

EXPOSITION OF PSALM 130

JOHN OWEN



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ABOUT THIS BOOK



A rich Puritan commentary on Psalm 130, exploring the **nature of forgiveness** and the experience of a soul overwhelmed by guilt seeking relief in God's grace. Owen traces each verse with pastoral depth, examining the **depths of sin-entangled conscience**, the reality of divine pardon through Christ, and the soul's posture of **waiting, hoping, and fearing God**. Rooted in careful exegesis and practical divinity, this work addresses the inner life of believers who have known both the weight of sin and the freedom of gospel mercy.



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CONTENTS



Title Page	5
To the Reader	6
Imprimatur	10
Psalm 130	11
Verses 1-2	12
Verse 3 (Paraphrase)	13
Verse 4 (Paraphrase)	14
Verse 5 (Paraphrase)	15
Verse 6 (Paraphrase)	16
Verses 7-8 (Paraphrase)	17
General Scope of the Whole Psalm	18
Verse 3	62
Verse 4	93
Verses 5-6	410

TITLE PAGE



A Practical Exposition on the 130th Psalm. In this work, the nature of the forgiveness of sin is explained and its truth and reality are affirmed. The condition of a soul troubled by the guilt of sin, and brought to relief through a discovery of God's forgiveness, is discussed at length.

By John Owen, D.D.

John 5:39. Search the Scriptures.

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TO THE READER



Christian reader,

The following exposition and discourses are intended for the benefit of those whose spiritual condition is reflected in the Psalm explained here. Both Scripture and personal experience testify that this describes not just a few people, but many — in fact, all who believe will find themselves in some part of it. Some readers may look here to understand their own situation as it is described. My entire purpose has been to serve their faith, peace, and spiritual comfort. If they find any truth clearly revealed, any proper application of it to their conscience, or any faithful explanation of the Holy Spirit's meaning in Scripture that fits their condition and builds them up, then much of my goal has been accomplished. I know there are some who dislike discourses of this kind and look down on them with contempt. But I cannot see why they should, unless the Gospel itself and all its mysteries are foolishness to them. Sin and grace — in their original causes, their various dimensions, their results, and their purposes — are the central subjects of all Scripture, of the entire revelation of God's will to humanity. Our present and eternal wellbeing depends on these things, and through them God has designed the great and everlasting display of His own glory. All transactions between God and the

souls of men turn on these matters. Who could imagine it unnecessary or superfluous to inquire into God's will about these things, and into our own stake in them? There are two ways this inquiry can be made. First, speculatively — by carefully examining the nature of these things as their teaching is set out in Scripture. An endeavor of this kind, done according to the mind of God, is right and praiseworthy, and covers most of the chief topics of Christian doctrine. But it should not be pursued as an end in itself. The knowledge of God and spiritual things relates to practical disciplines in this way: the purpose of all its ideas and doctrines is found in practice. Therefore, second, these things must also be considered practically — that is, as they actually concern the souls and consciences of real people. How people accumulate the guilt of sin; what sense they have of it, and what sense they ought to have; what danger they face because of it; what anguish and distress it brings to their souls and consciences; what remedies they turn to for relief; and also what the grace of God is by which alone they can be delivered, what it consists of, how it was prepared, how it was purchased, how it is offered, and how it may be received — together with what effects and results follow from receiving it, and how faith, obedience to God, dependence on Him, submission to Him, and waiting for Him are to be exercised in all of this — this is the chief work of those called to preach the Gospel, to investigate for themselves and to make known to others. Rightly and faithfully handling these things — whether in writing or in preaching, with wisdom, diligence, and zeal — is where their greatest usefulness lies, for the glory of God and the eternal good of human souls. Those who suppose it is an easy and ordinary matter to address these practical things in a way that truly builds up believers are

greatly mistaken. Because the nature of these subjects, and the way they touch the souls and consciences of all kinds of people, require that they be handled plainly and without the mixture of secular learning or the ornaments of style that discourses on other topics may rightly include. Some people, judging only by outward appearance — especially those to whom the true nature of these subjects is hidden — are quick to despise and mock the plain handling of them, as though it showed no wisdom or learning worthy of respect. But it is impossible to overstate how great a mistake such people make, driven by their own spiritual blindness and ignorance. A true spiritual understanding, a real grasp and comprehension of sin and the grace of God, makes up the greatest part of that wisdom, that soundness of mind, that genuine knowledge which the Gospel commands, displays, and values. To reveal and declare these things to others in words of truth and clarity, fitted to express them to minds opened and enlightened by the same Spirit through whom they were originally revealed; to draw these sacred spiritual truths from Scripture and, through careful preparation, apply and communicate them to the souls and consciences of people — this contains a major part of the ministerial skill and ability required of Gospel ministers, and calls for rigorous exercise of solid learning, judgment, and care. It is into this treasury, for the service of God's house, that I have placed my small contribution in the following exposition and discourses on the 130th Psalm. The Holy Spirit's design in that Psalm was to express and represent, through the person and condition of the Psalmist, the experience of a soul caught up in and nearly overwhelmed by the guilt of sin, then brought to relief through a discovery of grace and forgiveness in God, along with how that soul then carries itself after receiving

that relief. After expounding the words of the text, my goal and effort has been simply to fill out the portrait the Psalm gives us of a believing soul in that condition — to make its lines more visible, and the marks of its description more readable. My aim has also been to give others who are in the same condition as the Psalmist a light by which to recognize themselves in that image and representation made of them in the person of another. To that end I have been led to expand on the two great themes of sin and grace — especially on the latter, here called the forgiveness that is with God. Having a share in this, being made a partaker of it, is our greatest concern in this life and the sole foundation of all our hopes for a blessed portion in the life to come. It therefore certainly calls for our best and fullest effort — to look into its nature, causes, and effects, and especially into the ways and means by which we may be made partakers of it, and how that participation may be secured to us for our peace and comfort, as well as into the love, holiness, obedience, and fruitfulness in good works that God requires of us on account of this grace. An explanation of these things is what I have designed to pursue in these discourses — always keeping one eye on the sole rule and standard of truth, the Holy Scriptures (especially the portion under particular consideration), and the other eye on the experience and edification of those who believe, whose spiritual benefit and growth, without any other consideration in the world, is the aim in publishing them.

IMPRIMATUR



October 12, 1668. Rob. Grove. R. P. Humph. Dom. Episc.
Lond. a sac. Dom.

PSALM 130



Out of the depths I have cried to You, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice; let Your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications. If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared. I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in His word I hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning — yes, more than those who watch for the morning. Let Israel hope in the Lord, for with the Lord there is mercy, and with Him is plentiful redemption. And He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.

VERSES 1-2



O Lord, through my many sins and offenses I have brought myself into great distress. My iniquities are always before me, and I am on the verge of being overwhelmed by them as by a flood of water — they have dragged me into the depths where I am nearly swallowed up. Yet even though my distress is great and confusing, I do not — I dare not — give up all hope of relief or recovery. Nor do I seek any other remedy or means of relief; I turn to You alone, Jehovah. In coming to You, the greatness and urgency of my trouble makes my soul urgent, earnest, and pressing in my supplications. While I have no rest, I can give You no rest — oh, therefore, attend and listen to the voice of my crying and prayers.

VERSE 3 (PARAPHRASE)



It is true, O Lord, You great and fearsome God, that if You were to deal with me in this condition — with any living person, with the best of Your saints — according to the strict and exact terms of the law, which first presents itself to my guilty conscience and troubled soul, and if You were to take note of, observe, and hold in remembrance my iniquity or theirs or the iniquity of any one person, in order to deal with them and repay them according to the law's verdict, then neither I nor they would have even the faintest expectation of deliverance. All flesh would fail before You, and the spirits You have made would fail as well, and that for eternity — for who could stand before You when You executed Your displeasure in that way?

VERSE 4 (PARAPHRASE)



But O Lord, this is not absolutely and universally the way things stand between Your majesty and poor sinners. You are infinitely good and gracious in Your nature, and freely and willingly inclined by Your purposes to receive them. A blessed way has been made for the exercise of Your holy inclinations and purposes toward sinners, through the mediation and blood of Your dear Son. Because of this, they have sure grounds to conclude and believe that there is pardon and forgiveness with You for them, and that they may receive it through the way You have appointed. This is the path I will persist in, together with all who fear You. I will not give up, leave You, or turn away from You because of my fears, discouragements, or despair. Instead, I will continue steadfastly in the worship You have appointed and the obedience You require — with great encouragement to do so.

VERSE 5 (PARAPHRASE)



And in this, on the basis of the forgiveness that is with You, O Lord, I wait with all patience, quietness, and perseverance. My whole soul is engaged in this work — in an earnest expectation of Your coming to me in grace and mercy. To encourage me in this, You have given me a blessed word of grace, a faithful promise, in which my hope is firmly fixed.

VERSE 6 (PARAPHRASE)



Yes, in carrying out and maintaining this duty, my soul is fixed on You, and in its whole disposition turned toward You. I watch with such diligence and alertness for every sign of Your appearing, Your self-revelation, and Your coming to me, that I surpass even those who watch with longing desire, careful attention, and earnest expectation for the morning light — whether they watch to be relieved from their night duties, or to have light for the acts of worship in the temple they love so dearly.

VERSES 7-8 (PARAPHRASE)



In this I have found such rest, peace, and satisfaction for my own soul that I cannot help but invite and encourage others in the same condition to take the same path. Let all the Israel of God — all who fear Him — learn this from me and from my experience. Do not be hasty in your distress; do not despair, do not give up hope, do not turn to other remedies. Instead, hope in the Lord — for I can now give special testimony that there is mercy with Him suited to your need. Whatever your distress may be, the redemption that is with Him is so abundant, plentiful, and beyond searching out, that if you persist in this duty the undoubted outcome will be that you are delivered from the guilt of all your sins and the anguish of all your troubles.

GENERAL SCOPE OF THE WHOLE PSALM



The Holy Spirit's design in this Psalm is to express, through the Psalmist's experience and the working of his faith, the condition of a soul deeply entangled within itself, brought to relief on the basis of grace, and then acting toward God and His people in a manner fitting to the discovery of that grace. It is a great design, full of rich instruction.

This general overview reveals the structure and scope of the entire Psalm. First, verses 1 and 2 present the state and condition of the soul, along with how it behaves within that condition: 'Out of the depths I have cried to You, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice; let Your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications.'

Second, verses 3 and 4 show his search for relief, and here two things present themselves to him. The first, which comes to mind immediately in his distress, he pushes away in verse 3: 'If You, Lord, should mark iniquity, O Lord, who could stand?'

The second he embraces and finds both relief and support in, in verse 4: 'But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared.'

Upon this discovery and his settling on that relief, the whole person acts in faith and conducts himself accordingly.

First, toward God, in verses 5 and 6: 'I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in His word I hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning — yes, more than those who watch for the morning.'

Second, toward the saints, in verses 7 and 8: 'Let Israel hope in the Lord, for with the Lord there is mercy, and with Him is plentiful redemption. And He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.'

Each of these parts, along with all they contain, must be opened one by one.

This overview also explains my purpose from these verses — namely, to describe the tangled distress that can come upon a gracious soul like the Psalmist's, along with the nature and proper workings of faith in such a condition, with the primary aim of showing what it is that gives a soul relief, support, and ultimately deliverance from that troubled state.

May the Lord in His mercy direct these reflections in such a way that both the writer and the readers may share in the benefit, relief, and comfort the Holy Spirit intended for His people in this Psalm.

The state and condition of the soul represented in the Psalm. The first two verses opened.

The state and condition of the soul represented here — as the foundation on which the Psalm builds, along with its behavior and the general working of its faith in that state — is expressed in the

first two verses: 'Out of the depths I have cried to You, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice; let Your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications.'

First, the present state of the soul under consideration is contained in the phrase 'out of the depths.'

Some of the ancient commentators, including Chrysostom, understood this expression as referring to the depths of the Psalmist's heart — not crying from the mouth or tongue only, but from the deepest recesses of the mind.

The word is indeed used to express the depths of human hearts, though in an entirely different sense, as in Psalm 64:6: 'The heart is deep.'

But the plain meaning of the text and the consistent use of the word do not support that interpretation. The Hebrew term, meaning 'depths' or 'deep places,' is commonly used for valleys or any deep place, but especially for deep waters. Valleys and deep places, because of their darkness and isolation, are associated with horror, helplessness, and trouble, as in Psalm 23:4: 'When I walk in the valley of the shadow of death' — that is, in the extreme of danger and trouble.

When this word is applied metaphorically to the condition of the human soul, it describes difficulties or pressures marked by fear, horror, danger, and trouble.

These depths are of two kinds.

First, there are providential depths — outward distresses, calamities, and afflictions, as in Psalm 69:1: 'Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my soul; I sink in deep mire where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood

sweeps over me.' This is the extreme of trouble that the Psalmist describes. He had been reduced to the condition of a man about to drown — cast into the bottom of deep, murky water with no firm footing and no ability to escape, as he further explains in verse 15.

Second, there are internal depths — depths of conscience because of sin, as in Psalm 88:6: 'You have put me in the depths of the pit, in the darkest places, in the deep places.' What the Psalmist means by this expression he explains in the following verse, verse 7: 'Your wrath lies hard upon me.' The sense of God's wrath on his conscience because of sin was the deep he had been cast into. So again in verse 15, speaking of the same matter, he says: 'I suffer Your terrors,' and in verse 16: 'Your fierce wrath sweeps over me.' He calls these things water, waves, and deeps, following the same metaphor.

These internal depths are what is chiefly intended here. Augustine on this passage writes: 'He cries out under the weight and waves of his iniquities.' He cries out under the burden and flood of his sins.

The rest of the Psalm makes this clear. Desiring to be delivered from these depths out of which he cried, the Psalmist deals with God entirely on the basis of mercy and forgiveness — and it is sin alone from which forgiveness is a deliverance. The teaching he proclaims when he is delivered is also about mercy, grace, and redemption, as the close of the Psalm shows. And what brings us deliverance is most on our hearts when we are delivered.

It is true that these two kinds of depths often come together, as David says: 'Deep calls to deep' (Psalm 42:7). The depths of affliction stir the conscience to a deep sense of sin. But sin is the dis-

ease; affliction is only a symptom of it. In treating a cure, the disease itself must be the primary concern — the symptom will either follow in healing or depart on its own.

Many interpreters believe this was David's condition here — that great trouble and distress made him deeply aware of sin. We should not entirely pass over that meaning, even as we focus primarily on what the Psalmist himself chiefly had in mind as he addressed God.

This in general is the state and condition of the soul dealt with in this Psalm, and it serves as the key to the entire discourse — the hinge on which everything turns. As it relates to my purpose from this Psalm, what arises from it can be summed up in two propositions. First, gracious souls, even after much communion with God, may be brought into inescapable depths and entanglements because of sin — for this is exactly the condition the Psalmist describes as his own, and he was such a soul. Second, the inner root of outward distress must be the primary concern in all pressing trials: in affliction, that root is sin.

Gracious souls may be brought into depths because of sin. What those depths are.

Before I proceed further in unpacking the words — since all of them bear on the first proposition — I will explain and confirm the truth it contains, so that what is being said, and what is being affirmed throughout this discourse, may be clearly understood.

This is a sobering truth to set before us. Whoever hears it ought to tremble within himself, so that he may have rest in the day of trouble. It reflects the apostle's counsel in Romans 11:20: 'Do not be conceited, but fear,' and also in 1 Corinthians 10:12: 'Let

him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.' When Peter had learned this truth through painful experience, after all his boldness and eagerness, he urged all the saints to pass the time of their earthly life in reverent fear (1 Peter 1:17), knowing how close evil and danger may lurk even in our greatest seasons of peace and calm.

A few examples from the many on record that illustrate this truth may be mentioned. Genesis 6:9 tells us that Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation, and that Noah walked with God. He did so for a long time, and in an evil time, surrounded by every kind of temptation — for all flesh had corrupted its way on the earth (verse 12). This gave his obedience a special distinction, and his communion with God as he walked before Him must have been deeply sweet and precious. He was a gracious soul, attested by God himself twice over. But we know what happened to this holy man. Anyone who reads the account in Genesis 9:21 will readily grant that he was brought into inescapable distress because of sin. His own drunkenness (verse 21), along with its result, became the occasion for the unnatural act of his son (verse 22), which then led him to pronounce a curse on that son and his descendants (verses 24-25). All of this, together with the awareness of God's just displeasure — coming so soon after that tremendous miraculous deliverance — must have overwhelmed him with grief and deep anguish of spirit.

The case is even clearer with David. Under the Old Testament no one loved God more than he did, and no one was loved by God more than he was. The paths of faith and love in which he walked are, for most of us, like the way of an eagle in the sky — too high and too difficult for us to follow. Yet to this day the cries of this

man after God's own heart still ring in our ears. Sometimes he speaks of broken bones, sometimes of drowning depths, sometimes of waves and waterspouts, sometimes of wounds and diseases, sometimes of wrath and the sorrows of hell, and everywhere of his sins and the burden and trouble they brought. We all know something of the occasions that led to his depths, his darkness, his entanglements, and his distresses. As no one had more grace than he, so no one is a greater example of the power of sin and the effects of its guilt on the conscience than he. But examples of this kind are obvious and come readily to mind, so they need not be repeated. I will therefore show,

First, what specifically is meant by the depths and entanglements caused by sin into which gracious souls, even after much communion with God, may be cast.

Second, why it is that they may fall into such a condition, and why they often actually do.

For the first question, some or all of the following things contribute to the depths described here.

First, the loss of the familiar sense of God's love that the soul previously enjoyed. There are two kinds of awareness of God's love that believers in this life may experience. There is the passing, overwhelming work of the Holy Spirit on the heart, filling it with unspeakable, glorious joy in the apprehension of God's love and the believer's relationship to Him in Christ. This, or its immediate effect, is called 'joy inexpressible and full of glory' (1 Peter 1:8). When the Holy Spirit shines into the heart with clear evidence of the soul's participation in all Gospel mercies, it causes the soul to leap with joy, to exult and triumph in the Lord — being carried for

a season above all awareness of sin, self, temptation, or trouble. But just as God provides the bread of His house for all His children, He reserves these delights and powerful restorations only for the seasons and persons in which and to whom He knows they are needed and useful. Believers may be without this kind of sense of love and yet not be in any depths at all. A man can be strong and healthy on wholesome food without ever drinking spirits and cordials.

There is also a settled, abiding sense of God's love in the hearts of most of those we are speaking of — people who have had long communion with God — consisting in a prevailing Gospel persuasion that they are accepted by God in Christ. Romans 5:1: 'Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God.' I call it a prevailing persuasion to indicate both the opposition made to it by Satan and unbelief, and its power in overcoming that opposition. This is the root from which all the peace and ordinary comfort that believers experience in this world springs and grows. It is what quickens and enlivens them for duty (Psalm 116:12-13), and it is the salt that makes their worship and service pleasing to God and refreshing to themselves. It sustains them under trials and gives them peace, hope, and comfort in life and in death. Psalm 23:4: 'Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me.' A sense of God's presence in love is sufficient to rebuke all anxiety and fear in the worst and most dreadful circumstances. Not only that, but it gives solid comfort and joy even in the midst of them. So the prophet expresses it in Habakkuk 3:17-18: 'Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no food; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be

no herd in the stalls — yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.' This is the sense of love that mature believers may lose because of sin. This is one step into their depths. They will no longer retain any such Gospel apprehension of God's love as gives them rest, peace, or comfort, or that influences their souls with delight in duty or support under trial. This will be more fully explained later.

Second, painful thoughts about their great and wretched unkindness toward God are another part of the depths experienced by sin-entangled souls. David describes this in Psalm 77:3: 'I remembered God,' he says, 'and was troubled.' How could the remembrance of God be a source of trouble to him? In other places he says it was his only relief and support. What made it now an occasion of trouble? Things had not been well between God and him, and whereas before, when he remembered God his thoughts were chiefly occupied with God's love and kindness, now they were entirely dominated by his own sin and unkindness. This caused his trouble. In this lies a share of the entanglement that sin brings. Such a soul says to itself: 'Foolish creature, is this how you have repaid the Lord? Is this the return you have made to Him for all His love, His kindness, His comforts, His mercies? Is this your friendship toward Him? Is this the loyalty you boasted of — that you had found such goodness and excellence in Him and His love that though all men should forsake Him, you never would? Have all your promises, all your commitments made to God in times of distress, under strong obligations and mighty impressions of His good Spirit on your soul, come to this — that you should so foolishly forget, neglect, despise, and abandon Him? Now He is gone; He has withdrawn from you. What will you do? Are you not even

ashamed to ask Him to return?' Such thoughts cut Peter to the heart after his fall. The soul finds them cruel as death and strong as the grave. It is bound in their chains and cannot be comforted (Psalm 38:3-6). A great part of the depths we are examining consists in this. For this line of thinking stirs up and sharpens every grieving, constricting, distressing emotion — sorrow and shame, along with self-reproach and the desire to punish oneself that accompanies them. And because the reason and the object of these emotions in this case surpass all other occasions for them, on no other account do they produce such severe and painful self-reflection.

Third, a revived sense of justly deserved wrath also belongs to these depths. This is like the opening of old wounds. When people have passed through a sense of wrath and found rest and deliverance through the blood of Christ, to return to those old thoughts again — to be dealing afresh with hell, curse, law, and wrath — is a depth indeed. This often happens to gracious souls because of sin, as in Psalm 88:7: 'Your wrath lies hard upon me,' says Heman. It pressed and crushed him heavily. There is a kind of self-judgment about deserving wrath that can coexist with a comforting assurance of one's interest in Christ — the soul finds sweetness in this, as it serves to magnify grace. But in this case the soul is left under the weight of it without any such relief. It plunges itself into the curse of the law and the flames of hell with no encouraging support from the blood of Christ. This is walking in the valley of the shadow of death. The soul converses with death and all that seems to lead toward it. The Lord also, to increase its perplexity, breathes

new life into the law — gives it a fresh commission, as it were, to take such a person into custody — and the law will never in this life fail to do its duty.

Fourth, oppressive fears of God's temporal judgments also contribute to these depths, for God does judge His people, and judgment often begins at the house of God. Such a person may say: 'Though God should not cast me off forever, though He should pardon my iniquities, yet He may take vengeance on my offenses in such a way as to make me feed on bitterness and wormwood all my days.' As David says in Psalm 119:120: 'My flesh trembles in fear of You, and I am afraid of Your judgments.' Such a person does not know what the great God may bring upon him, and being filled with a sense of the guilt of sin — which underlies this entire condition — every judgment of God fills him with dread. Sometimes he thinks God may expose the filth of his heart and make him a scandal and a reproach in the world, as in Psalm 39:8: 'Oh, make me not the reproach of the foolish.' Sometimes he trembles for fear that God will strike him suddenly with some notable judgment and take him out of the world in darkness and sorrow — so David says, 'Do not take me away in Your wrath.' Sometimes he fears he will be like Jonah, stirring up a storm in his family, in the church of which he is a member, or in the whole nation. 'Let them not be ashamed for my sake.' These things, as Job says, make his heart soft and melt within him. When any affliction or public judgment from God is fastened to a sharp and living sense of sin in the conscience, it overwhelms the soul — whether the judgment is only justly feared or has actually come, as was the case with Joseph's brothers in Egypt. The soul is then tossed from one depth to another: a sense of sin drives it to think about its affliction, and the

affliction drives it back to a sense of sin. So deep calls to deep, and all God's waves go over the soul. Each makes the soul more tender and sharpens its sensitivity to the other. Affliction softens the soul, so that the sense of sin cuts deeper and makes larger wounds; and the sense of sin weakens the soul so that affliction weighs more heavily and increases its burden. In this condition, an affliction that a person in his normal state of spiritual peace could have embraced as a sweet token of God's love becomes instead like goads and thorns in his side, robbing him of all rest and quiet. God makes it, as thorns and briars, the instrument by which He teaches stubborn souls their duty, just as Gideon did to the men of Succoth.

Fifth, there may also be added to these, prevailing fears — for a season — of being utterly rejected by God and found to be a reprobate on the last day. Jonah seems to reach this conclusion in chapter 2, verse 4: 'Then I said, I am cast out of Your sight' — I am lost forever; God will own me no more. Similarly, Heman in Psalm 88:4-5: 'I am counted with those who go down to the pit; I am like a man who has no strength, set apart among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, whom You remember no more, and who are cut off from Your hand.' This can press the soul until the sorrows of hell surround and seize it, until it is stripped of comfort, peace, and rest, until it becomes a terror to itself and would rather die than continue living. This can happen to a gracious soul because of sin. Yet because this directly assaults the life of faith, God does not — except in extraordinary cases — allow any of His people to remain long in this horrible pit where there is no water, no re-

freshment. Still, it often happens that even the saints are left for a season to a fearful expectation of judgment and fiery indignation, as the dominant feeling of their minds. And,

Sixth, God secretly sends His arrows into the soul, wounding and distressing it, adding pain, trouble, and restlessness to its desolation. Psalm 38:2: 'Your arrows have sunk into me, and Your hand has pressed down hard on me.' Again and again in his walk, God would shoot a sharp, piercing arrow and fix it in his soul, stinging, wounding, and confusing him, filling him with pain and severe affliction. These arrows are God's rebukes, as in Psalm 39:11: 'When You discipline a man with rebukes for sin.' God speaks in His word, and by His Spirit in the conscience, words sharp and bitter to the soul, fixing them so that the soul cannot shake them loose. Job mourns this grievously in chapter 6, verse 4. God speaks with such power that His words pierce the heart straight through. What the result then is, David declares in Psalm 38:3: 'There is no soundness in my flesh because of Your anger, nor any rest in my bones because of my sin.' The whole person comes under the force of these arrows, and all health and rest are taken away. And,

Seventh, spiritual weakness and an inability to perform one's duty — whether in doing or in suffering — attend such a condition. Psalm 40:12: 'My iniquities have overtaken me, and I am not able to look up.' His spiritual strength had been worn down by sin so that he could not even approach God. Such a soul cannot pray with life and power, cannot hear with joy and profit, cannot give freely and cheerfully, cannot meditate with delight and heavenly focus,

cannot act for God with zeal and freedom, cannot think of suffering with courage and resolve — but is instead sick, weak, feeble, and bowed down.

Now, I say, a gracious soul after much communion with God may — because of sin and the sense of its guilt — be brought into a state and condition where some, or more, or all of these and similar distresses become its portion. These make up the depths of which the Psalmist here complains. What specific sins, or what kinds of sins, ordinarily cast the souls of believers into these depths will be explained later. For now I will show both why believers may fall into such a condition, and also why they often actually do.

Why believers may be brought into depths because of sin. The nature of the provisions of grace given in the covenant. How far they extend. The principles of the power of sin.

First, the very nature of the covenant in which all believers now walk with God — and in which all their provision for obedience is contained — leaves open the possibility of their falling into the depths that have been described. Under the first covenant, no mercy or forgiveness was provided for any sin. It was therefore necessary that it supply sufficient grace to preserve from every sin, or it could have served no purpose at all. God's righteousness required this, and so it was. To have made a covenant that provided no pardon at all, and yet no sufficient grace to keep the covenant-makers from needing pardon, would not have been consistent with God's goodness and righteousness. But He made man upright, and man on his own accord sought out many inventions.

It is not so in the covenant of grace. In that covenant, pardon is provided through the blood of Christ. It is therefore not absolutely necessary that grace effectually preserving from every sin be administered in it. Yet the covenant of grace is on every account to be preferred over the first covenant. For beyond the relief of pardon — which the first covenant knew nothing of — it also contains much provision against sin that was not found in the other.

First, the covenant of grace provides absolutely against every sin that would cancel the covenant and bring about a final separation between God and a soul that has once been taken into it. This provision is unconditional. God has taken upon Himself the responsibility of making it good and establishing this law of the covenant — that it will not be canceled by any sin. Jeremiah 32:40: 'I will make an everlasting covenant with them,' says God, 'that I will not turn away from doing good to them, and I will put the fear of Me in their hearts, so that they will not turn away from Me.' The security of this depends on nothing in ourselves. All that is in us is to be used as a means toward the fulfillment of this promise, but the outcome depends entirely on the faithfulness of God. The whole certainty and stability of the covenant rests on the efficacy of the grace administered in it, which preserves people from all such sins as would cancel it.

Second, this covenant provides for constant peace and comfort, in spite of and against the guilt of those sins that believers, through weakness and temptation, fall into daily. Though they fall into sins every day, they do not fall into depths every day. Within the terms of this covenant, there is a consistency between a sense of sin that leads to humiliation and a peace accompanied by strong consolation. After the apostle had described the entire conflict be-

lievers have with sin, and the frequent wounds they receive from it — which makes them cry out for deliverance (Romans 7:24) — he still concludes in chapter 8, verse 1 that there is no condemnation for them, which is a sufficient and stable foundation for peace. So also 1 John 2:1: 'These things I have written to you so that you may not sin; and if anyone does sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.' Our great aim and care should be not to sin, but when we have done our best, if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves (chapter 1, verse 8). What then should poor, sinful, guilty people do? Let them go to the Father through their Advocate, and they will not fail to find pardon and peace. As Paul says in Hebrews 6:17-18, God is abundantly willing that we who have fled for refuge to take hold of the hope set before us should have strong consolation. What was the condition of the one who in ancient times fled to a city of refuge for safety — from which this expression is taken? He was guilty of bloodshed, though unintentional, and would have died if he had not escaped to the city of refuge. Even though we may carry the guilt of sins that the law pronounces death for, yet by fleeing to Christ for refuge, God has provided not only safety but strong consolation as well. Forgiveness in the blood of Christ does not only remove guilt from the soul — it removes trouble from the conscience. The apostle develops this at length when setting out the excellence of Christ's sacrifice in Hebrews 10. He tells us that the sacrifices of the old law could not perfect the worshippers (verse 1), and he proves this in verse 2 because they never thoroughly and truly removed consciousness of sin — that is, the depths and distresses of conscience about sin. But now, he says, Jesus Christ in the covenant of grace has forever perfected those who are sanctified (verse 14), providing

for them such stable peace and consolation that they have no need for sacrifices to be renewed every day (verse 18). This is the great mystery of the Gospel in the blood of Christ — that those who sin every day should have peace with God all their days. This holds true provided their sins fall within the category of those weaknesses against which this consolation is provided.

Third, the covenant provides grace to prevent and preserve the soul from great and serious sins — the kind that by their very nature tend to wound the conscience and cast the person into such depths and entanglements where he finds neither rest nor peace. What kinds of sins these are will be explained later. In this covenant there is grace upon grace (John 1:16), and abundant grace administered from the inexhaustible fullness of Christ. Grace reigns in it (Romans 6:6), destroying and crucifying the body of sin.

But this provision in the covenant of grace against peace-destroying, soul-entangling sins is not, in its actual administration, unconditional. There are covenant commands and exhortations, and it is on faithful attention to these that much of the grace administered in the covenant depends. We are everywhere instructed to watch, pray, exercise faith, stand on constant guard, put sin to death, and resist temptation with steadfastness, diligence, and perseverance — and all of this is directed toward securing the grace described. These things are, on our part, the condition for the administration of that abundant grace which preserves us from soul-entangling sins. Peter informs us of this in 2 Peter 1:3: the divine power of God has given us everything that pertains to life and godliness. We have from it a continual supply and provision for obedience at all times. He also says in verse 4 that He has given us great

and precious promises, so that through them we might become partakers of the divine nature. What then is required of us in this blessed state, so that we may make proper use of the provision made for us and enjoy the encouraging influence of those promises? He prescribes it in verses 5-7: 'Giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, and to virtue knowledge, and to knowledge self-control, and to self-control perseverance, and to perseverance godliness, and to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love' — that is, carefully and diligently attend to the exercise of all the graces of the Spirit and to a way of life in everything consistent with the Gospel. What will be the result if these things are attended to? Verse 8: 'If these things are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.' It is not enough that these things exist in you — that you have the seed and root of them from the Holy Spirit. You must take care that they grow and abound, for without that, though the root of the matter may be in you and you are not entirely without spiritual life, you will be poor, barren, withered, and fruitless creatures all your days. But suppose these things do abound and make you fruitful — then, says verse 10, 'if you practice these things, you will never stumble.' Never stumble into sin? No, that is not what the promise says, and one who claims, after doing everything, to have no sin is a liar. Or does it mean never completely fall away from God? No, the preservation of the elect from total apostasy is not suspended on such conditions, especially not on the degree of growth implied by 'abounding.' Rather, it means they will not fall back into their old sins from which they were cleansed (verse 9) — the conscience-wasting and defiling sins in which they lived during their unregenerate state. So while the

covenant of grace through Jesus Christ does provide abundant supplies for the soul's preservation from entangling sins, the actual administration of those supplies takes into account our diligent use of the means He has appointed for us to walk in.

Here is the breadth of the new covenant. Here is where renewed free will is exercised. This is the field of willing, voluntary obedience under the administration of Gospel grace. There are two extremes that, regarding their outcome, the covenant is not concerned with. Complete sinless perfection — freedom from every sin, every failure, every weakness — is neither provided for nor promised in this covenant. It is a covenant of mercy and pardon, which presupposes the continuation of sin. Total and final falling away from God is absolutely prevented. Between these two extremes — absolute perfection and total apostasy — lies the wide field of the believer's obedience and walk with God. There are many sweet, heavenly passages in this field, and many dangerous depths. Some walk near to one extreme, some near the other. Indeed, the same person may sometimes press hard after perfection and at other times be cast very close to the edge of destruction. Between these two extremes lie many soul-plunging sins against which no absolute provision is made, and into which believers are sometimes overtaken for lack of giving all diligence to use the means of preservation.

Fourth, the covenant of grace provides no ordinary, settled consolation for those under the guilt of great sins — or sins greatly aggravated — which they fall into by neglecting the conditions of growing actual grace described above. There are sins which, either because they naturally wound and waste the conscience, or because in their effects they break out into scandal (causing the name

of God and the Gospel to be spoken of with contempt), or because of circumstances that make them especially unkind toward God, deprive the soul of its accustomed comfort. I will not now explain how and on what grounds such sins terrify the conscience, break the bones, darken the soul, and cast it into inescapable depths despite the relief provided through pardon in the blood of Christ. That they do so, and that consolation is not as wide in scope as safety, we know. On this basis God presents it as an act of pure sovereign grace to speak peace and refreshment to the souls of His people in their depths of sin-entanglement (Isaiah 57:18-19). And indeed, if the Lord had not so arranged things that serious provocations require special reliefs, it might justly be feared that the carelessness of believers could produce much bitter fruit.

One thing must be noted here in passing: what has been said relates to the experience of sinners in their own souls, not to the nature of the thing itself. In the Gospel, consolation is provided for the greatest sins as well as the smallest. The difference arises from God's sovereign administration of it, according to the terms of the covenant we have described. Under Moses's law there was an exception for certain sins for which no sacrifice was appointed, so that those who were guilty of them could not be justified from them — that is, ceremonially, as to their standing in the Jewish church and nation. So Paul tells the Jews in Acts 13:38-39 that through Jesus Christ the forgiveness of sins was being proclaimed to them, and that through Him everyone who believes is justified from everything from which they could not be justified by the law of Moses. There is now no exception of any particular sins when it

comes to pardon and peace. What we have said relates only to the manner and way in which God is pleased to administer consolation to the souls of sinning believers.

This is the evidence I offer to show that the souls of believers, even after much gracious communion with God, may still fall into inescapable depths because of sin. Why they actually and often do so will be explained further.

The principles underlying this are well known, so I will only briefly touch on them.

First, reflecting a little on the nature of indwelling sin as it remains in even the best of the saints in this life will show us why they are sometimes surprised and plunged into the depths described. For,

First, though the strength of every sin is weakened by grace, the root of no sin is fully removed in this life. Indwelling desires are like the stubborn Canaanites who, after the general conquest of the land, refused to leave and continued to dwell there (Judges 1:27). When Israel grew stronger they brought them under tribute, but they could not completely drive them out. Sovereignty belongs to grace, and when it grows strong it brings sin largely under control, but sin will not be entirely expelled. The body of death is not to be done away with except through and by the death of the body. In the flesh of even the best saints there dwells nothing good (Romans 7:18) — but the contrary is there, and that is the root of all evil. The flesh desires against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh (Galatians 5:17). Therefore, just as the Spirit's actions are universal in opposing all evil, so also the flesh's actions are universal in promoting it.

Second, certain desires or branches of original corruption gain such advantages in some people — through natural temperament, habit, occupation, social environment, or similar circumstances — that they become like Canaanites who had iron chariots: they are extremely difficult to subdue. It is a victory simply to maintain constant war against them, for they will almost always be in active rebellion.

Third, indwelling sin, though weakened, retains all its properties, since the properties of a thing follow its nature. Where the nature of something is, all its natural properties are as well. What these properties of indwelling sin are, I should explain here, but I have dealt with the whole power, efficacy, nature, and properties of indwelling sin in a treatise written for that purpose alone. In short, these properties are such that it is no wonder some believers are cast into depths by them — the wonder is rather that any escape. The reader may find my full discussion of this in that work.

Second, add to this the power and prevalence of temptation, which because I have also already addressed in a special discourse written for that purpose, I will not develop further here.

Third, the sovereign will of God in dealing with sinning saints must also be considered. Divine love and wisdom do not work toward all people in the same way. God is pleased to continue peace to some, even over and above great provocations. His love will humble them, and gentle rebukes will recover them from their wandering. Others He is pleased to bring into the depths we have been describing. But in general I may say that serious provocations meet with one of two outcomes from God.

First, those in whom such sins are found are left to a notable barrenness and fruitlessness in their lives — they wither, grow worldly, dry, and are much cast out of the affections of God's people. Or second, they are brought into these depths, and the way of their deliverance is laid out in this Psalm. So I say that God deals with His saints in great variety. Some have all their bones broken while others receive only gentle strokes of the rod. We are in the hands of mercy, and He may deal with us as seems good to Him. But for our part, great sins ought to be accompanied by an expectation of great depths and perplexities.

This is the state of the soul set forth in this Psalm and presented here for our consideration. These are the depths in which it is entangled, and these are the ways and means by which it is brought into them. How the soul conducts itself in and under this state and condition comes next in our study. But before I proceed to that, I will add a few things to what has been said, to further open the whole case before us. These are: first, what kinds of sins typically cast believers into these depths; and second, some observations on the aggravations of those sins.

What sins usually bring believers into great spiritual distress. Aggravations of those sins.

First, sins that by their very nature destroy the conscience belong to this category — sins that rise up in opposition to everything of God that is within us, including the light of both grace and nature. Such were the sins that cast David into his depths. Such are the sins listed in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10: 'Do not be deceived,' says the apostle, 'neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the

kingdom of God.' It is certain that believers may fall into some of the sins named here; some have done so, as the record shows. The apostle does not say that those who have committed any of these sins will not inherit the kingdom of God, but those who live in these — or any of these — sins, or others like them. There is no provision of mercy for those who habitually live in such sins. These and similar sins are, by their very nature — even apart from aggravating circumstances (which in a believer they in reality never are without) — able to plunge a soul into depths. These sins cut the locks of people's spiritual strength, and it is futile for them to say, 'I will go out and act as I did before.' Bones cannot be broken without pain, and great sins cannot come upon the conscience without trouble. But I need not labor this point. Some say these sins deprive even true believers of all their interest in the love of God, but that goes too far. All agree that they rob them of all comforting evidence and well-grounded assurance of it. They did so to David and to Peter, and in this lies no small part of the depths we are searching into.

Second, there are sins which, though they do not rise in the conscience with such a bloody guilt as those described, yet because of certain circumstances and aggravations, God takes them so unkindly that they become a root of unrest and trouble for the soul for the rest of its days. To some sins of ungodly people He says: 'As I live, this iniquity will not be forgiven you until you die — if you have come to this height, you will not escape; I will not spare you.' And there are offenses in His own people which may be so surrounded by aggravating circumstances that He will not let them pass without first casting the person into depths and making them cry out for deliverance. Let us consider some of them.

First, failures under exceptional expressions of God's love and kindness are of this kind. When God has given someone a clear and expressive manifestation of His love — convincing him of it, making him say in the innermost part of his heart, 'This is undeserved love and kindness' — and that person then becomes careless in his walk with God, there is an unkindness in it that will not be forgotten. It is noted of Solomon's failures that he fell into them after God had appeared to him twice. All sins committed under or after special mercies will sooner or later meet with special rebukes. Nothing distresses a sinner's conscience more than the memory of abused light in times of darkness, or of neglected love in times of desertion. God will make them feel this. 'Though I have redeemed them,' says God, 'yet they have spoken lies against Me' (Hosea 7:15). So also in Hosea 13:4-7. When God has dealt graciously with a person in His providence — perhaps delivered him from trouble and set him in a large place, anticipated him with many fruits and effects of His goodness, blessed him in his person, relationships, and work, and dealt well with his soul by giving him a gracious sense of His love in Christ — for such a person to fall into sinful failure goes to the heart of God and will not be passed over. Devaluing God's love is a great offense. 'Has Nabal repaid my kindness like this?' says David; 'I cannot bear it.' And the clearer one's convictions have been in this regard, the more severe their self-reproach will be.

Second, sins committed in or after great afflictions are also of this kind. God does not afflict willingly or discipline us merely for His own pleasure — He does it to make us partakers of His holiness. To take so little notice of His hand in it that, even under or after the affliction, one fails to watch against the workings and sur-

prises of sin — this carries unkindness with it. 'I struck him,' says God, 'and he went on stubbornly in the way of his own heart.' He cannot bear these offenses from His sons and daughters. Has God brought you into the furnace, so that you melted under His hand, and in pity and compassion He gave you enlargement? If you have quickly forgotten how He dealt with you, is it any wonder if He reminds you again through trouble in your soul?

Third, pulling back from strong convictions and early stirrings of love before conversion is often remembered against the conscience afterward. When the Lord by His Spirit powerfully convicts the heart of sin and at the same time gives some glimpse of His love and the excellencies of Christ — so that the heart begins to yield and nearly surrenders, being almost persuaded to become a Christian — if through the strength of desire or unbelief it then goes back to the world or to self-righteousness, that foolishness carries an unkindness that is sometimes not passed over. God can, and often does, exercise the greatness of His power to recover such a soul. But He will deal with that person about this contempt of His love and the excellency of His Son, even as those things were revealed to him in the first stirrings.

Fourth, sudden forgetfulness of tender expressions of God's special love is another such occasion. God cautions His people against this, knowing their tendency toward it. Psalm 85:8: 'God the Lord will speak peace to His people and to His saints, but let them not turn back to folly.' Let them be on guard against their readiness to forget tender expressions of special love. When God at any time draws near to a soul by His Spirit, in His word, with gracious words of peace and love — giving a sense of His kindness upon the heart through the Holy Spirit, so that it is filled with in-

expressible and glorious joy — and then that soul, through a temptation, a distraction, or simple carelessness and neglect (which often happens), allows this sense of love to be as it were erased, losing the motivating power for obedience that accompanied it — this also is full of unkindness. We have an account of this in Song of Solomon 5:1-6. In the first verse the Lord Jesus draws near with full Gospel mercies for His beloved: 'I have come to you, O my sister; I have brought myrrh and spice, honey and wine with me' — that is, whatever is spiritually sweet and delightful: mercy, grace, peace, comfort, joy, and assurance are all ready for you. In verse 2, the bride in her drowsy, indifferent state takes little notice of this gracious visit. She is diverted by other matters and cannot attend fully and wholeheartedly to the blessed communion being offered to her, and makes excuses as though otherwise engaged. But what is the result? Christ withdraws, leaves her in the dark in the midst of many consolations stripped from her, and it is a long time before she finds any recovery.

Fifth, great opportunities for service neglected, and great gifts not used, are often the occasion of plunging the soul into deep distress. Gifts are given to trade with for God. Opportunities are the market days for that trade. To hide the one away and let the other slip will end in trouble and desolation. Restlessness and perplexity of heart are worms that will surely breed in the rust of gifts that go unexercised. God loses a revenue of glory and honor through such slothful souls, and He will make them feel it. I know some today who are nearly sinking into the grave because of opportunities for service they have let pass.

Sixth, sins committed after specific warnings typically lead to this outcome. Of all the various specific warnings God uses toward sinning saints, I will single out just one. When a soul is wrestling with some desire or temptation, God in His providence causes some particular word — in the preaching of the Gospel or the administration of one of its ordinances — that is specially suited to the state and condition of that soul, whether through rebuke or persuasion, to come close and enter the innermost parts of the heart. The soul cannot help but notice that God is near, that He is dealing with it and calling it to look to Him for help. And He rarely gives such warnings to His people without being especially near to give them relief and help if they respond to His call. But if His care and kindness in this are neglected, the rebukes that follow are usually more severe.

Seventh, sins that bring scandal seldom allow the soul to escape depths. Even in cases of great sin, God in His discipline often focuses more on the scandal than on the sin itself, as in 2 Samuel 12:14. Many professing Christians take little notice of their worldliness, their pride, their anger, or their careless speech — but the world does notice, and the Gospel is damaged by it. It is no wonder if they themselves eventually experience bitter fruit from these things at the Lord's hand.

There are many other aggravating circumstances of sin which elevate offenses that are not in themselves so dreadful in nature into a guilt that plunges the soul into depths. The examples given may serve as sufficient illustrations. That is all we have aimed at, so I will not expand further on each category.

Some thoughts on the aggravations of the guilt of these sins — those that typically bring the soul into the condition described above — will bring this part of the discussion to a close.

First, the soul is furnished with a principle of grace that is continuously active and working for its preservation from such sins.

The new nature is living and active for its own growth, increase, and security, according to the terms of the covenant of grace (Galatians 5:17) — it desires against the flesh. It naturally works toward its own preservation and growth, just as newborn children have a natural inclination toward the food that will keep them alive and cause them to grow (1 Peter 2:2). A soul, therefore, cannot fall into these entangling sins without a high degree of neglect toward the very principle that was placed within it for completely opposite ends. The strivings, desires, cries, and longings of that principle are ignored. It is from God and of God, and is the renewal of His image in us — something God owns and cares for. Wounding its vitals, stifling its workings, and neglecting its efforts toward the soul's preservation always accompany sins of the kind we are describing.

Second, while this new nature — this principle of life and obedience — is not able in itself to preserve the soul from the sins that will bring it into depths, full provision for continual supplies to meet all its needs has been made in Jesus Christ. There are treasures of help in Christ to which the soul may go at any time and find relief against the attacks of sin. He says to the soul as David said to Abiathar when he fled from Doeg: 'Stay with me; do not be afraid. He who seeks my life seeks your life, but with me you will be safe.' Sin is my enemy no less than yours; it seeks the life of your soul, and it seeks my life too. Stay with me, for with me you

will be safe. The apostle urges this in Hebrews 4:16: 'Let us come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.' If there is ever a time of need for the soul, it is when it is under the assault of serious sins. At such a time there is suitable and timely help in Christ for relief and support. The new nature pleads with sighs and groans for the soul to come to Him. To ignore Him with all His provision of grace while He stands calling — 'Open to me, for my head is drenched with the dew, and my hair with the drops of the night' — to despise the sighing of the poor prisoner, the new nature which sin has sentenced to die, cannot be anything other than a serious offense. God might well complain and say: 'See these poor creatures; they were once entrusted with a supply of grace within themselves. This they threw away, and brought themselves into the greatest misery. That they might not completely perish a second time, their portion and resources are now laid up in another — a safe Keeper. In Him their lives and comforts are secured. But see their wretched negligence — they risk everything rather than look to Him for help.' And what do we think is in the heart of Christ when He sees His children giving way to conscience-destroying sins without that turning to Him which the very life and peace of their own souls demands? These are not the daily weaknesses that cannot be avoided. Their guilt always comes with a more or less serious neglect of the relief provided in Christ against them. The means of preservation from them is blessed, ready, and close at hand. Christ's stake in our preservation is great; the souls' stake is beyond description. To despise and neglect the means, Christ, our souls, our peace, and our life must make that guilt exceedingly guilty.

Third, much to the same effect might be said about the specific provision made against such sins in the covenant of grace, as has already been described. But I will not carry that discussion further.

This may be enough regarding the state and condition of the soul represented in this Psalm. We have seen what the depths are in which it is entangled and the ways and means by which anyone may come to be cast into them. The next thing to consider is the conduct of a gracious soul in that state and condition — what course it steers toward deliverance.

The duty and actions of a believer under distress from a sense of sin. His application to God. To God alone. Earnestness and intensity of mind in this.

The words of these first two verses also describe the conduct of the soul in the condition we have described — that is, what it does and what course it steers for relief. 'I have cried to You, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice; let Your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications.'

There is in these words a general application made toward relief. First, consider to whom the application is made: to Jehovah. 'I have cried to You, Jehovah.' God disclosed that name to His people to confirm their faith in the stability of His promises (Exodus 3). He who is Being itself will assuredly give being and reality to His promises. Having to deal with God concerning His promises of grace, the Psalmist comes to Him under this name: 'I call upon You, Jehovah.'

In the application itself, observe the following.

First, the human terms of the expression. He prays that God would direct His ears to be attentive — expressing, in the manner of humans, serious attention to what is spoken, in contrast to turning aside from what one disregards.

Second, the earnestness of the soul in the work it has at hand, which is evident both in the repetition of his request — 'Lord, hear my voice; let Your ears be attentive to my voice' — and in the force of the words he uses. 'Let Your ears,' he says, 'be diligently attentive.' The word signifies the most careful attentiveness and close attention: 'let Your ears be very attentive' — and to what? To 'the voice of my supplications,' which most interpreters render as 'my earnest prayers for the averting of evil or punishment.' But the underlying word comes from a root meaning 'to be gracious or merciful,' so it properly denotes supplications for grace. 'Be attentive, O Lord,' he says, 'to my supplications for grace and mercy, which I now make to You according to my extreme need.' In these words the Psalmist sets forth in general the disposition and working of a gracious soul when it has been cast into depths and darkness by sin.

The foundation of what I will further draw from this passage rests on two propositions.

First, the only approach a sinful, entangled soul makes toward relief is an application to God alone: 'To You, Jehovah, I have cried; Lord, hear.'

Second, the depths of sin's entanglement will drive a gracious soul to intense and earnest application to God: 'Lord, hear; Lord, be attentive.' Dying men do not call out sluggishly for help.

What seems necessary in general for the direction of a soul in the state and condition described will be briefly drawn from these two propositions.

First, trouble, danger, and distress — pointing not only to evil things but to a real sense of them in the mind and soul — will by themselves move those who experience them to seek relief. Everything by nature seeks to be at rest. A drowning man needs no encouragement to try to save himself. Spiritual troubles will similarly move people to seek relief. To seek no remedy at all is to be senselessly hardened or wretchedly hopeless, as were Cain and Judas. We may assume, then, that the main business of every soul in depths is to seek deliverance. They cannot remain at rest in a condition where there is no rest. What course a gracious soul steers in this effort is laid down in the first proposition — both negatively and positively. He applies himself to nothing but God, and he applies himself to God. A clear illustration of both sides is found in Hosea 14:3, where those poor, distressed, returning sinners say: 'Assyria will not save us; we will not ride on horses; neither will we say anymore to the work of our hands, You are our gods, for in You the fatherless finds mercy.' Their turning to God is accompanied by a renunciation of every other way of relief.

There are various things that sinners tend to turn to for relief in their distress, which prove to be like waters that fail. How many things have the Roman Catholics invented to deceive souls? Saints and angels, the Blessed Virgin, the wood of the cross, confessions, penances, masses, pilgrimages, dirges, purgatory, papal pardons, works of compensation, and the like — these have become the pathway for countless souls into everlasting ruin. If they truly understood the terror of the Lord, the nature of sin, and the media-

tion of Christ, they would be ashamed and horrified at themselves for these abominations. They would not say to these idols: 'You are our gods; come and save us.' How far short do all their inventions fall even of the man who would gladly offer rivers of oil — yes, the fruit of his own body for the sin of his soul, his firstborn for his transgression (Micah 6:7) — and yet gains nothing from it but an aggravation of his sin and misery? Even the pagans surpassed them in their devotion and expense. It is not a new question — what course sin-troubled souls should take for relief. From the beginning of the world, the minds of by far the greatest part of humanity have been occupied with it. Where there was light or darkness, such was the course they took. Among those who were ignorant of God, this inquiry produced all the demonic superstition that spread across the face of the entire world. When paganism was destroyed by the power and effectiveness of the Gospel, the same inquiry — working in the minds of darkened people in conjunction with other desires — produced the papacy. When people lost a spiritual understanding of the covenant of grace, the mystery of the Gospel, the plan of eternal love, and the power of the blood of Christ, they turned — in part or in whole — for relief in their entanglements to the broken cisterns described. These are of two kinds: self, and other things. As for those other things belonging to false worship, which are abominated by all of God's people, I need say nothing more about them. What relates to self is not confined to Roman Catholicism but extends to the limits of human nature, and prevails in all who are under the law — seeking relief from the distress of sin through self-effort and self-righteousness. So many poor souls in distress turn to themselves. They expect their cure from the same hand that wounded them. This was the spirit of

Judaism, as the apostle tells us in Romans 10:3. And all people under the law are still driven by the same principle. They return, but not to the Lord. Finding themselves in depths, in distress about sin, what course do they take? They resolve to do this differently and never do that again; this will be their regular practice and that they will do in an extraordinary way. As they have offended — from which their trouble arises — so they will improve, and they expect their peace to spring from there, as if God and they stood on equal terms. Some spend their entire lives this way — sinning and improving, improving and sinning, never once coming to true repentance and peace. Believers are on guard against this. They see themselves as fatherless — 'in You the fatherless finds mercy' — that is, helpless, without the least ground for hope in themselves or expectation from themselves. They know their repentance, their improvement, their prayers, their humiliations, their fasting, their mortification will not relieve them. They will repent and improve and pray and fast and humble their souls, for they know these things are their duty. But they know their goodness does not extend to Him with whom they have to deal, nor does He benefit from their righteousness. They will carry out all these duties, but they expect no deliverance through any duty. 'It is God,' they say, 'with whom we have to deal; our business is to listen for what He will say to us.'

There are also other ways in which sinful souls destroy themselves through false remedies. Distractions from their distressing thoughts appeal to them. They will fix on something — anything — that cannot cure their disease but will only make them forget they are sick. So Cain, under the terror of his guilt, departed from the presence of the Lord and sought inner rest in outward labor and

activity — he went and built a city (Genesis 4:16). Such were the courses Saul fixed on: first music, then a witch. Nothing is more common than for people to handle their convictions this way. They see their sickness and feel their wound, and then go to the Assyrian (Hosea 5:13). This insensibly leads people into atheism. Repeatedly applying the distractions of earthly pleasures to convictions of sin is a powerful means of producing final impenitence. Some drunkards perhaps would never have become so, had they not first been convicted of other sins. They try to stifle the guilt of one sin with another. They flee from themselves to themselves, from their consciences to their desires, seeking relief from sin by sinning. This is far from believers. They will not allow even lawful things to be a diversion from their distress. They may and will use lawful things, but not to divert their thoughts from their troubles. They know these troubles must be resolved between God and themselves. They will not simply wear off — they must be taken away. These pitfalls, and countless others like them, a gracious soul takes care to avoid. It knows it is God alone who is Lord of its conscience, where its depths lie. It is God alone against whom it has sinned. It is God alone who can pardon its sin. Nothing will entice or divert it from dealing with Him. 'To You, O Lord,' it says, 'I come. Your word concerning me must stand. On You I will wait. If You have no delight in me, I must perish. Other remedies I know are empty. I do not intend to spend my strength on what is not bread. To You I cry.' Here a sin-entangled soul must fix itself. Trouble drives it to look for relief. Many things outside press themselves forward as distractions; many things within offer themselves as remedies. 'Forget your sorrow,' say the former. 'Ease yourself of it by us,' say the latter. The soul refuses both as physi-

cians of no value, and makes its application to God alone. He has wounded, and He alone can heal. Until anyone who is aware of the guilt of sin will come away from every alternative and deal directly with God, it is pointless to expect relief.

Second, the soul is intense, earnest, and urgent in this — which was the second point observed. This is no time for sluggishness. The soul's everything, its greatest concerns, are at stake. Dull, cold, formal, customary applications to God will not serve here. Ordinary expressions of faith, love, and fervency — the usual seasons, opportunities, and duties — are not adequate for this condition. To do nothing more than the ordinary now is to do nothing at all. A person who exerts no more effort and energy for his deliverance when he is in depths, on the verge of perishing, than he does when he is at liberty on smooth and easy paths, will scarcely escape. Some in such conditions are careless and negligent — they think they can wear off their troubles in the usual routine, and that although they are now aware of their danger, peace will come eventually. This attitude contains much contempt of God. Others despair and waste away under their pressures. Spiritual sloth influences both these kinds of people. Let us see this disposition illustrated in another example. We have an instance in the bride in Song of Solomon 3:1-3. She had lost the presence of Christ and was therefore in the very state and condition described above (verse 1). It was night for her — a time of darkness and desolation — and she searches for her Beloved: 'On my bed night after night I sought him whom my soul loves.' Christ was absent and she was left in depths and darkness because of it. So she seeks Him — but as most people tend to do in the same state. She does not quicken her pace, does not go beyond her ordinary routine of duties, does not change

the disposition she normally has at other times. But what is the result? 'I sought him,' she says, 'but did not find him.' This is not the way to recover a sense of lost love or to get out of her entanglement. This drives her to another course of action. She begins to think that if things continue like this she will be ruined. 'I am still going through the duties,' she says in effect, 'but I do not have my Beloved's presence. I am not meeting with Christ in them. My darkness and trouble remain. If I do not take some other course, I will be lost.' 'I will arise now,' she says in verse 2. 'I will shake off all the ease, sluggishness, and routine that clings to me.' A fresh, vigorous course must be pursued. Resolving on new, extraordinary, vigorous, and persistent applications to God is the first general step of a sin-entangled soul working toward recovery: 'I will arise now.' And what does she do once resolved? 'I will go about the city,' she says, 'in the streets and in the squares, and seek him whom my soul loves.' 'I will leave no means untried by which I might possibly come to a fresh enjoyment of him.' If a man is searching for a friend he can only look for him in the streets and the squares — that is, either in the town or in the open country. 'So will I,' says the bride. 'In whatever way, ordinance, or institution, by whatever duty — public or private, in community with others or in solitary withdrawal — Christ has ever been or may be found, or peace obtained, I will seek Him and not give up until I come to an enjoyment of Him.' This is the disposition, this the resolution, that a soul in depths must come to if it ever expects deliverance. For the most part, people's wounds fester and become infected because of their foolishness (Psalm 38:5). They are wounded by sin, and through spiritual sloth they neglect their cure. This weakens them and unsettles them day by day, yet they endure it all rather than

come out of their worldly ease to deal seriously and urgently with God. It was not so with David (Psalm 22:1-2). 'Why,' he says, 'are You so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry in the daytime, but You do not answer; and at night, and am not silent.' What is wrong with the man? Can he not be quiet night or day — never silent, never at rest? And if he is somewhat troubled, can he not contain himself without groaning and crying out? Yes, he cries all day long (Psalm 32:3) and groans all night long (Psalm 6:6). What is all this groaning, sighing, tears, and crying all day and all night about? Ah, leave him alone — his soul is bitter within him. He has fallen into depths. The Lord has withdrawn from him, trouble is at hand, he is filled with anguish over sin, there is no quietness or soundness in him, and he must earnestly and relentlessly press God for relief. Alas, how strange this disposition is to most people today. How little of this spirit's working is found among us. Is not the reason that we value the world more and heaven and heavenly things less than he did? That we can get along better without a sense of God's love in Christ than he could? And is it not therefore that we daily see so many withering professors who have in effect lost all communion with God beyond a little lip-service and talk — the foul smell of whose wounds is offensive to everyone but themselves? And so they go on, ready to die and perish, rather than stir themselves like this holy man to meet the Lord. Heman was much the same (Psalm 88:11-13). What sense he had of his depths he declares in verse 3: 'My soul is full of troubles,' he says, 'and my life draws near to the grave.' And what course does he take in this heavy, sorrowful, and desolate condition? 'O Lord, God of my salvation,' he says, 'I have cried out by day and in the night before You; let my prayer come before You;

incline Your ear to my cry' (verses 1-2). Day and night he cried to the God of his salvation, and with earnestness and persistence. This was his business; this was what he was occupied with all his days.

This is the point being made: if a gracious soul is brought into the depths described because of sin, when the Lord is pleased to lead it toward recovery, He causes it to be vigorous and restless in all the duties by which it may make application to Him for deliverance. Where this intensity and earnestness of the soul in its applications to God chiefly consists will now be briefly explained, after I have touched on some of the considerations and motives that stir it up to this.

First, the greatness of a person's concerns naturally drives him to this earnestness. People do not deal with dull and sluggish spirits when their greatest interests are at stake. David tells us he was more concerned with the light of God's face than the men of the world could be with their grain and wine (Psalm 4:6-7). Suppose a man of the world saw his house — where all his wealth and possessions are stored — catch fire, with everything in danger of being consumed before his eyes. Would he remain calm and quiet? Would he not exert himself with all his might and call for every help he could get? And why — because his portion, his everything, his greatest concern is at stake. Shall the soul then be sluggish, careless, dull, and complacent when fire is set to its eternal concerns? When the light of God's face — which is more precious to it than the greatest abundance of grain and wine could be to the men of the world — has been taken from it? It was a sign of astonishing recklessness in Jonah that he was fast asleep when the ship was on the verge of sinking on his account. Will it be thought any less

reckless in a soul which, being in a storm of wrath and displeasure from God, sent out into the deep after it, should neglect it and sleep — as Solomon says — at the top of a mast in the middle of the sea? How that poor creature whose heart was sold to his idols cried out when they were taken from him (Judges 18:24): 'You have taken away my gods, and what do I have left?' And shall a gracious soul lose his God through his own folly — lose the sense of His love, the comfort of His presence — and not follow hard after Him with all his might? Peace with God, joy in believing — such souls have obtained these before. Can they live without them now? In their ordinary walk, can they help but cry out with Job: 'Oh that it were with me as in former months, when the lamp of God shone above my head' (Job 29:2-3); and with David: 'O Lord, restore to me the joy of Your salvation' (Psalm 51:12), for 'O my God, my soul is cast down within me' when I remember former blessings (Psalm 42:6)? They cannot live without it. And suppose they could make a poor attempt to press on in their pilgrimage while all around them is smooth — what will they do in the time of outward trials and distresses, when deep calls to deep and one trouble stirs up and sharpens another? Nothing will then support them, they know, except what is now missing from them, as in Habakkuk 3:17-18 and Psalm 23:4. So the greatness of their concerns drives them to the earnestness described.

Second, they have a deep sense of these great concerns. All people are equally interested in the love of God and the forgiveness of sin. Every person has a soul of the same immortal constitution, equally capable of blessedness and misery. Yet we see that most people are so stupidly dull that they take little notice of these things. Neither the guilt of sin, the wrath of God, death, nor hell

occupy or concern them. These things are their concerns, but they have no sense of them. Gracious souls, however, have a quick and living sense of spiritual things. For,

First, they have a saving spiritual light by which they can discern the true nature of sin and the terror of the Lord. Though they are now supposed to have lost the comforting light of the Spirit, they never lose the sanctifying light of the Spirit — the light by which they are able to perceive spiritual things in a spiritual manner. This never entirely departs from them. By this light they see sin to be exceedingly sinful (Romans 7:13). By it they know the terror of the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:11), and that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Hebrews 10:31). By it they perceive the excellence of the love of God in Christ, which surpasses knowledge — the present sense of which they have lost. By it they are able to look within the veil and take in the blessed consolations enjoyed by those saints whose communion with God was never interrupted. This represents to them all the sweetness, pleasure, joy, and peace they experienced in former days when God was present with them in love. By it they are taught to value all the fruits of the blood of Jesus Christ, many of which they are now cut off from and deprived of. All this, along with other things of similar weight, makes them acutely aware of their concerns.

Second, they remember what it cost them previously to deal with God about sin, and from this they know that what they now have in hand is no ordinary matter. They must return to their old work and pick up the old cup again. Recovery from depths is like a new conversion.

Often, the whole work is gone through again fresh, as it appears to the soul. The soul knows it was a work of dread, terror, and trouble, and it trembles within itself at its fresh ordeal. And,

Third, the Holy Spirit gives such poor souls a fresh sense of their deep concerns specifically to stir them up to these earnest applications to God. The whole work is His, and He carries it on through means suited to the end He is pursuing. By these means a gracious soul is brought into the disposition described. Now there are several things that come together in and contribute to this disposition.

First, there is a continual thoughtfulness about the sad condition in which the soul finds itself in its depths. Being deeply affected by their condition, such souls are constantly pondering and turning it over in their minds. David describes what this was like for him in Psalm 38:2-8: 'Your arrows have sunk into me, and Your hand has pressed down hard on me. There is no soundness in my flesh because of Your anger; nor any rest in my bones because of my sin. For my iniquities have gone over my head; as a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me. My wounds fester and are corrupt because of my foolishness. I am bent and greatly bowed down; I go mourning all day long. I am feeble and badly crushed; I groan because of the agitation of my heart.' Restlessness, deep brooding, unquiet hearts, continual heaviness of soul, sorrow and anxiety of mind — these lie at the root of the applications we are describing. From these sources their prayers flow out, as David adds in verse 9: 'Lord, all my desire is before You, and my sighing is not hidden from You.' This is where all his trouble found its expression. He prayed out of the abundance of his meditation and grief. Thoughts of their state and condition follow such people to

bed and greet them when they rise, accompanying them all day long. As Reuben cried out, 'The child is gone, and where shall I go?' — so such a soul cries out: 'The love of God is gone, Christ is gone, and where shall I take my sorrow? God is offended, death is near, relief is far away, darkness surrounds me. I have lost my peace, my joy, my song in the night. What do I make of duties? Can two walk together unless they are agreed? Can I walk with God in duty while I have made Him my enemy? What do I make of ordinances? Will it do me any good to be in Jerusalem and not see the king's face? To live under the ordinances and not meet the King of Saints in them? May I not justly fear that the Lord will take His Holy Spirit from me until I am left without remedy?' With such thoughts as these, sin-entangled souls are occupied, and they roll about in their minds throughout all their applications to God.

Second, the application itself consists in and is made through the prayer of faith — that is, crying to God. This is done with intensity of mind, which has two fruits or properties: first, importunity; and second, constancy.

It is said of our blessed Savior that when He was in His depths on account of our sins, He offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears (Hebrews 5:7). Strong crying and tears express the utmost intensity of spirit. David expresses it through groaning, as we have seen, and also through sighing, moaning, and panting. A soul in such a condition lies before the Lord with sighs, groans, mourning, cries, tears, and groaning, according to the various workings of the heart and how it is affected by what it has to deal with. This produces,

First, importunity. Our Savior has wonderfully set out the power of importunate faith in Luke 11:8-10 and chapter 18, verse 1. Importunate prayer is certainly prevailing prayer. Importunity is made up, as it were, of two things: frequent coming and varied pleading. A truly importunate man will come to you seven times a day about the same matter, and after all that, if any new thought occurs to him — even if he had resolved not to come again — he will come again. And there is nothing he can think of as relevant to his case that he will not make use of and turn to the advantage of his plea. So it is in this case. People will use both frequent coming and varied arguments. Psalm 86:1: 'I cry to You daily' — or rather, all the day. He had just this one matter of business and he attended to it thoroughly. By this means we give God no rest (Isaiah 62:7), which is the very mark of importunity. Such souls go to God and are not satisfied with what they have done; they go again. Something still remains, and they go to Him again. The heart is not yet emptied, and they go to Him once more — that He may have no rest. What variety of arguments are pleaded with God in this case I could also show from the same David. But it is well known — there is almost nothing he does not make a plea of: the faithfulness, righteousness, name, mercy, goodness, and kindness of God in Jesus Christ; the concern of others in him, both friends and enemies of God; his own weakness and helplessness; yes, even the greatness of sin itself. 'Be merciful to my sin,' he says, 'for it is great.' Sometimes he begins with arguments of one kind, then being briefly drawn to other considerations, a new plea is suggested to him by the Spirit and he returns immediately to his primary aim, all of which argues great intensity of mind and spirit.

Second, constancy also flows from intensity. Such a soul will not give up until it obtains what it is seeking and looking for, as we will see in our further study of this Psalm.

This is, in general, the conduct of a gracious soul in the condition represented to us here. As much as such people love their peace, love their souls, and care for the glory of God, they are not to be found lacking in this duty. Why do controversies drag on so long between God and your souls, so that perhaps you scarcely see a good day all your lives? Is it not for the most part because of your sloth and despair of spirit? You will not brace your minds to press matters with God to a quick resolution in the blood of Christ. You go on and off, start and stop, try and give up — and for the most part, even when your condition is extraordinary, you content yourselves with ordinary and customary approaches to God. This makes you wither, become useless, and waste away in your perplexities. David did not do so. After many and repeated failures through sin, yet through swift, vigorous, and restless exercises of faith, all was repaired, so that he lived in peace and died in triumph. So rise and act. Do not let your wounds fester through your foolishness. Do the thorough work that lies before you. Whether it is long or difficult, it does not matter — it must be done, and it is accompanied by safety. What you are likely to encounter first will be described next.

VERSE 3



The words of the verse explained and their meaning opened. The general disposition of a gracious soul in its distress over sin has been described. Now we turn to its particular actions — what it does and what it encounters.

First, in particular, it cries out: 'If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?'

There is a supposition in the words and an inference drawn from it. In the supposition there is, first, the name of God fixed upon as suited to it, and second, the thing itself supposed. In the inference, the substance of it is expressed — 'to stand' — along with two things in the way it is stated: first, it is expressed as a question, and second, the question is left indefinite: 'Who could stand?'

'If You, Lord' — here he fixes on another name of God: Jah. Though this name comes from the same root as the former, it is rarely used except to convey and express the awesome majesty of God. 'He who rides through the heavens is exalted by His name Jah' (Psalm 68:4). He must now deal with God about the guilt of sin, and God is represented to the soul as great and terrifying — so that the soul may know what to expect if the matter must be tried according to the penalty sin deserves.

What then does he say to Jah? 'If You should mark iniquities' — the Hebrew word means to observe and hold as in secure custody, to keep, preserve, and watch carefully. It means to notice and observe in such a way as to retain what is observed, to ponder it, and lay it up in the heart, as in Genesis 37:11: 'Jacob observed Joseph's dream' — that is, he kept the memory of it and turned it over in his heart.

The 'marking of iniquities' intended here is God's paying such attention to them as to reserve them for punishment and vengeance. In contrast to this marking, He is said not to see sin, to pass over it, to cover it, to forget it, or to remember it no more — that is, to forgive it, as the next verse makes clear.

It need not be argued that God marks all sins in all persons in the sense of seeing them, knowing them, disapproving of them, and being displeased with them. This cannot be denied without removing all grounds for fearing and worshiping Him. To deny it is the same as denying the very existence of God — deny His holiness and righteousness, and you deny His existence. But a day is appointed when all the people of the world will know that God knew and took notice of every one of their most secret sins. There is therefore a double marking of sin by God, neither of which can be denied with respect to any sin or any person. The first is physical — consisting in His omniscience, to which all things are open and exposed. In this sense no sin is hidden from Him; secrets are open before the light of His face. All sins are marked by Him. Second is moral — a displeasure and disapproval with every sin, which is inseparable from the nature of God because of His holiness, and which is declared in the sentence of the law equally to all people in the world. But the marking intended here is that which tends to-

ward censure and punishment according to the terms of the law. It includes not only the sentence of the law but also the will to punish according to it. 'If You,' says the Psalmist, 'the great and fearsome God, exalted by Your glorious name Jah, should take notice of iniquities so as to repay them to sinners according to the severity and demand of Your holy law — what then?' It is answered by the substance of the conclusion: 'Who could stand?' That is, as Chrysostom says, no one — this 'who' means 'none.' No one, not a single person in the world. 'Who could stand, or endure the trial?' Everyone on this supposition must perish, and that forever. This is what the desert of sin and the curse of the law — which is the rule of this marking of iniquity — require. There is a notable force in the question, which expresses the way the conclusion is stated. 'Who could stand?' is stronger than saying, 'None can endure the trial and escape without everlasting ruin.' For the question is not 'How can I?' but 'Who could stand?' — leaving it open to no one. When the Holy Spirit wants to set out the certainty and dreadful-ness of the destruction of the ungodly, He does so by just such an expression, in which a deeper meaning is pressed into the minds of people than any words can fully clothe or declare. 1 Peter 4:17: 'What will be the outcome for those who do not obey the Gospel?' and verse 18: 'Where will the ungodly and the sinner appear?' So here — 'Who could stand?' contains a deep hint of dreadful ruin for all with whom God should deal by marking their iniquities. See Psalm 1:5.

The Psalmist, preparing to deal with God about sin, lays out first — in general — how things must stand, not for himself only but for all the world, on the assumption he has fixed upon. 'This is not my situation alone; it is the situation of all mankind, every one

who is flesh and blood. Whether their guilt matches what I carry or not, it does not matter. All are guilty; all must perish. How much more, then, must this be my condition, who have accumulated such great guilt. Here he presses a powerful argument against himself on the supposition already stated: If not even the holy, the humble, or the most believing soul can endure the trial, how much less can I — who am chief among sinners, the least among the saints, falling immeasurably behind them in holiness while equally exceeding them in sin?'

This is the sense and weight of the words. Let us now consider how they express the workings of the soul whose state and condition is represented here, and what direction they offer to those who have fallen into the same state.

What first presents itself to a soul in distress because of sin. This opened in four propositions. Thoughts of God marking sin according to the terms of the law — full of dread and terror.

The depths in which the Psalmist found himself have been described. His resolution to seek God alone for relief and recovery has also been shown, along with the general earnestness with which he goes about it. Now, as he approaches God in that disposition and with that purpose, the first specific thing he fixes on is the greatness of his sin and guilt according to the terms of the law. From this it appears that,

First, when a sin-troubled soul approaches God, the first thing that presents itself is God's marking of sin according to the terms of the law. This is the same for all kinds of sinners — whether before conversion or in relapses and entanglements after conversion. There is a parallel between conversion and recovery from depths.

Both are accomplished by the same means and in the same ways, and both produce the same effects on the souls of sinners — though they differ in certain respects that need not be addressed here. What is said under this heading may therefore be applied to both groups: those not yet converted, and those genuinely delivered from that state — and especially to those who do not know which group they belong to, that is, to all guilty souls. The law will press its claim against all. It will condemn the sin and do all it can against the sinner. There is no shaking it off. It must be properly answered, or it will prevail. The law issues an arrest for the debt, and it is useless to tell the officer to leave or beg him to pass by. If payment is not made and a receipt of discharge is not produced, the soul must go to prison. 'I am going to God,' says the soul. 'He is great and fearsome, a marker of sin — what will I say to Him?' This makes it tremble and cry out, 'O Lord, who could stand?' And from this it appears that,

Second, serious thoughts of God marking sin according to the terms of the law fill the soul of a sinner with dread and terror. But this is not all. The Psalmist is not simply overwhelmed with terror, crying out 'Who could stand?' Embedded in the words is a thorough and sincere acknowledgment of his own sin and guilt. In speaking of what sin deserves in his own case, he acknowledges his own. From this it follows that,

Third, a sincere sense and acknowledgment of sin, with self-condemnation in the justifying of God, is the first specific working of a gracious soul as it rises out of its entanglements. All of this is contained in these words. He acknowledges both his own guilt and the righteousness of God if He should deal with him according to what sin deserves.

These things lie in the words taken on their own. But the state of the soul represented here carries us further. The Psalmist does not stop here — as we will see when we open the next verse, which is the primary focus of the whole. As a transition from the one to the other, while continuing the general design laid out at the beginning, we must carry with us this further observation.

Fourth, though self-condemnation is an important preparation for the discovery of forgiveness in God, a poor distressed soul must not remain in that state, nor rest upon it, but must press on to embrace forgiveness itself.

There is also a general proposition contained in the words that may be useful here: God's marking of iniquities and a person's salvation are forever incompatible — that is, His marking them in the persons of sinners for the purposes already described.

Some of these I will develop further, as handling them serves the purpose in view.

I will begin with the first one laid down — concerning the effects of serious thoughts about God marking sin according to the terms of the law, which, as I said, is the first thing that presents itself to a sin-entangled soul in its approach to God.

This will not stand alone, however. I will draw the first two observations together, using the first only to confirm the second, which will express the meaning of the words taken on their own. The third and fourth will carry us forward in the soul's progress toward the relief it is seeking. The proposition to be insisted on first comes to this: In a sin-troubled soul's approach to God, the first

thing that presents itself is God's marking of sin according to the terms of the law, which is of itself able to fill the soul with dread and terror.

I will first say something about this in itself, and then inquire into how it concerns the soul whose condition is represented here.

The Lord speaks of some who, when they hear the words of the curse, still bless themselves and say they will have peace (Deuteronomy 29:19). Whatever people preach or say about the terror of the Lord, they despise it — which God threatens with utter destruction. He notes this again as amazing wickedness and the height of hardness in Jeremiah 36:24. Generally, it is with sinners as it was with Gaal the son of Ebed in Judges 9, when he was fortifying Shechem against Abimelech. Zebul tells him that Abimelech is coming and will destroy him. 'Let him come,' says Gaal; 'I can deal with him; let him bring his army — I am not afraid of him.' But at the very first sight of Abimelech's army, he trembles with fear (verse 36). Tell hardened sinners of the wrath of God and that He will come to plead His cause against them — for the most part they pay no attention and have no serious thoughts about it; they go on as if they are sure they can handle it. Yet in spite of all their boldness, a day is coming when fear will overtake them and make them cry out: 'Who among us can dwell with the consuming fire? Who among us can live with everlasting burnings?' Indeed, if the Lord is pleased in this life to draw especially close to any of them, they quickly see that their hearts cannot endure and their hands cannot be strong (Ezekiel 22:14). Their hands go limp and their proud hearts tremble like a leaf.

The one who sinned first, and had the first occasion for serious thoughts about God marking sin, gives us a striking example of what we have affirmed. And the first instance of any kind is the measure of all that follows in the same kind (Genesis 3:8). He heard the voice of God — as he had done before, without the least trouble or alarm of spirit; he was made for communion with God, and to hear His voice was part of his blessedness. But now he says: 'I heard Your voice and was afraid, and I hid myself.' He knew that God was coming to investigate sin, and he could not bear the thought of meeting Him. If he could have gone into the very ground from which he was taken and been hidden from God there, he would not have hesitated to try. Everything had changed for him. In that God whom he had previously loved as a good, holy, powerful, righteous Creator, Sustainer, Benefactor, and Rewarder, he now saw nothing but wrath, indignation, vengeance, and terror. This made him tremble out those dreadful words: 'I heard Your voice and was afraid, and I hid myself.'

The giving of the law afterward confirms what effects the contemplation of God dealing with sinners according to its terms must produce (Exodus 20:18-19). All the people saw the thunder, the lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking — as the apostle also describes it in Hebrews 12:18. In this manner that fiery law came forth from the Lord (Deuteronomy 33:2), so that all who were present exceedingly trembled. And all of this relates only to the severity of the law in general, without its being applied to any particular soul. There is a solemnity that carries awe even in the preparation for a court session held by poor mortals like ourselves — but the true dread of it is unique to the criminals for whose trial and sentence all that preparation is made. When a

soul comes to think that all this fearsome preparation, this display of terrible majesty, these streams of fiery law are directed at him personally, it will make him cry out: 'Lord, who could stand?' And this law is still in full force toward sinners, just as it was on the day it was given at Mount Sinai. Though Moses grew old, his strength never failed. Nor has the law given through him lost any of its strength, power, or authority toward sinners. It is still attended by thunder and lightning as of old. And it will not fail to represent the terror of the Lord to a guilty soul.

Among the saints themselves I could produce examples to show that they have experienced this. The cases of Job, David, and Heman are well known. I will consider it only in Christ Himself. From His own side He had no cause for any discouraging thought, being holy, innocent, and undefiled. He fulfilled all righteousness, did His Father's will in all things, and remained in His love. This must have been attended by the highest peace and most blessed joy. Even at the very beginning of His trials He had full assurance of a favorable outcome, as we see in Isaiah 50:7-8. Yet when His soul was occupied with thoughts of God marking our iniquities upon Him, it was sorrowful to the point of death. He was overwhelmed with distress and great anguish (Mark 14:33). His agony, His bloody sweat, His strong cries and prayers, His repeated plea — 'If it is possible, let this cup pass from Me' — and His last dreadful cry — 'My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?' — all show what it meant to Him for God to mark iniquities. Surely poor sinners may well cry out 'Lord, who could stand?' when the Son of God Himself trembled so under the weight of it.

In serious thoughts of God marking sin, He is presented to the soul clothed with all those glorious and terrifying attributes and excellencies that naturally produce dread and terror in the hearts of sinners who have no relief from any covenant connection in Christ. The soul looks on Him as the great Lawgiver (James 4:12), able to destroy both body and soul in hell for every breach of His law; as One terrible in holiness, whose eyes are too pure to look on iniquity; as One great and powerful — the living God, into whose hands it is a fearful thing to fall; as One attended by retributive justice, saying 'Vengeance is Mine, and I will repay' (Hebrews 10:30). When a soul considers God clothed with all these fearsome and terrible excellencies, coming to deal with sinners according to the terms of His fiery law, it cannot help but cry out with Moses: 'I am exceedingly frightened and trembling.'

These things work in the mind the conclusion stated in the words — namely, that God's marking of sin according to the terms of the law and a person's salvation are utterly incompatible. This is a conclusion that cannot fail to shake a soul pressed under a sense of its own guilt.

When a person who is truly guilty and knows himself to be guilty is brought to trial, he has only four possible grounds of hope that he might survive it. He might think that either the judge will be unable to discover his crimes and so a way of escape will be opened; or that someone will powerfully intercede with the judge on his behalf; or that the rule of the law is not strict enough to take notice of his failures; or that the penalty is not so severe that there is no possible way to escape it. Cut him off from all expectation from any one or all of these, and every hope he has must necessarily collapse. How does it stand in this case?

First, something has already been said about the judge. The present question is whether anything can be hidden from Him, and whether a door of escape can thereby be opened to a sinner. The apostle tells us that all things are open and exposed before Him (Hebrews 4:13), and the Psalmist says that there is not a thought in our hearts or a word on our tongues but He knows it from afar and understands it completely (Psalm 139:2, 4). What the sinner knows about himself that gives him reason to fear — God knows that. And what the sinner does not know about himself that gives him reason to fear — God knows that too, for He is greater than our hearts and knows all things (1 John 3:20). When God not only lays before the sinner the secret sins he still has some memory of, but also brings to light and sets before him that whole world of filth and folly that he never truly noticed or has entirely forgotten — it will trouble him, even overwhelm him.

Second, but might not this judge be persuaded to overlook what He knows and deal favorably with the sinner? Might not an intercessor be found to plead on behalf of the guilty soul? Eli settles this question in 1 Samuel 2:25: 'If one man sins against another, the judge will mediate for him, but if a man sins against the Lord, who will intercede for him?' 'There is not between us,' says Job, 'an arbitrator who could place his hand on both of us and settle the matter' (Job 9:33). We are here considering a sinner purely under the administration of the law, which knows nothing of a Mediator. In that case, who would take it upon himself to intercede for the sinner? Moreover, all creatures in heaven and earth are engaged on God's side in the quarrel against sinners, and the greatness and terror of His majesty would certainly deter any and all of them from taking up such a cause. What request would need to be

made to God in such a case? Would it not be asking Him to cease being holy, to stop being righteous, to abandon His throne, to deny Himself and His sovereignty — so that a rebel, a traitor, His cursed enemy, might live and escape His justice? Is this a reasonable request? Would whoever made it be fit to intercede for sinners? Would he not by making such a request prove himself the greatest sinner of all? The sinner has no expectation of any door of escape being opened. The whole world stands against him, and the case must be tried out nakedly between God and himself. But,

Third, perhaps the rule of the law by which the sinner is to be tried is not so strict that, in the case of sins like his, it might admit a favorable interpretation. Or perhaps the good he has done might be weighed against the evil, and some relief found that way. But the matter stands quite otherwise. There is no good action of a sinner — even if it were perfectly good — that can weigh against or compensate for the evil of even the smallest sin committed. For all good is owed on a prior account, even if no guilt had been incurred. Paying back money you borrowed makes no satisfaction for what you stole; no more can our good deeds compensate for our sins. Nor is there any good action of a sinner that does not carry enough evil and guilt with it to make it unacceptable on its own account — so people may well cease from any idea of doing more than is required. Moreover, where any sin exists, even if all the good in the world could be supposed to exist in the same person, nothing of that good could come into consideration in the necessary order of our dependence on God, until the guilt of that sin had been fully answered. Since the penalty of every sin is the eternal ruin of the sinner, all his supposed good avails him little. And as for the law itself, it is an expression of the holiness, righteous-

ness, and wisdom of God, so there is no evil, great or small, that is not forbidden and condemned by it. On this basis David states the whole matter in Psalm 143:2: 'Do not enter into judgment with Your servant, for in Your sight no one living is righteous' — that is, if things are to be tried and decided by the law, no sinner can obtain acquittal. Paul explains this in Romans 3:20 and Galatians 2:16. But yet,

Fourth, perhaps the sentence of the law is not so fierce and dreadful that, even if guilt is found, there may still be a way of escape. But the law speaks not one word short of death to an offender. There is a greatness and an eternity of wrath in its sentence, and God Himself has undertaken to see its vengeance carried out. On all these grounds, therefore, the conclusion stated must inevitably be settled in the soul of any sinner who entertains thoughts of drawing near to God.

Though what has been said may be of general use to sinners of all kinds — whether already brought home to God or still strangers to Him — I will not develop any general application of it here, since it is directed toward one specific end. The aim is to show what are the first thoughts that arise in the heart of a poor entangled soul when it first begins to work toward recovery in returning to God. The law immediately presses its claim against him. God is presented to him as angry, displeased, and provoked, and His terror — to a greater or lesser degree — surrounds him on every side. This fills him with fear, shame, and confusion of face, so that he does not know what to do. These troubles are greater or lesser according to what God sees is best for the poor soul's present humbling and future safety. What then does the sinner do? What does he think? Does he try to flee from God and give up all efforts at re-

covery? Does he say, 'This God is holy and terrifying — there is no point in me looking for anything from Him but fury and destruction, and so I may as well give up rather than keep trying to draw near to Him'? It cannot be denied that in this condition, thoughts of this kind will be suggested by unbelief, and that sometimes they produce great distress in the soul. But this is not the final outcome of this exercise. It produces another effect. It calls forth the first particular working of a gracious soul as it rises out of its sin-entanglements — namely, as was described: a sincere sense of sin and acknowledgment of it, with self-condemnation in the justifying of God. This is the first thing a soul seeking recovery from its depths is brought to. His general resolve to do thorough work with what is before him has already been described. What these words direct us to next is the soul's reflection on itself upon considering God's marking of iniquity, as mentioned. This is faith's great and proper use of the law, the nature of which will be opened further in the next discourse.

The first particular workings of a soul toward recovery from the depths of sin. A sense of sin — what it consists of and how it is produced. Acknowledgment of sin — its nature and characteristics. Self-condemnation.

What the general disposition of the soul is — when stirred by grace and resolved in its strength to work toward recovery from the depths of sin-entanglement — has been described. We have also shown what kind of reception such a soul may generally expect, and will ordinarily encounter. It may go out at first like Samson with his hair cut off, thinking it will do as it did before — but it quickly discovers that its peace is lost, its wounds are painful, its conscience is restless, God is displeased, and its whole

condition — as far as it can see — is hazardous. This fills it with the thoughts expressed in this third verse and fixes the conclusion discussed above firmly in its mind. It now finds it has the law to deal with again. From this arises the sense and acknowledgment of sin, and the self-condemnation in the justifying of God, of which we now speak. The soul does not become sullen, stubborn, or resentful, and so run away from God. It does not utterly despair and give up. It argues nothing in its own defense or in minimizing its sin and guilt. It does not quarrel with or murmur against the holiness, severity, and righteousness of God's law. Instead, it turns entirely on itself — on its own unworthiness, guilt, and deserving — and in a sense of these things, lays itself down at God's feet, waiting for His word and verdict.

Three things we attribute to such a soul in this condition. First, a sincere sense of sin. There are two kinds of sense of sin. The first is general and theoretical, by which a person knows what sin is, knows himself to be a sinner, and knows himself to be guilty of this or that sin — but his heart is not moved in proportion to that knowledge. The second is active and effective. The soul, being acquainted with the nature of sin, with its own guilt in relation to sin generally and to specific sins, is entirely influenced by that understanding, producing fitting emotions and responses.

We have an example of both in the same person. Before Nathan came to David, he had the first kind; afterward he had the second as well. It is impossible to suppose that before the prophet arrived, David had no general knowledge and sense — not only of the nature of sin in the abstract, but also of the fact that he himself was a sinner and guilty of the very sins for which he was later rebuked. To suppose otherwise is to suppose not only that he had

been stripped of his sainthood, but of his humanity as well, and turned into a beast. Yet this general knowledge produced in him no emotion fitting to his condition. The same may be said of most sinners in the world. But when Nathan came and gave him that second, effective sense of which we speak, we all know what effects it produced.

It is only the second kind that is under consideration, and even that is twofold: first, legal, which precedes conversion; and second, evangelical, which precedes recovery from depths. How these two differ from each other and how they may be distinguished — both being in their own way sincere — is not my purpose to explain here.

Now this sense, which we assign as the first duty, work, or action of a returning soul, is a deep and practical understanding produced in the mind and heart of a believing sinner by the Holy Spirit — a grasp of sin and its evils in relation to the law and love of God, the cross and blood of Christ, the communion and comfort of the Spirit, and all the fruits of love, mercy, and grace of which it has been made a partaker or may hope for on Gospel grounds.

First, the primary agent who produces this sense is the Holy Spirit. He it is who convicts of sin (John 16:8). He works through means. He worked it in David through the ministry of Nathan, and in Peter through the look of Christ. But the work is His. No person can produce this in their own soul. It will not arise from mere rational reflection. Though a person may turn over in his mind things that one would think would be enough to break hearts of stone, yet if the Holy Spirit does not put forth His own particular power, this sense of sin will not be produced. As the water at the

pool of Bethesda was not stirred until an angel came down and moved it — so neither will the heart be moved for sin without a saving movement of the Holy Spirit.

Second, it is a deep sense of sin and its evils. Light, passing thoughts about them do not amount to the sense we are describing. 'My sorrow,' says David, 'is continually before me' (Psalm 38:17). It pressed him constantly and heavily. He therefore compares this sense of sin — wrought by the Holy Spirit — to arrows stuck in the flesh (verse 2). They cause sharp, constant pain. Sin in this sense of it lays hold on the soul so that the sinner cannot look up (Psalm 40:12). It remains with him, making his wound pour out in the night without ceasing (Psalm 77:2) and robbing the soul of rest — 'my soul,' he says, 'refused to be comforted.' This sense of sin lies down with him and rises with him in whom it is. Light, passing thoughts accompanied by occasional sighs and brief prayers are not worthy of a soul that is returning. And,

Third, it is practical. It does not reside only in the speculative part of the mind, hovering in general ideas — it dwells in the practical understanding, which effectively moves the will and the emotions. It is an understanding from which sorrow and humility are inseparable. The acts of the practical understanding necessarily produce, along with themselves, fitting acts of the will and emotions — so much so that some have concluded that what is usually attributed to the understanding is in fact proper to the will. This understanding works on the whole soul so that it is cast into its shape and likeness: humility, sorrow, and self-abhorrence live and die with it.

Fourth, it has in the first place a respect to the law of God. There can be no proper consideration of sin in which the law does not have its place. The law summons the sinner, and he willingly brings his sin to be judged by it. There he sees it to be exceedingly sinful (Romans 7:13). Though a believer stands less under the dominion of the law than others, he nevertheless knows more of its authority and nature than others. He sees more of its spirituality and holiness. And the more a person sees of the excellence of the law, the more he sees of the vileness of sin. This is what a soul does in its first effort toward recovery from sin's entanglements. He works to know his disease thoroughly so that he may be cured. He knows that being ignorant of his condition and its danger will do him no good. He knows that if his wounds are not searched to the bottom they will fester and become infected. He therefore brings himself and his sin to the law. By it he sees the vileness of the one and the danger of the other. Most people remain stuck in their depths because they want to avoid the very first step of rising from them. From the bottom of their misery they would like to leap at once to the top of their happiness. The soul managed in this work by the Holy Spirit does not do this. It converses with the law, brings its sin to it, and fully hears its verdict. When sin has been thoroughly condemned, it then attends further to the welfare of the sinner. If you ever desire to come to rest, do not avoid this entrance to it. Weigh carefully and attend to what the law says about your sin and what it deserves, or you will never make a proper application to God for forgiveness. If you ever want your soul justified by grace, take care to have your sins judged by the law.

Second, this sense of sin also has a respect to the love of God. And this breaks the heart of the poor returning sinner. Sorrow from the law shuts itself up in the soul and strangles it. Sorrow from the thought of God's love opens it and makes it flow. Thoughts of sinning against the love of God, worked in by the Holy Spirit — what shall I say? Their effects on the heart cannot be described. This made Ezra cry out: 'O my God, I am ashamed and embarrassed to lift up my face to You' (Ezra 9:6), and in verse 10: 'What shall we say after this?' — that is, after all the fruits of love and kindness they had been made partakers of. Thoughts of love and sin placed alongside each other make the soul blush, mourn, be ashamed, and be confounded in itself. So in Ezekiel 36:31: 'Then you will remember your evil ways and your deeds that were not good.' When will they do so? When thoughts and perceptions of God's love are brought home to them. 'And,' says God, 'you will loathe yourselves in your own sight.' The soul now calls to mind what love, what kindness, what mercy, what grace, what patience has been extended to it and of which it has been made a partaker. All these thoughts now flood in upon it like streams of water. Such mercy, such communion, such privileges, such hopes of glory, such foretastes of heaven, such peace, such comfort, such joy, such workings of the Spirit — all for a poor, wretched, lost, abandoned sinner; and all of it despised, neglected, and the God of it all offended and forsaken. 'Ah,' says the soul, 'where shall I take my sorrow?' This fills him with shame and confusion of face, makes him mourn in secret and sigh from the depths of his being. And then,

Third, the blood and cross of Christ is also brought to remembrance by the Holy Spirit. 'Ah,' says the soul, 'have I repaid the astonishing, overwhelming love of my Redeemer like this? Is this the

return, the repayment, I have made to Him? Are not heaven and earth struck with wonder at the despising of that love which fills them with wonder?' This broke Peter's heart at the look of Christ. In this condition, words such as these from Christ will ring in the ears of the soul: 'Did I love you and leave My glory to become a shame and a reproach for your sake? Did I not count My very life — and all that was dear to Me — too small a price for your sake, to save you from the wrath to come? Have I been a wilderness to you, or a land of darkness? What more could I have done for you? When I had nothing left but My life, My blood, and My soul, they all went for you — that you might live by My death, be washed in My blood, and be saved through My soul being made an offering for you. And have you repaid My love like this? Preferring a sinful desire before Me, the world before Me, or through mere sloth and foolishness being turned away from Me? Go, ungrateful and unthankful soul, and see if you can find another Redeemer.' This overwhelms the soul and nearly drowns it in tears and sorrow. Then the bitterness of Christ's sufferings is also brought to mind. They look on Him whom they have pierced and mourn (Zechariah 12:10). They remember His anguish and affliction, His cries and tears, His agony and sweat, His abandonment and distress, His blood and death, the sharpness of the sword in His soul, and the bitterness of the cup placed in His hand. Such a soul now looks at Christ bleeding, dying, and wrestling with wrath and curse for it, and sees its own sin in the streams of blood that flowed from His side. All of this deepens the sense of sin of which we speak. Also,

Fourth, it has respect to the communion and comforts of the Holy Spirit, and all the privileges and fruits of love that He brings to believers. The Spirit is given to believers on the promise of

Christ to dwell in them. He takes up their hearts as His dwelling place for these purposes: to purify and sanctify them, to make them holy and dedicated to God; to furnish them with graces and gifts; to bring them into privileges; to guide, lead, direct, and comfort them; to seal them to the day of redemption. Now this Spirit is grieved by sin (Ephesians 4:30), and His dwelling place is defiled by it (1 Corinthians 6:19; 3:17). Thoughts of this greatly sharpen the spiritual sense of sin in a recovering soul. It considers what light, what love, what joy, what comfort, what privileges it has been made partaker of through Him; what promptings, warnings, and stirrings He gave to keep it from sin. And then it says within itself: 'What have I done? Whom have I grieved? Whom have I provoked? What if the Lord should now, for my foolishness and ingratitude, entirely take His Holy Spirit from me? What if I have grieved Him so that He will dwell in me no more, delight in me no more? What grim darkness and desolation — what utter ruin — would I be left to? In any case, what shame and confusion of face belongs to me for my wretched insincerity and ingratitude toward Him?'

This is the first thing that appears in the returning soul's actions and disposition: a sincere sense of sin on the grounds described, produced in it by the Holy Spirit. A soul in the depths we have described must come to this if it ever expects or looks for deliverance and recovery. Let such persons not expect a renewed sense of mercy without first having a revived sense of sin.

Second, from this flows a willing, genuine, and gracious acknowledgment of sin. People may have a sense of sin and yet let it burn like a fire shut up in their bones, to their constant distress, without being able to come to a free and open acknowledgment of

it. Yes, confession may be made in general terms — even mentioning the very sin that most entangles the soul — and yet the soul fall far short of properly performing this duty. Consider how it stood with David in Psalm 32:3: 'When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.' How could David keep silent while groaning all day long? What kind of silence is consistent with groaning? It is simply a failure to do what is described in verse 5: 'I acknowledged my sin to You, and I did not hide my iniquity.' It was not a silence of waiting submissively on God — that would not have produced the wasting of his spiritual strength that he complains of: 'my bones wasted away.' Nor was it a sullen, stubborn, defiant attitude. But he describes, as Calvin observes — and observes rightly — 'an affection between patience and stubbornness, bordering on both.' That is, he had a deep sense of sin — this troubled and tormented him all day long, which he calls his groaning; it weakened and wore him out, making his bones waste away or his strength decay. Yet he was not able to bring his heart to that genuine, gracious acknowledgment that would have been like lancing a festered wound — giving at least some relief to his soul. God's children are often in this way like children of our own. Though convinced of a fault and genuinely troubled by it, they will hardly acknowledge it. So they go about sighing and mourning, groaning all day long — but an unhealthy and resistant disposition of spirit, under the power of unbelief and fear, keeps them from this duty.

For this acknowledgment to be acceptable to God, two things are required: first, it must be free; and second, it must be full.

First, it must be free and genuinely open. Cain, Pharaoh, Ahab, and Judas all came to an acknowledgment of sin — but against their will. It was pressed out of them; it did not flow from them.

The confession of a person under the terrifying pressure of the law or the dread of impending judgment is like the confession of criminals under torture — they speak what will bring death to themselves and those they love. What they say, though it may be true, is the fruit of compulsion and pain, not of any genuine openness of mind. So it is with those who are merely convicted by the law. They come no more freely to the acknowledgment of sin. The reason is that all sin carries shame, and to be free about shame is naturally impossible, since shame is the natural recoiling of human nature from itself and from appearing as it truly is. But the returning soul has never more freedom, liberty, and openness of spirit than when acknowledging those things of which it is most ashamed. And this is no small evidence that it proceeds from the Spirit who is accompanied by freedom — for where the Spirit of God is, there is freedom (2 Corinthians 3:17). When David was released from his silence, he expressed this disposition in performing this duty (Psalm 32:5): 'I acknowledged my sin to You, and I did not hide my iniquity. I said, I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.' His mouth is now open and his heart is enlarged. He multiplies one expression upon another to show the largeness of his heart. So does a soul rising from its depths in its first approach to God. Having the sense of sin — described above — worked in it by the Holy Spirit, its heart is made free and enlarged to a genuine acknowledgment of its sin before the Lord. It pours out its soul to God and has never more freedom in anything than in dealing with what it is most ashamed of.

Second, it must also be full. Reserves destroy confession. If the soul retains any secret desire to keep some secret pleasure — any lingering fondness for some Rimmon, any bit of the price held

back — this makes the whole more of a theft than an offering. If there remains any bitter root of favoring even one sinful desire or sin, or any occasion or temptation to sin, then no matter how open, free, and earnest a person may be in acknowledging all other sins and evils, the entire duty is rendered worthless. Some people, when brought into depths and anguish over a particular sin and forced to acknowledge it, at the same time pay little attention to their other foolishness and iniquities, which may be no less offensive to God than the one from which their present trouble arises. Let not such a person, as James says in another context, think he will receive anything from God. It must be both full and comprehensive, as well as free and genuine.

The right performance of this duty is so important that the promise of pardon is often particularly attached to it, as something that certainly carries with it all the other duties that make up a full return to God (Proverbs 28:13; 1 John 1:9). Remarkable also is that passage in Job 33:27-28: 'He looks at men, and if anyone says, I have sinned and perverted what was right, and it was not worth it to me — He will deliver his soul from going down into the pit, and his life will see the light.' He will not only be made a partaker of pardon, but of comfort and joy in the light of God's face as well.

Third, there yet remains self-condemnation together with the justifying of God, which lies explicitly in the words of the verse we are considering. There are two parts to this.

First, self-abhorrence. The soul is now entirely displeased with itself and reflects on itself with all emotions of regret and grief. The apostle declares this is how it was with the Corinthians when godly sorrow was working in them (2 Corinthians 7:11) — among other things, it produced in them indignation and a desire to punish

themselves, a reflection on themselves with all manner of dislike and abhorrence. In the resolution of the controversy between God and Job, this is the point where it comes to rest. Just as he had come in general to a free, full, and genuine acknowledgment of sin (Job 40:4-5), so in particular he surrenders his entire cause in this abhorrence of himself (Job 42:6): 'I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes.' 'What a vile and wretched creature I have been,' says the soul. 'I blush and am ashamed to think of my foolishness, baseness, and ingratitude. Is it possible I could deal with the Lord this way? I abhor myself, I loathe myself. I would flee from myself I am so vile and loathsome — a thing deserving contempt from God, angels, and men. And,

Second, self-judgment is also part of it. The apostle urges this on the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 11:31: 'If we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged.' This is the soul pronouncing sentence on itself according to the terms of the law. It brings not only its sin, but itself, before the law. It places itself — as to merit and desert — under the stroke and severity of the law. From this arises a full justifying of God in whatever sentence He may choose to pronounce on the case before Him. These three things that we have passed through compose the disposition and first actions of a gracious soul rising from its depths. They are all clearly expressed in that passage where a notable recovery is described in Hosea 14:1-4. This clears the way for the exaltation of grace — the great purpose God is pursuing in all of this (Ephesians 1:6). What He is now doing is bringing the soul to glory in Him (1 Corinthians 1:31), which is all the return He receives from His immense and infinitely generous outpouring of grace and mercy. Nothing can make grace conspicuous and glorious until the soul is brought to this point.

Grace will not seem high until the soul is laid very low. This also fits and prepares the soul to receive mercy in a sense of pardon — the great thing it is seeking. And it prepares the soul for every duty required of it in the condition in which it finds itself. This brings the soul to waiting with diligence and patience. If things do not immediately answer our expectations, we are ready to say, 'I have done what I can; if it will be no better I must bear it as I am able' — a disposition God abhors. The soul in this frame is content to wait on God's pleasure, as we will see at the close of the Psalm. 'Oh,' says such a one, 'if I ever receive a renewed sense of His love, if I ever enjoy one more smile of His face, it is all of unspeakable grace. Let Him take His own time and season. It is good for me to wait quietly and hope for His salvation.' And this disposition puts the soul to prayer — yes, a soul that is always in this frame always prays. And it is very clear that failure to engage thoroughly in the performance of these duties is the great reason why so few people ever fully break free from their entanglements all their days. People treat their wounds lightly, and therefore after a fresh and painful festering, they are brought back into the same condition of restlessness and trouble in which they were before.

Causes of failure when people are convicted of sin and humbled. Resting in that state. Resting on it.

The soul is not to be left in the state just described. There is other work for it to apply itself to if it intends to come to rest and peace. It has gained an important advantage toward discovering forgiveness. But to remain in that state, or to rest upon it, will not bring it into its harbor. Three things were identified before in the soul's first serious approach to God for deliverance: a sense of sin, acknowledgment of it, and self-condemnation. Two errors often af-

fect people when they are brought into that state. Some rest in it and press no further; others rest upon it and suppose that it is all that is required of them. The Psalmist avoids both errors and, despite all his pressures, reaches out toward forgiveness — as we will see in the next verse. I will briefly explain these two errors and show why they must be avoided.

First, by resting or staying in this state I mean the soul despairing through discouraging thoughts that deliverance cannot be obtained. Being made deeply aware of sin, it is so overwhelmed with thoughts of its own vileness and unworthiness that it sinks under the burden. Such a soul is afflicted and tossed by storms and not comforted (Isaiah 54:11), until it is utterly exhausted. It is like a ship in a storm at sea: when all means of fighting have been exhausted, the crew give themselves up to be driven and tossed wherever the winds and waves please. This brought Israel to cry out: 'My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God' (Isaiah 40:27), and Zion to say: 'The Lord has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me' (Isaiah 49:14). The soul begins secretly to think there is no hope, that God takes no notice of it, that it will one day perish, that relief is far off and trouble close at hand. These thoughts press them so hard that though they do not completely forsake God to their destruction, neither do they draw near to Him effectively enough for their comfort.

This is the first error that a soul in this condition must be enabled to avoid. We know how God rebukes Zion for it. 'Zion said, The Lord has forsaken me, and my Lord has forgotten me' (Isaiah 49:14). But how foolish is Zion, how stubborn, how unbelieving in this! What grounds does she have for such sinful despair, such discouraging conclusions? 'Can a woman,' says the Lord, 'forget her

nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.' He gives the same rebuke to Jacob on a similar complaint in Isaiah 40:28-30. There is nothing more offensive to the Lord, or more harmful to the soul, than this kind of sinful despair. For,

First, it gradually weakens the soul and disables it both for present duties and future effort. As a result, some poor souls mourn and waste away in this condition, never getting one step beyond a tormenting sense of sin all their lives. Some have dwelt on it so long and entangled themselves in such a multitude of troubled thoughts that at length their natural faculties have been weakened and rendered entirely useless — they have lost both their sense of sin and everything else. Against some, Satan has used the opportunity to cast so many entangling objections into their minds that their whole time has been consumed proposing doubts and objections against themselves. They have gone back and forth, from one person to another, and being never able to settle their own thinking, they have spent all their days in a fruitless, withered, comfortless condition. Some who come to a better outcome are for a season brought into such a disorder of spirit, or are so filled with their own troubled thoughts, that even the truths most suited to their condition make no impression on them at all. So the soul is weakened by dwelling too long on these things — until some cry out as those in Ezekiel 33:10: 'Our sins are upon us; we are wasting away in them. How then can we live?'

Second, if this disposition persists on its own, it will gradually give way to harsh thoughts about God, and so to complaining and weariness in waiting on Him. At first the soul neither expects nor fears any such outcome. It supposes it will condemn and abhor it-

self and justify God, and that forever. But when relief does not come, this resolution begins to weaken. Secret thoughts arise in the heart that God is harsh, unyielding, and impossible to deal with. This sometimes produces complaints that will bring the soul to further complaints before it reaches resolution of its trials. Here, in the humiliation that precedes conversion, many a convicted person perishes. They cannot wait for God's time and perish in their impatience. And we have many examples of what even the saints of God have been overtaken with in their own depths and trials. Delight and expectation are the foundations of our abiding with God. Both of these are weakened by a conquering, prevailing sense of sin without some relief coming from even a distant discovery of forgiveness. Therefore our troubled soul does not stay here but presses on toward that discovery.

Second, there is also a resting upon this state that is harmful and damaging. Some people, finding this sense of sin along with all that accompanies it worked in them to some degree, begin to think that now all is well — that this is all that is required of them. They will try to build a life out of whatever comfort arguments they can draw from their own trouble. They think it is grounds for peace that they do not have peace. Some settle here before conversion, and it proves their ruin. Because they are convicted of sin, troubled by it, and burdened with it, they think it will go well for them. But were not Cain, Esau, Saul, Ahab, and Judas convicted of sin and burdened by it? Did it profit them? Did it bring them into the promises? Did the wrath of God not overtake them nonetheless? So it is with many today — they mistake their conviction for conversion, and think their sins are pardoned because they have been troubled.

This, then, is the error we are rejecting — the error that a soul in this condition must carefully avoid: to be so satisfied with its humiliation as to make it a ground of support and comfort, being thereby kept from exercising faith for forgiveness. For this is,

First, a fruit of self-righteousness. For a soul to place the source of its peace or comfort in anything of its own is to fall short of Christ and to settle for self. We must not only be justified but also glory in Him (Isaiah 45:25). People may make use of the evidence of their graces — but only as means toward a further end, never as any resting point for the soul. And this robs even people's humiliations of all true Gospel humility. True humility consists more in believing than in being aware of sin. Believing is the soul's great self-emptying and self-humbling. Awareness of sin can coexist with a stubborn resolve to grasp at something on the basis of self-effort.

Second, while an evangelical sense of sin is a grace, it is not the uniting grace. It is not what connects us to Christ or what, in its own nature, particularly exalts Him. In this sense of sin there is both what is natural and what is spiritual — the matter of it and its spiritual quality. The former consists in sorrow, trouble, self-abasement, dejection, and anxiety of mind, along with similar emotions. Of these I may say, as the apostle says of afflictions, that they are not pleasant but painful. They are accompanied by an aversion toward their object. In their own nature they amount to nothing more than the soul retreating into itself with a dislike of what it is sorrowful about. When these emotions are spiritualized their nature is not changed. In and by them, the soul acts according to their nature — retreating into itself with a dislike of what

they are concerned with. To settle here, then, must necessarily mean stopping short of Christ, whether it is for life or for consolation.

Let there be no mistake. There can be no evangelical sense of sin and humility where there is no union with Christ (Zechariah 12:10). It is simply that in itself and in its own nature it is not saving. Christ is the only rest of our souls. To settle short of Him in anything, for any end or purpose, is to lose it. It is not enough to be prisoners of hope — we must turn to the stronghold (Zechariah 9:12). It is not enough to be weary and burdened — we must come to Him (Matthew 11:28). It is not enough to be weak and know it — we must take hold of God's strength (Isaiah 27:4-5).

Third, pressing toward forgiveness is in fact the very life and power of evangelical humility. How can a person know that his humility is evangelical — that his sorrow is according to God? Is it not from this: that he does not do as Cain did, who cried that his sin was greater than he could bear and then departed from the presence of God; nor as Judas, who repented and hanged himself; nor as Felix, who trembled for a while and then returned to his sinful desires; nor as the people in the prophet, who wasted away in their iniquities out of vexation of heart? He does not divert his thoughts to other things to relieve his soul in its trouble; he does not fix on a righteousness of his own; he does not sluggishly lie down under his distress. Instead, in the midst of it all, he presses his application to God in Christ for pardon and mercy. And it is the soul's coming to God for forgiveness — and not its sense of sin — that gives God the glory of His grace.

We have accompanied the soul this far into its depths. It is now looking for forgiveness. What forgiveness is, and how we come to have a part in it, is the primary subject of this discourse and will be considered next.

VERSE 4



The words explained and the Psalmist's design in them uncovered.

The state and condition of the soul approaching God in this Psalm is recounted in verse 1. It was in the depths — not only the providential depths of trouble, affliction, and the distress that comes with it, but also the depths of conscience, the distress that comes from the guilt of sin, as has been explained in the opening of those verses.

The soul's application to God — with restless intensity and earnestness in that state and condition — its consideration of the law and the severity of God's justice in proceeding by it, and the inevitable ruin of all sinners if God insists on that manner of dealing, have also been opened and shown from the preceding verses.

In this troubled state, perplexed within itself and overwhelmed by contemplating God marking iniquity according to the terms of the law, what it fixes on — from which any relief, stay, or support in such a condition might be expected — is now laid out in this verse.

Verse 4: But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared.

I will first explain the words as to their meaning and significance, then show the Psalmist's design in them with respect to the soul whose condition is represented here, and finally set out the general truths they contain, in which all our concerns lie.

'There is forgiveness' — the Septuagint and Jerome both render it as 'propitiation,' which carries somewhat more than the simple 'pardon' given by some.

The Hebrew word means forgiveness itself — from a root meaning to spare, to pardon, to forgive, to be gracious — and stands opposed to a word formed from the same letters rearranged (common in that language) meaning to cut off and destroy.

The word is consistently applied to sin and expresses everything that goes into pardon or forgiveness. As,

First, it expresses the disposition or willingness to pardon — God's gracious readiness to forgive. Psalm 86:5: 'You, Lord, are good and ready to forgive' — gracious, gentle, merciful, ready to spare and be favorable. So also Nehemiah 9:17: 'You are O God a God of forgiveness' — or as we render it, 'ready to forgive'; a God of pardons, with an abundance of them in Your gracious heart (Isaiah 55:8), always ready to extend pardon to sinners. The word is used again to the same purpose in Daniel 9:9.

Second, it refers to the act of pardoning — actual forgiveness itself. Psalm 103:3: 'Who forgives all your iniquities' — actually discharging you of them. The apostle, drawing on this passage, renders the word in Colossians 3:13: 'Having freely forgiven you all your trespasses' — for this is what the word implies.

And this is the word God uses in the covenant, in that great promise of grace and pardon in Jeremiah 31:34.

We are warranted — indeed required — to take the word in the fullest extent of its meaning and usage. It is a word of grace and calls for an interpretation that leans toward its fullest sense. As we have seen, it may be rendered as propitiation or grace, or as pardon, and it points to three things.

First, the gracious, tender, merciful heart and will of God — who is the God of pardons and forgiveness, always ready to forgive, to show mercy, and to give out pardons.

Second, a respect to Jesus Christ — the only propitiation for sin, as He is explicitly called in Romans 3:25 and 1 John 2:2. This is what stands between the gracious heart of God and the actual pardon of sinners. All forgiveness is founded on propitiation.

Third, it denotes the actual pardon or forgiveness as we receive it — encompassing it both actively, as an act of grace in God, and passively, as it reaches our souls together with the deliverance that attends it. In this sense, looking downward to its effects on us, it is of pure grace; looking upward to its causes and to the Lord Christ, it flows from propitiation or atonement. This is the pardon administered in the covenant of grace.

As to the place these words hold in this Psalm and their relation to the state and condition of the soul described here, this seems to be their meaning.

'O Lord, although it must be granted that if You should mark iniquities according to the terms of the law, every living person would perish — and that forever — yet there is hope for my soul. Even I, who am in the depths of sin-entanglement, may find acceptance with You. For while I am putting my mouth in the dust, if so there may be hope, I find that there is an atonement, a propitiation

made for sin — on the basis of which You say You have found a ransom and will not deal with those who come to You according to the severity and demand of Your justice. Rather, You are gracious, loving, tender, and ready to forgive and pardon, and do so accordingly. There is forgiveness with You.'

The following words — 'therefore You shall be feared,' or 'that You may be feared' — though free from any ambiguity in the original, are rendered so differently by interpreters that it is worth taking note of this in our passage.

The Targum has it, 'that You may be seen.' This does not translate the word exactly, but it does capture the sense of the place well enough. God in His displeasure is said to hide Himself, or His face (Isaiah 8:17): 'The Lord hides His face from the house of Jacob.' Through forgiveness we obtain again the light of His face. This scatters the darkness and clouds around Him and gives us a comforting sight of His face and favor. There is forgiveness with Him, that He may be seen. Moreover, there is only one letter different in the original words — a letter that is commonly exchanged for the other.

The Septuagint renders the words as 'for Your name's sake' — or 'for Your own sake,' that is, freely, without regard to anything in us. This would also allow a fair and sound reading, except that there is unusually strong evidence that the text they used was corrupted. The Latin Vulgate — which for the Psalms was translated from the Septuagint — renders these words as 'for Your law's sake,' which makes clear that the translator read the text differently from the reading we now have. Now though this reading makes no proper sense in itself (for forgiveness is not bestowed for the law's sake), it does reveal the origin of the mistake. The word for 'law'

differs by only one letter from the word for 'that You may be feared,' and it was by a confusion of these that 'for Your law's sake' crept into the text. This gives no support whatsoever to the theory that the Hebrew vowel markings are a late invention — as though differences between manuscripts might arise from the Septuagint translators working from copies that had no vowels, which could cause such discrepancies. For this difference involves a consonant as well as the vowels, so there would be no basis for this theory unless we also claimed that they had copies with different consonants from those we now possess. Bellarmine, in his exposition of this passage, tries to defend the Vulgate reading — 'for Your law's sake' — by claiming that 'law' here refers not to the law of our obedience but to the rule or order of God's dealings with us, that is, His mercy and faithfulness. This is a mere invention to prop up an old error, which any honest person would have simply admitted rather than defended with so weak a pretense. For that word is never used in the sense he invents here, nor can it bear any such meaning.

Jerome renders these words as 'that You may be dreadful or terrible' — which is certainly not the intent of the passage. This observation is made for the relief of the soul, not for the increase of its dread and terror: 'There is forgiveness with You.'

But the words are clear and their sense is plain: 'therefore You shall be feared' or 'that You may be feared.'

In the Old Testament, the fear of the Lord encompasses the whole worship of God — moral and institutional — and all the obedience we owe to Him, both in what we do and how we do it. Since everything we perform for God is to be carried out with reverence and godly fear, this name is given by a figure of speech to the

whole of worship. 'That You may be feared,' then, means 'that You may be served and worshiped' — that I, who am on the verge of fainting and giving up because of sin, may yet be encouraged and continue in the obedience You require of me. And this appears to be the meaning of the whole verse, as it follows from and is shaped by the preceding ones.

'Although, O Lord, no one can approach You, stand before You, or walk with You if You should mark their sins and failures according to the terms of the law — nor could anyone serve so great and holy a God as You — yet because I know from Your own revelation that there is also with You, on the account of Jesus Christ, propitiation, pardon, and forgiveness, I am encouraged to continue with You, to wait for You, to worship You. Without this discovery I would rather have rocks and mountains fall on me to hide me from Your presence.'

But there is forgiveness with You, and therefore You shall be feared.

With the words now opened, we can see clearly in them the state and condition of the soul expressed in this Psalm — a condition that answers the experience of all who have had any dealings with God in and through the depths and entanglements of sin.

Coming from his deep distress (verse 1), having addressed God with fervent, repeated cries — yes, outcries — to Him and to Him alone for relief (verses 1-2), having also acknowledged his iniquities and considered them according to the terms of the law (verse 3), and having confessed himself lost and undone forever on that account (verse 3), he does not remain in this state of self-condemnation and dejection. He does not say, 'There is no hope; God is a

jealous and holy God whom I cannot serve; His law is a fiery law before which I cannot stand, so I may as well give up, sit down, and perish rather than contend any longer.' No — instead, searching by faith into the revelation God makes of Himself in Christ through the covenant of grace, he finds a solid foundation of encouragement to continue waiting on God with expectation of mercy and pardon.

Propositions and observations from the foregoing exposition of the words. The first proposition presented for confirmation. There is no encouragement for any sinner to approach God without a discovery of forgiveness.

From the words as they lie in context in the Psalm, the following propositions arise. First, faith's discovery of forgiveness in God — even without a present sense of its own specific interest in it — is the great support of a sin-troubled soul. Second, Gospel forgiveness — whose discovery is the sole support of sin-distressed souls — relates to the gracious heart and goodwill of the Father, the God of forgiveness; to the propitiation made by the blood of the Son; and to the free pardon or forgiveness according to the terms of the covenant of grace. Third, faith's discovery of forgiveness in God is the sole foundation of adherence to Him in acceptable worship and reverent obedience.

The first of these is what I primarily aim to confirm and apply; the others, only insofar as they coincide with it or may serve to illustrate or demonstrate it.

In handling this truth, so that it may be of the greatest benefit to those whose good is sought in presenting and working through it, I will take the following course and show: first, that there is not

the least encouragement for the soul of a sinner to deal with God without this discovery; second, that this discovery of forgiveness in God is a great, holy, and mysterious matter that very few attain to on sound Gospel grounds; third, that this is nonetheless a great, sacred, and certain truth, as may be shown from its many evidences; fourth, that this is a stable support to a sin-distressed soul — this will be demonstrated, and the whole applied to the various concerns of those who consider it.

First, there is not the least encouragement for the soul of a sinner to entertain any thoughts of approaching God without this discovery. All the rest of the world is covered by a flood of wrath. This is the only ark to which the soul may flee and find rest. Everything outside it is darkness, curse, and terror.

We have an example of this beyond all exception in Adam. When he knew himself to be a sinner and it was impossible — as we will show later — for him to discover anything like forgiveness in God, he abandoned all thought of dealing with Him. The best his foolish scheming could manage was an attempt to escape (Genesis 3:10). 'I heard Your voice in the garden,' he says to God, 'and I was afraid because I was naked, and I hid myself.' Nothing rang in his ears but 'you shall surely die.' In the morning of that very day he had been made by God's own hand. Just hours before he had walked and talked with God in boldness and peace. Why then did nothing possess him now but fear, flight, and hiding? Adam had sinned. The promise had not yet been given. No revelation of forgiveness in God had yet been made. He knew no other course to take than that vain and foolish one of hiding. No more can any of his descendants without that revelation. Whatever else any of them have fixed on in this situation has been no less foolish

than his hiding — and in most cases far more destructive. When Cain received his sentence from God, it says he went out from the presence or face of the Lord (Genesis 4:16). He could never remove himself from God's providential presence — as the Psalmist makes clear at length in Psalm 139:7-9. Even the pagans knew by the light of nature that guilt could never drive a person beyond God's reach.

'Where will you flee, Enceladus? Whatever shores you reach, you will still be under Jupiter.'

They knew that divine vengeance would not spare sinners and could not be avoided (Acts 28:4). From God's gracious presence — which Cain had never enjoyed — he could not depart. What he departed from was God's presence in worship and all outward acts of communion with Him. He had no discovery of forgiveness through faith, and so resolved to have nothing more to do with God or with those who held to Him. This refers to the whole course of his life, not to any single action.

This is also stated in Isaiah 33:14: 'The sinners in Zion are afraid; trembling has seized the godless. Who among us can dwell with the consuming fire? Who among us can dwell with everlasting burnings?' The people described are sinners, hardened sinners and hypocrites. Conviction of sin and its deserved penalty had come upon them. They had no light to discern forgiveness. They saw God only as a consuming fire and everlasting burning — One who would not spare but would certainly inflict punishment according to sin's desert. From this came their conclusion, couched in their question: there can be no peaceful dealings between Him and them; there is no remaining, no enduring His presence. And what this reflection brings the souls of sinners to when conviction grows strong on them, the Holy Spirit shows in Micah 6:6-7: 'With what

shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the God on high? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with yearling calves? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?' The sense of sin presses; forgiveness has not been discovered — like the Philistines closing in on Saul without Samuel coming to direct him — and how the poor soul torments itself in vain, trying to find a way to deal with God! 'Will careful and diligent observance of His own ordinances and institutions relieve me? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings and yearling calves? Alas, you are a sinner, and these sacrifices cannot make you perfect or acquit you (Hebrews 10:1). Shall I do more than He has ever required of any human being? If only I had thousands of rams and ten thousand rivers of oil to offer Him! Alas, if you had all the bulls and goats in the world, it is impossible for their blood to take away sins (verse 4). But I have heard of those who snatched their own children from their mothers' arms and cast them into fire until they were consumed, trying thereby to quiet their consciences and expiate the guilt of their iniquities. Shall I take that course? Will it relieve me? I am ready to give my firstborn to the fire if it will bring me deliverance from my transgressions.' Alas, this never came into God's heart to approve or accept. And as it was then under that form of worship, so it remains now with respect to any duties — whether actually performed or only imagined. Where there is no discovery of forgiveness, they give the soul no relief, no support. God is not to be dealt with on such terms.

The greatness and rarity of the discovery of forgiveness in God. Reasons for it. The testimony of conscience and the law against it.

Second, this discovery of forgiveness in God is great, holy, and mysterious, and very few attain to it on sound Gospel grounds.

All people say there is forgiveness; most are convinced they believe this. Only those in great and desperate extremity — like Cain or Spira — seem to call it into question. But their thoughts about it are empty, groundless, and for the most part wicked and practically atheistic. Elihu tells us that to declare this rightly to a sinful soul is the work of a messenger, an interpreter, one in a thousand — that is, in truth, the work of Christ Himself (Job 33:23). The common thoughts of people about this thing are shallow and foolish, and can be traced to the attitude the Psalmist describes in Psalm 50:21: they think that God is altogether like themselves — that He takes little or no account of these things and passes them over as casually as they do. That the majority of people have, despite all their claims, never in reality had any true discovery of forgiveness — this will be shown with undeniable clarity later. I will shortly demonstrate the difference between their empty presumption and a gracious, Gospel discovery of forgiveness in God. For it must be noted that by this 'discovery' I mean both the revelation God makes of it and our understanding and reception of that revelation to our own benefit, as will be shown immediately.

The difficulty of this discovery arises partly from the obstacles that stand in the way of it and partly from the nature of the thing itself that is discovered. I will briefly address both.

But before I proceed, something must first be said to explain what I specifically mean by a discovery of forgiveness. It may be considered in two ways: first, as a doctrinal, objective discovery of it in its truth; and second, as an experiential, subjective discovery of it in its power. In the first sense, forgiveness in God has been re-

vealed ever since the giving of the first promise. God disclosed it in a word of promise — or it could never have been known, as will be explained later. In this sense, after many lesser degrees and advances in the light of it, it was fully and gloriously brought forth by the Lord Jesus Christ in His own person, and is now revealed and preached in the Gospel by those entrusted with the word of reconciliation. To declare this is the primary work of Gospel ministers. Here lie those unsearchable treasures and riches of Christ which the apostle counted it his chief honor and privilege to be entrusted with declaring and dispensing (Ephesians 3:8-9). I know it is despised by many and misrepresented by many, whose ignorance and blindness is to be mourned. But a day is coming that will reveal what kind of work every man's was. In the second sense — how this discovery is made by faith in the soul — that will be further opened and explained in its proper place. Here many people make a mistake and deceive themselves. Because it is in the book, they think it is in them also. Because they have been taught it, they think they believe it. But it is not so. They have never heard this voice of God at any time, nor seen His form. It has not been revealed to them in its power. For this to happen is a great work. For,

First, the constant voice of conscience stands against it. Conscience — if not seared — inexorably condemns and pronounces wrath and judgment on the soul that has the least guilt clinging to it. It has this advantage: it lies very close to the soul, and through persistence and loudness of speaking it will be heard in what it has to say. It will make the entire soul attend to it, or it will speak like thunder. And its constant voice is that where there is guilt there must be judgment (Romans 2:14-15). Conscience by nature knows nothing of forgiveness. In fact, to hear anything of

forgiveness goes against its very trust, function, and office. If a man of courage and integrity is entrusted to hold a garrison against an enemy, and someone comes and tells him that peace has been made between his master and the enemy — so he may leave his post, open the gates, and stand down — how cautious will he be, lest he be betrayed under this pretense? 'No,' he says, 'I will hold my ground until I have express orders from my superiors.' Conscience is entrusted with the power of God in the soul of a sinner, with a commission to keep everything in order with respect to the judgment to come. It will not betray its trust by believing every report of peace. No — this it says, and it speaks in the name of God: guilt and punishment are inseparable twins. If the soul sins, God will judge. 'What are you telling me about forgiveness? I know what my commission is, and I will abide by it. You will not bring in a superior command, a contrary principle, into my trust. If this forgiveness you speak of is real, it seems I must let go of my throne — another Lord must come in.' Not yet knowing how the whole matter is settled in the blood of Christ. Now whom should a person believe if not his own conscience, which will neither flatter him nor seek to frighten him, but speaks the truth as the matter requires? Conscience has two functions in relation to sin: one is to condemn the acts of sin; the other is to judge the person of the sinner — both with reference to God's judgment. When forgiveness comes, it would separate and divide these functions and take one of them out of conscience's hands. It would divide the spoil with this strong one. Conscience will continue to condemn every act of sin, but it will no longer condemn the sinner himself — the person will be freed from that sentence. Here conscience labors with all its might to hold its entire domain and to keep forgiveness from being en-

throned in the soul. It will allow people to talk about forgiveness, to hear it preached — though they abuse it every day — but to receive it in its power stands in direct opposition to conscience's dominion. 'In this kingdom,' says conscience, 'I will be greater than you.' And in many — in most — it holds its position and refuses to be deposed.

Nor is it an easy thing to deal with it on this point. The apostle tells us that all the sacrifices of the law could not do it (Hebrews 10:2) — they could not bring a person into a state where he would no longer have a conscience of sin, that is, a conscience that condemns the person. For a conscience that senses and condemns sin itself is never to be removed. And this can only be accomplished through the blood of Christ, as the apostle declares at length in that passage.

It is then no easy thing to make a discovery of forgiveness to a soul when the function and office that conscience rightfully claims for itself stands in opposition to it. From this springs the soul's strong drive to establish its own righteousness, by which its natural principles may be preserved in their power. Let self-righteousness be enthroned and natural conscience asks for nothing more — it is satisfied and at peace. It knows the law; it knows righteousness. But as for forgiveness, it says, 'Where does this come from?' Until Christ completes His conquest, there are — on this account — secret strivings in the heart against free pardon in the Gospel, and wavering of mind and spirit concerning it. Yes, and the doubts and fears of believers themselves are nothing other than conscience's struggle to maintain its full dominion — to condemn the sinner as well as the sin. More or less, it maintains its claims against the Gospel as long as we live in this world. The blood of

Christ has a great work to do on the conscience of a sinner. As has been shown, conscience has power and claims the right to condemn both sin and sinner. One part of its power is to be clarified, strengthened, and made more active, vigorous, and watchful; the other part is to be entirely taken away. It will now see more sins than before, more of the vileness of all sins than before, and condemn them with more abhorrence than ever, on more and more glorious grounds than before. But it is also made to see an interposition between those sins and the person of the sinner who committed them — and this is no small or ordinary work.

Second, the law stands against this discovery. The law is a beam of God's own holiness. What it speaks to us, it speaks in the name and authority of God. I will briefly show two things about it.

First, this is the voice of the law: that there is no forgiveness for a sinner. Second, a sinner has strong grounds to give credit to the law in that assertion.

First, it is certain that the law knows neither mercy nor forgiveness. Its very sanction is wholly opposed to them: 'The soul that sins shall die.' 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things written in the book of the law to do them' (Deuteronomy 27:26). From this the apostle declares universally, without exception, that those who are under the law are under the curse (Galatians 3:10). And he says in verse 12, 'The law is not of faith' — there is an incompatibility between the law and believing; they cannot coexist in power at the same time. 'Do this and live; fail and die' is the constant, unchanging voice of the law. This it speaks in general to all and in particular to every one.

Second, the sinner seems to have many weighty reasons to attend to the voice of this law and accept its verdict. For,

First, the law is native to him — his household companion, his old acquaintance. It came into the world with him and has grown up with him from infancy. It was planted in his heart by nature; it is his own reason. He can never shake it off or part with it. It is his close companion, his friend, clinging to him as flesh to bone, so that those who do not have the written law still carry out the work of the law (Romans 2:14-15) — because the law itself is inborn in them, and all the faculties of the soul are at peace with it and in submission to it. It is the bond and joint that holds them together in harmony and correspondence with one another in all their moral actions. It gives life, order, and motion to them all. Now the Gospel, which comes to overturn the law's verdict and rescue the sinner from it, is foreign to his nature — a strange thing to him, something he has no familiarity with. It has not been raised up with him, and there is nothing in him to take its side, to support it, or to argue on its behalf. Is a man not more likely to believe a familiar companion, a friend — indeed himself — than a foreigner with unfamiliar principles, principles that make no sense to his reason (1 Corinthians 1:18)?

Second, the law tells the sinner nothing but what his conscience confirms to be true. There is a constant agreement in the testimony of law and conscience. When the law says a certain thing is a sin worthy of death, conscience says it is exactly so (Romans 1:32). And where the law itself, being only a general rule, goes no further, conscience helps it along and says, 'This and that specific sin — so worthy of death — this very soul is guilty of.' Then the law says, 'Die, as you have deserved.' This agreement must carry enor-

mous weight in persuading the soul to believe the law's report and testimony. The law does not say a single word that the sinner does not have a witness within himself confirming its truth. These two witnesses always agree, and so it seems firmly established as truth that there is no forgiveness.

Third, the law, though it speaks against the sinner's interests, speaks nothing but what is so just, righteous, and fair that it even compels the sinner's own agreement. So Paul tells us that people know this voice of the law to be the judgment of God (Romans 1:32). They know it and cannot but consent that it is God's judgment — that is, good, righteous, fair, and beyond challenge. And indeed, what could be more righteous than its sentence? It commands obedience to the God of life and death, promises a reward, and declares that failure to perform duty will bring death. On these terms the sinner enters the world. They are good, righteous, and holy. The soul accepts them and knows of nothing better or more equitable it could ask for. The apostle insists on this in Romans 7:12-13: 'Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. Did then that which is good bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment sin might become exceedingly sinful.' Wherever the blame falls, the soul cannot but acquit the law and confess that what it says is righteous and beyond contradiction. And rightly so. Now while the authority and credibility of a witness may carry great weight in a doubtful matter, and the agreement of multiple witnesses strengthens testimony, nothing produces belief more powerfully than when the things spoken are themselves just and good and admit of no reasonable objection. So it is in this case.

To the authority of the law and the concurrence of conscience, this is added — the reasonableness and fairness of the thing itself as proposed, even in the judgment of the sinner: namely, that every sin shall be punished and every transgression shall receive its just reward.

Fourth, but still further. What the law says, it says in the name and authority of God. Therefore what it says must be believed, or we make God a liar. It comes not in its own name but in the name of Him who appointed it. You may then ask: Is it really so? Is there no forgiveness in God? For this is the constant voice of the law, which you say speaks in the name and authority of God and is therefore to be believed. I answer briefly with the apostle: what the law speaks, it speaks to those who are under the law. It does not speak to those who are in Christ, whom the law of the Spirit of life has set free from the law of sin and death. But to those who are under the law it speaks, and it speaks the very truth, and it speaks in the name of God, and its testimony is to be received. It says there is no forgiveness in God — for those who are under the law. And those who flatter themselves with a contrary persuasion will find themselves terribly mistaken on the last day.

On these and similar grounds, I say, there seem to be strong reasons why a soul would conclude that things will go according to the law's testimony and that it will find no forgiveness. Law and conscience work together and press their way into the thoughts, mind, and judgment of a sinner. They reinforce each other's testimony and prevail greatly. If any think otherwise, I leave them to their experience. If God ever awakens their consciences to perform their proper duty thoroughly; if He ever opens their souls and lets in the light and force of the law upon them, they will find it no

small struggle to grapple with. I am certain that they prevail so far in the end that in preaching the Gospel we have great cause to say, 'Lord, who has believed our report?' We come with our report of forgiveness — but who believes it? By whom is it received? Neither the lives, the consciences, nor the conduct of the majority give us reason to suppose that it is truly embraced.

Third, the ingrained ideas in the minds of people about the nature and justice of God also stand against this discovery. All people by nature carry indelible impressions of the holiness and purity of God, of His justice and hatred of sin, and of His unwavering righteousness in the government of the world — impressions they can neither set aside nor ignore. For notions about God, whatever they are, will assert themselves and rule in the heart when matters are put to the test. They were present in the pagans of old and remained with them in all their spiritual darkness — as countless examples could show. But so it is with all people by nature: their inward thought is that God is an avenger of sin; that it belongs to His rule and government of the world, His holiness and righteousness, to ensure that every sin is punished. This is His judgment, which all people know, as was noted before (Romans 1:32). They know that it is righteous for God to repay sinners with tribulation. From this arises the dread and fear that seizes people when they sense the presence of God, or anything under Him and above them that seems to come on His behalf. This notion of God as One who avenges all sin exerts itself secretly but effectively. So Adam trembled and hid himself. And it was the saying of old, 'I have seen God and shall die.' When people are under some fearsome providence

— thunder, lightning, storms, darkness — they tremble not so much at what they see, hear, or feel as from their secret thoughts that God is near, and that He is a consuming fire.

These inborn notions universally oppose all notions of forgiveness, which must be brought into the soul from outside — having no natural principle within to promote it.

It is true that people by nature have assumptions and common inborn ideas about other attributes of God besides His holiness and justice — such as His goodness, benevolence, and love for His creatures. But all of these carry within them this embedded assumption: that everything between God and His creatures stands as it did at creation. And since people have no natural conception of forgiveness, the entering of sin weakens, disturbs, and darkens those conceptions of goodness and benevolence that they do have, so that they cannot draw any benefit from them. If they have any notion of forgiveness, it comes from some corrupted tradition — not at all from any universal inborn principle, such as those they have of God's holiness and retributive justice.

This is the first ground from which it appears that a real, solid discovery of forgiveness is indeed a great work — with many difficulties and obstacles standing in the way of its accomplishment.

False presumptions of forgiveness identified. The differences between them and genuine evangelical faith.

Before I proceed to present and work through the remaining evidences of this truth, I must address an objection that will naturally arise in the minds of many readers — one that, if left unanswered, would render what has been said useless to them. So I will clear it out of the way before moving forward.

It will be said: does not all of this directly contradict our daily experience? Do we not find all people holding — and most holding far too strongly — an impression of forgiveness with God? What is more common than the thought that 'God is merciful'? Are not the consciences and convictions of most people silenced by this impression? Can you find anyone who thinks otherwise? Is it not a common complaint that people presume on it to their eternal ruin? Surely, then, something that all people do, that every person can so easily do, and that no one can be kept from doing even when it destroys them, cannot have the difficulty you are claiming. And it is on this very basis that this effort to demonstrate this truth has been laughed to scorn by some — people who have taken it upon themselves to teach others while evidently needing to be taught themselves the very first principles of God's word.

Answer: All of this is true, and much more to this point could be said. The foolishness and presumption of poor souls in this can never be sufficiently mourned. But there is a vast difference between embracing a cloud and a shadow, and possessing the truth in reality. I will show later the true nature of forgiveness and what it consists of, and by that the emptiness of this self-deception will be revealed and exposed. It will become clear in the end that, despite all their claims, the majority of people know nothing at all — or nothing that matters — of what is actually under consideration. For the present, then, I will in a few observations show how far this common delusion differs from a true Gospel discovery of forgiveness — the kind we are inquiring after.

First, the common idea of forgiveness that most people carry is of two kinds. First, there is an atheistic presumption about God — an assumption that He is not so just and holy, or not just and holy

in the way that some represent Him to be — and this is the foundation of their confidence about forgiveness. People think that certain descriptions of God are designed only to frighten them. They think He takes little notice of these things and that whatever He does notice He will easily overlook, as they suppose more befits Him. 'Come, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.' This is their inward thought: 'The Lord will not do good, nor will He do evil' — which the Psalmist says is people's thought that God is just like themselves (Psalm 50:21). They have no deep or serious thoughts of His greatness, holiness, purity, or severity, but think He is like themselves — not greatly moved by what they do. Whatever thoughts they have of sin, they assume God has the same. If a brief prayer is enough for them to feel their conscience is cleared of sin, they think it is enough for God not to punish it. The majority of people make light work of sin, yet in nothing do they more reveal what they truly think of God. Whoever has shallow thoughts of sin has never had serious thoughts of God. In fact, people's undervaluing of sin springs entirely from their contempt of God. All that sin involves flows from its relation to God. And as people's perceptions of God are, so will their perceptions of sin be — since sin is opposition to Him. This is the condition of most people: they know little of God and are little troubled about anything relating to Him. God is not revered, sin is a trifle, and forgiveness is nothing — available to whoever asks for it. But shall this atheistic wickedness of the human heart be called a discovery of forgiveness? Is this not to make God an idol? He who is not acquainted with God's holiness and purity, who does not know sin's deserving and sinfulness, knows nothing of forgiveness.

Second, from the doctrine of the Gospel as it is commonly preached and made known, there is a general idea formed in people's minds that God is ready to forgive. From this preaching, I say, people develop a doctrinal impression of this truth — but without any truly satisfying foundation for that impression as it relates to themselves. They have heard it, they have been told it repeatedly, and so they think it and are resolved to go on thinking it. A general persuasion of this kind spreads across all to whom the sound of the Gospel comes. It is not a persuasion rooted in trustful faith in the Gospel; it is an opinion that grows from hearing reports of it.

People find some relief by it in the ordinary course of their daily lives, in the duties of worship they do perform, and in their troubles and distresses — whether inward troubles of conscience or outward afflictions of providence — and so they resolve to hold on to it.

This is what I will briefly address, showing the differences between this common prevailing impression of forgiveness and faith's discovery of it in power to the soul.

First, what we are rejecting is loose and general — not fixed, rooted, or planted in the mind. This is always the case when people receive things merely in their ideas rather than in their power. It lacks firmness and foundation, which are deficiencies that accompany all ideas retained only in the memory and not embedded in the judgment. They have general thoughts about it and use them as occasion demands. They hear that God is a merciful God and intend to deal with Him as such. As for the true ground, origin, and basis — on what account the pure and holy God who does no injustice, the righteous God whose judgment it is that those who com-

mit sin are worthy of death, should yet pardon iniquity, transgression, and sin — they do not weigh it, they do not consider it. Or if they do, it is in the same shallow, theoretical way in which they consider the thing itself. They take it for granted that it is so and are never seriously pressed to ask how it comes to be so — because in reality they have no genuine concern in it. How many thousands might we meet who simply assume that forgiveness is available with God, yet have never had any serious engagement in their souls with the grounds of it or its consistency with His holiness and justice? But those who know it by faith have a sense of it fixed particularly and distinctly on their minds. They have been pressed to inquire into its foundation and grounds in Christ, so that on a solid and unquestionable basis they can approach God and say, 'There is forgiveness with You.' They see how and by what means more glory comes to God through forgiveness than through punishing sin — a matter that the other kind of person is not at all concerned about. If they can escape punishment, they are mostly indifferent to whether God receives any glory from it.

Second, the first kind of impression arises without any testing or inquiry in the consciences of those who hold it. They have not, through the power of conviction and distress of conscience, been pressed to inquire whether this thing is true or not. It is not a persuasion they have arrived at in the process of seeking peace for their own souls. It is not the result of a deep search for rest. It precedes trial and experience, and so it is not faith but opinion. For though faith is not experience, faith is inseparable from experience, as every practical habit is. Distress in their consciences has been prevented by this opinion, not healed. The reason most people are not seriously troubled about their sins is their persuasion

that God is merciful and will pardon — when in truth no one can genuinely have that persuasion on Gospel grounds in the ordinary way, except those who have been genuinely troubled over sin. So it is with those who make this discovery by faith. They have had conflicts in their own spirits. Being deprived of peace, they have conducted a diligent search into whether forgiveness was to be found at all. The persuasion they have of it — whether stronger or weaker — is the outcome of a trial they have gone through in their own souls, of an inquiry into how things stood between God and them regarding peace and acceptance of their persons. This is an enormous difference. The one sort might possibly have had trouble in their consciences over sin, were it not for their opinion of forgiveness. That opinion has prevented and stifled their convictions rather than healing their wounds — which is the work of the Gospel. It has kept them from being wounded, which is the work of false security. Indeed, here lies the ruin of most of those who perish under the preaching of the Gospel. They have received the general idea of pardon; it floats in their minds and immediately presents itself as relief on every occasion. Whenever God begins to deal with their consciences — in the preaching of the word, under an affliction, or upon some great sin against their ruling light — before the conviction can ripen or come to any completion, before it approaches its proper work, they choke it and heal their consciences with this idea of pardon. Many a man is cured in this way between the church meeting and his own front door. You can see them leave shaking their heads and beating their chests, and before they reach home they are as whole as ever. 'Well — God is merciful, there is pardon' — this has done the cure. The other kind

have obtained their persuasion as the result of discovering Christ in the Gospel after full conviction. They have had trials, and this is the outcome.

Third, the notional impression of forgiveness produces no love to God, no delight in Him, no reverence of Him — but rather a contempt and casual attitude in dealing with Him. There are none in the world who treat God worse than those who hold an ungrounded persuasion of forgiveness. And if they do fear Him, or love Him, or obey Him in any measure, it is from other motives and considerations — not from this — and these other motives will not make anything they do acceptable. They may love God as One who is good to creation; they may fear Him as One who is great and powerful. But a sense of pardon has no power over them for any such ends. Carnal boldness, formalism, and contempt of God are the common fruits of such a notion and persuasion. Indeed, this is what produces the greatest sinners in the world. People who have a general impression but not a sense of the particular power of pardon — whether in outward or inward sins, openly or secretly — are the great sinners among humanity. Where faith makes a discovery of forgiveness, everything is different. Great love, fear, and reverence of God are its companions. Mary Magdalene loved much because much had been forgiven her. Great love springs from great forgiveness. 'There is forgiveness with You,' says the Psalmist, 'that You may be feared.' No unbeliever truly and experientially knows the truth of that inference. But so it is when people fear the Lord and His goodness (Hosea 3:5). I say, then, where pardoning mercy is truly grasped, where faith makes a discovery of it to the soul, the soul is drawn close to God and filled with the great springs of love, delight, fear, and reverence (Psalm 116:1, 5-7).

Fourth, this notional impression of the pardon of sin produces no serious, thorough hatred and detestation of sin, and does not prevail in leading to its abandonment. On the contrary, it secretly insinuates into the soul encouragements to continue in sin. Its nature is to diminish and minimize sin and to support the soul against its convictions. So Jude tells us that some turn the grace of God into an occasion for immorality (verse 4) — and he says they are ungodly people. But how can they turn the grace of our God into immorality? Is grace itself capable of being converted into lust or sin? Can what was once grace ever become license? It is objective, not subjective grace — the doctrine, not the real substance of grace, that is intended. The doctrine of forgiveness is this grace of God that can be so abused. From it, people who have only a general idea of forgiveness habitually draw secret encouragements to sin and folly. Paul also lets us know that worldly people, coming to a doctrinal familiarity with Gospel grace, are very prone to drawing such conclusions (Romans 6:1). And it will be revealed on the last day how incalculably this glorious grace has been perverted in the world. It would have been better for many if they had never heard the name of forgiveness. It is otherwise when this revelation is truly received in the soul through believing (Romans 6:14). Being under grace — under the power of belief in forgiveness — is our great protection from being under the power of sin. The faith of forgiveness is the principle of Gospel obedience (Titus 2:11-12).

Fifth, the general idea of forgiveness brings no sweetness or rest to the soul. It may produce flashes of joy, but not lasting rest. The doctrine floats back and forth in the minds of those who hold it, but their wills and affections have no solid delight or rest by it. Because of this, despite all the profession of forgiveness made in

the world, most people ultimately ground their peace and comfort in themselves. Their sense of well-being moves up and down according to how they feel about their own doing well or poorly — according to whatever their ruling light of conscience may be. Each person in his own way finds satisfaction in what he does in response to his own convictions, and is inwardly troubled about his condition according to how far he seems to fall short of them. They do not know how to build a full life of contentment on pardon. One duty gives them more true repose than many thoughts of forgiveness. But faith finds sweetness and rest in forgiveness. When grasped by faith, it is the soul's only harbor. It leads a person to God as One who is good and to Christ as rest. Fading, evanescent joys often accompany the one, but solid delight together with constant obedience are the fruits only of the other.

Sixth, those who have only the former take up their persuasion on false grounds — though the thing itself is true — and they cannot but use it for false ends and purposes, contrary to its natural and proper tendency. Their false grounds will be revealed when I come to treat the true nature of Gospel forgiveness. As for their ends, the impression is generally used only to fill in what is lacking. Self-righteousness is their foundation, and when that is too small or too narrow to cover them, they piece it out with forgiveness. Where conscience accuses, this must supply the deficiency. Faith, on the other hand, places forgiveness on its proper foundation — of which more later — and uses it for its proper end: namely, to be the sole and only ground of our acceptance with God. That is the proper use of forgiveness, that everything may be of grace — for when the foundation is pardon, the entire superstructure must be grace. From what has been said, it is clear that

despite the contrary suggestion implied in the objection now removed, it is a great thing to have Gospel forgiveness discovered to a soul in a saving manner.

The true nature of Gospel forgiveness. Its relation to the goodness, grace, and will of God. Its relation to the blood of Christ. Its relation to the promise of the Gospel. What faith considers about it.

The difficulties that stand in the way of faith's discovery of forgiveness — showing it to be a matter of greater weight and importance than commonly understood — have been discussed in the foregoing discourse. There is yet another ground for the same truth. This one is taken from the nature and greatness of the thing itself discovered — that is, of forgiveness. To this end I will show what it is, what it consists of, and what it encompasses and relates to, according to the meaning of the second proposition laid down earlier.

I am not here taking forgiveness strictly and precisely as the act of pardoning, nor will I dispute what that consists of in a technical sense. Consciences that come with sin-entanglement to God know nothing of such debates. Nor will the expression 'there is forgiveness with God' allow any such restriction as to refer only to the formal act of pardon. My task is to inquire into the nature of the pardon that poor, convicted, troubled souls seek, and which Scripture proposes to them for their relief and rest. And I will not handle this in the abstract either, but in relation to the truth under consideration — namely, that it is a great thing to attain a true Gospel discovery of forgiveness.

First, as was shown in the opening of the words, the forgiveness we are inquiring after is related to the gracious heart of the Father. By this I understand two things.

First, the infinite goodness and graciousness of His nature. Second, the sovereign purpose of His will and grace.

There is in forgiveness this weighty consideration — the infinite goodness of God's nature. Sin stands in direct opposition to God. It is a rebellion against His sovereignty, an opposition to His holiness, a provocation to His justice, a rejection of His yoke, and — as far as the sinner is able — a casting off of that dependence which a creature owes its Creator. That God should have pity and compassion on sinners, in every one of whose sins all of this evil is present — and incomparably more than we can comprehend — argues an infinitely gracious, good, and loving heart and nature in Him. For God does nothing but what is consistent with the properties of His nature and flows from them. All the acts of His will are expressions of His nature.

Whatever God proposes as an encouragement for sinners to come to Him has a special relation to or influence on the forgiveness that is with Him. For nothing can encourage a sinner as such, except insofar as it is or relates to forgiveness. That this graciousness of God's nature lies at the head and spring — is the root from which forgiveness grows — is evident from that solemn proclamation in which He declared His name and thereby revealed His nature (Exodus 34:6-7): 'The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth, who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression, and sin.' His forgiving of iniquity flows from the fact that in His nature He is merciful, gracious, patient, and abounding

in goodness. If He were not so — infinitely so — there would be no point in looking to Him for forgiveness. Having made this known as His name and thereby declared His nature, He in many places proposes it as a relief and refuge for sinners and as an encouragement to come to Him and wait for mercy from Him. Psalm 9:10: 'Those who know Your name will put their trust in You.' It will encourage them to do so. Others have no foundation for their confidence. But if this name of God is truly made known to us by the Holy Spirit, what could prevent us from coming to Him and resting on Him? So Isaiah 50:10: 'Who is among you who 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.' Not only sinners, but sinners in great distress are addressed here. Darkness of state or condition in Scripture denotes everything involving desolation and trouble. To be in darkness where there is yet some light — some relief, though darkness predominates — is sad and comfortless. But to not only be in darkness but to walk in it — that is, to continue in a course of darkness with no light, no discovery of help or relief — seems an overwhelming condition. Yet sinners in this very state are called to trust in the name of the Lord. I have shown before that nothing but forgiveness — or what relates to it and encourages the expectation of it — is of any use to a sinner, and far less to one in such great distress because of sin. Yet such a person is here sent to nothing but the name of the Lord, in which His gracious heart and nature is revealed. That, then, is the very fountain and spring of forgiveness. And this is what John would work a sense of into our souls when he tells us that God is love (1 John 4:8) — that is, One of infinitely gracious, tender, good, compassionate, and loving nature. Infinite

goodness and grace is the soil from which forgiveness grows. It is impossible for this flower to spring from any other root. Unless this is revealed to the soul, forgiveness is not revealed. To consider pardon merely as it terminates on ourselves — and not as it flows from God — will bring neither benefit to us nor glory to God.

This point also confirms that the discovery of forgiveness we are discussing is no ordinary thing — it is a great discovery. When people come with a sense of the guilt of sin and begin to think seriously and deeply about God, they will find it is no easy matter to have their hearts truly and thoroughly convinced of His loving and gracious nature toward the forgiveness of sinners. It is easy enough to say so in general terms, but the soul will not find it so easy to believe it for itself. What was said earlier about the inborn notions people carry regarding God's justice, holiness, and severity will come into full force here. Though people profess that God is gracious, yet the aversion they have toward Him and toward fellowship with Him shows plainly that they do not believe what they say and profess. If they truly believed it, they could not help but delight in Him and trust Him — but they do not, for those who know His name will put their trust in Him. So the lazy servant in the parable said, 'I knew that you were a harsh man' — perhaps he professed differently before, but that was what lay in his heart when it came to the test. What is necessary for those to whom this discovery is to be made is a spiritual apprehension of the gracious and loving heart and nature of God. This is the spring from which everything else flows, and that fountain must be infinitely sweet to produce such streams. Anyone who considers the glorious structure of heaven and earth and all they contain must conclude that they were the product of infinite wisdom and power — nothing less

could have brought such an effect. And anyone who truly considers forgiveness and looks at it with a spiritual eye must conclude that it comes from infinite goodness and grace. This is what the hearts of sinners wrestle with when they come to seek pardon. Psalm 86:5: 'You, Lord, are good and ready to forgive.' Nehemiah 9:17: 'You are a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great lovingkindness.' And Micah 7:19: 'Who is a God like You, who pardons iniquity — because He delights in mercy.' God encourages sinners in this, wherever He says that He forgives sins and blots out iniquities for His own sake or for His name's sake — meaning He will deal with sinners according to the goodness of His own gracious nature. So Hosea 11:9: 'I will not execute the fierceness of My anger; I will not return to destroy Ephraim, for I am God and not man.' If no more mercy, grace, and compassion could be shown in this case than what could possibly be stored up in the heart of a man, it would be impossible for Ephraim to be spared. But God says, 'I am God and not man.' Consider the infinite largeness, generosity, and goodness of the heart of God — and there is yet hope. When a sinner is earnestly seeking forgiveness, nothing concerns him more than the heart of God toward him. There is nothing he labors harder to discover, and nothing that sin and Satan labor harder to hide from him. He turns this over in his mind and wrestles with it constantly. And if the voice of God in Isaiah 27:4 — 'Fury is not in Me' — ever sounds in his heart, he is relieved from his great distress. Our Savior seems to address this very fear in John 16:26-27: 'I do not say that I will ask the Father on your behalf, for the Father Himself loves you.' The disciples had good thoughts of the tender heart and care of Christ the Mediator toward them — but what was the heart of

the Father? What reception would they find with Him? Would Christ need to pray that they might find favor with Him? No — as for the love of His heart, there is no need of it, for the Father Himself loves you. If this then belongs to forgiveness — and everyone who has truly sought it knows that it does — then it is certainly no common discovery to have it revealed to the soul.

To have all the clouds and darkness that sin raises between us and the throne of God cleared away; to have the fire, storms, and tempests kindled around Him by the law removed; to have His glorious face unveiled and His holy heart opened, and to be given a view of those infinite treasures of goodness, mercy, love, and kindness that have had an unchangeable dwelling there from all eternity; to have a discovery of these eternal springs of patience and forgiveness — this is something that none but Christ can accomplish, as John 17:6 shows.

Second, this is not all. This eternal ocean, infinitely satisfied with its own fullness and perfection, does not naturally pour out streams for our refreshment. Mercy and pardon do not flow from God the way light comes from the sun or water from the sea — as a necessary result of their nature, whether they will it or not. It does not automatically follow that anyone must receive forgiveness simply because God is infinitely gracious. For may He not do as He wills with what is His own? Who has given to Him first, that it should be paid back to him? Romans 11:35. All the fruits of God's goodness and grace are kept entirely within His own sovereign will and pleasure. This is His great glory, as shown in Exodus 33:18-19. 'Show me Your glory,' said Moses. And God said, 'I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the Lord before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious.'

When God proclaims His name — that He is merciful, gracious, patient, and abounding in goodness — some might conclude that things must go well for everyone. They might think people hardly need to seek mercy from Him. But God says: this is My great glory — that I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious. There must be a free act of God's will to deal with us according to His abundant goodness, or we can have no share in it. I call this the purpose of His grace — the good pleasure He has purposed in Himself (Ephesians 1:9), or as it is described in Ephesians 1:5-6: the good pleasure of His will, purposed to the praise of His glorious grace. This free and gracious will of God — this purpose to act toward sinners according to His own abundant goodness — is another element that shapes the forgiveness we are discussing. Pardon flows immediately from a sovereign act of free grace. This free purpose of God's will and grace to pardon sinners is in fact what is chiefly meant when we say there is forgiveness with Him. That is, He is pleased to forgive, and doing so is consistent with His nature. The mystery of this grace is deep — it is eternal and therefore beyond full comprehension. Few people's hearts are lifted to contemplate it. People settle for a general notion of mercy, which does them little real good. They want to escape punishment, but they never inquire into what it truly means to be forgiven. So whatever they know of it, they come by easily — and will find in the end that it does them little good. But these fountains of God's activity are revealed so that they may become the fountains of our comfort.

Now this purpose of God's grace involves several acts, all of them relating to Gospel forgiveness.

First, there is God's purpose of sending His Son as the great means of procuring and purchasing forgiveness. Though God is infinitely and incomprehensibly gracious, and though He purposes to extend His grace and goodness to sinners, He will do so in a way that does not compromise His own holiness and righteousness. His justice must be satisfied, and His holy anger against sin must be made known. Therefore He purposed to send His Son — and has sent Him — to open the way for mercy, without in any way diminishing the glory of His justice, holiness, and hatred of sin. It would be better for us all to fall eternally short of forgiveness than for God to lose any of His glory. This is stated in Romans 3:25: God put Him forward as a propitiation through faith in His blood, to declare His righteousness for the remission of sins that are past. The goal is the remission of sins, but it must be accomplished in such a way that not only God's mercy but also His righteousness is declared — and therefore it must come through a propitiation, an atonement, in the blood of Christ. See also John 3:16, 1 John 4:9, and Romans 5:8. This also lies within the mystery of the forgiveness administered in the Gospel — it comes forth from God's eternal purpose of making a way, through the blood of Christ, for the granting of pardon. And this greatly magnifies the excellence of this discovery. People who have shallow thoughts of God — whose hearts were never struck with awe at His majesty and greatness, who never seriously considered His purity and holiness — may think it a small thing for God to pardon sin. But do they consider the means by which it had to be accomplished — the sending of His only Son to die, as we will see further on? And there was no other way it could be done. Let us set aside familiar assumptions and received traditions and weigh this matter carefully. We will

undoubtedly find it to be a great thing that forgiveness should be with God in such a way that it is made available to us — knowing something of what we are — by the sending of His only Son to die. How little is this truly believed, even among those who profess it? And how small and shallow are the thoughts people have about it when they seek pardon? For most, avoiding punishment is the full extent of their aim and desire — the only thing they think about when dealing with God about sin. Such people think our task here is easy — merely to prove that forgiveness exists with God. But this impression of ease comes from their own ignorance and darkness. If they ever truly come to search for it — to inquire into its nature, reasons, causes, and fountains — they will give a very different account of it. Christ is the center of the mystery of the Gospel, and forgiveness is laid up in the heart of Christ, flowing from the Father's love. In Him are hidden all the treasures of forgiveness. And surely it is no small thing to have the heart of Christ revealed to us. When believers seek pardon, their faith engages with this reality — that God, with whom the soul has to deal, has sent the Lord Christ to die, so that forgiveness might be freely given out. They do not dwell on general notions of escaping punishment; such thoughts are not enough for them. They have a closer dealings with God than to be satisfied with that. They inquire into the graciousness of His nature, the good pleasure of His will, and the purpose of His grace. They ponder and look into the mystery of His wisdom and love in sending His Son. If these springs are not clear to them, the streams will bring them little refreshment. It is not enough merely to seek salvation — we are to inquire and search carefully into the nature and manner of it. These are the things that the angels themselves long to look into (1 Peter 1:11-13). Yet some think

that having a set of words about them gives them a sufficient grasp of these things. Doubtless one reason why many who truly believe still waver about forgiveness all their days is that they have never exercised faith to look into the springs of it — its eternal fountains — but have merely stayed with the idea of actual pardon. In any case, these things lie entirely outside the consideration of those who merely claim an acquaintance with this truth.

Second, there is another sovereign act of God's will to be considered here — His eternal designation of the persons who will be made partakers of this mercy. He has not left this to chance and uncertainty, as though it were unknown to Him who would be pardoned and who would not. No one ever becomes a partaker of forgiveness except those whom He has eternally and graciously appointed to it. The apostle declares this in Ephesians 1:5-7: the source is His eternal predestination, the end is the glory of His grace, the means is redemption in the blood of Christ, and the thing itself is the forgiveness of sins. No one ever is or can be made a partaker of forgiveness except by virtue of this act of God's will and grace, which therefore has a particular influence on it and must be considered in any serious treatment of the subject. I know this can be abused by pride, presumption, and unbelief — as the whole work of God's grace can be, and in fact the blood of Christ has been abused in a special way. But in its proper place and use, it has a significant influence both on the glory of God and on the consolation of human souls.

There are also other acts of this purpose of God's grace — such as giving sinners to Christ and giving sinners a share in Christ — but I will not elaborate on these, since their nature is sufficiently revealed in the one already explained.

Second, forgiveness relates to the propitiation made in and by the blood of Christ the Son of God. This was stated in the opening of the text. Here lies the knot and center of Gospel forgiveness. It flows from the cross and springs out of the grave of Christ.

Elihu describes it this way in Job 33:24: 'God is gracious to him and says, Deliver him from going down to the pit; I have found a ransom.' The whole of what is intended lies in these words. First, there is God's gracious and merciful heart toward the sinner — 'He is gracious to him.' Second, there is the actual pardon itself, which we will discuss later — 'Deliver him from going down to the pit.' Third, there is the center of the whole, where God's gracious heart and actual pardon meet — and that is the ransom, the propitiation or atonement in the blood of Christ — 'I have found a ransom.'

The same truth is expressed in Isaiah 53:11: 'My righteous Servant will justify many, for He will bear their iniquities.' The justification of sinners begins with absolution or pardon. This arises from Christ's bearing of their iniquities. In doing so, He finished the transgression, made an end of sin, and made reconciliation for iniquity (Daniel 9:24). All the sacrifices — and consequently the entire worship of the Old Testament — pointed to this connection between forgiveness and the shedding of blood. From this the apostle concludes that without the shedding of blood there is no remission (Hebrews 9:22) — meaning all pardon arises from bloodshedding, even the blood of the Son of God. So we are said to have in Him redemption, even the forgiveness of sins (Ephesians 1:7). Our redemption in His blood is our forgiveness — not that we are all actually pardoned at the moment of the cross, for to that must be added the Gospel granting of pardon, which we will dis-

cuss later. But through His blood it is procured, the grant of pardon is sealed in it, and the certainty is given that it will in due time be applied to us. This is the thrust of the apostle's argument in Romans 3:24-26: the work described there proceeds from grace, serves the interest of righteousness, is carried out through the blood of Christ, and results in forgiveness. The blood of Christ relates to the pardon of sin in several ways.

First, pardon is purchased and procured by it. Our redemption is our forgiveness, as a cause contains its effect. No soul is pardoned except with reference to the blood of Christ as the procuring cause of that pardon. Thus He is said to have washed us in His blood (Revelation 1:5); to have purged our sins in Himself (Hebrews 1:3); by one offering to have taken away sin and to have perfected forever those who are sanctified (Hebrews 10); to be the ransom and propitiation for our sins (1 John 2:2); to have made an end of sin (Daniel 9:24); and to have made reconciliation for the sins of His people (Hebrews 2:17). God has enclosed His rich stores of pardon and mercy in the blood of Jesus.

Second, in His blood the promise of pardon is ratified and confirmed, so that nothing is lacking for our complete forgiveness but our pleading the promise by faith in Him. 2 Corinthians 1:20: 'All the promises of God are in Him Yes, and in Him Amen' — that is, faithfully, irrevocably, and immutably established. The apostle, having told us that God's covenant promise is that He will be merciful to our sins and iniquities (Hebrews 8:12), goes on to inform us that in Christ's undertaking this covenant becomes a testament (Hebrews 9:15-17) — so ratified in His blood that mercy and forgiveness of sin are irrevocably secured for us in it.

Third, in His own person as the head of the church, Christ received a full acquittal on behalf of the whole body. His personal discharge upon completing His work was a pledge of the discharge that would in due time be given to His entire mystical body. Peter tells us in Acts 2:24 that it was impossible for death to hold Him. Why? Because death was inflicted on Him as a penalty, and when He had paid the debt, He was legally to be acquitted. Now for those on whose behalf and in whose name and place He suffered, it was in their name and place that He received His acquittal.

Fourth, upon His death God the Father entrusted to Him the entire administration of forgiveness. Acts 5:31: 'He gives repentance and the forgiveness of sins.' It is Christ who forgives us (Colossians 3:13). All forgiveness is now at His disposal, and He pardons whom He will — all who have been given to Him by the Father — never casting out any who come to God through Him. He is entrusted with all the stores of His Father's purpose and His own purchase, and therefore declares that all things that the Father has are His (John 16:15).

In all these ways forgiveness relates to the blood of Christ. Mercy, pardon, and grace could find no other way to flow from the heart of the Father than through the very heart's blood of the Son, and so they stream to the heart of the sinner.

Two things are chiefly to be considered in forgiveness as it relates to the blood of Christ. First, the way it was procured; second, the way it is administered by Him. The first is deep, mysterious, and awesome — it came through His blood, the blood of the cross, the anguish of His soul, His enduring of wrath and curse. The sec-

ond is gracious, merciful, and tender — which is why so many things are said about His mercifulness and faithfulness, to encourage us to look to Him for forgiveness.

This also adds to the mysterious depths of forgiveness and makes its discovery a weighty matter. The soul that earnestly seeks it must consider what it cost. How casually do most people treat pardon? How easy they think it is to understand it, and not very hard to obtain it. But to have genuine fellowship with God in the blood of His Son is something of an entirely different nature than most imagine — people who think they understand well enough what it means to be pardoned. 'God be merciful' is a common saying, and equally common is the desire that He would be so for Christ's sake. Poor souls are shaped by such expressions who know nothing of God, nothing of mercy, nothing of Christ, nothing of the mystery of the Gospel. Others look at the outside of the cross — but how few attain to seeing into the mystery of the Father's love working in the blood of the Mediator, to considering by faith the great transaction of divine wisdom, justice, and mercy accomplished there? To come to God through Christ for forgiveness — and in doing so to behold the law issuing all its threats and curses in His blood, losing its sting, and ending its demand for punishment at the cross; to see all sins gathered up in the hand of God's justice and made to meet on the Mediator; and to see eternal love springing triumphantly from His blood, flourishing into pardon, grace, mercy, and forgiveness — this the heart of a sinner can only be enlarged to receive by the Spirit of God.

Third, forgiveness includes the free granting, discharge, or pardon of sin according to the terms of the Gospel — and this may be considered in two ways.

First, as it rests in the promise itself — that is, God's gracious declaration of pardon to sinners in and by the blood of Christ; His covenant made to that end, which is presented in various ways according to what He knew was needed to produce faith and communicate the consolation He intends through it.

This is the law of His grace — the declaration of the mystery of His love, as discussed above.

Second, there is the bringing home and applying of all this mercy to the soul of a sinner by the Holy Spirit — through which we are freely forgiven all our trespasses (Colossians 2:13).

Gospel forgiveness, I say, takes in all these things — these principles all have an influence on it. What makes this clearer — and with this I will close this consideration of forgiveness's nature — is that faith, in applying itself to God for forgiveness, distinctly engages with these elements: sometimes fixing on one alone, sometimes on another, and sometimes taking all of them into view together. Not that at any time it fixes on one to the exclusion of the others, but that at different seasons it finds special encouragement, or is especially drawn, by one of them more than the rest. That one then becomes an entry point — a door into the treasures laid up in all the rest. Let me illustrate each one in turn.

First, sometimes faith fixes on the name and infinite goodness of God's nature and draws forgiveness from there. The Psalmist does this in Psalm 86:5: 'You, Lord, are good and ready to forgive.' He rests his pursuit and expectation of pardon on the infinite goodness of God's nature. So also Nehemiah 9:17: 'You are a God of pardons, ready to forgive, of an infinite, gracious, and loving na-

ture — not severe and wrathful.' And this is what we are encouraged to do in Isaiah 50:10 — to rest on the name of God — as in countless other places.

In this way faith often finds a particular sweetness and encouragement in the consideration of God's gracious nature. Sometimes this is the first thing faith fixes on, and sometimes the last thing it rests in. Often it makes a stand here when driven from every other ground. It can say, whatever else may be uncertain, God is gracious — and at least arrive at the conclusion drawn from Joel 2:13-14: 'God is gracious and merciful — who knows but that He will return?' When faith has laid hold on this consideration, it will not easily be driven from its expectation of relief and forgiveness.

Second, sometimes the soul by faith approaches the sovereignty of God's will in a particular way — the will by which He is gracious to whom He will be gracious and merciful to whom He will be merciful, which as was shown is another significant spring or principle of forgiveness. This is the path David's faith took in his great distress and perplexity (2 Samuel 15:25-26): 'If I find favor in the eyes of the Lord, He will bring me back; but if He says, I have no delight in you, behold, here I am — let Him do to me as seems good to Him.' What David was wrestling with was whether God had any delight in him — that is, whether God would graciously pardon and forgive the great sin against which at that time He was showing His anger. David lay down before the sovereign grace of God and waited patiently to discover the free decision of His will concerning him. At this door, as it were, he entered into consideration of those other springs of pardon that faith inquires into and rests on. Sometimes this is the only glimmer of hope that appears to a distressed soul — which in time fills the whole horizon, as the

other considerations are added, and yields plentiful refreshing showers. A sin-entangled soul is often reduced to this condition when looking for relief. It can see nothing except this: that God is able, and can — if He graciously chooses — relieve and acquit him. All other supports, all other springs of relief, are shut off or hidden from view. The springs may in fact be close at hand, as they were for Hagar, but the soul's eyes are kept from seeing them. So they cast themselves on God's sovereign pleasure and say with Job, 'Though He slay me, I will still trust in Him — I will not let Him go.' In themselves they are lost — that much is certain. How the Lord will deal with them they do not know. They see no signs or tokens any more; evidence of God's grace in them, or of His love and favor toward them, is entirely out of sight. Any present personal interest in Christ seems foreign to them, and they lie every moment at the edge of eternity. What course should they take? If they remain at a distance from God, they will surely perish — for who has hardened himself against Him and prospered? And there is not even the slightest relief to be had except from and through Him, for who can forgive sins but God? So they bring their guilty souls into His presence and wait on the pleasure of His grace, willing to submit to whatever He speaks concerning them. And sometimes this proves an anchor to a soul tossed by the storm — not giving it full rest and peace, but saving it from the rock of despair. There it stays until more and more light breaks forth upon it.

Third, faith dealing with forgiveness commonly fixes in a particular way on its relation to the mediation and blood of Christ. So the apostle directs in 1 John 2:1-2: 'If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and He is the propitiation for our sins.' If someone has sinned and is in depths of

entanglement over it, what course should he take? How should he proceed to find deliverance? He must go to God for pardon. But what should he rely on to encourage him in doing so? The apostle says: consider by faith the atonement and propitiation for sin made in the blood of Christ, and the fact that He is still carrying on His work of love in obtaining pardon for us — and rest your soul on that. This, I say, is most commonly the first thing faith fixes on.

Fourth, faith fixes on actual pardon itself. So God sets it before faith as a motive for further believing in Isaiah 44:22: 'I have blotted out your transgressions like a thick cloud, and your sins like a cloud; return to Me, for I have redeemed you.' Actual pardon of sin is set before faith as an encouragement to a full returning to God in everything (2 Samuel 23:5). The same could be said of all the other particulars we have discussed. Each of them will yield particular relief to a soul dealing with God about forgiveness, since each carries within it some special aspect of forgiveness. Only, as I said, none of them does this exclusively — they are rather the special doors through which believing enters into the whole. These things will need to be addressed further in what follows.

Let us now gather up the purpose for which all these considerations have been laid out. It is to show that a real discovery of Gospel forgiveness is a matter of greater consequence and importance than it may have appeared to some at first. Who is not hopeful and expecting pardon? Who does not think they understand well enough what it is, if they could only obtain it? But people may have general thoughts of escaping punishment and yet be far from any saving acquaintance with Gospel mercy.

Forgiveness is discovered or revealed only to faith, and the reasons for this.

To close this discussion, I will add only what is contained in the proposition that underlies everything — namely, that this discovery of forgiveness is made, and can only be made, to faith alone. The nature of forgiveness is such that nothing else can discover it or receive it. No reasoning, no inquiry of the human heart can reach it. The vague sense of something like forgiveness that the ancient pagans had, or that false worshippers have today, is not the forgiveness we are speaking of — it is merely a product of their own imagination.

The apostle tells us this in Romans 1:17: the righteousness of God is revealed in the Gospel from faith to faith. Nothing but faith has any part in it. This righteousness of God consists in the forgiveness of sins through the blood of Christ, declared in the Gospel. It is revealed from God's faithfulness in the promise to the faith of the believer — to those who receive the promise with faith. And again, more fully, in 1 Corinthians 2:9: 'Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.' The ways we normally come to know something are through sight, hearing, or the reasonings and reflections of the mind. But none of these can reach the things of the Gospel that God has prepared for us in Christ. How then can we come to know them? He answers in verse 10: 'God has revealed them to us by His Spirit.' And it is faith alone that receives the revelations of the Spirit — nothing else has access to them.

To confirm this, we may consider that this great mystery is:

1. Too deep, and 2. too great for anything else to discover; and
3. nothing but faith is suited to making this discovery.

First, this mystery is too deep and mysterious to be reached by anything else. Reason's line is too short to fathom the depths of the Father's love, the blood of the Son, and the Gospel promises built on it — in which forgiveness dwells. People cannot by their own rational thinking launch out into these depths or draw water from these wells of salvation. Reason stands by, astonished, and asks, 'How can these things be?' It can gather only shells at the shore of this ocean — a few surface-level observations about the outward letter — and then bring back a discouraging report, as the spies did. All reason can do is try to keep faith from venturing into it, crying out, 'Spare yourself — this attempt is foolish, these things are impossible.' This is one of the things faith sets aside and leaves behind when it commits the soul to this great work. In order to come to a discovery of forgiveness, faith causes the soul to deny itself and all its own reasoning, and to surrender itself to an infinite fullness of goodness and truth. Though it cannot reach the bottom of these depths, it enters into them and finds rest there. Nothing but faith is fitted to rest, be satisfied, and content itself in mysterious, bottomless, unsearchable depths. Being a grace that empties the soul and denies reason, the more it encounters what lies beyond its search and reach, the more satisfaction it finds. 'This is exactly what I was looking for,' says faith — 'the infinite and unsearchable.' 'When I know that there is abundantly more beyond me than I have comprehended, I am satisfied — for I know that nothing less will do good to the soul.' This is precisely what puzzles and overwhelms reason, leaving it useless. What it cannot grasp, it will dismiss or despise. Either it is overwhelmed and dazzled like weak eyes confronted with too bright a light, or — strengthening itself through inborn pride and stubbornness — it concludes that

this preaching of the cross and of forgiveness from God's love through the blood of Christ is plain foolishness, not fit for a wise person to pay attention to. This is how it appeared to the wise Greeks of old (1 Corinthians 1:24). So when a soul is brought under the real conviction of sin and earnestly desires to be freed from its painful entanglements, it becomes the hardest thing in the world to persuade that soul of forgiveness. Anything else looks more reasonable — any self-righteousness in this life, any purgatory in the next.

The greater part of those throughout the world who have been under conviction have turned away from forgiveness for this very reason. Masses, penances, and merits have seemed more acceptable. People who have no desire other than to be forgiven will still choose to settle for anything rather than forgiveness itself. Even if they escape those traps and conclude that nothing but pardon will help them, it is still impossible for them to receive it in its truth and power unless faith enables them. I am not speaking here of people who accept it casually as a common report, but of souls who find themselves genuinely needing to seek it. When they know it is their one urgent concern — all their hope and relief — when they know they will perish eternally without it, and when it is declared to them in plain, sober truth, they still cannot receive it. What is the reason? What keeps these starving souls from the food they need? It is this: they have nothing to lead them into the mysterious depths of eternal love, the blood of Christ, and the promises of the Gospel. We can see poor, troubled souls standing day after day at the edge of this pool, and yet never once venture into it their whole lives.

Second, this mystery is too great for anything else to discover. Forgiveness is something chosen by God from eternity to exalt and magnify the glory of His grace, and on the day of judgment it will be made plain to all the world that it was indeed a great thing. When the soul comes in any measure to sense it, it finds it so great, so excellent, and so astonishing that it is overwhelmed by the thought. It has dimensions — a length, breadth, depth, and height — that no measure of the rational soul can take or calculate. There is surpassing greatness in it (Ephesians 1:19). And the work described in Ephesians 3:19 is great — to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge. At this point, reason will confess itself at a standstill. To know that which surpasses knowledge is not reason's work. 'It cannot be known,' says reason, and that is the end of it for reason. But this is faith's proper work — to know precisely what surpasses knowledge. To know it in its power, virtue, sweetness, and effectiveness — though it cannot be fully known in its nature and excellence — and through believing to have all the benefit of a full comprehension of what cannot be fully comprehended. Hence Hebrews 11:1 says faith is the substance of things not seen — though those things are absent in themselves, faith gives them a present reality in the soul. So it knows things that surpass knowledge; by mingling itself with them, it draws out and delivers their benefit to the soul. From all of this it is evident — as the third point proposed — that faith alone is suited to be the means of this discovery, and so I need not press that point further.

The discovery of forgiveness in God is a great support for sin-entangled souls. Particular assurance is attainable.

There remains a brief confirmation of the position first laid down and now clarified, before I come to the application of the words we are primarily concerned with. I say, then, that the discovery of forgiveness in God is a great support for a sin-entangled soul, even when that soul has no specific persuasion of its own personal share in it. There is something assumed in this statement, and something affirmed.

First, it is assumed that a believer may have a gracious persuasion and assurance of faith concerning his own personal share in forgiveness. A person may — and many do — believe it for themselves, so as to have not only the benefit of it but also the comfort of it. In general, all the saints mentioned in Scripture had this assurance, except in times of depths, distress, and spiritual desertion, such as the one in this Psalm. David expressed his confidence in God's love and favor toward his own soul hundreds of times. Paul did the same for himself in Galatians 2:20: 'Christ loved me and gave Himself for me.' And 2 Timothy 4:8: 'There is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on that day.' And that this confidence in the Lord and His grace was not claimed for himself alone, he shows in Romans 8:38-39.

Nothing is more unfounded than the common argument used to undermine this anchor of the saints' consolation — the claim that no individual's name appears in the promise. It is true that the promise does not address any person by the name they go by in daily life. But the matter is far otherwise than that objection suggests. To think that the names by which we are known among one another and distinguished from each other in this life need to be written in the promise in order for us each to believe it personally

for ourselves is a foolish notion. The new name of every child of God is in the promise, and believing makes it perfectly legible to him. In fact, experience shows us that no elaborate argument is needed here. The soul by a direct act of faith believes its own forgiveness without making inferences or drawing conclusions — and may do so simply on the basis of the promise set before it to be believed. But I will not stray from my present task, and so I will note only one or two things regarding the assumption laid down.

First, it is the duty of every believer to press toward an assurance of personal interest in forgiveness, and to be diligent in cherishing and maintaining it once attained. The apostle urges this on all of us in Hebrews 10:22: 'Let us draw near with full assurance of faith' — that is, assurance of our acceptance with God through forgiveness in the blood of Jesus. This is what he is plainly discussing. And this foundation of our faith and confidence he would have us hold fast to the end (Hebrews 3:14). It is no small failure in believers when they are not pressing toward maturity in faith and obedience. Often some sinful indulgence to self, the world, or laziness is the cause. This is why so few reach Gospel assurance. Yet most of our privileges — and effectively all of our comfort — depend on this one thing. To encourage this duty, let me briefly ask you to consider both what produces this assurance and what it produces in turn — what it is the fruit of, and what fruit it bears.

In general, assurance is the product of a fuller and richer communication of the Spirit than ordinary — a deeper sense and experience of the choicest fruits of Christ's death, given to those who are justified through their acceptance of the atonement.

It does not flourish without the Spirit's sealing, witnessing, establishing, and pouring out the love of God in our hearts. See Romans 5:2-5. And what believer should not long for and press after the enjoyment of these things? To read of them in the Gospel without experiencing them in our own hearts, and then to sit down quietly without continually pressing after them, is to despise the blood of Christ, the Spirit of grace, and the whole work of God's love. If there are no such things, the Gospel is not true. If there are, and we are not pressing after them, we are despisers of the Gospel. Surely the person who would not have more of the Spirit — all of Him that Christ has promised — does not truly have the Spirit. These things are the hundredfold that Christ has left us in this world to balance out our sorrows, troubles, and losses. Will we be so foolish as to neglect our only lasting riches and treasures? In particular, assurance is the product of an exercised, vigorous, and active faith. That our faith should be this way — always, in every state and condition — is, I believe, our duty to pursue. Not only our comfort but our obedience depends on it. The more genuine faith — faith of the right kind — the more obedience. For all our obedience is the obedience of faith.

As for its fruit and what it produces — these are the highest activities of our souls toward God: love, delight, rejoicing in the Lord, peace, joy, and consolation within ourselves, along with readiness to act or suffer, and cheerfulness in doing so. Even when these do not grow directly from this root, their flourishing depends entirely on it. It is therefore every believer's duty to break through all difficulties in pressing toward this particular assurance. The objections people raise against themselves in this matter may be considered at another time.

Second, in God's ordinary dealings with us, it is mostly our own negligence and laziness that causes us to fall short of this assurance. It is true that it depends in a special way on the sovereignty of God — He is as absolute in giving peace to believers as in giving grace to sinners. This may be recognized and offered as a comfort in times of trial and distress. He creates light and causes darkness as He pleases. Yet considering the promises made to us, the encouragements given to us, and the love and tenderness with which God receives us, I cannot but conclude that in ordinary circumstances the cause of falling short of this assurance lies where I have placed it. This is the first thing assumed in the earlier statement.

Second, it is also assumed that there is — or may be — a saving persuasion or discovery of forgiveness in God even where there is no assurance of any personal share in it, or that one's own sins in particular are pardoned. This has a promise of gracious acceptance with God and is therefore saving (Isaiah 50:10): 'Who is among you who fears the Lord and 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.' Here we see the fear of the Lord and obedience, with a blessed encouragement to rest in God and His all-sufficiency — and yet no assurance, no light, only darkness, and that darkness continuing for a long season. For a person who is convinced of God's pardoning love cannot be described as walking in darkness with no beam or ray of light. Yet the faith of such a person, and the obedience springing from it, has this gracious promise of acceptance with God. Countless testimonies and exam-

ples of this could be offered. I will offer only a little evidence through one observation about the nature of faith, and one more about the way forgiveness is proposed to be believed.

First, faith is described as — and actually is — a cleaving to the Lord (Deuteronomy 4:4): 'You who did cleave to the Lord' — that is, who did believe. Joshua 23:8: 'Cleave to the Lord your God.' The same language is used in the New Testament in Acts 11:23, where he urged them to cleave to the Lord with purpose of heart — that is, to continue steadfast in believing. Faith is also often described as trusting in the Lord, rolling our burdens on Him, casting our care on Him, and committing ourselves or our ways to Him. Now all of this amounts to the soul's surrender of itself to God, to be dealt with according to the covenant of grace ratified in the blood of Christ. A soul cannot do this without some discovery of forgiveness in God. But it can do this without any specific assurance of its own personal share in that forgiveness. This faith — that clings to God, that adheres to Him — will lead people to conclude that it is both their duty and their wisdom to entrust their souls to God and to hold fast to Him as revealed in Christ, waiting on the pleasure of His will. It enables them to make Christ their choice. And it will bring them safely to heaven, though perhaps at times not very comfortably.

Second, the way forgiveness is revealed and declared in the Gospel confirms the same truth. The first offer made is not a declaration to any individual person that his sins are forgiven. Rather, it is simply that there is redemption and forgiveness of sins in Christ. The apostle sets it out this way in Acts 13:38-39: 'Let it be known to you, therefore, brothers, that through this Man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by Him everyone who believes is

freed from all things from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.' All of this may be believed without a person having assurance of his own personal share in what is declared. When these things are believed with the faith the Gospel calls for, that faith is saving and is the root of Gospel-acceptable obedience. The ransom — the atonement by Christ, the fullness of redemption in Him, and therefore forgiveness in His blood for believers, arising from the goodwill, grace, and love of the Father — this is the first Gospel discovery that a sinner in a saving manner embraces. Particular assurance arises — or may arise — afterward. This also is assumed in the statement.

What is affirmed in the statement is this: that a discovery of forgiveness in God, even without any particular assurance of personal interest in it, is a great support for a sin-entangled soul. Let no one despise the day of this small thing — small in the eyes of some, and even some good people, as if it did not deserve the name of faith. As has been shown, this discovery of forgiveness is the soul's persuasion, on Gospel grounds, that whatever its own state and condition may be or may become, God in His own nature is infinitely gracious, and that He has determined by a sovereign act of His will from eternity to be gracious to sinners. It sees that He has made a way for the administration of forgiveness through the blood of His Son, as He has abundantly declared in the promises of the Gospel. 'Whatever may be true of me, this is true of God — there is forgiveness with Him.' This is the first thing a soul in the depths rises to. And it is a support, enabling the soul to fulfill its present duties while waiting for consolation from above.

It has been this way with the saints of old. Hosea 14:3: 'Assyria will not save us; we will not ride on horses; nor will we say again to the work of our hands, "You are our gods," for in You the orphan finds mercy.' Here we have a solemn renunciation of all other helps, reliefs, and supports — whether civil or religious — that are not God. And along with it, a solemn resolve in their great distress to cling to God alone. Both of these are great and blessed fruits of faith. What is the foundation of this blessed resolve? The proposition: 'In You the orphan finds mercy' — that is, there is forgiveness with You for helpless sinners. This lifted their hearts in their depths and sustained them as they waited to receive the blessed promises of mercy, pardon, grace, and holiness that follow in the next verses. Until those promises came home to them in their power and effect, they lived on this: 'In You the orphan finds mercy.'

The condition seems even lower in the passage we have in Joel 2:13-14: 'Tear your heart and not your garments, and return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness, and relenting of evil. Who knows whether He will not turn and relent and leave a blessing behind Him?' What is set before the faith of those addressed here is that the Lord is gracious and merciful — that there is forgiveness in Him. The response called forth by this is Gospel repentance. The personal application of the promise amounts to no more than this: 'Who knows — perhaps the Lord may return and leave a blessing, and deal with us according to the revelation He has given of Himself as merciful and gracious.' This is far from any comfortable assurance of a personal share in that grace, mercy, or pardon. But the prophet says: come this far at least, and here is a solid founda-

tion for seeking God further for a fuller revelation of Himself in grace and mercy. When a soul sees enough in God to conclude, 'Well — who knows but that He may yet return and have mercy on me also,' that is enough to sustain it and bring it into greater light.

The church in Lamentations gives a sad account of her condition in this regard. She makes that bitter conclusion against herself in chapter 3, verse 18: 'My strength and my hope have perished from the Lord.' And in verse 8: 'When I cry out and call for help, He shuts out my prayer.' So far is she from a comfortable assurance of any personal share in mercy and acceptance that, under her pressures and temptations, she is ready to positively conclude the opposite — that she is rejected and cast off forever. What course then should she take? Should she give up waiting on God and say there is no hope? No, she will not go that way. Verse 26: 'It is good that one should hope and wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.' Yet there seems little encouragement for her to do so, given the state she described. Things are indeed very sad, she says — 'My soul still remembers them and is bowed down within me' (verse 20). But then: 'This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope' (verse 21). 'It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because His compassions do not fail.' There is mercy and unfailing compassion in God. So though my present condition is full of darkness and I see no deliverance, I will still choose to wait on Him. Who knows what those infinite stores and treasures of mercy that are with Him may at length provide for me? Many similar examples could be added.

We may observe in passing how far this support extends and what it enables the soul to do.

First, the soul is enabled by it to surrender itself to the disposal of sovereign grace, in self-loathing and a renunciation of all other means of relief. Lamentations 3:29: 'He puts his mouth in the dust; if so be there may be hope.' His language is: whatever God wills. He lies at God's disposal — humbled, broken, but waiting on His pleasure. 'Though He slay me,' says Job, 'yet I will trust in Him' (Job 13:15). Whatever He does to me — whatever the outcome — I will remain clinging to Him. I will not think of any other way to free myself from my distress. I will not flee like Jonah, nor hide like Adam, nor take any other path of escape. The soul says: God is a God who hides Himself from me (Isaiah 45:15). I walk in darkness and have no light (Isaiah 50:10). My flesh fails and my heart fails (Psalm 73:26). I am overwhelmed with trouble. My iniquities have taken hold of me so that I cannot look up (Psalm 40:12). The Lord has forsaken me and my God has forgotten me. Every day I am filled with dread and terror, on the verge of fainting, with no relief in sight. What shall I do? Shall I curse God and die, or say this evil is from the Lord — why should I wait for Him any longer? Shall I take the way of the world and, since things will not improve, become entirely careless about my eternal end? No. Whatever my lot and portion may be, I know there is forgiveness with God. This and that poor man trusted in Him, cried to Him, and were delivered. So David in his greatest distress encouraged himself in the Lord his God (2 Samuel 15:25-26). It is good for me to cast myself into His arms. He may frown; He may still be angry. But no matter — this is the way I will go. As it pleases Him to deal with me, so let it be. And the advantages a soul gains through this self-surrender — which this faith will surely produce — are beyond description.

Second, the support extends to a resolution to keep waiting in whatever condition the soul is in. The church arrives at this in Lamentations 3:26: 'It is good that one should hope and wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.' I will not give up my expectation. I will not rush ahead or place limits on God. I will lie at His feet until His own appointed time of mercy comes. Expectation and quietness together make up waiting. These the soul attains by means of this support. It looks upward like a servant watching the hands of his master, eyes fixed on God — watching to see what He will do, listening to hear what He will say concerning him. It misses no season or opportunity in which God might reveal His will. And it does this quietly, without resentment or complaint, turning all its grievances against itself and its own unworthiness, which has kept it from a fuller experience of the love and grace that is with God. That this effect also accompanies this faith will be seen clearly in the close of the Psalm.

Third, the support extends to waiting on God through all the means of grace, looking for a sense of forgiveness — and so it shapes the whole course of obedience. 'There is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared.' To fear the Lord is an expression encompassing all of His worship and all our duty. 'This is what encourages me,' says the Psalmist in his depths, 'because there is forgiveness with You, I will continue in all duties and all the ways of Your worship where You may be found.' And however difficult things may be for a time, the end of the soul who abides with God in this way will be peace. Let us now look at how this support actually works.

First, it produces a genuine liking of God in the soul, and with it some love for Him. The soul perceives God as someone infinitely to be desired and delighted in by those who have any share in forgiveness. It cannot help but consider Him as good and gracious, however uncertain its own estate may be. Psalm 73:1-2: 'Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart; but as for me, my feet had almost slipped.' 'Whatever my own condition may be, I know that God is good — good to Israel — and with that I will support myself.' Once the soul has gained this ground — seeing God in Christ as One to be delighted in and loved — great and blessed effects follow. First, self-loathing and surrender to God, with steadfastness in that surrender, will surely accompany it. Second, something new in God will keep coming to mind to relieve the soul in its fainting — new springs of hope will open every day. Third, the soul will be gradually drawn, almost without noticing, to delight in its dealings with God. Though in its own particular case it meets with frowns, corrections, and apparent refusals, this still gives it relief: God is who He has been declared to be. So the soul says: 'Whatever else may be, yet God is good, and it is good for me to wait on Him.' Without this discovery, the soul takes no pleasure in God. Whatever it does in relation to Him, it does only because it dare not do otherwise — constrained by awe of His greatness and terror. And that kind of obedience God could have from demons.

Second, this support removes several overwhelming obstacles that stood in the soul's way before it embraced this discovery of forgiveness.

First, it removes all the hindrances mentioned earlier — the objections arising from God's greatness, holiness, and severity; the unbending strictness of the law; and the natural workings of con-

science that rise up against all hope of forgiveness. All these are removed and set aside by this faith. Where this faith is present, it reveals not only forgiveness, as has been shown, but also the true nature of Gospel forgiveness. It reveals it as flowing from the gracious heart of the Father through the blood of the Son. Now this propitiation in the blood of the Son removes all those obstacles — even before the soul has any specific assurance of its own share in it. It shows how all the attributes of God can be exalted, the law fulfilled, and forgiveness still given to sinners. In this lies no small advantage to a soul in its approach to God. All those dreadful impressions of God that used to beset the soul at the first thought of coming to Him are now cleared away, so that the soul can quietly address its own particular concerns before Him.

Second, in particular it removes the crushing sense of the unspeakable greatness of sin. When the heart is seized with it, this can press the soul to death. Distressed sinners say: if their sins were not so great — greater than any heart can imagine or tongue describe — perhaps things might go well for them. They are not so much troubled that they are sinners as that they are great sinners. Not simply that these and those sins are on their record, but that they are great sins, heavy with terrible aggravations. If sin were otherwise, they feel they could manage it. Now though this discovery does not free them from the entanglement of sin as their own; yet it does free them from the weight of sin as great and many. This distinction can be separated out. The soul sees enough in God to forgive great sins — even if it cannot yet see enough to assure it that its own sins in particular will be forgiven. That great sins will be pardoned, this discovery puts beyond doubt. Whether his own sins will be pardoned — that is now the only remaining question.

Everything that faith can do in general, this faith does — except make a personal application of what is believed to the soul's own case. The soul can therefore no longer be justly crushed by the greatness of its sin, since the infinite scope of the forgiveness it now sees in God relieves it of that. What remains is only the question of its own sin — about which more will be said later. These and similar obstacles are removed by this faith.

Third, this support gives some life and encouragement to duty. First, to duty as duty — seeing God by faith in such a fullness of grace, the soul cannot help but be encouraged to meet Him in every act of duty and to lay hold of Him through it. Every way that leads to Him, simply because it leads to Him, must be valued and embraced. Second, to all duties — and in this lies no small advantage. God is often found in the practices of duty, but in which particular one He will be found by any given person at any given time is uncertain. This faith therefore presses the soul into all of them. So it drove the Bride in the passage that parallels our text in Song of Solomon 3:2-4. The support this provides is easy to understand — not support from the duties themselves, or by them, but in them, as the means of exchange between God and the soul.

From these effects of the discovery of forgiveness in God, certain things follow that are sufficient to maintain the spiritual life of the soul.

First, a resolution to abide with God and commit everything to Him. As the text we noted teaches: 'There is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared.' Because I have found this, because I am persuaded of it, I will abide with Him in the way of His fear and worship. This is what our Savior calls for in John 15:4: 'Abide in Me; apart from Me you can bear no fruit.' And the Lord, represent-

ing His claiming of the church as His — illustrated through the prophet's taking of an adulteress in vision — does so on these terms in Hosea 3:3: 'You shall stay with me for many days; you shall not play the harlot, and you shall not be with another man; so also I will be for you.' Now this abiding with God implies two things: first, that there are oppositions, pressures, and temptations pulling in the opposite direction; and second, that the soul refuses to make any other choice in place of God.

First, abiding with God implies opposition. To abide — to be stable and steadfast — is to be so in the face of opposition. Many discouragements are ready to rise up in the soul against it. Especially fears: that it will not hold on, that it will be rejected in the end, that everything in it is worthless and hypocritical; that it will not be forgiven, that God takes no real notice of it. Therefore, the soul thinks, it may as well give up its hope — a thought that can feel like the giving up of the ghost. These thoughts assault the soul continually. Additionally, opposition arises from inward corruption and temptations to sin, which work against the life of faith. These can rise to a high degree of power, so that the guilt incurred by giving in threatens to throw the soul out of all expectation of mercy. 'I will perish by these means one day,' says the soul, 'if I am not already lost.'

But where faith has made this discovery of forgiveness, the soul will abide with God against all these discouragements and oppositions. It will not leave Him, it will not stop waiting for Him. David expresses this in his own experience in Psalm 73:2: 'My feet had almost slipped, my steps had nearly gone.' And verse 13: 'Surely I have kept my heart pure in vain.' Yet after all his struggles, he comes to this in verse 26 and 28: 'Though my flesh and heart fail,

it is good for me to draw near to God.' 'I will still abide with God; I will not let go of the fear of Him or my profession of faith.' 'Though I walk weakly, lamely, and unevenly, yet I will still follow after Him.' It was the same with the disciples when many fell away from Christ at the time of a strong temptation and walked with Him no more. Jesus said to the twelve, 'Do you want to go away also?' Peter replied on behalf of the rest: 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life' (John 6:66-68). The soul says: 'Such and such is my condition — I am tossed and afflicted, without comfort, with little life, little strength, real guilt, many sins, and much disconsolation.' 'What then?' says God by His word. 'Do you want to go away also?' 'No,' says the soul. 'There is forgiveness with You. You have the words of eternal life, and therefore I will abide with You.'

Second, abiding with God implies refusing to make any other choice. While the soul is in this condition — without any evidence of its own personal share in forgiveness — many suitors press themselves on it, soliciting it to be unfaithful by embracing them instead. Both self-righteousness and sin will be very persistent in this. Self-righteousness presents itself as extremely useful, offering the soul some help, assistance, and support for its condition. Saul said: 'Samuel has not come, and the Philistines are closing in — I will venture and offer the sacrifice myself, even though the law forbids it.' The particular promise has not yet come to the soul's personal relief; it has no evidence of a special interest in forgiveness. Then temptation moves in and says: try finding relief in something of your own making. This is to be unfaithful to God. Self-righteousness disguises itself for this purpose in many ways — like the wife of Jeroboam when she went to the prophet. Sometimes it appears

as duty, sometimes as signs and tokens. But its aim is always to get some portion of the soul's faith and trust fixed on itself instead of God. But when the soul has truly seen forgiveness, it will not listen to these solicitations. 'No,' it says. 'I see such beauty, such excellence, such desirability and fitness to my need and condition in the forgiveness that is with God, that I am resolved to abide in Gospel longing and expectation of it all the days of my life. Here my choice is fixed, and I will not change it.' This resolution gives glory to God's grace. When the soul — without any evidence of its own personal interest in forgiveness — nevertheless prefers it above what presents itself with many arguments as an immediate relief, God is glorified, Christ is exalted, and the spiritual life of the soul is secured.

Second, this discovery of forgiveness in God — with all the effects mentioned — will produce a resolution to wait on God for peace and consolation in His own time and way. Isaiah 28:16 says that one who believes will not rush. Rushing implies impatience and precipitation. The soul that has made this discovery is freed from that — it resolves to wait for God's appointed time for peace and consolation. God, speaking of His fulfillment of His promises, says in Isaiah 60:22: 'I, the Lord, will hasten it in its time.' May we not therefore hasten toward it ourselves? No — He says He will hasten it, but in its time, its due and appointed time. Considering all the obstacles and hindrances, He will bring it quickly — but at the right time. And this the soul is to wait for, and so it will.

When Jacob saw the beauty of Rachel and loved her, he was content to wait seven years for her; no time seemed too long, no labor too hard to win her. So the soul, having discovered the beauty and excellence of forgiveness as it rests with God — in His gracious

heart, His eternal purpose, the blood of Christ, and the promise of the Gospel — resolves to wait quietly and patiently for the time when God will make clear to it its own personal share in that forgiveness. Even one experience of embracing it personally — even at the hour of death — is more than worth the waiting and obedience of a whole lifetime.

And the Psalmist shows this to have been the effect produced in his own heart and spirit, for upon this discovery of forgiveness in God he resolves both to wait on God himself and to encourage others to do the same.

Third, this discovery also prepares the soul to receive the consolation and deliverance from its distress that it waits for — the evidence of a personal share in forgiveness.

First, it does so by making the soul attentive and watchful for it. It makes the soul like a merchant who has all his wealth in a distant country and is working to bring it safely home. If his goods arrive, he is well provided for; if they are lost, he is ruined. This makes him eager for news that they are safe — and as Solomon says, good news from a far country to such a man is like cold water to a thirsty soul (Proverbs 25:25), full of refreshment. He cannot claim those goods as yet in his possession, yet he is glad simply to know they are safe there. So it is with the soul. The riches it values so highly seem in a far country — so is the promise, that it shall behold the land that is very far off (Isaiah 33:17). It is glad to hear news that they are safe — glad to hear forgiveness preached and the promises declared — even though it cannot yet claim them as its own.

But the merchant does not stop there. He listens eagerly for news of everything that might bring his wealth safely home — especially when everything he has is at stake. Such ships are called ships of desire in Job 9:26, because the man longs so greatly for their safe arrival. He watches the winds and the weather, and considers every danger and obstacle along the way. And no one can blame him, for everything he has is riding on it. The soul acts similarly — watching and listening for every means by which this forgiveness might be personally brought home to it. It fears sin and temptation. It rejoices to feel a fresh breeze of the Spirit of grace, hoping that it may bring in its return from the land of promise. All of this prepares the heart to receive a spiritual sense of forgiveness when it is revealed.

Second, it also prepares the soul by giving it a right sense of the value of the grace and mercy it desires. The merchant in the parable was not prepared to possess the pearl for himself until he discovered it was of great price — then he knew how to pursue it, obtain it, and keep it. The soul, through this act of faith upon the discovery of forgiveness, comes to see that the pearl hidden in the field is truly precious. This stirs it up both to seek possession of it and to give it its proper worth. Such a soul says: 'How excellent, how precious is this forgiveness that is with God! Blessed — truly blessed — are those who are made partakers of it! What a life of joy, rest, peace, and consolation they must live! If only I had their assurance of a personal share in it, and the spiritual consolation that flows from it — how I would despise the world and all Satan's temptations, and rejoice in the Lord in every condition!' This sense of the greatness of grace also powerfully prepares and fits the soul to receive a blessed taste of it in a way that gives God glory.

Third, it prepares the soul by giving it a proper understanding of forgiveness — its nature, causes, and effects. At first, the soul looks for nothing more than escape — freedom from punishment by whatever means. 'What must I do to be saved?' is the height of its concern. 'Who will deliver me? How can I escape?' It would be satisfied to escape any way — by the law or the Gospel, it does not matter, as long as it escapes. But through this discovery of forgiveness made by adhering faith, the soul comes to plainly see the nature of forgiveness and to recognize that it is so excellent that it is to be desired for its own sake. When a soul is first brought under distress over sin, it often does not know exactly what it wants. It has a discomfort and restlessness it wants to be free of, a dread of some evil condition it wants to avoid. But now the soul can say not only what it wants to be free from but also what it desires and is aiming for. It wants a share in eternal love. It wants the gracious kindness of the heart of God turned toward it personally. It wants the everlasting purpose of His will poured out in its heart. It wants a particular share in the precious blood of the Son of God, through which atonement has been made for it. And it wants all of these things testified to its conscience through a promise received with faith. These are what it comes for — this is the only way it desires to be saved, and no other. It sees such glory of wisdom, love, and grace in forgiveness, and such an exalting of the love of Christ in all His offices and undertakings — especially in His death, sacrifice, and bloodshedding by which He procured reconciliation — that it longs intensely to participate in them.

All these things, to varying degrees, will be produced by this discovery of forgiveness in God — even without any evidence of a personal share in it. And these will surely maintain the spiritual

life of the soul and sustain it in such obedience as God accepts in Christ. Darkness, sorrow, and storms may come to those who have this discovery, but their eternal condition is secured in the covenant of God, and their souls are bound up in the bundle of life.

From what has been said, we may draw some conclusions along the way regarding the true nature of believing.

First, the effects attributed to this faith in God's forgiveness — effects that always accompany it — make it clear that most of those who claim it, who claim to believe that there is forgiveness with God, in fact believe no such thing. I will argue this more fully at another point, but I cannot pass it by entirely here. I will simply ask those who are so quick to profess this faith — who find it nearly impossible to imagine that anyone could fail to believe it — what effects it has produced in them, and whether it has enabled them to perform the duties mentioned above. I fear that for many, the reality stands in sharp contrast to their professed faith. They love sin all the more for it, and love God none the better. Assuming that a few hollow words will settle the matter of their sins, they gradually come to have shallow thoughts about sin and about God as well. This persuasion is not from the One who calls us. Poor souls — your faith is the devil's greatest tool for your destruction. It is the highest contempt of God, Christ, and forgiveness that you can be guilty of. It is a means to let you quietly down into hell. The Moses that the Pharisees trusted in will condemn them — and so it will be with you. As no one is saved except by faith, so you — were it not for your faith, so called — might possibly have been saved. If a man's gold turns out to be counterfeit, his jewels painted glass, and his silver lead or dross, he will not only be found poor when put to the test, but the shock of his disappointment will make his

poverty all the more terrible. If the faith that should be more precious than gold is found rotten and corrupt, if the light within a man is darkness — how vile is that faith, how great is that darkness? This is clearly what the faith of far too many will prove to be in this matter.

Second, the work we are engaged in is the rising of a sin-entangled soul out of its depths, and what we have discussed is what must give it its first relief. When souls are in distress, what they typically look for is consolation. What do they mean by that? They want assurance that their sins are forgiven, and through that assurance to be freed from their present perplexity. What is the result? Some of them continue complaining all their days and never arrive at rest or peace — falling far short of consolation and joy. And some are so thoroughly discouraged that they abandon all progress in the ways of God. Why? Is it not because they are trying to finish the building before they have laid the foundation? They have not yet done the full work of believing in God's forgiveness, and yet they want to leap immediately to assurance. God does not delight in such a frame of spirit, for two reasons.

First, it is self-centered. The great design of faith is to give glory to God (Romans 4:20). The end for which God gives out forgiveness is the praise of His glorious grace (Ephesians 1:6). But if a soul in this frame simply wants peace for itself, it has very little concern for giving glory to God. It cries like Rachel: 'Give me children or I die' — give me peace or I perish. That God might be honored, and that the forgiveness it seeks might be rendered glorious, is at best a second thought, if it is a thought at all. This selfish eagerness to thrust one's hand into the side of Christ from the start is something He will pardon in many, but accepts in none.

Second, it is impatient. People behave this way because they will not wait. They have no desire to stand at a distance for any season, as the tax collector did. They do not want to submit their souls to lie at the feet of God, to give Him the glory of His goodness, mercy, wisdom, and love in the ordering of them and all their concerns. This waiting involves the full and universal submission of the soul to God — a settled conviction that we, and everything we desire and aim at, should properly be at His sovereign disposal. This gives glory to God. But the impatience of these poor souls keeps them from performing this duty. And both of these failures arise from the same root.

Third, these failures arise from weakness. It is weakness in any condition that makes people restless and worn out. The state of clinging to God in faith is as safe a condition as the state of full assurance — it simply involves more struggle and wrestling. It is not fear of the final outcome, then, but weakness and weariness of the struggle that makes people anxiously press for a deliverance from that state before they are well established in it.

Let the sin-entangled soul therefore always keep in mind the order and method of the Gospel that we have been considering. First, exercise faith in God's forgiveness, and when the soul is established in that, it will have a foundation on which it can stand securely when it comes to apply forgiveness personally. Get this foundational principle settled on Gospel grounds before moving on. Answer the objections that stand against it, and then you may proceed. In believing, the soul makes a conquest into enemy territory. Do what those do who are entering an enemy's country — secure the passages, fortify the positions as you advance, so that you are not cut off in your progress. Do not be like a ship at sea that

passes through the water it has sailed but holds no claim to it — neither to what lies behind nor to what lies ahead. This is the condition of a soul that does not settle these foundational principles. It presses forward, and the ground crumbles beneath its feet, so that it wanders in uncertainty all its days. If people would only lay this principle firmly in their souls and secure it against attack, they might move more slowly than some — but with far more safety. Some claim to leap at once into full assurance. I can only hope that for most this does not prove to be nothing more than brazen presumption. It is pointless for a person to try to run who cannot yet walk — to labor toward assurance in himself when he has never truly believed in God's forgiveness. So that we may be able to fix this persuasion firmly against all opposition, what I will do next is set out unquestionable evidences of this Gospel truth — evidences the soul can safely build and rest on. These constitute the confirmation of the main proposition laid down earlier.

Evidences of forgiveness in God. There are no inborn notions of any free act of God's will. Forgiveness is not revealed by the works of nature or the law.

First, the things that are spoken of or known about God are of two kinds. The first kind is natural and necessary — these are His essential properties, the attributes of His nature: His goodness, holiness, righteousness, omnipotence, eternity, and the like. These are what the apostle refers to in Romans 1:19 as 'that which is known about God.' He goes on to say they may be known in two ways. The first is by the inborn light of nature — it is, he says, 'evident within them' (verse 19), taught by the common conceptions and instinctive knowledge of God that all people carry by nature. From this, all people know that God exists, that He is eternal, in-

finitely powerful, good, righteous, holy, and almighty. No special revelation is needed for people to know these things. That said, to know them in a saving way does require revelation — and therefore those who know these things by nature also receive them by faith on the basis of revelation. Hebrews 11:6: 'Whoever would come to God must believe that He is and that He rewards those who seek Him.' Though people may know God by the light of nature, they cannot come to God by that knowledge alone.

Second, these essential properties of God's nature are also revealed through His works. As the apostle says in Romans 1:20: 'The invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood through what has been made — even His eternal power and Godhead.' See also Psalm 19:1-3. This is the first category of things that may be known about God.

Second, there are the free acts of His will and power — His eternal purposes, along with the earthly workings that flow from them. Forgiveness is of this kind. It is not a property of God's nature but an act of His will and a work of His grace. Though it has its source and spring in the infinite goodness of His nature, it proceeds from Him and is exercised only by an absolutely free and sovereign act of His will. Now nothing of this kind — nothing of God's free acts and purposes — can be known in any way except through special revelation.

First, there is no inborn knowledge of any act of God's will in the human heart — which is the first way we come to know anything about God. Forgiveness is not revealed by the light of nature. Human nature, as such, does not declare it. By that means, 'No one has seen God at any time' (John 1:18) — that is, no one has seen Him as a God of mercy and pardon, as the Son reveals Him. Adam

had an intimate acquaintance, within the limited capacity of a creature, with the properties and excellencies of God's nature. This was implanted in his heart as indispensable to the natural worship he was to render by the law of his creation. But when he had sinned, it is clear that he had not the least thought that there was forgiveness with God. Such a thought would have laid a foundation for further dealings with God about his condition. But he had no design other than to flee and hide himself (Genesis 3:10) — showing plainly that he was utterly ignorant of any such thing as pardoning mercy. Such — and no different — are the first and purely natural conceptions of all sinners: that the judgment of God (Romans 1:32) is that sin is punished with death. It is true that in many people these conceptions are suppressed by rumors, reports, and traditions suggesting things might be otherwise. But all of these are far removed from the revelation of forgiveness we are speaking of.

Second, the study of God's creation does not lead anyone to the knowledge that there is forgiveness with God. The apostle tells us in Romans 1:20 what God's works reveal — His eternal power and Godhead, that is, the essential properties of His nature — but nothing more. They do not reveal any of the purposes of His grace, any of the free acts of His will, or pardon and forgiveness. Beyond this, God made all things in a state of uprightness and integrity (Ecclesiastes 7:29), making it impossible for creation to have any reference to sin — which is the corruption of all things — or to the pardon of it, which is their restoration. Since sin did not yet exist in the world and was not imagined to exist when everything was made from nothing, how could anything in creation declare or reveal its forgiveness?

Third, no works of God's providence can make this discovery either. God has indeed borne witness to Himself and to His goodness in every age since the creation, through the works of His providence. So Acts 14:15-17: 'We preach to you that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations He permitted all the nations to walk in their own ways, yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.' He left Himself without witness in this sense: through the works of His providence listed there, He testified to Himself to this extent — that He exists, is good, does good, and rules the world. Those who took no notice of these works or of the fruits of His goodness they lived on, and instead turned to idols, were utterly without excuse. But those works of providence did not reveal pardon and forgiveness. For God still permitted the nations to go on in their own ways and overlooked their ignorance. So again in Acts 17:23-30: Paul declares to those at Athens the God who made the world and everything in it, who gives to all people life and breath and everything else, who made from one man every nation on the face of the earth, and who determined their appointed times and boundaries — doing this so that they would seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him. Using arguments from creation and providence, the apostle proves God's existence and attributes. He shows that God designed His works to reveal Himself as the true and living God, the Maker and Governor of all things — sufficiently that they should have inquired after Him rather than treating Him as an unknown God. But of the discovery of pardon and forgiveness by these means, he

says nothing. Indeed he plainly shows it was not accomplished this way. For the great call to saving repentance comes through the revelation of forgiveness. But God did not call the Gentiles to saving repentance through these works of providence. He permitted them to walk in their own ways (Acts 14:16) and overlooked the times of their ignorance. But now — that is, through the word of the Gospel — He commands all people to repent (Acts 17:30).

There was one significant act of God's providence concerning sin, which occurred when man first fell into it. Far from revealing forgiveness in God, it rather strongly suggested the opposite. This was God's dealing with the sinning angels. The angels were the first sinners, and God dealt with them first about sin. What His dealing with them was, the Holy Spirit tells us in 2 Peter 2:4 — He did not spare the sinning angels. This is the same word used where the apostle speaks of God laying all our iniquities on Christ — of Christ undergoing the punishment due to them. Romans 8:32: 'He did not spare Him' — meaning He laid on Him the full punishment that the law's curse and sanctions required for sin. So He dealt with the angels that sinned — He did not spare them, but inflicted on them the punishment due to sin, casting them into chains of darkness to be held for the judgment of the great day. Up to this point, God kept all thought of forgiveness within His own eternal heart. Not the faintest dawning of it appeared in the world. This was from the beginning no small obstacle to any thought of forgiveness. The world was made; sin entered through the most glorious part of creation, whose recovery by pardon might seem most desirable — yet not the slightest appearance of forgiveness was revealed. So it remained hidden in God from the foundation of the world (Ephesians 3:9).

Third, God gave man a law of obedience immediately upon his creation — indeed, the substance of it was implanted in him at creation itself. This law presupposed the possibility that man might transgress it. The very nature of a law given to free agents, with threatened penalties and promised rewards, requires that presupposition. Now attached to this law, or revealed alongside it, there was not the slightest hint that pardon might be obtained if transgression followed. Genesis 2:17 states the law: 'In the day that you eat from it you will surely die.' There God leaves the sinner under the power of that threat. Of forgiveness or pardoning mercy there is not the least suggestion. To this very day, that law — which was then the whole rule of life and acceptance with God — knows nothing of forgiveness. 'You shall surely die, O sinner' is its precise and final verdict. From these preliminary considerations, added to what was said before, some things preparatory to the discussion that follows may be drawn out.

First, it is a great and rare thing to have forgiveness in God revealed to a sinful soul. As has been shown, this is something that conscience and the law, together with the inborn notions in the human heart about God's holiness and retributive justice, actively resist. There is no natural presumption of it — no common notion of it in the human mind. No contemplation of God's works, whether of creation or providence, will reveal it. And God's dealing with the sinning angels makes it appear deep, astonishing, and mysterious. People who have shallow and careless thoughts about God, themselves, sin, obedience, the coming judgment, and eternity — people who feed on the ashes of rumors, reports, hearsay, and tradition without looking into the reality of things — may take forgiveness to be an ordinary and commonly accepted truth, easy to embrace,

which virtually no one disbelieves. But convicted sinners who put these things to the test as people running toward eternity have very different thoughts about them. As for what it is claimed everyone believes, we have great cause to cry out: 'Lord, who has believed our report? To whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?'

Second, since the discovery of forgiveness in God is so difficult a matter, it is therefore precious and excellent — being the foundation of all our communion with God in this life, and of all genuine hope of enjoying Him in the life to come. It is a pure Gospel truth that has no shadow, footprint, or hint anywhere else. The entire creation has not the faintest impression of it left on it.

Third, it is therefore without question our duty to inquire diligently into this salvation — as the prophets of old did — and to consider what sure evidences faith has of it; evidences that will not and cannot fail us. To be casual and hasty about this matter, to take it up at random, is evidence of an unsound and rotten heart. The person who is not serious in inquiring into the revelation of this matter is serious about nothing in which God or his soul is concerned. The Holy Spirit knows what our hearts are like and how slow we are to receive this blessed truth in a truly saving way. Therefore He confirms it to us with weighty assurances, as in Hebrews 6:17-18: 'God, wishing to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the unchangeable nature of His purpose, interposed with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things — in which it is impossible for God to lie — we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement.' It is forgiveness of sin that the apostle is treating there. To give evidence of it and produce belief in us, he first engages a property of God's nature in the matter — God is,

as Titus 1:2 says, the God who cannot lie, who cannot deceive or be deceived. It is impossible for Him to do otherwise. This extends in general to all of God's words and works. But in this matter there is a particular unchangeableness of His purpose. People might think that even if something has been spoken about forgiveness, it could perhaps be otherwise. No, says the apostle — it was spoken by God, and it is impossible that He should lie. But could not God, given the countless provocations of sinners, change His mind about it? No — there is a particular unchangeableness in His purpose to carry this through; it cannot change. But how do we know this is truly the purpose of His will? He has declared it through His word, given in the form of a promise. A promise by its nature raises expectation in those to whom it is made, and requires exact faithfulness in its fulfillment — which God on His part will certainly provide. But that is not all. So that no room might be left for any quibbling objection, He interposed with an oath. So we have this truth grounded in the truthfulness of God's nature — one of His essential excellencies — established in the immutable purpose of His will, brought forth in a word of promise, and confirmed by God's pledging Himself against all grounds of exception — swearing by Himself that so it shall be. I have mentioned this only to show what weight the Holy Spirit places on the delivery of this great truth, and how deeply it concerns us to inquire diligently into it and into the grounds and evidences that may be offered for it — among which are the following.

The discovery of forgiveness in the first promise. The evidence of the truth contained in it. The institution of sacrifices, their use and purpose. Also the prescription of repentance to sinners.

The first discovery of forgiveness in God — which I place as the first evidence of it — was made in God's initial dealings with our first parents after their shameful sin and fall. To show that this is an evidence carrying great conviction with it, and one on which faith may securely rest and embrace, the following observations must be considered.

The first sin in the world was, in many respects, the greatest sin that ever occurred. It was the sin of human nature as a whole — a conspiracy in which all individuals were involved. As the saying goes, 'We were all that one man' — in that one man, and in that one sin, we all sinned (Romans 5:12). It left God not a single subject in moral obedience on the earth, nor any ground for there ever to be one. When the angels sinned, the entire race did not fall. Thousands of thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand of them, continued in their obedience (Daniel 7:10). But here, every individual human being — with the sole exception of the One who was not yet represented in Adam — was caught up in the same crime and guilt. Beyond this, the sin disrupted God's government over the entire creation. God had made all things in number, weight, and measure, in order and beauty, pronouncing His own work very good (Genesis 1:31). Much of that beauty lay in the subordination of everything to everything else, and of all things to God Himself, through the praise and obedience of man. The rest of creation, being made subject to man, was to return its tribute of honor and glory to God through him. But all this order was destroyed by this sin, and the very creation was made subject to futility (Romans 8:20). On these and similar grounds, it could easily be shown that this was the greatest sin ever committed in the world.

Second, the man who had sinned agreed in his heart and conscience with the righteous sentence of the law. He knew what he deserved and expected nothing less than the immediate execution of the sentence of death. He therefore did not attempt a defense, had no expectation of pardon, waited for no trial, but fled and hid himself and sought to escape. Genesis 3:10: 'I was afraid,' he said, 'and I hid myself.' Never were words of greater horror spoken in the world, nor will there be until the day of judgment. Poor creature — he was filled with the expectation of the vengeance due for a broken covenant.

Third, God had just demonstrated in the sinning angels what His justice required and how He could deal with sinning man without the least compromise of His government, holiness, or goodness. See 2 Peter 2:4.

Fourth, there was nothing outside of God Himself that should have moved Him in the slightest to so much as delay the execution of His wrath for one moment — He had not done so with the angels. Everything now lay under wrath, curse, confusion, and disorder. Nothing remained that was good, lovely, or desirable in His sight. As in the first creation, what was first brought forth from nothing was formless and empty — nothing in it moving God to bring forth all things in the glory that followed, the whole design proceeding from His own infinite goodness and wisdom — so it was now again. Sin had brought emptiness and futility upon the whole creation. Nothing remained that could serve as a motive for merciful restoration. Everything devolved once more on His sovereignty. With all things in this condition — every door standing open to the glory of God's justice in punishing sin, nothing outside of Him restraining His hand, the whole creation and espe-

cially the sinner himself lying trembling in expectation of a dreadful doom — what now came forth from Him? The blessed word of Genesis 3:15: 'The seed of the woman shall bruise the serpent's head.' It is well known that the entire mystery of forgiveness is wrapped up in this one word of promise. The great way of its coming forth from God — through the blood of the Messiah, whose heel was to be bruised — is also there indicated. And this was the first discovery ever made of forgiveness in God. It was made by a word of pure revelation, and so faith must receive it. This revelation of forgiveness in God — contained in this one promise — was the foundation of all worship offered to Him by sinners for many ages. For we have shown before that without it no sinner can have the least encouragement to approach God. And it will remain to the end of the world as a clear evidence of the truth in hand — a firm foundation for faith to rest and build upon. Let a sinner seriously consider the state of things as they were in the world at that moment, as described above, and then see God coming forth with a word of pardon and forgiveness — flowing purely from His own love and from those counsels of peace between the Father and the Son — and he cannot but conclude, even in his greatest difficulties, that there is forgiveness with God, that He may be feared. Let the law and conscience, let sin and Satan come forward and object to this evidence. Enough may be spoken from it — whatever the particular case in which the soul is contending with them — to put them all to silence.

Second, God revealed this sacred truth through His institution of sacrifices. Blood sacrifices all relate to atonement, expiation, and consequently to forgiveness. It is true they could not in themselves take away sin or make perfect those who came to God

through them (Hebrews 10:1). Yet they undeniably pointed to the taking away of sin — the forgiveness of it — by what they signified and foreshadowed. Let me then look back briefly into their origin and purpose.

First, the origin and first institution of sacrifices is not explicitly stated in Scripture — only the practice of the saints is recorded. But it is certain from clear scriptural evidence that they were of God's immediate institution and appointment. God never allowed human will or wisdom to be the source and rule of His worship. The command that heads the rule of His worship — 'You shall not make for yourself' — which is the heart of the command (what follows being an explanation and confirmation of the law itself by examples), cuts off all such claims. It stands like a flaming sword turning every way to prevent people's arbitrary additions to God's institutions. God will not surrender the glory of being the sole law-giver regarding all matters of His worship — or any part of it — to any son of man.

Second, the time of their institution is also not mentioned. Some among the Roman Catholics argue — through the philosophical disputation by which their unstable position is propped up — that sacrifices would have existed in Paradise even if man had not sinned. As with all their opinions, we ought first to ask what they gain by it, since their entire religion is bent toward their own material interest. In this particular case that interest is obvious, since the assertion flatly contradicts the very nature and purpose of most sacrifices — namely, that they should be offered where there is no sin. Their goal is to establish a general rule: that there can be no true worship of God in any state without a sacrifice. From this they conclude that the continual sacrifice of the Mass is necessary

in the church, and that without it there is no true worship of God. In this way they arrive quickly at their advantage — the Mass being that inexhaustible source of revenue that feeds their pride and greed throughout the world. But there is in the church of Christ an altar still and a sacrifice still — the very one they have rejected in favor of the abominable fiction of their Mass — namely, Christ Himself, as the apostle tells us in Hebrews 13:10. As for the animal sacrifices, since they could not have existed before the entrance of sin, it may be demonstrated that they were instituted from the foundation of the world — that is, immediately after sin entered. Christ is called the Lamb of God (John 1:29), with reference to the sacrifices of old, as 1 Peter 1:18-19 shows. From this He is represented in the church as a Lamb slain (Revelation 5:6), pouring out the efficacy of all sacrifices upon His church. He is said to be a Lamb slain from the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8) — which could not be the case unless some sacrifice foreshadowing His death had been offered from the beginning. For this speaks not only of the efficacy of His mediation but of the manner of it. Beyond this, the apostle tells us that without the shedding of blood there is no remission (Hebrews 9:22) — meaning God, to demonstrate that all pardon and forgiveness from the foundation of the world was bound to the blood of Christ, gave no word of pardon except with blood. Now I have shown that He revealed pardon in the first promise, and therefore the shedding of blood and sacrifices followed immediately. The covenant itself was also dedicated with blood (Hebrews 9:18). Some believe that the animals from whose skins God made garments for Adam were offered as sacrifices. Nor is this conjecture without merit. Indeed it seems to carry a shadow of Gospel mystery — that the nakedness which became

their shame through their sin should be covered by the skins of their sacrifices. For in the true sacrifice there is something corresponding to this. The righteousness of the One whose sacrifice removes the guilt of our sin is called our clothing, which covers our pollution and shame.

Third, after the giving of the law, the greatest, most noble, and most solemn part of the worship of God consisted in sacrifices. This form of worship continued with God's approval in the world for about four thousand years — from the entrance of sin until the death of the Messiah, the true sacrifice, which put an end to all that was merely symbolic.

Having established these points, we may consider what God's mind and aim were in instituting this worship. One instance — the most solemn of its kind — will resolve this inquiry. Leviticus 16:5: two male goats were taken as an offering for sin. Consider only (without going into all the details) how one of them was treated in verses 20-22: 'He shall bring the live goat, and Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, all their transgressions and all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and he shall send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who stands in readiness. The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote land.'

What is the purpose of all this solemnity, and what is being declared by it? Why should God appoint poor sinful people to come together, take a goat or lamb, confess over its head all their sins and transgressions, and devote it to destruction under that confession? Had men invented this themselves, it would have meant nothing. But it was an institution of God, binding His church to

observe it on pain of His severest displeasure. It was certainly a solemn declaration that there is forgiveness with Him. Would the God who is infinitely good — and therefore will not deceive — who is infinitely true, holy, and faithful — and therefore cannot deceive — call out those He loved to a solemn representation of a matter involving their greatest and eternal concern, and then let them feed on nothing but ashes? Let people take care that they do not mock God, for God truly does not mock man — not until man has finally and completely rejected Him. For four thousand years, then, God declared by sacrifices that there is forgiveness with Him, and led His people through them to make a public representation of this before the world. This is a second undeniable evidence of the truth in hand — one that may prove of real use to souls who come truly and seriously to deal with God. For though the practice has ended, the instruction intended in it remains.

Third, God's appointment of repentance to sinners reveals that there is forgiveness in Himself. The calling of sinners to repentance is a revelation of forgiveness. After the angels sinned, God never once called them to repentance. He would not deceive them — He let them know what they should expect from Him. He has no forgiveness for them, and therefore requires no repentance from them. It is not, and never was, a duty incumbent on them. Nor is it required of the damned in hell — God does not require it of them, nor is it their duty. Since there is no forgiveness for them, what reason would there be to repent? Why should it be their duty to do so? Their eternal anguish over sin committed contains nothing of repentance. The appointment of repentance, then, is a revelation of forgiveness. God would not call a sinful creature to humble itself and grieve over its sin if there were no way of recovery or relief.

The only way of recovery from the guilt of sin is pardon. So Job 33:27-28: 'He looks on men, and if any say, "I have sinned and perverted what was right, and it was not profitable for me," He will redeem his soul from going into the pit, and his life shall see the light.' In the verses before this, the writer describes the various ways God uses to bring people to repentance — through dreams (verse 15-16), through afflictions (verse 19), and through the preaching of the word (verse 23). What does God aim at through all these different means? To cause the person to say, 'I have sinned and perverted what was right.' To bring him to repentance. And what follows if God achieves His aim and the person comes to that point? Then there is forgiveness for him, as is declared in verse 28. To develop this evidence further, I will confirm by a few obvious observations these two things.

1. That the appointment of repentance does indeed prove that there is forgiveness with God.
2. That everyone in whom genuine repentance toward God is produced may confidently conclude that there is forgiveness with God for him.

First, no repentance is acceptable to God unless it is built on — or leans on — faith in forgiveness. The Scripture gives us a multitude of witnesses to this truth. Many have been, and many are recorded, who were convicted of sin, troubled about it, sorry for it, who made open confession and acknowledgment of it, who under the pressing weight of it cried out even to God for deliverance — and yet fell short of mercy, pardon, and acceptance with God. The cases of Cain, Pharaoh, Saul, Ahab, Judas, and others could be examined. What was lacking that made everything they did fall short? Consider one example for all. It is said of Judas that he repented (Matthew 27:3). But what did this repentance consist of?

He was convicted of his sin in general — 'I have sinned,' he said (verse 4). He was acutely aware of the particular sin he stood charged with before God in his conscience: 'I have betrayed innocent blood — I am guilty of blood, innocent blood, and in the vilest manner, by treachery.' He came to a full and open confession of his sin. He also made restitution of what he had gained from his sin, returning the thirty pieces of silver — all of which testified to a genuine sorrow that drove the whole. One might think that Judas's repentance looks much like the young ruler's obedience, who said, 'All these things I have done from my youth — is there anything still lacking?' And yes, one thing was lacking in that young man — he had no true faith or love for God, which corrupted and spoiled all his other performances. One thing was also lacking in the repentance of Judas — he had no faith in God's forgiveness. That he could not believe. And so, after all his sorrow, instead of coming to God, he gave God the ultimate defiance and went away and hanged himself.

Indeed, faith in forgiveness, as has been shown, has many degrees. Among those degrees there is one that is indispensably necessary to render repentance acceptable. I will not dispute exactly what it consists of. It is not an assurance of one's general acceptance with God. It is not a certainty that the particular sin troubling the soul has been forgiven. A general — so long as it is a genuine Gospel — discovery that there is forgiveness in God will suffice. The church expresses it in Hosea 14:3: 'In You the orphan finds mercy.' And Joel 2:14: 'Who knows whether He will not turn and relent.' 'I have this ground,' says the soul. 'God is in Himself gracious and merciful. The fatherless, the destitute and helpless who come to Him through Christ, find mercy with Him. No one in

heaven or earth can prove that He may not return to me also.' Now, a person's convictions may be ever so sharp and deep, his sorrow ever so abundant, overflowing, and lasting, his confession ever so full, free, and open — if this one thing is missing, everything else amounts to nothing but what drives toward death.

Second, to prescribe repentance as a duty to sinners without a foundation of pardon and forgiveness in Himself would be inconsistent with the wisdom, holiness, goodness, faithfulness, and all the other glorious perfections of God's nature.

First, the apostle lays this as the great foundation of all consolation — that God cannot lie or deceive (Hebrews 6:18). He appeals again to God's faithfulness and truthfulness for the same purpose in Titus 1:2: 'God, who cannot lie, has promised it.' Now there is a lie in things as well as in words. A person who does something that by its nature is designed to deceive those who observe it, and who does it with the intention of deceiving them, is no less a liar than one who affirms what he knows to be false. There is a lie in actions as well as in words. The whole life of a hypocrite is a lie. So the prophet says of idolaters: 'there is a lie in their right hand' (Isaiah 44:20).

Second, the call to repentance is by its very nature fitted to produce in the sinner's mind the thought that there is forgiveness with God. Repentance is for sinners only. Our Savior said, 'I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.' It is for them and them alone. It was no duty for Adam in Eden, none for the angels in heaven, none for the damned in hell. What then does this appointment say? 'O sinners, come and deal with God through repentance' — does that not openly speak of forgiveness in God? If it were otherwise, could people be more completely frustrated or de-

ceived? Would not the institution of repentance be a lie? Such a delusion might come from Satan, but not from the One who is the fountain of goodness, holiness, and truth. His call to repentance is a full demonstration of His readiness to forgive (Acts 17:30-31). It is true that many deceive themselves in this matter. They raise themselves to an expectation of escaping punishment — not on Gospel grounds — and their disappointment becomes a great part of their punishment. But God deceives no one. Whoever comes to Him on His call to repentance will find forgiveness. It is said of some that He will laugh at their calamity and mock when their fear comes (Proverbs 1:26) — that is, He will intensify their misery by letting them see what their pride and folly has brought them to. But who are these? Only those who refuse His call to repentance along with the promises of acceptance attached to it.

Third, there is therefore no reason why those who are under a call to repentance should question whether there is forgiveness in God. This bears on my second point. 'Come,' says the Lord to the souls of men, 'leave your sinful ways, turn to Me, humble yourselves with broken and contrite hearts.' 'Alas,' say poor convicted sinners, 'we are poor, dark, ignorant creatures — or we are old in sin, or great sinners, or backsliders, or have fallen repeatedly into the same sins. Can we expect forgiveness for us?' But you are under God's invitation to repentance, and to disbelieve forgiveness is to call God's truthfulness, holiness, and faithfulness into question. If you will not believe forgiveness, whatever excuse you offer, in truth it is because you hate repentance. You deceive your own souls when you claim you cannot come to repentance because you

cannot believe forgiveness. For in the very institution of this duty, God has pledged all His attributes to make good that He has pardon and mercy for sinners.

Fourth, there is even less reason to doubt forgiveness where genuine repentance has in any measure been produced. No soul comes to repentance except at God's call. And God calls none except those for whom He has mercy ready when they come. As for those who sin against the Holy Spirit — since they shut themselves out from forgiveness, they are not called to repentance.

Fifth, God expressly declares in Scripture that the forgiveness that is with Him is the very ground of His prescribing repentance to man. One instance may suffice — Isaiah 55:7: 'Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the Lord, and He will have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.' You see to whom He speaks — to those who are perversely wicked, who make a practice of sinning. What does He call them to? Plainly to repentance, to the duty we have been discussing. But what is the basis for such an invitation to such profligate sinners? The abundant forgiveness and pardon that is with Him — superabounding over whatever the worst of them could possibly need, just as Romans 5:20 declares.

And this is another way in which God has revealed that there is forgiveness with Him — and it is an unshakeable foundation for faith to build upon in its approach to God. The certainty of this evidence cannot be questioned without making statements that are derogatory to the glory and honor of God. And this connection between repentance and forgiveness is the principle from which God convinces a stubborn and unbelieving people that all His ways and dealings with sinners are just and right (Ezekiel 18:25) — and if

there were any failure in it, they could not be so. Every soul therefore that is under a call to repentance — whether from its natural condition or from some backsliding into folly after conversion — has a sufficient foundation to rest on regarding the pardon it seeks. God is ready to deal with it on terms of mercy. If it refuses to come to Him on those terms out of love for sin or the power of unbelief, its condemnation is just. And it would be well for this truth to be firmly impressed on the minds of people. I say this notwithstanding the general assumptions people seem to have about this matter — for these principles must still be driven home to them.

First, such is the unbelief lurking in the hearts of people by nature that, despite their professions, we need to be continually pressing on them evidences of even the very being and essential properties of God. In doing so we at least have the help of the in-born notions in their own minds, which they cannot completely suppress. How much more necessary is this in reference to the free acts of God's will, which are known only through pure revelation. Our teaching needs to be line upon line. And even then we have reason enough to cry out, as was said before: 'Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?'

Second, what was said earlier about the obstacles that stand in the way of souls receiving this truth in a saving manner should be remembered. Those who have no experience of these obstacles between God and their own souls appear to be ignorant of the true nature of conscience, law, Gospel, grace, sin, and forgiveness.

Third, many who have come to a saving persuasion of this truth have nevertheless not received it on clear and unquestionable grounds. Not knowing how to trace their faith back to its

proper foundations, they are unable to answer the objections that arise against it in their own consciences, and so they waver about it wretchedly all their days. These people need to have these foundational principles reinforced in them. If they would weigh them properly, some might have cause to say what the Samaritans said after first giving credit to the woman's report (John 4) — that they had only a report before, but now they find all things to be exactly as reported, and even more. A little experience of one's own unbelief, together with observation of the unstable progress and constant wavering of others, will be sufficient to convince anyone of the necessity of the work we are engaged in.

But it will be objected that it is needless to multiply arguments and evidences in this case, since the truth under consideration is granted as one of the fundamental principles of religion. Since no one calls it into question, it does not appear that so much time and labor is needed to confirm it. What is granted and plain, after all, needs little confirmation. But several things may be said in reply — all of which together plead for the accumulation of our arguments in this matter.

That something is generally granted as an opinion is no evidence that it is genuinely believed by many. A number of things are taken for granted as opinions that are not believed with the kind of faith that changes practice. We have partly shown before, and will afterward prove beyond question, that very few believe this truth with a faith that gives them an actual share in it and the benefit of it. And what good will it do any of us that there is forgiveness of sin with God, if our own sins are not forgiven? No more good than it does a poor, starving man to know that some king is rich. My aim is not to establish this as a mere opinion or a theoret-

ical truth, but to demonstrate it in the principles of its being and revelation — in such a way that it may be truly believed, on which all our blessedness depends.

Second, a truth needs confirmation not less but more for being plain and fundamental — and all the more because of its worth and weight. 'This is a faithful saying and worthy of full acceptance,' says the apostle, 'that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.' I say the same of this truth, which is in substance the same: it is worthy of full acceptance, that there is forgiveness with God. Therefore it ought to be fully confirmed. Especially since we use no other demonstrations of it than those God Himself has furnished us with for that purpose — and He would not have furnished them if He had not known we needed them. As for the plainness of this truth — it is well if it is indeed plain to us. This I know: nothing but the Spirit of God can make it so. People may please themselves and others with clever speculations and make them appear to be things of great discovery and attainment, which on close examination turn out to be either not true, or if true, of very little consequence. It is these foundational truths that have wrapped within them the mysteries of God's wisdom and grace. Whoever can unfold them rightly will show himself a workman with no need to be ashamed. These still waters are deep. The further we dive into them, the greater the discovery of their depths. And there are many other sacred truths whose mention is common but whose depths are little searched and whose power is little known.

Third, we multiply these evidences because the multitudes concerned in them are vast. All who believe, and all who do not, are involved. Those who believe need to be established, and those who do not believe need to be encouraged to do so. Among both groups,

some evidences will be more helpful and useful to one person, others to another. Among them all, it may be that all are gathered up so that no fragment is lost. They are all, I trust, instruments provided by the Holy Spirit for this purpose. Through this ministry we seek to place them in His hand, to be made effective as He wills. One may reach one soul, another may reach another, according to His pleasure. One may serve to establish, another to console, a third to encourage — according to the needs of poor souls. God, who has provided them all, knows that all are needed.

Fourth, they are also needed because of the varying conditions in which the spirits of believers themselves may find themselves at different times. One evidence may help the same soul at one season, another at a different season. One may secure the soul against a particular temptation, another may stir it up to thankfulness and obedience.

I have said these things so that you will not think we have dwelt too long on this consideration. I pray God that your consolation and assurance may abound as you read these meditations — as I trust they have not been entirely without fruit in their preparation.

Further evidences of forgiveness with God. Testimonies that God was pleased with some who were sinners. The patience of God toward the world as evidence of forgiveness. The experience of God's saints to the same effect.

Fourth, as a fourth evidence of this truth, consider those — both in the Old and New Testaments — about whom we have the strongest assurance that God was well pleased with them and that they are now in His presence. This is the argument the apostle

presses with many examples in Hebrews 11. How many does he there list who obtained a good testimony, the testimony that they pleased God? Verse 2 and 5. All these inherited the promises through faith — that is, they obtained the forgiveness of sin. For since by nature they were children of wrath and under the curse just as others are, they could not have obtained a secure share in God's favor and the testimony that they pleased Him in any other way. Without forgiveness, every one of them would, by right, have remained in the same state as Adam when he heard the voice of God and was afraid. Since it is evident, then, that certain people in every generation have enjoyed the friendship, love, and favor of God in this world and at death have entered into glory, this makes it plain that there is forgiveness of sin with Him — without which these things could not have been.

Following the apostle's example, let us mention some particular instances. Look at Abraham. He was the friend of God and walked with God. God made a solemn covenant with him and takes it as His memorial throughout all generations that He is the God of Abraham. Abraham is without question now at rest with God. Our Savior calls the place or condition into which blessed souls are gathered 'Abraham's bosom' — he himself is at rest, and with him others are at rest.

The same was true of Isaac and Jacob. They too are in heaven, alive to and with God. Our Savior proves this from the terms of the covenant: 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' God is not the God of the dead but of the living (Matthew 22:32). They are still alive — alive to God and with Him — by virtue of the covenant. For if after their death God would not

still be called their God, death would have reached their whole persons. But they are still alive with God in heaven, and their bodies, by virtue of the same covenant, are to be recovered from the dust.

The same is true of David. He was a man after God's own heart who did all His will and fulfilled all His pleasure. Although he died and his body saw corruption, he is not lost — he is with God in heaven. He ended his days triumphantly, with a full expectation of eternal rest beyond anything attainable in this world, and this by virtue of the covenant. These are the last words of David: 'Although my house is not so with God, yet He has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and secure' (2 Samuel 23:5).

Peter also is in heaven. Christ prayed for him that his faith would not fail, and in his death he glorified God (John 21:19).

So is Paul. He too is in heaven — he knew that when he departed he would be with Christ. We are therefore surrounded by a cloud of witnesses.

First, it is absolutely certain that they were all sinners. They were all sinners by nature — in this there is no difference among any of the children of men. And they were sinners personally as well. They confessed it of themselves, and the sins of all of them stand on record. Indeed some of them were great sinners — guilty of serious and notable failures. Some sinned before their conversion, like Abraham, who was an idolater (Joshua 24:2-3), and Paul, who was a persecutor and a blasphemer. Some sinned after their conversion — some in sins of the flesh against obedience, as David, and some in sins of profession against faith, as Peter. Nothing is more evident, then, than that not one of them came to

rest with God by any path other than forgiveness. Had they been guilty of no more than what is recorded of them in Holy Scripture, they could still have been saved no other way. For anyone who breaks the law in any one point is guilty of breaking the whole (James 2:10).

What shall we say then? Do we think that God has forgiveness only for this or that particular individual? No one doubts that all these were pardoned. Was it by virtue of some special personal privilege unique to them? Where would such privilege have come from, since by nature they were no better than others — nor would they have been so personally, had they not been delivered from sin and prepared for obedience by grace, mercy, and pardon? They all obtained forgiveness by virtue of the covenant — forgiveness that is with God. And that same forgiveness is equally available to others who come to God the same way they did — by faith and repentance.

Second, many of those about whom we have this assurance were not only sinners but great sinners, as was noted — and this point must be pressed further to head off another objection. Some may say that although these were sinners, they were not sinners of the same kind as themselves. And although they obtained forgiveness, this is no argument that they also will do so, since they are guilty of different sins with different aggravations. To this I say that I take no pleasure in dwelling on or even repeating the sins and failures of the saints of old. Not only God's grace but the sins of people have been twisted by some into license — made into a cover for their lusts. Yet for the purposes for which the Holy Spirit has recorded these things, we may refer to them. They were written to warn us, to make us careful lest we also fall, and to give re-

lief in our own unexpected falls. When mention of them serves to magnify sovereign grace and mercy — as it does here — we may dwell on them. I believe I can safely say, without going into particulars, that there is no sin, no degree of sin, no aggravating circumstance of sin, no kind of persistence in sin — the one sin alone excepted — for which there are not those in heaven who were once guilty of it.

Some may yet say that they have considered the sins and falls of Lot, David, Peter, Paul, and the thief on the cross, and still do not find their own condition represented — and so cannot conclude that they will meet with the same outcome.

In answer: first, I am not showing that this or that person will be pardoned, but demonstrating that there is forgiveness with God — and forgiveness for all kinds of sins and sinners — which these examples assuredly confirm. Moreover they make plain that if other people are not pardoned, it is simply because they do not make the same appeal for forgiveness that these did.

Second, to remove this objection further — consider what the apostle says about the various kinds of sinners who obtained mercy in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11: 'Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor those who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified.' It would be hard to compile a grimmer list. Yet some from every one of these categories were justified and pardoned.

Third, suppose even this list of sins does not cover the soul's condition because of some particular aggravation of its sin not mentioned. Let such a person add what our Savior says in Matthew 12:31: 'Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.' They are not all actually forgiven and pardoned to all people — but they are all forgivable for those who seek pardon for them according to the Gospel. There is forgiveness with God for all of them. And certainly every sin except that one falls within the scope of 'every sin and blasphemy' — and so some who have been guilty of it are now in heaven.

We consider it a good sign and evidence of a healing water's virtue when, without any fraud or deception, we see the crutches of cured cripples and disabled people hung around it as a testimony to its power. And it is a great demonstration of a physician's skill and ability when many come to a sick person and say: 'We had the same disease you have, with the same symptoms and the same effects, and through his skill and care we were cured. Oh,' says the sick man, 'bring him to me. I will put my life in his hands.' Now all the saints in heaven stand around a sin-sick soul, for in this matter we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1). And what do they testify? What do they say to a poor guilty sinner? 'As you are, so were we — so guilty, so perplexed, so deserving of wrath, so afraid of destruction from God.' 'And what path did you take, what course did you pursue to obtain the blessed condition in which you now are?' 'We all went to God through Christ for forgiveness, and found in Him an abundance of grace, mercy, and pardon for us all.' The rich man in the parable thought it would be a great means of conversion if someone rose from the dead to

preach. But here we see that all the departed saints, now in glory, jointly preach this foundational truth — that there is forgiveness with God.

Poor souls are prone to think that everyone they read or hear about who has gone to heaven went there because they were so good and so holy. It is true that many of them were remarkably and exemplarily holy in their generations. All of them were holy according to their degree and measure, for without holiness no one will see God. And it is our duty to strive to be like them in holiness if we ever intend to be like them in happiness and glory. But not one of them — not a single person now in heaven, Jesus Christ alone excepted — ever arrived there by any other path than the forgiveness of sin. And that same path will bring us there too, even if we fall short of many of them in holiness and grace.

I press this evidence of forgiveness especially because I find the apostle Paul presenting it powerfully in his own person in 1 Timothy 1:12-16. 'I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, because He judged me faithful, appointing me to His service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief. This is a trustworthy saying, deserving full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display His perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in Him for eternal life.' A great sinner, says he — the chief of sinners — which he illustrates through notable instances of his sin. 'I was a blasphemer' — the highest sin against God. 'A persecutor' — the highest sin against the saints. 'An insolent opponent' — the highest wickedness to-

ward humanity. 'But,' he says, 'I received mercy — I was pardoned — and that with blessed effects.' First, that after all this he should be counted faithful and appointed to the ministry. Second, that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ in him and toward him was exceedingly abundant. And what was the reason — what was the purpose for which he was so treated? That he might be a pattern, an evidence, and an argument that there is grace, mercy, and forgiveness available for all kinds of sinners who believe in Him for eternal life.

To conclude this evidence: every person now in heaven has his pardon sealed in the blood of Christ. All these pardons are, as it were, displayed in the Gospel — all enrolled in its promises as encouragement for those who need forgiveness to come and claim their own. Do not fear the guilt of sin, then, but fear the love of it and its power over you. If we love sin better than forgiveness, we will certainly go without forgiveness. If we would only rather be pardoned in God's way than perish, our condition is secure.

Fifth, the same truth is evident from the patience of God toward the world and the purpose of it. To clarify this, we may observe the following.

First, when sin first entered and the covenant God had made with mankind in Adam was broken, God could have immediately executed the threatened curse and brought eternal death on those who sinned. Justice required it, and there was nothing in all creation to interpose even for a temporary delay of the punishment. Had God at that moment sent sinful man — along with the fallen angels who led him into sin — immediately into eternal destruction, He would have been glorified in His righteousness and severity by the angels who did not sin. Or He could have created a new

race of innocent creatures to worship Him and glorify Him for His righteous judgment — just as all the elect at the last day will glorify Him for the destruction of the ungodly.

Second, God has not taken this course. He has continued the human race on the earth for a long span of time, watching over them with His providence and exercising extraordinary patience, forbearance, and longsuffering toward them. The apostle Paul discusses this at length in Acts 14:15-17, Acts 17:24-30, and Romans 2:4. It is open and plain in every day's experience. The whole world is daily filled with tokens of God's power and patience. Every nation, every city, and every family bears evidence of it.

Third, there is a common abuse of this patience of God that is visible in the world in every generation. So it was in ancient times. God saw it and grieved over it (Genesis 6:5-6). All the evil, sin, and wickedness that has ever been in the world — more than any heart can conceive or tongue express — has been an abuse of this patience of God. For most people this is the outcome of God's patience and forbearance. They use the time He gives them to fulfill every abomination their evil hearts can suggest, or into which Satan can draw them. The state of the world proclaims this, and everyone's own experience confirms it.

Fourth, let us then consider what the true and proper end of God's patience toward the world actually is — His endurance of it in sin and wickedness for so long, allowing generation after generation to multiply. Are we to think that God has no other design in all His patience toward mankind through all generations than simply to let them all, without exception, sin against Him, dishonor Him, and provoke Him — so that He may at length destroy them all forever? It is true that this is the consequence and the outcome

for the majority, through their persistent wickedness and their love of sin and pleasure. But is this God's design? His only design? Does He have no purpose beyond merely tolerating their folly for a time and then taking revenge upon them? Is this His intention not only toward those who are obstinate in their darkness, ignorance, and rebellion — whose damnation is just and does not sleep — but also toward those whom He stirs up by His grace to seek a remedy and deliverance from sin and death? God forbid. Such a thought would contradict all those inborn notions of God's infinite wisdom and goodness that all His works reveal and declare. Whatever God's purpose may be, this cannot be it. He must long since have cut off the entire race of mankind, if He had no other thoughts and purposes toward them.

Fifth, if God's patience has any other intention toward any, any other effect on some — that must be reckoned its principal end, and the reason for which it is also extended to others. Since those for whom God has a special design in His patience must come into the world through the ordinary means of human reproduction, across all ages from the beginning of the world to its end, the patience extended to them must of necessity extend to all others as well, in whatever variety God is pleased to exercise it. The whole world therefore continues under the patience of God and its fruits — for the sake of those within it who are the objects of His gracious design.

Sixth, let us then consider what the end of this patience is and what it teaches us. This patience can have no possible end — other than the rejected one — unless there is forgiveness of sins with God. Unless God is ready and willing to forgive the sins of those who come to Him according to His appointment, His patience

serves no purpose other than a design of wrath, anger, severity, and resolve to destroy. This is monstrous even to suppose and would reflect unspeakable dishonor on the holy God. If a man were to bear with those in his power in their faults for no other purpose than to take advantage of their failures in order to bring a greater punishment and revenge upon them, what more vile affection, what more corrupt heart and mind could he display? Shall we think this is the whole design of God's patience? God forbid.

It may be objected that this argument is not conclusive, since God's dealing with the sinning angels seems to count against it. It is clear that they fell into transgression and rebellion before mankind did — for they led and seduced our first parents into sin. Yet God has borne with them and exercised patience toward them to this very day, and will do so until the end of all things when they will be cast into the fire prepared for the devil and his angels. And yet it is granted that there is no forgiveness in God for them. It does not necessarily follow, therefore, that there is forgiveness for man simply because God has been patient toward the angels.

I answer that this objection must be addressed more fully when we come to remove the great objection against this whole truth — the one mentioned earlier, drawn from God's dealing with the sinning angels, whom He did not spare. For the present, two or three observations will clear it out of the way.

First, the case of the sinning angels is not the same as the case of the human race across all generations. Only those individual angels who personally committed the first sin are in this condition. They have not multiplied or increased in God's providence and patience over time — they remain the same individual beings who sinned at the beginning, and no more. Therefore, the immediate

execution of the full punishment due to their sin would not have prevented any further increase in their number. With mankind it is entirely different. God has continued His patience toward human beings, bringing into existence millions of additional persons who were not personally involved in the first sin. Had God not continued His forbearance, their very existence — and with it their sin and misery — would have been prevented. So the case of the sinning angels and that of mankind are not the same.

Second, God in fact exercises no patience toward the angels that sinned — precisely because He has no forgiveness for them. As Peter tells us in 2 Peter 2:4: 'God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness.' Immediately upon their sin they were cast out of God's presence — the presence they were made to enjoy — and thrown into hell as the place of their confinement and present anguish under God's curse and displeasure. Although some of them may be permitted to roam the earth, walking back and forth in it to serve the ends of God's holy and wise providence — and in that sense be out of their prison — they remain in chains, delivered over to chains of darkness to be kept until the final judgment. In all of this they lie under the active execution of God's curse. There is therefore no patience truly exercised toward them. If a notorious criminal or murderer is committed to a dungeon and kept bound in iron chains to prevent escape until the appointed day of his solemn trial and execution — with no intention of sparing him — no one would say patience is being exercised toward him. The arrangement is simply designed to ensure his punishment is certain and complete. Such is the condition of the angels that sinned. They are not objects of God's patience.

Third, the reason why the full and final punishment of these angels is being held back until the appointed time is not for their sake, their benefit, or their advantage in any way. It is solely so that the ends of God's patience toward mankind might be accomplished. Once those ends are fulfilled, the angels will not be spared for a day, an hour, or a moment. God's dealings with them, therefore, are nothing but a withholding of the full infliction of their punishment until He has accomplished the blessed purposes of His patience toward humanity.

A second objection may be raised: does not Romans 9:22 say that God, wishing to show His wrath and make His power known, endured with much patience the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? This seems to suggest that the end of God's endurance and longsuffering — at least toward some — is simply their preparation for destruction.

In answer, first: there is a difference between enduring with much longsuffering and actively exercising and declaring patience. The former simply means God is withholding for a time a destruction He could justly inflict — which is not what we are speaking of. The latter means God is acting in a way of goodness and kindness for some specific purpose.

Second, the very next verse declares the great end of God's patience and answers this objection. Verse 23: 'in order to make known the riches of His glory for vessels of mercy, which He has prepared beforehand for glory.' This is the great end of God's patience. While He is in the process of achieving it for the vessels of mercy, He endures others with much longsuffering and forbear-

ance. It is therefore fully clear that there can be no sufficient reason for God's patience toward sinners unless there is forgiveness prepared for those who come to Him through Christ.

And Scripture plainly confirms this in 2 Peter 3:9. The question is why God withholds the execution of His judgment on the wicked and ungodly. Some would have it that God is slow — that He is indifferent to the sins of people and pays them no attention. No, says the apostle. God has another design in His patience and longsuffering. What is it? To show that He is not willing that any should perish. This is exactly what we have argued. For our deliverance from destruction comes through repentance, which necessarily implies the forgiveness of sin. So Paul tells us in Romans 3:25 that what is declared in the Gospel — and what the end of God's patience and forbearance is — is the remission of sins.

Let us then apply this evidence to our own approach to God for pardon. It is certain that God could have taken us from the womb and cast us into outer darkness. In the course of our lives we have been guilty of such provocations that God could justly have used them as an occasion to glorify His justice and severity in our ruin. And yet we have lived this long in the patience and forbearance of God. To what end has He spared us and let pass all the occasions for our destruction that we ourselves have put into His hand? Is it not so that, through His patience, He might give us time and opportunity to obtain an interest in the forgiveness to which He testifies? Let us then be encouraged to use this time for the very purpose for which it is being given to us. You who are still uncertain of your condition — consider that the patience of God has been extended to you this very day so that you might use it to obtain the

forgiveness of your sins. Do not lose this day — not one day more — as you value your soul. Dreadful will be the condition of those who perish through despising or abusing the patience of God.

Sixth, the faith and experience of the saints in this world testify to this truth — and we know that their witness in this matter is trustworthy. Let us then ask them what they believe, what they have found, and what they have experienced regarding the forgiveness of sin. God Himself directs and leads us to this, appealing to our own experience as a source of relief and support in our distresses. Isaiah 40:28: 'Have you not heard? Have you not known?' Have you not yourself — you who now cry out that you are lost and ruined because God has forsaken you — found and known from His past dealings with you that the very opposite is true? And if our own experiences can strengthen us against the workings of our unbelief, so too can the experiences of others. This is what Eliphaz directs Job to in Job 5:1: 'Call now — is there anyone who will answer you? And to which of the holy ones will you turn?' This is not a call to pray to them for help, but an inquiry into their experience in the matter at hand. Some have foolishly tried to use this passage to support the invocation of departed saints — when in fact it forbids or discourages that rather than directing it. The holy ones in view are the saints on earth (Psalm 16:3) — those whose experiences Job is directed to seek out. David presents it as a great encouragement to waiting on God as a God who hears prayer that others have done so and found a blessing. Psalm 34:6: 'This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles.' If God did this for him, why should we not also cry out? The experiences of one are often set before others for their confirmation and establishment. So David says: 'Come and hear, all you

who fear God, and I will tell what He has done for my soul.' He is not content to point them only to the word, promises, and providence of God — though he does that most often. He will also give them the encouragement and support of his own experience. So Paul tells us that God comforted him in all his tribulation so that he might be able to comfort others in any trouble with the same comfort he himself had received from God (2 Corinthians 1:4) — that is, so that he could share with them his own experience of God's dealings with him and the satisfaction and assurance he found there. He also sets forth God's dealings with him in the pardon of his sins as a great motive to move others to believe (1 Timothy 1:13-16). This mutual sharing of meaningful experiences in the things of God — or of our own spiritual sense and evidence of the power, effectiveness, and reality of Gospel truths — rightly handled, is of singular usefulness to all kinds of believers. So the great apostle himself tells us in Romans 1:11-12: 'I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you — that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.' He longed not only to instruct them in the ministry committed to him, but also to share with them about their mutual faith and the experiences of God's peace in believing that each had attained.

We have called in the testimony of the saints in heaven, with whom those on earth form one family — that one family in heaven and earth named after the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 3:14-15). And they all agree in their testimony, as befits the family and children of God. But with the saints below we may

deal with personally — whereas we can only gather the witness of those already departed from what is on record about them. In order to clarify this evidence, several things should be observed.

First, people who live under the profession of religion without experiencing its power and effectiveness in their hearts are — whatever they profess — very close to atheism, or at least greatly exposed to it. If they profess to know God but deny Him by their actions, they are detestable and disobedient and unfit for any good work (Titus 1:16). Let such people set aside tradition and custom and give themselves to a free and honest examination of things — they will quickly discover that all their profession is a miserable self-deception, and that in truth they do not believe a word of the religion they profess. For of what their religion claims to be present within them, they find nothing true or real. And what reason do they have to believe that what it says about realities outside them is any different? If they have no experience of what it says should be within them, how can they have any confidence in the reality of what it reveals to be beyond them? John tells us that the one who claims to love God — whom he has not seen — while failing to love his brother whom he has seen, is a liar. People who fail to perform things of equal concern to them — things that can be tested — are not to be believed when they profess things about greater matters that cannot be tested. So the one who does not believe, who finds no power in what his religion says should be at work within him, and yet claims to believe in things he can have no experience of — is a liar. For instance, the one who professes the Gospel avows that the death of Christ crucifies sin, that faith purifies the heart, that the Holy Spirit quickens and enables the soul for duty, that God is good and gracious to all who come to Him,

that precious fellowship with Him is obtainable through Christ, and that there is great joy in believing. These things are plainly, openly, and repeatedly set forth in the Gospel. The apostle therefore presses people to obedience on their account (Philippians 2:1). Now if people have lived long in professing these things, saying they are true, but find nothing of truth, reality, or power in them — no experience of their effects in their own hearts or souls — on what stable ground do they believe anything else in the Gospel that they cannot experience? A person professes that the death of Christ will mortify sin and subdue corruption. Why does he believe it? Because the Gospel says so. But does he find it to be true? Does it have this effect in his own soul? Not at all — he finds no such thing in himself. How then can this man believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God simply because the Gospel says so, when he finds no real truth in what the Gospel says should be at work within him? So our Savior argues in John 3:12: 'If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?' If you do not believe the doctrine of regeneration — which you should have experience of, as something wrought in human hearts on this earth — how can you receive those heavenly mysteries of the Gospel that must at first be received by a pure act of faith, without any immediate sense or experience?

Of all dangers in making a religious profession, let those who profess beware of this above all — of a customary, traditional, or merely doctrinal acceptance of truths that ought to have their effects and fulfillment within them, while they have no experience of their reality and power. This is plainly having a form of godliness while denying its power. We see many of this kind turning into atheists, mockers, and open apostates. They find within them-

selves that their profession was a lie — that in truth they possessed none of the things they spoke of. And why should they continue affirming what does not exist? Beyond that, finding that the things they professed should be at work in them are not — they conclude that what they believed about external realities is no different, and so they reject everything altogether.

You may ask: what should a person do who cannot find or obtain experience within himself of what the word declares? He cannot find the death of Christ crucifying sin in him. He cannot find the Holy Spirit sanctifying his nature or obtain joy in believing. Should he refuse to believe or profess these things simply because he cannot attain a blessed experience of them? Our Savior has given perfect direction in this case in John 7:17: 'If anyone is willing to do His will, he will know of the teaching, whether it is of God or whether I speak from Myself.' Continue pressing on in the things revealed in the teaching of the Gospel, and you will have a satisfying experience that they are true and that they are of God. Do not stop acting faith on them and you will find their effects. As Hosea 6:3 says: 'Then we will know, if we press on to know the Lord.' Experience will follow upon perseverance in faith and obedience. Indeed, the first act of sincere believing will itself be accompanied by such a taste — giving the soul enough experience to produce firm adherence to the things believed. This is the way to prove for yourself what the good and acceptable and perfect will of God is, as revealed to us (Romans 12:2).

Second, where there is an inward spiritual experience of the power, reality, and effectiveness of any supernatural truth, it gives the soul great satisfaction, stability, and assurance. It removes the soul from danger or suspicion of being deceived and gives it the

testimony of God within itself. As the apostle says: 'He who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself' (1 John 5:9). He had just discussed the many testimonies given in heaven by all three holy persons of the Trinity, and on earth through grace and the ordinances, to the forgiveness of sin and the eternal life to be obtained through Jesus Christ. That record is true, firm, and stable — an enduring foundation for souls to rest upon that will never deceive them. Yet all the while it remains outside of us — something we have no experience of within ourselves. We rest on it only because of the authority and faithfulness of those who give it. But the one who actually believes has the testimony in himself — he has by experience a real inward evidence and assurance of the things testified to — namely, that God has given us eternal life, and that this life is in His Son (verse 12). Let us then consider briefly what this evidence consists of and from where this assurance arises. Several things must be noted.

First, there is a deep correspondence and likeness between the heart of a believer and the truth he believes. As the word is in the Gospel, so is grace in the heart — indeed they are the same thing expressed in different ways (Romans 6:17). 'You obeyed from the heart the form of doctrine to which you were handed over.' What is powerfully expressed there is that the doctrine of the Gospel produces the form, shape, image, and likeness of itself in the hearts of those who believe — they are cast into its mold. As the one is, so is the other. The principle of grace in the heart and the grace expressed in the word are like children of the same parent, fully resembling one another. Grace is a living word, and the word is a portrayed grace. As regeneration is, so is a regenerate heart. As the doctrine of faith is, so is a believer. This gives great evidence and

assurance of the things believed. 'As we have heard, so we have seen and found it' — such a soul can produce the duplicate of the word and thereby verify all things.

Second, the original expression of divine truth is not first in the word — not even as given out from the infinite depths of divine wisdom and truthfulness. It is first hidden, stored, and expressed in the person of Christ. He is the original pattern of truth, from whom it is expressed in the word and from and by the word impressed on the hearts of believers. So as it pleased God that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge should be in Christ, dwelling in Him, having their principal residence in Him (Colossians 2:3) — the entire word is simply a revelation of the truth that is in Christ, an expression of His image and likeness to the sons of men. Thus we are said to learn truth as it is in Jesus (Ephesians 4:21). It is in Jesus originally, and from Him it is communicated to us through the word. We are taught by it and learn through it, for thereby — as the apostle continues — we are renewed in the spirit of our mind and put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness (Ephesians 4:23-24). First the truth is in Jesus; then it is expressed in the word; then the word, learned and believed, becomes grace in the heart, fully answering to the Lord Christ, whose image it is — the image from which this transforming truth proceeded. The apostle carries this even higher — to God the Father Himself, whose image Christ is, and believers His image, through the word. 2 Corinthians 3:18: 'We all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, by the Spirit of the Lord.' To which add 2 Corinthians 4:6: 'God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give

the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.' The first pattern of all truth and holiness is God Himself. Christ is His image — the radiance of His glory and the exact imprint of His nature (Hebrews 1:3), the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15). Hence we see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ — because He, being God's image, displays and makes plain the love, grace, and truth of the Father. We behold it in His face because of the open and glorious manifestation of God's glory in Him. And how do we behold this glory? As in a mirror — that is, in the Gospel, which has the image and likeness of Christ reflected upon it and communicated through it. So we have traced truth and grace from the person of the Father to the Son as Mediator, and from there transfused into the word. In the Father it exists essentially; in Jesus Christ originally and by way of example; and in the word as in a transcript or copy. But does it remain there? No — God by the Gospel shines into our hearts (2 Corinthians 4:6). He illuminates our minds with a saving light and understanding of it. What follows from this? The soul of a believer is transformed into the same image by the effective working of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:18) — that is, the likeness of Christ imprinted on the word is impressed on the soul itself, renewing it into the image of God after which it was originally created. This brings everything into perfect harmony. Where Gospel truth is truly received and experienced in the soul, there is not merely a correspondence between the soul and the word, but between the soul and Christ through the word, and between the soul and God through Christ. This gives the soul firm and assured establishment in the things it believes. Divine truth conveyed to us this way is firm, stable, and immovable. And we can say of it, in a spiritual sense, what John

says: 'That which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands concerning the word of life — we know it to be true.' Indeed, a believer is a testimony to the certainty of truth in what he is, far beyond what he can be in anything he says. Words can be pretended. Real effects carry their testimony inseparably with them.

Third, it follows from this that there must be great assurance of truths received and believed in this way. For through this process the senses are trained to distinguish good from evil (Hebrews 5:14). Where there is a spiritual sense of truth — of the good and evil in doctrines, arising from an inward experience of what is truly good, together with a turning away from the contrary, obtained through an established habit and frame of heart — there is strength, steadfastness, and assurance. This is the teaching of the anointing, which will not and cannot deceive. This is why many in past ages and in recent times who could not engage in formal debate were yet able to die for the truth. When a philosopher came to someone and tried to prove by clever argument that motion does not exist, the man — unable or unwilling to refute the argument — simply got up, walked back and forth, and gave a real answer to the sophistry. So it is in this case. When a soul has a real experience of the grace of God, of the forgiveness of sins, of the virtue and effectiveness of the death of Christ, of justification by His blood, and of peace with God through faith — let men, devils, or angels from heaven oppose these things. If it cannot answer their arguments, it can still rise up and walk. It can oppose its own satisfying experience to all their reasonings and suggestions with full holy confi-

dence and assurance. A person will not be argued out of what he sees and feels. And a believer will hold as firmly to his spiritual sense as any person holds to his natural senses.

This is the meaning of the apostle's prayer in Colossians 2:2 — 'that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery.' They already had understanding of the mysteries of the Gospel, but he prays that through further experience they might come to the assurance of that understanding. To be true is a property of the doctrine itself. To be certain and assured is a property of our minds. This experience so unites the mind with the truth that we say a certain truth is most certain — when in fact certainty is the property of our minds and their knowledge, not of the truth known. A truth is certain to us — meaning we have an assured knowledge of it — through the experience we have of it. This is the assurance of understanding Paul speaks of. He further prays that we may come to the riches of this assurance — an abundant, plentiful assurance — that is, to an acknowledgment of the mystery of God arising from a sense and experience of its excellence and worth.

This is true of all Gospel truths — they are fitted and suited to be experienced by a believing soul. There is nothing in them so high, nothing so mysterious, nothing so seemingly lowly or outwardly unimpressive, but that a gracious soul has experience of excellence, reality, power, and effectiveness throughout. Consider for example what concerns the order and worship of the Gospel. This seems to many to be a purely external matter, of which a soul can have no inward sense or relish. There are many opinions about it and endless disputes. But let a gracious soul in simplicity and sin-

cerity of spirit give himself up to walk with Christ according to His appointment — and he will quickly find such a taste and delight in the fellowship of the Gospel, in the communion of saints, and of Christ among them, that he will come to such riches of assurance in the understanding and acknowledgment of the ways of the Lord as no amount of disputing can ever reach. What is so high, glorious, and mysterious as the doctrine of the ever-blessed Trinity? Some wise men have thought it best to keep it veiled from ordinary Christians, and others have expressed it in terms no one can understand. But take a believer who has tasted the gracious Lord — in the eternal love of the Father, the great undertaking of the Son in mediation and redemption, and the almighty work of the Spirit creating grace and comfort in the soul — and who has experienced the love, holiness, and power of God in all of it. He will adhere to this mysterious truth with far more firm confidence — being led into it and confirmed in it by a few plain testimonies from the word — than a thousand debaters who carry only the notion of it in their minds. Let a real trial come, and this will be evident. Few will sacrifice their lives for bare speculations. Experience gives assurance and stability.

Having established the credibility of this testimony, let us now make use of it. It is clear on these grounds that truths in which believers have experience carry great certainty. Where they communicate their power to the heart, they give an unquestionable assurance of their truth. And once that is settled in the soul, all disputes about it are put to silence.

These things being so, let us inquire into the faith and experience of the living saints — what they know of the truth under consideration: that there is forgiveness with God. Let us go to some

poor soul who now walks comfortably in the light of God's face and say to him: 'Did we not know you some time ago to be full of sadness and deep anxiety of spirit — sorrowful almost to death, and bitter in soul?'

He answers: 'Yes, that is true. My days were spent in mourning and my life in sorrow, and I walked heavily in fear and bitterness of spirit all day long.'

'But what was troubling you? What was the matter, since as far as outward things went, you were at peace?'

He answers: 'The law of God had laid hold on me and struck me down. It showed me that I was a wretched sinner, overwhelmed with the guilt of sin. Every moment I expected tribulation and wrath from the hand of God. My wound was open through the night and would not heal, and my soul refused comfort.'

'How is it then that you have been delivered, and are no longer sorrowful? Where have you found ease and peace? Were you delivered by some means, or did your trouble simply wear away on its own?'

He answers: 'No, certainly not. If I had not found an effective remedy, I would have sunk and perished forever.'

'What course did you take?'

He answers: 'I went to the One I had sinned against, through Jesus Christ, and found Him far better to me than I could have expected, or would ever have believed, had He not overcome my heart by His Spirit. Instead of the wrath I feared — and rightly, for I had deserved it — He said to me in Christ, "Fury is not in Me." For a long time I could not believe it. I thought it impossible that there could be mercy and pardon for me, for such a one as I. But

He continued to sustain me — sometimes by one means, sometimes by another — until, drawing my soul near to Himself, He caused me to see the folly of my unbelieving heart and the vileness of the hard thoughts I had about Him, and that there is truly with Him forgiveness and plentiful redemption. This has taken away all my sorrow and given me quiet rest and assurance.'

'But are you certain of this? Might you not possibly be deceived?'

The soul answers: 'I have not the least suspicion of any such thing. And if anything of that kind ever arises, it is quickly overcome.'

'But how are you confirmed in this persuasion?'

He answers: 'The sense of it that I have in my heart, the sweetness and rest I experience, the influence it has on my soul, the obligation it lays on me for all thankful obedience, the relief, support, and consolation it has provided in trials and troubles, at the brink of death, and at the threshold of eternity — all corresponding exactly to what the word declares about these things — this will not allow me to be deceived. I could not indeed receive it until God was pleased to speak it to me. But now, let Satan do his worst — I shall never cease to bear this testimony: there is mercy and forgiveness with Him.'

How many thousands could we find in the world who have had such a seal of this truth in their hearts that they could not only lay down their lives with confidence in its confirmation, if called to do so, but do cheerfully and triumphantly stake their eternal souls upon it. Indeed, this is the very source of all the peace, serenity of mind, and strong consolation they experience in this world.

On the principles laid down before, this is to me a great and important evidence. God has not manifested this truth to the saints — has not copied it out of His word and worked it into their souls — only to leave them open to any possibility of being deceived.

The institution of religious worship as evidence of forgiveness.

Sixth, God's institution of religious worship — and the honor thereby rendered to Him by sinners — is another evidence that there is forgiveness with Him. I earlier cited one particular act of worship for this purpose — sacrifices — showing how in their particular nature and significance they declared and manifested reconciliation, atonement, and pardon. What I now aim to show is how all the worship God has appointed to us, and all the honor we give His holy majesty through it, is built on the same foundation — namely, the assumption of forgiveness — and is designed to teach it and confirm us in it. I will state this briefly.

First, the general end of all divine and religious worship is to bring God a return of glory from the creation. God's infinite self-sufficiency is such that He has no need of any such glory or honor. He was in Himself no less infinitely and eternally glorious before the creation of anything than He will be when surrounded by the praises of all the works of His hands. And His absolute perfection is such that no honor given to Him, no admiration of Him, no ascription of glory and praise can add anything to Him. Hence the Psalmist says, 'My goodness does not extend to You' (Psalm 16:2) — meaning it does not reach You so as to add to You or profit You, as it may do the saints who are on the earth. As Job 22:2-3 says: 'Can a man be profitable to God, as one who is wise may be profitable to himself? Is it any pleasure to the Almighty that you are

righteous, or does He gain if you make your ways blameless?' There is no doubt that it is well pleasing to God for us to be righteous and upright. But we do not thereby do Him a favor in the sense of supplying something He needs or gaining something for Him. And Job 35:7: 'If you are righteous, what do you give to Him? Or what does He receive from your hand?' The apostle gives the reason for all this in Romans 11:36: 'From Him and through Him and to Him are all things.' Being the first sovereign cause and the last absolute end of all things, infinitely perfect and self-sufficient, nothing can be added to Him. Or as the same apostle says: 'The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything' (Acts 17:24-25). As He Himself argues at length in Psalm 50:7-13.

Second, therefore all the return of glory that God receives through worship depends entirely on His own free choice and appointment. All worship now depends on the sovereign will and pleasure of God. It is true that there is a natural worship owed by rational creatures by the law of their creation. This was indispensably and absolutely required from the beginning. The very being of God and the order of things demanded it. Given that God made creatures such as we are, it could not be otherwise than that moral obedience was due to Him — that He should be trusted, believed in, and obeyed as the first cause, last end, and sovereign Lord of all. But the entrance of sin, which placed the sinner absolutely under the curse of God, entirely overturned this order of things. Man was now to have perished immediately, and the entire framework of this obedience was to have ended. But here, in the sovereign will

of God, an interposition was made between sin and the sentence, and man was given a reprieve from destruction. All worship following from this — even what was formerly natural by the law of creation — now resolves into a free act of God's will.

And all worship is designed for this end — to give glory to God. For God has said that He will be sanctified in all who draw near to Him in worship and will be glorified in it (Leviticus 10:3), and that the one who offers Him praise — that is, performs any part of His worship and service — glorifies Him (Psalm 50:23). The nature of the thing itself declares that it can have no other end. By it He receives glory even from the inanimate creation.

Fourth, consider that God has prescribed no worship of Himself to the angels that sinned. They are indeed under His power, and He uses them as He pleases to serve the ends of His holy providence. He holds them within limits by His power and keeps them under dread of the full execution of His wrath. But He does not require of them that they should trust in Him. They believe indeed — and tremble. They have a natural apprehension of God's being, power, providence, holiness, and righteousness, which is inseparable from their nature. And from this they have an expectation of the punishment and vengeance that is due to them, which is inseparable from them as sinners. This is their faith. But to believe in God — to put their trust in Him, to surrender themselves to Him — God does not require of them. The same is true regarding love, fear, and delight — all the inward affections that are the proper worship of God. These they do not have, nor does God any longer require them. They gave them up forever in their first sin. And where these are not, where they are not required, where they cannot exist, no outward worship can be prescribed or ap-

pointed. For outward instituted worship is simply the way God chooses and assigns for the expression and exercise of the inward affections of our minds toward Him. He governs the fallen angels by the hand of providence, not by the word of command. Now as God dealt with the angels, so He would have dealt with mankind, had He left them all under the curse without remedy or hope of relief. As He does with the fallen angels — satisfying Himself forever in the glory that rises to Him from their punishment — so He would have done with humanity, had there been no forgiveness with Him for them. He would not have required them to fear, love, or obey Him, or have appointed any way of worship for expressing such affections. For to what end would He have done so? What righteousness would allow that service, duty, and obedience be required of those who could have no expectation or hope of acceptance or reward? This would contradict the very first understanding God requires us to have of His nature. For one who comes to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him (Hebrews 11:6) — which could not be so if He appointed voluntary worship while proposing no reward to those who worship Him.

Third, it is therefore clear that God, by prescribing worship to sinners, fully declares that there is forgiveness with Him for them.

First, He thereby shows that He is willing to receive a new return of glory from them. This, as we have shown, is the end of worship. He would never have done this except with a design to accept and reward His creatures. Do we think He will receive their voluntary, reasonable service — rendered according to His will and command — without rewarding it? And not with just any reward, but one entirely out of proportion to their obedience? Nothing of the

sort would befit His infinite self-sufficiency, goodness, and generosity. Manoah's wife argues this well in Judges 13:23: 'If the Lord had meant to kill us, He would not have accepted a burnt offering and a grain offering at our hands.' His acceptance of worship from us is an unmistakable demonstration that He will not execute against us the severity of the first curse. This is clearly evidenced in the first recorded act of solemn instituted worship performed by sinners in Genesis 4:4: 'God had respect to Abel and his offering.' Some believe God gave a visible sign of His acceptance — perhaps fire from heaven. How else would Cain have known instantly that his brother and his offering were accepted, while he and his were not? However it was, it is clear that whatever testimony God gave of His acceptance of the offering, He gave equally concerning the person offering it — He first had respect to Abel, and then to his offering. Therefore the apostle says that by this Abel obtained the testimony that he was righteous (Hebrews 11:4) — the testimony of God Himself. Now this was through the forgiveness of his sins, without which he could neither be righteous nor accepted, for he was a sinner. This God declared by accepting his worship. So we also, whenever we have any testimony of God's acceptance of us in any part of His worship, should use it for the same end. Has God expanded our hearts in prayer? Has He answered any of our requests? Has He refreshed our hearts through preaching, the ordinances, or any other means? We should not rest in the particular occasion of the communion we had with Him. Doing that is the reason we lose our experiences — they lie scattered, separated from their proper root, and are easily forgotten. The first use we ought to make of any such particular experience in

the worship of God is this: to conclude that God has pardoned our sins and accepted our persons — for without that, none of our worship or service would please Him or be accepted by Him.

Second, by this God lets us know that He is dealing with us on new terms — so that despite sin, we may still enjoy His love and favor. For this we have the pledge of His truthfulness and integrity. He cannot deceive us. But through His command for worship, we would be deceived if there were not forgiveness with Him. For that command encourages us to expect, and gives us assurance of, acceptance with Him — which without forgiveness cannot be obtained. God therefore declares by His institution of, and command for, worship that there is nothing that will inevitably prevent those who give themselves up to the obedience of His commands from enjoying His love, favor, and fellowship with Him.

Fourth, as a matter of fact, it is known and acknowledged that God has appointed worship for sinners to perform. All the institutions of the Old and New Testaments bear witness to this. God is their author. People do not know what they are doing when they neglect them or attempt to mix their own imaginations into them. What could the human mind conceive or devise that could have any bearing on securing the confidence of believers in their acceptance with God? Is there any need for human additions to testify to God's truthfulness, faithfulness, and goodness? These things He has taken upon Himself. This then is what should be fixed on our souls at the very first invitation to religious worship: God intends a new return of glory from us, and therefore declares that there is a way for the removal of our sins — without which we can give Him no glory by our obedience. And this is accomplished only through forgiveness.

Fifth, there are particular ordinances of worship appointed specifically to confirm to us the forgiveness of sin. This is especially true in the worship instituted by the Lord Jesus under the New Testament. I will give one or two examples.

First, the ordinance of baptism. This accompanied the dawn of the Gospel in the ministry of John the Baptist. And he expressly declared in his preaching on it that it was instituted by God to declare the remission of sins (Mark 1:4).

It is true that the Lord Christ Himself submitted to that ordinance — being baptized by John — who had no sin. But this belonged to the obedience God required of Him, for He had been made under the law for our sakes. He was to observe all the ordinances and institutions of God's worship — not because His own person needed the particular meaning and significance some of them carried, but because as our sponsor, surety, and Mediator, standing in our place in all that He did, He was to yield obedience to them so as to fulfill all righteousness (Matthew 3:15). So He was circumcised and so He was baptized — both of which had reference to sin — though He was entirely free from all sin in His own person. For He was free from no form of obedience to any command of God.

But as was said, baptism itself — as an ordinance of worship appointed for sinners — was a declaration of the forgiveness that is with God. It was so from its first institution. God calls a man in a marvelous and miraculous manner, gives him a ministry from heaven, and commands him to go and baptize all those who, confessing their sins and professing repentance, come to receive a testimony of forgiveness. In its particular nature as an ordinance, God appointed it to represent to the senses the certainty and truth

of His grace in pardon — through a visible pledge. He lets them know that He will take away their sin — their spiritual defilement — just as water takes away the outward filth of the body. And He declares that through this they will be saved, as certainly as Noah and his family were saved in the ark floating on the waters (1 Peter 3:21). What an enormous deception would have been played on poor sinners in all of this, if it were not absolutely certain that they could obtain forgiveness with God.

After the introduction of this ordinance in John's ministry, the Lord Christ took it into His own hands and commanded its observance by all His disciples. I will not debate here who are the proper immediate recipients of it — whether only those who can actually make profession of their faith, or believers together with their infant children. For my part, I believe that all whom Christ loves and pardons are to receive the pledge of it. And the sole reason advanced by those in former ages against baptizing the infants of believing parents was that they thought such infants had no sin — a mistake we now recognize. But I am not treating of these things here. This much I say is certain: in prescribing this ordinance to His church, the great intention of the Lord Christ was to assure us of the forgiveness of sins. Sinners are invited to participate in this ordinance for that very end — to receive the pardon of their sins, or rather an unmistakable pledge and assurance of it (Acts 2:38). The very nature of the ordinance declares this to be its end, as was indicated before. This is another engagement of God's truth, faithfulness, and holiness, so that we cannot be deceived in this matter. 'There is forgiveness with Me,' says God. 'But how shall I know it, Lord?' says the soul. 'How shall I come to be assured of it? For because of the unrelenting accusations of conscience and the curse of

the law upon the guilt of my sin, I find it very hard to believe. Like Gideon, I would have a sign.' 'Then look,' says God, 'I will give you a pledge and a token that cannot deceive you. When the world of old was overwhelmed with a flood of waters because of sin, and those who remained had every reason to fear that the same judgment would fall again on them or their descendants — seeing the same cause was still present, for the thoughts of people's hearts were still evil continually — to secure them against these fears, I told them I would never again destroy the earth with water, and I gave them a token of My faithfulness by placing My bow in the cloud. And have I failed them? Though the sin and wickedness of the world since that day has been unspeakably great, mankind has not been drowned again, and never shall be. I will not disappoint the expectation I raised by that token. Wherever there is a word of promise confirmed with a sign, never fear a disappointment. So it is in this matter. I have declared that there is forgiveness with Me, and to give you assurance of it, I have ordained this pledge and sign — a seal of My word — to remove all doubt and suspicion that you may be deceived. As the world will be drowned no more, so those who believe will never fall short of forgiveness.'

And this is the use we ought to make of this ordinance. It is God's guarantee of the pardon of our sins, and we may safely rest in it.

Second, the same is the purpose of the other great ordinance of the church — the Lord's Supper. The same truth is confirmed by another sign, pledge, token, or seal. We have shown earlier how Gospel forgiveness is connected to the death or blood of Jesus Christ — the means by which it is procured for us, and the way by which it comes forth from God to the glory of both His righteous-

ness and His grace. This ordinance, appointed specifically to represent and call to remembrance the death of Christ — and to communicate its benefits to those who believe — primarily concerns our faith and comfort in the truth under consideration. Therefore in the very institution of it, beyond the general purpose already mentioned which would have been sufficient for our security, there is additionally an explicit mention of the forgiveness of sin. So our Savior says in instituting it for the use of the church to the end of the world in Matthew 26:28: 'This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.' As if He had said: The purpose for which I have appointed the observance of this service to you is to testify to you that by My blood — the sacrifice of Myself and the atonement thereby made — I have purchased for you the remission of your sins, which you shall assuredly receive. I will add nothing more on this point, since the death of Christ as it relates to this ordinance will come before us again.

Third, what is the end of all church order, assembly, and worship? What is a church? Is it not a company of sinners gathered together according to God's appointment — to give glory and praise to Him for His pardoning grace, for the forgiveness of sins, and to yield Him the obedience He requires from us on account of how He has dealt with us? This is the nature and this is the end of a church. Whoever does not understand it, or does not use it for that end, only abuses that great institution. And such abuse fills the world. Some try to use the pretense of the church to advance their own worldly interests. Some perform its required duties with the secret hope that doing so will be their righteousness before God. Some fulfill only the letter of their convictions through a hollow

profession. But the true end and true use of the church is this alone: we assemble to learn that there is forgiveness with God through Christ, to pray that we may be made partakers of it, to bless and praise God for our share in it, and to commit ourselves to the obedience He requires on that account. If this were constantly on our minds and in our purposes, we might be more established in faith than perhaps most of us are.

Fourth, one more particular instance of this kind will conclude this evidence: God has commanded us — and the Lord Christ has taught us — to pray for the pardon of sin. This gives us unquestionable assurance that pardon can be obtained and is to be found in God.

First, the Lord Christ, in revealing the will of God to us concerning the duty He requires, has taught and instructed us to pray for the forgiveness of sin. It is one of the petitions He has left on record for our use and pattern in that summary of all prayer He gave us in Matthew 6:12: 'Forgive us our debts.' Some contend that this is a set form of prayer to be used in exactly these words. All agree that it is at least a rule for prayer, covering the main things we are to pray for and obliging us to make supplication for them. So then, by the authority of God as revealed to us by Jesus Christ, we are bound as a matter of duty to pray for pardon and forgiveness.

Second, given this, it would be the highest imaginable blasphemy and dishonor to God to think that there is no forgiveness with Him for us. If we were to come on our own initiative — without His warrant and authority — to ask anything of Him, we might well expect to be disappointed. What would give us the boldness for that? But when God Himself commands us to come and ask

something from Him — making it our duty, so that neglecting it becomes great sin and rebellion — to suppose He does not have the thing to give, or that His will is entirely opposed to giving it, is to reproach Him with a lack of truthfulness, faithfulness, and holiness, and to deny that He is God. For what sincerity could there be in such proceedings? Could it be consistent with any divine excellence? Could it have any end but to deceive poor creatures — either to mock them if they pray according to His command, or to add to their guilt if they do not? God forbid such thoughts should enter our hearts.

Third, to remove all remaining question in this matter: God has promised to hear our prayers, and in particular those we make for the forgiveness of sin. So our Savior has assured us that what we ask in His name will be done for us. And He has, as we have shown, taught us to ask this very thing of God as our Heavenly Father — that is, in His name. For it is in Him and through Him alone that God is a Father to us. I need not labor over particular promises to this effect — they are, as you know, abundant in Scripture.

What has been said is sufficient to establish our present argument: namely, that God's prescription of religious worship to sinners undeniably proves that there is forgiveness with Him — especially considering that the principal parts of the worship so prescribed and appointed are specifically designed to confirm us in faith of that truth.

And this is the design of the words we are expounding: 'There is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared.' As we have shown, the fear of God in the Old Testament frequently expresses not simply that particular gracious affection of our minds called

fear, but the whole worship of God in which that and all other gracious affections toward Him are to be exercised. The Psalmist tells us that the foundation of this fear or worship — and the only motive and encouragement for sinners to engage in it and give themselves to it — is that there is forgiveness with God. Without this, no sinner could fear, serve, or worship Him. This is therefore undeniably proved by the institution of worship — the very thing proposed for confirmation.

The purpose of all these things — as we will declare more fully afterward — is to encourage poor sinners to believe, and to show how inexcusable they will be who, in spite of all of this, refuse through the power of their lusts and unbelief to come to God in Christ that they might be pardoned. Indeed, the laying out of the certainty and fullness of the evidence given for this truth makes plain from where it is that people perish in and for their sins. Is it for lack of mercy, goodness, grace, or patience in God? Is it due to any deficiency in the mediation of the Lord Christ? Is it for lack of the mightiest encouragements and most certain assurances that there is forgiveness with God? Not at all. It is solely because of their own obstinacy, stubbornness, and perversity. They will not come to this light — indeed they hate it — because their deeds are evil. They will not come to Christ that they might have life. It is merely darkness, blindness, and love of sin that brings people to destruction. And this is laid bare, and all pretenses and excuses are removed, and the shame of people's lusts is exposed, by the full confirmation of this truth that God has furnished us with.

Take care, you who hear or read these things. If they are not mixed with faith, they will greatly add to your misery. Every argument will become your torment. But these considerations must be

pursued further afterward.

Moreover, if you take to heart what has been said about the nature and purpose of the worship of God that you attend, you may be instructed in its proper use and observance. When you approach it, remember that this is what God requires of you as sinners. He would not have required it if He did not have thoughts and intentions of mercy for sinners. Bless Him with all your souls that this is laid as the foundation of everything you have to do with Him. You are not utterly cast off because you are sinners. Let this support and warm your hearts when you go to hear, to pray, or to any act of worship. Consider what your principal work is in all of it. You are going to deal with God about forgiveness — its existence, causes, results, and effects. Listen to what He speaks, declares, and reveals about it. Receive His revelation and promises with faith. Inquire diligently into all the obedience and thankfulness, all the duties of holiness and righteousness, that He rightly expects from those who are made partakers of it. In this way you will observe the worship of God to His glory and your own good.

The giving and establishing of the new covenant as another evidence of forgiveness with God. The oath of God engaged in its confirmation.

Eighth, another evidence of this truth may be taken from the making, establishing, and ratifying of the new covenant. That God would make a new covenant with His people is often promised and often declared. See among other places Jeremiah 31:31-32. That He has in fact done so, the apostle demonstrates at length in Hebrews 8:8-12. Several things in this may be considered for our present purpose.

First, it is assumed that God had before made another covenant with mankind — this one is called new in reference to that earlier one. It stands opposed to that former covenant, which is by comparison called old, and this is called new — as the apostle explicitly states in the passage cited. Now a covenant between God and man is a great and wonderful thing, whether we consider its nature or its ends. In its own nature it is a compact, agreement, and arrangement for certain ends and purposes between the holy Creator and His poor creatures. How infinite and unspeakable must the grace and condescension of God be in this? For what is poor, miserable man, that God should set His heart on him — that He should, as it were, place limits on His sovereignty over him and enter into terms of agreement with him? For whereas before, man was simply an object of God's absolute dominion — made at His will, for His pleasure, and on the same grounds to be crushed into nothing at any moment — now he has a foundation and ground given him to stand on, from which to expect good things from God on the basis of God's faithfulness and righteousness. God, in a covenant, offers those holy properties of His nature to His creatures as something for them to lay hold of and argue from in their dealings with Him. Without this a person would have no foundation for any fellowship or communion with God, no expectation from Him, and no direction for how to deal with Him in any concern. It was therefore a great and remarkable condescension in God to take His poor creature into covenant with Himself. And this will be all the more evident when we consider the ends of the covenant — why God deals with man this way. Those ends are none other than that man might serve Him rightly, be blessed by Him, and be brought to the everlasting enjoyment of Him — all to

God's glory. These are the ends of every covenant God takes us into with Himself. And these are the whole of man. No more is required of us in the way of duty, and no more could be required to make us blessed and happy, than what is contained in them. That we might live to God, be accepted by Him, and come to the eternal enjoyment of Him — this is the whole of man: all we were made for, all we are capable of. And these are the ends of every covenant God makes with men, all summed up in that solemn word: that He will be their God and they shall be His people.

Second, given the nature and ends of a covenant, there must be some great and weighty reason to change, alter, and abolish a covenant once made and established — to set aside one covenant and enter into another. Yet this is exactly what the apostle says God has done, as stated in Hebrews 8:13, proved by the fact that God Himself calls what He promised a 'new' covenant — which undeniably confirms two things: first, that the other had become old; and second, that being old, it was changed, altered, and removed. I know the apostle speaks immediately of the old administration of the covenant under the Old Testament and Mosaic institutions. But he does so with reference to the way the first covenant made with Adam was revived in it. For in the giving of the law — with the curse that accompanied it, which was blended into that administration — there was a solemn revival and representation of the first covenant and its sanction, which gave it life and force to keep the people in bondage all their days. And the end of the abolishing of the legal administration of the covenant was simply to remove from God's dealings with His people all remaining use and memory of the first covenant. As was said, then, to take away, annul, and change a covenant so made, ratified, and established between

God and man, is a matter that must rest on some compelling, important, and unavoidable cause. And this will be even more evident if we consider the following.

First, in general, the first covenant was good, holy, righteous, and equitable. It was such as befitted God to make and was in every way the happiness of the creature to accept. We need no other argument to prove it holy and good than this — that God made it. It was the product of infinite holiness, wisdom, righteousness, goodness, and grace. And therefore in itself it was altogether perfect, for such are all the works of God. Beyond this, it was such that even after man, through his own fault, can obtain no good from it and must perish forever by virtue of its curse — he cannot but acknowledge its righteousness and holiness. The law was its rule; in it the terms of the covenant are contained. And the apostle says, whatever becomes of the sin and the sinner, 'the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good' (Romans 7:12) — holy in itself by its own nature, as the order and constitution of the most holy God; just and equal with reference to us, so that we have no ground for complaint against its authority or its terms.

Second, it was specifically good, holy, and righteous in all its commands and in the obedience it required. Two things in particular made it exceptionally righteous with respect to its precepts. First, all its commands were suited to the principles of human nature as God created it — and the regular exercise of those principles was the very perfection of man. In the first covenant God required nothing of man, prescribed nothing to him, for which a natural principle of doing it was not already implanted in his nature. This made all those commands equal, holy, and good. Why should anyone complain of requirements for which their own nature was

already fitted and inclined? Second, all its commands were proportionate to the strength and ability of those to whom they were given. God in that covenant required nothing of any person that He had not first enabled him to perform — nothing above his strength or beyond his power. For this reason too it was righteous. The covenant was also exceptionally good, holy, and righteous in its promises and rewards. 'Do this,' says the covenant — 'this which you are able to do, for which the principles of your nature are suited and inclined.' And what will follow? 'Do this and live' — life is promised to obedience, and such a life as, both for the present and future, brought with it everything needful to make the creature blessed and happy. Indeed, this life — containing the eternal enjoyment of God, with God Himself as the reward — was far beyond what any obedience of man could require as due or have any reason to expect on any basis other than the sheer goodness of God.

Third, the first covenant made provision for the preservation and display of God's glory, whatever the outcome on man's part. This was provided for in the wisdom and righteousness of God. If man continued in obedience and fulfilled the terms of the covenant, everything was arranged to serve the eternal glory of God in rewarding him. God would forever have manifested and exalted the glory of His holiness, power, faithfulness, righteousness, and goodness. He would have been glorified as the almighty Creator and Sustainer, as the faithful God and righteous Rewarder. On the other hand, if man through sin and rebellion should break the terms of the covenant, God had made provision that no damage to His glory would result. By constituting a punishment proportionate in justice to the sin and its desert, He ensured that the

glory of His holiness, righteousness, and faithfulness to His warnings would be exalted — and that to all eternity. God would have lost no more glory through the sin of man than through the sin of the angels — which in His infinite wisdom and righteousness has become a great stage for His eternal glory. For He is no less excellent in His greatness and severity than in His goodness and power.

We may now return to our earlier inquiry. With everything so excellently and admirably arranged in infinite wisdom and holiness in this covenant — man's whole duty and blessedness fully provided for, and God's glory absolutely secured in every outcome — what was the reason God did not leave all things to stand or fall according to its terms? Why did He set aside this covenant and promise to make another — and then do so? It is certain He could have maintained it with complete security to His own glory, for He makes all things for Himself, even the wicked for the day of evil.

God Himself shows the sole and only reason for this arrangement in Hebrews 8:7-13. The sum of it is this: despite the excellent constitution of the first covenant, there was no provision in it for the pardon of sin — no room or place for forgiveness. On the assumption that man sinned, he was left in that covenant without remedy. God had not revealed in it that there was any such thing as forgiveness with Him, nor did any sinner have the least hope or grounds for expecting such a thing from Him. He must die and perish without remedy or recovery. Now, says God, this must not be. Mercy, goodness, and grace require a different state of things. This covenant will not display them; their effects cannot be communicated to poor sinners through it. Hence, He says, it is defective. I will not lose the glory of these, nor shall sinners go unrelieved by them. Therefore, though I could strictly bind all mankind

to the terms of this covenant, I will make another covenant with them — one in which they shall know and find that there is forgiveness with Me, that they may fear Me.

Next to the blood of Christ by which this covenant was ratified and confirmed, this is the greatest evidence that can possibly be given that there is forgiveness with God. For what other purpose does God make this great change in His dealings with mankind? Forgiveness of sin is expressly contained in the words of the covenant. Set it aside and the new covenant would be no more useful or advantageous than the old. For since this covenant is made directly with sinners — there was no one in the world at the time God made it who was not a sinner, nor is it of use to any but sinners — forgiveness of sins is the very life of it.

From this we may see two things: first, the greatness of forgiveness, that we might learn to value it; and second, the certainty of it, that we might learn to believe it.

First, its greatness. God would not have done so great a thing unless it was for a great — the greatest — end. Had it not been a matter of the utmost importance for the glory of God and the good of human souls, God would not have set aside one covenant and made another for its sake. We can see plainly how deeply God's heart was set on it — how His nature and will were engaged in it. All this was done so that we might be pardoned. The old glorious structure of obedience and rewards was pulled down to the ground so that a new one might be built for the honor and glory of forgiveness. God forbid that we should think lightly of what was so remarkably and wonderfully brought about — in which God had, as it were, staked His great glory. Shall all this be done for our sake, and shall we undervalue or despise it? God forbid. If one may say

so, God could more easily have made a new world of innocent creatures governed by the old covenant than have established this new one for the salvation of poor sinners. But then where would have been the glory of forgiveness? It could never have been known that there was forgiveness with Him. The old covenant could not have been preserved while sinners were pardoned. Therefore God chose to leave the covenant rather than leave sinners unrelieved, grace unexalted, and pardon unexercised. Prize it as you prize your souls, and give glory to God for it, as all who believe will do throughout eternity.

Second, for the security of it, that we may believe it. What greater security could possibly be given? God deceives no man, any more than He Himself is deceived. What more could God — who cannot lie — have done to satisfy us in this matter than He has already done? Would you be made a partaker of this forgiveness? Go to God and spread before Him this whole matter. Plead with Him that He Himself has, of His own gracious will, so far set aside the first covenant as to make a new one — and that the only reason was that the first had no forgiveness in it. This new covenant He made for the very purpose that it might be known that there is forgiveness in Him. Shall we not then be made partakers of it? Will He now deny to us that which He has given such assurance of and raised such expectation concerning? Nothing can harm us here, nothing can destroy us but unbelief. Lay hold on this covenant and we shall have pardon. God expresses this in Isaiah 27:4-5. Would we continue on the old foundation of the first covenant? All we can do on that basis is set thorns and briars in God's way — a defense against His coming upon us with His indignation and fury. Our sins are like that, and our righteousness is no better. And what will

be the outcome? Both they and we will be trampled down, consumed, and burned up. What way then, what remedy is left? Only this — laying hold on the arm and strength of God in the covenant where forgiveness of sin is provided. In that covenant alone He says, 'Fury is not in Me.' And the end will be peace with Him, both here and forever.

Ninth, the oath of God interposed and engaged in this matter is another evidence of the truth under consideration. Since this is annexed to the covenant just discussed and serves as its confirmation, I will deal with it more briefly. In it we may consider the following.

First, the nature of God's oath. The apostle tells us He swore by Himself, giving the reason that He had no greater to swear by (Hebrews 6:13). An oath for the confirmation of something is an invocation of a supreme authority that can judge the truth of what is spoken and call to account any breach of the commitment. God has no such authority but Himself — because He could swear by no greater, He swore by Himself. He does this in two ways. First, by an explicit declaration that He has sworn by Himself — which was the form of God's first solemn oath in Genesis 22:16: 'By Myself I have sworn, says the Lord' — meaning: I have taken it upon Myself as God, or let Me not be God, if I do not perform this thing. This is expressed as 'by His soul' in Jeremiah 51:14: 'The Lord of hosts has sworn by His soul' — that is, by Himself, as we render it. Second, God does it by the special interposition of some property of His nature suited to give authority and confirmation to the word spoken — such as His holiness (Psalm 89:35: 'I have sworn by My holiness'), or as in Amos 4:2. Sometimes He swears by His life: 'As I live, says the Lord.' 'I live,' says God, 'it shall be so.' And sometimes

by His name (Jeremiah 44:26). God thereby engages the honor and glory of the properties of His nature for the certain fulfillment of the things mentioned. This is clear from the form of expression, as in Psalm 89:35: 'Once I have sworn by My holiness' — in the original the sentence is incomplete, implying: 'If I lie to David — let Me not be, nor be counted, what I am.'

Second, the purpose of His oath. God does not give it to make His word or promise sure and firm in itself — for every word of God is already true and certain, being His own — and He could rightly require us to believe it without any further confirmation. But knowing the great objections that Satan and our own unbelieving hearts will raise against His promises — especially regarding our own personal share in them — He interposes His oath to settle our minds and remove all pretexts for unbelief. What room for distrust can remain in such a case? If there is a disputed matter between people, and an oath is interposed to confirm what is in question, it puts an end to all strife, as the apostle says (Hebrews 6:16). How much more ought it to do so when God Himself is the One who swears? The apostle declares the purpose of His oath to be to show the unchangeable nature of His counsel (Hebrews 6:17). His counsel had already been declared in the promise, but doubt may arise as to whether, on one occasion or another, God might change His mind — or whether He has altered it in some way that renders it useless to us. Whatever the occasion for such doubt, God adds His oath to remove it all, manifesting the unquestionable immutability of His counsel and promises. What is confirmed in this way is secured to the highest degree of which anything is capable. To refuse to believe it is the height of impiety.

Third, in this interposition of God by oath there is an unspeakable condescension of grace — which is both a great motive to faith and a great aggravation of unbelief. For what are we, that the holy and blessed God should so condescend to us as to engage Himself by an oath for our satisfaction and assurance? As one said well of old: 'How blessed are we, for whose sake God swears; and how wretched, if we do not believe even God when He swears to us.' It is an inestimable privilege that God should engage Himself by His oath for our sakes. Our misery will be all the greater if we do not believe Him when He swears to us. What can we now object against what is so confirmed? What pretense, excuse, or color can we have for our unbelief? How just, righteous, and holy must the destruction be of those who, in the face of this strange, wonderful, and unexpected security, refuse to set their seal to the truth that God is true.

Having established these points, we may consider how variously God has engaged His oath to confirm that there is forgiveness with Him. First, He swears that He has no pleasure in the death of a sinner, but rather that he repent and live (Ezekiel 33:11). 'As I live,' says the Lord, 'I have no pleasure in the death of a sinner.' Now without forgiveness in Him, every sinner must die — without remedy. By confirming with His oath that it is His will for the sinner to return, repent, and live, He swears first and foremost that there is forgiveness with Him for those sinners who do repent and turn to Him.

Further, since the great means God has appointed for the forgiveness of sins is the mediation of the Lord Christ — as we will show afterward — He has on several occasions confirmed His purpose in Christ, and the counsel of His will, by His oath. By this

oath He promised Christ to Abraham and to David of old, which proved the foundation of the church's stability in all generations and of its security and assurance of acceptance with God. See Luke 1:73-75. And in Christ's taking up the office by which the forgiveness of sins was to be particularly procured — namely, His office as a priest offering sacrifice and making atonement for sinners — God confirmed it to Him and established Him in it by His oath (Hebrews 7:20). He was not made a priest without an oath. And to what end? That He might be the guarantor of a better covenant (verse 22). And what was that better covenant? The one that brought with it the forgiveness of sins (Hebrews 8:12-13). It was therefore forgiveness that was confirmed by the oath of God. Further, the apostle shows that the original promise made to Abraham, having been confirmed by the oath of God, all His other promises are similarly confirmed. From this he draws that blessed conclusion in Hebrews 6:17-18: for everyone who flees for refuge to the hope set before him — that is, who seeks to escape the guilt of sin, the curse, and the sentence of the law, by applying himself to God in Christ for pardon — he has the oath of God to guarantee that he will not fall short of it. And so all the aspects of the forgiveness of sin are testified to by the oath of God — which we have shown to be the highest security God can give in this matter and the highest we are capable of receiving.

The name of God confirming the truth and reality of forgiveness with Him. The same is also done by the properties of His nature.

Tenth, another foundation of this truth, and infallible evidence of it, may be taken from the special name and title God takes to Himself in this matter. He owns the name of the God of pardons —

or the God of forgiveness. So He is called in Nehemiah 9:17. We have rendered the words as 'You are a God ready to forgive,' but they are more precisely 'You are the God of pardons' — or forgiveness, or propitiation. That is His name, which He owns and accepts when ascribed to Him. The name by which He will be known. To clarify this evidence we must consider the name of God and its use.

First, the name of God is what He reveals Himself to be — what He would have us know Him as and acknowledge Him to be. It is an expression of His nature or attributes that He has taken to Himself. Whatever therefore any name of God declares Him to be, that He is, and that is what we may expect to find when we come to Him — for He will not deceive us by giving Himself a wrong or false name. On this account He requires us to trust in His name, because He will assuredly be to us what His name declares. Resting on His name, fleeing to His name, calling on His name, praising His name — things so frequently mentioned in Scripture — all confirm this. These could not be our duty if we might be deceived in so doing. God is, and will be to us, what His name declares.

Second, God is said to be known by a name when those to whom He reveals Himself rest on that name by faith and experience what that name declares. For this reason, God did not reveal Himself under the Old Testament by the name of the Father of Jesus Christ or the incarnate Son, because that grace had not yet been accomplished for them — God having provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect. They were not entrusted with the full revelation of God in all His blessed names. Neither does God call us to trust in any of His

names unless He gives it to us in a special covenant way as something to rest upon. He speaks to this in Exodus 6:3: 'I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by My name, Lord, I did not make Myself known to them.' Now it is certain that both of these names — God Almighty and Lord — were known among His people before. In the first recorded instance of Abraham approaching God in worship, he uses the name Lord in Genesis 12:7. He built an altar to the Lord, and afterward not only does Moses use that name in retelling the story, but it was already in frequent use among them. Why then is it said that God appeared to them as God Almighty but not as the Lord? The reason is that God Almighty was the name He gave Himself in the solemn confirmation of the covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17:1: 'I am God Almighty.' And when Isaac prayed for the covenant blessing to rest on Jacob, he used that same name in Genesis 28:3: 'May God Almighty bless you.' He called upon the name of God that had been pledged in the covenant made with his father Abraham and with himself. For us to rest on God's name with full assurance, then, it is not enough for God merely to reveal that name as His own — He must also give it to us for this very purpose: that we might know Him by it and place our trust in Him according to what it declares. This is what happened whenever He revealed Himself to someone in a particular way through a special name. So He did with Jacob in Genesis 28:13: 'I am the God of Abraham and of Isaac' — assuring him that as He had dealt faithfully in the covenant with his fathers, so He would deal with him. And in Genesis 31:13: 'I am the God of Bethel' — the One who appeared to you there, blessed you, and will continue to do so. But when that same Jacob asked after another name of God, God did not answer him — as though com-

manding him to live by faith on what God had already been pleased to reveal. God had not made Himself known to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob by the name Lord, because He had not specifically offered them that name or engaged it in His covenant with them, even though the name itself was otherwise known. They lived and rested on the name God Almighty, as the name suited to sustain and comfort them in their wandering, helpless condition while the promise awaited fulfillment.

But when God came to fulfill His promises and bring the people into the land of Canaan by virtue of His covenant, He revealed Himself to them and renewed His covenant with them under the name Lord. By this, God declared that He had come to give stability and fulfillment to His promises. Therefore, the people were now to live on the name Lord in expectation of those promises being kept — just as their fathers had lived on the name God Almighty in expectation of His protection during their wandering. This name became the foundation of the Jewish church and the ground of faith for all who sincerely believed in God within it. It is a striking work of God's providence that since the Jews rejected the covenant of their fathers and were cast out of it because of their unbelief, they have completely forgotten that name of God. No Jew in the world today knows what it is, how to pronounce it, or how to speak it. Some among them, and others outside, claim to find deep mysteries in the letters and vowels of that name that make it unutterable. But the truth is this: having been cast out of the covenant that was built and established on that name — through their own blindness and superstition, in the just judgment of God — they are no longer able to speak it or take it on their lips.

What is required, then, is that God's name be given to us as pledged in covenant, securing our expectation that He will be to us what His name declares.

Third, the entire gracious name of God — every title He has given Himself, every ascription of honor He has owned — is confirmed to all who believe in Jesus Christ. For just as He has declared to us the whole name of God (John 17:6), so not just this or that promise of God, but all the promises of God are Yes and Amen in Him. In earlier times, each particular promise God made to His people served especially for the specific occasion on which it was given, and each name of God was to be rested on in the particular situation it was suited to address — the name God Almighty for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the name Lord for Moses and the people. But now, through Jesus Christ and in Him, every particular promise belongs to all believers in all their circumstances, and every name of God belongs to them at all times as something to rest upon and trust in. So the particular promise made to Joshua at his entrance into Canaan — given to encourage and strengthen him in that great undertaking of conquering the land — is applied by the apostle to all believers in all their circumstances: 'I will never leave you nor forsake you' (Hebrews 13:5). In the same way, every name of God now belongs to us as if it had been specifically pledged in covenant to us personally. This is because the whole covenant is ratified and confirmed to us in Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 6:18; 7:1). This absolutely secures for us a share in the name God has taken for Himself — the God of forgiveness — as surely as if it had been given to each one of us individually to assure us of it.

Fourth, God takes the name 'God of forgiveness' as peculiarly His own — the name by which He will be distinguished and known. He claims it for Himself as expressing something that the power and goodness of no other can extend to. The apostle says there are many lords and many gods — some who are called such, and some who are regarded as such. How is the true God distinguished from these supposed gods? By this very name: He is the God of pardons. Micah 7:18 says, 'Who is a God like You, who pardons iniquity?' This is His prerogative — in this, none is equal to Him, none is like Him, and none shares it with Him. The false gods of the nations cannot give what they do not possess — they have no refreshing showers of mercy and pardon in their power. Neither angels, nor saints, nor images, nor popes can pardon sin. By this name God distinguishes Himself from them all.

Fifth, to be known by this name is the great glory of God in this world. When Moses asked to see God's glory, God told him that he could not see His face (Exodus 33:18, 20). God's face — the glorious majesty of His being, His essential glory — cannot be seen by anyone in this life. We cannot see Him as He is. But the glorious manifestation of Himself we may behold and contemplate. We see it as if seeing the back of God — the shadow of His excellencies that He casts before us as He passes by in His works and dealings with us. And that is what Moses would see. What did it consist of? The revelation and declaration of God's name in Exodus 34:6-7: 'The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth, keeping lovingkindness for thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin.' To be known by this name — to be honored, feared, and trusted as it declares Him — is the

great glory of God. And can this name fail us? Can we be deceived by trusting in it and expecting to find Him to be what His name declares? God forbid.

Take all of these considerations together and they give us another firm foundation for the truth we are establishing, and strong encouragement for poor sinful souls to draw near to God in Christ for pardon. God has no name that He has not given to Himself. It is not lawful to know Him or call Him in any other way — He is what He calls Himself. What His name declares, His nature is. Every name of God is also pledged in Jesus Christ through the covenant and offered to us as something to place our trust and confidence in. And this is His name and memorial: the God of forgiveness. By this He distinguishes Himself from all others and holds it out as the principal title of His honor and His peculiar glory. According to this name, therefore, all who believe will assuredly find that there is forgiveness with Him.

Eleventh, the essential properties of God's nature — and what is required for them to be displayed — will give us further assurance of this truth. To that end, consider the following observations.

God is absolutely perfect and absolutely self-sufficient. Before and apart from creating anything — before He put forth His almighty power at all — He was eternally glorious and fully satisfied in His own holy excellencies and perfections. The making of all things therefore depends on a purely sovereign act of God's will and pleasure. The whole creation acknowledges this in Revelation 4:11 and 5:12: 'You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power, for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed and were created.' God could have left all of creation unmade without the slightest diminishment of His glory. Not one

holy property of His nature would have been lessened or reduced by that omission. Creation, then, depended entirely on a free act of His will and choice.

Second, if God chose to act outwardly — to produce anything outside of Himself by His power — it was absolutely necessary that He Himself be the end of that action. Before anything was created, there was nothing that could serve as the purpose for bringing it into existence or as the goal toward which it should be directed. Since God is an infinite agent in wisdom, understanding, and power, He could have no end in His actions except one that is equally infinite. It is therefore natural and necessary for God to do all things for Himself. He cannot have any other end, and He has in fact done exactly this, as Proverbs 16:4 says: 'The Lord has made everything for its own purpose.' He aimed at Himself in all He did, since there is no other infinite good for Him to make His aim and goal but Himself alone.

Third, doing all things for Himself does not mean that He gains any new real benefit or improvement by doing so. His absolute eternal perfection and self-sufficiency make this impossible. God does not become more powerful, great, wise, just, holy, good, or gracious through any of His works or anything He does. He can add nothing to Himself. What He intends and designs in His works, therefore, must be the manifestation and declaration of the holy properties of His nature. And there are two things this requires.

First, He must make them known — declaring through means suited to His infinite wisdom both that these properties belong to Him and what their nature is, to the extent the creature can understand.

He does things to make His power known and to declare His name throughout the earth (Romans 9:17, 22). It was said that through the works of creation, 'that which is known about God is evident' (Romans 1:19-20). And what is that? The natural, essential properties of His being — His eternal power and divine nature. Under this heading fall all God's promises to glorify Himself, all the prayers of His saints that He would do so, and all the Scripture's declarations that He has done so. He has made known His wisdom, holiness, power, goodness, self-sufficiency, and the other perfections of His nature.

Second, God designs not only to make His properties known but to receive praise, attribution of glory, and honor on their account. His design is to be admired in all who believe (2 Thessalonians 1:10) — that upon perceiving the excellencies He has revealed, and as He has revealed them, they would admire, adore, applaud, glorify, and praise Him; worship, believe in, and trust Him in all things; and pursue the eternal enjoyment of Him as their reward. This ascription of glory takes three forms.

First, it is interpretive — the way inanimate creatures and animals ascribe glory to God simply by what they are and what they do. By their very existence and by following the law and inclination of their nature, they give God the glory of the wisdom and power by which they were made, and of the sovereignty on which they depend. This is why, in the praises of God throughout Scripture, inanimate creatures — heaven and earth, winds, storms, thunder, and the beasts of the field — are so often called to give praise and glory to God. They do so by what they are, since through the impression of God's glorious excellencies stamped in their effects upon them, those excellencies are made known and evident.

Second, it is involuntary in some rational creatures. Sinful men and angels have no intention, no will, and no desire to give glory to God — they do everything in their power to the contrary, hating, reproaching, and blaspheming Him. Yet they cannot shake off God's yoke. In their minds and consciences they are forced — and will be forever — to acknowledge that God is infinitely holy, infinitely wise, powerful, and righteous. And He receives the glory of all these properties from them even in their very desire that He were otherwise. When they wish that God were not just enough to punish them, not powerful enough to torment them, not wise enough to find them out, not holy enough to be displeased with their lusts and sins — in that very wish they acknowledge and give to God the glory of His justice, wisdom, power, and holiness. Once God has made His properties known, the ascription of glory to Him for them is natural and unavoidable for rational creatures.

Third, it is voluntary — expressed in the reasonable service, worship, fear, trust, and obedience of angels and men. God reveals the properties of His nature to them, and they acknowledge and adore those properties, place their confidence in them, and thereby glorify Him as God. This voluntary glorifying of God consists of three things.

First, making the excellencies of God that have been revealed to us the chief and governing object of all the moral activities of our souls and all the movements of our affections. To fear the Lord and His goodness — to fear Him because of His goodness — to trust in His power and faithfulness, to obey His authority, to delight in His will and grace, to love Him above all because of His excellencies and beauty: this is to glorify Him.

Second, to pray for and rejoice in all the ways and means by which God will — or has promised to — further manifest and declare these properties of His nature. Why do we pray for and long for God's promises to His saints to be fulfilled, His warnings to His enemies to be carried out, the remaining glorious works of His power and grace to be accomplished, the kingdom of Christ to come, and glory to draw near? Is it not chiefly and principally so that the glorious excellencies of God's nature may be more fully revealed, more widely known, and more highly exalted — that God may appear more as He is and as He has declared Himself to be? This is to give glory to God. Likewise, our joy and satisfaction in any of God's ways and works rests solely on this: that in them, God in His properties — His power, wisdom, holiness, and the like — is revealed, declared, and made known.

Third, in the joint, active celebration of His praises. This is among the most important duties we are called to and the one we are most urgently and frequently urged toward. In its nature it consists in our believing, joyful expression of who God is and what He does — admiring, adoring, and blessing Him because of His holiness, goodness, and all other perfections, and because of His works of grace and power that flow from them. This is what it means to praise God, as Revelation 5 shows.

Fourth, note that none of these properties of God can be made known or glorified except through His declaration of them and their effects. We know no more of God than He is pleased to reveal to us. This means not only revelation through His Word, but revelation through any means — His Word, His works, or impressions from the law of nature on our hearts and minds. And whatever God declares about Himself, He does so by exercising, putting

forth, and displaying the effects of those properties. We know His power, wisdom, goodness, and grace, for instance, through their effects — the works of God that proceed from them and correspond to them. Whatever is in God that is not made known in this way, we cannot perceive or glorify Him for. Since God does all things — as we have shown — for the glory of these properties, He reveals and makes them known accordingly.

Fifth, given God's purpose, it is necessary that He reveal and make known all the attributes and properties of His nature through works and effects that specifically proceed from them and correspond to them, so that He may be glorified in them — and as events show, this is exactly what He has done. What reason could there be for God to be glorified in one essential excellency of His nature and not in another? This must be especially affirmed of those properties whose manifestation, as events have shown, constitutes His principal glory — and whose knowledge is of the greatest benefit to all people in relation to His purposes for them.

Sixth, with these things established, consider how they apply to what is under examination. In creating all things, God glorified and manifested His greatness, power, wisdom, and goodness, along with many similar properties. But what about His sovereignty, righteousness, and holiness? These were not revealed by creation, or at least not clearly enough for Him to be fully glorified in them. Would He then leave them in darkness — hidden, undiscovered — while resting content in the glory of those properties already made known through creation? Would there be any reason for that, given that His design is to do all things for Himself and for His own glory? Therefore He gave His holy law as a rule of obedience to men and angels. This plainly revealed His sovereignty

and authority over them, and His holiness and righteousness in the equity and purity of what He required — so that in and through these properties He might also be glorified. Just as He made all things for Himself — that is, to manifest His greatness, power, wisdom, and goodness — so He gave the law for Himself, to manifest His authority, holiness, and righteousness. But is this everything? Is there not also remunerative justice in God, expressed in His generosity? And is there not punitive justice in Him, expressed in His severity? Yes to both, and in pursuing the design already described, these too must be manifested, or God will not be glorified in them. This He accomplished through the rewards and punishments He attached to the law of obedience He had prescribed. To manifest His remunerative justice, He promised a reward in a spirit of generosity — a reward that the angels who did not sin received. And in the penalty He threatened — which sinning angels and men incurred — He revealed His punitive justice in a spirit of severity. So all these properties of God are made known through their effects, and so God is glorified in them and on their account.

But after all of this — are there no other properties of His nature, divine excellencies inseparable from His being, that none of these means so much as hint at? There clearly are: mercy, grace, patience, longsuffering, compassion, and the like. Concerning these, observe the following.

First, where there are no objects for these properties, they cannot be declared, manifested, or exercised. Just as God's power or wisdom could not be manifest if there were no objects for them to act upon, neither can His grace or mercy. If no one ever stands in need of them, they can never be exercised and therefore can never be known. For this reason they were not revealed through creation,

through the law, through its sanctions, or through the law written in our hearts — because none of these presuppose any objects of grace and mercy. Grace and mercy can only be exercised toward sinners — those who have made themselves miserable through sin.

Second, no excellencies of God's nature are more expressive of His divine goodness, loveliness, and beauty than these — mercy, grace, longsuffering, and patience. Therefore, there is nothing He requires of us more — in terms of resembling Him and conforming to His image — than these very qualities: mercy, grace, and a readiness to forgive. And the opposite spirit in any person is what He most abhors. Those who showed no mercy will receive judgment without mercy. It is therefore certain that God will be glorified in the manifestation of these properties of His nature.

Third, these properties can be exercised — and therefore can only be known — through the pardon of sin. This places it beyond all doubt that there is forgiveness with God. God will not forfeit the glory of these excellencies. He will be revealed in them, known by them, and glorified for them — which would be impossible if there were no forgiveness with Him. Here we find not only the truth of forgiveness but its necessity.

Forgiveness is manifested in God's sending of His Son to die for sin, and also in the obligation He places on us to forgive one another.

Twelfth, we now come to the evidence that is the center where all the lines of the previous arguments meet and rest — the fountain from which all those streams of refreshment flow, the source

that animates and gives life and force to all of them. This evidence lies in God's sending of His Son. Considering it will leave no pretense or excuse for unbelief in this matter.

To make this evidence as clear and compelling as possible, we must consider the following.

1. What gave rise to this sending.
2. Who it was that was sent.
3. How and in what manner He was sent.
4. To what end and purpose He was sent.

First, we need to consider where this forgiveness originated. It came from the eternal, mutual agreement and plan of the Father and the Son, as described in Zechariah 6:13: "The counsel of peace shall be between them both." This passage speaks of Christ, called the Branch. He will build the temple of the Lord and bear the glory. He will sit and rule on His throne as a priest, and the counsel of peace will be between them both. That is, between God the Father who sends Him and the Son Himself. This was the plan for peace-making between God and humanity, which was carried out in due time by Christ, who is our peace (Ephesians 2:16). He speaks of this in Proverbs 8:30-31: "Then I was beside Him, as a master craftsman, and I was daily His delight, rejoicing always before Him, rejoicing in the inhabited parts of the earth, and my delights were with the sons of men." These are the words of wisdom — that is, the Son of God. When did this happen? "Then I was with Him." This was before the mountains were settled, before He had made the earth or the fields — that is, before the creation of the world, from eternity (verses 25-26). But how could He rejoice in the inhabited parts of the earth? And how could His delight be with the sons of men, when they did not yet exist? The answer is that it was the plan of peace toward them, mentioned before. In

carrying out this plan, He would be sent to live among them on the earth. He rejoiced in the anticipation of being sent to them and the work He would do for them. Then, with His own consent and delight, He was foreordained to His work even before the foundation of the world (1 Peter 1:20), and received from the Father the promise of eternal life even before the world began (Titus 1:2). This eternal life was to be given to sinners by way of forgiveness through His blood. This whole plan is expressed in Psalm 40:7-8. The apostle draws on this passage in Hebrews 10:5-7: "Then I said, 'Look, I come. In the scroll of the book it is written of Me. I delight to do Your will, O God. Your law is within My heart.'" There you see the will of the Father in this matter, along with the law that governs how it would be carried out. And there is the will of the Son, answering the Father's will, and His delight in fulfilling the law that was prescribed for Him.

Now let us consider: what was the purpose of this eternal plan of peace — this agreement between the Father and the Son from eternity about the state and condition of humanity? If God had intended to leave everyone to perish under the guilt of their sins, there would have been no need for any such plan, design, or counsel. God had given humanity a law, righteous and holy, and if they broke it, He had threatened them with eternal destruction. Under the rule, authority, and power of this law, He could have righteously left them to stand or fall according to its verdict and sentence. But now He assures us and reveals to us that He had other thoughts about this matter — that there were other plans between the Father and the Son concerning us. And these were plans in which the Son delighted as He looked forward to their fulfillment. What could these thoughts and plans be, other than a way to de-

liver humanity? And that deliverance could only come through the forgiveness of sins, for whatever else might be done, if God keeps track of sins, no one can stand. So listen, poor sinner, and have hope. God is planning your deliverance and freedom. What is beyond the power of the Father's and Son's wisdom and grace to accomplish? And for this purpose the Son was sent into the world, which is the second thing to consider.

2. Whom did God send to carry out this work? Scripture places great weight and emphasis on this point, and so must faith. John 3:16 says: "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son." And 1 John 4:9 says: "In this the love of God was revealed toward us, because God sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him." And again in verse 10: "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins." Who is this one who was sent and called the only begotten Son of God? Consider two descriptions of Him — one from the Old Testament and another from the New. The first is from Isaiah 9:6: "For to us a Child is born, to us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon His shoulders, and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace." The other is from Hebrews 1:2-3: "God has spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, by whom also He made the worlds, who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high." This is the one who was sent. In His nature He was glorious — even God over all, blessed forever. In His likeness to the Father, He is the brightness of His glory and the express im-

age of His person, possessing all the same essential qualities. So whatever we find in Him, we can be assured of in the Father also — for whoever has seen Him has seen the Father, who is in Him. In power He is omnipotent, for He made all things and upholds all things with incredible ease by the word of His power. In office He is exalted over all, sitting at the right hand of the Majesty on high. In name He is the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father. So whatever He came to accomplish, He will certainly fulfill — for what could hinder or prevent this Mighty One from completing His purpose?

This consideration raises our evidence to a height that gives unquestionable assurance in this matter. Here is a specific and concrete object for faith to fix upon and rest in. Why did this glorious Son of God come and dwell among poor sinners? We beheld the glory of the eternal Word — the glory of the only begotten of the Father — and He was made flesh and pitched His tent among us (John 1:14). To what end? It was for no other purpose than to carry out the eternal counsel of peace toward sinners already described: to procure forgiveness of sin for them and to declare it to them. And what greater evidence, what greater assurance can we have that there is forgiveness with God for us? God Himself has given us a rule: what is done by giving an only begotten or only beloved son gives assured testimony of genuine sincerity in the thing so confirmed. So He said to Abraham in Genesis 22:12: 'Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.' This is how such a thing can be known — or it cannot be known at all. What blessed conclusions faith may draw from this: 'Now I know that there is forgiveness with God, since He has not withheld His Son, His only Son, but gave Him to accomplish it.' The apostle teaches us to reason this way in

Romans 8:32: 'He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?'

What more can any soul desire? What ground remains for unbelief to stand on in this matter? Is there anything more to be done? It was to make plain that there is forgiveness with Him, and to open the way for its exercise, that God sent His Son — and that the Son of God came into the world, as will become even clearer afterward.

Third, the manner in which the Son was sent adds further evidence and assurance to everything already said. How was He sent? Not in glory, not in power, not in an open display of His eternal power and divine nature. Had it been that way, we might have thought He came merely to manifest and glorify Himself in the world — and He could have done that without any thought of mercy or pardon toward us. But He came in an entirely different way: seen in the likeness of sinful flesh (Romans 8:3), in the form of a servant (Philippians 2:7), born of a woman, born under the law (Galatians 4:4). What He endured, suffered, and underwent in that state and condition is known to us all to some degree. None of this could have been merely or primarily for Himself. All He sought at the end of it was to be glorified with the glory He had with the Father before the world was (John 17:5). It must therefore have been for our sakes — to save and deliver us from the state of wrath and the coming judgment that we had brought on ourselves through sin. That is, to procure for us the forgiveness of sin. Had God not designed pardon for sin, He would never have sent His Son in this manner to testify to it. And He did it this way because there was no other way it could be accomplished, as we have al-

ready shown. Do we doubt whether there is forgiveness with God, or whether we will obtain it if we come to Him seeking it? Consider the condition of His Son in the world — His suffering, poverty, temptation, sorrow, and affliction. Then ask your soul: what was the purpose of all this? If you can find any other design in it, any other reason, cause, or necessity for it, besides testifying and declaring that there is forgiveness with God and purchasing and securing its communication to us — then stay in your fears and perish. But if this is indeed the reason, then we have more than sufficient ground to assure our souls of what we may expect.

Fourth, beyond all this, what preceded leads to a great and marvelous outcome in the death of the Son of God. This was a momentous event, and it is worth pausing to ask what was designed in it. Scripture gives us a full account.

First, He died to make atonement for sin and reconciliation for iniquity (Daniel 9:24). He gave His life as a ransom for the sins of many (Matthew 20:28; 1 Timothy 2:6). He was made sin so that others might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Corinthians 5:21; Romans 8:3). He bore our sins in His body on the cross (1 Peter 2:24). This is the reality of the matter. Despite all the love, grace, and condescension described above, our sins were so contrary in nature to God's justice and holiness that unless atonement was made and a price of redemption paid, no pardon — no forgiveness — could be obtained. This is what Christ undertook to do through the sacrifice of Himself, fulfilling everything that had been foreshadowed and represented in the sacrifices of old — as the apostle explains at length in Hebrews 10:5-9. In this, the forgiveness that is in God is laid out so clearly and visibly that anyone who cannot read it will be condemned forever. And justly so —

for what more could be required to justify God in that eternal condemnation? Anyone who will not believe His grace as testified and shown in the blood of His Son — let him perish without remedy.

Second, the curse and sentence of the law stands on record against sinners. It asserts its demands against our release and binds us under obligation to punishment. God will not set aside or nullify His law without its demands being met — without that, there is no acceptance for sinners. This is the next purpose Christ's death was designed to accomplish. Just as He made atonement and satisfied justice — which is the source and foundation of the law — He also fulfilled and answered the demands of the law as an expression of God's justice. Romans 8:3 says He suffered in the likeness of sinful flesh so that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled and answered. He answered the law's curse when He was made a curse for us (Galatians 3:13). And so in terms of the law's obedience requirement, He became the end of the law for righteousness to all who believe (Romans 10:3-4). And in terms of the penalty the law threatened, He bore it, removed it, and took it out of the way. He has therefore made a way for forgiveness right through the heart of the law — the law now has nothing to say against the pardon of those who believe.

Third, sinners are under the power of Satan. He lays claim to them — and how shall they be rescued from his grip and dominion? This too was a purpose Christ's death was designed to accomplish. He appeared to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8), and through death He destroyed the one who had the power of death (Hebrews 2:14) — stripping him of his power, dismantling his dominion, and removing his claim over sinners who believe, as we have explained more fully elsewhere.

Through all of these things — and many other aspects of His death that could be cited — we are fully assured of the forgiveness that is with God and of His willingness for us to be made partakers of it.

Fifth, was this all? Did His work end with His death? Did He do nothing further to secure the forgiveness of sins for us beyond dying for them? No — He also lives after death for the same end and purpose. The Son of God, in the nature He took on to make atonement for sin through death, lives again after death to secure and complete the forgiveness of sins for us. He does this in two ways.

First, by being raised from the death He underwent to make atonement for sin — raised by the power and gracious will of God — He demonstrates and testifies that He fully completed the work He undertook. He received a discharge on our behalf. Had He not fully answered the guilt of sin through His death, He would never have been raised from it.

Second, He lives after death a mediatorial life, interceding for us so that we may receive the forgiveness of sin, and Himself giving it out to us. These truths are frequently cited to encourage souls to believe, so they need not be elaborated further here.

So this is how the matter stands: so that mercy might have a way to exercise itself in forgiveness, while remaining consistent with the honor of God's righteousness and law, the Son of God was sent for the ends and purposes described. This constitutes the greatest work God has ever done or ever will do. It was the most remarkable product of infinite wisdom, goodness, grace, and power. In this, all the excellencies of God shine forth more glori-

ously than in all the other works of His hands. Let us then carefully consider this matter and bring our souls — with all their objections — to this evidence, to see what exception we can raise against it. I know nothing will satisfy unbelief — its design is to convince the soul in the end of what it tries to persuade it of now: that there is no forgiveness in God. Satan, who uses this device, knows well that there is none for those who believe there is none — or rather, who refuse to believe there is any. For on the last day, people will receive according to their faith or unbelief. The one who rightly believes, and the one who does not believe, that forgiveness is with God — neither of them will be deceived about their own particular standing. But what reasonable objection can be raised against this evidence, this foundation of our faith in this matter? God has not sent His Son in vain — which He would have done, as we have shown, had He not designed to manifest and exercise forgiveness toward sinners. To strengthen our faith from this, let us probe these things further through some particular inquiries.

First, since the Son of God died in the way and manner He did, according to the determined counsel and will of God — why did He do so, and what was His aim in it?

Answer: It is plain that He died for our sins (Romans 4:25) — that is, to make reconciliation for the sins of His people (Hebrews 2:17-18). Moses, the prophets, and the whole of Scripture testify to this. Not a single word of Scripture can be rightly believed without this as the foundation. Nor can we render any true obedience to God without it.

Second, what then did God do to Him? What took place between God as the judge of all and the One who was the Mediator of the church?

Answer: God laid on Him the iniquities of all — all the sins of all the elect (Isaiah 53:6). He made Him a curse for us (Galatians 3:13). Making Him a sin offering, He condemned sin in the flesh (Romans 8:3; 2 Corinthians 5:21). So everything that the justice and law of God required regarding the punishment due for sin was laid upon Christ and executed on Him.

Third, what then did Christ do in His death? What was He aiming for? What was His intention in submitting to and enduring the will of God in all of this?

Answer: He bore our sins in His own body on the cross (1 Peter 2:24). He took our sins upon Himself, undertook to answer for them, to pay our debt, and to bring an end to the dispute between God and sinners on their account (Daniel 9:24). His aim was undoubtedly to make such complete atonement for sin through everything He suffered and endured that nothing more on that account could ever be required.

Fourth, did God have anything more to require of sinners for sin — to satisfy His justice, vindicate His holiness, exalt His glory, and repair His honor — beyond what He charged against Christ? Did He lay only part of the penalty due for sin on Christ, execute only some of the law's curse against Him, while reserving some of His wrath for sinners themselves?

Answer: Certainly not. Christ came to do the whole will of God (Hebrews 10:7-8). God did not spare Him anything that His holy will had appointed to be done in relation to sin (Romans 8:32). God would never have dealt with His Son this way only to make a half-finished work of it. Nor is the work of making satisfaction for sin the kind of work where any portion — however small — could

ever be taken up by another. Nothing is more dishonoring or blasphemous toward God and Christ than the foolish Roman Catholic notion of works that satisfy for punishment due for sin, or any part of it — as also is the idea of purgatory pains to purge any remaining guilt after this life. This work of making satisfaction for sin is one that no creature in heaven or earth can have any part in. It was entrusted entirely to the Son of God, who alone was able to undertake it and who has perfectly accomplished it. Therefore God now says, 'Fury is not in Me; whoever takes hold of My strength shall have peace' (Isaiah 27:4-5).

Fifth, what happened to the Lord Christ in His undertaking? Did He see it through, or did He give way under it? Did He only demonstrate His love and show His goodwill for our deliverance, or did He also pursue it effectively — not stopping until He had made a way for the exercise of forgiveness?

Answer: It was not possible for death to hold Him (Acts 2:24). He knew beforehand that He would be carried through His work, that He would not be abandoned in it, nor give way under it (Isaiah 50:6-8). And God gave unmistakable evidence that Christ had paid the debt of sin to the uttermost by raising Him from the dead. For anyone imprisoned under the sentence of the law for the debt of sin is not released until he has paid to the last cent. His resurrection from the dead, therefore, demonstrated that He had done exactly this.

Sixth, what has become of Him now? Where is He, and what is He doing? Has He finished His work and set it aside, or does He continue to carry it forward until it is brought to its completion?

Answer: He was dead, but He is alive and lives forever. He has told us that because He lives, we will live also. This is the purpose of His mediatorial life in heaven: He lives forever to intercede for us (Hebrews 7:26-27). And His purpose in doing so is that the forgiveness of sin He has procured for us may be communicated to us, so that we might receive it and live forever.

What ground is left for questioning the truth we are examining? Which link in this chain can unbelief break? If people resolve — in spite of all this evidence and assurance — that they will still not believe there is forgiveness with God, or refuse to take steps to secure it for themselves, or despise it as something not worth pursuing, then this much is enough for those who declare and preach these things: they are a fragrant offering to God both among those who are perishing and among those who are being saved. I am grateful to God for the opportunity to bear testimony to the grace of God in Christ. If it is not received, it is because the god of this world has blinded the eyes of people so that the light of the gospel of the glory of God does not shine into their minds. But Christ will be glorified in all who believe on these principles and foundations.

Thirteenth, another evidence of this same truth may be drawn from the fact that God requires forgiveness of us — commanding us to forgive one another — and therefore there is assuredly forgiveness with Him for us. The force of this consideration will become clear in the observations that follow.

First, it is certain that God has required this of us. There are many well-known passages on this, so they need not all be cited here. See Luke 17:3-4, Ephesians 4:32, and Matthew 18:24 to the

end. There are, however, a few things that give this command particular weight and show how important this duty is — things worth noting.

First, our Savior requires us to carry a sense of our integrity and sincerity in fulfilling this duty into our approaches to God in prayer. He therefore teaches and commands us to pray for forgiveness of our debts to God — that is, our sins and offenses against Him that make us debtors to His law and justice — even as we forgive those who trespass against us (Matthew 6:12). Many people are quick to argue about whether the words of this model prayer are to be recited exactly every day. I wish they would pay equal attention to the prescription given here for the spirit and frame of heart that ought to accompany all our prayers — it might possibly reduce some of their intensity on that and other matters. But here is a rule for all prayer, as all acknowledge, as well as a description of what is required to make it acceptable. In particular, this is required: that before the One who searches all hearts, and in our approaches to Him in our most pressing concerns, we declare our sincerity in fulfilling this duty and make our obtaining of what we seek contingent on it. This is a great honor placed on this duty, making it especially significant and showing how closely God's glory and the good of our souls are wrapped up in it.

Second, note that no other duty is explicitly placed in the same rank or order with forgiveness — which makes clear that it has been singled out as a token and pledge of our sincerity in all other aspects of our obedience to God. Christ Himself has made it the test case for sincerity in universal obedience, which is no small honor. The apostle places great weight on the fifth commandment — 'Honor your father and mother' — because it is the first com-

mandment with a promise (Ephesians 6:2). All the commandments had a promise ('Do this and live'), but this was the first to have a specific, attached promise. And that promise had a particular foundation in God's ordering of the thing itself: parents would prolong the lives of obedient children (Exodus 20:12) — by praying for their welfare, blessing them in God's name, and guiding them in the ways of obedience so that they might live and possess the land. This promise has now been carried over from the covenant of Canaan into the covenant of grace, with parents' blessing contributing to their children's share in it and prolonging their days to eternity, even if their days in this world are few. As Isaiah 53:10 says of our Savior, He would see His seed and prolong His days — a word that has been lifted over into eternal things. But that is by the way. Just as the special promise attached to the fifth commandment sets it apart, so does this specific focus on forgiveness in our prayers set it apart. Though we are to carry a testimony of our sincerity in universal obedience into all our approaches to God, the singling out of this particular duty makes it especially remarkable and shows what a high value God places on it and how much it pleases Him.

Third, God requires this forgiveness of us on the basis of the forgiveness we receive from Him — which places upon us the greatest possible obligation to perform it and provides the strongest and most powerful motive imaginable for doing so. See Ephesians 4:32.

Fourth, this duty is more directly and explicitly required in the New Testament than in the Old. It was required then, but not as openly, plainly, or expressly as now. We therefore find a different spirit among believers under the old dispensation compared to

those under the new. Some of the Old Testament saints expressed toward their enemies, oppressors, and persecutors sentiments that, while warranted by a particular movement of the Spirit in them and suited to the dispensation they lived under, are not appropriate for us now, who receive grace upon grace through Jesus Christ. Zechariah, dying, cried out, 'The Lord see it and avenge it' — but Stephen, dying in the same cause and in the same way, said, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' Elijah called down fire from heaven, but our Savior rebuked even the smallest inclination in His disciples to imitate him in this. The reason for this difference is that forgiveness in God — especially its nature and cause — is far more clearly revealed in the gospel under the New Testament, which has brought life and immortality to light, than it was under the law. All our obedience, both in content and manner, must be shaped by the revelation God has given us.

Fifth, forgiving others is made an explicit condition of obtaining pardon and forgiveness from God (Matthew 6:14-15), and the nature of this is explained in Matthew 18:24. There are not many conditions of this kind in the gospel. I acknowledge that they have no direct causal power in bringing about the fulfillment of the promise — but failure to meet them is sufficient proof that we have no legitimate claim to the promise and no grounds for appealing to it. Our forgiving of others does not earn forgiveness for ourselves, but our refusal to forgive others proves that we ourselves are not forgiven. All of these things show what weight God Himself places on this duty.

Second, observe that there is no quality more fitting, useful, honorable, or praiseworthy in any person than a sincere practice of this duty. To be harsh, unyielding, relentless, and revenge-seeking

is one of the worst corruptions of human nature. No one is more widely and justly branded with real dishonor among wise and good people than those who are like this and act accordingly. To nurse injuries, hold onto a sense of wrongs, watch for opportunities of revenge, and live in hateful perversity is to display the image of the devil to the world in its true colors — for he is the great enemy and the avenger of himself. On the other side, no grace, no virtue, no duty, and no ornament of the mind or character is in itself so lovely, so fitting, so praiseworthy, or so useful to humanity as gentleness and a readiness to forgive and pardon. This is the quality above all that makes a person a truly good person — someone others would even risk their lives for. And I am sorry to add that this grace is recommended also by its rarity — it is rarely found among people. How little this duty is practiced — like self-denial, willingness to bear the cross, and forsaking the world — is evidence, if not of how little genuine sincerity there is in the world, then at least of how little growth and progress there is among those who profess the faith.

Third, every grace, virtue, and perfection in any person is both a gift flowing from God's divine goodness and generosity and an expression of some divine excellency or perfection — some quality that exists in God in an infinitely more excellent degree. We were created in the image of God. Whatever was good and beautiful in us was part of that image, especially the ornaments of our minds and the perfections of our souls. These qualities bore a resemblance to and a correspondence with certain excellencies in God, to which they may be traced by way of analogy. This image was largely lost through sin, leaving only a shadow of it in the faculties of our souls and in the dominion over creation that God in His pa-

tience still permits to people. The recovery we receive through grace is nothing less than the initial renewal of God's image in us (Ephesians 4:22-24) — the implanting in our natures of those graces that make us like Him again. And nothing qualifies as grace or virtue unless it corresponds to something in God. Whatever we possess of this kind, God possesses absolutely, perfectly, and in an infinitely more excellent way.

Let us now put these things together. God requires of us that there be forgiveness in us for those who offend us — forgiveness without limit or restriction. He bestows this grace on His saints, places a high value on it, and makes clear in many ways that He counts it among the most excellent of all human qualities and one of the most admirable traits any person can have. What shall we then say? Is there forgiveness with Him or not? He who made the eye — does He not see? He who planted the ear — does He not hear? He who prescribes forgiveness to us and bestows the grace of it upon us — is there not forgiveness with Him? To say otherwise is as much as to say: though we are good, God is not; though we are kind and generous, He is not. Whoever finds this grace at work in him to any degree, yet fears he will not find it in God for himself, is in that very fear elevating himself above God — which is the natural fruit of wretched unbelief.

But the truth is, if there were no forgiveness with God, forgiveness in man would be no virtue at all — nor would the qualities that incline toward it, such as gentleness, compassion, patience, and pity. What would those things amount to but the unleashing of human nature into rage and madness? For just as every truth consists in its correspondence to the first and eternal Truth, so virtue

does not consist primarily in conformity to a rule or command, but in correspondence to the first, absolute, perfect Being and His perfections.

The properties of forgiveness — its greatness and its freedom.

The arguments and demonstrations presented above have, we hope, established beyond question the great truth we have been examining — the life and soul of all our hope, profession, religion, and worship. The aim of all this discussion is to lay a firm foundation for faith to rest on when it comes to God seeking forgiveness of sins, and to encourage all kinds of people to do so. That aim now remains to be explained and pressed home. But before we come to that directly, two things need to be addressed first. The first is to set out some of the qualities and aspects of this forgiveness that may both encourage and compel us to pursue it and to receive the promises and testimonies concerning it with faith, to our benefit. The second is to show how necessary all this effort is, in light of the great unbelief that is found in most people on this matter. As to the first of these, then, consider the following.

First, the forgiveness that is with God is such as befits Him — suited to His greatness, goodness, and all other excellencies of His nature — the kind of forgiveness through which He makes Himself known as God. What He says concerning certain works of His providence — 'Be still and know that I am God' — may be said with even greater force concerning this great act of His grace: still your souls, and know that He is God. It is not like the narrow, grudging, half-hearted, and constrained forgiveness that is sometimes found among people when it is found at all. It is full, free, boundless, bot-

tomless, and absolute — such as befits His nature and excellencies. In a word, it is forgiveness that is with God, and through its exercise He will be known as such.

First, God Himself sets His forgiveness apart from anything our thoughts or imagination can reach, because it is His — and like Himself. It is an object for faith alone, which can rest in what it cannot fully comprehend. Faith is never safer than when it is, so to speak, overwhelmed by infiniteness. But set mere rational thought or human imagination to work on such things and they fall impossibly short. They can neither conceive of these things rightly nor use them for their proper purpose. If God's forgiveness were not beyond what people could imagine, no human being could be saved. God expresses this Himself in Isaiah 55:7-9: 'Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the Lord, and He will have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.' It is plain from the context that these thoughts and ways are thoughts and ways of forgiveness and pardon. Our understanding falls short of them — we know little or nothing of the infinite largeness of His heart in this matter. The person He is speaking of is an openly wicked man, a man of deceit and persistent evil — someone we would have little hope for, whom we would hardly think it worth addressing about conversion, and for whom we could barely bring ourselves to pray, being inclined to write him off as a lost cause. But let him turn to the Lord, and he will receive forgiveness. How can this be? Is it possible there could be mercy for such a person?

Yes — for the Lord will multiply to pardon. He has forgiveness in Him to outpace all the multiplied sins of anyone who turns to Him and seeks it. But this is very hard for us to take in. This is not how we deal with hardened offenders against us. 'True,' says God, 'but My ways are not your ways.' 'I do not act in this matter as you do or as you are accustomed to act.' 'Then how can we understand it — how can we conceive of it?' You will never do it through reason or imagination, for as the heavens are above the earth, so are God's thoughts in this matter above our thoughts. This is an expression used to convey the largest and most incomprehensible distance possible. Creation can supply no more fitting image of it. The heavens are inconceivably far above the earth and incomparably more glorious. So are the thoughts of God — not only distant from ours but possessing a glory that we cannot rise to. When we come to deal with God about forgiveness, we so often get tangled in every branch of quarreling, disputing unbelief. Some particular circumstance or aggravation, some supposedly unique case, strips us of our confidence. The root cause is failing to think rightly about Him with whom we are dealing — measuring Him by the line of our own imagination, bringing Him down to the level of our thoughts and ways. Because we find it hard to forgive a small debt, we think He cannot forgive a large one. But God has provided an answer to this in Hosea 11:9: 'I will not execute My fierce anger; I will not destroy Ephraim, for I am God and not man.' Our assurance in this matter must come from His nature. Were He a man, it would be impossible — given so many and such great provocations — for Him to turn away from the fierceness of His anger. But He is God. This gives His forgiveness an infiniteness and an inconceivable boundlessness that exalts it above all our thoughts and ways. Here

is something to lament: presumption, which turns God into an idol, ascribes to that idol a greater largeness in forgiveness than faith is able to rise to when it deals with Him as the God of infinite excellencies and perfections. The reasons for this are plain enough. But this much is certain: no presumption can falsely imagine for itself a forgiveness from the idol of its heart that faith may not find in Him and receive from Him in the proper way.

Second, God calls on His infinite excellencies to demonstrate the greatness and boundlessness of His forgiveness. He puts them before us to convince us that we will find pardon with Him proportionate and answerable to them. See Isaiah 40:27-31: 'Why do you say, O Jacob, and assert, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the Lord, and the justice due me escapes the notice of my God"?, 'Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth does not become weary or tired. His understanding is inscrutable. He gives strength to the weary, and to him who lacks might He increases power. Though youths grow weary and tired, and vigorous young men stumble badly, yet those who wait for the Lord will gain new strength; they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary.' The issue in question is whether acceptance with God — which can only come through forgiveness — can be obtained. Sinful Jacob was either despairing of this or at least deeply discouraged about it. But God says: 'My thoughts are not your thoughts in this matter.' And what does He do to correct their mistake? What argument does He use to free them from unbelief and rebuke their fears? He simply calls them to consider who and what He is — with whom they have to do. So that they might expect acceptance and forgiveness such as befits

Him, He reminds them of His power, His immensity, His infinite wisdom, His unchangeableness, and all the excellencies and properties of His nature. He then asks them whether they do not have every reason to expect forgiveness and grace beyond all their thoughts and comprehension — forgiveness that answers the infinite largeness of the heart from which it flows.

Moses pressed this same argument when pleading for forgiveness for the people under a severe provocation and a threatened destruction in Numbers 14:17-18. He pleaded for pardon in a way befitting the great and glorious properties of God's nature — in a way that would demonstrate His infinite power and all-sufficiency.

This, I say, is a general encouragement to believers. We have, I trust, established on unquestionable grounds that there is forgiveness with God — which is the hinge on which the whole outcome of our eternal condition turns. And this forgiveness is like Him — suited to Him, answering the infinite perfections of His nature, exercised and given by Him as God. We are prone to narrow and restrict it through our unbelief, and in doing so to make it unworthy of Him. The person who, being wholly under the power of the law, believes there is no forgiveness with God, or does not believe it can be obtained — with the voice of the law supporting him in that — dishonors God no more (or hardly more) than those who, having been convinced of all the grounds and principles of forgiveness and of the truth of the testimony given to it, still shrink and restrict it until it falls short of what is worthy of One whose excellencies are all infinite and whose ways are therefore beyond all comprehension. If we resolve to deal with God in this matter — which is the business now before us — let us do it in a way that befits His greatness, which is the same as doing it in a way that truly answers

the need of our souls. Let us not tangle our own spirits by putting limits on His grace. The father of the boy possessed by a demon, in his deep distress when he came to our Savior, cried out: 'If You can do anything, have compassion on us and help us!' (Mark 9:22). He desperately wanted his son delivered, but the matter seemed so great that he questioned whether the Lord Christ had either enough compassion or enough power to help. And what did this get him? Nothing but a delay in his child's healing. Our Savior held him back until He had taught him better, saying in verse 23: 'If you can? All things are possible to him who believes.' 'Do not misunderstand — if your child is not cured, it is not for lack of power or compassion in Me, but for lack of faith in you.' 'My power is such that all things are possible through it, provided they are believed.' This is how it is with many who long to be made partakers of forgiveness. If it were possible, they would gladly be pardoned — but they cannot see how it is possible. Where is the problem? Is it that God has no pardon for them — for people like them? Perhaps they fall short of pardon because of this. But the reason is not that God cannot pardon them. It is that they cannot — they will not — believe that the forgiveness with Him is such that it would answer every need of their souls, because it answers the infinite largeness of His heart. And even if this does not fully deprive them of pardon, it greatly delays their peace and comfort. God does not take it well to be limited by us in anything, least of all in His grace. He calls this a tempting of Him, a provoking test — as in Psalm 78:41: 'Again and again they tempted God, and pained the Holy One of Israel.' This He could not bear. If there is any pardon with God, it is such as befits Him to give. When He pardons, He pardons abundantly. Take your half-pardons and limited, conditional forgiveness with reser-

vations and restrictions to the sons of men — it may suit them; it is like them. God's forgiveness is absolute and perfect. Before it, our sins are as a cloud before an east wind and a rising sun. He is said to do this work with His whole heart and His whole soul — freely, generously, and abundantly forgiving our sins, and casting them into the depths of the sea (Micah 7:19), into a bottomless ocean, a picture of infinite mercy. Remember this, poor souls, when you come to deal with God in this matter: all things are possible to those who believe.

Second, this forgiveness is with God not merely in the sense that we may come to it if we choose, without offending Him, but in the sense that He has placed His great glory in declaring and communicating it. We can honor Him in no better way than by coming to Him to receive it. For the most part, we behave as if we would rather steal forgiveness from God than receive it from Him as One who gives it freely and generously. We pick it up and put it down again, as though we would gladly have it if only God would not, as it were, notice us taking it — because we are afraid He is not truly willing for us to have it. We would steal this fire from heaven and have a share in God's treasures and riches almost without His consent. At the very least we think we receive it reluctantly from Him, with great difficulty, as something rarely given and barely obtained — that He gives it out with a kind of unwilling willingness, the way we sometimes give charity without cheerfulness, as though He loses something each time He pardons. We are prone to think that we are very willing to receive forgiveness but that God is unwilling to give it — because He seems to lose something by it, as though He must give up the glory of inflicting punishment for sin, which we suppose He is most reluctant to relinquish. This is the very na-

ture of unbelief. But in truth, things are entirely otherwise. In this matter, through the Lord Christ, God has ordered all His dealings with sinners to the praise of the glory of His grace (Ephesians 1:6). His design in the whole mystery of the gospel is to make His grace glorious — to exalt pardoning mercy. The great fruit and product of His grace is forgiveness: the forgiveness of sinners. This is what God intends to make Himself glorious in and through. All the praise, glory, and worship He designs to receive from anyone in this world is to flow to Him by way of this grace, as we have established at length before. It was for this cause that He spared the world when sin first entered it. For this cause He provided a new covenant when the old had become unprofitable. For this cause He sent His Son into the world. All of this He has testified through all the evidences we have examined. Had He been willing to lose the praise of His grace, none of this would have been done. We can therefore honor God in no more excellent way than by receiving forgiveness from Him — He being willing to give it precisely because it tends to His own glory, through the way He has specially chosen for its display. Hence the apostle urges us to draw near boldly to the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16) — that is, with the confidence of faith, as he explains boldness in Hebrews 10:19-20. We come about a business that God is well pleased with — one He delights in doing, as He expresses in Zephaniah 3:17: 'The Lord your God is in your midst, a victorious warrior. He will exult over you with joy, He will be quiet in His love, He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy.' This is how God pardons: He does it in a rejoicing, triumphant way, abundantly satisfying His own holy soul in it, and resting in His love. We have every encouragement to draw near to the throne of grace and receive what God is so willing to

give. To this end also serves the oath of God previously discussed — to cut the root of all secret reserves of unbelief concerning God's unwillingness to give mercy, grace, and pardon to sinners. See Hebrews 6:17-18. The tendency of all our earlier arguments, therefore, is not merely to prove that there is forgiveness with God, which we may believe without being mistaken — but which we ought to believe. It is our duty to do so. We recognize it as our duty to pray, to hear the Word, to give generously, to love fellow believers, and to avoid sin — and when we fall short in any of these, we feel the guilt of it pressing on our conscience. But we hardly think it our duty to believe the forgiveness of our sins. It is well for those who can do it, we think — but we do not think it is a fault in those who cannot. Such people may be pitied, we suppose, but not justly blamed — not even by God Himself. Whose conscience is almost ever burdened with this as a sin — that he does not believe the forgiveness of his sins as he ought? And this is simply because people do not judge it their duty to do so. For when a person fails in a duty he recognizes as such, guilt from that failure will press on his conscience. But what could possibly be lacking in this matter to make it a duty?

First, there is forgiveness with God, and this has been manifested, revealed, and declared. That manifestation is what makes it an object of faith. We believe things to be in God and with Him not merely because they are so in themselves, but because He has revealed and declared them to be so (1 John 1:2). What He so declares, it is our duty to believe — or we frustrate the very purpose of His revelation.

Second, we are expressly commanded to believe, under the highest promises and the gravest penalties. This command is what formally makes believing a duty. Faith is a grace in that it is freely worked in us by the Holy Spirit and is the root of all obedience and other duties as it is planted in the heart. But as it is commanded, it is a duty — and these commands are expressed in various ways throughout the New Testament: through invitations, exhortations, and declarations, all of which carry the force of commands.

Third, it is a duty — as we have shown — of the greatest importance to the glory of God.

Fourth, it is of the greatest importance to our souls, both now and in eternity. These points needed to be added to lay the foundation for the exhortations that follow.

Evidence that most people do not truly believe forgiveness.

What should now follow is the practical application of this truth that the whole discussion has been building toward — namely, giving exhortations and encouragements to believe. But I can take only a few steps in this direction before I imagine someone saying: 'Surely all this is unnecessary — who does not already believe everything you have been trying to prove? All this effort has been spent to little or no purpose.' Before I urge anyone to believe, then, I will first try to show that they do not already believe it. Many people — most people, I say, who live under the proclamation of the gospel — are pitifully deceiving their own souls in this matter. They do not actually believe what they profess to believe and what they think they believe. People talk about fundamental errors — this, to my mind, is the most fundamental and most destructive error anyone can fall into. It consists of two parts:

first, they do not truly believe forgiveness; second, they suppose they do believe it, which keeps them from seeking their only remedy. Both of these mistakes strike at the foundation and ruin the souls of those who live and die in them. I will then examine this matter briefly by a clear inquiry. Whether we truly believe forgiveness or not can be answered and decided by some plain rules and principles. But before the resolution I intend, two observations need to be made first.

First, people in this case are very prone to deceive themselves. Self-love, empty hopes, fondness for one's lusts, common false assumptions, laziness, unwillingness to examine oneself, and concern for reputation — both in the world and perhaps in the church — all work together powerfully in people's self-deception in this matter. It is no easy thing for a soul to break through all of these, and all the self-reasoning that rises from them, to reach a clear judgment about its own dealings with God regarding forgiveness. People also find in a general presumption of this truth a convenient relief from the gnawing of conscience and troubling thoughts about sin. Aiming only at the removal of discomfort, and finding their present assumption sufficient for that, they never bring their persuasion to the test.

Second, as people are prone to this self-deception, so they actually practice it — they do deceive themselves, and they do not know they do so. The last day will make this evident, if people will not be convinced of their folly sooner. When our Savior told His disciples that one of the twelve would betray Him, though only one of twelve was in danger, every one of the twelve made a personal inquiry about himself. I will not say that one in twelve is mistaken here — but I am certain the truth tells us that many are called and

few are chosen, and that only a few truly believe forgiveness. Is it not then incumbent on each person to inquire about which group he is likely to be found in at the last day? While people push this inquiry away from themselves, thinking or saying it may be the concern of others but not of them, they perish — and without remedy. Remember what poor Jacob said when he had lost one child and feared the loss of another in Genesis 43:14: 'If I am bereaved, I am bereaved' — as if saying, if I lose my children, I have nothing more to lose; they are my everything. Nothing worse can happen to me in this world — comfort, joy, life itself goes with them. How much more may people say in this case: if we are deceived here, we are deceived — all is lost. Hope, life, and soul must all perish, and that forever. There is no help or remedy for those who deceive themselves in this matter. They have found a way to go quietly down to destruction.

These things are raised as incentives to self-examination in this matter, and to make the considerations that follow useful. Let us then turn to them.

First, in general: this is a gospel truth — the great, foundational, and most important truth of the gospel. It is the turning point between the two covenants, as God Himself declares in Hebrews 7:7-13. Now a very basic consideration of how people actually live will settle this inquiry — whether they truly believe the gospel, the covenant of grace, and its foundational principles. Surely their ignorance, spiritual darkness, blindness, corrupt affections, worldly lives, earthly-mindedness, and open rejection of the Spirit, the ways, and the yoke of Christ speak no such language. Are we to think that proud, self-willed, worldly, self-seeking people — haters of God's people and His ways, despisers of the Spirit of

grace and His work, those who sacrifice everything to their own lusts — believe the covenant of grace or the forgiveness of sins? God forbid that we should entertain even one thought so dishonoring to the gospel. Wherever the gospel is truly received and believed, it produces different effects (Titus 2:11-12; Isaiah 11:6-9). It teaches people to deny all ungodliness and worldly desires. It changes their hearts, natures, and ways. It is not the barren, powerless, and fruitless thing that such a conclusion would make it.

Second, those who truly believe forgiveness in God thereby obtain forgiveness. Believing gives them a share in it and brings it home to the soul. This is the inviolable law of the gospel — believing and forgiveness are inseparably joined. Among the many evidences that a person has a share in forgiveness, I will name only one: they prize and value it above all the world. Let us ask what esteem and value many of those who claim to believe forgiveness actually place on it. Do they look upon it as their treasure, their jewel, their pearl of great price? Are they earnestly concerned about it? Do they frequently look and check whether it remains safely in their possession? Suppose a man has a precious jewel stored somewhere in his house — and suppose it is to him what the poor widow's two mites were to her, her entire livelihood. Would he not think carefully about it? Would he not frequently reassure himself that it is safe? We can tell that a house or a field does not belong to a man when he passes by it daily and takes little or no notice of it. Now how do most people regard forgiveness? What is their ordinary attitude toward it? Are their hearts constantly filled with thoughts about it? Are they earnestly concerned about whether they have it? Do they reckon that while forgiveness is secure, all is secure for them? When it is, as it were, obscured by sin

and unbelief, do they give themselves no rest until it is freshly discovered to them? Is this the frame of most people? The Lord knows it is not. They talk of forgiveness but do not esteem it, do not prize it, and make no specific inquiry after it. They gamble carelessly on whether they are ever partakers of it; they call upon it as a remedy for pangs of conscience, or else hardly think of it at all.

Let no one with such a mindset flatter himself that he has any real acquaintance with the mystery of gospel forgiveness.

Third, those who claim to hold this persuasion should be asked how they came to hold it — so that we may know whether it is from the One who calls us, and so that we may determine whether they have broken through the difficulties in embracing it that we have shown at length to stand in the way.

When Peter confessed our Savior to be the Christ, the Son of the living God, our Savior told him that flesh and blood had not revealed this to him, but the Father in heaven (Matthew 16:17). It is the same with those who truly believe forgiveness in God: flesh and blood has not revealed it to them. Nothing within them or around them has helped them toward it — everything lies in opposition to it. This is the work of God — that we believe (John 6:29). It is a great work, the greatest work God requires of us. It is great not only in itself — for the grace of believing is a great thing — but also in respect of its object: what we have to believe, namely, forgiveness itself. The great honor of Abraham's faith lay precisely in the fact that death and impossibility lay in its path (Romans 4:18-20). But what is a dead body and a barren womb compared to an accusing conscience, a condemning law, and the sense of God as a consuming fire — all of which, as we showed, oppose themselves to a soul called to believe forgiveness?

What now do most people who are confident in their profession of this faith have to say to this? Let them speak honestly and they must admit they never found the slightest difficulty in this matter — they never doubted it, never questioned it, and do not know why they should. It is something they have taken so entirely for granted that it never cost them an hour of labor, prayer, or meditation. Have they had secret debates and struggles in their hearts about it? No. Have they considered how the objections against it might be answered? Not at all. But is it really true that this persuasion simply came to you, you know not how? Are the corrupt natures of people and the gospel really so naturally compatible? Has the new covenant become so natural to flesh and blood? Has the greatest secret ever revealed from the Father's heart become so familiar and easy to the wisdom of the flesh? Has what was foolishness to the wise Greeks and a stumbling block to the sign-seeking Jews suddenly become wisdom and a plain path to the very same principles that were in them? The truth of the matter is this: such people have a general, useless, barren notion of pardon — furnished to them by Satan, presumption, tradition, hearsay, and the habitual hearing of the Word. But as for that gospel discovery of forgiveness we have been describing, they are utterly ignorant and unacquainted with it. To convince such poor souls of the folly of their presumption, I would simply ask them to go to some genuine believers they may know and ask whether they came by their faith and their sense of forgiveness so easily. 'Alas,' says one, 'for twenty years I have been pursuing God, and still I have not arrived at a settled, cheerful persuasion of it.' 'I know what it cost me,' says another, 'what trials, difficulties, and temptations I wrestled through before I obtained it — what I have at-

tained has been of unspeakable mercy.' 'And my daily prayer is that I may be kept in it by the surpassing greatness of God's power, for I continually wrestle with storms ready to drive me from my anchor.' A little of this kind of conversation ought to be enough to convince poor, blind, carnal souls of the folly and emptiness of their confidence.

Fourth, there are specific means through which the revelation and discovery of this mystery is made to people's souls. By these means they obtain it, or they do not obtain it. The mystery itself was a secret, hidden in the counsel of God from eternity, and there was no way it could be revealed except through the Son of God — and that is done through the word of the gospel. If you say you know it, let us ask how you came to know it and by what means it was declared to you. Was it through the truth of God's Word, through the promise of the gospel? Was it by hearing the Word preached, or by reading or meditating on it? Did it come through some timely word from Scripture spoken to you? Or did it gradually take hold of your heart and mind through the struggles and conflicts of your soul over sin, working from the general truth in which you had been instructed? Or by what other means have you come to that acquaintance with it of which you boast? You can say how you came by your wealth, your gold and silver. You know how you became educated, or how you learned the craft of your trade — who taught you, and how you came by it. There is nothing that concerns you about which you cannot answer those questions. Think it no great burden, then, to also answer this one: by what way or means did you come to the knowledge of forgiveness you claim? Was it by any of the means mentioned above, or some other? If you cannot give a clear answer — if you can only say that

you have heard it and believed it as long as you can remember, that those before you said so and those around you say so, that you never met anyone who questioned it nor heard of anyone except perhaps one or two despairing wretches — then it is fair to ask whether you have any real share in this matter at all. If uncertain rumors, reports, and general notions lie at the bottom of your persuasion, do not suppose that you have any communion with Christ in it.

Fifth, of all who profess to believe forgiveness, how few there are who actually know what it is. They believe, they say — but as the Samaritans worshiped, they do not know what. With some, bold presumption and crying 'peace, peace' passes for believing forgiveness.

With others, a general sense that God will not punish them — that though they are sinners they will get away with it — passes for the same thing.

Some think they will manage by their prayers and desires to keep God from sending them to hell. In one way or another, escaping the punishment of hell and avoiding judgment in the next world is what most people have fixed their minds on.

But is this the forgiveness revealed in the gospel — the forgiveness we have been treating? The source and origin of our forgiveness lies in the heart and gracious nature of God, declared by His name. Have you inquired seriously into this? Have you stood at the shore of that infinite ocean of goodness and love? Have your souls found support and relief from that contemplation? Have your hearts leaped within you at the thought of it? Or if you have never been moved in a particular way by this, have you at least bowed

your soul under the consideration of that sovereign act of God's will — the next source of forgiveness — that glorious exercise of free grace by which, when all might justly have perished (for all have sinned and fall short of His glory), God yet chose to have mercy on some? Have you surrendered yourself to this grace? Is any of this part of what you believe? Suppose you are a stranger to this as well — what communion with God have you had in the blood of Christ? We have shown how forgiveness relates to His blood: how it makes a way for mercy to be exercised consistently with the glory and honor of God's justice and His law; how pardon is procured and purchased through it; the mysterious reconciliation of love and law; and the new way it sets the conscience free to do its work. What do you have to say to these things? Have you seen pardon flowing from the heart of the Father through the blood of the Son? Have you looked upon it as the price of His life and the purchase of His blood? Or do you only have general thoughts that Christ died for sinners and that forgiveness relates to Him somehow — while remaining a stranger to the mystery of this great work? Suppose this too is the case. Let us go a little further and ask whether you know anything else of equal importance in this matter. Forgiveness, as we have shown, is declared, offered, and held out in the covenant of grace and the promises of the gospel. The rule for receiving it is that it be received with faith (Hebrews 4:2). It would be well if you had grown to this point — but those who are strangers to the things just mentioned are no less strangers to this. The conclusion is that you do not know what forgiveness is — what it consists of, where it comes from, how it is

procured, or by what means it is given out to sinners. It is pointless for such people to claim they believe what they are, in both understanding and practice, such utter strangers to.

Sixth, another line of inquiry concerns the condition the soul must be in before it is possible for it to believe forgiveness. If such a condition exists, and it can be shown that very many of the people we are addressing have never been brought into it, then it is clear that they neither do nor can believe forgiveness — however much they may deceive their own souls.

We showed earlier that the first disclosure of pardoning grace was made to Adam immediately after the fall. What was his state and condition at the time? How was he prepared to receive this great mystery at its first revealing? That pattern seems to be a significant guide for how things proceed. What is first in any kind sets the pattern for all that follows. Now what was Adam's condition when forgiveness was first revealed to him? The story makes it plain: convicted of sin and terrified of punishment, he lay trembling at the feet of God. In that state, forgiveness was revealed to him. The Psalmist frames it the same way in Psalm 130:3: 'If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?' He is full of thoughts about the desert of sin and of inevitable, eternal ruin if God were to deal with him according to what the law demands. It is in that state that the great comfort of forgiveness with God is brought to him by the Holy Spirit. We know the kind of response our Savior encountered with the Pharisees on this account. 'Are we blind also?' they said. 'No,' He replied, 'but because you say you see, your sin remains' (John 9:40-41). It is pointless to speak of forgiveness to people in your condition — you must necessarily remain in your sins. 'I did not come to call the righteous but sinners

to repentance' — those who not only are sinners (as you also are) but who know it, and know what a ruined state it leaves them in. The healthy have no need of a physician — the sick do. While you consider yourselves righteous and well, it is useless to speak to you of forgiveness; you cannot understand or receive it. It is therefore impossible for anyone to truly believe forgiveness in God unless he has been genuinely convicted of sin in himself. If the hard ground is not broken up, it is pointless to sow the seed of the gospel. There is neither life, power, nor sweetness in this truth until a door is opened for its entrance through conviction of sin.

On this ground too, let us continue our examination of those who commonly boast of their familiarity with this mystery. You believe there is forgiveness with God? Good — but have you been convicted of sin? Yes, you say — you know well enough that you are a sinner. Then answer once more, regarding the nature of this conviction of sin you claim. Does it not consist of these two elements: first, a general sense that you are a sinner, as all people are; and second, particular troubling pangs of conscience when, at some outburst of sin, conscience accuses, rebukes, and condemns? You would say yes — what more could be required? But this is not the conviction we are asking about. That is a work of the Spirit through the Word. What you are describing is a merely natural work — one you can no more be without than you can cease being human. It will do nothing to help you receive forgiveness. But perhaps you will say you have gone further than that and these things have had a deeper effect in you. Let us then test whether your process has been according to God's intention — and so whether this insurmountable barrier has been removed from your path. For though not every convicted person believes forgiveness, no one

who is not convicted does. Have you then been made genuinely sensible of your natural condition — what it means to be alienated from the life of God and liable to His wrath? Have you been convicted of the universal hostility in your heart toward the mind of God, and of what it means to be at enmity with God? Has the staggering number of the sins of your life been set in order before you by the law? Have you considered what it means for sinners — sinners such as you are — to have to deal with a righteous and holy God? Have you considered what it means for sinners — sinners such as you are — to have to deal with a righteous and holy God? If you answer honestly, many of you must say that you have never been put through this. You have heard of these things many times, but you cannot say you have gone through this work or had any experience of it. Then you are a stranger to forgiveness because you are a stranger to sin. But suppose you say you have had such thoughts, and are persuaded that you have been thoroughly convicted of sin — I will ask one more question. What effects has your conviction produced in your heart and life? Have you been filled with anguish and spiritual distress? Have you had fears, dread, or terror to wrestle with? You may say no — and I will not press that inquiry. But what I will press is this: has it filled you with self-loathing and disgust, with self-condemnation and humility? If conviction does anything at all, it will do that. If you fall short here, it is fair to fear that all your other claims are worthless. Where there is no true work of conviction, there is no faith in forgiveness — whatever is claimed. And how many empty boasters this test will expose is all too evident.

Seventh, we have yet a stronger evidence than all these. People live in sin — and this shows they do not believe the forgiveness of sin. Faith in general purifies the heart (Acts 15:9). Our souls are purified through obedience to the truth (1 Peter 1:22), and life is made fruitful by faith (James 2:22) — faith works through works and is made complete through them. And the doctrine of forgiveness has a special influence on all holiness (Titus 2:11-12): the grace of God that brings salvation teaches us to deny all ungodliness and worldly desires, and to live sensibly, righteously, and in a godly manner in this present age. That is the grace we are speaking of. No one, therefore, can believe the forgiveness of sin without a corresponding hatred and forsaking of it. The grounds of this could be laid out more fully — the way faith in forgiveness works to produce a forsaking of sin — if needed. But all who acknowledge the gospel must own this principle: genuine belief in the pardon of sin prevails on people not to go on living in sin.

But what of the great majority of those who claim to receive this truth? Are their hearts purified by it? Are their consciences cleansed? Are their lives changed? Do they deny all ungodliness and worldly desires? Does their belief in forgiveness teach them to do so? Have they found it effective for these purposes? Where then does all the clamor and evidence to the contrary among them come from?

Some of you are drunkards, some are people who take God's name lightly, some are sexually immoral, some are liars, some are worldly, some are haters of everything to do with Christ and His concerns on earth — proud, greedy, boastful, self-seeking, envious, hot-tempered, gossipers, malicious talkers, slanderers, and the like. Are we to think that people like these believe the forgiveness

of sin? God forbid. Again, some of you are spiritually dark, ignorant, and blind — utterly unfamiliar with the mystery of the gospel — and you make no effort at all to inquire into it. You either hear it not at all, or hear it carelessly, lazily, habitually, to no effect. Let no such people deceive their own souls: to live in sin and yet believe the forgiveness of sin is utterly impossible. Christ will not be a servant of sin or give His gospel to be a doctrine of license for your sakes. You will not be forgiven so that you may be free to commit more evil. God forbid.

If anyone says, 'I thank God I am not such a person as those mentioned — I am no drunkard, no blasphemer, no immoral person — so this does not concern me; my life and duties tell a different story,' then consider this further.

The Pharisees were everything you say of yourself — and yet they were the greatest despisers of forgiveness who ever lived, because they hated the light on account of their evil deeds. As for the duties you mention — what is the root and source of them? Are they driven by this faith in forgiveness you boast of, or not? Is it not fair to fear they are nothing of the sort? You do not perform them because you love the gospel but because you fear the law. If the truth were known, I suspect it would turn out that all you gain from your belief in pardon is an encouragement to sin. Such goodness as you have springs from a different root. It may also be that you use a belief in forgiveness to shield yourself from the blows of conscience or from guilt over particular sins — which is as bad as the other. It is as harmful to be encouraged toward sin by it as to be shielded by it from humiliation for sin. No one under heaven is

further from genuine belief in grace and pardon than such people are. All their righteousness comes from the law, and a great deal of their sin comes from the gospel.

Eighth, those who truly believe forgiveness do so for the ends and purposes for which God has revealed it. This builds on and extends the previous consideration. If God reveals something for one purpose and people use it for an entirely different one, they are not receiving God's Word or genuinely believing what is revealed — they are stealing the word and deceiving their own souls.

Let us then examine the ends and purposes for which this forgiveness was first revealed by God — the same ends for which it continues to be declared in the gospel. We have already shown who it was to whom this revelation was first made and what condition he was in when it came. He was a lost, wretched creature with no hope and no help, with no knowledge of how he could ever find acceptance with God. God revealed forgiveness to him in Christ as his everything. God's intention in it was that a sinner's all should be of grace (Romans 11:6) — for if anything is added to grace for the same purpose, grace is no longer grace. Furthermore, God intended forgiveness as a new foundation for obedience, love, and thankfulness — that people would love because they were forgiven and be holy because they were pardoned. As I showed earlier, that forgiveness might be the righteousness of sinners and the source of new obedience in them, all to the praise of grace — these were God's ends in revealing it.

Our question then is whether people receive this revelation for these ends and use it for these purposes and these only. I could demonstrate the contrary by cataloging all the common abuses of the doctrine of grace mentioned in Scripture — they are familiar

enough in the world. But it is not necessary. Instead of believing, most people seem to make a studied insult of the gospel. They either proclaim it to be an unholy and polluted way by turning its grace into license for evil — or they treat it as a weak and inadequate way by attempting to blend it with their own righteousness. Both of these are an abomination to the Lord.

From these and other considerations of similar weight that could be added, it is evident that our labor is not wasted, nor is the exhortation that follows pointless. It appears that, despite all the noise and pretense to the contrary in the world, there are very few who genuinely receive this foundational truth of the gospel — that there is forgiveness with God. Poor souls toy with their own self-deceptions and perish in their own delusions.

An exhortation to believe the forgiveness that is with God — its reasons and its necessity.

We now come to the direct application of this great truth. Having laid our foundation in the unfailing Word, and having given — we hope — sufficient evidence for its truth, our final task is to apply it to the good of people's souls, which has been our aim all along. All sinners without exception are the persons addressed by this truth. No category of sinners is excluded from it. And they may all be placed under two headings.

First, those who have never yet sincerely embraced the promise of grace, and who have never yet received forgiveness from God through faith. These are the people we have been trying to rescue from their delusions — to expose the false presumptions by which

they tend to ruin their own souls. These are the people we now want to guide into safe and peaceful paths where they may find assured rest and peace.

Second, there are those who have received forgiveness but who, being entangled again by sin, or clouded by darkness and temptation, or weakened by unbelief, do not know how to apply it to their peace and comfort. This is the condition of the soul depicted in Psalm 130 — and it is this condition that we will address specifically and in detail in its proper place.

Our exhortation is therefore to both groups: to the first, that they would receive forgiveness so that they might have life; to the latter, that they would make use of it so that they might have peace. To the first — that they would not overlook, disregard, or neglect so great a salvation as is being offered to them. To the latter — that they would stir up the grace of God within them to receive with faith the grace of God declared to them.

I will begin with the first group — those who are still complete strangers to the covenant of grace, who have never yet believed this forgiveness on saving grounds, who have never once tasted gospel pardon. Poor sinners — this word is for you.

Perhaps you have heard or read the same kind of message before — perhaps often, perhaps a hundred times. It is your concern to hear it again. God would have it so. The testimony of Jesus Christ is to be declared in this way. We must proclaim this counsel of God so that we are free from the blood of all people (Acts 20:26-27). And not once or twice — in preaching the Word, we must be ready in season and out of season, correcting, rebuking, and encouraging with all patience and teaching (2 Timothy 4:2). As for

you — woe to you when God stops speaking to you; when He refuses to call you any longer. This is God's departure from any person or people: when He will no longer deal with them about forgiveness. As He says, 'Woe to them when I depart from them' (Hosea 9:12). Therefore, may God give to such people eyes that see and ears that hear, so that the word of grace would no longer be spoken to them in vain. In our exhortation to such persons, we will proceed step by step, as the nature of the matter requires. Consider, then, the following.

First, despite all your sins — all the evil your own heart knows you are guilty of, and that hidden store of evil treasure within you that you cannot even fully see — despite the charge that lies against you from your own conscience, despite the dreadful sentence and curse of the law you are subject to, despite every just ground you have to think that God is your enemy and will be so forever — there are terms of peace and reconciliation provided and offered between God and your soul. This is the first thing declared by the words we have been examining. Whatever else they tell us, they positively assert this: there is a way for sinners to be accepted by God. There is forgiveness with Him, that He may be feared. We trust that we have not confirmed this by so many testimonies and evidences in vain. Now, that you may see how great a privilege this is and how deeply your wellbeing depends on it, consider the following.

First, this belongs to you in a special way — it is your particular advantage.

It is not so with the angels who sinned. No terms of peace or reconciliation were ever offered to them, and never will be to eternity. No way of escape was provided for them. Having sinned once

— as you have done a thousand times — God did not spare them but cast them down to hell and delivered them to chains of darkness, to be kept for judgment (2 Peter 2:4).

It is not so with those who have died in their sins, even a moment ago. How many souls who departed from this world perhaps an hour since would rejoice beyond measure for a share in this privilege — to hear terms of peace between God and themselves proposed one more time. But their time is past; their house is left to them desolate. As the tree falls, so it must lie. It is appointed for all people to die once, and after that comes judgment (Hebrews 9:27). After death there are no terms of peace — nothing but judgment. The living — only the living — are able to benefit from this privilege.

It is not so with those to whom the gospel has not been preached. God allows them to walk in their own ways and does not call them to repentance in this manner. The terms of reconciliation that some imagine are offered through the shining of the sun and the falling of rain have never brought any soul to peace with God. Life and immortality are brought to light only through the gospel. This is your privilege — you who are still alive and still have the Word sounding in your ears.

It is not so with those who have sinned against the Holy Spirit, even if they are still alive and living where the Word of forgiveness is preached. God offers no terms of reconciliation to them. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, says Christ, will not be forgiven (Matthew 12:31). There is no forgiveness for such sinners. If we knew who they were, we should not even pray for them (1 John 5:16) — their sin is unto death. How many may be in this condition, God alone knows.

But this word is to you — these terms of peace are being set before you. This is what you must above all attend to. Woe to you if it is found at the last day that you neglected it. Therefore, consider the following.

Second, consider by whom these terms are offered to you and by whom they were procured for you. By whom are they offered? Who could undertake to resolve the dispute between God and sinners? No creature, certainly, is fit or worthy to step into this matter on its own account. For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been His counselor? Therefore it is God Himself who offers these terms — and not only offers them, but invites, urges, and pleads with you to accept them. The whole of Scripture testifies to this. It is fully expressed in 2 Corinthians 5:18-20. He has provided them, He has set them before you, and He makes use of ministers only as His agents, acting in His name. Forgive us if we are a little earnest with you in this matter. Alas — everything we can muster through zeal for His glory or compassion for your souls falls infinitely short of His own pressing urgency in this. See Isaiah 55:1-4. What infinite condescension! What blessed grace! Who is it that addresses you this way? The One against whom you have sinned — of whom you are rightly afraid. The One whose laws you have broken and whose name you have dishonored. The One who has no need of you, your love, your friendship, or your salvation. It is He who offers you these terms of reconciliation and peace. Consider the apostle's word in response to this in Hebrews 12:25: 'See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking.' It is God speaking to you in this matter — speaking from heaven. In doing so, He sets aside every advantage He has against you for your destruction. Woe to your souls — forever — if you should refuse Him.

Third, by whom were these terms procured for you, and by what means? Do not think this was brought about by chance or by some ordinary undertaking. Remember that the offer made to you this very day cost nothing less than the blood of the Son of God. It is the fruit of the suffering of His soul. For this He prayed, He wept, He suffered, He died. Will it now be neglected or despised by you? Will you still count the blood of the covenant as a common thing? Will you exclude yourself from every benefit of the price at which these terms were purchased — and leave your soul with nothing but the guilt of despising the price by which it could have been bought?

Fourth, consider that you are sinners — great sinners, condemned sinners. Some of you may be worse than countless fellow sinners who are already in hell. God could long since have cast you off forever from all expectation of mercy and caused all your hopes to perish. Or He might have left you alive and yet refused to deal with you any longer. He could have caused your sun to go down at noon and given you darkness instead of light. He could have spared your life a little longer and yet sworn in His wrath that you would never enter His rest. As things now stand, it is otherwise. How long this will continue, neither you nor I know at all. God alone knows what time is yours and how long it will last. We are to speak while it is still called today. And this is what I have to offer you for the present: God declares that there is forgiveness with Him — that your condition is not desperate or hopeless. There are still terms of peace being offered to you. It strikes me as extraordinary that poor sinners would not at least stir themselves to inquire about them. When a poor man in ancient times had sold himself and his children into service and given away his ancestral land be-

cause of poverty — with what eagerness do you think he heard the sound of the trumpet announcing the Year of Jubilee, when he and all his household were to go free and return to their inheritance? And will poor servants of sin — slaves to Satan — who have forfeited every inheritance in this world and the next, not attend to any proclamation of the year of rest, the acceptable year of the Lord? This is what is offered in the terms of peace with God in this matter. Do not put it off. This concerns you. Your soul's greatest interests are at stake in it. And it is a great matter — for consider the following.

Fifth, when the angels came to announce the birth of our Lord Jesus, they said, 'We bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people' (Luke 2:10). What was this joyful news? What was the report about? Simply this: 'For today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord' (verse 11). That is all — a Savior is born; a way of escape has been provided. Yet they declared this to be a matter of great joy — and so it was. To every burdened and convicted sinner, it is a matter of unspeakable joy and gladness. A Savior is born! This gives life to a sinner and opens a door of hope in the valley of trouble. It is the first rescue of a soul in distress over sin. In substance, this was all that the saints of many ages had to live on — and not in the enjoyment of it, but only in the expectation. They lived on the word that the seed of the woman would crush the serpent's head — that is, a way of deliverance has been provided for sinners. This they inquired into with all diligence (1 Peter 1:10-12) and turned it to their eternal advantage. As Jacob's spirit revived when he saw the wagons his son Joseph had sent to bring him to himself — so did theirs revive at their dim discovery of a way of forgiveness. They looked

upon the promise of it as what God had sent to bring them to Himself, and they saw the coming day of Christ in it and rejoiced. How much more do sinners now have reason to rejoice, when the substance of that promise has appeared and the news of His coming has been proclaimed. This is therefore a great matter: that terms of peace and reconciliation have been offered, and that it has been made known that there is forgiveness with God. On these grounds, then, we press forward with the exhortation we have before us.

Suppose someone were justly condemned to a cruel and shameful death and lay trembling in expectation of its execution, and a man sent for that purpose came to tell him that terms had been proposed on which his life might be spared — even if the messenger left before he heard the particulars. Would that not be reviving to him? Would he not cry out: 'Please find out what the terms are, for there is nothing so hard that I would not undergo it to escape this miserable end'? Would it not transform the whole spirit of such a man and, as it were, put new life into him? But suppose instead he were sullen, stubborn, and obstinate — took no notice of the messenger or said, 'Let the judge keep his terms to himself; I want nothing to do with them' — without even asking what they were. Would not such a person deserve to perish? Has he not brought double destruction upon himself: first by deserving death through his crimes, and then by refusing the honest and good means of rescue offered to him? I acknowledge that it often happens that men begin to inquire after these terms of peace, and when they are revealed, they dislike them — and like the rich young man in the gospel, they go away sorrowful. The wretched wickedness and misery of that condition — which befalls many

convicted persons — will be addressed afterward. For now I speak to those who have never yet sincerely attended to these terms or seriously inquired after them. Think of your condition as you please — or choose not to think of it at all, and pass your time in complete disregard of your present and future state. Yet this is actually your situation in regard to your eternal interests: you lie under the sentence of a bitter, shameful, and everlasting death. You have lain under that sentence in the midst of all your pleasures ever since you came into this world. And you are in the hands of One who can in the blink of an eye destroy both body and soul in hell fire. Into this state of affairs, people are sent on purpose to let you know that there are terms of peace — that there is still a way of escape for you. And so that you cannot avoid the conclusion aimed at, they tell you that the God who cannot lie has commanded them to say so. If you question the truth of what they say, they are ready to produce their warrant under God's own hand and seal. There is no room here for evasion or excuse. Surely, if you have any concern for your eternal state, if there is any drop of tender feeling in you toward your own soul, if any rational thought dwells in your mind — if it has not all been erased and obliterated by the power of lust and love of sin — you cannot but feel yourself to be unspeakably concerned in this proposal. But if instead you surrender yourself to the power of unbelief, the will of Satan, love for your lusts, and this present world — so as to take no notice of this message from God, never seriously inquiring into the nature and significance of the terms offered — can you escape? Will you be delivered? Will your end be peace? The Lord knows it will be otherwise — and that forever.

So the apostle assures us in 2 Corinthians 4:3-4: 'And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.' If you do not receive this word — if it is hidden from you — it is by the power and working of Satan on your mind. And what will the end be? You must and will perish, and that forever.

Remember our Savior's parable in Luke 14:31-32: 'What king, when he sets out to meet another king in battle, will not first sit down and consider whether he is strong enough with ten thousand men to encounter the one coming against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace.' What He teaches in this parable is the necessity that lies on us of making peace with God — whom we have provoked and justly made our enemy — and our complete inability to resist or withstand Him when He comes forth in judgment and vengeance against us. There is a key difference between the parable and the reality, as there always is in illustrations. Among people at war, it is not the role of the stronger party — the one assured of victory — to send to the weaker, who is already in his power, to propose terms of peace. Here it is the opposite: God, who is infinitely powerful, justly provoked, and able to destroy poor sinners in a moment, when He is not far off but at the very door, sends of His own accord with conditions of peace. And will He be refused by you? Will you still neglect His offer? How great then will your destruction be?

Hear then once more, poor sin-hardened souls, you stubborn of heart who are far from righteousness. Is it nothing to you that the great and holy God — whom you have provoked all your days and still continue to provoke, who has no need of you or your salvation, who can whenever He pleases glorify Himself eternally in your destruction — has of His own accord sent to tell you that He is willing to be at peace with you on the terms He has prepared? The enmity began on your part. The danger is on your part alone. He might justly have expected that the first message for peace would come from your side. Yet He begins with you. And will He be rejected? The prophet expresses this well in Isaiah 30:15: 'Thus says the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, "In repentance and rest you will be saved, in quietness and trust is your strength." But you were not willing.' The love and condescension on God's part in those words, and the folly and ingratitude on our part that they describe, are beyond expression. They are fearful words: 'But you were not willing.' Remember this against another day. As our Savior said in the same vein to the Jews: 'You are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life.' Whatever else is claimed, it is willfulness and stubbornness that lie at the root of this refusal.

Therefore — whether you may profit by it or whether the Lord's way may be prepared to glorify Himself upon you — I leave this word before all who hear or read it, as the testimony God requires to be given to His grace. Terms of peace with God have been provided for you and are being set before you. It is still called today — do not harden your hearts, as did those of old who could not enter God's rest because of unbelief (Hebrews 3:19). Some of you may be old in sin and unacquainted with God. Some may have been great sinners, notorious sinners. Some may have reason to feel that you

are near the grave — and so near to hell. Some may have consciences that are unsettled and wounded. Some may be in outward troubles and confusion that have stirred you to look at your condition. And some may be in the madness of your natural strength and lusts — your health is full, your ambitions are alive, and your hearts are full of sin, pride, and contempt for the ways of God. No matter — this word is to you all. I will only remind you that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. You hear the voice or read the words of a poor mortal — but the message is the message, and the word is the word of the One who shakes heaven and earth. Consider carefully, then, what you must do and what answer you will give to the One who will not be mocked.

But you may say: 'What great matter is this, and why is it pressed with such earnestness? We have heard the same words a hundred times over. Just last Lord's Day, this or that preacher spoke to the same effect. Why must it be insisted on again now with such urgency?'

If it is indeed so — that you have been dealt with this frequently and still remain in a state of irreconciliation — my heart aches for you at the thought of your wretched and almost hopeless condition. If someone who is often corrected and yet stiffens his neck will perish suddenly and without remedy (Proverbs 29:1), how much more will that be true of the person who is often invited to peace with God, yet hardens his heart and refuses to treat with Him? I think I hear His voice concerning you: 'Those enemies of mine shall not taste of the supper I have prepared.' If this word is something common and worthless to you — if you set no value on it — then take your way in sin; stumble, fall, and perish. It is not so slight a matter to poor convicted sinners who tremble at the Word

of God. They will prize it and make use of it. We will therefore follow the counsel of Proverbs 31:6-7: 'Give strong drink to him who is perishing, and wine to him whose life is bitter.' We will offer this new wine of the gospel to poor, heavy-hearted, conscience-distressed sinners — sinners who are ready to perish. To them it will be sweet; they will drink of it and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more. It will take away all their sorrow and sadness — while you are drunk with the fruit of your lusts, and retch, and lie down, and rise no more.

But if any of you begin to say in your hearts that you would gladly deal with God — 'Oh, that the day had come when we might approach Him! Let Him speak whatever He wishes and propose whatever terms He wishes — we are ready to hear' — then consider the following.

Second, the terms that have been provided for you and set before you are fair, holy, righteous — yes, and pleasant and easy. This being another main heading in the work before us, before I go further in explaining and confirming it, I will draw one or two observations from what has already been said.

First, see here the foundation on which we preach the gospel. There are many disputes about whether Christ died for every individual person in the world or only for the elect — some drawn from every kind of people. If we say the latter, some then tell us we cannot indiscriminately invite all people to believe. But why not? We do not invite people as all people — no person as simply one of all people — but all people as sinners. And we know that Christ died for sinners. But is the very first thing we are to set before a sinner under the law — that Christ died for him in particular? Is that the beginning of our message to him? Would that not be a ready way

to lead him to conclude: 'Let me then continue in sin, that grace may increase'? No. In the natural order of things, our first work is what we have been engaged in here: declaring the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ — the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord.' There is a way of reconciliation provided. God is in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself. There is a way of acceptance; there is forgiveness with Him to be obtained. At this very threshold of the Lord's house, the greater part of those to whom the gospel is preached stumble and perish, never looking inside to see the treasures that are there — never entering a state where they have any ground to inquire whether Christ died for them in particular. They do not believe this report and take no serious notice of it. This was the ministry of John the Baptist, and those who did not receive it rejected God's counsel concerning their salvation (Luke 7:30) and perished in their sins. This is the sum of the blessed invitation wisdom gives in Proverbs 9:1-5. And here people stumble, fall, and perish (Proverbs 1:29-30).

Second, you who have found grace and favor to accept these terms and thereby to obtain peace with God — learn to live in holy wonder at His condescension and love in this. That He would provide such terms. That He would reveal them to you. That He would enable you to receive them. Unspeakable love and grace lies in all of it. Many have never had these terms revealed to them; few find the grace to accept them. And from whom is it that you have received this particular mercy?

Do you properly consider the nature of this matter? Scripture presents it as an object of eternal wonder: 'God so loved the world'; 'In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us first.' Live in this wonder, and do everything in your various relation-

ships to persuade your friends, family, and acquaintances to attend to this great treaty of peace with God — whose terms we will now examine, as they were stated in general before.

Second, the terms provided and offered to you are fair, holy, righteous — yes, and pleasant and easy (Hosea 2:18-19). They are not such as a guilty condemned sinner might justly expect, but such as an infinitely good and gracious God would propose — not suited to human wisdom, but full of the wisdom of God (2 Corinthians 2:6-7). The poor convicted wretch, when he thinks about dealing with God, turns over in his mind what terms he is likely to meet (Micah 6:6-7), and settles on the most dreadful, difficult, and impossible he can imagine. 'If anything can be done with this great and most high God,' he says, 'it must require rivers of oil, thousands and ten thousands of offerings, even my firstborn child — whatever is most terrible to nature, whatever is most impossible for me to perform, that is surely what He demands.' But the matter is entirely otherwise. The terms are of a completely different character. It is a way of pure mercy, a way of free forgiveness. The apostle lays it out in Romans 3:23-25: a way of propitiation, of pardon, of forgiveness in the blood of Christ. The terms are the acceptance of the forgiveness we have been describing. Who would not think the whole world would rush in to receive these terms and eagerly accept them? But for the most part it proves to be the opposite. Of all ways, people like this one least. 'It would have been something,' said Naaman, 'if the prophet had come out and done this or that — but this: "Go, wash, and be clean" — I do not like it; I am being mocked.' People think to themselves that if some great thing had been required of them for salvation, they would immediately set themselves to it — but to come to God

through Christ and be freely forgiven without more effort, that they do not like. Some rigorous penance, some compensatory obedience, some satisfactory mortification or purgatory — that would seem a more fitting way. But this of pure pardon through the cross — it is foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:18, 20). 'I would rather have it by works of the law,' says the Jew (Romans 9:32; 10:3). 'This way of grace and forgiveness — I do not like it.' Others say the same. Others practice the same every day. Either this way is entirely rejected, or it is 'improved' by some additions — which in God's sight amounts to the same as rejecting it.

Here multitudes of souls deceive themselves and perish. I do not know which is harder: to persuade an unconvicted person to think seriously about any terms at all, or to persuade a convicted person to accept these. Whatever people say and whatever they claim, in practice they do not like this way of forgiveness. I will therefore offer some further considerations to help forward your acceptance of the terms proposed.

First, this is the way — these are the terms — of God's own choosing. He devised this way and established it Himself. He did so when all was lost and ruined. He did it not at our desire, request, or suggestion, but entirely of His own accord. Why then should we argue with Him about it? If God wills that we be saved through pure mercy and forgiveness — if His wisdom and sovereignty are expressed in it — shall we oppose Him and say we do not like it? Yet this is the language of unbelief (Romans 10:3-4). Many poor souls have argued with God over it, until at last, as it were overpowered by the Spirit, they have said, 'If it must be so, and God will save us by mercy and grace, then so be it — we sur-

render to His will.' And yet throughout all their debate, they imagined it was nothing but their own unworthiness that kept them from embracing the promise of the gospel.

It was by a similar tactic that Satan deceived our first parents of their standing in the covenant of works. 'The terms, as you understand them,' he said, 'are unreasonable. Did God really say you could eat from every tree in the garden, but not from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, or you will die? You will not surely die — for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened.' There is no proportion, he implied, between the disobedience and the penalty; the outcome cannot be what is feared. And by these means he ruined them. He proceeds the same way to deprive souls of their share in the covenant of grace to which they are invited. 'The terms are unreasonable — how can anyone believe them? There is no proportion between the requirement and the promise. To have pardon, forgiveness, life, and blessed eternity for believing — who can rest in that?' Here lies a conspiracy between Satan and unbelief against the wisdom, goodness, love, grace, and sovereignty of God. The poison of this deception lies in the claim that God's righteousness and mercy are not as infinite as they actually are. The apostle, to remove this foolish notion, directs us to the pleasure of God in 1 Corinthians 1:27: it pleased God, through the foolishness of preaching — that is, through the gospel, which they counted foolishness — to save those who believe. He allowed people to try other ways, and when those ways had been shown to be utterly insufficient for the ends people sought, it pleased Him to reveal His way. And what are we, to argue with Him about it? God asserts this very rejection of personal righteousness and choice of the way of grace and forgiveness in Jeremiah 31:31-34: 'Behold,

days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers — but this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put My law within them, and I will be their God... and I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.' Let this way stand, then, and the way of human wisdom and self-righteousness perish forever.

Second, this is the way that, above all others, gives glory directly and immediately to God. God has ordered and arranged all things in this way of forgiveness so that no flesh may boast in His presence, but that he who boasts may boast in the Lord (1 Corinthians 1:29, 31). 'Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what principle? Not by works, but by faith' (Romans 3:27). It could easily be shown that God has so designed the saving of sinners through forgiveness according to the principle of faith that it is utterly impossible for any soul to have the least ground for boasting in itself — either in an absolute sense, or in comparison with those who perish. 'If Abraham,' says the apostle, 'was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God' (Romans 4:2). The obedience of works would have been so infinitely disproportionate to the reward — which is God Himself — that there would have been no boasting before God, for His goodness and grace would still have had to be acknowledged. But in comparison with others who did not render the required obedience, Abraham would have had grounds for boasting. Now even this is eliminated by the way of forgiveness, and no pretense remains for anyone to claim the slightest share of its glory except God alone. In this lies the excellence of faith: that it gives glory to God (Romans 4:20) —

the denial of which, under various pretenses, is the product of proud unbelief. And this is what God will bring everyone to — or they will perish: that shame is ours, and the whole glory of our salvation is His alone. He expresses this design in Isaiah 45:22-25. In verse 22 He offers Himself as the only relief for sinners: 'Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth.' But what if people take some other course, look to themselves, and so decline this way of pure mercy and grace? He says in verse 23: 'I have sworn by Myself, the word has gone forth from My mouth in righteousness and will not turn back, that to Me every knee will bow, every tongue will swear allegiance.' Look to that. He has sworn that you will either bow willingly or answer for your disobedience at the day of judgment — to which Paul applies those words in Romans 14:11. What do the saints do in response? Verses 24-25: 'They will say of Me, "Only in the Lord are righteousness and strength." In the Lord all the offspring of Israel will be justified and will glory.' They bring their hearts to receive all righteousness from Him and to give all glory to Him.

God first placed man in a blessed state, in such dependence on Himself that man might have worked out his eternal happiness while bringing great glory to God in doing so. 'Man, being in this dignity, did not remain' (as the Psalmist says). God now settled on another way — as I have noted — in which all the glory would be His own, as the apostle sets out at length in Romans 3:23-26. Neither the way from which Adam fell, nor the way in which some of the angels continued — which were essentially the same — can compare with this way of forgiveness in terms of the glory it brings to God. I dislike speculation about the things of God. Yet, on the basis of the interposition of the blood of Christ, I think I may say

boldly that more glory comes to God from saving one sinner by this way of forgiveness than from giving the reward of blessedness to all the angels in heaven. This seems evident from the solemn scene in Revelation 5:9-13, where the whole creation ascribes glory to God — and all of it centers on the bringing forth of forgiveness through the blood of the Lamb.

I dwell on this the more because it stands so directly against the wretched principle of unbelief that reigns in the hearts of most people and often troubles even the best. That a poor, ungodly sinner going to God loaded with the guilt of all his sins, to receive forgiveness at His hand, brings more glory to God than the obedience of an angel — people are not readily inclined to think this, nor can they be prepared for it except by this truth itself. The essential nature of the unbelief that works in convicted sinners lies in a refusal to give to God the whole glory of salvation. There are many harmful controversies in religion debated in the world with great noise and clamor — but this is the greatest and most destructive of all, and it is mostly transacted silently within people's souls, though under various forms and pretenses. It has also broken out in writings and debates — that is, whether God or man shall have the glory of salvation, or whether it is to be attributed entirely to God, or whether man may on some basis claim a share. Now if any of you is in this condition — that you would rather perish than that God should have His glory — what can be said but: go, condemned soul, perish forever, without the least compassion from God or from any who love Him, angels or people.

If you say for your part you are content with this arrangement — let God have the glory, as long as you are forgiven and saved — there is still just cause to suspect this may be a self-serving con-

tempt of God. It is a great thing to truly give glory to God by believing. Such casual, offhand responses seem to have no connection with it. Take care that instead of believing, you are not found to be among those who mock — and so find your chains made stronger.

But a poor convicted sinner may find encouragement here. You would willingly come to acceptance with God and so attain salvation. Your soul longs for it. Would you willingly take the course that would bring the most glory to God? Surely it would be right and entirely fitting to do so. What if someone came to tell you from the Lord of a way by which you — poor, sinful, self-condemned creature — could bring as much glory to God as any angel in heaven is capable of? 'Oh, if I might bring even the least glory to God, I would rejoice in it!' Behold then the way He Himself has chosen for the exaltation of His glory: that you come to Him on the sole basis of grace in the blood of Christ, for pardon and forgiveness. And may the Lord strengthen you to give yourself up to it.

Third, consider that if this way of salvation is refused, there is no other way for you. We are not presenting this way of forgiveness as the best and most pleasant option — but as the only way. There is no other name given except that of Christ; no other way but this of forgiveness. Here is your choice: take this path, or perish forever. It is a shame, indeed, that our fallen nature is such that this argument must even be made — that we will neither submit to God's sovereignty nor delight in His glory. But since it must be made, let it be. I intend neither to flatter people nor to frighten them, but to tell them the truth as it is. If you continue in your present state and condition — if you rest on what you do or hope to do, if you comfort yourself with general hopes of mercy mixed with your own efforts and obedience, if you do not come to a full gospel

commitment to this way of God, if you do not make it your everything and give God glory in it — you will and must perish, and that forever. There is no more sacrifice remaining for your sins, no other way of escape for your soul. You have not only the excellence of this way to draw you, but its absolute, unavoidable necessity to compel you. And now let me add: I am glad this word has been spoken and written to you. You and I will one day give an account for this discourse. What has already been spoken, if neglected, will stand as a weighty testimony against you. You will not fare as those who never heard the joyful sound. All these words that are consistent with the gospel — if they are not turned to grace in your hearts here, they will become torment to your souls hereafter. Do not choose any other way — it will be futile and will not profit you. And take care lest you suppose you are embracing this way when in truth you are not, about which I have already given a warning.

Fourth, this way is free and open to sinners. A man fleeing to the city of refuge might well have many troubled thoughts — whether he would find its gates open when he arrived, or whether the avenger of blood might overtake and kill him while he was still calling for entry. And even with open gates, certain crimes excluded men from refuge (Numbers 35:24). It is not so here. See Acts 13:38-39.

This is the voice of God the Father: 'Come to the wedding feast, for everything is prepared' — no fear of being turned away (Matthew 22:4). That is why the preachers of the gospel are said to beseech people in His name to be reconciled (2 Corinthians 5:18-20).

And it is the voice of the Son: 'Whoever comes to Me I will certainly not cast out' (John 6:37). Whoever he may be who comes will certainly be received. The same is His call and invitation in other places, as in Matthew 11:28 and John 7:37.

And this is the voice of the Spirit and of the church and of all believers in Revelation 22:17: 'The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost.' All of this centers on one thing: that sinners may come freely to the grace of the gospel.

And it is the well-known voice of the gospel itself — as in Isaiah 55:1-3 and Proverbs 9:1-5. And it is the voice of all the saints in heaven and earth who have been made partakers of forgiveness — they all testify that they received it freely.

Some indeed try to abuse this united testimony of God and people. What is said about the freedom of God's grace they try to apply to the capacity of the human will. But the riches and freedom of God's mercy do not in the least interfere with the efficacy of His grace. Though He proclaims pardon in the blood of Christ without restriction — according to its fullness and excellence — He gives out His quickening grace to enable people to receive it as He pleases, for He has mercy on whom He will have mercy. But this belongs to the matter itself. The way is open and prepared. It is not because people cannot enter but because they will not, that they do not enter. As our Savior Christ says to the Pharisees: 'You do not hear God's word because you are not of God' (John 8:47; John 6:44). And: 'You are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life' (John 5:40). Even in the most casual neglect of the gospel, there is a deliberate act of the will refusing Christ and the grace He

offers. And this is done by people under gospel preaching every day. Nothing at the last day will more directly advance the glory of God — in demonstrating the inexcusableness of those who did not obey the gospel — than this: that terms of peace in the blessed way of forgiveness were freely offered to them. Some who hear or read this word may have lived long under the ministry of the gospel and yet perhaps never once seriously pondered this way of coming to God through forgiveness in the blood of Christ — thinking that going to heaven is a matter of course that people need not trouble themselves much about. Do they know what they have been doing? Throughout all their days they have been positively refusing the salvation freely offered to them in Jesus Christ. 'Not us,' they will say, 'we never had any such thought and would not refuse it for anything in the world.' But know this: in so far as you have not effectively received Him, you have refused Him. And whether your day and season is already past, the Lord alone knows.

Fifth, this way is safe. No soul has ever been lost in it. There is no one in heaven who will not say it is a safe way. There is no one in hell who can say otherwise. It is safe for all who venture on it — all who truly enter it. In the old way, we were responsible for maintaining ourselves in the way. This way maintains itself and us. This will become evident in the considerations that follow.

First, this is the way provided by the wisdom, care, and love of God in Christ, substituted in place of another that was removed precisely because it was not safe and could not bring us to God (Hebrews 8:7-8): 'For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second; but finding fault with them, He says...'

First, He tells us that the first covenant was not faultless — for if it had been, there would have been no need for a second. The commandment itself — the substance of that covenant — the same apostle declares to be holy, just, and good (Romans 7:12). But it was defective with respect to all the purposes of a covenant, given our condition as sinners: it could not bring us to God. As Romans 8:3 informs us, it was weakened through the flesh — that is, through the entrance of sin — and so became useless for saving souls. Granted — through our sin and failure, this good and holy law, this covenant, became unprofitable to us. But what did that obligate God to do? Was He bound to abandon His own institution and appointment simply because through our own fault it had ceased to benefit us? Not at all. He could righteously have bound all of us to the terms of that covenant — to stand or fall by them forever. But He chose not to do so.

Second, in His love and grace He found fault with it (verse 8) — not in itself and absolutely, but only to the extent that He would provide another way that would supply all its defects and shortcomings with respect to the goal in view. What that way is the apostle declares in the following verses through the end of that chapter. The summary is in verse 12: 'For I will be merciful to their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.' It is the way of pardon and forgiveness — substituted in place of that insufficient way which was removed.

Consider then: the infinitely wise and holy God, pursuing His purpose of bringing souls to Himself, had set aside one way of His own appointment as useless and weak because of sin — against which it provided no remedy. In its place He substituted another way. Would He not make that new way entirely free from the faults

and failures He had charged against the one He removed? The one thing that made the former way defective was sin — it could do anything except save a sinner. Therefore this was the primary problem to be addressed in this way of forgiveness. And here we see how clearly God has not only distinguished but opposed two things: the way of personal righteousness and the way of forgiveness. He found fault with the first. What then does He do? Does He amend it — trimming what seemed excessive, moderating its severity, and patching its gaps with forgiveness, so as to revive it? This is indeed the approach many take in their thinking, and most in their practice. But this is not God's way. He removes the one entirely and establishes the other in its place. People's efforts to mix the two will be found to be of little use to them at the last. I can have little confidence in what God Himself has declared to be defective.

Second, the unchangeable principles and foundations on which this way is built make it secure and safe for sinners.

First, it is founded on the purpose of God (Galatians 3:8): 'The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith... — God would do this; He had purposed and determined to proceed this way. All the purposes of God are accompanied by immutability.

Second, His promise is also pledged in it, given in the form of a covenant, as has already been explained.

Third, this promise is confirmed by an oath. And it may be noted that God never interposes with an oath except in connection with this way of coming to Himself through forgiveness. For wher-

ever God's oath appears, it relates either to Christ in type, or to Christ in person, or to the covenant established in Him.

Fourth, this way is confirmed and ratified in His blood — from which the apostle demonstrates its absolute security and safety at length in Hebrews 9. Therefore, whatever soul — responding to the invitation under consideration — gives himself up to come to God by the way proposed, will find in it absolute peace and security. Neither our own weakness and folly from within, nor the opposition of any of our enemies from without, will be able to drive us from this way. See Isaiah 35:4-10.

Third, in the other way, every individual person stands on his own footing — and must do so, to the last moment of his life in this world. You want to come to God, obtain His favor, and come to an enjoyment of Him. What will you do? What course will you adopt to achieve these ends? Even if you were as holy, as perfect, as righteous, and as free from sin as you could possibly desire, you would have some confidence in approaching God. But if this is the way you settle on, take this with you: you stand entirely on your own personal account throughout all your days. And if you fail in the slightest, you are lost forever. 'For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all' (James 2:10). And what peace could you possibly find — were you as holy as you ever aimed or desired to be — while this is your condition? But in this way of forgiveness, we all stand on the account of one common Mediator, in whom we are complete (Colossians 3:10). And the failure to properly grasp this truth is a major cause of misery for many souls. Suppose a person regards himself as released from the covenant of works — where exact and perfect righteousness is rigidly required — and understands he is called

instead to gospel obedience performed sincerely and with integrity. Even so, if he is not also clear that he does not stand in this gospel way on his own account either, he will never be able to maintain his comfort to the end of his journey. In the best of people there will be found so many particular failings that in hard seasons they will seem to call their integrity into question. And so many doubts will arise — through the darkness of the mind and the power of temptation — that the soul will find little rest. Here lies the great security of this way: we abide in it on the basis of the faithfulness and ability of our common Mediator, Jesus Christ.

This is another consideration strengthening our invitation to embrace the way of coming to God now being proposed. Nothing is lacking that is needed to give any soul that ventures into it infallible security. Terms of peace have been offered, as you have heard. These terms are excellent and holy, chosen by God, serving His glory — free, safe, and secure for sinners. What can any soul object against them? And on what do people rest their confidence when they neglect so great a salvation? Is it in their lusts and sins, which they hope will give them as much satisfaction as they could want? Alas, those will ruin them and produce nothing but death. Is it in the world? It will deceive them — the form of it is passing away. Is it in their own duties and righteousness? Those will not save them — for even if they pursued the law of righteousness, they would not attain to the righteousness of the law. Is it in the length of their lives? Alas, life is but a shadow, a mist that appears for a little while. Is it in a future amendment and repentance? Hell is full of souls perishing under such resolutions. Only this way of pardon remains — and yet of all ways it is the most despised. But I have one more consideration to add before pressing the exhortation further.

Sixth, consider that this is the only way and means to enable you to obedience and to make what you do in it acceptable to God. Some of you may be under the weight of conviction and may have made commitments to God — to live for Him, to keep yourself from sin, to pursue holiness. Perhaps you did so in times of affliction, danger, sickness, or after receiving some mercy. But you find you cannot maintain stability or consistency in your course — you break your commitments to God and to your own soul, which fills you with new distress, or else hardens you and leaves you indifferent and careless, so that you return to your resolutions only when fresh conviction or fresh affliction overtakes you. This is a ruinous and destructive condition, and nothing can deliver you from it but embracing forgiveness.

First, everything you do without this — however it may satisfy your mind or ease your conscience — is not accepted by God at all. Unless this foundation is laid, everything you do is lost. All your prayers, all your duties, all your improvements are an abomination to the Lord. Until peace has been made with Him, they are merely the acts of enemies — which He despises and rejects. You may run earnestly, but you are running in the wrong direction. You strive, but not lawfully, and will never receive the crown. True gospel obedience is the fruit of faith in forgiveness. Whatever you do without it is only a building without a foundation, a castle in the air. You can see the order of gospel obedience in Ephesians 2:7-10. The foundation must be laid in grace — the riches of grace through Christ in the free pardon and forgiveness of sin. From this must your works of obedience proceed, if you want them to be of God's appointment and find acceptance with Him. Without this, God will say of all your services, worship, and obedience what He said to

Israel of old in Amos 5:21-25: 'I despise it all, I reject it all' — for it is not for Him or for His glory. Now if you are under convictions of any kind, nothing matters more to you, nothing you place more confidence in, than your duties — your repentance, your improvement, what you do, and what you hope one day to become. Is it nothing to you to lose all your hopes and expectations from this source? To have no better reception with God than if all this time you had been wallowing in your sins and lusts? Yet this is your situation if you have not begun with God on His own terms — if you have not received the atonement in the blood of His Son, if you are not a partaker of forgiveness, if your person is not pardoned. All your duties are under a curse.

Second, this alone will give you such motives and encouragements to obedience as will bring life, eagerness, and delight to it. You perform duties and abstain from sins, but with heaviness, fear, and a sense of bondage. If your conscience could be quiet and your hope for eternity maintained without them, you would give them up forever. This makes all your obedience burdensome — and in your heart you cry out with the man in the prophet, 'What a weariness this is!' The service of God is the single greatest drudgery of your life: something you dare not omit and take no pleasure in. Nothing can deliver you from this wretched and miserable condition but embracing forgiveness. This will give you such motives and encouragements as will powerfully move your heart and soul. It will bring freedom, liberty, delight, and cheerfulness to all the duties of gospel obedience. You will find a constraining power in the love of Christ; a freedom from bondage when the Son has truly set you free. Faith and love will work genuinely and naturally in your spirit. What was once your greatest burden will become your

chief joy (2 Corinthians 7:1). Thoughts of the love of God, the blood of Christ, the covenant of grace, and the sense of pardon in them will enlarge your heart and sweeten every duty. You will find new life, new pleasure, and new satisfaction in everything you do. Have you ever truly understood that word from the wise man: 'Her ways are pleasant ways and all her paths are peace' (Proverbs 3:17)? Have the ways of holiness, obedience, and duty been like that for you? Whatever you claim, they are not, and they cannot be, while you remain a stranger to the one thing that can make them so. I speak to those who are under the law: would you be free from that bondage, that grating yoke in the duties of obedience? Would you have everything you do toward God be a delight and pleasure to you? This, and this alone, will accomplish it.

Third, this will place all your obedience on a solid footing in your own soul and conscience — the very footing fixed on in the gospel. As things now stand, everything you do is really only an attempt to settle your account with God for your sin. You hope that by what you do for Him and toward Him, you can buy off what you have done against Him — so that you do not fall into His wrath and judgment. This makes everything you do wearisome. Like a man who labors all his days merely to pay an old debt and never gets to keep anything for himself — how tedious and exhausting is his work. In all likelihood, at some point he will give up and run from his creditor. So it is in this case. People who secretly hope to compensate God through their obedience find their debt growing every day, with ever less hope of making a satisfactory payment. This makes them weary, and for the most part they lose heart under their discouragement and ultimately flee from God altogether. This way of forgiveness alone will settle things differently in your

conscience. It will show you that all your debts have been paid by Christ and freely forgiven to you by God — so that what you now do is an act of gratitude and thankfulness, flows toward eternity, advances the glory of God and the honor of Christ in the gospel, and will be a comfort on the day of final account. This encourages the soul to labor, invest, and press on — with everything now looking forward, and all turning to your advantage.

Fourth, do you not find in yourself a weakness and inability in the duties of obedience — a failure to perform them in a way acceptable to God? Perhaps you are not as aware of this as you ought to be. Attending only, or mainly, to the outward form of duties, you have not experienced your own weakness. You do not know how to fill your duties with faith, love, and delight — and so you are unaware of your own insufficiency in this. Yet if you have any measure of light or conviction (and it is to such I am now speaking), you cannot but see and acknowledge that you are unable in your obedience to accomplish what you are aiming at. You do not have the strength or power for it. Now it is faith in forgiveness alone that will furnish you with the ability you need. Pardon does not come to the soul alone — or rather, Christ does not come to the soul with pardon only. Pardon is the door He opens and enters by, but He comes with a Spirit of life and power. As without Him we can do nothing, so through His enabling us we may do all things. Receiving gospel forgiveness enlists all the grace of the gospel in our support.

This is the sum of what has been said: the obedience you perform under your convictions is burdensome and joyless to you, and it is entirely unacceptable to God. You lose everything you do and everything you hope to do going forward, if the foundation is

not laid in receiving pardon in the blood of Christ. It is high time to tear down the empty and imaginary structure you have been building, and to begin laying a new foundation — one on which you may build safely and cheerfully, a building that will stand forever.

Furthermore, this way is so excellent, so precious, so near the heart of God, so bound up with the blood of Christ, that neglecting it will assuredly be severely reckoned with by the Lord. Let no one think they can despise the wisdom and love of the Father, the blood of the Son, and the promises of the gospel at little cost. In a very few words, let us survey what the Holy Spirit says on this point. There are three ways in which the judgment due to neglecting the embrace of forgiveness — gospel grace — is expressed.

First, it is stated directly: 'He who has disbelieved shall be condemned' (Mark 16:16). That is a hard word. Many people cannot bear to hear it. They would not have it mentioned if they could help it, and are ready to turn against anyone from whose mouth it comes. But let no one be deceived — this is the gentle word that mercy itself, that love itself, that Christ, that the gospel speaks to those who despise forgiveness. It is Christ who is this preacher of law and judgment. It is He who cries out: 'If you do not believe, you will be condemned.' And He will come Himself in flaming fire to take vengeance on those who do not obey the gospel (2 Thessalonians 1:8). This is the end of the disobedient — if God, if Christ, if the gospel can be believed.

Second, it is stated comparatively, in relation to the judgment due to breaking the law (2 Corinthians 2:16). In the preaching of forgiveness through Christ, to those who are perishing we are a fragrance of death — a deep and heavy death. As Hebrews 10:29

puts it: 'How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve?' — more severe than anything the law ever threatened or inflicted for its breach. Not different in kind, but greatly increased in degree. Hence the addition of many stripes.

Third, it is expressed through a cry of wonder at the inexpressible and unavoidable nature of the punishment due to such sinners. Hebrews 2:3: 'How will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?' There is no way of escape — those who neglect so great a salvation will unavoidably perish. As the Holy Spirit also says in 1 Peter 4:17: 'What will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?' What mind can grasp the wretchedness of their condition? None can, says the Holy Spirit — it cannot be put into words they could comprehend. What will their end be? 'There will be a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries' (Hebrews 10:27) — a certain, fearful anticipation of things too dreadful to comprehend.

These are the grounds of the exhortation we are pressing. On these foundations, in light of these principles, let us speak plainly and soberly together. I am speaking to poor souls who have deceived themselves or utterly neglected their eternal condition and have not yet genuinely received this forgiveness. Your present state is sad and pitiable. Nothing stands between you and eternal ruin but the fragile uncertainty of a dying life. The persuasion of forgiveness you currently hold is good for nothing but to harden and destroy you. It is not the forgiveness that is with God. You have not embraced it on gospel grounds or evidences. You have stolen painted beads and take yourself to be the rightful owner of pearls and precious jewels. As surely as you have any concern for your own eternal condition — which you are drawing closer to every

day, and may enter sooner than you know — prevail upon yourself to attend to the exhortation laid before you. It is your own business you are being asked to attend to.

First, think seriously about what you are resting your hopes and expectations on for eternity. People who are great and otherwise wise are very prone to deceive themselves here. They suppose they think and believe very differently from what they actually think and believe — as their cry on the last day will make plain. Press your soul a little on this. Do you at all seriously think about these things? Or are you so under the power of your lusts, ignorance, and darkness that you neglect and despise them? Do you rise and sleep and perform some duties — or neglect them — in a spirit of great coldness, indifference, and detachment, like Gallio who cared little for these things? Or do you comfort yourself with hopes of future amendment, intending that when certain things are accomplished, you will be a different person? Or do you not simply hope for the best in general on the basis of what you have done and what you intend to do? If any of these describes your condition, it is unspeakably miserable. You lie down and rise up under the wrath of the great God, who will in the end prevail against you — and there will be no one to deliver. But if you say: 'No, this is not our condition — we rely on mercy and forgiveness,' then let me in the fear of the great God ask a few things further.

First, consider seriously whether the forgiveness you rest on and hope in is the gospel forgiveness we have described — or only a general sense that though you are a sinner, you will not be punished. You know God is merciful and you hope He will not let you perish in hell. If this is your case, forgiveness itself will not help you. This is the presumption described in Deuteronomy 29:19.

Gospel pardon is something of an entirely different character. It has its source in the gracious heart of the Father, is brought about by a sovereign act of His will, is made consistent with the glory of His justice and holiness by the blood of Christ — by which it is purchased in a covenant of grace, as has been explained. If you say: 'Yes, this is the forgiveness we rely on — it is what you have described' — then I desire further that you would consider the following.

First, examine your own heart as to how you came to have a share in this forgiveness, to embrace it, and to have a right to it. A person can deceive himself just as thoroughly by supposing he possesses true riches when he does not, as by mistaking counterfeit goods for genuine ones. How then did you come to be a partaker in this gospel forgiveness? If it simply came upon you without your knowing how — if a lifeless, barren, inactive persuasion of it gradually crept into your mind — do not be mistaken. God will come and call you to account for it, and it will appear that you had no part or portion in it. But if you say: 'No — we were convicted of sin, we were made deeply troubled in our consciences, and on that account we looked for forgiveness, which has given us rest' — then I desire the following.

Second, carefully consider for what ends and purposes you have received and make use of this gospel forgiveness. Have you used it to fill the gap your duties could not fill — to patch together a peace in your own conscience because your duties could not answer your convictions? This, and countless other ways, can lead people to lose their souls while thinking all is well — even on the account of pardon and mercy. Hence the apostle's caution in Hebrews 12:15: 'See to it that no one comes short of the grace of

God.' People miss it and fall short of it while thinking they are pursuing it — yes, while claiming to have found and obtained it. Now if any of these should prove to be your condition, I desire the following.

Third, consider seriously whether it is not high time to look for a way of deliverance and escape — to save yourself from this evil age and to flee from the wrath to come. The Judge stands at the door. Before He deals with you as a judge, He knocks with an offer of mercy. Who knows but that this may be the last time He deals with you in this way? Whether old or young, you have only your season, only your day. It may be nightfall for you when it is still day for everyone else. Your sun may go down at noon, and God may swear that you will never enter His rest. If you are resolved to continue in your present condition, I have nothing more to say to you. I am clear of your blood, in that I have declared to you the counsel of God in this matter. I must leave you to face God alone at the last day. Poor souls — I tremble to think how He will deal with you when there is no one to deliver. I seem to see your poor, destitute, abandoned souls — forsaken by your lusts, your sins, the world, your friends, angels, and people — trembling before the throne of God, filled with horror and dreadful expectation of the sentence. Oh that I could mourn over you while you are still among the living — while there is still hope. Oh that in this, your day, you would know the things that belong to your peace.

But if any of you should say: 'No — we will seek the Lord while He may be found; we will draw near to Him before He brings darkness' — then consider, I pray, the following.

Fourth, what Joshua told the children of Israel when they made such a resolution and cried out, 'We will serve the Lord our God' (Joshua 24:19): 'You will not be able to serve the Lord, for He is a holy God and a jealous God; He will not forgive your transgressions or your sins.' Go to Him on your own account, in your own strength, with your best efforts and duties, and you will find Him too great and too holy for you to deal with on those terms. You will obtain neither acceptance for your person nor pardon for your sins. 'But this is hard news,' you may say. 'If we sit still we perish, and if we rise to try, it will not be better. Is there no hope left for our souls? Must we waste away under our sins and God's wrath forever?' God forbid. There are further directions remaining to guide you out of this entanglement.

Fifth, ponder carefully what has been said about this way of approaching God. Consider it in its own nature and in all the ends and purposes for which God has proposed it. Do you approve of it? Do you judge it a way suited to bring glory to God? Does it answer all the needs and distresses of your soul? Do you think it excellent, safe, and glorious to those who have entered into it? Or do you have any objection against it? Give your answer to the One in whose name and by whose appointment these words are spoken to you. If you say: 'We are convinced that this way of forgiveness is the only way for the relief and deliverance of our souls' — then continue.

Sixth, loathe yourself for all the blindness and stubbornness with which you have until now despised the love of God, the blood of Christ, and the offers of pardon in the gospel. Be humbled to the dust in a sense of your vileness, pollution, and abominations — things that are spoken to daily and need not be repeated here.

Seventh, work your heart diligently with thoughts of the abundant grace manifested in this way of sinners coming to God, and of the excellence of the gospel in which it is unfolded. Consider the eternal love of the Father — the fountain and spring of this entire arrangement. Consider the inexpressible love of the Son in establishing and ratifying it, in removing all obstacles and hindrances through His own blood, bringing forth the redemption and forgiveness of sins in all its beauty and glory as the price He paid. And let the glory of the gospel — which alone makes known this discovery of forgiveness in God — dwell in your hearts. Let your minds be occupied with these things. You will find effects from them that surpass anything that has yet been produced in your souls. What have you mostly been occupied with until now? When you have risen above the churning of lusts and corruptions in your heart, the entanglements of your work and daily affairs — what have you been able to lift your heart to? Troubling fears about your condition, vague hopes without taste or relish that yield no refreshment, legal demands, burdensome duties, distracted consciences, broken purposes and promises — all of which have tossed you back and forth without any settled rest. And what effects have these thoughts produced? Have they made you more holy and more humble? Have they given you delight in God and strength for new obedience? Not at all. Where you were, there you still are — without the slightest progress. But now bring your soul to these springs, and test the Lord — from that day forward you will be blessed with spiritual abundance.

Eighth: if the Lord is pleased to carry your soul this far, stir yourself up to choose and embrace the way of forgiveness that has been revealed. Choose it decisively — choose it in preference to

and over against every other way. Say you will be for Christ and not for another, and let that be your settled course. Here venture, here rest, here place your soul. It is a way of peace, safety, holiness, beauty, strength, power, freedom, and glory. You have the very nature, name, love, purposes, promises, covenant, and oath of God; the love, life, death, and blood, the mediation, offering, and intercession of Jesus Christ; and the power and effectiveness of the Spirit and gospel grace He administers — all of these assuring you of the excellence, uniqueness, and safety of the path you are now entering.

If the Lord is pleased to persuade your hearts and souls to enter on the path set before you, and to carry you through its varied experiences to this closing act of faith, God will have the glory, the gospel will be exalted, and your own souls will reap the eternal benefit of this exhortation.

But if, despite all that has been said — all the invitations and encouragements held out to you — you continue to despise so great a salvation and live and die in the condition you are in — then, as the prophet said to Jeroboam's wife, 'Come closer, for I have been sent to you with a hard message' (1 Kings 14:6). I say then —

Ninth: if you resolve to go on neglecting this salvation and do so — then cursed be you by the Lord with all the curses written in the law and all the curses pronounced against those who despise the gospel. Yes, let you be anathema maranatha — cursed in this world always, until the Lord comes; and when the Lord comes, cursed from His presence into everlasting destruction. Curse them, all you holy angels of God, as the obstinate enemies of your King and Head, the Lord Jesus Christ. Curse them, all you churches of Christ, as despisers of that love and mercy which is your portion,

your life, your inheritance. Let all the saints of God, all who love the Lord, curse them and rejoice to see the Lord coming forth in power against them to their everlasting ruin. Why should anyone have a thought of compassion for those who despise the compassion of God, or mercy for those who trample on the blood of Christ? While there is still hope, we earnestly desire to grieve for you and to labor in soul for your conversion to God. But if you are hardened in your way, shall we join ourselves to you against Him? Shall we place you above His glory and desire your salvation at the cost of His honor? God forbid. We hope to rejoice in seeing all the vengeance and indignation in God's right hand poured out to eternity upon those who have refused Him (Proverbs 1:21-33).

Rules to be observed by those who would come to stability in obedience. The first rule. Christ is the only infallible judge of our spiritual condition. How He judges: by His Word and by His Spirit.

What remains to be pursued further, on the principles already laid down, is to persuade souls who are more or less entangled in the depths of sin to embrace this forgiveness by believing — and so to come to peace and comfort. Since such persons are full of objections against themselves, I will aim primarily to anticipate those objections and thereby encourage them to believe and bring them to stability. Everything I have to offer flows naturally from the doctrine that has been set out at length. Yet I will not in every particular trace things back to it, but will focus generally on those things that may tend to the encouragement and comfort of both distressed and doubting souls. I will do this in two ways.

First, I will lay down general rules that are necessary to be observed by all who intend to come to gospel peace and comfort. Then, second, I will consider some of the objections that seem

most representative of the specific reasoning with which troubled persons typically entangle themselves.

I will begin with the general rules, which, through the grace of Christ and the supply of His Spirit, may be of use to believers in the condition under consideration.

Rule I: Do not be judges of your own condition — let Christ judge. You are invited to take comfort in this gospel truth: there is forgiveness with God. You say, "Not for me." Jacob said the same thing: "My way is hidden from the Lord" (Isaiah 40:27). And Zion said so too: "The Lord has forsaken me, and my Lord has forgotten me" (Isaiah 49:14). But did they judge themselves correctly? We find in those passages that God saw things very differently. This false judgment that souls make about their own condition while caught in their difficulties is often an almost unconquerable barrier to any improvement. They fill themselves with their own thoughts about it and dwell on them, instead of looking outward for a remedy. Fearful thoughts about their spiritual condition are often a large part of some people's sickness. Many diseases tend to cloud a person's thinking and cause misunderstandings about their own nature and danger. These delusions are a real part of the person's illness. The soul is no less weakened by them, and the effectiveness of remedies no less blocked, than by any other real disease. In such cases, we urge people to trust the judgment of their skilled physician rather than continually wearing themselves out with their own distorted imaginations and despairing over their own mistakes. They should rest in what they are told by the one who understands the causes and tendencies of their condition better than they do. It is often part of the soul's depths to have false ideas about its own condition. Sin is a madness (Ecclesiastes 9:3),

and to the degree that anyone is under its power, that person is under the power of madness. Madness reveals itself most quickly and effectively by filling those who have it with strange ideas and perceptions about themselves. The madness of sin works the same way, according to its degree and strength. So some cry "peace, peace" when sudden destruction is at hand (1 Thessalonians 5:3). It is this madness, under whose power they live, that gives them such groundless ideas about themselves and their condition. And some say they are lost forever, when God is actually with them. So do your duty, and let Christ judge your state. Your situation is too important for you to reasonably hand over the judgment of your condition to anyone else. When eternal well-being or eternal ruin is at stake, for a person to abandon their own thinking and give themselves over blindly to the judgment of other fallible, sinful people is foolishness. But there is no danger of being deceived by Christ's verdict. The truth is, whether we want it or not, He will judge. And whatever He determines will be the way things stand at the last day (John 5:22). The Father judges no one directly and personally, but has committed all judgment to the Son. All judgment that concerns eternity — whether it is to be passed in this world or in the next — is committed to Him. Accordingly, in that passage He judges both things and persons. He makes His determination about things in verse 24: "He who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation, but has passed from death into life." Let people say what they please — this verdict will stand: faith and eternal life are inseparably joined. And He judges persons in verse 38. "You do not have the word of God abiding in you," He says to the Pharisees, who believed quite differently about themselves. So

do not take Christ's role out of His hands. You will find that He often determines things entirely contrary to what people think — on both sides. Some He judges to be in a bad condition, though they are very confident that all is well with them and take great pride in their spiritual state. And He judges the condition of others to be good, though they themselves are full of doubt and may even be looked down on by others. We can single out an example or two of each kind. 1. We see Laodicea's self-assessment of her spiritual state in Revelation 3:17: "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing." A fine state, it would seem — a blessed condition. She lacks nothing that could contribute to her rest, peace, and reputation. She is doctrinally correct, numerous, and flourishing. So she believes, and so she reports about herself — with a subtle contempt for others whom she looks down on. "Let them manage as they will; I am as I say." But was that really her condition? Was she truly what she was so convinced of and so publicly professed? Let Jesus Christ be heard to speak in this case. Let Him come and judge. "I will do so," He says (verse 14). "Thus says the Amen, the faithful and true Witness." Coming to give His verdict in a case of this importance, He takes this title so that we may know His word is to be accepted without question. Every person is a liar. Their testimony has no value — let them pronounce whatever they will about themselves or about one another. What then does He say about Laodicea? "You are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked." What a dreadful and sad disappointment! What a terrible surprise! How many Laodicean churches do we have in the world? How many professing Christians are members of such churches? Not to mention the majority of people who live under the means of grace, all of whom have good hopes about their eter-

nal condition. Among professing believers themselves, it is frightening to think how many will be found lacking when they come to be weighed on this scale. On the other hand, He judges some to be in a good condition, no matter how full of doubt they may be. He says to the church of Smyrna in Revelation 2:9: "I know your poverty." Smyrna was complaining that she was a poor, insignificant congregation. "Well," He says, "do not be afraid. I know the poverty you complain about — but you are rich." That is His judgment, His testimony, and His verdict about her condition. Such will be His judgment at the last day, when people on both sides will be taken completely by surprise at His sentence. This situation is directly addressed in both passages mentioned at the start of this discussion. Take for example Isaiah 40:27: Zion said, "The Lord has forsaken me." That is Zion's judgment about herself and her state and condition — a sad report and conclusion. But does Christ agree with Zion's verdict? The next verse gives us His answer: "Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you." The actual state of affairs is as different from her self-assessment as it could possibly be. So what is the point of people making such pronouncements about themselves? The judging of souls regarding their spiritual state and condition is the work of Jesus Christ — especially for the purpose we are now discussing. People may and do take many approaches to judging themselves. Some do it based on trivial and superficial guesses. Some rely on bold and wicked assumptions. Some are driven by desperate, godless ideas. Some are moved by the power of convictions. But none of their methods produces a judgment that is always sound and reliable. A person's judgment based on his own

reasoning is seldom true and even more seldom lasting. I am not speaking of self-examination — a careful investigation of one's graces and actions — but of the final verdict regarding one's spiritual state and condition. That belongs to Christ. Now there are two ways in which the Lord Jesus Christ delivers His decisive verdict in this matter. 1. By His Word. He determines in the word of the gospel the state and condition of all people in general terms. Each individual, coming to that Word, receives his or her own sentence and judgment. He told the Jews that Moses accused them (John 5:45). Moses' law accused and condemned those who transgressed it. And in the same way, the word of the gospel acquits everyone who is discharged by it. Our self-judgment is simply our receiving by faith His verdict as given in the Word. His procedure in this is recorded in Job 33:22-23. "His soul draws near to the pit, and his life to those who bring death." This seems to be his state — it looks hopeless. What then? If there is an interpreting angel with him — the Angel of the Covenant, who alone can do this — He will show him his uprightness. He will give the person a right understanding of his interest in God and of the true state of his heart toward God. Jesus Christ has determined in the word of the gospel the condition of every person. He tells us that sinners, of whatever kind they may be, who believe are accepted by Him and will receive forgiveness of sins. The soul we are discussing is now engaged in the work of coming to God for forgiveness through Jesus Christ. It has many heavy objections within itself and against itself — reasons why it should not come, why it will not be accepted. Our Lord Jesus, the wisdom of God, foresaw all these objections. He knew in advance everything that could be said in this case, and yet He has determined as we have shown. In general, people's arguments against

themselves arise from sin and the law. Christ knows what is in both of them. He tested them to the utmost in terms of their penalties, and yet He has determined as we have described. Their particular objections come from specific features of their sin — their greatness, their number, their aggravating circumstances, and the like. Christ knows all of these as well, and He stands by His firm determination. On the whole, then, it is right that His Word should stand. I know that when a soul brings itself to be judged by the word of the gospel, it does not always immediately receive a clear and satisfying answer. But when Christ is pleased to speak the Word with power, people will hear the voice of the Son of God and be convinced by His sentence. So let the soul that is rising out of depths and pressing toward a sense of forgiveness lay itself down before the Word of Christ. Let it attend to what He speaks. And if for a time it does not have power to quiet the heart, let it wait awhile. It will not always be so. Christ will deliver His verdict into the conscience with such power and effectiveness that the soul will find rest and peace in it. Christ also judges by His Spirit — not only by making the verdict of the gospel effective in the soul, but as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:11: "We have received the Spirit of God, that we may know the things that have been freely given to us by God." The Spirit of Christ makes the soul aware that this or that grace comes from Him, that this or that duty was performed in His strength. He brings to mind what He Himself has worked in people at various times, to give them support and relief in their current struggles. And when it has been clearly shown to the soul at any time by the Holy Spirit that something worked in it or done by it is genuinely from God, that discovery can never be utterly lost. He also bears witness with our spirits by His Spirit regarding our state

and condition. I have written about this at length elsewhere, so I will pass over it here. This, then, is our first general rule and direction. People's self-assessments of their spiritual condition are unreliable, because their minds are usually influenced by their present difficulties, and they cannot see things impartially. Mistakes in such assessments are extremely harmful to a soul seeking relief and a sense of forgiveness. The nature of gospel assurance — what is consistent with it. What its effects are. Self-condemnation and self-loathing are fully consistent with gospel justification and peace. Some people have no peace precisely because they possess the very thing without which peace is impossible. Because they cannot help condemning themselves, they cannot accept the reality that God acquits them. But this is the mystery of the gospel, which unbelief cannot grasp. Nothing but faith can give real substance to things that seem so contradictory. It is easy to learn the concept, but it is not easy to experience its power. For a person to see within themselves what would condemn them — something that grieves them deeply — and at the same time to know that they are accepted and acquitted, is a feat that nothing in the world can accomplish except faith alone. We are now under a law of justification that excludes all boasting (Romans 3:27). So although we have joy enough in another, we always have more than enough cause for humiliation in ourselves. The gospel will teach a person to feel sin and believe righteousness at the same time. Faith will carry heaven in one hand and hell in the other — showing the soul the wrath it deserves as well as the mercy it has received. A person may see enough of his own sin and folly to draw the fire of hell out of heaven, and yet see enough of Christ to quench that fire and bring the peace of heaven out of the threat of hell. These two

realities necessarily produce very different, even opposite, effects in the soul. And the person who does not know how to assign each to its proper place and season will inevitably be confused. The work of self-condemnation, then, which people in these depths cannot help but overflow with, is — within the arrangement of the covenant of grace — consistent with acceptance and forgiveness. There can be a deep sense of sin on grounds other than the fear of hell. David was never more humbled for sin than when Nathan told him it was forgiven. And there can be an awareness of hell as deserved, which the soul nevertheless knows it has been delivered from in the end. To clarify this further: Some people think assurance exists only in those who, if asked directly, 'Are you certain you will be saved? Do you know your sins are forgiven?' would answer with immediate and emphatic confidence. But just as the blessed truth of assurance has been misrepresented in the world under such a notion, so such descriptions entirely miss its true nature. As a result, some conclude that very few believers have any assurance, because they lack this bold confidence or cannot speak of it in these terms. And so assurance is treated as something not greatly to be desired, since it seems so rarely attainable — as if most of the saints are meant to live without it. The importance of assurance — not only as it is our life of comfort and joy, but also as it is the principal means by which godliness flourishes — requires us to look at this more carefully. (1) We should identify what things are not only consistent with assurance but are actually necessary companions of it, which some mistake for evidences that it is absent. And, 2. I will say something about its nature, especially as it reveals itself through its effects. 1. A deep sense of the evil of sin — of the guilt of one's own sin — is in no way inconsistent with gospel

assurance of acceptance with God. By a sense of the guilt of sin, I mean two things: (1) A clear conviction of sin by the Holy Spirit, who says to the soul, "You are the one." And (2) a sense of God's displeasure against sin — His indignation and wrath. David expresses both of these in his complaint in Psalm 31:10: "My life is spent with grief, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my iniquity, and my bones waste away." His sin was before him, and the sense of it pressed him hard. Yet despite all this, he had a confident assurance that God was his God in covenant (verse 14): "I trusted in You, O Lord; I said, 'You are my God.'" And the terms of the covenant, by which alone God is anyone's God, include the promise that He will be merciful to their sin and remember their iniquities no more. To whomever He is God, He is so according to the terms of that covenant. So here these two things are joined together. He says, in effect: "Lord, I am crushed by the sense of the guilt of my sins, and yet You are my God who forgives them." The basis for this is that God, through the gospel, has divided the work of the law and taken part of it out of its hands. The law's entire duty is to condemn both sin and the sinner. The sinner is freed by the gospel, but the law still retains its right against the sin itself — it condemns it, and rightly so. Now, although the sinner is freed, finding that his sin is still seized upon and condemned fills him with a deep sense of it. A person may therefore have a deep sense of sin all his days, living continually under its weight, abhorring himself for his iniquity and sinful nature, and yet all the while have a settled assurance of his acceptance with God. Deep sorrow for sin is consistent with assurance of forgiveness. Indeed, it is a great means of preserving it. Godly sorrow is a fruit of the gospel, not something that opposes it. It is the work of heaven it-

self, not merely the assurance of heaven, to wipe all tears from our eyes. In fact, these graces have the most outstanding promises attached to them, as in Isaiah 57:15; 66:2 — along with blessedness itself (Matthew 5:4). They are themselves the substance of many gracious gospel promises (Zechariah 12:10). Some people, feeling the weight and burden of their sins and being called to mourning and humiliation on that account, are so far from thinking they have any assurance that they doubt whether they have any faith or grace at all. But gospel sorrow and gospel assurance can dwell together in the same heart at the same time. Indeed, just as in all worldly joys there is a hidden wound, so in all godly sorrow and mourning — considered in itself — there is a secret joy that the world cannot understand. I am convinced that generally those who mourn the most have the most assurance. And all true gospel mourners will be found to have the root of assurance so grafted into them that in its proper season it will spring forth and bring forth fruit. A deep sense of the indwelling power of sin is consistent with gospel assurance. An awareness of indwelling sin will cause many groans and sighs. Trouble, unrest, sorrow, and anguish of heart — expressing themselves in sighs, mourning, and groaning for deliverance — are the constant companions of a sense of indwelling sin. "What is the point," someone asks, "of speaking to a soul deeply aware of the restless power of indwelling sin about assurance?" "I am on the verge of perishing at every moment," such a person says. "My lusts are strong, active, restless — even outrageous. They give me no peace. I fall before them constantly." "I lie face-down on the ground all my days and cannot help but be uncertain about the outcome." But when such a person has said everything he can, he will not be able to make more sorrowful

complaints about this than Paul has already made in Romans 7. And yet Paul closes that discussion with one of the highest expressions of assurance anyone could ever seek: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). It is not assurance but the full enjoyment of glory that eliminates this sense of struggle. But if people insist they can have no assurance because they have the very thing without which assurance is impossible, they are on the wrong path entirely. A little salt of the gospel cast into these bitter waters will make them sweet and wholesome. The sense of sin's guilt and power, when received in a gospel light, does not destroy but rather supports assurance. Doubts, fears, and temptations — if they do not habitually prevail — are consistent with gospel assurance. Though the devil's power is limited with respect to the saints, his hands are not tied. Though he cannot ultimately prevail against them, he can still assault them. And although there is no longer an evil heart of unbelief ruling in believers, there will always be unbelief lingering in their hearts. The kind of evidence, conviction, and persuasion of acceptance with God that rules out all contrary reasoning — that kind of absolute certainty — will not be obtained in this world. We may have peace with God while having no peace from Satan's attacks. Now unless a person properly considers the nature of this spiritual conflict and its consistency with gospel peace, he will draw wrong conclusions about himself. On this account, some of the holiest people in this world, being entirely consumed with their inner battles and struggles, have concluded that they have no assurance at all. Evangelical assurance is not a fixed point that cannot vary. It may be higher or lower, greater or less, dim or attended with more clarity. It is not completely lost just because it is not at its peak.

God sometimes wonderfully lifts the souls of His saints with some close and near approaches to them, giving them a sense of His love, peace, and joy — carrying them almost to the gate of heaven. But this life is not a season for constantly receiving wages. Our work is not yet finished; we are not always to remain on the mountaintop. But has the soul lost all its assurance when it comes down? Not at all. Before, it had assurance with joy, triumph, and exultation. Now it has assurance — or may have it — with wrestling, tears, and complaints. The degree is different, but the reality remains. And a person's assurance may be just as genuine and true when he lies on the ground with a sense of sin as when he is carried up to the third heaven with a sense of God's love. In short, this assurance of salvation is a gracious, evangelical persuasion of acceptance with God in Christ and of an interest in the promises. It is grounded on the faithfulness of God's word and carries the soul through all its duties and difficulties with this fruit: It gives delight in obedience and draws out love in the duties we perform for God. Enough assurance of a comfortable outcome to their obedience — a blessed conclusion to their labors and duties, their pursuit of holiness, mortification, self-denial, and endurance — is granted to make all these things pleasant and sweet to those who are engaged in them. To run as those who are uncertain, to fight as those who beat the air, to travel as those who have no confidence of a comfortable arrival — this is a state that quickly wearies the soul. And when it does, it is a season when the soul gives very little glory to God and receives very little growth in grace. Many things, as we have shown, interpose themselves — many doubts and entangling perplexities arise — but still there is a comforting persuasion at the root that gives life and vigor to all gospel duties. This

persuasion prevails in believers: that their labor in the Lord, their watching, praying, suffering, giving, mortification, fighting against sin, and pursuit of holiness will not be in vain. This gives them such delight in their most difficult duties as travelers have on a hard journey toward a home they long for, or as soldiers have in a harsh campaign that they are confident they will win. It casts out fear — tormenting fear — the kind that fills the soul with paralyzing uncertainty, harsh thoughts of God, and dread of His approaches. First, with respect to its source, it comes from a spirit of bondage (Romans 8:15). "We have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear." It is not a fear that makes an occasional intrusion on the soul — every person experiences that — but a settled, abiding fear that possesses and controls the mind. Second, it tends toward bondage. It brings the soul into bondage (Hebrews 2:14-15). Christ died to "deliver those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage." Fear of death as a penalty, as it lies within the curse of the law, is a tormenting, enslaving fear. Third, it has torment. "Fear has torment" (1 John 4:18). It gives no rest, no peace to the mind. Now this kind of fear is cast out by gospel assurance of forgiveness — not that it may never make an incursion, but it will not be permitted to dominate. Assurance gives the soul a hope and expectation of the glory that will be revealed, and it secretly stirs the soul up and enlivens it in preparation for that glory. This is the hope that "does not disappoint" (Romans 5:5), because it will never leave the soul exposed to failure and shame. Wherever there is the root of assurance, there will be this fruit of hope. The proper focus of this hope is things absent, invisible, and eternal — the promised reward in all its dimensions. This hope reaches out in times of distress, temptation, failure, and

under a sense of sin's guilt and power. From it springs a source of secret relief in the soul — something that calms the heart and quiets the spirit in the midst of all storms and disturbances. Now, just as wherever there is assurance there will be this hope, so wherever this secret, relieving hope is found, it grows on no other root than that of assurance. Among other things this hope accomplishes, let me give one comprehensive example: it will carry those who possess it to a willingness to die for the testimony of Jesus, even in the most terrible manner. The approach and manner of death add to its terror. But this is nothing compared to what death means for those who see through it as a passage into the eternity that follows. For a person to choose death over life, in the most terrible form, while expecting an eternity to follow — this can only come from a deep-rooted persuasion of an interest in eternal blessedness. I am convinced that there are hundreds who, on the basis of genuine gospel conviction, would embrace the stake for the testimony of Jesus, even though they are currently full of doubts and fears about their own acceptance with God. But since these things are aside from my main purpose, I will not pursue them further. The point of this rule is practical. Let the soul make sure it is well acquainted with the nature of what it seeks. Let it acknowledge the lack of what it does not yet have, but let it not deny what it does have — which may be far more than it realizes. The fourth rule. Remove the hindrances to believing by thoroughly searching out sin. Rules and directions for that duty. Whatever your condition may be, and whatever your perception of it, continue waiting for a better outcome. Do not give up and throw away your hope. This rule contains the essence of the great example given to us in this psalm. When forgiveness in God is discovered, even though no

personal interest in it is yet obtained, the soul is still to wait — and in waiting, to hope. The Holy Spirit tells us that "light is sown for the righteous, and gladness for the upright in heart" (Psalm 97:11). Light and gladness are sown for them. Deliverance from darkness — from misunderstandings about God, from harsh and suspicious thoughts about one's own condition — is what a soul in distress longs for. Now, says the Holy Spirit, these things are sown for the righteous. Does the farmer, after casting his seed into the earth, immediately expect it to spring up the next day or the next week? No. His God, as the prophet says, instructs him with good sense and teaches him — namely, what he must do and how he must wait. He gives time for the seed to grow and then for the harvest to ripen. Should we not also be instructed by Him? "Behold," says James, "the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, and has long patience for it, until it receives the early and latter rain" (James 5:7). And if light is sown for those in darkness, shall they smother the seed under the soil or destroy the tender blade by their impatience? Waiting is the only path to stability and assurance. We cannot reach it by hurrying. In fact, nothing pushes the goal further away than undue haste. The reason is that a sense of personal interest in forgiveness and acceptance is given to the soul by a sovereign act of grace from God. It cannot be obtained by any rational conclusions or logical deductions we can make. All we can do in our reasoning and self-examination is to remove hindrances and prepare the way for the sovereign communication of it from God. The peace and rest we seek come from pure sovereign grace. "When He gives quietness, who then can make trouble? And when He hides His face, who then can behold Him?" (Job 34:29). What is the proper way to receive what comes from sovereignty and free

grace? Does not the nature of the thing itself tell us? It is by waiting. So if impatience drives the soul into resentment, or weariness makes it lazy — which are the two ways people fall short in waiting — they cut themselves off from the very thing they seek. And let no one think they can work out their difficulties any other way. Their own reasoning will not bring them to any lasting settlement. David's experience shows this (Psalm 30:6-7). He reasoned with himself like this: the person whose mountain is made strong, the one God defends — he will never be moved or shaken. That is a statement of confidence and triumph. But what was the outcome? In the middle of these happy thoughts, God hid His face, and David was troubled. He could no longer sustain his comfort from such reasoning, because comfort had never really come from his own arguments. It had come from the shining of God's presence, not from any reasoning of his own. So let no disappointment, no discouragement, no weariness make us give up the duty and practice of waiting. The church does the same in Lamentations 3:21: "This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope." What does she call to mind? This: "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because His compassions never fail" (verse 22). "They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness." "I will still hope. I will continue waiting, because of never-failing compassion, because of endless mercies, because of God's own faithfulness." And from this she draws a blessed conclusion (verse 26): "It is good that one should hope and wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord." This is our third rule. It is good to hope and wait, whatever our present condition may be, and not to give up — unless we want to guarantee failure. But we should also add the following: If there is a lot of rubble left in the foundation of the building, it is no won-

der the whole structure always shakes and totters. Leaving any sin unexamined to the bottom will poison all our comfort. David knew this. When dealing with God in his distresses, he prayed that God would not remember the sins and transgressions of his youth (Psalm 25:7). Youth is often a time of great carelessness and forgetfulness of God. Many stains and spots are usually brought on the soul during that period. "Childhood and youth are vanity" (Ecclesiastes 11:10). Not because they quickly pass away, but because they are usually spent in emptiness, as the following advice to "remember your Creator in the days of your youth" (Ecclesiastes 12:1) makes clear. Many people's approach is to wear such things out of memory and never walk with a sense of their past foolishness and madness, never making those sins the subject of thorough spiritual reckoning. I am speaking of the saints themselves. For with others who live under the means of grace, whom God intends to bring under conviction at some point, the usual course is different. Perhaps they receive a scare or conviction that produces a change of heart — not a new heart, but a different heart. A different heart, but not a new heart. So a different course of life, a different profession, and different actions flow from this change. They content themselves with this transformation. But a later reckoning may come, to their own disturbance and as an unconquerable hindrance to their peace and comfort. This was the case with Job (Job 13:26): "He makes me possess the sins of my youth." God filled his heart, his thoughts, his mind with these sins. He made them stay with him so that he possessed them — they were present with him as a settled inheritance. He made the sins of his youth the sufferings of his old age. And it is a sobering thing, as someone has said, when youthful sins and aging bones meet together — as Zophar

puts it (Job 20:11): "His bones are full of the sins of his youth." The carefree attitudes of some people's youth prepare the way for painful reckoning in their old age. Take heed, young ones. You are doing things now that will remain with you into old age — if not into eternity. Job calls this possession of the sins of youth "the writing of bitter things against him." And indeed it is impossible for sin not to be bitter at one time or another. God calls it "a root that bears gall and wormwood" (Deuteronomy 29:18). "A root of bitterness springing up to cause defilement" (Hebrews 12:15). This, then, must be searched out to the bottom. Israel will not have success or peace while there is an Achan in the camp. Neither success in overcoming temptation nor comfort in believing can be expected while any Achan — any unexamined sin — lies hidden in the heart. Let people go over those sins and others of similar nature, which can be grouped under the same general categories, as described. And if they find they have contracted the guilt of any of them, let them not be surprised that they are still wandering in the fog without comfort. Instead, let them marvel at the riches of God's patience, grace, and forbearance — that they have not been utterly cast out of all hope of finding acceptance with Him. This will speed the end of their trouble, according to the direction given. 2. Let them organize the review of their lives under specific headings and seasons that will give them a clearer and more distinct view of their conduct. For example: First, regarding the state of their inner life, let them consider: First, the unregenerate period of their lives — everything before their conversion, before they were brought to God. If there were any great and notable eruptions of sin against God during that time, God requires that a deep awareness of them be maintained. Consider how often we find Paul reviewing the sins

of his life and conduct before his conversion. "I was violent, and a blasphemer," he says. Such reflections ought to be prompted by any great, provoking occasions of sin, to keep people humble and to make them feel the constant need for pardoning grace and mercy. If such sins lie neglected and are not considered according to their seriousness, they will weaken the soul in its comforts and in its communion with God. If there were any clear intimations of God's goodwill and love to the soul, which were then broken off through neglect, unworthiness, or the love of sin, those too must be reviewed. There are two kinds of sins that effectively undermine our future peace and comfort, and that should therefore be frequently examined. First, sins that because of their aggravating circumstances carried some special unkindness toward God. Such are sins committed after warnings, after experiences of God's love, after specific commitments against them — relapses, failures in duty, and similar offenses. These kinds of sins carry much unkindness with them and will be searched out if we try to hide them. 2. Sins that caused scandal — whether to a few, to many, or even to a single person who is or may be affected by us. The aggravating weight of such sins is obvious. It is rare that we fully do our duty or respond to God's will in any situation He brings us into. And if our failures in this area are not handled properly, they will certainly hinder and disrupt our peace. Rule V: The fifth rule. The sixth rule: the distinction between faith and spiritual sense. Learn to distinguish between unbelief and jealousy. There is a twofold unbelief. (1) There is a universal, total unbelief — the kind found in all unregenerate persons. They have no faith at all, no real saving faith. I am not speaking of this. It is easily distinguished from any grace, since it is the complete enemy and opposite of all grace. (2) There

is a partial, specific unbelief that consists in wavering at or questioning the promises. This is displeasing to God — a sin attended by more aggravating circumstances than people usually realize, though they commonly excuse it in themselves and are rarely convicted of it. It is clearly described in Psalm 78:19-20. God had promised His presence to the people in the wilderness — to feed, sustain, and preserve them. How did they receive these promises from God? "Can He give bread?" they asked. "Can He provide meat for His people?" (verse 20). What great sin or offense is there in this question? In verse 19, it says: This is called "speaking against God." "They spoke against God; they said, 'Can God prepare a table in the wilderness?'" Unbelief that questions the promises is a speaking against God — a limiting of the Holy One of Israel, as it is called in verse 41. It assigns boundaries to His goodness, power, kindness, and grace based on what we find in ourselves — something He detests. By this unbelief we make God like ourselves. This is what it means to limit Him: to expect no more from Him than what we ourselves can do, or what we can understand others doing. You will say this was a great sin in the Israelites because they had no reason to doubt or question God's promises, since they had already experienced such great deliverances. We are glad to think so now. But when they were so many thousands of families without a single piece of bread or drop of water in a howling wilderness, things did not look the same to them as they do to us in hindsight. We are always ready to suppose that our reasons for doubting are perfectly valid. Everyone assumes their circumstances are more compelling than anyone else's. But no matter what we claim, this is speaking against God, limiting Him — and it is what keeps us from steadfast reliance on Him. But there is also a spiritual jeal-

ousy that resembles unbelief on the surface, though its root is quite different. "Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm," says the bride, "for jealousy is cruel as the grave" (Song of Solomon 8:6). "I cannot bear this distance from you, these fears of being disregarded by you." "Set me as a seal on your heart." Now this spiritual jealousy is the anxious concern of a believing soul that has a sincere, deep love for Christ but lacks the full assurance of His love in return. All groundless jealousy arises from a hidden sense of unworthiness in the person who feels it, combined with a high regard for the one who is the object of their love. It is the same with this spiritual jealousy. Its root is love — sincere love that cannot be quenched by many waters or drowned by floods (Song of Solomon 8:7). This love fills the soul with exalted thoughts of the glorious excellencies of Christ and with admiration of Him. These are mixed with a deep sense of its own unworthiness and distance from Him. Now if these thoughts — on the one hand about Christ's glory and on the other about one's own unworthiness — are not properly directed and managed by faith, which alone can hold them in balance, the soul will be filled with fears and anxious concerns. This condition may sometimes be mistaken for questioning the promises of God, and what is actually an overflow of love may be judged as a deficiency of faith. Do not confuse these two, or much needless unrest will follow in the judgment you make about your condition. How, then, can we tell them apart? I answer briefly: 1. Unbelief that works by questioning God's promises is a weakening, discouraging, draining thing. It takes away the life and energy of the soul and makes it sluggish and indifferent toward the duties of obedience. The more a person questions God's promises, the less life, power, joy, and delight in obedience that person has.

For faith is the root and spring of all other graces, and as faith thrives or declines, so do they all. People sometimes think that their uncertainty about God's love and about acceptance through the forgiveness of sin actually drives them to greater diligence in their duties. Perhaps it does for some — this is indeed the condition of many. But what kind of duties are these, and how are they performed? And does God accept them? The duties themselves are legalistic — a label that comes not from their substance or content (since they may be the same duties faith produces) but from their motivation and their goal. In this case, both are legalistic: their motivation is legal fear, and their goal is legal righteousness. The whole effort amounts to working for life rather than working from life. In plain terms, they are performed with a spirit of bondage — without love, joy, freedom, or delight — merely to quiet the conscience or appease God. Those are the purposes they serve. And does God accept them? No matter how many such duties are multiplied, God everywhere testifies that He detests them. This, then, is what unbelief mixed with convictions will produce. It is the natural way for unbelief to express itself when the soul is under the power of conviction. But when it comes to genuine gospel obedience in all its duties — carried on in communion with God through Christ, with delight in Him — unbelief destroys all of this. Spiritual jealousy, on the other hand, has the opposite effect. It cheers, enlivens, and enlarges the soul. It stirs up activity, earnestness, and energy in its longings and desires for Christ. "Jealousy is fierce as the grave," says the bride, "therefore set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm." It makes the soul restlessly long for nearer, more vivid, and more assured communion with Christ. It stirs up vigorous desires and active pursuit. Every doubt and

fear it generates about the love of Christ actually pushes the soul toward greater earnestness after Him, not away from Him. Unbelief that works by questioning the promises is entirely self-centered. It begins and ends with self. Self-love — in its desire for freedom from guilt, danger, and punishment — is its life and soul. As long as this goal can be reached, it finds no delight in God Himself. Nor does it care by what means the goal is achieved, as long as it is achieved. If such people can gain any assurance that they will be freed from death and hell — whether by the works of the law or by any other means — they are satisfied. Spiritual jealousy, by contrast, fills the mind with many and varied thoughts about Christ, constantly presenting Him as more and more worthy of love and desire. The bride does exactly this on a similar occasion, as you can see in detail in Song of Solomon 5:9-16, where she gives a full and glowing description of her beloved to those who ask about him. These different things can be distinguished and discerned in these ways. Rule VI: Learn to distinguish between faith and spiritual sense. This rule comes from the apostle in 2 Corinthians 5:7: "We walk by faith, not by sight." It is primarily the sight of glory that is intended here. But faith and sense of any kind are clearly distinct. What is believed may not be felt. Indeed, it is God's will and command that faith should stand and do its work where all sense fails (Isaiah 50:10). And spiritual sense works the same way as natural sense in this regard. Thomas refused to believe unless he could see the object of his faith with his eyes or touch it with his hands. But our Savior said: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29). If we will believe nothing about God — about His love, His grace, or our acceptance with Him — beyond what we can spiritually feel and

sense in our hearts, we are no better than Thomas. Tangible spiritual impressions of God's love are great springs of joy, but they are not absolutely necessary for peace or for the well-ordered conduct of gospel obedience. We are willing to believe Him as long as the certainty of our experience backs it up. But if that is how we deal with God, what is praiseworthy in it? The prophet tells us what it means to believe (Isaiah 50:10). When nothing is left — outward or visible — to support us, then to rest quietly on God: that is believing. So Psalm 73:26 teaches the same thing. And the apostle, using the example of Abraham, shows us what it is to believe with respect to a specific promise (Romans 4:18). "Against hope, he believed in hope." When Abraham could see no outward ordinary means for the fulfillment of the promise, when countless objections arose against it, he still believed — because God had spoken it. (1) Our acceptance with God through Christ — which is essentially the same as the forgiveness of sin we have been discussing. And (2) the grace of sanctification from God in Christ. Of each of these there is a spiritual sense or experience to be obtained. This peace is the rest and composure of the soul emerging from trouble, based on the reconciliation and friendship established with God through Christ. And like all peace, it has two parts: first, freedom from war, trouble, and distress; and second, rest, satisfaction, and contentment. And this second part, at least, belongs to the spiritual sense we are asking about. Beyond this, there is joy in the Holy Spirit — called "joy unspeakable and full of glory" (1 Peter 1:8) — as well as glorying in God (Isaiah 45:25), along with many similar effects that flow from "the love of God poured out in our hearts" (Romans 5:5). "Yes," you say, "these are the things I aim at. These are what I want to experience and be filled with." It is this

peace, this joy, this glorying in the Lord that you long to possess. And I say you do well to seek them — they are excellent blessings. But if you treat these things as belonging to the essence of faith — without which you can have no real interest in forgiveness — you are making a fundamental mistake. These things are not the same as believing, nor are they direct, automatic effects of it — things that are immediately produced wherever faith exists. They are additional blessings of faith that God grants according to His sovereign will. The way for any soul to receive them is to wait on the sovereignty of God's grace, who creates peace as it pleases Him. The person, then, who equates believing with experiencing these things and refuses to believe he has faith until he possesses them is walking on the wrong path entirely. And it may be that it is not God's will for you ever to be entrusted with them. Perhaps it would not be for your benefit. Some servants who are poor managers of money must have their wages kept for them until year's end, or it will do them no good. Perhaps some believers would be such spendthrifts of satisfying peace and joy, and would be so distracted by them from attending to necessary duties, that in love God withholds them. It is from the same care and love that peace and joy are withheld from some believers and granted to others. You are therefore to receive forgiveness by a pure act of believing, in the way and manner described at length earlier. And do not think that it is not genuinely in you simply because you do not constantly feel it in your heart. See to it in the meantime that your faith produces obedience, and God in due time will cause it to produce peace as well. The seventh rule. This is the grace we have from God in Christ for our sanctification. When the soul cannot find this grace in itself — when it can find no evidence of any grace from God, no

fruit of the Spirit — it concludes that its condition is bad. It is indeed bad for anyone who has no grace at all. But the person who cannot find grace is not necessarily the same as the person who has none. These are different things. A person may have grace and yet not have it actively working at certain times. He may have grace for spiritual life while lacking it for spiritual comfort. Grace may need to be "stirred up," as Paul says (2 Timothy 1:6). And a person may have grace actively working in him and yet not know it or sense that it is active. We frequently see people under great temptation believing they have no grace at all, while at that very moment displaying the clearest evidence of grace in their very complaints and longings. Heman complains that he was free among the dead — a man of no strength (Psalm 88:4-5) — as someone who had no spiritual life, no grace. This tormented his mind and nearly drove him to distraction (verse 15). And yet there can be no greater expressions of faith and love toward God than those mixed into his very complaints. These things — faith and sense — must be carefully distinguished. And no soul should conclude that because it lacks the one, it lacks the other — that because it has no joy and peace, it therefore has no faith and no genuine interest in forgiveness. Do not mix foundation work and building work together. The eighth rule: spend no time in fruitless complaints. Do not mix foundation work and building work together. Our foundation in dealing with God is Christ alone — pure grace and pardon in Him. Our building is in and through holiness and obedience. Both are necessary, but they must not be confused. And there are great mistakes in this area that bring great confusion to people's souls. Some spend their whole lives laying the foundation and are never able to build on it in a way that comforts them

or honors God. The reason is that they keep mixing into the foundation stones that belong only to the building above it. They keep bringing their obedience, their duties, their mortification of sin, and similar things into the foundation. These are precious building materials, but they are unfit to be laid first, bearing the entire weight of the structure. The foundation must be laid, as we said, in pure grace, mercy, and pardon through the blood of Christ. The soul is to accept this and rest in it simply as grace, without considering anything in itself as any basis for it — doing so by faith alone. And because these things — grace and works — will not mix, people spend fruitless effort trying to combine them all their days. But if the foundation is of grace, it is not of works at all, "for otherwise grace is no longer grace" (Romans 11:6). If anything of our own is mixed with grace in this matter, it completely destroys the nature of grace. And if grace is not preserved intact, the whole foundation is overthrown. But does this lead to lawlessness? Does this make obedience, holiness, duties, mortification of sin, and godly living useless and unnecessary? Absolutely not. In fact, this is the only way to order them rightly for the glory of God. Do we have nothing to do but lay the foundation? No — all our days we are to build on it, once it is firmly and soundly laid. And obedience, holiness, duties, and mortification are the means and materials of our building up. This, then, is what the soul must do if it wants to come to peace and stability. Let it release all former efforts, if it has been engaged in the wrong kind. Let it simply receive, accept, and hold fast to pure grace, mercy, and pardon, with a full recognition that in itself it has nothing to contribute to the foundation — relying on faith alone. No other foundation can anyone lay. Do not move on from here until this work is done well. Do not stop your earnest effort to

bring your heart to rest in this righteousness of God and to bring your soul into the obedience of faith. Do not move on until this is accomplished. If you have been following a different path — trying to earn an interest in the pardon of sin through your own efforts and finding yourself continually disappointed — that is the expected outcome. Return here, then. Bring this foundation work to a blessed conclusion in the blood of Christ. And when that is done, build with all your might — but not before. It is equally destructive to bring the duties of our obedience — any reliance on them, any hopes pinned to them — into the foundation itself. But these things, being distinct in themselves, must be handled distinctly in the soul. Confusing them is the source of much confusion. In a muddled way, people try to maintain a life of grace and duty, which in their proper places should be joined together but never mixed up as one and the same thing. Fruitless and spiritless complaints — bemoaning themselves and their condition — become the substance of many people's spiritual lives. If they can raise objections against themselves and construct complaints out of their circumstances, they think they have done their duty. I have known some who spent a great part of their time going from one person to another with their objections and complaints, never mixing in any serious effort toward faith, and finding their condition no better year after year. These things are contrary to the life of faith. It is good, certainly, in our spiritual distresses to go to those who are equipped with the tongue of the learned, to speak a word in season to weary souls. But for people to fill their minds and imaginations with their own objections and complaints, never trying to mix them with faith, is the way to make their condition worse, not better. And yet some, I am afraid, may take pleasure in this kind of

behavior, as if it had some special spiritual distinction to it. Others fall into a different pattern: They are occupied mostly with spiritless despondency. And in some cases these feelings are made worse by their natural temperament or physical ailments. We see examples of this every day. Now what is the benefit of these things? What did Zion gain by crying, "The Lord has forsaken me, and my God has forgotten me"? What did David gain by saying, "I will perish one day by the hand of Saul"? Undoubtedly they only hurt themselves. Consider how David rouses himself when he finds his mind inclined to this pattern. After saying, "Why do You cast me off, O God? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?" he quickly rebukes and collects himself: "Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God!" Do you think you will improve your situation by wishing it were better, or complaining that it is so bad? Are your complaints about lack of health, lack of success, lack of provision things you settle for in ordinary life? In such matters you would take an active, industrious course toward a remedy or relief. In things of the smallest importance in this world and this life, you would not content yourself with wishing and complaining. As though industry in using natural means for natural ends were God's plan, but diligence in using spiritual means for spiritual ends were not equally appointed by Him! What does Scripture call for in your condition? Is it not industry and activity of spirit? And what does the nature of the situation require? Distress that one still hopes to overcome clearly calls for effort and action. If you are past hope, complaining is useless. If you are not past hope, why do you give yourself over to despondency? Our Savior tells us that "the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by

force" (Matthew 11:12). He is not speaking of the outward violence of its enemies seeking to destroy it, but of the spiritual earnestness and forcefulness that people use in pursuing their interest in it. There is, then, a holy violence — a restless activity and vigor of spirit — to be exercised in pursuing an interest in this kingdom. Apply this to your condition. Are you in depths and doubts, wavering and uncertain, not knowing your condition or whether you have any interest in forgiveness? Are you tossed back and forth between hopes and fears, lacking peace, comfort, and stability? Then why do you lie on your face in despondency? These spiritual activities — prayer, meditation, obedience, self-examination — are not peace itself, and they are not assurance. But they are part of the means God has appointed for obtaining them. "Give all diligence to make your calling and election sure" (2 Peter 1:10). "But," says the soul, "I have no certainty. I am afflicted and tossed and not comforted. My heart will not settle. My thoughts are confused and entangled." "There is, I admit, forgiveness with God, but I rightly fear that I will never be made a partaker of it." What is the usual course taken by those who hear such complaints? Mostly they have a good opinion of the person who brings them. They judge them to be godly and holy, though much afflicted. They feel sympathy and compassion and set about trying to relieve them. By various approaches and applications they seek to give comfort in the person's present state. But what is the outcome? Does this relief not usually prove to be like the morning cloud and the early dew — a little refreshment that quickly evaporates? My answer is: I do not condemn this approach, and I would not have anyone left comfortless in their depths. But I would offer two cautions: 1. Great spiritual wisdom and discernment are required in administering consola-

tion to distressed souls. If in any area the tongue of the spiritually wise is needed, it is here — in speaking the right word at the right time to those who are weary. Indiscriminately applying gospel comforts without first making a correct assessment of the person's true state and condition may actually do more harm than good. And let people be careful to whom they entrust their souls and consciences — not to those who simply have ready-made comforts for every complaint. If counsel and consolation of this kind are given, they should be specific and distinct from the counsel we are discussing now — the counsel of watchfulness, diligence, and active pursuit. For let us see what the Holy Spirit advises in this condition for those who want to make their calling and election sure (2 Peter 1:5-11). "You who are now on the edges of the kingdom, who do not know whether you belong to it or not — you shall have an entrance into the kingdom of our Lord abundantly supplied to you." This is the advice the Holy Spirit gives in this case, and this is the blessed promise attached to following it. And the compassionate course of administering consolation is not to be separated from it. But, you may say, you use diligence and yet make no progress. But do you actually use diligence? Do you pursue study, effort — all diligence — diligence at all times, in all the ways God has appointed, with all the means available? Do these things abound in you? You say you cannot do all this because you are so weak, so unwell. But really you will not — you will not part with your ease, you will not deny your other interests, you will not press through difficulties. Is this giving all diligence? Is this working out our salvation with fear and trembling? And can we not see professing believers indulging themselves in vanity, folly, anger, envy, laziness, and the like — and then complaining that they have no peace, no

assurance, no comfort? God forbid it should be otherwise with you, or that we should try to speak peace to you in such a condition. To hear of someone who walks lazily and carelessly, who indulges his sins, and then to find him complaining that he has no peace or assurance — this deserves a rebuke, not comfort. Spiritless complaints and excuses designed to avoid vigorous spiritual effort must be set aside. If they are not, ordinarily no comfort will follow. We have a powerful example of this in the bride (Song of Solomon 5:2-8). She is drowsy and unwilling to respond to communion with Christ, to which she is invited (verse 2). This leads her to make excuses for not answering. As a result, Christ withdraws His presence from her and leaves her without her former comforts (verse 6). What does she do? She rises, goes out, seeks, inquires — she is restless in using every means until she finds him. This must be the course of everyone who would achieve the same result. Spiritual peace and laziness will never dwell together in the same soul and conscience. Rule IX: The ninth rule. Watch out for improper expressions about God and His ways during times of distress. In times of doubt, distress, and confusion, guard against harsh thoughts about God, hasty and unconsidered statements about Him or His ways. These arise in three situations: 1. In deep perplexities of mind caused by some pressing terror from the Lord. 2. During the long, wearisome continuation of some tempting distress. We have many examples of this, some of which we will mention. 3. In spiritual disappointments caused by the strength of sinful desires or temptation. When a person has perhaps recovered through grace from a painful sense of some sin's guilt, or has resisted some powerful temptation — and then falls into the same sin or is overcome by the same temptation again. Consider an example

or two of each kind. The first we find in Job, at the height of his trials and terrors from the Lord. See, among other passages, Job 10:3: "Is it good for You," he says to God, "that You should oppress, that You should despise the work of Your hands?" Poor worms that we are — who are we dealing with? Who would say to a king, "You are wicked," or to princes, "You are ungodly"? And will we speak this way to the God of heaven and earth? And see what conclusions he draws from such thoughts: Job 14:15-17: "You number my steps. Do You not watch over my sin? My transgression is sealed up in a bag, and You sew up my iniquity." He charges God with being his enemy — one who watched for every opportunity against him, who seemed to be glad when he stumbled, who sealed up his sins like evidence to be used against him later. If that had actually been God's disposition toward him, he would have perished forever, as he himself acknowledged elsewhere. The second kind we find in the prophet Jeremiah (Lamentations 3:18): "I said, 'My strength and my hope have perished from the Lord.'" Present grace in spiritual strength and future expectation of mercy — both are gone. And what comes from this? Hidden harsh thoughts about God Himself are bred by it: "When I cry out and shout, He shuts out my prayer" (verse 8). "You have covered Yourself with a cloud, so that no prayer can get through" (verse 44). These things are grievous to God and in no way helpful to the soul in its condition. In fact, they increasingly unfit the soul for every duty that might lead to its relief and deliverance. The same was true of Jonah (Jonah 2:4): "I said, 'I have been cast out of Your sight.'" All is lost and gone. I might as well give up as keep fighting; I am only laboring in vain. Similar complaints also fell from Heman in his distress (Psalm 88). The general who heard one of

his soldiers cry out under a wound, "I am killed! I am killed!" sent word to him: "You may be wounded, but you are not killed. That is not your determination to make." It is not for every private soldier in every danger to pass judgment on the battle. That is the work of the general. Jesus Christ is the captain of our salvation. He has undertaken to lead and guide our souls through all our difficulties and temptations. Our duty is to fight and press forward. His work is to manage the outcome, and to Him it must be entrusted. So remember these things: First, it is not for you to take Christ's judgment out of His hands and pass sentence on your own soul. Judgment regarding the state and condition of people is committed to Christ, and to Him it must be left. We addressed this in our first rule, and it is especially relevant in the situation being discussed. Self-judgment regarding sin and what it deserves is our duty. But judging our state and condition in relation to the remedy God has provided is the office and work of Jesus Christ, to whom it must be submitted. Consider that harsh thoughts about what God will do with you, and grim, despairing sentences pronounced against yourself, tend to produce worse things in your soul over time. It may be that when a person's perplexities are at their peak and the saddest statements are practically forced out of them, they have no ill intent behind them. But such thoughts are very apt to infect the mind with other harmful inclinations. After a while, they will lead the soul to view God as an enemy — as one who takes no delight in it. And what happens when the soul begins to view God as an enemy? No one will continue to love for long where they expect nothing in return. Do not allow your mind to be infected with such thoughts, and do not dishonor God with any statements that flow from them. Make the most of the slightest appearances of

God's grace or pardon. If you want to reach stability and a comforting assurance of an interest in forgiveness through the blood of Christ, make the most of every appearance of grace, however small. The bride notices her husband and rejoices in him when he stands behind the wall, when he does nothing more than look through the lattice (Song of Solomon 2:9). She seizes upon the slightest glimpse of him to support her heart and stir up her affections toward him. People in danger do not sit still and wait until something appears that will guarantee their rescue. They grab hold of anything — a plank, a piece of the ship — that offers even a chance of preservation. And God does, in many places, express encouragements that give the soul little more than a possibility of reaching what it seeks. For example, Zephaniah 2:3: "Perhaps you will be hidden in the day of the Lord's anger." And Joel 2:14: "Who knows whether He will turn and relent and leave a blessing behind Him?" Perhaps we will be sheltered. Perhaps we will receive a blessing. This was the best ground Jonathan had for his great undertaking against the enemies of God (1 Samuel 14:6): "Perhaps the Lord will work for us." And why does God sometimes make these seemingly uncertain hints of grace and mercy? Is it so that we should ignore them and give up? No — His purpose is that we should seize upon them, lay hold of them, and make the most of even the slightest appearances of grace. This kind of response shows that we value His favor and will not let even a glimmer of it pass unnoticed. When people are on a voyage at sea and run into a storm that continues and threatens to overwhelm them, if after many days any sign of land appears, even at a great distance, their spirits revive. They set their course toward it, using whatever means they have. The soul we are describing is afflicted and tossed

and not comforted. In the intimation of grace and pardon, there is a distant discovery of some relief. "This may be Christ; this may be forgiveness." The soul becomes convinced of this — it cannot deny that at a certain time, under certain circumstances, in certain duties, it was persuaded that grace and mercy were real and available. This is enough to set its course steadily in that direction — to press forward toward the harbor that will give it rest and peace. Consider how little David had to bring his soul to composure in his great distress (2 Samuel 15:25-26): "If I find favor in the eyes of the Lord, He will bring me back and show me the ark and His dwelling place. But if He says, 'I have no delight in you,' here I am — let Him do to me as seems good to Him." He has nothing but sovereign grace to rest on, and to that he gives himself up. Faith is indeed the soul's venture for eternity. It is a venture regarding one's eternal condition. The soul must either cling to itself and its own empty hopes of a righteousness of its own, or it must abandon all such expectations and cast itself on the grace and mercy of God in Christ. Now if all the former paths are harmful and futile — if the best of them is a direct opposition to the gospel — what remains but to let go and trust the grace that is offered?

To close these general rules, I add one final direction: consider specifically where the problem lies — what it is that keeps you from peace through a settled persuasion that you have an interest in gospel pardon. Do not keep drifting up and down in vague generalities and uncertainties. Drive things to a specific point so that it can be tested whether that thing truly has the power to keep you in your present entanglement and discouragement. Search out your wound, so that it can be determined whether it is curable.

We cannot expect people to identify their own specific concerns so that they can be addressed one by one. Instead, we must ourselves organize the various distresses that trouble the minds of people in this matter into general categories and speak to them according to the Word of truth. Individual cases, as varied by their circumstances, are endless. They cannot be adequately addressed in a general instruction like this; they must be left to occasional conversations as particular cases are brought to those entrusted with ministering the mysteries of God. Others have already labored in this area and their work is in wide use. It must be said, however, as was observed before, that specific cases are so shaped by their particular circumstances that it is very rare for any general treatment of them to be entirely adequate or well matched to the way those going through them experience them. I will therefore bring things under some general headings to which most of the objections that troubled sinners raise against their own peace may be reduced, and leave the application of that light to the relief of individual souls as God is pleased to make it effective.

Second General Part of the Application: Grounds of Spiritual Unrest Considered. The first ground: Afflictions. The ways afflictions are magnified in the mind, and rules for dealing with them.

What lies before us now is the second part of the second general application drawn from the truth we have been considering. Our aim is to lead souls toward peace with God through a gracious persuasion of their interest in the forgiveness that is with Him. This part consists, as was stated, in a consideration of some of the distressing doubts that trouble the minds of people and keep them from settling into peace.

First, such distresses and objections against the soul's peace and acceptance with God arise from afflictions. They have done so in times past, and they do so in many people today. Afflictions, when their weight is amplified in the mind by their nature or accompanying circumstances, often affect the mind in various ways — sometimes so darkening it as to produce the thought that all afflictions are messengers of wrath, all signs of God's displeasure, and therefore proof that one is not pardoned or accepted with God.

This is a time of great affliction for many people, and some of those afflictions come with countless aggravating circumstances. Some have come with a dreadful and sudden shock — things that do not occur in ordinary providence even across many generations. Such is the condition of those who have been brought to the most extreme loss by the recent great fire; some have had their entire families and all their descendants taken from them; within a few days they have been suddenly bereaved, as in a plague. Some, in their own persons or through those close to them, have endured long and severe trials through oppression and persecution. These things have varied effects on the minds of people. Some cry out with that wicked king, 'This evil is from the Lord; why should we wait for Him any longer?' and give themselves over to seeking comfort in their own lusts. Some bear up under their troubles with natural strength of spirit. Some have received a sanctified and fruitful use of their trials and found joy in the Lord. But many go heavily under their burdens, their minds darkened by many misunderstandings of God's love and of their personal interest in His grace. It is not out of place, therefore, to speak briefly to this source of trouble as we begin this section. Outward troubles are often the occasion, if not the direct cause, of great inward distress.

You know how the saints of old expressed their experience of them and their struggles with them. David's complaints are well known to all who have any genuine communion with God in such things; so are those of Job, Heman, Jonah, Jeremiah, and others. They do not complain only of their troubles, but of their sense of God's displeasure in and through them — of His hiding His face while they were under such trials.

It is not otherwise today, as those who speak with many people know well — people who are either suddenly struck by unexpected troubles or worn down by trials and the failure of long-hoped-for relief. They consider their condition both in itself and in comparison to others, and on both counts are filled with dark thoughts and despondency. One says: 'I am rolled from one trial to another; the clouds return again after the rain. All God's waves and breakers pass over me. In my own person I am pressed with sickness, pain, and trouble; in those close to me, with their sins, failures, or death; in my outward condition, with loss, poverty, and damaged reputation — I am like a withered branch. Surely if God had any special care for my soul, it would not be this way, or some timely end would have been put to all this.' Then they look over at some other professing Christians and see their tables spread day after day, the Lord's favor shining constantly on their households, their every desire granted. Nothing grievous from this world touches them. And they think: 'Surely if I had an interest in His grace and in pardon, the God of Israel would not chase after a flea in the mountains, or set Himself in battle array against a leaf blown by the wind. He would spare me a little and leave me alone for a moment. But as things stand with me, I fear my way is hidden from the Lord, and the justice due me escapes His notice.' Thoughts of this

kind torment people's minds and keep them from receiving the strong comfort God is abundantly willing to give them through a settled persuasion of their blessed interest in the forgiveness that is with Him.

This was exactly David's situation — or at least these outward troubles were a major part of the depths from which he cried out for relief through a sense of pardon, grace, and redemption with God.

In response to these complaints, I answer first: so many excellent things have been said about afflictions — their necessity, their usefulness, and so on — and such blessed purposes are assigned to them, which in many people have actually been accomplished, that someone unfamiliar with the real experience of affliction might think it impossible for anyone to be shaken in their confidence in God's love on that account. But as the apostle tells us, no affliction is pleasant at the time — it is painful. And the very person who at the end of his trials made the solemn declaration that it was good for him to have been afflicted was, as we have seen, deeply distressed while going through them. There are therefore several accompanying circumstances of severe afflictions that seem to set them apart from the general rule and the promises of love and grace.

1. The memory of past and buried sins and failures lies hidden within many afflictions. It was this way with Job. "You make me," he says, "to possess the sins of my youth." See his plea to this effect in Job 13:23-27. In the middle of his troubles and distresses, God revived in his spirit a sense of former sins — even the sins of his youth — and made him possess them. God filled his soul and mind with thoughts of them and anxiety about them. This made him fear

that God was his enemy and would continue to deal with him severely. It was the same with Joseph's brothers in their distress (Genesis 42:21): "They said to one another, 'We are truly guilty concerning our brother, because we saw the anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us, and we would not listen. That is why this distress has come upon us.'" And in verse 22: "Behold, his blood is now required of us." Their distress revived a deep and perplexing sense of guilt from a sin committed many years earlier, along with all its aggravating circumstances. This stripped them of all their comforts and relief, filling them with confusion and trouble — even though they were completely innocent of the charge currently brought against them. The same thing happened with the widow of Zarephath, with whom Elijah stayed during the famine. When her son died — and his death seems to have been somewhat extraordinary — she cried out to the prophet: "What do I have to do with you, O man of God? Have you come to call my sins to remembrance and to kill my son?" (1 Kings 17:18). It seems she had contracted guilt from some great sin in the past. Now, in her severe affliction at the death of her only child, the memory of it was recalled and revived in her soul. This is how deep calls to deep at the noise of God's waterspouts, and all His waves and billows pass over a person (Psalm 42:7). The deep of affliction calls up the deep of sin's guilt, and both together become like billows and waves passing over the soul. We see only the outside of people's afflictions. They usually complain only about what is visible. And it seems like an easy thing to apply comfort and relief to those who are distressed. The rule in this matter is so clear, so frequently repeated and emphasized, and the promises attached to this condition are so many and precious, that everyone has something ready to offer

those who are suffering. But often we know nothing about the bitterness hidden within people's afflictions. They keep that to themselves, and their souls feed on it in secret (Lamentations 3:12). God has stirred up the memory of some great sin or sins, and they see their afflictions as the means by which He is coming to enter into judgment with them. Is it any wonder if they are in darkness and filled with sorrow?

2. In many afflictions there is something that seems new and unique, which takes the soul by surprise. The person cannot easily fit their condition into the general teaching about afflictions. This perplexes and entangles them. It is not affliction in general that troubles them, but some specific element in it that fills the soul with particular dread. They begin to wonder whether anyone else has ever experienced anything like it, and this robs them of the support they might receive from the examples of others. And indeed, when God intends an affliction to cut deeply, He will put an edge on it — in its nature, manner, or circumstances — that makes the soul feel its sharpness. He will not stay within the limits and boundaries we set for ourselves, the ones we think we could handle. Instead, He will stamp it with the imprint of His own greatness and awe, so that He may be acknowledged and submitted to. This was the situation with Naomi. From a full and prosperous condition, she went to a foreign country with her husband and two sons, where all three died, leaving her destitute and poor. So when she gave her account of God's dealings with her, she said: "Do not call me Naomi" (meaning pleasant), "but call me Mara" (meaning bitter), "for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty

has afflicted me?" (Ruth 1:20-21). The same was true of Job, of the widow of Zarephath, and of the widow at Nain who was burying her only child. Again and again in severe afflictions, God is pleased to introduce a particular entangling element that perplexes the soul and darkens all its reasoning about God's love and its own interest in pardon and grace.

Third: in some people, their affections are very strong and deeply attached to lawful things, which makes their nature tender and sensitive, and prone to receiving deep impressions from pressing afflictions. Although this in itself is a good natural disposition, and helps preserve the soul from the hard stubbornness that God abhors, yet if it is not carefully watched, it is apt to entangle the soul with many troubling temptations. The apostle points to two opposite dangers we face under trials and afflictions: 'My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reprov'd by Him' (Hebrews 12:5). A person may either, through natural hardness, despise and be defiant under suffering — or faint and despair, falling short of the end God intends to accomplish through a proper response. Though the temperament we are speaking of is not prone to the first extreme, it is greatly prone to the second — which, if not guarded against, is no less harmful. In such people, when strong emotions are stirred, they cloud and darken the mind and fill it with distorted perceptions about God and about themselves. Everything appears to them through a lens of fear, dread, terror, grief, and every kind of discouragement. This causes them to faint and despair, forming very dark and troubled views of themselves and their condition.

Fourth: afflictions find some people already entangled with powerful corruptions — love of worldly things or worldly pleasures, love of reputation, ambitious plans for leaving a legacy, or perhaps more carnal and sensual sins. When these two things unexpectedly collide — a great affliction and a strong corruption — what an inner upheaval they produce in the soul. It is like a powerful remedy meeting a severe and stubborn disease in the body: there is a violent conflict within, often endangering the very life of the patient. So it is when a severe trial, a sharp blow from God's hand, falls on a person in the midst of pursuing some corruption. The soul is shaken nearly to distraction and can hardly think anything but that God has come to cut the person off in the middle of his sin. Every unmortified corruption fills even the anticipation of affliction with dread. And there is good reason for this — for although God may be merciful to people's sins, if He were to take vengeance on their stubborn, chosen patterns, their condition would be dark and grievous indeed.

Fifth: Satan never fails to seize such opportunities to press his advantage against those under God's hand. It was in the time of suffering that he fell upon the head of the church, making it the very hour of the power of darkness. He will not miss any apparent opportunity to work against Christ's members. And this is his chief line of attack in such seasons: persuading them that God has no regard for them, that they have fallen under His judgment and severity as those who have no share in mercy, pardon, or forgiveness.

For these and similar reasons, then, although afflictions are in general so clearly testified to be pledges and tokens of God's love and care — designed for blessed ends such as conformity to Christ and participation in the holiness of God — yet because of these cir-

cumstances, they often become the means of casting the soul into the depths and hindering it from a refreshing sense of the forgiveness that is with God. That these things may not become a real or lasting cause of inward spiritual distress, the following rules and directions may be observed.

First: not only afflictions in general, but great and manifold afflictions attended with all kinds of aggravating circumstances, are always consistent with the pardon of sin — even after clear tokens and pledges of that pardon and of God's love. Consider Job 7:17-18: 'What is man that You magnify him, and that You are concerned about him, that You examine him every morning and try him every moment?' What the thoughts were that led him to marvel at God's care and love is expressed in verses 12-16. The words there are among the darkest in the entire book; and yet, when Job came back to himself from his overwhelming anguish, he acknowledged that all of it proceeded from God's love and care — from His very resolve to magnify a man and do him good. For this purpose God chastens a person every morning and tries him every moment — with afflictions that are, for the time, so far from being pleasant that they give no rest and even make the soul weary of life, as Job expresses in verses 15-16. And it is worth noting that while no one on earth had afflictions to match Job's, God gave him three testimonies from heaven that no one on earth matched him in grace. And while it may not be stated as an absolute rule, it has generally been true throughout God's providence, from the beginning of the world, that those who have had the most afflictions have had the most grace and the most evident marks of acceptance with God.

Christ Jesus, the Son of God, the head of the church, had all afflictions gathered and concentrated in Himself — and yet the Father always loved Him and was always well pleased with Him.

When God solemnly renewed His covenant with Abraham, and Abraham had prepared the sacrifice by which it was to be ratified, God caused a smoking furnace to pass between the pieces (Genesis 15:17). This was to show him that a furnace of affliction was woven into the covenant of grace and peace. God also told Zion that He had chosen her in the furnace of affliction (Isaiah 48:10) — that is, in the afflictions of Egypt: burning, fiery trials, as Peter calls them (1 Peter 4:12). No argument can therefore be drawn from affliction — from any kind of it, or from any aggravating circumstance that accompanies it — that should in any way discourage the soul from its comforting and sustaining persuasion of an interest in God's love and forgiveness.

Second: no length or duration of afflictions should undermine our spiritual comfort. For confirmation of this, consider the great example of the Son of God. How long did His afflictions continue? What end or relief was given to them? They continued until He cried out with a loud voice and gave up His spirit. From His manger to His cross, His afflictions only increased, and He died in the middle of them. He was the head of the church and its great representative — the One to whose likeness we are predestined. If God wills the same for us — that we should have no rest and no relief from our trials until we lay down in the grave, that whatever condition we pass through, trials will be present in all of them and depart only at death, when immortality and glory begin — what is there in this to complain of?

Third: where the memory and troubling sense of past sins is revived by present afflictions, separate the two in your mind and deal with them one at a time. As long as you handle them together, you will be tossed from one to the other and find no rest for your soul. They will each intensify the other. The sharpness of affliction will add to the bitterness of the sense of sin, and the sense of sin will sharpen the affliction and cause it to cut more deeply into the soul, as the earlier examples showed. Deal with them separately, therefore, and in their proper order. This is what the psalmist did here. He had both pressing on him at once, and together they brought him into the depths from which he cries out for deliverance. See Psalm 32:3-5. And what course did he take? He addressed his sin first — distinctly and separately. And once he received a release from the guilt of sin, which he had waited for so earnestly, his faith quickly rose above his outward trials, as his blessed conclusion shows: 'He himself will redeem Israel from all his iniquities' (Psalm 130:8) — all Israel, and himself among them. Do the same, then: single out the sin or sins whose guilt has been revived on your conscience. Use all diligence to come to a settled resolution of the matter through the blood of Christ. This is what God is calling you to through your affliction. Sin is the disease; your affliction is only the symptom. In the cure you are seeking, this must be addressed first and most urgently. Once that is dealt with, the rest will lose its hold on your soul by itself. Once the root is dug up, you will not long feed on the bitter fruit it produced — and even if you do, the bitterness will be taken from it and it will become pleasant as well as wholesome. How this is accomplished through an application to God for forgiveness has been explained

at length. But if people insist on dealing with their sins and their troubles in a confused tangle, their wound will remain incurable and their sorrow endless.

Fourth: remember that a time of affliction is a time of temptation. Satan, as we have shown, will not miss any apparent opportunity to assault the soul. When Pharaoh heard that the people were trapped in the wilderness, he pursued them. When Satan sees a soul tangled up in its troubles and distress, he considers it his moment to attack. He seeks to sift and comes when the grain is under the threshing floor. Know therefore that when trouble comes, the prince of this world comes also — and be prepared for him. Now is the time to take up the shield of faith to extinguish his flaming arrows. If they are left unchecked, they will set the soul on fire. Watch and pray, therefore, that you do not enter into temptation — that Satan does not give you a false picture of God. He who dared misrepresent Job to the all-seeing God will boldly misrepresent God to us who see and know so little. Do not be ignorant of his schemes, but resist his every attempt to insert himself between God and your soul in a matter that is none of his concern. Do not let this troublemaker inflame the conflict.

Fifth: learn to distinguish the effects of natural temperament and physical condition from genuine spiritual distress. Some people carry heavy, dark, and persistent thoughts in their minds that stem from their natural constitution. These will not be resolved by argument, nor completely overcome by faith. The goal must be to reduce their force and effects by understanding their source. If people cannot recognize this in themselves, those ministering to

them have a serious responsibility to discern what comes from natural causes — conditions for which a quick cure should not be expected.

Sixth: take care in times of peace and ease not to store up, through negligence or careless living, painful provisions for a day of darkness and affliction. It is sin that makes troubles bitter. The sins committed in peaceful times are revived with full force in times of distress. The fear of future affliction and coming trials should make us careful not to bring into those seasons what will make them bitter and sorrowful.

Seventh: strive to grow better under all your afflictions, or your afflictions may grow worse — God may mix them with more darkness, bitterness, and terror. Just as Joab told David that if he did not stop his scandalous mourning over Absalom, all the people would abandon him and he would find himself in a far worse condition than anything he was lamenting or anything that had ever happened to him before — the same may be said to those under affliction. If trials are not handled and used rightly, something worse may — and in all likelihood will — follow. Wherever God takes up this work of afflicting, He commonly pursues it until He has accomplished His purpose for the person being afflicted. He will not stop threshing and breaking the grain until it is fit for His use. Lay down your resistance to Him, then. Give yourself to His will. Release everything about which He is contending with you. Follow after what He is calling you to, and you will find light rising in the midst of darkness. If He holds a cup of affliction in one hand, lift your eyes and you will see a cup of consolation in the other. And if every star withdraws its light while you walk in God's way, be assured that the sun is about to rise.

Eighth: under the terms of the covenant of grace, a person may be aware that a particular affliction relates to a particular sin, and yet have a solid and comforting persuasion of the forgiveness of that sin. This was the case in general in God's dealings with His people: 'He forgave their iniquity and did not destroy them; and often He restrained His anger and did not arouse all His wrath' — He forgave them, yet He also took vengeance on their sinful ways (Psalm 99:8). Whatever they suffered under the consequences of their chosen sins — and that phrase is as strong as any applied anywhere to God's dealings with His people — He at the same time assured them of the pardon of their sin. So you know it was with David. His greatest trial and affliction — which came directly because of a specific sin and in which God took vengeance on his sinful action — was introduced with a word of grace: God had put away his sin and he would not die. This is stated plainly in the terms of the covenant with the seed of Christ in Psalm 89:31-34.

Objections against believing, arising from internal matters. The person does not know whether he is regenerate or not. The nature of regeneration examined. The difference between saving grace and common grace. This difference can be discerned. People can know whether they are regenerate. The objection answered.

Another category of objections and discouragement arises from internal matters — things required in the soul for it to have an interest in the forgiveness that is with God. We will address some of these, which concern: first, the state of the soul; and second, specific workings within the soul.

First, regarding the soul's state: some say that unless a person is regenerate and born again, he cannot be a partaker of mercy and pardon. But on this whole question they find themselves in the

dark. They do not know well what regeneration is — it is debated in various ways. Some would locate it only in the outward signs of initiation into Christ; others describe it differently. Further, they are uncertain whether those who are regenerate can or may know that they are, or whether this can in any measure be known to others with whom they might speak about it. If it cannot be known, they remain uncertain on this point too. And perhaps they can identify neither the time when nor the manner in which any such work was wrought in them — and without that, since it is wrought through means and springs from certain causes, they feel they cannot have a settled persuasion of their acceptance with God through pardon in the blood of Christ. This is the core of most of the objections troubled souls bring against themselves regarding their state and condition. From this they draw out arguments in great variety, shaped by their particular circumstances and temptations. They reinforce these objections with many proofs drawn from their sins, failures, and fears. My aim is to lay down some general rules and principles that may be applied to particular situations and moments of crisis. This I will do in response to the several parts of the general objection mentioned above.

First: it is absolutely certain that there are two states or conditions into which all humanity is divided, and every living person belongs completely and definitively to one of them. These are the state of nature and the state of grace — the state of sin and the state of righteousness through Christ. Every person in the world belongs to one of these two. Scripture is so full of this truth that it appears to be one of the first and most fundamental things it teaches us. It is just as clear that there are two different states in this world as that there are two in the world to come. In fact, all

our faith and all our obedience rest on this truth. Moreover, the covenant of God, the mediation of Christ, and all the promises and warnings of law and gospel are built on this foundation. This truth also lays bare the rampant practical atheism in the world. People are not merely ignorant of these things, like Nicodemus, wondering how they can be — they scorn them, despise them, and mock them. To speak of being born again is something the world treats with contempt. But whether people will or not, to one of these two conditions they must belong.

Second: just as these two states differ morally in their nature and in the actual causes that constitute that difference, so there is a genuine distinction between the things that place a person in one condition versus the other. Whatever goodness, virtue, duty, or grace may be found in an unregenerate person, there is in the regenerate person something of an entirely different kind that is simply not present in the other. The difference between these states themselves is plain in Scripture. One is a state of death, the other of life; one of darkness, the other of light; one of enmity toward God, the other of reconciliation with Him. And that the one state is constituted by a kind of grace that is peculiar to it and absent from the other — this I will briefly set out.

First: the grace of regeneration flows from a particular source and fountain that pours much of its living water into the regenerate soul — not one drop of which falls on those who are not regenerate. That source is electing love. This grace is given in the pursuit of the decree of election: 'He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him' (Ephesians 1:4). Our holiness — which springs solely from regeneration — is an effect of our election: it is what God works in our

souls in pursuit of His eternal purpose of love and goodwill toward us. As the apostle also says in 2 Thessalonians 2:13: 'God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit.' God, having purposed salvation as the end, has also appointed the sanctification of the Spirit as the means by which we are brought to that end in an orderly way. But the best of common grace or gifts that may be in unregenerate people are merely products of God's general providence, ordering all things for His glory and the good of those who will become heirs of salvation. They are not the fruits of electing eternal love, nor appointed means for the certain and infallible attainment of eternal salvation.

Second: the graces of the regenerate have a manifold relationship to the Lord Christ that the common graces of unregenerate people do not. I will name one or two of these relationships. First: they have a specific moral relationship to the mediatory acts of Christ in His offering and intercession. Saving grace is a specific part of what Christ purchased by His death and the shedding of His blood. He made a twofold purchase for His elect: their persons, to belong to Him; and saving grace, to belong to them. 'He gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless' (Ephesians 5:26-27). Christ's purpose in giving Himself for His church was to secure for it that saving grace by which, through the use of means, it would be regenerate, sanctified, and purified. As Titus 2:14 says: 'He gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.' This actual purification in

grace and holiness has a direct relationship to Christ's death: He specifically designed His death to secure it for those for whom He died. And in the pursuit of that purchase, His intention was actually to bestow it on them — to effectually work it within them. Moreover, saving grace has a specific relationship to His intercession, in a way that distinguishes it from any gifts or common graces that other people may receive. Giving us the rule and model of His intercession in John 17, He states that He does not pray for the world but for His elect — those the Father had given Him, because they were His (John 17:9). And what does He pray for them, specifically and distinctly from all other people? Among other things, one principal request is in verse 17: 'Sanctify them in the truth.' Their sanctification and holiness are granted in answer to the prayer and intercession of Christ that is peculiar to them, with all others excluded: 'I pray for them; I do not pray for the world.' The common grace found in unregenerate people — whatever distinction it produces among them — has no such relationship to Christ's offering and intercession. Common grace is not the product of this particular intercession.

Second: saving grace has a real relationship to Christ as the living, life-giving Head of the church. He is the living spiritual fountain of all the church's spiritual life and of every vital act it performs. 'Christ is our life' (Colossians 3:4), and our life is hidden with Him in God (Colossians 3:3). That eternal life which consists in knowing the Father and the Son (John 17:3) exists in Him as its cause, head, spring, and fountain. From Him it is derived to all who believe, who 'receive of His fullness, and grace upon grace' (John 1:16). All true, saving, sanctifying grace — all spiritual life and everything belonging to it — flows directly from Christ as the

living Head of His church and the fountain of all spiritual life to its members. The apostle expresses this in Ephesians 4:15-16: 'We are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.' He expresses the same thing again in Colossians 2:19. All grace in the entire body comes from Christ the Head, and there is no growth or advance of it except through His effectual working in every part, bringing it to the measure He has appointed. Nothing — not even the least measure of this grace — can be obtained except by virtue of our union to Christ as our Head, because it consists in a vital and effectual flowing from Him and His fullness. This kind of relationship to Christ is something the grace found in unregenerate people is entirely incapable of.

Third: the grace of regeneration and its fruits are administered in and through the covenant. This is the promise of the covenant: that God will write His law in our hearts and put His fear in our inner being, so that we will not depart from Him (Jeremiah 32:40). This is the grace we are speaking of, whatever its specific character. It is given to none but those who are taken into covenant with God, for it is promised to them alone, and it is worked in and upon their souls by virtue of that covenant. All unregenerate people are strangers to the covenant and are not made partakers of the grace that is uniquely and exclusively promised in it and given through it.

Fourth: even the smallest spark of saving, regenerating grace is worked in the soul by the Holy Spirit, given to dwell in believers and to remain with them. He is the living water that Jesus Christ

gives to believers, which becomes in them 'a well of water springing up to eternal life' (John 4:14). First they receive the water — that is, the Spirit Himself as the spring — and from that spring, living waters flow up in them, produced and worked by the Spirit who is given to them. Although the common gifts and graces of unregenerate people are effects of the Holy Spirit's power working in and bestowed on them — as are all other works of God's providence — yet the Spirit does not work in them as one received by them, dwelling in them, and abiding with them as an unfailing spring of spiritual life. Our Savior states this explicitly: the world and unbelievers do not know the Spirit, cannot receive Him, and do not have Him abiding in them. All of this, in contrast to all unregenerate persons, is affirmed of all who believe.

Fifth: even the smallest measure of saving grace — the kind that belongs uniquely to the regenerate — is Spirit: 'That which is born of the Spirit is spirit' (John 3:6). Whatever is so born is spirit; it has a spiritual nature and cannot be produced by any means out of the principles of human nature. It is therefore called 'a new creation' (2 Corinthians 5:17). However small or great it may be — however much it differs in degree from one person to another — its nature is the same in all: it is a new creation. Just as the smallest worm in the old creation is no less a creature than the sun — or indeed the most glorious angel in heaven — so in the new creation, the least spark of true grace from the sanctifying Spirit is a new creation, no less than the highest faith or love that ever existed in the greatest of the apostles. Now what is Spirit and what is not Spirit — what has a new spiritual nature and what has none — however much they may outwardly resemble each other, differ in kind from one another. This is how saving grace in the regenerate

and common grace in the unregenerate stand in relation to each other. So just as these are two distinct states, they are genuinely and substantially different from one another. This answers the second part of the objection — the part drawn from uncertainty about these states and about regeneration itself, and about its real difference from the opposite state that excludes one from an interest in forgiveness.

Third, the inquiry is whether this state can be known — to the person who is truly in it, and to others who may have a concern in knowing it. To this I say: the difference between these two states and the causes that constitute them, being real, is also discernible. It can be known by those who are in each state, and by others. It can be known who are born of God and who are still children of the devil; who have been made alive by Christ and who are still dead in trespasses and sins. But here observe the following.

First: I do not say that this is always known to the persons themselves. Many cry 'Peace, peace' when sudden destruction is at hand. Such people either think themselves regenerate when they are not, or they willfully ignore the question of what is required of them to have peace, and so delude themselves to their ruin. And many who are truly born of God do not know it. They may for a season walk in darkness and have no light.

Second: I do not say that this is always known to others. It is not known to unregenerate people with respect to those who are regenerate, because they do not truly and substantially understand what it means to be regenerate. Natural people do not perceive the things of God — that is, they do not see them in their own light and nature (1 Corinthians 2:14). Just as they cannot rightly discern the things that put a person into that condition — for such things are

foolishness to them — so they cannot judge rightly about persons in whom those things are present. Even when they happen to reach a correct conclusion about some person or thing, they do not do so on right grounds, nor with any inner conviction of what they judge. Generally they judge incorrectly about such persons, and because they see in those people a profession of something they do not find in themselves, they conclude they are hypocrites and false pretenders. For the things that demonstrate their union with Christ and evidence their being born of God are things the unregenerate neither savor nor can receive. Nor is the state of others always known or discerned by those who are themselves regenerate. They may sometimes, like Peter, mistake a Simon Magus for a true believer — or like Eli, mistake a Hannah for a daughter of wickedness. Many hypocrites are so equipped with gifts, common graces, knowledge, and religious profession that they pass among believers as genuinely born of God. And many true saints may be so hidden under darkness, temptation, and sin that they appear to be strangers to the very family to which they truly belong. Human judgment may fail, but God's judgment is according to truth.

Third, here is what we affirm: through the diligent use of the means appointed for this purpose, a person may know — and others who have a concern in knowing it may also know — which of the two conditions he belongs to; that is, whether he is regenerate or not, so far as his or their duty requires. This can be known, and known with a certainty that will prove reliable when put to the test. The proper discharge of certain duties — both in ourselves and toward others — depends on this knowledge, and therefore we may attain it to the extent that it is necessary for faithfully discharging those duties to the glory of God. Since the matter has come up, I

will briefly touch on the latter question — what duties depend on our judging others to be regenerate, and the grounds and principles by which such a judgment may be made — even though it is not directly in our main line of inquiry.

First: there are many duties we are called to perform with and toward professing Christians that cannot be discharged in faith without making some judgment about their state and condition. It is only with reference to these duties that we are called to judge the state of others. We are not giving license to rash, uncharitable pronouncements on the spiritual condition of others, nor to any judging of others beyond what our own duty toward them indispensably requires. For instance: if we are to lay down our lives for the brothers and sisters, it is entirely appropriate that we should know them to be such, so that we may risk our lives in faith when called to do so. We also join with them in the ordinances in which we solemnly profess that we are members of the same body with them — sharing the same Head, the same Spirit, the same faith and love. We must love them because they are begotten of God, children of our heavenly Father, and therefore must have some good grounds for believing them to be so. In short, the faithful performance of all the principal gospel duties we owe to one another — for God's glory and our own growth — depends on the assumption that we may have a satisfying persuasion about the spiritual condition of others from which to direct our actions toward them.

Second, as to the grounds for this: I will mention only one, on which all others rest. It is pressed in 1 Corinthians 12:12-13: 'For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body,

whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.' All believers are united to and hold from one Head. Just as the members of the natural body are under one head, so is the mystical body of Christ — that is, all believers — under Christ their Head. They have this union through the indwelling of the same life-giving Spirit that is in Christ their Head, by whom they are all brought into the same spiritual state and disposition. They are made to drink of the same Spirit, for this same Spirit produces the same effects in them all — the same in kind, though different in degree — as the apostle fully explains in Ephesians 4:3-6. And this Spirit is in them and not in the world (John 16:13). This gives believers a natural quality in their duties toward one another — a mutual care, rejoicing, and sorrowing as members of one another (1 Corinthians 12:25-26). And it reveals and discloses them to each other, so far as is necessary for performing those duties, in a manner fitting for members of the same body. On this basis there is a spiritually natural correspondence among them, as face answers face reflected in water. They can see and discern in others what they have experienced in themselves. They can taste and appreciate in others what they feed on themselves — the very thing in which the life of their souls consists. The same Spirit of life being in them, they share the same spiritual taste and perception. Unless that sense is distorted by temptations, false ideas, or prejudice, they can discern in their communion that Spirit of which they all drink. This gives them the same likeness and image in the inner person, the same heavenly light in their minds, the same affections. Being thus equipped to judge and discern one another's spiritual state with reference to their mutual duties, they also have the true rule of Scripture by which to judge

all spirits and spiritual effects. This is the foundation of all that sincere love and genuine communion that exists among the saints of God in this world. But here two cautions must be observed.

First: we should not judge the state and condition of any person in the world beyond what we are called to in the exercise of our duty — and we are so called only with reference to the duties we are to perform toward them. What business do we have judging those who are outside that context — anyone we have no duty-based reason to consider? Here the great rule applies: 'Do not judge, so that you will not be judged' (Matthew 7:1). Let us leave all people — even the worst — to God's judgment seat, except where clear duty requires otherwise. They are servants of another, and they stand or fall before their own Master. There have been serious failures among us in this matter: some have been ready to condemn all who do not go along with them in every principle, opinion, or practice. And every day, minor provocations are made the grounds of severe censures. Nothing is more contrary to the character of the meek and holy Spirit of Christ. This is our rule: if we are called to act toward someone as a saint and a living member of the body of Christ, in duties we cannot perform in faith unless we are persuaded that they are so — then on the grounds and by the means described, we are to satisfy ourselves about one another.

Second: when we do seek to discern one another's condition in reference to such ends, let us be sure to pursue those ends when we have reached our conclusion. Those ends have been stated. They are these: to love one another without pretense, as members of the same mystical body with us; to naturally care for and about one another; to delight sincerely in one another; to minister to one another's needs, both temporal and spiritual; to watch over one

another with compassion. These and the like are the only purposes for which we are ever called to consider one another's spiritual condition — and if these ends are neglected, the inquiry itself becomes pointless. It is here that the great failure lies: people pursue the knowledge of one another's condition and then neglect the very thing it was meant to produce. Here lies the life or death of all church fellowship. All church community and relationship is built on the assumption that its members are all regenerate. Some locate this foundation in baptism alone, holding that all who are baptized are regenerate. Others require further evidence of the actual work of grace itself. But all build on the same foundation: that all church members are to be regenerate. And to what end? So that all may mutually perform those duties toward one another that regenerate people owe to one another. If those duties are omitted, there is no profit in church community at all. Churches without this are mere shells — bodies without souls. For just as there is no real union to Christ without faith, there is no real union among the members of any church without love, actively expressing itself in all the duties mentioned. Do not let this ordinance be in vain.

But we must return from this digression to the matter before us: what a person may discern about his own being regenerate or born again. I say then —

Second: a person may come to a settled and satisfying persuasion that he is regenerate — a persuasion so reliable that it will not deceive him when it is put to the test. For there are many duties whose faithful performance, for God's glory and the growth of the soul, depends on this persuasion and conviction. Such duties are these.

First: a right sense of our relationship to God and a corresponding disposition of heart toward Him. One who is born again is born of God — begotten of God through the incorruptible seed of the Word. Without a persuasion of this, how can a person conduct himself toward God as his Father on the grounds of faith? And how great a part of our obedience toward God and our communion with Him depends on just this, we all know. If people drift through all their days in uncertainty about this — never reaching a settled and comforting persuasion of it — they will hardly ever produce any genuine, childlike acts of love or delight toward God, which greatly undermines their entire life of obedience.

Second: thankfulness for grace received is one of the principal duties of believers in this world. But how can a person in faith give thanks to God for something he is entirely uncertain whether he has received? I know some people go through the motions in this matter. They will thank God in a formal way for their regeneration, sanctification, justification, and the like — but if you ask them whether they themselves are regenerate, they will mock the question or at least admit they know nothing of the sort. What is this but to mock God and presumptuously take His name in vain? If we are to praise God as we ought for His grace — guided and directed by Scripture, in a manner suited to the nature of the thing, with a frame of heart that shapes our whole obedience — it must be our duty to know the grace we have received.

Third: much of our spiritual watchfulness and diligence consists in cherishing, nurturing, and increasing the grace we have received — in strengthening the new creation that has been worked in us. This is primarily what the life of faith consists in and what the spiritual wisdom faith gives to the soul is for. But how can any-

one apply himself to this while remaining completely uncertain whether he has received any principle of living, saving grace? Since God requires our utmost diligence, watchfulness, and care in this matter, it is certain He also requires of us — and grants to us — the foundation from which all these duties spring: acquaintance with the state and condition we are actually in. In short, there is nothing we have to do in view of eternity that does not, in one way or another, relate to our understanding and conviction about our state and condition in this world. Those who are negligent in examining and testing themselves leave everything between God and their souls at absolute uncertainty and dubious risk — and that is not the life of faith.

We now return, on the basis of these premises, to the part of the objection under consideration. Some say: 'We do not know whether we are regenerate or not, and are therefore entirely uncertain whether we have an interest in the forgiveness that is with God — and so we dare not admit the comfort offered in the truth being set before us.'

Taking for granted what has already been said in general, I will lay down the grounds for resolving this troubling doubt in the rules that follow.

Rule I: Make sure that the assurance you are seeking is of the right kind — not the kind that merely matches your own imagination. The second and third general rules about the nature of spiritual assurance, and what is consistent with it, are to be kept in mind here. If you are looking for a kind of evidence, a clarity of insight, and an absolute conviction about your condition that will leave no room for doubts, fears, questionings, or any occasion for fresh examination and self-testing — you will be seriously disap-

pointed. Regeneration introduces a new principle into the soul, but it does not entirely remove the old. Some people want security, not assurance. The principle of sin and unbelief will still remain in us and still work in us. Their presence and their activity will constantly drive the soul to serious inquiry about whether they are more powerful in it than the state of regeneration can accommodate. The ongoing conflicts we must have with sin will not allow us to have the kind of constant, perfectly clear evidence of our condition that we might desire. A persuasion that holds up against strong objections to the contrary, keeping the heart engaged in the faithful performance of those duties that belong to the regenerate state, is the substance of what you are to look for in this matter. Rule II: If you are uncertain about your state and condition, do not look for some extraordinary, immediate direct testimony of the Spirit of God to settle it. I do acknowledge that God sometimes brings peace and assurance to the soul in this way: He causes His own Spirit to bear witness directly with our spirit that we are children of God — both through regeneration and adoption. He does this, but as far as we can observe, He does it sovereignly — when and to whom He pleases. Beyond this, God has left the nature of that particular testimony of the Spirit quite obscure and difficult to identify, with very little agreement on what it consists in or what its character is — and this is because He wants people to find satisfaction through His ordinary teachings, consolations, and communications of grace. No one person's experience is a rule for others. An incorrect understanding of it is a matter of real danger. Yet it is certain that humble souls in extraordinary circumstances may have recourse to it and receive benefit and relief. You may therefore desire it, you may pray for it — but not with such a spirit as to

refuse the satisfaction that may be found through the ordinary ways of truth and peace. This is the stretching out of the hand to touch the side of Christ — but 'blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed' (John 20:29). Rule III: If at any time in the past you received some special or direct pledge or testimony from God given to your soul about its sincerity and its regeneration, work to recover that memory and to revive a sense of it in your spirit now in your present darkness and trouble. I am persuaded there are very few genuine believers who have not received, at one time or another and in one duty or another, some singular testimony from God to their own souls about their sincerity and His acceptance of them. Sometimes He does this in a duty in which He has enabled the soul to draw so near to Him that it has been warmed, enlivened, comforted, and satisfied with His gracious presence — and which God made for that soul a token of its uprightness. Sometimes, when a person is entering into some great temptation, trial, or dangerous duty in which death itself is feared, God comes in by one means or another — through a quiet intimation of His love — and gives that person something to carry with him as provision for the way, thereby testifying to his sincerity. This sustains him, as the food given to Elijah sustained him for forty days in the wilderness. Sometimes God is pleased to shine directly into the soul in the middle of its darkness and sorrow, catching it by surprise — and by that light relieves it against its own pressing self-condemnation. And sometimes the Lord gives these tokens of love to the soul as a refreshment when it is emerging from a storm of temptation that has battered it. There are many other times and seasons in which God is pleased to give believers some special testimony in their consciences to their own integrity. But all of these

are produced by a transient working of the Spirit that stirs and enables the heart to a spiritually felt perception and reception of God's expressed kindness toward it. These impressions do not remain in their felt power and influence on our emotions — they pass away quickly. They must therefore be stored up in the mind and judgment, to be drawn on and made use of by faith as occasion requires. But we are prone to lose them. Most people know no use for them beyond the moment of feeling them — and even then, through ignorance of how to preserve them, they prove like a sudden light brought into a dark room and then taken away again: the moment of light only makes the darkness feel deeper. The true use of them is to treasure them up and ponder them in our hearts, so they may be supports and testimonies to us in times of need. Have you, then — you who are now in the dark about your state and condition, uncertain whether you are regenerate or not — ever received such a refreshing and encouraging testimony from God, given to your integrity and His acceptance of you? Call it back to mind and make use of it against the discouragements that arise from your present darkness — the very discouragements that keep you from sharing in the comfort offered to you in this word of grace. Rule IV: A careful and spiritually serious consideration of the causes and effects of regeneration is the ordinary way and means by which believers come to be satisfied about God's work in and upon them. The principles and causes of this work are the Spirit and the Word. One who is born again is born of the Spirit (John 3:6) and of the Word: 'In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth' (James 1:18). We are 'born again through the living and enduring word of God' (1 Peter 1:23). Wherever a person is regenerate, there has been an effectual work

of the Spirit and the Word upon his soul. This is to be inquired into and sought out. Ordinarily it will make itself known. Such impressions will have been made on the soul, such a change produced in it, that a diligent and spiritual search will not miss them. This is a major part of the duty of those who are in the dark and uncertain about whether this work has been accomplished in them. Let them call to mind what the Spirit has done through the Word in their souls. What light has been communicated to their minds? What discoveries of Christ and the way of salvation have been opened to them? What sense and hatred of sin has been worked in them? What satisfaction has been given to the soul to choose, embrace, and rest in the righteousness of Christ? To what degree of submission to God — in keeping with the covenant of grace — has the heart been brought? Call to mind what transactions there have been between God and your soul about these things; how far they have been carried; whether you have broken off negotiations with God and refused His terms; or if not, where things presently stand between you; and what reason there can be — since God has graciously begun to deal with you this far — that you have not yet fully closed with Him in the work and design of His grace. The deficiency must necessarily lie on your part. God does nothing in vain. Had He not been willing to receive you, He would not have dealt with you as far as He has. What remains to settle your condition, then, is a resolved act of your own will in responding to the mind and will of God. And by this kind of searching, the soul may come to satisfaction in this matter — or at least discover where the difficulty lies that produces its uncertainty, and what is missing that would complete its desire.

This work may also be discovered by its effects. Something is produced by regeneration in the soul that may be considered either in terms of its existence or in terms of its operations. As to its existence: it is spirit — 'that which is born of the Spirit is spirit' (John 3:6), produced by the effectual working of the Holy Spirit. It is 'a new creation' (2 Corinthians 5:17): the person who is in Christ Jesus and has been born again is a new creation, with a new and spiritual life (Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 2:1). In brief, it is an enduring furnishing of all the faculties of the soul with new spiritual and vital principles, enabling a person in every act of obedience to live a spiritual life toward God. This principle is produced in the soul by the work of regeneration. As to its operations: it consists in all the gracious workings of the mind, will, heart, and affections in the duties of obedience God has required of us. This is what gives life to our duties — without it, even the best of our works are merely dead works — and what renders them acceptable to the living God. It is not my purpose here to pursue and develop all of this at length. I mention it only so that those who are held back from sharing in the comfort offered through the forgiveness with God — because they cannot confidently conclude they are born again, knowing that this comfort truly belongs to such persons — may know how to make a right judgment about themselves. Let such people therefore stop drifting up and down in vague generalities and uncertainties, with spiritless complaints that only ruin their peace. Instead, let them actually put things to the test by examining the causes and effects of the work they are inquiring about. It is through such means that God will be pleased to give them all the assurance and stability regarding their state and condition that they need — and that will encourage them in their course of obedi-

ence. But suppose — after all that has been said — that by the most thorough search and inquiry a person can make, he still cannot come to a satisfying persuasion that this great work of God's grace has taken place in his soul. Is this sufficient reason to keep him from receiving support and comfort from the truth that there is forgiveness with God — which is precisely the intent of the objection before us? I say further, then —

First: regeneration does not precede, in order of time, the soul's interest in the forgiveness that is with God, or its being made a partaker of the pardon of sin. I say only that it does not precede it in order of time, leaving aside the question of which has priority in order of nature. What the method of the gospel suggests is that absolution, acquittal, and the pardon of sin is the foundation of all saving grace communicated to the soul, and so precedes all grace in the sinner whatever. But because this pardon of sin is to be received by faith — by which the soul is truly made partaker of it and all the benefits belonging to it — and because faith is the foundational grace received in regeneration (since it is by faith that our hearts are purified, as an instrument in the hand of the great purifier, the Holy Spirit of God) — I place these two together and will not dispute their priority in the order of nature. In time, the one does not precede the other.

Second: it is therefore clear that an assurance of being regenerate is by no means a necessary prior condition for believing in one's interest in forgiveness. Even if a person lacks the former, it is — or may well be — his duty to pursue the latter. When convicted people cried out, 'What shall we do to be saved?' the answer was: 'Believe' — you will be saved. Believe in Christ and in the forgiveness of sins through His blood. This is the first thing convicted sin-

ners are called to. They are not directed first to secure in themselves the certainty that they are born again, and only then to believe. Rather, they are first to believe that the forgiveness of sins is offered to them in the blood of Christ, and that through Him they may be justified from everything from which the law could not justify them. Neither, when this is set before them, is it their duty to question whether they have faith or not — it is their duty actually to believe. And faith in its working will give evidence of itself. See Acts 13:38-39. Suppose, then, that you do not know that you are regenerate — that you have no strong, refreshing, consistent evidence or persuasion of it. Should this hold you back? Should it discourage you from believing forgiveness, from embracing the promises, and thereby actually obtaining an interest in the forgiveness that is with God? Not at all. On the contrary, this very thing should stir you up all the more to your duty.

First: suppose it is the case that you are not yet regenerate — that you are still in a state of sin and have only been brought under the conviction of light. Even then, this is the very way by which a person is translated into a state of spiritual life and grace. If you hold back from believing in and for forgiveness until you are regenerate, you may well — and in all probability will — fall short of both forgiveness and regeneration. Lay the foundation here, and the building will follow. This will open the door and give you entrance into the kingdom of God. Christ is the door — do not attempt to climb in over the wall. Enter through Him, or you will remain outside.

Second: suppose you are already born again, but simply do not know it — as is the case with many. Then this very path — believing in forgiveness — is a means by which you may receive evidence

of your regeneration. It is good to embrace and make use of all the signs, tokens, and pledges of our spiritual condition. But the best course is to follow the genuine and natural workings of faith, which will lead us into the most settled understanding of our relationship to God and acceptance with Him. Believe first the forgiveness of sins as the effect of pure grace and mercy in Christ. Let that faith be nourished and strengthened in your soul. It will imperceptibly shape your heart toward a comforting, gospel-grounded persuasion of your state and condition before God — and that persuasion will be accompanied by assured rest and peace.

To conclude this part of the discussion: remember that what has been said concerning the state of regeneration in general can be applied to every specific objection, fear, or discouragement that falls under that heading. All objections that arise from particular sins — from the aggravating circumstances of their seriousness, or from relapses into them — belong here. The way these things weigh on the mind and produce fear is by generating the impression that the person is not regenerate, for if he were, he supposes he could not have been so overcome or entangled. The rules laid down are therefore suited to the distress of sinners' souls in all such specific cases.

Finally, something particular was added at the end of the objection that, while not directly in our line of inquiry and not of great importance in itself, deserves a brief response — lest it leave any entanglement in people's minds. It is this: some people do not know and cannot give an account of the time of their conversion to God, and therefore cannot satisfy themselves that the saving work of His grace has occurred in them. This is a common concern that comes up regularly, so I will address it briefly.

First: it has been shown that in this matter there are many things on which we may rightly base a judgment about ourselves, and it is great folly to set all of those aside and put the whole weight of the question on a single circumstance. If a person has a lawsuit in which he has many solid evidences in his favor and only one circumstance is uncertain and in dispute, he will not stake his case on that disputed circumstance — he will press the evidences that are clearer and speak more fully in his behalf. I will not deny that the matter of the time of conversion is often a significant circumstance; in the affirmative — when it is known — it is of great use for stability and comfort. But it is still only a circumstance, one on which the existence of the thing itself does not depend. A person who is alive knows he was born, even if he knows neither the place nor the time of his birth. So someone who is spiritually alive, and has grounds of evidence that he is, may know that he was born again — even if he knows neither when, nor where, nor how. This situation is common in people of quiet natural temperament who had the advantage of being raised under the means of light and grace. God often in such people begins and carries on the work of His grace imperceptibly, so that they come to genuine growth and maturity before they are even aware of being alive. Such people come eventually to be satisfied in saying, with the blind man in the gospel: 'How our eyes were opened, we do not know — only one thing we know: we were blind, and now we see' (John 9:25).

Second: even in this matter, we may need to be content to live by faith — to believe what God has done in us, if it is the subject of His promises, just as we believe what He has done for us, which also rests on nothing other than His promise.

Objections arising from the soul's present state and condition: weakness and imperfection in duty. The opposition posed by indwelling sin.

Third: there is another category of objections against the soul's receiving comfort from an interest in forgiveness — objections arising from the soul's present condition in terms of actual holiness, duties, and sins. When in darkness and under temptation, souls complain that they cannot find in themselves the holiness or its fruits that they suppose an interest in pardoning mercy would produce. Their hearts feel weak, and all their duties feel worthless. If weighed in the balance, they believe everything would be found wanting. In the best of their duties they sense such a mixture of self-seeking, hypocrisy, unbelief, and pride that they are ashamed and distressed by the memory of them. These things fill them with discouragement, so that they refuse to be comforted or to receive any refreshing persuasion from the truth being pressed on them — and instead conclude they are complete strangers to the forgiveness that is with God, remaining helpless in their depths.

Following the approach taken throughout, I will lay down only some general rules that may support a soul under the discouragement that tends to come on it in such a condition — so that none of these things may weaken it in its effort to lay hold of forgiveness.

First: this is the proper place to apply our seventh rule — to resist spending time in spiritless complaints when vigorous exercise of grace is what is called for. If this is truly your condition, why do you remain face down on the ground? Why do you not rise and press yourself to the utmost, giving all diligence to add one grace to another until you find yourself in a better state? Assuming that rule is being put into practice, I add the following.

First: a clear awareness of one's own holiness has a tendency to slide into self-righteousness. What God gives us on the account of sanctification, we are all too ready to count toward justification. It is a hard thing to feel grace at work and yet to believe as though there were none. We have so much of the Pharisee in us by nature that it is sometimes good for us when our progress is hidden from our own view. We are prone to take our grain and wine and devote them to other lovers. Were there not in our hearts a perceptible principle of corruption, and in our duties a noticeable mixture of self, it would be impossible for us to walk with the humility required of those who hold communion with God in a covenant of grace and pardoning mercy. It is a good life that is attended by faith in Christ's righteousness and a sense of one's own corruption. As long as I know Christ's righteousness, I will be less troubled about knowing my own holiness. To be holy is necessary; to be fully aware of it is sometimes a temptation.

Second: even the duties God has appointed, when turned into self-righteousness, become deeply offensive to Him (Isaiah 66:2-3). What has a good origin can be corrupted by a bad end.

Third: often holiness in the heart is more clearly seen by the opposition it meets than by its own dominant working. The Spirit's operation is known by the flesh's resistance. We measure a man's strength by the loads he carries, not by the pace at which he walks. 'Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?' (Romans 7:24) is better evidence of grace and holiness than 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people' (Luke 18:11). A heart pressed, grieved, and burdened — not only by the guilt of sin, which troubles an awakened conscience, but by the persistent power of indwelling sin, tempting, seducing, hindering,

captivating, and restlessly disturbing — may, from that very fact, have as clear an evidence of true holiness as from delightful fruitfulness. Ask yourself: what is it in you that is troubled and grieved? What seems almost crushed and cries out, complains, and longs for deliverance? Is it not the new creation? Is it not the principle of spiritual life you possess? I am not speaking of trouble over sins committed, nor of fears about sin breaking out into loss, shame, ruin, or dishonor, nor of a convicted conscience afraid of judgment. I am speaking of the spirit's striving against sin out of a genuine hatred and loathing of it — moved by the combined considerations of love, grace, mercy, fear, the beauty of holiness, and the excellency of communion with God that are set before us in the gospel. Even if you feel only passive in these things — as if you are merely enduring sin's assaults and doing nothing — yet if you sense the blow and stand under it as under the attack of an enemy, there is the root of the matter. This is true not only of the existence of holiness, but also of its degrees. Degrees of holiness are to be measured more by the opposition faced than by what the soul produces on its own. Someone may have more grace than another who bears more visible fruit, simply because he faces greater opposition and more intense temptation (Isaiah 41:17). And a deep sense of having nothing is often a great sign that something is present in the soul.

Second, regarding the charge of worthlessness and self-seeking in our duties:

It is certain that as long as we are in the flesh, our duties will taste of the vessel from which they come. Weakness, defilement, self-seeking, and hypocrisy will cling to them. Whatever some may claim to the contrary, the church's own complaint in Isaiah 64:6

confirms this. The chaff is so mixed with the wheat that the grain can scarcely be seen. Know this as well: the more spiritual a person is, the more clearly he sees his own unspirituality in his spiritual duties. A superficial performance will satisfy a superficial Christian. Job abhorred himself most when he knew himself best. The clearer our discoveries of God, the viler everything of self will appear. Further: our duties and performances are often measured by us very inaccurately. Those we think are best may in fact be worst, and those we think are worst may in fact be best. A person who has wrestled with distractions, had no outward advantage, no extraordinary stirrings of hope or fear or sorrow to help him, may rise from prayer thinking he has done nothing but provoke God — when in fact there was more genuine working of grace in him, contending with the deadness his condition had cast on his soul, than when, through the combined force of moved natural emotions and outward stimuli, a frame of feeling was raised that seemed to him to reach to heaven. So this perplexity about your duties may be nothing more than what is common to the people of God — and should be no barrier to peace and stability.

Second, on the claim of hypocrisy: you know the usual answer. It is one thing to do something in hypocrisy — it is another to be unable to do it without some mixture of hypocrisy. Hypocrisy, in its broader sense, is everything that falls short of full sincerity, whether in substance or manner. But our sincerity is no more perfect than our other graces; in its measure it remains with us and attaches itself to everything we do. Similarly: it is one thing to do something for vanity and to be seen by others — it is another to be unable to keep out the subtle insinuations of self and pride entirely. The person who does something in hypocrisy and for pride

is satisfied when his corrupt end is obtained, even if he is aware he sought that end. The person who does something with a mixture of hypocrisy — with some breach of his sincerity, some barely-perceived pull of outward incentives — is not satisfied when a self-serving end is achieved, and is genuinely dissatisfied with the failure of his sincerity. In short: if you still desire to be sincere and do earnestly try to be so in private duties and public worship — in praying, listening to the Word, giving, pursuing God's glory, and loving the saints — then even if those duties are sometimes done with detectable hypocrisy when traced to its most subtle forms of self and pride, they are not done in hypocrisy, and they do not make the person who performs them a hypocrite. I say of all this, as of everything said above: it is useful for relieving us under a troubled condition, but it gives no license to settle comfortably into that condition.

Third: know that God does not despise small things. He takes note of the faintest breathings of our hearts toward Him, even when we ourselves can see or perceive nothing of the kind. He knows the Spirit's mind in those workings that never rise to a level clear enough for us to reflect on and observe. Everything that is of Him is recorded in His book, though not in ours. He noticed that even as Sarah acted in unbelief toward Him, she nonetheless showed respect and regard for her husband, calling him lord (Genesis 18:12; 1 Peter 3:6). Even while His people are sinning, He can find something in their hearts, words, or ways that pleases Him — how much more, then, in their duties. He is a skilled refiner who can find much gold in ore where we see nothing but lead

or clay. He remembers the duties we forget, and forgets the sins we remember. He justifies our persons though ungodly, and will also accept our duties, though they are not perfectly godly.

Fourth, to give further support to those who are distressed over their weak and worthless duties: know that Jesus Christ takes out whatever is defective and offensive in them and makes them acceptable. When an unskilled servant gathers a mixed bundle of herbs, flowers, and weeds from a garden, the one who knows what is useful picks out what is good and discards the rest. Christ deals with our performances in this way. He removes all the self-serving ingredients in them, whatever form they take, and adds incense to what remains and presents it to God (Exodus 28:36). This is why, at the last day, the saints will not recognize their own duties and performances when they meet them — they will be so transformed from what they were when they first went out of hand. 'Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or naked?' (Matthew 25:37) — this is because God accepts a little, and Christ makes our little a great deal.

Fifth: is this a reason to keep you from believing? The reason you are not more holy is that you have not more faith. If you have no holiness, it is because you have no faith — holiness is the purifying of the heart through faith and obedience to the truth. And the reason you are not more fruitful in duty is that you are not more advanced in believing. The reason your duties are weak and imperfect is that your faith is weak and imperfect. If you have no holiness, believe — so that you may have it. If you have only a little, or what seems imperceptible, be steadfast in believing so that you

may abound in obedience. Do not resolve to wait until you are strong before you eat — when the only way to grow strong is to eat the bread that sustains the human heart.

Objection 4: The powerful stirring of indwelling sin and corruption is another source of the same kind of trouble and discouragement. Those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. But some say, 'We find various corruptions actively working in our hearts, taking us captive to the law of sin.' These trouble not only by their guilt but by their ongoing power. 'If we had been made partakers of the law of the Spirit of life, we would by now be more free from the law of sin and death. If sin had been fully pardoned, it would be more effectively subdued.'

There are three considerations that make the activity of indwelling sin so troubling to the soul.

First: it is unexpected. The soul does not anticipate it after the first great conquest of sin and the whole-hearted commitment of the heart to God. When the soul first says, 'I have sworn and am determined to keep Your righteous judgments' (Psalm 119:106), there is commonly a season of peace — at least for a time — from the vigorous and disturbing activity of sin. There are good reasons for this. The old things have passed away; all things have become new. Under the power of that comprehensive change, the soul is completely turned away from the things that would otherwise feed, stir up, provoke, or cherish any lust or temptation. When some of these advantages pass and sin begins to stir and act again, the soul is surprised and concludes that the work it has passed through was not genuine and lasting, but only temporary. The person may even think sin has grown stronger than before — simply because he is

now more sensitive than he was before. It is like someone whose arm or limb has been numb: while it was deadened he could endure deep cuts without feeling them; but once sensation returned, he feels the slightest cut and may think the instruments are sharper than before — when the only difference is that he now has feeling where he had none. Something like this may happen to a person in this condition: he may think lust more powerful than before simply because he is more conscious of it than before. Indeed, sin in the heart is like a snake: you may pull out its sting and cut it into many pieces — and though it can sting mortally no more, and can no longer move its whole body at once, yet it moves in all its parts and makes a greater show of movement than before. So it is with lust: when it has received its death wound and has been cut in pieces, it moves through so many parts of the soul that it amazes the person dealing with it. Coming unexpectedly in this way, it often fills the spirit with great discouragement.

Second: its activity is universal. This also surprises: there is a universality to the working of sin even in believers. There is no evil it will not move toward; there is no good it will not attempt to hinder; there is no duty it will not defile. The reason is that we are sanctified only in part — not wholly in any single faculty, though genuinely and savingly in every faculty. Sin remains in every capacity of the soul and in all the affections, and so it may work toward any sin to which human nature is liable. There are degrees of sin from which all regenerate persons are exempted; but to temptations toward all kinds of sin they are exposed — and this adds to the power of the temptation.

Third: indwelling sin is endless and restless. It is never fully quiet, never conquered, never abandoning the fight. It rebels after being overcome and assaults afresh after being resisted. Often, after a victory has been won and a struggle subdued, the soul expects rest and peace from its enemy. But this does not come. Sin works and rebels again and again and will do so throughout this life, so that no end to the conflict will come short of death. This subject is dealt with at length elsewhere in a recently published work on this particular theme.

These and similar features of indwelling sin's activity often entangle the soul in making a judgment about itself and leave it in the dark about its state and condition.

A few things will be offered in response to this objection as well.

First: the powerful and felt activity of indwelling sin is not inconsistent with a state of grace. 'For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another' (Galatians 5:17). In the same person there are contrary principles — the flesh and the Spirit — and contrary workings from those principles. These workings are described elsewhere as intense and vigorous. 'Fleshly lusts wage war against the soul' (1 Peter 2:11; James 4:1). To wage war is not to make a faint or gentle opposition easily dismissed and overcome — it is to go out with great strength, using craft, cunning, and force, putting the entire outcome at risk. This is how these lusts wage war: such is their activity in and against the soul. And therefore the apostle says, 'You cannot do what you want' (Galatians 5:17; Romans 7:14-17). In this conflict, the understanding remains unconquered — it condemns and disapproves of the evil being pressed upon it. The

will is not subdued — it does not want to do the evil urged upon it. There is hatred and revulsion toward sin remaining in the affections. And yet sin rebels, fights, rages, and takes captive. This objection therefore receives a straightforward answer: powerful activity and universal, relentless struggles of indwelling sin — seducing toward all that is evil and setting itself against all that is good — are not sufficient grounds for concluding a state of alienation from God. See the other work previously mentioned for a fuller treatment of this.

Second: your state is not to be measured at all by the opposition sin makes to you, but by the opposition you make to it. No matter how fierce sin's attacks may be, if your resistance to it is genuine, you may be troubled — but you have no reason to despair.

I have mentioned these things only to provide a sample of the objections people typically raise against actually embracing the truth pressed upon them for their consolation. We have also offered some rules of truth for their relief — not intending to give complete resolution to every case mentioned, but only to remove the darkness they create, so that it will not prevent anyone from receiving with faith what has been declared from this blessed testimony: that there is forgiveness with God, that He may be feared.

VERSES 5-6



We now turn to the second part of this psalm, which describes how a soul, troubled by sin, conducts itself after it has discovered by faith where its rest lies and from whom its relief must come — namely, from the forgiveness that is with God, which we have been examining.

There are two things in general, as was noted before, that the soul in this condition turns to: the first concerns itself, and the second concerns the whole Israel of God.

What concerns itself is the description of the frame of heart and spirit the psalmist was brought into when faith discovered forgiveness in God — along with the duties he engaged in, the grounds for them, and the manner of their performance, in verses 5-6: 'I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in His word I hope.' 'My soul waits for the Lord more than the watchmen wait for the morning — yes, more than the watchmen for the morning.'

In these words, he describes both his frame of spirit and the duty he engaged in — both in terms of its substance and its manner.

I will follow the same method used throughout: first, considering the reading of the words, then their meaning and significance, and the fittingness of what is mentioned in them to the condition of the soul under consideration — all of which will provide the foundation for the observations to be drawn from them.

The words rendered literally, word for word, read as follows: 'I have earnestly expected Jehovah; my soul has expected, and in His word I have tarried, or waited. My soul to the Lord, more than the watchmen in the morning — the watchmen in the morning; or, to the morning.'

The word translated 'I have waited' or 'expected' comes from a root meaning to expect, to hope, to wait. The Latin commentators note that the word conveys being intensely intent on someone with great longing — looking toward him and depending on him — and it also expresses the earnest inclination and direction of the will and mind. The word denotes eagerly looking out for something or someone with strong desire and dependence.

Paul seems to have captured this word fully in Romans 8:19, using a term that expresses an intent, earnest expectation that shows itself by craning forward and looking around with eagerness and diligence. This same quality is expressed directly in Psalm 69:20: 'I looked for someone to take pity' — that is, I looked anxiously in every direction to see if anyone would have compassion on me or mourn with me. I looked around carefully and eagerly, to see if any would pity or grieve with me.

So 'I have waited' means: with full engagement of soul, mind, will, and affections, I have looked to God in earnest expectation of what I need from Him — what must come forth from the forgive-

ness that is with Him.

Second: he says he has waited for, or expected, Jehovah — using the same name of God in his expectation that he first used when he applied to Him.

It is not this or that means, not this or that assistance, but Jehovah Himself that he expects and waits for. It is Jehovah Himself who must satisfy the soul — His favor and loving-kindness, and what flows from them. If He does not come Himself, if He does not give Himself, nothing else will bring relief.

Third: 'My soul waits or expects.' This is not an outward duty, no lip-service, no bodily exercise, no cold and formal performance of a duty — no, my soul waits. It is soul work, heart work, that I am engaged in. I wait; I wait with my whole soul.

Fourth: 'In His word I hope' or wait. The Hebrew word used here conveys hoping, expecting, enduring, and sustaining — with care, earnestness, and effort. Some scholars note the word carries the sense of anxious yet persevering expectation, of holding on. This is why the Septuagint rendered it one way, and the Vulgate rendered it 'I have sustained and waited with patience.'

He sustained his soul on the word of promise so that it would not utterly fail. Having made a discovery of grace and forgiveness — though still at a great distance from it, as one who has glimpsed land while still in a storm at sea — he encourages himself and his soul not to despair.

Yet all of this still does not fully convey the intensity of the psalmist's soul in his expectation of Jehovah. The earnest engagement of his soul in this duty rose beyond what he could express. And so he continues in verse 6: 'My soul waits for the Lord' — that

is, expects Him, looks for Him, waits for His coming to him in love and with forgiveness — 'more than the watchmen wait for the morning, the watchmen wait for the morning.'

These latter words are rendered and interpreted in various ways. The Septuagint and Vulgate render them: 'from the morning watch until night.' Others read: 'from those who keep the morning watch to those who keep the evening watch.' Still others: 'more than the watchmen in the morning, more than the watchmen in the morning.'

The words are also expounded differently. Augustine would have the phrase signify placing our hopes in the morning of Christ's resurrection and continuing in them until the night of our own death.

Jerome, rendering the words 'from the morning watch to the morning watch,' expounds them as continuing our hopes and expectations from the morning we are called into the Lord's vineyard to the morning when we receive our reward — much the same in sense as the former. Chrysostom likewise interprets it as referring to our whole life.

It cannot be denied that these interpreters were led into these readings by the Septuagint and Vulgate translations, which both divided the words quite contrary to their natural connection — reading them as: 'My soul expected the Lord. From the morning watch to the night watch, let Israel trust in the Lord' — thus attaching these words to the following exhortation to others, when they are plainly part of the expression of the psalmist's own duty. The words are in fact a comparison and an allusion to watchmen, and may be taken in one of two senses.

The words are a comparison and an allusion to watchmen, and may be taken in one of two senses.

First, in a civil sense: those who keep the night watch look, long for, and expect the morning — when, released from their post, they can take the sleep they need and desire. This expresses a very earnest expectation, longing, and desire.

Second, in a sacred sense: as the Chaldee Paraphrase renders it, 'more than those who look for the morning watch, which they carefully observe in order to offer the morning sacrifice.' In this reading, the temple guards and watchmen look diligently for the appearance of morning so they may joyfully offer the morning sacrifice at the appointed hour — and in the same way, and with even greater diligence, my soul waits for Jehovah. So the soul of the psalmist waits for Jehovah with even more eagerness than the temple watchmen wait for the morning to offer their sacrifice.

You have now seen the reading of the words and how far their meaning opens itself through that consideration.

Let us next briefly consider the several parts of the text as they relate to one another. We have: first, the expression of the duty the psalmist was engaged in, which is earnest waiting for Jehovah. Second, the foundation and ground of that waiting and expectation, which is the Word of God — the word of promise. Third, the frame of his spirit in, and the manner of his performance of, this duty — expressed in the following ways.

First, in the very words he uses, as we have already explained.

Second, in the emphatic doubling — indeed tripling — of his expression: 'I wait for God; my soul waits for God; my soul for the Lord.'

Third, in the comparison he draws between his performance of this duty and that of watchmen who keep their bodily watch with the greatest care and diligence: 'more than those who watch for the morning.'

So we have: first, the duty performed — earnest waiting and expectation. Second, the object of his waiting — Jehovah Himself. Third, his support in that duty — the word of promise. Fourth, the manner of his performance of it. First, with earnestness and diligence. Second, with perseverance.

Let us now consider the words as they describe the frame and working of a soul entangled in sin.

Having been lifted out of his depths by the discovery of forgiveness in God, as was explained before, and yet not immediately made a partaker of that forgiveness in the sense of a comforting experience of it, he gathers his soul back from wandering away from God and supports it from sinking under his present condition.

It is Jehovah alone, with whom is forgiveness, who can relieve me and do me good, he says. His favor, His loving-kindness, and what flows from them — this is what I need. On Him therefore I attend with all care; on Him I wait. My soul is filled with expectation from Him. Surely He will come to me; He will come and refresh me. Though He seems still to be far off and to leave me in these depths, yet I have His word of promise to support and sustain my soul — on that I will lean until I obtain the enjoyment of Him, and of His loving-kindness which is better than life.

This is the frame of a soul entangled in sin, who has truly discovered forgiveness in God by faith, but has not yet been made a partaker of a comforting and refreshing sense of it. We may represent it in the following observations. Observation 1: The first proper fruit of faith's discovery of forgiveness in God for a sin-distressed soul is patient waiting and expectation. Observation 2: The proper object of a sin-distressed soul's waiting and expectation is God Himself as reconciled in Christ: 'I have waited for Jehovah.' Observation 3: The Word of promise is the soul's great support in waiting for God: 'In Your word I hope.' Observation 4: Sin-distressed souls wait for God with earnest intention of mind, diligence, and expectation — as shown by the repetition of the expression. Observation 5: Continuance in waiting until God appears to the soul is both necessary and prevailing — necessary because without it we cannot attain what we seek, and prevailing because in this way we will never ultimately fail. Observation 6: The stability found in waiting, even where there is no present sense of forgiveness, gives the soul much quiet rest and comfort. This observation arises from the effect these verses have on those that follow: having come this far, the psalmist can now look around and begin to address others, encouraging them to wait for grace and mercy.

And so, though the soul has not yet reached the haven of consolation where it longs to be, it has cast out an anchor that gives it stability and security. Though still tossed, it is secured from shipwreck — more sick than in danger. A waiting condition is a condition of safety.

Hence the psalmist now turns to others. On the basis of the discovery he has made of forgiveness in God, and the stability and comfort he has found in waiting on Him, he calls and encourages

others to the same duty — in verses 7-8.

I will pass through the observations laid down briefly, still with reference to the state and condition of the soul represented in the psalm. Many things that might rightly be developed in applying these truths have already been covered in our earlier general rules. We must therefore sometimes refer back to those, since they should not be repeated here. For this reason I will move through what follows as briefly as possible — yet without omitting any directions offered here for the guidance of the soul whose condition and working of faith are here described. The first proposition, then, is this.

The first proper fruit of faith's discovery of forgiveness in God for a sin-distressed soul is patient waiting and expectation.

This the psalmist openly and directly engages in, expressing it as both his duty and his practice. He does it with such emphasis, as was shown in the explanation of the words, that I do not know of any duty so forcefully commended and vividly presented to us anywhere else in Scripture.

To understand this rightly, you must call to mind what was said about the state of the soul under consideration — its depths, entanglements, and sense of sin, with its application to God about these things. Remember also what was taught about the nature of forgiveness and the revelation of it made to the faith of believers, and that this revelation may come to a soul that has no refreshing sense of its own interest in forgiveness. It knows not that its own sins are forgiven, though it believes there is forgiveness with God. The principal duty incumbent on such a soul is what is stated in the proposition: patient waiting and expectation.

Two things must be addressed in reference to this: first, the nature of the duty itself must be explained; and second, its necessity and usefulness must be demonstrated.

As for the nature of this duty, something has already been suggested by our explanation of the words the psalmist uses to express it. But we should observe that these duties, as required of us, do not consist in any single act of the soul. Rather, they involve the whole spiritual posture and conduct of the soul in relation to the goal it is pursuing. This waiting, as it is commended to us here and elsewhere — and as it encompasses the specific duties of the soul in the condition being described — includes three things: (1) Quietness, as opposed to haste and inner turmoil. (2) Diligence, as opposed to spiritual laziness, despondency, and neglect of the means God has provided. (3) Expectation, as opposed to despair, distrust, and the other direct workings of unbelief.

1. Quietness. This waiting is sometimes expressed as silence. To wait is to be silent: "It is good that one should hope and wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord" (Lamentations 3:26). The same word is sometimes translated as "rest," as in Psalm 37:7: "Rest in the Lord" — be silent before Him. Here it is joined with hoping or waiting as something that belongs to its very nature, and the same appears in various other passages. God calls souls to this in a special way during times of difficulty and distress. "In quietness and confidence shall be your strength" (Isaiah 30:15). And the fruit of God's righteousness through Christ is said to be "quietness and assurance forever" (Isaiah 32:17). First quietness, then assurance. Now this silence and quietness that accompanies waiting — and is in fact an essential part of it — is opposed first to haste. Haste is the soul's improper lifting up of itself. It comes from

weariness with its present condition, pressing toward an end of its troubles in a way not directed by the Spirit of God. When God calls His people to waiting, He describes the opposite of this duty as "the lifting up of the soul" (Habakkuk 2:3-4): "Though the vision tarries, wait for it. Behold, the soul which is lifted up is not upright in him, but the just shall live by faith." God has given the soul a vision of peace through the discovery of the forgiveness that is with Him, but He wants us to wait for an actual experience of it that brings rest and comfort. The one who refuses to do this — who lifts up his soul, pressing ahead beyond the rule and method of the Spirit of God in this matter — does not have an upright heart, and will never know what it is to live by faith. This ruins and disappoints many a soul in its pursuit of forgiveness. The prophet, speaking of this matter, tells us that "he who believes will not make haste" (Isaiah 28:16). The apostle uses these words twice (Romans 9:33; Romans 10:11), rendering them in both places as: "Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame." This is because haste turns people away from believing, disappoints their hopes, and leaves them in shame and confusion. People who feel the guilt of sin, having had some glimpse of the rest, ease, and peace their souls could find through forgiveness, are prone to grab at it eagerly and make false, unsound, premature applications of it to themselves. They cannot bear the yoke the Lord has placed on them. They grow impatient under it and cry out like Rachel: "Give me children, or I die" (Genesis 30:1). They want it any way they can get it. Now, just as the soul's first duty is to give itself to waiting, so the first step into waiting consists in this silence and quietness of heart and spirit. This is the soul's effort to keep itself humble, con-

tent with God's sovereign will regarding its condition, and refusing every path to rest and peace except those to which it is guided by the Word and Spirit.

2. Quietness is also opposed to tumultuous, anxious thoughts and distressing inner unrest. The soul is silent: "I was mute, I did not open my mouth, because You did it" (Psalm 39:9). David doubles the expression, showing how hard he worked to quiet and still his soul under God's will. In the condition we are describing, the soul is prone to many tumultuous thoughts — a flood of perplexing thoughts that serve no useful purpose. How they are to be guarded against and rejected was explained earlier in our general rules. This quietness in waiting will prevent them. And this is the first element of the duty we have described.

Second, diligence — as opposed to spiritual laziness — is also included in waiting. Diligence is the active engagement of the mind in the regular use of means for pursuing a given goal. The goal the soul is aiming at is a comforting, refreshing share in the forgiveness that is with God. To reach this goal, God has established and blessed various means. Neglecting them through carelessness or laziness will certainly prevent the soul from reaching that goal. This is obviously true in natural things. The one who does not sow should not expect to reap. The one who does not clothe himself will not be warm. And the one who neglects the means of health will not enjoy it. People understand this when it comes to their outward affairs. Though they rightly acknowledge their dependence on God's blessing, they do not expect to prosper without being industrious in their work. The same is true in spiritual things. God has appointed one thing as the means of obtaining another. He blesses us through the use of these means, and His glory arises

from them because they are His own appointments. And this diligence is entirely about practice — the regular use of means. A person is called diligent in business when they have a diligent hand. Though it is a quality of the mind, it relates entirely to practice and action. David expresses this diligence in his waiting in Psalm 40:1. The Hebrew literally reads "waiting, I have waited" — meaning diligently, earnestly, through the use of means. He also describes this duty with a vivid comparison in Psalm 123:2: "As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their masters, and as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, until He has mercy on us." Servants who wait on their masters and watch their hands are looking for some indication of their master's wishes, so they can attend to them immediately. So, he says, we wait for mercy — not in lazy neglect of duties, but in constant readiness to obey God's will in all His commands. We see an example of this in the bride when she was in the same condition we have been describing (Song of Solomon 3:1-2). She lacked the presence of her beloved, which amounts to the same state we are considering — for where the presence of Christ is absent, there can be no sense of forgiveness. At first she seeks him on her bed: "By night on my bed I sought the one my soul loves; I sought him but did not find him." She seems to have gone no further than desires at this point, since she was still in bed. And the result was that she did not find him. But did she settle for that and lie still, waiting for him to come to her? No. She says she will rise and go through the city, through the streets and the broad ways, to seek the one her soul loves. She was determined to use every available means to find the one she was missing. In the city, the streets, and the fields, she would search for him. And the blessed result is reported in

verse 4. She found him, held him, and would not let him go. This, then, belongs to the soul's waiting. Diligence in using the means by which God ordinarily communicates a sense of pardon and forgiveness is a principal part of it. What are these means? They are well known: prayer, meditation, reading and hearing the Word, and the administration of the sacraments. All of them are appointed for this purpose. All of them are channels through which love and grace are communicated to the soul. So do not be discouraged or lazy. Rise up and be active. Attend diligently to the word of grace. Be fervent in prayer. Be faithful in using all the ordinances of the church. In one or another of them, at one time or another, you will meet with the One your soul loves — and God through Him will speak peace to you.

Third: there is expectation in waiting, which stands in direct opposition to every working of unbelief in this matter and is the very life and soul of the duty under consideration. So the psalmist declares it in Psalm 62:5: 'My soul, wait in silence for God only, for my hope is from Him.' The soul will not and cannot wait on God in a right manner unless it has expectations from Him — unless, as James says, it looks to receive something from Him (James 1:7). The soul in this condition regards forgiveness not only as something it desires in itself, but chiefly as something God has promised. From that promise it expects. This is expressed in the fourth observation laid down earlier: sin-distressed souls wait for God with earnestness, intention of mind, and expectation. This arises from the emphasis of the repeated expression, but principally from the nature of the comparison the psalmist makes — likening his waiting to those who watch for the morning. Those who watch for the morning do not merely desire it or prepare for it

— they expect it, knowing with certainty that it will come. Though darkness may be troublesome for a time and last longer than they would wish, they know the morning has its appointed hour of return and will not be delayed beyond it — so they watch for its appearance at every moment. So it is with the soul in this matter. David expresses it in Psalm 5:3: 'In the morning, O Lord, You will hear my voice; in the morning I will order my prayer to You and eagerly watch.' The word we translate 'order' and 'look up' is more precisely 'arrange things toward God, so as to be in readiness to wait on Him according to His appointments, and to look out.' Though our translation sometimes limits this to the posture in prayer, the word has a broader meaning. It means to look diligently ahead for what is coming toward us — to watch for the fulfillment of our expectation. This is a part of waiting for God; it is, as I said, the life of it. The prophet calls it standing on his watchtower and watching to see what God would speak to him (Habakkuk 2:3) — namely, in answer to the prayer he had raised in his distress. He is now waiting in expectation of an answer from God. And this is what poor, weak, trembling sinners are so earnestly encouraged to in Isaiah 35:3-4: 'Strengthen the weak hands, and make the feeble knees firm. Say to those with anxious hearts, "Take courage, fear not. Behold, your God will come."' Weakness and discouragement are effects of unbelief. God would have them removed by an expectation of His coming to the soul according to the promise. And this, I say, belongs to the waiting of the soul in the condition described. Such a person expects and hopes that God will in His own season manifest Himself and His love, giving the soul an experiential sense of a blessed interest in forgiveness. The fulfillment of God's purpose and promise is what

the soul is continually watching for. It will not despair or give up, but stirs up and strengthens itself to full expectation that the desires of the soul will be satisfied in due time — as we find David doing in places too numerous to count.

This is the duty that is first and principally commended to the soul that is persuaded there is forgiveness with God but does not yet see its own interest in it: wait on, or wait for, the Lord. And when this duty is performed rightly, it has two qualities: patience and perseverance. By patience, people are kept to the length of God's time. By perseverance, they are sustained through the full length of their own duty.

And this is what was stated in the first observation drawn from the words: that continuance in waiting until God appears to the soul is necessary — because without it we cannot attain what we seek — and prevailing — because in this way we will never ultimately fail.

God is not to be limited, nor His times prescribed to Him. We know our way and the end of our journey, but our specific stations of rest we must wait to learn from His mouth, just as the people did in the wilderness. When David comes to deal with God in his great distress, he says to Him: 'But as for me, I trust in You, O Lord, I say, "You are my God." My times are in Your hand' (Psalm 31:14-15). His times of trouble and of peace, of darkness and of light, he acknowledged to be in God's hand and at His disposal — so that his duty was to wait for God's time and season for his portion in them.

During this state the soul meets many obstacles, difficulties, and perplexities — especially if its darkness lasts a long time, as with some it continues for many years, and with some for all their lives. Their hope being so long deferred makes their hearts sick and their spirits often faint. And this fainting is a failure in waiting, a lack of perseverance and continuance that defeats its purpose. So David says in Psalm 27:13: 'I would have despaired unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.' Had I not been sustained by faith, I would have given up. And what form did that giving up take? What was the fainting that would have overtaken him without the faith he mentions? It was an abandonment of waiting on God — as his own exhortation to himself and others shows in verse 14: 'Wait for the Lord; be strong and let your heart take courage; yes, wait for the Lord.' Wait with courage and resolve, so that you do not faint. The apostle also places the blessed outcome of faith and obedience on the avoidance of this failure: 'We will reap if we do not grow weary' (Galatians 6:9). Hence we have both encouragements against fainting and promises that in the way of God we will not be overtaken by it. 'Consider Him who has endured,' says the apostle, 'the Captain of your salvation, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart' (Hebrews 12:3). Nothing else will cause you to fall short of the goal. 'Those who wait for the Lord' — that is, in the use of the means He has appointed — 'will gain new strength' and will not faint (Isaiah 40:31).

This perseverance in waiting, then, is to accompany the duty on account of both things stated in the proposition: it is absolutely necessary for the soul's own sake, and it is assuredly prevailing in the end — it will not fail.

First: it is necessary. Those who watch for the morning — to whose frame and conduct the soul's waiting for God is compared — do not give up until the light appears. If they grow weary and faint, and so cease watching, all their previous effort is lost and they lie down disappointed. So it will be with the soul that abandons its watch and fails in its waiting. If, on account of some new eruption of lust or corruption; or the return of old temptations or the assault of new ones; or a renewed and sharp sense of guilt; or the weariness of working and laboring so long in the dark — if the soul begins to say within itself, 'I have looked for light and found only darkness; for peace and found only trouble; the summer is past, the harvest is over, and I have found no relief; I have had access to such blessed means and still have found no rest' — and on that account gives up its waiting in the course previously prescribed, it will at last utterly fail and fall short of the grace it was reaching for. 'You have held fast and have not grown weary' is what brings the reward (Revelation 2:3).

Second: perseverance in waiting is assuredly prevailing — and this makes it a necessary part of the duty itself. If we continue to wait for the vision of peace, it will come; it will not delay, but will answer our expectation. No soul ever failed that persevered in this duty to the end. The joys of heaven may sometimes come before consolation in this life — God sometimes gives the full harvest without sending the firstfruits beforehand. But spiritual and eternal peace and rest are the infallible outcome of enduring waiting on God.

This is the duty the psalmist declares himself to be engaged in, on the encouraging discovery that was made to him of forgiveness in God. 'There is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared; I

wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in His word I hope.' And this is what is required of us in a like condition. This is the great direction given to us in the example and practice of the psalmist, concerning our duty and conduct in the condition described. This was the way by which he rose out of his depths and escaped his entanglements. If any of us are in this state, let them take direction from this.

First: encourage your souls to wait on God. When new fears arise, when old discouragements continue, say to your souls: still wait on God. 'Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him, the help of my countenance and my God' (Psalm 43:5) — as the psalmist does in a similar situation. So he says elsewhere: wait on God; and take courage; shake off laziness; rouse yourselves from your despondencies; do not let fears prevail. This is the only way to prevail, and it will assuredly succeed. Oppose this resolution to every discouragement, and it will give new life to faith and hope. Say: 'My flesh fails and my heart fails, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever' (Psalm 73:26). Though your troubled thoughts have worn down even the outward person — as they do in many — so that the flesh fails; and though you have no refreshing evidence from within yourself or from your own experience, so that the heart fails; yet resolve to look to God. There is strength in Him, and satisfaction in Him, for the whole person. He is a rock and a portion; this resolution will strengthen things that would otherwise be ready to die. It will keep life in your course and stir you to plead with God in an acceptable season when He will be found. Job raised his condition to the possibility that God might slay him — that is, add one blow of rebuke upon

another until Job was consumed and taken out of this world in darkness and sorrow. And yet Job resolved to trust, to hope, to wait on Him, knowing he would not utterly fail by doing so. The church expresses this frame so admirably in Lamentations 3:17-26 that nothing can be added to it. 'My soul has been rejected from peace; I have forgotten happiness. So I say, "My strength has perished, and so has my hope from the Lord." Remember my affliction and my wandering, the wormwood and bitterness. Surely my soul remembers and is bowed down within me. This I recall to mind, therefore I have hope: The Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "Therefore I have hope in Him." The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the person who seeks Him. It is good that he waits silently for the salvation of the Lord.' We have here both the condition and the duty, with the method of the soul's working in reference to both of them, fully expressed. The condition is sad and bitter; the soul is in depths far from peace and rest (verse 17). In that state it is ready to give up entirely and count all as lost — both present strength and future hope (verse 18). This makes its condition full of sorrow and bitterness, and its own thoughts become like wormwood and gall (verses 19-20). But does it lie down under all this? Does it give up and stop? No — it says: 'I call to mind that there is forgiveness with God, grace and mercy and goodness for the relief of distressed souls, for people in my condition' (verses 21-23). And the conclusion from that is this: since all help is to be looked for and all relief expected from Him alone, it is good to quietly wait and hope for the salvation of God. The psalmist stirs himself to this as the best and most blessed course for his deliverance.

Second: remember that diligent use of the means for the end aimed at is a necessary accompaniment to, and ingredient of, waiting on God. Take this direction into account as well. Do not expect to be freed from your entanglements through restless, spiritless wishing that things were otherwise — means must be used in order to obtain relief. What those means are, is well known to all: mortification of sin, prayer, meditation, faithful attendance on all the gospel ordinances, general conversation about spiritual things, and — in particular — seeking counsel about your own state and condition from those who have received the gift of a learned tongue and are able to speak a timely word to the weary. All of these require diligence and perseverance — otherwise people will wish for deliverance from their entanglements in vain.

God is the proper object of the soul's waiting in its distresses and depths.

We have seen what duty is intended in the proposition. We now consider its reason — why this is the first, great, and principal duty of souls who, in their depths, have had it revealed to them that there is forgiveness with God. The reason is expressed in our second observation: the proper object of a sin-distressed soul's waiting and expectation is God Himself as revealed in Christ.

'I have waited for Jehovah,' says the psalmist. It is not this or that mercy or grace, this or that help or relief — it is Jehovah Himself that he waits for.

Two things must be addressed here: first, in what sense God Himself is the object of the soul's waiting; and second, how it follows from this that waiting is so necessary a duty.

First: it is the Lord Himself, Jehovah Himself, that the soul waits for. It is not grace, mercy, or relief in the abstract, but the God of all grace and help who is the full and adequate object of the soul's waiting and expectation. He is considered not in His absolute nature, but as He is the One with whom is forgiveness — as has been declared at length. He is waited on as He is revealed in and through Jesus Christ; as in Christ He has found a ransom and accepted the atonement for sinners in His blood; as He is the God of the covenant. In this sense He Himself is the object of our waiting.

And this is so because all troubles, depths, and entanglements arise from two things: first, the absence of God from the soul, and second, His displeasure.

The absence of God from the soul — His departure, withdrawal, or hiding Himself from it — is what principally casts the soul into its depths. 'Woe to them when I depart from them,' says the Lord (Hosea 9:12). And this woe and sorrow attend not only a total and universal departure of God from a person, but also a partial or gradual one — in some respects, in some seasons. When God withdraws His enlightening, refreshing, and comforting presence — whenever He no longer communicates Himself to a soul by the means He formerly used — then woe to that soul; sorrows come upon it and it falls into depths and entanglements. This condition calls for waiting. If God has withdrawn, if He hides Himself, what does the soul have to do but wait for His return? So says the prophet in Isaiah 8:17: 'And I will wait for the Lord who is hiding His face from the house of Jacob; I will even look eagerly for Him.' If God hides Himself, this is the natural and proper duty of the soul — to wait and look for Him. No other course of relief is avail-

able. What that waiting consists of and involves has been declared. Patient seeking of God in the ways of His appointment is included in it. The prophet expresses this with the word 'I will look eagerly for Him' — the same root as the word in the psalm — and it means to look earnestly for Him with expectation of His return.

Second: a sense of God's displeasure is another cause of these depths and troubles, and of the soul's continued experience of them — even after it has made the blessed discovery by faith that there is forgiveness with Him. This has been so thoroughly demonstrated throughout the entire preceding discussion that it need not be pressed again. Everything has to do with sin, and the reason trouble arises from sin is God's displeasure against it. What then is the natural posture and frame of the soul toward a displeased God? Should it contend with Him? Should it harden itself against Him? Should it despise His wrath and anger and treat His warnings lightly? Or should it hide from Him and seek to avoid the effects of His displeasure? Who does not know how ruinous such courses would be, and how many are destroyed by them every day? Patient waiting on God is the soul's only resource in this regard as well.

Second: this duty in the situation described is necessary because of the greatness and sovereignty of the One with whom we have to do. 'My soul waits for Jehovah.' Waiting is a duty that depends on the distance between the persons involved — the one who waits and the one who is waited on. So the psalmist informs us in Psalm 123:2: it is an action like that of servants and handmaids toward their masters and rulers. And the greater this distance, the more pressing are the reasons for this duty on every occasion. Because we are practically reluctant to perform this duty

rightly, or quickly grow weary of it despite being fully convinced of its necessity, I will dwell a little on considerations of God and ourselves that may not only demonstrate the necessity of this duty but also satisfy us of its reasonableness — so that by the first we may be led into it, and by the second we may be kept in it.

Two things may be considered with this purpose in mind — in Jehovah, whom we are to wait for. First, His being and the absolute and essential properties of His nature. Second, those attributes of His nature that relate to His dealings with us. Both are suited to work in us the affections and frame of spirit that fit the duty being pressed.

Considerations of God that make waiting on Him both reasonable and necessary. His glorious being.

First: let us consider the infinite, glorious being of Jehovah, with His absolute, unique, essential excellencies — and then consider whether it does not become us in every condition, and especially in this one, to wait for Him. This is the very course God Himself took with Job to bring him back from his complaints and discontent to quietness and waiting. He set before Job His own glorious greatness as manifested in the works of His power, so that Job — convicted of his own ignorance, weakness, and infinite distance in all things from God — might humble his soul into the most submissive dependence on Him and waiting for Him. And this Job did accordingly in chapter 42:6: 'I abhor myself, and I repent in dust and ashes.' His soul was now willing to be at God's disposal, and in that he found immediate rest and a swift healing of his condition. It is the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy (Isaiah 57:15), with whom we now have to do. He sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like

grasshoppers before Him; the nations are like a drop from a bucket and are regarded as a speck of dust on the scales; He lifts up the islands like fine dust. All the nations before Him are as nothing; they are regarded by Him as less than nothing and meaningless (Isaiah 40:15, 17, 22). To what end does the Lord set forth and declare His glorious greatness and power? So that all might be brought to trust in Him and wait for Him, as is explained at length in the close of that chapter. For shall grasshoppers, a drop from a bucket, dust on the scales, things less than nothing, complain against or grow weary of the will of the immense, glorious, and lofty One? He who lifts up all the islands as fine dust may surely, if He pleases, crush, cast aside, and forsake one island, one city within that island, one person within that city — and we before Him are but single persons. Serious thoughts of this infinite and all-glorious being will either quiet our souls or overwhelm them. All our weariness of His dealings with us arises from secret imaginings that He is like us — someone who ought to do nothing but what seems good in our own eyes. But if we cannot comprehend His being, we cannot make rules to judge His ways and proceedings. And how small a portion do we know of God? Even our nearest approaches in reason and imagination leave us still at an infinite distance from Him. What we say of His greatness, we do not fully understand — we only express our respect for what we believe, admire, and adore, but cannot comprehend. All our thoughts fall as short of His excellent greatness as our natures fall short of His — that is, infinitely short. Behold the universe, the glorious structure of heaven and earth — how little do we know of its beauty, order, and arrangement, and yet it was all produced by the word of His mouth. With the same ease, He can when He pleases

reduce it again to the nothing from which it came. And what are we, poor creatures of the earth — an insignificant and little-known part of the lower order of the works of His hands, few in number, fading in condition, and unnoticed by the rest of His creatures — that we should seek to remove ourselves from under any of His dealings with us, or grow weary of waiting for His pleasure? He presses this on us in Psalm 46:10: 'Cease striving and know that I am God.' Let there be no more complaints, no more disputes. Continue waiting in silence and patience. Consider who I am. Be still, and know that I am God.

To help us further in this consideration, let us also fix our minds briefly on some of the glorious, essential, and unique properties of His nature, one by one.

First: His eternity. Moses presents this to lead the hearts of believers to submission, trust, and waiting: 'From everlasting to everlasting, You are God' (Psalm 90:2). He is One whose being and existence is not in time but in eternity itself. So also Habakkuk in chapter 1:12: 'Are You not from everlasting, O Lord, my God, my Holy One?' And from this he draws his conclusion against making haste in any condition — that one must tarry and wait for God. David also engages this consideration in Psalm 102:27. How inconceivable is this glorious divine attribute to the thoughts and minds of human beings? How weak are the words by which we attempt to express it? One philosopher says it is a 'standing now'; another calls it 'perpetual duration.' The one who says the most only indicates what he knows it is not. We are creatures of yesterday — we change every moment and leave our place tomorrow. God is always the same; He was so before the world existed, from eternity. And having said that, I confess I do not fully know what I have said

— I have only indicated what I adore. The entire duration of the world from beginning to end takes up no space in God's eternity. However long it has lasted or may yet continue, it will amount to so many thousands of years — so much time; but time has no place in eternity. And as for us who in this matter have to do with God — what is our span compared to that of the world? A moment, as it were, in comparison to the whole. When human lives were prolonged in ancient times beyond the length of empires and kingdoms that exist today, this is how it was summed up: 'So-and-so lived this many years, and then he died' (Genesis 5). And what are we, poor creatures whose lives are measured in inches in comparison to that span? What are we before the eternal God — who subsists always and unchangeably in His own infinite being? A genuine consideration of this will subdue the soul into a condition of dependence on Him and waiting for Him.

Second: the immensity of God's essence and His omnipresence call for the same consideration. 'Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?' says the Lord (Jeremiah 23:24). The heavens — even the highest heavens, the most comprehensive created being — cannot contain Him, as Solomon declares (1 Kings 8:27). In His infinitely glorious being He is present with and not distant from all places, things, times, and all the works of His hands — and He subsists no less gloriously where they are not. God is present where heaven and earth are not, no less than where they are; and where they are not, He is Himself. Where there is no place, no space — real or imagined — God is; for place and imagination have nothing to do with immensity. He is present everywhere in creation: where I am writing, where you are reading. He is present with you, not distant from you. The common assumption of most people is that God in

His essence is only in heaven — if indeed they think He is even there, given how they live and act as if there were neither God nor devil but themselves. From such assumptions, thoughts readily arise and effectively take hold — such as those expressed in Job 22:13-14: 'How does God know? Can He judge through the thick darkness? Thick clouds are a hiding place for Him so that He cannot see, and He walks on the vault of heaven.' Notions of God's distance from people harden them in their ways. But the reality is entirely otherwise: God is everywhere, and a person may on every occasion say with Jacob, 'Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it' (Genesis 28:16). Let the soul called to wait on God exercise itself with thoughts of this immensity of His nature and being. We can never comprehend it fully — but the consideration of it will produce such awe of His greatness in our hearts that we will learn to tremble before Him and be willing to wait for Him in all things.

Third: thoughts of the holiness of God — His infinite self-purity as the eternal and immense One — are especially useful for the same purpose. This is what Eliphaz declares he received in a vision, in his reply to Job's complaint and impatience (Job 4:12-19). After describing his vision and the manner of it, he declares this to be the revelation that came to him by voice: 'Can man be just before God? Can a man be pure before his Maker? He puts no trust in His servants; and against His angels He charges error. How much more those who dwell in houses of clay, whose foundation is in the dust, who are crushed before the moth?' If the saints and angels in heaven do not measure up to God's infinite holiness even in their most perfect condition, is it fitting for creatures of the earth to suppose that anything He does is not absolutely holy and right,

and therefore best for them? This is the fiery property of God's nature, from which He is called a consuming fire and everlasting burnings. And the law, on which He had stamped some representation of it, is called a fiery law — because it consumes and burns up whatever is perverse and evil. Hence the prophet who had a vision of God's glory, and heard the seraphim proclaiming His holiness, cried out: 'Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts' (Isaiah 6:5). He thought it impossible that he could bear such a near approach of the holiness of God. And it is with this reminder of God's holiness that Joshua silenced the people with the terror of the Lord (Joshua 24:19). Let souls then who are under trouble and perplexity of any kind, exercise their thoughts about this infinite purity and fiery holiness of God. They will quickly find it their wisdom to become like weaned children before Him, content with whatever He directs them to — which is to wait for Him. This fiery holiness streams from His throne (Daniel 7:10) and would instantly consume the entire creation — now under the curse and under sin — were it not for the interposing of Jesus Christ.

Fourth: His glorious majesty as Ruler of all the world. Majesty relates to government, and it calls us to such an awe of God as makes waiting for Him both fitting and necessary. God's throne is said to be in heaven, and it is there that the glorious beams of His terrible majesty shine forth most fully. But He has also given some representation of it on earth, that we might learn to fear before Him. Such was the appearance of His glory in the giving of the law — the law by which He will judge the world and condemn all who break it and do not find an acquittal in the blood of Jesus Christ.

See the description of it in Exodus 19:16-18. So terrifying was the sight that even Moses said, 'I am full of fear and trembling' (Hebrews 12:21). And the effect on all the people is described in Exodus 20:18-19: they were not able to bear it, even though they had good assurance that it was for their benefit and advantage that He drew so near and manifested His glory to them. Are we dissatisfied with our condition? Cannot we wait under His present dealings? Let us think what it would mean to approach His presence or stand before His glorious majesty. Will not the dread of His excellence fall on us? Will not His terror make us afraid? Shall we not conclude that His way is best and His time is best, and that our duty is to be silent before Him? Similar manifestations of His glory as the great judge on His throne were given to several of the prophets: to Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1-4), to Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1), to Daniel (Daniel 7:9-10), and to John (Revelation 1). Read those passages attentively and learn to tremble before Him. These are not things foreign to us. This God is our God. The same throne of His greatness and majesty is still established in heaven. Let us therefore, in all the impatience and agitation our spirits are prone to in any condition, present ourselves before this throne of God and consider what would be best for us to say or do — what frame of heart and spirit becomes us, and what would be safest for us. All this glory surrounds us every moment, though we do not perceive it. And it will be but a few days before all the veils and shadows around us are taken away. Then all this glory will appear to us — either to endless blessedness or to everlasting woe. Let us therefore know that nothing in our dealings with God becomes us better than silently waiting for Him, and for what He will speak to us in our depths and distresses.

Fifth: it is good to consider the instances God has given of this His infinite greatness, power, majesty, and glory. Such was His mighty work of creating all things out of nothing. We dwell on small patches of earth, and we do not even know a small portion of the beauty of that little portion of ground given to us as our dwelling here below. But what is that compared to the whole habitable world and its fullness? And what an astonishing thing is the greatness of the earth, with the wide and vast sea, and all the kinds of creatures that fill it? The least of these has a beauty, a glory, an excellence that the utmost of our investigation ends in wonder at. And all this is only the earth — the lower and less exalted part of the world. What shall we say of the heavens above us, and all the creatures of light that have their dwelling in them? Who can conceive the beauty, order, purpose, and movement of them? The contemplation of this caused the psalmist to cry out, 'O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth!' (Psalm 8:1). And what is the source, origin, and cause of all these things? Are they not all the effect of the word of the power of this glorious God? And does He not by them and through them call us to a reverence of His greatness? The same may be said of His mighty and extraordinary works of providence in ruling the world. Is He not the One who brought the flood of old upon the world of ungodly people? Is He not the One who consumed Sodom and Gomorrah with fire from heaven, setting them forth as examples for those who would afterward live ungodly (Jude 7)? Is He not the One who struck Egypt with His plagues and drowned Pharaoh with his army in the Red Sea? Is He not the One of whom one servant struck down 185,000 in Sennacherib's army in a single night — who opened the

earth to swallow Dathan and Abiram, who sent fire from the altar to devour Nadab and Abihu? And have not all ages been filled with such instances of His greatness and power?

The reason I have dwelt on these things is to demonstrate the reasonableness of the duty we are pressing — namely, to wait on God quietly and patiently in every condition of distress. For what else becomes us when we have to do with this great and holy One? And a genuine consideration of these things will powerfully incline our minds toward it.

Second: this waiting for God extends to the whole of the condition expressed in the psalm, which includes not only spiritual depths about sin — which we have treated at length — but also providential depths, depths of trouble and affliction that we may encounter through God's holy and wise providence. Patient and silent waiting is our duty in these as well. Two considerations will assist us in this duty with respect to such depths of trouble or affliction. The first is the consideration of those properties of God that He exercises in a particular way in all His dealings with us, and which in all our troubles we are chiefly to regard. The second is the consideration of ourselves — what we are, and what we have deserved.

Let us begin with the first. There are four things in God's dealings and dispensations toward us that we should consider in this matter, all suited to work in us the end we are aiming at. The first is His sovereignty. This He declares; this we are to acknowledge and submit to in all the great and heavy dispensations of His providence and in all His dealings with our souls. May He not do what He will with what is His own? Who shall say to Him, 'What are You doing?' — and if any do, what will give them any standing in doing

so? He made this entire world from nothing and could have made another, or more, or all things entirely different from what they are. Nothing would subsist a single moment without His almighty support. Nothing would continue in its place, course, or purpose without His effectual influence and care. If anything could be, live, or act a moment without Him, we might take the liberty to dispute His disposal of it and press for the quick fulfillment of our desires. But from the angels in heaven to the worms of the earth and the grass of the field, all things depend on Him and His power continually. Why is one part of creation an angel, another a worm, this a man, that a beast — is it from their own choice, design, or contrivance, from their own wisdom? Or is it entirely from the sovereign pleasure and will of God? And what a madness it is to complain against what He does, seeing that all things are as He makes them and orders them, and could not be otherwise. Even the one who complains has his very being and existence from His mere pleasure. This sovereignty of God Elihu presses in his dealings with Job (Job 33:8-13). He perceived that Job had been arguing against God's severe dealings with him, that he was not humbling himself under God's mighty hand by which he was being disciplined, and was not waiting for Him in a right manner. And what does he set before Job to bring him to his duty? What does he reply to Job's arguments and complaints? 'In this you are not right,' he says in verse 12. 'I will answer you: God is greater than man' (verse 13). 'Why do you contend with Him? For He does not give an account of all His actions.' Even allowing that Job was just and innocent in other respects, and was not guilty of what his friends accused him of, yet in this he was wrong: it is neither just nor right for any person to complain about or speak against any of God's

dealings. One may object: 'But these dealings of God are very grievous, very dreadful — perhaps such as He has seldom exercised toward anyone from the foundation of the world. To be utterly destroyed and consumed in a day in all relationships and possessions, when no such thing was looked for or guarded against; to have a sense of sin revived on the conscience after pardon has been obtained — as it is with me.' It makes no difference, says Elihu. If you complain, you are not just. And his reason? God is greater than man — infinitely so, in power and sovereign glory. He is so absolutely greater that He gives no account of any of His actions. And what folly, what injustice it is to complain against His proceedings. Consider His absolute dominion over the works of His hands, over yourself and all you have; His infinite distance from you and His greatness above you — and then see whether it is just to complain against what He does. He pursues the same consideration in Job 34:18-19: 'Can He who says to a king, "You are worthless," and to nobles, "You are wicked" — who shows no partiality to princes nor regards the rich above the poor, for they are all the work of His hands — can He be questioned?' Verse 29: 'When He keeps quiet, who then can condemn? And when He hides His face, who then can behold Him — whether it is against a nation or against a man alone?' It is the same regardless: whatever God does and toward whomever — many or few, a whole nation or city, or a single person; whether high or low, rich or poor, good or bad — all are the works of His hands, and He may deal with them as seems good to Him. And this man alone, as God afterward declares, used the right and proper reasoning to bring Job away from his complaining and bring his spirit to rest, peace, and patient waiting for God. His other friends unjustly accused Job of hypocrisy and of

deserving these particular judgments above other men. Job, knowing his own integrity, was only provoked and hardened by their arguments and was stirred up to plead his own innocence and uprightness. But Elihu, granting Job's claim of integrity, directed him instead to the consideration of God's greatness and sovereignty — against which there is no rising up. And this is what God Himself afterward calls Job to.

Deep and serious thoughts of God's sovereignty and absolute dominion over all the works of His hands are an effective means of working the soul into this duty. Yes, this is what we must bring our souls to. Let us consider with whom we have to do. Are not we and all our concerns in His hands as clay in the hand of the potter? May He not do what He will with what is His own? Can we call Him to account? Is not what He does good and holy because He does it? Do any complaining thoughts against the works of God arise in our hearts? Are any objections ready to break out of our mouths? Let us lay our hands on our hearts and our mouths in the dust, with thoughts of His greatness and absolute sovereignty — and it will reshape our whole soul into a better frame.

And this sovereignty extends to the manner, times, and seasons of all things whatsoever. In outward affairs: if God will bring a dreadful judgment of fire on a people, a nation — why must it be London? If London, why so fierce, so raging, and so uncontrollable? Why the city and not the suburbs? Why my house and not my neighbor's? Why did some receive help and I none? All of these things are entirely to be referred to God's sovereign pleasure. There alone can the soul of man find rest and peace. It is the same in spiritual dealings.

So it was with Aaron: when his two elder sons suddenly died, Moses reminded him of God's sovereignty and holiness, and Aaron immediately held his peace — quietly humbling himself under God's mighty hand (Leviticus 10:3-4). And when David's affairs were thrown into the most extreme confusion by Absalom's rebellion, followed by a multitude of the whole nation, David released all other arguments and pleas and surrendered himself and all his concerns to the absolute pleasure of God (2 Samuel 15:25-26). And this is what we must bring our souls to in all our extremities, before we can find any rest or peace — or the slightest comforting persuasion that we may not yet fall under still greater severity in God's righteous indignation against us.

Second: the wisdom of God is also to be considered and submitted to. 'He is wise in heart, and who has defied Him without harm?' (Job 9:4). The prophet joins this with God's greatness and sovereignty in Isaiah 40:12-14. 'There is no searching of His understanding' (Isaiah 40:28). The apostle concludes all his reflections on the works of God with holy admiration of His knowledge and wisdom, from which His judgments become unsearchable and His ways past finding out (Romans 11:33-34). He sees and knows all things — in all their causes, effects, consequences, and circumstances, in their fullest reach and tendency, in their connections to one another and their suitableness to His own glory — and so He alone judges all things rightly. The wisest of men, as David says, walk in a shadow (Psalm 39:6). We see little and know little — and that only of a very few things, and imperfectly, and only as they appear at present, abstracted from their outcomes, results, ends, and relations to other things. If we would press further into wisdom about the works of God, we will be found to be like the young of a

wild donkey (Job 11:12). What is good for us or for the church of God, what is evil — we do not know at all. But all things are open and naked to God. The day will come when we will have such a view of the works of God, seeing one thing set against another, that we will find goodness, beauty, and order in them all — that everything was done in number, weight, and measure; that nothing could have been otherwise without diminishing His glory and harming those who believe in Him. But for the present, all our wisdom consists in referring all things to Him. He who does all of this is infinitely wise. He knows what He does, why He does it, and what will be the end of everything. We are prone, perhaps, to think that in such seasons everything will come to ruin — for ourselves, for the church, or for the whole world. How can this breach be repaired, this loss made up, this ruin recovered? Peace is gone, trade is gone, our substance is gone, the church is gone, all is gone — confusion and utter desolation are at the door. But if a person inexperienced at sea were on a ship, he might conclude every time the vessel tilted to one side that they were all about to be wrecked. Yet if he is not childishly timid, when the captain assures him there is no danger and tells him to trust his skill and all will be well, that will give him quietness and peace. We are indeed in a storm; the whole earth seems to reel and stagger like a drunk man. But our souls may rest in the infinite skill and wisdom of the great Pilot of all creation, who steers all things according to the counsel of His will. 'How many are Your works, O Lord! In wisdom You have made them all' (Psalm 104:24). And in the same wisdom He orders and disposes them. 'All this comes from the Lord of hosts, who is wonderful in counsel and excellent in wisdom' (Isaiah 28:29). What is good, fitting, and useful for us, for those close to

us, for the churches, for the city, for the land of our birth — He knows, and not one creature does. This infinite wisdom of God we are therefore to surrender and submit ourselves to. His hand in all His works is guided by infinite wisdom. In thoughts of this, in humbling ourselves under it, we will find rest and peace — and in all our troubles this will work us into a patient waiting for Him.

Third: the righteousness of God is also to be considered in this matter. This name in Scripture is used to denote many of God's excellencies, all reducible to the infinite rectitude of His nature. I have in mind here what may be called His governing righteousness — His righteousness in rule and government. Abraham appeals to this in Genesis 18:25: 'Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?' And the apostle affirms it in Romans 3:5-6: 'Is God unjust who inflicts wrath? May it never be! Otherwise, how will God judge the world?' Our souls are to own this in all the works of God. They are all righteous. All that God does is just — His throne is established in judgment. However dreadful, grievous, or seemingly severe His acts may be, they are all righteous. It is true He sometimes rises to do strange and unusual acts — things He does not do often or ordinarily, things that fill the world with dread and amazement (Isaiah 28:21). He will answer His people in terrible things. But all will be in righteousness. To complain about what is righteous, to speak against it, is the highest unrighteousness possible. Faith, therefore, fixing the soul on the righteousness of God, is an effective means to humble it under His mighty hand. To help us here we may consider —

First: God does not judge as man judges. We judge by what our eyes see and our ears hear — by outward appearances and evidence. But God searches the heart. We judge based on what lies between one person and another. God judges primarily on the basis of what lies between Himself and that person. And what do we know or understand of these things? What is in a person's heart — what purposes, schemes, designs, corrupt affections, and sins they carry; what transactions have taken place between God and them; what warnings He has given them, what rebukes, what commitments they have made, what convictions they have had, what use they have been making of their lives, their wealth, their families? We know nothing of these things and so can make no judgment on God's dealings with them. But this we know: that He is righteous in all His ways and holy in all His works — even the most terrible of them. And when the secrets of all hearts are revealed, how glorious will appear His drowning of the old world, His burning of Sodom, His swallowing of Dathan and Abiram in the earth, His utter rejection of the Jews, and all His other acts of providence that seemed to be accompanied by severity. And so too will our own trials — inward and outward — appear in the end.

Second: God is the judge of all the world — of all ages, times, places, and persons — and He orders all things so that they tend to the good of the whole and His own glory in the universe. Our thoughts are bounded, and still more our observations and ability to measure things, within a very small compass. Every thing stands alone to us, so we see little of its beauty or order, and we do not know how it ought rightly to be arranged. A particular thing may appear deformed to us that, when seen under the eye of the One who sees all things at once — past, present, and future — together

with all the joints and connections of wisdom and order by which things relate to one another, is in fact beautiful and glorious. For as nothing exists by itself, through itself, or for itself alone, so nothing stands in isolation. A line of mutual connection runs through the whole creation and every part of it, through all its changes and alterations from beginning to end, giving it its life, order, and beauty. Someone who can see only one part of a great statue or monument might think it a very misshapen thing, while the one who sees it all at once is assured of its due proportion, symmetry, and beauty. All things, all ages, all persons are thus seen all at once by God, and He orders them with regard to the whole, so that each may fill its proper place and play its part in the common movement of all things toward the same end.

Hence it is that in public judgments and calamities, God often allows the godly to be caught up together with the wicked — not on account of their own persons, but because they are parts of that body He will judge. Job expresses this somewhat harshly, but there is truth in his assertion in Job 9:22-23: 'It is all one; therefore I say, "He destroys the guiltless and the wicked." If the scourge kills suddenly, He mocks the despair of the innocent.' In public desolations, God often takes the good and the bad together; a sudden stroke involves them all. God does this for several reasons.

First: to manifest His own holiness — which is such that He can, without the slightest injustice or oppression, and even on account of their own provocations, take away the houses, possessions, estates, liberties, and lives of the best of His own saints. For how should any man — even the best of men — be just before God

if God chose to contend with him? No man can answer Him one word in a thousand (Job 9:3). On this account, no one can open his mouth about God's judgments without the highest impiety.

Second: He does so that His own people may learn to know His terror and to rejoice before Him always with trembling. Job affirms that even in his prosperity he was not at ease, but continually trembled with thoughts of God's judgments. Much wretched carnal security would be ready to invade and take hold of believers' hearts if God always and consistently passed them by in the dispensations of His public judgments.

Third: it may become a stone of stumbling and offense to wicked people who are to be hardened in their sins and prepared for ruin. When they see that all things happen alike to all — that those who make a strict profession of the name and fear of God fare no better than themselves — they are encouraged to despise God's warnings and the strokes of His hand, and so rush on toward the destruction for which they are being prepared.

Fourth: God does it to declare to all the world that what He does here is not a final judgment and ultimate determination concerning things and persons. For who can see the wise man dying as the fool, the righteous and holy perishing in their outward circumstances as the ungodly and wicked do, without concluding that the righteous God, the judge of all, has appointed another day in which all things must be reviewed — and in which everyone will receive his final reward according to how his works are found to have been? And thus we are to humble ourselves before the righteousness that always accompanies God's hand.

Fifth: His goodness and grace are also to be considered in all the works of His mighty hands. As there is no unrighteousness in Him, so also all that He does is good and gracious. And whatever relief from the full weight of His wrath exists in any trouble, it is from pure goodness and grace. Your houses have been burned, but perhaps your goods were saved — is there no grace, no goodness in that? Or perhaps your substance was also consumed, but your person is still alive — and should a living man complain? But say what you will: this stroke is not hell, which you deserved long ago. Yes, it may even be a means of preventing you from going there. So it is accompanied with infinite goodness, patience, and mercy. And if the consideration of that will not quiet your heart, take care lest something worse befall you.

These and similar considerations of God are what we are to engage our minds with, to lead our hearts into acquiescence in His will, submission under His mighty hand, and patient waiting for the outcome.

2. Consider our lowly and humble condition, and the infinite distance between us and the One we are dealing with. When Abraham — the father of the faithful and friend of God — came to speak with God about His judgments, he did so with this acknowledgment of his own condition: that he was nothing but dust and ashes (Genesis 18:27). He was a poor, lowly creature whom God had chosen to form from the dust of the earth and who would in a few days be reduced to ashes again. There is nothing we forget more dangerously than what we truly are. "Man is a worm, and the son of man is a worm," says Bildad (Job 25:6). And Job himself says: "I have said to corruption, 'You are my father,' and to the worm, 'You are my mother and my sister'" (Job 17:14). His kinship

and connection to them is the closest imaginable, and he is to be regarded no differently. There is nothing God despises more than a proud spirit that forgets the frailty and lowliness of our condition. "You said you are a god," He told the proud prince of Tyre, "but will you still say 'I am a god' in the hands of the one who kills you?" (Ezekiel 28:9). That severe rebuke God prepared for his pride. "You will be shown to be a man and not a god in the hands of the one who kills you." And when Herod gloried in the crowd's flattery — "The voice of a god, not a man!" — the angel of the Lord immediately struck him, and he was eaten by worms and died (Acts 12:23). There is indeed nothing more effective at humbling the pride of human hearts than rightly remembering what we are. So the psalmist prays: "Put them in fear, O Lord, that the nations may know themselves to be but men" (Psalm 9:20). Just that, and nothing more — poor, miserable, frail, mortal humanity, as the word signifies. What is man? What is his life? What is his strength? One writer called it the dream of a shadow, a mere nothing. David put it far better: "Certainly every man at his best state is but a breath" (Psalm 39:5). And James says that our life — which is our best, our all — is just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away (James 4:14). But enough has been said by many on this subject. And we who have seen so many thousands carried to the grave every week in one city have been taught the truth of our frailty as if by thorns and briars. Yet somehow there is nothing we are more prone to forget than what we ourselves are. This drives people into countless failures toward God and toward one another. You, then, who are suffering under God's hand in some severe trial, and who are ready at every opportunity to fill your mouth with complaints — sit down for a moment, take a right measure of

yourself, and see whether this attitude suits you. It is the great God you are complaining against, and you are just a man — a name that means a worm, a poor, frail, dying worm. And perhaps while you are still speaking, you are no more. Do you think it fitting for someone like you to set yourself up against the great possessor of heaven and earth? Poor clay, poor dust and ashes, poor dying worm — know your state and condition, and bow quietly under the mighty hand of God. You may argue with other people about your concerns, but leave God alone. The potsherds may quarrel with the potsherds of the earth, but woe to the one who strives with his Maker (Isaiah 45:9).

2. Consider that in this frail condition, we have all greatly sinned against God. So did Job: "I have sinned; what shall I do to You, O watcher of men?" (Job 7:20). If this consideration does not satisfy your mind, it will certainly stop every mouth. Even if all the curses of the law were carried out against us, every mouth must be stopped because the whole world has become guilty before God (Romans 3:19). "Why should any living person complain?" asks the prophet (Lamentations 3:39). Perhaps because his trouble is great and beyond words, such as has seldom or never come upon anyone before. But what then? Shall a person complain against the punishment of his sins? If this living person is a sinful person — and there is no one who lives and does not sin — then whatever his state and condition may be, he has no grounds for complaining. For a sinful person to complain, especially while still alive, is utterly unreasonable. Here is why:

1. Whatever has happened to us is just, because we are sinners before God. To complain against God's judgments — which are clearly righteous on account of sin — is to act like the damned in

hell, whose misery includes the fact that they constantly rage against a sentence and punishment they know to be perfectly righteous and holy. If this were the place, and if it were my purpose to catalog the sins of all who profess faith, how easy it would be to silence every complaint about their troubles. But that is not my present task. I am speaking to individuals, and not primarily to convict them of their sins, but to humble their souls. Another time may be taken to press that point directly and thoroughly. For now, let us simply do this: whenever our souls are ready to become entangled with thoughts about some severe act of God, and with our own particular pressures, troubles, and miseries caused by it, let us turn inward and examine our own personal sins. And when we have done so, let us see what we have left to say to God, what we have to complain about. Let the man hold his tongue, and let the sinner speak. Is not God holy, righteous, and wise in what He has done? And if He is, why do we not accept His ways and submit quietly to His will?

Second: but this is not all. We are not only such sinners as to make these dispensations of God plainly holy and His judgments righteous — we are also sinners such that these very dispensations are evidently accompanied by unspeakable patience, mercy, and grace. Consider one instance in particular. Is it only the burning of our houses, the loss of our goods, and the ruin of our estates that our sins have deserved? Had God made the temporary fire on earth a gateway into the eternal fire of hell, we would have had no righteous grounds for complaint. May we not therefore see a mixture of inexpressible patience, grace, and mercy in every dispensation? And shall we then speak against it? Is not the better advice this: 'Go and sin no more, lest something worse happen to you'

(John 5:14)? For a sinner who is not yet in hell to refuse to rest in God's will and to refuse to humble himself under God's mighty hand is to make himself guilty of the distinctive sin of hell. Other sins deserve hell, but willful speaking against God is the sin that is committed there, and there primarily. The church reaches a blessed and quieting resolution in this matter: 'I will bear the indignation of the Lord because I have sinned against Him' (Micah 7:9) — bearing it quietly, patiently, and in submission to His hand.

Third: consider that we are of ourselves incapable of making a right judgment about what is good for us — what is harmful, or what tends most directly to our chief end. 'Surely every man walks in a vain show; surely they make an uproar for nothing; he heaps up riches and does not know who will gather them' (Psalm 39:6). A person moves in the middle of false and misleading appearances, not knowing what truly to choose or do rightly — and so spends most of his time and energy on things that serve no real purpose. He gives one example of this: a person heaps up riches and does not know who will collect them — just one of the countless frustrations people meet throughout their lives, precisely because they do not know what is truly good for them. We all profess to aim at one chief and final end: the enjoyment of God in Christ as our eternal reward, and in pursuit of that end to be led on through the means of faith and obedience. Now if this is so, then the suitability or unsuitability of all other things to be counted good or evil for us must be measured by their tendency toward this end. And what do we know of that? As to the things of this life, do we know whether it would be better for us to be rich or poor, to have houses or to be without them, to have abundance or to live in want, to leave wealth and inheritance to our children or to leave them naked to the prov-

idence of God? Do we know what state and condition will most promote our obedience, most guard against our temptations, or most call us to mortify our corruptions? Since we know none of these things — as indeed we do not — would it not be best to leave them quietly in God's hands? I have no doubt that it will appear at the last day that an immense amount of evil in the hearts of people was checked by the destruction of their outward circumstances — even more by inward troubles. Many were delivered from temptations they would otherwise have fallen into, to their ruin and to the scandal of the gospel. Many a hidden poison has been lanced and cured by a blow, for God does not send judgments on His own people for judgment's sake or for punishment's sake alone — He always does so to accomplish some blessed design of grace toward them. And there is not a single soul that will rightly search itself and examine its own state and condition but will be able to see wisdom, grace, and care toward itself in all God's dealings. And if I were to trace here all the benefits that come to believers through the sanctifying hand of God in afflictions, calamities, troubles, distresses, temptations, and the other effects of God's visitations, it would be of great use to souls in this condition. But this subject has been so often and so well addressed by others that I will not dwell on it. I only desire that we would seriously consider how utterly ignorant we are of what is good for us in these outward things — and so leave them quietly in God's disposal.

Fourth: we may consider that all the things we are troubled about fall directly within the scope of that gracious word: 'God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose' (Romans 8:28). All things we enjoy, all things we are deprived of, all we do, all we

suffer — our losses, troubles, miseries, distresses (on which the apostle elaborates in the following verses) — shall all work together for good: together with one another, and all together with and under the power, grace, and wisdom of God. We may not see how or by what means this will be accomplished, but the One who has undertaken it is infinitely wise and powerful, and we know little or nothing of His ways. There is nothing we have, enjoy, or desire that has not turned to harm for someone. Riches have been kept for people to their hurt. Wisdom and high position have been the ruin of many. Liberty and abundance are for most a trap. Prosperity kills the fool. And we are not able of ourselves to secure ourselves even slightly from the harm and poison that is in any of these things — so that they may prove our ruin as well, as they have already proven to multitudes every day. It would be enough to fill any person's soul with horror and amazement to consider the ways and ends of most of those entrusted with this world's goods. Is it not evident that all their lives they seem to be industriously taking care to perish eternally? Luxury, riotous living, oppression, excess — and of late especially blasphemy and practical atheism — these are what people typically give themselves to. And this is the fruit of their abundance and security. What then if God should deprive us of all these things? Can anyone say with certainty that he is worse off? Might not those very things have led to his eternal ruin, as they do to thousands who are no worse by nature and who have had as many advantages as we? And shall we complain about God's dealings with them? And what shall we say when He Himself has undertaken to make all things He sends us work together for our good? Anxiety of mind and anguish of heart about our losses is not what we are called to in our troubles. This is our duty: let us

consider whether we love God, whether we are called according to His purpose. If we are, all things are safe in His hand, who can order them for our good and advantage. I believe that many a poor soul will be able to say from this, under all their trouble, what was once said by a man banished from his country who found better welcome elsewhere: 'My friends, I had perished if I had not perished. Had I not been ruined by fire, I might have been ruined in eternal fire. God has made all things work for my good.'

The purpose of all this discussion has been to demonstrate the reasonableness of the duty we are pressing from the psalmist — namely, to wait on God quietly and patiently in every condition of distress. For what else becomes us when we have to do with this great and holy One? Ignorance of God and of ourselves is the great principle and cause of all our restlessness. And this arises mostly not from lack of light and instruction, but from lack of consideration and application. The truths pressed here about God are obvious and known to all; so are those about ourselves. But by how few are they employed and put to use as they should be? We carry on as though we stood on equal terms with God — as if, like Jonah, we had the right to be angry about what He does. If we rightly considered Him, if we stood in awe of Him as we ought, it would certainly be different with us.

The influence of the promises into the soul's waiting in times of trouble. The nature of the promises.

Having laid down these considerations from the second observation taken from the words — that Jehovah Himself is the proper object of the soul's waiting in the condition described — I will add only one direction for how we may be enabled to perform this duty rightly. It has been shown that this duty is necessary, reasonable,

and prevailing for the obtaining of relief. This direction arises from another of the propositions laid down in explaining these verses, which has not yet been addressed, namely —

The Word of promise is the soul's great support in waiting for God. So says the psalmist: 'In His word I hope' — that is, in the word of promise. As the Word in general is the comprehensive rule of all our obedience to God and communion with Him, so there are specific parts of it suited to these specific workings of the soul toward Him. Thus the word of promise — or the promise within the Word — is what faith especially has in view in its hoping, trusting, and waiting on God; and it is suited to answer the immediate actings of the soul in those workings. From this word of promise, then — from these promises — the soul in its distresses takes encouragement to continue waiting on God, and it does so on two accounts.

First: because they are declarative of God — His mind and will. Second: because they are communicative of grace and strength to the soul. The second of these we will not treat here.

First: the end and use of the promise is to declare, reveal, and make known God to believers — and to do so in a particular way, concerning Him and in Him, that may give them encouragement to wait for Him.

First: the promises are a declaration of the nature of God — especially of His goodness, grace, and love. God has stamped all the glorious excellencies of His nature on His Word — especially as He is in Christ, on the word of the gospel. There, as in a mirror, we behold His glory in the face of Jesus Christ. As His commands express His holiness, and His warnings express His righteousness

and severity, so His promises express His goodness, grace, love, and generosity. And through these things we learn all that we truly and solidly know of God — we know Him in and by His Word. The soul therefore that in this condition is waiting on or for God, considers the representation He makes of Himself and His own nature in and by the promises, and receives support and encouragement in its duty. For if God teaches us by the promises what He is and what He will be to us, we have firm ground to expect from Him all the fruits of His kindness, compassion, and love. Let the soul form within itself that understanding of God that is presented in the promises, and it will powerfully move it to continue in expectation of His gracious return. For the promises all express goodness, love, patience, forbearance, longsuffering, pardoning mercy, grace, and generosity — with a full and satisfying reward. This is the beauty of the Lord of which the prophet speaks with such admiration: 'How great is His goodness, and how great is His beauty!' (Zechariah 9:17). This is the great attraction that draws the soul to adhere constantly to Him. Whatever difficulties arise, whatever temptations interpose, or however wearisome we grow in our straits, troubles, trials, and times of desertion — let us not entertain such thoughts of God as our own perplexed imagination might suggest. That course would quickly cast us into a thousand forms of impatience, misgiving, and failure. But remembering and meditating on God in His promises — as He is revealed in them and expressed through them — is suited to entirely different ends and purposes. There appears — yes, gloriously shines forth — such love, wisdom, goodness, tenderness, and grace as cannot but encourage a believing soul to abide in waiting for Him.

Second: the word of promise not only expresses God's nature as an object presented to faith's contemplation, but also declares His will and purpose to act toward the soul in keeping with His own goodness and grace. Promises are declarations of God's purpose and will to act toward believers in Christ Jesus according to the infinite goodness of His own nature — and this is done in great variety, according to the various conditions and needs of those who believe. All proceed from the same spring of infinite grace, but they branch out into countless particular streams according to our particular needs. To these do waiting souls go for support and encouragement. Their perplexities arise principally from their misunderstandings of what God is in Himself and what He will be to them. And where should they go to be undeceived but to that faithful representation He has made of Himself and His will in the word of His grace? 'No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him' (John 1:18). The gospel is nothing but the word of promise explained in all its springs, causes, and effects. There we must go to be instructed in this matter. The imaginations and reasonings of our own hearts will only deceive us here. The instruction of other people may do the same, and has no truth in it beyond what may be traced back to the word of promise. There alone may the soul find rest and refreshment. The soul we are speaking of is under trouble, perplexity, and distress regarding its outward condition — pressed on every side, perhaps. And as for its spiritual state, it is under various apprehensions of the mind and will of God toward it, as has been explained at length. In this condition it has been brought in some measure to a holy submission to God and patient waiting for the outcome of its trials. In this state it faces many

temptations to unbelief and much working of unbelief. The full force of that opposition amounts to this: that it is neglected by God, that its way is hidden and His judgment overlooked, that it will not be delivered now or saved hereafter. What direction could anyone give such a soul for its relief — to preserve it from fainting or abandoning the duty of waiting on God in which it is engaged — but this: to search and inquire what revelation God has made of Himself and His will concerning it in His Word? And this the promise declares. There the soul will find hope, patience, faith, and expectation all increased, comforted, and encouraged. Here lies the duty and safety of any in this condition. People may bear the first blow of any trouble with the strength, courage, and resolve of their natural spirits. Under some continuation of trials they may sustain themselves with former experiences and the usual springs and means of consolation. But if their wounds prove difficult to heal, if ordinary remedies are despised, if the trial is long — this is what they must have recourse to. They must search into the word of promise and learn to measure things not by the present state and feeling of their minds, but by what God has declared concerning them. And there are several excellencies in the promises, when hoped in and trusted in, that tend to establish the soul in this great duty of waiting.

First: the grace in the promises — that is, the goodwill of God in Christ for help, relief, comfort, pardon, and salvation — is suited to every particular condition and need of the soul. Just as light arises from the sun and is diffused through its beams to the specific use of all creatures capable of receiving it, so grace flows from the eternal goodwill of God in Christ and is spread through the promises, with a blessed fitting to the conditions and needs of all

believers. Whatever may occur between God and any soul, there is grace suited to it in one promise or another — as clearly and specifically as if that promise had been given to that person individually and directly. And this is what those discover by experience who at any time are enabled to receive a promise with genuine faith.

Second: the word of promise carries a wonderful, mysterious impression of God Himself upon it. Through it, He secretly and beyond all description communicates Himself to believers. When God appeared to Jacob in a dream, Jacob woke and said, 'God is in this place, and I did not know it' (Genesis 28:16). He already knew that God was everywhere, but this particular sense of His presence caught him by surprise. In the same way, a soul is surprised when God opens Himself and His grace through a promise. It cries out: God is here, and I did not know it. The soul finds such a close approach of God in His grace that it is met with a refreshing, unexpected joy.

Third: every promise carries a special engagement of God's faithfulness and truth. Grace and truth are the two essential ingredients of a gospel promise — they make up its matter and its form. I cannot pause here to explain in full what this special engagement of truth in the promise consists of, since it is well known and widely acknowledged. But it has a particular power to support the soul when it hopes in the promise and waits on God. Hope that rests on God's divine faithfulness under a special engagement can never put the soul to shame or leave it disappointed.

This is the duty the psalmist commits himself to and pursues as the only way to obtain a true share in the forgiveness that is with God and all the gracious effects that flow from it. In treating

this subject we have explained both its nature and its necessity, and we have examined the psalmist's own directions for practicing it — directions suited to those in the same condition as himself, aimed at attaining the same end he sought. No further application of that material is needed. What remains in the psalm is the address the psalmist makes to others, along with the encouragement he gives them to take the same path he has taken. He does this in the final two verses, which I will briefly explain in order to complete the exposition of the whole psalm — having already worked through what I principally aimed at.

Verse 7: Let Israel hope in the Lord, for with the Lord there is mercy, and with Him is plenteous redemption. Verse 8: And He shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities.

I will proceed through these words following the method already used. First, the meaning of the key words will be explained. Second, the sense and importance of the whole passage will be set out. Third, the relation these verses have to the condition of the soul expressed throughout the psalm will be made clear. From all of this, observations will arise for our instruction and direction in similar situations where we are or may be involved.

'Let Israel hope in the Lord' — literally, hope Israel in Jehovah. The Hebrew word translated 'hope' is the same word used in verse 5: 'In His word I hope.' It means properly to expect, to look for — which includes hope but adds something more: an earnest, active looking toward God for what is hoped for. The Latin rendering is *expecta ad Dominum* — hope in Him and look up to Him. 'For with the Lord there is mercy' — the usual Hebrew idiom omits the verb to be, which we supply: 'there is mercy.' This word for mercy means grace, generosity, goodness, and goodwill. It is frequently

paired with another word that brings out its full force — that word is truth: 'mercy and truth' together. These two are, as it were, the essential components of God's promises. It is out of goodness, grace, and generosity that He promises any undeserved mercy, and it is out of truth and faithfulness that He fulfills what He has promised. The Septuagint regularly renders this word by the Greek term for pardoning mercy, which is its consistent meaning throughout the New Testament.

'And with Him is plenteous redemption' — the phrase 'with Him' echoes verse 4: 'with You there is forgiveness,' the meaning of which has already been fully explained. The Hebrew word for redemption comes from the verb meaning 'to redeem.' This word often refers to a proper redemption — one accomplished by the payment of a price — not merely a release by power, though that too is sometimes called redemption. For example, when the first-born of Israel who exceeded the number of the Levites were redeemed, Moses took 'the redemption money' — that is, the price paid for their redemption (Numbers 3:49). Psalm 49:8 says: 'The redemption of a person's soul is precious' — it costs a great price. The redemption that is with God therefore relates to a price. Mercy or goodness, when viewed in relation to a price paid, becomes redemption — that is, it becomes the means and cause of actual deliverance. What that price is, see Matthew 20:28 and 1 Peter 1:18.

'Plenteous redemption' — the Hebrew word means much, abundant, plenteous. It applies both to quantity and to quality: great in quantity, meaning abundant and plentiful; and great in quality, meaning precious and excellent. The word is used in both a negative and a positive sense. On the negative side, Ezekiel 9:9 speaks of Israel's sins being multiplied and great — many in num-

ber and serious in their nature. On the positive side, the same word is applied to the mercy of God by which sins are removed — it is great and plenteous, precious and excellent.

Verse 8: 'And He' — that is, the Lord Jehovah, He with whom there is plenteous redemption — 'shall redeem,' or shall make His people partakers of that redemption which is with Him. 'He shall redeem Israel' — that is, those who hope and trust in Him.

'From all his iniquities' — the word rendered iniquities can mean both sin and the trouble or punishment that sin brings. Cain used this very word when God pronounced his sentence: 'My punishment is too great to bear' (Genesis 4:13) — meaning the consequence God had announced for his sin. There is a close connection between sin and trouble — punishment follows iniquity as surely as shadow follows light. The word here therefore means either sin with reference to the trouble it deserves, or trouble with reference to the sin from which it comes. Both meanings may well be intended here. God shall redeem Israel from all his sins and from all the troubles that have followed from them. This is the plain and straightforward meaning of these words.

These words close the psalm. The one who began in the depths — his own depths of sin and trouble, out of which he cried to God — has been so encouraged by the prospect of grace and forgiveness with God, which he obtained by faith, that he now turns to preach to others and to strengthen them in their expectation of deliverance from all their sin and trouble as well.

Such, for the most part, are all the trials and exercises of God's children. Their entrance may be a storm, but their close is a calm. Their beginning is often trouble, but their latter end is peace —

peace for themselves and blessing for the church of God. For in every age, those who have come through great personal trials have been most effective in helping others. God does not greatly test any of His own without some special purpose for His own glory.

Second: the sense and intent of the psalmist in these words is to be considered, and it resolves into three general parts. First, an exhortation: 'Let Israel hope in the Lord' — or, 'expect Jehovah.' Second, a ground of encouragement for performing the duty he calls for: 'For with the Lord there is much, plenteous, abundant, precious redemption.' Third, a gracious promise of the blessed outcome that will follow the performance of this duty: 'He shall redeem Israel from all his sins and out of all his troubles.'

In this exhortation, several things call for attention.

First, the persons being addressed: Israel. Not Israel according to the flesh — for 'they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel' (Romans 9:6). Rather, it is the Israel of Psalm 73:1 — the whole Israel of God, to whom He is good, namely those who are pure in heart. This means all those who are part of the covenant and inherit the promise given to their forefather who was first called by that name — that is, all believers. The psalmist addresses all of them together in this matter.

First, because every one of them has trials and entanglements with sin to some degree. Just as there is no one who lives without sinning, so there is no one who sins without being troubled and entangled by it. Perhaps not all of them are in the same condition as the psalmist — plunged into the same depths. Yet to some extent, every single one of them is involved enough with sin to need his direction. All of God's saints have been, or are now, or may yet

be in these depths. There is a wise saying from Augustine on this passage: 'Those who are most deeply in the pit are the ones who do not cry out from the pit.' None are so truly sunk as those who feel no need to cry out. Those who are never troubled by the depths of sin are themselves in the deep waters of complacency.

Second, none of them — whatever their present condition — are immune from falling into the same depths as the psalmist. Nothing in the covenant itself, and no single promise, absolutely guarantees they will never face such depths. What happens to one believer can happen to any. If one believer could fall away completely and be lost, all could — leaving none in the world — and that would mean the end of Christ's kingdom, which is itself strong evidence that no true believer can finally fall away. But they can fall into depths of sin; the testimony and examples proving this are beyond dispute. It is therefore good that all of them be prepared for the duty they may all need, and be ready to discharge it rightly. Moreover, the duty the psalmist describes is not limited only to the specific condition he has described — it is fitting and beneficial in many other seasons as well. For all these reasons, all the Israel of God are called to it.

Second, the duty itself is hoping in Jehovah — with a hope or trust that includes an expectation of relief. Two things are contained in this duty. First, the renouncing of any hope or expectation of deliverance from sin or trouble by any other means. 'Hope in Jehovah' — this is frequently stated wherever this duty is called for; see Hosea 14:3 and Jeremiah 3:22-23. We also explained the nature of this in the exposition of verses 1 and 2. Second, expectation from Him alone — this too was addressed at length in the ob-

servations drawn from the verses immediately before these, where the full nature of this duty was explained and directions were given for performing it rightly.

Second: the encouragement offered for this duty is the next thing in the words — 'for with the Lord is plenteous redemption.' Two things in this phrase deserve notice.

First, what the psalmist presents as the great encouragement for the duty — and that is redemption: the redemption that is with God, which amounts to the same thing as the forgiveness spoken of earlier: mercy, pardon, generosity, and goodness. He does not call Israel to hope in the Lord because they are the descendants of Abraham, the special people of God made partakers of privileges above all nations on earth — and still less because of any worthiness or goodness in themselves. He calls them to hope in the Lord solely on the basis of mercy in God — His grace, goodness, and generosity. The mercy of God and the redemption that is with Him are the only grounds sinners have for hope and confidence in coming to Him.

Second, there are two great features of this grace — one expressed, one implied in the words. The first is that this redemption is much, plenteous, and abundant. What most discourages troubled souls from waiting on God in hope is the fear that they will not obtain mercy — because their sins are so great, so many, or attended with such circumstances and weight that it seems impossible they could ever be accepted by God. The psalmist meets this discouragement directly by presenting the fullness, the abundance, and the limitless plenty of the mercy that is with God. It is mercy sufficient for the greatest sinners in their deepest depths — its treasures are inexhaustible. And the real force of this encourage-

ment does not rest so much on the fact that there is redemption with God, as on the fact that this redemption is plenteous and abundant.

Second: the word itself hints at the relationship between God's goodness and grace and the blood of Christ — which is why it is called redemption. As was shown in the analysis of the words, redemption relates to a price: the price by which we are bought, which is the blood of Christ. This is what makes way for mercy to be extended to sinners. Redemption — which properly refers to actual deliverance — is said to be 'with God' or 'in Him' as an effect existing in its cause. The causes are His own grace and the blood of Christ. These are what God has prepared for redeeming believers from sin and trouble and bringing Himself glory. This is the encouragement the psalmist sets before those called to wait on God. It is drawn from God Himself — as all encouragement for sinners to draw near to Him and wait for Him must be. Nothing but God Himself can give us the confidence to come to Him. And this encouragement is exactly suited to the soul's condition: redemption and mercy are what give relief from sin and misery.

Third: the final verse contains a promise of the outcome of performing this duty — 'He shall redeem His people from all their iniquities.' Two things are worth noting in these words.

First, the certainty of the outcome: 'He shall' — or 'He will' — redeem; He will assuredly do so. Now, while the psalmist states this as a revelation from God, a fresh promise of God, yet as it relates to the condition of the soul described in this psalm and the discovery made of forgiveness and redemption with God, the certainty it expresses is grounded in the principles already laid down.

From where, then, can we draw the certain conclusion that God will redeem His Israel from all their iniquities? The answer is as follows.

First, the conclusion follows from the nature of God. There is forgiveness and redemption with Him, and He will act toward His people in keeping with His own nature. There is redemption with Him, and therefore He will redeem; forgiveness with Him, and therefore He will forgive. The conclusion is just as certain and sure as this: that wicked, ungodly people will be destroyed, because God is righteous and holy, and His righteousness and holiness require their destruction. In the same way, the redemption and salvation of all who believe is certain on this ground: there is forgiveness with Him; He is good, gracious, and ready to forgive; and His goodness and grace require their salvation.

Second, the conclusion is certain on the basis of God's faithfulness in His promises. He has promised that those who wait on Him will not be put to shame, and that their expectation will not be disappointed. The conclusion therefore stands firm: in His time and in His way, they will be redeemed.

Second, there is the extent of this deliverance and redemption: 'He shall redeem Israel from all their iniquities.' As was shown in the analysis of the verse, this word can mean either sin that produces trouble, or trouble produced by sin — and both meanings apply here. From both — from all sin and all the trouble it brings — God will redeem His Israel. Not from this or that particular evil, not from this or that particular sin, but from all evil and all sin. He will remove every sin from their souls and wipe every tear from their eyes. God is said to accomplish this in several ways.

First, through the great foundational cause of all actual deliverance and redemption: the blood of Christ. He has laid a sure foundation for the entire work. The price of redemption has been paid, and they will in due time enjoy all its effects and fruits.

Second, through the actual giving out of the effects of that redemption to believers. This is certain for all God's elect — for His whole Israel. They will all be made partakers of these effects. This is the purpose of all God's promises, and of the grace and mercy promised in them: to be the means by which believers receive the redemption that has been purchased and prepared for them. And this happens in two ways.

First: partially, initially, and gradually in this life. Here God gives them the pardon of their sins, justifying them freely by His grace, and through His sanctification of them by His Spirit, He delivers them from the power and dominion of sin. He also delivers them from many troubles and from all troubles insofar as they carry any trace of God's curse or have a punishing character. Second: completely — when He will have freed them entirely from sin and trouble and from all their effects and consequences, by bringing them into the full enjoyment of Himself in glory.

Third: with the words now explained, we can briefly consider what they express about the state, condition, and spiritual activity of the soul that is portrayed throughout this psalm.

Having himself arrived at the state described earlier, and having firmly committed himself to performing the duty that would surely bring him to a place of full rest and peace, the psalmist now turns to the rest of the Israel of God to encourage them to take up the same duty — speaking from his own experience of the blessed

outcome he found in it. It is as if he said to them: You are now in afflictions and under troubles, brought on by your own sins and provocations. I acknowledge it is a sad and difficult condition. But there is hope in Israel concerning these things. Consider what happened to me, and how the Lord dealt with me. I was in inexpressible depths and saw for a time no way or means of deliverance. But God was graciously pleased to reveal Himself to me as the God who pardons iniquity, transgression, and sin. In the comfort and support I have received from that, I am now waiting for a full share in the fruits of His love. Let me therefore urge you who are in similar circumstances to take the same course. Fix your expectations entirely on mercy and sovereign grace, with no regard for any privilege or merit of your own. Rest in the plenteous redemption — those boundless stores of grace that are with Jehovah — and according to His faithfulness in His promises, He will deliver you out of all your perplexing troubles.

Having now explained the words, I will simply name the doctrinal observations they yield and so bring these discourses to a close. Observation 1: The Lord Jehovah is the only hope for souls distressed by sin — 'hope in the Lord.' This has been thoroughly demonstrated and confirmed at many points throughout the psalm. Observation 2: The only ground for any sinner's hope and expectation of relief is pure grace, mercy, and redemption — 'hope in the Lord, for with Him there is redemption.' All other grounds of hope are false and will disappoint. Observation 3: Inexhaustible stores of mercy and redemption are what sinners need in order to be encouraged to rest and wait on God. 'With Him is plenteous redemption.' Your misery is so great, and your fears and distress so pressing, that nothing less than boundless grace can relieve or sus-

tain you. There are therefore such treasures and stores in God as are exactly suited to this need. Observation 4: The ground of all the mercy, goodness, grace, and forgiveness that God shows to sinners is laid in the blood of Christ — which is why it is here called redemption. We have spoken of this at length already. Observation 5: All who wait on God on the basis of mercy and grace will have an undoubted outcome of peace. 'He shall redeem Israel.' As God says: 'Let him take hold of My strength, that he may make peace with Me — and he shall make peace' (Isaiah 27:5). Observation 6: The mercy given to those who wait on God will in the end be completely full and satisfying. 'He shall redeem His people from all their iniquities.'

These observations arise from the words as considered in themselves. But if we take into account their relation to the particular condition of the soul portrayed in this psalm, they yield two further observations. Observation 1: Those who have by faith and waiting come up out of the depths and obtained mercy — or who are being sustained in waiting for a sense of that mercy and forgiveness they have believed — are fitted, and only they are fitted, to preach and declare grace and mercy to others. This was the psalmist's own situation. Coming out of his own depths and distress, he declared to the whole Israel of God the mercy and redemption by which he had been delivered. Observation 2: A saving experience of grace and forgiveness leaves a deep impression of its fullness and excellence on the soul of a sinner. So it was with the psalmist here. Having himself obtained forgiveness, he can hardly find words enough to extol it. There is with God mercy, redemption, plenteous redemption, redemption from all iniquity — he has found it so, and so will everyone who truly believes it.

All of these observations — and especially the last two — could receive a full and useful development. But since what I principally intended from this psalm has been thoroughly addressed in the treatment of its opening verses, I will not here extend these meditations further. I am content to close with the exposition already given of the psalmist's design and the meaning of his words in these final verses.

THANKS FOR READING



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