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“Search the Scriptures” John 5:39

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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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GOD'S LOVE TO US

By "us" we mean His people, for whereas we read of the love "which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:39), Holy Writ knows nothing of a love of God *outside* of Christ. "The LORD is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works" (Psa 145:9), so that He provides the ravens with their food. "He is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil" (Luk 6:35), and His providence ministers unto the just and the unjust (Mat 5:45); but His *love* is reserved for His own elect. That is unequivocally established by its *characteristics*, for the attributes of His love are identical with Himself. Necessarily so, for "God is *love*," and in making that postulate, it is but another way of saying God's love is like Himself—from everlasting to everlasting, immutable. Nothing is more absurd than to imagine that anyone beloved of God can eternally perish or shall ever experience His everlasting vengeance. Since the love of God is "in Christ Jesus," it was attracted by nothing in its objects, nor can it be repelled by anything in, of, or by them, "having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end" (Joh 13:1). The "world" in John 3:16 is a general term used in contrast with the Jews, and that verse must be so interpreted as not to contradict Psalm 5:5-6; 7:11; John 3:36; Romans 9:13.

The chief design of the Gospel is to commend the love of God in Christ, for *He* is the sole channel through which it flows. It is not that the Son has induced the Father to love His people, but rather was it His love for them which moved Him to give His Son to them and for them. As Ralph Erskine (1685-1752) well said, "God hath taken a marvelous way to manifest His love. When He would show His power, He makes a world. When He would display His wisdom, He puts it in a frame and form that discovers its vastness. When He would manifest the grandeur and glory of His name, He makes a heaven, and puts angels and archangels, principalities and powers therein. And when He would manifest His love, what will He not do? God hath taken a great and marvelous way of manifesting it in Christ: His person, His blood, His death, His righteousness." "All the praises of God in him [Christ] are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God" (2Co 1:20). As we were chosen in Christ (Eph 1:4), as we were accepted in Him (Eph 1:6), as our life is hid in Him (Col 3:3), so are we beloved in Him—"the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus": in Him as our Head and Husband, which is why nothing can separate us therefrom, for that union is indissoluble.

Nothing so warms the heart of the saint as a spiritual contemplation of God's love. As he is occupied therewith, he is lifted outside of and above his wretched self. A believing apprehension thereof will fill the renewed soul with holy satisfaction, and make him as happy as it is possible for anyone to be this side of heaven. To know and believe the love which God has toward me is both an earnest and foretaste of heaven itself. Since God loves His people in Christ, it is not for any amiableness in or attraction about them, "Jacob have I loved." Yes, the naturally unattractive, yea, despicable, Jacob—"thou worm Jacob" (Isa 41:14). Since God loves His people in Christ, it is not regulated by their fruitfulness, but is the same at all times. Because He loves them *in* Christ, the Father loves them *as* Christ. The time will come when His prayer shall be answered, "That the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me" (Joh 17:23). Only *faith* can grasp those marvelous things, for neither reasoning nor feelings can do so. God loves us in Christ. Oh, what infinite delight has the Father as He beholds His people in His dear Son! All our blessings flow from that precious fountain.

God's love unto His people is not of yesterday. It began not with their love to Him No, "we love him, because he first loved us" (1Jo 4:19). We do not first give to Him, that He may return to us again. Our regeneration is not the motive of His love. Rather is His love the reason why He renews us after His image. This is often made to appear in the first open manifestation of it, when so far from its objects being engaged in seeking Him, they are at their worst. "Now when I passed by thee, and looked upon thee, behold, thy time was the time of love; and I spread My skirt over thee, and covered thy nakedness; yea, I swore unto thee, and entered into a covenant with thee, saith the LORD God, and thou becamest [manifestatively] mine" (Eze 16:18). Not only are its objects often *at* their worst when God's love is first revealed to them, but actually *doing* their worst—as in the case of Saul of Tarsus. Not only is God's love antecedent to ours, but it was borne in His heart toward us long before we were delivered from the power of darkness and translated into the kingdom of His dear Son. It began not in time, but bears date of eternity—"I have loved thee with an everlasting love" (Jer 31:3).

"Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1Jo 4:10). It is very clear from those words that God loved His people while they were in a state of nature, destitute of all grace, without a particle of love to or faith in Him; yea, while they were enemies

unto Him (Rom 5:8, 10). Clearly that lays me under a thousand times greater obligation to love, serve and glorify Him than had He loved me for the first time when my heart was won by His excellence. All the acts of God unto His people in time are the expressions of the love He bore them from all eternity. It is because God loves us in Christ, and has done so from everlasting, that the gifts of His love are irrevocable. They are the bestowments of “the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.” The love of God indeed makes a change *in us* when it is “shed abroad in our hearts,” but it makes none in Him. He sometimes varies the dispensation of His providence toward us, but that is not because His affection has altered. Even when he chastens us, it is in love (Heb 12:6), having our good in view.

Let us now look more distinctly at some of the operations of God’s love. First, in *election*, “We are bound to give thanks always to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit [His quickening] and belief of the truth” (1Th 2:13). There is an infallible connection between God’s love and His selection of those who were to be saved. That election *is* the consequence of His love is clear again from Deuteronomy 7:7: “The LORD did not [1] set his love upon you, nor [2] choose you, because ye were more in number than any people.” So again in Ephesians 1:4-5: “In love: having predestinated us into the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will.” Second, in *redeeming* them. As we have seen above from 1 John 4:10, out of His sovereign love, God made provision of Christ to render satisfaction for their sins, though prior to their conversion, he was angry with them in respect of His violated Law, and provoked holiness by their transgressions. And “how shall he not with him *also* freely give us all things?” (Rom 8:32)—another clear proof that His Son was *not* “delivered up” to the cross for all mankind, for He gives *them* neither the Holy Spirit, a new nature, nor repentance and faith.

Third, *effectual* calling. From the enthroned Saviour, the Father sends forth the Holy Spirit (Act 2:33). Having loved His elect with an everlasting love, therefore with lovingkindness does He draw them (Jer 31:3), quickening into newness of life, calling them out of darkness into His marvelous light, making them manifestatively His children, “Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God” (1Jo 3:1). If filiation does not issue from God’s love as a sure effect thereof, to what purpose are those words? Fourth, *healing their backslidings*: “I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely” (Hos 14:4)—without reluctance or hesitation. “Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it” (Song 8:7). Such is God’s love unto His people—invincible, unquenchable. Not only is there no possibility of its expiring of itself, but the black waters of their backslidings cannot extinguish it, nor the floods of their unbelief put it out.

“Love is strong as death” (Song 8:6). Nothing more irresistible than death in the natural world, nothing so invincible as the love of God in the realm of grace. As Thomas Goodwin (1600-1680) remarked, “What difficulties does the love of God overcome! For God to overcome His own heart! Do you think it was nothing for Him to put His Son to death?...When He came to call us, had He no difficulties which love overcame? We were dead in trespasses and sins, yet from the great love wherewith he loved us. He quickened us—in the grave of our corruption: ‘lo, he stinketh’—even then did God come and conquer us. After our calling, how sadly do we provoke God! Such temptations that if it were possible the elect should be deceived. It is so with all Christians. No righteous man but he is ‘scarcely saved’ (1Pe 4:18), and yet saved he *is*, because the love of God is invincible: it overcomes all difficulties.”

Scarcely any space is left over for an application, yet one is hardly necessary for such a theme. Let God’s love daily engage and engross your mind by devout meditations thereon that the affections of your heart may be drawn out to Him. When cast down in spirit, or in sore straits of circumstances, plead it in prayer, assured that His love cannot deny anything good for you. Make God’s wondrous love to you the incentive of your obedience unto Him—gratitude requires nothing less.



EXPOSITION OF JOHN'S FIRST EPISTLE

15. *Obediential Assurance (2:3)*

*“And hereby we do know that we know him,
if we keep his commandments.”*

Simple as this verse appears to be, and as it really is, yet a careful and critical examination of it raises five questions, on none of which do the commentators return a uniform answer.

First, with what is its opening “And” to be linked, precisely what is the connection between verse 3 and those that follow with what has preceded?

Second, which Person in the Godhead is specifically alluded to by the pronouns “Him” and “His”—the Father or the Son?

Third, what is the meaning of the word “know” here, and what distinction are we required to make between its double usage?

Fourth, what is the precise force of the “if”—is it a calling into question, the testing of profession, or the drawing of a logical inference?

Fifth, whose precepts are referred to in the “His commandments,” and which particular ones are in view—those of the Law or those of the Gospel, or both? A hasty conclusion must not be jumped to on any of these points, but care taken to supply proof before definite answers are returned. Guesswork is impious where God's Word is concerned.

What is the connection?

If 1:5, to the end of 2:2, is read consecutively, it should be evident that we have there a complete paragraph, in which the apostle has covered the whole subject of sin in relation to believers. A close reading of 2:3, to the end of 2:11, also makes it clear that those verses are to be regarded as another distinct and complete section, wherein the obedience of God's children is in view. But some may demur at the statement that a new division, treating of a different subject, commences at 2:3, seeing that it opens with the word “And.” While such an objection is not to be ignored, it must not be allowed to shake our impression that the two separate aspects of truth are there set forth: rather must we seek the relation between them. That there is a connection and relation, and probably an intimate one, is certainly intimated by the conjunction uniting them, and it is a matter of no little importance to discover or trace out their coherence, otherwise we are liable to bring a legalistic element into our understanding of 2:3, 5. Nor is the link, or links, between the two passages at all difficult to discover.

For a general statement, perhaps John Calvin's (1509-1564) can scarcely be improved on, for he pointed out, “John here reminds us that the knowledge of God derived from the Gospel is not ineffectual, but that obedience flows from it.” Stating almost the same thing in another form, we may say that gratuitous remission of sin is not a thing apart, but is ever accompanied by those sanctifying operations of the Spirit which cause the pardoned to express their gratitude by subjection unto God's revealed will. The grand truth of Christ's advocacy and propitiation will not, when savingly apprehended, induce a careless walk or encourage a spirit of lawlessness. Where Christ is truly known as Lord and Saviour, His authority is gladly owned; if He is loved, there will be no question about obedience. A spiritual apprehension of what Christ has done and is now doing for us is the most effective means and motive unto a God-honouring life: as the heart is brought under the power of the same, it is blessedly disposed unto every good word and work. After mentioning the gracious provision which God has made for the sins of His people, and the maintenance of their fellowship with Him, the apostle turned to consider the outward evidences of a spiritual knowledge of and communion with Christ.

But still more definitely: 2:3-6 is to be regarded as an amplification of 1:5-7, for the emphatic “This then is the message which we have heard of him” must be steadily borne in mind as we go through the entire epistle. There the apostle summarized what he and his fellows had heard from the lips of their Master and had seen so perfectly exemplified in His own life, namely that “God is light,” and in order to enjoy communion with Him the darkness must be shunned. In 1:7, he had affirmed that “if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another,” and though the light will increasingly make manifest our imperfections and defilements, yet, if we duly confess the same, the blood of Christ will cleanse us from all sin. Now, here in 2:3-6, “walk in the light” is declared to be a keeping of the divine

commandments and a following of the example which Christ has left us; while the resultant fellowship is seen in the “we do know that we know him” and the “abideth in him.” Finally, the opening “And” confirms our interpretation that God’s people alone are referred to in the whole of 2:2.

Which Person in the Godhead is specifically alluded to by the pronouns “Him” and “His”—the Father or the Son?

Several spiritually minded and scholarly expositors regard the pronouns “Him” and “His” in our text as relating to Jesus Christ, the nearest antecedent, but most of the more recent writers insist that they relate to “the Father” with whom Christ is the Advocate. After carefully weighing their respective opinions, we fail to see any argument which necessarily excludes either the One or the Other, and therefore we much prefer to follow the older commentators who included both Persons. Our present verse is speaking of a saving knowledge, and where that is in view, while the divine Persons may be distinguished, they are not to be separated. None can approach the Father except by the Son (Joh 14:6), and none can come unto the Son unless the Father draw him (Joh 6:44). As Christ declared unto those who opposed Him, “Ye neither know me, nor my Father: if ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also” (Joh 8:19), and as He told His disciples, “he that hath seen me hath seen the Father” (Joh 14:9). The One cannot be known apart from the Other: “no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him” (Mat 11:27).

As pointed out above, there is an intimate relation between 2:3-11, and 1:5-2:2, and for exegetical reasons we consider the pronouns of 2:3, look back to the One spoken of in 1:5. There we are informed that “God is light”—here that we “know Him” as such and conduct ourselves accordingly, for it is not merely a notional but an influential knowledge which John treats of. Now “God is light” is to be understood of the Godhead, and particularly of the triune God made known through Christ, “for in him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily [or personally]” (Col 2:9). It is true that God is light in Himself essentially, yet not so unto fallen men—outside of Christ God is unknown, and man is in total spiritual darkness. In like manner, “God is love.” He is so essentially, yet not unto fallen men—outside of Christ “God is a consuming fire” (Heb 12:29). “This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (Joh 17:3): here again the Two are joined together, for the Father cannot be known apart from the Mediator.

What is the meaning of the word “know”?

“Hereby we do know that we know him.” As one eminent expositor said, “It must be so as He is Father in Christ, so that hereby is implied that the knowing of God absolutely is not saving: it must be relative, in the glorious dispensation and mystery which is by Jesus Christ.” But we must now inquire, What is meant here by our knowing Him, and particularly knowing that we know Him? We say here, for this is another term which is far from being used uniformly in the Scriptures. In some passages, as, for example, Ecclesiastes 3:14, and the words of Nicodemus to Christ, “we know that thou art a teacher come from God” (Joh 3:2), “know” has the force of “believe,” as it has also in John 17:3. In other places it signifies “approve,” as in “They have set up kings, but not by me: they have made princes, and I knew *it* not” (Hos 8:4, and cf. Mat 7:23). In yet others it goes farther, and signifies “love”: “I am the good Shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine” (Joh 10:14, and cf. 1Co 8:3). But its commonest meaning is to be sure or assured, as in “One thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see” (Joh 9:25) and “we know that all things work together for good to them that love God” (Rom 8:28).

As it is with natural things so also with spiritual: there is a radical difference between a notional and experiential knowledge. I may be theoretically assured that a certain thing would be helpful or harmful to me, but I know actually and factually that fire burns, that water refreshes, that food strengthens, for I have proved it for myself. In like manner, there is a very real distinction between knowing about the Lord and in knowing the Lord Himself. As one can see the one consists merely of information concerning Him and the other is a personal and a saving acquaintance with Him. In the Scriptures we are told that at first “many of the Samaritans...believed” in Christ because of the testimony borne to Him by the woman at the well; but later, when they came into His presence and listened to His teaching, they declared, “Now we believe, not because of thy saying: for we have heard him ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world” (Joh 4:39, 42). Thus too Paul bore witness: “I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day” (2Ti 1:12)—from what he had already received from Him, he could confidently trust Him for the future. Such knowledge is vastly different from mere conjecture, it is based on something more than a probability, namely a certainty.

Christ can only be savingly known as we receive the Spirit's testimony concerning Him, surrender ourselves fully unto His control, and trust in Him with all our hearts. Then shall we obtain inward evidence of His reality and the verity of His offer. It is said of Him that He "knew no sin" (2Co 5:21): there the term connotes experience: that He had no practical acquaintance with it—having no carnal nature as we have. Thus to know Christ savingly is to have personal proof of His redemptive power: to pardon and cleanse, to subdue our passions, to speak peace to the conscience, to draw out our affections unto things above, and to have a vital realization of other divine influences of that Spirit which proceeds from Him. Finally, the word "know" also imports to acknowledge, as we are told of a certain Pharaoh "which knew not Joseph" (Exo 1:8), that is he had no regard for his memory, no sense of what Egypt owed to him, and therefore refused to be kind unto his people for his sake. In this sense, the term occurs in "And when he putteth forth his own sheep, he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice. And a stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him: for they know not the voice of strangers" (Joh 10:4-5): the sheep respond to Christ's voice—they publicly own Him, but refuse allegiance to all impostors.

"The knowledge of Christ has become expressive of a personal and saving interest in His work and grace. There is great propriety in this use of the term. Knowledge is the result of observation and experience. It implies certainty. If we say we know a man, it supposes we have had intercourse with him, and have proved what sort he is. If we know a country we must have been there and seen it and become versant with its inhabitants, soil, and products. If we know a medicine, we must have used or analysed it, and so become acquainted with its constituents and properties. Now this is precisely the force of the term when we speak of the knowledge of Christ. Hence it is the characteristic of believers in our text: 'we know Him.' We know His power, for we have proved it; we know His wisdom, for we have been guided by it; we know His love, for we have enjoyed it; and we know His truth, for we have ever found Him faithful. How thankful we should be that this is the nature of true religion. It is not a speculation about which there is uncertainty. It is not a doubtful opinion. It is knowledge. It is a reality of which we may know ourselves. They who attained it may say 'we know him'" (James Morgan, 1799-1873).

But is this really the case with all of God's children, uniformly so in their consciousness? No, indeed, far from it. Some of them are often full of doubts and made to question the reality of their relationship to Christ. And there is no little occasion for them to do so. As they behold what shipwreck some have made who started out so promisingly, apparently progressing more swiftly than themselves, they ask, Shall I end thus? As they hear the pratings of graceless professors who talk so fluently of divine things, and behold their carnal, and worldly lives, they wonder if their knowledge of Christ be only a theoretical and theological one. As they are frequently made painfully conscious of the risings of indwelling sin, and often have to cry "Iniquities prevail against me" (Psa 65:3), they are fearful of being deceived on this important matter. Yet none of these occasions affords a legitimate reason why any born-again soul should call into question his regeneration or saving knowledge of Christ. As Charles H. Spurgeon (1834-1892) said on this verse, "This ought not to be. It is too solemn a thing to be left to chance or conjecture. I believe there are saved ones who do not know of a surety that they are saved. They are raising the question often that never ought to be a question.

"No man ought to be content to leave that unsettled, for mark thee, if thou art not a saved man, thou art a condemned man. If thou art not forgiven, thy sins lie on thee. Thou art now in danger of hell if thou art not secure of heaven, for there is no place between these two. Thou art either a child of God, or not. Why say ye 'I hope I am a child of God, yet I do not know; I hope, yet know not I am forgiven?' In such suspense ye ought not to be. Thou art either one or the other—either a saint or a sinner, either saved or lost, either walking in the light or walking in the darkness." We fully endorse those sentiments, for there is scriptural warrant for the same. John tells us that one of the very purposes for which the Spirit moved him to pen this epistle was to give assurance to the hearts of God's people: "These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe [more confidently] on the name of the Son of God" (5:13). Thus one of its chief designs is to resolve all doubts and displace them with certainty.

That declaration of 5:13, shows that it is of deep importance that the Christian should know he has eternal life. For to be in doubt thereof is to reflect upon the veracity of God, whose Word declares that he has (Joh 5:24). It is to call into question the gracious work of the Spirit within him. It is much to his own spiritual loss. It deprives him of the greatest comfort which any soul can experience in this life, for to be assured that Christ is mine and I am his is a perennial joy and unfailing consolation under the heaviest trial. As one has said, "you who are living on 'perhappes' and 'maybes' are living on dust and ashes." Such

knowledge as John here treats of inspires confidence. What assurance it gives in prayer to know that I am making requests unto my Father—we can never ask believingly until such be the case. What courage it conveys for meeting temptations—shall a child of God panic and flee before the devil? It kindles the highest degree of love. To know that I know Him cannot but draw out my affections unto Him, and cause me to ask “What shall I render unto the Lord for all His benefits unto me?”

Now here in our text we are supplied with a sure recipe for the attainment and preservation of this sound state of the soul’s health. It is the first of seven passages in this epistle wherein are made known how a scriptural assurance is secured (for the time being we will leave the reader to search for the other six), namely by a keeping of the divine commandments: “hereby we do know that we know him.” Here is another instance where the same word occurs in a passage with two distinct meanings. To make them clearer we would paraphrase our text thus: In this way may God’s children be sure that they have a saving faith in and acquaintance with Him—by fulfilling His precepts. It is by means of a willing, impartial and habitual compliance with God’s will that we obtain evidence of the genuineness of our profession and supply proof that we really love Him. It is by a walking in subjection to Him that we may be sure we are in the narrow way that leads unto life. It is for this reason that we have entitled our chapter “Obediential Assurance,” for the validity of their persuasion is attested by a practical subjection to God’s authority.

What is the precise force of the “if”?

It is to be duly noted that the apostle was here emulating his Master, for He had clearly taught the same thing: “Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you” (Joh 15:14). Friendship entails obligations—the pleasing of and promoting the interests of one another. As to the design of the “if” in our text, we regard it as being threefold. First, as investigative, a testing of profession or putting to the proof of those who averred a saving knowledge of God. Then, as now, there were many who claimed to know God in Christ, but their knowledge was a barren one. Second, as discriminative, supplying God’s people with a criterion which if put to use would preserve them from being imposed upon by hypocrites. Third, as demonstrative, the sure evidence by which a Christian may determine his own state before God. The tree is known by its fruits, and if mine be bearing that which is spiritual and heavenly it cannot be one of nature’s planting. Thus the force of the “if” is double: hereby we may be assured that we truly know God spiritually providing we keep His commandments, or/and inasmuch as we do so. There cannot be real fellowship with God without its having a vital influence on the heart and a transforming effect upon the life.

Whose precepts are referred to in the “His commandments”?

But who is there who really keeps God’s commandments? All of His people, for whereas the unregenerate are designated “the children of disobedience” (Eph 2:2), the regenerate are addressed “as obedient children” (1Pe 1:14). There is a twofold keeping of God’s commandments: a legal and an evangelical. The former pertains to the Covenant of Works, wherein an absolute and perfect obedience, without failure or cessation, is demanded on pain of death. The latter marks the Covenant of Grace, wherein a filial and sincere obedience, though full of defects, is accepted by God—its blemishes being blotted out by the blood of Christ and its inadequacy covered by His merits. God looks at the heart, and where it beats true unto Him with a genuine desire and determination to please Him—grieving over and confessing that which displeases Him—He accepts the will for the deed. Love fastens not its eyes upon defects. Thus we find God testifying of David, notwithstanding his sad lapses, “He kept my commandments and my statutes” (1Ki 11:34); Christ declaring of His apostles, despite their failures, “They have kept thy word” (Joh 17:6); and the Holy Spirit bearing witness to the patience of Job (Jam 5:11), though he had not a little impatience.

The keeping of God’s commandments signifies and includes that we make His will the rule of our lives, using His Word as a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. That it works effectually in our souls, inclining our hearts and governing our wills. That we hold it in our memories and delight to meditate daily thereon. That we genuinely endeavour and prayerfully strive to perform God’s precepts. That we obey them implicitly, simply because they are God’s commandments, and not because they commend themselves to our reason, are agreeable to our inclinations, or conducive to our interests. That we obey them impartially, for if we be regulated by what God commands, then we shall be by whatsoever He enjoins—without any picking or choosing. That we do so cheerfully, regarding each commandment as an expression of the will of Him who loves us and whom we love and long to please. That we do so perseveringly, for if we really love Him we shall not stop obeying Him. Such obedience is not in order to salvation, but from gratitude for having been saved; nor is it performed in our own strength, but by grace duly sought from above.

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JOSHUA

67. The Challenge Met (11:6-7)

In our last, we considered the divine response made to the formidable movement inaugurated by Jabin and his fellows. The Lord promptly took up the cudgels on behalf of His menaced people. He assured His servant that he need entertain no fear whatever about the outcome, promising him, "I will deliver them up all slain before Israel" (11:6). In like manner is the Christian to be assured, and therefore it is his holy privilege to enter upon and engage in the good fight of faith resting on the sure pledges of God, confident of a successful issue, "He is faithful that promised" (Heb 10:23). The more we meditate upon the veracity of the Promiser the more will faith be strengthened. In proportion as we truly realize that we have to do with One who cannot lie, the greater confidence shall we have in His Word. Instead of being so much occupied with the difficulties of the way (which will but engender doubts), we need to look above unto Him, who has given us such "exceeding great and precious promises" (2Pe 1:4), to be the stay of our hearts, to cheer and gladden us. Those promises are to be treasured up in our minds, for they are both the food of faith to nourish and strengthen it and the fuel of faith to stoke and energize it. Otherwise, it will lack that which is necessary for its activity, as a fire will not burn without wood or coals—thus coldness of heart is due mainly to faith being deprived of its fuel!

There will be little or no success in our spiritual warfare unless we make much of the divine *promises*, and still more of the Promiser Himself. The foes that have to be encountered are far too powerful to be overcome by any might of ours, and therefore must we look to Him whose soldiers we are. If we do so, no matter how great our weakness or formidable the task assigned, the Lord will not fail us, "Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised" (Heb 11:11). There were strong impediments in the way of her faith, and at first, she was staggered by them, but as she regarded the immutability and fidelity of the Promiser, her doubts were stilled, faith prevailed, and strength was given. As Thomas Manton (1620-1677) well said, "Every divine promise has annexed to it the challenge, 'Is anything too hard for the Lord?'" As in Sara's case, so with us, very often there is a fight with unbelief before faith is established on the promise. But instead of suffering obstacles to hinder faith, they should be made a help to it—arguing, Here is a grand opportunity for me to prove the sufficiency of my God. He never promises more than He is able to perform. His word never exceeds His power, "Faithful is he that calleth you, who also *will do it*" (1Th 5:24).

It should be duly considered that this massing of the Canaanites against Israel occurred not soon after they entered the land, nor did they encounter anything like such an opposing force either at Jericho or Ai. No, rather was this trial met with after they had made considerable progress in taking possession of their heritage. Thus it was too with the father of all them that believe—each new test of Abraham's faith was more severe than the preceding ones. And so it is in the Christian life. Thus, it is the mature and *aged warrior* to whom this word is most appropriate, "Be not afraid." Why should Joshua fear? Since God had so wondrously delivered Israel from the bondage of Egypt, overthrown Pharaoh and his chariots in the Red Sea, provided for them all through their wilderness journey, miraculously opened the Jordan for them to enter into Canaan, most certainly He was not going to abandon them now and allow them to perish at the hands of Jabin and his armies. No indeed, when God begins a work He never stops when it is but half done, but always completes and perfects it (Phi 1:6). So it was with Israel under Joshua; and so it is with every elect vessel, "Whom he justified, them he also glorified" (Rom 8:30). Much takes place between the one and the other, but though death itself occurs (as has been the case with His people for the last six thousand years), the former guarantees the latter.

Let then the tried and aged pilgrim take comfort from the Lord's dealings with Israel, and give no place whatever to Satan's lie that God has tired of him. Like the fiend that he is, the devil seeks to attack us most fiercely when much oppressed by circumstances or at our weakest physically. When natural vigour has abated and the increasing weight of years be felt, he will seek to inject the most God-dishonouring doubts into the minds of His people. Reject them with abhorrence, and rest on the divine assurance, "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee" (Heb 13:5). He who has cared for His child all through the years most certainly will not forsake him or her in the time of old age. He who has responded to your cries in former days will not turn a deaf ear now that your voice has grown feeble. "He shall deliver thee in six troubles [has he not done so?]; yea, in seven [the final one] there shall no evil touch thee" (Job 10:19). Past deliver-

ances are sure earnest of future ones, "And even to your old age I am he: and even to hoar hairs will I carry you: I have made, and I *will* bear: even I will carry, and will deliver you" (Isa 46:4). Those are the "I wills" of Him who is the truth. Rest your whole weight on them.

But resting upon the promises does not mean that the saint may shirk any of his duties, or even relax in the performing of them. Rather do such divine assurances involve corresponding obligations. That is clear from the two halves of the verses quoted in our opening paragraph, "Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering: (*for* he is faithful that promised)" (Heb 10:23). That "for" is very forceful, supplying us with a powerful motive unto steadfastness and diligence. Since God be faithful to us, we ought to be faithful unto Him. To hold fast the profession of our faith is a comprehensive expression which includes every aspect of the Christian life, and the knowledge that God will infallibly make good His word unto us is to animate unto fidelity in the carrying out of its engagements. The divine promises are not only comforting pillows on which to rest our weary heads, but cordials to strengthen, spurs to move us, encouragements for us to press forward along the way, arguments for us to make use of in prayer. The divine promises are the food of faith, and faith is for producing good works. That is the practical application which the apostle made of the divine assurances in 1 Corinthians 15:54-57, "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord."

So far from annulling the believer's responsibility or countenancing any slackness in the discharge of the same, spiritual privileges involve additional obligations. But alas, man is such a creature of extremes that even a Christian, when he be deeply impressed with the aspect of the truth, is very apt to become so absorbed with it as to lose sight of and leave out of his reckoning the counter-balancing aspect of the truth. Because *God* performs everything for us, it does not mean there is nothing for *us* to do. If we ascribe the glory unto Him to whom alone it is due, we shall freely own to the Lord, "for *thou* also hast wrought all our works in us" (Isa 26:12); nevertheless, that does not alter the fact He has bidden us "work out *your own* salvation with fear and trembling" (Phi 2:12), yet that too is immediately followed with, "For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." There the *two sides* of the truth are placed in juxtaposition, and notice well the order in which they are set before us. First the enforcing of our duty, and then the encouraging motive to inspire us therein. The latter is not added to induce indolence, but in order to encourage effort. We have no scriptural warrant to expect that God will show Himself strong in our behalf unless we make conscience of His precepts and use the means He has appointed. Our bread is divinely guaranteed (Isa 33:16), nevertheless, it must be labored for (Joh 6:27).

The relation of Philippians 2:13 to 2:12 is a double one, being designed both to cheer and to humble us. The child of God is very conscious of his weakness, and knowing that the world, the flesh, and the devil are arrayed against him, and contemplating the tasks set before him—tasks which are spiritual and far above the compass of mere nature—he asks, How can I possibly accomplish them? The answer is, divine assistance is assured. The believer is not left to himself, but the omnipotent God operates within as well as for him, and therefore is he to go forth in the confidence that divine grace will be sufficient for him. Help is indeed needed by him, and if he conducts himself aright that help will certainly be given. On the other hand, he is required to work out his own salvation "with fear and trembling," that is, in a spirit of humility and lowliness. But how is that possible unto those who are proud and independent? We are all of us Pharisees by nature—boastful and prone to self-glorifying. How then can we be emptied of such a spirit? And again Philippians 2:13 supplies the answer. From this consideration—since it be God who works in me all that is praiseworthy, then I have nothing to boast of. I am constantly to remind myself that it is God who makes me to differ from those of my fellows whom He leaves to themselves. The strongest inducement possible to produce a self-abasing spirit is the realization that, apart from Christ, we can do nothing (Joh 15:5).

Above, we have said that there will be little or no success in our spiritual warfare unless we make much of the divine promises. Let us now add that the same is equally true of the divine *precepts*. That also is taught us in Joshua 11:6, for immediately after assuring His servant, "Be not afraid because of them: for to morrow about this time will I deliver them up all slain before Israel," the Lord added, "*thou* shall hough their horses and burn their chariots with fire." God's promises are not designed to further slothfulness, but to stimulate to the performance of duty. God does not work in us to promote idleness, but to "will and to do of his good pleasure." When the farmer sees God working by softening the ground with gentle showers, he is encouraged to plough and plant his fields. When the yachtsman perceives God working by stirring the becalmed air with a breeze, he is encouraged to hoist his sails. So it is spiritually. Grace is given the regen-

erate for them to *use*—“stir up the gift of God which is in thee” (2Ti 1:6). We are to “work out” what God has wrought in us, yet in complete dependence upon Him. We must beware of abusing the truth of divine operations and take to heart the warning of the lazy servant who hid his talent in the earth.

To be a successful warrior I must be able to say with David (and none obtained more military victories than he!), “Thy testimonies have I taken as an heritage for ever: for they are the rejoicing of my heart” (Psa 114:111). We agree with Charles Bridges (1794-1869) that when “testimony” occurs in the singular number, it has reference to the Bible as a whole—the entire revelation of God’s will unto mankind—but found in the plural, it is chiefly the preceptive parts of Scripture which are in view. This is borne out by verse 138: “Thy testimonies that thou hast *commanded*,” and “I have *kept* thy precepts and thy testimonies” (168). David had chosen God’s statutes or precepts as his “heritage” to lie upon. Not the world did he select for his happiness, but a heritage of holiness and wisdom, one which would not fail in time and one that would endure for ever. He made this choice because he realized their value—that they are like their Author, namely, “righteous and very faithful” (138), and because he loved them exceedingly (167). So too did the apostle bear witness: “I *delight* in the law of God after the inward man” (Rom 7:22)—only then will our obedience be acceptable unto Him. “I have kept thy precepts and thy testimonies,” and as Spurgeon said, “If we keep God’s testimonies, they will keep us—right in opinion, comfortable in spirit, holy in conversation, hopeful in expectation.”

The divine testimonies are as necessary and essential unto the believer in his spiritual warfare as are the divine assurances. It is the fight of faith which we are called to wage, and, as God’s promises are its food, so His precepts are its *directors*. Faith has three great tasks to perform: to trust implicitly in God, to render obedience to His revealed will, and steadfastly to resist all that is opposed thereto. The promises provide encouragement for the first, the precepts light for the second, and the Lord Himself must be looked unto for strength for the third. So it was in Joshua 11:6. The divine promise then was immediately followed by a precept, Joshua was required to hough the horses of the Canaanites and burn their chariots with fire. Matthew Henry (1662-1714) pointed out that this new campaign upon which Joshua was now entering “was a glorious one, no less illustrious than the former in the success of it, though in respect of miracles, it was inferior to it in glory. The wonders God then wrought for them, were to initiate and encourage them to act vigorously themselves. Thus the war carried in by the preaching of the Gospel, against Satan’s kingdom, was at first furthered by miracles; but the warfare by then was sufficiently proved to be of God, and the managers of it are now left to the ordinary assistance of divine grace in the use of the sword of the Spirit, and must not expect hailstones, or the standing still of the sun.”

The order given to Joshua for the houghing of the horses of the Canaanites and the burning of their chariots involved, of course, the vanquishing of them in battle. Accordingly we are told, “So Joshua came, and all the people of war with him, against them by the waters of Merom suddenly: and they fell upon them” (verse 7). Though it was the Lord Himself who had accepted the challenge of Jabin and his confederates, and had assured His servant that He would deliver them up all slain before Israel on the morrow, this did not signify that he and his men were to remain passive—mere spectators of God’s working. He was indeed about to act mightily *for* them, yet at the same time *by and through them*! This also needs to be made clear and emphasized in certain quarters today—not only where hyper-Calvinism or a species of fatalism holds sway, but also where a certain type of the “victorious life” teaching is misleading souls. For the one is as paralyzing as the other. The Christian is informed that the reason why he so often yields to external temptations or is overcome by indwelling sin is because he is making the great mistake of trying to fight his foes personally; that they will never be conquered until he, “by faith,” turns them over to Christ and counts upon His vanquishing them for him; that the battle is not his but the Lord’s—that He triumphed over Satan and all his hosts at the cross—and that if we yield ourselves completely to Him, His victory will be ours without any effort on our part.

There is just sufficient veneer of the truth to give this line of teaching a plausible appearance, yet there is also more than enough repudiation of Scripture to convince all who are subject to God’s Word of its error. Seemingly it supplies a blessed solution to the most distressing problem in the Christian life, and at the same time appears to honour Christ, but in fact, it repudiates human responsibility, and falsifies the teaching of our Lord. Faith is not only to rest upon the divine promises and rely upon what Christ has done for His people, it is also required to bring forth good works, run in the way of His commandments, follow the example He has left us. When one of the leaders of this modern movement declares, “As I trust Christ in surrender, there need be *no fight* against sin, but complete freedom from the power and even the desire of sin,” he not only inculcates what is contrary to the recorded experience of God’s people in all ages, but he

takes direct issue with Scripture itself. The Bible speaks of “striving against sin” (Heb 12:4), wrestling against principalities and powers (Eph 6:12), bids the believer “fight the good fight of faith” (1Ti 6:12), enjoins him to “endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ...that he may please him who has chosen him to be a *soldier*” (2Ti 2:3-4), and calls upon him to “put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil” (Eph 6:11).

It is obvious that the above references, and others of a similar nature, would be quite useless, meaningless, if the ideal state of Christian living were a merely *passive* thing, and if it be summed up in the catchword of one of its popular advocates, “Let go, and let God.” Most assuredly, the believer cannot gain the victory by his own powers; instead, he is to seek strength from the Lord, and then to use the same actively and strenuously. To speak of a *passive* “overcomer” is to employ words without meaning. To make the believer a mere onlooker of the Lord’s exploits is to reduce him to something less than a moral agent. “Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord” must not be so misunderstood and misapplied as to neutralize the exhortation “Let us run with patience [i.e. perseverance] the race that is set before us” (Heb 12:1). “Running,” like “wrestling” and “fighting,” is a figure which expresses the putting forth of vigorous endeavour. True, we are to be “looking unto Jesus” while thus engaged, yet *run* we must. True also that the Christian is to reckon on the blessed fact that his Saviour has triumphed over Satan, and yet that does not alter the fact that *he* is required to “resist the devil.” True, God has promised to tread Satan under our feet shortly, yet he is not there now, and more than Christ’s enemies have yet been made His footstool (Heb 10:13). The ultimate victory is sure, yet it has to be *fought for* by each one of us.

Thus it was in Joshua 11. Divine assurance that Jabin and his army would be slain on the morrow had been given, yet that did not release Israel from performing *their* duty. God had made no announcement that He would destroy the Canaanites by fire from heaven, as He did the cities of the plain (Gen 19) or that He would cause the earth to open her mouth and swallow them up as in the case of Korah and his company (Num 16). Instead, He had promised to “deliver them up all *slain* before Israel”—a word which imported, according to its common usage, being killed in battle. That His servant so understood it is evident, for we are told that he and all the men of war with him “fell upon them.” Joshua did not seek a defensive position and dig trenches for the protection of his men, and then sit down and wait for the Lord to work. No, with full confidence in his Master’s promise, he took the initiative, acted aggressively, and launched an attack upon the foe—boldly, suddenly, unexpectedly. God had said “to morrow I will deliver them up,” and, taking Him at His word, Joshua delayed not. Probably *that* was the very last thing which the hosts of Jabin were expecting, and they would be thrown into the utmost confusion from the very outset.



THE DOCTRINE OF HUMAN DEPRAVITY

6. *Its Nature, Part 3*

We have already pointed out a number of things in which the depravity of human nature *does not* consist, and, in our last, some of the inestimable blessings of which man *was deprived* by the fall. We now turn to the affirmative side, or a consideration of those evils which *have come* upon human nature as the result of our first parents' apostasy from God. We do not agree with those who teach that what is transmitted from Adam and Eve to their descendants, via the channel of natural generation and propagation, is a merely negative thing—the absence of good. Rather are we fully persuaded that something positive, an active principle of evil, is communicated from parents to their children. While we do not consider that sin is a substance or material thing, we are sure that it is very much more than a mere abstraction and nonentity. Man's very nature is corrupted. The virus of evil is in his blood. While there is privation in sin—a nonconformity to God's Law—there is also a real positive potency in it to mischief. Sin is a power, as holiness is a power, but a power working to disorder and death.

It has been said by some orthodox divines that "Men's natures are not now become sinful by putting anything in them to defile them, but by taking something from them which should have preserved them holy," But we much prefer the statement of the Westminster Catechism: "The sinfulness of that estate into which man fell consisteth in the guilt of Adam's first sin, the want of the righteousness wherein he was created, *and* the corruption of his nature, whereby he is utterly indisposed and disabled, and made opposite unto all that is spiritually good, and wholly inclined to all evil, and that continually, which is commonly called original sin, and from which sin proceed all actual transgressions." That fallen human nature is not only devoid of all godliness, but also thoroughly impregnated with everything that is devilish, may surely be argued from the two different kinds of sin of which every man is guilty—those of omission, wherein there is failure to perform good works, and those of commission, or positive contumacy of the law of God. Something answerable to *both* of those must exist in our sinful nature, or otherwise we should predicate a cause inadequate to produce the effect. While the absence of holiness explains the former, only the presence of positive evil accounts for the latter.

There are many names given in Scripture to original sin or the depravity of human nature which serve to cast light upon its nature. The following list makes no claim to being complete, though it probably contains the most significant ones. It is called the plague of the heart (1Ki 8:38), "foolishness bound up in the heart" (Pro 22:15), "the stony heart" (Eze 11:19), "the evil treasure" of the heart (Mat 12:35). It is designated "the poison of asps" (Rom 3:13), "the old man," because it is derived from the first man and is part and parcel of us since the beginning of our own existence, and "the body of sin" (Rom 6:6), for it is a whole assembly of evils, "sin that dwelleth in me" (Rom 7:17). It is denominated "another law in my members" (Rom 7:23) because of its unvarying nature and power, "the law of sin and death" (Rom 8:2), "the carnal mind" which is "enmity against God" (Rom 8:7). It is frequently spoken of as "the flesh" (Gal 5:17) because conveyed by natural generation, "the old man, which is corrupt" (Eph 4:22), "the sin which doth so easily beset us" (Heb 7:1), man's "own lust" (Jam 1:14) which inclines him to evil deeds.

It should be quite plain from the above definitions and descriptions of congenital sin that the human constitution is not merely negatively defective but positively depraved. There is not only in man's heart the lack of conformity unto the divine Law, but a positive deformity. Not only is the natural man without any desire for holiness, he is born with a disposition which is now radically opposed thereto, and therefore not only has he no love for God, but he is full of enmity against Him. Sin is also likened to "leaven" (1Co 5:6-7), and that is far more than the negation of the right savour which should be in bread, namely, a positive sourness which affects it and makes it unsavoury. Sin is not only the absence of beauty, but the presence of horrid ugliness; not simply the unlovely, but the hateful; not only the want of order, but real disorder. As "righteousness" expresses objectively the qualities which constitute what is good, and "holiness" that subjective state which is the root of righteousness, so *sin* includes not only outward acts of transgression, but the evil and rotten state of the whole inner man which inclines to and animates those external iniquities. Very far from being only an "infirmity," indwelling sin is a loathsome disease.

In seeking to define and describe the nature of depravity from the positive side, we would say, first, that the fall has brought man's soul *into subjection to death*. But it must be remembered that for the soul to be under the dominion of death is a very different thing from the body being so. When the body dies it be-

comes as inactive and insensible as a stone. Not so in the case of the soul, for it still retains its vitality and all its powers. Fallen man is a rational, moral, responsible agent, but his internal being is thoroughly deranged. Alienated from the life of God, he can neither think nor will, love nor hate, in conformity to the divine Rule. All the faculties of the soul are in full operation, but they are all unholy, and consequently, man can no more fulfill the design of his being than does a physical corpse. Dreadful and solemn are the analogies between the two. As a dead body is devoid of the principle which formerly vitalized it, so the soul has been abandoned by the Holy Spirit who once inhabited it. As a physical corpse rapidly becomes a mass of corruption and a repulsive object, such is the depraved soul of man unto the thrice holy God. As a lifeless body is incapable of renewing itself, so is the spiritually dead soul completely powerless to better itself.

“And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph 2:1). “The design of the apostle in this and some following verses is to show the exceeding sinfulness of sin, and to set forth the sad estate and condemnation of man by nature, and to magnify the riches of the grace of God, and represent the exceeding greatness of His power by conversion” (John Gill, 1697-1771). More clearly and fully did Thomas Goodwin, the Puritan, expound the striking coherency of this passage with its context. In the nineteenth verse of the preceding chapter, Paul had prayed that saints might duly apprehend and appreciate the greatness of that power which had been exercised by God in their salvation—that it was precisely the same as the divine might put forth for the resurrection and exaltation of His Son and which had now wrought an analogous change in them. The mighty power which had quickened Christ had also quickened them. Thus the blessed scope and end of the Holy Spirit here was to bring out the *answerable parallel* or show the analogous change which God had so wondrously wrought in them—that, what had been effected for Christ their Head, had been also in them His members, the one being of glorious pattern of the other.

In connection with Christ’s exaltation, three things were conspicuous. First, the condition of humiliation and death from which He was delivered and raised. Second, the sublime state of life and honour unto which He was exalted. Third, the Author thereof: God, whose almighty power was eminently manifested by the vast difference there was between those two states. Corresponding to the glorious miracles, described in the closing verses of Ephesians 1, is what is so graphically portrayed in the opening verses of chapter 2. First, the dreadful state in which God’s elect were by nature, namely, one of death in sin and such a death as brought its subjects under complete bondage to sin and Satan, so that they walk not in conformity to the divine law, but according to the corrupt maxims and customs of the world—being guided not by the Holy Spirit, but energized and directed by the evil spirit, here denominated “the prince of the power of the air.” Without any regard for God’s will or concern for His glory, they gave free rein to the lusts of the flesh and the desires of their carnal minds. But second, notwithstanding their horrible condition, God, who is rich in mercy, had raised them from the grave of sin and made them one with Christ in the heavens, by a vital and indissoluble union. And third, this marvel had been effected solely by the invincible power and amazing grace of God, without any co-operation of theirs.

That death which had come upon man’s soul is at least a threefold one. First, he is dead in law, like a murderer in the condemned cell awaiting execution. Second, he is dead vitally, without a single spark of spiritual life. Thus he is totally dead unto God and holiness, cast out of His favour without any power to recover it. He is dead in opposition to justification, and also dead in opposition to being regenerated and sanctified. And third, he is dead to all that is excellent. As “life” is not simply existence, but well-being, so “death” is not the negation of existence, but the absence of all the real pleasures of existence. In its scriptural sense, life signifies happiness and blessedness; death, wretchedness and woe. As the utmost natural misery which can befall man is for him to die—for “a living dog is better than a dead lion” (Ecc 9:4)—so spiritual death is the strongest expression which can be used to import our moral wretchedness. The former divests him of all those excellencies which are proper to him as man, but the latter makes him worse than a stone, for when he is dead he stinks, which a stone does not. So it is spiritually; the natural man is not only without any comeliness in the sight of God, but he is a stench in His nostrils.

In the first three verses of Ephesians 2, “there is an exact description of the state of man by nature, so complete and compendious a one as is nowhere together, that I know, in the whole Book of God” (Goodwin). The careful student will have observed that there is one detail in it upon which the Holy Spirit has placed special emphasis, namely, the one we are here treating of, for in verse 5 He *repeats* the words “dead in sin.” Three things are outstanding in sin, its guilt, its pollution, and its power, and in each of those respects man is in his natural estate “dead in sin.” “Thou art but a dead man,” said God to Abimelech (Gen 20:3). That is, thou art guilty of death by reason of this act of thine. It is said of Ephraim that “when he of-

fended in Baal, he *died*—sentence of condemnation came upon him (Hos 13:1). So of its pollution, for in Hebrews 6:1, we read of “repentance from *dead* works,” because every deed the natural man performs issues from a principle of corruption. So too of its power, for every sin man commits disables him the more unto God; his very activity in sin *is* his death, and the more lively he be in sin, the more dead will he become toward God.

That there *is* such a threefold death of which fallen man is the subject is further evident from the nature of the work of grace in the elect. For their spiritual death must needs answer to their spiritual quickening, and that is clearly threefold. There is a threefold life to which we are restored by Christ. There is, first, a life of justification from the guilt of sin and the condemnation and curse of the Law—termed by Christ “passing from death unto life” (Joh 5:24), and by the apostle “justification of life” (Rom 5:18). This is entirely objective, having respect to our status or standing before God, and is a greater relative change than for a condemned murderer to receive pardon. Second, there is a life of regeneration from the power and dominion of sin, called by Christ being “born again” (Joh 3:3), when a new nature or principle of holiness is communicated. This is wholly subjective, having respect to the change wrought in the soul when it is divinely quickened. Third, there is a life of sanctification from the pollution of sin, promised by God through the prophet, “Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you” (Eze 36:25). This is something experiential, consisting of a purifying of the heart from the love of sin, referred to as “the washing of regeneration” (Ti 3:5). The first is judicial, the second spiritual, and the third moral—the three comprising the principal parts of God’s so-great salvation—the glorification of the saint is yet future.

Second, the fall has brought man *into hopeless bondage to sin*. When the Holy Spirit assures the saints, “For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace” (Rom 6:14), He necessarily signifies that all those still under the covenant of works *are* beneath sin’s dominion, that it holds full sway over them. As the Lord Jesus declared, “Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin” (Joh 8:34), that is to say, sin is his *master*. Nevertheless, he yields voluntary and ready submission to sin’s orders, “Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness” (Rom 6:16). No one outside themselves coerces and compels them. The dominion of sin is not even an indwelling force against the will and endeavours of those who are under it, but it is connatural and congenial to them. Even though, occasionally, conscience feebly protests, its voice is silenced by the clamourings of lust, to which the will freely complies. The dominion of sin over the natural man is entire, for it pervades the spirit with all its powers, the soul with all its faculties, the body with all its members and it does so at all times and under all circumstances.

Sin is likened unto a monarch ruling over his subjects—“as sin hath *reigned* unto death” (Rom 5:21). Its kingdom is world-wide, for all the children of Adam are its subjects. Sin occupies the throne of the human heart, until almighty grace deposes it. Sin has taken possession of the complete soul, and under its direction and influence it constantly acts. The mind is in subjection to evil as a governing principle which determines all its volitions and acts, for sin’s lustings are so many imperial and imperious edicts. Yet we say again, this rule of sin is not a force upon the mind to which it makes opposition, for the soul is a *subject*—as a king continues to occupy the throne only by the consent and free allegiance of *his* subjects. While the soul cannot but will evil because of the reign of sin, yet its volitions are spontaneous. The dominion of sin consists in its determining influence upon the will, and this sway it retains to the end, unless victorious grace makes a conquest of the soul by the implantation of a contrary principle, which opposes the influence of indwelling sin, and disposes the will to contrary acts. Let conscience remonstrate never so sharply against the fatal choice, sin ever regulates the decisions and deeds of the natural man.

This dominion of sin “is not a propensity to some particular evil, but an inclination to deviate from the rule of our duty taken in its *full compass*. Yet, as the mind is incapable of exerting itself in all manner of ways and about all sorts of objects at once and in one instant, it is sometimes acting in one manner and sometimes in another as it is variously affected by the different objects about which it is conversant; but all its actions are evil. And those who study their hearts most will best understand the surprising variety of ways wherein evil concupiscence acts its part in the soul. In the several stages of human life, this sway of sin discovers itself. In childhood, by folly proper to that age. In youth, it exerts itself in various ways, by a low ambition, pride, and a strange fondness for sinful pleasures. In the state of manhood, by a pursuit of the transitory things of this world, and this is often under specious pretences of more extensive usefulness; but,

in fact, men are acted upon by a spirit of covetousness. In an advanced age, by impatience, etc.” (John Brine, 1703-1765).

The dominion of sin is made to appear more plainly and openly in some than in others, by their following a course of gross and flagitious evil, though it is just as real and great in those whose wickedness is more confined to the mind and heart. Scripture speaks not only of the “filthiness of the flesh,” but of “the spirit,” too (2Co 7:1), i.e. vile imaginations, envy and hatred of our fellows, inward rebellion, and ragings against God when His will crosses ours. A sovereign God permits and controls the direction and form it takes in each one. Our lot is cast in a day when the power and reign of sin is more manifest in the world than it has been for several generations. Nor is the reason for this far to seek. It is not because human nature has undergone any deterioration, for that is impossible—it has been rotten to the core since the time of Cain and Abel. No, rather is it because God would the more evidence the lie of Evolutionism and men’s proud boasts of “human progress” by increasingly removing His restraining hand, and thereby allowing the horrid corruptions of men’s hearts to become more visible and obvious. There are indeed degrees of wickedness, but none in the root from which it proceeds Every man’s nature is equally depraved, and everyone in an unregenerate state is wholly dominated by it.

So mighty is the power of sin that it has made all the sons of men its slaves. Few indeed realize that they are held fast by the cords of their sins (Pro 5:22), and still fewer wherein its strength lies. Sin is a powerful thing in itself, for it has a will of its own (Joh 1:13), a mind of its own (Rom 8:6-7), passions (Rom 7:5), yea, fiery ones (Rom 1:27); but as 1 Corinthians 15:56, informs us, “The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law.” The first part of that statement is obvious, but the second calls for some explanation. Sin is manifestly what puts venom into the dart of death and gives it its power to hurt and slay. Sin places a painful sting in death from the fact that it was what brought death into the world; had there been no sin, there had been no death. But more. It is sin, unpardoned sin, which makes death so dreadful, for not only does the king of terrors put a final end to all the pleasures of sin, but it conducts its subject unto certain judgment. But wherein is the Law of God “the strength of sin”? The Law is “holy...and just, and good” (Rom 7:12). How then can it be the strength of that which is corrupt, evil and abominable?

Most assuredly, the Law does not give the slightest encouragement to sin, rather does it sternly forbid it. The Law is not the essential but the accidental strength of sin, because of sin’s inherent depravity, as the pure rays of the sun result in the horrid steams and noxious stench rising from a dunghill. As the presence of an enemy calls into exercise the malice which lies dormant in the heart, so the holy requirements of the Law presenting themselves before man’s corrupt heart stir it unto active opposition. Thereby the exceeding sinfulness of sin is the more fully demonstrated, for its potency to evil is drawn forth by any restraint being laid upon it—the more a thing be forbidden, the more it is desired. Though fire and water be opposite elements, that is not so evident while there is distance between, but let them meet together and great is the spluttering and striving betwixt them. If the heart of man were pure, the Law would be acceptable unto it, but since it be depraved, there is fierce resentment against its spiritual precepts.

As the Law makes no provision for pardon, the natural effect of guilt is to widen the breach between the sinner and God. Sensible (as in some measure the most degraded are) of the divine displeasure, he is prone to withdraw farther and farther from the divine presence. Every augmentation of guilt is an augmentation of his estrangement. The more the sinner sins, the wider becomes the gulf between himself and God. This it is which gives strength to sin. It provokes the malignity of the heart against the Law, against all holy order, against the Judge. It exasperates the spirit of rebellion to unwanted fierceness, and makes the sinner desperate in his sin, causing its subjects to become increasingly reckless, and, as they perceive the brevity of life, to plunge more eagerly into profligacy. As frosty weather causes the fire to burn more fiercely, so the Law renders man’s enmity against God more violent. So Saul of Tarsus found it in his experience, for when the divine prohibition, “Thou shalt not covet,” was applied in power to his heart, he tells us that “sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence” (Rom 7:7-8).



INTERPRETATION OF THE SCRIPTURES

Part 8

8. The need of *collecting and collating* all passages dealing with the same subject, where cognate terms or different expressions are used. This is essential if the expositor is to be preserved from erroneous conceptions thereof, and in order for him to obtain the full mind of the Spirit thereon. Take as a simple example those well-known words, "Ask, and it shall be given you" (Mat 7:7). Few texts have been more grievously perverted than that one. Many have regarded it as a sort of blank cheque, which anybody—no matter what his state of soul or manner of walk—may fill in just as he pleases, and that he has but to present the same at the throne of grace and God stands pledged to honour it. Such a travesty of the truth would not deserve refutation were it not now being trumpeted so loudly in some quarters. James 4:3 expressly states of some, "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss"—some who "ask" do *not* receive! And why! Because theirs is but a carnal asking—"that ye may consume it upon your own lusts"—and therefore a holy God denies them.

Asking God in prayer is one thing; asking becomingly, rightly, acceptably and effectually is quite another. If we would ascertain *how* the latter is to be done, the Scriptures must be searched for the answer. Thus, in order to ensure a divine hearing, we must approach God through the Mediator, "Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you" (Joh 16:23). But to ask the Father in His name signifies very much more than just uttering the words "grant it for Christ's sake." Among other things, it signifies asking in Christ's person, as identified with and united to Him; asking for that which accords with His perfections and will be for His glory; asking for that which *He* would were He in our place. Again, we must ask in faith (Mar 11:24), for God will place no premium upon unbelief. Said Christ to His disciples, "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you" (Joh 15:7), where two further conditions are stipulated. In order to receive, we must ask according to God's will (1Jo 5:14) as made known in His Word. What a deplorable misuse has been made of Matthew 7:7, through failure to interpret it in the light of collateral passages!

Another example of failure at this point is the frequent use made of Galatians 6:15, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature" (or "new creation"). It is most proper and pertinent to use that verse when showing that neither the ceremonial ordinances of Judaism nor the baptism and Lord's supper of Christianity are of any worth in rendering us meet for the inheritance of the saints in light. So too, though much less frequently, we are reminded that, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love" (Gal 5:6), that is out of gratitude to God for His unspeakable Gift, and not from legal motives—only for what they may obtain. But how very rarely does the pulpit quote, "Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God" (1Co 7:19)—that which respects our submission to the divine authority, our walking in subjection to God's will, is omitted. It is only by placing these three verses side by side that we obtain a balanced view. We are not vitally united to Christ unless we have been born again; we are not born again unless we possess a faith that works by love; and we have not this saving faith unless it be evidenced by a keeping of God's commandments.

It is the duty of the expositor to gather together the various descriptions and exemplifications given in Scripture of any particular thing, rather than to frame a formal definition of its nature, for it is in this way that the Holy Spirit has taught us to conceive of it. Take the simple *act of saving faith*, and observe the numerous and quite different expressions used to depict it. It is portrayed as believing on the Lord Jesus Christ (Act 16:31), or the reposing of the soul's confidence in Him. As a coming to Him (Mat 11:28), which implies the forsaking of all that is opposed to Him. As a receiving of Him (Joh 1:12), as He is freely offered to sinners in the Gospel. As a fleeing to Him for refuge (Heb 6:18), as the manslayer sought asylum in one of the cities provided for that purpose (Num 35:6). As a looking unto Him (Isa 45:22), as the bitten Israelites unto the serpent upon the pole (Num 21:9). As an acceptance of God's testimony, and thereby setting to our seal that He is true (Joh 3:33). As the entering of a gate (Mat 7:13) or door (Joh 10:9). As an act of complete surrender or giving of ourselves to the Lord (2Co 8:5), as a woman does when she marries a man.

The act of saving faith is also set forth as a calling upon the Lord (Rom 10:13), as did sinking Peter (Mat 14:30), and the dying thief. As a trusting in Christ (Eph 1:13) as the great Physician, counting upon

His sufficiency to heal our desperate diseases. As a resting in the Lord (Psa 37:7), as on a sure foundation (Isa 28:16). As an act of appropriation or eating (Joh 6:51) to satisfy an aching void within. As a committal (2Ti 1:12)—as a man deposits his money in a bank for safe custody, so we are to put our souls into the hands of Christ for time and eternity (cf. Luke 23:46). As faith in His blood (Rom 3:25). As a belief of the truth (2Th 2:13). As an act of obedience unto God's holy commandment (2Pe 2:21) in complying with the terms of the Gospel (Rom 10:16). As a loving of the Lord Jesus Christ (1Co 16:22). As a turning unto the Lord (Act 11:21)—which implies a turning from the world. As a receiving of the witness of God (1Jo 10:9-10) as an all-sufficient ground of assurance, without the evidence of feeling or anything else. As a taking of the water of life (Rev 22:17). Most of these twenty expressions are figurative, and therefore better fitted than any formal definition to convey to our minds a more vivid concept of the act and to preserve from a one-sided view of it.

Much harm has been done by incompetent "novices" when treating of the subject of *regeneration*, by confining themselves to a single term—"born again." This is only one of many figures used in Scripture to describe that miracle of grace which is wrought in the soul when he passes from death unto life and is brought out of darkness into God's marvellous light. It is termed a new birth because a divine life is communicated and there is the commencement of a new experience. But it is also likened to a spiritual resurrection, which presents a very different line of thought, and to a "renewing" (Col 3:10) which imports a change in the original individual. It is the person who is divinely quickened and not merely a "nature" which is begotten of God. "Ye must be born again" (Joh 3:7), not merely something *in you* must be—"he is born of God" (1Jo 3:9). The same person who was spiritually dead—his whole being alienated from God—is then made alive; his whole being reconciled to Him. This must be so, otherwise there would be no preservation of the *identity* of the individual. It is a new birth of the individual himself, and not of something in him. The nature is never changed, but the person is—relatively, not absolutely.

If we limit ourselves to the figure of the new birth when considering the great change wrought in one whom God saves, not only will a very inadequate concept of the same be obtained, but a thoroughly erroneous one. In other passages it is spoken of as an illuminating of the mind (Act 26:13), a searching and convicting of the conscience (Rom 7:9), a renovating of the heart (Eze 11:19), a subduing of the will (Psa 110:3), a bringing of our thoughts into subjection to Christ (2Co 10:5), a writing of God's Law on the heart (Heb 8:10). In some passages something is said to be removed from the individual (Deu 30:6; Eze 36:26)—the love of sin, enmity against God; while in others something is communicated (Rom 5:5; 1Jo 5:20). The figures of creation (Eph 2:10), renewing (Ti 3:5), and resurrection (1Jo 3:14) are also employed. In some passages this miracle appears to be a completed thing (1Co 6:11; Col 1:12), in others, as a process yet going on (2Co 3:18; Phi 1:6). Though the work of grace be one, yet it is many-sided. Its subject is a composite creature and his salvation affects every part of his complex being.

Physical birth is the bringing into this world of a creature, a complete personality, which before conception had no existence whatever. But the one regenerated by God had a complete personality *before* he was born again. Regeneration is not the creation of an individual which hitherto existed not, but the spiritualizing of one who already exists—the renewing and renovating of one whom sin has unfitted for communion with God, by bestowing upon him that which gives a new bias to all his faculties. Beware of regarding the Christian as made up of two distinct and diverse personalities. Responsibility attaches to the individual and not to his "nature" or "natures." While both sin and grace indwell the saint, God holds him accountable to resist and subdue the one and yield to and be regulated by the other. The fact that this miracle of grace is also likened to a resurrection (Joh 5:25) should prevent us forming a one-sided idea of what is imported by the new birth and "the new creature," and from pressing some analogies from natural birth which other figurative expressions *disallow*. The great inward change is also likened to a divine "begetting" (1Pe 1:3), because the image of the Begetter is then stamped upon the soul. As the first Adam begat a son in his own image (Gen 5:3), so the last Adam has an "image" (Rom 8:29) to convey to His sons (Eph 4:24).

What has been pointed out above applies with equal force to the subject of *mortification* (Col 3:5). That essential Christian duty is set forth in the Scriptures under a great variety of figurative expressions, and it is most needful that we take pains to collect and compare them if we are to be preserved from faulty views of what God requires from his people on this important matter of resisting and overcoming evil. It is spoken of as a circumcizing of the heart (Deu 10:16), a plucking out of the right eye and cutting off of the right hand (Mat 5:29-30), which tells of its painfulness. It is a denying of self and taking up of the cross (Mat 16:24). It is a casting off of the works of darkness (Rom 13:12), a putting off of the old man (Eph 4:22), a laying apart of all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness (Jam 1:21)—each of which is necessary

before we can put on the armour of light or the new man, or receive with meekness the ingrafted Word, for we have to cease doing evil ere we can do well (Isa 1:16-17). It is a making no provision for the flesh (Rom 13:14), a keeping under the body, i.e. of sin (Rom 6:6; Col 2:11) and bringing it into subjection (1Co 9:27), a cleansing of ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit (2Co 7:1), and abstinence from all appearance of evil (1Th 5:22), a laying aside of every weight (Heb 12:1). In this month's "Depravity" article (paragraph 3), the various names of original sin are listed.

9. Equally necessary is it *not to sever* what God has joined together. By nature all of us are prone to run to extremes, particularly so those with a philosophical turn of mind, who, seeking for unity of thought, are in great danger of *forcing* a unity into the sphere of their limited knowledge. To do this, they are very apt to sacrifice one side or element of the truth for another. I may be quite clear and logical at the expense of being superficial and half-orbed. A most solemn warning against this danger was supplied by the Jews in connection with their interpretation of the Messianic prophecies by dwelling exclusively upon those which announced the glories of Christ and neglecting those which foretold His sufferings, so that even the apostles themselves were evilly affected thereby, and rebuked by Christ for such folly (Luk 24:25-26). It is at this very point that the people of God, and particularly His ministers, need to be much on their guard. Truth is twofold (Heb 4:12); every doctrine has its corresponding and supplementary element, every privilege its implied obligation. Those two sides of the truth do not cross each other, but run parallel with one another; they are not contradictory but complementary, and both must be held fast by us if we are to be kept from serious error.

Thus, we must never allow the grand truth of God's sovereignty to crowd out the fact of human responsibility. The will of the Almighty is indeed invincible, but that does not mean that we are nothing better than inanimate puppets. No, we are moral agents as well as rational creatures, and throughout are dealt with by God as such. "It must needs be that offences come," said Christ, but He at once added, "woe to that man by whom the offence cometh" (Mat 18:7). There the two things are joined together—the infallible certainty of the divine decrees, the culpability and criminality of the human agent. The same inseparable conjunction appears again in that statement concerning the death of Christ, "Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by *wicked* hands have crucified and slain" (Act 2:23). Again, our zeal for the doctrine of election must not suffer us to ignore the necessity of using means. They who reason, "If I be elected, I shall be saved whether or not I repent and trust in Christ," are fatally deceiving themselves—"chosen you to salvation *through* sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth" (2Th 2:13) is proof. None are ever saved until they believe (Luk 8:12; Heb 10:39), and therefore all are to be exhorted to do so.

Particular redemption (Christ making atonement for the sins of His own people only) must not prevent His servants from preaching the Gospel to every creature and announcing that there is a Saviour for every sinner out of hell who appropriates Him for his own. Sunder not the two halves of John 6:37—all that the Father gives Christ shall come to Him, albeit the individual must *seek Him* (Isa 55:6; Jer 29:13). Nor does the inability of the natural man annul his accountability, for though no man can come to Christ except the Father draw him (Joh 6:44), his refusal to come is highly blameworthy (Pro 1:24-31; Joh 5:40). Nor is a divided Christ to be presented to sinners for their acceptance. It is a delusion to imagine that His priestly sacrifice may be received, while His kingly rule is refused, that His blood will save me, though I despise His government. Christ is both "Lord and Saviour" and in that unalterable order (2Pe 1:11; 3:2, 18), for we must throw down the weapons of our warfare against Him and take His yoke upon us in order to find rest unto our souls. Thus, repentance and faith are equally necessary (Mar 1:15; Act 20:21).

While justification and sanctification are to be sharply distinguished, nevertheless, they must not be divorced (1Co 1:30; 6:11). "Christ never comes into the soul unattended. He brings the Holy Spirit with Him, and the Spirit His train of gifts and graces. Christ comes with a blessing in each hand; forgiveness in one, holiness in the other" (Thomas Adams, 1600-1662). Yet how rarely is Ephesians 2:8-9 completed by the quoting of verse 10! Again, the twin truths of divine preservation and Christian perseverance must not be parted, for the former is accomplished via the latter and not without it. We are indeed "kept by the power of God," yet "through faith" (1Pe 1:5), and if in 1 John 2:27, the apostle assured the saints "ye *shall* abide in him," in the very next verse he called on them *to* "abide in him"; as Paul also bade such work out their own salvation with fear and trembling, and then added "For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (Phi 2:13). Balaam wished to die the death of the righteous, but was not willing to live the life of one. Means and ends are not to be separated. We shall never reach heaven unless we continue in the only way (the "narrow" one) which leads thereto. ❧