyond refutation. It is beyond any logical ability to find flaw or reason to not believe it. In fact, all the evidence suggests that you can believe it, and you had better believe it! He was not just a man. This is the point the writer of Hebrews has made all through chapter one. He will again reassert that Jesus is not just another prophet, or another good teacher, or someone who is a wonderful moral guide. In verse five of chapter two through the completion of the second chapter the author of this epistle will present the same argument----Christ is superior because He is God in the flesh. He is the final authority by which we shall all be judged and by Whom we all shall be judged.

Now what is the argument of Christ Jesus that makes Him so superior, and why we should listen to Him? It is not only that He is Creator, or that He is God in the flesh. It is because He was resurrected from the dead. In chapter one and verse five the author pens, "For unto which of the angels said he at any time, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee? And again, I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a Son?" This in an Old Testament reference that predicted the resurrection of Christ. In Paul's sermon in the thirteenth chapter and verse thirty-three of Acts, he quotes this very same passage of Psalms two. Paul says, "God hath fulfilled the same unto us their children, in that he hath raised up Jesus again; as it is also written in the second psalm, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee." Paul interprets the resurrection of Christ as the fulfillment of the David's prophecy. The prophesy in the book of Psalms pointed to the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Dear friends, a miraculous pronouncement was made on that first resurrection morning. The pronouncement was that Jesus was who He said He was . . . the Son of God. The resurrection is very important for it seals the finality of what Jesus did on the cross and vindicates Christ. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the bedrock of what we believe. What about the cross you may ask? Let me say to you, I am not minimizing the cross, but without the resurrection, the cross is just another man being executed by the Roman government. The resurrection actually validates every sermon, teaching, and argument that Jesus ever presented.

What proofs do we have of the resurrection? What is it about Jesus' triumph over death and the grave that makes Him so superior? How can I know that His resurrection is legitimate? If I were to present the evidence of our Lord's resurrection before judge and jury the evidence would be overwhelming. There would be only one verdict that could be rendered. You be the judge. Ladies and gentleman, allow me to present just some of the irrefutable arguments and evidence proving the resurrection of Christ.

First, the Bible tells us that more than five hundred eyewitnesses saw Him. Many of these witnesses were examined and questioned later after the resurrection. Tonight, there is a summation of arguments being presented right now in Tallahassee, Florida, before the State Supreme Court. Neither the Bush camp or the Gore camp have five hundred witnesses that they can present, although I am sure they would like to.

It is overwhelming, to say the least, that five hundred people who lived at the time of Christ witnessed the resurrected Christ. Perhaps you would say some of the testimonies are clouded with self-motives that would impugn their testimony. But I ask you, all five hundred? I think not. The number is too great for this. Besides, some of the key witnesses of the resurrection literally gave their lives in support of their testimony that Jesus was alive. They also testified with their own blood that not only was He alive, but they had talked to Him, touched Him, walked with Him and saw Him ascend to the right hand of the Father.

I am sure most of you have heard of Chuck Colson. He was one of President Nixon's counselors and advisors. The infamy of the Watergate scandal became public, and he was imprisoned for his involvement in the cover up of Watergate. During the Watergate ordeal Colson became a Christian. He has since those days given testimony of his conversion with much fruit. After serving his prison term, he went back to prison to minister to inmates the love of God. Across America and foreign countries Chuck Colson has entered prisons proclaiming Christ. He is the founder of Prison Fellowship. Perhaps many of you listen to his daily five-minute radio commentaries called "Breaking Point."

Colson presents a compelling argument from human nature that gives evidence of the resurrection of Christ. His argument stems from the events of Watergate. Once, then presidential counselor, John Dean, walked into the Oval Office of the President of the United States and said, "Mr. President, there is a cancer growing in your administration," the Watergate cover-up began to unravel. Dean had talked to attorneys and the legal authorities. Colson said everyone who was close to Nixon began to hire their own attorney and gave depositions of what they knew. They all knew that once one man began to talk, they would all fall. So to protect themselves, they quickly began to share what they knew in order that it would go well for them should they have charges brought against them. Colson said when one individual began to tell all that he knew, everybody quit defending the President, and began to defend themselves.

Colson has reasoned from this lesson on human nature that the behavior of self-protection is a proof of the resurrection. If the resurrection were not true, then it would be reasonable to think that at least one disciple would have confessed such. The disciples of Christ were arrested by the civil authorities and threatened with their lives to confess that Jesus did not really rise from the dead. They were told that if they would not recant their testimony about the resurrection, they too would die. Not one disciple recanted. They would not change their story. Colson argues that if the apostles knew the resurrection was a hoax, meaning a farce that they made up in order to idolize their dead hero Jesus, it stands to reason they would have not died for a lie. If it were true that the resurrection of Christ was a deception and just one of them had cracked under

the pressure of the threat of death, then surely all would have confessed. This was the lesson of Watergate. But not one of the Lord's disciples recanted his testimony. Why? Because they had experienced the resurrected Savior! It was not a hoax.

Allow me to present another piece of evidence. If the Jewish authorities had the body of Jesus Christ, or if Christ had not risen, all they would have had to do was recover and present the body of the dead would-be Messiah? Why didn't they crush the infant sect by presenting the body of Christ? Having done so would have relegated the preaching of the apostles to the rubbish heap of history. But they presented no body. Why? Christ was alive, that is why. There is no record in the Scriptures or secular history that the Jewish or Roman authorities even looked for a body. Why did they not look for the key piece of evidence proving that Christ was dead and not alive? Because they knew themselves He had risen from the dead.

I say without fear of being contradicted, Jesus Christ is alive and He is who He says He is. He arose from the dead. This is the ultimate proof to the writer of Hebrews that Jesus is a better witness than you could ever receive. He is one who is far superior, and you had better listen to Him.

The second argument which Paul gives for believing in the Lord Jesus Christ is the severity of condemnation that will come to those who reject or neglect the messenger Jesus Christ. He says in verse two, "For if the word spoken by angels was steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward . . ." He is talking about the Old Testament. In the Old Testament the Bible gives us clear indication that angels helped to mediate or dispense the Old Testament. Some of those great prophets of God, who gave commandments, were given those commandments directly by angels. If any one of those commandments in the Old Testament were violated, then the violator received the correct punishment he or she deserved. The writer continues his argument in the next verse. Verse three he writes, "How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him?" In other words, if men who rejected angels got the deserved punishment, how much more will any who reject Christ receive a severer punishment?

Let me give you an example of some of the punishments that were given for violating some Old Testament laws. One of the laws in the Old Testament was the prohibition against picking up sticks on the Sabbath. If you picked up sticks on the Sabbath you were to be not jailed, not fined, not placed under house-arrest for seven days, you were to be stoned. Now let me make sure you understand the crime; the crime was picking up sticks on the Sabbath. If you picked up sticks on the Sabbath, and it was discovered that you had done so, the trial didn't take very long. The witnesses were brought forth and you were allowed to answer your accusers. If they found you guilty, you were immediately taken outside the city limits, and you were stoned. End of case.

That law came through angels. For picking up sticks you received the death penalty, which the writer of Hebrews says was a just reward. In other words, a punishment due to the crime. You may think this is quite severe and it is severe, but God is a Holy God, and His law can't be tam-

pered with. How much more severe “if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord?” If we reject the sovereign God who issued His New Covenant, His New Testament, to us, how much more the penalty shall be? It will not be by stoning, it will be by destruction in Hell, forever and forever.

This severity of just punishment is found in our Lord’s words in the Gospel of Luke chapter twelve. Hell is a place where everyone is not punished the same. Yes, all suffer the flames of Hell. All experience pain, but not everybody receives the same degree of punishment. Look at verse forty-seven and forty-eight, “And that servant, which knew his lord’s will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more.” Now these are not the words of just anybody, it is Jesus Christ teaching us about the severity of hell.

Jesus has uttered some things here that are terribly mind-boggling. He has in essence said that the religious crowd will find hell much, much more severe than those who were not religious. Yes, it is sadly true; religious people die and go to hell. The only thing that can keep a religious person out of hell is Jesus. Religions save no one, only Christ saves!

I can be theologically correct about the Christian faith and still go to hell. I can be perfect in my execution of all the finer details of soteriology, which are the doctrines of salvation, and still be unconverted. My eschatology (prophecy of the last days) can be flawless while my pneumatology (the doctrine of the Holy Spirit) be irrefutable and still not know God. I can be skilled in the doctrines of hamartiology (the doctrine of sin) and anthropology, (the doctrine of man) and be unfamiliar with the Savior. All these wonderful things that fascinate preachers and theologians for hours will not merit me one blessed day in heaven. Although I may have every “i” dotted and every “t” crossed, without Christ I perish like any demon in hell. Jesus is emphatic here, dear friend; the religious will receive many more stripes than the man who didn’t know the truth. The unenlightened may have been a murderer, he might have been a plunderer of homes, or a rapist, or a serial killer, but if he did not know the truth, his damnation will not be as severe as the man who had more light and truth. Now do not misunderstand. I am not saying that they, which lack knowledge, will have it easy in hell. A thousand no’s and by no means! But do not miss what the blessed Master says. Jesus Christ assigns guilt here to the degree of knowledge you have of this superior messenger, Himself. This is exactly what the our text in Hebrews is saying.

Tonight, we look into many prison cells, and we look upon them that are confined there, and we call them criminals of our society. Outside the confines of bars and armed guards are many who enjoy the finest foods, and the most excellent dwelling places, and have the finest of reputations, and yet their hearts are more full of hell then some men behind bars. If I am describing you, I am describing a man or woman that has no liberty. You are in bondage tonight. If you do not know Christ personally, experientially, some prisoners are freer than you are right here in that church pew. How can that be? Because God deems negligence of the truth of God as one of the highest

crimes that can be committed against Him. Therefore, He will deal with the criminally negligent far more severely than some hardened criminal who has never heard the truth.

I must continue since I know I have to prove this to you. Hell will be more severe to him who has heard over and over the gospel message than to him who has never heard. Tonight, there is some poor native in some far dark jungle who will die without hearing about Jesus. He will leave this world and enter the afterlife without having heard how he could have escaped what he is now enduring. He was never told of the great escape from eternal doom which is Christ the Lord. Some may argue that he will not go to regions of the damned. But such is fanciful wishing. Yes, the man goes to hell, and not only will he go, but it will be his just desert. But hear me you deceived man, God's wrath will be much more severe for you who have heard and have neglected the gospel message that Jesus died for sin and rose from the dead. He is the living God, and the returning judge of all the living and the dead. If you reject this warning, hell's flames will singe much more for you than that native who never heard. God considers the neglect of His truth the most hideous crime against His character.

I am not arguing that ignorance is bliss. I am not advocating that anyone will be able to plead an excuse before Him who sits on the throne of heaven. Is it not true that you have a sense of "fairness" or "rightness" that you will not severely condemn anyone if you think they have no knowledge of the law which they have broken? Isn't it true if your son or daughter has done something that you do not like and they say to you that they were not aware that this would displease you, that you will be less harsh with them than if they had known? Certainly their actions still displeased you, but the way you respond to them will be much less rigorous.

Now let me ask you, how do you respond after you have told the child what you expected, and they then violate your instruction? Isn't it true that a court is more likely to be lenient with the first offense than with the third or fourth offense?

The greatest guilt that one can carry into eternity is to know God's truth and not allow that truth to change them. Why will you not yield to the truth? Why must you add to your guilt the guilt of contempt for the precious blood that can remove your sin and present you faultless before the throne? In the final analysis, our judgment will be on how we dealt with Christ. Did we believe, submit, and obey? Or did we reject Him?

Let me move to the third and final reason why Jesus needs to be the preeminent one in your life, and why you need to go to Him this very evening confessing your sins. The third reason is the signs of confirmation that we were given after His preaching, after His death, and after His resurrection. Listen to verses three and four, "and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him; God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will?" Not only did Jesus preach it, but those who were with Him, namely His apostles and His prophets, they also confirmed His message. They preached that He rose from the dead; they preached that He was alive. They were eyewitnesses and they have told us the gospel is true.

I told you that I am confident that Paul wrote the book of Hebrews. But I told you that there was one verse that gives me any question that maybe Paul did not write it. It is this third verse. Whoever the author is says it was confirmed to him also by those who heard Christ Jesus. It would appear that the writer of the book of Hebrews found out about Jesus by someone preaching to him. Paul received the message about Jesus by Christ Jesus. Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus. But Paul could be meaning that he had heard the message perhaps from someone like Stephen in his proclamation in Acts chapter seven. He had heard the preaching of the apostles and others, and it is this that he is referring to.

This is irrelevant to what I want to say tonight, except that there was a great confirmation. Notice verse four, God Himself also confirmed the witness of Christ and the apostles by doing what? By giving witness through signs, wonders, various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit. "According to his own will," the author adds, meaning that God intervened in the preaching of those early apostles by doing signs and wonders and superceding the laws of nature. God intervened personally by doing the miraculous as a testament that Jesus was who He said He was. Think of the testimony of the book of Acts where over and over again we see physician Luke recording those wondrous displays of God's testimony that there is salvation in no other but Christ. God gave witness to the apostles' preaching, granting through their hands signs and wonders. God evidenced Himself and bore witness to the message of Jesus, His death, burial, resurrection, by confirming the message of salvation with the miraculous.

Although we are not living in times where signs and wonders are overly abundant, I don't believe that God has changed His modus operandi. I do not hold to the theory that cessationists subscribe to. They maintain that what God did back then, He doesn't do today. I have no scriptural proof of such a theory. We might look at the history of the church these last two thousand years and see a diminishing of the signs of miracles and wonders. But that does not prove that God can't or doesn't confirm the preaching of the gospel with signs and wonders today. I believe before God's church goes out of this world, you are going to see a resurgence of the miraculous. God once again will do with the last generation as He did with the first generation. He today bears testimony to His Son's death, burial, and resurrection. He confirms His Son's identity by the person of the Holy Spirit. There is nothing in the Bible that even remotely suggests that God's power has been diminished or that present generations do not need confirmation of the gospel.

I want to bring this to finality this evening. The whole reason for these four verses in Hebrews chapter two is to warn us against one of the greatest of all sins . . . negligence of the gospel. What does it mean to be negligent of the gospel? It means to take it lightly, to consider it of some importance, but not enough to devote your life to it. It means to treat it lightly. It does not mean to diminish its validity, or to argue that it doesn't have merit, but to simply ignore its merit. It means to live as if it has no merit. Many others have done this before you who are guilty of this spiritual criminal negligence.

The parable found in Luke chapter fourteen verse sixteen through verse twenty-four is an illustration of such neglect. Jesus is giving us a story, an illustration of what God's Kingdom is like, in

particular, how God extends invitations to be a part of his kingdom. So, he tells about the master of a kingdom who gives a great feast. The king invites several people to come to this supper. In verse eighteen we read, "And they all with one consent began to make excuse. The first said unto him, I have bought a piece of ground, and I must needs go and see it: I pray thee have me excused." This individual said that matters of real estate and finance concerned him more than the king's dinner invitation. The invitation is a symbol of God's invitation to be a part of Christ and the salvation that Christ has purchased for us. So, Christ is illustrating that wealth for some is more important than being aligned with Christ.

In verse nineteen another invited guest gave a different excuse. "And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them: I pray thee have me excused." A farmer was invited who considered his agriculture business far more important than the claims of Christ.

Yet another guest made excuse and said in verse twenty, "I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come." Being married, I might understand this excuse better than the other two. Yet, this man offered his duty to his wife as an excuse for his negligence of the gospel, which is unreasonable as the other two excuses.

Listen to the king's response to his invitations being declined. "So that servant came, and shewed his lord these things. Then the master of the house being angry said to his servant, Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind . . . For I say unto you, That none of those men which were bidden shall taste of my supper." Pay very close attention to what Jesus is saying. Some of the most unqualified and illegitimate shall be in the kingdom of God. Those who were the most prominent and the most religious obviously appeared to others to be acceptable to God. You look at their lives and you say if anybody is going to Heaven, it will be them. They appear faithful to their church. They seem to be respectable and moral. But not all that glitters like gold is gold. Outward appearance is not the final determination. The final determination is do you know Christ? And if you know Christ, you heed His words. You will not reject His invitation to be involved in His life and plans.

I am pleading with you tonight to beware of that common deception that is prevalent in all of our churches. The deception that says morals and good deeds is what it means to be a Christian. God has never saved a person whose religion so impressed Him to do so!

Perhaps someone is hearing me and thinks that I am a relic from the past. Here you find a man who preaches hell, fire, and brimstone. You thought such went out with the Victorian age. You think I am not in tune with modern times, that I am not politically correct. I may be out of step. I may not be in sync with modern theology and Christendom, but I want you to know, at the expense of my reputation, that Christ is the heart and bedrock of what it means to be saved. If you don't have His life in your life, you don't have Christianity. The only way to get His life into your life is that He chooses to step into your life and make the difference. He will always do that in accordance to the preaching of His gospel which is His word. Everyone under the sound of my preaching tonight, (not because it is me preaching but because it is His word that I proclaim), has

the opportunity of hearing Christ say to you, "Come to My supper, come unto Me you who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Come!" "The Spirit and the Bride say come." "Let him that is thirsty come and drink."

What will you do? Will you make excuses of negligence? Criminal negligence is to insult the Creator by offering up some petty excuse as to why you cannot come and accept His free gift of eternal life. Your business, your home, your children, what are they compared to Him? Whatever reason you offer, it is unacceptable.

William Perry was an English explorer, who wanted to discover the North Pole. One night he got his explorers together and said they needed to go farther North, so they looked at the starry constellation above and mapped the way they thought they should go. They walked and walked in the frigid cold hour after hour. They looked again at the same constellation and determined that they were farther South now than they were before. They finally discovered they had been walking on an ice flow that had drifted South quicker than they were able to walk towards the north.

I wonder how many of you are walking briskly and thinking that you are on your way to the Kingdom of God? The truth is you are going farther South all the time. Religion will not carry you, but Christ can. His arms are open; will you not rest in them tonight? Would you not run and leap into those arms, and say, "Carry me, sweet Jesus, Lord of Refuge, Prince of Peace." Would you here, tonight, claim Christ to be your righteousness? Throw away your own righteousness as filthy rags and put on His cloak of righteousness. Clothe yourself with His salvation. Salvation is not your own, it is His work. By His labor are you saved. You did not die and you cannot say, "It is finished." But He did; He did it all. Yield to that.

O dear friend, Heaven forbid, and would that angels be dispatched from Heaven now to do all that they can to persuade you to no longer neglect so great a salvation. But if you do, the prospect is so frightening, I don't know how to speak it. I don't now know how to tell you. May God have mercy upon you; that is all I know to say. Amen.