

A CHILD OF LIGHT  
WALKING IN  
DARKNESS

THOMAS GOODWIN



A CHILD OF LIGHT WALKING IN DARKNESS

# A CHILD OF LIGHT WALKING IN DARKNESS

*Thomas Goodwin*



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## ABOUT THIS BOOK



A profound Puritan exposition of Isaiah 50:10-11, exploring the experience of **spiritual desertion** — when God's children lose the sense of His favor and walk in darkness of conscience. Goodwin systematically examines the **causes** of such distress (the Spirit's withdrawal, Satan's assaults, and the corruption of the heart), the **cases** in which God permits it, and the **ends** it serves. The second part offers ten **practical directions** for recovering light and comfort, making this a pastoral masterwork for souls struggling with doubt and assurance.



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## TITLE PAGE



**A** Child of Light Walking in Darkness: A Treatise Showing the Causes, the Cases, and the Ends for Which God Leaves His Children in Distress of Conscience. Together with directions on how to come out of such a condition, with other observations on Isaiah 50:10-11.

By Thomas Goodwin, B.D.

Job 34:29. When He hides His face, who can behold Him?

Printed at London by M. F. for R. Dawlman and L. F. at the Brazen Serpent in Paul's Churchyard, 1636.

## DEDICATION



**T**homas Goodwin.

## TO THE READER



**W**hat drew these sermons from me, beyond your benefit, was the desire to set the record straight. They were first preached eight years ago, and some notes from them were — to say no more — passed into the hands of many, to my harm. They are presented here as they were preached, with little change in method, style, or content. To make the treatise more complete, I added the entire discourse on Satan's role in these desertions before publication, beginning at Chapter 6. In handling that subject, I trust I have not incurred the apostle's sharp rebuke against speculating about angels and intruding into things I have no scriptural warrant for (Colossians 2:18). I am confident that I followed the scholastics into their labyrinths no further than a clear thread of Scripture and right reason guided and warranted my way. Without such a guide, I regard the ways of this old and winding serpent in his dealings with us as Solomon described — like the way of a serpent on a rock, hidden and impossible to trace (Proverbs 30:18-19). For weaker readers — especially those in distress, for whom speculative and doctrinal discussions, however practical their subject, tend to be tedious and discouraging — if they find that section rough or tiresome (which I hope they will not), my advice is to skip it and pick up again at Chapter 11. From

there to the end, they will find material better suited to their understanding and condition, and more practically directed to their distress. May heaven's blessing go with it.

Thomas Goodwin.

## A CHILD OF LIGHT WALKING IN DARKNESS



**I**saiah 50:10-11. 10. Who among you fears the Lord, obeys the voice of His servant, yet walks in darkness with no light? Let him trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God. 11. Look, all of you who kindle a fire and surround yourselves with torches — walk in the light of your fire and in the torches you have lit. This is what you will receive from My hand: you will lie down in sorrow.

## THE WORDS PARAPHRASED



**T**hese words place before us a true believer at his worst and an unregenerate person at his best, side by side. They show the power of true faith — how it alone sustains the believer in his darkest hour — set against the emptiness of the unbeliever's presumptuous confidence at his most secure. The tenth verse addresses the believer's condition and support; the eleventh addresses the unbeliever's.

Consider a true believer who has had even the faintest ray of the glory of God — the light that shines in the face of Christ — let into his soul. His heart, captivated by that sight, has turned away forever from everything in this world and has committed all his future hope of comfort and happiness to enjoying that light of God's face alone. To keep that enjoyment, he fears offending God more than he fears hell, and he strives to obey the voice of God's servants as earnestly as he desires the happiness that awaits him. Now ask yourself: what is the worst thing, short of the eternal loss of God, that could truly befall this man? What could be worse than having the crack through which he first glimpsed that ray sealed shut — the light of God's face withdrawn, every evidence of his own graces hidden and clouded over, the sky of heaven so overcast that neither sunlight nor starlight appears — so that he has no light at

all? And worse still: his soul surrounded and besieged by all the powers of hell and darkness, with the terrors of the Almighty shot into his spirit. Left entirely to himself, walking in this darkness, he is filled with deep fears and suspicions that God is not his God — even questioning whether God ever will be — and sensing from the wrath he feels that God has become his enemy. All of this is presented here as the very condition of one who fears the Lord and obeys Him, summed up in the words: 'that walks in darkness and has no light.' You see him at his worst.

In such a desperate condition, what can be found to relieve and sustain this man? Only one thing is held out to him: the name of the Lord, on which he is to trust and lean — both the name of God declared in Exodus 34:6, 'The Lord God, gracious and merciful,' and the name of Christ called in Jeremiah 23:6 'Jehovah our righteousness.' By reaching out with the bare hand of faith and taking hold of either or both of these, he can use them as a staff — as David describes in Psalm 23:4 — while he walks in darkness through the valley of the shadow of death, leaning on it safely until at last he comes through and sees light in God's light forever. You see, likewise, the support of his soul in this condition.

By contrast, consider — as we are all invited here to do — the best and most confident of unregenerate men, surrounded by every means of confidence and comfort. This includes their own legal righteousness, which these Jews boasted of, along with every worldly and outward comfort they possessed. The prophet compares both of these to fire and sparks, since they produce light and a sense of warmth. First, let their lives and natural dispositions abound with countless sparks of legal righteousness that they themselves have kindled. This is how he describes all the various

acts and performances of outward, acquired righteousness — struck out from the power of natural principles — which produce a great blaze in a person's own opinion and self-esteem. Yet because these acts do not proceed from the Holy Spirit baptizing them with fire and renewing them, nor from internal principles of regeneration (which Christ compares to fire in Mark 9), God counts them all as a sacrifice offered with strange fire, which was forbidden. Such were the sparks in the light of which these Jews walked — those who sought to establish their own righteousness and trusted confidently in it rather than in the name of the Lord. Second, let these men also be surrounded with the greatest worldly glory and abundance of everything this world can give them. Solomon similarly compares worldly comforts to a fire of thorns and their pleasures to the crackling of thorns — here called sparks. Let such men keep their fires burning, piling on more each day, surrounding themselves with sparks, and walking for many years in the light and confidence of both their righteousness and their prosperity — despising all the while that poor believer who fears to rest in his own righteousness and refuses to be comforted by any of these things. Even so, Christ — who is the speaker here — says: when they have walked presumptuously and securely until they have walked themselves weary (as Isaiah 40:13 says), weary of all their own ways and pleasures as they will be one day, and then come to their deathbeds expecting to lie down and rest — they will indeed lie down, says Christ, and the bed will be of His making and His providing. This you will have from My hand, He says — you will lie down; but it will be a bed of sorrow and despair, from which they will never rise again.

## CHAPTER 1



**T**he main proposition and subject of this discourse, drawn from these words: a child of God may walk in darkness. This is shown to mean distress of conscience and the lack of assurance of justification.

That this is the meaning of the words will become clearer as we open the several propositions drawn from them. The first and most central proposition is this: a person who truly fears God and obeys Him may be in a condition of darkness with no light, and may walk in that condition for many days and years.

To explain the text and establish this great point firmly, and to show more precisely what the condition of a child of God in this darkness looks like, we will first ask what 'walking in darkness' means in this passage.

First, 'walking in darkness' is used in 1 John 1:6 to mean living in sin and ungodliness — committing known sins, neglecting known duties, continuing in works of darkness. But that is not how it is meant here. Christ would not have encouraged such people to trust in God, who is light, since the apostle tells us there can be no fellowship between Him and that kind of darkness. The Holy Spirit actually rebukes those who lean on the Lord while still sinning.

Besides, the text itself describes people who at present fear God and obey Him — which they could not be said to do if they were walking in darkness in that sense.

Second, it does not mean walking in ignorance, as it is used in John 12:36. Someone who has no light in that sense could never truly fear God or obey Him. A heart without knowledge is not good, as Solomon says, and walking in that kind of darkness goes hand in hand with walking in futility of mind (Ephesians 4:18).

Third, it means discouragement and sorrow, which is how darkness is often used in Scripture — as in Ecclesiastes 5:17. Conversely, light, being such a pleasant thing to see, is used as a picture of comfort. That this is the meaning here is clear from what is contrasted in the next verse: 'Walk in your light, yet you will lie down in sorrow' (Ecclesiastes 11:7).

But fourth, we must ask: what kind of sorrow, and why? Is it from outward afflictions or from inward distress of mind and conscience? Or, to use Solomon's distinction, is it from ordinary human hardships or from a wounded spirit? That question remains to be answered.

First, it is not limited to outward afflictions alone — what are called ordinary human hardships, the kind that arise from the circumstances of this world or from other people. Though 'walking in darkness' is used that way in Isaiah 59:9, and I will not exclude that meaning here, it cannot be the only or primary meaning. God's best support for those in outward affliction is still to trust in Him, and Scripture is wisest interpreted in the broadest sense the words and context allow. But the text adds 'and has no light' — that is, no comfort at all. Philosophers note that there is no pure dark-

ness without some mixture of light; similarly, outward afflictions alone cannot produce such complete darkness that every opening in the mind is shut off. God's people, when walking in the greatest outward darkness, may still have — and often do have — great light in their spirits. But what is described here is a condition of such total darkness that there is no light in it at all.

Therefore, second, this darkness must be understood principally as the absence of inward comfort in the spirit — something arising from what stands between the person and God — specifically the darkness and terror that accompany the loss of any sense of God's favor. This is how darkness is used elsewhere to describe inward affliction of spirit and mind, and the inability to see — in terms of assurance — that God is one's own God and that one's sins are pardoned. Psalm 88:6 shows Heman using this word to express his distress. The reasons for understanding it this way are as follows:

First, the remedy prescribed here is faith — to lean on God, and specifically on him as 'his God.' The phrase 'his God' is emphatic because that is precisely the point the person is troubled about and the point around which his darkness revolves. It is also exactly what faith — offered here as the remedy — looks to first and most directly as its primary aim and object.

Second, in the preceding verses the prophet spoke of justification — God's pardoning of sins and acceptance of persons. The prophet, or Christ speaking in the person of His elect as some interpret it, had expressed his assurance of this: 'God is near who justifies me; who shall condemn?' The apostle quotes these words in Romans 8:32-33 in connection with justification, to express the triumphant assurance of it, and applies them in the name of true

believers. But knowing that some poor souls — though they truly fear God — might lack this assurance and feel even more troubled on hearing it, since they cannot express that same confidence: therefore he adds, 'Who among you fears the Lord?' and so on. It is as if he were saying, 'Though you lack the comfortable sense and assurance of this, do not be discouraged — exercise faith, go outside yourself, rely on Christ and on the mercy found in God. You may fear God and still lack this assurance, and you are called to trust God even in the lack of it.'

Third, these words also connect to verse 4, where the prophet speaks of how God had given him assurance of his own justification for his personal comfort in the preceding verses, and also gave him the tongue of the learned to speak a word of comfort in season to those who are weary and heavy-laden. Accordingly, in this verse he shows the blessed condition of those who are most weary from long walking in darkness, and he reveals to them the way to come out of it and recover comfort again. In all of God's word there is no more comforting or fitting word for someone in such a condition. All of this confirms that the passage speaks of inward darkness and trouble of spirit — specifically regarding the application of justification and knowing God as one's own God.

## CHAPTER 2



**T**he particulars of this distress, contained in two phrases: 'walking in darkness' and 'having no light.'

The second thing to examine is the condition of someone who is in this darkness and has no light. I will describe it as far as the phrases used here allow, drawing on other Scriptures for help.

First, he is said to have no light. The apostle says in Ephesians 5:13 that light is what makes things visible — that is, perceptible to the sense of sight, which light properly belongs to. Just as light and faith are distinguished here in the text, sight is also distinguished from faith in 2 Corinthians 5:7, since faith is the evidence of things absent and unseen. So when the text says 'he has no light,' the meaning is: he lacks all present sensible evidence of God's favor toward him — he sees nothing that can give him any direct, present witness of it. God's favor, his own graces, and all the tangible signs and evidences of them — which are normally grasped through spiritual sight — have all become as absent things, as if they never existed. The light that ordinarily reveals them as present has been entirely taken away.

To understand this, we need to know that God gives His people a threefold light to strengthen faith, adding assurance and joy to it. This light is like a steel backing on a bow — it reinforces faith — and God adds or removes it as He pleases.

The first is the immediate light of His countenance — a clear, direct beam and revelation of God's favor, personally testifying that we belong to Him. This is called the sealing of the Spirit, received after believing (Ephesians 1:13), which David desired and rejoiced in more than all worldly things. 'Lord, lift up the light of Your countenance' (Psalm 4:6) — in more or less degree, in some glimpses of it, some of God's people have the privilege of walking with joy from day to day. Psalm 89:15: 'They shall walk in the light of Your countenance; in Your name they shall rejoice all day.' This light is utterly withdrawn in such darkness. It may come to this: in terms of any sense or sight of it, the soul may be left in a position like Saul's in 1 Samuel 28:15 — 'God has departed from me and no longer answers me, neither by prophets nor by dreams' — though with this difference: God had truly departed from Saul, but for these souls it is only in their own perception. Yet so completely, that as far as anything they can see, God has gone entirely — He does not answer them through prayer, the word, or conversation; they cannot get a single good look from Him. Such was Jonah's situation: 'I have been cast out from Your sight' (Jonah 2:4) — that is, he could not catch a glimpse of God; not one smile, not one glance, not a single ray of comfort, and so he thought himself cast out. God dealt this way with David often, and sometimes for a long time (Psalm 13:1): 'How long will You hide Your face from me?' and Psalm 89:46: 'How long?' and so on. David even reminded God how short a life he had and complained how much of that time

God's face had been hidden from him (verse 47). Heman experienced the same, and for a long time — from his youth (Psalm 88:14-15). So did Job (Job 13:24), and even Christ Himself: 'My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?'

But you may ask: how can this treatment of God's child be consistent with His everlasting love continuing toward that soul — that He would deal this way with one He loves? And how can it be consistent with the real influence of His grace powerfully enabling the soul all the while to continue fearing and obeying Him?

As for the first, it is entirely consistent with His everlasting love, and God may still be that person's God, as the text tells us. Isaiah 54:8: 'For a brief moment I hid My face from you, but with everlasting kindness I will have mercy on you.' It is only the hiding of His face and the concealing of His love — much as David concealed his love from Absalom while his heart still yearned for him. God takes the same liberty that other fathers take: to shut His children out of His presence when He is displeased with them. And it is only for a moment — that is, in comparison to eternity — even if it should last through the whole of a person's earthly life. He takes this liberty because He has an eternity of time in which to reveal His kindness — time enough for embraces and to pour out His love without measure.

As for the second, the real gracious influences of His favor may continue — upholding, strengthening, and carrying the soul forward in obedience and fear — even while He conceals that favor. When Christ cried, 'My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?' — when as great an eclipse of the light of God's countenance was upon His spirit as was upon the earth — He never obeyed God more completely and was never more strongly sustained than at

that moment, for He was obeying to the point of death. Consider how when the sun is eclipsed, the earth loses its light but not its influence. Metals forming deep in the earth are shaped by the sun, so that though its light does not reach them, its influence and power does, altering and transforming them. In the same way, God's favor visits men's hearts through the power, warmth, and vigorous influence of His grace, even when the light and comfort of that favor is shut out.

The second light God ordinarily gives His people to support their faith is the sight and comfort of their own graces — toward which so many promises point, such as love for His people, fear of His name, and desire to obey Him. Often when the sun has set, starlight still appears — that is, though the immediate evidence of God's favor no longer shines on the soul, his graces still show themselves as tokens of that love. The soul knows there is a sun that gives light to those stars, even though it cannot see the sun itself — just as at night we know there is a sun in another horizon because the stars we see receive their light from it, and we are certain it will rise again for us.

Now a soul that has true grace and continues to obey God may still lack the light to see those graces, and may look at his own heart as completely empty. As those on the ship in the storm (Acts 27:20) could see neither sun nor stars, so someone in temptation may have neither sunlight nor starlight — no light at all, as the text says. Isaiah 63:17 shows the church complaining that God had hardened them from His fear — they were afraid, feeling their hearts so hard that they could find no fear of God in them — yet the fear was there, as evidenced by the fact that they mourned its absence.

But third, even if a person lacks both the immediate light of God's countenance and the sight of present graces, he may still have a comforting memory of what he once had — and as long as that remains, he is not left in total darkness. Yet know that the state of one who fears God and obeys Him may reach the point where he has no comforting memory at all of former grace. In 2 Peter 1:9, a person with true grace is described as lacking its exercise — I take this passage to refer to a regenerate man, because he had been purged from sin but is now said to lack grace because he does not use it. Not using and not having are the same thing in practice, especially for things whose entire value lies in use — it is as if he did not have it. Such a man may fall into such blindness that he cannot see what is not far off, and so forgets his former assurance that he had been purged from his old sins. Yes, he may call all of it into question. David shows this in Psalm 30:6-7 — though his heart had been full of joy and assurance of God's favor just a short time before, God had only to hide His face and all of it was gone: 'I was troubled,' he says. He was blinded and could not see what had been so recently before him, just as people in a thick fog cannot see what is right in front of them.

The reason behind these last two observations is as plain as the experience of them. Graces in us shine with only a borrowed light, as stars do — their light comes from the sun. So unless God shines secretly and illuminates your graces, they will not appear to bring you comfort or serve as any witness of His favor to assure you. Our spirit — that is, our graces — never bears witness alone. If God's Spirit does not join in testifying, our spirit is silent. 'The Spirit of

God witnesses with our spirits' (Romans 8:16). Therefore, when God has withdrawn His testimony, the testimony of our own hearts and graces carries no force.

But you may ask: can a person truly exercise grace and not know it? Can he fear God and yet not recognize it?

Yes — some graces may be as fully at work in the heart at that time as at any other. A person may fear God as truly and as much as ever, and yet that fear may carry no light within it to reveal itself to him. It may be present in the heart — active and real — while remaining outside his awareness.

The reason is this: just as the influence of God's favor may be genuinely present in the heart while the sense, sight, and light of it is withdrawn, so the power of grace may be in the heart while the light and comfort of it is absent. It is true that every person, having the natural ability to reflect on his own inner life, can discern what thoughts he has and what emotions are stirring, and can name them for what they are — he knows he is thinking about something, that he is grieved, and so on. But he may still question whether those thoughts are acts of true and genuine faith, and whether those feelings of sorrow for sin are sanctified, holy, and spiritual affections. The reason for this uncertainty is that although the natural spirit within a person knows the things of a person, as the apostle says in 1 Corinthians 2:11 — that is, it understands his own thoughts as acts of a human being — it cannot discern their true moral quality without the supernatural light of God's Spirit. The Spirit, being both the giver and the agent of grace within us, is given by God precisely so that we may know the things that have been given to us by God (1 Corinthians 2:8, 12). 'Light is sown for the righteous, and joy for the upright,' says the psalmist. Grace and

its exercise is the seed they continually scatter; but light and joy is the harvest to be reaped. This seed often lies hidden for a long time, though it will sprout in the end. So light and joy may be separated from grace, and the comfort of grace from its power.

Second, let us consider the other phrase and what it tells us about the condition of someone who, as the text says, walks in darkness.

First, to walk in darkness means to be unsure where to go: 'He who walks in darkness does not know where he is going' (John 12:35). In the same way, the soul of a God-fearing person may be filled with doubts about whether God will ever be merciful — not knowing what God intends for him, whether he will go to heaven or hell. Psalm 77:7-9 shows this in doubtful, questioning language: 'Will the Lord be merciful?' — and in verse 10 he admits that calling this into question was his weakness. Heman's case in Psalm 88:5-6, 11-12 is similar — he thought of himself as one already in hell: 'free among the dead,' meaning numbered among those God no longer remembers (verse 5). Such was his darkness (verse 6), and he doubted whether God would ever lift him out of it (verses 10-12): 'Will You show wonders to the dead? Shall Your wonders be declared in the grave?' — meaning, had God ever shown mercy to one in the same state as those in hell, which was his current state? He had even lost hope: 'My hope has perished from the Lord' (Lamentations 3:18).

Second, those in darkness are prone to stumble at everything. Isaiah 59:10 names stumbling at noon as one of the effects of darkness. Take a soul left in darkness, and it will stumble at everything it hears from the word — in conversation or at sermons — and everything it reads. Every promise it encounters discourages it fur-

ther. Such a person thinks: how can there be such glorious promises that do not belong to me! They misread and misapply all of God's dealings and all of Scripture against themselves, refusing comfort — as Psalm 77:2 shows. And as verse 3 of that psalm shows, when they remember God, they are troubled.

Third, darkness is filled with terror and dread. Children in the dark imagine they see fearful things — which is why Genesis 15:12 speaks of 'the horror of darkness.' In the same way, a soul in this condition may be overwhelmed with fears and terrors — the fear of God's wrath, of God being its enemy. Heman was nearly driven out of his mind with terror (Psalm 88:15). The church in Lamentations 3 came to the same conclusion with certainty: 'Surely He has turned against me' (verse 3).

## CHAPTER 3



**T**he efficient causes of this distress: first, the Spirit — whether He has any part in it, and how much.

Having explained and established that this can and does befall those who truly fear the Lord, I will now show more fully:

First, the efficient causes.

Second, the circumstances in which it occurs.

Third, the purposes for which God leaves His children in such distress.

As for the efficient causes of this dark and desperate condition in a child of God — there are three that play a role in it.

First, God's Spirit.

Second, the person's own guilty and fearful heart.

Third, Satan.

As for God's Spirit: although He has some part in producing this distress, we must be careful not to attribute to Him those doubts, desperate fears, and dark conclusions by which a child of God calls his own standing into question. The Spirit is not the direct or positive cause of those things.

To this end, consider the well-known passage in Romans 8:16: 'You have not received the spirit of bondage to fear again, but the spirit of adoption.' Understanding this correctly will also answer an objection, since some have cited this verse as though it means that once a child of God has received the Spirit's seal of adoption, he can never again fall into feelings of bondage — that is, into fears of eternal damnation — and that this can happen to him only once, at his first conversion.

But if we read the words carefully, the apostle does not claim that fears of bondage can never return to a child of God. His point is that the Spirit we have received, having once become the Spirit of adoption, is never afterward again a spirit of bondage to us — never the cause of such fears. At first conversion, before He witnessed adoption, the Spirit did reveal that our condition was one of bondage — He did this in love, to drive us out of it. In that sense He was a spirit of bondage, which is what the apostle refers to when he says 'to fear again,' because the Spirit once was that to them. And the Holy Spirit rightly was so at that time — He could then testify that their condition was damnable, because it was the truth: they had lived in bondage, to which damnation was the just consequence, and had they died in it, damnation would certainly have followed. But once He has made a person a son and become the Spirit of adoption, if He were then to put that person back into such apprehensions and fears, He would be testifying to something untrue. Therefore, for the comfort of all believers, the apostle declares that the Spirit never reverses or contradicts His testimony of adoption — His office is to stand ready as a witness and to seal it. Yet while the judge does not condemn any further, the jailer may still trouble and frighten us, and our own hearts may condemn us.

God may give Satan permission to throw us back into prison, to clap irons on us again, and to become a lying spirit of bondage to us — just as he became a lying spirit in the mouths of Ahab's prophets. And God may allow our hearts to be fettered by the chains of our own sins, ensnared by their own inventions, fears, and suspicions (1 John 3:12; Proverbs 5:22).

For a clearer understanding of how all of this comes upon a child of God, I will show how far the Holy Spirit goes in contributing to it, and where Satan and our own hearts step in to deepen the distress beyond what the Holy Spirit alone intended. The whole must be attributed to these three distinct hands, and the work of God's Spirit must be carefully distinguished from Satan's — as light from darkness at the very beginning.

This, then, is how far the Spirit of God may participate in the darkness that falls on His child.

1. By withholding: He may suspend His testimony and hold back the exercise of His office of witnessing adoption. He may withdraw His comforting presence and hide Himself for a moment, concealing His love as other fathers sometimes do — as David did when his heart still yearned for Absalom. He may not allow the soul to see His face; He may shut a son out of His presence without casting him off. He may retain their sins — as Christ's expression has it in John 20:23 and Matthew 18:18 — that is, call back the certificate of pardon He had signed and sealed in earth, meaning in their own consciences, take it out of their hands, and return it to the pardon office in heaven to be held there. And when Satan comes forward with a false witness and accusation, and their own hearts accordingly condemn them, the Holy Spirit may stand

by in silence — saying nothing to the contrary, not contradicting Satan by any clear testimony or quiet rebuke, as He does at other times (Zechariah 3:1-2).

2. By acting: He may go further still.

1. The Spirit may reveal and display God as angry with His child for specific past sins, making that anger felt — not merely by concealing His love, but by directly impressing a sense of His wrath on the conscience, not just through outward crosses. Isaiah 57:17-18 shows this: God did not only hide Himself and 'was wroth' (expressing wrath by hiding Himself), but 'I struck him and was wroth'; and in verse 16 He 'contended and was wroth' — fighting against him as an enemy (as in Isaiah 63:10) — with His wrath falling on the spirit. The following verses show that the spirit was ready to fail and the soul He had made was brought near to collapse — the spirit was the very target God shot at and wounded, so deeply that it was ready to give out entirely. Solomon calls this, in contrast to all other afflictions, 'a wounded spirit, which who can bear?' distinguishing it from all outward afflictions on the body, which reach the spirit only indirectly through the body's suffering. He says, 'The spirit of a man will sustain his infirmity' — meaning all outward afflictions, which the spirit suffers only by sympathy. But when the spirit itself is exposed and wounded directly by God's wrath — which alone can reach and wound it — who can bear that? This is what God did to Heman: He did not only hide His face from him (Psalm 88:14), but 'Your fierce wrath has swept over me, and Your terrors have cut me off' (verse 16) — not merely wounded, but cut him off entirely. The Holy Spirit may make such immediate impressions of wrath on the spirit of His child as expressions of God's anger, because it is true that God is angry when they sin. He may

make that anger known not only through outward signs and afflictions, but by directly speaking it to the conscience and causing it to be felt through scalding drops of His hot displeasure falling on it. Just as earthly fathers show their anger by chastising the bodies of their children — as the apostle says, because they are 'the fathers of our flesh' (Hebrews 12:9) — so God for the same reason may show His anger and discipline His children by striking their spirits, for He is 'the father of our spirits' (Hebrews 12:6; Hebrews 4:12-13). Our spirits, and the very deepest parts of them, lie open and bare to Him with whom we have to do; and His word and Spirit, being living, powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, are able to divide and pierce even to the bones and marrow, as the same author writes. Yet in all of this, when He thus expresses His wrath on their consciences, He does not testify that this is an eternal wrath against them — it is only a temporary displeasure, 'but for a moment,' as Isaiah says — the indignation of a father, not the revenge of justice. And though the Spirit tells them that God is displeased, He never tells them they are accursed — that conclusion is a false deduction drawn from it.

Yet 2. The Holy Spirit may go even further: He may bring out and brandish over them the rod of God's eternal wrath — especially when they have provoked Christ by presumptuous sins — to prevent them from pressing recklessly forward in the way of their heart. He does this first by presenting to them, setting before them, and pressing home all those conditional warnings which threaten even believers with eternal damnation — such as Romans 8:13: 'If you live according to the flesh, you' (even you believers) 'will die.' There is a truth in all such conditional warnings that applies to God's dearest children under a condition — in relation to

continuing in sin — to stop them and prevent them when they are pressing forward in the way of their heart. To that end, when someone is beginning to enter a sinful course, the Holy Spirit may bring home such warnings with respect to that course of action and stir up the fear of the damnation thus threatened if he continues in those sins. But to apply a warning of eternal damnation to a believer simply and personally — as though to say, 'you will die eternally' — this the Holy Spirit does not speak to the heart of a believer while he is a believer. Also 2, the Holy Spirit may remind him of all the examples of people in whom, for going on in sin, God's soul had no pleasure, and show how God dealt with them — such as how He swore against many of the Israelites for their provocations that they would never enter His rest, or how He rejected Esau for despising his birthright. He does this to startle and awaken the person, with the implication that for such and such sins, God might deal with him in a similar way. These and similar examples the Spirit of God sets before the believing Hebrews (Hebrews chapters 3 and 12) and the believing Corinthians (1 Corinthians 10:5-13) to keep them in godly fear of offending. But to apply any such example absolutely to a specific person — to say, 'This is what God intends to do with you for such and such past sins, and God will never be merciful' — this the Holy Spirit does not say to a believer's heart.

## CHAPTER 4



**H**ow Satan and our hearts intensify this darkness through false conclusions drawn from the Spirit's work, illustrated by a parallel in the enlightening of temporary believers. The Spirit's work in both cases compared.

Now that the Spirit of God has proceeded this far in causing darkness and terror of conscience in those who fear Him, Satan and their own hearts — to which He may and often does further abandon them — seize on these dealings of the Holy Spirit (which are all holy, righteous, and true) as an opportunity to draw out false and terrifying conclusions against themselves and their standing before God. They conjure up overwhelming doubts and fears that they have no grace at all and are presently under the curse and the threats of eternal wrath. They go further still — fearing eternal rejection in the future and that God will never be merciful — and so sink lower and fall into a deeper darkness and bondage than the Holy Spirit caused or intended. They distort and misread all of His righteous dealings: for example, interpreting His withdrawal of light and presence as a permanent rejection. This is what Heman did in Psalm 88:14. They similarly misconstrue what is only a temporary chastening wrath — wounding their spirits for the present — as the earnest and expression of God's eternal

vengeance, arguing from the fact that they are under wrath that they must therefore be children of wrath. They also take every conditional warning of eternal damnation — which the Spirit applied only in relation to a particular future course of conduct — and apply it absolutely to their own persons, reading it as a statement of their present condition. And because examples of those whom God has cast off are set before them to show them what advantage God could take against them — they mistake those examples for their own destiny laid out before them, and conclude that God will deal with them in the same way. Thus, as the apostle says about sin in Romans 7:11 — that sin, taking opportunity through the commandment (which Paul misunderstood while he was a Pharisee), deceived him and killed him, even though 'the commandment is holy, just, and good' (verse 12) — so Satan and our own hearts, by occasion of the Spirit's dealings (which are righteous and true, as He is the Spirit of truth and leads into all truth), deceive believers and leave them counting themselves, in their own minds, among those whom God remembers no more, as Heman says in Psalm 88:5.

This same pattern plays out in other works and dealings of God's Spirit as well, where Satan and our hearts routinely practice the same delusions and false conclusions. Consider the more common and lesser works of the Spirit on the hearts of people not yet savingly regenerated: the Spirit enlightens them, produces impressions of joy, and gives them a taste of sweetness in the promises of the gospel and of the salvation offered there. This offer is extended to their hearts by the Spirit under the condition of true repentance and conversion. He worked this way on the stony ground, and in the Jews through John's ministry (John 5:35). This light, this taste, and this revelation of the conditional offer — which tends to-

ward salvation by drawing their hearts to seek it — is often taken by them, through Satan's abuse of this good work and through self-flattery, to be that saving grace with which salvation is annexed. The apostle distinguishes those enlightenings from it by the very phrase 'things that accompany salvation' in Hebrews 6:9 (versus verse 4). These people mistake the preparatory works for saving grace itself — just as the Jews mistook John, who was sent only to prepare the way for Christ, for the true Christ who was to come into the world. By misunderstanding God's Spirit in those dealings, they rush to a conclusion that the Spirit never intended in those promises.

I use this as an illustration because the Spirit's dealings in desertion — toward people already regenerate, which is our present subject — and His earlier dealings toward those who often never attain to regeneration run in a striking parallel. They are remarkably similar in the dealings themselves, and also in the differing false conclusions drawn from each, so that the one powerfully illuminates the other. God withdraws Himself just as completely — in the experience of those who are in covenant with Him — as He draws near and visits the hearts of those who are still strangers to Him. The compass needle of God's favor, so to speak, swings as far toward what feels like perdition in those who will be saved, as it swings toward what seems like heaven in others, many of whom never arrive there. As one is brought near to the kingdom of heaven — as Christ told one such person — so of true believers it may be said that their souls often draw near to hell in their own sense and feeling, and the pains of hell take hold of them. As the others are enlightened as Balaam was, so these are left to walk in darkness and see no light, and taste of the wrath the law threatens,

just as those others taste the goodness of the salvation the gospel offers. God chastises His children in a temporary anger for a moment, as He shines upon the others with a temporary favor. Just as those others rejoice in that light for a season (John 5:35), so God's dearest children may be in much heaviness for a season (as the apostle says in 1 Peter 1:6) and walk in darkness. And as the parallel holds in the dealings themselves, so it holds in the false interpretations that Satan and our hearts make of both. The cause of the mistake in each case is similar as well. God's dealings with those temporary believers so closely resemble His dealings with those to whom He grants a state of adoption, that the former too quickly conclude they have been accepted to life. Conversely, God's dealings with those in this temporary despair — as I may call it — so closely resemble His proceedings with those He cuts off forever, that they just as hastily conclude (as David said, 'I said in my haste') that they have been eternally rejected. Only the outcome differs: in the believers it tends only to present discomfort through their frailty; but in the others, their enlightenings — through their own willful neglect — turn to their destruction.

To conclude: we must carefully distinguish the Spirit's work from Satan's and our own hearts', never attributing those desperate conclusions to the Spirit. The depth of sorrow by which that humbled Corinthian was almost swallowed up (2 Corinthians 2:7) is attributed to Satan in verse 11, where it is called one of his devices — a word that refers in part to the Corinthian's sorrow. David similarly attributes his doubting in Psalm 77 — questioning whether God would be merciful to him (verse 7) — to his own

heart: 'This was my infirmity,' he says (verse 10). The blame in all of this is therefore to be divided between Satan and our own hearts.

## CHAPTER 5



**H**ow our own hearts cause this darkness: the principles within us that produce it.

To speak more specifically about each:

First, it should be no surprise that our own hearts are the causes and producers of such distress and darkness when the Holy Spirit deals with us in this way, because:

1. As creatures, we have such weakness and frailty in us — as David acknowledges — that if God merely hides Himself and withdraws His presence (which sustains us in comfort as it sustains us in being), we immediately fall into these fears. The psalmist says of all creatures: 'You hide Your face and they are troubled' (Psalm 104:29) — and this because of their weakness and dependence on God. The new creature is no less dependent on God's face and presence — in fact, far more so. It cannot stand alone; it fails when God hides Himself, as Isaiah describes in chapter 57. Especially in this life, during infancy — while it is still a child, as God describes Ephraim in Hosea 11:1 — it cannot stand or walk on its own unless God holds it up in His arms and teaches it, as He says there in verses 1 and 3. And just as children left alone in the dark are afraid of imagined terrors and prone to stumble and fall — because of

their weakness — so it is with the new creature in its childhood here in this life. 'It was my weakness,' says David (Psalm 30:6); and again, 'You hid Your face and I was troubled.'

There is not only such weakness in us as creatures, but:

2. There is also an inborn darkness in our spirits as sinful creatures. Since the fall, our hearts are by nature nothing but darkness — so it is no wonder that when God merely draws the curtain and shuts out the light, our hearts generate such horrible fears and doubts. In 2 Corinthians 4:6 the apostle compares this native darkness of our hearts to the formless void of darkness that covered the face of the deep at creation, when he says that God who commanded light to shine out of darkness (referring to Genesis 1:1-2) has shined into our hearts — even ours as apostles — to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. So only as long as God continues to shine — either with the light of comfort or of grace — do our hearts retain any light. And if at any point He withdraws the light of comfort from His face, while still continuing an influence of grace, our hearts immediately return to their former darkness. That vast interior of darkness then conceives and gives shape to all those fears and doubts within itself. Our hearts are also a great deep — so deep in darkness and deceitfulness that no plumb line can reach their bottom. 'Deceitful above all things — who can know it?' (Jeremiah 17:9). Darkness does not merely rest on the surface of this deep; it goes all the way down — darkness to the very bottom. No wonder, then, that when the Spirit ceases to move over this deep with beams of light, it casts us into such depths of darkness as Heman describes in Psalm 88:6, forming within itself such dreadful perceptions and desperate conclusions about a person's own standing before God.

Especially since 3, there is so much strength of carnal and corrupt reasoning in people, always ready to forge strong arguments and confirm those fearful apprehensions — particularly those drawn from the Spirit's dealings just described. The apostle says of the Gentiles that when 'their foolish heart was darkened' — that is, when left to their own natural darkness — 'they became vain in their imaginations,' or as the original has it, in their reasonings (Romans 1:21), and this even regarding things God had clearly revealed through nature. In the same way it may be said even of those who have been most enlightened: their hearts are prone to become far more irrational in their reasoning about and judging their own standing before God — drawing from His word and His dealings with them — once He leaves them in darkness. The caution given to believers in James 1:22 points to this, where they are urged not to deceive themselves through false reasoning — so the original renders it — that is, talking themselves into falsehood, as we might say in a similar phrase: fooling themselves. This applies specifically to judging their own standing before God, which people are more prone to miscalculate — through the distortions and biases of self-love — than any other spiritual truth. In people who lack true faith, the unsound hearers of the word (of whom the apostle there speaks) are prone, through carnal reason misapplying what they hear, to build up many false arguments for maintaining a high opinion of themselves. Conversely, in those who have true faith, all the carnal reason that remains unsubdued is prone to raise just as strong objections against the work of faith already begun, and to draw just as decisive conclusions against their present standing — particularly by misreading God's dealings with them. Being sometimes led by sense and reason while they walk in

darkness, they interpret God's attitude toward them by what they see and feel rather than by what His word calls them to believe. We see this in Gideon in Judges 6: because God was not working miracles as He had for Israel in the past, and had allowed them to fall into their enemies' hands, Gideon reasoned against the message of the angel — Christ Himself — who had said to him, 'The Lord is with you' (verse 12). Gideon objects: 'Oh my Lord, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? Where are all the miracles our fathers told us about? But now the Lord has forsaken us,' and so on. We see the same in Asaph (or whoever the holy author of Psalm 73 is): his feet nearly slipped in the dark. 'My feet had almost stumbled,' he says (verse 2) — that is, from holding his ground by faith, as the apostle speaks in Romans 5. This happened through an argument built by carnal reason from God's arrangement of outward prosperity for the wicked, contrasted with God's daily chastening of him through outward afflictions, as the context there implies. How decisive is the conclusion he draws from it: 'Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain' (verse 13). And his stated reason: 'For all day long I have been stricken' and so on (verse 14). He must have thought his reasoning strong and airtight, or he would not have been so confident in his conclusion. But what would this man have said and thought had he been in Heman's condition, or in Job's, or in David's? If in those shallows of outward troubles — which are common to all people — his faith could not find footing and he nearly went along with the common error of the wicked and condemned himself and the whole generation of the righteous (verse 15), how would his faith have fared if all of God's waves and breakers had rolled over him, as David complains in Psalm 42:7? How would he have sunk in Heman's depths

(Psalm 88) or in David's: 'I sink in deep mire where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the floods engulf me' (Psalm 69:2) — describing waters that came into his soul (verse 1), the very floods of God's immediate wrath breaking into his conscience and overwhelming the inward man, not just the outward? How much more decisively would he have concluded against himself in that condition? As indeed Heman, David, and many others among God's children have done when they have lain under and walked in such distress.

And the reason for all of this is as plain as the experience of it.

1. In general: reason is by nature a busy faculty that intrudes into God's affairs as much as our own, always trying its hand at arguing about His dealings with us. Jeremiah felt compelled to reason with God about His dealings toward wicked men (Jeremiah 12:1-2), and Job about His dealings with himself (Job 13:3). Since reason is also the highest principle in us by nature — our greatest distinction as human beings — it is no wonder that when we are left to ourselves in darkness, we walk 'as men,' as the apostle says in 1 Corinthians 1:3, and lean to our own wisdom, as Solomon describes — because it is our own, and it has been with us from the beginning. It is our great Ahithophel — and as David says of him, 'our guide with whom we have taken such sweet counsel' in all our worldly and practical affairs, where we rightly make use of its counsel. But we too often bring it into the sanctuary with us and walk with it into the house of God — to use David's language in Psalm 55:13-14 — that is, we allow it to meddle in sacred matters and to debate and pronounce judgment on our spiritual and eternal standing, just as it does on our temporal affairs. Worse still, we trust its verdict there. 'I thought,' says Asaph in that same psalm,

'to know this' (verse 16) — meaning, he thought he could grasp God's mind in those dealings through rational analysis and reach a sound conclusion. But after he went into the sanctuary (verse 17) with faith alone, consulting the word, he confesses that his own wisdom and best reasoning understood God's purposes and the principles by which He governs His children no better than a beast (verse 22) understands the intentions and reasoning of people. If reason, then, when it is so completely mistaken about the premises, still insists on exercising its faculty by drawing conclusions from them — it is no wonder that those conclusions are so wide of the mark. And yet, with Asaph, we think we know.

More specifically: carnal reason is the most deadly enemy to faith of all the principles in a person. Before faith is worked in us, it is the supreme principle; but faith deposes and subjects it, and afterward repeatedly contradicts it — even excluding it as incompetent in matters that belong to faith. So deep and fierce is this hostility toward faith that whatever is the most central work of faith — changing our standing before God, placing us in a state of justification, and assuring us of it — carnal reason shows its sharpest hostility precisely there, opposing faith in that work more than in any other. This hostility shows itself both before and after faith is worked, and each phase illuminates the other. Before faith is worked, carnal reason does everything it can to convince a person that his condition is good even without faith — thereby preventing faith from being sought at all, as though nothing were needed to change his standing or justify him, and so shutting it out entirely. Therefore, in the initial working of faith, the Holy Spirit brings faith in by force, like a conqueror, demolishing all those strongholds and proud reasonings (as the word is in 2 Corinthians

10:4) that carnal reason had long been building and fortifying, and erects faith on a throne built from their ruins. In the same way, after faith is worked, all the carnal reason that remains unsubdued — driven by a deeper revenge for that defeat and with a greater degree of hostility — continues to oppose faith. Only now it shifts the war, mustering new forces and turning all its heavy weapons in the opposite direction: persuading a person, by every objection it can raise, that his condition is bad — whereas before it insisted his condition was good. This is its way of attacking the great work of faith in justifying us. And because the next office of faith, after justifying us, is to settle peace with God in our hearts and a confidence that we are in His favor (Romans 5:1): carnal reason therefore bends all its power and ingenuity to persuade us on every occasion — by the most plausible and seemingly compelling arguments it can produce — that God is not at peace with us and has not yet been reconciled to us. This is precisely to contradict faith in the central thing it would persuade us of.

So while in unregenerate people carnal reason works by false reasoning to maintain a high opinion of their standing — once they are regenerated, that same carnal reason, continuing its opposition to faith, works just as hard to persuade them of a bad opinion of their standing.

If carnal reason ever has the upper hand over faith in any condition that befalls a child of God, it is now — in the valley of the shadow of death, as David calls it — walking in darkness with no light. This condition supplies carnal reason with the richest possible material for forging objections. All of God's dealings seem to line up against the person, as though every sign points toward ruin and condemnation. Faith is under its greatest eclipse, left to fight

alone in the dark without any second. Meanwhile, carnal reason and the darkened heart — led by feeling — are gripped by the deepest and most acute sense of what the heart most fears: God's severest wrath and displeasure. And this is felt not at a distance, inferred indirectly from outward afflictions, but immediately, from God's own hand. 'You have always suspected,' says carnal reason, 'that you were a child of wrath and that you and God were enemies; but now you find it confirmed beyond doubt, and from God's own mouth, who speaks grievous things against you — you even have it under His own hand, for He writes bitter things against you' — that is, in your conscience, as Job says in Job 13:26 — 'and counts you as His enemy' (verse 24); and He whips you with the same rod of His immediate wrath with which He lashes those who are cut off from His hand and whom He no longer remembers, but are now in hell, as Heman describes. This is also a time when the present sense of wrath so disturbs and — to use Heman's word — distracts the mind that it cannot attend to faith, which speaks of nothing but what it cannot see. This is just like the people of Israel, who could not listen to Moses' message of deliverance because of the anguish of their present bondage (Exodus 6:9). No wonder, then, that carnal reason is most active at this very moment and seizes the opportunity to frame and press the strongest possible objections against the soul while it is in this distress.

Add to this a fourth point: along with the strength of corrupt reason opposing faith, there are many other corrupt affections in the heart that join with carnal reason and reinforce it. They drive it and back it up just as powerfully in persuading God's children that their standing is bad as they do in securing the unregenerate in the false belief that their standing is good. The hand of self-love —

which bribes and biases carnal reason, especially in judging one's own standing — is found just as deep in the one as in the other. This sheds further light on the point at hand. Before faith is worked, self-flattery (one branch of self-love) bribes and sets carnal reason to work, pleading the goodness of the unregenerate person's standing, causing every false argument in favor of a good self-opinion to land convincingly. But once faith is worked, jealousy, suspicion, and unbelief — which are equally powerful offshoots of pride and self-love, and which begin to surface and grow as the former self-flattery is cut back — sharpen carnal reason's wit and urge it to argue and fight against the work of faith and grace that has begun. Every objection carnal reason discovers against that work is welcome and persuasive to these corrupt principles, because they are fed and strengthened by them.

The reason why these jealousies and suspicions — which are so contrary to the self-flattery that shaped our self-opinion before — should arise in the heart at the working of faith and be apt to take over is this: 1. In the work of humiliation that prepares for faith, all those strongholds of carnal reason that upheld self-flattery and the false good opinion of one's standing are demolished, and the mountains of presumption are leveled — a person is permanently stripped of all confidence in himself as such. 2. At that same time, he was so thoroughly and keenly convicted of the seriousness of sin (which he had previously shrugged off) and of the greatness and number of his sins, that instead of presuming as before, he is now prone to be suspicious of God — fearing that God may have been so provoked as to never pardon him — and is accordingly ready to twist every one of God's dealings to confirm that fear. 3. Through that same conviction, the infinite error and deceitfulness

of his own heart was so clearly exposed — having previously flattered him and told him his standing was good when it was most accursed — that he now becomes deeply afraid of still erring in that same direction, and is therefore ready to lend an ear to any doubt or objection that is raised. 4. He is also made acutely aware of the infinite danger to his eternal salvation that lies in holding a false good opinion of his standing — because such a false view keeps a person from saving faith — whereas entertaining the opposite error and judging his standing bad when it is actually good tends only to present discomfort. He therefore thinks it safer to err on the side of doubt than on the side of presumption. 5. He is also now deeply aware of how unspeakably important his eternal salvation is — something he had previously dismissed — and this awakens suspicion (which always doubts and probes in matters of great consequence) and keeps it alive, where before it had slept. All of these, now stirred and roused, not only drive carnal reason to pry relentlessly into everything that might suggest God's disfavor or the unsoundness of the heart, but also give a warm reception to every objection that is found, and lead to hasty and false conclusions based on them.

Finally, in addition to the corrupt principles of carnal reason and suspicion that stir up these doubts and fears from God's dealings with us, there is an abundance of guilt within us — guilt from our own failures toward God. We have consciences that remain in part defiled, and these may further join with all the other forces and deepen our fears and doubts. We are not only dark and weak creatures — we are also guilty ones. This guilt, like waves of the sea or the rising of the Jordan in flood, begins to surge and overflow in our consciences when these terrible storms from God break upon

us. David describes this in Psalm 38: when God's wrath was heavy upon him (verses 1-2), he also cried, 'My iniquities have gone over my head' (verse 4). There is much deceit and falseness of heart that, in those upheavals — when our consciences boil within us and are stirred and heated to the bottom — rises like scum to the surface. This is what happened to David when he was under God's rod for his sin of murder: along with the guilt of his sin, the deceitfulness of his spirit came up, and he cried out for 'truth in the inward parts' (Psalm 51:6). His sin (verse 2) was always before him, and so was his falseness of heart; and with that in view he wrote in Psalm 32: 'Blessed is the man in whose spirit there is no deceit, and whose sin the Lord does not count against him.' He wrote that when God had charged him with the guilt of his sin and laid bare the deceitfulness of his spirit (verses 4-5). This deceitfulness sometimes appears so completely that our consciences can hardly see anything else in us — it lies on top and covers our graces from our own view. Just as chaff rises to the top when wheat is tossed in a fan, so in these shakings and siftings of spirit, our corruptions float in our consciences while the graces within us lie buried beneath them and out of sight. The dark side of our hearts — like the dark side of a cloud — is turned toward us, and the light side away. Indeed, even the best of us carry enough within us that, if stirred and gathered in the conscience, could alone throw us into these burning bouts of trouble and distress. So when God's Spirit withholds from us the light of our own graces, and our own consciences present to us the guilt and corruption in our best actions, our hearts may conclude that we are hypocrites — as Mr. Bradford does of himself in some of his letters, and as others among the saints have done. Yes — even our consciences themselves, which

are the one remaining principle that should take the side of faith and bear witness (as their office is) to the goodness of our standing — may in this condition join with the other corruptions against us, bring in a false testimony, and pronounce a false verdict. Even conscience itself, which is designed like the body's indicator of health to reflect the condition of the whole — and is accordingly called good or evil according to the person's true state — is prone in such disturbances to change and darken, and to appear to the person's own view as dark as the conscience of a true hypocrite.

And the reason for this is as plain as the experience of it. Conscience remains in part defiled even in a regenerate person — though we are sprinkled from an evil conscience in part, we are not sprinkled from it completely. So though our persons are fully discharged from the guilt of our sins before God through the sprinkling of Christ's blood, the sprinkling of that blood upon our consciences — by which we perceive this — is imperfect. The reason is that this very sprinkling of conscience, by which it testifies to the sprinkling of Christ's blood and to our justification thereby, is itself part of the sanctification of conscience as a faculty whose office is to testify and witness our standing. Since the sanctification of all our faculties is imperfect, so is this. Therefore, when God's Spirit withdraws His witness from conscience regarding the goodness of our standing — when He ceases to embolden and encourage conscience by His presence and the sprinkling of Christ's blood against the remaining defilement — our consciences are just as prone to fall into fears, doubts, and self-condemnation. This is exactly as prone as our other faculties are to fall into any other sin when He withdraws the assistance of His grace from them. Therefore, as the law of sin in our members may gain the upper

hand and lead us captive to outward sin, so the guilt of sin in our consciences — remaining in part defiled — may by the same logic gain the upper hand and lead us captive to fears and doubts, casting us into bondage.

## CHAPTER 6



**T**he third efficient cause: Satan. His special malice in this temptation, his commission from God, his access to us, and the advantage he gains over us through the darkness within us.

This far, our own hearts — upon the Holy Spirit's deserting us — become authors of this darkness within us.

But in this, believers do not wrestle alone with flesh and blood and the darkness within them. They also conflict with spiritual wickednesses, the rulers of darkness (Ephesians 6:12), over their claim to heavenly privileges — that is, with Satan and his angels. The apostle compares him to a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8). Just as when God makes natural darkness and night falls, the young lions creep out and roar after their prey (Psalm 104:20-21) — so these roaring lions emerge when God has withdrawn the light of His countenance and night descends, and the fog and damp of jealousies and guilt begins to rise from a person's own heart. Then they come forth and say, as David's enemies said when he was in distress: 'Come, let us take him now, for God has forsaken him; let us devour him and swallow him up with sorrow and despair.' And as God says of His church's enemies in

Zechariah 1:15 — 'I was only a little displeased, and they helped to make the affliction worse' — so when God is but slightly angry with His child and hides His face only for a moment, Satan watches that hour of darkness (as Christ calls it in Luke 22:53) and adds his power of darkness to our natural darkness, aiming to produce — if possible — utter blackness and despair.

Regarding Satan's working in this, we will treat it more fully by way of explanation: 1. more generally, 2. more specifically.

## IN GENERAL



**F**irst, Satan has a special inclination and a particularly malicious desire to torment the saints with this kind of temptation — doubts and distress over whether God is truly their God. All his other temptations to sin are merely the laying in of gunpowder and setting of the fuse for this great plot to blow up everything. He tempted Peter to deny his master — 'Satan has desired to sift you' — but he had a deeper aim: an attack on Peter's faith, which Christ foresaw, and which was therefore the primary focus of His prayer: 'But I have prayed that your faith may not fail.' Satan hoped that gross sin would drag Peter into despair. We can also observe how Satan placed this very temptation at the front of his three assaults on Christ — who, in His obedience as in His temptations, is made our complete example. For He was tempted in all things — that is, with every kind of temptation — and in the same manner as we are, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15). Satan tempted Him not only to vain hopes — when he showed Him the glory of the whole world — and to presumption — urging Him to throw Himself from the pinnacle. His primary and first temptation was to stir up jealousy and distrust between Christ and His Father, and between His human nature and the divine. When Christ had just received testimony from all three persons — the Father pro-

claiming Him His Son from heaven, the Spirit descending on Him at His baptism (it being the special purpose of that ordinance to seal adoption and regeneration) — Satan came and tempted Him to question that voice, suggesting it might have been only a delusion. Since Christ's human nature had not yet performed any outward miracle (as appears from John 2:11), Satan wanted Him to take that opportunity in the extremity of His hunger — by commanding stones to become bread — to test whether He was truly the Son of God and hypostatically united to the second person. If God would not do that for Him, he suggested, Christ should question His sonship and conclude that the whole thing had been a delusion. That was the point of it: 'If You are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread,' implying that God leaving Him without even daily bread — which even evil parents give to their children, rather than giving a stone in place of bread — might seem to call into question whether He was the Son of God at all.

The reasons for this are: 1. Above all other graces in us, Satan is the greatest enemy to faith. Therefore in 1 Thessalonians 3:5 the apostle's deepest concern about Satan was precisely this — that he had been tampering with and corrupting their faith: 'I sent to find out about your faith, fearing that the tempter had tempted you.' For faith in God is faith's greatest weapon against Satan — it extinguishes all his flaming arrows (Ephesians 6:16). By standing firm in it, we resist him so that he flees from us (1 Peter 5:9). As faith is God's chief work and the master grace (John 6), so despair and doubt are Satan's masterpiece. He is especially envious of the joy of faith (Romans 15:13). And as comfort is the Holy Spirit's most characteristic and pleasing work, so discomfort and distress are the characteristic work of this evil spirit.

2. As Satan is most opposed to the Holy Spirit, so he delights in discrediting the Spirit's work in our hearts — persuading us that all of it is counterfeit.

3. Satan is called 'that envious one,' and the main target of his envy is this: that God should be our God, having cast Satan off. Since he cannot actually separate between God and us, he will try to create the suspicion in our minds that God is not our God. He tried to plant jealousy between God and our first parents: 'God knows that when you eat of it you will be like God,' and so on — as if God had forbidden that fruit out of envy toward them, wanting to keep them from a better condition. He attempted the same between Christ's human nature and the divine, even though they were hypostatically united.

4. 'God has given us eternal life, and that life is in His Son' — this is the great truth of the gospel, so that a Christian who does not believe it makes God a liar (1 John 5:10-11). Therefore Satan, being the great liar (John 8:44), opposes this great truth and our faith in it above all others. His envy at the elevation of our nature in Christ, according to that truth, is thought by some to have been his downfall — understanding John 8 that way: 'He did not stand in the truth.' However that may be, he now delights in making God out to be a liar to us in our own perception by casting doubt on His promises — and especially by using God's own dealings with us, twisting His righteous ways against us, to enforce that persuasion.

Second, as Satan has such a desire, so God may hand His child over to Satan for a time to be afflicted and terrified in spirit. Satan's final commission over Job seems to extend this far — only Job's life was excluded (Job 2:6): 'He is in your hand; only spare his life.' After that leave was given, we hear Job — though never

brought to question his standing before God — crying out about terrors and the sins of his youth; for Satan at that point buffeted his spirit as he had struck his body with boils. Though Satan has the will, desire, and raw ability to inflict this at any time, he must still have moral permission — leave and commission from God. God sometimes grants Satan power even over sons and daughters of Abraham (Luke 13) — power over their spirits as well as their bodies, to provoke them to sin but even more to terrorize them for sin, since there is more of punishment than of sin in the latter. God left David to Satan, to be provoked to sin just as Judas was. The provocation to number the people is attributed both to Satan and his malice (1 Chronicles 21:1), and to God and His anger in first granting Satan permission (2 Samuel 24:1). As an evil spirit from the Lord troubled Saul's mind (1 Samuel 16:14), so a messenger of Satan was sent to buffet Paul's spirit (2 Corinthians 12). In all of this, God does not give Satan any power beyond what He furnished him with as an angel at his creation, nor does He inform Satan of our secret sins against us to strengthen his assaults — I find no Scripture for this. It is permissive power only. This permissive power is either: 1. obtained and granted at Satan's own request (as the phrase in Luke 22:31 — 'Satan has requested to sift you' — implies, and Job 2:3, 'You moved me against him'; and as the singling out and summoning of a specific individual for this combat suggests — as Christ does here with Peter, which the wording implies; Job too was singled out for this contest by both God and Satan). Or 2. it comes through the ordinance of excommunication and church discipline rightly administered — with the key not erring — for gross and scandalous sins. The proper inward effect accompanying that ordinance, which casts a person out of the church, is inward

affliction and distress of conscience through Satan (which is the greatest of all punishments, as the apostle calls it in 2 Corinthians 2:6) — intended to bring the person to repentance. Just as, by contrast, the special work of baptism (which admits into the church) for adult believers was to seal up their adoption and regeneration with joy in the Holy Spirit, as in the case of the eunuch (Acts 8:39). We see this in the excommunication of the immoral Corinthian, where the excommunication is expressed as 'delivering him up to Satan in the name of the Lord Jesus' (1 Corinthians 5:9) — that is, he was to be cast out by a commission from Christ, who signed it in heaven when they published it on earth. When this is rightly administered, first, as the church cuts him off from fellowship with them, so God cuts him off from communion with Himself, hiding and withdrawing the light of His countenance, the witness of His Spirit, and His comforting presence. And not only this, but He delivers them up to Satan — a consequence that is therefore named to express the whole proceeding. This delivery to Satan was not a commission for Satan to lead him further into sin; the purpose the apostle stated was to destroy the flesh — that is, corruption and the body of sin — so that the spirit might be saved (verse 5): meaning, that contrary principle of grace that remained but was near death (as in Revelation 3:2) might be preserved from destruction. Though that often is indeed the outcome in hypocrites, as in Alexander (1 Timothy 1:19). Rather, it was to terrify and afflict his conscience and stir up in him the guilt of his sin with terror — which God uses to humble and mortify the flesh. This is exactly how Satan dealt with the excommunicated Corinthian: in the next letter (2 Corinthians 2:7) we find him nearly swallowed up with sorrow, which was Satan's doing, as verse 11 implies: 'We are not

ignorant,' says the apostle, partly in reference to this, 'of his devices.' Satan continued to handle him even when he had become truly humbled and was a fit person to receive forgiveness and comfort (verse 7) — when, though he feared God and obeyed Him, he walked in darkness. This continued until the church received him back. Or 3. where this ordinance is not administered for such sins, God Himself — who sometimes works without an ordinance the same effects that He works with it — excommunicates men's spirits from His presence and gives them up to Satan with terrors, to drive them back to Himself. So God gives Satan leave to exercise power over both the godly and the wicked, but with this distinction: the wicked He gives up to Satan as their ruler and head — they are therefore called 'the rulers of the darkness of this world' (Ephesians 6:12), who 'work powerfully in the children of disobedience' (Ephesians 2:2) — or else as captives to a prince, Satan taking them captive at his will (2 Timothy 2:26) so that they are led away (1 Corinthians 12:2). But His own people God gives up to Satan only as prisoners to a jailer, as a magistrate might hand over even his own child to custody — not giving the jailer unlimited authority, but only by appointment, for a set time, with a limited commission. Satan therefore cannot put them on the rack or throw them in the dungeon except when and as far as God permits. As when Satan is said to have cast the believers into prison in Revelation 2:10, his commission lasted only ten days, and then God rebuked him.

Satan having obtained this leave, third: his natural power to work darkness in us hardly needs extensive comment. His physical and natural power to work upon our spirits — by virtue of his nature as an angel — is exceedingly great. We are a middle kind of

creature between angels and beasts: beasts are purely physical, angels are purely spiritual, and humanity stands between them. God made us 'a little lower than the angels' (Hebrews 2) — just a little, but still lower; and because of that inferiority we are exposed to their workings and crafty schemes. The great advantage this gives them over us the apostle points to when he says, 'We do not wrestle with flesh and blood, but with spiritual wickednesses' (Ephesians 6:12) — that is, with spirits whose abilities far exceed the power of flesh and blood. 'Flesh' in such a comparison expresses weakness (as in Isaiah 31:3). They are also called 'principalities' for their authority, and 'powers' for their natural abilities — abilities directed at working on us, as the context there implies. Whatever power Satan had at his creation, it has now become the power of darkness — he is most powerful precisely in causing and producing darkness in us. Though he can, when needed, transform himself into an angel of light by filling his deceived followers with false joys, that is only a performance — a forced disguise. But showing himself an angel of darkness by terrifying and frightening weak consciences — that is now natural to him; it is where his power truly lies. He is therefore also titled 'the ruler of darkness,' and called 'that strong man' — strong to keep peace (Luke 11:21) in those he deceives with a false peace, and strong to make war and upheaval in us when he is cast out. We are therefore commanded to stand guard and put on the whole armor of God, so that we may be able to stand against his schemes (Ephesians 6:11).

Fourth: although Satan has great power, the exercise of that power to produce disquiet in us depends on the sinful darkness within us. We may say that just as he must have power from above — from God — to act, so he must also have fuel from below — from

those principles of guilt and darkness in us already described — or he cannot disquiet us. 'Satan comes,' says Christ, 'but he has nothing in Me.' Satan had a commission and therefore came; but he found nothing of his own image in Christ, no guilt of any of his works to work upon, and therefore could accomplish nothing against Christ's spirit. What gives Satan scope, opportunity, and material to work on us is therefore something within us. Even in the best of us there is something that falls within his jurisdiction, making our spirits fit subjects for his temptations to take hold. In Ephesians 6:12 they are called 'the rulers of the darkness of this world,' and in Colossians 1:12-13 their power is called 'the power of darkness' — so darkness is his territory, domain, and jurisdiction, for it is his work and his image, and without it he would have no power over us at all. Because of the darkness that remains in us, he has a twofold advantage.

1. He has the advantage of closer, more intimate, and more immediate access to our spirits — able to close in on them, suggest things to them, and work on them — tempting us not only as one person tempts another through the outward senses, but through the inward senses as well. This is an enormous advantage. Though it is true that as an angel he has the natural ability to do this by creation, yet as a devil and an unclean spirit, if we were perfectly holy as in innocency, he would be barred from any such near communication with us. We can observe this in his temptation of Adam in innocency: in his first assault he was not permitted — until after Adam sinned — to come inside him and work on his imagination and affections invisibly. He could only approach mediately and externally, through an audible voice in the body of a serpent. Likewise regarding the second Adam: we do not read that Satan

had access to Christ's inward senses and spirit, but only through external suggestion — by voice and by visible representations — as when he showed Him the glory of the world in visible scenes of his own making presented to the eye. Why else would he take the advantage of a mountain? If he had been working on Christ's inward senses, any location would have served. The devil appeared in a visible shape and tempted Christ visibly — he wanted Christ to fall down and worship him. At another point we find Satan working through one of Christ's apostles: 'Lord, spare Yourself,' he said (Matthew 16:23). When Christ replied, 'Get behind Me, Satan; you are a stumbling block to Me,' even then Satan was kept at a distance and could come no nearer. That he came even that close made Christ, in the great temptation in the wilderness, finally say with such force and indignation, 'Away, Satan!' (Matthew 4:10) — as though recoiling from the closeness of so foul a spirit. For what fellowship — meaning such close nearness — should light have with this angel of darkness? Satan would not have such close and inward access to our spirits were it not for the darkness in us, through which he enters. As darkness mingles with darkness, so he mingles with our spirits. So just as the light of grace begun in us fits us for God's drawing near, the darkness that remains in part unexpelled exposes us to Satan's drawing near — so near as to mingle with our spirits and become, as it were, one spirit with us.

2. Just as this darkness gives him access to get inside us, so that same darkness in us serves as perfect fuel for his fiery temptations — it catches and blazes immediately. He can take all those effects of the principles of darkness already described, amplify and intensify them, and add blackness to what is already dark in us. Since darkness is his domain, the more darkness there is in us, the

greater a foothold he has to work with. Therefore, all the effects he works in unregenerate people — who are nothing but darkness — he may also work in regenerate people, proportionate to the degree of darkness remaining in them, to a certain extent and for a limited time. This includes deluding their reason, falsely accusing them, terrorizing their consciences, and so on. Only one thing is excepted: the small despair and hatred toward God that constitutes the sin unto death. Having mentioned that sin incidentally (1 John 5:16), the apostle adds in verse 17 that 'he who is born of God does not sin' — meaning, not that sin. He continues: 'But he who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him' — that is, does not infuse the least drop of the venom of that sin, which is properly Satan's sin (John 8:44) and which he injects into the spirits of those who become the serpent's seed. Therefore, all the examples of how Satan has worked on the spirits of unregenerate people through their total darkness may be cited to show — in proportion — what he may also work on regenerate people for a season through their remaining partial darkness. All things happen alike to all, in their measure. So much in general.

## CHAPTER 7



**M**ore specifically: how Satan works upon those three principles in us — first, on carnal reason.

Since the exercise of his power lies in the darkness within us, let us look more closely at how powerfully he is able to work upon those specific principles: carnal reason, guilt of conscience, and jealousies and fears.

First, he works on carnal reason — on which he chiefly operates in this kind of temptation, since its strength lies in false reasoning, and in this, if anywhere, he has the advantage.

His ability to forge and invent false reasoning and arguments to overthrow our faith is — as one would expect — exceedingly great. For his knowledge he is called 'the wise one,' as well as Satan for his malice; and for his skill in outsmarting us, a serpent — who even in his youth outwitted our first parents: 'he deceived Eve through his cunning,' says the apostle (2 Corinthians 11:3), and that when their reason was not yet corrupted. Now he is that old serpent (Revelation 17:9), and we have become as children, easily tossed back and forth (Ephesians 4:14). He has had time enough to sharpen his knowledge — a student of five thousand years' standing who has lost not a moment, for as he is said to accuse day and

night (Revelation 12:10), so he is able to study day and night. He has made it his chief, if not his entire, study to equip himself for tempting and arguing against us. It is his trade; just as people are called lawyers or ministers from their calling, so he is called the tempter and the accuser from his work. Through long experience and observation he has developed set and carefully composed strategies (2 Corinthians 2:11), methods of temptation (Ephesians 6:11) that are studied and artfully constructed — entire systems and methods, like the curriculum of a professor who reads through his material again and again with students. The apostle calls them darts (verse 16), and Satan has a whole workshop and arsenal of them ready-made and forged. For the sharpness and subtle sophistication within them, they are called 'the deep things of Satan' (Revelation 2:24). And nowhere are those depths more to be found than here, for he is more thoroughly versed in this great question — whether a person is a child of God or not — than in any other. Every other controversy he has only dealt with in particular ages as it occasionally arose, but this has been the standing controversy of every age since God has had children on earth — and with every one of them, more or less, at one time or another he has had a formal dispute on this very point. He therefore knows all the advantages, twists, and turns of this debate — every objection, answer, and line of reasoning in it. And as other controversies grow more enlarged and subtle the longer they run and the further they develop, so must this one — especially in this more educated age of the world, and also because of the seemingly close resemblance that hypocrisy bears to true grace, which has tangled and complicated this controversy. The objections and difficulties a believer faces in reaching a sound judgment of his own standing are greater

than in any other controversy in the world, presenting stranger knots and requiring distinctions as sharp as any the scholastics have known to untie them. Indeed, they are such that if the Holy Spirit did not sometimes cut and sometimes untie them for believers by witnessing with our spirits that we are sons of God, bare reason alone could never settle the matter. Satan through long experience has all of this at his fingertips and has long since organized it all into ready categories. He notes what answers have brought relief to the spirits of believers in each particular doubt he has cast in, and then studies a further reply for the next time — or for the next believer he will have to deal with.

Second, as Satan has thoroughly studied this controversy and knows all its twists and false arguments, he also — by his daily study of people — knows how best to tailor and deploy those arguments to specific individuals and specific moments. The sole occupation of those evil spirits is to study people; that is why they go up and down through the earth. He keeps files on people and their various temperaments and states of spirit, just as he does on temptations. He knows all the various ranks and conditions of people in the state of grace, and which kind of temptation best fits each rank. For people's temptations are varied and many (1 Peter 2:6), just as the gifts and operations of the Spirit are (1 Corinthians 12:4-5). Having worked through this controversy with every kind of person, he knows how to set up the dispute, how to arrange and deploy objections, and how to land his blows with the most impact. Just as physicians, having observed how various medicines work on different ages and constitutions and what effects they produce, prescribe and apply specific remedies suited to each patient's condition even if they share the same disease — so Satan, by observation finding

that the hearts of some people mirror others as face to face in water (as Solomon says), recalls what arguments have most reliably taken hold with a type of Christian whose corruptions and graces much resemble those of the person he is now dealing with, and applies those same arguments again. 1. People's temperaments differ, and different suggestions suit different temperaments. Those with melancholy and suspicious spirits he targets with arguments and suggestions that will most penetrate their particular frame of mind. 2. The operations of graces, like those of sin, also vary across different temperaments. 3. And God's dealings with and work upon His children are as varied as any of this: some He humbles deeply; some He leads along with comfort; some He works on with a sudden and striking light, as if the sun were to rise all at once at midnight; others He works on gradually and imperceptibly, as the dawn slowly overtakes the night. Some have had a false or counterfeit work before; others were never enlightened until savingly. This variety opens room for various temptations. Whatever kind of work another Christian has experienced becomes a potential objection to someone who lacks it. 'I was never humbled like that,' says one; 'nor I ever comforted like that,' says another; 'I had a sudden, powerful work that came in like a spring tide, but now the tide has gone out and my first love has cooled,' says a third; 'I had some stirrings and enlightenings before,' says another, 'and I was deceived then, so perhaps I am being deceived now too.' And he is given the enormous task of comparing a counterfeit work with a true one. Every different path to faith lies open to a different set of objections. As we say that every earthly calling has its characteristic temptations, so the various ways of entering into this heavenly calling each have their own currents of temptation. All of this

Satan knows and has traced repeatedly, and he knows how to fit temptations to each person and press them with the most damaging effect. In the same way he takes the measure of every person's knowledge, understanding, and way of thinking — for according to how much or how little we know, we are vulnerable to different temptations. Many arguments and objections that are like small pellets — unable to reach or dent people of depth and knowledge who rise above them, and who have on the whole armor of God, abounding in all faith and knowledge — are exactly right for those who are more ignorant and remain close to the ground, and who have only a few broken pieces of that armor to protect themselves with. Conversely, his heavy artillery, which he fires against people of knowledge, would fly over the heads of those others and not come near such smaller targets. Not everyone in Thyatira was capable of comprehending Satan's deep things, nor were they intended to (Revelation 2:24). Consider how ignorance and lack of knowledge of the Scriptures and the ways of grace laid out therein gives Satan the opportunity to trouble many poor and sincere souls with false readings of Scripture. How many weak souls get stuck in the shallows and are sometimes long troubled by crude mistakes! Like small birds, they are kept down for a long time by the sticky straws of trivial objections that larger ones simply fly away with. Paul, being a man of knowledge, was not easily caught by such chaff: 'We are not ignorant of his devices,' he says (2 Corinthians 2:11). Therefore Satan takes a different approach with him and comes at him with direct, heavy blows — falling to buffeting him (2 Corinthians 12). So Satan takes careful measure of every person's understanding and fits objections to them of proportionate size. As the apostle prepared milk for infants and solid food for the mature

in his sermons, so Satan in his temptations suits and shapes them to each person's knowledge and way of thinking, always framing objections according to their understanding.

Third, he is able to convey all his false reasoning — however spiritual — invisibly, in such a way as to deceive us and make it land on us.

First, he is able not only to plant in the heart solicitations toward sensual and worldly things — such as the suggestion he put into Judas' heart to betray his master for money (John 13:2), or his tempting separated married couples toward immorality (1 Corinthians 7:5) — but also to insinuate and impart the most subtle and abstract reasoning about spiritual things that are entirely beyond the senses, suited to each person's level of understanding. We are therefore said to wrestle with them about heavenly things, with our claim to those things often being the very matter in contention. The phrase in Ephesians 6:12 — 'we wrestle with spiritual wickednesses in heavenly things' — is better understood as referring to 'heavenly things' rather than 'heavenly places,' since the word means something above the celestial, the highest heavens, which (if taken as places) the devils never entered after their fall. Since the word is used elsewhere for 'heavenly things' (as in Hebrews 8:5), and the preposition 'in' is also sometimes used to express the object or subject matter of something (as in Matthew 11:6: 'blessed is he who is not offended in Me,' meaning with Me or on account of Me), it may rightly be taken that way here — pointing us to the fact that what we are wrestling with Satan over is not worldly things like honors and riches, but heavenly things that concern our souls and eternal standing. Since the contest is about heavenly and spiritual blessings, it can only be carried out through

reasoning that fits the subject — that is, spiritual false reasoning abstracted from sense and imagination. In this respect they are called 'spiritual wickednesses,' because in such wickedness they deal and trade — as much as in sensual temptations — including tempting to unbelief, despair, and blasphemy against God, all of which are the kinds of temptations we are presently addressing. That he is able to convey and suggest spiritual thoughts and reasoning of any kind is demonstrated in many ways: he injects blasphemous thoughts against God that sometimes exceed the mental capacity of the person receiving them. It is also shown by Saul's prophesying under the immediate dictating of an evil spirit, as is expressly stated in 1 Samuel 18:10 — in a manner perhaps similar to how the Sibyls also prophesied. Most evidently it is seen in all the damnable heresies broached throughout the ages — in primitive times among the Romans, whose promoters are identified as agents of Satan. Therefore in Romans 16, having branded those who taught false doctrine among them and having instructed the church against them, Paul gives this encouragement (verse 20): that God would soon crush Satan under their feet — looking back to Satan's work in those errors just mentioned (verse 16), since Satan was their primary author. In the church of Thyatira, those cursed heretics who were admired by their followers for the supposed depth and profundity of their heresies — 'depths as they call them' (Revelation 2:24) — if they call them depths, says the apostle, 'I will call them depths of Satan,' for the devil was the master and author who suggested them. In later times, apostasy is attributed to 'deceiving spirits' — that is, devils — whom Paul foretells that people would follow (1 Timothy 4:1). And 'in the working of Satan' (2 Thessalonians 2:9) it was he who sharpened their minds

and pens. By the same logic, there is no reasoning about our standing before God, however spiritual, that Satan cannot suggest — just as he did those deep heresies to those who promoted them. So Satan can not only make the false reasonings our own hearts forge more plausible and convincing, and add further confirmations to deepen the darkness — he can also inject entirely new ones of his own invention, of whatever kind he chooses.

Second, he is not merely able to suggest those false arguments — he is able to insinuate them in such a way that they take hold of us and deceive us, and often to press them on us with deep force. In the passages already cited, it is not simply said that there would be spirits who would suggest errors, but that they would suggest them in such a way that people would give heed to them (1 Timothy 4:1). In 2 Thessalonians 2, where the working of those very spirits is described (verse 9), it is not only said that they were sent to delude, but with 'strong delusions' — with enough force put into them to prevail, so that people would actually believe them. Similarly, the lying spirit sent to persuade Ahab through the mouths of his false prophets was given not merely a commission to suggest a lie, but to do so in such a way that it would prevail with Ahab — as 2 Chronicles 18:21 says: 'And the Lord said, You shall persuade him, and you shall also prevail.' Just as he is able (when God permits) to delude the understanding of wicked people with false reasoning about heresy and false doctrine — by reason of the total darkness in them — so he is able (when God permits, as He sometimes does) to bring strong delusions upon the minds of God's own children through false reasoning about their standing, by reason of the darkness that partly remains in them. Through this he can produce in a godly person for a time and to a certain

degree the same effects he produces in others, as was noted earlier. The believing Galatians, at least some of them, were so thoroughly 'bewitched' — as Paul calls it — as to assent for a time to a grave error regarding justification. This happened because of the folly and darkness remaining in them, as Paul implies when he says: 'O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth?' (Galatians 3:1). If believers could be temporarily deluded even in the very doctrine of justification (which is unusual), then all the more may they — and ordinarily are they — misled in the personal application of faith, in believing their own justification — which is precisely the matter we are discussing. One caution must be added here: it is true that Satan cannot force an act of genuine assent to falsehood upon anyone's understanding. If he could, those who believed a lie would not have been condemned for it (2 Thessalonians 2:11-12), which would not be just unless it were their own sin — and this principle holds for all other temptations as well. Though Satan put the thought into Judas' heart (John 13:2), Judas' own conscience owns it entirely as his own act (Matthew 27:4): 'I have sinned,' and so on. Nor does Satan immediately and directly produce the act of assent in us the way God produces faith in us — if that were so, God's power in working good would be no greater than Satan's in working evil. And yet the scriptural language goes quite far in attributing things to Satan in this area. Of those who did not believe the gospel it says that 'the god of this world has blinded the minds of those who believe not' (2 Corinthians 4) — pointing to a working of blindness added on top of their natural blindness. So also the 'prince of the power of the air, who works powerfully' and so on (Ephesians 2:2). And the Corinthians while unregenerate are said to have been 'carried and

led away after dumb idols' (1 Corinthians 12:2). All of these phrases seem to point to more than the influence one person can have over another through ordinary moral persuasion. He suggests invisibly and with greater frequency and persistence; he holds the mind fixed on the object; he presents a whole army of confirmations at once, arrayed so forcefully that the mind can scarcely resist; and he presses all of this on the spirit with a violent and commanding insistence. Beyond this, the language also seems to imply some kind of physical working — not directly on the mainspring of the clock, so to speak, but on its wheels and weights — meaning the passions in the body and the images in the imagination, rather than on the understanding directly. Experience shows how powerfully those things can sway and corrupt the judgment.

Fourth, he is further able to follow up and sustain his arguments as occasions arise — keeping the dispute going, pressing his case, countering our answers with new replies, and bringing forward fresh arguments. This is why it is called 'wrestling' in Ephesians 6:12: 'We wrestle not with flesh and blood, but with principalities and powers' — like physical wrestling, it involves repeated attacks and attempts to gain the victory. He is, so to speak, trying to knock our feet out from under us — that is, to take away the reasoning that holds us up, by countering it with fresh objections. How often we experience such spiritual wrestling in times of spiritual conflict! In hours of temptation, believers find ongoing disputes carried out by a rational opponent who brings forward pertinent objections against every answer they inwardly consider. This is why ministers advise against arguing with this cunning sophist. Many people, when death has drawn near, have found the reasoning they relied on for their standing — and the evidences

they turned to — taken away and countered as fast as they could form them. That Satan has this skill in managing such disputes is further seen in the framing of heresies, where he assists their promoters with pertinent considerations to reinforce their ideas in their private reflection and study. If Satan were not able and skilled at opposing and replying in this way, these temptations — which consist of debates — could not be carried out. Otherwise, Satan would be disputing with us like someone arguing with a deaf person who can hear the argument but whose answers cannot be known — so that no reply can be formed. Therefore Satan must have some means — more or less a sense and impression of what the heart may be answering back. If this were otherwise, the glory God receives through the victory won over Satan in these temptations would be greatly dimmed, and Satan's defeat less complete. For the victory of faith in these disputes — and the resistance it puts up — consists chiefly in the replies that are made, by which faith quenches all his darts. When Satan once perceives that he has been resisted, he flees from us, as the apostle says in James 4:7, and does so of his own accord, as the language there implies — like a soldier who has been beaten and is ashamed. We can see this in Satan's conduct during his temptation of Christ, which proceeded through mutual exchange, and where Satan was overcome by the answers from Scripture that Christ gave. Being confounded, he left Christ — as the text says in Matthew 4:11 — as one too proud to endure defeat. Satan therefore has some way of perceiving the replies forming in our hearts to his objections, just as he has the ability to form and cast in those objections.

## CHAPTER 8



**T**hat Satan is able to work upon that other corrupt principle in us — guilt of conscience — both how far he is able to know material against us to raise accusations, and how he works upon the guilt and distortion of the conscience.

We have now seen how able Satan is to join with and strengthen carnal reason against us. Let us now consider what power and working he may exercise upon that other principle in us — our consciences — joining with their filth and defilement in accusing us and laying specific charges against us. This constitutes the greatest of his strength — a whole army of accusations that he marshals against us within ourselves. This kind of temptation consists of either false major premises or false minor premises, like the two wings of an army. His false major premises are misreadings of the ways and work of grace, or misunderstandings of Scripture passages, which he puts to us twisted and distorted — by reason of the darkness of ignorance in us. For example: 'that relapsing into the same sin again and again is incompatible with grace,' and many similar claims. For the standards people use to measure what kind of conduct is consistent with the state of grace are often too severe and rigid — and in others too loose. Some set the standard too narrow, allowing no room for failures; others set

it too wide, accommodating gross and habitual corruptions that cannot stand alongside grace. Satan deceives with both: using the first to flatter profane people into thinking they are in a good condition when they are not; using the second to convince people with weak and tender consciences that they are not in a good state when they actually are. In the same way, misunderstood Scripture passages often become the source of great temptation for many — as Hebrews 6 did for someone who had grown cold in their faith and concluded they could never be saved, because it says that 'those who have once been enlightened, if they fall away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance' — whereas that passage speaks only of a willful, total apostasy from the faith. As Elymas perverted the right ways of the Lord, so does Satan — and Elymas is therefore called 'a child of the devil' because in doing so he was doing his father's work (Acts 13:10). Now all such false arguments founded on these kinds of mistakes about grace and the rule by which we are to judge our standing — false major premises — properly belong under the category of carnal reason already discussed. But Satan has another wing of forces to join to these: false accusations of a person to himself, drawn from the guilt of his own heart and conduct — misconceptions a person forms of himself and false applications he makes to himself — another kind of argument where the minor premises are false. So even if a person is full of knowledge and through it has a right understanding both of Scripture and of the ways and work of grace by which people's standing is to be judged — so that Satan cannot overcome him with all his sophistry on that front — he may still be brought to pass a false verdict on himself through Satan's misrepresentation of his own ways, making what is straight appear crooked, and making ev-

everything in him appear to be hypocrisy. So if this cunning pleader cannot deceive the judge — so to speak — with false rules and mistakes in the law itself, he then tries to deceive by misrepresenting the facts of the case. He submits a false bill of accusation, carefully arranged and colored to produce a judgment against the person — laying before the eyes of the conscience selfish motives, deadness and hardness of heart, and dishonesty in various turning points in the person's life; objecting to what is good in them, magnifying what is evil, all to press out a false conclusion. To give a specific example: Satan often charges the conscience of a distressed person in this or a similar way: 'Those in whom any sin reigns, or in whose hearts hypocrisy and self-love is the dominant principle, are not in the state of grace; and such you are.' To prove this minor premise, he marshals before the conscience a multitude of examples: sins committed in this way and that way, committed so often; duties neglected, or if performed, done with such pride of heart and selfish motives, and so on. In this kind of reasoning, the major premise is often true; but the minor — 'and such you are' — is almost entirely false. And though there is truth in the specific instances cited to support it — that such sins were committed, and that in the performance of duties such selfish motives do arise and are found in the heart — they are not there in the way Satan would have the charge read: not as reigning, not as the dominant and governing principle of a person's whole life. That hypocrisy is present cannot be denied; but that hypocrisy rules and is dominant, and that nothing but hypocrisy is there — that is what is false, and yet that is what Satan stuns the conscience with, to press out this conclusion: 'Therefore you are a hypocrite.' How able he is to press home that conclusion with terror and fear we will show

shortly. What we are dealing with now is showing how capable he is of producing exactly this kind of false reasoning — where the deception lies chiefly in the assumption and minor premise, that is, in false applications made to the person himself — and in this he has mainly to do with the conscience. For the guilt of a person's particular ways, actions, and corruptions is what supplies the evidence and proof for those minor premises; and the defilement and unreliability of the conscience is the principle in us that he works upon when he presses a false conclusion from that evidence.

Here we should notice the difference between the Holy Spirit's dealings with a believer when He comes with the word, searches and examines the heart, and exposes corruptions — such as David prayed for: 'Examine me, O Lord, and try my heart' (Psalm 26:2; Psalm 139:23) — convicting and reproofing us, sometimes sharply, for our selfish motives, hypocrisies, and the like, and showing us where we have gone wrong, as Elihu says in Job 36:9-10 — and the siftings and winnowings of Satan (as Christ's phrase has it in Luke 22:31, of which more later). The difference is this: the Holy Spirit deals gently in this — like a father rebuking and convicting his child of wrongdoing, but without driving the point home to this conclusion: therefore you are a hypocrite. He draws no such inference as: therefore sin reigns in you. But in Satan's dealings, that is precisely the conclusion he drives everything toward. It is the bottom line and the recurring burden of all his accusations, the theme that runs through the whole of his charge against us.

In regard to his misrepresenting our standing and his false magnification of our sins against us, he is called — as 'the tempter,' which relates to all kinds of temptations — so also 'the accuser' (Revelation 12:10) or one who prosecutes against us. He accuses us

before God in God's court and before His tribunal, and also in the court of our own consciences. As he tempts us to sin, so also he uses sin against us — through the guilt of it — to drag us into despair. He who accused Job to God would surely accuse Job to himself all the more.

Although it may be truly said that neither Satan nor our own consciences can ever magnify the intrinsic sinfulness, the seriousness and vileness of our sins too much — seen in their true light and proper weight — since we can never see enough of them to hate, loathe, and mourn over them as we ought: yet Satan and our consciences may frame our sins with such false impressions and distortions as to make us perceive too much about them in the wrong direction — as when it is suggested that they are incompatible with the state of grace, or that they are utterly unpardonable. He may use them as the basis for proving a false conclusion. And while our sins, if truly set forth, can never be displayed too fully when the purpose is to drive a person more to God's free grace and to Christ — yet to present them alone in isolation, and to fix the mind entirely on them so that we forget all the mercies we have received, and in such a way that God's mercies and all comfort are hidden from us: this is Satan's practice, and it is the cause of the deep bondage we are here speaking of. In this regard, the name 'the accuser' is given to this evil spirit in direct and full opposition to that special name and office of the Holy Spirit — 'the Comforter' or pleader for us. For as the Holy Spirit intercedes within our own hearts to God for us, and upon true repentance helps us to make our defense — as the word implies in 2 Corinthians 7:11 — and comforts us by revealing to us the graces God has given us (1 Corinthians 2:12), and by pleading our evidences and witnessing

with our spirits that we are sons of God: so on the other side, Satan is 'the accuser' — laying to our charge the guilt of our sins, contesting our evidences, misrepresenting our standing before us, thereby to cast us down and swallow us up with sorrow (2 Corinthians 2:7). And further, because in these accusations his aim is to misrepresent our standing to us and falsely to distress us, he is even more specifically called 'the slanderer' — one who falsely and lyingly calumniates and slanders all our graces, all God's dealings with us, and all our dealings with Him: slandering our persons and our standing before us, charging us with being hypocrites — unsound, carnal, and counterfeit Christians — constantly putting the worst interpretation on everything. These false charges and slanders of his I take to be most properly the darts mentioned in Ephesians 6:11 — which are said there to be especially directed against our faith, and therefore faith is said to quench them. From his trade of forging these dart-like slanders he receives the name 'the slanderer' — drawn from the metaphor of throwing darts, since slanderous charges are like a club, a sword, and a sharp arrow, as Solomon says: 'their teeth are spears and arrows' (Psalm 57:4). Such are Satan's temptations and accusations against us — like darts and arrows that wound and pierce, running through the emotions and striking the soul through and through with fear. His name 'the tempter' comes from a word meaning 'to pierce,' because his darts are sharpened and hurled with such force as to penetrate and run through. Beyond their sharpness, they are called 'fiery' — making a double way for themselves, for a piece of iron, though blunt, if heated red hot will pass through without resistance. Satan is the great general of all the powers of darkness within us, and therefore he has some command even over the

forces of guilt — whose proper seat is the conscience — just as he commands the power of sin in our other members. As he can muster up fleshly lusts that war against the soul and provoke and sustain them in their assaults on us, so he can clap on the chains of guilt and bondage.

As he can stir the guilt that is already in us, so he can also work upon the faulty and polluted judgment of the conscience in assessing a person's own standing. Satan works on this and abuses it. Just as he has power to work upon the corruption in the rest of our faculties, so he has power over the defilement of the conscience, misleading it in its verdict the way a clever lawyer misleads a naive jury. The tumblers of conscience are already loose and out of their proper place by nature; he with his false keys twists and distorts them further. Conscience already gives an uncertain sound naturally; his false alarms and panics cast in from outside confuse its testimony far more. And how easy it is to trouble a soul already unsettled, to play upon jealousies already aroused! We see how far a cunning person can work on a suspicious nature to increase its surmises and suspicions. When a feeling is already stirred, how easily it is amplified; and when the Spirit has already given the conscience a sharp examination, Satan strikes in and elaborates on everything.

A fuller and more precise account of Satan's work here requires a further inquiry — a more extensive examination of how Satan comes to know enough material against us to make accusations. For if he accuses, he must — as was said in Acts 28 — 'have something against us to accuse us of,' otherwise it would be pointless. There is also this difference between these temptations, which exercise us about the guilt of sin, and those other temptations to sin:

the material of other temptations is something outside ourselves, but in these temptations, what is within us, what comes from us, and what has been done by us is made the ground of objection and distress. What is inside the person is what troubles the person.

But before entering on this inquiry, I must first state a general caution to set limits to the discussion.

The caution is this: we must hold firmly, both as an undoubted truth and as God's sole royal prerogative, that He alone can search and know the heart and conscience. In the same way, He alone can by His wrath immediately inflict those deep and mortal wounds with which people's souls are so often wounded, both in this life and eternally — of which there will also be a caution in the next chapter. These two glorious and incommunicable attributes of God are fully set forth in the description of the word of God in Hebrews 4:12-13. There, as at the gate of paradise a cherub with a flaming sword was stationed to keep our fallen parents from ever entering again, so Christ is represented as the supreme Judge to whom we are eternally accountable (verse 13) — or as the original has it, 'to whom we are to give an account,' as it is used in Romans 14:12 and elsewhere — wielding that dreadful sword of His word drawn and brandished (by which He will judge men on the last day, John 12:48, and which is therefore called 'a judge of thoughts,' verse 12). By the awe-inspiring terror of it He compels and drives those who hear the gospel to enter into that rest (to which He had urged them in verse 11) which He has opened for fallen humanity to enter. That sword has a double edge, as the text says, and in His hand — for He alone can wield it — it serves a double purpose. A judge requires two things to fully carry out his office: first, skill and knowledge to discover and examine the fact; second, power to execute

judgment on the offender when found guilty. The passage shows how both of these belong transcendentally and solely to God, as revealed in the power that resides in His word — the symbol of His justice and instrument of His power in judging. His word is called 'a discerner of thoughts' and 'a sword that pierces and wounds the soul and spirit with unspeakable anguish.' Some see the wounding power as described from the beginning of verse 12 through the words 'and is a discerner of thoughts,' and then from that point through verse 13 the other attribute — God's all-knowing and all-judging nature — as laid out. I rather think the apostle carries both through the whole in one sustained metaphor, though with the one more prominent in the first part and the other in the latter. Yet both alike are made the royal prerogative of God, which is the point we are establishing. Nor should it trouble anyone that this is attributed to the word of God, for that is the same as attributing it to God Himself. 'Where the word of a king is, there is power,' says Solomon (Ecclesiastes 8:4); so where the word of God is, there is the power of God — and that is how it is to be understood here. Therefore as in other Scriptures the word is said to create, and by it the heavens to be established, and in Galatians 3:8 'the Scripture is said to foresee' — meaning God foresaw, who wrote the Scripture — so also here, the word is said to know and wound the heart. That this is the apostle's clear intention appears from the connection between verses 12 and 13: having in verse 12 begun by attributing this power to the word, he closes in verse 13 by transferring all that was said of it back onto God Himself: 'with whom we have to do.'

To open the words a little more fully, so as to draw out this point clearly, which it is necessary to establish first. The words are: 'For the word of God is living and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart; and there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and laid open to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.'

First, concerning that sole searching power over the soul discussed here, and that other — the sole power to wound the conscience — to be discussed in the next chapter, we will have similar occasion to lay the groundwork.

For the present, the searching, examining, and judging power of the word is expressed through an analogy to anatomical dissection — which, though less common then than now, was already practiced — or else to the cutting open of sacrifices, whether Jewish or pagan, particularly by the soothsayers who carefully examined every inward part, as we find in the prophet Ezekiel 21:21. The analogy runs as follows: just as entrails are to a sharp sword, a sacrificial knife, or anatomical instruments in a strong and skilled hand — so are all the most inward and hidden parts of the heart, including the most difficult to divide, to this sword in God's hand when He is pleased to use it to search the mind and heart and bring its secrets to light. He can use this sword not only to strip off the outer clothing of outward and formal actions and so present the soul naked (as His expression has it in verse 13) — and not only to peel off all the skin so as to see what lies beneath (as the next word there, translated 'laid open,' sometimes signifies) — but further to cleave and cut down to the backbone, for even that depth

belongs to the word's signification, so that all the inner parts are exposed and so carefully divided and laid apart that each may be separately seen and examined. 'It pierces to the division of soul and spirit.' By this, grace and corruption are not most properly meant here — for then the apostle would more likely have said 'flesh and spirit'; and besides, the people he is primarily speaking about are those who will be found to be secret unbelievers, in whom there is no spirit in that sense at all. Rather, soul and spirit are used here as near synonyms to point to the most inward and intimate depths of a person's inner being — the soul and spirit of the soul, so to speak. Or soul and spirit may be understood as general and specific: the spirit being the higher part of the soul, the seat of spiritual capacities; and the soul the lower, the seat of animal and sensory functions. And further: 'of both joints and marrow' — just as in a body one can by dissection and anatomy view the very joints and see the marrow within the bones, and so discover what lies in the most inward parts of the body, so God by His word can search and expose the most hidden and intimate secrets of the soul. 'There is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and laid open to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.' The searching power of this sword is such that no creature can shelter itself from it. In these few lines the apostle implies that God — who is the Judge to whom we will give account at the last day, and with whom we eternally have to do — already has a complete and perfect view of all people, even to the most inward and hidden secrets of their hearts. From this we can see that He will be able to judge righteously on the last day, when He brings all things to light. So much for that sole searching power of God over

the hearts of people — by which I have established that Satan has no direct insight into the heart, no knowledge of it like God's. And so that royal prerogative of God is established.

The reasons God has reserved this to Himself are: 1. It was for the glory of God that He should have one private chamber among created beings that He alone knows and holds the key to — demonstrating His omniscience, and providing one space sanctified in such a way that no creature's eye can penetrate it. So that the greatness of His glory may appear — that He is not worshipped only outwardly, as the great are, but inwardly in spirit and truth; and that His glory is such as commands the innermost parts, which no eye sees but His own. A person will therefore honor God all the more, knowing that one cannot deceive Him as one might deceive all other authorities.

2. That God alone might be the judge and rewarder of people's ways, and be looked to as such — the one to whom all must give account. This draws the creature's eye to Him alone, since the best and deepest part of all our actions belongs to Him and comes under His view. Therefore it is said that 'He rewards people according to their works, whose hearts He knows.' It was fitting that only He should take on the role of rewarder, since only He can know the principles behind all actions — in which the chief good or evil of an action lies. This is the great glory of God and Christ at the day of judgment: that they will disclose the secrets of all hearts (1 Corinthians 4:5). Scripture does not say so much that people's actions will be disclosed then as that the secrets of their hearts will be — for therein lies God's glory, which He will not share with anyone else.

This having been stated as a necessary caution, I come to the question just raised: how and to what extent Satan may come to know enough material against us to make accusations.

1. In general, consider:

1. Satan knows what motives, intentions, thoughts, and desires corrupt hearts like ours typically produce in all people, and can therefore guess at what selfish motives may be at work in any given action and lay them to our charge — and often guess correctly, speaking a person's heart at random. For our natures are prone to bring forth all kinds of sinful desire, as the apostle says in Romans 7. Even if he knew nothing more than the temptations common to human nature, that would take him far in accusing any person — having keys of all kinds fitted to all kinds of spirits, trying each to see which will enter. Just as David's older brother charged David when he came to the battlefield — 'This is the pride and the wickedness of your heart' — guessing at his selfish motives: so Satan does. He often charges us in the same way, by inference. He did this with Job: 'Does Job serve God for nothing?' — he knew that such selfish motives existed in some people's hearts, and ventured to lay the charge against Job as well.

2. Even if he knew very little about us specifically, he could still plant a single suspicious thought about a person's standing and set the jealous heart to work searching out more material against itself. In a case of treason, even the smallest tip sets the whole investigative apparatus in motion to get to the bottom of the matter and draw everything out. So Satan often does no more than cast in a single scruple, which becomes a theme for the heart to expand

upon — and when conscience looks inward, it finds material against itself to confirm and multiply that suspicion. So much in general.

But 2, he may more specifically know a great deal against us to form charges from. And this first: even if we supposed he had no access to our inward parts and knew us no better than people can know each other — it being God's appointed limit to human knowledge that we judge by outward appearance, as God said to Samuel — yet every advantage people have to know each other, he has over us, and all more abundantly.

For 1. those spirits can perceive all physical actions — not of all people at once (for why else would Satan travel up and down the earth to survey it?), yet within a range proportionate to their nature. They understand things not only through innate inborn forms of knowledge, but also through receiving impressions from things they observe. They continue to learn. The good angels are said to learn from the church things about the mysteries of the gospel they had not known before (Ephesians 3:10). Though the way these spirits receive and process knowledge of physical things differs from ours, it is analogous to ours. We know no more how they should receive impressions of all things done by bodily beings than a blind person can imagine how sighted people receive colors. Yet we may be certain of this: whatever the senses or mind of a person can know, they can also know — for natural things are proper objects of knowledge for them. Indeed, all created things are made to be known by intelligent beings; and if by any, then by the most supreme intellectual natures.

2. They make it their business to study people; going up and down the earth to observe humanity is their occupation. 'Have you considered my servant Job?' God says to Satan. Satan makes it a practice to study and observe people — just as the apostle urges us to 'consider one another so as to stir up love,' so Satan considers people in order to stir up sin, and for sin to drive them into despair.

3. He may be present at our spoken confessions of sins to God or others, at the times when we lay open our hearts to God in private prayer, or to others in spiritual distress. Therefore, whatever of the heart is disclosed in those ways, he can and does know. And why should God not permit him and allow him the opportunity to accuse us even of what he has learned this way — since it serves the testing of His servants? This is especially true when people have returned to the very sins they confessed but did not forsake. It is just that when the guilt of former sins returns in such a case, Satan should be permitted to bring fresh charges on that basis, and that in such a case a person forfeits the protection that the privacy of confession might otherwise afford. And if God may permit another person — to whom we confessed according to God's own ordinance — to later disclose what was confessed and throw it back in our face, as has sometimes happened: why may not Satan, the accuser of the brothers, sometimes be allowed to lay to our charge what he came to know only in this way?

4. He is and can be present at all our more private actions and is privy to them, being with us at bed, at table, and in every company. By this he is able to accuse us: first,

Of all the gross and obvious sins a person has committed: these are usually the heaviest material for accusation and weigh on us most in such temptations — as David's murder and adultery weighed on him: 'My sin,' he says, 'is ever before me.' These pull a person down and put them in prison, and then the conscience comes in with all the smaller and more private corruptions — as lesser creditors do once the principal debtor has been brought to account. Once the soul has been brought to doubt through the accusation of one foul act, all the other private corruptions join in and offer themselves to accuse as well — for they lie at the door, as God told Cain, ready for just such an occasion.

He may also by this means accuse us of all deadness, drowsiness, and neglect in the performance of holy duties — such as lack of attention and alertness in them (which any attentive observer can easily detect) — and of the absence of stirring affections, and neglect of holy conduct in various situations, and the like. If a godly person were to follow another person around in all their company and settings, how much might that observer come to know about them, and be able to charge them with?

By such observation he can come to know a person's deepest besetting sins. So he knew and had observed that Judas's besetting sin was greed, and accordingly tailored his temptation to it.

From what he observes outwardly in our actions, he can in many ways infer the inward corruption that drives them. He has all the means that a wise and discerning person has — one who constantly watches another person, studies them intently, and has the opportunity to suggest things at will for the purpose of testing and discovering: all of these Satan has. And what Solomon says of a wise man — that though the heart of man is deep, a person of un-

derstanding will draw it out — is all the more true of Satan. First, by comparing one action with another, one speech with another, wise people guess at the ends and motives behind what others do. Second, by gestures — by a person's countenance and behavior — much can be read about them, and Satan can read us in the same way. Joab discerned David's pride in his command to number the people, so that it was loathsome in his eyes. And if Joab discerned this from the outward handling of the matter, how much more would Satan know — since he was the one who had put the motivating impulses in to persuade David to it? Third, by himself suggesting various motives and reasons, offering side interests and considerations this way and that, Satan observes how the heart responds to each suggestion — where it hesitates and what it was that moved a person in one direction or another. The Jews could see what moved Pilate to condemn Christ to death: the text notes that it was at the statement that otherwise he would be an enemy to Caesar that Pilate gave the sentence. So Satan, having stirred David with proud arguments to number the people, must have known what pride was already in his heart.

Beyond all this, how far Satan may have insight into the imagination and its images — which shadow forth the mind's inward thoughts as a shadow follows the body — and also into the passions, which are the flowing and ebbing of the body's spirits in which the will's affections express themselves: this I leave for others to determine. For the present, this much is certain: although all the powers of the rational soul are firmly locked to him, and the direct acts of the soul in itself are utterly hidden from him — so that no devil can directly perceive them any more than one angel can perceive another's thoughts — yet by inference, as those acts ap-

pear and express themselves outwardly in the body and bodily organs through actions, or inwardly through the passions, they can be read to a considerable degree by angels, indirectly and mediately. Yet this does not in any way infringe on that prerogative given solely to God — of being the one who alone searches and knows the heart — nor on that privilege belonging to the soul itself, that none should know the things of a person except the spirit within him — as we will have occasion to show in the appendix to this work.

Beyond those advantages and means of knowledge that we humans share with each other to some degree, these spirits have a further and closer means of knowing the acts of the rational powers — the understanding and the will — than any human can have of another. Similarly, they have a way of communicating their thoughts to us in a more intimate, hidden, and close manner. Yet even this falls short of direct intuitive knowledge of those acts. They can go further into a room than we can — into a room right next to the innermost chamber, which remains firmly shut to them. As their power in all other things exceeds ours by a degree, so also in this.

The rational powers and faculties in us — the understanding and the will — whose direct internal acts are locked to Satan, are nonetheless in this life immersed in the body and bodily organs on which their working depends. The understanding is joined to the imagination, which creates parallels, likenesses, and shadows of the thoughts the mind secretly conceives — so that almost no thought stirs without the imagination imitating it and acting it out as best it can. The will is likewise joined to the affections, which are immersed in bodily organs and spirits, so that no motion of the

will expresses itself without some degree of bodily affection stirring alongside it. Therefore affections are defined as much by their movement in the body as by their seat in the will itself — as when anger is defined as a boiling of blood around the heart, and affections are described as the flowing and ebbing of the body's spirits to and from the heart.

Both these — mental images and passions — all theologians grant that devils may know, and that they have closer access to perceive them in us than people have to perceive them in each other. Indeed, they may discern them directly and intuitively, as we perceive things that are in front of us. Without this, there could be no diabolical dreams — nor angelic ones either, caused by good angels. We find that a good angel communicated a great article of faith — Christ's divinity and birth — to Joseph in a dream, and therefore through his imagination. So they inspired the Sibyls and dictated prophecies, as was said; and so evil angels influenced Saul's imagination. They do this not by creating new images and impressions but by drawing on images already present. Since the images in the imagination are physical in character, angels can no more generate an entirely new image there than they can create a physical body from nothing. Therefore all the power of angels cannot cause a blind man to dream of colors. Their means of communicating suggestions to us in this regard must be by recognizing the mental images — that is, of all words heard or read that already reside in the imagination — and then arranging and composing them. This is like a typesetter in printing who orders the scattered letters before him into words and sentences to present the reader with what he wants read. In the same way, Satan presents to the understanding — which naturally prints off from the imagination

whatever is in it — whatever he has arranged there. For the same reason that he can summon and arrange those images, and view what is stored there, he must be supposed equally able to perceive any of them in the imagination at any time — even when reason itself calls them up and makes use of them, as it does whenever it turns its attention to think or reflect. All the operations of the sensitive powers, they can view and see — for all we know — as directly and intuitively as we see colors or the images in a person's eyes. So these evil angels may, when God permits, penetrate the mind, see all the images in the imagination, and those directly before the understanding that it is currently thinking about — just as a person can see what images are in another person's eye. And by perceiving those mental images the understanding is actually using and attending to at that moment, Satan can judge what the mind is currently thinking about.

And again, as we discern people's passions when they color and affect the outward features — as shame reddens the face and fear turns it pale — so may angels discern with greater subtlety the inward movement of those passions, which is what causes those outward changes. They can go further still and perceive the internal stirring of the body's spirits in our innermost parts — even in their channels and sources, in the physical heart we carry within us, in the veins and arteries — and so know what affections are at work. This is evident from the fact that they are also able to act upon these passions; their power to move and influence the affections comes from their ability to perceive them and their skill in stirring and moving the spirits and humors in which those passions are seated. In this ability to discern us, they exceed what people can discern of one another, as their power of communicating with us

also exceeds ours. As they can communicate secretly through the imagination — while we can only communicate through outward words and signs to the outward senses of others — so they can discern more secretly what is in the imagination, and not only what appears in the outward parts. They get further into the room than we can, so that they can detect the slightest rise of the tide, the faintest turn in the current of the affections in our veins and in the physical heart. Satan can detect those faint feverish surges of passion that accompany any act of the will — surges that people cannot detect in each other.

## CHAPTER 9



**H**ow able Satan is to work upon that third principle — the passions and corrupt affections — and drive home his false conclusions with terror.

We have seen how able Satan is to work upon the two principles already discussed — carnal reason, abusing it with false premises — and also upon the conscience, laying our sins to our charge with misrepresentations of our spiritual standing. It remains only to show how he can stir and work upon the passions and corrupt affections within us, make use of them, and press home all those false conclusions — that we are hypocrites — with frightening and overwhelming terror.

As Satan is called a serpent for his cunning reasoning, schemes, and craftiness, so he is also called a lion — the strongest of all beasts. A roaring lion — the most terrifying of all beasts, and most terrifying in his roaring, which Scripture frequently uses to express dread and horror: 'The lion has roared; who will not tremble?' (Amos 3:8). As some have observed, and the psalmist implies, his roaring strikes such horror and paralysis into all other creatures that they freeze as if lifeless, and he preys on them at his pleasure. It is in this respect that the darts mentioned earlier are

chiefly called 'fiery' — for the pain, anguish, inflammation, and burning they cause by distemping the affections. The fears our own hearts had already generated were like smoke; his darts put fire into them and cause them to flare and blaze. The image is drawn from the poisoned darts that the Scythians of old, and other peoples still, use in warfare — dipped in the blood and gall of asps and vipers, whose venomous heat, like a fire burning in the flesh, killed the wounded with torments most like hell of any other. Job also alludes to this: 'For the arrows of the Almighty are within me; their poison my spirit drinks; the terrors of God are arrayed against me' (Job 6:4). And what were those arrows but terrors? The text confirms it: 'the terrors of God.' Thus the Corinthian was in danger of being 'swallowed up' — as the word signifies — with excessive sorrow when Satan had to do with him (2 Corinthians 2:7). The same word is used again of the devil: 'seeking whom he may devour' (1 Peter 5:8). Just as Satan inflames other members and the disordered desires within them with a superadded natural force and violence — as the tongue, which though of itself full of poison, is said to be set on fire from hell, that is from Satan, who inflames people's tongues with an excess of venom and malice to wound others' reputations — so in the same way he can and does put fire into the darts with which he wounds the conscience. He thereby intensifies our fears and griefs, causing such agitation and anguish that the fire of hell, as it were, begins to burn in a person's conscience. As Christ is the bronze serpent, so Satan is the fiery serpent who can sting us through the guilt of sin.

Here I must bring in the same caution I used in the previous chapter — namely, that he does not produce these terrors by direct impressions upon the conscience, since the conscience in that re-

spect is subject to God's strike alone, just as it is subject to His knowledge alone. This, as I suggested, I take to be the other principal thrust of the words in Hebrews 4:11-12: 'The word of God is living and active.' There the apostle sets forth Christ as a judge fully equipped for vengeance — not only regarding omniscience to find us out in all our evasions, but also in power to punish. A judge would not be greatly feared if he only possessed skill and knowledge to discover guilt, however great, without the power to avenge and punish. Therefore the apostle's aim is to strike terror in their hearts by pointing to the vengeance He can execute. The apostle urges them not to trifle with God or with His word, in which He had warned those who disbelieved that they would not enter His rest. So the thrust of the words must necessarily be understood as displaying the dreadful power of God and of His word to avenge itself on those who despise it — not merely describing His omniscience and His knowing of the heart, but joining with it the power to pierce as deep in wounding the soul as in knowing it. Indeed, the extended illustration of His knowledge serves to heighten the demonstration of His power to punish — for who would not fear the hand whose eyes see so deeply? Accordingly, to express the dreadfulness of this power, all the apostle's expressions speak as fully to this as to the other point. He uses a comparison which, both by the nature of the things involved and by the more common scriptural use, most fully and properly expresses the slaying and wounding of souls by the word, even more than the searching of them. This word, he says, is 'living' — not merely in the sense of enduring forever, but in the sense of working and executing. We call things that are extremely operative 'live,' even when they are not alive: so 'quicksilver,' which runs through a person's body.

Conversely, medicines and treatments that have lost their potency we call 'dead.' Regarding this energy and power to work on people's hearts, John 6:63 says: 'The words I speak are spirit and life' — that is, full of an active principle. We commonly use 'spirit' to describe an active working principle — as in the spirit of wine. So in calling the word 'living,' the apostle points to it being filled with the most active, vigorous, and operative principle fit to work as needed — the Holy Spirit as its internal animating force. Having pointed to this internal principle of operation, the apostle adds 'powerful' and 'mighty in working' — indicating the power that flows from it, the ability to produce remarkable effects upon the soul. These expressions convey more than merely skill and knowledge to search and know the heart. Third, the apostle then points to the operations of this word as the effects of that power — and they are most dreadful, as the comparisons he uses make clear. 'Sharper than any two-edged sword.' Elsewhere the word is compared to an armory of every kind of weapon for war and justice — 'the weapons of our warfare are mighty' (2 Corinthians 10:4) for pulling down strongholds and bringing people to Christ, and also having 'readiness to avenge all disobedience' (verse 6) against those who do not submit. Here it is likened to a sword — the most common and most terrible instrument of death in that day. The brandishing of a sword strikes a person pale with horror before the blow ever falls. This is how vengeance is regularly expressed in Scripture, especially throughout the prophecy of Ezekiel. So also in Psalm 7:13: 'If he does not turn, God will sharpen His sword; He will bend His bow and make it ready — He has prepared His deadly instruments.' Whatever causes torment or anguish is called a sword in Scripture, and being pierced by a sword expresses the

most acute suffering — as in Luke 2:35: 'And a sword will pierce even your own soul' — spoken to the blessed mother of Christ, of the anguish that would cut her to the heart when she saw her Son on the cross. The same expression is used of His sufferings on the cross in Psalm 22:21, where He prays: 'Deliver my soul from the sword.' In this light, the word in Christ's hand as judge is compared to a sword. To intensify the terror with respect to the wounds and torments it inflicts, the apostle goes further. He says not only that it is as sharp, but sharper — not than a single-edged sword but than a two-edged sword, and not than some but than any two-edged sword. Further, to show that he is speaking in connection with the wounding, anguish, and torment caused in the soul, he points to the dividing of parts that are not only most hidden and inward — such as the marrow, covered by bones, and the ligaments, covered by flesh — but that also have the most exquisite sensitivity, so that wounding them causes the greatest agony. He says it pierces even through the bones — which must be assumed when it reaches to the marrow. The breaking of bones is consistently used in Scripture to express those acute and unbearable terrors and agonies of conscience — wounds of the spirit that a person cannot sustain. When the bones are broken, a person cannot stand or support themselves. Similarly the cutting of ligaments, nerves, and sinews — those that bind the joints, which are the organs of sensation and movement. Again, he says it divides not only the soul — that is, the sensitive part, the mind's passions — wounding them in the way that created beings such as people and angels can wound — but also the spirit, which is stated with emphasis. His meaning is not so much that it divides the soul from the spirit as that it pierces through both. It is a two-edged sword

that can at one blow strike through both. This is an axe that strikes at the root — at the spirit, which when wounded, who can bear it, as Solomon says? He concludes in verse 13 that just as all things are laid open before God, so if He strikes them with His word they lie as with their throats cut, dead and speechless at His feet, as Theodoret interprets that word. To this spirit in a person no created sword can reach — they turn edge against it. But the word reaches it, and only the word. The whole point of all this is the same that Christ expressed elsewhere in different terms: urging people to fear the God whose sword and powerful word is able to wound in this way — He alone is able to do it — and not to fear those who can only wound and kill the body, reaching only to the sensitive soul immersed in it, but cannot wound or kill the spirit. God alone can do this; no mere creature can, whatever its power. Therefore in all our thinking about Satan's power to know our sins and to trouble or distress our spirits — throughout this whole discussion — we must set limits so that this incommunicable royal prerogative of God and His word is preserved without encroachment: namely, that He alone knows and can directly wound the spirit and conscience. Both of these the passage establishes at once, which is why I have opened it at some length.

Yet although Satan cannot directly wound the conscience or impress God's wrath upon it — for just as no creature can pour out God's love and cause a soul to taste its sweetness, neither can any creature cause it to taste the bitterness of His wrath; God alone is His own messenger of both —

Yet, first, when the Holy Spirit has already lashed and whipped the conscience and made it tender, and stripped off the skin, Satan can then chafe it further and keep rubbing the wound with horrible

suggestions.

And second, he can by reviving the remembered experience of those lashes the soul has already received, overwhelm the soul with fears of an infinitely more terrible vengeance yet to come — flashing representations of hell fire into the conscience from the real glimpses it has already had, bewildering the soul into overwhelming and unimaginable horror.

And third, he can bring forward all the warnings thundered in the word against hypocrites and unregenerate people, and discharge them all with great force and noise upon a poor doubting soul. He presents and shows his prisoners the terrible warnings, chains, instruments of punishment — what the psalmist calls God's instruments of death — which God has stored in that great arsenal of His word, which 'has readiness to avenge all disobedience' (2 Corinthians 10:6). With the rattling of these chains, Satan makes a noise in the conscience of a poor sinner to terrify him. He is the more capable of this from personal experience — being himself 'bound with everlasting chains under darkness for the judgment of the great day' (Jude 6). As a comforting person and child of light is the more able to comfort others through the comfort with which God has comforted him personally, so this prince of darkness is the more powerful in terrifying weak consciences bound by the cords of their own sins — drawing on the terrors he has himself experienced from the Lord. Therefore, as Scripture attributes to him a power over sin, so also 'the power of death' (Hebrews 2:14). By 'the power of death' is meant not so much physical death as that eternal death to which the guilt of sin binds us over as its proper punishment. This power of his is not that of the judge who sentences to death or casts people into hell — that is Christ's own

royal prerogative, who holds the keys of death and of Hades (Revelation 1:18) — nor is it as though he were the chief tormentor of souls after the last day. Rather it refers primarily, first, to the power and advantage he obtained over sinners when he seduced them — giving him standing to come boldly as a prosecutor against them, empowered to invoke God's righteous law and word and to call upon and provoke His justice to condemn poor sinners — until Christ the righteous advocate stripped him of his grounds for accusation by His satisfaction, which before the law had placed in Satan's hands, and so 'destroyed him who had the power of death.' And second, as he has this power in God's court, so also in our consciences — to press the law upon us, to plead everything the law says against those under it, and to increase in us the fear of that death by presenting the terrors of the law to which natural conscience makes people subject all their lives. And as far as slavish fear remains, so far people may be subject to being terrified by the one who has the power of death over all who are in any degree under the fear of it.

And fourth, by his own power he can directly stir the passions of fear and grief, exciting them beyond their natural level — as the winds raise billows on the sea and make the floods roar. In the same way he can raise a tumult in the affections and throw the whole soul into violent turmoil. He is the prince of the aerial dimension of the little world within a person, just as he is of the elemental region in the greater world, and can therefore raise unnatural storms and vapors that darken reason and cause such thunders and lightnings as to hurl everything into black confusion — so that it feels as if hell and the soul are about to collide. Though it is true that he cannot reverse the stream and current of our affec-

tions — only God can turn this Jordan back — yet he can drive them faster and cause them to swell above their natural banks, so that affections inflated by him gain the strength of ten, as the demon-possessed man in Luke 8:29 did. We see in David how powerful an urge there was in him to number the people (2 Samuel 24) — contrary to all reason as well as religion, against the urging and opposition not only of Joab but of his other counselors. One might wonder that a man so holy and wise could be so driven to commit an act so foolish (as he himself afterward recognized, saying, 'I have acted very foolishly,' verse 10), and so grossly sinful that it was repulsive to Joab. But the devil was behind it: 'Satan provoked David to number Israel' (1 Chronicles 21:1) by stirring up that affection and impulse in him. And as he can stir other passions, so also fears and terrors, jealousies and distrust — bringing fear where there is nothing to fear. This is how he handled Saul when God gave him over to him: 'An evil spirit from the Lord troubled him' — or as most translate it, 'terrorized him' (1 Samuel 16:15). In stirring up these affections of fear and the like, he works not merely by presenting objects that naturally move them — which is all a person can do — but also physically, by disturbing the bodily humors in which those passions are seated. He can selectively work upon those humors in the body that will put a person into a fearful and trembling disposition. He can also disturb the images in the mind, the organs of the understanding — as was implied in the case of the man in Luke 8:35, who through Satan's working was not in his right mind. Once he has thrown everything within a person into disorder and put him into such a state of fearfulness, he then comes with his suggestions and speaks nothing but of wrath, terrors, warnings, the seriousness of the person's sins, and

the fearfulness of God's anger to the troubled conscience. Then — just as when a person's anger is up, every small thing provokes him further — so when fear and melancholy have been excited, every suggestion, every suspicion strikes the soul through and through with overwhelming fears and distrust. So although not directly, yet through these mists, vapors, and clouds he raises — which surround and darken this sun — he works upon the conscience. Experience shows that he prevails most in this kind of temptation with those of melancholy temperaments, who dwell in dark chambers and are easily deceived by his false colors and illusions. When the affections are stirred and cloud the mind, multitudes of troubling thoughts arise, and every suggestion suited to that mood takes hold and prevails with the spirit — as Christ's words show: 'Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?' (Luke 24:38). Passions are like heavy weights hung on a clock — they not only make the wheels (the thoughts) run faster, but twist and pervert them so that to a disordered heart all things are presented wrongly, just as to a bloodshot eye everything appears red. In sum: as Satan deludes his enthusiasts by inflaming and backing their false opinions with surges of joy and spiritual ecstasy — which differ from the Holy Spirit's joy, which is inexpressible and glorious, as far as heaven differs from earth — so he can and does back his false reasonings and accusations against holy people regarding their spiritual standing with an abundance of terror and disturbance, which also differ as far from the direct impressions of God's wrath made immediately by the Spirit upon the conscience.

## CHAPTER 10



**T**he conclusion: seven advantages Satan has over us in common, in all the dealings described.

As a general conclusion to this and all the rest of this discussion about Satan's working on us, I will mention some of the great advantages he has in all his false reasoning and accusations — in pressing them home, fastening his slanders and false conclusions drawn from them, and persuading the mind to accept them. I bring these forward here since they are common to all the particulars already described.

First, it is no small advantage that he can suggest the same things to us familiarly and repeatedly. The frequency of a thought that keeps returning — that hovers close and haunts us — has a hidden power to persuade us that it must be true. We commonly say, 'I have thought this again and again.' A persistent flatterer who keeps suggesting the same thing and seizes every occasion to do so may at last work hard enough to drive out a near and trusted friend and cause one to become suspicious of him. As the judge gave in to the widow's persistence (Luke 18:5), so the mind is prone to yield to a suggestion that keeps pressing itself upon it — yes, even to the point of passing a false verdict against itself.

Second, he can also — and does — present a multitude of arguments and considerations all at once, all pointing toward the same conclusion. He will sometimes bring in a cloud of witnesses and instances to prove us hypocrites, surrounding the mind with them on every side so that whichever way it looks it sees nothing else. Just as he showed Christ the glory of all the kingdoms of the world in a single moment, so he can do the same with a person's sins — presenting a sweeping panorama of them so that a person sees nothing else no matter where he looks. The force this must have in persuading the mind and judgment to assent is shown by experience. When a person doubting a contested question reads only the opposing side presenting everything that can be said against the position, it often staggers him and for the moment wins his opinion over — until he reads and considers what can be said in reply. Yes, even a person settled and firm in a truth is sometimes struck by such an array of arguments on the other side, arranged so forcefully, as to be shaken and staggered in the moment. And so it must necessarily happen in the contest over a person's spiritual standing when Satan marshals and deploys an entire army of objections all at once — not scattered piecemeal, as he is fully capable of doing.

Third, he is able to hold the mind's attention so fixed on these things as to shut out everything that might in any way bring comfort. He can turn down that page in the book of our hearts where grace or any encouraging thing is written, and hold our eyes fixed to read only the pages where our errors and sins are recorded. So he causes a person's soul to forget all that is good — as the church in desertion is said to do in Lamentations 3:17 — and to forget its own mercies, as Jonah describes. He can multiply suggestions so quickly and come in with such a storm that, as Job complains (Job

9:17), he will not allow them to catch a breath. Therefore the apostle calls them Satan's 'buffetings' (2 Corinthians 12), because like blows raining down in a fight they come thick and fast upon a person's spirit so that there is no time to recover. He sometimes pours down temptations not as ordinary drops of rain but as waterspouts — as sailors call them when a cloud suddenly bursts and releases a massive torrent, often enough to sink a ship. 'He breaks me with a tempest,' says Job in the passage mentioned.

Fourth, he adds weight to his lying accusations and false reasoning by an imperious and forceful assertion that it is so. He not only suggests reasons to persuade, but accompanies them with words of affirmation and insistence. Just as in argument a weaker spirit is often overpowered by a stronger — not so much by the force of the argument as by the strength and intensity of the person's manner, since many, when their logic is blunt and their arguments lack edge, bear down with greater force, as Solomon says (Ecclesiastes 10:10), and so prevail — so Satan, being by creation a spirit of greater power than ours, and our guilt further weakening us in contending with him, presses his accusations with overwhelming insistence. Skilled lawyers can argue a case with such confidence and forcefulness that, as Socrates said after his accusers had spoken, if he had not been entirely innocent he would have suspected himself guilty. How much more when this falls upon people as guilty as we all are, and the thing being pressed is something we are already suspicious of? What a person already fears, they easily believe — just as what a person hopes for, they readily accept, for we are quick to believe what we dread. There is often in our opinions a prior inclination — a quiet readiness of the mind to think that such and such is so — and in such a case Satan

can strike in powerfully to strengthen that conceit. I take this to be what is implied in the phrase in 2 Thessalonians 2:1, where the apostle warns that they should not be troubled 'neither by spirit nor by word' to think the day of judgment was at hand. By 'spirit' he means a pretense of divine revelation joined with a person's own private conceit and imagination — as also in 1 John 4:1. Often when Satan perceives the mind inclined to think or feel a certain way, he adds weight to the scale, and so the person is given over to the force of the delusion. We see this in the false prophets the apostle speaks of when he says, 'Do not believe every spirit, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.' Those false prophets became confident in their prophecies — 'they walk in the spirit,' says Micah 2:11, but they lie. They took up those ideas, and the devil joined with them and confirmed them. And as Satan by such false revelations confirms enthusiasts in their opinions and conceits, so he joins with the jealousies of believers and adds weight to the scales, powerfully pulling them toward a false judgment of their spiritual standing.

Fifth, because he backs his false conclusions with terror, this becomes an argument to the feelings — and such things carry enormous weight in shaping the mind's judgment about things. A thought that comes in accompanied by joy we are prone to accept as true; and likewise what comes in accompanied by terror. Such impressions are like a seal stamped on what is suggested, confirming it in the mind. As the Holy Spirit seals His instruction with impressions of joy (Job 33:16), so Satan seals his temptations with impressions of fear and distress. If a person has a dream accompanied by any strong feeling, they are prone to give attention to it and think there must be something in it. What made

Nebuchadnezzar certain that his dream had significance (Daniel 2 and 4) — even when he had forgotten what it was — was that it had frightened him and troubled his thoughts.

A sixth advantage is that he plants and works all these impressions while remaining undetected as their source, so that we do not recognize them as anything other than our own thoughts — and sometimes even take them to be the Holy Spirit working within us as the Spirit of conviction. This is an enormous advantage, comparable to an enemy obtaining the opponent's own passwords and their own regimental colors — it causes us to readily open the gates and yield to him. And though when a temptation is over we sometimes perceive his deception in it, still, because we cannot distinguish his suggestions from our own thoughts while we are in the midst of them and in that eclipse, he can return with the same temptation — today, tomorrow, and the next day — and we do not recognize it. If we could recognize it, we would not listen, any more than we would give attention to someone who had already deceived us. So Ahab's prophets did not know that Satan was a lying spirit speaking through them — one of them said to Micaiah, 'When did the Spirit of God depart from me to go to you?' Those 'strong delusions' of 2 Thessalonians 2:10 could not have prevailed to make people believe a lie if they had discerned that Satan had suggested them. Peter did not know that Satan was using him to tempt his Master to spare Himself — yet Christ perceived it, and therefore called him 'Satan.'

Last of all, there is no way for a person to avoid Satan's suggestions or escape from them — none but God can take Satan off a person; God alone can rebuke him; no one else can. A poor soul fights with Satan in this darkness like a person attacked by some-

one carrying a dark lantern — the attacker can see the one he is striking and knows exactly how to hit, and follows wherever the person goes, while the poor man cannot see his attacker, does not know who is striking him, and has no idea how to ward off the blows. Therefore the apostle, when buffeted by Satan, knew nothing to do but to turn to God in prayer, for he could no more escape or flee those suggestions than he could flee from himself. Nor could all the saints on earth have freed him in any other way — no one could, until God chose to cause Satan to depart (2 Corinthians 12).

## CHAPTER 11



**T**he second main topic: the circumstances in which God leaves His own children in this darkness. First, three extraordinary circumstances.

Having dealt with the efficient causes of this darkness — the physical causes — I now move to the circumstances in which, and the purposes for which, God leaves His children in such a condition — the moral causes. The circumstances were the second main topic I proposed to address, and they are either extraordinary or ordinary.

First, the extraordinary, such as:

First, out of His sovereign prerogative.

Second, when He intends to make a person exceptionally wise and able to comfort others.

Third, in the case of extraordinary comforts and revelations.

First: what if God chooses to exercise His sovereignty and prerogative in dealing with His child, proceeding in a way that follows no settled pattern or precedent? This He may do, and it is thought He did so in Job's case. Some consider Job among the Gentiles to be a type of Christ at His crucifixion — Christ who was to be aban-

done by His apostles and forsaken by God. Though Job's desertion began only with his estate, children, and body, it eventually pierced further and seized upon his spirit — not so far as to make him question God's love for him; we read nothing of that — yet showing itself in God's withdrawal of the comfort of His presence and in Satan's making Job the target of his arrows. And though God had cause enough in Job's case, no cause is actually pleaded; it resolves into an extraordinary dealing in which God took the liberty to glorify Himself by singling out one of His bravest and most valiant champions and setting him hand to hand against the powers of darkness. Because Satan was, as it were, not strong enough for Job, God himself became the adversary (Job 13:24). No one had been more upright than Job before; the Lord Himself glories in him; no one had ever lived more strictly (see chapter 31); no man kept himself in greater awe — and he did so precisely by fearing such a desertion beforehand, which was the only way to prevent it, for what a man fears he prays hard against. Job expresses this when he complains that, though he had dreaded this, yet it came (chapter 4:25) — implying that it was not ordinary, nor indeed is it. And though Job vindicates himself too confidently at points, this is what made him plead his own case so boldly: he could find no precedent, no settled pattern of such treatment. Therefore Elihu, who took both God's side and Job's and stepped in as a mediator — speaking as one in God's place to settle the matter — resolves it most fully into God's sovereign prerogative, though not without acknowledging Job's failings — yet not such as God ordinarily acts upon, nor does He treat others so severely — as appears in chapter 34. When God Himself came to contend with Job about it and show him the reason for it, He only demonstrated

how great He is and that He could therefore do as He pleased — using no other argument through chapters 38-41. God never lacks cause, nor deals this way where there is no sin; yet as it was said of the man born blind — that he was blind not for his own sin or his parents', though not without sin, but for the glory of God — that was an act of God's sovereign prerogative — so here. God had higher purposes in glorifying Himself through the patience and triumph of such a champion as Job, and in disproving the devil's charge that Job served God only for what he got. To demonstrate the falseness of that charge, God tested the matter; and also to refute the widely held belief of that era that godly people necessarily prosper outwardly in proportion to their godliness. Yet Elihu gives Job this sound and timely counsel: to use the occasion to search out his sins (chapter 34:31-32). And God could well take this liberty with Job because He was able to make full amends — as He afterward did, restoring to him double of what he had lost. Indeed, it was only the concealing of His love for a time, as many parents love to do with their children, while showing it all the more powerfully in real effects — as God even then was doing by making Job more than a conqueror.

A second extraordinary circumstance is when God intends to make a person a wise, capable, skilled, and mature Christian — wise in this way, which is the greatest learning and wisdom in the world: the ability to comfort others from personal experience.

This appears to be the reason for God's dealing with Heman. Heman was schooled in this kind of trial and kept in this condition of desertion from his youth (Psalm 88:15). He was put to it early, and the lessons set him were so deep that he was nearly out of his mind, as he himself says there. Yet in the end, when God raised

him up, this Heman — who lived around the time of David and Solomon — is counted among the wisest men of his age, one of the four who came next to Solomon himself (1 Kings 4:31). So the great apostle Paul was exposed to the same conflicts others faced — buffeted by Satan (2 Corinthians 12), filled with inward terrors as well as outward ones. What was this for? Not so much for any personal sin of his own as to make him able to comfort others (2 Corinthians 1:4-5). For the comfort that answers a temptation in one person's heart will answer the same in another's — the same key will unlock twenty locks that have the same tumblers. When temptations have the same character, the key that opened one person's chains will serve to unlock another's. It is not every word that comforts a weary soul, but only a word in season — one fitted to the person's specific situation. And who are better placed to offer such apt and timely comfort than those who have passed through the same temptations and similar distress? This art of speaking peace, comfort, and words in season is the greatest wisdom in the world, and it is not learned except in Heman's school. Temptation was one of Luther's teachers. Therefore, among the abilities of the ministry, Christ in this chapter (Isaiah 50) singles out this very gift and calls the tongue of one who can speak with fitting gentleness to weary souls 'the tongue of the learned.' And in Job 33:23, to lift up a soul that has drawn near the grave is said to be the work of 'one among a thousand' — which is easy to understand when you consider the danger of such distress. In Scripture it is called the breaking of bones (Psalm 51), because the strength of spirit that should hold a person up as bones hold up the body fails within them. To be a bone-setter is not every person's skill; it requires special art and delicacy and a gentle hand — that is, ten-

darkness and compassion — which are never truly natural unless we have ourselves tasted or feared the same. The apostle commands those who are spiritual to restore such a person (Galatians 6:1) — the word means to set back in joint — lest they themselves be tempted. It requires skill to draw out every splinter, to address every doubt, and to set everything right again. It is also called the wounding of the spirit: 'A wounded spirit, who can bear?' (Proverbs 18:14). As the power of sin wounds, so does its guilt — and the one is as hard to heal as the other. And since it is the spirit of a person that is wounded, what heals it must be something that penetrates to the spirit. There must be specific and carefully chosen remedies for these wounds, because they are typically of different kinds. For some objections Satan has devised that even the most learned have never encountered in books; and he has developed methods of tempting deserted souls (Ephesians 6) that he uses again and again. A person will not know those depths or be able to sound them unless he has himself been in the depths, as Heman describes. Then he will see such wonders of God in those depths as no one else has ever seen, and will thereby gain the wisdom to encourage others by his example to trust in God and call upon Him — as David did in Psalm 32:5-6.

The third extraordinary circumstance: God deserts when a person has had or is about to receive from God an abundance of revelations and comforts.

First, in the case of someone who has already received an abundance of revelations from God. After that glorious testimony given to Christ at His baptism — 'This is My beloved Son' (Matthew 3) — Jesus was then led away to be tempted (Matthew 4:1). The text draws attention to this timing precisely for this pur-

pose. In the same way God often deals with the members of Christ regarding the season and timing of their desertion and temptation. This was also the great apostle's experience (2 Corinthians 12:7): 'To keep me from exalting myself because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a messenger of Satan was given to me to torment me.' What he calls there 'a thorn in the flesh' that pricked him refers, I think, to a desertion and being left in distress of spirit rather than to a sinful lust — for his purpose is to glory in his weaknesses (verses 9-10), and if it had been a lust it would not have been something to glory in. Again, it was 'a messenger of Satan' — therefore something external — and it buffeted him; he was entirely passive in it, as a person being struck is. In the exercise of lusts our spirits are active. Besides, he prayed that it would depart — a phrase that suggests something external. God had taken him apart into heaven and spoken wonderful things to him; and when he came down again, Satan was given permission to take him to task and batter him. His flesh would have grown proud had it not been beaten black and blue. He had been in heaven and heard the language of angels and saints — things not lawful to be spoken — and he must hear from devils the language of hell. This buffeting I take to consist of satanic injections.

Second, before God dispenses great revelations and comforts, He sometimes deserts first. Just as, before great trials He intends to lead His children into, God fills their hearts with inexpressible and glorious joy to strengthen them against the coming conflict — so God, to encourage His Son for the great agony in the garden and the combat on the cross, first transfigured Him on the Mount — so on the other side, sometimes before great revelations and comforts, God withdraws Himself precisely at that time, thereby pre-

paring the heart for those comforts, as physicians prepare the body before administering a restorative. The greatest flood tide of comfort comes in upon the lowest ebb of distress. Distress enlarges the heart and makes it gasp and thirst for comfort all the more, and so becomes more capable of receiving it — for the principle is true: 'As the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our comfort also abounds through Christ' (2 Corinthians 1:5).

## CHAPTER 12



**T**he ordinary situations in which God leaves His children in darkness.

Now, second, we come to the more ordinary situations in which God usually gives or withholds light and darkness. Before naming specific cases, I want to establish a general rule about them. God does not always follow the same pattern in how He distributes these experiences. No one can say that in certain situations God will definitely withdraw from someone, or that He always does so. He varies in His dealings. Some people He leaves in darkness during and immediately after their conversion. Their sun rises in an eclipse and stays that way until noon, even until nightfall. On the other hand, He sometimes never shines more comfort on others than at the moment of their first conversion. Again, some He withdraws from after they commit a serious sin. But to others, He never reveals Himself more powerfully than after a serious sin that has been mourned over and repented of, showing the freedom of His grace. In the same way, some who have less grace and have lived more carelessly find their sails filled at death. They have a full and abundant entrance into the kingdom of Christ.

Others who have walked more carefully with God, whose final days you would expect to be the most glorious, He leaves to fears and doubts. Their sun sets behind a cloud.

The reasons why God varies in these dealings are, first, because spiritual comforts are not essential to being a Christian but rather contribute to a Christian's comfortable well-being. Also, in the way they are given out, they belong in the same category as temporary rewards. Although light and assurance are not earthly but heavenly blessings, they are still temporary blessings. Therefore, just as the promises of earthly good things are not absolute, so the promises to give assurance to a believer are not absolute in the same way that the promises to give him heaven and salvation are. Likewise, on the other side, darkness and distress of conscience are only temporary discipline, just as outward troubles are. They differ only in their subject matter: outward troubles deal with the outer life, while these deal with the inner life, namely a person's spiritual condition. So in distributing both, although God always follows some rule in all His dealings, He varies and deals differently with His children. He does this the same way He distributes outward prosperity and hardship, 'setting the one against the other, to the end that man should find nothing after him' (Ecclesiastes 7:14). He gives such contrasting and contradictory examples in both areas so that people cannot trace His ways or, as the phrase in Romans 9 puts it, say with certainty and precision what He intends to do in any given case. In the world to come, He settles accounts with everyone, no matter how different His distribution of rewards or punishments has been here. Whatever anyone is still owed, He then pays with respect to what they have already received. So in the matter of spiritual joy and assurance, God may grant it to

someone who has not feared and obeyed Him as much as another person who walks in darkness. But then, if someone has received more pledges of assurance beforehand and has not lived up to them, God counts it as making their sin worse. He did this with Solomon, whose sin is made worse in 1 Kings 11:9-10 by the fact that he sinned against God who had appeared to him twice. On the other hand, if these comforts make a person proportionally more fruitful than others, I see no reason why God, who crowns His own graces, would not reward them even more. This is one means He uses to produce more grace in some, just as afflictions are the means He uses for others. The same is true of withdrawals and distress of mind. Since they are a temporary punishment, God is just as varied in how He uses them. So a person with more grace, or one whom God intends to give more grace, may be afflicted and forsaken while a person with less grace reigns like a king, as was said of the Corinthians regarding worldly prosperity. The latter may have peace and freedom of mind, triumphing over Satan, hell, and discomfort, while apostles by comparison, that is, people outstanding in grace, are made spectacles to angels and people when it comes to spiritual struggles.

With this general rule established, the ordinary cases follow.

First, in the case of misplaced confidence. In Psalm 30, David had been in great distress of mind for a while, as verses 3 and 5 show: though heaviness may last for the night, joy comes in the morning. In this sunshine, David looked around and saw no cloud on the horizon that might eclipse his comfort again. Then he grew confident on no other basis than his present feelings. He thought it would always be this way for him, and he trusted in the comfort he had as if he could never again be troubled. Good souls are prone to

think this way in such situations. 'Now I shall never be moved,' David said. This was misplaced confidence, and God hid Himself again to break it (verse 7).

Now, misplaced confidence comes in three forms.

First, when we trust in false signs mixed in among true ones. This can happen even to believers who are in a state of grace and have genuine evidence to show for it. Yet alongside their sound evidence, they often accept many other signs that are only probable, even deceptive, and common to hypocrites as well. We are prone to treat many things as certain signs when they are not. Just as many people in Daniel are said to join the better side through flattery, so in a person's heart many false signs will come in, give their testimony, flatter the person, and say the same thing that true evidence says. Now, to reveal which signs are false and which are not, God withdraws from a person. Then they will find all their false signs fail them and abandon them the way flatterers do. These false signs are like broken teeth among healthy ones: they fail and trouble the person, like reeds that break when any weight is put on them and cut into the hand.

Second, when we place too much confidence on signs, even true ones. When we trust too much in comforts, former revelations, witnesses of God's Spirit, and our own graces, which are merely creatures and acts of God upon us and in us. When we let the full weight of our support rest on these things, God often withdraws from us so that 'no flesh should glory in His presence.'

Third, when we think graces and comforts are so deeply rooted in ourselves that we neglect God and Christ for maintaining, increasing, and exercising them. Then God withdraws the light of

these, so that we will go back to the source. Just as too much confidence in the power of built-in grace caused Christ to leave Peter to the power of sin, so confidence in the power of grace also causes God to leave us to the guilt of sin and the terrors that come with it.

The second case: for neglecting precious opportunities of comfort and refreshment that God has provided. This includes the neglect of holy duties in which God offered to draw near to us, such as the sacraments and similar practices. In Song of Solomon 5:4-7, Christ stood at the door and knocked. That is, He moved the heart of the church to pray or perform a similar duty through which He typically enters the heart and visits it. He offered to help her and began to enlarge and prepare her heart. She made excuses, and because of this Christ immediately went away, leaving behind only an impression, a lingering sense of Himself in her heart. It was enough to stir her up to seek Him because she felt His absence, as God typically does during times of withdrawal.

Third, in the case of not exercising the graces a person already has, not stirring them up. This was the condition of the church in Song of Solomon 5:2, when Christians are half asleep and half awake, so to speak. In that condition, Christ also withdraws. To perform duties with the inner self half awake and half asleep; to pray as if you were not really praying, just as we are told to use the world as if we were not using it; to do the work of the Lord carelessly: this provokes God to absent Himself, as He did in Song of Solomon 5:2. Likewise in 2 Peter 1:9, the person who lacks these things, that is, does not use them and neglects adding grace to grace, quickly falls into blindness and forgets everything they ever had. And indeed, there is no reason a person should have present comfort about future grace when they neglect using their present

grace. In Isaiah 64:7, God complains that no one stirred themselves up, and because of this God was angry. On the other hand, in verse 5, God meets the person who works righteousness and rejoices in the one who delights in doing righteousness. God meets such people, rejoices with them, and draws near to them. But those who do not stir themselves up, God rouses and wakes with terrors. 'Whoever walks according to this rule, peace be on him' (Galatians 6:16), and not otherwise. Although comfort is not always the immediate and necessary result of righteousness, it never comes without it.

Fourth, in the case of some serious sin committed against clear knowledge, not properly mourned over, or proving scandalous; or in the case of old sins long forgotten. I will give examples of each.

First, regarding serious sins committed against clear knowledge. David is an example of this. Though he was a man after God's own heart, we find him often complaining as someone who frequently experienced these withdrawals. Among other times, once in Psalm 119:25, 28 his soul clings to the dust and is at death's door. He says, 'Give me life,' meaning in regard to the sense of God's favor, which is better than life. Normally in Scripture we do not find such a significant withdrawal without also finding its cause, if we read further. So here, in verse 29: 'Remove from me the way of lying,' David says. He points to the sore in his heart, where his grief lay. Among other weaknesses, David had a lying spirit. This is very clear from two or three lies he told in a row when he fled from Saul and came to Ahimelech. Ahimelech, afraid to shelter him because of Saul, asked why he was alone. It was suspicious that such an important man would have no larger group attending him. David answered that the king had sent him on a mis-

sion (one lie), that the king had ordered him to keep it secret (another lie), and 'because my servants should not know it, I have sent them to different places' (a third lie). And again in verse 8, 'I have not brought my sword, because the king's business required urgency' (a fourth lie). These were deliberate lies. These were serious sins, sins against clear knowledge, because lying above all sins must be committed against the truth that rises up in the mind. It is a sin where a person's mind shows its craftiness and cunning, and a sin that proves extremely shameful and scandalous when the truth comes out. Therefore this sin, especially since he had been practicing it for a while (he calls it 'a way of lying'), weighed heavily on him long afterward. So he begged God to take the burden off: 'Remove from me the way of lying.' It was the weight of this that pressed his soul to the dust of death, as he had complained earlier.

Now regarding the second particular: when a sin is not thoroughly mourned over and confessed, or when at the time we committed it we had ways of convincing ourselves it was not a sin or not that serious. Or when we were unsure whether it was a sin and so were reluctant to acknowledge it, to burden ourselves with it in our confessions, because our hearts were more inclined to defend ourselves. This is likely what David did in the case of his murder of Uriah. He had done it so cleverly that he thought he could clear himself and wash his hands of it. After all, it was just 'the chance of war,' he said, that killed him. 'The sword takes one as well as another,' and so he excused it (2 Samuel 11:25). In this situation, God brings him to the breaking point (Psalm 32, which is thought to have been written, like Psalm 51, on the occasion of his murder). These sins had become known and scandalous, so David needed to

confess publicly, which he eventually did when he wrote Psalm 51 and stood, as it were, to make a public confession. But David was reluctant to do this. Since the murder had been carried out so cleverly, he could hardly be brought to confess it even in private, much less in public. In this situation, God laid His hand on him so severely that his natural strength dried up, as that psalm tells us. In people troubled in conscience, their mental distress often throws their bodies into fevers as intense as burning sickness. And this went on without stopping, day and night. He lay there crying out in agony. That is how he describes his experience of the torture, like a prisoner on the rack. Although he cried out to God for mercy, because he did not do so with a broken heart, God considered it nothing more than the desperate cries of a creature rather than the voice of a person genuinely humbled for his sin. And why was David put through this torment? He would not confess and humble himself for his sin. 'I was silent and yet I cried out' (verse 3). A quiet, broken-hearted confession could have prevented all this torment. But when at last he said, 'I will confess my sin' (verse 5), and in his heart he resolved to lay open all that sin of murder and adultery with all its details, then God pardoned him. Nathan came to him and told him, as soon as a word of confession began to fall from his lips, that his sins were pardoned. And yet after that, as Psalm 51 shows, God still did not restore comfort and the joy of His salvation to him. There David prays for it because he feels its absence. God did not restore it until David had also confessed publicly and thoroughly humbled himself, since his sin had caused the enemies of God to blaspheme. God required a public satisfaction.

When the man guilty of sexual immorality had committed that sin (1 Corinthians 5:1, 9), he was not humbled for it at the time. Afterward, in 2 Corinthians 2:7, when he was genuinely humbled, Paul told them to comfort him. But until his repentance was clear, Paul told them to hand such a person over to Satan, to the jailer, to the tormentor, to the prince of darkness to terrify him and afflict his spirit. The meaning of handing him over to Satan was that he should be formally excommunicated. When excommunication is carried out as it should be, in the name of the Lord Jesus and with the power of the Lord Jesus, then just as the church cuts them off from fellowship with themselves, God cuts them off from fellowship with Himself. He withdraws all communion with their spirits and leaves them alone in darkness and withdrawal. Not only that, but He hands them over to Satan, not with permission to drive them into more sin (for the apostle's stated purpose was to destroy the flesh, verse 5, not to feed it by provoking more sin), but to terrify and afflict the conscience and to stir up the guilt of sin and the terrors that come from it. God uses this to humble a person and to put sin to death. This is how Satan dealt with that Corinthian man when he was excommunicated and given over to Satan. In 2 Corinthians 2:7, he was nearly swallowed up by too much sorrow. Satan brought this about, 'whose schemes we are not ignorant of,' as the apostle says (verse 11). Now, just as every ordinance has its own proper work and intended inward effect on a person's spirit, so does this one. The proper effect and inward working of the great ordinance of excommunication is terror, sorrow, and spiritual withdrawal, meant to humble a person, just as the proper effect of the sacraments is to bring comfort, assurance, and the seal of the Spirit. And when this ordinance is neglected or skipped when seri-

ous and scandalous sins demand it, then God Himself often works this way and brings this upon a person who belongs to Him, even without that ordinance. This is how He dealt with David and others after serious sins. God inwardly excommunicates and casts people out of His presence and from all comfort in His ordinances, even though other people do not refuse them access to those ordinances. He acts like a father who is also a public official dealing with an unruly child after a major offense: though he does not disown the child, he may send him to prison as an example, down into the dungeon where he sees no light, into such tight confinement that he can neither sit, stand, nor lie down. As Elihu describes it in Job 36:16, he calls it bringing someone into a tight place and binding them in chains and cords of affliction, and then showing them their wrongdoing and where they have gone too far (verses 8-9).

Yes, and third, God does this not only immediately after sins are committed but sometimes long afterward, even after they have been confessed many times. Even after God has pardoned them in our consciences as well as in heaven, the guilt may return and leave us in darkness. In Job 13:26, for the sins of his youth, which he had undoubtedly humbled himself for and had received assurance of pardon, God wrote bitter things against him for those sins many years later and made him relive them, as Job himself says. Just as the power of sin and the law of sin are only partly removed from our bodies, so in our consciences the guilt of sin is likewise only partly removed in terms of our awareness of being pardoned. Therefore, just as the desires we thought were dead and that we assumed would never rise again sometimes revive and trouble us with fresh attacks, so too the guilt of sins we thought had long

been pardoned may revive. After committing some new sin, or becoming careless and forgetful about the old ones, God may let them loose on us again so that we look at them as if they had never been pardoned.

Now the reason behind all these cases, both why serious sins (especially those committed against clear knowledge) when not thoroughly confessed should cast us into these episodes of withdrawal even many years later, is this:

Because in doing so we rebel against God's Spirit, and that Spirit deals with us as we deal with Him. If you grieve Him, He grieves you. If you rebel against Him, He fights against you as an enemy. As Isaiah 63:10 says: 'They rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit, therefore He turned to be their enemy and He fought against them.' Now, to sin against clear knowledge is called rebellion (Job 24:11). When people try to put out and darken the light of guidance that God has set up in their hearts to direct their paths, God puts out the light of comfort and leaves them in darkness. But this is especially true when our hearts are so full of dishonesty that we argue our actions are not sins, or we minimize them, as David most likely did. In Psalm 32:2, he says that the person is blessed in whom there is no deceit. And in Psalm 51:6, 'You desire truth in the inward parts.' David had dealt dishonestly and deceitfully in that sin. If a person hides a sin and will not be convinced of it or bring it out through confession, God brings that person to the breaking point, just as officials put criminals on the rack to make them confess. And if any of our old sins revive and cause these terrors, it is because we began to see them as past and gone and thought we no longer needed to humble ourselves for them, assuming they were so buried they would never surface again. But

the memory of them should keep us humble all our days. It is charged against the people in Ezekiel 16:22 that they did not remember they once lay in their own blood. We tend to think that time wears away the guilt of sins, but to God they are as fresh as if they had been committed yesterday. Therefore, nothing wears them out but repentance. Great sins that have been forgiven must not be forgotten.

Fifth, in the case of a stubborn, unyielding spirit under outward hardships, when we will not change or submit to God. This may be part of the situation described in Isaiah 57:16. In verse 17, you can see where the conflict began: 'For the sin of his greed I was angry,' that is, for some out-of-control desire, some harbored lust. He does not mention so much a specific sinful act as a lust that was being sheltered. Because of this, God began to be angry and to show the effects of that anger by striking him, perhaps with some outward hardship first. 'I was angry and struck him.' When that did no good, God became more angry and began to hide Himself: 'I hid My face.' This refers to inward affliction, which he also calls 'contending with the soul,' leaving it to the point where the spirit was ready to collapse. He further reveals the cause of all this: 'He went on stubbornly in the way of his heart.' When lighter and outward blows will not turn us away from sin, God withdraws from our spirits and wounds them. And the reason is: in this situation, what other approach should God take? Either He must give the person up to hardness of heart and leave him to his stubbornness, in which case He would lose His child. But God is determined He will not do that: 'I will heal him,' He says in verse 18. So when the heart remains stubborn under other blows, God has no option left in His ordinary methods but to strike the spirit and wound it. And

this burden is the one most likely to break and humble a person, if anything can, because this is something no one can endure. A person's natural spirit and stubbornness can endure other outward hardships, and even pagan people have endured them. But a person's spirit fails under this (verse 16). Other hardships are limited, like removing some stars of comfort from the sky while others still shine. But when God's face is hidden, the sun itself, the source of light, is darkened, and total darkness falls on them. Therefore the heart is driven to God and broken away from everything else. And then God delights to restore and comfort a person again: 'I will restore comfort to him' (verse 18).

Sixth, in the case of abandoning truth and failing to stand for it when God calls us to do so. In this case He left many of the martyrs — many of whom, especially before those in Queen Mary's days (when with the gospel's growth and the increase of its light, God also gave greater strength), and even some in those days also forsook the truth for a time. Then God, in terms of comfort, forsook them. Then they, recovering God's favor upon repentance and a fresh resolve to hold to the truth no matter what came of it, found that their desertion had made them bolder and more steadfast. This was in part Jonah's situation: having been given a commission to go to Nineveh with a message from God, he turned aside and went the other way. God, in the middle of his false security, threw him into the belly of a great fish — and while he was there God withdrew from him as if He meant never to own him again, so much so that Jonah says in chapter 2:4: 'I said, I have been expelled from Your sight.' And there is this justice in God's dealing with us this way: as when we are ashamed of Christ, the fitting punishment is that Christ will be ashamed of us, so when we will

not witness for God there is no reason His Spirit should witness to us. And when we try to sidestep persecution for the sake of Christ, it is fitting that God should take us in hand Himself — which is far worse.

Seventh, in the case of ingratitude and too casual a regard for the assurance and light of God's face, and for freedom from the terrors and doubts that others live in — which is a sin Christians are prone to fall into. Just as sunlight, because it is constant, goes unnoticed — no one looks at the sun or pays attention to it, as someone observed, except when it is eclipsed — so a continual sunshine of God's favor, when enjoyed, tends to produce only a careless regard for it. In this case God withdraws those comforts and that assurance, because they are the greatest and sweetest comforts of all, and to abuse them or fail to value them provokes God above almost anything else. Therefore in this case God takes them away. For as in Hosea 2:9, when His people were ungrateful for outward blessings God took them away and did not restore them until they valued them properly and acknowledged from whom they came, so also with spiritual assurance, light, and comfort God deals in the same way.

## CHAPTER 13



**T**he third general head: The ends for which God leaves His children in darkness. First, ends drawn from God Himself and His faithfulness.

Now let us turn to the ends God may have in dealing this way with someone who fears and obeys Him. These ends are many and holy.

First, to display His power and faithfulness in upholding, raising up, and healing a spirit that has been long and severely wounded by inward terror — which is as great a demonstration of His power as any other. This is why Heman says in Psalm 88:10-11: 'Will You perform wonders for the dead? Will Your faithfulness be declared in the grave?' — meaning, raising my soul up again to joy and comfort is as great a work as raising a dead man; no, even greater — as great as raising a soul out of hell itself. The same terrors that destroy the dead, Heman says, seize on him in the same way. In Ephesians 1:19 it is said that the surpassing greatness of God's power was seen in raising Christ from death to life. Where did that power chiefly show itself? Not simply in raising His body — He had done that for others as well — but Acts 2:24 says the power was shown in this: that God loosed the pains of death, by

which it was impossible that Christ should be held, and raised Him up. His soul was heavy with terror to the point of death, and those pains were deadly in themselves — though not to Him, since being God as well as man it was impossible for Him to sink under them. Therefore, to raise and glorify that soul of His which had been so bruised, wounded, and pierced through — therein lay the wonder. And God showed a similar wonder in recovering Heman. To grasp the greatness of this work, consider how deep and deadly this kind of distress really is. It is compared to the bruising of a reed — and when a reed is bruised, who can make it stand upright again? It is called 'the wounding of the spirit' (Proverbs 18), which no created being knows how to reach and heal — none but God, who is the Father of spirits, who made them and knows how to mend them. It is not only called sickness of the spirit — as in Isaiah 33:24, where the lack of assurance of forgiveness makes poor souls say 'I am sick,' and the healing of which is reserved for the Sun of Righteousness who rises with healing in His wings (Malachi 4:2) — but it is also called death and destruction. So Heman describes his distress in Psalm 88. The reason is that God's favor is our life, by which we live and are sustained, and when it is withdrawn the soul is ready to fail, faint, and sink into ruin (Isaiah 57:16). Furthermore, the pain of these terrors is more violent and more powerful to hold us under than even the pangs of death. The wounds of sin's guilt are as deadly and as strong as the power of sin's lusts, and it takes just as great a power to dissolve and scatter them. For all the strength that the law and God's justice possess, sin also has behind it — 'for the strength of sin is the law' (1 Corinthians 15:56).

Second, just as God's purpose is for us to know the power of Christ's resurrection, so it is also for us to share in the fellowship of His sufferings — so that the soul may be made more like Him, as Philippians 3:10 says. Just as there are sufferings for Christ, so there are sufferings of Christ, and God makes His people partakers of both — persecutions from without and terror from within. Christ's soul was filled with these when, as Scripture says, 'He was heard in what He feared,' and 'His soul was heavy with sorrow to the point of death,' and 'My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?' And in Isaiah 53: 'It pleased God to crush and wound Him.' So to conform us to His image, we who are His brothers and the guilty parties must suffer something in spirit as He did and share in that portion. Therefore just as Christ suffered both inwardly and outwardly, so do many of His people. 'If we have suffered with Him, we shall also be glorified with Him.' The sons of Zebedee wanted to be glorified in Christ's kingdom above the other apostles. But Christ says in Matthew 20:22-23: 'Are you able to drink the cup of which I am about to drink?' — meaning the cup given to Him at His crucifixion ('Let this cup pass'), the bitter cup of God's wrath. 'And are you able to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?' — referring to outward afflictions and persecutions in the name of God. Christ speaks of this baptism in the present tense because He was already immersed in outward persecution. But the cup — which was the inward affliction of His spirit — He was yet to drink at His agony (spoken of in the future: 'which I am about to drink'), the cup that cast Him into that sweat before He reached the bottom. Though no created being could drink it to the bottom, they could taste it, and He told the disciples they would: 'You shall drink of it' (verse 23) — that is, they would taste

inward affliction and desertion as well as outward persecution, terrors within and without, all to make them more like Him and help them understand in part what He endured for them.

Third, God leaves His children in darkness to create a greater contrast between their condition here on earth and their condition in heaven. This is the very point of what the apostle says in 2 Corinthians 5:7: 'Here we walk by faith, not by sight.' He had said before that believers in this life live in a state of absence from the Lord — lacking His presence and therefore not enjoying the sight of Him — and so must exercise faith all the more, since faith is the grace given specifically for this present life. Though we sometimes have glimpses of His presence and light, we do not always walk by sight — for we walk by faith, not by sight. We will have all the sight of God we could want in heaven, when we shall see Him face to face as we are known, and be forever with the Lord, and in His light see light, and be satisfied with His image. We may therefore be content to do without it here sometimes. You can endure the clouds of this life, and even seasons where all light is taken away, because in the world to come there will be not one cloud for all eternity. Light is your portion, but now is the time of sowing, and light is sown (Psalm 97:11 — 'Light is sown for the righteous'). Be content to let it lie under the ground longer; the longer it does, the greater the harvest that will come up in the end. You must endure the alternation of day and night here — heaviness in the night and joy in the morning — because in heaven you will have unending day with no night. This difference between earth and heaven exists to make heaven more desirable and to exercise faith. The state of heaven is like a state of perfect and permanent health; so that we may fully appreciate it, we are repeatedly sick here, troubled by

fears that our sins are not forgiven. But when we arrive there, 'The inhabitants shall never be sick, and their sins shall be forgiven them' (Isaiah 33:24).

The fourth end is to show us where spiritual comfort and refreshment actually come from — that God alone holds the keys to that storehouse and distributes them however and whenever He pleases. So we may know, as Isaiah 45:6-7 says, that it is the Lord who forms light and creates darkness, both calamity and peace. And just as affliction does not rise out of the dust on its own (as Job observes), neither does comfort rise out of our own hearts. If we enjoyed comfort without interruption, we would be tempted to think it did. God will show us that our hearts are nothing but darkness, and that producing any spiritual comfort is as great a work as creating light at the beginning of creation. Therefore He says, 'I create the fruit of the lips, peace' (Isaiah 57:19), and that it is He who commands light to shine into our hearts — the same God who commanded light to shine out of darkness at the first (2 Corinthians 4:6). Nothing demonstrates this more clearly than His withdrawing that light at times and leaving us in darkness. Why does He sometimes fill our sails in prayer and at other times leave our hearts empty? Is it not so we might learn the lesson of Romans 8:26 — that the Spirit helps us in our weakness, and that we ourselves do not know what or how to ask? In the same way and for the same end, He sometimes hides Himself and at other times reveals Himself — to show that He is the immediate fountain of comfort, 'the God of all comfort' (2 Corinthians 1:4), so that we might know whom to thank, whom to depend on, and whom to turn to for comfort. It is just as difficult for us to leave ourselves and the created world behind and go to God alone for comfort as it is to

leave ourselves behind and go to Christ alone for righteousness. This also teaches us that however many outward comforts we possess, the comfort of our spirits depends on God alone — for if He withdraws Himself in the middle of those outward comforts, they all prove to be miserable comforters.

## CHAPTER 14



**A** second kind of ends: the trial and discovery of graces, especially faith.

God has other ends in mind — trying our graces and bringing them into the open. The same end God had in leading His people through the great wilderness where there was no water and where scorpions stung them (Deuteronomy 8:16) — which was to prove them — He has also in allowing His people to pass through this spiritual desert, barrenness, and darkness where there is no light and where the terrors of the law sting them. All His dealings with Israel then were a picture of how God deals with His people now. He is proving them and testing their hearts. For the same reason He left Hezekiah under the power of sin in the area of sanctification — to discover what was in his heart — He also leaves others of His children under the guilt of sin in the area of justification, to discover what is in their hearts as well. This is thought to have been His purpose in allowing Job to suffer — to reveal the strong patience and unconquered faith within him. There are many gracious qualities in a believer that have no opportunity to show themselves except in this kind of desertion. Some of the highest acts of grace, the purest fruits of it, and the surest proofs of its genuineness would never appear without such desertion. For instance:

in desertion it becomes clear whether a person truly loves God for who He is — for His wisdom, holiness, and goodness — even when that person does not know whether he will ever personally benefit from those qualities. It also shows whether a person's obedience is pure, sincere, and genuine. It reveals whether repentance is real — when a person repents even while holding no hope of reward for it. It shows whether sorrow is godly sorrow, when a person feels condemned in his own conscience and truly believes he is taking his final leave of God and going to judgment — and yet can fall on his knees, ask for forgiveness, mourn that he ever wronged God, and be angry with himself that a God so good and so just should have such just cause to be angry with him. Such qualities would never come to light if it were not for this darkness. Just as a substance reveals itself most clearly when tested and pushed beyond its normal limits — as anger reveals itself when a person is provoked — so God tests a person's graces, and in that testing their most hidden qualities come to light.

It would take too long to examine every grace individually. I will focus especially on the glorious grace of faith, which in this trial surpasses all other graces. Though faith serves us well in every condition we pass through, in desertion it alone does wonders — standing like Samson, encountering and conquering alone when there is no one to help. It is also the grace specifically called for in the text — 'Let him trust in the name of the Lord' — as the grace God principally tests in desertion, to reveal its genuineness and to show the power of it.

First, there is no grace God tests more than faith. This is clear from 1 Peter 1:7: 'You are grieved through various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith — more precious than gold which per-

ishes though tested by fire — may be found to result in praise, glory, and honor' — both to God who is believed in and to faith itself, which is the most glorious grace a Christian possesses, and which God loves to test so that its glory may appear. In verse 5 Peter had said that we are kept by the power of God to salvation. If anyone asks where that keeping power is most clearly shown, the answer is: in and through faith. 'You are kept by the power of God through faith.' And if you ask when and in what that power is most visible, he points to the various trials: 'that the trial of your faith...'

So of all graces, God most wants faith to be tested.

And second, of all trials, none tests faith more directly than the desertion of God's face — this experience of darkness and terror. Other temptations strike at faith only indirectly, but these aim straight at it, attacking the very object faith is reaching for: namely, that God is a person's God. These speak the direct opposite of what faith strives to hold on to — and they do so head-on, not merely by implication. Furthermore, other temptations are easy to endure and answer as long as the assurance of God's favor remains unshaken; that assurance answers them all and shakes them off as Paul shook the viper from his hand. But when that assurance begins to be questioned — as it is in desertion — who is able to stand? What can strengthen a person then but the power of faith? As Solomon says of the human spirit — that it can bear all kinds of affliction as long as it is itself whole, but if it is wounded who can bear it — so I say the same of assurance: when it is weakened and battered, the very foundations shake, a person's footing is gone, the root is struck. In such a case it is faith's special role to stand by a person when nothing else can. Therefore the text says, 'Let him trust,' because faith helps at this most extreme moment.

Third, the conflict between faith and desertion represents the height of the Christian's warfare. This is the most fiercely waged battle, the greatest — and in a sense the final — assault, on which everything is either won or lost. In these conflicts a person encounters God Himself, perceived as an enemy. God called Job out to be tested in a kind of single combat with Satan, and Job proved — if I may say it — too strong for Satan alone, so God joined against him as well. To bear the full force of His wrath and yet remain standing — this, above all, demonstrates the strength of faith. In Hosea 12:3 it is said of Jacob that 'by his strength he had power with God' — and that took real strength. This is accomplished by faith — or rather by God's power supporting faith — by which a person relies on God even when all His dealings seem to say He has abandoned that person. Though God puts on the most severe countenance and looks with the sternest expression, faith is not undone but can read love in His angry looks and trust God beyond what it sees — since faith is 'the evidence of things not seen.' In that moment faith goes entirely outside of itself, seeing nothing in itself but a capacity for mercy and the plentiful redemption it knows to be in God. This faith is a miracle of miracles, for it is founded — as the earth is — on what appears to be nothing in itself, and yet bears the weight of sin, of the devil, and even of God Himself. This is the faith by which you are converted, believing in Him who justifies the ungodly (Romans 4:5). It is also the faith by which we must live when all comforts fail. This is the faith that will stand by you at death, when the king of fears comes and besieges you. And this is the faith that will be found to result in honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ.

## CHAPTER 15



**S**ix more ends: for the increase of various graces and the destruction of corruptions.

Sixth, just as darkness serves to test and reveal grace, it is also a means God uses to increase grace and eat out corruption.

First, it is a means to destroy the flesh. The immoral Corinthian was to be handed over to Satan — that is, to be terrified — for the destruction of the flesh. Just as caustic agents eat out dead flesh, these terrors eat out dead corruptions; and the revival of old sins' guilt kills the seeds of sins still remaining in the heart. If an outward affliction — which only crosses the satisfaction of a lust — can be used by God to kill that lust, then inward terror arising directly from the guilt of sin must be a far more powerful means of doing the same.

Second, it is a means to humble. In Deuteronomy 8:16, one purpose of the scorpion stings in the wilderness — which were a picture of these spiritual stings and terrors — was to humble Israel, as well as to prove them. The same purpose was behind the thorn in the flesh, the buffeting by Satan so often mentioned (2 Corinthians 12:7): 'to keep him from becoming conceited.' So also,

'Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God' (1 Peter 5:6) — and if His mighty hand presses hardest in any affliction, it surely does so in these.

Third, it is a means to bring you into greater assurance and stability. In 1 Peter 5:10: 'The God of all grace, after you have suffered a little while, will Himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.' He knew they could not be truly settled until they had suffered in this or some similar way. A tree roots itself more deeply when it is shaken. Comforts increase in proportion to sufferings. Light is clearest and strongest when it rises out of darkness, because God creates it. The things people doubt most are the things God gives the greatest evidence for in the end.

Fourth, it trains you to fear God more and to obey Him. This is why the text adds these as the matching qualities of the soul in such a condition. Of all spiritual qualities, fearing God and obeying Him show themselves most clearly and unmistakably in this kind of trial. In Hebrews 5:8, even Christ Himself 'learned obedience through what He suffered.' The yoke tames the wild energy of animals and makes them useful — it breaks them; and in the same way these trials break the stubbornness of a person's spirit.

Fifth, to drive believers to pray more frequently and earnestly. The apostle's buffetings (2 Corinthians 12) made him pray three times — that is, repeatedly. In Luke 22:44, being in agony, Christ 'prayed more earnestly'; and being in fear He offered up 'loud cries' (Hebrews 5:7). Similarly, Heman's terrors made him a man of persistent prayer: 'I have cried out by day and in the night before You' (Psalm 88:1). Christians who are not in communion with God but still believe they have not lost Him tend to be careless and lazy in prayer. But once they sense that He is gone, or that they are

in danger of losing Him, they will search everywhere until they find Him (Song of Solomon 5:6-8) — making haste and crying after Him, as the bride did there.

Sixth, it causes believers to prize the light of God's face all the more when they recover it — to set a higher value on it, and to walk closely with God as children of light in order to keep it, prizing it more than grain and new wine. In Song of Solomon 3, at verse 2 she loses him; but at verse 4, she finds him again — and then she holds him and will not let him go.

# A CHILD OF LIGHT WALKING IN DARKNESS



**I**saiah 50:10 — 'Who among you fears the Lord, who obeys the voice of His servant, who walks in darkness and has no light?'

## USE 1



**I**f those who fear God and obey Him are exposed to such a condition as has been described, then consider: who among you does not fear the Lord or obey the voice of His servant? You who live in known sins and neglect known duties that God's servants — your ministers — tell you must be performed: who do not pray with your families, who take no care with your speech — can you expect to barely escape judgment? If those whom God has loved with a love as great and unchangeable as Himself still suffer His terrors in this life, what will happen to you — whom, without repentance, He has set Himself to hate and upon whom He intends to display the power of His wrath? If these things happen to the green tree, what will happen to the dry — which is ready for wrath and fire, like completely dry stubble, as the prophet says? If such darkness and horror falls on those who are children of light, whose inheritance is light, then what is reserved for you who are darkness itself and love darkness more than light? And if this happens to them for failing to stir up the grace they already have, what will happen to you who are utterly without it — and not only that, but who despise and mock it? If this happens to them for not humbling themselves over old sins long past, what will happen to you for continuing to pile new sins on top of the old ones with eagerness?

If it comes on them for neglecting opportunities to draw closer to God, what will come on you for rejecting the offer of grace and trampling underfoot the blood of Christ? All you who think there is no hell, or that if there is, it is not as dark as it is usually described — look at Heman, nearly driven out of his mind by terror and ready to die at any moment (Psalm 88), while his body was still strong and his outward circumstances were fine. Look at David lying on the rack, the Spirit of God breaking his bones, while he as king had every outward comfort at his disposal. Look at holy Job in chapter 6: 'Oh that my grief were actually weighed! It is heavier than the sand of the seas; that is why my words have been rash' — meaning, I cannot even begin to express my grief. 'The arrows of the Almighty are within me, their poison drinks up my spirit; the terrors of God are arrayed against me' (verse 4). Indeed, by verse 8 he wishes God would cut him off, and cries, 'Is my strength the strength of stones, or is my flesh bronze?' — complaining that he should have to endure such fierce assaults. My friends, God's people experience pain beyond the stone, gout, and toothache; when God's wrath falls on the conscience it is more than a few drops of scalding liquid on a tooth. And yet what Job and David felt is only a taste of the cup that those who do not obey must drink to the bottom — and eternity is the bottom. In Psalm 75:8: 'For a cup is in the hand of the Lord, and the wine foams' — that is, every bitter ingredient in the world is in it, the very essence of every evil is pressed into it. In this life a few drops from the rim of that cup fall on God's own people, and they taste it. But the bottom, the dregs — all the wicked of the earth shall drink them down and drain the cup dry, leaving nothing behind. And the bowls of it, which will never be emptied, shall be poured out to the very last drop. And if

God's own people begin to taste it — as Christ Himself did, and as the sons of Zebedee were told they would share in it — then as God says through Jeremiah in chapter 25:27-29: if My people have drunk of it, and I have brought disaster on the city that is called by My name, then you will certainly drink of it too — you will drink and stagger and fall and never rise again. If God's people are shut up in such darkness, what darkness is reserved for you? As Jude says in verse 13: 'the black darkness' — darkness where there is weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 22:13) — pitch black, with not a crack of light or a single ray of comfort breaking through, for all eternity. And this is not for a moment or a few years — it is forever. You who spend your days in pleasure and rejoice in them all — 'Remember that the years of darkness will be many,' says Solomon (Ecclesiastes 11:8) — many indeed: days of eternal night with no end, followed by no dawn.

## USE 2



**W**ho among you fears the Lord and has been brought out of the state of darkness, yet has never experienced the darkness of desertion I have described? You who have been spared those terrors of conscience that go beyond all the miseries the world can inflict — for just as the joy of the Holy Spirit is unspeakable and glorious, these terrors are unutterable and unbearably painful — yet souls who fear God and have obeyed Him more than you have been made the anvils of them. You who have been tenderly cared for, fed with sweet things, brought into the wine cellar, and had all of the Trinity feast with you — while others have eaten gall and wormwood (Lamentations 3:19). And likewise those who, though they do not enjoy great surges of joy and the peace that passes understanding, yet being justified by faith have a solid peace with God and walk in freedom of spirit in the use of His ordinances and the performance of holy duties. Let me give all such people one important lesson from this teaching: take note that such troubles do fall on God's people, beyond anything you have experienced. Many people do not believe this; Job's friends did not, and so they wrongly judged him. This is an important lesson to learn.

First, simply knowing about this kind of darkness prepares a person for it if it should come upon him. This is why the apostle urges believers not to think it strange when they face the fiery trial (1 Peter 4:12). When something is completely unfamiliar, if it comes it strikes even harder. If a person contracts a strange disease he has never heard of and no doctor knows how to treat, it terrifies him and drives him to despair. But if he has heard that others have suffered the same disease and recovered, that knowledge takes some of the bitterness away. Job's trial was strange and unfamiliar to his friends, and you can see how clumsily they tried to help — they left the wound worse than they found it. So to prepare yourself, it is good to know that such a condition exists. In the same spirit the apostle says in 1 Corinthians 10:13, speaking of other trials, that nothing has come upon them except what is common to man. There is great comfort in knowing that — that it is common, and that others have gone through the same.

Second, take notice of this so that you may remain more dependent on God and fear Him more. People who know no affliction beyond what they can see and feel outwardly — nothing beyond the loss of friends or reputation — often fear God less, and when it comes to giving up anything for God's sake they are less willing. But when they hear and understand that God's wrath exceeds Pharaoh's wrath — as Moses knew, who still cried out in awe of its immensity, 'Who understands the power of Your anger?' (Psalm 90) — then they will obey God and fear Him above all the kings of the earth, as Moses did, 'not fearing the wrath of the king' (Hebrews 11:27). When people enjoy every earthly comfort and think their mountain stands firm — well-built with wife, children, wealth, health, and reputation — they tend to feel they are safer

from God's judgment than other people, and are prone to say, 'Soul, you have plenty stored up for many years.' But know this: God can, without taking away your goods or your life, bring your spirit into such a condition of darkness in this very life that you would give everything you own for a moment's relief — when all other comforts will seem to you like the white of an egg, as Job says. Just as He has joys He gives that the world cannot give, He also has afflictions He sends that the world cannot inflict. Therefore fear Him more than you fear the loss of everything; obey Him rather than hold on to everything — for God can reach you in the middle of all your prosperity. So He reached David, who was a king, and then all his wives and his kingdom could not comfort him until God healed the bones He had broken.

Third, take note of these troubles so that you do not condemn others when they are in this condition. You walk in the light, and you see another person in the dungeon — he may be dearer to God than you. This was Job's friends' mistake: having no personal experience of such a condition, they concluded he was a hypocrite. If you judge that way, then as Asaph says, 'You have condemned the generation of the righteous' (Psalm 73:13-14). In doing so you also gratify Satan and bring reproach on the strict ways of grace. If God treats His own children this way, people like Job's wife say 'Curse God and die' — which is exactly what the foolish people of this world do.

Fourth, live out your time here in fear, and serve God with reverence (1 Peter 1:17), for 'our God is a consuming fire' (Hebrews 12). Keep your heart in awe by knowing that such an estate exists. This kept Job in awe and made him such a careful and upright man all his days. Read chapter 31 throughout and you will see

what a righteous man he was — then see the reason for all of it in verse 23: 'For I dreaded destruction from God, and I could not bear His majesty.' He says the same thing in chapter 4, last verse — that he had always feared what eventually came upon him, and that the distress of his spirit was the greatest evil he faced. He feared it might come upon him even in his most assured moments.

Finally, be thankful that God spares you. Perhaps your body is weak and He knows you are only flesh, so He does not bring His full wrath to bear. If He came upon you as He does upon others, it would destroy you. But recognize that you had a hardened heart just as much as anyone else. Has God cured it by gentle means, quietly dissolving it and carrying it away — while He has had to cut others open, bind them up, and put them through great pain to remove it? Then be thankful. You who are healthy and strong — are you not grateful when you see others sick and bedridden, writhing with kidney stones, toothache, and gout, from which you are free? How much more then should you be grateful for the health of your spirit — cheerfulness being its very marrow — when others are sick (as the expression goes in Isaiah 33) for lack of assurance that their sins are forgiven, when others are in misery all day as if on a rack, distracted and nearly out of their minds, a burden even to themselves? Be thankful that it is not so with you!

## USE 3



**W**ho among you fears the Lord and has been in darkness, but is now out of that eclipse and walking in the light again? You who have been in the dungeon and have been set free; whose spirit's wounds have been healed and whose soul has been raised from the lowest depths, when it was near the grave, and who have found a ransom — learn your duty as well.

First, be thankful to God and to Jesus Christ, and love Him all the more. You know and have tasted what He did for you. You know how bitter even a few sips of that cup were — the same cup He drained completely — and therefore you must love Him more. You also have greater experience of God's power and faithfulness, and of what a miracle He worked in raising you up again. He showed you wonders among the dead, as Heman says. Be thankful. So David says in Psalm 116:3 compared with verse 1: 'I love the Lord — and why? The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came over me; I was overcome by distress and sorrow — I was brought low, and He saved me.'

Second, learn to have compassion on others who are in that condition. Who is better suited to show it than you, who have gone through the same? If you hear of a soul in distress, you are ex-

pected to pray for that person more than others are. Christ learned to have compassion on us in all our weaknesses precisely by bearing those weaknesses Himself. God raised you up for this very purpose — so that you might comfort others with the comfort you have received and pray for them. So in Isaiah 57:17, when a poor soul is struck down, God is moved to restore him again partly for the sake of those who mourn for him.

Third, declare what God has done for you. You have been in hell — warn others not to go there. 'Knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade people' (2 Corinthians 5:11). If the rich man in Luke 16 had come back from hell, what stories would he have told to warn his brothers? Tell those stories yourself. You have seen the wonders of God in the deep; now that you are safely on shore, tell others about the rocks, the shallows, and the storms they are likely to meet if they pursue certain courses — of immorality, worldliness, and the like. David said that when his broken bones were healed, he would teach sinners God's ways (Psalm 51).

Fourth, be on guard against what might bring that condition back. The devil may throw you back into your old troubles if he finds the same material to work with — gross sins, acts of immorality, lying, dishonest dealings, and the like. You know what brought David to his broken bones. Also be on guard against performing duties in a formal, cold, or hypocritical way, and against resting in those duties as if they were enough — which is like a hollow tooth, as Solomon says: broken and better out than in. These things can bring the toothache back. Be on guard against sinning against clear light; if the devil finds no such material in you, he will not trouble you. Also, deal with stray doubts when they arise and do not leave them unaddressed — one day they may gather to-

gether and form an army. Though they rise in your conscience scattered and isolated now, and you can shrug them off, they will not always stay that way.

## USE 4



**T**hen there are those whose spirits are comfortless, dead, and hard, who question God's love and their own spiritual condition — especially those who were once in the sunshine but now sit in the valley of the shadow of death. For someone who was once cradled in God's lap, now to be lashed with terror and His sharpest rods — and on the most tender place, the conscience — to have their songs in the night turned into God writing bitter things against them: how bitter this is to them! They say that once they could never approach the throne of grace without their hearts being welcomed and their heads stroked, and they rarely went away without a token of assurance pressed into their hands. But now God is a terror to them, and when they rise from prayer or some other duty, their hearts condemn them more than before they began. Once they never looked toward heaven without receiving a smile; now they may cry day and night and not get one kind look from Him. Once, they say, they never set sail for any duty without a fair wind — God went with them. But now they have both wind and tide against them — God and the deadness of their own hearts alike. In short, God is gone and light is gone; God answers them neither in vision nor through His Word, neither in praying nor in

hearing; and therefore, they say, He has abandoned them, cast them off, and will never show mercy. 'Oh, woe to us,' they say, 'we are ruined.'

You are mistaken, poor souls — you do not know the Scriptures or the ways of your God and His dealings with His people. You think His heart has changed when His face has, and so you run from Him as Jacob ran from Laban. You think He has cast you off when He has only withdrawn to His place so that you will seek Him more earnestly. Like children when their mother has stepped away for a moment, you fall into crying as if you were undone. You are always in extremes: if He shines on you, your mountain will never be moved; if He hides His face, He will never be merciful. This is a childish and foolish way to judge — I will call it that, because you are being led by feeling alone, and like animals you believe nothing but what you feel and see, measuring God's love by His outward expression toward you. When Asaph did this in other afflictions, he cried out that he was stupid and like a beast (Psalm 73:22). Will you only trust God as far as you can see Him? One day you will be ashamed to think of how much trouble your childishness put the Spirit of God to. It is like the trouble a wise man has with a foolish wife who — if he goes out on necessary business, perhaps for her own benefit — complains that he doesn't care about her and has abandoned her; and if he corrects her for any fault, she says he hates her, and is so upset by it that a whole day's kindness cannot settle her again. That is how you deal with God. Though He has given you so many clear and certain evidences of His love, repeatedly renewed and confirmed, you remain suspicious, never settled, always doubting — calling everything into question at the slightest frown. Either God must let you continue

in your sinful habits without ever correcting you, or He must forfeit all acknowledgment of the love He has previously shown — because your jealous and peevish misreading of every small expression of His displeasure calls it all into question.

But those of you who are more deeply and lastingly distressed — I have compassion on you; I do not blame you for being troubled. When He hides His face, even the creatures are troubled (Psalm 104:29). God would have you take it to heart when He is angry (Isaiah 57:17). He took it badly in that passage when, after He struck the person, the person went on stubbornly without humbling himself. If you did not take God's absence to heart, it would suggest you had no grace — that you had not made Him your portion, if you could endure His absence without mourning. People of the world, having other comforts, can bear His absence well enough — but not you, who have made Him your portion and your exceeding great reward. Yet though you are to take it to heart and mourn under it, you must not be discouraged — you must not call everything into question. Though you change, God does not — nor does His love — for His love is Himself (1 John 4:8-10). Our perceptions and feelings may change, and God's outward dealings with us may vary, but His deep-rooted love does not. We are not today what we were yesterday, but Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. To say He has cast you off because He has hidden His face is a false conclusion drawn from the devil's arguments, and it wrongs God deeply. For in Isaiah 54:8: 'In an outburst of anger I hid My face from you for a moment, but with everlasting lovingkindness I will have compassion on you.' First, He has only hidden His face — He has not put you out of His mind. Second, though in anger, it is only a little anger. Third, it is only for a mo-

ment. Fourth, all that while He is full of you — 'I remember you.' Fifth, this is accompanied by kindness from everlasting to everlasting. When the sun is eclipsed — which is really an eclipse caused by the earth, not the sun, which shines just as brightly as ever — foolish people think it will never recover its light, but wise people know it will.

But you may say: If this desertion lasted only for a moment it would be bearable, but it has gone on for many years.

How many years? This life itself is but a moment, and God has all eternity in which to show His love — time enough to make up for a few years from that everlasting kindness. Remember that the text says a person who fears God may walk in darkness — not just a step or two, but through many long, weary stretches of it. Heman was afflicted from his youth; David so long that in Psalm 77 he wondered whether God had forgotten him. 'Has His promise failed forever?' Remember what is said in another situation in Luke 18:8 — that though God may seem to delay, He comes quickly — that is, though long in our eyes, it is quickly in His. He has all time before Him and knows how much of it remains to be spent in closeness with you.

But you may say: It is not only that He hides His face — I suffer terror; He is angry; He has turned against me; He fights against me; and therefore I must be a vessel of wrath fitted for destruction.

So it was with Job (chapter 13:24), and with what is described in Isaiah 63:10 and Psalm 88:16. But all of this is only the effect of a temporary wrath. There is a great difference between a child who is under wrath and a child of wrath. You may be a child under

wrath without being a child of wrath. Just as God may afflict your circumstances and your body, He may also afflict your spirit — but as a Father, for in Hebrews 12:9 He is called 'the Father of spirits.'

Ten directions for those more deeply troubled, and the means to recover light and comfort.

For the sake of those who are more deeply troubled, I will give some directions on how to conduct themselves in such a condition so as to come out of it more comfortably and more quickly. It is with these long and severe sicknesses of the soul as it is with the body — people are kept in them longer than necessary for want of right guidance, as we see with long fevers and similar illnesses.

## DIRECTION 1



**F**irst, guard against rash, desperate, impatient, and unbelieving words and wishes — the kind you will later be forced to take back with sorrow. David, when he was gripped by fear, spoke desperate words — claiming that Samuel's prophecy that he would be king would prove false. He said not only that he would one day be killed by Saul's hand (1 Samuel 27:1) — reasoning that since he faced danger to his life every day, and so many arrows were continually aimed at him, one would eventually find its mark — but he went further, saying 'I said in my alarm' (Psalm 116:11) that all men are liars, including the prophet Samuel, and that the promise had been nothing but an empty man's word. But he quickly corrected himself and added, 'I said this in my alarm.' Likewise in Psalm 31:22: 'I said in my alarm, I am cut off' — rash words, as he acknowledges, spoken in haste. In the same way, many a poor soul — after having had strong assurance at their first conversion that the kingdom is theirs, that heaven is theirs, reserved for them as they are kept for it by the power of God — yet when the devil is let loose to batter them as Saul did David, and God hides His face, and the arrows of the Almighty fly thick around their ears, and the terrors of the grave close in on them at every moment, they are prone to say that sooner or later they will

surely be cut off by God's hand, swallowed by Satan, and eternally destroyed. And when reminded of the hopes they had at their first conversion and the promises made to them, they are prone to say that the grace by which they should claim those promises is all a lie, false and counterfeit, nothing but hypocrisy — they say this in their haste, and too often. At another time, when David doubted the promise of an eternal kingdom made to him, he said that God would never be merciful. What a weak conclusion — that because a man does not see something at present, he should decide it will never come! But he acknowledged his error: 'It was my infirmity' (verse 10) to speak that way. So the church in Lamentations 3:17-18: 'I said, my strength has perished, and so has my hope from the Lord' — a desperate thing to say. But she takes it back in grief at verse 21: 'This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope.' Job, though fairly calm and composed in spirit at the beginning of the storm — which was noted to his credit, so that in chapter 1:22 it is said that in all this he did not sin by blaming God — maintained this only through chapters 1 and 2. Once the drops of God's wrath began soaking into his soul, he began to cry out in chapter 3 and cursed the day of his birth; in chapter 6:8-9 he wished God would cut him off; and in chapter 7:15 said his soul chose strangling rather than life. For these words God finally steps forward — as if from behind a curtain, having heard everything — and calls him to account: 'Who is this,' He says in chapter 38:2, 'who speaks like this?'

But good souls, you who are in trouble — be on guard against impatient wishes or words like these: that everything you have experienced was only hypocrisy, and 'Oh that God would cut me off — I wish I were in hell and knew the worst!' Be on guard, I say.

When a person is sick and raving, doctors and those around him who would normally treat him gently are forced to hold him down and restrain him. An impatient patient makes a doctor more severe than he would otherwise be. So God would deal more gently with you, but your impatience prevents it. Know also that this is taking God's name in vain to a high degree. The graces of God written in your hearts are part of God's name — they are how His love is made known to you. To call the genuineness of those graces into question and say they are counterfeit is like receiving a letter with the king's own signature and seal and declaring it forged — which is high treason. Or imagine a close friend or your father gave you precious old gold coins or jewels as tokens of their love, and in a jealous fit you declared them all counterfeit and base metal — this would deeply wrong and dishonor their love. It is the same when you deny God's handwriting in your own heart, when He has written there by His Spirit — joy, fear, love, zeal — and you say it does not look like His hand. If you deny the seal of the Spirit after He has sealed you to the day of redemption, and declare that all the pledges of heaven are counterfeit and worthless, you take His name, His love, and His mercy all in vain. Yes, you lie against the Holy Spirit, as the apostle said in another context. Though God gives you every right to examine and test all His graces in you and His dealings with you, do not desperately, at the first glance and on the smallest flaw, declare that there is no grace and that He will never be merciful. You wrong Him when you do that. Be on guard against it.

## DIRECTION 2



**S** econd, the troubled soul should search diligently. Set up an inquiry within your heart. In Psalm 77:6, David does this very thing in a time of desertion: 'I meditated with my heart, and my spirit made a diligent search.'

In this search, look into two things.

First, what might be the true cause that has provoked God to leave you and hide Himself from you.

Second, what is the main doubt, objection, reasoning, or fear in your own heart that leads you to call everything into question.

These are two distinct things. God may have a just reason for allowing you to be troubled, and yet the specific thing troubling and unsettling you may be a pure mistake, a misapprehension — just as a father may have good reason to let a child be frightened, while the thing the child is frightened by is nothing but an imaginary monster. It is necessary to look into both.

First, examine what might be the true cause provoking God to leave you. So Lamentations 3:40 says: 'Let us examine and probe our ways' — spoken by the church in desertion, as the earlier part of the chapter makes clear. To help yourself in this, go back over all the cases that have been presented: have you been carelessly

confident in false signs, or leaned too heavily on true ones while neglecting Christ and God's free grace? Did you before neglect to stir up your own graces? Go through all those cases; you will find something that is the cause. This is necessary, because until the true cause is found the heart will not submit, will not honor God's name, and the trouble will not lift — not until what provokes God to send it is confessed and forsaken. And if a particular sin is what God is targeting, He usually uses the horror and guilt of that very sin as the means of affliction — so that the sin itself becomes the visible source of your trouble. In that way it is easily identified; you will find your sin to be the thorn in your foot, the stone in your shoe that has been grinding and troubling you. David knew in Psalm 51 what had caused God to break his bones, because his very sin was the instrument God used to do it. The horror of that murder was the hammer God used to break him and the rod to beat him: 'My sin,' he says in verse 3, 'is always before me — it was always in my sight.' In outward afflictions it is harder to identify why God is afflicting a person. But in these inward distresses of conscience, the sin that is the true cause and moves God to afflict is often the very guilt God uses to terrify — it is both the initiating cause and the means of punishment.

But in case you cannot find the cause — as Job seemingly could not, and Elihu assumed he might not — then take this counsel (and follow it yourself until God shows you the cause), drawn from Job 34:31-32: say to God, 'What I do not see, teach me; and if I have done wrong, I will not do it again'; and if you do identify the sin, say also as in verse 31, 'I have suffered for it, I will not sin anymore.' Until you come to that point, God will not let up.

The second thing to search into is this: What is the chief reasoning in your heart that leads you to question whether God is your God? What makes you think so? What leads you to that conclusion?

You must recognize that although God hides Himself from you and terrifies your conscience because of some sin, the thing that produces in you the actual conviction that God has cast you off is usually some false reasoning or misapprehension — some mere mistake, some trick and strategy of Satan. When the Corinthian was excommunicated for his sin, Satan had permission to terrify his conscience for it. But Satan went further — he wanted to overwhelm him with sorrow by persuading him that his sin was unforgivable and that God would never receive him again. The reasoning Satan used was false, a scheme and a trick (2 Corinthians 2:7 compared with verse 11) — and a person who is unaware of it may go on mourning for a long time as if he were a castaway. So take your soul aside and seriously ask it and examine it — why is it troubled like this? What reason, what ground, do you have to think that God is not your God? Then examine whether that ground is actually valid. Just as the apostle tells us to give a reason for our faith (1 Peter 3:15), ask your soul for the reason behind its doubt.

So David does in Psalm 42:5: 'Why are you in despair, O my soul?' And because doubts rise again and again, he asks the same question in verse 11: 'Why are you in despair?' David knew that the way to dissolve doubts was to examine them carefully — for when he had examined them thoroughly he found they were needless and groundless, producing fears that had no real basis. God's child is often thrown into a prison of fears and bondage, and after lying there a long time and beginning to read over the warrant for his

confinement, he finds it was wrongful imprisonment all along — a mere trick of Satan his jailer. Just as worldly people, when they think their condition is good and that they are in God's favor, are usually resting on some delusion or false reasoning — such as prospering in the world, therefore God must love them; performing some duties, therefore all must be well — grounds they cannot bear to have examined, so on the other side, someone who fears God, when he concludes he is out of God's favor, has usually arrived at that conclusion through false reasoning too, which crumbles under examination, and when it does the soul is freed from its fears. Heman thought and said that God had cast him off. And what led him to think so? Because God had hidden His face. That does not follow, Heman — a father may hide his face from his son without casting him off. David reasons the same way in Psalm 77:2-3: 'I have sought God, prayed, used the means, and yet I am troubled; and yet God does not reveal Himself.' And what does he conclude from this in verse 7? 'Will the Lord reject forever?' He thought, 'If God loved me He would have heard me promptly'; he expected that his soul would not be worse off after praying. This was false reasoning, for God sometimes shuts out even His own people's prayers (Psalm 88:14). A father may at times seem so angry that he throws his child's petition aside, while still resolving to remain his father. It would take forever to list all the false reasonings that distressed souls fall into. Sometimes it comes from a passage of Scripture misunderstood and misapplied: some who are troubled by blasphemous thoughts against God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit — thoughts which are their greatest torment — conclude they have committed the sin against the Holy Spirit, by misreading Matthew 12:31, when that passage refers only to willful

and deliberate blasphemy of God and the work of His Spirit out of malice (Hebrews 10:29). Some, because they have sinned after having been enlightened and having tasted grace and have then fallen into some serious sin, conclude they can never be renewed — based on Hebrews 6:4 — when that passage is speaking of a willful and spiteful falling away, with such contempt that they would, if they could, crucify Christ again (verse 6). Otherwise David could not have been renewed, for he sinned presumptuously and despised the commandment of the Lord. Some, hearing of a fearful example of God's severe dealing with others — how He cast off Saul for a particular sin — conclude that upon committing a similar sin, God has cast them off as well. But there is no solid ground for such a conclusion, for secret things belong to God. Some, having heard that there is a point after which God sometimes no longer offers grace to a person but has sworn against him, conclude that their own time has also passed — which they have no basis for concluding. While it is true that God does this with many who have heard the gospel, the Word gives us no certain rule to conclude He has done so with any particular person. It is right to fear lest you provoke Him to it — but you have no sign that He has already done so with you. And indeed, the first and most important work in helping a troubled soul is to find out the basis of their doubting, examine its truth, and refute it. If a man is wrongly imprisoned or has a judgment entered against him, what does he do to remedy it? He looks for the error in the writ. So examine the basis of your trouble. Go to a spiritually skilled counselor; do not keep the devil's counsel, for the thing he opposes most is having your doubts brought to light.

## DIRECTION 3



**T**he third direction for those in distress: keep one ear open to hear and consider what speaks in favor of your comfort, just as you listen to what seems to be against you.

This direction addresses a deep weakness in those who are in distress. Through Satan's temptations their hearts become so thoroughly filled with dark and gloomy assessments of their condition that — as the people of God in Exodus 6:9, so overcome with anguish that they could not listen to the good news Moses brought or believe it could apply to them — so the souls of many in distress are so full of anguish and misery, so strongly fixed in desperate conclusions, and so far driven from hope, that they reject everything that is said to comfort them. They refuse even to glance at or consider anything that might give them grounds for comfort. They are like prisoners at the bar who, in the extremity of their fear, cannot read what is written in their hearts and in God's Word that might save them. Tell them what God has done for them and in them as evidence of His love — they often refuse to read it over, and if they do, they read it as someone does a book he intends to argue against. They pick quarrels and make objections at everything said, as if they had been hired as lawyers to plead against themselves and find flaws in the evidence. I have seen some who

used every bit of their mental energy to strengthen every argument and objection against themselves — who were actually pleased if they could raise an objection that stumped those who came to comfort them, as if winning the argument were all that mattered. And so, by dwelling only on what seems to be against them, they have pushed the bolts of their hearts so deep into despair and fixed them so firmly in hopeless sorrow, and twisted the genuine working of real evidence with such false reasoning, that when the most skilled and caring comforters came with the right keys to pull back the bolt, they could not turn — they could barely get the door open.

This was David's weakness, as verse 10 of Psalm 77 compared with verse 2 shows: 'My soul refused to be comforted' — he poured out every remedy and medicine brought to him. He was not only without comfort but actively refused it. 'What, bring me promises to comfort me?' such a person will say. 'You might as well carry them to someone in hell, or give medicine to a man beyond recovery.' And so he refuses to take anything offered to him. Similarly the church in Lamentations 3:17-18 — her heart was deeply gripped by a desperate conclusion: 'My strength and my hope,' she says, 'have perished from the Lord.' What drove her soul into such fixed despair? Verse 17 tells us: she forgot all good — that is, she refused to consider or even call to mind anything that had been a source of comfort to her. 'All good' — all God's former goodness and gracious dealings with her, every good thing worked in her and for her — she forgot it all. And what did her thoughts feed and dwell on instead? Only wormwood and gall, her bitterness and distress — brooding only on what seemed to be against her: 'I remember my affliction and my wandering, the wormwood and the bitterness.' These she could roll over and over in her mind, though they

were bitter — she would entertain no other thoughts. But when she began instead to consider God's gracious and faithful support of her even in that very desertion — faithfully renewing His mercies every morning (verses 22-23), and that even then He had kept alive in her heart a longing and lingering for Him, a quiet cleaving to Him, and had enabled her to choose Him as her portion (verse 24) — then 'This I recall to my mind,' she says in verse 21, 'therefore I have hope.' She spits out the wormwood and takes back her desperate words. As soon as her heart began to hear what might bring comfort, hope immediately began to return. This sullen, stubborn, desperate refusal to be comforted is something you must guard against, because by it you take Satan's side against the very one you should love most dearly — your own soul. Let Satan plead his own cause; do not do it for him. By doing this you also throw away your own mercies (as Jonah 2:8 describes), surrender your own rights, and are foolish enough to argue against your own claim — your own stake in the best things you can have a share in: God's mercies, made yours by an everlasting covenant. You give up the inheritance left to you in your Father's will, which you ought to defend, and you trust instead in the lying false predictions of Satan and your own unbelieving heart. By doing this you also become an unjust judge, for any judge who will only hear one side of a case renders a poor verdict.

## DIRECTION 4



**T**he fourth direction is to search diligently and call to mind what has formerly passed between God and you. The memory of former things often holds us up when present experience fails. David practiced this in a similar situation in Psalm 77:5-6. After his soul refused comfort (as I noted from verse 2), he finally became willing not only to hear what might speak in his favor but actively recalled the days of old and searched carefully — examining the record of God's dealings — to see if there was anything on record that might help him now that the devil was contesting his claim. It is like searching through old documents and deeds when someone challenges your ownership of a house or land. 'I remember my song in the night,' he says — meaning the joyful communion he had enjoyed with God when they sang together. 'I will meditate with my heart and my spirit ponders' — he turned his heart over thoroughly to see whether any grace had once been there, and whether any grace was still present. He searched for what might comfort him, as well as for what might have provoked God to deal with him this way.

Job did the same when he was struck down and forsaken by God. He examined every part of his life, looking for any solid ground to stand on in the middle of the sea of temptation — re-

counting the holy life he had lived and the fear and care with which he had served God (chapters 29, 30, and 31 throughout) — and told them plainly in chapter 27:5-6: 'Let them argue and contend against me, let them try to prove me a hypocrite — till I die I will not let go of my integrity, nor abandon my righteousness.' 'I will never give up my claim to God's mercies or the evidence I have to show for them.' And he says in chapter 19:27-28: 'Though my strength is spent at present, yet the root of the matter is in me' — meaning: though God deals with me this harshly, though the exercise of grace is largely hidden, the sunshine of God's favor withdrawn, and the joyful fruits of righteousness fallen from this now withered stock, yet the root remains — a root of faith that does not decay, a steady frame of grace that still endures, which hates sin and loves God. Can you call nothing to mind between God and you that argues unmistakably for His love? Nothing at all? Look again. Has God never spoken peace to your heart and poured His love into it? Have you never at any time found in your heart genuine love and goodwill toward Him? Some pure drops of godly sorrow for having offended Him, some moments of pure self-denial in which you aimed simply at His glory rather than your own benefit? Have you no old, proven evidence that has been confirmed again and again? Not one? And if you can call even one to mind — if it is genuine — it may sustain you. For if one promise belongs to you, then all of them do — because every promise conveys the whole Christ, in whom all promises are made and who is their substance. Just as in the sacraments the bread conveys the whole Christ and the wine conveys the whole Christ, so in the Word every promise conveys the whole Christ. And if you can say as the church of Ephesus said in Revelation 2:6, 'This I have — that I hate sin, every

sin as God hates it, and because He hates it' — just as Christ acknowledged them for this one grace, and though they had many sins and many failures, He said 'this you have' — if Christ will acknowledge you as His own for one mark of His; or if He sees even one mark of His child upon you, you may well present it to Him. Yes, even if it is present in a small degree — provided it is genuine and sincere. For God does not bring scales to weigh your graces and reject them if they are too light; He brings a touchstone to test them, and if they are true gold, however small the amount, it passes with Him. Though it is smoke rather than flame, though it is only a flickering wick in the socket — which in the original is described as more likely to go out than to keep burning, the kind we would normally throw away — He will not snuff it out but will accept it. And even if at present you feel no grace stirring in you whatsoever, nothing but hardness and deadness, yet if you can remember 'but once I had this' — as a woman who is pregnant, though she may not always feel the child move after the first quickening, yet because she did feel it move she still has hope and believes she is with child — so think of the new creature formed within you.

These are the things to call to mind and consider in times of distress — to remember former graces and spiritual dispositions in you, and God's gracious dealings with you. God remembers them in order to show you mercy; why should you not remember them in order to find comfort? So in Hebrews 6:9-10: 'We expect better things of you, for God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name.' And so He calls on them in Hebrews 10:31 to remember the former days, to find comfort in them — how they held firm when their hearts were tried

to the limit, when they lost their goods, their reputations, and everything for Christ, yet did not lose a good conscience. And if you do call to mind the things of old and still find no comfort at first (as is often the case, as it was with David in Psalm 77 — for after remembering his songs in the night, his soul was still left in doubt and he went on asking, 'Will the Lord be favorable again?') — still go back to them again, and then again. Though they yield nothing one time, they may the next — so that it may be seen that God comforts through them, not that they comfort on their own. Have you found a nursing source of consolation dry? Try again; comfort may come in the end. If you have assembled a jury to search and their first verdict condemns you, do as wise judges often do — send them back to reconsider; they may return a different verdict. Jonah looked once toward the temple and found no comfort (Jonah 2:4), which is why he said, 'I will look again toward Your holy temple.' A troubled heart is like one of those pictures that can be seen from two angles — look one way and you see nothing but some horrible shape of a devil; go to the other side and look again, and you see the image of an angel or a beautiful face. So some have looked at their hearts by the signs at one time and found nothing, it seemed, but hypocrisy, unbelief, hardness, and self-seeking — yet not long after, examining their hearts again by the same signs, they have seen the image of God drawn clearly on the table of their hearts.

## DIRECTION 5



**B**ut if recalling former signs brings no comfort — if the waves rolling over your soul are so deep you can find no bottom to drop anchor on, and the storm so severe that every cable snaps — as is often the case with many a poor soul —

Then fifth, take this fifth direction and put it into practice: renew your faith and repentance. Set your heart to the work of believing and repenting afresh, as if you had never yet begun. Stop reasoning for a time about the quality of your former faith and repentance, and instead get to work believing and repenting anew. Stop spending all your time throwing out anchors; start pumping out the water. Say: 'Well — suppose I have not yet been in a state of grace; that does not mean I am incapable of it going forward. Suppose my faith and repentance have not been genuine until now; I will therefore now begin to pursue what is genuine.' And to that end, use whatever flaws the devil points out in your past faith and repentance as a guide for what to correct and improve going forward. Begin to address the weaknesses and gaps that have been exposed; work to supply everything he charges is lacking in either, and mend every hole he picks. Say: 'Lord, I cast myself on Your mercies afresh. I want now to walk uprightly before You going forward — to let go of every sin, to submit to every duty, to reject ev-

ery selfish motive, and to set God and Christ as my aim and north star in everything.' And having done this, let the devil say his worst. Of all the directions I have given, I commend this one as a particularly effective remedy for dissolving temptations about assurance. I stamp it as proven — take it, practice it; it has been tested. It is the course the church in desertion finally comes to in Lamentations 3:40: 'Let us examine and probe our ways, and let us return to the Lord' — that is the last and best course she takes. When the water is at its lowest and the tide of assurance has run out, build up your banks as you would at low tide. When nothing but hypocrisy, unbelief, and insincerity appear to be in your heart, groan, reach, and strive after genuine sincerity — and let Satan say his worst.

But know that while this must be done and must not be neglected — and is often found to be a source of comfort, which is why I urged it in the previous direction — you are not to take only that course, and you must not look back to your former faith and repentance so much that you neglect practicing new faith and repentance. Begin to practice new acts of faith and repentance; this is the most direct route, the shortest path, and requires no more effort. It takes as little effort to obtain a new lease as to prove an old one valid. It would take many attempts to examine all your old evidences again and again — and they may be faded and blurred. You can cut the knot and end the temptations sooner through new faith than untie it by reasoning and arguing. And in truth, you must come to this in the end, because God's chief purpose in desertion is to drive you to renew your faith and repentance. 'Unless you are converted' — as Christ says even to His apostles — converted as if for the first time. He will not release you from the dun-

geon until you enter into new commitment and pledge renewed faithfulness. So begin to do it now. And as for the concern that doing this might undermine your former claim — that is not what I mean; I am not saying you should abandon your old faith and repentance as counterfeit. 'I will not abandon my integrity,' as Job says. My counsel is simply to stop insisting on it for a time and instead focus on renewing it. Then the comfort from your old repentance will return. As the apostle says of the law, so I say of your former claim: it is not abolished but confirmed by this. And as Christ says in John 7:17, 'If anyone is willing to do His will, he will know of the teaching whether it is of God' — so often the best way to know something is true is not to spend all your time debating it but to practice it, which settles controversies within a person's heart. So I say: to know the genuineness of, and therefore to find comfort in, former grace, add to your reasoning about it the practice of believing and repenting anew. This thoroughly outwits the devil and gains the advantage over him. By it the whole case is shifted, all his old arguments are overthrown, and he is forced onto new ground — the battle is moved elsewhere. Indeed it stops him entirely, for what can he say to it? He must now prove you are incapable of grace, that you will never repent — which all the world and every devil in hell cannot prove. And if in this situation he tells you (as he usually does) that everything going forward will be as futile as everything in the past has been:

## DIRECTION 6



**S**ixth, stop debating and instead be firm and resolute in your faith and turning to God, whatever the outcome may be. Faith is never at a dead end — it is the most determined thing in existence. Job vows he will trust God even if God kills him (Job 13:15). Do the same: whether God condemns or saves you, whatever He does with you, do not stop casting yourself on Him for mercy, or serving and loving Him. Keep using the means diligently and consistently, and be all the more diligent. Continue to fear and hate sin. Pray day and night as Heman did when he thought himself cut off: 'I have cried out by day and in the night before You, though I am as one whom You remember no more' (Psalm 88:1, 4-5). And in verse 9: 'I have called daily upon You' — though in verses 10-12 he thought himself practically in hell and considered it a miracle that he would ever rise again, yet he says in verse 13: 'But to You I have cried, O Lord.' That 'but' expresses his resolve — that whatever his perception of his condition, he had sought the Lord and would continue to do so. Even if you find no enjoyment in the ordinances, keep using them. Though desperately sick, still eat; take whatever is brought to you — some strength comes from it. Say: 'Whether I am condemned or saved, a hypocrite or not, I resolve to press on.' And there is good reason

for this: if you stop serving the Lord and resolve never to look to Him again, you will certainly perish — there is no hope in that direction. If there is an evil heart in you that departs from the living God, you are lost. But this other way — seeking Him — you may in the end prevail. 'Who knows but that God may be merciful?' In Lamentations 3:29 this counsel is given to a soul that is bowed down and abandoned: to put his mouth to the dust. He waits, endures, and does whatever is needed — not only if he has hope, but if there may be hope. If there is even the thought that it might turn out well, he will take the risk. Do the same. See what Esther did in a similarly desperate situation. She reasoned: 'If I stay silent, I will be destroyed; it is better to risk going to the king, even if it costs my life.' Therefore she said, 'If I perish, I perish.' The lepers reasoned the same way in their desperate case (2 Kings 7:3-4): 'If we go into the city, we will die there from the famine; if we sit here, we will also die. Come, let us fall on the mercy of the Assyrian camp — if they spare us, we live; if they kill us, we merely die.' There were many strong reasons to expect they would be killed — they were Jews, from the enemy's side, likely to be suspected as spies; and even if not, they were lepers who might infect the camp and were fit for nothing but to be put down. Yet in this desperate situation they took the better and more hopeful option, ventured to go to the Assyrian side, and you all know what happened. Reason the same way: 'If I stop believing, humbling myself, praying, and attending the means of grace, I will certainly perish — there is no escaping it. I will therefore press on doing all of these as sincerely as I can, to the best of my ability. And if God saves a sinner, a leper, an enemy — so be it. If not, I can only be condemned.'

But let me tell you: such a resolve can never go to hell with you. If anyone has a place in heaven, a soul like that does. For this not only puts the devil to silence — for in such a case, what can the devil say? If you will venture your soul, your service, and everything upon God, whatever the outcome, in this resolute yet safe way; if in pure trust you leave everything in God's hands with contentment and submission — what can he do with that? But it also puts the matter to God, who cannot bring Himself to condemn someone who goes on doing exactly this. When you freely serve Him, choose Him, venture everything, and leave yourself and all the consequences of your ways in His hands — by this one act in such a moment you will win more of His heart and love than perhaps by all your obedience in all your life before. Your salvation and the assurance of it — that is God's work; leave it to Him. Test His faithfulness. It is self-love that makes us so troubled about it. Press on in believing, repenting, mourning for sin, hating and forsaking it, using the means — that is your work. And doing so, you cannot be condemned.

## DIRECTION 7



**I**f you ask what grounds a soul in this situation has for venturing upon God in this way —

The answer is: His name. This forms the seventh direction.

Being resolved to turn to God and to continue fearing and obeying Him, you may safely and confidently trust in and rest upon the name of God when you have nothing else to rest on. This is the very direction the text gives, and I had thought to make it a distinct point of its own, but I will unfold and explain it here as a direction and means of support and comfort in this distress, taking it as it flows from the text.

The name of God is an all-sufficient foundation and support for the faith of someone who resolves to fear and obey God — even when that person sees nothing in himself and no promise in Scripture that currently belongs to him.

The name of God alone is here set against all other supports and props on which faith might rest. It is set against all comfortable awareness of God's love, and against all sight of any grace in oneself to which a promise is attached. So when a soul looks within itself with one eye and scans all of God's Word with another, and sees neither any grace in the one nor any promise in the other that

applies to any grace within itself — yet when that soul then looks at God and considers what kind of God He is, and what He has said about Himself, His mercy, His kindness, and His free grace toward sinful people, it may be upheld simply by what it knows to be in God as He has revealed Himself in the covenant of grace. This is what it means to rest upon His name.

Now to explain this further: by the name of God two things are meant.

First, those glorious attributes — especially of grace and mercy — by which God has expressed and made Himself known to us.

Second, Jesus Christ, as He is appointed and set forth to be righteousness for sinful people.

Concerning the first: in Exodus 34:4-7 the Lord proclaimed His name: 'The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished.'

Concerning the second: see Jeremiah 23:6, speaking of Christ: 'This is His name by which He will be called — THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS' — that is, Jesus Christ who is God has righteousness in Him for us, which may be made ours.

So when a poor soul in distress cannot say, 'I see such and such signs or any evidence in myself by which I can say God is my God or that Christ is mine' — yet because that soul sees free grace enough in God and righteousness enough in Christ, and knows that as a sinful person — not a devil — he may be capable of these and may come to have a share in them, even though he sees noth-

ing in himself that would give him any present claim — and because grace and mercy are God's name, and 'Our Righteousness' is His Son's name — he therefore casts himself upon both for pardon and favor, and his soul leans, rests, and abides on these, and will not be driven away from them. Two things meet in the heart to form this resting upon His name: first, that there is such free grace, goodwill, and mercy in God, and that Jesus Christ is appointed and made to be our righteousness; and second, that I am capable of and may come to have a share in both, and that though there is nothing in me that can claim a right to them, there is also nothing that shuts me out — and on that basis I cast myself upon God for both, and rest there. Yes, even though I cannot yet say I will ever obtain them. And this faith — where it is genuine and accompanied by the firm resolve to turn to God in all the ways described above — is as real a faith as any of you have in your own hearts.

And so I come to proving this: that when the name of God and Christ are simply and solely grasped, they can be a sufficient ground for faith to rest on. Nothing could be more comforting to a poor distressed believer. In Numbers 14, when God's anger burned hot against His people so that He began to say, 'How long shall they provoke Me?' (verse 11) and spoke of destroying them and making Moses into a great nation, what did Moses's faith turn to? Nothing but that proclamation of His name mentioned before. He appeals to it in verses 17-18: 'Let the power of my Lord be great according as You have spoken: The Lord is long-suffering and of great mercy, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin.' He asks God to show His power in pardoning, because just as much power is displayed in overcoming His wrath as in creating a world. 'Let

Your power be great.' It was His name, you see, that Moses appealed to, and it moved God to show mercy. Likewise, for His Son's sake, The Lord Our Righteousness, Elihu says in Job 33 that when a person's soul is in the deepest distress, yet if there is a messenger to show that person his uprightness, that is, the righteousness stored up for people in the Lord Jesus, then God is gracious to him and says 'Deliver him.' Resting on that, his body recovers. I mention these passages from the Old Testament rather than the New, from which you can see that God's name and His Son's name are completely sufficient to uphold and support a soul. The writer of Psalm 130, when he was in his depths, plunged over his head in sorrow and defeat, what did his faith turn to? To God's name. Not to anything in himself, but simply to what his faith understood to be in God: 'Mercy is with You,' he says, and nothing more. In God, and with Him, it is to be found. And he strengthens his faith in this by arguing that otherwise no one would fear Him. 'If You were to keep a strict record of all sins, no one could stand or would be saved; therefore surely mercy is with You.' 'Let Israel hope in the Lord' (verse 7), and why? Not because Israel sees grace in himself, but because 'mercy is with Him and plentiful redemption' (the last verse). The word redemption points to His Son's name. There is enough in Him; otherwise He will have none. And Israel is mentioned in His will as eligible for it. Therefore he says, 'I will wait and hope in the Lord' (verse 5). And though he could not say that God had forgiven him, forgiveness was with God. There he plants and rests his soul, like a beggar at a wealthy man's door when no one else in the land is able or willing to help him. There he waits, even though he does not know whether he will receive anything. 'In my father's house there is bread enough,' says the Prodigal Son.

There it can be found, and nowhere else, and there is plenty. 'Crumbs will be enough for me,' says the woman of Canaan. 'You are the Mediator,' she thought, 'and it is Your work to save. Though I am a dog, I am still able to receive crumbs.' 'Woman,' Christ says, 'great is your faith, not such faith among all My disciples.' These people trusted in His name and in nothing in themselves. David in Psalm 62:5 says he trusted in God for salvation and mercy, and throughout the whole psalm he urges: 'Trust in God fully and at all times, and in no creature' (verses 8-9). And what did he rest on? Simply two of His attributes: mercy and power. 'God has spoken once,' that is, irrevocably, as in Psalm 89:35, 'Once I have sworn,' 'and twice I have heard this,' that is, often encountered it in the word and reflected on it, 'that with God is power' (verse 11), so He is able to save in the greatest distress; 'and I have heard that to Him belongs mercy also' (verse 12), and therefore He may be willing to help. And because these are in Him, though I have nothing in myself, these are what I rest on, and these alone. Many more examples like this could be given.

The reasons why the name of God, what is in God, is a sufficient foundation for faith to rest on are:

First, because the name of God, that is, God's attributes and Christ's righteousness, fully and completely answers all the needs, doubts, objections, and distresses we can ever have or face. Whatever our needs or temptations may be, He has a name to supply them. For example, take His name in pieces, as mentioned in Exodus 34:5-6, and consider every part of it. Every part answers some temptation we may face.

First, are you in misery and great distress? He is merciful. 'The Lord, merciful,' therefore able to help you, and merciful, therefore willing.

Yes, but second, you will say, 'I am unworthy. I have nothing in me to move Him to help.' Well, therefore He is gracious. Grace means showing mercy freely. 'Yes, but I have sinned against Him for many years. If I had come to Him when I was young, mercy might have been shown to me.' To this He says: 'I am long-suffering.' 'Yes, but my sins overflow in number. It is impossible to count them. And they overflow in seriousness. I have committed the same sins over and over. I have been unfaithful to Him, broken my promises to Him again and again.' His name answers this objection too: He is abundant in goodness. He overflows in grace more than you overflow in sinning. And though you have been unfaithful to Him again and again and broken every promise, He is abundant in truth as well. He is better than His word, because He cannot fully express to our limited understanding all the mercy that is in Him for us. 'Yes, but I have committed great sins, made worse by many serious circumstances: against knowledge, willfully, and so on.' He forgives iniquity, transgression, and sin, sins of every kind. 'Yes, but mercy is in Him only for a few, and I may not be among them.' Yes, there is mercy for thousands, and He stores it up. Treasures of it lie with Him, kept safe, if people would come and receive them.

Raise whatever objection you want; His name will answer you. Do you need comfort as well as pardon? He is both 'Father of mercies and God of all comfort,' that is His name (2 Corinthians 1:3). Do you need peace of conscience because you are filled with terrors? He is 'the God of peace' (1 Thessalonians 5:23). 'Yes, but I

have a heart empty of grace and holiness and full of sinful desires.' He is the God of all grace to heal you, as well as the God of peace to pardon you. Do you need wisdom and direction? He is 'the Father of lights,' as the apostle says. Is your heart unreliable and full of indecision? He is unchangeable as well, as He says there (James 1). In this way, every objection that can be raised may be answered from His name. Therefore it is completely sufficient for faith to rest on.

The same can be shown just as fully in His Son's name, in whom God has empowered Himself to show mercy and give all good things. His name is equal to God's name, as vast in worth and merit as God's heart is in His purposes of showing and giving mercies, sufficient to purchase all that God intended to give. His name likewise has a complete sufficiency to supply all our needs and desires and satisfy every concern. For example, the name mentioned by the prophet Isaiah in chapter 9:6, compared with 1 Corinthians 1, the last verse: Would we have peace of conscience and the guilt of sins removed? He is the Prince of Peace, and is made righteousness to us. Are we in depths of distress, terrors within and without, from which we see no rescue? He is the Mighty God, able to save completely, being made redemption to us. Do we lack grace and the renewal and growth of His image in us? He is the Everlasting Father, a father to produce His likeness in us and everlasting to maintain it forever once it has begun. He is made sanctification to us. Do we lack wisdom to guide us? He is the Counselor, and is made wisdom to us. Everything we lack, He has. And everything He has, we lack. And further, even if we not only lack all these

things but lack them immeasurably, His name is also Wonderful, for He is wonderful in all these things, able to do beyond all our expectations to the point of astonishment.

Or if the soul wants more specific and detailed satisfaction on the point of justification, which consists in the pardon of sins and acceptance into the favor of God, being the very point questioned during this state of withdrawal, and in which the soul seeks satisfaction, that other name of His, 'The Lord Our Righteousness' (Jeremiah 23:6), will answer all the objections and doubts our hearts can raise, if we only had the skill to read out all the letters in it. For if that righteousness of His satisfied God, who in condemning us is greater than our hearts, then it can satisfy our hearts much more. The righteousness of His life and death is not merely a sufficient ransom (1 Timothy 2:6), but there is 'plentiful redemption' in it (Psalm 130). Yes, it overflows, as the apostle's wording implies (1 Timothy 1:14), more than full, more than would be needed, and that to pardon the sins of the one who in verse 15 was the worst of sinners. Elsewhere, he challenges all the wit and powers of sin, hell, and darkness to show up in this argument, and he undertakes to answer them all from this one foundational truth: 'Christ has died' (Romans 8:34), which is in effect the same as 'The Lord Our Righteousness.' 'Who therefore shall condemn?' What can be claimed, either about the seriousness of sin in general or about any of your sins in particular, that cannot be answered from the righteousness of His death and life? Is the objection that sin is an offense against the great God? And is not this righteousness the righteousness of Jehovah, the Mighty God, Jehovah Our Righteousness? Is the glory of this great God degraded by us in sinning? And will not the emptying of the glory of Him whose

name is 'the brightness of His Father's glory' in performing this righteousness for us make full amends? Are our sins the violation of the holy and righteous law in every part of it? And did not Jehovah, who gave and made that law, to make Himself our righteousness, 'make Himself under the law' (Galatians 4:4), and to produce a complete righteousness, 'fulfill every part of it' (Romans 8:3-4)? Is it the ongoing pattern of sin and the number and repetition of them that overwhelms you? 'All fullness dwells in Him who is our righteousness' (Colossians 1:19), and it has dwelt in Him longer than sin has dwelt in you. And the righteousness of our Messiah is 'everlasting righteousness' (Daniel 9:24), the merit of which an eternity of sinning could not use up or cancel. And is all this righteousness reserved for Himself alone, so that you could never come to have a share in it? No. The crowning point of our comfort is that 'Our' Righteousness is one letter of His name, and our names are written into His. For us it exists, and 'Ours' it is meant to be, as much ours to save us who trust in it as His own to glorify Him. 'Ours,' not for Himself: He had no need of it, being God blessed forever. Ours, not the angels': neither the good angels, for they are justified by their own righteousness, nor the bad angels, who are permanently removed from God's will. But ours, who are human beings. And among them, it belongs especially to those who are broken and lost, whose souls draw near to the grave and whose lives approach destruction, and who come and pray to God and rely on it. To them God cannot deny it, for it is theirs. For 'He will give to each person his righteousness' (Job 33:22, 26). So His Son's name is also completely sufficient to answer every objection, giving faith solid ground to rest on. 'Those who know His name will trust in Him' (Psalm 9:10).

A second reason why His name is sufficient, even when you have and see nothing in yourself, and no promise made to any grace in you to rest on, is because even all those promises made to conditions in us, which we ordinarily look to, are 'yes and amen' only in His name and His Son's name. That is the origin of them all, the root, the seed of them all. His name is the raw material of all those secondary promises, giving existence to them all. If it were not for the mercy, grace, truth, and kindness in Him and the righteousness in His Son, what would all those promises be worth? Just as the value of a contract depends on the ability of the person who makes it, so all these promises depend on His name.

Therefore, when you rely on His name, even though you have no promise made to anything in you to rely on, you are relying on the very foundation of all those promises. You are going back to the original, which carries more authority than copies. You are relying on the source into which all the others are resolved. Therefore it is sufficient even when all the rest fail you in your perception.

Third, His name alone is support enough for faith, because it is for His name's sake and His Son's name's sake that He does everything He does, and for nothing in us, but purely for what is in Himself. As Isaiah 48:9-10 says: 'For My name's sake...' Likewise in Ezekiel 36:22, 32: 'For My name's sake, and not for your sake.' And in Isaiah 43:25: 'I am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake, and will not remember your sins.' For His name's sake He blots out wrongdoing and pardons. And if it is for His name's sake that He does everything and fulfills all promises made to us and to what is in us, then when you see nothing in yourself to which any promise applies, nothing that might serve as any reason

or motivation for Him to pardon you, trust in His name. Because He is God and has mercy in Him, He will do it. For the thing that is the only or chief motivation for God Himself to do anything for us must be, when grasped and believed, the strongest and surest ground for our faith as well, persuading the heart that He will do it. Just as in knowledge, understanding the causes of things produces the surest knowledge, so in faith, understanding the chief motivation of God, the cause of everything, produces the greatest certainty of belief.

This, then, can direct poor souls in distress as to what to risk everything on: on what ground to stake their souls, efforts, endeavors, faith, repentance, obedience, and everything else, upon His name, when they see nothing in themselves to which any promise belongs. As David says in Psalm 73:26: 'My heart may fail, and my body may fail, but God will never fail.' So I may say: your comforts in prayers and in hearing, your joys, the down payments you have stored up, may all be spent in a dry season. Your own graces and all promises made to them, your own hearts may fail, and being created things they do fail again and again. But God's name and His Son's name, when rested on, will never fail you. Lean on these, not halfway in distress, but trust perfectly, as the apostle says (1 Peter 1:13), in the mercy you hear is in God, in the grace revealed. That means: throw and cast your whole soul, your whole weight, upon it. Only the person whose mind is fixed on God has perfect peace (Isaiah 26:3). Do not have half your soul on that rock which is higher than you. Climb up and get all of yourself onto it. And when everything fails, renew your faith in His name. Rest there. Die there. This is the purpose of Solomon's words in Proverbs 18:10: 'His name is a strong tower, and the righteous run to it and

are safe.' Now what is the purpose of a tower in a city? When all outer defenses are taken, the walls scaled, all fortifications abandoned and houses left behind, then a tower holds out last and is a refuge to flee to. So too, when the devil and God's wrath surround you on all sides and close in on your soul, and the comfort of every grace in you is taken from you, and you are driven from and forced to abandon all your other holds and grounds of comfort, then flee to the name of the Lord as your city of refuge, as it is compared in Hebrews 6:18. Say: 'There is mercy in You, Lord, and that is Your name. And there is righteousness in Your Son, and that is His name. And I am directed to trust in Your name in time of need.' Rest there and grab hold as if grasping the horns of the altar, and if you die, die there.

## DIRECTION 8



**T**he eighth direction is to wait upon God — trusting in His name and consistently using all the ordinances and means of comfort. Waiting is simply faith stretched further. Just as an allegory is an extended metaphor, waiting is simply continuing to believe in God and to look for help from Him with submission, even when He is slow to come. Waiting is an act of faith resting on God; an act of hope expecting help from Him; an act of patience, quietly contenting the mind until God comes; and an act of submission if He should delay longer still. So the church in this very situation says: 'It is good that he waits silently for the salvation of the Lord' (Lamentations 3:26). It is good indeed, for God will afflict you less, ease you sooner, and comfort you more when He does come. In the meantime it enables you to keep hold of yourself, to stay composed, and to be upheld. To do otherwise — to be impatient and give up looking for the Lord as Ahaz did — is the greatest folly possible. For as Job says in chapter 12:14, 'If He tears down, it cannot be rebuilt'; all the world cannot let you out. He holds the keys to the dungeon, and you must wait on His timing. He is waiting only for the right moment to let you out (Isaiah 30:18): 'Therefore the Lord longs to be gracious to you, and therefore He waits on high to have compassion on you, for the Lord is a

God of justice' — a wise and discerning God who knows the fittest times and seasons. That He delays is not from any lack of mercy, for He waits and longs to be gracious. He delays out of wisdom — He sees that the time is not yet right. He grieves as much as you that you are not yet ready for mercy, that His mercy would not yet be fully honored if He were to show it now — not until you have seen your misery more fully. Therefore He says, 'Blessed are all who wait for Him.' And as He waits only to be more gracious to you, so He waited a long while for you to begin turning to Him, saying, 'When will it once be?' (Jeremiah 13). You made Him wait on your timing before you turned from your sin; can you not wait on His for the pardon of it? And truly, escaping hell in the end is so great a mercy that it is worth waiting for all your days — even if you endure a kind of hell here and receive no kind look until your very last moment. So put your mouth in the dust and wait quietly — if there may be hope at last (Lamentations 3:29).

While waiting in this way, keep using all the means of grace more diligently and consistently — even if you find no benefit from them for a long time. Do not omit any ordinance God has appointed for your comfort and recovery. In a long illness you still use remedies even though many have failed — as the woman who had the issue of blood spent everything she had on physicians in the pursuit of her cure. Only the kind of spiritual distress that drives you away from the means can harm you. The kind of distress that drives you to the means can never harm you. Therefore the devil works harder than anything to keep troubled souls away from the Word, from good fellowship, from the sacraments, from prayer — by insisting that these things do you no good and that you are only increasing your condemnation.

But first: if you learn no other lesson from using the means than that you are utterly helpless on your own, and that unless God teaches you to benefit from them nothing good comes, so that you learn to depend on God in the ordinance — this itself is a great advance.

But second: just as when someone is ill and eats but then vomits, you still urge him to keep taking something down — because some strength is absorbed and something remains in the stomach that keeps body and soul together — so I say here: even if you seem to forget almost everything you hear and appear to gain no benefit from it, still hear — because some hidden strength is taken in. As for increasing your condemnation: know that to utterly neglect and despise the means is a far greater condemnation. Know that using them in dependence on and obedience to God would actually lessen your condemnation. Therefore read, pray, meditate, listen to preaching, talk with others about spiritual things, receive the sacraments — do not skip these appointed meals. When the body is sick you sometimes forgo your regular food, but when the soul is sick there is more need of these means than ever. All of these are both food and medicine — nourishment, remedy, and comfort all at once. Use the reading of the Word, for 'whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope' — so read it often. Attend preaching, for 'God creates the fruit of the lips, peace' (Isaiah 57:19). Receive the sacrament frequently — those are sealing days. Go and lay out your sins and receive your pardon; bring everything you know against yourself and bring it to Christ to set His seal to it.

Only take this caution: do not trust in your use of the means, but trust in God through the means. To think, 'Oh, I shall get comfort from such a person, or at such a time, or in such an ordinance' — this often ruins everything. Believe in God as if you were using no means at all, and yet use the means as diligently as if your confidence were placed in them.

## DIRECTION 9



**N**inth, above everything else, pray — and get others to pray for you as well, for God often restores comfort to those in distress at the request of those who mourn for them (Isaiah 57:18). But especially, pour out your own complaint to God with earnestness and intensity — for though the prayers of friends may help your case along, the matter must ultimately be worked out between God and you alone in private, and His good will must be obtained by seeking Him in secret. The apostle gives this counsel in James 5:13: 'Is anyone suffering? He should pray.' And of all afflictions, this one — darkness in the spirit — is the one that most needs prayer. Therefore David composed a psalm for precisely this purpose, not for his own private use only but for the benefit of everyone else in the same distress, as its title shows: Psalm 102, 'A Prayer of the Afflicted when he is faint and pours out his complaint before the Lord.' And David says this is his constant practice when his soul is overwhelmed: 'From the end of the earth I call to You; lead me to the rock that is higher than I' (Psalm 61:2). It was Christ's practice as well, for in His agony 'He prayed more earnestly' (Luke 22:44).

So whenever your sins and God's wrath collide in your conscience and make you desperately sick — as Isaiah describes — pour out your soul, lay everything open, and confess your sin. It will relieve you, as bringing up what has made you sick relieves the body; and it will also move God to have compassion and give you comforts and strength to restore you. So David in Psalm 38:18, being in great distress (verses 2-5): 'I will confess my iniquity; I am full of anxiety because of my sin' — and he makes that confession an argument to God for pardon. When his bones were broken (Psalm 51): 'Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity' (verse 2), 'for I know my transgressions' (verse 3). And having confessed (verses 4-6), he then cries: 'Make me to hear joy and gladness' (verse 8), and 'Restore to me the joy of Your salvation' (verse 12). And what was the main thing, the chief motive that worked most powerfully in him to confess, mourn, and bring everything up? 'Against You, against You' — he says it twice, putting as much weight on this consideration as on any other. That thought chiefly — if not solely — melted and broke him. Let the same thing work powerfully in your confessions. 'Against You, against You, have I sinned' — so often, so seriously, so presumptuously — against You, a God so great, and yet at the same time so good, so kind, so ready to receive and pardon, if only my heart were as willing to turn to You. And when your case is as Job's in chapter 10:15-17 — that you are full of confusion, so full you think your heart can hold no more, yet it increases and He fills you fuller still — then pour out your complaints to Him as He pours in distress to you. And when He hunts you as Job complains there, like a fierce lion, fall down and humble yourself like a poor and gentle lamb. If you die, die at His feet, mourning, bleeding out your soul in tears. And when He hunts you

from place to place and pursues you with blow after blow, follow hard after Him wherever He goes with complaint after complaint. And when He does not stop but returns again and again — showing Himself terrible to you day after day, night after night after some intermission — yet look again and again toward His holy temple, as Jonah did. And when He brings in new sins, new charges against you (as in verse 16): 'You renew Your witnesses against me' — and when you thought He was finished with you, He brings out new measures of discipline and raises old reckonings long past and forgotten: 'Changes and war are against me' — waves of disquiet alternating, and when one is overcome a new one rises in the field. Then fall on your knees and say as Job finally does: 'I have sinned, what shall I do to You, O Watcher of men? Why have You made me Your target? These and these are the things I have done and I cannot now undo them; what must I do to obtain Your favor?' Alas — nothing that can satisfy Him. Only confess your sin and accept your punishment. Strip yourself and with complete submission present a bare back to Him, and though every stroke draws not only blood but nearly your soul away, do not complain of Him at all. Put your mouth in the dust (Lamentations 3:29-30) — be still, not a word — except words that express your grief and acknowledge that you deserve ten thousand times more. Say as Micah 7:9: 'I will bear the indignation of the Lord because I have sinned against Him.' Testify to every stroke that it is not only just but less than you have deserved, and that it is His mercy you are not consumed and destroyed with every blow. And the harder He strikes, do not struggle — He will let you down the sooner. The higher He lifts His hand to strike, the lower let your soul fall: 'Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God.' And when He

has finished, still kiss the rod. Then take up words of pleading for yourself — it is for your life. Ask Him to remember what He has been thinking of from eternity — thoughts of peace and mercy toward us, too many to count (Psalm 40:5), which He has contemplated with the greatest delight, as His Son tells us in Proverbs 8:31. Plead as David and other saints have done: 'What has now become of all Your thoughts of mercy? Have they been restrained? Have all these been suddenly forgotten? Set aside — after all the time You have spent thinking them? Have You forgotten Your own ancient delight?' Ask Him whether He has forgotten His own name — to be gracious and abundant in lovingkindness, for that is His name. Say: 'Did the very intention of showing mercy from so far in eternity fill You with delight, and now when You have come to the very moment of carrying it out — with so great an opportunity before You, with a soul as full of misery, as fit an object for mercy, as ever — have You now no heart for it?' And further, say that you have been told of an infinite and all-sufficient righteousness in His Son, stored up in Him by His own accomplishment, of which His Son never had or can have any need Himself, being God blessed forever — and for whom then was it appointed, if not for the sons of men: those who are weary, wounded, sick, broken, lost? These His Son has included in His will, and He still lives to be His own executor. Say also to Him that you have heard that His Spirit is the Comforter, the God of all comfort, and that His Son has purchased every comfort — His full supply, all His remedies, all His skill — and is anointed with this Spirit expressly to pour Him out into the hearts of the wounded, the sick, and the broken, and the healthy have no need of Him. If it is said to you, 'Yes, but you are most unworthy' — answer: 'But He professes to love freely.' If the greatness

of your sins is raised against you, plead again that 'with Him is abundant redemption' (Psalm 130:7) — and say, 'If You do not have enough to pardon me, I am content to go without.' If you are told you are ungodly — say, 'I believe in Him who justifies the ungodly' (Romans 4:5). If He seems to put you off — as Christ did for a time with the Canaanite woman — and says He has no need of you, say that you have need of Him and cannot live without Him, for 'in Your favor is my life' and without it you are undone. If He seems to rebuke you, asking how you dare approach the high and lofty One — a sinful person before One whose name is holy — say, 'I have heard You Yourself say: Thus says the high and lofty One whose name is holy, that He dwells with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble' (Isaiah 57:15). And be bold to add that there are few in the world who seek Him, and if He were to turn away those who do, He would have fewer still — for who would fear Him if there were no mercy in Him and no abundant redemption?

If He still pursues you and His wrath lies heavy on you, ask Him what He is aiming at. Is it to have the victory and to be proved right when He judges — as Romans 3:4 says, which David also understood when he humbled himself (Psalm 51:4)? Tell Him freely that you are willing to give Him the victory, to yield to Him entirely, to resist Him in nothing — that you are content to submit both to His commanding will in all things and to His condemning will as well, if that is what pleases Him. Say that it would be just, as David acknowledges there, if He were to condemn you. Justify Him even as He is condemning you. Say that on the last day He will need no judge against you but yourself. Only ask Him to con-

sider what honor it brings Him to pursue dry stubble and break a withered leaf that crumbles at His touch — as Job pleads (Job 13:25) — to break a reed that is already broken.

Say, 'You are not a fitting match for me — and You have said You will not contend forever' (Isaiah 57:16) — especially when He sees someone laying down their weapons, as you are willing to do.

Or ask Him: is it that He aims to have glory from your eternal condemnation in hell? Tell Him it is true, He may — and that this is actually some comfort to you, that He can have glory even from your death and destruction, who never yet had much from your life. But ask Him to consider this before He drives His sword into you: that He first sheathed it in His Son's side (Zechariah 13:7). And that He may show as much power in overcoming His wrath as in venting it — yes, and have even greater glory from the former. Plead that you could never satisfy His justice even if He cast you down to hell — He may throw you into prison, but you can never pay the debt. 'What profit is there in my blood?' (Psalm 30:9). And therefore if satisfying His justice is His aim, He might more fully achieve it by accepting what His Son offered on your behalf — and in so doing He would be no loser. He would receive not only the honor of His justice but the glory of His grace and mercy as well, thus doubling the honor He receives from you.

Or is it, Lord, that You aim to receive more obedience from me than You have had before? Plead that this present course is actually disabling you for service — for while you bear His terrors you are like one of the dead: listless not only toward His work but toward everything else. Distracted by terror (as Heman pleads in Psalm 88:15), the powers and energies of your soul are scattered and dissolved and cannot attend to their duty. Beyond this distrac-

tion, plead also that it is consuming your strength, as David often complains and uses as an argument before God (Psalm 39:10-13): 'Remove Your stroke from me; I am consumed by the blow of Your hand. You rebuke and discipline a person for sin; You cause his beauty to waste away like a moth. Oh, spare me, so that I may regain strength before I depart and am seen no more.' And add that if He continues dealing with you this way, you will not be able to serve Him well or for long. 'How long, O Lord? Will You hide Yourself forever? Will Your wrath burn like fire? Remember what my lifespan is' (Psalm 89:46-47, compared with Psalm 39:12). Tell Him that for the little time you have left to live, the more joy you have the more service you will be able to render Him, and the more earnestly you will go about His work — 'for the joy of the Lord is your strength' (Nehemiah 8:10) — and more acceptably as well, for He loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7). Therefore ask Him to restore to you the joy of His salvation — then you will be able to do more service for Him in a week than in a whole year at present, long distress of mind being like long illness, which makes all your work weak — and it is to His own disadvantage to have His servants lie long sick in His hands.

And if it is objected that if you were trusted with much assurance you would abuse it and turn it into license, reply that He can prevent this by preparing your heart beforehand for these comforts so that they work most effectively in you. By writing a law of love toward Him in your heart — which, when joined with His love shed abroad, will work most powerfully. One grain of it will do more to purge out sin, constrain to obedience, and strengthen for it than a pound of terrors. And say that though you do have a stubborn and self-loving heart, He can make His lovingkindness overcome it, for

it is stronger than death (Song of Solomon 8:6). Say: 'There is love in me that runs out freely toward other things — if only You were pleased to win it to Yourself.' Point out that the soul mentioned in Isaiah 57 had as stubborn and stiff a heart as yours, and went on stubbornly despite all the terrors. And yet, Lord, You took a different approach with him and healed him — and through comforts: 'I will heal him,' God says there, 'and I will restore comfort to him' (verses 17-18). And so, if it please Him, He may deal with you in the same way.

And if comfort and mercy still do not come, and God still seems to cast you off, then call to mind whether you have ever had any true communion with Him — and on that basis begin to challenge Him. So the church does in Isaiah 63:16, when in this same situation — with God's mercies withheld — she still says: 'You are our Father.' She could see that God was angry and her own heart was hard (verse 17), yet she thought she should still know Him: 'Surely You are our Father — where is Your zeal, the stirring of Your heart?' Challenge Him on the basis of the old acquaintance you have had and kept with Him in former times. Say: 'Surely You are my Father and my husband, however strangely You may be acting toward me now. Do You not remember what has passed between You and me in prayer, in that room, at that time?' Do you have any fragment of a broken keepsake between you and Him — any token that could only have passed between Him and someone He had betrothed to Himself in love? Produce it at a time like this. And if you can discern no grace in yourself, ask Him to look into your heart — and be bold enough to ask whether He can see anything there that He Himself wrote, never to be erased. Ask Him whether there is not some spark of love for Him and fear of Him

that He Himself placed there, and ask Him if He recognizes His own handwriting. And for your comfort, know that even when you cannot read it — your graces being much blurred — He can always read His own hand, and will not deny it.

You may be yet bolder. Ask Him to look into His own heart and consider the thoughts He had of you — those secret, ancient purposes He bore toward you from all eternity. And if He at first seems still silent, ask Him to look at you again and ask whether He does not know you, whether He has not known and claimed you as His own from everlasting, and engraved your name on the palms of His hands and on the tablet of His heart with letters of lovingkindness so deep and lasting that they have not yet been — indeed never will be — erased. Tell Him you are content to leave yourself wholly to what passed between Him and His Son concerning you, and let His own heart settle it. Appeal to Christ as your guarantor and witness on your behalf — One who was present at all His counsel — asking whether you are not one of those He gave to Christ with the commission to redeem and save. Ask Him to look into Christ's heart as well, to see if your name is not written there in His own hand, and whether Christ did not bear your name on His heart — as the high priest bore the names of all the tribes — when He hung on the cross and when He ascended into the Most Holy Place. So Habakkuk, offering a prayer in the name of the church, has taught us how to plead in Habakkuk 1:12: 'Are You not from everlasting, O Lord, my God, my Holy One?' It was a bold question — yet God does not rebuke it but endorses it, and presently gives an assurance to their hearts before they go further, for their very next words — spoken abruptly, as if from a sudden answer received — express that assurance: 'We shall not die.' God,

being challenged and His own thoughts quoted back to Him, could not deny it — He acknowledged it was true. And so while you may be speaking as if blindfolded, casting anchor in the dark, yet speaking His very heart, He may own you and fall upon your neck and kiss you.

And if even after continual praying like this you still find no comfort, no answer from Him, and He seems rather to shut out your very prayers (as in Psalm 22:2-3), then reason with Him as David does in Psalm 88:14: 'Why do You reject my soul and hide Your face from me? For alas, I have nothing else to help me in my time of need but prayer. And if prayer does no good, I am undone.'

And if through all these discouragements your condition grows worse and worse, so that you cannot even pray but are struck mute when you come before Him (as David in Psalm 77:4: 'I am so troubled that I cannot speak') — then make signs when you cannot speak. Groan, sigh, sob, and murmur as Hezekiah did (Isaiah 38:14); bewail your own unworthiness, and ask Christ to speak your requests for you and God to hear Him on your behalf. Christ is an advocate with the Father, pleads no losing case, and has never been turned away in any suit He has argued (1 John 2:1).

And if still — perhaps after many years — He does not acknowledge you, and it grows darker and darker, perhaps until death draws near, or to such extremes that He seems to you to have cast you off forever — so that your distress rises to thoughts like this: that there is no other way but that you and He must part. Then in the midst and depths of such dreadful fears, get down on your knees one more time. And notwithstanding everything, fall to blessing Him for all those glorious excellencies of holiness, kindness, grace, and wisdom that are in Him — the beauty of which

first captured your heart and made you love Him — even though you might never benefit from them. Bless Him for all the mercy He shows to others, by which they have occasion to magnify Him, even if you are found unworthy. Bless Him and those who will forever live with Him, who stand before Him and see His face and enjoy Him forever. Whatever sins you believe you will be condemned for, condemn yourself for them first, and still ask forgiveness for them. Whatever service you have at any time rendered Him that brought Him any glory — get your heart to say you do not regret it, that you are glad for all done for Him, and wish it had been better. Whatever mercies you have received from Him — confess your unworthiness of them and thank Him, even if you were never to receive any more. (Such qualities as these in such extreme situations often appear in the hearts of God's children.) Ask Him only to preserve good thoughts of Him in you, so that you will not blaspheme Him. And as you find yourself sinking into hell in your own perception — see if He does not call you back again.

See what God Himself says in Jeremiah 31:18-20. Ephraim is His son, His dear son, His pleasant child — as He says there. And yet God began to speak against him in words as sharp and bitter as anything He has said against you, and dealt with him severely and looked on him sternly as if He meant never to have mercy on him. Upon this Ephraim begins to weep — rebuked as I have taught you to be — and to mourn for himself, having been yoked as you are, to be tamed. He acknowledges it was justly done, having been like an untrained ox, unaccustomed to the yoke. And Ephraim began to be ashamed and confused, unable to look up because of his sin against God. He seeks repentance — and seeks it from God — knowing he was unable to turn to God without His help: 'Turn me,

and I shall be turned.' And he challenges God and His eternal love: 'You are the Lord my God.' Well, says God: though it has been a long time since I spoke against him, and I have let him lie in misery a long while, I still remember him. His tears and sighs never leave my mind. And though he thinks I had forgotten him, I remember him still — and My heart is troubled for him as much as, and more than, he is troubled for himself. I can hold back no longer — I will surely have mercy on him. And had He condemned him, His heart would have been troubled for him indeed, all His days.

## DIRECTION 10



**T**he tenth and final direction is this: having done all these things, do not be satisfied with mere ease but with healing — not ease of conscience but healing of conscience. I ground this on Isaiah 57:17-18. What was the true outcome of the trouble endured by the man God contended with there? It was healing and guidance: 'I will guide him, and I will heal him.'

Those of you who are troubled in mind — do not think your condition is good simply because you have begun to stop being troubled. It is only good when the outcome of your trouble is the healing of your spirit on some genuine ground of comfort, and when the result is guidance into God's ways and a closer walk with Him. For God may loosen the cords and take you off the rack without yet having pardoned you. A traitor thrown in the dungeon with many chains on him may be let out of the dungeon, have his chains removed, have the freedom of the Tower, and walk about with his keeper — and still not have his pardon. In fact, they usually take off the irons and allow more freedom before execution. This is the situation for many. 'I thank God,' one person says, 'I went through much distress of mind and conscience — such and such sins terrified me and I could not sleep for them. But now I am well again and they no longer trouble me.' Yes, but is that all? You have cause

to fear that your irons have merely been taken off in preparation for execution. Troubles of mind regarding the guilt of sin work the same way as sin's power over us — in justification as in sanctification. A person who has had a strong lust stirring within him, if he goes a year or two and finds it no longer stirring, thinks he is completely free from it — when in fact it may only be restrained, not killed; a pause, not mortification. So it is often with this distress of mind arising from the guilt of sin: because a person no longer feels the doubts and fears and terrors he was accustomed to, he immediately concludes all is well — when it may be merely a truce, not a peace; a temporary laying down of arms to build greater force against the soul later; a reprieve and a brief relaxation in prison, not a pardon.

To help you understand this better: between a person who is God's child and a wicked person — though both may be, and are, troubled in mind and conscience — there is a fundamental difference both in the chief source of their trouble and in how it is resolved and removed. A wicked person's trouble comes from the anguish and present pain he feels in sin, from God's wrath lashing his conscience, and from fear that his sin will not be pardoned — that he will endure this torment forever in hell. So it was with Judas, Cain, and many others. But a godly person's trouble — though it often contains all of these — has at its center something further. It is not only the sting and smart of sin, but also its filth, its ugliness, the offense done to God that wounds him. For he has a heart that beats like God's heart, and therefore he looks at sin with the same kind of eyes God uses. And just as God considers the offense against Himself to be the greatest evil in sin, so does a godly heart. It is not just the sting of the serpent but the poison that troubles

him. Nor is it only the lack of pardon and the fear of God's eternal wrath that mainly troubles him — it is the loss of God's favor, the separation from One whom he sees as so excellent and glorious, the inability to see His face. His desire is to live in God's presence and to have God be his God. As the wound is, so is the remedy needed. Therefore the wicked person, being troubled only by the sting and smart of sin — once you pull out the sting, remove the load, he is perfectly fine again, as cheerful and easy as ever. Seeking only present ease, he confesses his sin and does whatever is necessary at the moment to get out from under it — as Pharaoh said, 'Remove this death from me' (Exodus 10:17). Or at most, his goal is only pardon from sin and peace with God — to be freed from the fear of enduring forever what his conscience is now tasting. So the remedies wicked people reach for match this: they are like noisemakers used to quiet fretful children. They run to cheerful company and music, as Cain built cities, and in this way they push away the terrors of their consciences. Ease is all they are looking for. Or they run to a formal performance of religious duties — as poor souls under the papacy, when stricken by the friars' sermons, were assigned penances and good works, which calmed them for a while, and for which they thought they deserved pardon. People do the same today, turning to religious duties with the same mindset as a bribe for pardon: 'What shall I give,' as Micah 6:7 says, 'for the sin of my soul?'

But the wound of God's child goes deeper — it is not the sting of sin only but its poison; not the pain but the offense done to God; not the fear of His wrath but the absence of His favor. So ease from those terrors does not satisfy him. It is not enough even to simply be at peace with God or to receive pardon. He does not say only, 'O

wretched man that I am, who will rescue me from this death?' but 'who will rescue me from this body of death?' If he were simply told that God would pardon him and not hold him accountable for any sin, with nothing more said to his conscience, he would still be troubled until he had assurance of God's goodwill as well. If someone said to him, 'God will pardon you, but He will never love you as He did; He will not look at you; you must not come into His presence' — this would grieve the soul more than the pardon would comfort it, and he would be in distress without end. I may borrow what Absalom said when he addressed his father after being banished from him, as a picture of the true longing and deepest trouble of a soul in this condition (2 Samuel 14:32). Absalom had been forgiven the offense, but it did not satisfy him. 'Let me see his face — or let him kill me.' So it is with a poor soul: ease, pardon, the removal of chains — none of these content him until he enjoys communion with God and sees His face in His ordinances. Psalm 24:6: 'This is the generation of those who seek Him, who seek Your face' — this is the defining mark, the disposition of that generation. You can see this in David when his conscience was wounded for that great sin. What was troubling him? Not the absence of pardon — the prophet had already told him God had pardoned him. Not merely the stings of conscience and the ache of broken bones. But 'against You, against You, have I sinned' — so that ease alone could not satisfy him. And further, in verse 10: 'Create in me a clean heart' — for having dwelt on that unclean act, it had left a stain in his imagination. 'And renew a right spirit within me; oh give me grace and sincerity of heart toward You, and let me live in Your presence and see You and have fellowship with You' (verse 11). The absence of this was what troubled him, and he could find no rest

until he had obtained it. For he was not seeking ease or pardon only, but the healing of his conscience through God's favor and the experience of His love. So take care not to rest in mere ease. Are you now in darkness, filled with terror and God's wrath? You will not rest until that darkness is dispelled by the rising of the Sun of Righteousness and the revealing of God's face in the face of Jesus Christ. Until His righteousness is conveyed to your heart through some one of His wings — some promise, some ordinance of His. For since the wound is the unrighteousness of sin, nothing but Christ's righteousness will heal it. And since the wound is also the absence of God's favor — the lack of His face and goodwill, the sense of not knowing Him as your God — nothing but the revealing and dawning of this in your heart will heal you. See what the wound is, and the remedy must match it. This alone truly heals — for though by other means the wound may be covered over and ease obtained, it will break out again. So in Isaiah 57:17-18: 'I will heal him' — and how? By restoring comforts to him. 'Restore to me the joy of Your salvation,' says David, 'that the bones You have broken may rejoice.' And how does He heal him? 'I create the fruit of the lips, peace' — He does it through some promise or other. If what troubles you is the sense of missing God's presence and being separated from Him, the heart finds no rest until it has found its beloved (Song of Solomon 3:1-5). If the trouble is doubting whether any grace is in the heart — the heart finds no rest until some genuine grace is evidenced and some promise connected to it is brought home. Always: see what the trouble is — the remedy must match it, and then it heals. Have you ever been in the dungeon? What was it that set you free? Was it Christ's righteousness taken hold of — God's face revealed — your own grace confirmed

with some promise brought home to your heart, arriving with a commission to deliver you? Then that is the right remedy. Otherwise your chains may simply be removed — only in advance of your execution.

## GLEANINGS



**I**saiah 50:10 — 'Who among you fears the Lord, who obeys the voice of His servant, who walks in darkness and has no light? Let him trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God.'

Some gleanings remain from this text, which I thought good to gather into one bundle and work through at this point.

The second doctrine is this: though it may happen to someone who fears God that they walk in darkness, yet this happens to only a few — the text says 'Who among you?', singling such a person out from a crowd. If he had spoken simply of those who fear God and obey Him without adding the limitation of walking in darkness, he might well have spoken in broader terms. But when he speaks of those who fear God and walk in darkness and suffer terrors from their youth — as Heman did — such a person is one in a thousand. Of such a person he says, 'Who among you?' — few have any experience of such a condition. Job had friends who were certainly godly, for Job was to pray for them and God said He would hear Job on their behalf; and they likely knew many other godly people besides Job. Yet when this condition of darkness came upon Job, it was so strange and unknown to them that they concluded he must be a hypocrite — they had never experienced or heard of anything

like it in others. When Christ was about to enter His agony, He would not even have many of His apostles standing nearby as witnesses, let alone sharing in it — He took only two or three.

First, because though all of God's people are fighting people and people of courage, He has only a few champions — as David, though he had many soldiers, had only a few of the mighty men. Therefore He calls only a few out to fight single combat with Satan and His wrath. Though He exercises all of His people in lighter skirmishes, He does not call all to fight such hard and bloody battles. 'Have you considered My servant Job? There is no one like him on earth' — Job God will send into the field, but not the others, his friends.

Second, as He has few champions fit and able for such an encounter, He also has a range of other trials with which to exercise them — poverty and bad reputation, imprisonment and cruel mockery, loss of property, trouble with friends. Some people have enough to bear under just one of these, and it is rare for all of them to fall on one person at once. Some spirits are so fragile that they would collapse and not be able to hold themselves together, and God never allows anyone to be tested beyond what they can bear (1 Corinthians 10:13). Some people have weak bodies, and if God rebuked them long for sin they would be reduced to nothing — 'He remembers that they are flesh and does not stir up all His wrath,' as David says. Some people God has immediate use for in their callings and work, and if they were driven to distraction as Heman was by continual terrors, they would be unable to function.

Third, God normally uses this kind of affliction only in extreme cases — when He meets with a very stubborn heart and a stiff, proud spirit — a hard case. As Isaiah 57:17 shows, if lesser trials

would accomplish the purpose, He would not bring out the great rod. If a rod will thresh out the cummin, He does not use the threshing wheel or a flail (Isaiah 28:27). Lighter afflictions work on most of His people, through His blessing — kindness works, disgrace works, poverty works. And He does not willingly afflict (Lamentations 3:33), and therefore never unnecessarily. He does not throw men into the dungeon for every fault. Therefore few are long exercised in this way.

So do not conclude that you have no genuine grace simply because you were never terrified as some have been. Just as some have true faith and settled peace who have never tasted joy unspeakable and full of glory, so some have sound humiliation who have never known the terrors of conscience. If you see sin as the greatest misery and Christ as the greatest good, you have been humbled.

We may often preach things that concern only a few in a congregation, and yet we must preach them. There are only a few who walk long in darkness, yet it is to such that Christ preaches. Yes, and for their sake God gives gifts — 'the tongue of the learned.' God often gives a pastor after His own heart for just a few: 'I will take you one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion, and I will give you shepherds after My own heart' (Jeremiah 3:14-15). So even Christ Himself says in Luke 4:26: 'There were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, yet Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon; and there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, and none of them was cleansed but Naaman the Syrian.' So Christ says: 'I am sent to only a few.' Therefore just as we must not withhold a poor soul's portion because no one else

shares in it, so the rest must not take offense but wait — as in a distribution — until their portion comes. And if any one poor soul has had his condition addressed, all the rest should give thanks.

Consider why some who are distressed in mind complain that no one has ever been in a condition like theirs — they are prone to say this, as the church does in Lamentations 1:12. The reason is that few are so troubled, and perhaps they have never known anyone who was. But still, some are and have been in the same situation. As 1 Corinthians 10:13 says: 'No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind.'

Those few in congregations who walk in darkness and yet fear and obey God — God and Christ have a special eye toward them and a special care for them. You can see how He singles them out from all the rest: 'Who among you?' In Isaiah 66:2: 'But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word' — as if, though all things and all people in the world are His creatures and He cares for them all, He seems to overlook everyone else and to fix His gaze on that one person, as if there were no one else in the whole church.

The first reason is that it is Christ's very office to do this. The Spirit is upon Him for this purpose (Isaiah 61:1-3): to open the prison to those who are bound, shut up in this dungeon; to give to those who mourn beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. He is the physician and has taken on the cure (Matthew 9:12). And whom should the physician have His eye on but the sick — and especially the most sick, as those are who cannot find assurance that their sins are forgiven (Isaiah 33:14)? He is the Shepherd (Isaiah 40:11) and will care for all His sheep — He knows them by name. But for whom

especially? The lambs who are weak — young Christians. 'He will gather the lambs in His arms and carry them in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing ewes' — those who are laboring and bringing forth, as those under terror are. He will not drive them too hard, for God has charged Him to lose none of them.

Second, if His office did not move Him, His love would — for He is a merciful and compassionate high priest (Hebrews 4:15). He was tempted in every way just as we are — and especially in agony of spirit, of which He drank more deeply than anyone — and is therefore most fitted to have compassion on us in precisely that. And the more deeply someone is troubled, the more He is moved. In Isaiah 63:9: 'In all their affliction He was afflicted.' And in Jeremiah 31:20: 'Since I spoke against him, I remember him still; therefore My heart yearns for him.' When a child is sick, the mother is more troubled and attentive toward that child — her eyes and thoughts on him more than on all the rest of the household combined.

The application of this is to meet the belief that falls on all who are in darkness — that of all people, God regards them least. 'But Zion said, The Lord has forsaken me' (Isaiah 49:15). So David: 'God has forgotten to be gracious.' Because they find their own hearts cold toward God, they assume His heart is cold toward them. Because they can find no love in their hearts for God, they assume He bears none toward them. But you see that Christ especially seeks out such people — overlooking all others. 'He has engraved you on the palms of His hands; every sigh of yours goes to His heart.' In Isaiah 57:15: 'I dwell with him who is broken and humble in spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble.' God is near him.

The second application is this: if God's eyes are more on us when we are in distress of spirit than at any other time, then let our eyes be on Him. 'We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on You.' Let our eyes be toward Him for help, as those who looked on the bronze serpent looked to be healed. Let our eyes be toward Him for service — as a servant's eyes are on their master — looking not to people, not to reputation, but keeping our eyes on God in all we do, as if there were no one else in the world whose approval we needed.

In describing God's children who are in darkness, the text chooses to identify them by fear and obedience rather than by any other grace — observe this: when God's children are under terror, the most prominent grace that appears in them is the fear of offending God and the willingness to obey Him. Other graces may be at work, but these stand out most clearly — which is why He mentions them for their comfort.

First, by way of explanation: different conditions draw out different graces. When the sunshine of God's favor melts the heart, love and obedience flowing from it are most prominent — and also godly sorrow. So Mary wept much and loved much, for much was forgiven her. On the contrary, when the sense of God's love is withdrawn and fears and terrors are spread through the heart, then fear and obedience show and discover themselves. So in Isaiah 66:2, being poor and contrite and 'trembling at His word' are joined together — trembling at every command and warning, afraid to transgress. The reason is:

Graces and the affections in which they are seated stir more or less in us depending on their objects and our awareness of them. So when the soul is most filled with conviction of sin and aware-

ness of God's wrath, it fears most — and fear works accordingly against whatever might displease God. Hence the apostle: 'Since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire' (Hebrews 12:28-29). Therefore when we actually feel Him to be so, we should be most suspicious of ourselves if we are not all the more fearful of offending Him and obedient to Him.

The first application is one of testing: whether you are a child under wrath. Ask whether you fear more — and whether that fear produces obedience. As Christ learned obedience through what He suffered, so will you — if you have His Spirit.

The second application is to exercise graces in their proper seasons: when you are afflicted, pray; when joyful, sing psalms (James 5:13); when filled with assurance, then mourn and humble yourself (Ezekiel 16, last verse).

## A CHILD OF DARKNESS WALKING IN LIGHT



**I**saiah 50:11 — 'Behold, all you who kindle a fire, who encircle yourselves with firebrands, walk in the light of your fire and among the brands you have set ablaze. This you will have from My hand: you will lie down in torment.'

Let us now turn to the opposite condition — that of wicked people, who are described here as walking in the light of their own fire.

The main challenge is understanding what is meant by their own fire and by walking in its light — which is set in contrast to walking in darkness and trusting in the name of the Lord, that is, Christ's righteousness, as I explained earlier. To understand this, keep in mind that the author's aim is to contrast the different foundations for justification and comfort that a godly person has versus a natural, unregenerate person.

The support and comfort of a godly person's soul rests in the light of God's face — and when that is missing, he is in darkness, however many outward comforts he may have. The support, com-

fort, and foundation of his faith for justification — when he sees no righteousness in himself — is the name of the Lord Jesus Christ our righteousness.

By contrast, the fire and light of their fire in which wicked people are said to walk refers to two things.

First, their own natural righteousness — what they possess and produce by nature, in the state of nature — and the sparks and acts of it. This is what they trust in, while neglecting the name of the Lord, the righteousness of justification, and the righteousness of the new creature.

Second, the light of outward comforts from created things — the pleasures they enjoy in this world, sparkling and bright — which they walk in and are satisfied with, while neglecting communion with God, estranged from the life of God and living without Him in the world. The contrast in the text strongly implies that both of these are meant by their fire.

First, to understand how their own kindled fire refers to their own righteousness apart from Christ — the kind the Pharisees had, and Paul had before his conversion — we must note that the author, speaking to Jewish hearers, draws on the imagery of the Old Testament types with which they were familiar.

Fire, as they knew, was what sacrifices were offered with — symbolizing, as in Mark 9, the inward and habitual grace and righteousness by which we offer ourselves and our service as a living sacrifice to God (Romans 12:1).

When they offered incense or sacrifice acceptable to God, they were not to offer it with common fire — ordinary fire struck from stones by their own effort — but with fire from heaven, taken from

the altar (Leviticus 9:24). This fire was kept burning continuously, and when a new altar was made, fire came from heaven (2 Kings 7:3). The high priest was to take fire from the altar whenever he offered incense (Leviticus 16:12). When Nadab and Abihu offered common fire of their own kindling (Leviticus 10:1), they were destroyed for thinking to please God with it. All of these were types pointing to something greater. Correspondingly, fire of their own kindling refers to the common righteousness of moral uprightness and natural devotion — found even in the nature of some pagans (Romans 2:14) — which the Jewish people also practiced through the common aid of nature, custom, and upbringing, and through the force of natural conscience enlightened by the law and sharpened by self-interest. All of this, coming from unrenewed nature rather than from grace, is called fire of their own kindling — and yet they thought it pleased God and rested in it as an acceptable sacrifice, just as Nadab and Abihu did. The righteousness they should have offered God was the one from heaven — the righteousness of Christ received by faith, and a new work of grace — fire from that altar, Christ Himself, changing their hearts and making them new creatures, renewing them into the same image of holiness that was in Him. This differs from the goodness of nature you bring into the world, or which education has shaped in you, as much as the fire and light of the sun in heaven differs from ordinary fire — or the light of a firefly from the light of the sun.

Because the Jewish people rested in this outward conformity to the law produced by their own effort, they are said in Romans 10:3 to seek to establish their own righteousness, being ignorant of both of the true righteousnesses — Christ's righteousness, which is the fire from heaven, and the righteousness of regeneration that

changes their natures, which is the fire from the altar. Nicodemus was ignorant of both, and would have lain down in sorrow as his ancestors did, had not Christ changed him and born him again.

To develop this further: in human hearts — even stony ones toward God — there are still some sparks of fire that can be struck out by the Word, by education, by the awakening of conscience, and by appealing to self-interest. The sparks of this fire are those outward acts of righteousness that arise from self-love and natural conscience — which die like sparks and do not endure, unlike the true righteousness of regeneration (2 Corinthians 9; 1 John 2:16). And the light of this fire — in which unregenerate people satisfy themselves — is the self-justifying response of natural conscience when any outward act of moral behavior is performed, described in Romans 2:15.

Walking in the light of this fire means resting in it all their days — never striving to have their hearts changed, never seeking the new principle of grace and love toward God that flows from Christ as its source.

## USE



**U**se 1: Since so many offer only common fire to God, you should examine whether the righteousness you think pleases God is anything more than fire of your own kindling.

First, examine the source of the righteousness that is kindled in your heart and burns in your life. Was it kindled in you by fire from heaven — that is, by the Holy Spirit coming down through God's ordinances upon you like fire, burning up your lusts, breaking the power of sin, and kindling sparks of true love toward God and zeal for His glory, which are beyond the reach of natural human ability? Or is it nothing more than this: that since every person has some dormant sparks of honesty toward others, sobriety, and devotion to a deity buried in the ashes of corrupt nature — for even the pagans had the law written on their hearts (Romans 2:14) — these sparks, through living in a church context where moral uprightness and religion are professed, through decent upbringing, natural wisdom, and the prodding of conscience, have been fanned into some blaze of moral behavior and outward religious observance? Know that if there is no other principle and nothing more, it is only fire of your own kindling, and you will lie down in sorrow.

Second, examine what duties especially fuel and sustain that fire in you — in what duties is the righteousness you think pleases God mainly exercised? If they are principally duties toward other people — honest dealing and sobriety — and you bring in a stick or two from the first table, that is, some religious duties you cannot neglect without losing your reputation, such as attending public worship: this fuel, if there is nothing more, indicates only common fire. Look at the households of the pagans and you will find most of these practiced there; that you make these the heart of your religion suggests it is only fire kindled from those sparks buried in nature. Those common sparks present in every person's heart correspond especially to the second table of the commandments. But if it were fire from heaven, those duties would not be neglected — yet the chief heat of your heart would be directed toward the duties of heaven and the worship of God, public and private. There is a difference between practicing just enough righteousness to live in the world with some comfort and reputation — to be honest and sober and to attend God's ordinances as the situation demands — and a person whose zeal and intensity also reach toward duties the world does not value: mourning for sin, laboring over the heart in private between God and one's own soul, feeding on heavenly things and thoughts, maintaining a fire the world itself would quench. This second pattern is a sign of something more than common fire.

Third, in these duties, common fire warms only the outside — as the fire you use daily does — it does not heat you within. So common righteousness is satisfied with outward observance and a formal performance of public and private duties. But fire from heaven heats within first — it heats the heart — as at the hearing of

the Word: 'Were not our hearts burning within us?' So it heats the heart in prayer and makes a person fervent in spirit, serving the Lord.

Fourth, examine what drives and sustains that fire of righteousness in you — what motives lead you to do what you do. If worldly ends are what keep you from sin and motivate honest dealing — such as your reputation, fear of disgrace, the accusations of conscience alone, fear of hell, or hope of heaven — this is only common fire. But if love for God, consideration of His mercies, His eternal love, the love of Christ, and zeal for His glory are the bellows that fan the flame, the fire is heavenly. If when you ought to be stirred by such things they leave your heart cold, it is only common fire.

Use 2 is to guard against walking in the light of such fire — that is, resting in it for salvation and being satisfied with it, as most people in the world do and as the Jewish people in this text did — for you will lie down in sorrow if you do.

But you may say: we do not trust in our own righteousness, for we profess Christ and believe in Him, and this — added to what we already have — is enough.

My answer is: though you profess Christ, first — unless you have had a light that has shown you that all the righteousness you possess by nature and have developed through nature is a false righteousness, you still rest in your own and do not rely wholly on Christ. So in Philippians 3, Paul first counted everything a loss and rubbish, surrendering his own righteousness, in order to gain Christ — implying that there was no other way to have Him. People may seem to invoke Christ's title, as many add the king's title to a

property deed to secure it, while still holding on to and pleading their own claims. But you must surrender your own first and rely wholly on Christ, or He will not save you.

Second, someone who does not daily, above all things, directly and immediately aim at and pursue Christ's righteousness — making it the main focus of his thoughts, prayers, and efforts, and finding no rest without it — still rests in his own. For when Paul had given up his claim to his own righteousness, the thing he sought above all else was to be found in Christ (Philippians 3).

Third, you must also seek from Christ a new righteousness of sanctification. You will see that the common righteousness of nature and upbringing will not please Him, and Christ must be made sanctification to you (1 Corinthians 1:30) as well as righteousness. Nicodemus, though a moral person before, when he came to Christ found his old morality would not serve without being born again and becoming a new creature. So you must not think to supplement or add to Christ with fire of your own kindling — everything must come from the altar. Your moral virtues must be transformed into graces by receiving a new end — one that carries your heart, in all that you do, toward God.

The second meaning I add is that the fire of outward comforts is also intended. While people enjoy these, they go on happily, neglecting God, Christ, and communion with Him. But the soul of a believer who lacks communion with God is in darkness — and until he enjoys God again he can find comfort in nothing else. So in Ecclesiastes 7:6, the laughter of the wicked is compared to the crackling of thorns.

Fire is a useful element — it provides both warmth and light, which are remedies against cold and darkness, two of the greatest hardships the body faces.

Warmth is comforting. So in Isaiah 44:16, the prophet says: 'He warms himself and says, Aha! I am warm, I have seen the fire.'

Light is also comforting. As Solomon says, it is pleasant to see the sun. This is why fire here stands for outward comforts.

But what kind of fire is it? Only kitchen fire — what the philosopher calls earthly fire. For it is fire of their own kindling, as the text says — not the purest element of fire above. God is described as light and fire, and the saints enjoy Him, refreshed by His light and seeing light in it.

And the comparison in this sense holds well.

A burning fire has two components, both of which together are called fire.

First, fuel — such as wood or coals.

Second, the element of fire that feeds on the fuel.

Correspondingly, the earthly pleasures and satisfactions that wicked people enjoy and rest in have two matching elements.

First, the object — like the fuel — which consists of earthly and worldly things.

Second, their intense burning lusts, which feed on and live off this fuel. Both together make the fire spoken of here, and the comparison holds in many ways.

First, because the fuel of these fires — their lusts and pleasures — is base and earthly. What fuels a kitchen fire? Things dug from the earth: dung, wood, coal. In the same way, earthly things are the

fuel for their desires. Their lusts are therefore called 'the members of the earthly body' (Colossians 3:5), for all their pleasures consist of earthly things and their desires are set on them — beautiful spouses, children, houses, food and drink; their god is their belly and they set their minds on earthly things (Philippians 3:19).

Second, when the fuel is taken away the fire goes out — and so people's hearts die when outward things are taken from them. When Nabal realized David might come and seize his possessions, his heart died within him. People live in created things, and when those are gone they die.

Third, as fire consumes and leaves nothing but ashes (Hebrews 12, final verse), so do people's lusts (James 4:4). They ask in order to consume everything on their pleasures. All the gratification they obtain leaves nothing behind; none of the strength spent on it remains. They live for themselves, and with themselves everything dies.

Fourth, fire is voracious — a whole world would not satisfy it if left to burn on. And one day this whole world will be consumed by fire as a judgment on it for having enticed people. Just the same are people's desires for pleasure — never satisfied. The more fuel is added, the more can be added; they enlarge their desire like the fires of hell (Habakkuk 2:5).

Fifth, the pleasures that arise from lusts meeting their objects are only like sparks. Job calls sparks 'the sons of fire,' being generated when fire meets fuel. Pleasures are the offspring of your lusts when desire and its object come together. And they are short-lived

— they are only sparks, dying almost as soon as they are born (Colossians 2:22), perishing in the using; and like the crackling of thorns, they quickly go out.

Sixth, smoke accompanies such fires since the fuel is impure. So much sorrow accompanies their pleasures (Proverbs 14:13), and in the end it all goes out in smoke — as the text says: they will lie down in sorrow.

Put these two together then: the strange fire of their own righteousness — produced by and remaining in unchanged nature — and the kitchen fire of outward comforts. These are the two main things that keep all wicked people from Christ and from justification through Him.

For the covenant of grace contains two main promises.

First, that God Himself — who is the God of all comfort — will be an abundant reward (Genesis 17:1-2). By faith we receive Him as such and are separated from all other comforts in comparison with Him.

Second, that Jesus Christ His Son is made the Lord our righteousness (Jeremiah 23:6). Therefore before we receive Him as such, we must be emptied of all our own righteousness from nature, so that God and Christ might be all in all to us. This is why the first and chief work of grace consists in emptying the heart and bringing it to nothing — both in terms of its own righteousness, and also in regard to all outward comforts — so that no person may boast in His presence. Corresponding to these two promises, there are two main obstacles found in people by nature.

First, because in nature they find some sparks of moral goodness, they rest in them and mistake them for grace — and so neglect Christ.

Second, finding themselves also warmed in this world by many outward comforts and surrounded by sparks, they are satisfied with these. As long as that rich young man had righteousness of his own and possessions of his own, he cared nothing for Christ, for communion with Him, or for righteousness from Him. Very well, says Christ in effect: flatter yourselves with your own righteousness and warm yourselves with your own sparks and walk on. But know that you will lie down in sorrow when the godly rest peacefully in their beds (Isaiah 57:2). You will lie down bedridden in hell — like a woman in labor who will never rise again.

THE END.

## THANKS FOR READING



If you spotted a typo or have feedback, the email is **[sam@goodsoilapps.com](mailto:sam@goodsoilapps.com)** — or use the in-app feedback form in *Christian Reader*.