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*“Search the Scriptures” John 5:39*

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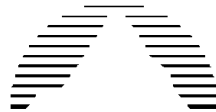
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*Studies in the Scriptures* appeared without interruption from 1922 to 1953, each issue including six to eight articles addressing a different topic in a series. While virtually unknown to the Christian world when he died, his writings continue to grow in their influence upon God's people around the world, through their clarity, careful exposition, and Christ-centeredness.

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## MISSING GOD'S BEST

There are many real Christians who live more under God's frowns than His smiles, who experience more of His chastening rod than His special favours, who are better acquainted with inward disquietude than that peace which "passeth all understanding" (Phi 4:7). Now, that ought not to be, and when it is so with any of us, the fault is entirely our own. However unpalatable that may be, it is the truth. Scripture is too plain on this point for any misunderstanding. "He doth not afflict willingly" (Lam 3:33). No, God afflicts, because we give him occasion to. Though we be His dear children, He will not wink at our waywardness, but will maintain the honour of His House and enforce the principles of His righteous government. If we be refractory, He will visit our iniquity with stripes (Psa 89:32). If we follow a course of self-will, and self-pleasing, then we shall be made to discover "the way of transgressors is hard" (Pro 13:15).

What has just been pointed out is neither "strange doctrine" nor "legalistic" teaching. Almost a century ago, the editors of "The Gospel Standard" in their "Address to the Reader" said: "We cannot, except to our own cost, set aside Scripture precepts and Scripture practice because our corrupt nature withstands them. God's ways may not please our carnal mind, but He will not alter them for that reason. If we walk contrary to Him, He will walk contrary to us; and if we are disobedient, we shall reap its bitter fruits. If sin be at one end of the chain, sorrow will surely be at the other. If we sow to the flesh, we shall most certainly of the flesh reap corruption; but if we sow to the spirit, we shall of the spirit reap life everlasting." Note well those words. "We cannot, except to our own cost, set aside Scripture precepts and Scripture practice"—and that "cost" is *missing* God's best for us. But let us appeal again to His own Word.

In our last, we quoted that blessed, yet conditional, promise: "For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to shew himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him" (2Ch 16:9). But let us note how solemnly the same verse ends: "Herein thou hast done foolishly: *therefore* from henceforth thou shalt have wars." Poor Asa's heart had *not* been "perfect toward" the LORD, and therefore, he missed His best. That Asa was a pious man is clear from 2 Chronicles 14:2, where we are told that he "did that which was good and right in the eyes of the LORD his God." Alas, like many, another whose early life promised well, it expired amid the shadows. And wherein was it that he failed so lamentably in the instance referred to above? 2 Chronicles 16:1-8 tells us: It was because at a crisis, he turned unto the arm of flesh, instead of relying upon the Lord his God—with which should be compared the final reference to him: "Yet in his disease he sought not to the LORD, but to the physicians" (2Ch 16:12).

"I am the LORD thy God, which brought thee out of the land of Egypt: open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it [i.e. thou shalt enjoy My best]. But my people would not hearken to my voice; and Israel would none of me. So I gave them up unto their own hearts' lust: and they walked in their own counsels" (Psa 81:10-12). And were they not greatly the losers by it? Observe what follows: "Oh that my people *had* hearkened unto me, and Israel had walked in my ways! *I should* soon have subdued their enemies, and turned my hand against their adversaries...*He should* have fed them also with the finest of the wheat: and with honey out of the rock should I have satisfied thee" (Psa 81:13-16). What could be clearer than that? By their waywardness and disobedient walk, they *forfeited* those blessings and missed God's best! Instead of subduing their enemies, He allowed those enemies to overcome them; instead of providing abundant harvests, He sent famines; instead of giving them pastors after His own heart, He suffered false preachers to deceive them.

"O that thou hadst hearkened to my commandments! then had thy peace been as a river, and thy righteousness as the waves of the sea" (Isa 48:18). That also has reference to a people who had *missed* God's best. Alas, of how many of the saints is that Divine lament true! It is much to be feared that this is the case with the majority of God's children today. They have been regenerated, and their lives are generally speaking ordered by the Word—otherwise, they would not be Christians at all—yet there is something in their lives which *hinders* the Lord from showing Himself strong in their behalf and making them prosper both spiritually and temporally. What that something is, is plainly intimated in the above words: It is a spirit of disobedience, a failing to hearken to God's commandments, a falling short of walking in the full light which He has vouchsafed them. Privileges entail obligations: God requires much more from you today than He did ten years ago!—from those who enjoy an edifying ministry, than from those who do not (Luk 12:48).

Yes, the reason why the peace of those referred to in Isaiah 48:18 was *not* “as a river” and their “righteousness as the waves of the sea” was because they had failed to fully respond to the light God had granted them. We say “fully,” for one who rejects His light in total is unregenerate. It is a blessed thing, an unspeakable privilege, to be favoured with light from God, especially in a day when “the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people” (Isa 60:2)—which has been the case of Christendom the last few decades. The great majority of God’s children “hath followed” the LORD “fully” (Num 14:24) *at first*, responding to the Spirit’s illumination and adjusting their lives to the teachings of God’s servants. And then a duty is shown them, or a denying of self is set before them which is more than flesh and blood can tolerate, and they *balk*, excusing themselves under one plea or another. Thereby, they choke the channel of blessing, grieve the Spirit, miss God’s best—and if impenitent, have to smart under increasingly heavy chastisements.

“No good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly” (Psa 84:11): *That* is to enter into and *enjoy* God’s best. Now set over against that, “Your iniquities have turned away these things, and your sins have withholden good things from you” (Jer 5:24): *That* is to forfeit and *miss* God’s best. They who follow the devices of their own hearts, fall in with the customs of the world, or yield to the lusts of the flesh, not only deprive themselves of those blessings which are the portion of the obedient, but suffer needless adversities and painful afflictions from a faithful Father—as was clearly evidenced in the lives of Jacob and David. So too, later, in the history of that remnant of Israel who returned from Babylon to Palestine, unto whom God said, “Ye looked for much, and, lo, it came to little; and when ye brought it home, I did blow upon it. Why? saith the LORD of hosts. *Because of* mine house that is waste, and ye run every man unto his own house [occupied with selfish interests rather than God’s glory]. *Therefore* the heaven over you is stayed from dew, and the earth is stayed from her fruit” (Hag 1:9-10)—which, in New Testament language, means fresh supplies of the Spirit are withheld, and ye are fruitless branches of the Vine.

The point at which most Christians fail is not in committing transgressions—“For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not” (Ecc 7:20)—but in *failing to put things right!* It is not so much the commission of sin, but sins unmourned for and unconfessed, which choke the channel of blessing. “He that covereth his sins shall not prosper” no matter how well versed he be in the Truth or admired by his fellows; for there is a worm eating at the root of his spiritual life. “But whoso confesseth and forsaketh them [however heinous or numerous] shall have mercy” (Pro 28:13). See to it, my reader, that you make conscience of what men term “little sins” and excuse them not. See to it that you keep short accounts with God, penitently owning unto Him every known fault, if you would not miss His best. Acknowledge your transgressions, even though you have done so a thousand times previously. Avail yourself daily of the Fountain “opened...for sin and for uncleanness” (Zec 13:1).

## THE PRAYERS OF THE APOSTLES

### 26. Ephesians 3:14-21, Part 2

“For this cause I bow my knees” (Eph 3:14): Because God has dealt so wondrously and bestowed upon you such favours (as those described in Eph 2:1 to 3:12), therefore, I seek from Him further blessings on your behalf; yea, in view of those marvellous exercises of Divine grace and power, my heart is drawn out to ask for the highest possible benefits. “Unto the Father of our [not “the”] Lord Jesus Christ”—that is, I supplicate *our* gracious Father, and He is such, because He is the covenant-God of our Head, “of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named” (Eph 3:15). Since all things have been gathered together in one in Christ, “both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him” (Eph 1:10), the entire family receives its name from Him. Since Christ has been made the Head of all—of the celestial hierarchies, as well as of the Church (Eph 1:21-23; Col 2:10)—He has a proprietary right in the whole community: They all own Him, and He owns them all. Such is our understanding of the 15<sup>th</sup> verse.

Third, *its appeal*: “That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be...” etc. (Eph 3:16). That states the rule by which the Lord is entreated to confer His favours: On the one hand, not according to the faith or faithfulness of His people; nor on the other, according to their spiritual indigence and need—but rather, and better, according to His own glorious riches. Indirectly, it is indeed an admission of our poverty and unworthiness, but directly, it is faith eyeing the fulness and sufficiency of the Lord of glory. “It is not His power to the exclusion of His mercy, nor mercy to the exclusion of His power, but it is everything in God which renders Him glorious—the proper object of adoration. The apostle prays that God would deal with His people according to the plenitude of grace and power, which constitutes His glory and makes Him to His creatures the source of all good” (Charles Hodge, 1797-1878). But the “riches of his glory” includes more than His grace and power, comprehending “everything in God which renders Him glorious.” It was an appeal to His goodness, munificence, His infinite resources, the plenitude of His perfections.

“That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory” (Eph 3:16). To aid our feeble understandings, the Spirit here, as so frequently, speaks after the manner of men: The things which they count of highest value are termed their “riches.” Now, elevate that concept to a vastly superior plane. The Lord, too, has *His* “riches,” and as our thoughts can rise no higher than that which is super-eminent or glorious, they are styled, “the riches of his glory.” They are not only riches of glory or glorious riches, “but his riches in glory” too (Phi 4:19); that is, celestial riches, those which are His on high—an earnest or foretaste of which the saints are granted even in this life. The reference is to Christ’s abundant fulness, as He is “the heir of all things” (Heb 1:2). As such, He is possessed of inexhaustible resources for the supplying of our every need. There is in Him amplitude and plenitude of glory, and “according to” the same, we should ask Him to minister unto us.

Glory is something more than excellency: It is excellence made manifest and brought into high esteem. It is the perfection of the Divine character displayed and made real and ineffable unto our hearts. The wondrous and blessed thing is that He has joined His glory with the good of His people. The two things are inseparably connected together—they glorying in Him, He being glorified in them. It is, therefore, our happy privilege to prefer our requests with this fact before us, and ask Him to bestow His favours upon us accordingly. Thus it was here. The apostle was about to rise to the very pinnacle of petitionary prayer, seeking for Christians the most glorious things they could be granted, and he made that his *plea*—will it not be for Thy glory to grant such requests and vouchsafe such blessings! If we be straitened, it is not in the Lord, but in ourselves, and the fault is entirely our own. We should eye by faith the fulness of the Divine perfections, for the riches of the God-man Mediator are as unlimited as the illimitable glory of the Divine nature itself.

Fourth, *its petitions*. Before turning to them in detail, let us proffer a few general remarks thereon. The requests which the apostle was about to make are prefaced by the explanatory words, “For this cause.” He was on the point of asking that they should be strengthened with might by the Spirit in the inner man, and that Christ might dwell in their hearts by faith, from which petitions it might be inferred that their condition was a parlous one, or at any rate, that they were in a weak and low case. Yet, there is nothing whatever in the whole of the context which lends colour to that idea. No, rather was it because of the wondrous things which God had already done for them that Paul was encouraged to ask Him that these saints might be

granted enlarged apprehensions and enjoyments of His favours. So far from settling on our leas when the Lord has bestowed signal blessings upon us, that should stimulate us to desire and seek further gifts at His hand. *That* is the practical lesson for us to learn from the “For this cause,” and the petitions which follow it.

But that is not all there is for us in the particular detail to which we have just directed attention. There is something else in it which we need to take to heart—namely, that those who have received the highest favours from God are in real need of prayer, of themselves seeking unto the mercy-seat. Why so? That they may be enabled to make a good use of what has been conferred upon them and walk worthy of the same. “For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required” (Luk 12:48), and only fresh supplies of Divine grace can enable us to meet that requirement; and such supplies must be earnestly and daily sought by us. Privileges entail obligations, and spiritual obligations cannot be discharged in our own strength. God had richly blessed the Ephesians, and for that cause or reason, the apostle prayed for them to be strengthened with might by Christ’s Spirit in the inner man, that they might truly appreciate those blessings and express their gratitude in lives which would redound to the glory of the Giver of them.

We should also ponder these petitions in the light of how God is here addressed and the plea made to Him. No doubt, the reader, like the writer, has heard prayers in which the body of them bore little or no relation to their opening language: Prayers that began by addressing the Deity in high-sounding names, but which had no connection with or appropriateness unto the petitions that followed. Very different are the prayers of Scripture. There, we find the introductory ascriptions are most suited to what follows, that the particular character in which God is addressed bears an intimate respect unto the requests made to Him. For example, when Jacob was in deadly fear of Esau, he supplicated the Lord thus: “O God of my father Abraham, and God of my father Isaac, the LORD which saidst unto me, Return unto *thy country*... Deliver me, I pray thee, from the hand of my brother” (Gen 32:9-11). It was unto his fathers (and their seed) that God had promised to give Canaan! So also when the souls under the altar begged God to avenge their blood, they addressed Him as, “O Lord, holy and true” (Rev 6:10).

In the prayer before us, the address is made unto “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,” and what follows is an appeal unto His fatherly affections and solicitude. He has told us that, “Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear him” (Psa 103:13). What freedom of heart should the realisation of that blessed fact give us when we approach unto the throne of grace! The Redeemer, too, has assured us, “If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?” (Mat 7:11)! It is to no unwilling Bestower the saint approaches, whose reluctance to communicate has to be overcome by his entreaties, but to a loving Father who is more ready to give than we are to ask. How that ought to melt and encourage us! Because He is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, He is our Father, too, as and such more ready to impart good things to us than the tenderest earthly parent can be to his little ones. It was *thus* the apostle here viewed Him, and he framed his requests accordingly.

Nor should we overlook the clause that immediately follows: “Of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named” (Eph 3:15). It seems to us that the apostle turned that also into a plea. It was as though he said: “O blessed Lord, many of Thy dear children are now in Thine immediate presence on high, but there are some of Thy loved ones still in the place of need here below. Those with Thee above are enjoying the beatific vision. Let not all blessedness be confined unto them, but grant that a portion at least of the same—yea, a goodly portion—be given to those who are yet in this howling wilderness.” So should we make practical use of, turning into a supplicatory *plea*, every doctrinal statement of the epistles. “That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory” (Eph 3:16). Paul’s gaze was directed upward to a sphere of ineffable purity and felicity, and to the One who occupied the central place in it. It was that which moved him to seek for no ordinary favours, but for blessings which were accordant to and commensurate with the infinite riches of His glory.

The blessings which Paul here sought for the saints stand out in glaring contrast from the mean and meager petitions which many believers are wont to make today. The great majority of professing Christians seem to regard the substance and sum of salvation as consisting in a deliverance from the penalty of their sins and an assurance that they will spend eternity in Heaven. They appear to have little or no concept of the glorious privileges which are theirs in this present interval: Their being mightily energized by the indwelling Holy Spirit, their access to and enjoyment of Christ within the veil, their growing up into Him in all things, their being fulfilled with all the fulness of God. Those petitions of Paul present possibilities in the Christian life that few contemplate, and fewer still strive after. A knowledge of sins forgiven is indeed

an inestimable boon, yet that stands at the very outset of Christian experience, and is but an earnest of far greater and grander blessings, which the Father will bestow upon us if we follow on to know Him and seek to lay hold of that for which we were laid hold of by Christ Jesus, reaching forward unto those things which are before (Phi 3:12-14).

We say again, if we be straitened, it is in ourselves and not in the Lord, and the fault is entirely ours. He has set before us a rich feast in the Gospel: "A feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined" (Isa 25:6). No niggard Host is our God, nor would He have us partake sparingly of His bounties: "Eat, O friends; drink, yea, drink *abundantly*, O beloved" (Song 5:1) is the call of His largess unto us. "Open thy mouth *wide*" is His invitation, "and I will fill it" (Psa 81:10) is His promise. Then how deeply ashamed of ourselves should we be if we have occasion to cry, "My leanness, my leanness, woe unto me!" (Isa 24:16). Such "leanness" brings no honour unto Him. Such "leanness" reveals how far below our privileges we are living. Such "leanness" is the consequence of failing to avail ourselves of the rich provisions God has made for us, and such failure is to be traced back unto the *defectiveness* of our prayer-lives: "Ye have not, because ye ask not" (Jam 4:2)!

Let it be carefully observed that the apostle did not preface his petitions by saying, "O God, if it can be possible, bestow these glorious spiritual riches upon Thy people." No, indeed, he would not so insult the One who has told us, "He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also *freely* give us *all* things?" (Rom 8:32)—yes, "freely," not grudgingly. Not once in their prayers for the saints do we find any of the apostles qualifying their petitions with "*if* it be Thy will." It is true that the Redeemer prayed in Gethsemane, "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Mat 26:39), but *He* was there in a situation which *we* can never occupy, and never once did He teach His disciples to pray thus: Contrast Matthew 7:7, John 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:23; and contrast, too, His own "Father, I will" of John 17:24! True, our wills must be subordinated to the Divine, yet it is both our privilege and duty to be "understanding what the will of the Lord *is*" (Eph 5:17).

"And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us" (1Jo 5:14). That does not refer to His eternal decree or secret will, which concerns no part of our responsibility, but His *revealed will*, as made known to us in His Word. In the Word, God has plainly declared that He is ready to bestow, in response to the prayer of faith, whatever will be for His glory and for our good. Nor has He left undefined what is for His glory and our good: The recorded prayers of the apostles plainly reveal the same unto us. We need, therefore, have no hesitation whatever in praying that we may be strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in our hearts by faith, that we may be filled with all the fulness of God—for it is God's revealed will that we *should* ask for those very things, and it is nothing but a false or mistaken humility for us to add to His words, "if it be Thy will." It *is* God's will, or the apostle would not have been moved by the Holy Spirit to make such requests and then place them on record for our guidance.

In view of such passages as Psalm 81:10, Song of Solomon 5:1, Romans 8:32, etc., it is truly pitiful to hear so many professing Christians praying as though God were either a "hard Master" or One whose riches were very limited. He has expressly bidden them, "covet earnestly the best gifts" (1Co 12:31), yet how few of them do so. How little holy ambition have they to enter into God's best for them, to grow in grace, to be fruitful branches of the Vine, to show forth His praises. How little of His truth, His holiness, His grace seems to satisfy them. They exist, rather than live; paddle in the ocean of His love, rather than swim in it. Their desires are weak, their expectations small, their aspirations almost nil. To "covet earnestly the best gifts" is to long intensely for them, with the implications of a corresponding zealous effort to obtain those Divine bestowments, which will make for increased piety and usefulness; and this, not only for ourselves, but for our fellow-saints too. That is exactly what the apostle was doing here: Coveting earnestly the best gifts for the Ephesians.

"That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man" (Eph 3:16). That each was the first thing which Paul requested the Father on their behalf. Let each Christian reader ponder it thoughtfully and hopefully. Let him seek to realise now, if he has never done so before, that the pardon God bestowed upon him at the hour of conversion was but *the beginning* of the fulfilment of His purpose of grace towards him, that He has far better things awaiting him in *this* life. His forgiveness of your sins was but a means to an end, with a design to something further and richer. Let the Christian reader recognise that he has not yet begun to conceive of the rich heritage unto

which God has begotten him, unless he perceives that it is his privilege, his duty, his rightful portion to be strong with the strength of the Divine Spirit. The Devil would fain persuade you that God would have His child remain frail and feeble in this life, but that is one of his many lies. God's revealed will for us is the very reverse—namely, "Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might" (Eph 6:10). O my reader, suffer not Satan to deceive you any further, but seek right now to possess what Christ has purchased for you.

It is just because it is God's revealed will that we should be spiritually hale and hearty, that we are to seek strength from Him, and therefore, seek it *expectantly*. Had He not discovered to us His good pleasure on this matter, we might have been in some doubt how to act, but since He has made known His mind thereon, our course is quite clear. Let the reader turn to Ezekiel 36:25-36 and observe the blessed promises which God has there made to His people, closing with the declaration, "I the LORD have spoken it, and will do it" (Eze 22:14). And then let him attentively observe that in the very next verse, we are told, "Thus saith the Lord GOD; I will yet for this *be enquired* of by the [spiritual] house of Israel, *to do it* for them" (Eze 36:37). Divine favour does not release us from our duty—of realising and acknowledging our dependency upon Him. Divine promises are given for faith to lay hold of and plead before the throne of grace. It is God's revealed will that Christians should be strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man, but it is also His will that they should earnestly covet the same and believingly seek it from Him by fervent supplication.

The apostle Paul had himself declared, "Though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is *renewed* day by day" (2Co 4:16); nevertheless, the knowledge of that did not render it meaningless, nor needless, to *pray for* that very thing! God does not treat us as though we were irrational creatures, but as moral agents; and therefore, He requires our concurrence and co-operation—not to assist Him, but for the discharge of our responsibility, and more especially, for the calling into exercise of those spiritual graces which He has imparted to His children. We must ask if we would receive. And we must ask expectantly, for according unto our faith, will it be unto us (Mat 9:29). It is much to be thankful for if we have been made conscious of our deep need, yet that will avail us nothing, unless we have also learned how to obtain daily supplies of grace. It is in answer to importunate prayer that God gives of His best unto us. David was in sore straits, but he knew whither to turn for relief: "In the day when I cried thou answeredst me, and strengthenedst me with strength in my soul" (Psa 138:3).

The Christian is as entirely dependent upon the continued operations of the Spirit as he was for His initial ones, for of himself, he can no more sustain his spiritual life, or maintain his faith, than he could originate them. If the Spirit were to suspend His operations, we should be helpless, for He it is who works in us both to will and to do of God's good pleasure (Phi 2:13). Indwelling sin is not weakened by regeneration, and the flesh never ceases its exertions. So it is, too, from without: Satan is ever seeking an advantage against us. Moreover, the soul is strangely deluded by the treachery of our senses, and the revolt of our passions when temptations assail us, so that unless seasonable relief be granted, we are soon overcome. Without the Spirit's help, we can neither mortify our lusts (Rom 8:13), pray aright (Rom 8:26), nor bear fruit (Eph 5:9). Yet, there must be our concurrence: We may, we can concur, or we should differ nothing from the unregenerate. God works all works for and in us, yet also *by* us.



## THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JOSHUA

### 6. *The Great Commission (1:1-9), Part 3*

When Jehovah called Moses to go down into Egypt and make known His demand unto Pharaoh, He assured His servant, "I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt say" (Exo 4:12). When Jeremiah was ordained a prophet unto the nations, and he shrank from the task before him, God said, "They shall fight against thee; but they shall not prevail against thee; for I am with thee, saith the LORD, to deliver thee" (Jer 1:19). With such assurances does the Lord fortify the hearts of those whom He commissions to go forth in His name. Similarly, when the risen Redeemer bade His apostles make disciples of all nations and baptise them, He first emphasised the fact that "all power is given unto me in heaven and in earth," and then comforted them with the declaration, "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world" (Mat 28:18-20). So, too, when He told Paul to remain at Corinth, He cheered him thus: "Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace: For I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee: for I have much people in this city" (Act 18:9-10).

In like manner, did the Lord prepare Joshua for the undertaking to which he was called. First, He gave him the threefold assurance, "There shall not any man be able to stand before thee all the days of thy life: as I was with Moses, so I will be with thee: I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee" (Jos 1:5). The time had arrived when he was to lead the people of Israel across the Jordan and marshal their forces for the conquest of the promised land. On the threshold of that difficult and dangerous task, Jehovah had thus encouraged and animated His servant. Great were the obstacles and perils confronting them, but great, too, were the consolations here vouchsafed him. Highly favoured as was Joshua in being made the recipient of such promises, yet they were not designed to set aside the discharge of his own responsibility: He was not to say within himself, "These covenant engagements will certainly be fulfilled, so there is no need for me to be exercised." So far from using them as a couch for him to rest upon, they were designed as a girdle wherewith to gird up his loins for future activities.

"Be strong and of a good courage: for unto this people shalt thou divide for an inheritance the land, which I swear unto their fathers to give them. Only be thou strong and very courageous" (Jos 1:6-7). The Divine assurance received by Joshua was therefore intended as a spur unto energy, as an incentive to the performance of duty, for the quickening of his heart unto the same. The connection between this exhortation and what immediately precedes it inculcates a most important practical lesson: God's promises are not meant to set aside His precepts, but rather, are given to encourage us to do with all our hearts and might whatever he has bidden us. Assurances of Divine assistance must never be regarded as nullifying our accountability, or as rendering needless the putting forth of our utmost endeavours, but instead, are to be taken as so many guarantees that if we be "always abounding in the work of the Lord" (the discharge of our daily duties), then we may "know that our labour is not in vain in the Lord" (1Co 15:58).

Those professing Christians who reason that God has promised never to leave nor forsake us (Heb 13:5)—and therefore, it is quite safe for us to flirt with the world and trifle with sin—do but make manifest the unregenerate condition of their hearts. They who take unto themselves the Divine declaration, "He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Phi 1:6), and then conclude there is no need for them to make their calling and election sure, or desire the sincere milk of the Word that they may grow thereby, render it very doubtful that a good work has been begun in *them*. They who say, "God will assuredly fulfill His decrees and draw unto Christ all whom He has ordained unto eternal life, and therefore, there is no need for us to be deeply concerned about souls and seek after their salvation," speak not the language of His true children, but wrest the Truth. If our response to God's promises be that of sloth and carelessness, that is proof we have received them carnally and not spiritually. The use or misuse we make of the Divine cordials affords a good index of the state of our hearts.

God had just assured Joshua "I was with Moses, so I will be with thee" (Jos 1:5). That language was unequivocal and unqualified, yet it was far from signifying that he might take things easily, or simply, "stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD" (Exo 14:13)—words which have been grievously misapplied. No, rather were they designed to inspire him to the performance of duty and to let him know that his efforts should not be in vain. "Be strong and of a good courage" (Jos 1:6): That was the first effect which those assurances should work in him; and until they *did*, he was not fitted for the task before him. That task entailed the facing of problems and dangers, such as were enough to make the stoutest heart to quake; nev-

ertheless, Joshua was to undertake it without trepidation or hesitation. And why so? Because the living God—the omnipotent Jehovah—had declared that not a man should be able to stand before him, that *He* would not fail nor forsake him. Then what was there to fear? Had not Joshua good ground, sufficient reason, to be strong and to act valiantly?

Upon entering Canaan, powerful enemies had to be faced, for the land was inhabited by races of giants—men who were famous both for stature and strength. They were a fierce and warlike people, strongly armed, for they had “chariots of iron” (Jos 17:16). True, but God had said, “There shall not any man be able to stand before thee all the days of thy life: as I was with Moses, so I will be with thee: I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee” (Jos 1:5). Formidable obstacles had to be overcome. The cities of the Canaanites were fortified, described by the ten spies as “great and walled up to heaven” (Deu 1:28). That was the language of unbelief’s exaggeration, yet they were mighty strongholds which had to be overthrown. Even so, God’s “I will not fail thee” (Jos 1:5) was more than sufficient. Again, there was the food problem to be considered. In the wilderness, the Israelites had been daily supplied with manna from heaven, but that was now to cease. When the Jordan was crossed, that great host of people must quarter on the enemy. Who was to provide for such a multitude? How should they be fed? Was not such a problem enough to make Joshua quail? No, not after he had received such assurances.

Not only were the Canaanites a numerous and powerful foe, but those whom Joshua commanded were a most unpromising people. What trouble they had occasioned his predecessor in the desert! Ever ready to murmur, wanting to turn back to Egypt, stiffnecked, and with no faith in Jehovah. What could Joshua expect from their immediate descendants? How far could he count on their loyalty and co-operation? Was it not more than likely that their hearts would turn from him, as those of their fathers so often had from Moses? Even so, God had said, “I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee” (Jos 1:5). How well suited were those Divine assurances to be his situation! In view of them, what good reason had the Lord to bid him, “Be strong and of a good courage” (Jos 1:6)? And in view of the same, what sufficient ground had Joshua to go forward in full confidence and valour! So he *would*, if he took those promises to heart and mixed faith with them. Ah, it all turned on that. As cause stands to effect, so would the laying hold of those promises produce strength of spirit and courageous action. Joshua did receive them by faith, and such was their effect upon him.

What bearing does the above have upon *us* today? In our last, we pointed out that the promise of Joshua 1:5 belongs to Christians today—and here, we must insist that the precept, “Be strong and of a good courage” (Jos 1:6) is also addressed to us personally, that God so enjoins *us*. “Quit you like men, be strong” (1Co 16:13), “Be of good courage” (Psa 31:24) make known the Divine requirements from us. Those are the graces specially needed by believers if they are to overcome their enemies, surmount the obstacles in their path, and possess their possessions. “Granted,” says the reader, “but when you bid me, ‘be strong,’ you do but tantalize me, seeing that is the very thing I desire to be, and yet, am conscious I am not.” But cannot you see the fault is entirely your own?—that your weakness and fear are due to your failure to mix faith with God’s promises? What more do you want than what God has said to you in Joshua 1:5? If God be for you, who can be against you? Look away from yourself, from your enemies, from your difficulties, unto Him who hath said, “I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee” (Jos 1:5): Count upon Him, and strength will displace weakness; and courage, fear.

“Only be thou strong and very courageous, *that* thou mayest observe *to do* according to all the law, which Moses my servant commanded thee” (Jos 1:7). This exhortation is not a mere repetition of the one in the previous verse, but a particularizing of it, or an application of the same to a specific duty. The “Be strong and of a good courage” of verse 6 was more general; this here relates especially to walking in the way of God’s commandments. Resoluteness, fortitude, daring, and perseverance were required for the great exploits which lay ahead; yet, equally necessary and essential—if less apparent unto some today—was strength and courage, if Joshua was to be completely *submissive* to the legislation of his predecessor. The world admires most the man who is independent, strikes out along a line of his own, and counts meekness and submission as a mean-spirited thing. It is the free-thinker and the free-liver who is generally admired by the godless, and obedience is despised as something servile. Joshua was now virtually made king in Jeshurun, and it called for real courage for Israel’s commander-in-chief to take his orders from another—and especially so, when the carrying out of the same seemed to be a hazardous matter.

Let the Christian faithfully apply this exhortation unto himself, and perhaps he will the better perceive what it involved for Joshua. “Only be *thou* strong and very courageous, that [in order that] thou mayest

observe to do according to all the law" (Jos 1:7). Is there not an inseparable connection between the two things?—is not courage required in order to obedience? Fellow-Christian, if your character and conduct are to be regulated by the Divine standard, if all the details of your life are to be ordered by God's statutes, what will men think and say of you? Will they not deem you mad? It calls for courage—courage of a high order—for a preacher to scorn all novelties and disdain the contemptuous sneers of his fellows that he is "behind the times," because he declares only the counsel of God. And it calls for real courage for the private Christian to cleave close to the path of obedience when many professors will sneer at his "strictness" and "strait-lacedness." How many are *afraid* of being thought "queer" or "puritanical"! Ah, my reader, it requires resolution and valour to swim against the tide of popular opinion, as it does to differ from "our doctrines," if one sees that God's Word requires it.

"That thou mayest observe to do according to all the law, which Moses my servant commanded thee: turn not from it to the right hand or to the left, that thou mayest prosper whithersoever thou goest" (Jos 1:7). There was the commission which Joshua received from the Lord. He was not to be regulated by his own inclinations, nor lean unto his own understanding, he was not to be governed by the principle of expediency, nor be seeking to please those under him; instead, he must be actuated in all things by a "thus saith the LORD." For the carrying out of that commission, he needed strength and courage, so that he might be daring enough to strictly heed the instructions which Moses had left in writing for him. And in order to the exercise of those graces, his heart must be constantly occupied with the assuring promises God had given him. So God's servant today must teach His people to observe all things whatsoever Christ has commanded, resting on His promise, "Lo, I am with you always" (Mat 28:20). So, too, the private Christian must heed that word, "Whatsoever he saith unto you, do" (Joh 2:5), counting on His promise to make his way prosperous.

As another has pointed out, "In Joshua's case, full obedience to the Divine command involved innumerable difficulties, such as besieging fortified cities and fighting against warriors who came to battle in chariots of iron armed with scythes." He who contemplates enlisting under the banner of Christ needs well to sit down and count the cost, for it is no child's play to "follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth" (Rev 14:4). A merely nominal profession is easy enough to make and maintain after the manner of the times, but to be a real Christian means to deny self, take up the Cross, and go forth unto Christ without the camp. Through his obedience, Joshua made many enemies. When it became known that Jericho had been captured and Ai vanquished, we read of certain kings confederating together to destroy him. Such will be the experience of the obedient Christian. It will be his desire and effort to make no enemies, but if he is faithful to Christ, many of his old friends will turn against him, and he probably prove that his foes are found even in his own household. "Woe unto you" if "all men shall speak well of you!" (Luk 6:26).

Joshua's obedience required strength and courage, because it involved years of *persevering effort*. Rome was not built in a day, nor was Canaan captured in twelve months. Long marches, protracted campaigns, much heavy fighting was entailed before Israel fully entered into possession of their heritage. As another has said, "The days were not long enough for his battles. He bids the sun stand still and the moon is stayed: and even when that long day has passed, yet the morning sees him sword in hand still. Joshua was like those old knights who slept in their armour. He was always fighting." Such is the life of the Christian: A warfare from end to end. No sooner does he receive pardon from Christ than the great conflict. Every yard of the narrow way which leadeth unto Life is contested—not a foot will Satan yield to him. When victory has been obtained over one lust, another immediately raises its ugly head. When one temptation has been overcome, ten others more subtle menace him. There is no respite, no furlough is granted. "But he that endureth to the end shall be saved" (Mat 10:22), and none other will. Something more than human strength and prowess is called for.

"Do according to all the law, which Moses my servant commanded thee: turn not from it to the right hand or to the left" (Jos 1:7). As one has well pointed out, "It is the exactness of obedience which constitutes the essence of obedience." The fact is that if we do not desire and earnestly endeavour to keep *all* of God's commandments, we are totally lacking in the spirit of genuine obedience. He who picks and chooses between them is a self-pleaser, and not a God-pleaser. The vast majority in Christendom today say, "We must not be too precise"—but that is too thin a garb to cover their hypocrisy. At heart, they want to turn their backs on God's Law altogether, but as an open avowal of such a sentiment would at once expose them, they resort to such cant as, "We must not be too nice, too strict, too particular." It is this temporizing and compromising which has brought Christendom into the sorry state that it is now in. An omission here,

and a human addition there, opened the flood-gates of evil. As the Lord will have all our hearts, or nothing, so He will accept only an obedience which respects all His commandments (Psa 119:6)—and not one which is partial and discriminating.

Joshua was granted no indulgence, but must adhere rigidly and constantly to the Rule set before him. No matter how contrary to natural wisdom and prudence might be the carrying out of its precepts, no matter how unpopular it should make him with the people of Israel, God required full and continuous obedience from him. And so He does of us today, and unto those of His nominal disciples who fail to render the same, He asks, “And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?” (Luk 6:46). Yes, “nominal” disciples is all they are, for He Himself declares, “that servant, which knew his lord’s will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes” (Luk 12:47). It is probable that the apostle had Joshua 1:7 in mind when he said, “by the armour of righteousness on the right hand and on the left” (2Co 6:7)—righteousness is right doing, acting according to the standard of right, namely, the Law of God. When one said to a Puritan, “Many people have rent their consciences in halves; could you not just make a little nick in yours?” He answered, “No, I cannot, for my conscience belongs to God.”

Finally, let us notice that the path of obedience is the path of *prosperity*: “Turn not from it to the right hand or to the left, that [in order that] thou mayest prosper whithersoever thou goest” (Jos 1:7). Conformity unto the revealed will of God may entail trial, but there will be abundant compensation. Of course, there shall, for the Lord will be no man’s Debtor. The path of obedience is the path of blessing: The treading thereof may incur the frowns of men, but what matters that if we have the smile of our Master! True, the prosperity may not immediately appear—for faith has to be tried and patience developed—yet in the long run, it will be found that in keeping the Divine commandments, “there is great reward” (Psa 19:11). So Joshua found it, as he adhered strictly to the Divine Law, and success crowned his efforts—and that is recorded for *our* encouragement. Let us not forget that “godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that *now is*, and of that which is to come” (1Ti 4:8)—yet, that promise is conditioned by our keeping of the precepts.

## SPIRITUAL GROWTH OR CHRISTIAN PROGRESS

### *11b. Its Recovery*

In our last, we sought to make clear the urgent *necessity* for recovery from a spiritual decline. We turn now to consider its *desirability*. Look at it first from the *Godward* side. Is it not inexcusable that we should so evilly requite the eternal Lover of our souls? If He who was rich for my sake became so poor that He had not where to lay His head in order that I (a spiritual pauper) might be made rich, what is due Him from me? If He died the shameful death of the Cross that you might live, is not your life to be devoted wholly to Him? If you be Christ's, "ye are not your own" and "bought with a price," and therefore called upon to "glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's" (1Co 6:19-20). If He can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, think you that He is unmoved if we leave our "first love" (Rev 2:4) and divide our affections with His rivals? Do you suppose that a backslidden Christian affords Him any pleasure! Surely, you are aware of the fact that such a case brings no honour to Him. Then let His love constrain you to return and reform your ways, so that you may again show forth His praises and give him delight.

Consider your case in view of *other Christians*. There is a bond uniting the saints which is closer than any natural tie: "So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another" (Rom 12:5); and therefore, those "members should have the same care one for another" (1Co 12:25). So vital and intimate is that mystical union that if "one member suffer, all the members suffer with it" (1Co 12:26). If one member of your physical body is affected, there is a reaction throughout your whole system: So it is in the mystical Body. The health or sickness of your soul exerts a very real influence—either for good, or for evil—upon your brethren and sisters. For *their* sake then, it is most desirable that, if in a spiritual decline, you should be restored. If you be not, your example will be a stumblingblock to them, and if they have much association with you, their zeal will be dampened, and their spirits chilled. Surely, it is not a matter of little concern whether you be a help—or hindrance—to your fellow-saints. "But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Mat 18:6).

Contemplate your case in connection with *your unsaved relatives* and friends. Do you not know that one of the main obstacles in the way of many from giving a serious consideration to the Gospel is the inconsistent lives of so many who profess to believe it? Years ago, we read of one who was concerned about the soul of his son, and on the eve of his departure for a foreign land, sought to press upon him the claims and excellency of Christ. He received this reply: "Father, I am sorry, but I cannot *hear* what you say, for *seeing* what you do"! Is that the unuttered sentiment of your child? You may reply, "I do not believe that anything in my conduct can have any influence on the eternal destiny of any soul." Then you are woefully ignorant. "Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word *be won by* the conversation [behaviour] of the wives" (1Pe 3:1). In saving sinners, God uses a variety of means; as in prejudicing sinners, Satan employs many agents: Is God, or Satan, most likely to *use you*? Most certainly the latter, if you be in a backslidden state.

Coming lower still, let us appeal to *your own interests*. What have you gained by leaving your "first love"? Have you found the vanities of this world more pleasing than the feast which the Gospel sets before you? Does association with empty professors and the ungodly supply more satisfaction to the heart, than fellowship with the Father and His Son? No, the very opposite. Rather, have you discovered that in forsaking the Fountain of living waters, you have betaken yourself to broken cisterns which hold none (Jer 2:13)? The joy of salvation you once had is departed; the peace of God which passeth all understanding that formerly ruled your heart and mind through Christ Jesus, does so no longer. Today, your case resembles that of "the prodigal"—feeding on husks in the far country, while the rich fare of the Father's House is no longer partaken of by you. An uneasy conscience, a restless spirit, a joyless heart is now your portion. Have you not reason to cry, "Oh, that I were as in months past, as in the days when God preserved me; When his candle shined upon my head...As I was in the days of my youth, when the secret of God was upon my tabernacle" (Job 29:2-4)? Then whose fault is it that you do not again have that blessed experience?

Yes, from every viewpoint, it is most desirable that a Christian be recovered from his spiritual decline. Yet, it is also important that he should not conclude he *has* been recovered, when such is *not* the case. Since

a backslidden state is far from being agreeable, it is natural for one in it to want to be delivered from it. For that very reason, it is much to be feared that many have prematurely grasped at the promise of forgiveness, and said to their souls, "Peace, peace" when there was no peace. As there are many ways by which a convicted sinner seeks peace for his soul without finding it, so it is with a backslider. If he leans unto his own understanding, follows the devices of his own heart, or avails himself of the remedies advertised by religious quacks, he will rather be worsened than improved. Unless he complies with the injunctions laid down in the Word of Truth—for such cases and meets the requirements therein specified—there can be no real recovery for him. Alas, that this is so little realised today; and that so many who went astray and think they are returned unto the Bishop of their souls are labouring under a delusion.

If there is to be a real recovery, it is requisite that the right means be used, and not that which is destructive of what is desired. When trees grow old or begin to decay, it is useful to dig about them and manure them—for often, that will cause them to flourish again and abound in fruit. But if instead of so doing, we removed them out of their soil and planted them in another, so far from that advantaging them, they would wither and die. Yet, there are many professing saints who suppose that the decay of grace does not arise from themselves and the evil of their hearts, but rather, attribute the same unto uncongenial surroundings, unfavourable circumstances, their present occasion, or station in life; and they persuade themselves that as soon as they be freed from those, they will return to their "first love," and again delight themselves in spiritual things. But that is a false notion and spiritual delusion. Let men's circumstances and stations of life be what they will. The truth is that all their departures from God proceed from an evil heart of unbelief, as is clear from Hebrews 3:13. Do not deceive and flatter yourself, then, with the idea that what is needed for a recovery from your spiritual decline is but a removal into more favourable and congenial circumstances.

As it is from want of watchfulness—and because of the allowance of sin that all decays proceed—so it is a return unto unsparing mortification of our lusts, with all the duties that lead thereunto, must be the way of recovery. Yet at this point, too, we need to be much on our guard, lest we substitute for the denyings of self which God has enjoined, those pharisaical or papistical inventions which are of no value. Under the name and pretence of the means and duties of mortification, men have devised and enjoined a number of works, ways, and duties, which God never appointed or approved, nor will He accept; but will rather ask, "Who hath required *this* at your hand?" (Isa 1:12). Self-imposed abstinences and austerities may "have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body" (Col 2:23), but they will not profit the soul one iota. Unless those who are weighted down with a sense of guilt conduct themselves by the light of the Gospel, they will think to placate the displeasure of God by taking themselves to an unusual course of severities, which *He* has nowhere commanded. No abstinence from lawful things will deliver us from the consequences of having indulged in unlawful ones.

Again, the one who is exercised over the distressed by his spiritual decline is very liable to be wrongly counseled, if he turns to his fellow-Christians for advice and help. It is to be feared that in this day, there are few even among the people of God who are qualified to be of real assistance unto others. In most instances, their own spirituality is at such a low ebb, that if they be turned unto for relief, they will only be found to be "physicians of no value" (Job 13:4). And if they consulted the average preacher or pastor, the result is not likely to prove much better. Of old, Jehovah complained of the unfaithful priests of Israel, "They have healed also the hurt of the daughter of my people *slightly*, saying, Peace, peace; when there is no peace" (Jer 6:14). There are not a few such today. If one who was mourning over having left his "first love" asked them the way of return thereto, instead of probing the conscience to ascertain the root of the "hurt," they would endeavour to quieten his fears and soothe him; instead of faithfully warning him of the seriousness of his case, they would say there was nothing to be unduly exercised over, that perfection is not attainable in this life; and instead of naming the means God has appointed, they would tell him to continue attending the services regularly and contributing liberally to the cause, and all would be well. Many a wound has been skinned over without being cured.

"When Ephraim saw his sickness, and Judah saw his wound, then went Ephraim to the Assyrian, and sent to king Jareb: yet could *he* not heal you, nor cure you of your wound" (Hos 5:13). The historical reference is to Israel and Judah when in great danger from the pressure of enemies, instead of humbling themselves before God and seeking His help, they betook themselves unto a neighbouring nation, and looked to it for protection—yet, to no avail. But it has a spiritual application unto those who are conscious of their spiritual decline, but who turn to the wrong quarter for deliverance. Backsliders are often aware of

their wretched plight, but perceive not that sin is the cause of it, and God alone can heal their backsliding (Hos 14:4). When His chastening rod falls upon them, so far from recognising that it is *His* mighty hand correcting them, that it is His *righteous* hand dealing with them, they imagine it is only “circumstances” which are against them, and turn to the creature to extricate them—but to no good effect. Since there has been a departure from God, there must be a return to Him—and in that way He has appointed—or there can be no recovery from the evil consequences of that departure.

We turn now to consider the *possibility* of recovery. It may appear strange to some of our readers that we should deem it necessary to mention such a thing, still more so that we should discuss it in some detail. If so, surely they forget that since Satan succeeds in persuading many a convicted sinner that his case is hopeless, that he has carried his rebellion against God to such lengths as to be beyond the reach of mercy, driving him into a state of abject despair; it should not be thought strange that he will employ the same tactics with a backslidden saint—assuring him that he has sinned against such favours, privileges, and light, and that his case is now hopeless. Those who have read the history of John Bunyan (1620-1677)—and his case is far from being unique—and learned of his lying so long in the slough of despond, when the Devil made him believe he had committed the unpardonable sin, should not be surprised to learn that he is still plying the same trade and persuading one and another that he has so far departed from the Lord that his recovery is impossible.

But we do not have to go outside the Scriptures to find saints not only in a state of despondency and dejection before God, but in actual despair of again enjoying His favour. Take the case of Job. True, there were times when he could say, “For I know that my redeemer liveth” (Job 19:25), and “When he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold” (Job 23:10). But his assurance was not always thus: There were also seasons when he exclaimed, “Mine hope hath he removed like a tree. He hath also kindled his wrath against me” (Job 19:10-11). True, he erred in his judgment; nevertheless, such was how he felt in the dark hour of trial. Take the case of Asaph: “In the day of my trouble I sought the Lord: my sore ran in the night, and ceased not: my soul refused to be comforted. I remembered God, and was troubled” (Psa 77:2-3). Is not that an apt description of many a backslider, as he calls to mind the omniscience, the holiness, and the justice of God? But did he not find relief by reminding himself of God’s grace and loving-kindness? No, for he went on to ask, “Will the Lord cast off for ever? and will he be favourable no more? Is his mercy clean gone for ever? doth his promise fail for evermore? Hath God forgotten to be gracious? hath he in anger shut up his tender mercies?” (Psa 77:7-10). That he should speak thus was indeed his infirmity—yet, it shows into what despondency a saint may fall.

Consider the case of Jeremiah. Said he, “I am the man that hath seen affliction by the rod of his wrath... Surely against me is he turned;... He hath set me in dark places... He hath hedged me about, that I cannot get out: he hath made my chain heavy. Also when I cry and shout, he shutteth out my prayer... He hath filled me with bitterness, he hath made me drunken with wormwood... And thou hast removed my soul far off from peace:... And I said, My strength and my hope is perished from the LORD” (Lam 3:1-18). Is not that the language of despair! It was not only that his hope was weak and wavering, but he felt it had “perished,” and that “from the LORD”! Lower than that, one cannot get. He had no expectation of deliverance; he saw no possibility of being recovered from his wretched condition. And think you my reader there are no Christians in such a sad plight today? If so, ask yourself, “Why has God placed on permanent record such groanings of His people when they occupied the dungeons of despair?” The time may come when such language will exactly suit *your* case; and if so, you will be very glad to hear that there *is* a possibility of deliverance, a door of hope opened in the valley of Achor.

There can be little room for doubt that the chief reason why so many professors today see no need for pointing out *that it is possible* for a backslidden Christian to be restored is because of the defective teaching they sit under. They hold such light views of the sinfulness of sin, they perceive so faintly the spirituality and strictness of God’s Law, they have such a dim conception of His ineffable holiness that their consciences are comatosed; and hence, they are blind to their own state, and are unaware of what would be involved in delivering them out of it. They have had “Once saved, always saved,” “My sheep shall never perish” dinned into their ears so often, they take it for granted that every backslider will be restored as a matter of course—i.e. without any deep exercises of heart on their part, or compliance with the requirements which God has laid down. Yea, there are extensive circles in Christendom today, where it is taught that “having forgiven you all trespasses” (Col 2:13) means “every trespass—past, present, and future;” and that, so far from the Christian asking God for daily forgiveness, he should rather thank Him for having al-

ready forgiven him. Of course, those who swallow such deadly poison require not to be informed that recovery from a relapse is possible.

But different far is it with one who lives in the fear of the Lord, whose conscience is tender, and who views sin in the light of Divine holiness. When *he* is overtaken by a fault, he is cut to the quick, and should he so far decline as to leave his "first love" he will find a way of recovery by no means easy; and should he continue departing from God until his case become such that he has a name to live, but is dead, he may abandon hope entirely. When he seeks a return unto the Lord, it will be a case of "out of the depths have I cried unto thee" (Psa 130:1)—out of the depths of his heart, out of the depths of conviction, out of the depths of anguished contrition, out of the depths of despondency and despair. In his remarkable book on Psalm 130, John Owen (1616-1683), after pointing out that "gracious souls after much communion with God may be brought into inextricable depths and entanglements on the account of sin," went on to define those "depths" as: 1. Loss of the wanted sense of the love of God, which the soul did formerly enjoy. 2. Perplexed thoughtfulness about their great and wretched unkindness towards God. 3. A revived sense of justly deserved wrath. 4. Oppressing apprehension of temporal judgments."

But the eminent Puritan did not stop there. He went on to say, "There may be added hereunto, prevailing fears for a season of being utterly rejected by God, of being found a reprobate at the last day. Jonah seems to have concluded so: 'Then I said, I am cast out of thy sight' (Joh 2:4)—I am lost forever: God will own me no more. And Heman, 'I am counted with them that go down into the pit: I am as a man that hath no strength: Free among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, whom thou rememberest no more: and they are cut off from thy hand' (Psa 88:4-5). This may reach the soul, until the sorrows of Hell encompass and lay hold upon it: until it be despaired of comfort, peace, rest; until it be a terror to itself, and be ready to choose strangling rather than life. This may befall a gracious soul on the account of sin. But yet because this fights directly against the life of faith, God does not, unless it be in extraordinary cases, suffer it to lie long in this horrible pit, wherein there is no water—no refreshment. But this often falls out, that even the saints themselves are left for a season to a fearful expectation of judgment and fiery indignation, as to the prevailing apprehension of their mind."

We can bear testimony that in our extensive reading, we have come across not merely a few isolated and exceptional cases of backslidden saints who had sunk into such depths of soul trouble, distress, and horror, but many such; and that in the course of our travels, we have personally met more than one or two who were in such darkness and anguish of heart that they had *no hope*, and no efforts of ours could dispel their gloom. Let that serve as a solemn warning unto those who at present are enjoying the light of God's countenance: "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest *he* fall" (1Co 10:12)—fall into a state of unwatchfulness, and then into wickedness. Sin is that "abominable thing" which God hates (Jer 44:4), whether it be found in the unregenerate or the regenerate. If we trifle with temptation, then, we shall be made to taste what an exceeding bitter thing it is to depart from the living God. If we enter the paths of unrighteousness, we shall obtain personal proof that "the way of transgressors is hard" (Pro 13:15). And the higher have been our privileges and attainments, the more painful will be the effects from a fall.

But thank God the recovery of a backslider *is possible*, no matter how heinous or long protracted it was. The cases of David, of Jonah, of Peter demonstrate that! "No man that is fallen under spiritual decays has any reason to say, there is no hope, provided he take the right way of recovery. If every step that is lost in the way to heaven should be irrecoverable, woe would be unto us: We should all assuredly perish. If there were no reparation of our breaches, no healing of our decays, no salvation but for those who are always progressive in grace; if God should mark all that is done amiss, as the Psalmist spake, 'O Lord, who shall stand?' (Psa 130:3). Nay, if we had not recoveries every day, we should go off with a perpetual backsliding. But then, as was said, it is required that the right means of it be used" (J. Owen). What those right means consist of—and the very real difficulties which attend the use of them by those who have openly departed from God—must be left for consideration (D.V.) to our next.



## THE DOCTRINE OF RECONCILIATION

### 9b. Its Reception

In our last, we sought to show that the words, “be ye reconciled to God” (2Co 5:20) are not an exhortation unto saints to acquiesce in the Divine providences, or to render submission to His discipline and ordinances—but instead, that they form part of an account which the apostle was giving of his evangelical commission, of what his message was to men at large—and therefore, those words express the call which the Gospel makes to the unsaved. Before turning from that verse, let us point out that there is an expression in it which supplies an incidental, yet very real and strong, confirmation of what has been frequently insisted upon in this series. Again and again, we have pointed out that in connection with reconciliation, God is viewed specifically in His *official* and governmental (rather than in His essential or paternal) character, as Rector, or Judge. In full accord therewith, His servants are here referred to as “*ambassadors* for Christ, as though God did beseech”! (2Co 5:20)—in no other connection are ministers of the Gospel so designated!

After all that was pointed out under our fourth main division (its Arrangement), when we dwelt at length on the glorious provision of the Everlasting Covenant, and all that was brought forward under our fifth division (its Effectuation), when we showed how Christ carried out all He had engaged Himself to do under that Covenant, and the reward He earned—a “seed” for the travail of His soul—it might be thought that the elect were absolved and reconciled to God the moment the Saviour triumphantly cried, “It is finished” (Joh 19:30). But not so. As Stephen Charnock (1628-1680) pointed out, “We must distinguish between reconciliation *designed* by God, *obtained* by Christ, *offered* by the Gospel, and *received* by the soul.” It is through failing to recognise and bear in mind those very real and necessary distinctions that we confuse ourselves, confounding what should be kept separate. It was their failure to distinguish between totally different aspects of the Truth, which led some Arminians into teaching the gross error that the entire human race was reconciled to God by Jesus Christ—though most of them know it not.

For the purpose of simplification, the fourfold distinction drawn by S. Charnock may be reduced unto a twofold one: A reconciliation, which, in the language of the lawyers, is *de jure*, and one which is *de facto*—or in theological terms, the *impetration* or purchase of reconciliation by Christ and the *application* of it to us, or our actual receiving of the same. This will be more intelligible to the average reader if we remind him of the difference between having a legal right *to* a thing and a right *in* it. Such is the case with a minor with reference to an inheritance. If but ten years old when his father died and willed an estate to him, as soon as the will was proved, he had a legal right to the estate—none else could claim it; but not until he reached his majority would he have a right in it, not until he was twenty-one could he enter into possession and enjoyment of it. The Holy Spirit uses that very figure in Galatians 4:1-7 when treating of dispensational differences of privilege under the old and new covenants.

It is by observing this fundamental distinction that we obviate a difficulty which a first reading of 2 Corinthians 5 might occasion. There we read, “God, who *hath* reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ” (2Co 5:18); and then the call is made, “*be ye reconciled to God*” (2Co 5:20). But there is nothing whatever inconsistent between those two statements, or anything in them, which should puzzle us. Paul was not there essaying a systematic exposition of the doctrine of reconciliation, but instead, was giving *an account* of his evangelical ministry or message in connection therewith. As was shown in our last, by the quotation from Thomas Goodwin (1600-1679), that “ministry” consists of two parts: A reconciliation wrought on God’s part, and a reconciliation on our part toward God—the latter being equally necessary as the former. It is necessary, because since the alienation exists on each side, both parties must set aside their enmity, before amity is possible. It is necessary in order to the enforcement of human responsibility. It is necessary for us to be reconciled to God, because that is what He requires of us, as the way He has *appointed*. But let us amplify that a little.

While a great deal has been written to show that in the transactions between the Father and the Mediator, God determined to take full satisfaction unto His *justice*—and therefore, ordained that His Son should be offered a sacrifice—much less has been written to demonstrate that the *holiness* of God required *we* must cease our revolt against Him, before He can be reconciled to us, or receive us into His favour. Yet, the one is as true, as important, as necessary, as essential as is the other. God is as jealous in the vindication and glorifying of one of His attributes, as He is of another; and therefore, if on the one hand, we read that Christ is set forth “a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness” and “that he might

be *just*, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus” (Rom 3:25-26); on the other hand, we are told that He “Who hath saved us, and called us with an *holy* calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began” (2Ti 1:9), addressing us thus: “But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation [behaviour]” (1Pe 1:15).

In the wondrous and perfect salvation which God planned and provided for His people, infinite wisdom saw to it that each of His perfections should be owned and magnified, and if our presentation of the Gospel fails to exhibit that grand fact, it is defective and partial. It is “To the praise of the glory of his *grace*, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved” (Eph 1:6). It is “according to his *mercy* he saved us” (Titus 3:5). In order that the claims of His righteousness might be met, He “spared not his own Son” (Rom 8:32), abating not the least whit that justice demanded. Likewise, He is resolved that without “*holiness*...no man shall see the Lord” (Heb 12:14). If He would not that the cup of death pass from Christ at His so earnest entreaty, most certain it is that He will not recede one iota from the requirements of His holiness in receiving us into His friendship; and therefore, His inexorable demand is, “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon” (Isa 55:7). For God to pardon those who persisted in their wicked ways would be to condone sin.

If there be a revolt in a kingdom, two things are required before peace can be restored and amity again prevail. The king must be willing to exercise clemency on a righteous basis, and his subjects must cease their rebellion and become obedient to his scepter. Orderly government would be reduced to a farce if a pardon was offered unto those who continued to oppose the throne. Now the King of kings has announced His willingness and readiness to pardon any rebel among men, but only on the condition that he first throw down the weapons of his warfare against Him (2Co 10:4-5). The carnal mind is enmity against God (Rom 8:7); and obviously, that enmity must cease before we can be reconciled to Him. By nature and practice, we are “alienated and enemies” in our mind “by wicked works” (Col 1:21); and clearly, those works must be confessed and repented of, hated and abandoned, ere there can be peace between us and the thrice Holy One. Christ does not save us in our sins, but *from* our sins (Mat 1:21). “But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, is therefore Christ the minister of sin? God forbid” (Gal 2:17).

In this chapter on what God requires from us in order to our reconciliation with God, Thomas Goodwin pointed out the following.

“1. For the preparing us to be reconciled, it is necessary that we be convinced that we are enemies to God, and that He accounts us such; and that so long as we remain in that estate, He is also an enemy to us, and can be no other. This what God in Christ hath done gives demonstration of. He would not save us upon Christ’s bare entreaty, but He would have satisfaction, and have Christ feel what it was to stand in the room of *sinners*. Yea, one end why God saved us by way of satisfaction to His justice was that sinners pardoned might, in what Christ suffered, see and thoroughly apprehend what sin had deserved. And is it not, then, requisite that they should at least lay to heart and be sensible of their own treason and rebellions, and that God and they are at odds? Traitors must be convicted and condemned, ere they are capable of a legal pardon, as sentence must be pronounced ere a legal appeal can be made. It is so in man’s courts, and it is so in God’s proceedings also. Neither indeed will men be brought so to sue out for His favour and prize His love till then—for it was never heard any man did heartily sue to one for pardon and peace with whom he did not first apprehend himself at variance.

2. It is necessary also that men apprehend the danger of going on in this estate; for though one should know another and himself to be enemies, if he thought his enemy were either careless or weak, he would slight reconciliation with him, and though sought unto, would not seek it. He who is mentioned in Luke 14:31-32 was to sit down and consider if he were able to go out and meet his enemy, else he would never have sought conditions of peace. So the soul—until it apprehends and considers (finding God and itself enemies) what a sore enemy He is, and what a fearful thing it is to fall into His hands—will not, till then, care to seek out to Him.

3. If one apprehended God implacable, not inclinable to peace, or hard to be entreated, he would never come at Him neither. Thus David—when Saul and he were at odds—suborned Jonathan secretly to observe what mind Saul bare towards him; and when he found him, and bent to kill him (1Sa 20:33), David came not at him.

4. The soul comes to be persuaded better things of God, and things that accompany reconciliation, and conceives hope that reconciliation is to be *had*, and *had for it*. And therefore, in all whom God means to reconcile to Himself, after He hath humbled them, He fixeth a secret persuasion on their hearts that He is ready to be reconciled to them—if they will be reconciled to Him. God gives them a secret hint of His intended good will to them. He reveals what a gracious God He is, and how freely He pardons...the same God, who, from everlasting, spake unto His Son and wooed Him for us, doth speak likewise secretly (inwardly) to a man's heart to allure and woo him to come in to Him" (T. Goodwin)—thereby overcoming his reluctance, quieting his fears, and making him willing in the day of His power. As He employs the Law to impart a knowledge of sin, to convict us of our high-handed rebellion against the Most High, so He uses the Gospel to make known the wondrous provision He has made both to satisfy the claims of His Law and to meet our deep need.

If it be asked, "Since Christ has satisfied every requirement of God, why are repentance and faith necessary from us?" What has been said above should furnish a sufficient and satisfactory answer. It is because God is pleased to exercise pardoning mercy in such a way as is suited to *all* His perfections. It would be contrary to His wisdom to dispense the precious benefits of Christ's atonement to impenitent rebels. It would be contrary unto His governmental honour for Him to cast pearls before swine, to be trampled beneath their feet. It would be contrary unto His holiness for Him to bestow pardon upon one whom He knew would abuse such a favour—as though He granted a dispensatory power for him to sin with impunity. As it is no reflection upon the sufficiency of Christ's satisfaction that believers are called to suffer afflictions and death—for they are not penal inflictions for the satisfying of His justice, but are sent for the exercising of their graces (1Pe 1:7); so it in no way derogates from the perfections of Christ's satisfaction that sinners be required to repent and believe, for there is nothing meritorious about such exercises.

Goodwin then went on to point out about the sinner...

"He must be set a-work to seek, as a condemned man, God and His favour in Christ, and peace and reconciliation through Him. He should pray to Him, and He will be gracious...God is the party superior, and it is fit the inferior should seek to the superior. He also is the person wronged, and though He be willing and desirous to be reconciled, yet He will have His favour prized. David longed to be reconciled to Absalom, yet he would be sought unto, for he would have his favour prized to the utmost and not cast away. Yea, and because the favour of God is better than life, he will be sought to with more earnestness and constancy than a man seeks for his life: 'And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart' (Jer 29:13). If God hath bidden us seek peace with men, yea, and to ensue it (Psa 34:14, 1Pe 3:11)—that is, though it fly away, yet follow it—much more are we, then, to seek peace with God Himself; and though He seem to reject us, yet to press upon Him—as David saith, 'my soul followeth hard after thee' (Psa 63:8).

"He will be sought unto with confession of and mourning for offending Him, for being in bitterness and mourning is joined with supplication for grace (Zec 12:10). This is necessary to reconciliation, because an acknowledgement is to be made (Jer 3:13). God would be sought humbly unto by us, as those that are traitors and rebels. God will have men know when He pardons, that he knows *what* He pardons, and therefore, will have them acknowledge what they deserve: 'That every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God' (Rom 3:19). If a man will become wise, he must become a fool (1Co 3:18); so a man that will become a friend to God must turn enemy against himself and judge himself worthy of destruction (Eze 36:31)...Where mourning for offending God is wanting, there is no sign of any good will yet wrought in the heart to God nor love to Him, without which God will never accept of a man...God will not pardon till He sees hope of amendment. Now, until a man confesses his sin—and that with bitterness—it is an evidence he loves it (Job 20:12-14). While he hides it, spares it, and forsakes it not, it is sweet in his mouth. A man will never leave sin till he finds bitterness in it.

"He must renounce all other friendships. The nature of reconciliation requires this—for friendship with anything else is enmity with God. 'Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God?' (Jam 4:4). As God will not have us serve other masters, so neither other friends. 'If any man come to me, and hate [forsake] not his father, and mother...' etc., is unworthy of Me says Christ (Luk 14:26). A friendship not only with proclaimed enemies—open sins—but with all the things which the world hath is enmity with God. A believer may have a lordship over them, but not friendship with them. He may use them as strangers and servants, but not as friends so as they have his heart. Friendship is entered into by choice—kindred is not so. So Jonathan *chose* David to be his friend (1Sa

20:30). As God did choose you, so also must you choose Him. As God chooses you 'freely' (Hos 14:4), out of good will, so must you choose Him freely. As He chose you forever never to cast you off, so you are to choose Him forever. As nothing can separate from His love, so let nothing separate Him from yours.

"Let thy heart resign up itself and all that it hath, and devote it all unto God forever, to be commanded and used by Him. Thus did God for us: If He spared not His own Son, but with Him also freely gives us all things, let all you have be God's—giving up yourselves first unto the Lord (2Co 8:5). Let God have all thy understanding, will, affections, and whatever else. And let all be His, to command in any thing as He pleases, and study how to set all a-work for Him. Likeness of disposition is the only sure and lasting foundation of friendship, being the soul of it—for it is impossible two should long be friends, unless they be one in their minds and affections, liking and loving the same things: 'Can two walk together, except they be agreed?' (Amos 3:3). Accordingly, a man that is thus reconciled must endeavour to walk and behave himself as a friend. The nature of reconciliation requires it: 'A man that hath friends must shew himself friendly' (Pro 18:24). Therefore, Christ said, 'Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you' (Joh 15:14). Watch over yourselves in all your ways, and be fearful to displease Him and His goodness (Hos 3:5).

"God designed to set forth His love so as to attain the ends of loving. It is not to give forth peace only, but to manifest good will and kindness, as Luke 2:14 shows. Yea, the ground of His showing mercy is His love (Eph 2:4). And although on our part, our love and friendship to God is not the ground of His, yet it *is* the end or *aim* of His. Though He did not love us because we loved Him first, yet He loved us that we might love Him in return. Therefore, in those He saves, if there were not wrought an inward principle of love and friendship, and good will mutual again to Him, that might answer His love to us, His love would not have its end, and would be finally cast away. For so we reckon love to be given away in loss when it is not answered in its kind—that is, with a true love in response. God would have His love valued and esteemed by those He saves, for love is the dearest thing that any one hath to bestow, because whoever hath a man's love hath *all* he hath—for it commands all. If God's love be esteemed by us, it will work holiness in us."—*Thomas Goodwin (condensed and a few words altered)*.

We have quoted at such length from that excellent Puritan, because while Goodwin was a high Calvinist (a supralapsarian) and magnified the free and sovereign grace of God as few have done, yet he was also an able evangelist, a faithful shepherd of souls; and though he was a strict *particular*-redemptionist, yet he also enforced human responsibility; and while he taught clearly the total depravity and utter ruin of fallen man, yet he also shunned not to state plainly and emphatically what God required from the unsaved. We could easily reproduce the same, in substance, from John Owen (1616-1683), Thomas Manton (1628-1688), John Bunyan (1620-1677), and others of the seventeenth century. How far some in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries departed from their teaching, we leave the reader to determine, as he may also decide how solemn and serious—or how unimportant—such departure was: Whether the unsaved in many a so-called "place of truth" have been lulled to sleep by a fatalistic presentation of the doctrine of election and by harping so much on the creature's inability to meet God's requirements, or whether they have been faithfully exhorted to repent and believe the Gospel.

Should the reader say, "I mentally assent to most of what Goodwin wrote, but I find myself totally *unable to comply* with his directions," we ask, "Cannot you see that such a statement greatly *aggravates* your wickedness?" Suppose I have grievously wronged and offended a dear friend of yours, and you came to me saying you deplored the breach between us, that your friend was willing to be friends again, if I would put matters right and beg forgiveness. Suppose you pleaded with me to do the proper thing, and the only reply I made you was, "I am *unable* to." What would you think? Would you not justly conclude that all I lacked was a willing heart?—that the reason I would not seek unto the one I had injured was either because I *hated* him, or because I was *too proud* to humble myself before him? You would judge rightly! So it is with the sinner and God. If we analyse his "cannot," it is because he is so wedded to his idols, so in love with sin, he *will not* forsake them. And anything in our preaching which comforts him in his "will not" is contrary to the Truth.

