

THE  
CHRISTIANS  
IN COMPLETE  
ARMOR

WILLIAM GURNALL



THE CHRISTIANS IN COMPLETE ARMOR

# THE CHRISTIANS IN COMPLETE ARMOR

*William Gurnall*



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## ABOUT THIS BOOK



A landmark of **Puritan spiritual theology**, this exhaustive treatise on Ephesians 6 equips believers for the **war against Satan, sin, and the world**. Gurnall methodically exposes the devil's subtlety and power, then furnishes the Christian with every piece of **the whole armor of God** — its nature, purpose, and practical use. Marked by pastoral warmth and theological precision, it remains one of the most thorough treatments of **spiritual warfare** in Christian literature, prized for its counsel on maintaining **courage, faith, and perseverance** under trial.



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## CONTENTS



|  |     |
|--|-----|
| To My Dearly Beloved Friends and Neighbors, the Inh...     | 6   |
| A Treatise of the Whole Armor of God                       | 13  |
| Chapter 1. Of Christian Courage and Resolution, Wher...    | 17  |
| Chapter 2. Of the Saints' Strength, Where It Lies, and ... | 29  |
| Chapter 3. Of Acting Our Faith on the Almighty Power...    | 41  |
| Chapter 4. Of Acting Our Faith on the Almighty Power...    | 49  |
| Chapter 5. Wherein Is Answered a Grand Objection T...      | 67  |
| Chapter 1. Showing the Christless and Graceless Soul t...  | 80  |
| Chapter 2. Showing That the Armor We Use Against S...      | 89  |
| Chapter 3. Showing That the Armor We Use for Our D...      | 97  |
| Chapter 4. Of the Entireness of Our Furniture — It M...    | 105 |
| Chapter 5. Of the Use of Our Spiritual Armor, or the E...  | 116 |
| Chapter 1. Of Satan's Subtlety to Choose the Most Adv...   | 131 |
| Chapter 2. Satan's Subtlety in Managing His Temptati...    | 137 |
| Chapter 3. Of Satan's Subtlety in Choosing Instrumen...    | 145 |
| Chapter 4. Wherein This Point of Satan's Subtlety, as ...  | 154 |
| Chapter 5. Wherein Is Showed the Subtlety of Satan a...    | 160 |
| Chapter 6. A Brief Application of the Second Branch o...   | 175 |
| Chapter 7. Containing Some Directions Tending to En...     | 179 |
| Chapter 8. Of the Saints' Victory Over Their Subtle En...  | 192 |
| Chapter 9. An Account Is Given How the All-Wise Go...      | 197 |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Chapter 10. A Brief Application of the Point in Two Br...   | 210 |
| Chapter 1. Showing the Christian's Life Here to Be a C...   | 216 |
| Chapter 2. Wherein Is Showed What Is Meant by Fles...       | 234 |
| Chapter 3. Wherein Is Shown What a Principality Sata...     | 246 |
| Chapter 4. Of the Great Power Satan Has Not Only Ov...      | 264 |
| Chapter 5. Of the Time When, the Place Where, and t...      | 280 |
| Chapter 6. Of the Spirituality of the Devil's Nature an...  | 333 |
| Chapter 7. Of Satan's Plot to Defile the Christian's Spi... | 345 |
| Chapter 8. How Satan Labors to Corrupt the Christian...     | 354 |
| Chapter 9. Of Pride of Gifts and How Satan Tempts th...     | 362 |
| Chapter 10. Of Pride of Grace                               | 377 |
| Chapter 11. The Third Kind of Spiritual Pride — Pride ...   | 394 |
| Chapter 12. Showing What the Prize Is Which Believer...     | 403 |
| Chapter 13. An Exhortation to the Pursuit of Heaven a...    | 421 |
| Chapter 1. The Reason Why the Apostle Renews the S...       | 432 |
| Chapter 2. The Best of Saints Subject to Decline in Th...   | 437 |
| Chapter 3. A Cautionary Direction from What We Ma...        | 442 |
| Chapter 4. A Word of Counsel for the Recovery of Dec...     | 449 |
| Chapter 5. The Words Opened, and What Is Meant by ...       | 456 |
| Chapter 6. Showing That the Day of Affliction Is Evil a...  | 460 |
| Chapter 7. The Application of the Point                     | 473 |
| Chapter 8. The Second Argument with Which the Exh...        | 484 |

TO MY DEARLY BELOVED FRIENDS  
AND NEIGHBORS, THE INHABITANTS  
OF LAVENHAM



**M**y Dear Friends,

Solomon says, "The desire of a man is his kindness, and a poor man is better than a liar" (Proverbs 19:22). If you share his view, I am confident these notes — which I dedicate to your service — will receive a warm welcome from you. You will find me to be the poor man by the small gift I bring, but the sincere desire for your eternal happiness from which it comes will, I hope, keep me from being the liar. I was never able to serve you as well as many ministers serve their people, having come to you in much weakness, and God has seen fit to keep me limited in strength and other abilities. For that reason — not to make up for that lack, but to express how deeply I feel it — I have all the more reason to pour as much love as I can into the little I am able to do for you. Truly, my heart is wide open toward you, and toward God on your behalf. If anything makes me reluctant to pass into the next world — which my failing health urges me more than most to prepare for — it is the thought of leaving so few of you walking the road to eternal life, and of leaving those who are on that road without the closer

Gospel-fellowship that would help and comfort you on the journey. Indeed, while I am still among you, little do you realize how much of your poor minister's life rests in your hands. If I were to measure my life by its joy — as who does not? — then I can say with some honesty, as Paul did, that I live when I see any of you standing firm in the Lord, and I die when I see others standing firm in their sins, unmoved by all the invitations of the Gospel that have called out to them. And why, my dear friends, should the life of your souls be any less precious in your own sight than it is in mine? But I will stop there — I would not want to seem like a husband who is kinder to his wife in public before strangers than he is at home.

What I present to you in this treatise is a dish from your own table, and I hope it will sit well with you for that reason. You cannot look down on it — even if the fare is plain — without blaming yourselves, since you were the ones who chose the cook. I cannot urge others to spend much time reading these plain sermons, since that would draw them away from the richer labors of others to glean a few thin ears from mine. But with you, my own people, I can be a little bolder. Physicians say that a mother's milk, though not as rich as another woman's, is more fitting for her child precisely because it is natural — provided no harmful quality is found in it. I think the same could be said of the spiritual milk a minister gives his flock. A congregation that faithfully draws from its own minister — if what he gives is sound — may expect God's blessing in that nourishment, even if it lacks the richness that pleases a more demanding taste. Whatever these sermons may be, some of the vitality you experienced in hearing them will be missing when you read them. It is as impossible to paint fire with its heat as it is

to capture in writing what happens in preaching. There is as much difference between a sermon in the pulpit and a sermon in a book as between milk warm from the breast and milk in a feeding bottle — yet what it loses in living taste it makes up for in convenience. The book can be at hand when the preacher cannot, and that is truly the chief purpose of printing: just as a bottle and spoon is used when the mother is sick or away, so the book quiets the Christian and sustains him in the absence of the ordinance. The person who reads sermons and good books at home to avoid the trouble of going to hear them is robbing his own soul while wearing the clothes of religion — he looks out for his comfort, not his growth; he eats cold food when hot is available. He risks losing the benefit of both by despising one. If the bride could have had her beloved at home, she would have had no need to search the streets and wait at the public places. Why should we offer theft in place of sacrifice, robbing God of one duty in order to pay Him another? He has arranged our work in better order than that — one wheel would not interfere with another if we lived more consistently. A large part of David's wisdom in numbering our days involves dividing — ordering this short life so that each duty receives its proper portion of time. An instrument is not in tune unless it has all its strings, and even with all its strings it will not make good music unless the musician knows when to let each string speak. The Christian is not in tune unless he takes up all the duties of his place and calling, and those duties will not be harmonious in God's hearing unless each one is done in its proper season. My friends, labor not only to do the duties of your place, but to do each duty in its proper place as well. Hear when you should hear. Know your time for the prayer closet and your time for the shop — and when

your hour for withdrawing comes, a few minutes now and then reviewing what you heard will not, I hope, be counted among your wasted time. The subject of this treatise is solemn: a war between the saint and Satan — one so fierce that the cruelest battles ever fought by men will look like sport and child's play beside it. What is the killing of bodies compared to the destroying of souls? It is a sobering thought that tens of thousands were sent to the grave in recent years by the sword of man — but far more astonishing to consider how many of those may have been sent to hell by the sword of God's wrath. This is a spiritual war you will read about — not a history of battles fought long ago and now finished, but of what is happening right now. This conflict is not playing out at the far end of the world; it concerns you and everyone who reads this. The field on which this war is fought is every person's own soul. There are no neutrals in this war — the whole world is engaged in the conflict, either for God against Satan, or for Satan against God. In years past, a great question was: Whose side are you on? Failing to give a good answer cost many their lives. My dear friends, think seriously about what answer you intend to give to God and conscience when, in a dying hour, they ask each of you: Whose side are you on? It is an extraordinary mercy that you are still in a place where you can choose your side — that will not always be so, and perhaps not for one more day. If you are once in another world, you must stand by your colors, but here you may still flee Satan's camp and be taken into Christ's service. The drum beats in the Gospel calling for volunteers. O Lord, make them willing in the day of Your power. I know you all want to be on the winning side. What can you be sure of while under the devil's banner but damnation? The curse of God clings to him and to all who take his part.

Do not let the small plunder and spoil of sinful pleasures and profit bewitch you into following his camp. What good is the soldier's loot from a battle if he himself is slain on the field before he can carry it off — as many have been in these wars, if the reports are true? That is what you must certainly expect. The weapon is loaded and aimed at your heart, and it will be your eternal death if you persist. God's threats will go off at last — and then where are you? In hell, where your wedge of gold and your Babylonish garment, your wages of unrighteousness, will do you little good. Neighbors, I am reluctant to leave you on the road where God's arrows fly — but I must have a word for you, my Christian friends, who have taken up Christ's cause and are in the field against Satan. My heart is with you who have willingly offered yourselves among the Lord's people to His help against the mighty. He could destroy Satan without you, but He receives your love as kindly as if He could not. God has sent me, as Jesse sent David, with this small gift to you and the rest of my brothers who are in His camp. If it serves only to strengthen your hearts and hands in fighting the Lord's battles, I will bless God that He put it into my heart to visit you in this way. Hold on, dear friends, in your Christian warfare — let no one take your crown. Sharpen your courage at the throne of grace, from which all your supplies of soul-strength come. Send faith often up to the hill of the promise, to see and bring back the sure news of Christ's coming to you — indeed, for you — and of assured victory with Him. Read the deeds that Christ's worthies have done by faith, and in their victories read your own, for through them He spoke to us as the God of Jacob. Be thankful for every victory you gain, and do not let the howling wilderness still ahead of you put your song of praise for past temptations out of tune — yet

rejoice with trembling, as those still in enemy territory who must hold by the sword what they gain by the sword. Be sure to stand in close order with one another — these times give us too many sad examples of those who first fell away from fellowship with their brothers, and then fell into the destroyer's hand; stragglers are quickly seized. You will find you are safest as a body. Guard against a private spirit — keep in view and in mind not only your own safety, but the safety of the whole army of saints, especially the company in which you march — I mean your congregation. The soldier who sees an enemy fighting his brothers and does nothing only makes it easier for that enemy to slay him in the end. Do not say, therefore, "Am I my brother's keeper?" God would not keep the man who cared nothing for keeping his brother. Watch over one another — not to play the critic on your brother's failings and triumph when he stumbles, but to help him up if he falls, or better yet, to keep him from falling by a timely rescue, as Abishai came to David's aid. Keep your rank and file. We see what advantage Satan has gained in these disordered times, since we have tried to fight him out of proper order, and the private soldier — I mean the ordinary Christian — has taken the officer's work out of his hands. Harden yourselves against the scandals that the cowardice and treachery of false brothers have caused. The true soldier is one who is not discouraged by those who flee or fall in battle, but presses on to victory even if he has to step over the bodies of those cut down in the fight. In a word, disentangle your hearts as much as you can from love of, and distracting anxiety about, this present world. "No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him" (2 Timothy 2:4). If anyone ought to have his affairs in order and his

worldly interests settled, it is the soldier — and if any soldier, then surely the Christian. Once your heart is put to death toward the world, and the care for your name, estate, and relationships here is rolled onto God, you are fit to march wherever Christ leads. The lack of this has caused many to rush home to protect their own private stake there, when they should have been in the field for Christ. And now, my Christian friends, march on — not in confidence in your armor, but in the power of His might, who has promised soon to crush Satan under your feet.

But since this work appeared first in preaching, it cannot do much harm to the rest, even if this portion gets into print a little ahead of the whole. Therefore, dear friends — if God makes this imperfect work of any service to your faith — I humbly ask that you continue to press at the throne of grace for a blessing on my poor ministry among you, and also lift up a prayer that strength may be given to bring forth what of this work is still undelivered. I am not pointing you somewhere I do not intend to go myself, but will seek the grace to be found faithful in striving with you and for you — so that among all who find any spiritual benefit from my weak labors, you, to whom they are chiefly devoted, may receive not the least.

Lavenham, January 1, 1655. Your affectionate, though unworthy minister, William Gurnall.

## A TREATISE OF THE WHOLE ARMOR OF GOD



**E**phesians 6:10 — Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might.

Paul was now in chains, yet not confined so closely that he was denied pen and paper — God, it seems, gave him some favor in the eyes of his captors. Paul was Nero's prisoner, but Nero was far more God's. And while God had work for Paul to do, He provided him friends both in the court and in the prison. Persecutors may send the saints to prison, but God can provide just the right keeper for them.

How did this great apostle spend his time in prison? Not writing attacks against those who had imprisoned him, though they were the worst of men — the holy sufferers of that era had little taste for that kind of zeal. Nor did he spend it in political scheming to work his way out of trouble through groveling flattery or sinful compromise with the powerful men of the day. Some would have used any tool available to gain their freedom, and would not have cared whether they got out by the door or the window. But this holy man did not value his liberty or his life so highly as to purchase them at the slightest risk to the Gospel. He knew too much

of another world to bid very high for the enjoyment of this one, so he had made peace with whatever his enemies might do to him — knowing well he could go to heaven whether they permitted it or not. No, his great concern was for the churches of Christ. As a faithful steward, he labored to set God's household in order before his departure. We read of no dispatches sent to court to secure his release, but many sent to the churches to help them stand firm in the freedom Christ had won for them. There is no better way to get even with the devil and his instruments for all their spite against us than by doing as much good as we can wherever we find ourselves. The devil would have done better to leave Paul alone — for no sooner did Paul arrive in prison than he began preaching, and at that the gates of Satan's prison flew open and poor sinners came out. It was a happy day for Onesimus that Paul was sent to jail; God had an errand for Paul to deliver to him and others that the devil never dreamed of. Indeed, Paul not only preached in prison, but — so that he might do the devil all the damage he could — he sent his letters to the churches, that by tasting his spirit in his afflictions and reading his faith, now about to be offered up, they might be all the more confirmed in theirs. Ephesus was not least in his thoughts, as is clear from his two-year stay there (Acts 19:10) and his summoning of the elders of that church all the way to Miletus on his last journey to Jerusalem (Acts 20:17), to say farewell to them as one who would never see their faces in this world again. The deep impression that heartbreaking departure left on the spirits of those elders — and through them, on the whole church — must have moved Paul, now in prison, to write to

that church, so that with so much of his spirit, and of the Spirit of the Gospel, still in their hands to draw on, they might more patiently receive the news of his death.

In the earlier part of this letter, Paul soars high in the mysteries of faith. In the latter part, following his usual method, he comes down to application. There we find him gathering all those truths together like beams of light, focusing them in a powerful call to action — urging them to walk worthy of their calling (Ephesians 4:1). That is done when a Christian's life is transparent, so that the grace of the Gospel shines out in the power of holiness from every angle and in every relationship — like a candle in a crystal glass, not in a dark lantern that gives light in one direction and darkness in another. Paul therefore works through the various relationships of husband, wife, parent, child, master, and servant, pressing the same truth in each.

Having set everyone in their proper place and assigned each their particular duty, Paul acts like a wise general who has arranged his army in rank and file — and then delivers the following address to the Ephesian camp, expressed entirely in military language, as best fitting the Christian calling, which is a continuing warfare with the world and the prince of the world. The address itself has two parts.

First, a brief but powerful and encouraging call to battle, in verse 10.

Second, the rest is devoted to specific directions for waging this war successfully, with motivations sprinkled throughout. We begin with the first.

First, the word of encouragement to battle. Paul opens his address with this: "Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord" — the best possible way to prepare them for the directions that follow. A soul gripped by fear and drained of courage by a strong sense of danger is in no position to receive counsel. As we see in an army thrown into flight by a sudden alarm and the dread of danger, it is hard to rally them back into order while the fright is still fresh. Therefore the apostle first lifts their spirits: be strong in the Lord. It is as if he were saying: perhaps some downcast souls feel their hearts failing as they see their enemies so strong and themselves so weak, so numerous and they so few, so well-equipped and they so naked and unarmed, so skilled and experienced in combat and they still green recruits. Let none of these thoughts dismay you, but march on with undaunted courage and be strong in the Lord — upon whose performance the weight of the battle rests, not on your skill or strength. One of a minister's greatest responsibilities — and greatest skills — in rightly dividing the Word is to press the Christian's duty in such a way that it does not crush his spirit by laying the burden on his own shoulders rather than on the Lord's strength, as our apostle here teaches us.

In this verse, first, there is a familiar address: "My brethren."

Second, there is the exhortation: "Be strong."

Third, there is a qualifying direction attached to the exhortation: "In the Lord."

Fourth, there is an encouraging expansion of that direction: "And in the power of His might" — or, in His mighty power.

End.

## CHAPTER 1. OF CHRISTIAN COURAGE AND RESOLUTION, WHEREFORE NECESSARY, AND HOW OBTAINED



**W**e will skip past the address and begin with the exhortation: "Be strong" — that is, be courageous, as the phrase is commonly used in Scripture. "Be strong and courageous" (2 Chronicles 32:7). Similarly in Isaiah 35:4: "Say to those with anxious heart, 'Be strong.'" Or in other words: bring together all the powers of your soul and gather every resource you have — you will need all of it. From this, the point is as follows.

The Christian, more than anyone, needs courage and resolution. In fact, everything he does as a Christian — everything he can do — is an act of valor. A cowardly spirit falls short of even the lowest Christian duty. Joshua 1:7 says: "Be strong and very courageous, that you may" — what? — stand in battle against warlike nations? No — "that you may be careful to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you." It takes more courage and greatness of spirit to obey God faithfully than to command an army of men — to be a Christian than to be a captain. What seems more ordinary than prayer? Yet prayer cannot be performed rightly without a princely spirit. Jacob was said to have behaved

like a prince when he did nothing more than pray — for which he came out of the field bearing God's banner. What a carnal person calls prayer, on the other hand, is nothing but poverty of spirit. Such a person is as great a stranger to true prayer as the cowardly soldier is to the exploits of a valiant commander. The Christian in prayer draws near to God with a humble boldness of faith, takes hold of Him, wrestles with Him, and will not let Him go without a blessing — all of this in full view of his own sins and of divine justice, which fires at him from the flaming mouth of the law. The carnal person's boldness in prayer, by contrast, is simply the child of ignorance in the mind or hardness in the heart — not feeling his sins or knowing his danger, he rushes into prayer with a blind confidence that quickly crumbles when conscience wakes up and gives the alarm that his sins are upon him, as the Philistines were on Samson. At that, in a panic, the poor-spirited wretch throws down his weapons, flees God's presence like guilty Adam, and dare not look Him in the face. Indeed, every duty in a Christian's entire walk with God, or labor for God, is lined with many difficulties that shoot at him like enemies through the hedges as he marches toward heaven, so that he must contest every inch of ground along the way. Only a few noble-spirited souls — those who dare take heaven by force — are suited for this calling. For further proof of this point, consider a few specific duties every Christian faces.

First, the Christian must declare and carry out an uncompromising war against his own deepest sins — the sins that have been most dear to his heart must now be trampled underfoot. David said: "I have kept myself from my iniquity" — and what courage and resolution that requires! You may think Abraham was truly tested when he was called to take his son, his son Isaac, his only

son whom he loved, and offer him up with his own hands — yet what was that compared to this? "Soul, take your lust — your only lust, the child of your dearest affection, your Isaac, the sin that has brought you the most joy and laughter, from which you have promised yourself the greatest pleasure or gain. As surely as you hope to see My face with comfort, lay hands on it and offer it up. Pour out its blood before Me. Drive the sacrificing knife of mortification into the very heart of it — freely and willingly, for no sacrifice offered with a downcast face is pleasing — and do this now, before you allow yourself one more embrace from it." Truly this is a hard chapter. Flesh and blood cannot bear this word. Our lusts will not lie as patiently on the altar as Isaac did, or as a lamb led to slaughter that is silent. They will roar and cry out, indeed shake and tear the heart with their hideous screaming. Who can fully express the conflicts, the wrestlings, the spiritual convulsions the Christian goes through before he can bring his heart to this work? Who can set out the art, the persuasive arguments such a lust will put forward in pleading for its life? At one moment Satan will minimize and soften the matter: "It is just a small one — spare it, and your soul shall live just the same." At another moment he flatters the soul with the secrecy of it: "You can keep me and your reputation too — I will not appear in public with you to embarrass you before your neighbors. Shut me away in the most hidden room of your heart, out of others' hearing if you wish — only let me now and then enjoy the secret embrace of your thoughts and affections." If that is refused, Satan will seem to ask only for a stay of execution, as Jephthah's daughter asked her father: "Leave me alone for a month or two, and then do to me as you have promised" — knowing full well that few lusts kept on reprieve ever

fail in the end to win their full pardon and recover their hold on the soul. What resolution does it take to break through such pressure and urgency, and to carry out the execution at once, in spite of all that? Here the world's most celebrated warriors have shown themselves utter cowards — men who returned from the field with victorious banners and then lived, and indeed died, as slaves to some base lust at home. As someone once said of a great Roman captain who, while riding in his triumphal chariot through Rome, never took his eyes off a woman of loose character walking along the street: "Look at this fine captain who conquered such mighty armies — himself conquered by a single foolish woman."

Second, the Christian must live differently — not according to the world's customs. Romans 12:2 commands us not to be conformed to this world, meaning not to accommodate ourselves to its corrupt patterns. The Christian must not be the kind of person who tailors his profession to fit the fashions of the times or the preferences of whatever company he finds himself in. When asked how he managed to keep his position through such shifting times — under a ruler who was first for and then against a certain religion — one courtier answered that he was not a stubborn oak but a bending willow that could yield to the wind. But the Christian must stand fixed to his principles and not change his colors, freely showing what country he belongs to by his holy constancy in the truth. What scorn, what traps, what dangers does this distinctiveness expose the Christian to? Some will hoot and mock him, just as someone dressed in an old foreign fashion would be laughed at in the streets. Michal mocked David in exactly this way. Indeed, the world counts the Christian a fool for his distinctive way of life — which I have thought gave rise to that common way of calling

someone a fool by referring to him as a "mere Abraham." Why Abraham? Because Abraham did what carnal reason — the world's idol — laughs at as sheer folly: he left a secure estate in his father's house to go somewhere he did not know, to receive an inheritance he did not know when. And truly all the saints are branded with that same label by the so-called wise world. "You know the man and his talk," said Jehu to his companions when asking what that wild fellow had come for — and the wild fellow turned out to be nothing less than a prophet (2 Kings 9:11). This requires courage to endure the shame the Christian must expect for living differently. Shame is what proud human nature most dreads — to avoid it, many have dared not confess Christ openly, and many have lost heaven because they were ashamed to travel to it wearing a fool's coat. Furthermore, as some will mock, others will persecute to death — simply because the Christian's principles and practices do not conform to theirs. This was the trap set for the three young men: they must dance to Nebuchadnezzar's tune or burn. This was the plot laid to snare Daniel, who walked so blamelessly that his very enemies could only testify that he had no fault except his distinctiveness in his religion (Daniel 6:5). It is a great honor to a Christian — indeed to religion itself — when all his enemies can say is that he is too strict and will not do as they do. In such a situation, where the Christian must either compromise or burn — either give up prayer or become prey to the cruel teeth of violent men — how many clever retreats and self-preserving distinctions would a cowardly, unresolved heart invent? The Christian who faces such great opposition had better be well-seated in the saddle of his profession, or he will quickly be thrown off.

Third, the Christian must press on toward heaven in the midst of all the scandals thrown in the path of godliness by the apostasy and disgraceful falls of false professors. There have always been such people in the church who, by their sad failures in belief and practice, have laid a stumbling stone in the road of profession. At this stone, weak Christians are apt to halt — as the people halted at the bloody body of Asahel — not knowing whether they dare venture any further in their profession. They see those whose gifts they so admired lying before them, wallowing in the blood of their slain profession: once-zealous professors turned into fierce persecutors; once-strict performers of religious duties turned into irreligious atheists — as unlike the men they were a few years before as the valley of Sodom, now a bog and swamp, is unlike what it was when it was compared for fruitfulness to the garden of the Lord. We need a holy resolution to bear up against such discouragement and not faint — like Joshua, who lived to see virtually the whole camp of Israel revolting and in their hearts turning back to Egypt, yet with undaunted spirit maintained his integrity and resolved that though not a single man would stand with him, he would serve the Lord.

Fourth, the Christian must trust in a God who sometimes withdraws Himself. Isaiah 50:10 says: "Let him who walks in darkness and has no light trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God." This requires a holy boldness of faith — to venture into God's presence as Esther came to Ahasuerus, when there is no smile on His face and no golden scepter of promise visibly extended to encourage the soul to draw near, and yet to press forward with that noble resolve: "If I perish, I perish." More than that — to trust not only in a withdrawing God but in what feels like a God who strikes; not

merely when His love is hidden, but when His wrath seems to break out. For a soul to make its approach to God by resting in faith while God appears to fire upon it and shoot His frowns like poisoned arrows into it — this is hard work, and it will test the Christian's steel thoroughly. Yet we find exactly that bold spirit in the poor woman of Canaan, who took up the sharp words Christ fired at her and with humble boldness sent them back to Him in her prayer.

Fifth, the believer must persevere in his Christian course until the end of his life — his work and his life must leave the stage together. This adds weight to every other difficulty of the Christian calling. We have known many who entered the field and found the soldier's work appealing for a battle or two, but soon had enough and came running home again — few can endure it as a lifelong trade. Many are quickly drawn into holy duties and easily persuaded to take up a profession of religion — and just as easily persuaded to lay it down. They are like the new moon, which shines briefly in the early part of the night but sets before half the night is gone; or like bright-seeming professors in their youth whose old age is wrapped in the thick darkness of sin and wickedness. Oh, this persevering is a hard word! This taking up the cross daily, this praying always, this watching night and day and never laying aside your clothes and armor — never giving yourself permission to relax your holy attention to God and your walk with God — this drives many away from Christ in sorrow. Yet this is the saint's duty: to make religion his every-day work, with no vacation from one end of the year to the other. These few examples are enough to show how much courage and resolution the Christian needs. The application follows.

First application: This gives us a reason why there are so many professors and so few true Christians; so many who run and so few who obtain; so many who go into the field against Satan and so few who come out as conquerors. The reason is that everyone desires to be happy, but few have the courage and resolution to wrestle with the difficulties they meet on the way to that happiness. All Israel came joyfully out of Egypt under Moses's leadership — indeed, a mixed multitude came with them — but when their stomachs were pinched a little with hunger and their eager desire for Canaan was delayed, and instead of peace and plenty they found war and hardship, they were ready like cowardly soldiers to flee their colors and make a dishonorable retreat back to Egypt. In the same way, the great majority of those who profess the Gospel, when it comes to the moment of testing — when they must decide what they will deny, endure, and sacrifice for Christ — grow sick of their undertaking. Their hearts fail them. They are like the waters of Bethlehem — desirable enough in the abstract, but if they must fight their way through so many enemies to reach them, they will settle for their own cistern and leave heaven to those willing to pay a higher price for it. How many part with Christ at this crossroads! Like Orpah, they walk with Christ a little way while He is drawing them away from their worldly hopes and preparing them for hardship — and then they kiss Him and leave, unwilling to lose heaven but even more unwilling to buy it at such a cost. They are like young people who foolishly choose some pleasant trade — like the confectioner's — because they crave the treats it offers, but when they meet the sour sauce of labor and toil that goes with it, they give up and tire of their work. The sweet bait of religion has drawn

many to nibble at it who are offended by the hard service it demands. It takes a different spirit than the world can give or receive to follow Christ fully.

Second application: Let this exhort you, Christians, to pursue this holy resolution and courage — for without it you cannot truly be what you profess. The cowardly are first in line among those marching toward hell (Revelation 21). It is the violent and valiant who take heaven by force — cowards have never won heaven. Do not claim to have royal blood in your veins and to be born of God unless you can prove your lineage by this heroic spirit: the willingness to dare to be holy in spite of men and devils. The eagle tests her young by the sun; Christ tests His children by their courage — by whether they dare look death and danger in the face for His sake (Mark 8:34-35). How jarring a sight it is: a bold sinner and a fearful saint; one resolved to be wicked and a Christian wavering in his holy course. Guilt putting innocence to flight, and hell holding the field, shamelessly displaying its banners of open wickedness while saints hide their colors in shame or flee from them in fear — when they ought rather to wrap themselves in those colors and die upon the spot than betray the glorious name of God, which is called upon by them, to the mockery of the ungodly. Take heart, therefore, O you saints, and be strong. Your cause is good; God Himself has taken up your fight and appointed His own Son as general of the field — called the Captain of our salvation. He will lead you on with courage and bring you off with honor. He lived and died for you; He will live and die with you. For mercy and tenderness to His soldiers, there is none like Him. Trajan, it is said, tore his own clothes to bind up his soldiers' wounds; Christ poured out His blood as balm to heal His saints' wounds and used it to

bind them up. For courage, none can compare with Him — He never turned His face from danger, not even when hell's malice and heaven's justice appeared in the field against Him. "Knowing all the things that were coming upon Him, He went forth and said to them, 'Whom do you seek?'" (John 18:4). For victory, He is undefeatable — He never lost a battle, even when He lost His life. He won the field, carrying its spoils in the triumphal chariot of His ascension to heaven, where He makes an open display of them to the unspeakable joy of saints and angels. You march in the company of magnificent spirits — your fellow soldiers, every one of them a child of the King. Behold some of them who, enduring here below a great conflict of afflictions and temptations, take heaven by storm and force. Others you may see, after many assaults, setbacks, and rallying of their faith and patience, climbing the walls of heaven as conquerors. From there they look down and call you, their fellow brothers still on earth, to march up the hill after them, crying out: "Press on — the city is yours, as it is now ours. For a few days of conflict we are now crowned with heaven's glory; one moment's enjoyment of it has dried all our tears, healed all our wounds, and made us forget the sharpness of the fight in the joy of our present victory." In a word, Christians, God and angels are watching — observing how you conduct yourselves as children of the Most High. Every exploit your faith performs against sin and Satan causes a shout in heaven — as you boldly put down this temptation, scale that difficulty, and retake ground you had just lost from your enemy's hands. Your dear Savior, who stands by with a reserve force ready for your relief at the critical moment, rejoices at heart to see the proof of your love for Him and your zeal for Him in every battle. He will not forget the faithful service you

have rendered in His wars on earth, but when you come out of the field He will receive you with the same joy with which His Father welcomed Him at His return to heaven. Now, Christian, if you intend to press on courageously against all opposition on your march to heaven — as you should — you would do well to build your spirit with such generous and soul-ennobling thoughts. But especially, make sure your principles are firmly fixed — for an unstable heart is weak as water and cannot excel in courage. Two things are needed to fix our principles.

First, a settled judgment in the truth of God. A person who does not clearly know what he is fighting for or whom he fights for may easily be persuaded to change sides or at least remain neutral. There are such people among those counted as professors who can barely give an account of what they hope for or whom they hope in — yet they think of themselves as Christians, having run before they knew their errand. Or if they do have some principles to go on, those principles are so unsettled that every wind knocks them down, like loose tiles blown from a rooftop. Blind zeal is soon put to shameful retreat, while holy resolution built on firm principles stands up like a rock in the midst of the waves. "Those who know their God will be strong and carry out great exploits" (Daniel 11:32). The angel told Daniel who the men were that would stand firm and hold out for God in that hour of both temptation and persecution that Antiochus would bring upon them. Not all the Jews — some would be corrupted by mere flattery, others scared out of their profession by threats. Only the few with fixed principles — those who knew the God they served and were grounded in their religion — these would be strong and do great things: incorruptible before flattery, unconquerable before force.

Second, a sincere aim at the right goal in our profession. No matter how well a man knows the things of Christ, if his aim in his profession is not right, his principles will hang loose — he will not venture much or far for Christ, no more and no further than he can protect his own stake. A hypocrite may show some spirit up close and some short burst of courage in overcoming a few difficulties, but he will prove himself a broken-down horse in the end. The man with a false goal in his profession will soon come to the end of his profession the moment he is pressed on the very point where it hurts him most — that is, when he is called to give up what his corrupt heart has been after all along. At that point his heart fails him and he can go no further. Be careful, then, of that side-glance toward profit, pleasure, honor, or anything short of Christ and heaven — for these things will steal your heart, as the prophet says wine and women do. And if your heart is taken away, very little courage for Christ will remain. How bold Jehu was at first, and he told the world it was zeal for God! But why did his heart fail him before half his work was done? Because his heart was never truly set right — the very thing that stirred up his zeal at first was what quenched and crushed it in the end, and that was his ambition. His desire for a kingdom made him zealous against the house of Ahab, to cut off those who might in time edge him from the throne. Once that was done and he was quietly settled, he dared not finish God's work, for fear of losing what he had gained by provoking the people with a thorough reformation. He was like some soldiers who, once they find rich plunder in the sacking of a town, are spoiled for fighting ever after.

## CHAPTER 2. OF THE SAINTS' STRENGTH, WHERE IT LIES, AND WHEREFORE LAID UP IN GOD



**T**he second part of the text follows, which contains a qualifying direction. Having urged the saints at Ephesus — and through them all believers — to holy resolution and courage in their warfare, the apostle takes care lest this exhortation be misunderstood and lead them to rely on their own strength for the battle. He therefore directs them away from themselves and to the Lord: "Be strong in the Lord." From this, observe the following.

The Christian's strength lies in the Lord, not in himself. In other armies, a general's strength lies in his troops — he rises, as one great commander once told his soldiers, on their wings. If their feathers are clipped and their power is broken, he is lost. But in the army of the saints, the strength of every saint — indeed of the entire host — lies in the Lord of hosts. God can defeat His enemies without their hands, but they cannot so much as defend themselves without His arm. One of God's names is "the Strength of Israel" (1 Samuel 15:29). He was the strength of David's heart — without Him, this valiant warrior, who when upheld in God's arms could defy one who defied a whole army, behaved strangely with

fear at a word or two that dropped from a Philistine's mouth. God was the strength of David's hands: "He trains my hands for battle" — and so He is the strength of all His saints in their war against sin and Satan. Some raise the question of whether there is any sin committed in the world in which Satan has no part. But the question of whether there is any holy action performed without God's special assistance alongside it is already settled: "Apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). "Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God" (2 Corinthians 3:5). We — apostles, saints with habitual grace — yet this grace lies like water at the bottom of a well, which will not rise no matter how much we pump, until God pours in His activating grace, and then it flows. To think is something; to will is more than to think; to put our will into action is more than both. Yet all of these are from God: "It is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13). He makes the heart new, and having made it fit for heavenly motion — setting every wheel, so to speak, in its right place — He winds it up with His energizing grace and sets it going: the thoughts to stir, the will to move and reach toward the holy object set before it. Yet even then the whole mechanism can stall and cannot climb the hill of action until God puts His shoulder to the wheel. As Romans 7 says: "To will is present with me, but how to do good I do not find." God is at the bottom of the ladder and at the top as well — the Author and Finisher, helping and lifting the soul at every rung as it ascends toward any holy action. Now the Christian is set to work — but how long will he keep at it? Alas, poor soul — no longer than the same hand that first empowered him holds him up. He quickly expends the strength he has re-

ceived, and therefore to sustain a holy course, there must be renewed strength from heaven at every moment. David knew this, and so even when his heart was in as holy a frame as he had ever felt it, and his people by their freewill offerings showed the same, he still prayed that God would "keep this forever in the intentions of the thoughts of the heart of Your people, and direct their heart to You" (1 Chronicles 29:18). He thanked God for the mercy that had made them willing, and then implored His further grace to strengthen them and fasten the knot, so that these precious pearls newly strung on their hearts might not slip off. The Christian, when fullest of divine supply, is like a glass without a foot — he cannot stand or hold what he has received any longer than God holds him in His strong hand. Therefore, when Christ was on His way to heaven and about to take leave of His children, He committed them to His Father's care in His absence: "Father, keep them" — as if He said, they cannot be left alone; they are poor helpless children who can neither stand nor walk without help. They will lose the grace I have given them and fall into those temptations which I kept them from while I was with them, if they are out of Your sight or Your arms for even a moment. Therefore, Father, keep them.

Consider also the Christian as he comes to any duty of worship — still his strength is in the Lord. If he would pray, where will he find material for his prayer? He does not know what to pray for as he ought. Left to himself, he will soon pray himself into some temptation or other and ask for what it would be cruelty in God to grant. Therefore God puts words in our mouths: "Take words with you and return to the Lord" (Hosea 14:2). But now that he has words put in his mouth, they will freeze on his very lips unless

some heart-warming affection thaws the tap. Where will this fire come from? There is not a spark to be found on his own hearth — only some strange fire of natural emotion, which will not do. Where then must the fire come from to thaw the iciness of the heart, if not from heaven? The Spirit must stretch Himself over the soul, as the prophet stretched himself over the child, and then the soul comes to some genuine warmth and heavenly heat in its affections. The Spirit must groan, and then the soul will groan — He helps us to these sighs and groans that turn the sails of prayer. He melts the heart, and then it bursts out of the heart in groans, from the lips in heavenly eloquence, and from the eyes like water through a floodgate in tears. And yet, even now that the soul is enabled to wrestle with God in prayer — what will it gain by all this? Suppose the Christian is weak in grace: can he pray himself strong or pray his corruptions weak? No — that is not found in prayer as an act of the creature. That too drops from heaven: "On the day I called, You answered me; You made me bold with strength in my soul." David received strength in the act of prayer, but he did not get it from his prayer — he got it from his God. He did not pray himself strong; God strengthened him while he was praying. Now cast your eye on the Christian engaged in another ordinance — hearing the Word preached. His strength to hear the Word is from God. God opens the heart to pay attention; He opens the understanding of the saint to receive the Word in such a way as to grasp what it means. It is like Samson's riddle, which we cannot unravel without his heifer. He opens the womb of the soul to conceive by the Word — as the understanding conceives of it — so that the barren soul becomes a joyful mother of children. David sat under the public preaching of the law for half a year, with the womb of his

heart shut up, until Nathan came and God came with him. Then the time of new life arrived — David conceived instantly, brought forth that same day, and fell at once into the bitter pangs of sorrow for his sin, which did not pass until he had cast them forth in that beautiful Psalm 51. Why did that one word work more than all the previous preaching? Simply because God now spoke alongside His Word in a way He had not before. He is therefore said to "teach His people to profit" — the Head Teacher who sits in heaven sometimes calls a soul from His assistant and draws the student directly to Himself, saying: "You have not been approaching the hearing of the Word in the right way. Understand this truth this way; make use of this promise like that" — and at once the eyes of the understanding open and the heart burns within him while God speaks. So we see the truth of this point: the Christian's strength is in the Lord. We now turn to some demonstrations of this.

## SECTION I.

First reason: The first reason may be drawn from the nature of the saints and of their grace — both are creatures. It is in the very nature of the creature to depend on God its Maker, both for its being and its operation. Can you imagine an accident to exist outside of its subject — whiteness apart from a wall or some other surface? It is just as impossible for a creature to exist or act without strength from God. To exist, act, and move from within oneself alone is so exclusively a property of God that He cannot share it with any creature. God simply is, and there is none beside Him. When God made the world, He is said to have finished His work — that is, He created no new species or kinds of creatures beyond that point. But to this day He has not finished His work of Providence. "My Father

is working until now," says Christ (John 5:17) — that is, preserving and empowering what He has made with strength to exist and act. This is why He is said to "hold our souls in life." Works of human craftsmanship, once finished, may stand for a time without the craftsman's help — a house stands after the carpenter who built it is dead. But God's works, both in nature and in grace, are never off His hands. Therefore, as the Father is said to work continually in preserving the works of nature, so the Son, to whom the work of redemption is committed, tells us He works as well. Nor did He finish His work when He rose again, any more than His Father finished His work at creation. God made an end of creating; Christ made an end of purchasing mercy, grace, and glory for believers by His once-for-all death. And as God rested at the end of creation, so Christ, when He had accomplished eternal redemption and by Himself purged our sins, "sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Hebrews 1:3). But He has not ceased to work — by His intercession with God for us, and by His Spirit in us for God, He upholds His saints, their graces, and their comforts in this life. Without that, they would all collapse into ruin. So we see that as grace is a creature, the Christian depends on God for his strength. But there is more.

Second reason: The Christian's grace is not only a creature, but a weak creature in conflict with enemies stronger than itself — and therefore it cannot hold the field without help from heaven. When no support comes in, the weakest goes to the wall. Grace in this life is only weak — like a king in the cradle — which gives Satan an advantage to press his schemes more effectively against this young king's reign in the soul. Indeed, Satan would quickly end the war by destroying the believer's grace if heaven did not take the

Christian under its protection. True, grace wherever it is found has a principle within itself that makes it desire and strive to preserve itself according to its strength. But when it is overpowered it will perish unless God assists it — like fire in green wood, which dampens and suppresses what has been kindled and will in time go out unless it is blown up or more fire is added. So it is with grace in the heart. God brings His grace into the heart by conquest. In a conquered city, some yield and become true subjects to the conqueror, but others plot how they may throw off this yoke. It therefore takes the same power to hold the city that it took to win it. The Christian has an unregenerate part that is discontented with this new change in the heart and resists the sweet government of Christ's scepter just as the people of Sodom resisted Lot's authority over them: "This fellow, a stranger, controls us?" And Satan leads this mutinous mob against the Christian. So if God did not continually reinforce His newly planted colony in the heart, the very natives — I mean the remaining corruptions lurking in their dens and holes — would come out and devour the little grace the holiest person on earth possesses. To them it would be bread.

Third reason: A third demonstration may be drawn from the great design God pursues in the salvation of His saints — indeed, in the entire transaction of it from first to last. This design has two parts.

First, God would bring His saints to heaven in a way that most fully expresses His deep love and mercy toward them.

Second, He would express His mercy and love to them in a way that rebounds back to Him in the greatest possible advance of His own glory. How perfectly this is served by having the saints receive

all their strength for every step they take toward heaven will soon become clear.

First, this way of giving strength to the saints lends double weight to God's love and mercy.

First, it pours sweetness into everything the believer has or does. When he finds comfort in his heart, enlargement of heart in duty, support in the face of temptation — to consider where all of this comes from, what friend has sent it in. It does not come from my own supply or from any creature. Oh — it is my God who has been here and left this sweet fragrance of comfort behind Him in my heart. My God, who unnoticed by me has filled my sails with the breezes of His Spirit and carried me off the shallows of my own deadness, where I had run aground. It is His sweet Spirit who held my head and steadied my heart in that affliction and temptation, or else I would have passed out in a faint of unbelief. How can this fail to endear God to a gracious soul? His supplies come so directly from heaven, and they would be lost if the Christian had any reserve of his own to draw on. Consider which speaks more love: a prince who gives his favorite a pension and lets him manage on his own, or a prince who takes the chief care upon himself, comes to this man's house every day, looks into his pantry, sees what provisions he has and what he is spending, and so steadily provides for him from time to time? Perhaps some proud spirit who likes to be independent, or who values the money more than the prince's company, would prefer the first. But one who longs for the heart and love of his prince would be overwhelmed with joy at the second. This is how God deals with His saints. The great God comes and looks into their pantry, sees how they are supplied, and provides accordingly as He finds them. "Your heavenly Father knows

that you have need of all these things" — and you shall have them. He knows you need strength to pray, to hear, to suffer for Him — and in that very hour it will be given.

Second, this way of God's dealing with His saints adds to the fullness and stability of their strength. If the stock were in our own hands, we would soon prove to be broken merchants. God knows we are leaking vessels — even when fullest, we could not hold it long. Therefore, to secure everything, He keeps us positioned under the outflow of His strength — and a leaking vessel kept under a running tap is supplied as fast as it leaks. So our leakage is continually replenished. This was God's provision for Israel in the wilderness: He split the rock, and the rock followed them. They had not only a drink in the moment — the water ran in a stream behind them, so that you hear no more of their complaints about thirst. That rock was Christ. Every believer has Christ at his back, following him with strength as he goes, for every condition and trial. One flower with its root still attached is worth more than many cut ones in a bouquet — which, however fragrant, are no longer growing but are withering even as you wear them. God's strength, as the root, keeps our grace alive; without it, that grace would die, however beautiful it once was.

The second design God has in the happiness of His saints is that He might express His mercy and love to them in a way that rebounds back to Him in the highest possible advance of His own glory (Ephesians 1:4, 12). This is fully achieved by empowering the saints with a strength that is not their own but comes from their God as they need it. If God had given His saints a stock of grace to start with and left them to manage it on their own, He would certainly have been magnified — since it would have been more than

He owed any creature. But He would not have been fully glorified as He is now, when not only the Christian's first strength to come to Christ is from God, but he remains indebted to God for the exercise of that strength in every action throughout his Christian life. It is like a child traveling in his father's company — all the expenses are paid, but the father carries the money, not the child. So the Christian's way is covered at every point, but he cannot say "I did this" or "I endured that" — only "God worked all of it in me and for me." The very comb of pride is cut here; there is no room for any self-exalting thought. The Christian cannot say: "That I am a saint is mercy — but that my faith is strong, that is the fruit of my own care and watchfulness." Poor Christian! Who kept your eyes open and stirred your care? Was that not the offspring of God just as much as your faith was at the beginning? No saint will say of heaven when he arrives there: "This is heaven that I built by the power of my might." No — the new Jerusalem above is a city whose builder and maker is God. Every grace, and every degree of grace, is a stone in that building — the capstone of which is laid in glory, where the saints will see more plainly how God was not only the one who laid the foundation but also the one who finished the work. The glory of that work will not be divided and parceled out, some to God and some to the creature. It will all be fully returned to God, and He will be acknowledged as all in all.

## SECTION 2.

First application: If the Christian's strength is in the Lord and not in himself, then surely the person without Christ must be a poor, helpless creature — with no ability of his own to do anything toward his own salvation. If a ship fully launched, rigged, and with

sails spread cannot move until a favorable wind fills them, how much less can the timber lying in the carpenter's yard shape and frame itself into a ship. If a living tree cannot grow unless the root sends up its sap, how much less can a dead, rotting stake in the hedge — which has no root — come to life on its own. In short, if a Christian who possesses the spiritual life of grace cannot exercise that life without strength from above, then surely one who lacks this new life, who is dead in sins and trespasses, can never beget it in himself or contribute to producing it. The state of being unregenerate is a state of powerlessness. "While we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly" (Romans 5:6). Just as Christ found the whole mass of humanity buried under the ruins of their fallen condition — no more able to lift themselves from beneath the weight of God's wrath than a man buried under the rubble of a collapsed house is able to free himself unaided — so the Spirit finds sinners in an equally helpless condition, as unable to repent or believe in Christ for salvation as they were to purchase it on their own. Let the proud who celebrate the power of human nature be put to shame forever — as if a man with the bricks and mortar of natural ability could build a tower whose top reaches heaven itself. "It does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy" (Romans 9:16). God Himself has scattered such builders of Babel in the thoughts of their hearts. He raises this spiritual temple in the souls of people not by might or by any power of their own, but by His Spirit — so that grace, grace alone, may be proclaimed over it forever. Therefore, if anyone still in their natural state would become wise for salvation, let them first become fools in their own eyes. Let them renounce the carnal wisdom that does not perceive the

things of God, and ask God for wisdom — He gives generously and without reproach. If anyone would have strength to believe, let him become weak and die to his own strength, for "by strength no man shall prevail" (1 Samuel 2:9).

Second application: If the Christian's strength lies in God and not in himself, this should keep the Christian humble — even when most enlarged in duty and most assisted in his Christian course. Remember, Christian, when you have your best outfit on — who made it, who paid for it. Your grace and your comfort are neither the work of your own hands nor the reward of your own merit. Do not, for shame, be proud of another's expense. That assistance will not stay long if it becomes a nurse to your pride; you are not the master of the strength you have been given. Your Father is wise — even when He allows you the most for your spiritual maintenance, He keeps the resources in His own hands and can quickly restrain you if you grow reckless with His grace. Walk humbly before your God, and make good use of the strength you have, remembering that it is borrowed. No one wastes what he has to beg for. Who gives alms to a beggar who spends it carelessly? Even when you have the most, you cannot go long without returning to your God's door. And how can you face Him for more when you have squandered what you already received?

## CHAPTER 3. OF ACTING OUR FAITH ON THE ALMIGHTY POWER OF GOD



**T**he third part of the text follows, which contains an encouraging expansion attached to the exhortation in these words: "And in the power of His might." Two questions need to be answered to understand this phrase. First, what do the words "the power of His might" mean? Second, what does it mean to be strong in the power of His might?

For the first: "the power of His might" is a Hebrew idiom meaning simply His mighty power — similar to the phrase in Ephesians 1:6, "to the praise of the glory of His grace," which means to the praise of His glorious grace. "His mighty power" means nothing less than His almighty power. Sometimes the Lord is called mighty and strong (Psalm 24:8), sometimes most mighty, sometimes Almighty — in every case, what is meant is God's infinite, almighty power.

For the second: to be strong in the mighty power, or power of the Lord's might, involves two acts of faith.

First, a settled, firm conviction that the Lord is almighty in power. "Be strong in the power of His might" means: be deeply rooted in your faith concerning this foundational truth — that God

is almighty.

Second, it involves a further act of faith: not only to believe that God is almighty, but also to believe that this almighty power is committed to your defense. This means bearing up undauntedly in the midst of all trials and temptations, leaning on the arm of God Almighty as though it were your own strength. That is the apostle's purpose here — both to drive us off from leaning on our own strength, and to encourage the Christian to draw on God's almighty power as freely as if it were his own whenever he is attacked by Satan in any form. Just as a man set upon by a thief summons all the force and strength in his body to defend himself and strike back at his attacker, so the apostle urges the Christian to be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might — as if to say: Soul, run to your God, whose mighty power is entirely intended and devoted by God Himself for your help and defense. Go and strengthen yourself in it by steady faith, as that which will be spent to the utmost for your good. From this, I believe two principles will draw out the richness of these words.

First: It should be the Christian's great care and effort in all temptations and trials to strengthen his faith on the almighty power of God.

Second: The Christian's duty and care is not only to believe that God is almighty, but to rest firmly by faith on this almighty power of God as engaged for his help and support in all his trials and temptations.

First principle developed: It should be the Christian's great care in all temptations and trials to strengthen his faith on the almighty power of God. When God holds Himself out as the object

of the soul's trust and confidence in any great crisis or undertaking, He typically presents this attribute of His almighty power in the promise, as the surest grip for faith to hold on to. Just as a father on a rough road gives his child his arm to hold, so God customarily reaches out His almighty power for His saints to exercise their faith upon. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had their faith tested by God more than almost any of His saints before or since — not one of the great things promised to them did they live to see fulfilled in their lifetime. And how did God make Himself known to them for their support? By displaying this very attribute. "I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty" (Exodus 6:3). This was all they had to live on throughout their days — and with it they lived comfortably and died triumphantly, leaving the promise to their children without doubting — because God Almighty had given His word — that it would be fulfilled. Similarly in Isaiah 26, great mercies are promised to Judah and a song is written in advance to be sung on that glad day of their salvation. But because a sharp winter of captivity lay between the promise and the springtime of its fulfillment, the prophet calls them to exercise their faith on God Almighty in the meantime. Verse 4: "Trust in the Lord forever, for in God the Lord we have an everlasting Rock." Likewise, when His saints are going into the furnace of persecution, what does He direct their faith to carry with them into prison? This same almighty power. "Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator" (1 Peter 4:19) — "Creator" being a name of almighty power. We will now give some reasons for this point.

First reason: Because it is no easy work — however plain and clear this truth may now appear — to actually make use of it in the deepest moments of temptation. To vindicate God's name from the evil reports that Satan and carnal reason raise against it in such moments requires a strong faith indeed. I grant that this principle is part of natural theology — the same light that discovers a Deity will, if followed carefully, establish that this God is almighty. But in a carnal heart, this truth is like a rusty sword, barely drawable from the scabbard and therefore of little use. Such truths are so imprisoned in natural conscience that they rarely get a fair hearing in the sinner's heart until God sets them free and brings them out of their prison house — where they are locked up under the power of unrighteousness — by the mighty work of His convincing Spirit. Then, and not until then, will the soul truly believe that God is holy, merciful, and almighty. In fact, some of God's own dear people — and not the least gracious among them — have at times had their faith stuck in this swamp, struggling to get past the difficulties and improbabilities that sense and reason throw in the way, and to rest on God's almighty power in spite of them. Moses himself, a star of the first magnitude in grace, see how his faith flickers and dims until he wrestles through the temptation: "The people among whom I am are 600,000 on foot, and You have said, 'I will give them meat that they may eat for a whole month.' Shall flocks and herds be slaughtered for them, to be sufficient for them?" (Numbers 11:21). This holy man had for a time lost sight of God's almighty power and was wondering how this could be done — as if to say in plain terms, "How can this possibly happen?" God understood what Moses was really expressing, and answered in verse 23: "Is the Lord's power limited?" Consider also Mary in John 11:32:

"Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died." And her sister Martha in verse 39: "Lord, by this time there will be a stench." Both were godly women, yet both betrayed the weakness of their faith in Christ's almighty power. Mary limited Him by place — "If You had been here" — as if Christ could not have preserved his life from a distance as well as in person, or could not have sent healing to him as well as brought it Himself. Martha limited Him by time — "By now he stinks" — as if Christ had arrived with His remedy too late and the grave would not release its prisoner at His command. And do you think so highly of yourself, Christian, that your faith needs no careful effort for further grounding in God's almighty power — when you see even people like these stumble over this very kind of temptation?

Second reason: Because this act of faith, above all others, is absolutely necessary to sustain the Christian in the hour of temptation. All the Christian's strength and comfort must be fetched from outside himself, and he has nothing to send on that errand but faith. Faith goes to heaven and knocks God up — like the man in the parable who knocked on his neighbor's door at midnight for bread. Therefore when faith fails and the soul has nothing to go to market for supplies, the household must suffer in the meantime. Now faith is never fully laid aside until the soul denies or at least questions the power of God. When the Christian disputes God's will — whispering to himself, "Will He pardon? Will He save?" — this may make faith hobble toward the throne of grace, but it will not knock the soul off from seeking God's face. Even then, faith in God's power will accompany the soul there: "If You are willing, You can make me clean; if You are willing, You can pardon, You can purge." But when the soul concludes that God cannot pardon,

cannot save — that is a shot through the heart of faith. The soul then falls at Satan's feet, no longer able to resist. It grows indifferent to duty, careless whether it prays or not — like a person who finds the well dry and throws away his bucket.

Third reason: Because God is very protective of this jewel in His crown — this aspect of His name. We cannot spell His name correctly and leave out this letter, for it is that very name by which He is distinguished from all His creatures. A man may be called wise, merciful, mighty — but God alone is all-wise, all-merciful, Almighty. So when we drop the word "all," we mislabel God and call Him by a creature's name, which He will not answer to. God's protectiveness of this prerogative appears in three particulars.

First, in the strict command He lays on His people to give Him the glory of His power: "You are not to say, 'It is a conspiracy!' ... It is the Lord of hosts whom you should regard as holy" (Isaiah 8:12-13). That is to say: in this desperate condition, when your enemies are joining forces and you appear to reason's eye as a people who are lost, unable to contest with such united powers surrounding you on every side — now I charge you: honor Me by giving Me the glory of My almighty power. Believe that your God is able, by Himself alone and without any other help, to defend you and destroy them.

Second, in His severity toward His dearest children when they waver in their faith and do not come promptly — without reasoning and debating — to rest on His almighty power. Zechariah only asked the angel, "How will I know this for certain? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years" — yet for revealing his unbelief he was given a sign indeed, but one that not only strengthened his faith but severely punished his unbelief, for he was struck

mute on the spot. God loves His children to believe His Word, not to debate His power — as Luther truly said, "God loves those who run to Him, not those who question Him." What gave power to Abraham's faith in Romans 4:21 was that "he was fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform."

Third, in the way God chooses to deliver His choicest mercies and greatest acts of salvation to His people. He arranges the scene of His providence so that when it is over, it is unmistakably clear that almighty power was at work. To this end, God commonly removes the means and secondary causes that, if left standing around His work, would obscure and block the full view of what He has done. "We had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead" (2 Corinthians 1:9). Christ waited while Lazarus was dead so that He might draw the eyes of their faith more directly to His power — raising a dead man rather than healing a sick one, since the former carried a far fuller proof of almightiness. Indeed, God often allows a contrary power to rise up at the very moment He intends to act mercifully toward His people, so that He may raise a more magnificent monument to His own power in the ruin of whatever opposes Him. Had God brought Israel out of Egypt under the kings who knew Joseph, they might well have had a friendly departure and an easy deliverance. But God reserved this for the reign of that proud Pharaoh, who cruelly oppressed them and would stake his kingdom rather than satisfy God's purpose for them. And why must it happen this way? So that God would bring them out with an outstretched arm. The magnifying of His power

was God's great design: "But, indeed, for this reason I have allowed you to remain, in order to show you My power and in order to proclaim My name through all the earth" (Exodus 9:16).

Fourth, in the effectiveness of an argument pressed from God's almighty power when brought before God Himself in prayer. This was the last arrow Moses had in his quiver when he pleaded for the life of Israel: "If You slay this people as one man, then the nations who have heard of Your fame will say, 'Because the Lord could not bring this people into the land which He promised them...'" (Numbers 14:16). And in verse 17: "But now, I pray, let the power of the Lord be great." With this argument Moses received their pardon.

The application of this point will follow under the next, which is:

## CHAPTER 4. OF ACTING OUR FAITH ON THE ALMIGHTY POWER OF GOD, AS ENGAGED FOR OUR HELP



**I**t is the saints' duty — and should be their constant care — not only to believe that God is almighty, but also to believe strongly that this almighty power is theirs: that is, committed to their defense and help, so that they draw on it in all difficulties and temptations.

### SECTION I.

First, I will prove that God's almighty power is committed to the Christian's defense, along with the grounds for that. Second, why the Christian should act his faith strongly on this truth.

First: God's almighty power is committed to the saints' defense. God brought Israel out of Egypt with a strong hand — but did He then set them down on the other side of the Red Sea to find and force their way to Canaan by their own cleverness or strength? When He opened the iron gate of their house of bondage and brought them into the open country, did He vanish as the angel vanished from Peter when he came out of prison? No — as a father

carries his son, "the Lord carried them all the way they went" (Deuteronomy 1:31). This vividly pictures the saints' march to heaven. God brings a soul out of spiritual Egypt by His converting grace — that is the day of His power, when He makes the soul willing to come out of Satan's grip. Now the saint is on the march, and the whole country rises against him. How shall this poor creature pass through all dangers and make it safely past the borders of every enemy? God Himself enfolds him in the arms of His everlasting strength. "You are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed" (1 Peter 1:5). The power of God is that shoulder on which Christ carries His sheep home, rejoicing all the way (Luke 15:5). These everlasting arms of His strength are those eagle's wings on which the saints are both tenderly and securely carried to glory (Exodus 19:4). There are five ties or commitments that bind God's power to serve as the saints' lifeguard.

First: the close relationship He has with His saints — they are His own dear children. Everyone cares for his own; even a mother hen bustles and stirs herself to gather her brood under her wing when the hawk appears. No care is stronger than what nature teaches. How much more will God — who is the Father of such instincts in His creatures — stir up His whole strength to defend His children? "He said, 'Surely they are My people' — so He became their Savior" (Isaiah 63:8). It is as if God said: Shall I sit still with My hands folded while My own people are mistreated before My face? I cannot bear it. A mother sitting in her house hears a single cry and recognizes the voice: "Oh, it is my child!" She drops everything and runs to him. So God takes the alarm at His children's

cry. "I heard Ephraim grieving," says the Lord — his cry reached God's ear, His ear moved His heart, and His heart called up His power to rescue him.

Second: the deep love He bears toward His saints commits His power on their behalf. He who has God's heart will not lack His arm. In a human being, love commands all the other emotions and sets all the powers of the whole person to work. So it is with God: love sets all His other attributes to work. When God fixed His mind on doing good to lost humanity, wisdom began designing the way, and almighty power undertook to raise the structure according to wisdom's plan. All God's attributes are ready to accomplish what He has purposed. Now the believing soul is the object of God's choicest love — the very same love with which He loves His Son (John 17:26).

First: God loves the believer as the product of His eternal counsel. When a soul believes, God's eternal purpose and decree concerning that person — whom He chose in Christ before the foundation of the world, and with whom His thoughts had been pregnant so long — finally brings forth. How could God not love intensely the creature He had carried so long in the womb of His eternal purpose? This magnificent creation of heaven and earth was built as nothing more than a stage on which He would in time act out what He had decreed in eternity concerning the saving of you and a few more of His elect. Therefore, in keeping with the joy and delight He took in planning this before the world began, He must rejoice over the believing soul now with a love and pleasure beyond all understanding. And having brought His counsel this far toward completion, He will surely raise all the power He has rather than be cheated of His glory within a few steps of home — that is, His

entire design in the believer's salvation. The Lord who has chosen His saints, as Christ prays for Joshua their representative, will rebuke Satan and all their enemies.

Second: God loves His saints as the purchase of His Son's blood. They cost Him dearly, and what is so hard to gain will not be easily lost. He who was willing to spend His Son's blood to win them will not withhold His power to keep them.

Third: God loves the saints for their likeness to Himself — so that if He loves Himself, He cannot but love Himself as He appears in them. And as He loves Himself in them, so He defends Himself in defending them. What is it in a saint that enrages hell, if not the image of God? Without that image, the war would soon be over. It is the panther's hatred for a man that makes it fly at his picture. "For Your sake we are being put to death all day long" (Psalm 44:22) — and if the quarrel is God's, surely the saint will not go to war at his own expense.

Third: the covenant commits God's almighty power to His saints. "I am God Almighty; walk before Me" (Genesis 17:1). There is a mutual alliance — offensive and defensive — between God and His saints, and He puts it in writing that He will exert the full power of His Godhead for them. "The Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, is indeed God over Israel" (1 Chronicles 17:24). God does not parcel Himself out in small portions — He gives His saints leave to claim whatever a God has as their own. Let any man who can, sit on God's throne and take away His crown, if he can fasten any falsehood on the Holy One. As His name is, so is His nature: a God who keeps His covenant forever. The promises stand as the mountains stand around Jerusalem, never to be moved. The weak Christian, as much as the strong, is within this line of protection. If

saints had to fight it out in the open field by the strength of their own grace, the strong would be more likely to stand and the weak to fall in battle. But both sheltered within the covenant are equally safe.

Fourth: the saints' dependence on God and expectation from God in all their difficulties obligates His power to come to their aid. Where does a gracious soul flee in any need or danger from sin, Satan, or their instruments? To his God — as naturally as a rabbit to its burrow. "When I am afraid, I will put my trust in You" (Psalm 56:3). David tells God he will feel free to step into His house when caught in any storm, and does not question his welcome. When Saul hunted him, he left a city with gates and walls to trust God in the open field. Indeed, all the saints are taught the same lesson: to give up their own strength and rely on God's power; to give up their own cleverness and cast themselves on God's wisdom; to give up their own righteousness and look for everything from the pure mercy of God in Christ. This act of faith is so pleasing to God that such a soul will never be put to shame: "The hope of the afflicted will not perish forever" (Psalm 9:18). A pagan once said, when a bird frightened by a hawk flew into his chest: "I will not betray you to your enemy, since you have come to me for sanctuary." How much less will God surrender a soul to its enemy when it takes refuge in His name, saying: "Lord, I am hunted by this temptation, hounded by this lust. Either You must pardon it or I am damned; either You must kill it or I will be its slave. Take me into the arms of Your love for Christ's sake. Shelter me in the arms of Your everlasting strength. It is in Your power to save me from, or give me over to, the hand of my enemy. I have no confidence in myself or in anyone else. Into Your hands I commit

my cause and my life, and I rely on You." This kind of dependence will undoubtedly awaken God's almighty power for that person's defense. He has sworn the greatest oath that can come from His lips — sworn by Himself — that those who flee for refuge to hope in Him shall have strong consolation (Hebrews 6:17). This should give the saint all the more boldness to expect a warm welcome when he goes to God for refuge, because he cannot come before he is expected — God having set up His name and promises as a strong tower that both calls His people in and expects them to take shelter there.

Fifth: Christ's presence and work in heaven places a strong obligation on God to bring His full force and power into the field for the defense of His saints on every occasion. One of the chief purposes of Christ's journey to heaven and His continued stay there is that He might as the saints' Advocate constantly intercede with His Father for the supplies and reinforcements their needs require. And to assure us of this before He went, He told us, so to speak, the headings He intended to pray on when He arrived there — one of which was that His Father would keep His children while they remained in the world from its evil (John 17:15). Nor does Christ take up this work on His own initiative — He has the same appointment of His Father for what He now prays in heaven as He had for what He suffered on earth. The one who ordained Him a priest to die for sinners did not then strip Him of His priestly garments, as was done with Aaron, but appointed Him to ascend to heaven in them, where He sits as a priest forever by God's oath. This office of intercession was established purely in mercy to believers, so that they might have full assurance of the performance of all God had promised. Jesus Christ therefore resides at court as

our ambassador, ensuring that everything between God and us proceeds according to agreement. If Christ attends faithfully to His work and is faithful in His office for believers, all is well. And does it not befit Him to be so, who intercedes for such beloved relations? Suppose a king's son escaped from a besieged city, leaving behind his wife and children — whom he loves as his own soul — and they are near death by sword or famine unless relief comes quickly. Could this prince, now arrived at his father's palace, amuse himself with the pleasures of court and forget the distress of his family? Would he not rather rush to his father — with their cries and groans always in his ears — and before eating or drinking, deliver his message to his father and plead with him, if he has ever loved him, to send all the forces of his kingdom to lift the siege before any of his dear family should perish? Surely, though Christ is at the height of His glory and out of the storm in His own person, His children left behind in the midst of sins, Satan, and the world's assaults are in His heart and will not be forgotten by Him for a moment. The care He takes for our affairs was shown in the swift dispatch with which He sent His Spirit to His apostles' supply when He ascended — almost as soon as He was seated at His Father's right hand, He sent Him, to the incomparable comfort of His apostles and of all who have believed, or shall believe, on Him to the end of the world.

## SECTION 2.

The second part of the point follows: that saints should keep this power of God in view as committed to them, and press it home on their souls until all doubts and fears on the matter are silenced. This is the heart of the exhortation: "Be strong in the Lord, and in

the power of His might" — fortify and entrench your souls within the breastwork of this attribute of God's mighty power, which God Himself has made over to you.

First: it is the purpose of all promises to be a security for our faith — and this is especially true of those in which His almighty power is expressly pledged. We are meant to count this attribute as our own portion and draw from the comfort it offers as freely as a man draws from the harvest of his own field. "Walk before Me, I am God Almighty" — God said to Abraham: settle on this as your portion and live on it. The apostle in Hebrews 13:6 teaches us what use to make of a promise. Verse 5 gives the promise: "I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you." Then verse 6 gives the conclusion we are to draw by faith: "So we may boldly say, 'The Lord is my helper.'" "We" — that is, every believer — "may boldly say" — that is, we may confidently conclude that God will help, not timidly and hesitantly saying "perhaps He will," but asserting it boldly in the face of men and devils, because He who is almighty has said it. For a Christian to fail to strengthen his faith on this incomparably sweet attribute — to sit back with a few weak, uncertain hopes when he both may and ought to be strong in the faith of such promises — what is that but to undervalue the blessing of such promises? It is like a man who is promised a house and land and told to make it as legally secure as possible, but who then takes no care to do so — would that not be taken as a slight against his friend's generosity? Is it a small thing that God transfers His almighty power to us by promise and invites us to make it as sure to ourselves as we can by faith — and we neglect this, leaving the deeds of the promises unsealed in our hearts?

Second: our obedience and our comfort are strong or weak in direct proportion to our faith in this truth.

First, consider our obedience — as a child of faith, it shares in faith's strength or weakness. Abraham, being strong in faith, performed that heroic act of obedience in offering up his son. His faith being well settled on God's power, he carried without staggering what would have laid a weak faith flat on the ground. No act of faith strengthens us for duty more than the act that eyes God's almighty power pledged to assist us. "Go in this your strength" — God said to Gideon — "Have I not sent you?" As if He said: Can I not carry you through your work? Will I not? Gideon went in the faith of this and did wonders. This same faith brought Abraham from the east to God's feet — not knowing where he was going, but knowing with whom he traveled: God Almighty. But take a soul not persuaded of this, and how unsteady and inconsistent he is in the course of his obedience. Every strong threat from man dismays him, because his faith is not fixed on the Almighty — and so at times he will dodge a duty to please men, betraying his trust into the hands of a feeble creature. He has fleshly eyes to see the power of men but lacks spiritual eyes to see God at his back protecting him with almighty power. If his eyes were open to see that, he would not be so thrown into confusion by the approach of any weak creature. "Should such a man as I flee?" said faithful Nehemiah (Nehemiah 6:11). He had just come from the throne of grace, where he had called in the help of the Almighty: "O God, strengthen my hands" (verse 9). Now he would rather die on the spot than dishonor his God with a shameful retreat.

Second: the Christian's comfort grows or fades depending on how his faith is looking to God's power. Let the soul question that power, or question whether it belongs to him, and his joy bleeds out as blood from a broken vein. It is true that a soul may make its way to heaven with great difficulty by a faith of mere reliance — trusting God as able to save — without this full persuasion of its personal interest in God. But such a soul sails with a faint side-wind, like a ship with its masts laid over the side, exposed to wind and weather, carried along only because better-equipped vessels are towing it. Many fears come rolling in on such a soul like waves, keeping it more underwater than above. But the soul that sees itself folded in the arms of almighty power — oh, how it goes surging before the wind with sails filled with joy and peace! Let affliction come, let storms rise — this blessed soul knows where it will land and be welcomed. The name of God is its harbor, where it puts in as boldly as a man steps into his own house when caught in a downpour. He hears God inviting him into His attributes as into chambers prepared for him: "Come, my people, enter your chambers" (Isaiah 26:20). God calls them His own, and it would be foolish modesty not to claim what God gives. "Surely will one say, 'In the Lord I have righteousness and strength'" (Isaiah 45:24) — meaning: I have righteousness in God's righteousness, strength in His strength. In this sense Christ can no more say that His strength is His own and not the believer's than a husband can say his body is his own and not his wife's. A soul persuaded of this may sing cheerfully with the sharpest thorn pressing against its breast. David did just this in Psalm 57:7: "My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast; I will sing, yes, I will sing praises!" What makes him so joyful in such a dark place as the cave where he was

hiding? He tells you in verse 1: he is nestled under the shadow of God's wings — and now well may he sing away both care and fear. A soul so provided for may rest comfortably on a hard bed. Do you not think that those who live on London Bridge sleep just as soundly as those who live in a great palace — knowing that the waves roaring beneath them cannot harm them? Just so may the saints rest quietly over the very floods of death and fear no evil.

### SECTION 3.

First application: If God's almighty power is committed to the saints' defense, then those who meddle with the saints — God's enemies, I mean — will have a hard fight on their hands, since they are going up against those who are far above their match. The devil was cunning enough to want Job out of his trench, his hedge torn down, before attacking. But men are reckless enough to challenge the saints in open field, even though they are surrounded by the almighty power of God. What folly it would be to attempt to besiege a city that cannot be blockaded, because no enemy can cut off its supply line — and the way to heaven is just such a city. In the church's tightest siege, there is a river whose streams make glad that city of God, bringing timely support from heaven. The saints' fresh springs all flow from God, and it is as feasible for feeble man to stop the streams of the clouds as to dam up those currents that flow invisibly, like underground streams, from the fountainhead of His mercy into the hearts of His people. The Egyptians thought they had Israel in a trap when they saw them march into that dead-end by the sea: "They are hemmed in, they are hemmed in!" And indeed they would have been irretrievably trapped had not the same almighty power that led them on been committed to bringing

them out with honor and safety. Then once out of that danger, they are in a wilderness where nothing is available for clothing or food — and yet there they will live for forty years, without trade or farming, without begging or taking from any neighboring nation, not beholden to them for a penny along the way. What can almighty power not do to provide for His people? What can it not do to protect them against the power and wrath of their enemies? Almighty power stood between the Israelites and the Egyptians so that the Egyptians could not even get close to see their enemy. God put up a dark cloud as a screen before their eyes, while all the while His own eye was looking through the cloud, working confusion and disorder in their ranks. Has the Almighty grown weaker in our day, or have His enemies grown stronger, that they promise themselves better results? Neither — but men are blinder than the enemies of the saints in former times, who at least sometimes fled at the appearance of God among His people, crying, "Flee, for the Lord fights for them." By contrast, many today would rather credit the devil himself with their defeats than acknowledge God in the matter — more ready to say the devil fought against them than that God did. O you who have not yet shaken off the impressions that the almighty power of God has at any time made on your spirit: beware of having anything to do with that class of men, whoever they are. Do not come near their dwelling; do not cast your lot in with those who are enemies of the saints of the Most High, for they are people marked out for destruction. God loves His saints so much that He makes nothing of giving whole nations as their ransom. He tore open the very womb of Egypt to save the life of Israel His child (Isaiah 43:3).

Second application: This shows the dismal, wretched condition of all who are still without Christ. You have seen a rich mine opened, but not one piece of this treasure belongs to you. This truth is loaded with incomparable comfort — but it is bound for a different shore, belonging to the saints, into whose hearts it delivers all its comfort. See God shutting the door on you when He sets His children to feast on such delicacies: "Behold, My servants will eat, but you will be hungry; My servants will drink, but you will be thirsty" (Isaiah 65:13). God has a fixed number that He provides for; He knows how many are in His household — these and no more will sit down at the table. One of the chief dishes at the saints' table is the almighty power of God. This was set before Abraham and stands before all God's saints, that they may eat their fill of comfort from it. But you shall be hungry. He is almighty to pardon — but He will not exercise that power for you, an unrepentant sinner. You have not a single friend on the bench, not one attribute in all of God's name that will speak in your favor. Mercy itself will sit and vote with the other attributes for your condemnation. God is able to save and help in a time of need — but on what basis are you bold enough to expect His saving arm to be stretched out for you? A man will get up at midnight to let in a child who is crying and knocking at his door, but he will not take that trouble for a dog howling outside. This pictures your condition well enough, sinner — and this is telling your story at its best. For the same almighty power of God that is committed to bringing the believer to salvation is just as deeply committed to bringing you to your execution and damnation. What bond is stronger than an oath? God Himself is under an oath to bring destruction on every unrepentant soul. The oath God swore in His wrath against the un-

believing Israelites — that they would not enter His rest — applies to every unbeliever to the end of the world. In the name of God, consider: if it were merely the oath of a man, or a group of men who had sworn — like those in the book of Acts — to kill a certain person, and you were that person, would it not fill you with terror night and day and rob you of all peace until they were appeased? What then fills the pillows of those who sleep so soundly without horror or alarm, even after being told that the almighty God is under oath to damn them body and soul without timely repentance? O sinners, think seriously — is it wisdom or courage to refuse terms of mercy from God's hands, whose almighty power, if rejected, will soon deliver you into the hands of justice? And how fearful a thing it is to fall into the hands of the living almighty God, no tongue can express — not even those who are already feeling the weight of it.

Third application: This word is for you who are true saints. Be strong in the faith of this truth — make it an article of your creed. With the same faith with which you believe there is a God, believe also that this God's almighty power is your sure friend, and then put it to its best use.

First: In the agonies of conscience that arise from the greatness of your sins, flee for refuge into the almighty power of God. Truly, when a man's sins are displayed in all their terrible colors, spread out in all their damning weight, and the eye of conscience is awakened to see them through the magnifying glass of temptation, they must overwhelm the soul with horror and dread. But then the soul can say with the prophet: For all this vast host arrayed against me, there are more with me than against me. One Almighty outweighs many mighties. All these mighty sins and devils together do not

make one almighty sin or an almighty devil. Set this one attribute against all the hideous charges they bring against you. It is like the French ambassador who silenced the Spaniard's pride in listing his master's many titles with a single title that drowned them all. God Himself in Hosea 11:9, after piling up His people's sins to the full, breaks out in a sweet promise to show what a God can do: "I will not execute My fierce anger" — and why not? "For I am God and not man." "I will display the almightiness of My mercy." It is something like our common saying when a child or a woman strikes us: "I am a man, not a child or a woman, so I will not strike back." The very fact of considering God to be God implies that He is almighty to pardon as well as to judge, and this brings some relief. But to consider further that it is almighty power in bond and covenant to pardon — this brings far more. As no one can bind God but Himself, so no one can break the bond He makes. Are they not His own words that He will abundantly pardon? Isaiah 55 says He will multiply to pardon — as if He said: "I will match your sin with mercy, and spend all I have, rather than let it be said My goodness was overcome by your evil." The gracious soul in this situation is like a captain who surrenders his castle on generous terms — his life spared and safe passage to his home, with all his estate and possessions secured — for all of which he has the general's written word and seal, on which he marches out. But then rough soldiers assault him and put his life in danger. He appeals to the general, whose honor is now pledged for him, and he is promptly rescued while his enemies are punished. You, poor soul, when accused by Satan and troubled by his terrors, may say: "It is God who justifies. I have His written word that my life would be given to me as soon as I laid down my arms and submitted to Him, which I desire to

do. Behold, the gates of my heart are open to let the Prince of peace in. Is not the Almighty able to perform His promise? I commit myself to Him as to a faithful Creator."

Second: Make use of this almighty power of God and your interest in it when tempted to sin — when you are overpowered and fleeing before the face of a strong corruption, or when you fear you will one day fall by it. Boldly take hold of this attribute, reinforce yourself from it, and in resisting, believe that a timely victory over that sin is coming. The almighty God stands in sight of you while you are in the valley fighting, and waits only for a cry from you when distressed in battle — and then He will come to your rescue. Jehoshaphat cried out when surrounded by his enemies, and the Lord helped him (2 Chronicles 18:31). How much more may you count on His help in the battles of your soul. Go to the throne of grace with that promise: "Sin shall not be master over you" (Romans 6:14) — and before you press the promise, add to your faith this comfort: though the word "almighty" is not written out in this and every promise, it is implied, and you may read it there without adding to God's Word. "Sin shall not be master over you" — so says the almighty God, for this and all His attributes are the constant seal on all His promises. Now, soul, put the bond into action, and do not fear the outcome. It is a debt, and therefore it is owed to you. He whom you are pressing is able, so there is no risk of losing the case, and He who was gracious enough to bind Himself when He was free will be faithful enough — being able — to perform now that He is bound. Only while you await the fulfillment of the promise and the assistance of this almighty power against your corruptions, take care that you remain under the shadow of this attribute and within the conditions of this promise.

The shadow cools only if you stay within it — what good is any shadow, even of a mighty rock, if you sit in the open sun? What good is almighty power engaged for you if you throw yourself out of its protection by rushing boldly into the mouth of temptation? The saints' falls have happened when they ran out of their trench and their stronghold. Like conies, they are a weak people in themselves, and their strength lies in the rock of God's almightiness, which is their home.

Third, Christian: make use of this when you are oppressed by the weight of any duty or service that lies upon you in your place and calling. Perhaps you find the duty of your calling too heavy for your weak shoulders. By faith, boldly lay the heaviest end of your burden on God's shoulder — which is yours, if you are a believer, as surely as God can make it by promise. When you grow sick of your work and are tempted, like Jonah, to run from it, encourage yourself with God's word to Gideon, whom He called from the threshing floor to thresh the mountains: "Go in this your strength, have I not sent you?" Fall to the work God sets you, and you engage His strength to go with you. "The way of the Lord is a stronghold" (Proverbs 10:29). Run from your work, and you turn God's strength against you — He will send some storm or other after His runaway servant to bring him home. How often has the coward been cut down in a ditch or under some hedge, while the brave soldier who stood his ground and kept his place came off in safety and honor? Are you called to suffer? Do not shrink back because you are afraid you will not be able to bear the cross. God can lay it so evenly on you that you will not feel it. Even if no visible support comes until you reach the prison door, or until you have one foot on the ladder or your neck on the block — do not despair. "In the

mount the Lord will be seen" (Genesis 22:14). In that very hour He can give you such a look of His sweet face that it will bring color to the ghastly face of cruel death and make it appear lovely in your eyes for His sake. He can give you so much comfort in hand that you will acknowledge God is more than keeping up with you, more than repaying all the shame and pain you can endure for Him. And if it should not amount to that, He will still give you enough to cover all the expense the journey costs you, as is promised in 1 Corinthians 10:13. You will have it when needed — and this should satisfy a Christian, especially if he considers that even though he may not carry as much of heaven's joy with him into heaven as others do, he will meet it as soon as he arrives at his Father's house, where it is kept in store for him. In a word, Christian: rely on your God and make your daily approaches to the throne of grace for continual supplies of strength. You little know how gladly He receives it when you make use of Him — the more often the better, and the more you come for, the more welcome you are. Why else would Christ have said to His disciples, "Until now you have asked for nothing in My name"? (John 16:24) — it was to express His generous heart in giving, reluctant to put His hand to His purse for a small amount, and so by a familiar kind of expression urging them to ask for more. It is like Naaman, who when Gehazi asked for one talent, urged him to take two — such a generous heart your God has. While you are asking for a little peace and joy, He bids you open your mouth wide and He will fill it. Go and search through your heart from one end to the other, Christian. Find out your needs, take stock of all your weaknesses, and set them before the Almighty as the widow set her empty vessels before the prophet. Had you more vessels than you could bring, He

could fill them all. God has strength enough to give, but He has no strength to deny. Here, the Almighty Himself — with all reverence be it said — is weak. Even a child, the weakest in grace in His family, who can do nothing more than say "Father," is able to overcome Him. Therefore do not let the weakness of your faith discourage you. Nothing moves the heart of mercy to stir up almighty power on your behalf more than your weakness — when it is honestly felt and honestly pleaded. A pale face and hollow cheeks move us more, I trust, than the practiced speech of a robust, sturdy beggar. So the soul that comes weighed down with a sense of weak faith, weak love, weak patience — the very weakness of these things is itself an argument for help.

## CHAPTER 5. WHEREIN IS ANSWERED A GRAND OBJECTION THAT SOME DISCONSOLATE SOULS MAY RAISE AGAINST THE FORMER DISCOURSE



**O** bjection: But some discouraged Christian says: "I have prayed again and again for strength against such a corruption, and to this day my hands are still weak. These enemies are so strong that I am ready to say all the preachers are merely flattering me when they pour their oil of comfort on my head and tell me I will eventually gain the victory over these enemies — that I will see that glad day when, like David, I will sing to the Lord for delivering me from the hand of all my foes. I have prayed for strength for a particular duty and find I still come to it just as weakly and halfheartedly as before. If God is with me through His mighty power to help me, why has all this befallen me?"

Answer 1: First, poor heart, look again into your own soul and see whether you cannot find some strength that has already been sent in, which you overlooked before. This is possible — indeed, it is very common in such cases — for God to answer our prayer not in the exact form we asked, or for the very thing to come in at the

back door while we are watching the front. Truly, the friend you are looking for may already be in your house without your knowing it. Is this not your situation, poor soul? You have been praying for strength against a particular lust, and you want God immediately to exert His power to knock it on the head and lay it dead — never to stir in your heart again. Is that not the door you have been standing at, watching for God to enter — and there is no sign or news of His coming that way? The corruption still stirs, and may be more troublesome than before. Now you ask: where is the strength promised for your relief? Before you draw that sad conclusion against your God or yourself, I urge you to consider whether He has not already sent in strength through another door. Perhaps you do not have the strength to conquer it as quickly as you desire — but has He not given you more strength to pray against it? You prayed before, but now more earnestly; all the powers of your soul are rising to plead with God. Before you were moderate in your request; now you have a burning zeal — you can take no denial. Indeed, you would welcome anything in place of this corruption. If only God would take your sin and send a cross instead, you would bless Him for it. Now, poor soul — is this nothing? Is this no strength? If your God had not reinforced you, your sin would have weakened your spirit of prayer, not deepened it. David began to recover himself when he began to recover his spirit of prayer. The stronger the cry, the stronger the child — you can count on it. Jacob wrestled, and this is called his strength in Hosea 12 — it showed how much of God was in him that he could take such a hold on the Almighty and keep it, even when God seemed to push him away. If you are enabled, soul, to deal with the God of heaven like this, you have no need to fear — you will be far more

able to deal with sin and Satan. If God has given you strength enough to wrestle with Him and press through denials, you have overcome the stronger of the two. Overcome God, and He will overcome the other for you. Again, perhaps you have been praying for further strength in your duties — that you might be more spiritual, more vigorous, more focused, more sincere — and yet you still find your old weaknesses clinging to you as if you had never told God about them. Well, soul, look again into your heart with an unprejudiced eye. Even though you do not find the helping strength you prayed for, do you not have more self-humbling strength than before? Perhaps the distress these remaining weaknesses cause you in your duties has given you a lower opinion of all your duties than ever. Indeed they make you abhor yourself when you see them — as if you were covered in something loathsome. Job's condition on the ash heap, covered with boils and running sores, looks better to you than your own — for the soul, you say, is worse off than his body was. Oh, this grieves you deeply, does it not? That you should appear before the Lord with such a dead, divided heart, and do your worst work for the One who deserves your best. And is all this nothing? Surely, Christian, your eyes are as veiled as Hagar's — otherwise you would see the outpouring of divine grace in this very frame of heart. Surely others looking on would think God has done a mighty work in your soul. What goes more against the grain than bringing our proud hearts to be ashamed of the very things they naturally boast about and glory in? And is it nothing for you to trample on your own duties — to count them the occasion of your humiliation and self-abasement, when others make them the ground of their confidence and self-satisfaction? Much virtue has gone out from Christ to dry up this fountain of pride in

your heart, which sometimes in gracious people runs through all their duties, so openly that those with less grace than they can see it.

Answer 2: Second, Christian, interpret God's dealings with you charitably. Suppose it is as you say — you have pleaded the promise, waited on the means, and yet find no increase in either grace or comfort. Now be careful not to charge God foolishly, as if He were not what He promises — that would be giving Satan exactly what he has been gaping after all this while. It befits the trusting disposition of a child far better, when what he wrote to his father for has not immediately come, to say: "My father is wiser than I. His wisdom will guide what to send and when, and his fatherly love for me will neither allow him to withhold anything truly good, nor to let the right moment slip by." Christian, your heavenly Father has gracious purposes that are presently holding His hand — otherwise you would have heard from Him by now.

First: God may withhold further degrees of strength in order to press you into more diligent use of what you already have. A mother does this with her child who is learning to walk — she sets the child down, stands at a little distance, and calls it to come to her. The child feels its legs are weak and cries for help, but the mother deliberately steps back so that the child will put all its small strength into reaching her. When a poor soul prays against a particular sin, God seems to step back and stand at a distance; the temptation grows stronger and no visible help appears — precisely so that the Christian, though weak, will exercise the strength he has. We often find that the sense of one's own weakness is a special means of stirring greater care and diligence. A person who knows he is weak — prone in company to forget himself, prone in anger to

fly out — if there is any true grace in him, this self-knowledge will make him more watchful and cautious than someone who has gained greater strength over such temptations. It is like a child who writes to his father for money and none comes right away — this makes him manage the little he has more carefully; not a penny will now be spent idly. So when a Christian has prayed against a sin again and again and still finds himself weak and prone to be overcome, how careful should that make him about every situation and every occasion. Such a person has no need to give his enemy any advantage.

Second: God may withhold the helping strength you desire in duty, or the killing strength you want against corruption, purely out of a gracious plan — so that He might thereby have an opportunity to express His love in such a way as will most warmly draw the soul to love Him in return. Perhaps, Christian, you are praying for a mercy you need, or for deliverance from a great affliction — and in the act of prayer you find no more than ordinary help, indeed, many distractions of spirit in the praying and many misgivings and fearful doubts afterward. Well, despite all those defects in your duty, God still hears your prayer and sends the mercy — precisely so that He might make His love appear larger in your eyes, and sweeter to your taste, through His accepting of your weak service and overlooking the disorders of your spirit. Here is less strength for the duty, so that there may be more love in the mercy — nothing will move a gracious heart more than that kind of reflection. See it in David in Psalm 116:11-12: "I said in my alarm, 'All men are liars.' What shall I render to the Lord for all His benefits toward me?" It is as if David said: Notwithstanding all the encouraging messages I had from God through His prophets, my own

prayers, and those remarkable providences that carried a partial answer in them — I still betrayed much unbelief, questioning the truth of the one and doubting the fulfillment of the other. And yet, notwithstanding all my failures, God has fulfilled my desire and kept His promise? Oh, what shall I render to the Lord? David thus reads God's mercy through the lens of his own weakness and frailty, and it appears very great. But if a mercy were to arrive as the answer to prayer performed with such strength of faith and height of grace as to be free from the usual failings, this might become a snare — producing some self-congratulating thoughts in the soul rather than wonder at the mercy.

Third: God may give less helping strength in order to show more of His sustaining strength — in upholding weak grace. We do not marvel at a strong, healthy man who eats heartily and sleeps well staying alive. But a sickly body, full of ailments and infirmities, held together and propped up by the physician's art to old age — that draws some wonder from those who see it. Perhaps you are a trembling soul — your faith weak, Satan's assaults strong, your corruptions stirring and active, and your power to put them to death small, so that in your estimation they seem to be gaining ground on your grace rather than losing it. Every now and then you are ready to think you will be cast as a wreck on the devil's shore. And yet to this day your grace lives, though full of leaks. Is it not worth pausing to look at this strange sight? A broken ship with masts and hull battered and torn, being towed by almighty power through an angry sea — through storms of sins and devils — safely into harbor. A dim candle sputtering in the face of a fierce wind and not blown out. A weak infant in grace held up in God's arms until he beats the devil to a standstill. This is what God is doing in

upholding you. You are one of those babes from whose mouths God is perfecting His praise — ordaining such strength for you that you, a babe in grace, shall yet defeat a giant in wrath and power.

Third answer: If after long waiting for strength from God it is still as you complain, examine whether the hindrance may be found in yourself. The head is the seat of the vital spirits, yet obstructions in the body can deprive the other members of them for a time. Until the passage between Christ your Head and you is clear and free, your strength will not come. Therefore be willing to examine yourself.

First: Have you truly been coming to God for strength to perform duty, to put corruptions to death, and the like? Perhaps you will say, "Yes, I have attended on those ordinances which are the means through which He has promised to give out strength." But is that all? You may attend them and yet not wait on God in them. Have you not been expecting strength from the ordinances themselves, placing them in God's role — as the woman in the parable placed her husband? Is not the attitude of your heart something like those in James 4:13: "We will go to such a city and buy and sell and make a profit"? Has your heart not said, "I will go and hear such a man and get comfort, get strength"? And do you wonder you remain weak, barren, and unfruitful? Are the ordinances God, that they should make you strong or comforted? You might hear them answer you, poor soul, as the king answered the woman in the siege of Samaria: "Help, O prayer — help, O minister!" But how can they help except the Lord help? These are Christ's servants. Christ keeps the key to His own cellar; they cannot so much as make you drink when you come to their Master's house. Therefore,

poor soul, do not stop short of Christ himself. Press through all the crowd of ordinances and ask to speak with Jesus — to see Jesus and touch Him — and virtue will flow out.

Second: Ask your soul whether you have been thankful for the little strength you have. Even though you are not strong enough in grace to run with the foremost or keep pace with the tallest of your brothers, are you thankful that you have any strength at all? Even if it is only enough to call out after those you see outrunning you in grace — that is worth your thanks. Not all in David's army reached the rank of his few mighty warriors in prowess and honor, and yet they did not dismiss themselves from the army. You have reason to be thankful for even the humblest place in the army of saints. Even the smallest gift of Gospel mercy and grace must not be overlooked. As soon as Moses and his people were through the sea, they struck up a song before moving from the bank, acknowledging the wonderful appearance of God's power and mercy for them — though this was but one step in their journey. A howling wilderness lay before them, and they could not survive a few days on all their supplies. Yet for all the great victory, Moses praised God for this first taste of mercy. This holy man knew that the only way to keep credit with God so as to receive more was to stay faithful and pay down his praise for what had been received. If you want fuller gifts of divine strength, acknowledge God in what He has already done. Are you weak? Bless God you have life. Do you often fail in duty through weakness and fall into temptation? Grieve over this — yet bless God that you do not live in total neglect of duty out of godless contempt for it, and that instead of falling through weak-

ness you do not lie down in the filth of sin through the wickedness of your heart. The ungrateful soul has no one else to blame for its lack of growth.

Third: Are you humble under the assistance and strength God has given you? Pride stops the pipeline. If the heart begins to swell, it is time for God to hold back and turn off the tap — for everything poured on such a soul runs over into self-congratulation and is as water poured on the ground in terms of any good it does the soul or any glory it brings to God. A proud heart and a high mountain are never fruitful. Now, beyond the common ways pride shows itself — in undervaluing others and overvaluing oneself, and the like — observe two other symptoms of it. First, pride appears in bold ventures — when a person runs into the mouth of temptation, relying on the confidence of the grace he has received. This was Peter's sin, which led him to go farther than humble faith warranted, walking right into the devil's territory and so becoming his prisoner for a time. The good man, when in his right frame of mind, had a low enough opinion of himself — as when he asked his Master, "Is it I?" fearing he might be the one to betray Him. But the same man who at one moment feared he might be the traitor could at another moment not think badly enough of himself to suspect he might deny his Master. Him? Never — though all the others might forsake Him, he would stand firm. Is this your case, Christian? Perhaps God has given you much understanding of His mind; you are skilled in the Word of life, and so you dare to breathe in corrupt air — as if only the weaker spirits of less-knowing Christians were at risk of being infected with the contagion of error and heresy. You have a large portion of grace — or at least you think so — and you venture where a humble-minded Christian

would fear his feet might slip. Truly, you are now tempting God to allow your lock to be cut, when you are bold enough to lay your head in the lap of a temptation. Second, pride appears in the neglect of the means by which the saints' grace and comfort are to be nourished even at their strongest. Perhaps, Christian, when you are in fear and doubt you keep close to God — your pitcher is often at His door. But when you have obtained some measure of peace, a certain distance quickly grows between you and God; your pitcher no longer travels as it once did to these wells of salvation. No wonder you fall behind, even if you are rich in grace and comfort, since you are spending the old stock and not currently trading to bring in more. Or if you are not neglecting duty outright, perhaps you are not performing it with the humility that formerly adorned it. Then you prayed in a sense of your weakness to obtain strength; now you pray to display your strength so that others may admire you. And if once — like Hezekiah — we call in spectators to see our treasure and applaud us for our gifts and comfort, then it is high time for God, if He truly loves us, to send messengers to carry those things away from us that are carrying our hearts away from Him.

Fourth: If your heart does not convict you from what has been said — if you have sincerely waited on God and yet have not received the strength you desired — then let it be your resolve to live and die still waiting on Him. God does not tell us when He will come, and it would be presumptuous to set a time for Him on our own. "Stay in Jerusalem," Christ said to His disciples, "until you are clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49). He says the

same to you: stay at Jerusalem. Wait on Him in the means He has appointed, until you are clothed with further power to put your corruptions to death. And for your comfort, know the following.

First: Your perseverance in waiting on God will itself be evidence of strong grace in you. The less encouragement you receive in duty, the more your faith and obedience prove their strength by holding you up in duty regardless. The merchant who keeps trading when times are so dead that all his goods sit unsold, and yet does not pull out but rather trades more and more — his stock must be large. No comfort in hearing, no relief in praying, and yet more hungry to hear and more frequent in prayer? O soul, great is your faith and patience.

Second: Rest assured that when you are at your greatest extremity, strength will come. "Those who wait for the Lord will gain new strength" (Isaiah 40:31). When the widow was preparing her last handful of meal, that was when the prophet was sent to sustain her household. When temptation is strong, your little strength nearly spent, and you are on the verge of yielding to your enemies — that is when you can expect reinforcements from heaven to enable you to hold out. So it was for Paul: "My grace is sufficient for you" — power from heaven to lift the siege and drive the tempter away. So it was for Job: when Satan had the upper hand against him, God stepped in and called Satan off — like a wise moderator who, when the respondent is being pressed hard by a skilled opponent, steps in before he is overwhelmed. "You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful" (James 5:11).

Ephesians 6:11 — Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.

This verse is a key to the one before it, in which the apostle had urged believers to lift their fainting spirits on the Lord and the power of His might. Now in these words he explains himself and shows how he would have them do this — not by coming into the field presumptuously without the armor God has appointed all His soldiers to wear, while boldly trusting in God's power to save them. The soul who has nothing but a carnal confidence in the name of God, puffed up by ignorance of both God and himself, is sure to fall short of the goal — heaven. No — the one who would have his confidence properly placed in God's power must conscientiously use the means appointed for his defense and not rush naked into battle. Like that fanatical man at Munster who insisted on going out to drive away the entire army besieging that city with no other weapon than a few words charged with the name of the Lord of hosts — which he blasphemously took upon himself to use — saying: "In the name of the Lord of hosts, depart!" He himself soon perished, teaching others wisdom at the price of his own folly. What foolish, swaggering language you will hear from the lips of the most godless and ignorant among us: they trust in God, hope in His mercy, defy the devil and all his works, and say similar things — and yet they are poor, naked creatures without a single piece of God's armor on their souls. To clear away such presumption from the saints' camp, the apostle adds this direction to his exhortation: "Put on the full armor of God." So the words fall into two general parts.

First: a direction attached to the former exhortation, showing how we may come, in the right way, to be strong in the Lord — namely, by putting on the full armor of God.

Second: a reason or argument supporting this direction — "so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil." In the direction, observe the following.

First: the equipment he directs us to put on — and that is armor.

Second: the kind or quality of this armor — the armor of God.

Third: the quantity or completeness of the armor — the full armor of God.

Fourth: the use of this armor — "Put on the full armor of God."

To begin with the first — the equipment every person must obtain who would fight Christ's battles. The question here is: What is this armor?

First, by armor is meant Christ. We read of "putting on the Lord Jesus" in Romans 13:14, where Christ is presented under the image of armor. The apostle does not tell them, for their rioting and drunkenness, to put on sobriety and temperance; for immorality and licentiousness, to put on chastity — as a philosopher might have done. Instead he says: "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ" — implying that until Christ is put on, the soul is unarmed. It is not a man's morality and philosophical virtues that will repel a temptation fired with full force from Satan's cannon — though it may deflect the smaller shot of a minor temptation. The person who is in armor, then, is the person who is in Christ. Furthermore, the graces of Christ are also armor — the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, and the rest. This is why we are also told to put

on the new man (Ephesians 4:24), which is made up of all the various graces as its parts and members. The unarmed soul, therefore, is the unregenerate soul. This is not to exclude the duties and means which God has appointed the Christian to use for his defense.

With the phrase understood in this way, the point is:

## CHAPTER 1. SHOWING THE CHRISTLESS AND GRACELESS SOUL TO BE THE SOUL WITHOUT ARMOR, AND THEREIN HIS MISERY



**T**he point is this: a person in a Christless, graceless state is naked and unarmed — and therefore unfit to fight Christ's battles against sin and Satan. Stated differently: a soul outside of Christ is naked and destitute of all armor to defend himself against sin and Satan. At the beginning, God sent man into the world fully equipped, having been created in righteousness and true holiness. But by a scheme the devil stripped him — and so as soon as the first sin was complete, it is written in Genesis 3:7: "They were naked" — that is, poor, weak creatures, subject to Satan's will, a defeated people disarmed by their proud conqueror and unable to resist him. It cost Satan some effort to make the first breach, but once he had the gates opened and himself established as conqueror in the heart of man, he played the tyrant. A whole troop of other sins poured in after him without a struggle. Instead of confessing their sins, Adam and Eve hid in the bushes and wanted nothing to do with God. When they could not escape Him, how did they behave before Him? They shifted blame from one to

the other — passing the guilt along rather than seeking mercy. So quickly were their hearts hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. This is the wretched condition of every son and daughter of Adam. The devil finds us naked and makes us slaves — until God by His effective call delivers us from Satan's power into the kingdom of His dear Son. This will become still clearer if we consider this Christless state under four descriptions.

First: it is a state of alienation from God. "You were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise" (Ephesians 2:12). Such a person has no more claim on any covenant promise than a man living in Rome has on the city charter of London — which is the birthright of its own citizens, not of foreigners. He is without God in the world. He can claim no more protection from God than an outlawed subject can claim from his prince. If harm comes to him, it falls on his own head. God has His hedge of special providence around His saints, and the devil — though his greatest spite is against them — dare not come onto God's ground to touch any of them without specific permission. What a desperate condition it is, then, when a soul is left out in the wide world — in the midst of legions of lusts and devils — to be torn apart like a helpless hare among a pack of hounds, with no God to call them off. Let God withdraw from a people, however warlike they may be, and they immediately lose their wits and cannot find their hands. A band of children or wounded men could rise up and drive them out of their fortified cities, because God is not with them. This is what gave Caleb and Joshua the confidence to quiet the mutinous Israelites at the news of giants and walled cities: "They are food for us; their protection has been removed from them" (Numbers 14:9).

How much more must that soul be as food for Satan who has no defense from the Almighty? Take men of the greatest natural or acquired abilities, lacking only a union with Christ and renewing grace from Him — what fools the devil makes of them, leading them at his pleasure, some to one lust, some to another. The proudest of them all is a slave to one passion or another, even to the ruin of body and soul forever. What is the mystery that men of such talent and intelligence debase themselves to such degrading servitude to hell? Simply this: they are in a state of alienation from God, and no more able by themselves to break out of the devil's prison than a slave can throw off his chain.

Second: the Christless state is a state of ignorance — and those who are ignorant must necessarily be naked and unarmed. If a man cannot see his enemy, how can he ward off the blow aimed at him? One sighted prophet can lead a whole army of blind men wherever he chooses. The imperfect knowledge the saints have here is already an advantage for Satan against them — he often gets at them from the blind side. How easily, then, can he lead a blind soul out of the right way with a handful of smooth words, when that soul does not know a single step of the road? That the Christless state is a state of ignorance is clear from Ephesians 5:8: "You were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord." "You were darkness" — not merely in the dark, as a sighted person can be. A child of light is often in the dark about some truth or promise, but still has a spiritual eye — which the Christless person lacks. Without that eye, he is darkness itself. And this darkness cannot be enlightened except by union with Christ, expressed in the next phrase: "But now you are Light in the Lord." Just as the eye of the body, once destroyed, cannot be restored by any human

art, so the spiritual eye — lost through Adam's sin — cannot be restored by the teaching of men or angels. It is one of the diseases Christ came to cure (Luke 4:18). It is true that there is a light of reason given to every person by nature, but this light is darkness compared with the saint's knowledge — as the night is dark compared to the day, even when the moon is at its full. This nighttime light of reason may keep a person from some of the large and obvious ditches of gross sin, but it will never help him escape the subtler corruptions that the saint can see like dust particles in the beam of spiritual knowledge. There is a kind of careful work the soul is called to do that cannot be accomplished by the candlelight of natural knowledge. Furthermore, even where the common illumination of the Spirit is added to this natural light, it is still darkness compared with the sanctifying knowledge of a renewed soul. The sanctifying knowledge of a believer both reveals spiritual truths and warms the heart with love for them at the same time — like the sun with its life-giving power, which the other kind lacks. Under merely common illumination, therefore, the heart remains cold and dead. Such a person has no more strength to resist Satan than if he knew nothing of the command at all — whereas the Christian's knowledge, even when taken prisoner by a temptation, pursues the soul and brings it back as Abraham brought back his nephew from the enemy's hands. This hints at the third point.

Third: the Christless state is a state of powerlessness. Romans 5:6 says: "While we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly." What can a disarmed people who have neither sword nor gun do to throw off the yoke of a conquering enemy? Such is Satan's power over the soul. Luke 11:21 calls him the strong man who keeps the soul as his palace. If he faces no disturbance

from heaven, he has nothing to fear from a rebellion within. He keeps everything at peace there. What the Spirit of God does in the saint, Satan in a similar fashion does in the sinner. The Spirit fills the heart of His people with love, joy, holy desires, and godly fears. So Satan fills the sinner's heart with pride, lust, and deceit. "Why has Satan filled your heart?" Peter asked Ananias (Acts 5:3). Filled with Satan as a drunkard is filled with wine, the sinner is no longer his own man — he is Satan's slave.

Fourth: the unregenerate state is a state of friendship with sin and Satan. If it is enmity against God — and it is — then it is friendship with Satan. It will be difficult to make such a soul fight seriously against his friend. Is Satan divided? Will the devil within fight against the devil at the door? Will Satan in the heart shut out Satan knocking outside? Sometimes there appears to be a struggle between Satan and a carnal heart, but it is a pure sham — like the fight between two fencers performing on a stage. At first you might think they mean it, but watching how careful they are about where they strike you can soon tell they have no intention of doing real harm. What puts it beyond all doubt is this: when the performance is over, you see them laughing together over what they made from their audience, which was all they were fighting for. When a carnal heart makes the greatest show of opposing sin — complaining about it, praying against it — follow him off the stage of outward duty, where he has earned the reputation of a saint (the prize he was fighting for), and you will see him sitting as comfortably with his sin in a corner as ever before.

First application: This removes the mystery of Satan's great victories in the world. When you look out and see his vast empire, the tiny territory where Christ's subjects live, the heaps of precious

souls prostrate under his proud foot, and the small regiment marching under Christ's banner — perhaps the strangeness of it makes you ask: Is hell stronger than heaven? Are the arms of Satan more victorious than the cross of Christ? Not at all. Consider just this one thing, and you will marvel that Christ has any followers at all rather than that He has so few. Satan finds the world unarmed. When the prince of this world comes, he finds nothing to oppose him — the whole soul is disposed to surrender at the first summons. And if conscience, the governor representing God in the soul, holds out for a little while, all the other powers — will and affections — are discontented, like mutinous soldiers in a garrison, who never rest until they have brought conscience over to yield. Or they simply set open the city gates to the enemy against the command of conscience, treacherously surrendering their conscience as prisoner to their lusts. But when Christ comes to claim the soul, He meets a scornful answer: "Depart from us! We do not desire the knowledge of the Almighty. We will not have this man reign over us." With one voice they vote against Him and rise up against Him as the Philistines rose against Samson, whom they called the destroyer of the country. "You are not willing to come to Me," says Christ (John 5:40). Oh, how faithful poor sinners are to the devil's cause! They will not give up the castle they hold for Satan until it is on fire over their heads. Pharaoh opposed Moses on one side, and Israel cried out against Moses on the other. Christ receives such treatment from both Satan and sinners. What diminished Alexander's conquests was that he overcame a people buried in barbarism, without arms or military training. What heightened Caesar's reputation — though he conquered fewer — was that he overcame a more warlike and well-equipped people. Satan's victo-

ries are over poor, ignorant, graceless souls who have neither arms, hands, nor will to resist. But when he attacks a saint, he sits down before a city with gates and bars, and always rises in shame — unable to seize the weakest stronghold or pluck the weakest saint from Christ's hands. Christ, meanwhile, draws souls out of Satan's dominion with a high hand, in spite of all the force and fury of hell, which pursues them like Pharaoh and his armies.

Second application: This gives us a reason why the devil has such a fierce hatred for the Gospel. Why? Because the Gospel opens a storehouse of arms and equipment for the soul. The Word is that "tower of David" in Song of Songs 4:4, built as an armory in which a thousand shields hang — all the shields of the mighty warriors. From this storehouse the saints have always drawn their armor, and the preaching of the Gospel unlocks it. As the light of the Gospel advances, Satan's shadowy kingdom of darkness retreats. In Revelation 14:6, one angel goes forth to preach the everlasting Gospel — and immediately another angel follows at his back, crying in verse 8: "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!" The very first charge the Gospel made against the kingdom of darkness shook its foundations and sent the legions of hell running. The seventy whom Christ sent out brought back this quick report of their mission: "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name." And Christ answered: "I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning" (Luke 10:17-18). As if He said: That is no news — I was watching Satan fall when I sent you. I knew the Gospel would make its mark wherever it went. No wonder, then, that Satan labors to drive out the Gospel that drives him out. He knows that an army is nearly defeated when its magazine is blown up. It is true that under the very Gospel, the devil rages more fiercely in

those swine-like sinners whom God has given over to be possessed by that foul spirit for rejecting His grace. But he is cast out of others who before the proclamation of God's grace in the Gospel were under his command, serving various lusts and pleasures. Now, by the light of the Gospel they see their folly, and by the grace it brings they are enabled to renounce him. This — this is what torments the foul spirit: to see himself abandoned by his old friends and servants, and this new Lord coming to take his subjects from him. Therefore he works either to drive the Gospel away by persecution, or to persuade people to send it away from their borders by policy. And was he ever closer to achieving this among us? What contempt he has brought the preaching of the Gospel to! The value has dropped by half from what it was a few years ago, even among those counted the greatest traders on the saints' exchange. Some who once thought it worth crossing the seas — nearly as far as others sail for gold — to enjoy the Gospel are now reluctant to cross the street to hear it at such a cheap rate. And some who do come, who once trembled at it, now seem to attend mainly to mock at it or quarrel with it. Indeed it has come to such a point that the Word sits so heavily on the sensitive stomachs of many professors that it comes back up at once, and with it a great deal of bitterness toward the preacher — especially if he touches on the sins and errors of the times. The mere naming of these is enough to cause offense, though the nation is sinking under their weight. What reproaches are faithful ministers of the Gospel loaded with? I call heaven and earth to witness whether they ever suffered a hotter persecution of the tongue than in this age of apostasy. A new generation of professors has arisen who refuse to recognize them as ministers of Christ — even though those who came before them, greater both in

grace and years, more able to trace their spiritual lineage than these newcomers, owned them to their dying day as their spiritual fathers. And must not the ark shake when those who carry it are struck at in both their person and their office? What are these people doing? Alas, they do not know. Father, forgive them. They are cutting off their right hand with their left. They are leaving themselves and the nation naked by despising the Gospel and those who bring it.

Third application: Consider your desperate condition, you who are wholly naked and unarmed. Can you pity the beggar at your door — seeing on a winter's day someone shivering with bare back, exposed to the fury of the cold — and not pity your own far more terrible soul-nakedness, which lays you open to heaven's wrath and hell's malice? Their nakedness covers them with shame and fills them with fear of perishing, driving them to knock and cry for relief with pitiful moans. And can you let Satan come and cut your throat in the bed of your laziness, rather than accept the clothing that would cover you — indeed, the armor that would defend you? I mean Christ and His grace, which is offered to you in the Gospel. Do not too quickly believe your own flattering heart if it tells you that you are already provided with these. I fear many a fine-looking professor will be found just as naked in regard to Christ and genuine grace as drunkards and swearers themselves. There are those who content themselves with a Christ in profession, in gifts, and in outward duties, but do not seek a Christ in solid grace — and so they perish. Gifts and outward duties are an ornament to the Christian, as a scarf and plume are to a soldier, but they do not stop the bullet in battle. It is Christ and His grace that does that.

Therefore labor to be a sound Christian rather than merely a showy one. Grace adorned with gifts is more beautiful, but gifts without grace are only a richer prize for Satan.

The second part of the first main division of the text follows — the quality or kind of armor the Christian is here directed to obtain. Not just anything will do. Better to have no armor at all than armor that is not proof — and none qualifies except the armor of God. It must be of God in two respects. First: in its institution and appointment. Second: in its composition.

CHAPTER 2. SHOWING THAT THE  
ARMOR WE USE AGAINST SATAN  
MUST BE DIVINE IN THE  
INSTITUTION, SUCH ONLY AS GOD  
APPOINTS



**F**irst: the armor the Christian wears must be of divine institution and appointment. A soldier comes into the field with no weapons but those his general commands. It is not left to each person's fancy to bring whatever weapons he pleases — that would breed confusion. The Christian soldier is bound by God's orders. Though the army is on earth, the war council sits in heaven. These duties you shall perform; these means you shall use. To do more, or to use means other than what God commands — even with some apparent success against sin — is boldness for which such a person will surely be called to account. Military discipline among men is strict on this point. Some have been put to death by a court-martial even for beating the enemy, because they were out of their place or acting contrary to orders. God is very exacting on this point. He will say to those who invent their own ways to worship Him, coin their own means to kill corruption, or seek comfort from their own mint: "Who has required this of you?" This is truly

being righteous beyond measure, as Solomon speaks — when we presume to correct God's law and add our own supplements to His rule. Who will pay a man wages for work he was not assigned by God? God told Israel that the false prophets would do them no good because they did not come on His errand. So neither will those ways and means help that God has not appointed. God's thoughts are not like man's, nor His ways like ours. If man had been set to organize the Israelite army marching out of Egypt, his wisdom would surely have directed them to plunder the Egyptians of their horses and arms — more suited to such an expedition — rather than to borrow their jewelry and earrings. But God would have them come out on foot and without weapons, and Moses kept strictly to that order. Indeed, when horses were captured in battle, because God had commanded that they be hamstrung, they obeyed — though it seemed to their disadvantage. It was God's war they were waging, and it was therefore reasonable that they should be under His command. They camped and marched by His direction; as the ark moved or rested, they fought by His command. The numbers appointed, the means and weapons to be used — all were prescribed by God, as in the assault on Jericho. And what is the lesson of all this for us — for surely God had our march to heaven and our fight with these cursed spirits and lusts in view — but that we should fight lawfully, using only the means we have from His mouth in His Word?

First application: This reproves two groups.

First, those who fight Satan in armor that has no divine institution.

First: the Roman Catholic. Look into that armory, and you will find hardly a piece that qualifies as armor of God. They fight in the pope's armor — his authority is the forge where their weapons are made. It would be a kind of punishment to your patience to list all the various pieces of armor with which they burden poor souls — far too heavy indeed for the broadest shoulders among them to bear, and more than the wiser among them mean to use: their masses, matins, vigils, pilgrimages, Lenten fasts, self-flagellations, vows of chastity and poverty, and a world of such things. Where is a word of God for any of these? Who has required them? A thousand judgments will one day fall on those imposters who have stripped the people of the true armor of God and put these reeds and bulrushes in their hands. This may vindicate us before God and men for our departure from those who would force us to risk the life of our souls in such paper armor, when God has provided something far better.

Second: the carnal Protestant, who fights in fleshly armor. 2 Corinthians 10:3 speaks of warring according to the flesh — that is, with weapons or means that a person's carnal wisdom suggests, not ones God commands, and which are therefore weak. How few people are clothed with anything else on the day of battle. First, when Satan tempts to sin: if he does not get an immediate welcome, whatever resistance is offered is usually carnal. The strength they rely on is their own, not God's. The motives are carnal — the fear of men more than the fear of God. Where one says, "How can I do this and sin against God?" many say in their hearts, "How can I do this and anger my employer, displease my parents, or lose the good opinion of my minister?" Herod feared John and did many things because of it — had he feared God, he would have labored to

do everything. The same applies to all motives that spring from the creature rather than from God. They are armor that will not withstand a shot. If your strength rests in a creature-lock, it can easily be cut off. If in God, it will hold — just as His command holds. "It is written" — I cannot come to my lust without setting my foot on my Maker's law. Or the love of Christ: I cannot reach my lust without stepping over my bleeding Savior — so away with you, foul tempter, I hate you and your suggestion. This foundation is rock and will stand. But if it is some carnal consideration that is keeping the scale tipped, a heavier weight of the same kind can be found that will tip it the other way. A woman who dislikes a man only because of his clothes may easily be won when he comes in a different outfit. Satan can change his suit, and then your mouth will be stopped when your carnal argument is removed. Second, when the Word or conscience rebukes for sin: what armor do people commonly use to cover their guilty souls? None but carnal. If they cannot escape the charge brought by these, they try to soften it by minimizing what they did. "It is true, I did — I admit — commit that fault, but I was drawn in." "The woman gave me and I ate" was Adam's fig-leaf armor. "It was only once or twice — surely that does not matter too much. Was this such a serious thing? I know fine Christians who do as much as this. I thank God I cannot be charged with being a whore or a thief." This is the armor meant to deflect the blow. But if conscience cannot be put off this way, they try to redirect their thoughts by striking up the loud music of carnal pleasures, so that its noise may drown out conscience. Or like Cain they go away from God's presence and stay away from those ordinances that give them a headache and disturb the rest of their raging conscience. If the ghost still haunts them, they try to pacify

it with some good deed or other, setting it against their bad ones. Their charity and alms in old age must atone for the oppression and violence of their earlier years — as if this little incense were enough to air out and remove the plague of God's curse that lies in their ill-gotten goods. So poor souls catch at any sorry covering that will not even hide their shame, much less stop the bullet of God's wrath when God fires at them. This armor must be of God's own appointing. Adam was still naked for all his fig leaves — until God taught him to make coats of skins, which (as some believe) were a veiled picture of Christ, the true Lamb of God, whose righteousness alone was appointed by God to cover our shame and armor our naked souls from the sight and stroke of His justice.

Second, this also reproves those who use the armor of God but not as God has appointed — which appears in three ways.

First: when a person uses a God-appointed duty not as armor against sin, but as a cover for sin. Who would think him an enemy who wears Christ's colors in his hat and follows Christ in all the outward exercises of worship? Such a person may pass every checkpoint without being challenged — everyone takes him for a friend. Yet there are some who are all the while fighting against Christ. The hypocrite is that man. He learns his moves, acquires the Word, has his tongue tipped with Scripture language, and walks in the habit of a Christian — purely as a scheme to carry on his trade more effectively. Like highwaymen in our day who commit robbery dressed as soldiers so they will be less suspected. This is desperate wickedness indeed — to take up God's arms and use them in the devil's service. Of all sinners, such will find the least mercy. False friends will fare worse than open enemies.

Second: those who do not use the armor of God as God intends are those who place a carnal confidence in it. We must not trust in the armor of God, but in the God of this armor, because all our weapons are only "mighty through God" (2 Corinthians 10:4). The ark was the means of Israel's safety, but when it was carnally applauded and gloried in, it hastened their overthrow. So duties and ordinances, gifts and graces, are in their proper place means for the soul's defense. Satan trembles, just as the Philistines trembled at the ark, when he sees a soul diligently using the means of duty and exercising grace. But when the soul trusts in those things themselves, that is dangerous. Some, when they have prayed, think they have pleased God for the whole day, even though they take little care over their steps. Others have such a high opinion of their faith, sincerity, and knowledge that you might as soon convince them they are dogs as persuade them they could ever fall into such an error or sinful practice. Still others, when they have been especially helped in a duty, are prone to pat themselves on the back — "Well done, Bernard" — and expect to prosper because they have performed their errand so well. What do such attitudes reveal but a carnal confidence in their armor that will prove their ruin? Many souls, we may safely say, perish not only while praying, repenting, and believing after a fashion — they actually perish by their praying and repenting while trusting carnally in those acts. Just as sometimes in battle a soldier loses his life because of his own armor — it is so heavy he cannot run with it, and so tightly buckled that he cannot shed it in time to flee for his life. If we are to be saved, we must come naked to Christ, stripped of all reliance on our duties. We will not flee to Christ while trusting in our duties. And some are so locked into them that they cannot come without

them — and so in the day of temptation they are trampled under the feet of God's wrath and Satan's fury. The poor tax collector threw down his arms — that is, every confidence in himself — and cried for quarter at the hand of mercy: "God, be merciful to me, the sinner." He came away with his life. He went home justified. But the Pharisee, loaded with his own righteousness and proud of it, stood on it and was lost.

Third: those who do not use the armor of God as such are those who, in performing divine duties, do not look to God through them. This makes all their efforts weak and ineffective. The Word becomes powerful when read as the Word of God. The preached Gospel is powerful to convict the conscience and revive the drooping spirit when it is heard as the appointment of the great God, and not merely as the exercise of a frail creature. Whether we are keeping the divine appointment in view will be revealed by three things.

First: when we enter into a duty and do not look up to God for His blessing. If you were keeping God's appointment in view, you would say: "Soul, if any good comes out of this present service, it must drop from heaven — for it is God's appointment, not man's. Can I profit whether God wills it or not? Can I think to find and carry away any soul-enriching treasure from His ordinance without His blessing? Would I not do well to look up to Him, by whose blessing I live more than by my bread?"

Second: it appears we are not keeping God's appointment in view when we have a low opinion of the means. "What is the Jordan, that I should wash in it? What is this preaching, that I should attend it, when I hear nothing I did not know before? What are these poor elements — water, bread, and wine?" Are these not

the reasonings of a soul that has forgotten who appoints these things? If you remembered who commands, you would not question what the command is. What though the instrument is clay — let Christ use it, and it will open the eyes, though in itself it seems more likely to shut them. If you had your eye on God, you would silence your carnal reasoning with this: "God sends me to this duty. Whatever He says to me, I will do it — though He should send me, as He sent the servants at Cana, to draw wine out of pots filled with water."

Third: when a soul gives up a duty because it has not obtained from it what it expected. "I can see it is useless to continue pursuing the means as I have done," the soul says. "Satan still defeats me — I will just give up." Soul, do you remember it is God's appointment? Surely then you would persevere in the midst of discouragement. He who tells you to pray tells you to pray without ceasing. He who tells you to hear tells you to wait at wisdom's doorposts. You would reason this way: "God has set me on this duty, and here I will stand until God takes me off and tells me to stop praying."

CHAPTER 3. SHOWING THAT THE  
ARMOR WE USE FOR OUR DEFENSE  
AGAINST SATAN MUST NOT ONLY BE  
DIVINE BY INSTITUTION, BUT  
CONSTITUTION ALSO



**S**econd: the Christian's armor must be the armor of God in regard to its make and composition. What I mean is this: it is not only God who must appoint the weapons and arms the Christian uses for his defense — He must also be the one who produces them. He must work all their work in them and for them. Prayer is an appointment of God, yet it is not armor of proven quality unless it is prayer flowing from the Spirit of God. Hope is the helmet the saint is commanded to wear, but this hope must be God's own creation — for it is God who "has caused us to be born again to a living hope" (1 Peter 1:3). Faith is another principal piece of the Christian's equipment, but it must be the faith of God's elect. He is to wear righteousness and holiness as his breastplate — but it must be "true holiness" (Ephesians 4:24): "Put on the new man, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth." So you see: it is not armor as armor, but armor as the armor of God, that makes the soul impreg-

nable. "Whatever is born of God overcomes the world" (1 John 5:4). A faith born of God, a hope born of God — but the counterfeit, illegitimate offspring of duties and graces, being conceived from mortal seed, cannot be immortal.

Since the soul's armor must be of God's making, be urged then to examine carefully whether the armor you wear is God's workmanship or not. There is a great deal of counterfeit goods on the market today, and little genuine armor being worn by the mass of professors. This is Satan's backup plan: if he cannot keep the sinner happy in his naked state of open wickedness, he will put him off with something that looks like grace — flimsy material that will neither do the sinner any good nor do Satan any harm. Like children who cry for a knife or dagger and are just as satisfied with a bone knife and wooden dagger as with the real thing — so long as they have something called armor, they are content regardless of what it is. Pray they must — but little thought goes into how it is performed. Believe in God? Yes, they hope they are not unbelievers. But what faith really is, how they came by it, or whether it will hold in an evil day — these questions have never been put to their hearts. So thousands perish with the empty delusion that they are armed against Satan, death, and judgment — when they are miserable and naked. Indeed they are worse off than those who are more openly naked (I mean those who do not have even a rag of respectability to hide their shame from the world's eye) — and this in two respects.

First: it is harder to reach such a soul savingly, because he has a form though not the power, and this gives him a defense. A soul that is purely naked — nothing resembling a wedding garment on him — is speechless. The drunkard has nothing to say for himself

when you ask why he lives so piggishly. You can get right up to him, get within his defenses, and turn the mouth of his own conscience on him, which will shoot conviction into him. But come to deal with someone who prays and hears, who makes a claim to faith and hope in God — here is a man in gleaming armor, weapon in hand, keeping the preacher and the Word he charges him with at arm's length. "Who can say I am not a saint? What duty do I neglect?" Here is a breastwork he hides behind, which makes him a much harder target for the observation or reproof of others, since his chief defect is inward, where human eyes do not reach. Furthermore, it is harder to work on him because he has already been handled and has made a false start. How did he come to be acquainted with such duties and make such a profession? Was it always like this? No — the Word has been at work on him; his conscience has scared him out of his open course of wickedness into the form of a profession. But having stopped short of true conversion, for lack of a thorough change, he is harder to move than the openly wicked person. He is like a lock whose tumblers have been tampered with — harder to turn the key than if it had never been touched. Better to work with a rough, wild colt never yet backed than one that was broken badly and took a wrong training. A bone completely out of joint is easier than one badly set. In short, such a person has more to surrender than a profane sinner: the profane person has only his lusts, his immorality, his indulgences. But the formal professor has his duties and his apparent graces. Oh, how hard it is to persuade such a man to dismount and hold Christ's stirrup while he and his duties are made Christ's footstool.

Second: such a person is deepest in condemnation. None sink so far into hell as those who came nearest to heaven, because they fall from the greatest height. It deepens the torment of damned souls above that of devils in this respect — that God's Spirit sought them out, pleaded with them, and in doing so gained on them more than on others. The more God by His Spirit has pursued and worked on a soul, the hotter will hell be for that person if he perishes. Their additional privileges add to their sin, and the memory of those privileges, accented in hell, will add to their torment. None will have such a bitter parting from Christ as those who traveled halfway with Him and then turned back.

Therefore I urge you: examine your armor. David refused to fight in armor he had not proven — even though it was a king's armor. Perhaps some thought him too fussy. "What? Is the king's armor not good enough for David?" Many will say similarly: "Are you so particular and precise? Such a great man does this and that and expects to reach heaven at last — do you not dare risk your soul in his armor?" No, Christian. Do not follow the example of the greatest person on earth. It is your own soul you are risking in battle, so you cannot be too careful about your armor. Bring your heart to the Word as the only test of your grace and equipment. The Word — as I told you — is the tower of David from which your armor must be drawn. If you can find this tower's stamp on it, then it is of God; otherwise not. Test it therefore by this one scriptural mark. The weapons God gives His saints to fight His battles with are mighty: "The weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful" (2 Corinthians 10:4). The sword of the Spirit has its point and edge, by which it makes its way into the heart and conscience — cutting through the hardness of one and the insensi-

tivity of the other (with which Satan, like a buff coat and chain mail, arms the sinner against God) — and there cuts and slashes, kills and puts to death lust in its own stronghold, where Satan thinks himself impregnable. The breastplate that is of God does not bend or crack at every push of temptation, but is of such divine quality that it repels Satan's suggestions with scorn flung back in his teeth. "Should such a person as I sin?" — as Nehemiah said in another context — and the same spirit runs through all the other pieces. Now test whether your weapons are mighty or weak. What can you do or endure for God that an outright hypocrite clothed in fleshly armor could not also do? I will tell you what the world says — and if you are Christians, clear yourselves and wipe off the mud they throw on your gleaming armor. They say: "These professors have more of God in their talk than we do; they are more often in the practice of duty than we are. But when they come down from the mount into their shops, relationships, and ordinary employments, even the best of them is no different from us. They can throw down the tablets of God's commandments just as easily as we can, come away from a sermon and be just as greedy and tight-fisted, just as irritable and quick-tempered as the worst of us. When it actually costs them something to show love to Christ — to relieve a poor saint or support the Gospel — you may get more from a stranger, even an enemy, than from a professing brother." O Christians: either vindicate the name of Christ under whose banner you appear to march, or throw away the seeming armor by which you have drawn the eyes of the world upon you. If you will not, Christ Himself will discharge you — with shame enough before long. Never call it the armor of God if it does not defend you against the power of Satan. Therefore take up each piece of your

armor and test it — as a soldier before battle will set his helmet as a target and fire a couple of bullets at it to see how it holds. But be sure you fire Scripture-bullets. You boast of a breastplate of righteousness — ask your soul: Did you ever in your life perform a duty purely to please God, with no thought of benefiting yourself? You have prayed loudly and often against your sin, and the noise of those shots has been heard by others as if there were intense combat between you and your corruption. But can you honestly show a single sin you have actually killed by all that praying? Joseph was alive even though his coat came back bloody to Jacob — and your sin may be just as alive for all your mortified look in duty and outcry against it. If you would test each piece this way, your trusting heart would not be so easily deceived by Satan's counterfeit goods.

Objection: But is all armor that is from God equally mighty? We read of weak grace and little faith — how then can this be a reliable test of whether armor is from God or not?

Answer: The weakness of grace is measured against stronger grace — but even that weak grace is strong and mighty in comparison with counterfeit grace. I am not asking you to test your grace by a standard that only stronger grace can meet, but by the standard that distinguishes true grace from false. True grace, when at its weakest, is stronger than false grace at its strongest. True grace has in it a principle of divine life that the other lacks. And life, as it gives excellence — a flea or a fly, by reason of its life, is more excellent than the sun in all its glory — so it also gives strength. The slow movement of a living man, though so feeble he cannot walk a quarter of a mile in a day, yet because it comes from life, has more real strength in it than a ship sailing swiftly, whose motion comes from an external source. So it is possible that a hypocrite may ex-

ceed a true Christian in the outward bulk and display of a duty — yet because the hypocrite's strength does not come from inward life but from some external wind and tide that carries him along, and the Christian's strength comes from an inward principle of life — the Christian's weakness is stronger than the hypocrite at his very best. I will name just two acts of grace when at their weakest, by which the Christian surpasses the hypocrite in all his finest display. You may say: grace is at a truly low ebb when the Christian is led to commit a sin — and perhaps a serious sin, the kind that even a worldly person might not want to be known for. Grace may sink that low. Yet even at that ebb, true grace will prove to be of greater force than anything the hypocrite can show.

First: this principle of grace will never rest until the soul weeps bitterly with Peter over having offended so good a God. Speak, O you hypocrites: can you show a single tear you ever shed in genuine sorrow for a wrong done to God? Perhaps you may weep at the sight of the bed of torment your sins are making for you in hell. But you have never loved God well enough to grieve for the injury you have done to His name. Augustine has a perceptive comment on Esau's tears in Hebrews 12: "He wept that he lost the blessing, not that he had sold it." This shows an excellence in the saint's sorrow above the hypocrite's. The Christian, by his sorrow, shows himself to be a conqueror of the very sin that just overcame him. The hypocrite, by his pride, shows himself a slave to a worse lust than the one he is resisting. The Christian hates the sin even while committing it; the hypocrite loves it even while refraining from it.

Second: when true grace is under the foot of a temptation, it will stir up in the heart a fierce desire for revenge. It is like a prisoner in an enemy's hands, thinking and planning how to escape

and what he will do when free — watching and longing every moment for his deliverance so that he may take up arms again. "O God, remember me this one time, please, and strengthen me just this once, that I may be avenged on the Philistines for my two eyes" (Judges 16:28). So prays the gracious soul — that God would spare him a little and strengthen him once before he dies, so that he may be avenged on his pride, his unbelief, and those sins by which he has most dishonored his God. But a false heart, far from plotting revenge on its sin, swells against the law that holds its lust in check, like the sea against its banks. It is angry with God for making sin such a barrier that the soul must risk its eternal welfare to get past it.

## CHAPTER 4. OF THE ENTIRENESS OF OUR FURNITURE — IT MUST BE THE WHOLE ARMOR OF GOD



**T**he third aspect of the saints' equipment is its completeness: the full armor of God. The Christian's armor must be complete — and that in three respects.

### SECTION I.

First: he must be armed in every part from head to foot — soul and body, the powers of the one and the senses of the other — with no part left bare. A dart can fly through a small gap (like the arrow that brought death to Ahab through the joints of his armor), and Satan is just such a marksman, able to shoot at a target the width of a penny. If the whole man is armored but only the eye is left exposed, Satan can easily shoot a fireball of lust in through that opening and set the whole house ablaze. Eve only looked at the tree — and a poisonous dart struck her to the heart. If the eye is shut but the ear is open to corrupt conversation, Satan will wriggle in through that hole. If all the outward senses are guarded but the heart is not kept with all diligence, the soul will soon be betrayed into Satan's hands through its own thoughts. Our enemies are on

every side, and so our armor must cover every side — "on the right and on the left" (2 Corinthians 6:7). The apostle speaks of sin as an enemy that surrounds us. If any part of the line is unguarded or poorly held, that is where Satan strikes. We often see the enemy enter a city at one side while being driven back at the other, simply because no one was watching the whole perimeter. Satan divides his temptations into several squadrons — one he sends to assault here, another to storm there. We read of both fleshly wickedness and spiritual wickedness. While you are repelling Satan's attack of fleshly wickedness, he may be entering your city through the other gate of spiritual wickedness. Perhaps you have kept your integrity in the practical areas of your life — but what armor do you have to defend your mind and judgment? If he catches you off guard there and corrupts your thinking with some error, your practice will not hold out much longer. The one who could not get you to profane the Sabbath through open sensuality and atheism may succeed through the cover of a corrupt principle like misguided Christian liberty. So we see the need for comprehensive armor protecting every part.

## SECTION II.

Second: the Christian must be in complete armor in regard to all the individual pieces and weapons that make up the full armor of God. Indeed the graces are linked together — they hang like the links of a chain, the stones in an arch, or the members of a body. Pierce one vein, and the blood of the whole body may drain out through that opening. Neglect one duty, and none of the others will serve us well. In his second letter, chapter 1, verses 5 through 7, the apostle Peter presses the Christian to a joint effort to grow

the entire body of grace — for health is when the whole body is thriving. "Add to your faith virtue," he says. Faith is the lead grace. Very well — you have faith; add virtue. True faith is active and stirring by nature; without good works it is dead or dying. Faith grows strong through active works, as Luther said. Good works are sustained and kept in good condition by a holy life: just as the flesh covering the frame of the body, though it receives its heat from the vital organs within, yet helps to preserve the life of those very organs — so good works and gracious actions derive their life from faith, yet are necessary helps in preserving the life of faith. So we see a child sometimes nourishing the parent who bore it, which is only doing its duty. You are fruitful in good works, yet you are not out of the devil's reach unless you also add to your virtue knowledge. This is the candle without which faith cannot see to do its work. Are you about to give alms? If it is not a charity with eyes — if charity does not have this eye of knowledge to direct when, how, how much, and to whom you should give — you may at once wrong God, the person you are helping, and yourself. Are you humbling yourself for your sin? Without knowledge of the tenor of the Gospel, Satan may play on your ignorance. He may convince you that you are not humbled enough, when God knows you are nearly overwhelmed by your tears and carried away by the torrent of sorrow toward despair. Or he may show you your own tear-stained face and flatter you into a carnal confidence in your humiliation. Perhaps you see the name of God being dishonored in your community and your spirit is stirred within you, as Paul's was at Athens. If knowledge is not seated in the saddle to rein in your zeal, you will soon be carried over hedge and ditch until you fall off some cliff by irregular action. Neither is knowledge enough — you

must also be armed with self-control, which here I take to be the grace by which the Christian, as master of his own house, orders his affections as servants to reason and faith, so that they do not move irregularly or lurch out in disordered desire for, anxiety about, or delight in the creature-comforts of this life. Without this, Satan will be too much for you. The historian tells us that in one of the famous battles between the English and the French, what lost the day for the French was a shower of English arrows that so enraged their horses as to throw the whole army into disorder — their horses, now without any control, trampled down their own men. The affections are like the horse under the rider, on which knowledge should be mounted. If Satan's barbed arrows hit them, so that your desires for created things become unruly and jostle with your desires for Christ — if your care to keep your reputation or finances throws your care to keep a good conscience into disorder, and your carnal joy in wife and child tramples down or gets ahead of your joy in the Lord — then you can judge for yourself which side victory will fall on. Now suppose you are marching in good order thus far toward heaven while swimming in prosperity. Must you not also prepare for rough road and bad weather — I mean an afflicted season? Satan will line the hedges with a thousand temptations when you enter the narrow lanes of adversity, where you cannot run from this sort of trial as you could in the open country of prosperity. Perhaps you escaped the snare of an alluring world, yet may be thrown down by that same world when it frowns. Though self-control kept you from being drunk with the sweet wines of prosperity's pleasures, for lack of patience you may be drunk with the wine of astonishment that is in affliction's hand. Therefore the apostle says: to self-control add patience. Either pos-

sess your soul in patience, or else some raging spirit of discontent will possess you. An impatient soul in affliction is like a madman in chains — indeed, too much like the devil in his chains, raging against God while bound by Him. Very well — do you have patience? An excellent grace indeed, but not sufficient by itself. You must be a godly person as well as a patient one. Therefore the apostle says: to patience add godliness. There is a cold, atheistic patience, and there is a warm, Christian patience. Satan numbs the conscience of the one — no wonder the person who feels nothing does not complain. But the Spirit of Christ gently calms the other — not by removing the sense of pain, but by overwhelming it with the sense of His love. Now godliness includes the whole worship of God, inward and outward. If you are ever so correct in your morals but not a worshiper of God, you are an atheist. If you worship God, and devoutly, but not according to the rule of Scripture, you are an idolater. If according to the rule, but not in spirit and truth, you are a hypocrite — and so fall into the devil's mouth. Or if you give God one part of His worship and deny another, Satan still comes away with his goods. "He who turns away his ear from listening to the law, even his prayer is an abomination" (Proverbs 28:9). And yet, Christian, your armor is still not complete. Your godliness would indeed be sufficient if you were to live in a world by yourself, with nothing to do but enjoy immediate communion with God. But you will not always dwell on this mountain of immediate worship — and when you come down from it, you have many brothers and servants of your Father living with you in the same household. You must conduct yourself fittingly, or your Father will be displeased. First: you have brothers, heirs of the same promise as yourself. Therefore you must add to your godliness brotherly

kindness. If Satan can set you at odds with them, he strikes a deep wound in your godliness. It is hard to join hearts in prayer when you cannot join hands in love. Second: there are not only brothers but also servants — a multitude of ungodly, worldly people who, though they have never been called sons and daughters, still belong to God's household as His creatures, and your heavenly Father wants you to walk blamelessly before them — indeed, to walk in a way that wins them. To do this, you must add to brotherly kindness love — by which grace you will be willing to do good even to the worst of people. When they curse you, you must pray for them — indeed, pray for nothing less for them than Christ and heaven. "Father, forgive them," said Christ, while they were digging into His side for His heart's blood. Truly I am persuaded that the lack of this final piece of armor has given Satan great advantage in our times. We are so afraid our love will be too broad — whereas in this sense, if it is not as wide as the world it is too narrow for the command that bids us do good to all. May not we ministers be charged with lacking this? When all our preaching is directed only to the saints, and no effort is made to rescue poor, uncalled captive souls from the devil's grip — who may be hauled to hell without any interference while we are comforting the saints and preaching their privileges — we leave the ignorant to remain ignorant and the profane to remain profane, for want of a compassionate love for their souls that would move us to rebuke and exhort them so they might also be brought into the way of life, just as the saints who are already walking in it are being encouraged. We are stewards to provide bread for the Lord's household. The greatest part of our hearers cannot and must not have the children's bread — but shall we give them no portion at all? Christ's love

pitied the multitudes, and in His public preaching He made special application to them — as in that famous sermon of Matthew 23, most of which is spent in rousing the sleepy consciences of the hypocritical Pharisees with those thunderclaps of woes repeatedly pronounced against them. Again, how great an advantage has Satan from the lack of this love in our homes? Is it not observed how little care is taken by professing heads of households to instruct their young people? Indeed, some have drunk in the principle that it is not their duty. O where is their love in the meantime, when they can see Satan come within their own walls and drive a child or a servant to hell in their ignorance and wickedness, without so much as venturing a word of correction or instruction to rescue these poor souls from the murderer's hand? We must leave them to their freedom, it seems — and that is about as fair a deal as we can give the devil. Give corrupt nature enough of this rope, and it will soon strangle the very principles of God and religion in their tender years.

### SECTION III.

Third: the completeness of the saints' armor may be understood not only as having every individual piece of equipment, but as the completeness and advancement of each individual piece. Just as the Christian is to pursue every grace, so he is to press toward the growth and increase of every grace, even toward perfection itself. Just as he is to add to his faith virtue, so he is to add faith to faith — always advancing his grace. This is frequently pressed on believers: "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). And: "Purify yourselves, just as He is pure." Here we are given an exact standard to aim for — not as if

we could actually equal the purity and perfection that is in God, but to make us strive all the harder when we see how infinitely short of that standard we fall, even when we write our best. Similarly, James 1:4: "Let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." You who can barely manage a small burden with your little patience would sink under a greater one — therefore patience must always be growing, or eventually we will meet a burden too heavy for our weak shoulders. Consider a few reasons why the Christian should be constantly growing in grace.

First: because grace is subject to decay and therefore always needs replenishing. As in any army that frequently engages in battle, weapons are battered and broken — one man's helmet is bent, another's sword is nicked, a third's pistol is broken. Recruits and repairs are always needed. In one temptation the Christian's helmet of hope is knocked off his head; in another his patience is sorely pressed. The Christian needs an armorer's shop close at hand to repair his losses promptly — for Satan is most likely to attack when the Christian is least prepared to receive him. "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you like wheat" (Luke 22:31) — Christ knew they were poorly equipped at that moment: their Captain about to be taken from the head of their troop; arguments among themselves about who would be greatest; and the supplies of stronger grace that the Spirit was to bring not yet arrived. Now Satan had a scheme to surprise them. Therefore Christ, to forestall him, promised to quickly dispatch His Spirit for their supply, and in the meantime sent them to Jerusalem to wait together in united

prayer — standing, as it were, as a body on guard while He came to their relief. This shows us what to do and where to go for supply when our grace is weak.

Second: because Satan is always perfecting his skill and intensifying his rage. It is not for nothing that he is called the old serpent — subtle by nature, but even more so by experience; wrathful by nature, yet growing more enraged with each passing day. Like a bull that grows fiercer the longer he is baited. Therefore we who must grapple with him now that his time is so short had better come well equipped into the field.

Third: because it is the goal of all God's dealings to perfect His saints in their grace and comfort. Why does He cut and prune by afflictions, if not to purge and cleanse so that they may bring forth more fruit — fuller and better fruit? "Tribulation produces patience" (Romans 5:3) — that is God's purpose in it. It produces — that is, it increases — the saint's patience; it enrages the wicked but softens the saints. It is His purpose in the preached Gospel to carry His saints onward from faith to faith (Romans 1:17). Accordingly He has equipped His church with ministers, and those ministers with gifts, "for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:12). Why does the scaffold stand with the workman on it, if the building is not going up? For us not to advance under such means is to frustrate the purpose of God. Therefore the apostle rebuked the Hebrew Christians for their failure to grow in the school of Christ: "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God" (Hebrews 5:12).

How few there are who truly strive to advance in their spiritual condition and labor to fill up what is still lacking in their knowledge, patience, and other graces. First: tell some about adding faith to faith, one degree of grace to another, and you will find they have more mind to add house to house and field to field. Their souls are always thirsting and gaping for more — but for what? Not for Christ or heaven. It is earth, earth they can never get enough of, until death comes and stops their mouths with a shovelful dug from their own grave. What a tormenting life they must have, always crying for more weight and yet unable to press their craving desires to death. O, the only way to quench this thirst for earthly things — if only men would believe it — is to kindle another thirst, one after Christ and heaven. Get a great heart burning fiercely after these, and the other thirst will die on its own, as a fever-thirst dies when the body comes back to its natural temperature. Second: others do not labor to perfect their grace because they have convinced themselves they are already perfect — and on that basis they throw away prayer, hearing, and all other ordinances as childish aids for those babes in grace who have not yet reached their lofty attainments. Oh, what fools pride makes of people! Truly, heaven would not be such a desirable place if we were to be no more perfect there than these people are here — too high for this world, and too low for another. The way God cures this frenzy of pride, we have seen in our day, is something like what He did with Nebuchadnezzar — giving them the heart of a beast, meaning allowing them for a time to fall into beastly practices, by which He shows them how far they are from the perfection they dreamed of so vainly. Third: others who have true grace and genuinely desire to grow in it are nonetheless discouraged in their pursuit by too

deep a sense of their present poverty. Tell some such person to labor for more power over corruption, more faith in and love toward God — that they might do God's will cheerfully and endure whatever He appoints in the greatest afflictions patiently, even thankfully — and they will never believe that someone whose faith is so weak, whose love is so cold, and whose stock is so small could ever attain any such height. It is as if you tried to persuade a beggar with one poor penny in his pocket that if he will go and trade with it, he will become Lord Mayor of London before he dies. But why, poor hearts, do you so despise the day of small beginnings? Do you not see a tiny mustard seed grow into a great tree? Weak grace is like it — both in its smallness at the start and in its growth in the end. Dare you say you have no grace at all? If you have any — even the least that any person ever started with — I dare tell you that God has done more for you in that than He would do in making what is now so weak as perfect as the saints' grace is now in heaven. First, He has done more, considered as an act of power. There is a greater gulf between no grace and grace than between weak grace and strong — a greater gulf between chaos and nothing than between chaos and the beautiful order of this heaven and earth. The first day's work of both creations is the greatest. Second, considered as an act of grace: it is greater mercy to give the first grace of conversion than to crown that grace with glory. It is greater grace and condescension in a prince to marry a poor young woman than, having married her, to clothe her like a princess. He was free to do the first or not — but his relationship to her strongly pleads for the second. God might have chosen whether to give you

grace or not. But having done so, your relationship to Him and His covenant now obligates Him to add more and more until He has fitted you as a bride for Himself in glory.

## CHAPTER 5. OF THE USE OF OUR SPIRITUAL ARMOR, OR THE EXERCISE OF GRACE



**T**he fourth and final aspect of the saints' equipment is the use they are to make of it: "Put on the full armor of God."

Briefly, what is this duty — to "put on"? Since he is writing to saints (many of them at least), he does not mean only the initial putting on through conversion, which some of them may not yet have done. He also means that they should exercise what they already have. There is a difference between having armor in the house and having it buckled on — between having grace in principle and having grace in action. The instruction is therefore this:

It is not enough to have grace — this grace must be kept in active use. The Christian's armor is made to be worn. There is no laying down or taking off our armor until we have finished our warfare and completed our course. Our armor and our garment of flesh come off together — then, indeed, there will be no more need for watch and guard, shield or helmet. Those military duties and field-graces — faith, hope, and the rest — will be honorably discharged. In heaven we will appear not in armor but in robes of glory. But here they are to be worn night and day. We must walk,

work, and sleep in them — or we are not true soldiers of Christ. Paul professed to strive for this: "I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men" (Acts 24:16). Here we see this holy man at his arms — drilling and exercising himself in his techniques, like a soldier practicing his movements before the battle. The reason for this is as follows.

## SECTION I.

First: Christ commands us to have our armor on and our grace in exercise. "Be dressed in readiness, and keep your lamps lit" (Luke 12:35). Christ speaks either in military language as to soldiers, or in domestic language as to servants. If as to soldiers, then "be dressed in readiness and keep your lamps lit" means: be ready to march, with your armor on — for the belt goes over everything — and your match lit, ready to fire at the first alarm of a temptation. If as to servants, which seems more natural, then He tells us — as a master who has gone abroad tells his household — not to take off our clothes through laziness or fall asleep and let our lights go out, but to stand ready to open the door when He returns, even at midnight. It is not fitting for the master to stand at the door knocking while the servant sleeps inside. Indeed, there is no duty the Christian has been charged with that does not imply this daily exercise: pray — but how? without ceasing. Rejoice — but when? always. Give thanks — for what? in everything. The shield of faith and the helmet of hope — we must hold them to the end. The sum of all this is that we should walk in the constant practice of these duties and graces. Where a soldier is posted, there he stands — and

must neither move nor sleep until he is relieved. When Christ comes, the only soul who will receive His blessing is the one He finds so doing.

Second: Satan's advantage is great when grace is not in active use. When the devil found Christ so ready to receive his attack and repel his temptation, he quickly had enough. It is said he departed for a time — as if in his shameful retreat he comforted himself with hopes of catching Christ off guard at a more favorable moment. And we find him coming back at what was indeed the most likely time to have succeeded — had his enemy been man and not God. Now if this bold enemy watched and observed Christ so carefully from moment to moment, does it not require you to look to yourself, lest he catch your grace off guard at some point? What he misses now through your watchfulness, he may gain later through your carelessness. Indeed he counts on you being worn out by constant duty. "Surely," Satan says, when he sees the Christian up and earnest in duty, "this cannot last long." When he finds the Christian tender of conscience and careful to avoid occasions to sin, he tells himself: "This is only for a little while. Before long I will have him unbend his bow and unbuckle his armor — and then I will have at him." Satan knows what habits you keep in your house and prayer closet. Though he has no key to your heart, he can stand in the next room to it and faintly hear what is whispered there. He tracks the Christian by the scent of his own footprints. Once he catches the least hint of which way your heart inclines, he knows how to take you — if but one door is unbolted, one post unmanned, one grace out of its place, that is advantage enough.

Third: because it is such an awkward and difficult business to recover the activity of grace once lost, and to revive a duty long neglected. "I have taken off my dress" says the bride in Song of Songs 5:3. She had given in to a lazy mood, lay on her bed of sloth — and how hard it is to rouse her. Her beloved is at the door, pleading with her by every loving name that should remind her of the close relationship between them: "My sister, my darling, my dove" — open to me. Yet she does not rise. He tells her his hair is wet with the drops of the night. Still she does not stir. What is the matter? Her robe was off, and she is reluctant to put it on again. She had given way to her laziness, and now she does not know how to shake it off. She would have been glad of her beloved's company, if only he would open the door himself. And he wanted her company just as much, if only she would rise to let him in. On these terms they parted. The longer a soul has neglected duty, the harder it is to take it back up — partly from shame, since the soul having played truant does not know how to look God in the face; and partly from the sheer difficulty of the work, which is now twice as hard as it would be for someone who has kept up the steady exercise of grace. Everything is out of order. It takes that person more time and effort to tune his instrument than it takes another simply to play the tune. He approaches duty as if coming to it fresh for the first time — like a student who has not looked at his book for a while and whose lesson has nearly gone out of his head, whereas the one who was reviewing it just moments ago has it perfectly. Perhaps you are called to bear an affliction, and your patience has been unexercised — you have given it little or no thought during the time you were prospering. Now you kick and thrash like a young ox unaccustomed to the yoke (Jeremiah 31:18), whereas an-

other bears the same cross meekly and patiently because he has been continually stirring up his patience and fitting the yoke to his neck. You know the confusion in a town when a sudden alarm sounds in the dead of night — the enemy at the gates and the people asleep inside. What a cry is heard! One is missing his clothes, another his sword, a third doesn't know where to find his powder. They run about in a panic, which would not happen if the enemy found them on guard, orderly and ready for his approach. Such a commotion arises in a soul that has not kept his armor on — this piece and that will be missing just when he needs it.

Fourth: we must keep grace in exercise out of regard for others — our fellow soldiers. Paul had this in mind when he was exercising himself to keep a good conscience: he did not want to be a stumbling block to others. The cowardice of one soldier may cause others to run. The ignorance of one soldier who does not know how to handle his weapons may do harm to those around him — some have shot their own friends thinking them enemies. The unwise walk of one professor makes many others worse off. But even if you do not fall to the point of becoming a public scandal, you still cannot be as helpful to your fellow brothers as you should be. God commanded the Reubenites and Gadites to cross over ahead of their brothers, armed and ready, until the land was taken. So, Christian, you are to be a help to your fellow brothers who perhaps do not have the settled peace in their spirit that you have, or the measure of grace and comfort. You are to help such weaker ones and go before them, armed for their defense. If your grace is not in exercise, you fail them. Perhaps you are a master or a parent with a household under your care — they fare as you thrive. If your heart is in a holy frame, they benefit from the duties you perform. If your

heart is dead and low, they lose by your hand. Just as a nursing mother eats more for the sake of the child she nurses, so for the sake of those under your care you should be all the more careful to exercise and nourish your own grace.

## SECTION 2.

Objection: But some may say, this is hard work indeed — armor never off, grace always in exercise. Did God ever intend religion to be such a burdensome business as this makes it?

Answer: You speak like one of the foolish world and show yourself a complete stranger to the Christian life by talking that way. A burden to exercise grace? Why — it is no burden to exercise the natural functions of life: to eat, to drink, to walk. All of these are delightful to us when we are well. If any of them is difficult, it is because nature is under some trouble — stuffed up, and then breathing is hard; sick, and then even food is offensive. So take a saint in his right condition: it is his joy to be occupied in the exercise of grace in this or that duty. "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord'" (Psalm 122:1). His heart leaped at the invitation. When any occasion draws him away from communion with God — however good the occasion may be — it is unwelcome and unpleasant to him. Just as you who are used to being in your shop from morning to night find it tedious to be away for a day even among good friends, because you are not where your work and calling lies. A Christian engaged in duty is like a person in his calling — as it were, in his shop where he belongs and where he wants to be. It is therefore far from tedious. Religion is burdensome to none so much as to those who are irregular in practicing it. Habit makes heavy things light. We barely feel the weight

of our clothes because they are fitted to us and worn every day, whereas the same weight on our shoulder would trouble us. So it is with religious duties: what is painful for carnal people is made light for the saints, partly because these duties fit the saints' new nature, and partly because of their daily exercise in them. When the disciples first entered Christ's ways, they could not pray long or fast much — the wineskins were new and the wine too strong. But after they had walked in those ways for a few years, they became mighty in both. Do you complain that the road to heaven is rough? Walk in it more often, and it will become smooth.

But second: even if this constant exercise of grace were harder on the flesh — which is the only one complaining — the sweet benefits that flow from it to the Christian will more than repay all his labor and effort.

First: exercising your grace will increase your grace. The diligent hand makes rich. A careful person counts as lost not only what is stolen from his safe, but also what lies there unproductive. "That commodity," says the businessman, "if I had bought it with the money sitting in my vault, would have brought me this much return — which is now lost." So the Christian may say: "My early knowledge, had I kept pressing on to know the Lord, might have grown to the full light of day." "I have more understanding than all my teachers" (Psalm 119:99). How did David come by it? He tells us in the next words: "For Your testimonies are my meditation." He was more active in the exercise of duty and grace. The most gifted students are not always the greatest scholars, because they do not study commensurate with their ability. Neither does the

man who starts with the largest capital always end up the wealthiest. A little grace well managed through daily exercise will grow, while greater grace neglected will decay.

Second: just as exercise increases grace, so it also makes grace visible. If a man wants to know whether he is lame, let him get up and walk. One turn around the room will tell him more than a long argument while he sits still. Do you want to know whether you love God? Be frequent in putting that love into action — the more the fire is blown, the sooner it is seen. The same is true of every other grace. Sometimes a soul questions whether it has any patience, any faith — until God places it in an afflicted condition, where it must either exercise this grace or be undone. Then it appears like a person who thinks he cannot swim, until thrown into the river; gathering all his strength, he manages to swim to shore and discovers what he can do. How often have we heard Christians say: "I thought I could never have endured that pain, or trusted God in such a tight place. But now God has taught me what He can do for me and what He has worked in me." You could have known this earlier, if only you had more often stirred up and exercised your grace.

Third: exercising grace invites God to draw near to such a soul. God sets the Christian to work and then meets him in it. "Arise and work, and the Lord be with you" (1 Chronicles 22:16). He sets a soul to reading — as He did with the Ethiopian official — and then He joins a messenger to his chariot. A soul at prayer receives: "O Daniel, man of high esteem." The bride who lost her beloved on her bed of sloth finds him when she rises and goes out: "Scarcely had I left them when I found him whom my soul loves" (Song of Songs 3:4).

## SECTION 3.

First application: This falls hard on those who are so far from exercising grace that they walk in the full exercise of their lusts. Their hearts are like a glassblowing furnace — the fire never goes out and the workshop windows never close. They are always at work, hammering out some wicked scheme on the anvil of their hearts. There are those who give their lusts completely free rein — whatever their wretched hearts desire, they shall have. They pamper their lusts as some people pamper their children, denying them nothing, never once saying to their souls — as David failed to say to Adonijah — "Why have you done this? Why are you so proud, so greedy, so godless?" They spend their days making provision for these guests. Like a busy inn, the house never cools — as one guest leaves, another arrives; as one lust is served, another calls for attention. Just as some exercise grace more than others, so there are those who deal more heavily in sin, generating more of God's wrath in a day than others do in a month. Blessed, by comparison, are those whom God restrains by His hand on their outward or inward man, so that they cannot rush on as furiously as those who are driven by health of body, power and position, riches in their coffers, and a numbed and hardened conscience — all pushing them toward filling up the measure of their sins. We read of the Assyrian, who enlarged his appetite like hell and stretched out his desires as men stretch a bag crammed full of money to make it hold more (Habakkuk 2:5). The adulterer, as if his body were not fast enough to carry out the commands of his lust, stirs it up by sending out lustful glances that return loaded with adultery, and fans this fire with indecent songs and feasting — the proper fuel for the devil's kitchen. The malicious man, to lose no time from his

lust, tears his neighbor to pieces even as he lies in his bed, unable to sleep unless some such bloody sacrifice is offered to his ravening passion. Oh, how this should shame the saints! How often is your zeal so hot that you cannot sleep until your hearts have been in heaven while you lay on your beds, and there found peace in the sight of your dear Savior and some embrace of His love?

Second application: This reproves those who mock and jeer at the saints while they are exercising their graces. No one is sneered at quite like the saint engaged in his calling. Men may work in their shops and follow their trade as diligently as they please, and no one in the street pays it any attention. But let a Christian be seen at work for God — in the exercise of any duty or grace — and he is hooted at, despised, and hated. Few people are so bad that they seem to dislike religion in the abstract. They can commend a sermon on holiness or a discourse about God and Christ in the pulpit. But when these things are actually displayed before their eyes, sparkling in a saint's daily life, they become contemptible and hateful to them. This living, walking holiness bites. Though they liked the preacher's skill in painting it in words, they now run from it and spit at it when they see it in practice. This exercise of grace offends the godless heart and stirs up the enmity within. Just as Michal could not help mocking David when she saw him dancing before the ark. The same person who praised the preacher for delivering a learned discourse on zeal will ridicule a saint for expressing an act of zeal in his own place and calling — now grace comes too close. A corrupt heart must keep some distance from holiness so that its beams do not strike too sharply on his conscience. So the Pharisees could honor the old prophets as holy men and lavish money on their tombs. But Christ — worth more than all of them

combined — was scorned and hated. What is the explanation? The prophets were off the stage and Christ was on it. Envy feeds on the living; after death it rests.

Third application: Test yourself by this — do you have grace? Does your grace show itself in daily practice? A man who has clothes will surely wear them and not be seen going naked. People talk about their faith, their repentance, their love for God. These are precious graces — but why do we not see them walking about in their daily lives? Surely if such guests lived in your soul they would look out at the window sometimes and be seen in this duty and that holy action. Grace is a stirring, active thing — not a dead image you can lock in a chest while no one knows what god you worship. No, grace will show itself. It will walk with you into all places and companies. It will buy and sell with you, it will have a hand in all your undertakings, it will comfort you when you are sincere and faithful for God, and it will complain and rebuke you when you are not. Try to stop its mouth and heaven will hear its voice — it will groan, mourn, and struggle, just like a living man you are trying to smother. I would as soon believe a man is alive if he lies perfectly still and quiet when nailed in his coffin, as believe you have grace if you never exercise it in any act of spiritual life. What — you claim to have grace, and yet are led as tamely as a fool to the stocks by your lust? Why are you nailed there, fastened to your sin? If you have grace, come down from it and we will believe you. But if you are so docile a slave as to sit still under the command of lust, you are deceiving yourself. Do you claim to have grace and yet show none of it in your present condition? Perhaps you are wealthy. Do you show humility toward those beneath you? Do you show a mind set on heaven more than on earth? Perhaps

your heart is swollen with your wealth so that you look on the poor as creatures of a lower order and despise them, and as for heaven you never think of it — like that wicked prince who said he would rather lose his share in paradise than in Paris. Are you poor? Why do you not exercise grace in that condition? Are you content and diligent? Perhaps instead of contentment you grumble — you cannot see a fine coat on your wealthy neighbor's back without envying it. Instead of trusting Providence and supplying your needs through honest diligence, you are ready to break through the fence into your neighbor's rich pasture — serving yourself by sin rather than waiting for God's blessing on your honest labor. If so, do not be angry when we call you by your right name, or at least question whether we may properly call you a Christian — whose conduct is so contrary to that sacred name, which is too holy to be written on a rotten post.

Fourth application: Be encouraged, O saints of God, to walk in the active exercise of grace. It is the minister's duty to keep this heavenly fire burning on the saints' altar through constant exhortation and, when necessary, reproof. Peter saw the need to keep his hand on the bellows at all times (2 Peter 1:12). He wrote: "I will always be ready to remind you of these things, even though you already know them and are established in the truth that is present with you" — and that would not stop him. As long as he lived in this body, he said, he would stir them up and keep reminding them (2 Peter 1:13). There is a spiritual drowsiness we are prone to in this life. Christ had to rouse His disciples twice, yet found them sleeping a third time. Either exercise your grace, or Satan will stir up your corruption instead. Like two buckets in a well, as one goes down the other rises. There is a body of sin within you that, like an

enemy waiting for its moment, watches for a chance to seize control — and it is easier to keep it down than to pull it down once it has risen. Your time is short and your road is long. You had better press on, or you will be overtaken by night before your Father's house comes into view. How miserable it is for a traveler on the road to heaven to stumble through the dark — many can tell you that with an aching heart. And what do you have here that deserves your attention above all this? Are your worldly cares and pleasures really worth it? Is it wise to pour so much effort into a house you are about to leave, while forgetting what you must carry with you? Before the fruit of what you are planting now has time to ripen, you yourself may be lying in the grave. "The time is short," says the apostle (1 Corinthians 7:29). The world is drawing near its final port. God has trimmed the sails of human life down to a brief span, and the time is coming when it will not matter whether we had wives or not, riches or not — but there will be an enormous difference between those who had grace and those who did not. There will even be a difference between those who actively traded in grace and those who were more careless. The one will enter glory abundantly, while the other will suffer loss of much of his cargo, thrown overboard as goods that have no value in that heavenly country. While you are here, others will benefit from your lively graces. Your cheerfulness and energy in your heavenly course will encourage those who travel with you. Anyone would be sluggish indeed who did not press on when they saw such passion for God in the one leading the way. Your grace will also restrain the sins of others, who are never so subdued as when grace steps forward and sits like a ruler at the gate, visible to all who pass by. The person who swears does not know such majesty is present

when the Christian is too timid to speak. So he goes on without fear. But if grace had its dagger of zeal ready, and the courage to draw it in a wise rebuke, sin would leave the scene and slink back into its hole in shame. "The young men saw me and hid themselves, and the elders rose and stood" (Job 29:8). And does not God deserve the best service you can give Him in your generation? Did He give you grace to bury it in an idle stockpile, so no one would benefit? Can you say He has ever been lacking in love and mercy toward you? Are they not always in motion for your good? Is the eye of providence ever closed? No — He who keeps you does not slumber. Is His eye ever off you for a moment? No. "The eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous" — He has fixed His gaze there forever, and takes infinite delight in what He sees. When has His ear been shut to your cries, or His hand withheld from your needs? Indeed, do not your circumstances occupy the very thoughts of God — and are those thoughts anything other than thoughts of peace? A few drops of this oil will keep the wheel turning.

"That you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil" (Ephesians 6:11).

These words give the reason why the Christian soldier must be so completely armed: so that he may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. The force of this argument rests on two points.

First, the danger if unarmed: the enemy is no small or contemptible foe — he is the devil himself, described here as a cunning engineer through his schemes and strategies.

Second, the certainty of standing against all his cleverness and schemes if we are fully armed: "that you may be able to stand firm." There is no standing without armor — but there is also no fear of falling into the enemy's hands if we are armed.

Beginning with the first point: the saints' enemy is the devil, described here by his schemes. The original word speaks of method and craft — the art of handling a matter in an orderly way. We say a person is methodical when they compose an argument with skill and precision. Because this quality shows sharpness of mind, the word is used to describe how Satan lays his plots and strategies in his warfare against the Christian. The skilled soldier, after all, has his order just as the scholar does — there is method in forming an army just as there is in framing an argument. The point before us is this:

The devil is a very subtle enemy. The Christian is most at risk not from the devil's strength, but from his cunning and craft. He is called the old serpent — subtle above all other creatures, and being old, more experienced than any other serpent. Satan was more crafty than man in his state of perfection; how much more so now, when man is weakened by the fall, having never recovered the crack in his understanding that came through Adam's sin. As man has lost, Satan has gained more and more experience. He lost his wisdom the moment he became a devil, but ever since he has increased his craft. Though he lacks the wisdom to do himself any good, he has more than enough cunning to do others harm. God shows us where Satan's strength lies when He promises to crush the head of the serpent — crush his head, and he dies at once. Now, in examining Satan's subtlety, we will look at his two main designs and reveal his schemes and tactics in each. His first main

design is to draw people into sin. His second is to accuse, torment, and trouble the saint for sin. First, let us consider the devil as a tempter to sin. In this role he shows his cunning subtlety in three ways.

First, he chooses the most advantageous moment for tempting.

Second, he arranges his temptations in such a deliberate order and form that it reveals his craft.

Third, he selects the right instruments and agents to carry out his design.

## CHAPTER 1. OF SATAN'S SUBTLETY TO CHOOSE THE MOST ADVANTAGEOUS SEASONS FOR TEMPTING



**F**irst, Satan shows his subtlety by choosing the most fitting and advantageous moments for tempting. Solomon says, "There is an appointed time for everything" (Ecclesiastes 3:1) — meaning there is a precise moment which, when seized, makes a task easy and quick to accomplish. The same wise man gives this as the reason why people so often fail and are disappointed in their plans: they do not know their time (Ecclesiastes 9:11). They arrive after the opportunity has passed. A hundred soldiers at the right moment can turn a battle and save an army, when thousands at the wrong moment cannot. Satan knows when to advance — when he is most likely to succeed. Just as Christ has the tongue of a skilled teacher to speak a timely word of counsel and comfort to a doubting, discouraged soul, Satan reveals his dark art and hellish skill by speaking words of seduction and temptation at just the right moment. A word spoken in season is a word that lands with full force. Let me show you the specific seasons Satan chooses for his temptations.

The first season Satan seizes is when a person is newly converted. No sooner is this child of grace — this new creature — born, than the dragon pours a flood of temptation after it. Satan only taught the Egyptians a small portion of his own cruelty when he inspired them to drown the newborn Israelite babies in the river. The first cry of the new creature sets all the legions of hell on alert. They are as alarmed by it as Herod and all Jerusalem were at the birth of Christ — and now they plot to take the life of this newborn king. The apostles faced greater opposition and persecution in their later years, when they were filled with larger measures of the Spirit. But it was in their earlier years, as young converts, that they faced the sharpest temptations from Satan — as you can see from the various incidents recorded about them. Satan knew that grace within them was still weak, and that the promised supply of the Spirit had not yet arrived. When is an enemy more likely to capture a town than when it is in such a weakened state? And so he tested them all. The advantages Satan has over a new convert are so many that we might wonder how the young convert survives at all. Knowledge is weak, making the new believer easily led into error — especially in times of division, when many different paths are presented, one person saying "Here is Christ" and another "There is Christ," and the new Christian, inclined to think that anyone who speaks kindly means well, is like a little child who has lost his way home and will follow anyone who offers to lead him. The new convert has little experience to draw on. If Adam, whose knowledge was so complete, was quickly deceived — being attacked before he was fully settled in his new home — how much greater an advantage does Satan have over the new convert? In such a person, Satan finds every grace severely hampered in its

ability to resist — both because grace is weak, and because the opposing corruptions are still largely undealt with, which makes grace act with great difficulty and impurity. It is like a fire just kindled where there is more smoke than flame, or like freshly brewed beer that runs cloudy. So while new converts often show more intensity of emotion — it overflows into greater outward religious activity than in others — it also comes with more dregs of carnal passion mixed in. Satan knows this, and therefore chooses to stir what he can see is already troubled.

Second, Satan tempts when the saint is burdened with some great affliction. This is like a dark alley or a deserted road — the perfect place for a thief to demand your purse. A skilled commander first works to create a breach in the wall, then rushes in to storm the city. Satan first obtained God's permission to weaken Job through losses in his estate, his children, his health, and his other comforts — and then tempted him toward impatience and more. He let Christ fast forty days before making his move, just as an army waits until a castle is starved of provisions, then sends a message calling for surrender — never more likely to be accepted than at such a desperate moment. A temptation strikes hardest when the only apparent path to relief runs directly through the sin Satan is offering. When a person is desperately poor and Satan whispers, "Would you really rather starve than step over the line and take what you need?" — that is enough to make any flesh and blood hesitate.

Third, when the Christian is about to undertake some significant work for God's glory, Satan will lie like a serpent in the road — an adder in the path that bites the horse's heels so that its rider falls backward. This is how he stood at Joshua's right hand to op-

pose him. The right hand is the working hand, and his standing there shows his intent to obstruct the work. The devil has never been a friend to the work of God's temple, which is why that work takes so long to complete. How conveniently he helped the Jews to their excuse: "The time has not come" — God's time had come, but not the devil's. So Satan helped them to this weak evasion, twisting the meaning of providence to suggest it was not yet time, when in fact they were not prospering because they had not started the work sooner, as God plainly told them. Paul and Barnabas had a holy plan to revisit the churches in every city and strengthen the believers' faith. The devil knew what a blow this would strike to his kingdom. Their travels would interfere with his own circuit, so he stirred up a sharp disagreement between these two godly men. They grew so heated that they parted ways in that storm (Acts 15:39). There were two great turning points in Christ's life — His entrance into public ministry at His baptism, and His completion of it at His death. At both moments, the devil confronted Him fiercely. The more public your position, Christian, and the more prominent your service for God, the more you must expect the devil to have some particularly dangerous design against you. If every ordinary soldier needs armor against Satan's arrows of temptation, then the commanders and officers who stand at the front of the battle need it far more.

Fourth, Satan tempts when a visible object is present to strengthen the temptation. This is how he approached Eve near the tree, keeping it in her sight while he made his appeal — so that by assaulting two gates at once, it would be harder for her to stop the temptation from landing. If Eve's eye so quickly stirred her heart toward disordered desire, how much easier it is now for

Satan to use the presence of an object to awaken the lust that lies dormant in the heart. Just as Naomi sent her daughter to lie at Boaz's feet, knowing well that if he allowed her to stay there, there was hope he might take her into his household — so if the Christian allows the object to come that close, Satan will count on his suit being granted in time. Therefore, if we do not want to give in to a sin, we must not walk past or linger at the door of the occasion. Do not let your eyes wander toward what you do not want to be captured by. Do not entertain in your mind what you do not intend to let into your heart. Close familiarity breeds affection — some people have ended up bound to what they once thought they could never have wanted.

Fifth, the tempter comes after great displays of God's love. Grace is in such a fragile condition that it struggles equally under God's smiles and His frowns. As someone once said of the English nation — that it could endure neither full liberty nor full bondage — so the soul can manage neither extreme. When God smiles and opens Himself to us warmly, we are prone to grow proud and self-indulgent. When He frowns, our faith sinks just as far. Fair weather and warm sunshine bring up the weeds of corruption; sharp frost nips and kills the flowers of grace. The Christian is in danger on both sides. Therefore Satan takes advantage of the moment when the Christian is flush with spiritual comfort. Like a swindler who befriends a young heir the moment he has just collected his rents, and never leaves until he has drained him of his money — Satan lies in wait for that very moment, ready to lure the saint into some sin that will quickly drain away his joy. Did anyone ever receive a greater testimony from heaven than Peter? In Matthew 16:17, Christ called him blessed and placed a singular

honor on him, making him a representative for all the saints. No doubt this favor to Peter stirred the envious spirit to attack him all the sooner. If Joseph's special coat made his brothers plot against him, it is no surprise that Satan's malice would target the one on whom Christ had placed such a mark of love and honor. And so we find Satan quickly at Peter's shoulder, using him as an instrument to tempt his own Master — who quickly recognized the enemy and rebuked Peter with the words, "Get behind Me, Satan." The man who seemed a rock just moments before has, through Satan's strategy, become a stone of stumbling for Christ. Similarly, David had received remarkable mercies — firmly established on his throne with his enemies defeated, even pardoned for his great sin, nearly ready to lie down in peace. Then Satan cut in to cloud his clear evening and tempted him to count the people. Satan is most eager to throw the saint into the mud precisely when his coat is cleanest.

Sixth, at the hour of death, when the saint is physically broken and prostrate, this coward falls upon him. It is his last chance in the game — now or never. Overcome the saint now, and it is over forever. As they say of the natural serpent, that it is never seen at full stretch until it is dying — so this spiritual serpent never strains his cleverness and schemes more intensely than when his time is running out. The saint is on the very threshold of eternity, and Satan treads on his heel — unable to trip him up and prevent his arrival in heaven, but at least hoping to bruise him so that he arrives there in greater pain.

## CHAPTER 2. SATAN'S SUBTLETY IN MANAGING HIS TEMPTATIONS, WHERE SEVERAL STRATAGEMS USED BY HIM TO DECEIVE THE CHRISTIAN ARE LAID DOWN



**T**he second way Satan shows his tempting subtlety is in the strategies he uses to deceive the Christian during the act of temptation.

First, he flies false colors and approaches the Christian disguised as a friend, so that the gates are opened to him and his proposals welcomed before either is recognized for what it is. This is why he is said to disguise himself as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14). Of all his plots, none is more dangerous than when he appears wearing Samuel's cloak, disguising his foul purpose with fine language. In the realm of error, he corrupts people's judgments by passing off his ideas as precious gospel truths. Like a cunning merchant, he offloads his old stock — errors that have been sitting on his shelf for ages — by giving them a fresh look to match the trends of the times, and they are accepted as new light. Under the cover of Christian liberty he smuggles in licentiousness; by exalting the Spirit he pushes aside Scripture; by elevating faith

he undermines repentance and discredits good works. By loudly lamenting the corruption in the church's practices, he draws unstable souls away from it and keeps them unsettled until they fall into such confusion that they can see no church at all. His success in swaying people's conduct and lives through this strategy is no less than his success in corrupting their beliefs. Under the guise of zeal, he sometimes ignites a dangerous flame of passion and anger in the heart. Like a fire that has gotten out of control, it makes the Christian's spirit boil over into unchristian desires — even praying for revenge where forgiveness is called for. We see this in the disciples in Luke 9:55, where two godly men ask for fire to fall from heaven. They had no idea where the spark had come from that was heating them so strongly — until Christ told them, "You do not know what kind of spirit you are of." Sometimes Satan pretends to offer pity and natural affection — counsel that might even seem reasonable — while his real aim is to promote cowardice and sinful self-preservation. Through this, the Christian may be led to abandon his post, back away from the truth, or avoid some necessary duty of his calling. Christ quickly saw through this when Satan used Peter as his mouthpiece: "Take care of Yourself, Lord" — and Christ stopped him with the sharp rebuke, "Get behind Me, Satan." How much we need to study Scripture, know our own hearts, and understand Satan's schemes — so that we do not welcome this enemy and all the while imagine it is Christ who has come to visit.

A second strategy Satan uses is gathering intelligence about the saint's situation. This is one of the great wheels in the politician's clockwork: having spies in every place who keep him informed of his enemies' plans and movements. This gives him the advantage both of foiling their designs and more safely accomplishing his

own. It is no difficult matter to play the game well when you can see your opponent's hand. David knew how things stood at court — Jonathan's arrows carried him the news, and accordingly he moved his position and stayed well ahead of his great enemy Saul. Satan is the greatest intelligence-gatherer in the world. He makes it his business to study the inclinations, thoughts, emotions, and intentions of people, so that finding which tendency dominates, he can apply himself accordingly. He looks for which way the current flows so he can open the channel of temptation and direct it toward the creature's fall — never forcing it against the natural current. Consider the piercing perception of angelic beings — how quickly Satan picks up the scent by a word dropped, a glance of the eye, or some equally small signal, which is enough to put him on alert. Add to this his years of experience in examining the human heart, having inspected and effectively dissected so many through his long practice — greatly refining his knowledge. Add his tremendous diligence, always studying the saints and thinking through how to harm them, as we see in Job's case, where he had observed Job so closely that he could give God an immediate answer about Job's situation and what might be the most effective means of breaking him. And beyond all this, consider the network of contacts he has among those in and around the Christian — from whom he learns much about the person's state, just as David learned from Hushai while in Absalom's court. With all of this, it is nearly impossible for anyone to move out of the privacy of their own heart without Satan knowing which way they lean. Some corrupt passion or other will give the soul away to him, just as those around David revealed his location to Saul — pointing him toward David in the wilderness of Engedi. These informants say to Satan:

"If you want to catch this person, he has gone that way — you will find him buried in worldly business, over his head in the desires and anxieties of this life. Look, another person sits under the shelter of this child, or that gift, or that talent of mind — set your trap there and you will soon have him." Once Satan has this intelligence, he needs no help from anyone else. He certainly will not be at a loss when his own students — the Jesuits, I mean — show such agility of mind in twisting and reshaping themselves into whatever form will most effectively seduce the person they are targeting. Is ambition the lust that grips the heart? Satan will fill such a person with enticing plans. How easily, having first inflated them with empty hopes, does he lead them into terrible sins? This is how Haman, desiring a monopoly on his king's favor, was driven into that bloody plot against the Jews — a plot that ultimately destroyed him. Is sexual sin the lust the person's eye is drawn toward? Satan will become the procurer, arranging the encounter. Finding Amnon sick with this desire, he sent Jonadab — a scheming man — to plant the clever idea of feigning illness in his head, by which his sister Tamar fell into his trap.

Third, Satan shows his subtlety in his gradual approach to the soul. When he comes to tempt, he is modest and asks for very little. He knows he can gain through many small requests what he would be refused if he asked for everything at once. A small group can slip into a city when an army advancing openly would be turned away. So, to avoid raising suspicion, Satan begins by presenting a few general propositions that do not reveal the depth of his plot. These are like scouts sent ahead while his main force lies hidden in the undergrowth nearby. This is how he worked his way into Eve's confidence. He did not immediately say "Take and eat"

— he was far too shrewd for that. Such a direct move would have frightened her away from the conversation entirely, just as a fish is scared from the bait by a stone dropped in the water. Instead, he raised a question designed to open the door: "Did God really say that? Are you sure you understood Him? Could the One who lets you eat from all the other trees really mean to deny you the best one of all?" In this way he digs around the roots of her faith and loosens them, so that the tree falls all the more easily at the next gust of temptation. This is a truly dangerous strategy. Many have agreed to walk one mile with Satan who never intended to go two — but once on the road, they were drawn further and further until they no longer knew how to leave his company. This is how Satan leads people down into the depths of sin by a winding staircase that hides the bottom from view. First he presents an object that stirs some thoughts. Those thoughts set the emotions on fire. The emotions cloud the mind. The mind now disabled, Satan dares to show himself more openly, and boldly urges the person toward the very thing they would have refused just moments before. Many people today living in open ungodliness never imagined they would drift so far from their earlier profession — but Satan deceived them with modest beginnings. Do not give Satan even an inch in his first approaches. The beggar who is modest and restrained at the door will take command of the house once he is let in. Yield at the start, and you surrender the strength to resist him later. Once the hem is worn through, the whole garment will unravel if it is not mended by timely repentance.

The fourth way Satan shows his subtlety in managing his temptations is through his reserves. A wise commander always keeps fresh troops nearby, ready to be sent in when others are beaten

back. Satan is rarely without this resource. When one temptation is repelled, he quickly brings up another to fill the gap and hold the line. So he tempted Christ first toward unbelief and distrust — suggesting He should turn stones into bread, as if it were time to fend for Himself after being so long neglected by His Father, having fasted forty days with no provision in sight. No sooner had Christ extinguished that arrow with "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God'" — than Satan had another loaded and ready. He tempted Christ toward presumption: he set Him on the pinnacle of the temple and said, "Throw Yourself down, for it is written, 'He will command His angels concerning You'" (Matthew 4:5-6). As if to say: if You truly trust God and His Word as You claim, show it by casting Yourself down — for You have a promise standing between You and the ground, if You dare trust God. And while Christ had His answer ready and was fully prepared to receive attack from every direction — being so completely armed that no temptation could find a weak spot — we should note that Satan's temptations against Christ were like a serpent's movement across a rock: they left no mark, no dent at all. But against us they are like a serpent on sand or loose earth, which leaves a clear trail — even when a temptation does not enter the heart, it colors the imagination, which is right next door to it, and the object there is poised to slip in if we are not very careful. This is especially true when Satan shifts his attack: after we have resisted one approach, he comes at us from a fresh angle, actually building his next temptation on our very resistance to the first. This requires real readiness in our defenses and skill with all our weapons — like a debater who, when his planned arguments are countered, must now handle a new and

unexpected question. That is when he is truly tested. This is indeed Satan's method when tempting the Christian to neglect the duties of God's worship on account of worldly responsibilities, their number, or their apparent necessity. When that approach fails, he comes from the opposite direction, drawing the Christian to neglect his worldly calling out of a seeming zeal to pursue the worship of God. Or first, he works to deaden the heart in a duty — but finding the Christian too watchful for that, he then puffs the person up with pride over how well the duty went. His subtlest and most refined temptations are always saved for last.

Fifth, Satan shows his subtlety in his strategic retreats. An enemy may appear to flee as though defeated when his actual aim is to gain advantage. This was Joshua's stratagem by which he caught the men of Ai in a trap (Joshua 8). Scripture records not only Satan being driven out, but also the unclean spirit going out voluntarily — yet with the intent to return and bring worse company with him (Matthew 12:43). Satan is not always driven back by the power of conquering grace. Sometimes he withdraws and lifts his own siege — specifically to lure the Christian out from his fortified position into the open field, where he can catch the one he could not reach while still behind his defenses. Temptations drive the saint to his stronghold, just as the sight of a dog sends a rabbit to its burrow. The soul keeps watch, stays on guard, and dares not neglect duty while the enemy is just below the walls firing in temptations constantly. But when Satan seems to abandon the attack and the Christian notices he is no longer troubled by those familiar stirrings — he is prone to relax his diligence, grow careless in duty, and become either inconsistent or merely going through the motions. This is what happened to the Romans, whose courage faded

without the Carthaginian army to keep them sharp. Whether Satan is tempting or not, attacking or retreating — stay in order, hold your fighting posture. Let his apparent flight strengthen your faith, but do not let it weaken your watchfulness. The Parthians do their enemies the most damage during their retreat, firing their arrows as they run — and Satan can do the same to you, if an apparent victory makes you careless.

### CHAPTER 3. OF SATAN'S SUBTLETY IN CHOOSING INSTRUMENTS FIT FOR HIS TURN TO CARRY ON HIS TEMPTING DESIGN



**T**he third way Satan shows his subtlety as a tempter is in the choice of instruments he uses to carry out his design. He is the master craftsman who designs the temptation and gives it its shape — but sometimes he has workers to finish the job. He knows his work can often be done more effectively through others when he does not appear openly himself. There is not the same natural affinity between an angelic being and a human as there is between one person and another. Therefore Satan cannot approach us as naturally and personally as a fellow human can. In this, as in other things, he imitates God. You will recall that this same reasoning explains why the Israelites asked God not to speak to them directly but through Moses — and God approved: "They have spoken well," He said, "I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you" (Deuteronomy 18:17). In the same way, Satan uses people just like us as his instruments. Through them he becomes more familiar and is less easily suspected, while — like Joab — he gets someone else to do his work. Not just anyone will

serve his purpose, however. He is very selective about the instruments he chooses. Not every soldier is suited for a diplomatic mission, or for betraying a city, or similar tasks. Satan carefully considers who can serve his ends most effectively. In this he differs from God, who is not selective about His instruments — because He needs no one and can accomplish His purposes equally through any person. But since Satan's power is limited, he must make up for the lion's weakness with the fox's cunning. The people Satan targets for his instruments fall into four main categories.

First, persons of position and power. Second, persons of talent and cunning. Third, persons of holiness, or at least those reputed to be holy. Fourth, persons of close relationship and personal influence.

First, Satan chooses persons of position and power. These are found in either civil government or the church. If he can, he will secure the throne and the pulpit — the two fortresses that command the entire line. Men of power in civil government have always been a target of his meddling. A prince or ruler can stand for a thousand — which is why Paul said to Elymas when he tried to turn the proconsul away from the faith, "You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the devil" (Acts 13:10) — as if to say: you learned this from your father the devil, haunting the courts of princes and working your way into the favor of the powerful. Satan has a double strategy in winning such people to his side. First, no one has such power to draw others along: corrupt the captain, and he will likely bring his whole company with him. When men of standing in their tribes sided with Korah, a large crowd was immediately drawn into the conspiracy. When Jeroboam set up idolatry, Israel was quickly ensnared — the people willingly followed his

command (Hosea 5:11). Second, even if the sin remained confined to the court and spread no further, the sin of a great man — even a good one — can cost an entire kingdom dearly (1 Chronicles 21:1). Satan stirred up trouble against Israel by provoking David to count the people. He had a grievance against Israel, and he settled it through their king's sin, which brought a devastating plague down on their heads. Second, Satan targets those in positions of office within the church. There is no more effective way to infect an entire city than to poison the cistern from which everyone draws water. Who would persuade Ahab not to go to Ramoth-gilead to his death? Satan had a plan: "I will be a deceiving spirit in the mouth of all his prophets" (1 Kings 22:22). How can the godless be hardened in their sins? Have the preacher smooth things over and cry "Peace, peace" — and it is done. How can the worship of God be brought into contempt? Let Hophni and Phinehas live scandalously, and many — both good and bad — will despise the offering of the Lord.

Second, Satan employs people of talent and cunning. If anyone has a sharper mind and greater depth of reasoning than others, that is the person Satan looks for in his service. He succeeds at this to such a degree that very few of this class are found among Christ's disciples — "not many wise" (1 Corinthians 1:26). God will not have His kingdom — whether in the heart or in the world — maintained by human cleverness. The gospel command is that we walk in godly simplicity, without pretense. The serpent can coil itself and appear to be something it is not — but this does not become the saints. When any of them have resorted to the serpent's cunning, it has not served them well. Jacob obtained the blessing through a scheme, but he could have received it more cheaply

through straightforward dealing. Abraham and Sarah both deceived Abimelech — and God exposed their sin and rebuked them for it through the mouth of a pagan. Asa, for reasons of state policy, allied himself with Syria — even pawning the sacred vessels of the sanctuary to secure help. What came of it? "In this you have acted foolishly," God said, "indeed, from now on you will have wars" (2 Chronicles 16:9). Sinful cleverness will not prosper long in the saints' hands. But Satan does not abandon his ways — he searches for the sharpest minds: a Balaam, an Ahithophel, a Haman, a Sanballat — men admired for their counsel and deep scheming. These are the ones suited for his purposes. A wicked cause needs a smooth orator; bad goods need a persuasive salesman. In particular, the instruments Satan uses to seduce and corrupt people's minds are typically men of subtle intelligence — the kind who, if it were possible, would deceive even the elect. This is what made the apostle so anxious for the Corinthians, whom he had brought to Christ: he feared that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent, so their minds might be led astray from their pure devotion to Christ. It takes a genuinely cunning devil to pull the bride's affections away from her beloved — yet there is such a bewitching power in Satan's instruments that many have been led to turn against the very truths and ordinances — indeed, against Christ Himself — to whom they once seemed committed. This kind of instrument shows their master's subtlety in three particular ways.

First, these instruments show their master's subtlety by attacking the reputations of Christ's faithful servants. This is Satan's old trick: to build up his own credibility by destroying the reputation of those who faithfully serve Christ. He taught Korah, Dathan, and

Abiram to charge Moses and Aaron: "You take too much upon yourselves, since all the congregation is holy" (Numbers 16:3). They tried to convince the people that Moses and Aaron were acting out of pride, claiming an exclusive monopoly as if only Aaron and his associates were holy enough to offer incense. Through this cunning strategy, they seduced nearly the entire congregation to their side for a time. Similarly, the false prophets — Satan's hired witnesses to Ahab — turned viciously on the faithful Micaiah. Our Savior Himself was treated no better by the Pharisees and their allies. And Paul, the foremost of the apostles, had his ministry undermined and his reputation attacked by false teachers, who portrayed him as a weak and unremarkable preacher: "His personal presence is unimpressive and his speech contemptible" (2 Corinthians 10:10). And this is your great man?

Second, these instruments display their master's subtlety by covering their deceptions and errors with carefully chosen ideas and genuine truths. Arius himself, and other dangerous agents of Satan, were too shrewd to fill their teaching with nothing but false doctrine. They sprinkled genuine and precious truths throughout their teaching, but blended their corrupt principles in with such skill that the mixture was not easily detected. As one observer notes, Christ warned His disciples about exactly this when He told them to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees — meaning their errors. But why leaven? Because of how secretly it is mixed into the wholesome bread. You do not make your entire loaf out of leaven — no one would eat it. Instead, you work a small amount into a whole batch, and it sours everything. Christ was telling His disciples that the Pharisees mixed their errors among many truths — so they needed to be on guard, lest the error go down along with the

truth. Furthermore, leaven looks very much like the dough itself — it is made from the same grain, differing only in age and sourness. Christ was pointing out that the Pharisees' errors closely resembled the truth, being scraped from Scripture but turned sour by their own false interpretations. This is precisely what makes it easy for Christ's sheep to be infected with the disease of error — because the weed that causes the rot looks so much like the grass that nourishes them.

Third, their subtlety appears in promoting teachings that are lenient toward the flesh. This draws whole crowds of naive souls into their net. The human heart loves to shape a religion according to its own desires, and readily believes whatever favors its own inclinations. There are three lusts that Satan's instruments aim to satisfy through their teaching: carnal reason, pride, and fleshly liberty.

First, carnal reason — this is the great idol worshiped by the more intellectual segment of the world, who make it the very standard of their faith. From this bitter root have grown the Arian and Socinian heresies. Anyone who will go no further than reason can carry them may manage tolerably in the plain territory of the moral law — but when they come to the depths of the gospel, they must either turn back or accept that faith must carry reason over what it cannot cross on its own.

Second, another lust Satan feeds is pride. By nature, man wants to be his own god — though his attempt to climb that high is what caused his fall in the first place. Whatever teaching flatters a good opinion of oneself is welcome, and this has given birth to another dangerous family of errors. These are the Pelagian and semi-Pelagian errors, which set human nature on its own feet and per-

suade people that they can come to Christ on their own, or at least with only mild external assistance — a guiding hand, or an argument to motivate them — without any new creating work being done in the soul. We cannot imagine how smoothly such ideas go down. Suppose one builder tells you that your house is rotten and must be torn down, with all new materials brought in — while another says nothing of the sort: this beam is fine, that rafter can stay, a little repair work will do. It would be no surprise at all if you preferred the one who asked less of you. The faithful servants of Christ tell sinners from Scripture that in their natural state they are corrupt and rotten — that nothing of the old frame will serve, and everything must be made new. But along comes an Arminian, who flatters the sinner's pride and tells him he is not as weak or wicked as the others make out. "If you choose to, you can repent and believe — or at least by putting forth your natural abilities, you can oblige God to supply what you lack." That is the builder proud hearts will always prefer.

Third, Satan uses his instruments to feed the desire for fleshly freedom that is natural to every person — who is by nature a child of Belial, unwilling to wear any yoke. And if he must wear one, the one that pleases him most is the one with the softest lining and the least pressure on the flesh. So when faithful teachers of Scripture hold firm to the strictness of God's commands and press for sincere obedience, Satan's instruments step in and say: these are harsh taskmasters who will not allow the Christian a single day off from duty, but keep him in constant obligation. "We will show you an easier road to heaven." "Come," says the Roman Catholic, "confess to the priest once a year — pay him well for his trouble — be an obedient son of the church, and we will overlook the rest."

"Come," says the antinomian, "the gospel charter allows far more freedom than these law-bound preachers tell you. They demand repentance and faith, when Christ has already done all of that on your behalf. What is left for you to do but enjoy life?" There must be something in it — that deceivers find such quick returns for their product while truth moves slowly. Is it not this: they are willing to sell heaven to their followers at a lower price than Christ offers it to His? He who sells cheapest will always have the most customers. But in the end, the best is the best bargain. Truth with self-denial is a far greater value than error with all its pleasures for the flesh.

Third, Satan selects people who have a great reputation for holiness. Nothing works better than a live decoy bird to draw other birds into the net. But can people of genuine holiness really do this kind of work for the devil? Yes — such is Satan's cunning, and the weakness of even the best Christians, that the most godly people have served as his instruments to lead others astray. Abraham tempted his wife to lie: "Say you are my sister." The old prophet led the man of God off his path (1 Kings 13) — and the man's reputation for holiness, combined with the prophet's age, likely gave authority to his counsel. How carefully this should make you walk — you who by long service and great progress in the ways of God have earned a name for spiritual maturity in the church. What you say, do, and believe carries weight, because others look more to you than to their own path.

Fourth, Satan chooses people who are closely connected by relationship or affection to those he wants to influence. Some will welcome the gift for the sake of the one who brings it. David would likely not have received from Nabal what he accepted from Abigail

— and he thanked her for it. Satan delivered the forbidden fruit to Adam through Eve's hand. Delilah accomplished more with Samson than all the Philistine armies combined. Job's wife brought him the poison: "Curse God and die." Some think Satan intentionally spared her life when he destroyed Job's children and servants — though she was technically within the scope of his permitted harm — because she was the most effective instrument, through her close relationship and his deep affection for her, to lead him into temptation. Satan used Peter, a disciple, to tempt Christ — and at another time used Christ's friends and relatives. Some martyrs have confessed that the hardest trial they faced was overcoming the prayers and tears of those closest to them. Even Paul could not escape this trap without real anguish: "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart?" (Acts 21:13).

## CHAPTER 4. WHEREIN THIS POINT OF SATAN'S SUBTLETY, AS A TEMPTER TO SIN, IS BRIEFLY APPLIED



**F**irst application: Do not pursue sinful cleverness and manipulation — it only makes you like the devil. There is a kind of wisdom belonging to the serpent that is commended, and that is his natural excellence as a creature — the literal serpent excels other animals in its shrewd, observant nature, and the mystical serpent excels humans in knowledge as an angel. But when the cunning of the one and the knowledge of the other are turned toward harm — the first to harm bodies, the other to harm souls — that kind of wisdom must be abhorred. The serpent's eye, as someone rightly says, is only fitting when it is in the dove's head.

First, do not be shrewd in plotting any sin. Some are skilled at doing evil (Jeremiah 4:22) — masters of this craft who, lying in bed, can work out their wicked schemes with a kind of devilish ingenuity. Think of the Egyptians who "dealt shrewdly" with the Israelites, or Jezebel, whose bloody design was drawn up in such fine-looking language that some might have mistaken her for a saint while she was playing the devil. This is the dark art that will

blacken the soul of whoever practices it. And it is not difficult to learn — even a fool can master it. Be willing to do evil, and the devil will supply the cleverness. Spend some time in his school, and you can quickly become cunning. No sins reveal a higher degree of wickedness than those that result from deliberate planning and deep scheming. Just as animals that carry their young longer produce offspring that are stronger and more fully developed — the elephant above all others — so the longer a sin is being formed and worked over inside, and the more times the head and heart conspire together over it, the more complete and devastating the sin. By contrast, many unformed sins are conceived and thrown out in the heat of sudden passion. Those impulsive acts show weakness; the premeditated ones show deep wickedness.

Second, beware of concealing sin once you have committed it. This is one of the schemes that is native to the human heart, and as much cunning is on display in hiding sin as in any other part of the sinner's craft. What a trick the patriarch's sons used to blind their father's eyes with a blood-stained coat. Joseph's master's wife, to get ahead of any accusation from Joseph, accused him of the very thing she was guilty of — like a thief who escapes by shouting "Stop the thief!" God taught people to make garments to cover their naked bodies — but the devil taught them to weave coverings to hide the nakedness of their souls. The more clever you think you are in hiding your sin, the more completely you are playing the fool. No one is more humiliated than the liar when found out — and found out you certainly will be. Your cover is too short to hide you from God's eyes, and what God sees He will, if you do not expose it yourself, reveal before the whole world in the end — however well you escape in this life.

Third, beware of using cunning and sinful cleverness even in pursuing legitimate ends. It is perfectly lawful to improve your finances and manage them well for your family's future — but do not take the devil's advice, which will lead you toward tricks in your trade and deceit in your dealings. Such people may pass as shrewd for a time, but the prophet has read their destiny: "At the end he will be a fool" (Jeremiah 17:11). It is lawful to love your estate, your life, and your freedom — but beware of sinful scheming to preserve them. It is no wisdom to play games with God by denying His truth or evading your duty in order to keep peace with people. A fencer who leaves his soul exposed to be run through with guilt, while he is busy lifting his hands to protect a minor wound on his head, is a poor swordsman. The very fear we are running from commonly meets us at the door we were running toward. "Whoever tries to save his life will lose it." If you value your peace, Christians, be straightforward with God and with people, and stay on the king's highway. Go the plain road of the command to reach your goal — do not leap over hedges and ditches trying to get there a little sooner. Those who do typically either meet some obstacle that sends them back in shame, or find themselves risking their necks at some desperate leap. The one who is willing to go a little further around in order to keep company with God is sure to arrive home more safely, if not more quickly. The historian's observation is worth remembering: crafty counsels look promising at first, prove harder to carry through in the middle, and in the end repay those who attempted them with deep regret. (Livy)

Second application: Since Satan is so subtle, do not think you can outsmart him. He will get the better of you in the end. Do not sin with plans to repent afterward. You may sincerely intend that

right now — but do you really think you are sitting down to gamble with a cheat, free to collect your winnings and walk away whenever you choose? Poor soul, he has a thousand devices to draw you deeper and deeper, until he has left no tenderness in your conscience at all. Some have sat down to gamble intending only to risk a small amount, yet through the secret hold that gambling takes on a person, have ended up playing away the very clothes on their back before they could stop. How many have in this same way sinned away all their principles — indeed, their very profession of faith — until they have not even that much left as a cover, but walk in open shame? They are like children who climb into a boat intending to play near the shore, but are swept by a sudden gust out to the open sea before they know what has happened. How do you know, you who play lightly with Satan, that you will not in the end be carried out to the wide sea of open godlessness — you who are beginning so modestly? Some men are so cunning in trapping people and so merciless once they have them in their grip that a person would be better off begging than borrowing from them. Satan is exactly this kind of dealer — skilled at winning people's trust and drawing them into his debt, and when he has them at his mercy, as merciless as the wolf is to the lamb.

Third application: Study Satan's schemes and familiarize yourself with his methods. Paul assumes that every saint understands them to some degree: "We are not ignorant of his schemes" (2 Corinthians 2:11). Only a poor fighter pays no attention to how his opponent attacks. I have already laid out many of his particular strategies, which may be of some help. For your further guidance in studying and understanding Satan's schemes, take this threefold counsel.

First, take God into your counsel. Heaven has a clear view of hell. At any time, God can tell you what plots are being hatched there against you. Think of Satan as God's creature — and as such, God cannot but know him completely. The one who makes a watch knows every pin in it. God formed this twisted serpent, though not the twistedness of this serpent. And though Satan's method of tempting is as difficult to trace as the way of a serpent on a rock, God tracks him perfectly — indeed, God knows all his thoughts at once. Hell itself is laid bare before God, and this destroyer has no place to hide. Furthermore, think of Satan as God's prisoner — held fast in chains. The Lord, as his keeper, necessarily knows where His prisoner goes, for Satan cannot move without His permission. Finally, think of Satan as God's messenger — for that is what he is: "An evil spirit from the Lord troubled Saul." And the one who gives him his assignment is perfectly able to tell you what it is. Go then and make use of God's resources. Draw on your relationship with Christ, who knows what His Father knows and is ready to reveal everything that concerns you (John 15:15). It was Christ who detected Satan's coming against Peter and the other apostles and faithfully warned them of it (Luke 22) before they suspected anything. Everything transacted in heaven and hell passes through Christ's hands. We live in times of great action, deep scheming, and plots on every side. Only those at the very center of power understand what is happening — everyone else knows only what gets printed in pamphlets. It is just the same with Satan's plots against the souls of people: very few understand anything significant about what he is planning against them. But the saints are among those few — those from whom God will not hide His own counsels of love, but through His Spirit reveals what He

has prepared for them in heaven (1 Corinthians 2:10). How much less, then, will He conceal any destructive scheme of Satan from them.

Get to know your own heart well, and you will better understand Satan's designs against you — since he tailors his method of tempting to the tendencies and condition of your heart. Just as a general walks around a city, studies it carefully, and then positions his artillery where he has the greatest advantage — so Satan surveys and sizes up the Christian from every angle before he attacks.

Finally, read the Word of God carefully and attentively. In it you have the record of the most significant battles fought by the most outstanding soldiers in Christ's army of saints against this great warrior Satan. Here you can see how Satan has overcome them, and how they recovered the ground they lost. Here His secret plans are exposed. Every lust you face is described in Scripture; every temptation the Word arms you against. It is reported that a certain man once attempted to poison Luther, but was stopped when a faithful friend sent Luther a picture of the man with a warning to watch for him. By that means Luther recognized the would-be murderer and escaped. The Word shows you, O Christian, the face of the very lusts Satan sends against your soul. "By them Your servant is warned," says David (Psalm 19:11).

CHAPTER 5. WHEREIN IS SHOWED  
THE SUBTLETY OF SATAN AS A  
TROUBLER AND AN ACCUSER FOR  
SIN, WHERE MANY OF HIS WILES  
AND POLICIES TO DISQUIET THE  
SAINTS' SPIRITS ARE DISCOVERED



**T**he second major area in which Satan proves himself such a subtle enemy is in troubling the saints' peace and disturbing their spirits. Just as the Holy Spirit's work is not only to sanctify but also to comfort — His fruit being righteousness and peace — so the evil spirit Satan is both a seducer to sin and an accuser for sin, both a tempter and a troubler. And he works in the same order. As the Holy Spirit first sanctifies and then comforts, so Satan first tempts and then accuses. Potiphar's wife first tried to get Joseph to gratify her lust; when that failed, she turned to charging him — using his coat as evidence to cover her malice. Nor is it hard for Satan to find some opening in the saint's coat when he is walking most carefully. The proper seat of sin is the will; the proper seat of comfort is the conscience. Satan has no direct access or absolute power over either, since they are locked to all but God. Therefore everything he does — whether defiling temptations or

unsettling distress — is by schemes rather than open force. And he is no less skilled at troubling the saints than at tempting them. Satan moves like a serpent. Other creatures move in a direct line, but the serpent winds and twists its body as it travels, so that when you watch it, you can hardly tell which way it is actually heading. So Satan, in his tormenting temptations, works through many twisting and complex strategies, turning this way and that to conceal his design from the saint. These methods are set out below.

### SECTION 1.

First, Satan troubles the Christian by laying his own children at the saint's door — charging him with what is actually Satan's own creation. He has such remarkable skill at this that many dear saints of God are terribly tormented and crushed, as though they were the vilest blasphemers and most complete atheists in the world. Yet in reality, Satan has put the cup in their sack — only so secretly slipped it into the saint's heart that the Christian, though horrified and frightened by these thoughts, and distrustful of his own heart, cannot understand how such movements could have come to him — if not bred within and thrown up by his own corrupt heart. And so he bears the guilt himself, unable to identify the true source, mourning as one who is abandoned and rejected by God: "Surely," he says, "if God had not forsaken me, I would never have such filth of hell crawling in my heart." This is exactly what Satan aimed for. He is not foolish enough to hope that truly blasphemous and atheistic thoughts would be welcomed in a soul that has already turned him away when he came with enticing offers. His design is revenge — since the soul will not give itself over to his other lusts, he haunts it and terrifies it with these imps of blasphemy. He did

something similar with Luther: when Luther drove him off, Satan left a foul stench behind him in the room. So when the Christian has beaten Satan back in his more pleasant temptations, Satan in his fury belches out this stench of blasphemous impulses to torment and horrify him — hoping the Christian will draw some dark conclusion from them. And in fact, the Christian's fault lies more in the conclusion he draws from them (such as that he must not be a child of God) than in the impulses themselves. The counsel I give in this case is to treat these impulses as you would treat vagrants and troublemakers who pass through your town. You cannot stop them from passing through, but you can make sure they do not settle there — you drive them out and send them back where they came from. Deal with these impulses the same way: mourn over them, resist them, and they will not be charged to your account. In fact, you will likely be troubled by such visitors less often. But if you begin to entertain them and nurture them as though they were your own, then God's law will hold you responsible for them.

## SECTION 2.

Second, another scheme of Satan as a troubler is exaggerating the saints' sins. He has a remarkable talent for this kind of attack — not because he hates the sin, but because he hates the saint. His chief subtlety here is to frame his accusation so that it appears to come from the Holy Spirit. He knows that an arrow from God's quiver wounds deeply — so when he accuses, he comes in God's name. Imagine a child who knows he has displeased his father, and an enemy who wants to torment him forges a letter from the father and cunningly places it in the son's hands. The son receives it as genuinely from his father — a letter charging him with serious of-

fenses, disowning him, and threatening to cut him off entirely. The poor son, already aware of his many failures, not knowing it is a forgery, is devastated, unable to eat or sleep for grief. A real torment is produced from a completely false and invented cause. This is exactly how Satan operates. He observes the state of things between God and His children. He sees a particular saint falling short in one duty, failing in another — and he knows the Christian is aware of this, and that the Spirit of God will also show His displeasure over these things. Both of these facts prompt Satan to draw up a long indictment, gathering every aggravating circumstance he can find, and then present it to the saint as if it came from God. This is how he taught Job's friends to gather the weaknesses Job had shown in his distress and throw them back in his face — as though they had been sent from God to declare him a hypocrite and announce divine judgment against him.

Question: How can we tell Satan's false accusations apart from the genuine rebukes of God and His Spirit?

Answer. First, if the accusations contradict a previous work of the Spirit in your soul, they are from Satan, not from the Holy Spirit. Observe what Satan is actually trying to do when he accuses the Christian and exaggerates his sin: his goal is to make the Christian feel he is not a true saint at all, and to convince him he is merely a hypocrite. "Now you have shown your true colors," Satan says. "Look at that foul spot on your coat — that is not the mark of a child of God. What genuine saint ever committed such a sin in such a way?" "All those assurances and joys you boasted about were false, I promise you." So at one blow Satan tries to shatter everything. The entire structure of grace that God has been building in the soul for many years must be blown down at one breath from

his malicious lips, and all the sweet comforts by which the Holy Spirit has sealed God's love in the heart must be erased by this single blot that Satan draws across the clean page of the saint's evidence. But take comfort in this: if the Spirit of God has ever begun a work of sanctification or comfort in you — causing you to hope in God's mercy — He has never been, and never can be, the one to bring you opposite news. His language is not yes and no — it is yes and amen, forever. When a saint strays, the Spirit can rebuke — He will show His displeasure and plainly confront the soul about its sin, as He did with David through Nathan: "You are the man — you have done this." And He described David's sin in such vivid and piercing terms that David's heart melted like water. But that was not all — the Spirit also told David what punishment was coming, one that would cut deeply: a member of his own household, his own beloved son, would rise up against him. By this God wanted David to understand how grievously He viewed that sin, committed by a child of His, a saint — to experience what it means to have his own dear son treacherously rebel against him and ruthlessly hunt for his life. Yet through all of this, not a single word from Nathan told David to consider himself no longer a saint, or to question the work God had done in his soul. Nathan had no such commission from God. He was sent to make David mourn for his sin — not to make him question his standing with God, which God had established so clearly so many times before.

Second, when the accusations attack the richness of God's grace and reflect poorly on God's own character, they are not from the Holy Spirit but from Satan. When your sins are presented and magnified to you as exceeding either the mercy of God's nature or the grace of His covenant — here the devil reveals himself. This

comes from that foul liar. The Holy Spirit is Christ's advocate, sent to commend Him to souls and draw sinners to embrace the grace of the gospel. Could such words fall from His sacred lips as would break off that match and lower Christ in the thoughts of a person? You can easily identify where that voice is coming from. When you hear someone praise another man as wise and good, but then add a "but" that overturns everything — you can tell immediately that this is no friend, but a subtle enemy who uses apparent praise to make the man look worse. In the same way, when you hear God described as merciful and gracious, but "not to a great sinner like you" — as powerful, but "not strong enough to save you" — you can say: Away with you, Satan. Your words give you away.

### SECTION 3.

Third, another strategy of Satan is picking apart the Christian's prayers and spiritual duties, putting him to enormous toil and distress. Satan is at church before you are, Christian — he is literally standing beneath your closet window listening to what you say to God in private, all the while working out how to bring a charge against you based on your own prayers and devotions. He is like those who attend sermons only to find fault with the preacher, to make him an offender for a misplaced word. He is like a clever debater who, while his opponent is still presenting his argument, is already studying how to tear it apart. Satan has such skill at this that he can take our spiritual duties apart piece by piece and distort them so badly that they appear merely formal — no matter how earnest they were — and hypocritical, no matter how much genuine sincerity was in them. When you have finished a duty, Christian, this deceiver stands up to unravel your work: "There you

were playing the hypocrite — zealous, but serving yourself. Here your mind wandered, there you nearly fell asleep; a little further on you swelled with pride. What reward can you expect from God now that you have ruined His work and cut it all to pieces?" This way he drives many poor souls to live an exhausted and miserable life. Nothing they do escapes his attack, until they do not know whether they should pray or not, listen to preaching or not, and whether — when they have done so — it has amounted to anything at all. Their souls hang in uncertainty and their days pass in sorrow, while their enemy stands in a corner laughing at the trick he has played on them — like someone who drops a fake spider in the dish, making those at the table either too disgusted to eat or afraid they have been poisoned after eating.

Question: What should we do in this case to resist Satan's attacks against our spiritual duties?

First, let this make you more careful and diligent in everything you do. This is exactly the purpose God has in allowing Satan to watch over you so closely — that you, as His children, would be more careful, knowing you have a watcher who will report your failures to God and accuse you to your own conscience. Does it not make sense to write your letter carefully when you know such a sharp critic will read and scrutinize every word? Does it not make sense to know your own heart well, to study Scripture diligently, and to understand your soul's standing in every case of conscience — when you have such a cunning opponent ready to challenge every answer you give?

Second, let this make you more humble. If Satan can find so much to charge you with in your best duties — what could God Himself find? God sometimes allows the weaknesses of His people

to be noticed by the ungodly, who are quick to jeer at them for it — and His purpose is to humble His people. How much more should Satan's accusations — which are, in large part, all too accurate — drive us low before God?

Third, identify the logical errors in Satan's argument — and once you see through them, you will be able to answer his challenge. The errors are twofold.

First, Satan tries to convince you that you and your duties are hypocritical, proud, and merely formal, simply because some of those sins can be found in your duty. But, Christian, learn to distinguish between pride in a duty and a proud duty, between hypocrisy in a person and a hypocrite, between wine in a man and a man in wine. Even the best saints have these corruptions stirring within them and in their prayers. These birds will land on Abraham's sacrifice — but take comfort in this: if you find within your heart a party that pleads for God and registers its protest against those corruptions, then you and your duties are spiritually acceptable before God. God sees these things as the weaknesses of your frail and imperfect state here below, and He pities you — as you would pity your own lame child. How offensive we find someone who mocks a person for a natural disability, a clouded eye, or a halting tongue. These corruptions in your new nature are exactly like that. Notice what Christ does in His prayer against Satan in Zechariah 3:2: "The Lord said to Satan, 'The Lord rebuke you' — is this not a brand plucked from the fire?" It is as if Christ said: Lord, will You allow this envious spirit to taunt Your poor child and charge him for the weaknesses that cling to his imperfect state? He has only just been pulled out of the fire. It is no wonder there are still some sparks unquenched, some corruption unmortified, some

disorder unreformed in his life. And what Christ did for Joshua, He does without ceasing for all His saints — constantly pleading with His Father for their weaknesses.

Second, his other error is arguing from the sin that is in our duties to their rejection by God. "Do you really think," Satan asks, "that God will accept such broken payment from you? Is He not a holy God?" Here, Christian, learn the distinction and answer Satan directly. There are two kinds of acceptance. There is acceptance as payment of a debt, and there is acceptance of a gift offered as a token of love and gratitude. A man may refuse counterfeit money or a partial payment when a debt is owed — yet the same man, if a friend sends him even a bent coin as a sign of affection, will receive it warmly. It is true, Christian, that the debt you owe to God must be paid in full and lawful currency — but your comfort is that Christ is your paymaster. Send Satan to Him; tell Satan to bring his charges against Christ, who stands at God's right hand ready to settle the accounts and show the full discharge of the entire debt. Your personal duties and obedience fall under a completely different category — they are tokens of your love and gratitude to God. And such is the gracious nature of your heavenly Father that He accepts your mite. Love refuses nothing that love sends. It is not the weight or value of the gift — it is the heart behind it that makes it kindness.

#### SECTION 4.

A fourth strategy of Satan as a troubler is to drag the saint into deep despair under the plausible pretense that he has not been sufficiently broken over his sin. The apostle specifically identifies this as one of the devil's schemes: "We are not ignorant of his devices"

— his deceptive arguments (2 Corinthians 2:11). Satan places great stock in this tactic; it is one of his most frequently used weapons. What Christian has not encountered him at this door? Satan finds the Christian easily worked on here, since the conditions are already in his favor — the Christian is on his own complaining of his hardness of heart, and is very prone to believe anyone who agrees with his gloomy thoughts. He tends to think that anyone who tries to tell him otherwise is just flattering him. It is far easier to deepen the shade of a soul that is already dark with sorrow than to bring it into the light of joy and comfort.

Question: How should I answer this subtle enemy when he troubles my spirit with the accusation that I have not mourned enough for sin?

Answer. As with the previous cases: identify the logical error in his argument, and his mouth is quickly stopped.

First, Satan argues like this: There should be a proportion between sin and sorrow. But there is no proportion between your sins and your sorrow. Therefore you have not mourned enough. At first glance, what a compelling argument. For the major premise — that there should be a proportion between sin and sorrow — Satan will show you Scripture. Manasseh was a great sinner, and ordinary sorrow was not enough for him: "He humbled himself greatly before the Lord" (2 Chronicles 33:12). "Now," says Satan, "weigh your sin against your sorrow. Are you as great a mourner as you have been a sinner? For so many years you have waged war against the Almighty, trampling His laws, straining His patience to the breaking point, piercing the side of Christ with your bloody dagger — while you were grieving His Spirit and rejecting His grace. Do you think a little remorse, like a cloud dropping a few tears, will

now be accepted? No — you must steep in sorrow as long as you soaked in sin." Now let me show you the error in this argument. We must distinguish between two kinds of proportion in sorrow.

First, an exact proportion of sorrow matching the inherent nature and full weight of the sin committed.

Second, there is a proportion measured by the standard of the gospel. The first kind — exact proportion matching the full weight of sin — is not actually achievable, because the injury done in even the smallest sin is infinite, since it is committed against an infinite God. And even if it could be achieved, it would still not be acceptable according to the terms of the old covenant, which contained no clause offering hope through later repentance. But the second kind — gospel sorrow — is genuine repentance that leads to life. It is both given by the Spirit of the gospel and measured by the rule of the gospel. This is the path provided for your relief. You know how on a road that is flooded in places, there is sometimes a foot-bridge or a raised causeway alongside, so travelers can bypass the flood and pass safely. No one with eyes and good sense would wade through the waters when they can walk around the danger. If you try to match your sorrow exactly to the weight of your sin, you are a dead man. You will quickly find yourself in over your head — drowning in your own tears and never getting past even one sin you have committed. Do not go down that path if you value your life. Turn instead to this gospel path, and you will escape the danger. O you tempted souls — when Satan says you have not mourned enough, remember where your relief is to be found. "I am a Roman citizen," Paul said, "I appeal to Caesar." Say: "I am a Christian. I appeal to Christ's law." And what is the law of the gospel on this matter? Heart-sorrow is gospel sorrow. "They were

pierced to the heart" (Acts 2:37) — and Peter, like a good surgeon, did not leave those bleeding patients in pain with their wounds open. He immediately applied the healing remedy of the gospel: "Believe in the Lord Jesus." A wound to the heart is more than a wound to the conscience. The heart is the seat of life. Sin wounded there is a dying sin. Doing anything from the heart makes it acceptable (Ephesians 6:6). Poor soul, would you have sat this long in the devil's prison if you had understood this clearly? Does your heart clear you or condemn you when you are alone before God, mourning over your sin? If your heart is false, I cannot help you — not even the gospel can. But if it is sincere, you have confident access to God.

A second argument Satan uses runs like this: If your sorrow falls short of someone who never truly repented, you have not mourned enough. And your sorrow does fall short of some who never truly repented. Therefore you have not mourned enough. The first premise is true enough. But how will Satan prove the second? This way: Ahab grieved over his sin and put on sackcloth. Judas made a bitter confession. "Did you not know," Satan says, "someone who was under the terror of a troubled conscience for many months, going about in a mournful condition — and everyone thought he was the greatest convert in the area? Yet in the end he fell badly and became an apostate. But you have never felt such sharp conviction, never passed so many weary days and nights in mourning and bitter lamentation as he did. So your sorrow falls short of someone whose sorrow still fell short of genuine repentance." And truly this is a painful stumbling block for a soul in a moment of temptation. It is like a ship sunk right at the harbor mouth — more dangerous to others than if it had gone down in the

open sea. The sins of the openly wicked cause less damage to others, because they sink in the broad sea of godlessness far from shore. But those who are convicted of sin, troubled in conscience, and then fall apart so close to the harbor — within sight, as it were, of saving grace — these cause far more damage to those who see them. Tempted souls can hardly navigate past these examples without being shaken. "Am I any better than that person who turned out to be nothing in the end?" Now, to help you see through the error in this argument, we must distinguish between the terrors that can accompany sorrow and the essential nature of the grace of repentance itself. Terrors, while they sometimes accompany sorrow, can be separated from it — just as the rage of the sea driven by the wind can be separated from the sea itself when the wind dies down. From this distinction, draw two conclusions.

First, a person may have less terror than a hypocrite who had intense terror accompanying his sorrow, and yet possess the genuine grace of repentance — which the hypocrite with all his terror lacked. Christians make many mistakes by judging by what is incidental to a grace rather than by what is essential to it. Sometimes you hear someone pray with moving expression — while you can barely get out a few broken words yourself — and you are ready to condemn yourself and admire him, as though the gilded handle makes the key open the lock better. You see another person overflowing with joy that you do not have, and are quick to conclude his grace is greater and yours is less — when in reality you may have more genuine grace, but simply lack the light to see where it lies. Be careful about judging by incidentals. Perhaps you have not heard the rattling of hell's chains, or felt the outcries of the condemned thundering through your conscience until your body

trembled. But have you not seen in the bleeding Christ something that melted and broke your heart — indeed, that made you loathe and hate your sins more deeply than the devil himself? It is strange, Christian, to hear a patient complain about his doctor simply because, when the medicine worked effectively — clearing out the disorder and restoring his health — he was not made as sick as other patients by it. You have far more reason to bless God that the convictions of His Spirit worked so gently in you, accomplishing in you without all that terror what has cost others so dearly.

Second, this is actually a very weak argument — and in fact, the opposite is true: the greater the terror, the less the genuine sorrow for sin tends to be, while that terror remains. Terrors are sometimes preparatory to true sorrow. They precede this grace the way the austere John the Baptist preceded the gentle Jesus. But just as John decreased when Christ increased, so as true godly sorrow increases, these terrors decrease. Wind gathers clouds — but those clouds rarely fall as steady rain until the wind that gathered them dies down. In the same way, these terrors raise the clouds of our sins in our consciences, but when those sins melt into godly sorrow, the storm is quickly calmed. Indeed, as strong winds blow the rain away, so these terrors actually keep the soul from reaching gospel sorrow. When a person is crying out, "I am condemned, I am condemned!" — he is so consumed with the fear of hell that sin as sin, which is the proper object of godly sorrow, is barely looked at or mourned for. A murderer condemned to death is so gripped by the fear of dying and the thought of the gallows that the body of his victim may lie before him unlamented. But when his pardon arrives, then he can weep freely for the one he killed. "They will

look on Him whom they have pierced, and mourn" (Zechariah 12:10). Faith is the eye. That eye, seeing its sin as the thing that pierced Christ, and seeing Christ pardoning that sin, moves the heart. The heart moved sighs; those inward clouds melt and run from the eye of faith in tears. And all of this happens not in a storm of terror but in the calm atmosphere of love and peace. So, Christian, see how Satan deceives you when he tries to convince you that you have not mourned enough because your sorrow was not accompanied by this kind of legal terror.

## CHAPTER 6. A BRIEF APPLICATION OF THE SECOND BRANCH OF THE POINT — OF SATAN'S SUBTLETY AS A TROUBLER AND ACCUSER FOR SIN



**F**irst application: Is Satan so subtle in disturbing the saints' peace? Then those who show the same craft and subtlety in tormenting the saints' spirits are proving themselves to be children of their infernal father. I will say nothing here about bloody persecutors — Satan's instruments of violence to slaughter the saints — but rather about those who more quietly undermine and trouble the saints' peace.

First, those who dig up the saints' old sins — sins God has forgiven and forgotten — for no other purpose than to wound their spirits and stain their reputation. These reveal truly diabolical malice, going to the trouble of traveling many years into the past just to find a handful of dirt to throw in a saint's face. This is what Shimei did when he taunted David: "Get out, you man of bloodshed!" (2 Samuel 16:7). When you who fear God are met with such reproaches, answer them as Beza answered the Roman Catholics,

who, lacking any other material against him, accused him of some flirtatious poems he had written in his youth. He replied: "These men begrudge me the pardoning mercy of God."

Second, those who watch for the saints to stumble and seize on every weakness to make them look contemptible and themselves amused. Such people bring a dreadful curse upon themselves without realizing it — no less than the curse on Amalek, whose very name God threatened to blot from under heaven. What had Amalek done to deserve this? They struck down those at the back of the march — the feeble ones who could not keep up with the rest. And was it so great a cruelty to do this physically? How much more cruel to strike the feeble in grace with the cutting edge of a mocking tongue.

Third, those who lay their own sins at the saints' door. Ahab called the prophet "the troubler of Israel" — when in fact it was he himself and his father's house who were the trouble (1 Kings 18:17-18). What grief do you think it caused Moses when the Israelites blamed the deaths in the wilderness on him — when God knew he had consistently pleaded as their guarantor every time God's hand was raised to destroy them? And this is the charge that the best of God's servants in our crooked generation face today. "We can thank them," say the ungodly, "for all our recent miseries. We were doing fine until they wanted to reform us." For shame — do not blame the good medicine that was administered. Blame the corrupt body of the nation that could not bear it.

Fourth, those who deliberately sin simply to trouble the saints' spirits. This is what Rabshakeh did — blaspheming openly, and when asked to speak in another language, going on all the more to torment them. Sometimes you will find a godless man — knowing

full well that a certain person is conscientious and cannot bear to hear God's name taken in vain or God's ways mocked — who will deliberately choose exactly that kind of talk to scratch at that sensitive soul and trouble their gracious spirit. Such a person strikes both Father and child with one blow, as if disgracing God were not enough unless the saint is standing there to witness the insult done to his heavenly Father.

Second application: This should move you to wonder and gratitude, O saints who are not at this day under Satan's grip. He is so cunning at creating distress — and yet you have peace in your conscience? To whom do you owe that calm in your spirit? To no one but your God, under whose wing you sit — warm and safe. Is there not enough combustible material in your conscience for his sparks to ignite? Perhaps you have not committed the kind of terrible sins others have — but that is not the reason for your peace. The smallest sin is more than enough to condemn you, let alone to trouble you. Perhaps you have not fallen badly since your conversion — that is rare, if you have been walking with God for a long time. Yet the ghosts of your pre-conversion sins could haunt your conscience. You have received many proofs of God's favor — who more than David? And yet he was sometimes unable to read his own evidence, as though he had never learned. The sense of God's love comes and goes with present experience. The one who is in the dark, while he remains there, does not see any better for the light he once had. O bless God for the light that shines in through your window. Satan is plotting against your comfort every single day. This thief sees your pleasant fruit hanging on the branch, and his mouth waters for it — but the wall is too high for him to climb.

Your God keeps this serpent out of your garden. It is not the grace of God within you, but the favor of God as a shield around you, that defends you from the evil one.

Third application: Let Satan's subtlety in attacking your peace make you, O Christian, more watchful and wise. You are not dealing with a fool — you are dealing with one who has more than enough cunning to spill your comfort and ruin your joy if you are not careful. The peace and joy of your conscience is the delicacy he is always reaching for. It is no easier to keep flies out of the pantry in summer — where they will spoil your food — than it is to keep Satan out of your conscience. He has robbed many saints of many a sweet season of peace, sending them to bed without the supper of God's comfort. Be careful that he does not steal yours as well.

CHAPTER 7. CONTAINING SOME  
DIRECTIONS TENDING TO ENTRENCH  
AND FORTIFY THE CHRISTIAN  
AGAINST THE ASSAULTS AND WILES  
OF THE DEVIL AS A TROUBLER OF  
THE SOUL'S PEACE



**Q**uestion: How can I take a defensive posture against Satan's schemes as a troubler of the soul?

SECTION 1.

First, if you want to be guarded against him as a troubler, take care to guard against him as a seducer. The handle of Satan's ax — the one he uses to chop at the roots of the Christian's peace — is typically made from the Christian's own wood. First he tempts to sin, then he accuses for it. Satan is only a creature and cannot work without materials. He can make much out of little — but he cannot make something out of nothing, as we see in his assault on Christ, where he accomplished nothing because he came and found nothing in Him to work with. Though the devil throws the stone, it is the mud in us that muddies our peace. It was pointless for the

Philistines to attack Samson until his hair was cut. Therefore take care not to give in to Satan's enticing impulses. These are the stumbling blocks over which he hopes you will trip and bruise your conscience — and once that is done, he can take his time making the cure as slow as possible. A saint's conscience does not heal as easily as others. Do not drink Satan's cup — there is poison in it. His wine is a mocker; do not be drawn by how it sparkles in the temptation. What you swallow with sweetness, you will bring back up as bitterness and grief. Above all, beware of presumptuous sins. You are not beyond the danger of them. We have sad stories of saints who fell — and what followed? Then God said, in effect, "Take him, jailer" — "Deliver such a one to Satan." And if a saint is the prisoner and the devil is the keeper, you can imagine what treatment will follow. How Satan will tear and rend a wounded conscience! Even though that solemn act of church discipline is rarely exercised as it should be, God's own court is always in session — and when He withdraws His presence from a soul, that soul immediately falls into Satan's hands. But if through Satan's subtlety you have been caught, do not stay in his territory. Shake the viper off your hand and go quickly to your physician. Fresh wounds heal best — but if you neglect it and let it get air, your conscience will soon fester. Ahab was wounded in battle and was reluctant to give in to it — he was held upright in his chariot — but he died from the wound. When a soul has been wounded by sin, Satan tries to prop it up with flattering reassurances, holding it up, as it were, in its chariot against God. "Give in to this? You're going to lose all the pleasure ahead of you over this little scratch?" Do not listen to such counsel. The sooner you yield to repentance, the more favorable treatment you will receive. Every step you take in

the direction of delay puts you further from your peace. A torn garment catches on every nail and the tear only grows wider. Renew your repentance quickly, so that this breach may be repaired and worse damage prevented — which will surely come if it is not.

## SECTION 2.

Second, study carefully this great gospel truth: a soul's justification before God. Acquaint yourself with it in all its parts — the moving cause, which is God's free mercy: "Being justified freely by His grace" (Romans 3:24); the meritorious cause, which is the blood of Christ; and the instrumental cause, which is faith — together with all the precious privileges that flow from it. If this truth were truly opened to the soul, it would not only ruin the pope's market — as Gardiner once said — but the devil's as well. When Satan comes to disturb the Christian's peace, a lack of clear understanding here leaves the Christian easily beaten. He is like the hare that could escape the hounds by ducking into a nearby thicket or burrow, but trusting to her own legs, is tracked by her own footprints and scent until she falls exhausted into their jaws. In everything a Christian does there are traces of sinful weakness, and a trail by which Satan can track and chase him across every hedge and ditch, through this grace and that duty — until the soul, unable to stand under Satan's accusations, is ready to fall down in despair at his feet. But here is a hiding place where the enemy dares not come: the clefts of the rock, the shelter of the stairway, to which this truth leads. When Satan charges you as a sinner, perhaps you put forward your repentance and changed behavior — but you will quickly be driven out of those works when Satan shows you the sinful impurities mixed in with them. This truth, however, would stop all his bullets:

you believe in Him who said, "Not to the one who works, but to the one who believes in Him who justifies the ungodly — his faith is credited as righteousness" (Romans 4:5). Get into the tower of the gospel covenant, and roll this truth — like the woman who dropped the millstone on Abimelech's head — onto the head of Satan.

### SECTION 3.

Third, make sure, Christian, that you keep to open ground. Take care that Satan does not force you into a narrow pass where you can neither fight nor escape. That is the trap the Egyptians thought they had the Israelites in when they cried, "They are hemmed in, they are hemmed in!" There are three kinds of narrow passes in which Satan tries to trap Christians: difficult questions, obscure scriptures, and dark providences.

First, Satan tries to confuse the Christian with difficult and complicated questions — deliberately meant to slow him down and obstruct his movement. When he runs into such puzzles in his Christian walk that he cannot easily resolve, he may either give up entirely or press on with great heaviness. This is exactly why we are told not to burden young converts with debatable theological disputes (Romans 14:1). Sometimes Satan will ask a soul how it knows it is elect — and wherever he finds someone not fully settled enough to claim that certainty, he uses it as an argument against that person's coming to Christ and His promises. As if it were presumption to embrace what belongs only to the elect before you know you are among their number. Christian, stay on open ground and you are safe. The plain truth is this: we are not to make our election the basis of our faith — rather, our faith and our calling

are the evidence that proves our election. Election is first in God's acting — God chooses before we believe. But faith is first in our acting — we must believe before we can know we are elected. Indeed, by believing, we come to know it. The farmer knows it is spring by the grass coming up, even though he has no knowledge of astronomy. You can know you are elect, just as surely through the work of grace in you, as if you had stood at God's shoulder when He wrote your name in the book of life. It would have been presumptuous for David to assume he would be king before Samuel anointed him — but not afterward. When you first believe and receive Christ, the Spirit of God is sent to anoint you for the kingdom of heaven. This is the holy oil poured out only on heirs of glory — and it is no presumption to read what God's gracious purpose toward you was from of old, when He has printed those thoughts and made them legible in your effectual calling. You are not climbing up to heaven and prying into God's secrets — heaven is coming down to you and revealing them. Satan will also ask the Christian when exactly he was converted: "You call yourself a Christian — and you can't even tell me when you began?" Stay on open ground, and be content with this: you can see the streams of grace flowing, even if the time of your conversion — like the source of the Nile — cannot be located. God often comes early, before gross sins have violated the soul, slipping quietly into a person's heart without great commotion. In such a case, Satan is simply trying to deceive you when he sends you on that search. You can know the sun is up even if you did not observe the exact moment it rose. Satan will also ask: "What will become of you if God brings you into a trial where you must choose between betraying your faith or burning for it, or when everything you own is stripped

away — no food, no money? Do you really think well enough of yourself to believe your faith would hold out in such a test?" If you have any discernment at all, Christian, you can see what Satan is after. This is a trap. By stirring fear of future trouble, he tries to get you to neglect your present duty and to be ill-prepared for such a trial if it ever comes. If a man has much to do the next day, it is wise to clear his mind of it before sleep — otherwise anxious thoughts will break his rest and leave him less fit in the morning. The less rest the soul finds in God and His promises concerning future events, the less strength it will have to bear them when they actually arrive. When you are troubled by such fears, calm your heart with these three plain conclusions.

First, every event is the product of God's providence. Not a sparrow — and certainly not a saint — falls to the ground through poverty, sickness, persecution, or any other cause, without the hand of God in it.

Second, God has given His firm pledge that He will never leave you or forsake you. The One who equips you for one condition will equip you for another. God teaches His servants their whole trade. Grace is a comprehensive principle. At the very first moment of your spiritual life, enduring grace was given alongside praying grace.

Third, God in His wisdom hides from you the help He intends for the various changes of your life, so that He may draw your heart into complete dependence on His faithful promise. This is how He tested Abraham's faith — letting him go all the way to the point where his hand was raised, and then coming to his rescue. Christ sent His disciples out to sea while He remained behind —

deliberately, to test their faith and reveal His love. Take comfort in this: even though you cannot see your God on the road, you will find Him at the end.

Second, Satan troubles the tender consciences of doubting Christians with obscure scriptures — passages whose meaning lies too deep for their weakened and troubled minds to easily find. With these he traps poor souls terribly. Just as melancholy people are drawn to melancholy places, doubting souls tend to dwell repeatedly on those difficult passages of Scripture that only increase their doubts. I have known many who have stared so long at Hebrews 6:4-6 and Hebrews 10:26 — passages that rush past the understanding like a swift current past the eye, so that the meaning cannot be grasped without great careful study — until their heads were spinning. Unable to untangle the difficulties, they fell into despairing thoughts about their own condition, crying out that they had "sinned against the knowledge of the truth" and therefore no mercy remained for them. If they had given their minds rest by looking away from those passages — whose fine engraving is too intricate to be studied long by a weak eye — they might have found in other scriptures what is plainly expressed there, which would have helped them, as through a lens, to understand these safely. Therefore, Christian, keep to open ground. When your condition calls for bread and wine, you can be sure it is your enemy who is handing you stones to break your teeth on — I mean, scriptures that are most suited to nourish your faith and lift your drooping spirit. When you find plain scriptures that speak to your situation, cross the river where it is shallow — do not wade beyond your depth. Are you afraid because you have sinned since coming to know the truth, and therefore think no sacrifice remains for you?

Look at the cases of David and Peter — see how they match yours, and how their recovery was left on record so that it might be a key in your hand to open such passages as these. Can you not safely conclude from their examples that these texts do not mean no one who sins after knowing the truth can be saved? In fact, in both those passages, the meaning is neither of someone who once had true grace falling away, nor of individual acts of sin, but of a total and universal departure from the faith — both the doctrine of it and the appearance of practicing it. If the root of grace was ever genuinely in you, other scriptures will first comfort you against those individual acts of backsliding you have committed, through sweet promises inviting such people to return and examples of saints who received peace after similar failures. They will also settle your heart against those harder passages, by giving your faith full assurance that your small measure of grace will not die — it is immortal, not in its own nature, because it is a created thing, but by covenant, as a child of promise.

Third, dark providences. From these, Satan argues against God's love toward a soul and grace within it. He obtained permission to strip Job of his earthly estate and bereave him of his children — and then worked to make him question his spiritual standing and his status as God's son. Job's wife pressed him to think harshly of God ("Curse God and die"), and his friends pressed him to think harshly of himself — as though he must be a hypocrite. Both rested on the same mistaken assumption: that severe affliction and a state of grace could not coexist. Christian, keep to open ground. Do not let Satan's misreading of dark providences lead you either to charge God foolishly or to condemn yourself as His enemy. Read the darkest providence with the commentary of

Scripture, and you will not draw such a harsh conclusion. Just as God can draw a straight line with a crooked stick — remaining righteous while using wicked instruments — so He can remain gracious while sending harsh providences. Joseph kept his love even when he spoke roughly to his brothers. I am not surprised that the wicked think they have God's blessing because they are in the warm sunshine. They are strangers to His counsels, without His Spirit, and they judge God and His providence entirely by how things feel to them at the moment — like small children who think everyone loves them who gives them sweets. But it is remarkable that a saint should be confused by his afflicted condition, when he has the very key to decode God's handwriting. Christian, has not God privately taught you through His Spirit and Word how to read the shorthand of His providence? Do you not know that the saints' afflictions stand for blessings? "For those He loves He disciplines" (Hebrews 12:6). And prosperity in an ungodly state — must that not be read as a curse? Does not God, in a sense, condemn the wicked to wealth, honor, and victory in this world, as well as torment in another? He sometimes gives them more than they seem to want, all to bind them more securely in a deep sleep of false security — just as Jael served Sisera: he asked for water but she gave him milk, to put him more soundly to sleep before she drove the peg through his head. Milk, as some write, has a property that inclines toward sleep.

#### SECTION 4.

Fourth, take care to preserve the assurances of pardon you have received from God. There are bright seasons — special times, almost like festival days — when God comes clothed in His mercy

and holds out the scepter of His grace more openly to His children than usual, bearing witness to their faith and sincerity. At those times the sky is clear, not a cloud in sight to darken the Christian's comfort. Love and joy are the soul's feast and delight while that season lasts. But when God withdraws and that gladness is taken away, Satan's work begins — to erase and wear down the memory of that testimony, in which the soul gloried as proof of its spiritual standing. He wants to make sure the soul cannot produce it as evidence when Satan brings his charges again and demands to see the documents proving the soul's spiritual state — or forces the soul to abandon its claim. It is therefore vital that you store these assurances safely. A single testimony of that kind may silence your accuser many years later. One affirmative word from God's mouth about your forgiven state — even if long ago — carries more weight than a thousand accusations from Satan. David's old songs of praise broke in with light to his soul in the dark nights of his sorrow.

Question: But what counsel do you give to the distressed soul who says, "I cannot lay hold of my former comforts, and I dare not claim those assurances I once thought were genuine. I can see that there were some dealings between God and my soul in the past — some hope I once had — but now these have been so crossed out and overwritten by backslidings, repentances, and fresh falls that I question all my evidences, whether they were ever real. What should someone in this condition do?"

Answer. First, renew your repentance as if you had never repented. Act fresh faith as if you had never believed. Done sincerely, this will stop Satan's mouth with an unexpected reply. Let him object that your former acts were hypocritical — what can he say

against your present repenting and believing? If those are genuine, they put you entirely beyond his reach. It will be harder for Satan to disprove the present workings of God's gracious Spirit while those impressions are fresh than to find fault with old deeds and past evidences. Past acts are transient. Just as unbelievers tend to view sins committed many years ago as small or meaningless because of the distance of time, so the Christian stands at a real disadvantage trying to clearly recall acts of grace that passed between God and him long ago — though even those old evidences are sometimes of great use. Just as God can make a sinner feel the sins of his youth as though they were freshly committed, to his terror in old age — so God can bring back to the saint the comforts and assurances of former years with those very thoughts he had of them then, as fresh and vivid as if they were new.

Second, if Satan still haunts you with fears about your spiritual standing, go to the throne of grace and ask for a fresh copy of the assurance you have lost. The original is kept in the pardon office of heaven, of which Christ is the Master. If you are a saint, your name is on record in that court. Bring your grief to God, and hear what comes from heaven — rather than listening to the reports your enemy brings from hell. If doubting souls would reason less with Satan and pray more to God over their fears, they would find their answers sooner. Can you expect truth from a liar, or comfort from an enemy? Did Satan ever speak well of believers? Was not Job the devil's hypocrite — while God declared him without equal in holiness and proved it true in the end? If Satan knew you were a saint, would he tell you? If you were a hypocrite, he would be just as reluctant for you to know that too. Turn your back on him and go to your God. Do not fear — sooner or later He will sign your certifi-

cate again. But take care not to rush into a verdict against yourself simply because the answer is not given immediately when you ask. The messenger may take a long time, but may still arrive with good news.

Third, avoid engaging the enemy while you are in a weakened state. Instead, pull back to the defenses and make an honorable retreat into the fortifications Christ has prepared for His sick and wounded soldiers. There are two positions of strength into which abandoned souls can withdraw: the name of God, and the unconditional promises of the gospel. These are the safe harbors that are most useful precisely when the storm is too severe for the ship to survive at sea. "Do you hope to see God?" says Satan. "Only the pure in heart will have that vision." "Do you think you will have comfort? That belongs to those who mourn in spirit." Now, soul — even if in the heat of temptation you cannot claim to be the pure in heart or the mourner in spirit, you can still say: I believe God is able to work these things in me — indeed, He has promised such mercy to poor sinners. It is His covenant: He will give a new heart, a clean heart, a soft heart. And here I wait, knowing that just as there was nothing in any human being to move the great God to make such promises, there is nothing in any human being that can prevent the Almighty from keeping them wherever and whenever He chooses. This act of faith, accompanied by a deep longing for the grace you cannot yet find and a continued use of the means of grace — though it may not resolve all your doubts — will at least keep your head above water so that you do not despair. And you need that shore in this condition, or the house will fall.

Fourth, if Satan still follows you, call in help — and do not keep the devil's secret. The very strength of some temptations lies in their concealment. Simply revealing them to a faithful friend — like lancing an abscess — often brings immediate relief to the soul. Satan knows this all too well. And so, like a thief who breaks into a house and either gags the occupants or holds a pistol to their chest threatening death if they cry out — Satan, wanting to rob the soul freely of its peace and comfort, intimidates it into silence. "If your brothers or friends know this about you," Satan says, "they will turn on you — others will mock you." In this way many a poor soul has been kept long in its pain by holding it in. By keeping the devil's secret, Christian, you forfeit a double help: the counsel and prayers of your fellow believers. And what an immeasurable loss that is.

CHAPTER 8. OF THE SAINTS'  
VICTORY OVER THEIR SUBTLE  
ENEMY, AND WHENCE IT IS THAT  
CREATURES SO OVERMATCHED  
SHOULD BE ABLE TO STAND  
AGAINST SATAN'S WILES



**T**he second part of the apostle's argument follows, meant to rouse them more vigorously to arms — namely, the assurance that standing against this subtle enemy is not only possible but certain, if we are fully armed: "that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil." This is what gives the apostle's argument its right balance. He did not intend to frighten them into cowardly retreat or gloomy despair of victory by telling them the enemy was so cunning. Rather, he meant to stir them to vigorous resistance, grounded in the firm expectation of strength to hold their position in battle and to stand victorious after it. Both of these, I believe, are included in the phrase "standing firm against the schemes of Satan." Sometimes "to stand" describes a fighting posture — as in verse 14. Sometimes it describes the posture of victory — as in Job 19:25: "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end He will stand on the earth." That earth — the

very field where all the bloody battles between Christ and Satan were fought — on it He will stand at last, when no enemy will dare show his head. Taking both meanings together, the observation is this:

Satan, with all his cleverness and schemes, will never defeat a soul armed with true grace. In fact, the one who wears this armor of God will conquer him. Look through Scripture and you will not find a single saint who was not engaged in some measure with this enemy — sifted and shaken by him to one degree or another. Yet in the end we find them all coming through with an honorable victory: David, Job, Peter, Paul — who were the most severely tested of all on record. And lest anyone attribute their victory to the exceptional strength of their own grace above weaker believers, the glory of their victories is given to God, in whom the weakest are as strong as the strongest. We will give two reasons why the Christian, who seems so outmatched, proves so unconquerable.

First, the curse that rests upon Satan and his cause. God's curse blasts everything it touches. The Canaanites and their neighboring nations, though renowned in war, became food for Israel — and why? They were cursed nations. The Egyptians were a shrewd people: "Let us deal wisely," they said — yet being cursed by God, that curse lay like a thorn in their heart and was ultimately their destruction. Indeed, let the Israelites themselves — who carry the sign of God's covenant in their flesh — once become the people of God's curse through their sins, and they are trampled like dirt under the Assyrian's feet. This is what drove Balak to seek so desperately for a curse upon Israel. Now there is an irrevocable curse that has clung to Satan since Genesis 3:14-15: "The Lord God said to the serpent: 'Because you have done this, you are cursed...' —

which passage, while partly referring to the literal serpent, speaks chiefly of the devil and the wicked, his spiritual serpentine offspring. This is clear from the enmity declared between the serpent's seed and the woman's, which plainly describes the ongoing conflict between Christ and His people against the devil and his. Now there are two things in that curse that should comfort the saints. First, the curse prostrates Satan under their feet: "On your belly you will go" — which is no more than is promised elsewhere, that God will subdue Satan under our feet. This prostrate condition of Satan assures believers that the devil will never lift his head — that is, his cunning — higher than the saints' heel. He may make you limp, but he cannot take your life. And the bruise he deals you will be answered with the crushing of his own head — the utter ruin of him and his cause. Second, his food is limited and appointed. Satan will not devour whomever he pleases. Dust is his food — which seems to confine his power to the wicked, who are of the earth, earthly, mere dust. But those who are of a heavenly origin have their graces reserved as food for Christ (Song of Songs 7:13), and their souls are certainly no morsel for the devil's teeth.

The second reason is drawn from God's wisdom — for God, having undertaken the ordering of the Christian's path to heaven (Psalm 37:23-24), oversees especially this matter of Satan's temptations. We find that Christ was not led by the evil spirit into the wilderness to be tempted, but by the Holy Spirit (Matthew 4:1). Satan tempts not when he wills, but when God permits — and the same Holy Spirit who led Christ into the field brought Him off with victory. We therefore find Christ returning in the power of the Spirit, after repelling Satan, into Galilee (Luke 4:14). When Satan tempts a saint, he is only God's messenger (2 Corinthians 12:7):

"There was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to torment me." But more precisely, as Beza renders it, he was sent by God to Paul. And indeed the purpose he served was too gracious and good to have been Satan's own design: "to keep me from becoming conceited." The devil never intended to do Paul such a favor — but God sent him to Paul, as David sent Uriah with letters to Joab, with neither knowing the full content of the message. The devil and his instruments are both instruments in God's hands. This is why the wicked are called His sword, His ax. Leave it to God to wield the one and manage the other. Only a clumsy workman hacks his own legs with his own ax — which God would be doing if His children were worse off for Satan's temptations. Let the devil choose his approach — God is ready for him at every weapon. If Satan tries sheer force, assaulting the saints through persecution, the Lord of Hosts will oppose him. If Satan comes through cunning and policy, God is equally prepared there. The devil and all his counsel are fools before God. Indeed, their wisdom is foolishness. Skill and craft enhance everything except sin. The more finely crafted the watch, the painting, and so on, the better — but the more wit and skill applied to sin, the worse, since it is directed against an all-wise God who cannot be outsmarted, and who will in the end only repay the workers with greater condemnation. "The foolishness of God is wiser than men" (1 Corinthians 1:25) — indeed, wiser than the combined wisdom of men and devils. That is, the means and instruments God uses against Satan are stronger than all Satan's clever schemes. What is weaker than a sermon? Who looks more foolish to the worldly-wise than the saints? Yet God is wiser in a weak sermon than Satan is in his deepest plots — the kind hatched when the sharpest minds of a

whole council of profound advisors put their heads together. God is wiser in His simple servants than Satan is in his Ahithophels and Sanballats. And God deliberately chooses to defeat the strategies of hell and earth through these means, in order to put those strategies to greater shame (1 Corinthians 1:21). How humiliating it is for a great scholar to be bested by a plain farmer's argument! So God calls forth Job to wrestle with Satan and his supporters — for Job's three friends proved themselves to be on Satan's side. And surely the fencing master cannot hold his own against someone who is beaten by one of the students. God sits laughing while hell and earth sit plotting (Psalm 2:4). He thwarts the schemes of the crafty; He shatters their carefully worked-out plans and plots — that is what the language means — pulling down the labors of years of scheming in a single moment (Job 5:12). Indeed, just as great men keep wild animals for sport — the fox, the boar, and others — so God keeps Satan and his instruments to display His wisdom in catching them. It has been observed that hunting some animals yields not only pleasure to the hunter but also a sweeter taste to the one who eats them afterward. In the same way, God, by displaying His wisdom in pursuing the saints' enemies, adds a special sweetness to their deliverances in the end. "He crushed the heads of Leviathan, He gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness" (Psalm 74:14). After He had hunted Pharaoh out of every hiding place and forced him through every disguise, He broke the very core of all his schemes and served him up to His people as a feast, garnished with the display of His wisdom and power.

CHAPTER 9. AN ACCOUNT IS GIVEN  
HOW THE ALL-WISE GOD DOES  
OUTWIT THE DEVIL IN HIS  
TEMPTING OF SAINTS TO SIN,  
WHEREIN ARE LAID DOWN THE  
ENDS SATAN PROPOUNDS AND HOW  
HE IS PREVENTED IN THEM ALL



**Q**uestion: How does God defeat Satan and outwit his schemes in tempting His saints?

Answer. God does this by accomplishing His own gracious purposes for the good and comfort of His people through the very temptations by which Satan intended their ruin. This is the noblest kind of conquest — turning the devil's own weapon back to wound his own head, cutting it off with his own sword. God sets the devil to catch the devil, laying His own plans, as it were, under Satan's wings and making him hatch them. This is how the patriarchs helped fulfill Joseph's dream while they thought they were getting rid of him. Let me illustrate with a few specific examples.

SECTION 1.

First, Satan's temptations aim at defiling the Christian's conscience and disfiguring the beautiful image of God — engraved in holiness on the Christian's heart. Satan is an unclean spirit and would make the saints unclean too, so that he might glory in their shame. But God outwits him, turning Satan's temptations to sin into a means of cleansing from sin. They are the dark soap with which God washes His saints white.

First, God uses Satan's temptation toward one sin as a preventive against another — as Paul's thorn in the flesh prevented his pride. God sends Satan to press Paul on the side where he is strong, so that in the meantime He can fortify him on the side where he is weak. So Satan is made a fool — like an army that lays siege to a town and exhausts itself to no purpose, while in the meantime giving the enemy the advantage of reinforcing elsewhere. And all this is done by the counsel of a Hushai — a secret friend to the opposing side. God, the saint's true friend, sits in the devil's council and steers proceedings there to the saint's advantage. God allows the devil to trouble the Christian with temptations toward blasphemy and atheism. Along with the spiritual distress these produce, the soul is driven to earnest prayer, humbled by the horror of these apparitions in its imagination, and protected from the formality and pride that God could see were otherwise encroaching. It is like a household where some urgent business keeps the master up later than usual — and by that means the thief who planned to rob the house that very night is kept out. Had Satan not kept that soul's spirit of prayer and watchfulness alive through those distressing temptations, Satan might very well have come as a seducer and found the soul napping in false security.

Second, God purges out the very sin Satan tempts toward — through the temptation itself. Peter never had such a conquest over his self-confidence, and never received such a grounding of his faith, as after his terrible fall in the high priest's courtyard. He who had been so certain of himself as to say, "Even if all the others stumble, I never will" — how modest and humble had he become within a few days, not even daring to claim he loved Christ more than his fellow disciples, those same men he had ranked himself above before. And what an unshakeable confessor of Christ and His gospel did he prove to be before councils and rulers — the very man who had just moments before been thrown off by the challenge of a servant girl! And all this was the fruit of Satan's temptation, sanctified to him. A saint discovers through a fall what the dominant corruption in him actually is. The temptation stirs up the problem — and having identified it, the soul is better positioned to deal with it, applying the specific means that address that particular illness. The soul will now marshal everything it has against this enemy. Paul would not have worked so hard to discipline his body had he not found Satan already knocking at that door.

Third, God uses these temptations to advance the whole work of grace in the heart. One spot leads the whole garment to be washed. David, overcome by one sin, renews his repentance for everything (Psalm 51). A good homeowner, when he sees rain coming in through one spot, calls in the workman to inspect the whole house. This is what distinguishes a sincere heart from a hypocrite, whose repentance is selective — soft on one point, hard on another. Judas cried out about his betrayal — but not a word about

his thieving or his hypocrisy. The hole in his conscience was no wider than where the bullet went in. But genuine sorrow over one sin breaks the heart open to mourn for all the others as well.

## SECTION 2.

Second, Satan's design in tempting one saint extends to others — either encouraging them to sin by that person's example, or discouraging them in their own walk by the offense he has caused. But God makes a fool of him here too.

First, God makes the failures of such a saint a timely warning to others to watch their footing. When you see a gentle Moses provoked to anger — how carefully you need to guard your own unruly heart. Strong winds do some damage — blowing down a loose tile here, a tottering turret there — yet the general benefit outweighs the harm to a few. They are like a broom in God's hand, sweeping and purifying the air. So, though some wicked people, by God's righteous judgment, are hardened into greater sin by the saints' falls — yet the benefit sincere souls receive through having their formality and false security further purged far outweighs that harm. Those wicked ones are only sent a little faster in the direction they were already heading.

Second, God makes the falls of His saints a source of comfort for troubled consciences. This has been and still is like a feather — when the passage is so blocked that no comfort can otherwise get through — dropping a little hope into the soul to keep it alive from falling into complete despair. Some have been revived by this when they felt themselves next door to hell in their own fears. David's sin was great, yet he found mercy. Peter fell terribly, yet he

is now in heaven. "Why do you sit here, O my soul, under the darkness of despair? Rise up and call on your God for mercy — He has granted it to others for the very same sins."

Third, God has a purpose in allowing Satan to press and strain some of His saints through temptation: to train them into a fitness to comfort their fellow believers in similar conditions. He sends them to this school — where they are under Satan's rod and lash — so that his cruel treatment of them will drive them to study the Word and their own hearts. Through this they gain experience of Satan's strategies, until at last they become masters in the art of comforting tempted souls. Speaking a timely word to a weary soul is an art in itself. Completing an apprenticeship in human learning will not equip a person for it. Learned doctors have proven themselves utterly unprepared here — knowing no more how to handle a wounded conscience than a layperson knows how to use a surgeon's instruments during an anatomy lecture. Neither is book-knowledge of Scripture sufficient — even if a man knew it as well as a pharmacist knows every bottle on his shelf, able to reach instantly for any promise. No — not even grace itself is enough, unless it has been exercised through these buffetings and soul-conflicts. We find even Christ Himself trained in this school (Isaiah 50:4): "He awakens My ear to listen as a disciple" — as a tutor calls his student to sit and learn from him. And what was the lecture read to Christ so that He might have the tongue of the learned to speak a timely word to the weary? Verse 5: "The Lord God has opened My ear; and I was not disobedient, nor did I turn back. I gave My back to those who strike Me..." His sufferings — which were mingled throughout with temptations — were the lecture from which Christ emerged so equipped to counsel and comfort

distressed souls. So the devil would have done better to leave Christ alone — and to leave His saints alone as well, for their suffering only equips them to serve Satan's enemies all the more effectively in comforting others. No one handles struggling souls as gently as those who remember the pain of their own heart's sorrows. No one is as skilled at applying the comforts of Scripture to wounded consciences as those who have lain bleeding themselves. They recognize the symptoms of soul-trouble and feel others' pain in their own hearts — something those who know Scripture without that experience cannot do. They are like an inexperienced physician who can name every herb in the herbal, but when a patient arrives, does not know how to apply his knowledge in practice. The saints' experience gives them a sovereign remedy made from the very flesh of the scorpion — which, through Christ, they themselves have slain. And that remedy has a power above all others to draw out the poison of Satan's temptations from the heart.

### SECTION 3.

Third, when Satan tempts a saint to sin, his aim is to create a breach between God and the soul. He hates both of them, and so he labors to divide these dear friends. "If I can get this person to sin," he thinks, "God will be angry — and when God is angry He will discipline His child soundly. That will be satisfying. And while God is correcting the saint, the saint will question God's love and grow cold in his love to God. So even if I cannot keep him from heaven in the end, he will have little joy on the way there." In that condition, God and the soul will be like a husband and wife who have quarreled — neither looking kindly on the other. Now see how God makes a fool of Satan in both of these aims.

First, God uses His saints' temptations as the very means by which He deepens the communication of His love to them. When Satan got Adam to eat the forbidden fruit, he thought he had scored the final victory — that he had placed man in the same hopeless position as the fallen angels, as unlikely ever to see God's face as those apostate spirits. But God had intended this very event to usher in the great gospel plan of saving humanity through Christ. No sooner had this prologue of the fall been completed than Christ was brought forward in the great promise of the gospel given to Adam — and at God's call, undertook the work of recovering lost humanity from Satan's grip and restoring them to their original glory, and more than that. The lowest flower in Christ's field exceeds Adam in all his original royalty. And as Satan fared in his first temptation, so he has been on the losing side ever since. What did all his labor against Job gain him — except to show that holy man at last how deeply God loved him? When he overthrew Peter so shamefully, do we not find Christ claiming Peter with as much love as ever? Peter was the one disciple singled out by name to receive the good news of the resurrection: "Go, tell His disciples and Peter." As if Christ said: Be sure that his sad heart is comforted with this news, so that he knows I am at peace with him in spite of his recent cowardice.

Question: Does this not seem to excuse sin and make Christians careless about falling into temptation? If God shows such love to His saints after their falls and failures, why should we be so careful to avoid sin when it ends so well in the end?

Answer: Two things will guard against that false conclusion.

First, we must distinguish between a soul that is overtaken through its own weakness and the enemy's cunning and power — and another who through a false heart deliberately surrenders himself to Satan's lust. A general will show little mercy to a soldier who treacherously throws down his arms and runs to the enemy — but if another soldier fights bravely and still receives a wound and is overpowered, it is no dishonor for the general to show his care and love, even sending the man from the field in his own carriage, laying him in his own bed, and assigning him his own surgeon. God does not encourage wickedness in His saints — He pities weakness. Even when the saints fall into a sin that is presumptuous in its nature, they do not commit it as presumptuously as others do. There is a part of them that remains true to God, though it was outvoted. Moses spoke rashly — but the devil had his instruments to provoke him, completely contrary to that good man's nature. David numbered the people — but see how the devil dogged and hunted him until he finally wore him down (1 Chronicles 21:1): "Satan stood up against Israel and moved David to number Israel." How valiantly did Job repel Satan's arrows! No wonder that in such a barrage one might slip between the joints of his armor. And as for Peter — we know that good man went into the field with a truly loyal, even passionate heart. It was only when the enemy appeared that his courage failed him.

Second, consider how God communicates His love after a saint's fall — not while they are sinning, or because they have sinned, but when they are mourning and humbling themselves for their sins. If God smiled on them while they were actively sinning, that might strengthen the sin — like giving wine in a fever that would feed the disease. But when the crisis has passed, the poison

of the disease spent and breathed out through genuine humiliation, the soul lies low. God's wine of comfort is a strengthener for the drooping spirit — not fuel for sin. When David was first drawn into temptation, he had to be clothed in sackcloth and mourning — and then God removed it and put on him the garment of joy and praise (1 Chronicles 21:10, 15). Job, though he showed so much courage and patience, eventually revealed some weakness after being long attacked by so many fierce accusers — both human and demonic. He had to cry out, "I repent," and abhor himself in dust and ashes, before God took him in His arms (Job 42:6). God takes the same path with all His children. To His saints in that posture of humility, God can safely — to His own honor and their benefit — give a larger measure of His love than usual. Their fears and sorrow, which their sin has cost them, will serve as water to dilute this strong wine of joy and take away its intoxicating quality — so that it neither rises up into pride nor causes them to stumble backward into apostasy.

Question: But why does God now communicate His love?

Answer. First, from His own compassionate nature: "You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful" (James 5:11). God has no desire to keep probing bleeding wounds. He knows that a mourning soul is easily discouraged. A frown or an angry look from God — whom the saint loves so dearly — must pierce the heart deeply. Therefore God declares Himself ready to revive such a one (Isaiah 57:15), and gives the reason in verse 16: "For I will not contend forever, nor will I always be angry; for the spirit would grow faint before Me." Whose spirit is meant? Not the spirit of the presumptuous sinner — he goes on without flinching.

But the spirit of the contrite and humble. A father watches his children's responses. One commits a fault and goes on defiantly, scorning his father's displeasure. Another, when he has offended, takes it to heart, refuses to eat, goes off to some corner to grieve over his father's displeasure. The father sees it, and his heart yearns toward that child. If he does not put the child's fear to rest by showing his love, that child's spirit would break. A long breach between such a father and such a son is simply not possible — the one melting over his sin, the other melting over his grieving son.

Second, God does this to pour greater shame on Satan, who is the great troublemaker between God and the soul. How humiliated is the person who has stirred up conflict between a husband and wife, a father and son, when he sees the breach repaired and all parties turned against him? Things went badly for Christ's enemies when Herod and Pilate became friends — can it go well for Satan when he sees all is well between God and His children? If Esther is in favor, Haman her enemy will have his face covered in shame. Indeed, this covers Satan's face with shame: to see a poor saint whom he just had permission to plunder, trouble, and torment now sitting in the sunshine of God's love — while he, like a ravaging lion, howls over the loss of his prey.

Second, Satan's aim is to weaken the saint's faith in God and cool his love for God — but he is outwitted in both. First, God turns their temptations, and even their falls, into a further strengthening of their faith. Like a tree, it stands more firmly for having been shaken. Or like the giant Antaeus in the myth of his wrestling with Hercules — who is said to have gained new strength from every fall to the ground. False faith, once overthrown, rarely rises again. But genuine faith rises and fights more boldly, as we see in Peter and

other examples from Scripture. Temptation to faith is like fire to gold (1 Peter 1:7). Fire does not only reveal which is true gold — it also refines the genuine gold and makes it purer. It comes out perhaps less in volume and weight, since the dross and impurities that debased it are removed — but greater in value and quality. When Satan is restrained and the Christian walks in the sunshine of divine favor with the encouragement of divine help, his faith may appear great compared to another who is experiencing God's withdrawal and Satan's pressure. But this is not a fair comparison — like trying to determine which of two men is taller by measuring one naked and the other in heavy clothing. Or like comparing two pieces of gold by weighing one with the dirt and grime collected in the purse, against the other that has been refined in the fire. Faith before temptation has much foreign material clinging to it that goes for faith. But when temptation comes, these things are exposed. Now the Christian feels corruption stir that had seemed dead before. A cloud comes between the soul and the sweet face of God — and the sense of that cloud, combined with the little sense of the corruption before, had been holding up his faith. But those props punctured, he now learns the true stroke of this heavenly art of swimming on the promise, with nothing else to keep him afloat but that. And a little of this carries more of the genuine nature of faith than all the rest combined. It is like Gideon's small band — actually stronger when all the supporting troops are sent away than when they were present. And this is all the devil gains: instead of destroying the faith he aimed at, he becomes the very instrument of refining it and thereby strengthening it.

Second, the love of tempted saints is actually deepened toward Christ through their temptations and falls. In the midst of the struggle there may seem to be a dampening of their love — like water first sprinkled on a fire. But when the conflict is over and the Christian comes back to himself, his love for Christ will break out like a blazing flame. First, the shame and sorrow a gracious soul must feel for its sinful failure during the temptation will drive it to express love for Christ above all. This is beautifully illustrated in the bride, who — when the cold spell of her spiritual dullness had passed and the temptation was over — stirred herself with purpose. Her lazy sickness had turned into love-sickness. She found it as hard now to sit still as she had before found it hard to get up. She could rest nowhere out of her beloved's sight, but ran and asked everyone she met for him. Where did all this intensity of longing come from? It was all called forth by her unkind treatment of her husband: she had parted with him so coldly that, thinking over what she had done, she went to make her peace. If sins committed before conversion have such power over a gracious soul that the memory of them — even when pardoned — will still break and melt the heart into sorrow (as we see in Mary Magdalene) and press the person to show greater zeal for God than others (as in Paul) — how much more will the sins of a saint who, after sweet communion with Jesus Christ, lifts his heel against the very heart that received him? That sorrow will dissolve the heart into tears, and that grief will press him to serve God at a higher level than others. No child in all the household is as devoted as the one who has returned from rebellion. Second, beyond the shame — the experience such a person gains of Christ's love beyond others will also increase his love. Christ's love is fuel for ours. As the same

things that give us being also provide our growth, so Christ's love is both the mother and the nurse of our love. The more Christ displays His love, the more our love is warmed. And next to Christ's dying love, none is greater than His rescuing love in temptation. A mother never has a better opportunity to show her affection for her child than when the child is in distress — sick, impoverished, or imprisoned. In the same way, Christ never has a better opportunity to show His love to His children than when they are being tempted, indeed, when they have been overcome by temptation. When His children lie in Satan's prison, bleeding from wounds of conscience — that is the moment He chooses to give proof of His tender heart in showing mercy, His faithfulness in praying for them, His care in sending them help, and His deep love in visiting them through His comforting Spirit. When the soul has finally come through a great temptation and reviews the whole history of it — seeing what its own weakness was in resisting Satan, and indeed its own unfaithfulness in going along with Satan, which might have provoked Christ to abandon it to Satan's fury — and then to see both its foolishness pardoned and its ruin graciously prevented, and by no other hand than Christ coming to its rescue (as Abishai came to David when the giant was about to kill him) — this must unspeakably endear Christ to the soul. Reading such accounts, the Christian cannot help asking — as Ahasuerus asked about Mordecai, who had exposed a conspiracy and saved the king's life — what honor has been shown to his dear Savior for all of this? And so Jesus Christ, whom Satan thought to drive from the soul's affections, ends up sitting higher and more securely in the saint's heart than ever before.

## CHAPTER 10. A BRIEF APPLICATION OF THE POINT IN TWO BRANCHES



**F**irst application: This gives the reason why God permits His dear children to fall into temptation — because He is able to out-shoot Satan with his own bow, and to rise above Satan precisely in the thing Satan uses to try to outwit the Christian. God will be admired by His saints in glory not only for His love in saving them, but for His wisdom in the path He chose to bring them there. God's love in saving them will be the sweet wine at the marriage feast. His extraordinary wisdom in accomplishing it will be the fine craftsmanship engraved on the cup. Now wisdom is most clearly seen in untangling knots and navigating through difficulties. The more intricate the mechanism of a lock, the more wisdom is required to fit a key to it — to choose the means that can meet every turning within it. God deliberately permits such temptations to occur so that His wisdom may be all the more admired in resolving them all, leading His saints by the very road Satan meant to take them to hell — to glory instead. The Israelites were commanded to remember all the way God led them through the wilderness for forty years (Deuteronomy 8:2). The history of these wars, Christian, will be pleasant reading in heaven, though the fighting was bloody on earth. Moses and Elijah talked with Christ

on the Mount of Transfiguration — a picture of the sweet communion that will pass between Christ and His saints in glory. And what was their conversation (Luke 9:30)? His death and sufferings. It seems that a discussion of our sufferings and temptations is not too low a subject for that blessed state. Left out, it would leave a blank in the beautiful face of heaven's glory. If the damned could forget the road they traveled to hell — how often God's Spirit was pleading with them, how far they were moved by conviction, the many turnings and returnings of their journey toward and away from God, what real possibilities, indeed probabilities, they had of reaching heaven while on earth — if some hand were kind enough to erase those tormenting memories, it would ease them enormously. So if it were possible for glorified saints to forget the path they took to glory — the various dangers from Satan and their own backsliding hearts — both they and their God would be the poorer for it, I mean in terms of His manifest glory. What is the glory in which God appears at Zion's deliverance — those royal garments of salvation that make Him so admired by men and angels? It is nothing less than the celebration of all His attributes, according to what each one accomplished toward their salvation. Now wisdom is what the creature prizes above all else — and it was the first bait Satan used, when he convinced Eve that she would become like God in knowledge and wisdom. Therefore God, in order to give Satan the more shameful defeat, allows him to use his cleverness and schemes in tempting and troubling His children — which is where Satan supposes himself most advantaged over the saints — so that the road to His own throne (where His wisdom will at last sit in full majesty alongside His mercy) may be paved, as I may say it, with the skulls of devils.

Second application: This gives strong encouragement to our faltering faith on behalf of the Church of Christ. If all of Satan's wit and cunning cannot overcome one single soldier in Christ's camp, much less will he ever destroy the whole army. These are days of great confusion in the Christian world, and the deepest fear of a godly heart is for the ark — lest it fall into enemy hands, and once this sacred thing is taken, the city of God, His church, be trampled under the feet of pride. I admit that Satan appears to be gaining ground daily. He has worked his way in a remarkable way into the hearts and convictions of many who, by the reputation of their profession and zeal, had been counted among the chief of Christ's servants in their generation. He has badly corrupted the truths of Christ and brought the ordinances into contempt — so that by this, and as a judgment for it, the womb of the gospel has become largely barren, and her children who hang at her breasts are not thriving in love and holiness as they once did when the milk was richer and more full of life. He has taken advantage of divisions among the godly to harden the wicked into greater contempt of religion. Through the bloody wars of recent years, he has stirred the rage of the godless and those hostile to Christ to a level of fury against His little flock higher than ever before — so that if God should ever allow the sword to fall into their hands, they are trained and primed to play the bloody slaughterers on Christ's sheep more thoroughly than their predecessors did. And they are not so discouraged that they have given up hope of such a day; some even draw on those anticipated joys in advance to cheer themselves while waiting for the rest to come. Now, Christian, perhaps their confidence, along with the disordered state of Christ's cause in the world, is disturbing your spirit about how these rolling

providences above our heads will resolve. But be still, poor heart, and know that the contest is not between the church and Satan — it is between Christ and him. These are the two champions. Stand still, O army of saints, and by faith watch the all-wise God wrestle with a cunning devil. Even if you do not live to see the end of these great confusions, generations after you will see the Almighty strike off this Goliath's head with his own sword, and catch this cunning hunter in the trap of his own scheming. As Bernard wrote: Unbelief fears Satan as a lion; faith treads on him as a worm. Watch your God at work, therefore, and trust that what He is doing will be a masterpiece. Nothing can drive Him from His work. A pilot may be knocked from the helm and can do little in a storm, leaving the ship to drift. An architect cannot work when night falls, and is driven from the scaffolding by a driving rain. The wisest counselors and mightiest princes on earth are like these. A crisis can come when calling on the king for help is as futile as calling on a beggar. Human wisdom can be leveled with folly — but God is never interrupted. All the plots of hell and all the tumults of earth have not so much as shaken God's hand enough to spoil one letter or line that He has been drawing. The mystery of His providence may hang a curtain before His work so we cannot see what He is doing — but when darkness is all around Him, righteousness is the foundation of His throne forever. Where is our faith? Let God be wise, and all men and devils be fools. What if it seems more likely that a new Babel will rise than that a Babylon will fall — yet believe that God is making His secret approaches and will suddenly plant His ladders against its walls. Suppose truth were a prisoner like Joseph, and error the courtier with its head lifted up in the favor of the times — do you not remember that the path to truth's promo-

tion runs through the prison? What if the church were like Jonah in the whale's belly, swallowed up in the eyes of reason by the fury of its enemies — do you not remember that the whale had no power to digest the prophet? O do not be too quick to bury the church before she is dead. Wait while Christ tries His skill before you give up. Bring Christ to her grave by your prayers, to speak a resurrection word. The faith of the saints in such crises has been remarkable: Joseph pledged his bones that God would visit his people, asking them to carry him along to where he believed they would be brought. Jeremiah purchased a field from his uncle and paid for it in cash — and this while the Babylonian army was camped around Jerusalem, ready to take the city and carry him away with the rest into exile. All of this by God's direction (Jeremiah 32:6-8), that he might show the Jews how firmly he believed, even at that dark moment, that God's promise of their return would be fulfilled. Indeed, God considers Himself greatly dishonored in the thinking of His people — even at the lowest point of His church's circumstances — if His bare word and single promise are not accepted as sufficient security for faith in His deliverance.

Ephesians 6:12 — "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places."

These words are connected to what came before by the word "for," which either refers back to the two preceding verses — in which case they add further reason pressing both the necessity of Christian courage in verse 10 and the necessity of full Christian armor in verse 11 — or they connect specifically to the last words of verse 11. There the apostle identified the saints' great enemy as the

devil and described him in one of his characteristics — his cunning subtlety. Here the apostle portrays him more fully, not to discourage the saints but to awaken their alertness, so that seeing their enemy advancing in full formation, they might stand in better order to meet his charge. Notice here the apostle's straightforwardness and plain dealing. He does not minimize the strength of the enemy and present him as insignificant — the way commanders sometimes try to keep their soldiers steady by making light of the enemy's power. No, he tells them the worst from the start. If Satan himself had been given the task of describing his own power, he could not have claimed more than is acknowledged here. See here the difference between Christ's way of dealing with His followers and Satan's way with his. Satan dares not let sinners know who the God is they are fighting against — that knowledge alone would be enough to start a mutiny in the devil's camp. Poor souls are drawn into the field by a false picture of God and His ways, and they are kept there by lies and flattery. But Christ is not afraid to show His saints their enemy in all his power and rank — because the weakness of God is stronger than all the powers of hell.

CHAPTER 1. SHOWING THE  
CHRISTIAN'S LIFE HERE TO BE A  
CONTINUAL WRESTLING WITH SIN  
AND SATAN, AND HOW THE TRUE  
WRESTLERS SHOULD MANAGE  
THEIR COMBAT



**T**hese words contain a vivid description of a bloody and unending war between the Christian and his relentless enemy. In them we may observe, first, the Christian's condition in this life, described by the word wrestling.

Second, the opponents who stand against the Christian in arms, described first in negative terms — not flesh and blood, or more precisely, not chiefly flesh and blood. Second, in positive terms — but against rulers, powers, and so on.

SECTION 1.

First, regarding the Christian's wrestling condition in this life: it is made especially significant by three distinct characteristics.

First, the kind of combat the Christian's condition is compared to — wrestling — which, though sometimes used for sport and recreation, is used here to capture the intensity of the Christian's encounter. There are two things about wrestling that make it a sharper combat than others. First, wrestling is not primarily fighting against a crowd. It is when one enemy singles out another and engages him one-on-one, each exerting full force against the other — as with David and Goliath, when the whole armies stood as if in a ring to watch the bloody outcome of that duel. This is fiercer than fighting in an army, where even in a sharp and prolonged battle, the soldier is not constantly engaged but can fall back after his discharge and catch his breath. He might even escape without a blow, since the enemy's aim is at the whole force, not at any particular man. But in wrestling you cannot escape like that — you are the enemy's specific target and will be shaken and tested thoroughly. The original word signifies such a struggle as makes the whole body shake. Satan does not just have a general hatred for the army of saints — he has a particular spite against you specifically. We read that when Jacob was alone, a man wrestled with him. Just as God delights to have private communion with each individual saint, so the devil seeks to try it hand-to-hand with the Christian when he gets him alone. Just as we lose much comfort when we fail to apply God's promises and providence personally — "God loves me, pardons me, cares for me" — the water at the public fountain does us no good if we have no pipe to bring it into our own cistern. In the same way, our watchfulness is weakened when we think of Satan's fury only in general terms, as aimed at the saints as a whole, rather than at me in particular. How careful a

soul would be if, on the way to church or the prayer closet, he carried this serious thought: "Satan is at my heels right now to hinder me in my work — unless my God helps me!"

Second, it is a close combat. Armies fight at a distance. Wrestlers grapple hand to hand. An arrow shot from far off can be seen and avoided — but when an enemy has hold of you, there is no escape. You must either resist forcefully or fall shamefully at his feet. Satan comes in close, grips the Christian within himself, seizes his very flesh and corrupt nature, and by this shakes him.

Second, the universality of the combat. "We wrestle" — the word includes all. Notice that the apostle deliberately shifts from "you" in the previous verse to "we" in this one, to include himself as well as them. The quarrel is with every saint. Satan is not afraid to attack the minister, nor does he disdain to wrestle with the humblest saint in the congregation. Great and small, minister and people — all must wrestle. There is no part of Christ's army resting comfortably in their quarters while others fight. There are enemies enough to engage everyone at once.

Third, the permanence and duration of this combat, implied by the present tense. Not: our wrestling was at conversion but is now over and we have passed the danger. Not: we will wrestle when sickness comes or death approaches. But: we are wrestling — right now. The enemy is always within sight, indeed within fighting range. There is a fresh temptation for every day, which — like Paul's chains — goes with us wherever we go. These particulars together lead to this conclusion:

## SECTION 2.

The Christian's life is a continual wrestling. He is, as Jeremiah said of himself, "born a man of strife." What the prophet said to Asa may be said to every Christian: "From here on you will have wars" — from your spiritual birth to your physical death, from the hour you first set your face toward heaven until you set your foot in it. Israel's march out of Egypt is, in the gospel sense, our taking the field against sin and Satan. When did Israel have peace? Not until they planted their banner in Canaan. There is no peaceful condition for the Christian in this life. Whether it is prosperity or adversity, both hands are occupied — keeping pride and false security down in prosperity, and keeping faith and patience up in adversity. There is no place the Christian can call neutral ground. Lot in Sodom wrestled with the wicked people around him — his righteous soul tormented by their corrupt way of life. And how did things go for him at Zoar? Did not his own daughters bring a spark of Sodom's fire into his own bed, inflaming him with lust? Some have thought: if only I were in a different household, under a better ministry, removed from these circumstances — then I would never be tempted the way I am now. I grant that a change of environment is a real help to weak human nature, and those things provide some advantage against Satan. But do you think you can flee from Satan's presence that way? No — even if you took the wings of the morning, he would fly after you. A change of setting may alter his method of attack, but it will not make him abandon his design. As long as his old ally is alive within you, he will keep knocking at your door from without. No duty can be performed without wrestling. The Christian needs his sword as much as his trowel. He wrestles with a body of flesh. This body is to the Christian in duty what a difficult horse is to a traveler — he cannot

make his journey without it, and it takes great effort to travel with it. If the flesh is kept well-fed and strong, it becomes willful and refuses to obey. If it is kept low, it is weak and tires quickly. Either way, the Christian makes little progress because he is limited to his weak body's pace. He wrestles with a body of sin as well as a body of flesh. This body of sin grumbles and resists whenever the soul takes up any duty. Sometimes it keeps the Christian from duty altogether, so he cannot do what he wants. As Paul said, "I wanted to come to you once and again, but Satan hindered me" (1 Thessalonians 2:18) — so the Christian may say at such times: "I wanted to pray, wanted to meditate on the Word I heard, on the mercies I received — but this enemy got in the way." It is true that grace holds the scepter in such a soul — yet just as schoolboys, when the master steps out, close the door on him and run wild for a while before being punished — so the unregenerate part takes advantage when grace is not on watch to disrupt its rule and shut it out from duty. Though this in the end makes the soul more strict in dealing with that corruption, it takes some fierce fighting before grace recovers its throne. And even when the body of sin cannot shut grace out of duty entirely, the Christian is still badly hindered within it. He cannot do what he does the way he wants to do it. The enemy spoils many lines in the copy by nudging him with irrelevant thoughts. When the Christian is praying, Satan and the flesh are chattering — and they cry louder, trying to drown his cry or throw him off entirely. So we see the Christian is attacked on every side. How could it be otherwise, when the seeds of war are deep in the very natures of both parties — seeds that can never be fully removed until the devil ceases to be a devil, sin ceases to be sin, and the saint ceases to be a saint? Wolves may fight among themselves,

but they quickly settle down because the conflict is not written into their natures. But the wolf and the lamb can never be made friends. Sin will wage war against grace, and grace will oppose sin, whenever they meet.

### SECTION 3.

First application: This rebukes those who do wrestle — but against whom? Against God, not against sin and Satan. These are bold men indeed who dare try a fall with the Almighty. And yet such people exist, and a woe is pronounced against them: "Woe to the one who quarrels with his Maker" (Isaiah 45:9). It is easy to predict who will lose in that contest. What can a man do but break his legs by dashing them against a rock? What kind of battle will it be when thorns pick a fight with fire and stubble contends with flame? But where do these giants live who dare enter the ring with the great God? What are their names, that we might identify them and mark them as creatures above all others unworthy to live? Be careful, you who ask that question — the wretched person you seem to be speaking of so forcefully may turn out to be wearing your own clothes. Judas was the traitor, though he would not answer to the name — he deflected with, "Surely it's not I, Master?" And you may be the one fighting against God. The heart is deceitful. Even holy David, whose anger burned so fiercely against the rich man who took the poor man's lamb, swore an oath that the man who did such a thing deserved to die — only to be told by the prophet that he was that very man (2 Samuel 12).

There are two ways in which people wrestle against God. First, when they wrestle against His Spirit. Second, when they wrestle against His providence.

First, when people wrestle against His Spirit. We read of the Spirit striving with humanity: "My Spirit shall not always strive with man" (Genesis 6:3). The striving there is not anger meant to destroy them — God could do that without any struggle. It is a loving contest with humanity. The people of the ancient world were rushing headlong toward their ruin. God sent His Spirit to intervene, and through counsels and warnings to try, as it were, to stop and reclaim them. It is like someone seeing another about to harm himself, struggling to take the knife from his hand. Or like someone carrying a purse of gold to give away, following a person with every kind of plea, trying to get him to accept and take it. This is the nature of the Spirit's striving with people. It is the lusts of people — those deadly instruments with which sinners are destroying themselves — that the Holy Spirit strives through His gentle counsels and appeals to take from our hands. And it is Christ's own grace and eternal life that He strives to get us to accept from God's mercy. For repelling the Spirit who strives with them in this way, sinners are justly called fighters against God: "You stiff-necked people who are uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are always resisting the Holy Spirit" (Acts 7:51). Now there are two ways the Spirit strives, and so two corresponding ways we wrestle against Him. First, the Spirit strives with sinners through His messengers. These come on His errand, not their own — and so He owns the faithful counsels, rebukes, and exhortations they give as His own acts. Noah's preaching of righteousness is called the Spirit's preaching (1 Peter 3:19). The labor of Moses, Aaron, and other servants of God in instructing Israel is called the Spirit's instruction (Nehemiah 9:20). So when the Word that God's ministers bring in His name is rejected, and their faithful counsel is tossed aside and

treated with contempt — those people are striving against the Spirit just as really as if Christ had visibly stood in the pulpit Himself and preached the very same sermon to them. When God comes to reckon with sinners, this will be proven. He will refresh their memories and remind them of His striving with them and their unkind resistance. "Whether they hear or refuse to hear, they will know a prophet has been among them" (Ezekiel 2:5). People quickly forget what they heard, and who spoke to them. Ask them what was pressed on their conscience in a particular sermon, and they have forgotten. What precious truths were laid out in another — those too are gone from their minds. It would be well for them if their memories in the next world were no better. It would ease their torments considerably. But there they will know they had a prophet among them, and what a treasure was in their hands — though they were fools who threw it away. They will know who he was and exactly what he said — though a thousand years have passed, it will be as fresh as if it happened last night. The more zealous and compassionate, the more diligent and powerful the preacher was in his calling, the greater their sin will be found — for turning away from such earnest effort to do them good. Surely God will have something to say on behalf of the sweat and worn-out lives of His servants who spent themselves striving with such rebellious people. Perhaps for now, sinners, your sky is clear — not a cloud in sight to suggest a storm is coming. But know, as people say, that winter does not sleep forever in the clouds — it will come eventually. Every warning your faithful ministers have pronounced from God's Word, God is bound to carry out. He confirms the word of His servants and fulfills the counsel of His messengers — in judgment against sinners, confirming the threats, just as in mercy

He performs the promises that those same messengers declare as the portion of His children. But it will be time enough to ask the dying whether the words their faithful preachers delivered have taken hold of them. Some have confessed with horror that they have — like the Jews in Zechariah 1:6: "Just as the Lord of hosts purposed to do to us in accordance with our ways and our deeds, so He has dealt with us."

Second, we wrestle against God when we wrestle with His providence — and this in two ways. First, when we are discontented with how He has ordered our circumstances. The way God provides for us does not satisfy us, so we find fault with His dealings or at least mutter inwardly — which God hears just as clearly as He hears our spoken words. God considers it the beginning of a quarrel when we do not accept and say "Amen" to His providence, whatever it may be. He calls it "contending with the Almighty" (Job 40:1) — indeed, reproving God. And any person who dares find fault with God and bring charges against heaven is a bold man indeed. God challenges whoever does this to answer for it: "Will the faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Let him who reproves God answer it" (Job 40:2). It was high time for Job to stop when he heard what meaning God placed on those unguarded words that had slipped from him in the anguish of his spirit and the extremity of his suffering. Contend with the Almighty? Reprove God? The good man was immediately silenced and cried out: "I am insignificant; what can I reply to You? I will put my hand on my mouth" (Job 40:4). Let God pardon what was past, and Job would speak no such language again. O, beware above all else of this kind of wrestling. Quarreling is miserable with anyone — with neighbors or friends, wife or husband, children or servants. But it is

worst of all with God. If God cannot please you, but your heart rises against Him — what hope is there of your pleasing Him? He will take nothing kindly from the person who is angry with Him. And how can love for God survive in a discontented heart that is always murmuring against Him? Love cannot think evil of God, nor endure to hear anyone speak evil of Him — it must take God's side, as Jonathan took David's when Saul spoke badly of him. And when love cannot be heard, it will, like Jonathan, rise and be gone. When you are afflicted, love will allow you to groan — but not to grumble. If you pour out your burdened heart to God in prayer and humbly wrestle with Him on your knees, love is on your side and will help you find the best arguments to bring to God. But if you vent your disordered passions in a spirit of rebellion against God, it pierces love to the heart.

Second, we wrestle against providence when we remain incorrigible under the various ways God deals with us. Providence has a voice, if only we had ears to hear. Mercies should draw us; afflictions should drive us. When neither gentle treatment nor harsh treatment does us any good — when we remain impenitent under both — this is to wrestle against God with both hands. Each of these has its own particular weight. Resisting mercy is ungrateful. Resisting affliction is to treat God's anger lightly and to harm ourselves by kicking against the goads. Mercy should make us ashamed to sin. God's wrath should make us afraid to sin. The person who is not ashamed by mercy lacks even basic human dignity. The person who is not afraid when struck is worse than an animal, who at least respects the whip and the spur. Mercy — especially outward mercies, which are pleasing to the carnal part even in a Christian — has sometimes proven a snare even to the best of men.

But usually affliction is what recovers them. When affliction makes people worse, however, and they harden themselves against God, sinning more and more while the rod is on them — what is likely to change them? Few are made better by prosperity whom afflictions make worse. The person who will sin even while suffering will certainly sin even more once the pain is gone. But beware of fighting against God. Nothing is gained by scuffling with God but blows — or worse. If He says He will afflict you no more, that is actually the worst thing He can say. It is as much as saying He will keep the debt until the next world and settle the whole account there. But if He means you mercy, you will hear from Him in some affliction sharper than anything before. He has tools that can split you open if you were an even harder piece of wood than you are. "Are there still treasures of wickedness in your house, and the short measure that is cursed?" God said to Israel (Micah 6:10). Still incorrigible — even as the Lord's voice cries to the city, telling you to heed the rod and the One who appointed it? See what God then resolves to do (Micah 6:13): "I will also make you sick, striking you down." As if He said: My earlier medicine was too weak — it did not work or upset your stomach. But I will prepare a dose that will make you truly sick.

Second, this rebukes those who appear to wrestle against sin, but not according to the rule of command that Christ gives. There is a law governing wrestling that must be followed: "If anyone competes as an athlete, he does not win the prize unless he competes according to the rules" (2 Timothy 2:5). The apostle is alluding to the Roman games, where judges were appointed to ensure that no foul play occurred contrary to the rules of wrestling. The prize was denied to anyone who used unlawful methods, even if

they did defeat their opponent. The apostle applies this to make Christians careful in their warfare — since they are under a stricter law and discipline that requires not only courage to fight, but obedience: fighting in order, according to the word of command. And few who are considered great wrestlers actually do this.

First, some who wrestle against one sin embrace another in the process. In this case it is not actually the person wrestling against sin — it is one sin wrestling against another. And no wonder thieves fall out when they come to divide the spoil. Lusts are many and varied (Titus 3:3), and it is hard to serve multiple masters, especially when their commands conflict. When pride says to spend lavishly and entertain extravagantly, greed says to hoard. When malice says to take revenge, self-serving caution says to hide your anger even if not forgive it. When lust pulls toward its desires, hypocrisy pulls back out of fear of public shame. Is the person who resists one sin at the command of another — perhaps a worse one — truly a champion for God?

Second, some wrestle, but they have been pressed into the field — they are not volunteers. A servile fear temporarily frightens them away from their lust, so the conflict is really between their conscience and their will, not between them and the lust itself. "Give me this sin," says the will. "No," says the conscience — it has been burned before, and throws it away. A man may love wine even while he is reluctant to burn his lips. Even hypocrites are afraid of getting burned. In these conflicts, the will ultimately prevails — either by persuading the understanding to present the desired lust in a more attractive form so that conscience is not alarmed by the apparent danger, or by quieting conscience with a promise of future repentance, or by giving up some sin it can most

easily spare, thereby gaining the reputation of something resembling reformation. If none of these strategies work, then — driven by the fury of its lust — the will declares open war on conscience, sinning in the face of it. Like a wild horse that, impatient with the spur that pricks it and the bridle that restrains it, gets the bit between its teeth and runs at full speed until it throws off its rider — and then, seeing lush pasture ahead, charges through every hedge and ditch, until in the end you find it starving in a pound for its trespassing. This is how many people sin at such a rate that conscience can no longer hold the reins or stay in the saddle, but is thrown down and left for dead. Then these wretches range wherever their lusts can feed most freely — until at last they pay dearly for their stolen pleasures, when conscience returns to itself, pursues them, and seizes them by the throat more firmly than ever, never releasing them until it brings them before God's judgment.

Third, others wrestle with sin but do not hate it — and therefore they go easy on it and do not seek to destroy it as a deadly enemy. These wrestle in play, not in earnest. The wounds they give sin one day are healed by the next. No matter how firmly people resolve against sin, it will creep back into their affections — until the love of sin is extinguished in the heart. And this fire will never die on its own. The love of Christ must put out the love of sin. As Jerome excellently put it: "One love puts out another." This heavenly fire will indeed extinguish that flame from hell. He illustrates this with the story of Ahasuerus and Queen Vashti: in chapter 1 the king issues a hasty decree that she should never come before him again — but when his anger cools (chapter 2:1) he begins to soften toward her. His advisors, seeing this, immediately search out a beautiful young woman for the king to love and bring into his royal

household. Once that was done, we hear no more of Vashti. In the same way, the soul's decree against sin will only hold when the soul has taken Christ into its heart.

#### SECTION 4.

Second, to the saints: since your life in this world is a continual wrestling, it is wise to learn how to manage the combat as effectively as possible. To that end, take these brief directions.

First, make sure you do not go into the field without a second — by which I mean, engage God by prayer to stand at your back. God is in an offensive and defensive alliance with you, but He expects to be called. The Ephraimites were offended that Gideon went to battle without calling them in — should God not be even more rightly displeased if you went without Him, as if you meant to steal a victory before He even knew about it? You would be claiming more courage than Moses, who would not move without God's presence — not even when God offered to send an angel as his captain. You would be claiming more wisdom than Jacob, who — when Esau was marching up against him — turned away from him and fell upon God instead. He knew that if he could prevail with God in prayer, he could trust God to deal with his brother. Engage God, and the back door is shut. No enemy can come at you from behind — indeed, your enemy will fall before you. "Let the counsel of Ahithophel be turned to foolishness," David prayed. Heaven answered his prayer with "Amen," and the wretched man hanged himself.

Second, be very careful not to give your enemy a handhold. Wrestlers try to get a grip on some part of their opponent that gives them the advantage of an easier throw. To prevent this, wrestlers in ancient times would first strip off their garments, and second, oil their bodies. For the first: Christian, labor to put off the corruption that is most particularly yours — what David calls "my own iniquity" (Psalm 18:23). This is the garment Satan grabs hold of. Identify what it is and mortify it daily. Satan will retreat in shame when he sees the head of that enemy mounted on the wall — the very thing that was supposed to betray you into his hands. For the second: Roman wrestlers used to oil their bodies. Do the same — bathe your soul in frequent meditation on Christ's love. Satan will find little welcome where Christ's love lives. Love kindles love, and that love will be like a wall of fire to keep Satan out. It will make you disdain sin's offer, and like oil, it will keep your joints supple and make you quick to fight your enemy. Think how Christ wrestled on your behalf. Sin, hell, and wrath would all have come crashing down on you if He had not met them in the road. Can you find it in your heart to repay His love by betraying His glory into sin's hands through cowardice or treachery? Do not say you love Him while you keep in your heart the very sins that tore His heart from His body. It would be a strange thing for a child to keep, and delight in using, the very knife with which his father was stabbed.

Third, press home any advantage you gain wisely. Sometimes the Christian has his enemy on the ground — he can set his foot on the very neck of his pride, and throw away his unbelief as something absurd and irrational. Now — like a wise wrestler — fall with your full weight on your enemy. Though people consider it un-

sportsmanlike to strike an opponent who is down, do not be so courteous with sin as to let it catch its breath or get back up. Take care that God does not charge you with what He charged Ahab — letting go an enemy now in your hands whom God has appointed for destruction. Learn a little wisdom from the enemies of Christ, who when they had Him under their power were never satisfied they had Him secure enough — not even when He was dead, and so they sealed and posted guards at His grave. Do the same to prevent the resurrection of your sin: seal it down with stronger resolutions and solemn covenants, and guard it through a watchful and careful walk.

Third application: This is ground for comfort to the weak Christian who doubts the reality of his grace because of the inward conflicts and battles he has with his lusts. He is ready to say — like Gideon when surrounded by outward enemies — "If God is with me, why has all this happened? Why do I find such stirrings within me, urging me toward sin and pulling me back from what is good?" Why do you ask? The answer is simple: because you are a wrestler, not yet a conqueror. You are misunderstanding what the Christian life looks like in this world. When a person becomes a Christian, he is not immediately called to celebrate over slain enemies — he is carried into a field to meet and fight them. The state of grace is the beginning of a war against sin, not the end of it. So that you would not be without an enemy to wrestle with, God Himself will sometimes enter the field in disguise and appear to be your enemy. This is what happened when Jacob was alone and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. So set your heart at rest if this is your concern. Your soul may actually take comfort in the fact that you are a wrestler. This internal striving — if it is on the right basis and for

the right end — is evidence that there are two nations within you, two opposing natures: the one from the earth, earthly; the other from heaven, heavenly. And for your further comfort, know this: though your corrupt nature was born first, it shall serve the younger.

Fourth application: How this should make you, Christian, long to be home — where there is none of this struggle and strife! It is remarkable that every hour does not feel like a day, and every day like a year, until death sounds your glad retreat and calls you off the field — where the bullets fly thick and you are fighting for your life against deadly enemies — and brings you to court, where the saints hold not swords but palms, not drums but harps, where the groans of bleeding soldiers and wounded consciences give way to the sweet and ravishing music of triumphant victors singing the praises of God and the Lamb, through whom they have overcome. Well, Christians, while you are still in this world, take comfort in these things. There remains a place of rest for the people of God. You are not swinging at empty air — you are wrestling for a heaven that waits beyond these clouds. You have your worst first; the best will follow. You wrestle only to win a crown — and win it to wear it — and wear it, indeed, never to lose it. Once it is placed on your head, no one will remove it, and you will never face the hazard of battle again. Here we overcome only to fight again. One temptation's battle may be over, but the war continues. What peace can we have as long as devils can come out of their holes, or anything of sinful nature remains within us unmortified? The body of sin will fight on its knees and strike with one arm even while the other is cut off. But when death comes, the final blow is struck. This good physician will completely cure you of your spiritual

blindness and lameness — as the martyr told his fellow at the stake that bloody Bonner would do for their bodily suffering. What is it, Christian, that steals the joy from your life? It is the wrestlings and battles this inward enemy puts you through. Is it not this enemy — like Peninnah — that vexes and disturbs your spirit and has kept you from many a sweet meal you might have had in communion with God and His saints? Or when you have come, has made you cover God's altar with your tears and groans? Will it not be a blessed hand that cuts the knot and sets you free from your deadness, hypocrisy, pride, and all the rest that has yoked you? It is life that is your loss, and death that is your gain. Be willing to endure the tearing of this veil of flesh, and you will be where you long to be — out of reach of sin, at rest in the bosom of your God. Why should a brief pain frighten you more than deliverance from the constant torment of sin should delight you? Some have chosen to undergo surgery rather than be ground down daily by a recurring stone — and yet their pain may return. Can you not quietly contemplate dying, to be delivered from the torment of these sins — never to return? And yet that is not even half of what death does for you. Peace is sweet after war; ease is welcome after pain. But what tongue can express the joy and glory that will fill the soul at the first sight of God and that blessed company? None but those who dwell there can tell. If we knew more of that blessed state, we ministers would find it as hard to persuade Christians to be willing to live here a while longer as we now find it to persuade them to be willing to die so soon.

## CHAPTER 2. WHEREIN IS SHOWED WHAT IS MEANT BY FLESH AND BLOOD, AND HOW THE CHRISTIAN WRESTLES AGAINST THE SAME



### SECTION 1.

**N**ow follows the description of the saints' enemies, with whom they are to wrestle.

First, described in negative terms: not against flesh and blood.

Second, in positive terms: but against rulers and powers, and so on.

For the negative part of the description: this is not a pure negation, as if we had no conflict with flesh and blood at all and engage only against Satan. It means, by way of comparison, not only with flesh and blood — and in some sense, not chiefly with them. This kind of phrasing is common in Scripture. For example, Luke 14:12: "Do not invite your friends to dinner, but the poor" — meaning, not only those, to the exclusion of the poor. Now, what is meant here by flesh and blood? The phrase carries a double meaning.

First, flesh and blood may refer to our own inward corruptions — the sin that dwells in our corrupt nature, so often called "the flesh" in Scripture: "The flesh sets its desire against the Spirit." And sometimes "flesh and blood" — as in Matthew 16:17: "Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you" — meaning: this confession you have made comes from above. Your corrupted fleshly mind could never have discovered this supernatural truth; your sinful will would never have embraced it. Similarly in 1 Corinthians 15:50: "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" — meaning sinful mortal flesh, as the following words explain. And in Galatians 1:16: "I did not consult with flesh and blood" — meaning carnal reasoning. This inward enemy may be called flesh partly because of its origin and partly because of its operations. As to its origin: it is transmitted to us through natural birth. Adam begat a son in his own likeness — sinful as well as mortal and wretched. Indeed, the holiest saint on earth, having flesh in him, passes on this corrupt and sinful nature to his child, just as the circumcised Jew begat an uncircumcised child. And the wheat that has been cleaned and winnowed, when sown, still comes up with a husk. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh" (John 3:6).

Second, this corrupt nature is called flesh because of its operations, which are carnal and fleshly. The reasoning of the corrupt mind is fleshly — this is why it is called the carnal mind, unable to grasp the things of God, which it neither does nor can perceive. Just as the sun hides the heavens above it from us while it reveals things below, so carnal reason leaves a person in darkness about spiritual truth even while it is most capable of grasping worldly knowledge and earthly interests. What a childish question Nicodemus asked Christ — for such a wise man — even though

Christ had wrapped His answer in earthy language to help him. If fleshly reason cannot understand spiritual truths even when accommodated in its own language, how would it possibly manage if those truths were presented in their original form — stripped of all carnal clothing and shown in their pure spiritual nature? The desires of the natural will are also carnal. Therefore, Romans 8:5 says those who live according to the flesh "set their minds on the things of the flesh." All their desires, delights, concerns, and fears are in and about carnal things. The natural person has no more taste for spiritual food than an angel has for physical food. Every creature has its proper diet. The lion does not eat grass, nor the horse meat. What is food for the carnal heart is poison for the gracious heart, and what is pleasing to the gracious is unpleasant to the carnal. According to this interpretation, the apostle's meaning is not that the Christian has no conflict with his corrupt nature — for elsewhere it says the Spirit wrestles against the flesh and the flesh against the Spirit, and this enemy is called "the sin that so easily entangles" the Christian. Rather, his point is to show how much worse the conflict is because an outside force — Satan — has joined forces with this inner enemy. It is like a king who is already fighting his own rebellious subjects when a foreign army joins the rebels. He can then be said to be fighting not merely his own subjects but a foreign power. The Christian wrestles not with bare corruption alone, but with Satan operating within it. Even without the devil, we would have our hands full resisting the corruptions of our own hearts. But Satan's presence makes the battle far more terrible, because he commands these forces with such skill and experience. Our sin is the weapon — Satan is the one who wields it. Lust

is the bait — Satan is the fisherman. When a person is drawn in by his own desire, he is said to be tempted (James 1:14), because both Satan and our own lust work together to complete the sin.

First, let this drive you, Christian, to press hard in the work of mortification. It is unwise to leave your lusts armed when they will certainly rise and side with your enemy when he comes. The commanders of Achish were wise to refuse to trust David in their army when they were going to fight against Israel — fearing he might turn against them in the battle. And will you dare to go to prayer or engage in any duty where Satan will oppose you, without making sure your pride, your unbelief, and the rest are not in a position to join forces with him?

Second, if Satan and your own flesh are both against you — not corruption alone, but sharpened by Satan's cunning and backed by his power — see then how much more help you need than your own grace alone can provide. Take care not to grapple with him in the strength of your grace alone. You have two against one. Satan overcame Adam even though Adam was well equipped, because he was left to himself — how much more easily will he overthrow you. Cling close to your God for strength. Get Him with you, and then — though you are but a worm — you will be able to deal with this serpent.

## SECTION 2.

Second, flesh and blood is taken as a description of humanity. "We do not wrestle against flesh and blood" — that is, not against human beings, who are here described by that part which chiefly dis-

tinguishes them from angels: "Touch me and handle me," said Christ, "for a spirit does not have flesh" (Luke 24:39). According to this interpretation, observe two things.

First, how lowly the Spirit of God speaks of humanity.

Second, where the apostle places the real weight of the saints' battle — not in resisting flesh and blood, but in standing against rulers and powers. The apostle does not exclude our conflict with people, since the war is between the serpent and his seed. The whole world is not wide enough to hold saints and the wicked together peacefully. But his intent is to show what a complex enemy we face — human wrath and Satan's power woven together into one.

First, how lowly the Spirit of God speaks of humanity — calling a person "flesh and blood." A person has a heaven-born soul that makes him kin to angels — indeed, to the God of angels, who is the Father of spirits. But this is passed over in silence here, as if God would not acknowledge what has been tainted with sin and is no longer what He first made it. Or perhaps it is because the soul, despite its noble origin, is so submerged in the physical and sensual that it deserves no better name than flesh — that part of humanity which levels us with the animals and is meant here to express human weakness and frailty. "Flesh" is the word the Holy Spirit uses to express the weakness and helplessness of a creature: "The Egyptians are men and not God, and their horses are flesh and not spirit" (Isaiah 31:3) — that is, weak. Conversely, when God wants to express power and strength, He sets it against flesh: "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh... but powerful" (2 Corinthians 10:3-4). And so in the text: not flesh and blood, but powers. As if to say: if you had only a weak, frail hu-

man being to fear, it would not be worth arming or preparing. But you have enemies who are not flesh, and who cannot be resisted by flesh. This shows us how weak a creature humanity is — not only weaker than angels, who are spirit while we are flesh, but in some sense more fragile even than animals, since human flesh is more delicate than animal flesh. This is why the Spirit compares humanity to grass, which quickly withers (Isaiah 40:6), and to the flower of the field. Indeed, humanity is called vanity (Psalm 62:9): "Men of low degree are vanity, and men of high degree are a lie" — both equally empty. Only the wealthy and powerful have their vanity covered with honor and wealth — which are here called a lie, because they are not what they appear to be. And that makes them worse than plain vanity, which at least is known for what it is and does not deceive.

First application: Is humanity but fragile flesh? Let this humble you, O man, in all your excellence. Flesh is only one step from filth and decay. Your soul is the salt that keeps you from stinking above ground. Is it your beauty you take pride in? Flesh is grass — but beauty is the vanity of this vanity. This attractiveness is like the flower, which does not even last as long as the grass. It appears for its season and is gone — indeed, it is like the beauty of the flower, which fades while the flower still stands. How quickly will the plow of time furrow your face — or a single bout of fever change your appearance so completely that those who once admired you are afraid to look at you? Is it your strength? That is an arm of flesh that often withers as it is stretched out. Before long the blood that is now warm will freeze in your veins. The spring crowned with May blossoms will soon step on the heels of December. Your marrow will dry in your bones, your muscles will shrink, your legs will

bow under the weight of your body, your eyes will fail, your tongue will not be able to call for help. Your heart and your flesh will both fail. And then, you who are now such a giant — try to walk across your room if you can, or just lift your head from your pillow, or call back the breath that is departing from your nostrils, never to return. And do you dare to boast in that which may so quickly be brought to the ground?

Is it your wisdom? The same grave that covers your body will bury all of that too — your worldly wisdom, I mean. All your plans will perish, and your grand schemes will come to nothing. Though if you are a Christian, your thoughts as such will ascend with you. Not one holy aspiration of your soul will be lost. Is it your bloodline and birth? Whatever your status, you are born a commoner until you are born again. The same blood runs in your veins as in the beggar on the street: "He made from one man every nation of mankind" (Acts 17:26). We find all people made of the same blood. In two things all are equal: we come into the world the same way and we leave it the same way. As no one is made of finer earth, so no one dissolves into purer dust.

Second application: Is humanity flesh? Then do not trust in human beings. "Cursed is the man who trusts in mankind and makes flesh his strength" (Jeremiah 17:5). Not in the powerful — robes can hide and adorn flesh, but they cannot change it. "Do not trust in princes" (Psalm 146:3). They cannot keep their own crowns on their heads or their heads on their shoulders — and do you look to them for what they cannot give themselves? Not in the wise, whose plans so often backfire. As the Latin saying goes: a jar was started on the wheel — why does a jug come out? A person's natural wisdom intends one thing, but God turns the wheel and

brings out another. Do not trust in holy people — they have flesh in them, so their judgment is not infallible, and their path is sometimes uncertain. A holy person's error may lead you astray, and while he recovers, you may press on and be lost. Do not trust in any person, in all people combined, not even in yourself — for you are flesh. "He who trusts in his own heart is a fool," says the wise man (Proverbs 28:26). Do not trust even in the best of what you are or do. The garment of your righteousness is spotted with the flesh. Paul counts everything a form of "confidence in the flesh" except our rejoicing in Christ (Philippians 3:3).

Third application: Do not fear people — they are only flesh. This was David's resolve: "I shall not be afraid; what can mere man do to me?" (Psalm 56:4). You need not fear, and you ought not to fear. You need not fear. What — not even a powerful person? Not even a great crowd of people who hold the keys to every prison, who can kill or let you live? No — not even these. But see to it that they are your enemies only for righteousness' sake. Be careful not to make even the smallest child your enemy by wronging them. God will vindicate even the wicked against the saint who offends them. If a saint does wrong, he will find no shelter under God's wing for that sin. This is what made Jerome lament that the sins of Christians made the arms of the barbarian nations invading Christendom victorious: "Our sins make the barbarians strong." But if human anger finds you in God's path, and fury blazes against you because of your holiness, you need not fear — even if your life is what they are hunting. Flesh can only wound flesh. A person may kill you, but cannot harm you. Why should you fear being stripped of something you have already surrendered to Christ? The first lesson you learn as a Christian is to deny yourself,

take up your cross, and follow your Master. So the enemy comes too late — you have no life to lose, because you have already given it to Christ. Nor can anyone take it without God's permission. Everything you have is insured. And though God has not promised you freedom from suffering, He has undertaken to bear your loss — indeed, to repay you a hundred times over. And you will not have to wait until the next world. You also ought not to fear flesh. Our Savior commands us three times in the space of six verses not to fear humanity (Matthew 10). If your heart fails before a person, what will you do when facing Satan, whose little finger is heavier than a man's strength? The Romans had practice weapons — blunted swords and wooden clubs — to train with before graduating to live steel. If you cannot bear a bruise from a man's blunt weapon, what will you do when Satan's sword is in your side? God considers Himself dishonored when His children fear a weak and frail person. Therefore we are told: "It is the Lord of hosts whom you should regard as holy, and He shall be your fear" (Isaiah 8:13) — not to fear what others fear. Now, if you would not fear humanity who are only flesh, work at this:

First, mortify your own flesh. Only flesh fears flesh. When the soul degenerates into carnal desires and pleasures, carnal fears naturally follow. Take care, Christian, that you do not put yourself in bondage. Perhaps your heart feeds on other people's praise — this will make you afraid of being spoken badly of, like those who hedged about Christ (John 12:42), claiming Him in private but not confessing Him openly because they loved human approval. David said that the mouth of the wicked is an open grave (Psalm 5:9) — and in that grave many a saint's name has been buried. But if this fleshly desire were mortified, you would not care about being

judged by people. The same applies to all carnal attachments. Some foods are known to aggravate illness. If you set your heart on anything carnal — spouse, children, wealth, and so on — these will incline you to a base fear of the person who may be God's instrument to afflict you through those very things.

Second, set faith against flesh. Faith anchors the heart, and an anchored heart is not easily frightened. Physicians tell us we are most susceptible to infection when our vitality is low, which is why the antidotes they prescribe are all strengthening remedies. When the spirit is low through unbelief, every threat from a person makes a deep impression. Let your faith take a deep draft of the promises, and your courage will rise.

Fourth application: Take comfort, Christian, in this: since you are flesh, your heavenly Father knows it and makes allowance for it.

First, in affliction: "For He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust" (Psalm 103:14). He is not like an unskilled medical practitioner who has one remedy for everyone regardless of age or strength. He is like a wise physician who considers the patient and then writes the prescription. People and devils are merely God's pharmacists — they do not formulate the medicine, but only dispense what God prescribes. Balaam loved Balak's reward well enough, but could not go a hair's breadth beyond what God permitted. Indeed, God does not treat the wicked the same way: "Did He strike them as He struck those who struck Israel?" (Isaiah 27:7). In the saint's cup, the poison of the affliction is neutralized — in the wicked person's cup, it is not. What is medicine for one is destruction for the other.

Second, in duty: He knows you are only flesh, and therefore pities and accepts your weak service. Indeed, He makes excuses for you: "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:41).

Third, in temptations: He considers that you are flesh, and measures the temptation to fit so fragile a nature. It is called a "temptation common to man" (1 Corinthians 10:13) — a moderate temptation, as the margin notes, fitting for so frail a creature. Whenever the Christian begins to buckle under its weight, God hastens to his rescue as quickly as a tender mother would run to her fainting child. This is why He is said to draw near to revive such a one — lest their spirit give out.

### SECTION 3.

The second matter follows: the complexity of the saints' enemies. We do not face bare humanity — we face humanity with Satan driving it forward. Not flesh and blood alone, but rulers and powers operating through them. There are two kinds of people the Christian wrestles with: the godly and the ungodly. Satan is at work in both.

The Christian also wrestles with godly people. Even among saints, Satan finds ways to stir up conflict — working through misunderstandings and differences that arise between them. Abraham and Lot fell out. Aaron and Miriam rose up against Moses. The apostles had a sharp dispute about who would be the greatest. And so it goes. Satan is the one fanning those flames. Gregory compared two saints in conflict to two cocks fighting — one of them is sure to be wounded, and the feathers of both will fly. A quarrel between saints rarely leaves either party unharmed. When godly peo-

ple are at odds with each other, the contention disorders the soul, weakens their graces, and makes their witness in the world a stumbling block rather than a light.

The Christian also wrestles with wicked people. Because the saint is not of this world, the world hates him — just as it hated Christ before him. Heretics and persecutors are doing their father's work. Satan is the commander-in-chief behind them all. The Sabeans plundered Job, but they were doing it on Satan's errand. The persecutors who come at the saints with their tongues and their hands are the devil's instruments — as Revelation 2:10 makes plain: 'The devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested.'

First application: Pity those who drive against Christ's truth and servants. They are possessed and driven by the devil — they are not fully their own masters. Augustine lamented over Lycinius, who was brilliant and gifted, yet wasted all his talents in the devil's service. He was not angry at the man so much as grieved for him — seeing such capacity squandered in so wretched a cause.

Second application: When persecuted, saints should look past the human instrument to Satan behind it. Spend your indignation on Satan, not on the person he is using. Anselm compared the heretic or persecutor to a horse and the devil to the rider. The goal is not to fight the horse — it is to dismount the rider. Erasmus recorded how Augustine, even when dealing with heretics, would pray and plead for mercy on their behalf — recognizing that the real enemy was not the person but the power driving them.

CHAPTER 3. WHEREIN IS SHOWN  
WHAT A PRINCIPALITY SATAN HAS,  
HOW HE CAME TO BE SUCH A  
PRINCE, AND HOW WE MAY KNOW  
WHETHER WE ARE UNDER HIM



**V**erse 12. But against principalities and powers, etc.

SECTION 1

The apostle has already shown what the saints' enemies are not -- flesh and blood, frail human beings who can be seen coming, resisted by human strength, or escaped by running away. Now he describes them positively: against principalities, against powers, etc. Some believe the apostle uses these different names and titles to describe distinct ranks among the devils, each one under another's authority. In this view, the devil in verse 11 is the head or monarch, and the groups in verse 12 are lesser ranks beneath him -- like princes, dukes, and earls under an emperor. No one can deny that there is some order among the devils. Scripture speaks of a prince of devils in Matthew 9, and of the devil and his angels, who fell with him from their original position. They are called his angels

because, as many believe, one angel above the rest acted as the ringleader and drew many others into his rebellion. They all sinned and fell together. But the idea that there are as many distinct orders among them as there are separate terms in this description is not convincing. That notion is too weak to build a sermon on. So we will take these titles as referring to the devil collectively. We wrestle not with flesh and blood, but with devils who are principalities, powers, and so on. These terms should not be divided up to make principalities one rank and powers another. Some of these terms cannot refer to distinct orders but must apply to all of them together -- such as spiritual wickedness. Being spirits or being wicked is not unique to one rank but is common to all.

First, the devil -- or the whole pack of them -- is described here by their government in this world: principalities.

Second, by their strength and might, called powers.

Third, by their nature in both its substance and corruption: spiritual wickedness.

Fourth, by their kingdom or proper territory: rulers of the darkness of this world.

Fifth, by the ground of the war: in heavenly places, or about heavenly things.

First, regarding principalities -- the abstract is used for the concrete. That is, these are beings who hold a principality. In the same way, Titus 3:1 tells us to be subject to principalities and powers, meaning princes and rulers, as other translations read it. We wrestle against princes. Some take this to express the superior nature of angels above humans, just as the spirit and stature of earthly princes is greater than that of common people. Great men

have great spirits, like Zebah and Zalmunna said to Gideon when he asked who they had killed at Tabor: "As you are, so were they -- each one looked like a king's son," meaning they had a majesty and presence fitting for royalty. In this view, the exalted nature of angels is intended, since angels are as far above the highest prince as a prince is above the lowest peasant. But because their nature is already described in the fourth term, I will agree with those who take this as referring to their principality of government -- the rule that the devil exercises in this lower world. The key point is this:

Satan is a great prince. Christ Himself calls him the prince of the world in John 14. Princes have their thrones where they sit in authority. Satan has his, as Revelation 2:13 says: "You dwell where Satan has his throne." And it is a throne that no earthly prince can match. Few kings are enthroned in the hearts of their subjects. Earthly rulers govern bodies and control finances, but how often in a single day are they pulled from their thrones by the wishes of their unhappy subjects! Satan, however, holds the heart of every one of his subjects. Princes receive honor and tribute from their people. Satan is served on bended knee by his subjects. The wicked are said to worship the devil, as Revelation 13:4 tells us. No prince demands such worship as Satan does. Nothing less than religious worship will satisfy him, as 2 Chronicles 11:15 shows. Jeroboam is said there to have ordained priests for devils. That is why Satan is called not only the prince but the god of this world -- because he receives the worship of a god. Princes who hold absolute power have legislative authority. In fact, their own will is their law -- as it is to this day in Turkey, where laws are written on no other tablets than in the proud sultan's mind. In the same way, Satan gives law to the poor sinner, who is bound and must obey, even though the

law is written with his own blood and brings nothing but damnation for carrying out the devil's desires. It is called a law of sin in Romans 8:2 because it comes with authority. Princes have their ministers of state, whom they employ to protect and expand their territories. Satan has his too, as 2 Corinthians 11:15 tells us, and they spread his cursed plans. That is why we read of doctrines of devils. Princes have their state secrets, known only to a few trusted favorites. In the same way, the devil has his mysteries of iniquity and depths of Satan, as we read about in Revelation 2:24. Not all his subjects know these secrets. They are shared only with a few favorites -- people like Elymas, whom Paul called full of all deceit and a child of the devil. These are people whose consciences are so corrupted that they do not hesitate at the most terrible sins. They are his favored ones. I have read of a people in America who prefer their meat rotten and stinking. The devil shares their taste. The more corrupt and rotten a person is in sin, the more the devil is pleased. Some are more the children of the devil than others. Christ had His beloved disciple, and Satan has those who lie in his very lap and know what is in his heart. In a word, princes have their taxes and tribute, and so does Satan. In fact, he does not merely take a share of what the sinner has -- he owns it all. The devil is the merchant, and the sinner is just the broker trading on his behalf. In the end, all the sinner's gains go into the devil's purse: time, strength, abilities -- even conscience itself -- all spent to keep Satan on his throne.

## SECTION 2

Question: But how did Satan come to have this principality?

Answer: Not lawfully, though he can present what looks like a fair claim. Consider:

First, Satan obtained his principality by conquest — he won his crown by force and holds it by power and cunning. But conquest is a flawed title. A thief is no more honest because he can force a traveler to hand over his purse. A thief on a throne is no better than a pickpocket on the road or a pirate in a small boat — as one man boldly told Alexander the Great. What was unjust at the start does not become right with the passing of time. Satan has held his possession for a long while, but a thief remains a thief as long as he keeps stolen goods. Satan stole Adam's heart from God at the beginning, and he has been doing the same thing ever since. Christ's conquest, by contrast, is just — because the cause of the war was righteous: He came to recover what was His own. That is something Satan cannot say about even the smallest creature.

Second, Satan might claim his principality by election. It is true he came in by a trick, but now he is a prince by the unanimous choice of corrupt human nature. As Christ said: 'You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father' (John 8:44). But this claim also has a flaw. By the law of creation, humanity is God's subject and cannot surrender God's rights. By sinning, a person forfeits God's protection — but God does not forfeit His sovereignty. Sin disabled humanity from keeping God's law, but it did not free them from the obligation to keep it.

Third, Satan might claim a grant from God Himself — which is exactly what he boldly presented to Christ, urging Him to worship Satan as prince of the world. He showed Christ all the kingdoms of the world and said, 'All this authority I will give to You, for it has been handed over to me, and I give it to whomever I wish' (Luke

4:5-6). There was a grain of truth in this — though he said more than was true, as he always does: he mixes truth with lies to give his lies credibility. God has, in a sense, given this world over to Satan. But not in the sense Satan implied — not to do with as he pleases, and not by any approving act that makes him God's appointed viceroy. Satan is prince of this world not by the grace of God, but by the permission of God.

Question: But why does God permit this fallen creature to exercise such rule over the world?

Answer. First, as a just act of judgment on humanity for rebelling against the rightful and good government of their Creator. This is how God punishes rebellion: 'Because you did not serve the Lord your God with joy and a glad heart... you shall serve your enemies in hunger and in thirst' (Deuteronomy 28:47-48). Satan is a king given in God's wrath. Ham's curse is humanity's punishment — a servant of servants. The devil is God's slave, and the sinner is the devil's slave. Sin put the devil on the creature's back, and now he drives without mercy — as he drove the swine — until the creature is consumed in flames, unless mercy steps in.

Second, God permits Satan's rule in order to glorify His name through the rescue of His elect from the power of this great tyrant. What a glorious name God will have when this war is finished — a war in which He found the entire world under this enemy's occupation, with not one son of Adam willing to volunteer for His service, until made willing by the day of His power. This will give God a name above every name — not only above all creatures, but above every name by which He had previously been known. The creation of heaven and earth gave Him the name Creator. Providence gave Him the name Preserver. But this gives Him the

name Savior — in which both the former are included: He preserves a creature that would otherwise have been lost, and He creates a new creature, the child of grace, who through God is able to drive out of the field the very enemy who drove Adam — in the fullness of his created strength — out of Paradise. Should not all God's other works empty themselves, like rivers flowing into the sea, losing their individual names and swelling into the single great work of redemption? Had Satan never taken God's elect prisoner, they would not have gone to heaven with such shouts of triumph. Scripture describes three great expressions of joy: the joy of a woman after giving birth, the joy of harvest, and the joy of dividing the spoil of victory. Each of these joys is born out of suffering — many pains and tears for the woman in labor, many fears for the farmer, dangers and wounds for the soldier — but at last they receive their reward, and the memory of past sorrows only deepens their present joy. If Christ had come, united Himself to our nature, and returned peacefully to heaven with His bride, meeting no resistance — that would have been astonishing love, and it would have brought the joy of a wedding. But this way of bringing His saints to heaven is greater still. It adds to the wedding song the triumph of a conqueror who rescued His bride out of Satan's grip, as he was leading her to the chambers of hell.

### SECTION 3.

First application: Satan is such a great prince — so examine whose subject you are. His empire is vast. Only a few are exempted — those who have been transferred into the kingdom of God's dear Son. Even within Christ's own visible territory, the church, where His name is professed and the Gospel held out, Satan has his sub-

jects. Just as Christ had His saints in Nero's court, so the devil has his servants in the outward court of the visible church. You need more than living within the church's walls and outwardly conforming to its practices to be free from Satan's rule. Satan is content to allow that much — and loses nothing by it. A king permits his merchants to travel to, even live in, a foreign country, learning its language and observing its customs. None of that breaks their allegiance to their home king. Outward church membership does not break your allegiance to Satan. When a law was passed in Queen Elizabeth's reign requiring everyone to attend church, the Catholics sent to Rome to ask the Pope's pleasure. He reportedly replied: 'Tell the Catholics in England to give me their hearts, and let the Queen take the rest.' You are the subject of whoever holds your heart — not whoever holds your outward conformity.

But to bring this trial to a conclusion, understand that you belong to one of these two -- and only one. Christ and Satan divide the whole world between them. Christ will tolerate no equal, and Satan will accept no superior, so you cannot hold allegiance to both. Now, if you say Christ is your prince, answer these questions.

First, how did He come to the throne? Satan once had quiet possession of your heart. By birth you were, like everyone else, Satan's subject. In fact, you often proved it by the course of your life, treating him as your rightful lord. So how did this great change happen? Satan surely would not have willingly handed over his crown and scepter to Christ. And you yourself were neither willing to give up your allegiance nor able to resist his power. This change, then, can only be the fruit of Christ's victorious work -- the One whom God has exalted to be a Prince and a Savior, as Acts 5:31 tells us. So speak up: Has Christ come to you the way

Abraham once came to Lot when Lot was a prisoner of Kedorlaomer -- rescuing you out of Satan's hands while he was dragging you in chains of sin toward hell? Did you ever hear a voice from heaven through the ministry of the Word calling out to you, the way it once called to Saul -- laying you at God's feet and turning you toward heaven? Did it strike you blind in your own estimation, when before you had a high opinion of your spiritual condition? Did it tame and humble you so that now you are willing to be led by the hand like a child after Christ? Did Christ ever come to you the way the angel came to Peter in prison -- rousing you up, causing the chains of darkness and numbness to fall off your mind and conscience, and also making you obedient, so that the iron gate of your will swung open to Christ before He left you? If so, then you have something to say for your freedom. But if all of this sounds like a foreign language to you, and you know of no such work that has taken place in your spirit, then you are still in your old prison. Can there be a change of government in a nation by a conquering army without the citizens hearing about it? Can one king be dethroned and another crowned in your soul while you notice nothing the whole time? The regenerating Spirit is compared to the wind in John 3:8. His first movements in the soul may be so quiet that the person does not know where they come from or where they lead. But before He is finished, the sound will be heard throughout the whole soul, so that it cannot help but see a great change in itself and say: "I who was blind can now see. I who was hard as ice am now broken over sin. Now my heart yields -- I can melt and mourn over it." "I who was perfectly content without Christ -- who used to wonder what others saw in Him to make such a fuss -- have now changed my tune. Instead of scornfully

asking the daughters of Jerusalem, 'What is your Beloved?' I have learned to ask where He is, so that I might seek Him with you." O soul! If you can say this is true of you, then you know who has been at work in you. It is none other than Christ, who by His victorious Spirit has transferred you from Satan's power into His own sweet kingdom.

Second, whose law do you freely submit yourself to? The laws of these two princes are as opposite as their natures. One is a law of sin (Romans 8:2), and the other is a law of holiness (Romans 7:12). So unless sin has robbed you of your senses so thoroughly that you cannot tell sin from holiness, you can -- if you are willing to be honest with yourself -- quickly find your answer. Confess, then, and give glory to God: to which of these laws does your soul give its agreement? When Satan sends out his command and tells the sinner to go trample on some commandment of God, what do you do? Do you yield yourself, as Paul puts it in Romans 6:16? Paul uses a word picture drawn from servants of princes and others who present themselves before their lord, ready and available to do whatever he wants. The apostle uses this to vividly describe how eagerly the sinner's heart runs to obey Satan's call the moment he knocks. Now, does your soul go out to meet your sin the way Aaron went out to meet his brother -- glad to see its face in an opportunity? You are not dragged into sin reluctantly. You actually like the command. "Transgress at Gilgal" -- this pleases you well (Hosea 4:15). You are like a courtier who not only obeys his prince's order but thanks him for the assignment. Do you really need long to figure out whose subject you are? Did anyone ever question whether those were Jeroboam's subjects who willingly followed his command? Hosea 5:11. How sad for you -- you are under the power of

Satan, bound by a chain stronger than bronze or iron: you love your sin. A saint may be temporarily overpowered, sold under sin, as the apostle laments, and therefore glad when deliverance comes. But you sell yourself to practice wickedness. If Christ came to take you from your sins, you would whine after them the way Micah whined after his gods.

Third, where do you go for protection? It is a prince's duty to protect his subjects, and in return a prince expects his subjects to trust him with their safety. Even the bramble in the parable says: 'If in truth you are anointing me king over you, then come and take refuge in my shade' (Judges 9:15). So who has your confidence? Do you dare trust God with your soul and with the affairs of your life when you walk in obedience? Loyal subjects go about their duties and leave matters of state to the wisdom of their prince and his council. When wronged, they appeal to their prince and his laws for justice. When they offend their prince, they submit to the penalty, bear his displeasure patiently, humble themselves, and seek to regain his favor — they do not fly into open rebellion. This is how a gracious soul lives. He goes about his Christian calling and commits himself to God as a faithful Creator, trusting God's wise providence to order his life. If he suffers violence from anyone, he does not stoop to seek the devil's help or take justice into his own hands. He rests in the counsel and comfort God's Word provides. If he offends and comes under God's correcting hand, he does not take up arms against God and refuse correction — instead he says: 'Why should any living mortal complain when punished for his sins?' (Lamentations 3:39). A corrupt heart, by contrast, does not dare venture his possessions, his life, his reputation — anything — with God in a path of obedience. He thinks he will be ruined in-

stantly if he simply rests under the shadow of God's promise for protection. So he runs from God as if fleeing a crumbling building, and places his confidence in wicked schemes, making lies his refuge — like Israel trusting in crooked ways, even while God tells him: 'In repentance and rest you will be saved; in quietness and trust is your strength' (Isaiah 30:15). He does not have the faith to take God at His word for security in the path of obedience. And when God afflicts him for his disloyal behavior, instead of accepting the punishment and thereby acknowledging God as his sovereign Lord who has every right to correct a disobedient subject, his heart fills with rage against God. Rather than waiting humbly and quietly — as a good subject would — until God accepts his repentance and restores his favor, his wretched heart paints God as an enemy. It refuses to let any gracious or loving thought of God take root, and drives him to expect nothing good from God. 'This disaster is from the Lord — why should I wait on the Lord any longer?' (2 Kings 6:33). Yet a gracious heart is most encouraged to keep waiting by the very consideration that drives the wicked away: because it is the Lord who afflicts (Micah 7:9).

Fourth, with whom do you sympathize? The prince you belong to is the one whose victories and losses you take to heart — whether in your own soul or in the world around you. What does your soul say when God blocks your path and keeps you from a sin Satan has been urging you toward? If you are on Christ's side, you will rejoice when rescued from a temptation — even if the rescue came through an affliction. As David said of Abigail, so you will say here: 'Blessed be the Word, blessed be the providence that kept me from sinning against my God.' But if you are on the other side, you will nurse a secret resentment against whatever stood in your way,

and be bitter that your plan failed. A corrupt heart — like Amnon — pines away when it cannot have what it craves. Again, what does the progress of Christ's work in the world sound like to your ears? When you hear the Gospel advancing — the blind seeing, the lame walking, the poor hearing good news — does your spirit rejoice at that hour? If you are a saint, you will. As God is your Father, you will rejoice that more brothers and sisters have been born. As He is your Prince, you will rejoice that the number of His subjects is growing. And when you see the plots of Christ's enemies exposed and their powers defeated, can you go out with the saints to meet King Jesus and ring Him in from the field with praises? Or do your bells ring in reverse — does such news send you home like Haman, mourning, to empty your heart swollen with bitterness against His saints and His truth? Or if your self-control is strong enough to keep your face pleasant and even join the people of God in their shouts of joy — are you secretly mourning within, no more pleased with it than Haman was with holding Mordecai's stirrup, when he would rather have held the ladder? That marks you as a certain enemy of Christ, however smoothly you may carry yourself before others.

Second application: Give thanks to God, you saints, who after this examination can say you have been transferred into the kingdom of Christ and delivered from the tyranny of this usurper. Most people have at least one special day each year they mark and celebrate — a birthday, a wedding anniversary, a day of freedom from cruel servitude, or a deliverance from some great danger. This mercy contains all of those in one. You may call it, as Adam called his wife Eve — the mother of all the living — for every other mercy rises up and calls this one blessed. This is your birthday. You ex-

isted before, but you began to truly live when Christ began to live in you. The father of the prodigal dated his son's life from the moment of his return: 'This my son was dead, and is alive again.' It is your wedding day. 'I have betrothed you to one husband, to Christ,' Paul told the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 11:2). Perhaps you have enjoyed your husband's sweet company for many years and seen a rich harvest of joys and comforts through your fellowship with Him — a thought that can only deepen your love for Him and make the day of your betrothal precious in your memory. It is the day of your freedom. On that day, the contract by which you were bound to sin and Satan was cancelled. When the Son set you free, you became truly free. You cannot say you were born free, for your father was a slave. Nor did you purchase your freedom — 'By grace you have been saved' (Ephesians 2:8). Heaven was settled on you in the promise, and it cost you nothing — not even the paperwork. Everything was done at Christ's expense. God made a covenant with Him and gave Him the promise of eternal life before the world began — a free gift to be given to every believing soul the day they come to Christ and receive Him as their Prince and Savior. From the moment you came under Christ's shadow, all the sweet fruit of the tree of life is yours. With Christ, everything in both worlds belongs to you: all things are yours, because you are Christ's. O Christian — look at yourself now and bless your God when you consider what a change has been made in your condition since that dark and dreadful time when you were a slave to the prince of darkness. How could you ever want your old work in the devil's kitchen again? How could you think of returning to your house of bondage, now that you know the privileges of Christ's kingdom? Great princes who rose from poverty and obscurity to

kingdoms and empires have often delighted — as a way of heightening the joy of their present honor — to speak of their humble beginnings, to revisit the small cottages where they were born and raised. It is not unprofitable for the Christian to peer through the bars and look at the smoky cell where he once lay — to study the chains that once bound him, and then compare Christ's court with the devil's prison, the joy of the one against the horror of the other. But even when we do our best to let this mercy fully reach our hearts, bringing every reason we can find to magnify it — how little of it can we really grasp here? This is a mercy too excellent to be fully seen except by a glorified eye. How can it be fully known where it cannot be fully enjoyed? You have been transferred into the kingdom of Christ, but you are still a long way from His court. That court is kept in heaven, and the Christian knows it only as we know distant countries we have never visited — through maps, or by occasional rare gifts sent to us as a taste of what grows there in abundance.

Third, this truth calls you to loyal and faithful service to Christ, who has rescued you from Satan's bondage. Say to Christ, O saints, what Israel said to Gideon: 'Come and rule over us, for you have delivered us from the hand — not of Midian, but of Satan.' Who is more able to defend you from Satan's wrath than the One who broke his power? Who would rule you more tenderly than the One who could not bear to see another's tyranny over you? And who has any right to you besides the One who risked His life to redeem you — so that, delivered from all your enemies, you might serve Him without fear in holiness all the days of your life? Would it not be a tragedy if Christ went to all this trouble to lift your head from Satan's house of bondage and give you a place among those in His

own house — admitted to serve Him, which is the highest honor any man or angel can receive — only to find that after all this, you had a hand in treasonous action against your dear Savior? Surely Christ might think He deserved better treatment from you, if not from anyone else. Where should a prince safely dwell, if not among his own courtiers — especially those who were all taken from chains and prisons and elevated to honor, so that their gratitude would bind them all the more to his service? Let devils and wicked men do their own work, but do not let your hand, O Christian, be raised against your dear Savior. But simply telling you not to play the traitor is too little. If you have any loyal blood in your veins, your own heart will condemn you when you tear even the smallest corner of His holy law. You cannot carry burning coals in your chest any more than you can hide treason there against your dear King. No — it is some noble purpose I want you to fix your mind on: how you may lift the name of Christ higher in your heart, and as much as lies within you, in the world as well. How deeply God was moved when David — peacefully settled on his throne — was not thinking about how to entertain himself with the pleasures that usually corrupt and degrade the courts of kings in peacetime, but rather how he might honor God by building a house of worship for the One who had raised up a throne for him (2 Samuel 7). Is there nothing, Christian, you can think of in which you might serve God in a meaningful way in your generation? He is not a good subject who is only thinking about what he can get from his prince and never considers what service he might do for him. Nor is he a true Christian whose thoughts dwell more on his own happiness than on the honor of his God. If subjects could choose whatever life was best for their own enjoyment, all would want to live at court with

their prince. But because the prince's honor matters more than personal comfort, noble spirits can deny themselves the pleasures of court life, risk their lives in the field, and still thank their prince for the honor of their service. On these terms, the blessed Paul was willing to have his coronation day in glory postponed, choosing instead to remain with his suffering brothers and sisters in order to advance the Gospel. This is truly what makes life worth living — that we have in it a real opportunity (if we have the heart to use it well) to give proof of our genuine gratitude to God for His redeeming love in rescuing us from the power of the prince of darkness and bringing us into the kingdom of His dear Son. Therefore, Christian, lose no time. Whatever you mean to do for God, do it now. Are you a magistrate? Now it will quickly be seen which side you are on. If you have truly renounced allegiance to Satan and taken Christ as your King, declare yourself an enemy to everything that bears Satan's name and marches under his banner. Study your commission carefully, and when you understand the duties of your office, go to work zealously for God. Your King's sword has been placed in your hand — be sure you use it, and take care how you use it. When the day comes to deliver it back and give your account, let it not be found rusty in its sheath through laziness and cowardice, stained with violence, or bent and notched by partiality and injustice. Are you a minister of the Gospel? Your calling is high — you are an ambassador, not from some minor ruler, but from the great God to His rebellious subjects. It is a calling so honorable that the Son of God did not think it beneath Himself to come from heaven in extraordinary fashion to carry it out; He is therefore called the messenger of the covenant. Indeed, He would still be here in person today, had He not been called to serve as our

ambassador and advocate with the Father in heaven. In His bodily absence He has entrusted you and a few others to carry on the treaty with sinners that He Himself began while on earth. What could you do more pleasing to Him than to be faithful in this work — a work on which He has set His heart so deeply? As ever you hope to see His gracious face with joy — you who are His ambassadors — give yourself to this work and labor to bring this treaty of peace to a blessed conclusion between God and those to whom you are sent. And if sinners will not come to terms and accept the articles of the Gospel, you will be — as Abraham said to his servant — cleared of your oath. Though Israel may not be gathered, you will still be glorious in the eyes of the Lord. And let the private Christian not say he is a barren tree and can do nothing for Christ his King, simply because he cannot bear the fruit of a magistrate or minister. Though you have no commission to punish others' sins with the sword of justice, you can show your zeal by putting your own sins to death with the sword of the Spirit, and by mourning over theirs as well. Though you cannot condemn them from the bench, you can — and indeed should — by the power of a holy life, convict and judge them. Lot was such a judge to the Sodomites. Though you are not sent to preach and baptize, you can be wonderfully helpful to those who are. The Christian's prayers sharpen the sword of both magistrates and ministers. Pray, Christian — pray again and again — that Christ's kingdom may be enlarged. Never go to hear the Word without praying, 'Your kingdom come.' Loving princes take great delight in the cheers and good wishes of their subjects as they pass by. A 'Long live the King' from a loyal heart, though poor, is worth more than a payment from those who withhold their hearts while they hand over their money. You serve

a King, Christian, who knows the thoughts of all His subjects. He counts it His honor not to have a multitude submit to Him outwardly, but to have a people who love Him and genuinely embrace His rule — people who, if they could choose their own king and write their own laws to live under every day, would want no other king than Him and no other laws than those He has already given them. It was no doubt a great comfort to David that he had the hearts of his people so completely that whatever the king did pleased them all. And surely God was equally pleased that what He did satisfied David — for David was as content under God's rule and direction as the people were under his. This is witnessed in the calm of his spirit during the greatest affliction that ever came upon him: 'Behold, here I am, let Him do to me as seems good to Him' (2 Samuel 15:26). What a loyal soul! He would rather live in exile with God's good pleasure than have his throne back if God would not say it was good for him.

CHAPTER 4. OF THE GREAT POWER  
SATAN HAS NOT ONLY OVER THE  
ELEMENTARY AND SENSITIVE PART  
OF THE WORLD, BUT THE  
INTELLECTUAL ALSO — THE SOULS  
OF MEN



SECTION 1.

**T**his is the second branch of the description, in which Satan is presented by his might and power. This gives weight to the first branch. If he were a prince without the power to raise a force that could threaten the saints, the swelling title of 'prince' would mean nothing. But his power matches his rank, as will appear in five particulars.

First, his names. Second, his nature. Third, his number. Fourth, his order and unity. Fifth, the mighty works attributed to him.

First, his names reveal his great power. He is called the strong man (Luke 11:21) — so strong that he holds his house in peace against all the sons of Adam. No one on earth is capable of chal-

lenging this giant; Christ had to come from heaven to destroy him and his works, or the battle would be lost. He is called the roaring lion — a beast that commands the whole forest. When he roars, everything trembles. Pliny reports that a lion can walk among other animals and they stand paralyzed while he selects his prey without resistance. Satan is just such a lion, leading sinners captive at his will (2 Timothy 2:26). He takes them alive, as the word says — like a fowler takes a bird with a small crumb of bait lured into the net, or like a conqueror takes a cowardly enemy who has no heart to fight and surrenders without a struggle. Such cowards the devil finds in sinners. He has barely appeared in a temptation before they yield. Only a very few noble spirits — and those are the children of the Most High God — dare to stand against him and strive against sin to the point of resisting to the last. He is called the great red dragon, who sweeps down a third of the stars of heaven with his tail — wicked men who are his instruments. He is called the prince of the power of the air, because just as a prince can muster his subjects and draw them into the field for his service, so the devil can raise the forces of the aerial realm. In a word, he is called the god of this world (2 Corinthians 4:4) because sinners give him god-like worship, fearing him as the saints fear God Himself.

Second, the devil's nature reveals his power: it is angelic. 'Bless the Lord, you His angels, who excel in strength' (Psalm 103:20). Strength is used as another name for angels in Psalm 78:25 — 'Men ate the bread of angels,' which in the original means the bread of the mighty. The power of an angelic nature appears in two things: its superiority and its spirituality.

First, its superiority. Angels are at the top of creation; humanity itself was made a little lower than the angels. In the works of creation, the superior has power over the inferior: the animals have power over grass and plants, humanity has power over animals, and angels have power over humanity.

Second, the spirituality of their nature. Human weakness comes from the flesh. The soul is made for great things, but weighted down by a body of flesh, it is forced to work at the strength of its weaker partner. But the devils, being angels, have no such burden. No fumes from a fleshly nature cloud their understanding, which is clear and sharp. No drag at their heels slows their movement, which Scripture describes by the wind and the flame of fire. Being spiritual, they cannot be resisted by physical force. Fire and sword cannot harm them. The angel who appeared to Manoah went up in the fire that consumed the sacrifice. Yet to this day, superstitious people imagine they can ward off the devil with their physical charms and rituals — hence the Roman relics, crosses, and holy water, and among the Jews in their more corrupt periods, the belief that their phylacteries and circumcision could frighten away evil spirits. Some of them even applied the verse in Song of Solomon 3:8, 'Every man has his sword on his thigh, because of fear in the night,' to circumcision — as if it were a charm against spirits that terrify in the dark. But the devil cares nothing for any of these. He even ignores an ordinance of God when it is used as a magic formula with fleshly confidence. He has often been bound with such fetters and chains, as the Gospel account says, and snapped them apart, and no one could tame him that way. As Job says of Leviathan: he treats iron as straw and bronze as rotten wood. It takes one stronger than the strong man to bind him —

and only God, the Father of spirits, is stronger. The devil lost much through his fall in relation to the holy and blessed state in which he was created. But he did not lose his natural abilities. He is still an angel, and has an angel's power.

Third, the number of devils adds to their power. What is lighter than sand? Yet in great enough quantity it becomes crushing. What creature is smaller than a louse? Yet what plague was more devastating to the Egyptians? How formidable, then, must the devils be — so mighty in nature and so vast in number? There are devils enough to besiege the entire earth. There is no place under heaven where Satan does not have his forces, and no person without some of these cursed spirits haunting and watching him wherever he goes. For special assignments, Satan can send a whole legion to keep guard over a single person, as in Mark 5. If so many can be spared to attend one person, what would Satan's full army roll amount to if we could see it? Consider what a difficult march we face on the road to heaven, knowing we must pass through the very territory of this multitude, spread across the face of the whole earth. When armies are disbanded and the roads fill with soldiers drifting aimlessly about, travel becomes dangerous — reports of murders and robberies come from every direction. These powers of hell are that company of angels who were discharged from heaven for their mutiny and disobedience, driven out of that glorious host. Ever since, they have roamed down here, bent on doing harm to the children of men — especially those traveling the road to heaven.

Fourth, their unity and order makes their great number even more formidable. We cannot say there is love among devils — that heavenly fire cannot live in a devil's heart. Yet there is a kind of

unity and order among them: they are all agreed on their purpose against God and humanity. Their unity is bound together not by love, but by hatred and strategy. Hatred of God and His children fills them all, and strategy tells them that if they do not cooperate, their kingdom cannot stand. Our Savior gives clear testimony to how faithful they are to this wicked brotherhood when He says that Satan does not fight against Satan. Have you ever heard of a mutiny in the devil's army? Has any fallen angel ever freely surrendered even one soul to Christ? They are many, yet there is one spirit of wickedness in them all. The devils said 'My name is Legion' — not 'our name.' The devil is called Leviathan (Isaiah 27:1). The Lord with His strong sword will punish Leviathan — the name comes from the idea of something bound together or joined, used for the whale (Job 41), whose strength lies in its scales, so tightly locked together that it is covered as with armor. In the same way, these cursed spirits work in tight coordination, and they labor to bind their human instruments into the same league with them. Simple obedience is not enough for them — where they can obtain it, they require an explicit oath of loyalty from their servants, as in the case of witches.

Fifth, the mighty works attributed to evil spirits in Scripture declare their power. These works operate in three spheres: the physical world of nature, the world of the senses and bodies, and the intellectual world of human souls. In the physical world: consider what dreadful effects this prince of the power of the air can produce. He cannot create the smallest breath of air, drop of water, or spark of fire — but if he is let loose, as the Reverend Master Caryl notes on Job 1, he can go to God's storehouse and use these elements in ways no human can withstand. He can hurl the sea

into such a fury that the depths boil like a pot. He can whip the air into storms and tempests as though heaven and earth would collide. Job's children were buried in the ruins of their house by a single breath from his mouth. He can also go to God's arsenal and fire off the great cannons of heaven, unleashing thunder and lightning that does not merely frighten but kills — far beyond what nature ordinarily produces. If human ingenuity can refine nature so powerfully, as we see in the invention of gunpowder, Satan is far more capable of drawing out nature's force. Over the world of the senses his power is also great — not only over animals, as when he drove a herd of swine into the sea, but over human bodies as well. Job's painful sores were not the natural breakout of a diseased body but the marks of Satan's claws on his flesh, doing in an instant what nature would have taken much longer to produce. And the people tormented by demons in the Gospels were grievously afflicted by him. But the devil regards all of this as small game. His true hatred is aimed at the souls of men — what we might call the intellectual world. His cruelty to the body is always in service of his attack on the soul. Christ's compassion for people's bodies while on earth — healing their diseases — served the good of their souls. He won them with mercies suited to their physical desires, so they would more readily receive mercy for their souls from the hand that had been so kind to their bodies. We do the same with children — give them something they enjoy to persuade them to do something they would rather avoid, like going to school. Satan, who is cruel as Christ is gentle and wishes good to neither body nor soul, shows cruelty to the body as part of his campaign against the soul. He knows well that the soul is easily unsettled by the body's distress. The soul lives under the same roof as the body and cannot help

hearing the body's groans — and when the soul is disturbed by those groans, it is no surprise if, like a tongue made foolish by lack of sleep, it breaks out into sinful behavior. That is the bottom of the devil's plot against the saint. As for other poor souls, Satan has gained something close to god-like fear and reverence from them by the power he exercises — with God's permission — in striking their possessions, livestock, and bodies. This is still seen among certain peoples today. And among ourselves, there are many who plainly show what a throne Satan holds in their hearts by seeking help and cures from his doctors — I mean wizards — as if there were no God in Israel. Even if Satan had no other means of working on the souls of men than through the body's vulnerability, given how far humanity has fallen from its original dignity — how completely the body, which was meant to be a bright and ordered dwelling, has become its master instead of its servant — it would be no surprise that he accomplishes so much. But beyond this, as a spirit he has more direct access to the soul, and as a superior spirit he has power over humanity as a lower creature. Above all, having gotten inside the soul through the fall of man, he now has far more power than before. Where he meets no resistance from God, he sweeps everything before him. In the wicked, who are completely under his control, he is said in a sense to do what God does in the saints. God works effectively in His people (Galatians 2:8; 1 Thessalonians 2:13). Satan works effectively in the children of disobedience (Ephesians 2:2) — the same word is used for both. He is in a sense as effective in them as the Holy Spirit is in the saints. His delusions are powerful (2 Thessalonians 2:11). They do not leave empty-handed. The Spirit enlightens; Satan blinds the minds of those who do not believe (2 Corinthians 4:4). The Spirit fills the

saints (Ephesians 5:18). 'Why has Satan filled your heart?' Peter asked Ananias (Acts 5:3). The Spirit fills with knowledge and the fruits of righteousness; Satan fills with envy and all unrighteousness. The Holy Spirit fills with comfort; Satan fills the wicked with terror — as in Saul tormented by an evil spirit, and Judas, into whom Satan is said to have entered. When Satan had satisfied his purpose upon Judas — as Amnon did with Tamar — he shut the door of mercy on him, turning the man who had just betrayed his Master into the executioner of himself. Although the saints are not the proper subjects of Satan's power, they are the chief objects of his hatred. His foot rests on the back of the wicked, but he wrestles actively with the saints, and when God steps aside, he is far more than their match. He has sent the strongest among them home trembling, crying to their God with a conscience full of anguish. He is powerful both as a tempter toward sin and in sustaining the attack. He knows the Christian's situation so well and is able to throw his burning bombs so deep into the inner senses — whether stirring up lust or dread — and press them with such tireless persistence, that even if they do not at first find any ready fuel in the Christian at which they can ignite (which is the more common case), he may in time wear the person down through the length of the siege and wave after wave of such impulses, until the soul listens to a negotiation with them, if not an outright surrender. In this way, he often wearies the soul into submission simply by persistence.

## SECTION 2.

First application: Let this knock the pride out of you, O man — whoever you are who boasts in your power. Even if you had more than any son of Adam ever possessed, what would it all amount to against the power of these angels? Is it your physical strength you boast of? What is the strength of frail flesh compared to the force of their spiritual nature? You are no more to them than a child to a giant, a worm to a man. They could tear up mountains and throw the world into chaos if God would allow it. Is it your mental ability above others? Do you not see how he makes fools of the wisest people, twisting them around like a sophist manipulating a simpleton, making them believe light is dark and bitter is sweet? Could his own ability be anything less than remarkable, to make a rational creature so absurdly throw away treasure for filth — giving up God and the glory available in Him, in the hope of gaining something better by embracing sin? And he accomplished this when humanity had its fullest wits in the innocence of creation. Is it the power of position and dignity won through great achievement? Even if you could subdue nations and give laws to the whole world, without grace from above you would still be his slave. And he himself, for all his power, is a cursed spirit — the most miserable of all God's creatures, made worse precisely because he has such great power to do harm. Had the devil lost all his angelic abilities when he fell, he would have gained by the loss. So tremble, O man, at any power you hold, unless you use it for God. Are you strong in body? In whose service does that strength run — God's, or your lusts? Some are strong to drink, strong to sin. Your chains will therefore be all the stronger (Isaiah 28:22). Do you hold a position that could do great service for God and His church, yet have no heart to use it for them — and instead turn it against them? You

and the devil will stand at the same bar. It seems you intend to go to hell with a full load. There is no greater curse on a person than power without grace. Such powerful figures in the world make a fine show while they are here — like senior officers at the head of their regiments, towering above the common soldiers. But when the army is routed and all are taken prisoner, they strip off their insignia and would be glad to pass for the lowest private. Devils, and the great ones of this world, would be glad at that day to appear in the rags of some obscure person and receive their sentence as such — but then their titles, dignities, and riches will be read out, not for their honor, but for their greater shame and damnation.

Second application: This exposes the foolishness of those who think getting to heaven is an easy matter. If the devil is so powerful and the road to heaven so full of them, then it will take a hard fight before we plant our banners on the walls of the new Jerusalem. Yet it is clear that many think otherwise, judging by how they prepare for the journey. If you saw someone going out without a coat, or with a very thin one, you would say he has no fear of bad weather. If you saw someone riding a long journey alone and unarmed, you would conclude he expects no thieves on the road. Everyone, if you ask, will say they are on their way to heaven — but how few seek the company of the saints as if they needed fellow travelers for the journey? Most go out completely unequipped, without anything resembling armor — not enough even to be called serious Christians. Others may show you some vague, groundless hope in God's mercy with no basis in Scripture, and are content with that. But this will be like a rusty, defective pistol — it will explode in their own face when they try to use it. Is it unfair to say these people think noth-

ing of what it takes to reach heaven? These same men, many of whom do so well in the world, never built their earthly estates with so little effort as they think will get them to heaven. Ask them why they work their trade so hard, and they will tell you that wealth is not earned by sleeping, that families are not provided for with your hands in your pockets, that there are swindlers and cheaters in business who would ruin you if you were not watchful. And are there none who might cheat your soul and rob you of your crown of glory if they can? You are blinder than the prophet's servant if you do not see more devils surrounding you than he saw soldiers around Samaria. Your worldly business the devils will not hinder — they may even help you to sinful tricks in that, the better to hinder you in this. But once you resolve to seek Christ and His grace, they will oppose you to your face. They have sworn an oath — like the men who swore to kill Paul — to take the life of your soul if they can. They are desperate creatures who know their own doom is sealed, and they will sell their own lives as dearly as possible. What folly, then, to hand your soul over to them when Christ stands ready to be your escort? Outside of Him you are a lost person — you cannot defend yourself against Satan alone, and you cannot stand with Satan against God. Come to Christ, and you are delivered from one of your enemies — and the most formidable one: God, who has now become your friend and will stay close to you in your conflict with the other.

Third application, to the saints: Do not be dismayed by this report Scripture gives of Satan's power. Let those fear him who do not fear God. What are these mountains of power and pride before you, O Christian, who serve a God who can make a worm thresh a mountain? The greatest harm Satan can do you is by feeding this

false fear of him in your heart. Bernard observes of certain animals in the forest: though they can overpower a lion in a fight, they tremble when it roars. So the Christian — when it actually comes to the test — is able through Christ to trample Satan under his feet, yet stands trembling before the battle at the mere thought of him. Work to get a clear understanding of Satan's power, and this lion will not look as fierce as your anxious imagination paints him. Three considerations will relieve you whenever you are overwhelmed by fear of his power.

First, it is a derived power. Satan does not hold it from himself — he holds it by grant from another, and that other is God. All powers come from God, whether on earth or in hell. Truly believing this would first assure you, Christian, that Satan's power will never harm you. Would your Father give him a sword to use against you, His child? 'I have created the smith who blows the coals; I have created the destroyer to destroy' — and therefore God assures His people that no weapon formed against them will succeed (Isaiah 54:16-17). If God arms His enemies, those arms will be of little service to them. When Pilate tried to intimidate Christ by threatening what power he held over His life, Christ replied that Pilate could do nothing unless it were given to him from above (John 19:10-11). As if He said: Do your worst — I know who sealed your commission.

Second, this truth quiets and settles the soul when troubled by Satan within or his instruments without. Satan buffets me; a person persecutes me — but it is God who gave them both their power. 'The Lord told him to curse,' David said of Shimei. 'The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away,' Job said. This kept the peace in both their hearts. O Christian, do not fix your eyes on the

jailer who is whipping you — he may be cruel. But read the warrant. Look at who wrote it. At the bottom you will find your Father's signature.

Second, Satan's power is limited in two ways: he cannot do everything he wants, and he will not be permitted to do everything he can.

First, he cannot do everything he wants. His desires are boundless. They range not only through the earth below but reach up to heaven itself — pulling down his former fellow angels, smashing the carved work of that glorious temple as with axes and hammers, and even dethroning God to put himself in His place. This fool says in his heart: 'There is no God.' But he cannot do any of this. Nor can he do the many other things his bitter malice drives him to desire. He is a creature and has only the length of chain to which he is staked — he cannot exceed it. And if God is safe, then so are you. Your life is hidden with Christ in God: 'Because I live, you will live also' (John 14:19). You are engraved on the heart of Christ — if God were to pluck one away, He would have to pluck the other as well. Furthermore, just as he cannot harm the being of God, he cannot peer into the mind of God. He does not know the thoughts of man — how much less the thoughts of God. Nebuchadnezzar's astrologers and their master could not recover the king's dream. As people have private rooms where no one may enter without a key, God keeps the human heart as His own inner chamber, closed to everyone but Himself. When Satan attempts to foretell events, if God has not taught him his script and secondary causes do not help him along, he is out of his depth. To protect his reputation, he delivers his predictions in ambiguous terms, so that his words can be interpreted to fit whatever outcome occurs. When he presumes

to pronounce judgment on a person's spiritual state, there is no weight to be given to his verdict. He called Job a hypocrite, but God proved him a liar. Third, he cannot hinder those purposes and plans of God that he already knows about. He knew Christ was coming in the flesh and did his worst — but he could not prevent His arrival. Though there were many schemes in Satan's heart, the counsel of the Lord concerning Christ stood firm. Indeed, it was delivered through the very actions of Satan and his instruments, who thought they were satisfying their own desires but were actually fulfilling God's purposes against themselves. Fourth, he cannot override your will. The devil is not the commander of your sins, only their instigator. He cannot force you to sin against your will. He can accelerate what is already moving — like wind pushing a tide along faster — but he cannot reverse the current of a heart that is set in the opposite direction.

Second, Satan's power is so limited that he will not be permitted to do everything he can. God releases only as much of Satan's wrath as will serve His own purposes and advance His love toward His saints — and then He closes the floodgate and holds the rest back. God always calls Satan off before he can complete his work on a saint. Satan can — if God allows it — rob the Christian of much of his joy and disturb his peace through cunning insinuations. But he is under command. He stands like a dog beside the table while the saints sit at their feast of comfort — but he dares not snatch the food from their plates. His Master's eye is on him. Forgetting this robs God of praise and robs us of comfort, since God has locked up our comfort in the performance of our duty. If the Christian really considered what Satan's power is and who holds it in check, gratitude would always be on his lips. Does Satan

have the power to rob and burn, kill and destroy, torment the body, and distress the mind? Then who deserves thanks that I am still out of his hands in any of these ways? Does Satan love me more than he loved Job? Am I out of sight, or out of his reach? Has his courage cooled, or his anger been satisfied, that I escape so well? No — none of these. His wrath is not against one saint but against all of them. His eye is on you. His arm can reach you. His spirit is not tamed, and his appetite is not dulled by the millions he has already devoured — he is as keen as ever. Indeed, sharper, because he sees God about to put an end to things, and the close of the age coming fast. It is your God alone whom you have to thank for all this. His eye keeps you safe. When Satan finds the good man sleeping, he finds our good God awake. You are not consumed because He does not change. If His eye were to close or wander for one moment, there would be no need of another flood to drown you — and the whole world with you — than what would pour from this dragon's mouth.

Third, Satan's power is ministerial — appointed by God to serve the good of the saints. As was said of the proud Assyrian: he does not think of it that way, nor does his heart intend it that way. It is in his heart to destroy those he tempts. But no matter what he intends: as Luther comforted himself when told what had been decreed against the Protestants at the Diet of Nuremberg — that it was decreed one way there, but otherwise in heaven — so for the saint's comfort, the thoughts God has toward them are thoughts of peace, while Satan's aim is the ruin of their graces and the destruction of their souls. And God's counsel will stand in spite of the devil. Even the warrant God issues when He commits any of His saints to the devil's prison reads like this: 'Deliver such a one to

Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus' (1 Corinthians 5:5). So tempted saints may say: we would have perished if we had not appeared — by our own reckoning — to be perishing. This Leviathan, while thinking to swallow them up, is only sent by God — as the whale was sent to Jonah — to carry them safely to shore. 'Some of those who have insight will fall, in order to refine, purge, and make them pure' (Daniel 11:35). This is God's intention when He allows His children to fall into temptation — as we treat linen: spots gotten at the dinner table are removed by washing, rubbing, and bleaching in the sun. Saints pick up most of their spots during seasons of peace, ease, and prosperity. They never recover their whiteness so fully as when they come out from under Satan's scrubbing. We do too little when we merely refrain from fearing Satan. We should go further and draw comfort from the usefulness of his temptations to our good. All things are yours — you who belong to Christ. He who has given you life has given you death also. He who has given you heaven as your inheritance, with Paul and Cephas and all His ministers and ordinances to help you there, has also given you the world with all its afflictions — indeed, the prince of it too, with all his wrath and power — for the same end. This is love and wisdom wrapped in a riddle. But you who have the Spirit of Christ can unravel it.

## CHAPTER 5. OF THE TIME WHEN, THE PLACE WHERE, AND THE SUBJECTS WHOM SATAN RULES



**T**hese words contain the third branch in the description of our great enemy the devil, setting forth the proper seat of his empire with a threefold boundary. He is not lord over all — that title belongs to God alone and cannot be shared. He is a ruler of the darkness of this world, with his empire bounded by time, place, and subjects.

First, the time when this prince holds his rule: in this world — that is, now, not hereafter.

Second, the place where he rules: in this world — that is, here below, not in heaven.

Third, the subjects he rules: not all people in this lower world, either. They are described by the phrase 'the darkness of this world.' First, the first boundary.

SECTION.

The time when he rules: the word 'world' in the text can refer to that small stretch of time which — like an insignificant parenthesis — is bracketed on both sides by vast eternity. It is sometimes called 'the present world.' On this brief stage of time, this mocking plays the part of a prince. But when Christ comes to tear down this stage at the end of the age, Satan will be stripped of all rank — his crown removed, his sword broken over his head, driven off in scorn and shame. He will go from being a prince to being a close prisoner in hell, no longer able to trouble the saints or even rule the wicked. He and they together will lie under the direct execution of God's wrath. For this very purpose Christ holds His commission, which He will not surrender until He has put down all rule. Only then will He hand over His mediatorial kingdom to the Father, when He has put all enemies under His feet. Satan is already condemned — his doom was passed upon him just as Adam's was on his first sin — but full execution is being held until the end of the age. The devil knows it. It is an article in his creed, which is why he trembled and asked Christ why He had come to torment him before his time.

First application: This is bad news for the wicked. Your prince cannot remain on his throne much longer. Sinners have a merry time of it now — if only it would last. They laugh and celebrate while Christ's disciples weep and mourn. They dress in luxury while the saint goes in rags. No prince takes more care to reward his courtiers with pensions and positions than the devil does to satisfy his followers. He too has his rewards: 'All this I will give You' (Matthew 4:9). 'Am I not able to promote you?' Balak asked Balaam (Numbers 22:37). It is remarkable — though not surprising, given how corrupt human nature is — to see how Satan leads

sinners along on this golden hook. Let him dangle a bait of honor, money, or pleasure, and their hearts leap after it like a dog at a crust of bread. He gets them to sin for a scrap of food. The corrupt human heart loves the wages of unrighteousness — which the devil promises — so dearly that it does not fear the dreadful wages that God threatens. As you sometimes see a spaniel so eager for a bone that he will leap into a river if you throw it there — and by the time he struggles to reach it, it has sunk, and he comes away with nothing but a mouthful of water for his trouble — so sinners chase their desired pleasures, honors, and profits, swimming right through the warnings of God's Word, and sometimes they do not even get what they were reaching for. So God kept Balaam from honor, as Balak told him (Numbers 24:11). But however things go for them here, they are certain to lose themselves eternally without repentance. Those who are determined to have these things at any cost are the ones who fall into the devil's snare and are dragged into those foolish and harmful desires that will drown them in destruction and ruin (1 Timothy 6:9). O poor sinners! Would it not be wise, before you strike a deal with the devil, to ask what title he can actually give you to these glittering vanities? Will he settle them on you as a secure estate? Can he guarantee the bargain and protect you from legal disputes? Or can he put two lives into the purchase, so that when you die you will not be left destitute in another world? Alas, you will soon discover what a cheat he has run on you. From him you can expect nothing but 'buyer beware.' And this boastful prince who promises so much must come down himself — and a ruined prince makes for a ruined court. What howling there will be when Satan and his subjects are brought down together! But the sinner says: 'The pleasures and honors sin and Satan offer

are here now, while what Christ promises we must wait for.' And that is indeed what carries the most weight with people. 'Demas has deserted me,' Paul wrote, 'having loved this present world' (2 Timothy 4:10). Present, yes — but you cannot be sure it will still be yours the next moment. Your present happiness is slipping away, while the saints' future joy is coming and will never leave. Who in their right mind would trade a kingdom that lasts forever for a bowl of soup and a moment of pleasure? Only someone who thought he had nothing worth having except what he had already swallowed. Cicero quoted a line that expressed this view — one he said was fitter to be written on an ox's grave than a man's. What a wretched soul it is that thinks it is not better to deal with God for lasting good than with the devil for payment on the spot. Tertullian marveled at the folly of Roman ambition — men who endured every kind of hardship in camp and battle for no other prize than the honor of being consul for a year, which he called 'a joy that flies away at the year's end.' But how much more desperate is the madness of sinners, who will not endure a little hardship here, but entail on themselves the eternal wrath of God hereafter — and all for the short feast and fleeting pleasures their lusts provide them, which often do not last even an hour.

Second application: Let this encourage you, O Christian, in your conflict with Satan. The skirmish may be sharp, but it cannot last long. Let Satan tempt you and his instruments harass you — it is only for a little while, and then you will be rid of both troublesome neighbors. The cloud is passing over your head even as it drops its rain, and then comes fair weather — an eternal sunshine of glory. Can you not keep watch with Christ for an hour or two? Hold the field for a few more days? If you give up now, you are un-

done forever. But if you persevere until the battle is over, your enemy will never regroup again. Let faith peer through the keyhole of the promise and tell you what it sees laid up there for the one who overcomes. Let it listen and tell you whether it cannot hear the shouts of those crowned saints — like men dividing the spoil and receiving the reward of all their service and suffering here on earth. And do you stand on the other side, afraid to get your feet wet crossing those sufferings and temptations that, like a shallow puddle, stand between you and glory?

## SECTION 2.

Second, the devil's empire is confined not only in time but in place: he is the ruler of this lower world, not of the heavenly one. The highest the devil can reach is the air, which is why he is called its prince — that is the outer boundary of his empire. He has nothing to do with the world above. Heaven has nothing to fear from the devil, which is why its gates always stand open. This enemy has never dared look into that holy place since he was first expelled, but roams here below like a vagrant, banished from the presence of God, doing whatever harm he can to the saints on their way to heaven. Is it not a matter of great joy that Satan has no power over the place where the saints' happiness truly lies? What do you have, Christian, that is worth keeping that is not already there? Your Christ is there — and if you love Him, your heart is there too, living in the embrace of your Beloved. Your friends and fellow believers in Christ are there, or soon will be, and you will have a joyful reunion in your Father's house — despite the snares at every Tabor, despite all of Satan's plots that lie along the way. O friends, secure a title to that kingdom, and you are beyond the reach of this hawk.

This is what made Job truly a happy man. When the devil had stripped him to his skin and nearly torn that away too, Job could still — in the face of death and devils — declare Christ to be his Redeemer, whom he would see with his own eyes, those very eyes that now stood full of bitter tears, and see Him for himself as his own portion. It is a terrible thing to be robbed of everything at once — but that can never truly be said of a saint. The devil took Job's purse, so to speak, which put him in great difficulty — but he had a God in heaven who replenished his supply. You have some spending money in your purse right now — in your active faith, the assurance of your sonship, the comfort flowing from it, your freedom in prayer and other duties — and Satan may for a time disturb or even take these away. But he cannot access the records to blot your name from the book of life. He cannot annul your faith, void your relationship with God, or dry up your comfort at its source — though he may dam up the stream. He cannot prevent a happy outcome to your whole war with sin, even if he beats you in a particular skirmish. All of these are kept in heaven, among God's own crown jewels, guarded by Him who is said to keep us by His power through faith to salvation.

### SECTION 3.

The third boundary of the devil's principality concerns his subjects: they are described here as 'the darkness of this world' — that is, those who are in darkness. This word is used in several senses: sometimes to describe the desolate condition of a soul in great distress (Isaiah 50:10, 'He who walks in darkness and has no light'); sometimes to describe the nature of sin itself (Ephesians 5:11, where sin is called the works of darkness); and sometimes the par-

ticular sin of ignorance, which is often pictured by the darkness of night or the blindness of the eye. All of these meanings may be intended here, but chiefly the last. For even though Satan can stir up great trouble in a soul that is in the darkness of sorrow — whether from outward hardship or inward desertion — if the person is not also in the darkness of sin, Satan may disturb their peace as an enemy, but cannot be said to rule them as a prince. Sin alone places Satan on the throne. So I will take this phrase in its two latter senses.

First, the darkness of sin in general.

Second, the darkness of ignorance in particular. The meaning, then, is that the devil rules over those who are in a state of sin and ignorance — not simply those who sin or struggle with ignorance (that would include the saints), but those who are in a state of sin. The abstract phrasing 'ruler of the darkness' is used to express the fullness of the sin and ignorance that possesses Satan's slaves. Two teachings follow.

First: every soul in a state of sin is under Satan's rule.

Second: ignorance, above other sins, enslaves a soul to Satan — which is why all sin is described by the word that most clearly expresses this enslavement: darkness.

Every soul in a state of sin is under Satan's rule. Two questions need to be considered under this point.

First, why is sin described by darkness?

Second, how does every person in such a state appear to be under the devil's rule? For the first:

First, sin may be called darkness because the root and common cause of sin in humanity is darkness. The external cause is Satan, the great promoter of sin — a cursed spirit held in chains of darkness. The internal cause is the blindness and darkness of the soul. We can say of anyone who sins that he does not know what he is doing, just as Christ said of His murderers. If a person truly understood the real worth of his soul — which he now sells for nothing — the glorious and lovely nature of God and His holy ways, the incomparable love of God in Christ, and the poisonous nature of sin — and if he understood all this not by a sudden flash of insight at a sermon that vanishes like lightning, but by a lasting, settled light — it would ruin the devil's market. Poor souls would not so readily take this toad to their hearts. Sin works in disguise, and that is why it is welcome.

Second, sin is called darkness because it brings darkness into the soul — both naturally and as a judgment.

First, naturally. Sin has a corrupting effect on the understanding, which is to the soul what the eye and palate are to the body. The understanding perceives and distinguishes true from false the way the eye distinguishes white from black, and tests words the way the mouth tastes food. Now just as some things are harmful to the eye, and others to the palate — corrupting it so that it can no longer tell sweet from bitter — sin does the same to the person. It dulls judgment so that the very thing a person could once see as absurd and shameful in others, once he has drunk from this enchanting cup himself, he becomes unable to see the evil of it or reason against it at all. Saul, before he had ruined his conscience,

judged the medium of Endor worthy of death. But after he had trampled his conscience underfoot through other foul sins, he went to consult one himself.

Sin also brings darkness as a judgment. Those who have heard God's voice trying to open and teach them, and have run out of God's school into the devil's by rebelling against the light, will die without knowledge (Job 36:10-12). Why should the candle keep burning when the student is more interested in playing than working?

Third, sin runs toward darkness. False teachers bring in their destructive heresies secretly — like merchants selling bad goods who avoid the market where everything is tested by the standard, and prefer to offload their wares in private. The same is true in moral wickedness: sinners go out at night for their prey like animals, wanting to avoid being seen and afraid of being exposed. Nothing is more threatening to sinners than the light of truth (John 3:19), because their deeds are evil. Felix was so stung by what Paul said that he could not sit through the sermon, but rushed away and postponed the hearing until a 'convenient time' — which never came. The sun is no more oppressive in hot countries than the truth is to those who sit under powerful preaching. Just as those in hot climates seldom venture out in the midday heat — and when they must, cover their heads against the sun — sinners avoid the preaching of the Word as much as possible. If they must attend to keep up appearances with family or for some other worldly advantage, they try to neutralize the power of truth: by sleeping through the sermon, or by filling their mind with idle thoughts that Satan sends to keep them company and chatter with them during the service. Or they choose a tepid preacher whose

toothless talk flatters rather than challenges, tickles the imagination rather than pierces the conscience — and then their sensitive eyes can tolerate the light. People love truth that enlightens but not truth that convicts. They will admire and handle a sword with pleasure when it is in a fine scabbard, but run at the sight of it drawn.

Fourth, sin is darkness because of the misery it brings — and this in three ways.

First, darkness is miserable because it shuts out all productive work. What could the Egyptians do under the plague of darkness but sit still? For an active spirit, that is torment enough. So in a state of sin, a person is an utterly useless creature. He can do nothing acceptable in God's service and ruins everything he touches — like someone stumbling around a shop in the dark, doing nothing right. It could be written on the grave of every sinner who lives and dies in that state: 'Here lies a man who never did God an hour's work in all his life.'

Second, darkness is miserable in terms of enjoyment. No matter how beautiful the paintings in a room, if it is dark, who benefits from them? A soul in a state of sin may possess much but enjoys nothing — a serious evil that is rarely thought about. One clear look at its condition of enmity toward God would drop bitterness into every cup. Everything such a person has smells of hellfire. A man at a rich feast would enjoy it very little if he could smell smoke from a fire about to consume the house — and him in it.

Third, darkness fills with terror. Fears in the night are most dreadful, and a state of sin is a state of fear. A person deeply in debt has no peace except when asleep — and not even then, be-

cause the anxieties and fears of the day sink so deep that even sleep is restless and troubled. The wicked has no peace except when his conscience is asleep — and that sleep is broken, waking often in sick fits of terror. In his most prosperous times he is startled like a flock of birds in a cornfield at every shot. He eats in fear and drinks in fear. When afflicted, he dreads something worse to come, not knowing how far this cloud may spread or where it may bring him. Whether he will end in hell or not he cannot tell, and so he trembles in the dark, never knowing but that his very next step may be into the pit.

Fifth, sin leads to utter darkness — darkness pushed to its absolute limit. Sin at its fullest height combined with wrath at its fullest heat: both total, both eternal. Here in this life there is some mixture — peace and trouble, pain and relief, sin and thoughts of repentance, sin and hopes of pardon. But there, the fire of wrath will burn without any slackening, and sin will run alongside torment forever. The inhabitants of hell do not change. Their torment drives them to sin, and their sin feeds their torment — each one fueling the other, both inextinguishable.

Second, let us see how it is evident that those in a state of sin are under Satan's rule. Sinners are called the children of the devil (1 John 3:10). And who rules the child but the father? They are slaves — and who rules the slave but the master? They are the devil's own dwelling place. Where does a man have authority but in his own house? 'I will return to my house,' the devil says (Matthew 12:44) — as if he had said: I have been ranging among the saints of God, knocking at one door after another, and none will let me in. I can find no rest. But I know where I am welcome. I will go to my own house, and there I am sure to have complete

command. And when he arrives, he finds it empty, swept, and in order — ready for his return. Servants prepare the house and make it presentable when their master comes home, especially when he brings guests — as the devil does here, bringing seven more with him. Look at the sinner: everything he is and has is under the devil's control. Satan rules the whole person — beginning with the mind, which he blinds. The sinner's perception of everything is shaped by Satan. He looks at sin through the devil's glasses, reads the Word with the devil's commentary, and sees nothing in its true colors — he lives under a continual delusion. The wisdom of the wicked is actually called demonic (James 3:15) — because it is taught by the devil and resembles the devil's wisdom: capable only of doing evil. Satan commands the will — not by forcing it, but by drawing it effectively. 'His works you will do,' Christ said (John 8:44). You are set on your course; the devil has your heart and him you will obey. So when Christ comes to reclaim His throne, He finds the soul in an uproar — like Ephesus at Paul's preaching — shouting Christ down and lifting up its idol. 'We will not have this man reign over us' (Luke 19:14). 'Who is the Almighty, that we should serve Him?' (Job 21:15). Satan rules over all the sinner's physical members — they are called weapons of unrighteousness (Romans 6:13), all in the devil's service, like a kingdom's weapons defending the prince against any invader. The head plots, the hand acts, the feet carry the body wherever his service requires. He rules over all the sinner's possessions. Let God come as a poor member of the church and ask for a small gift to relieve someone's hunger — the miser's hand of charity goes lame; he cannot stretch it out. But let Satan call, and both his purse and his heart fly open. Nabal, who could not spare even scraps for David and his men, could

throw a feast like a prince to satisfy his own greed and drunkenness. He commands the sinner's time. When God calls to prayer and worship, there is never a spare hour all week. But when the sinner hears about a good time with friends at the tavern, everything is dropped to wait on his lord and master — work abandoned, wife and children crying, perhaps starving, while the wretch pours out their very livelihood at the altar of his lust. The sinner is bound by iniquity, and being bound, he must obey. Scripture says he follows his lust as a fool follows the path to death (Proverbs 7:22). The prisoner in chains cannot untie his own arms and legs and run from his keeper — no more can the sinner run from his lusts. They are slaves, and their bodies are instruments of sin. Just as a workman picks up his axe and it does not resist, so Satan uses them — unless God says otherwise.

See here the wretched condition of everyone in a state of sin. He is under Satan's rule and hell's government. What tongue can describe, what heart can grasp, the misery of this condition? Christ foretold a dreadful day (Matthew 24) when the abomination of desolation would stand in the holy place, and told those in Judea to flee to the mountains. But what was that compared to this? Those were only men, though abominable. These are devils. The abomination of desolation only stood in the physical temple and defiled and damaged that building. But these plant their flag in the souls of human beings — defiling that throne which is more glorious than the physical heavens themselves, made for God alone to occupy. Those invaders exercised their cruelty at most on the bodies of men, killing and torturing. Here, the precious souls of men are destroyed. When David wanted to curse God's enemies to the deepest degree, he prayed that Satan would stand at their right

hand. It is astonishing that sinners are not more terrified by this. They would cry out as though half-ruined if they saw one of their pigs or animals possessed by the devil and running headlong into the sea. But is not one human soul worth more than all of those? What a plague it is to have Satan take possession of your heart and spirit, driving you in the fury of your lusts toward destruction. O poor soul! What a terrible exchange you have made. You would not live under the gentle and just government of God, your rightful Lord. You are now being repaid for your rebellion against Him by the cruelty of this tyrant, who writes all his laws in the blood of his subjects. Why will you stay any longer, O sinners, under the shadow of this bramble, from whom you can expect nothing in the end but the eternal fire that will consume you? Look up — Christ is in the field, sent by God to reclaim His right and your freedom. His royal standard is raised in the Gospel, and the proclamation is made: any poor sinner weary of the devil's government, heavy-laden with the miserable chains of his spiritual bondage — so much so that the irons of his sin have entered into his very soul and he feels their weight — let him come to Christ. He will receive protection from God's justice, from the devil's wrath, and from sin's dominion. In a word, he will have rest — and a glorious rest at that. Usually when a people have been ground down under a bloody tyrant, they are ready enough to long for change and to listen to any offer that holds out hope of freedom — even if it comes from a stranger who might prove no better than the tyrant they left. Bondage is so crushing that people will take any change, like a sick man changing his bed even when it brings little relief. Why, then, should this deliverance be unwelcome to you, sinners? This deliverance is brought not by a stranger whose intentions you have

cause to fear, but by your nearest kinsman in blood, who cannot mean you harm without hating his own flesh — and who has never done that. He who took part of our flesh so that He might have the right to be our Redeemer would have no kinship with us in the sinfulness of our nature. And it is sin that makes us cruel even to our own flesh. What can you expect from One who is pure but pure mercy? Believe it — Christ counts it His honor to be king of a willing people, not of slaves. He comes to make you free, not to put you into bondage; to make you kings, not servants. No one speaks ill of Christ except those who have never been His subjects. Ask those who have experienced both Satan's service and Christ's — they are best qualified to tell you what each is like. When a soul crosses over from Satan's side to Christ, and has even one taste of the sweetness of His service, nothing can drag that person back to the old drudgery. It is like those who come out of the cold and barren North — they love the warm South so well that they seldom or never return. What is more dreadful to a gracious soul than to be handed over to Satan's control, or to fall under the power of its own lusts? It would rather leap into a burning furnace than be governed by them. The great request of a child of God is that God would sooner discipline him within His own house than turn him out to become Satan's prey. O sinners! If you knew — which you cannot know until you come to Christ and receive Him as your Lord and Savior — what the privileges of Christ's servants are, and how gently the saints are treated at His hands, you would say that those who stand continually before Him are the only truly happy people in the world. His laws are written not in His subjects' blood, as Satan's are, but in His own. All His commands are acts of grace. It is a privilege to be employed in them. "To you it has been granted

not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake' (Philippians 1:29). The saints count it such an honor to do anything He commands that they consider God rewards them for one act of service when He equips them for the next. 'This I have had,' David said, 'because I kept Your precepts' (Psalm 119:56). And what was this great reward? Look at verse 55: 'I have remembered Your name in the night, O Lord, and kept Your law.' The reward was that through past obedience he received more strength and ability to keep the law in the future. Was that not well worth the effort? There is fruit even in holiness — a present reward the Christian enjoys while still at work, enough to sustain him until the full reward comes, which is eternal life (Romans 6:22). Jesus Christ is a prince who loves to see His people flourish and grow rich under His government. And yet sinners are so afraid of Him that when He opens their prison and calls them out, they choose rather to bore their ears to the devil's post and remain his slave than to enjoy this blessed freedom. It is no wonder that some of the saints have, when faced with torture, refused to be delivered — that they might obtain a better resurrection. But what a mystery it is that ruined souls, bound in the chains of their lusts and facing God's irrevocable condemnation if they do not believe in the Lord Jesus, should refuse deliverance even as they are being driven to execution. This should astonish heaven and earth. Surely, dying in their sins, they cannot hope for a better resurrection than they have a death. I fear rather that they do not truly believe they will have any resurrection at all — and then it is no surprise they make so little of Christ's offer, thinking themselves safe once they are buried in the grave. But let sinners know: the grave cannot hold them when the day of judgment arrives and the Judge calls for the

prisoners to the bar. The grave was never intended as a sanctuary to protect sinners from justice — it is a holding cell to ensure they appear for trial. Sinners will be dug out of their hiding places and dragged to answer for their contempt of Christ and His grace. How astonished you will be to see as your Judge the very One you now refuse as your King — to hear the Gospel that acquits others for their salvation testify against you for your condemnation. What do you intend to do on that day, sinners? Will you cry and plead for mercy from Christ's hands? Alas — when the sentence is passed, your face will immediately be covered. Condemned prisoners are not allowed to speak. Tears are useless then, when there is no longer any room for repentance — either in Christ's heart or in your own. Or will you turn to your old master, in whose service you destroyed your soul, and cry to him as the woman cried to Ahab: 'Help, O king!' Alas — your eyes will see him in the same condemnation as yourself. Would it not be far better to renounce the devil's rule now, while you can still be received into Christ's kingdom? Pour out your tears and cries for mercy and grace now, while they can still be obtained — rather than saving them for another world where they will be of no use at all.

Question: But you might ask, "How can I -- a lifelong slave to sin who has lived so many years under Satan's cursed rule -- escape his dominion and power, and be brought into the kingdom of Christ?"

Answer. The difficulty of this great work does not lie in persuading Christ to receive you as His subject. He refuses no one who sincerely desires to come under His protection. It would go against His whole purpose to reject anyone like that. Do physicians chase their patients away? Do lawyers turn away their clients? Do

generals discourage soldiers who desert the enemy and come over to their side? Of course not. When David was in the field, 1 Samuel 22:2 tells us that everyone who was in distress, in debt, or discontent gathered to him, and he became their captain. Christ will do the same for everyone who is truly dissatisfied with Satan's government and comes to Him because of a genuine inner rejection of it. But the main challenge will be getting you to break free from your attachments to your sins and to Satan. Until that is done, Christ will not claim you as a subject but will view you as a spy. It is the same with sinners as with servants. There may be falling outs between servants and their masters, with heated words exchanged, until you would think they were about to pack up and leave immediately. But the quarrel is soon over, and by the next morning everything is forgotten. The servants are back at their work as hard as ever. Oh, how often sinners take their leave of their sins, giving notice to their old master that they will repent and reform and change everything! But within a few days they have repented of their repentance and undone their reforms. This shows they were carried away by some passing emotion when they thought or said these things. No wonder they reverse it all when they return to their normal state. Now, because Satan has many strategies that he uses to keep his hold on sinners, I will expose some of them. If you can resist these, it will not be hard to bring you out from under his power and rule.

First, Satan does everything he can to keep sinners from having any serious thoughts about the miserable condition they are in while under his rule -- or from hearing anything from others that might unsettle their minds even slightly from his service. He knows that reflection is the first step toward repentance. A person

who never considers what his ways are and where they are leading him is not likely to change them anytime soon. Israel did not stir until Moses came and talked with them about their terrible slavery and God's gracious plans for them. Then they began to desire to leave. Pharaoh quickly realized what might follow from this, and he cleverly worked to prevent it by doubling their workload: "You are idle, you are idle! That is why you say, 'Let us go and sacrifice to the Lord.' Go now and work!" (Exodus 5:17-18). It was as if he said, "Do you have so much free time that you can dream about running off into the wilderness? Are you holding your secret meetings with Moses to hatch your plots together?" "I will break up this conspiracy. Give them more work. Scatter them across the land to gather straw, so they cannot meet and lure each other's hearts away from my service." Satan is just as jealous over the sinner. He is afraid that every Christian who talks to the sinner, or every sermon the sinner hears, might win him over. If Satan had his way, the sinner would never come near a Christian or a church service -- not even have a single thought about heaven or hell from one end of the week to the other. And to make sure the sinner has as few such thoughts as possible, Satan keeps him busy with constant work. The sinner grinds away, and Satan keeps filling the hopper so the mill never stops. Satan is with the sinner as soon as he wakes, filling his wretched heart with wicked thoughts. These serve as a morning dose to keep him immune to any good influence that someone else might breathe on him during the day. All day long Satan watches him, the way a master would watch a servant he fears will run away. And at night, like a careful jailer, he locks him up again with even more chains and bars, not letting him fall asleep until he has done some mischief. What a pitiable wretch!

Was ever a slave so closely guarded? As long as the devil can keep you like this, you are certainly his. The prodigal son came to himself before he came to his father. He thought about the starving condition he was in. His husks were poor food, and he did not even have enough of them. Yet he could easily improve his situation if he just had the sense to go home and humble himself before his father. Now -- and not until now -- he went. So make up your mind, poor sinner, to sit down and consider what your condition is and what it could be if you would trade the slavery of Satan for the sweet government of Jesus Christ. First, ask your soul whether the devil can -- after you have worn out your miserable life in his hard service -- bring you to a happy state in the next world, or even protect you from a state of torment and misery. If he cannot, then ask whether there is not one Jesus Christ who is both able and willing to do it. And if so, is it not cruel beyond measure to your precious soul to stay any longer under the shadow of this thorn bush when you could make such a blessed exchange? A few of these thoughts, seriously and persistently pressed home to your soul -- with God adding His power to them -- can shake the very foundations of the devil's prison and send you running from him as fast as someone fleeing a house that is collapsing in flames around them.

Second, Satan uses instruments to oppose God's messengers and the offers of grace they bring -- working to keep sinners under his rule. When Moses came to deliver Israel from Egyptian bondage, Jannes and Jambres arose to resist him. When Paul preached to the deputy, the devil had his own chaplain at court to hinder him -- Elymas, a man full of cunning and evil. Whenever God is speaking to a sinner and urging him to come to Christ, Satan will always find someone to obstruct the work. Sometimes

he sends carnal friends to plead his case. Sometimes he stirs up old companions in wickedness — working sometimes to mock the person out of his new way, and if that fails, turning their old affection into bitter anger at him for abandoning them. Or if the sinner still presses forward, Satan has his flattering preachers — always like Job's messengers, the last being the worst — who with their soul-soothing, soul-destroying doctrine attempt to heal the wound without treating it properly. Now, if you ever desire to escape Satan's bondage, guard yourself against all of these. Steel yourself against the pleas of carnal friends and family. Resolve that if your own children clung to your knees to keep you from Christ, you would tear yourself away. If your father and mother lay prostrate at your feet, you would step over them to go to Christ rather than stay behind. We never give up their affections on better terms than these. As for your old companions in sin — surely you do not intend to wait for their blessing. You might as well ask the devil's permission too. Heaven is worth very little to you if you cannot find it in your heart to endure a little shame and bear a few taunts from scoffing Ishmaels for the hope of it. Let them spit in your face — Christ will wipe it off. Let them laugh, as long as you win. If they do not follow your example before they die, the shame will be entirely their own. God Himself will spit it back in their faces before men and angels, and then cast them into hell. Finally, escape the snare of those flatterers who use their tongues only to smooth over sinners' consciences with their soothing doctrine, and you stand a real chance of coming to Christ. Do not seek their counsel. They may offer you comfort, but every stitch they sew to close your wound will have to be torn open again — or you will die from it.

Third, Satan works to lead the sinner astray through delay. Vague, drifting thoughts about repenting do not frighten him at all — he can allow sinners to talk all day about what they intend to do. As long as he can buy time and use his skill to prevent those thoughts from taking root and ripening into an immediate decision, he is satisfied. Nearly everyone in hell once thought about repenting. But Satan managed things so skillfully that they could never settle on a specific time to actually do it. If you ever mean to escape his grip, flee out of his house and run for your life. Wherever this warning finds you, do not delay — not even in the middle of pleasures your desires are feeding you. Think of Brentius, who received a note from a trusted senator friend while sitting at supper with his wife and children, urging him to flee — quickly, more quickly, most quickly. He left his dear company and warm meal at once. Do the same, or you may regret your delay when it is too late. A vision warned the wise men to return home by a different route and not to visit Herod again, even though Herod had commanded them to return. So do not go back, drunkard, to your drinking companions. Adulterer, do not return to your immorality. You who are consumed by greed — do not return to your dishonest gain. Turn another way, and do not give the devil even a moment's advantage. God's command says, repent now. The imperative tense has no future form. God says, today, while it is still today. The devil says, tomorrow. Which will you obey — God or him? You say you mean to do it eventually — then why not now? Will you bargain with God over a day or two, haggling over the smallest terms? Heaven is not so costly that you cannot meet His terms. And which tomorrow do you mean? For all you know, you may have only one day left in your life — where then will you find a

tomorrow for repentance? But even if you had as many days ahead of you as Methuselah had, understand this: sin is hereditary, and diseases of this kind only grow stronger with age. It is with those who have long lived in sin as it is with those who have long lived under one government: they would rather stay as they are — even if things are not going well — than think about change. Or like a traveler who has been walking the wrong road all day: he would rather take any new path, jumping hedges and ditches, than turn back the long way to find the right road.

Fourth, Satan tries to negotiate a compromise — to broker a deal between himself and Christ. When a conscience cannot be quieted, Satan will, for the sake of peace, agree to give up something. This is how Pharaoh dealt with Moses: after much pressure, he was willing to let Israel go — 'I will let you go, that you may sacrifice to the Lord your God in the wilderness' (Exodus 8:28). But then came his condition: 'Only you shall not go very far away.' Satan works the same way. He will allow the sinner to pray, hear the Word, and make a respectable show of religion — as long as he does not go too far, so that Satan can have him back by nightfall. If God gets the morning, Satan expects the evening. He is content to divide the day. If conscience presses for reformation and a change of life, rather than lose the person altogether, Satan will even grant that — but just as Pharaoh, when he finally agreed to let Israel go, intended to keep their little ones behind as a pledge for their return (Exodus 10:11), so Satan must have at least one sin kept back. It does not even have to be a large one. Now, if you ever want to break free from the devil's rule, make no deal with him. Christ will be King completely, or not at all. Not a hoof must be left behind, nor anything that could give you a reason to return. Take your

eternal farewell of every sin — at least in the sincere and firm intention of your heart — or you accomplish nothing. Paul joins his faith and his purpose together (2 Timothy 3:10) — never one without the other. When God gave Israel the law at Sinai, He was, in a sense, administering the oath of allegiance. He declared the law by which He would rule them, and they gave their consent. This was the covenant God later calls Israel to remember in Jeremiah 2 — the solemn union in which they were formally joined as King and subjects. Notice: before God would do this, He required them to come out of Egypt. They could not obey His law and Pharaoh's idolatrous customs at the same time — so He brought them out first, before solemnly uniting them to Himself as a people uniquely His own. You must be free from another master before Christ will take you as His own. He will not share you with a rival. Oh, if only it could come to this! Then the union between Christ and you would soon be complete. Let me ask you, poor soul: have you seriously considered who Christ is and how good His rule is? Could you find it in your heart — out of a genuine hatred for sin and Satan and a genuine love for Christ — to renounce sin and Satan and choose Christ as your Lord? Does your soul say, like Rebekah, 'I will go' — if only you could find a way to reach Him? Perhaps you say: 'I am a poor prisoner here. I cannot shake off my chains and set myself free to come to Christ.' Then hear this, poor soul: can you groan sincerely under your bondage? If so, take comfort — your deliverance is near. The One who heard Israel's cry in Egypt will hear yours as well, and will come and save you from the grip of your own desires. He will not be like some who win your affection and then abandon the pursuit and never return. If Christ has won your heart, He will be faithful to you and will bear all the cost of

bringing you out of your prison. He will even come for you Himself, bringing with Him the wedding garments in which He will carry you from your prison to His Father's house with joy. There you will live not merely as a subject under His law, but as a bride embraced in His love. What more could be added to your happiness? Your King is your husband — a King to whom all other rulers are subjects, even the prince of this world himself — and yet so gracious that His majesty does not prevent His tender, personal dealings with you, a poor creature. It only deepens the wonder of His condescension. That is why God joins titles of greatness and intimacy together: 'Your Maker is your husband, your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel.' 'The God of the whole earth shall He be called' (Isaiah 54:5). These promises are introduced with the most fearsome and majestic titles precisely to show the depths of love they contain. How low does God stoop by coming to dwell with a poor humble soul? This is greater even than saying such a soul shall dwell with God — for a beggar living at court is not as remarkable as the king coming to live with him in his cottage. And yet this promise is announced with the most magnificent titles: 'Thus says the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and humble spirit' (Isaiah 57:15). Why such titles? To remove the fears that God's saints tend to take up from them. 'Will the high and lofty One look at me, a poor worm?' asks the humble soul. 'Will the Holy God draw near to such an unclean creature?' cries the contrite one. Isaiah himself cried out that he was undone at the sight of God and at the proclamation of this very attribute (Isaiah 6). God places these titles at the front of the promise so that the creature may know that His majesty and holi-

ness — which seem so terrifying to us — do not stand in the way of His love. Indeed, so gracious a Prince is your husband that He delights in His saints calling Him by names of affection rather than titles of state: 'You will call Me my husband, and will no longer call Me my master' (Hosea 2:16).

#### SECTION 4.

The second point follows. More than any other sin, ignorance enslaves the soul to Satan. A person with knowledge may still be his slave — but an ignorant person can be nothing else. Knowledge does not make the heart good, but without knowledge the heart cannot become good. There are some sins an ignorant person cannot commit, but there are far more that he cannot help committing. Knowledge is the key (Luke 11:52). Christ is the door (John 15). Christ opens heaven; knowledge opens Christ. This point becomes clearer in three particulars.

First, ignorance opens the door for sin to enter.

Second, just as ignorance lets sin in, it also locks sin inside the soul and locks the soul inside sin.

Third, just as it locks sin in, it also shuts out every means of help.

First, ignorance opens the door for Satan to march in with his whole army of desires. Where the watchman is blind, the city falls quickly. An ignorant person sins and — like drunken Lot — does not know when the tempter comes or when he leaves. He is like a man walking in his sleep: he does not know where he is or what he is doing. 'Father, forgive them,' said Christ, 'for they do not know what they are doing.' In 1 Corinthians 15, the apostle rebukes the

sensuality of some who, in verse 32, treated the nearness of death — which ought to sober people away from sin — as a reason to indulge: 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.' He then explains this twisted logic: 'Some have no knowledge of God.' An ignorant person has the shape of a man but the heart of a beast. 'There is no knowledge in the land,' says the prophet (Hosea 4:2), and look at what follows this blind captain: swearing, lying, killing, stealing, and everything else. We read in 2 Timothy 3:5 of some who are loaded down with sins — trees full of bitter fruit. And what do we find at the root that makes them so productive? Ignorance: foolish people who never come to the knowledge of the truth.

Second, just as ignorance lets sin in, it also locks it up — trapping sin in the soul and the soul in sin. Such a person lies in Satan's inner dungeon, where no light of conviction ever penetrates. Darkness invites sleep, and a darkened mind and a drowsy conscience always go together. When the storm arose, the sailors who were awake fell to praying to their God — but the sleeping man felt no fear. Ignorance puts the soul to sleep in the hold of stupidity. God has planted in animals a natural fear of whatever threatens to harm them. Push an animal toward a pit, and it recoils — instinct shows its resistance. Because human beings are of a higher nature and face greater dangers, God has placed a double guard over them: a natural fear of danger, and a natural shame that rises in the face when a person does something unworthy. But an ignorant person has slipped free from both these guardians. He sins without blushing because he does not know his guilt. He lacks the inner magistrate that should put him to shame. He feels no fear because he does not know his danger — and so he plays with his sin like a child splashing in waves that will soon swallow him.

Conscience is God's alarm clock to wake the sinner. It does not always ring continuously even for the person who has knowledge — God usually sets it to go off at particular moments, when He is speaking through a sermon or acting through a providence. But in an ignorant soul, this alarm is silent. A clock cannot run when its weights are removed. Conscience can only testify to what it knows.

Third, ignorance shuts out every means of recovery. Friends and ministers — indeed, Christ Himself — stand outside and cannot help the person in this condition. Threats and promises are equally useless: he does not fear the one or desire the other, because he knows neither. Heaven's road cannot be found in the dark. Therefore the first thing God does is break in with light — letting the soul see where it is and what the way out of its prison looks like. Without that light, all attempts to escape are useless. There is some small glimmer of light in everyone — pure inner darkness does not exist, I believe, in theology any more than in philosophy. This faint night-light may expose certain sins, produce inner pangs of conscience over them, and even move a person to step back from the most obviously destructive behaviors. There are some sins so cruel and costly that even the most hardened soul may, over time, grow tired of their company for purely selfish reasons. But what does any of this amount to if the person has never been introduced to Christ — the true way to God — and to faith and repentance as the only way to Christ? Such a person, after all this movement, will escape Satan by one door only to run headlong into his jaws by another. There are roads that seem right to a traveler at first but wind so gradually that when a person has gone a long way and thinks he is nearly home, he finds himself carried back to the very place he started. This is what will happen to every

soul ignorant of Christ and the way of life through Him. After what they think are many years of traveling toward heaven through good intentions, uninformed devotion, and outward reformation — just when they expect to be within sight of heaven — they will find themselves exactly where they began, as completely enslaved to Satan as they ever were.

Application 1. This speaks directly to you who are parents. See how urgent it is to instruct your children and raise them from an early age in the nurture and teaching of the Lord. Until these chains of darkness are broken off their minds, there is no possibility of getting them out of the devil's prison. He has no more docile a slave than the ignorant soul. Such a person walks ahead of Satan — like a sheep before the slaughterhouse — without knowing who is leading him or where he is being taken. Can you watch the devil driving your children to ruin and do nothing to rescue them from his hands? You are cruel parents if you can harden your hearts against your own flesh and blood in this way. Now, to stir you further to this duty, consider the following.

First, your relationship to your children obligates you to care for their precious souls. The soul is the real child, not the body — which is why Scripture sometimes uses 'soul' to mean the whole person. Abraham and Lot 'went forth with all the souls they had acquired in Haran' (Genesis 12) — that is, all the persons. The body is merely the sheath. If someone left a sword in your care, would you throw away the blade and keep only the scabbard? And yet parents typically measure their love and care for their children by what they provide for the outward life — by raising them to conduct themselves as respectable members of society after their parents are gone. These things are commendable. But is the most im-

portant matter of all forgotten in the process? No effort is made to ensure they may live as Christians, and know how to carry out their duty to God and man as such. And can they do this without knowledge of the holy rule they are to walk by? David certainly knew of no means adequate for this apart from the Word, and so he posed the question: 'How can a young man keep his way pure?' And he answered it immediately: 'By keeping it according to Your word' (Psalm 119:9). And how shall children compare their way with the Word if no one teaches them? Our children are not born with Bibles in their heads or hearts. And who should be the teacher if not the parent? Who else will do it with such natural love? I have heard mothers say in other contexts: 'Who could take such care with my child and be as watchful as I am, his own mother?' Parents who never introduce their children to God or His Word are cruel — they place their children under a kind of necessity of perishing, unless God raises up someone else to show them more mercy than their own parents did. Is it any wonder when a ship sinks or wrecks on a rock if it was sent to sea without a chart or compass? No more is it surprising when children plunge into sin and ruin if they are launched into this world — which is a sea of temptation — without any knowledge of God or their duty to Him. In the fear of God, parents, think on this: your children have souls, and God has set you to watch over them. It will be a poor account at the last day if all you can say is, 'Lord, here are my children. I raised them as proper gentlemen and left them rich and prosperous.' The rust on the silver you left them will testify to your foolishness and sin — that you did so much for what rusts and nothing to

enrich their minds with the knowledge of God, which would have endured forever. It would have been better to leave them less money and more knowledge.

Second, consider that it has always been the practice of godly people to instruct and teach their children the ways of God. We find David pouring instruction into his son Solomon: 'Know the God of your father, and serve Him with a loyal heart and a willing mind' (1 Chronicles 28:9). Though a king, David did not hand this off to his chaplains but pressed it personally on his son with his own lips. Nor was his queen Bathsheba neglectful of her duty. Her gracious counsel is on record in Proverbs 31. And to convey it with the greatest seriousness and weight, she first stirs her motherly heart, letting her son know that her words came from deep within: 'What, my son? And what, son of my womb? And what, son of my vows?' (verse 2). Instruction is most likely to reach the heart when it comes from the heart. Parents do not know what impression expressions of tender love, woven together with instruction, leave on their children. God calls us to draw out our souls to the hungry — which is more than drawing out our purse, since the purse can be opened while the heart remains cold and indifferent. That is how we should give ourselves in our instruction. There is no need to dwell at length on Timothy's mother and grandmother, who introduced him to the Scriptures from his childhood. Truly, I think any man who takes no care to introduce his child to God and the way that leads to Him calls his own faith into question. I have known some who were ungodly themselves yet were very concerned that their children receive a good education. But I have never known a genuine believer who was indifferent to whether his child knew God or not.

Third, failing to instruct our children is a serious injustice. We read of some who suppress the truth in unrighteousness. Among others, parents do this when they withhold from their children the saving truths that God has entrusted to them. There is a double injustice in it.

First, they act unjustly toward their children, who have as much right to be taught as they have to benefit from their parents' labor in building up a material inheritance for them. A parent who made no effort to provide for his child's material needs — or who had gathered wealth and then locked it away, refusing his child even the necessities — would be acting unjustly. How much more so the parent who lives in ignorance of God and thereby becomes incapable of providing for his child's soul. And most of all, the parent who has gathered a store of knowledge yet hides it from his child.

Second, they act unjustly toward God.

First, they act unjustly toward God by keeping in their own hands a gift that was meant to be passed on to their children. When God revealed Himself to Abraham, He had Abraham's children in view. We find God counting on Abraham to do exactly this — it is why God chose to tell him about His plan to destroy Sodom: 'Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? For I have chosen him, so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord' (Genesis 18:17, 19). The church began within a family and was preserved through the faithful care of parents who taught their children and households the truths of God, passing knowledge of Him from generation to generation. Though the church is no longer confined to such narrow limits, every individual family is a small nursery for the church. If

the nursery is not carefully tended, the orchard will soon wither. Could you be willing, Christians, that when you are laid in the ground, your children should grow into an alien plant — a generation that does not know God? Atheism does not need to be planted — you do quite enough to produce it in your children if you fail to plant faith in their minds. A gardener's mere failure to sow and tend his garden gives weeds all the room they need to take over. This is the difference between faith and unbelief: faith will not grow without planting, and even where it is planted it will die without watering. Atheism, irreligion, and ungodliness are weeds that spring up without being sown, but they will not die without being actively pulled out — all the effort and means available are barely enough to uproot them. Therefore you who are parents and do not teach your children deal all the more unjustly with God, because you neglect the best season in their entire lives for planting the knowledge of God in them and pulling up the weeds of atheism and irreligion. Young weeds come up most easily. Simple ignorance in youth becomes deliberate ignorance — and even brazen defiance — in old age. You will not instruct them when they are young, and they will despise their ministers when they are old.

Second, you deal unjustly with God if you do not raise your children in the knowledge of Him — because your children, if you are Christian parents, are God's children. They stand in a covenant relationship with Him that the children of unbelievers do not share. Should God's children be raised on the devil's curriculum? Ignorance is the very tool Satan uses to blind the minds of those who do not obey God. Should God's children receive no better upbringing than that? God counted the children of Jewish believers as born to Him: 'Your sons and daughters, whom you bore for Me'

(Ezekiel 16:20). Through the covenant God made with that people, He had joined them to Himself — and just as a wife bears children for her husband (they are his children), so God called the children of the Jews His own. He registered it as a horrifying wickedness that they did not raise those children as His, but offered them to Molech: 'They have slain My children,' God says (verse 21). And are not the children of a Christian His children just as the children of the Jews were? Has God revoked or amended the original covenant and cut off its entail? Do you dare to slay not only your own children but the Lord's as well? And is not ignorance the knife that does it? 'My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge' (Hosea 4:6). Do you not tremble? You are offering them — not to Molech, but to the devil — the very children you had previously given to God when you brought them to the solemn ordinance of baptism, where you publicly desired before God and the congregation that they might become covenant servants of the Lord. You bound them to Him, and you have never taught them either who their Lord and Master is or what their duty is as His servants. Out of your own mouth God will condemn you.

Fourth, consider, you who are parents, that by not instructing your children you make yourself responsible for every sin they commit until they die. We can sin through someone else and make their actions our own. 'You have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites,' God said through Nathan to David concerning Uriah (2 Samuel 12:9). In the same way, you may wound Christ and slay Him repeatedly with the sword of your wicked children — if you are not careful to raise them in the fear of God. There was something to be said for the pagan who, when a student mistreated him, turned and struck the teacher. The teacher may well have been

most at fault. When a child breaks the Sabbath, it is his sin — but it is even more the father's, if he never taught the child what God commanded. And if the parent is an accomplice in the child's sin, it will be hard to escape being a partner in — or even the primary cause of — the punishment. What a terrible reunion such parents will have with their children at the last day! Will those children not accuse their parents of murdering their precious souls and lay their blood at their door, cursing them to their faces for never teaching them better? But granted — by timely repentance you may secure your own soul from judgment on that day. Even so, God can discipline you here and now for neglecting your duty to your children. How often do we see children become a heavy burden to parents who neglected them? It is only just that children should not know their duty to a parent who never taught them their duty to God. Or if you do not live long enough to see this, surely you cannot help going to your grave in grief, leaving children behind who are on their way to hell. Some think that Lot's lingering in Sodom was partly his unwillingness to leave his sons-in-law behind to perish in the flames. No doubt it was deeply painful for him, and this may be why he stayed arguing with them until the angel physically pulled him away. And certainly nothing makes godly parents more reluctant to leave this sin-filled world than the desire to see their children brought safely out of reach of the fire God will rain down on sinners' heads before they go. You do not know how soon the messenger may come to take you away. Do your best while you are still with your children to win them home to God.

Application 2. To ministers of the Gospel. Let this stir up compassion in you for the many ignorant souls in your congregations who do not know their right hand from their left. This — spiritual darkness — is the great destroyer of communities, and it is what ministers should address with all their care and strength. More people are swept into hell by this plague of ignorance than by any other. Where there is knowledge and conviction, there is usually some sense of pain accompanying a sinner when he does wrong — pain that forces some, now and then, to seek a physician and come to their minister or others in distress of spirit for counsel. But the ignorant soul feels no such sting. If a minister waits for such a person to send for instruction, he may sooner hear the church bell ringing for the man's funeral than see any messenger come for his soul. You must seek them out — do not expect them to come to you. These are people who fear their cure more than their disease, and who work harder to conceal their ignorance than to have it healed. This should increase our compassion for them, precisely because they have so little compassion for themselves. I will admit that it is no small hardship for those of us who serve large congregations that we have neither the time nor the strength to address every individual and attend to each one as their needs require — and yet we cannot easily satisfy our consciences with anything less. But let us see to it that, though we cannot do everything we wish, we are not found failing to do what we can. Let not the difficulty of the task make us like those who, seeing more work before them than they can finish, grow sick of it and sit down in listless despair and do nothing at all. A man who has a large house falling into ruin but a small purse is better off repairing a little now and a little later than letting it all collapse because he cannot fix everything at

once. Many ministers may rightly complain that their predecessors left the congregation in worse repair than the building — and this makes the work immense indeed. Think of the Jews who had to clear away heaps of rubble before they could begin to build the wall — and yet the wall went up, because the people had a will to work (Nehemiah 4). If our hearts were truly filled with zeal for God and compassion for our people's souls, we would rise and get to work — even if we could only lay one brick a day — and God would be with us. Perhaps you are serving a people who are rough and deeply ignorant, like stones still in the quarry or timber still uncut. You may not bring the work to the completion you desire in your own day. But as David did for Solomon, your labor in teaching and instructing them may prepare the materials for another who will raise the temple. It is very common for one minister to enter into the labors of another — to see conversion in those whom a previous minister had planted the seed of knowledge and conviction. And when God settles accounts with His workers, the one who plowed and sowed will receive his wage just as surely as the one who harvested and reaped. What a blessed thing it is to be — as Job said of himself — eyes to the blind, and how much more so to the spiritually blind. This is what ministers are. God Himself calls pastors after His own heart those who feed their people with knowledge and understanding (Jeremiah 3:15). But woe to those who contribute to their people's ignorance. A minister can contribute to the ignorance of his people in several ways.

First, through his own ignorance. Knowledge is so foundational to the work and calling of a minister that he cannot fulfill it without it. 'Because you have rejected knowledge, I will also reject you from being My priest. Since you have forgotten the law of your

God, I will also forget your children' (Hosea 4:6). A minister's lack of knowledge is a deficiency that nothing else can make up for. No matter how meek, patient, generous, or blameless he may be in other respects, if he does not have the skill to rightly divide the Word, he is not suited for the ministry. Everything is good insofar as it serves the purpose for which it is made. A knife with a handle of diamonds is no knife at all if it will not cut. A bell that is cracked is not a bell. A minister's primary task is to teach others. His lips are to preserve knowledge. He should be as familiar with the things of God as any craftsman is with the tools of his trade. Ministers are called lights. If the light is darkness, how deep will the darkness of that people be? I know that the stars in Christ's hands are not all of the same brightness — some shine with greater gifts and grace than others. Yet every minister needs at least as much light as the star the wise men saw at Christ's birth: enough to direct sinners, from the Word, to the safe and true way to Christ and salvation. It is a terrible way to make a living — to kill men by incompetence, as some unskilled physicians do. But far worse is to earn a temporal wage while ruining souls through ignorance. A man who will take the helm as a pilot without ever having learned to read a compass is cruel to every passenger on the ship.

Second, through negligence. It makes no difference whether a nurse has no milk or simply refuses to draw it out for the child. There is a woe pronounced on the worthless shepherd (Zechariah 11) — those who have mouths but do not speak, lips that are not used to feed the people with knowledge. It will be the people's sin if they do not eat when bread is set before them. But woe to us if we do not give them their food in due season. What shall we say to our Lord who trusts us, if the abilities He gave us as resources to

buy bread for our people are found wrapped up in the cloth of laziness? If the time we should have spent teaching and instructing turns out to have been wasted on our own pleasures or used in the pursuit of our own profit? That servant will receive a grim welcome from his master when the master returns to find him away with the key while the household starves for lack of provision.

Third, a minister can contribute to his people's ignorance through preaching that fails to edify — whether by preaching unsound doctrine that corrupts the understanding rather than sharpening it. Better to leave people in plain ignorance than to color their minds with a false dye. Or by preaching that is trivial and empty — no more suited to feed souls than the husks that left the Prodigal famished, leaving hearers no wiser about their souls' good than before. Or by preaching so high above people's heads that the congregation stands staring blankly, having lost the thread entirely, and at the end of the sermon cannot say what the preacher meant. Or by preaching only advanced truths suited to mature believers whose spiritual senses are well exercised — excellent perhaps for building up two or three prominent saints in the congregation, but meanwhile forgetting the weaker members of the family, who in fact need the most attention precisely because they are least able to guide themselves or find their own nourishment. He is surely an unwise builder who erects a scaffold as high as a cathedral spire when his actual work is down at the foundation level. The scaffold should rise as the building goes up. Paul advanced in his teaching as his hearers advanced in knowledge: 'Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about Christ, let us press on to maturity' (Hebrews 6:1). 'Let us' — meaning, when they are ready to keep pace. It is well when the congregation can keep up with the

preacher. To preach truths and ideas beyond the hearers' capacity is like a nurse trying to feed a baby with a spoon too large to fit in the child's mouth. We may please ourselves and a few more advanced members by such preaching, but what do the poor ignorant ones gain in the meantime? The faithful steward is the one who considers both groups. The preacher is — as Paul said of himself — in debt to both Greeks and foreigners, to the educated and the uneducated (Romans 1:14), and is responsible to prepare truths suited to his hearers' level. Let the advanced receive their portion — but let them be patient while the weaker members of the family are served as well.

Fourth, a minister can contribute to his people's ignorance when the scandal of his life poisons his teaching — like a cook whose filthiness makes people afraid to eat anything that has passed through his dirty hands. Or when his proud and unapproachable manner keeps his people from ever coming to him. Anyone who wants to accomplish good in the ministry must be as careful as a fisherman — doing nothing to drive souls away, but doing everything to attract and invite them, so that they may be drawn within reach of the net.

Application 3. Is the ignorant soul truly such a slave to Satan? Then let this rouse you who are ignorant — you who sit like the blind Egyptians in darkness. Come out of this darkness quickly, or you are choosing to descend into outer darkness. When Haman's face was covered, it was a sign that he would not be permitted to remain in the king's presence. If you live in ignorance, it shows you are on God's list of those under judgment. He places this covering over the eyes of those whom He intends, in His wrath, to cast into hell: 'If our Gospel is hidden, it is hidden to those who are perish-

ing' (2 Corinthians 4:3). In one place sinners are warned that they will die without knowledge; in another, that they will die in their sins (John 8). Truly, the person who dies without knowledge dies in his sins. And what more terrible sentence can the great God pass on a creature than this? It is better to die in prison, better to die in a ditch, than to die in one's sins. If you die in your sins, you will rise in your sins. As you fall asleep in the dust, so you will wake on the morning of the resurrection. If you die an ignorant, Christless soul, that is how you will stand at judgment. The God from whom sinners now wish to be rid will then be someone whose acquaintance they desperately wish they had sought — as they themselves will be forced to admit. But then He will throw their own words back at them and tell them to depart from Him. He has no desire for their company. O sinners — you will see in the end that God can do without your company in heaven far better than you could do without His knowledge on earth. Yet it is still day! Open your curtains and behold Christ shining on your face with the light of the Gospel. Hear wisdom crying in the streets, and Christ calling outside your window through His Spirit and His messengers: 'How long, you simple ones, will you love simplicity? And how long will fools hate knowledge? Turn at my rebuke — behold, I will pour out my Spirit on you and make my words known to you.' What excuse can you offer, sinners, for your willful ignorance? Where is your defense for this sin? There was a time when the Word of God was precious precisely because it was so rare — no open vision, not a Bible to be found in town or country. The tree of knowledge was forbidden fruit; no one could read it without a license from the pope. A man was counted blessed who could smuggle a few pages of the New Testament into a corner, afraid even to

tell his own wife. How sweet those waters were when people had to steal them. But you have the Word in your homes or can easily obtain it. You have ministers who open it for you every Sunday in your assemblies. Many of you have been personally offered your ministers' time and care in private — ministers who plead with you earnestly to have compassion on your own souls and receive instruction. And their common lament is that you will not come to them for light. How long may a poor minister sit in his study before anyone of the ignorant sort will come to him with such an errand? Lawyers have their clients and physicians their patients — those are sought out and called up at midnight for advice. But the soul, which is worth more than clothing and body combined, is neglected. The minister is rarely thought of until both physician and lawyer have already done their work. Perhaps when the doctor has given up hope, we are then called to come and offer comfort — closing the eyes of those who were never opened to see Christ in His truth. We are counted heartless if we will not sprinkle them with holy water and anoint them for the kingdom of heaven, even though they do not know a single step of the road that leads there. Ah, poor souls — what comfort would you have us speak to those over whom God Himself pronounces judgment? Is heaven ours to hand out as we please? Is it within our power to overturn the laws of the Most High and save those whom He condemns? Do you not remember the curse that falls on the head of anyone who causes a blind person to wander off the road? (Deuteronomy 27:18). What curse then would be our portion if we were to encourage blind souls who are completely off the road to heaven — urging them to press on and expect to arrive there at last, when God knows their feet are on the path to eternal death? No — it is written, and God

will not reverse it. You may read your own names among those condemned souls upon whom Christ comes in flaming fire to take vengeance — those who, as the apostle tells us, 'do not know God and do not obey the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ' (2 Thessalonians 1:8). Therefore, in the fear of God, let this move you — whatever your age or sex, rank or condition in this world — to seek the saving knowledge of God in Christ, to know whom is eternal life. Are you young? Seek God now, while your mind is sharp and your memory strong, before the press of worldly cares crowds Him out or the passions of youth lead you away. The feet of those same desires that have buried millions of others in ruin stand ready to carry you the same way — unless preventing grace comes and delivers you out of their hands by filling your mind with the knowledge of God. This morning drink may protect you from being infected by the corrupt examples around you. How long you will remain in this world, you do not know. Go and see whether you can find graves your own size in the churchyard. And if you were to die ignorant of God and His law — what would then become of you? The small dry branches and the old logs — the young sinners and those withered with age — meet and burn together. Or if you stay a while longer, perhaps because you will not learn now, God will not teach you then. Or if you do manage to gain some acquaintance with God in old age, it is still sad to be sowing your seed when you should be reaping your harvest — learning to know God when you might instead be drawing comfort from a long and deep familiarity with Him. Are you old and ignorant? Poor soul — your life is nearly spent, and this light of God has never been kindled in your understanding? Your body is bending toward the dust, and nature is tolling the passing bell, as it were, and you — like one

walking into darkness — do not know where death will lead you or leave you. The infirmities of age likely make you wish your bones were already at rest in the grave. But if you were to die in this condition, your poor soul would wish it were back here again — bearing its old burdens. The aches and diseases of old age are grievous, but condemned souls would thank God if He would bless them with such a heaven as to lie in those pains and escape the torments of the other place. Think before you go. The less time you have, the more urgently you must use it to gain knowledge. We should hardly need to urge a prisoner who cannot read to learn his letters, when he knows he will hang if he cannot read the verse that could save his neck. It is not bare knowledge of Gospel truths that saves — but gross ignorance of them will certainly condemn. Are you poor? Your poverty is not your sin or your misery — your misery is that you do not know where the true treasure lies. If you were God's poor — rich in knowledge and faith — you would be truly blessed: 'Better is a poor but wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knows how to receive instruction' (Ecclesiastes 4:13). You would in fact be so blessed that if the princes of this world truly understood their own condition, they would rather be in your worn and ragged clothes than in their own robes. There are far better garments being prepared for you in heaven, which you will put on when theirs are stripped from them in shame. It will not trouble you then that you were poor in this world. But it will torment them that they were so rich and great, and yet so destitute in their souls.

Are you rich? Then work hard to gain the knowledge of the Most High. Solomon had more of the world's wealth than a thousand of you, and yet we find him earnestly at prayer, wrestling

with God for knowledge (1 Chronicles 1:10). All outward possessions are merely a case for goods, just as afflictions are a case for evils. I am afraid many people think their worldly greatness exempts them from this duty — as if God were obligated to save them because they are wealthy. Sadly, very few of the great will be found there. It would make one tremble to reckon up just how small a number from among the powerful will be saved. Not many great, not many rich — why so few saved? Because so few have saving knowledge. The level of practical atheism, ignorance, and coarse spiritual barbarism found even among those the world applauds and nearly worships on account of their estates and lands — people who cannot give any account of their faith — is astonishing. A poor working Christian could put a hundred of them to shame with the simplest questions about what they believe. If heaven could be bought with houses and land, these would outbid the poor disciples of Jesus Christ every time — they always have hundreds and thousands ready for a purchase. But that currency is not accepted at heaven's exchange. 'This is eternal life: that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.'

Question: But how can an ignorant soul come to knowledge?

Answer. First, be deeply affected by your own ignorance. Some are blind, like Laodicea, and do not know it (Revelation 3:17). Just as ignorance blinds the mind, pride acts as a screen over that ignorance so the person cannot even see it. Such people have so high an opinion of themselves that they take offense if anyone suggests they might be ignorant. Of all people, they are furthest from knowledge — too proud to learn from any man, they think, and too hardened to be taught by God. The entrance into Christ's school is low, and these people cannot stoop. The Master Himself is so

humble and gentle that He will not teach a proud student. Therefore, first become a fool in your own eyes. A man wiser than you has confessed as much: 'Surely I am more ignorant than any man, and I do not have the understanding of a man. I have not learned wisdom, nor have I knowledge of the Holy One' (Proverbs 30:2-3). When you have come to yourself — owning and blushing at the crude ignorance of your own mind — you are ready to be admitted into Christ's school. 'If they are ashamed, then show them the design of the house' (Ezekiel 43:10).

Second, be faithful with the small amount of knowledge you already have. Are you convinced that this is a sin and that is a duty? Follow that light closely. You do not know what that little may grow into. We commonly set up our children with a small inheritance at first, and as they use it wisely, we add more. The kingdom of God grows from small beginnings. God complained that Israel was 'brutish in their knowledge' (Jeremiah 10:14). He did not say brutish in their ignorance — if they had sinned merely from not knowing better, that would have been some excuse. But their actions were brutish and without reason, such as worshiping carved images even though they knew better. The person who prostitutes his knowledge to the service of sin will not advance in it (Job 36:12): 'If they do not listen, they shall perish by the sword and die without knowledge.' A candle sealed up in a closed lantern burns out quickly. And so does light sealed up in the conscience — not permitted to come out in how a person actually lives. Those who are charged with suppressing the truth in unrighteousness (Romans 1:18) — the very next thing you hear about them is that 'they became futile in their reasoning, and their foolish heart was darkened' (verse 21).

Third, press often to the throne of grace. To have prayed well is to have studied well. The best student of theology is the one who studies most on his knees. Knowledge is a divine gift, and all light comes from heaven. God is the Father of lights, and prayer places the soul under His direct instruction. 'If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God.' This is even more than raw knowledge — it is wisdom in how to use it. Study can make a person a great scholar in the Scriptures, but prayer makes a wise Christian. Prayer obtains sanctified knowledge, and without that sanctification, knowledge is an incomplete gift — a gift that falls short of being truly a gift. Pray then with humble boldness. God gives to all who ask, and He gives generously and without reproach — not like a proud man who would sooner shame someone for not knowing than take the trouble to teach him. Your request is very pleasing to God. Remember how Solomon fared when he asked in just this way, and expect the same result for yourself. Christ's school is a free school. He turns away no one who comes to Him, so long as they are willing to submit to the school's order. And though not all receive the same degree of knowledge — not everyone needs to be a Solomon in knowledge, unless everyone were a Solomon in position — the humblest disciple Christ sends out will be equipped with saving knowledge, enough to fit him for entrance into heaven's academy. 'You will guide me with Your counsel, and afterward receive me to glory.'

Fourth, you must give real time to a diligent search for truth. Truth lies deep and must be dug for. Since Adam was driven from Paradise, nothing comes to human beings without labor — except sin, which follows the hand readily enough. But this treasure of knowledge calls for the spade and pickax. We are told to search the

Scriptures. And Daniel 12:4 says, 'Many will go back and forth, and knowledge will increase' — a picture drawn from merchants who exert themselves to build an estate, going back and forth from one land to another, posting off to wherever they hear of something worth gaining, even to the ends of the earth. The soul must move like this — from one means of grace to another: reading for a while, then meditating on what it has read, then praying over those meditations, then seeking counsel afterward. 'What does this mean? How do you understand that?' It is not formal instruction alone that produces great students — it is close, personal engagement with a teacher. A brief conversation with the preacher sometimes brings more light than his entire sermon. Make sure you make use of every means of knowledge within your reach. In your search for knowledge, keep these three things in view.

First, keep your purpose pure and holy — not merely to know for the sake of knowing, as some pursue knowledge the way others chase wealth: once they have it, they sit and admire their ideas the way a miser admires his bags of money, but have no heart to use their knowledge for their own or others' good. This is a serious evil. Speculative knowledge, like Rachel, is beautiful but barren. Do not seek knowledge merely to be admired or recognized by others as having surpassed your fellow believers. That is too low an aim when the knowledge in view is the knowledge of God and Christ. To see a pagan study philosophy and then bring all his labor to that marketplace — content to be called a wise man — is low, yet somewhat understandable. But for one who knows God and what it means to enjoy Him, to settle for a breath or two of empty human praise — this is unmistakable folly. Aim far higher than that. Pursue knowledge so that you may fear the God you come to know

— as David did: 'Teach me, O Lord, the way of Your statutes, and I shall keep it to the end' (Psalm 119:33). The Word of God is called a light to our feet — not merely something to talk about with our tongues, but a guide to walk by. Seek it not to spread your own name, but to celebrate God's. As David promised: when he understood God's precepts, he would speak of His wonderful works and sound out His fame, awakening others to seek God as well.

Second, once your purpose is right, you must be consistent in pursuing it. The mysteries of Christ are not learned in a day. 'Then we will know, if we press on to know the Lord' (Hosea 6:3). Some people are in a good frame of mind for a moment — they open the Bible and read a chapter or two, then put it down for a week and do not return to it. Like a schoolboy who plays truant all week after being in class one day. Is it any wonder such people make no progress in knowledge? Bernard put it well: the difference between studying the Word and merely reading it is as great as the difference between the friendship of those who converse together lovingly every day and the acquaintance one has with a stranger at an inn, or someone you nod to as you pass in the street. If you want real knowledge, you must not merely nod at the Word now and then. You must walk with it and enter into daily conversation with it. The three men who stood by Abraham as he sat at his tent door were distant and reserved until Abraham invited them inside and welcomed them warmly. Then Christ — who was one among them, as shown by the name Jehovah given to Him in several verses and by the promise He made concerning Sarah in verse 10, which was His own promise rather than a message from God, as a created angel would have relayed it — began to reveal Himself to Abraham and disclose His secrets to him. The soul that will be most inti-

mately acquainted with the secrets of God in His Word is not the one who skims the text and merely tips his hat to it at his tent door, but the one who desires deeper fellowship with it — and so welcomes it into his soul through frequent meditation. David compared the sweetness of the Word to honey and the honeycomb. And indeed it is so full that even at a first reading some sweetness will occasionally drop from it. But the person who does not press it through meditation leaves most of it behind.

Third, be sure you follow the right order and method. Every field of learning has its basics as well as its more advanced and complex ideas. The right place to begin is always with the fundamentals. A student who was never grounded in grammar is not likely to thrive at the university. And those who have not been instructed in the foundations of the Christian faith cannot build on solid ground. The lack of this is why so many are unstable — today in one camp, tomorrow in another, blown into any shape by false teachers who merely breathe on them. They have no center from which to draw their lines. Do not consider it a disgrace — you who have wandered into error and lost yourselves in the maze of deep theological questions, which are now the great conversation even among the weakest believers — to be sent back to learn the first principles of the oracles of God more thoroughly. Too many people are, as Tertullian said in a different context, more protective of their reputation than their salvation — more ashamed to be thought ignorant than concerned to have it cured.

Fifth, if you want to grow in divine knowledge, attend the ministry of the Word. Those who neglect this and do not come where the Word is preached are like a man turning his back on the sun in order to see it. If you want to know God, come where He has ap-

pointed you to learn. Where the ordinary means are not available, God has extraordinary ways — as a father who has no school in his town will teach his child at home. But when a public school is available, he sends his child there. 'God manifests the aroma of the knowledge of Him through us in every place,' Paul says (2 Corinthians 2:14). Let people say what they like about the Spirit. The person who despises preaching will in the end be found to be a quencher of the Spirit — for the two are placed side by side: 'Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophetic utterances' (1 Thessalonians 5:19-20). But simply sitting under the means is not enough — painful experience teaches us this. There are some whom no sun will tan. They keep their old spiritual complexion under the most shining and burning light of the preached Word, as ignorant and ungodly as those who have never seen a day of Gospel light. Therefore if you want to receive any spiritual benefit from the Word, pay close attention to how you listen.

First, be a wide-awake hearer. Is it any wonder that a person goes away from a sermon no wiser than he came when he has slept through most of it, or spent it drifting in and out of consciousness? If God reveals anything of His mind to such a person, it would have to come through a dream. God did indeed speak to the patriarchs that way in ancient times, but not while they were profanely sleeping through an ordinance. Take serious warning against such irreverence. The person who deliberately composes himself to sleep during a service, as some do — or who does so and is not afterward deeply ashamed of it — betrays a very low and contemptuous view of the ordinance. Surely you think very little of what is being delivered, if it will not keep you awake — and very little of God Himself, whose message it is. See how you are put to shame by the

conduct of a pagan — and a king at that. Ehud had only to say to Eglon, 'I have a message from God for you,' and Eglon rose from his seat (Judges 3:20). And you sink into your seat to sleep. How dare you put such an insult on the great God? How often do you fall asleep at dinner or while counting your money? Is not the Word of God worth more than these? I would not be surprised if such sermon-sleepers dream of nothing but hellfire. You know it is dangerous to fall asleep with a candle burning beside you — people have been burned in their beds this way. But it is far more dangerous to sleep while the candle of the Word is shining so near you. What if you were to sink down dead like Eutychus? There is no Paul here to raise you as he was raised. And what security do you have that this will not happen?

Second, you must be an attentive hearer. The person who is awake but lets his eyes or mind wander — what is he doing but sleeping with his eyes open? A servant who is out of bed but paying no attention to his master's business might as well still be asleep. When God intends to do a soul good through the Word, He draws that person to listen closely and carefully to what is being delivered — as we see with Lydia, of whom it is said that she 'attended to the things which were spoken by Paul' (Acts 16:14). And in Luke 19:48: 'The people were hanging on His words.' They clung to Him the way bees cling to a sweet flower, or the way young birds stretch toward the beaks of their mothers as they are fed. That is the soul that will receive light and life from the Word. 'Hear, my children, and attend to know understanding' (Proverbs 4:1). Labor therefore, as you sit under the Word, to fix your wandering mind and set yourself to hear — as it is said Jehoshaphat set himself to pray. And to help yourself do this: before you go, get your heart into a

deep sense of your spiritual needs, especially your ignorance of the things of God and the desperate condition that ignorance puts you in. Until the heart is touched, the mind will not be fixed. Notice that it is said God opened the heart of Lydia, and then she attended (Acts 16:14). The mind goes where the will sends it. We direct our thoughts toward what our hearts desire. If the heart feels no sense of its ignorance and no longing for God, no wonder such a person does not truly listen to the preacher — the heart has sent the mind somewhere else. 'They come and sit before you as My people,' God says, 'but their heart goes after their own gain.' They do not come with any real desire to hear for the good of their souls — otherwise they would give themselves entirely to the task. No, their hearts belong to their self-interest. And so, like a lazy servant who has escorted his master to his seat in the pew and then slips out to his companions at the tavern and does not return until the sermon is nearly over, so do the thoughts of most people go during a service. They have slipped out to the street, the market, the shop — you can find them anywhere except attending to the duty before them — and all because these things have their hearts more than God and His Word.

Third, you must be a retentive hearer. Without this, the work will forever be starting over. Truths delivered to a forgetful hearer are like a seal pressed into water — the impression lasts only as long as the seal is held there. The sermon ends, and everything is undone. Therefore be very careful to fasten what you hear to your memory.

First, receive the truth with love for it. An affectionate hearer will not be a forgetful hearer. Love strengthens memory. Can a woman forget her child? Can a young woman forget her jewelry, or

a bride her wedding clothes? No — she loves them too well. If the truths of God were that precious to you, you would, like David, think on them day and night. Even when a Christian, through weakness of memory, cannot recall the exact words he heard or repeat them — he still keeps the power and savor of them in his spirit. Just as when sugar dissolves in wine: you cannot see it, but you can taste it. When food is eaten and digested, it is no longer visible in the form it was received, but the man is strengthened and refreshed by it — more able to walk and work than before. By that you know it was not lost. So the truths the Christian heard are tasted in his spirit and seen in his life. Perhaps if you ask him what specifically the minister said about faith, mortification, or repentance, he cannot tell you. Yet you find this: his heart is more broken for sin, more enabled to rest on the promises, and now more free from the world's grip. A good woman, coming from a sermon and asked what she remembered, replied that she could not recall much just then — but she had heard something that would make her reform certain things as soon as she got home.

Second, meditate on what you hear. Through this practice, David gained more wisdom than all his teachers. Notice what truth or what Scripture is opened to you in the sermon that was not clear to you before. Take some time in private to dwell on it and make it familiar to your understanding. Meditation is to the sermon what a harrow is to seed — it covers the truths so they are not picked up or washed away. I am afraid there are many passages marked during a sermon that are hardly looked at again once the service is over. If so, you give others the impression you are trading more seriously for your soul than you actually are — like a man who goes to a shop, selects a great deal of fine goods, sets them aside, and

then walks away and never comes to collect them. Take careful warning against this. The hypocrite deceives himself worst of all in the end.

Third, clear your memory of what is sinful. We erase our notebooks and wipe out what has been scrawled there before we can write something new. There is such a fundamental opposition between the truths of God and everything that is trivial and sinful that one drives out the other. If you want to keep the one, you must let go of the other.

## CHAPTER 6. OF THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE DEVIL'S NATURE AND THEIR EXTREME WICKEDNESS



**T**hese words are the fourth branch of the description: 'spiritual forces of wickedness.' Our combat with them is expressed by the word 'against' in the Greek — literally, 'against the spirituals of wickedness.' Many interpreters take this to mean not only the spiritual nature of the devil and the wickedness of that nature, but also — and chiefly — the nature and kind of sins that these wicked spirits most vigorously press upon the saints. They are the spiritual forms of wickedness, not the gross fleshly sins that the crowd of brutish sinners wallow in like pigs, but sin in its spiritualized form. These words present three conclusions.

First, the devils are spirits.

Second, the devils are spirits of extreme wickedness.

Third, these wicked spirits chiefly attack the saints with, and provoke them toward, spiritual forms of wickedness. First, the first conclusion.

## SECTION 1.

First, they are spirits. The word 'spirit' carries various meanings in Scripture. Among other uses, it is frequently used to describe the nature and essence of angels, both good and evil — both of whom are called spirits. The holy angels: 'Are they not all ministering spirits?' (Hebrews 1:14). The evil: 'Then a spirit came forward and stood before the Lord, and said, I will persuade him' (1 Kings 22:21) — that spirit was a devil. How often is the devil called the unclean spirit, the foul spirit, the lying spirit, and so on. Sin did not alter their substance — for as one writer correctly notes, if it had, the very nature that sinned could not be punished for it.

First, the devil is a spirit — that is, his essence is immaterial and simple, not composed of matter and form the way physical beings are. 'Handle me and see,' Christ said to His disciples when they thought they had seen a ghost. 'A spirit does not have flesh and bones, as you see that I have' (Luke 24:39). If devils were not immaterial in this way, how could they enter into and possess physical bodies, as Scripture tells us they have done — even a whole legion within one person (Luke 8:30)? One body cannot enter into another.

Second, devils are spiritual substances — actual beings, not merely qualities or evil impulses arising from within us, as some have absurdly suggested. The Sadducees and those who followed them denied the existence of angels, good or evil. But this is such a foolish notion that we would have to abandon both our reason and the plain testimony of Scripture to maintain it. Scripture records their creation (Colossians 1:16), the fall of some from their original state (Jude 6), the standing of others called the elect angels, the

happiness of the holy angels who behold God's face, and their assignment to attend on the saints as servants on the heirs of their master (Hebrews 1). It also records the misery of the fallen angels, held in chains of darkness until the day of judgment, and their present activity of doing harm to the souls and bodies of men as far as they are permitted. All of this makes their real existence plain enough. But humanity is so immersed in the physical that people are reluctant to believe in what they cannot see with their own eyes. By the same reasoning, they might deny the existence of God Himself — for He too is invisible.

Third, they are complete spiritual substances, each one with its own proper existence. In this they are distinguished from human souls, which are made to exist within a human body — forming with it one complete person. So the human soul, even when separated from the body at death, still tends toward reunion with its body.

Fourth, although they are complete spiritual substances, they are still finite — they are creatures. God alone is the uncreated, infinite, and absolutely simple Spirit — and the Father of all other spirits.

From this spiritual nature of the devil, we can see further what a dreadful enemy we have to contend with.

First, as spirits they have vast intellectual ability. Poor humanity, confined in this dark prison of the body, does not have enough light to grasp what angelic perfections are. That angels surpass all other creatures in knowledge is clear — as spirits, they stand nearest by creation to the nature of the God who made them. The heavens are not farther from the earth than angels are above humanity

in knowledge. Man by skill has learned to measure the height of the stars, but who can measure how far angels exceed man in knowledge? It is true that they have lost much of the knowledge they once had — all their knowledge as holy angels, in fact. What they now know of God has lost its savor, and they have no power to use it for their own good. What Jude says of wicked men may be said of them: 'Whatever they know naturally, in these things they corrupt themselves' (Jude 1:10). They know the holiness of God but do not love Him for it, as the elect angels do and as they themselves did at their creation. They know the evil of sin and are not the less drawn to it. Yet while they are such fools in their own interests, they still have more cunning than all the saints on earth — unless we have God playing the game for us.

Second, as spirits they are invisible, and their approaches are invisible too. They come and you do not see your enemy. Indeed, this is what makes them so little feared by the ignorant world — whereas invisibility is actually their greatest advantage, rightly understood. If men see an apparition of the devil or hear a noise in the night, they cry 'The devil! The devil!' and are nearly out of their minds with fear. Yet they carry him in their hearts and walk in his company all day long without fearing him at all. When your proud heart climbs toward the pinnacle of honor in your ambitious thoughts — who put you up there but the devil? When your heart is full of impurity and filth — who but Satan has been there, begetting those vile children in your corrupt spirit? When you are raging in your anger, throwing burning coals of wrath and fury around with your inflamed tongue — where was it set on fire but in hell?

When you are driven headlong like the swine into destruction, nearly choking on your own drunken excess — who but the devil is riding you?

Third, as spirits they are immortal. Of other enemies you may one day hear the news that they are dead and gone — as the angel told Joseph that Herod, who had sought the child's life, was dead. Persecuting people walk a scene or two upon the stage and are called off by death, and that is the end of all their plots. But devils do not die. They will pursue you to your grave, and when you die they will meet you in another world to accuse and torment you there as well.

Fourth, as spirits they are untiring in their activity. When a human battle is over, the conqueror must sit down and recover — and so loses the pursuit, unable to press the advantage in time. Some rulers have even abandoned their empires, exhausted and sated by bloodshed, when they could not achieve what they wanted. Diocletian, when he saw he was only mowing a meadow that grew thicker with every cutting — as Tertullian described the martyred Christians — threw away his scepter in frustration. Charles the Fifth reportedly did the same because he could not uproot the Lutherans. But the devil's spirit is never broken, and he never grows weary of doing harm, though he has been ceaselessly active since the day he began his roaming to and fro in the world. What would become of us if God were not at our back — One who infinitely outmatches the devil, as far beyond him as the devil is beyond us?

## SECTION 2.

Second, they are wicked spirits — wicked in the fullest sense, and called by way of supreme distinction 'the evil one' (Matthew 13:19). As God is called the Holy One because none is holy as the Lord, so the devil is called the evil one because he is without equal in wickedness. Let us take the measure of the devil's sin in a few particulars — partly so we can better judge the degrees of sin and sinners among humanity. The closer to God in holiness, the more holy; the more like the devil, the more wicked.

First, these fallen angels are the inventors of sin — the first to sound the trumpet of rebellion against their Maker, the ones who led the way into all the sin that has since filled the world. No tongue can fully express this sin. Here was a noble creature whom God had placed at the very top of creation, nearest to Himself — from whom God had kept nothing but His own royal crown. For this favorite of the court, without any cause or outside temptation, to make this brazen and blasphemous attempt to seize God's own crown — this paints the devil blacker than the imagination of men or angels can conceive. He is called the father of lies, as those who discovered any art are called its father. Jubal is called the father of all who play the harp and flute — he invented music. This is a dreadful aggravation of the devil's sin: he sinned without a tempter. Though humanity is not capable of this same aggravation in the same degree, some people do sin after the very likeness of the devil's transgression. As Paul says (Romans 1:30), some are 'inventors of evil.' Sin is, of course, an ancient trade — already discovered and at hand. But as in other trades and arts, notable figures arise who add to what others invented and, in a sense, make old arts new again. So there are always in every generation those who make old sins new by exceeding the wickedness of those be-

fore them. Sexual immorality is an ancient sin, but the people of Sodom invented a new form of it, which is why it carries their name to this day. Some invent new heresies; others new oaths — freshly coined, hot from the mint, too proud to swear in the old way. Others devise new methods of persecution. Julian had a way entirely his own, different from all who came before him. And to the end of the world, every age will surpass the previous in the depths of wickedness. Ishmael and the mockers of the ancient world were children and amateurs compared to the scoffers and cruel mockers of the last days. Beware of showing your cleverness by inventing new sins, lest you stir up God to invent new punishments. 'Is there not calamity for the unjust and disaster for the workers of iniquity?' (Job 31:3). Sodom sinned in a new way, and God destroyed them in a new way — sending fire from above upon them. Some have devised monstrous new opinions and errors, and God has answered their monstrous errors with equally monstrous physical events.

Second, they were not only the inventors of sin but are still the chief tempters and promoters of sin in the world. This is why the devil is called 'the tempter,' and sin is called the work of the devil — whoever commits it. Just as a building takes the name of the master craftsman, even though he used his workers' hands to build it. Be careful about soliciting others to sin — you are, in effect, doing the devil's job for him. Let him do it himself if he will; do not make yourself so much like him. Tempting another to sin is worse than sinning yourself. It shows sin to have grown to full strength in that person who does it knowingly and willingly. Herbs and flowers do not shed their seed until they are ripe; creatures do not reproduce until they have reached maturity. What do those who

tempt others accomplish but spreading their wicked beliefs and practices — raising up children for the devil, keeping their infernal father's name alive in the world? This shows that sin has reached full power in them. Many a man, though cruel enough to his own soul to get drunk or swear, will not tolerate it in a child or servant. What then should we call those who teach their children the devil's catechism — how to swear and lie, drink and debase themselves? They are little more than devils in human flesh. If you meet such a person, do not be afraid to call them what Paul called Elymas when he tried to turn the proconsul away from the faith — 'a son of the devil, full of all deceit and villainy, and an enemy of all righteousness' (Acts 13:10). Do you know what you are doing when you tempt someone? Let me tell you. You do something that your own repentance cannot undo. You poison someone with error, enroll another in the devil's school — the alehouse, I mean. Then perhaps later you see your mistake, recant your error and your foolishness, and give up the drunken trade. But are you certain you can bring them back with you? You cannot. They may well say — as someone once said, though on better grounds, to the man who had led him into error and then tried to lead him out again: 'You gave me one turn, but you will not give me another.' And what grief it will be to see these people going to hell on your errand, and to be unable to call them back. You may cry as Lamech did: 'I have killed a man to my own wounding, and a young man to my own hurt.' In fact, long after you are asleep in your grave, the person you led astray may have led others the same way, and your name may be quoted to recommend the very opinion and practice that you started — just as Abel, though dead, yet speaks. You may still be sinning, through

those who are alive, generation after generation. A small spark kindled by one person's error has cost many generations of effort to quench — and when it appeared to be out, it has broken out again.

Third, they are not merely wicked but maliciously wicked. The devil's name itself denotes his spiteful nature — his desire to torment and harm others. When he draws souls into sin, it is not because he tastes any sweetness or gains any profit from it. He has too much knowledge to find any joy or peace in sin. He knows his doom and trembles at the thought of it — and yet his spite drives him to desire and tirelessly pursue the damnation of souls. Like a mad dog running through a flock of sheep — killing one, then another, and when they are dead, unable to eat them, but killing simply to kill — Satan is carried along by a boundless rage against humanity, and especially against the saints. He would not leave one of Christ's flock alive if he could help it. Such is the height of his hatred against God, whom he hates with a total hatred. And because he cannot strike God directly, he strikes Him through His saints — knowing that the life of God is, in a manner, bound up with theirs. God's honor rises and falls with the exaltation or depression of His mercy toward His people — and this is the very attribute God intends to glorify most supremely in their salvation. It is therefore the attribute Satan hates above all others. And this is the worst that can be said of these wicked spirits: they maliciously attack God Himself, and in God, the glory of His mercy.

First application: This helps us understand more fully the desperate wickedness of human nature — which is so hard to truly know because it can never be seen all at once. It is a spring whose vastness lies not in the visible stream of outward sin (which may seem small) but in the source that feeds it endlessly. Here is a mir-

ror that shows us our hearts as they truly are. See the monstrous height of wickedness that is in the devil — and know that all of this is present in the heart of every human being. There is no less wickedness potentially in the most outwardly respectable sinner on earth than there is in the devils themselves. You will one day show it fully — whoever you are — if God does not prevent it by His renewing grace. You are not yet fully developed; your wings have not grown to make you a flying dragon. But you are of the same breed. The seed of this serpent is in you, and the devil produces offspring like himself. You stand in soil that is not yet quite right for sin to ripen fully — it will not come to its fullness until it is transplanted to hell. You who are here so respectable and modest — blushing at some sins out of shame and holding back from others out of fear — when you see your condition as desperate as the devil sees his, you will spit out blasphemies with the same malice that he does. Some Native peoples hold the belief that when a person dies, they are transformed into the disfigured likeness of the devil — so in their language, the same word serves for a dead man and the devil. Sin makes the wicked like him before they arrive there. But they will come into their full resemblance there, when those flames burn away the paint that now conceals their true appearance. The saints in heaven will be like the angels in their eagerness, love, and constancy in serving God. The damned will be like the devils — both in sin and in punishment. This one thought could be of great use to strip a sinner of any high opinion of himself. It is easy to point out the sins in a person's life and get him to admit that what he does is wrong. But here is where we lose him: he will say, 'That's true, I slipped up, I did what I shouldn't, God forgive me — but my heart is good.' Your heart is good, sinner?

The devil's nature is wicked — and yours is just as bad as his. These blemishes on your face show the fever raging in your corrupt nature within. Without the medicine of the Gospel — the blood of Christ applied to you — you will die a leper. Only Christ can give you a new heart; without that, you will grow worse and worse every day. Sin is a hereditary disease that increases with age. A young sinner will become an old devil.

Second application, to the saints — especially those whom God called early, intercepting the devil's market before their sins had time to develop. Sometimes the Spirit of God arrests sin in its camp before it reaches the battlefield, as in the sins of youth. Such a person, not having committed the bolder sins that others have been left to fall into, may not feel the weight of his own sin or the greatness of God's mercy as sharply as others. Let such a person look at the wickedness of his heart in this mirror of the devil's nature. He will see himself as great a debtor to God's mercy as Manasseh or the worst of sinners — not only for pardoning the same cursed nature, but for preventing it from unleashing those bloody sins that others were left to commit. That you did not act out such outrageous sins, you owe entirely to God's gracious intervention — not to any goodness in your nature, which bears the devil's mark. For that nature alone, God would have been justified in crushing you, as we crush a nest of serpents before they grow old enough to strike, knowing what they will do in time. No one would say Guy Fawkes was treated unjustly merely because Parliament was not blown up. It was enough that the materials for the massacre were prepared, and that he was found on site with match and fire ready to ignite the fuse. Can you say that when God first took hold of you, you did not have the same weapons of rebel-

lion — a nature fully loaded with enmity against God, which in time would have discharged itself in the open? What lay silent in your heart like unlit powder would have made its report eventually. O Christian, think on this. Be humbled for your corrupt nature, and say: Blessed be God, who sent His Spirit and grace in time to stay your hand — as Abigail stayed David — while your nature was planning nothing but war against God and His laws.

Third application: The devils are this maliciously wicked against God Himself? O then, understand the true nature of sin — and you will hate it. The reason we are so easily persuaded to sin is that we do not understand what Satan is actually after when he leads a person into it. Sinning is like soldiers going to war: officers beat their drums for volunteers and promise all who enlist good pay and plunder, and they come flooding in. But few stop to ask what the war is about, who they are fighting against, or why. Satan lures people to sin and makes golden promises about what they will gain in his service — and with those promises foolish souls are won. But how few ever ask: Who am I sinning against? What is the devil's design in drawing me to sin? Shall I tell you? Do you think your pleasure or profit is what he cares about? He has no interest in those things at all. He has far greater purposes in mind. He has declared war against God by his rebellion, and by drawing you into sin he enlists you in his quarrel — putting the life of your soul at risk in defense of his pride and lust. To accomplish this, he cares no more about the damnation of your soul than a great conqueror cares about losing a company of soldiers in a siege. And do you dare go into the field on his side against God? O earth — tremble at the presence of the Lord! This treacherous commander places you where no one has ever come out alive. Do not stand where God's

bullets fly. Lay down your weapons, or you are a dead man. Whatever others do — O you saints — be horrified at the thought of sinning willingly. When you do, you take up arms to help the devil against God. And what could be more unnatural than for a child to be found fighting against his own father?

## CHAPTER 7. OF SATAN'S PLOT TO DEFILE THE CHRISTIAN'S SPIRIT WITH HEART-SINS



**T**hese wicked spirits chiefly attack the saints with, and provoke them toward, spiritual sins. Sins may be called spiritual in two ways: either because of the subject in which they are committed, or because of the object they concern.

First, in terms of the subject: when the spirit or heart is the arena in which sin takes place, this is a spiritual sin. Impure thoughts, vile desires and passions — though their object may be something fleshly — are still spiritual sins, because they are purely acts of the soul and spirit and do not break out into outward action.

Second, in terms of the object: when the object itself is spiritual and not physical — idolatry, error, spiritual pride, unbelief, and similar sins. Paul calls both kinds 'defilement of the spirit,' distinguishing them from defilement of the flesh (2 Corinthians 7:1).

### SECTION 1.

First, concerning the first kind: Satan does everything he can to provoke the Christian to heart-sins — to stir up and feed these inner movements of sin in the Christian's heart. This is why no matter what duty the Christian takes up, these (his imps, as I might call them) haunt him. One sinful impulse or another darts in to interrupt him, as Paul confessed of himself: 'When I want to do right, evil is present with me.' If a Christian stopped every time these crossed his path, he would never make progress on his journey to heaven. This is the chief tactic left to the devil against the children of God. Now that his full army is broken and his commanding power over them has been stripped away, he comes out of hiding and falls on their rear with these inward suggestions. He knows his influence over the soul is not what it was when it was his slave. Then, there was no work too degrading for the soul to do at his command. But now the soul is free of his bondage, and he cannot order another master's servant as if it were his own. All he can do is watch for the right moment — when the Christian is least on guard — and present some sinful impulse attractively dressed to the eye of the soul, hoping the Christian will pick up this brat and cradle it in his thoughts until at last he makes it his own by embracing it. Satan knows this will defile the soul. And perhaps this small visitor let in through the window will open the door to a larger thief. Even if he does not succeed that far, the guilt and mere presence of these heart-sins will be a painful disturbance to a gracious heart — whose nature is so pure that it recoils from all filth (so that being haunted by such impulses is like a living person chained to a rotting corpse, dragging it wherever he goes), and whose love for Christ is so dear that it cannot endure without horror thoughts that are so contrary to and abusive of his Beloved.

This is why Satan is so eager to keep stirring up the unregenerate part — so that like a disturbed dunghill, the foul vapors rising from it may trouble the soul.

## SECTION 2.

First application: Use this to test your spiritual condition. What kind of welcome does Satan find when he comes with these spiritual forms of wickedness and invites you to dwell on them? Can you make peace with the filthiness of your spirit as long as your hands are clean outwardly? Or do you wrestle against heart-sins as well as outward ones? I am not asking whether such visitors ever come to your door — the worst of sins can be found knocking at a Christian's door, and even peering in. Just as holy impulses can stir in the hearts of wicked people. What I am asking is whether you are willing to let these visitors in and make them welcome. You probably would not be seen walking down the street with such company, or publicly commit the most blatant crimes. But can you, in the private room of your own soul, take up some unclean lust in your thoughts and play with it there? Can you drag a neighbor into the den of your mind and tear him apart with malice — and your heart not even cry murder? In short: can you hide any sin in the attic of your heart to keep it alive when the Word and Spirit come searching — like Rahab hiding the spies and sending the king of Jericho's messengers the wrong way? Perhaps you can say the adulterer and the murderer are not there — you sent those sins away long ago. But all the while, you are hiding them alive in the love of your soul. Know it now, or you will know it at great cost another day: you are utterly corrupt. If there were a spark of the life of God or the love of Christ in your heart, even though you could

not stop such impulses from coming, you would not conceal them — much less nurse them. When overwhelmed by them, you would call in help from heaven against these destroyers of your soul.

Second application: Show your loyalty to God, O saints, by vigorously resisting these spiritual forms of wickedness. First, consider: heart-sins are sins just as much as any other. 'The thought of foolishness is sin' (Proverbs 24:9). Mercury is poisonous whether diluted in water or in its concentrated form. Impurity, covetousness, and murder are fully present as sins in the heart as well as in the outward act. Every point of hell is still hell. Second, consider: your spirit is the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. He takes up the whole heart as His home, and when He sees His house being rented out from over His head, it is time for Him to leave. Do not defile your spirit until you are ready to lose His company. Third, consider: there may be more wickedness in a sin of the heart than in an outward act, because the aggravating factor in any sin is determined by what the heart is doing in it. The more the heart and spirit are engaged, the more malice is present in the sinful act. To backslide in heart is worse than to backslide in action — the comfort for a poor soul troubled by relapse is that though his foot slipped, his heart did not turn back but still faced Christ. So to err in the heart is worse than to hold an error in the head. This is why God makes so much of Israel's sin: 'They always go astray in their heart' (Hebrews 3:10). Their hearts drove them into error — they liked idolatry, and so they were easily persuaded to believe whatever suited them. Conversely, the more of the heart and spirit is present in any holy act, the more genuine goodness there is in it — even if it falls short of others in outward expression. The widow's two coins surpassed everyone else, Christ Himself being the judge.

So in sin: though inward acts of sin in thought and desire may seem light on human scales compared to outward acts, they may be so situated that God weighs them as greater. Peter puts the emphasis of Simon Magus's sin on the wicked thought that his words revealed: 'Pray to the Lord that the intent of your heart may be forgiven you' (Acts 8:22). Saul's sin in sparing Agag and keeping the best sheep and cattle was materially a far lesser act than David's adultery and murder — yet it is equated with something greater than both: witchcraft itself (1 Samuel 15:23). Where did Saul's sin get that depth of stain, except from the wickedness of his heart, which was worse than David's even at his lowest point of temptation? Fourth, if Satan gets into your spirit and defiles it, you will find it very hard to stay there. You have already tasted what he offers, and that taste corrupts the appetite, making it all the more likely that you will eventually sit down to a full meal of what you have already sampled. It would be strange if, while your heart is burning with thoughts of lust, the fire did not eventually break out through your lips — or worse.

Question: But what help do we have against this kind of temptation from Satan?

Answer. I assume you are a Christian if you are asking this question — and if you are asking it from an honest heart, that very fact proves you are. Who else would genuinely want relief from these visitors? Even when a worldly heart prays for deliverance from them, it would be sorry to have the prayer answered. 'Not yet, Lord' — that is the secret cry of such a heart, as Augustine confessed of himself. Sin is as truly the offspring of the soul as children are of our bodies, and it finds just as much favor in our eyes

— in fact, more. A sinner will sacrifice a child to keep a sin alive (Micah 6:7). And of all sins, none are more cherished than these heart-sins.

First, because they are the firstborn of the sinful heart, and the soul's greatest strength is poured into them.

Second, because the heart has more freedom in them than in outward acts. The proud man is often hemmed in and cannot display himself in the world with the pomp he desires. But within his own heart he can build a stage and cast himself as whatever great prince he pleases. The malicious man can slaughter in his imagination more in a few minutes than the angel killed of Sennacherib's army in a night. Nero could execute all of Rome on the chopping block of his heart at once.

Third, these sins stay with the soul when other sins no longer can. When the sinner has broken his body with drunkenness and filth and can no longer follow the devil's crowd in those ways, these corrupt inner desires will still entertain him with memories of his old pleasures. In short, these inward lusts of the heart have nothing to restrain them except the conscience that there is a God who sees. Other sins expose the sinner to human shame. Just as some who believed in Christ did not dare confess Him openly because they valued people's approval (John 12:42), so many sinners are kept from openly vouching for their lusts by the same concern for reputation. But with heart-sins, there is no such fear — if they can forget that heaven sees them, or persuade themselves there is no danger from that quarter, the coast is clear and they may be as wicked as they please. This is what makes inward sins so clung to

and cherished. If you find your heart set against these things, I am confident in calling you a Christian. And for your help against them:

First, bring your heart earnestly to God in prayer, asking Him to govern and direct your thoughts and desires. If the tongue is such an unruly thing that few can tame it, what is the heart — where thoughts swarm out as thick as bees from a hive and sparks from a furnace? It is not in humanity — not even in the holiest person on earth — to manage this without divine help. This is why we find David so often crying out to God to order his steps in His Word, to unite his heart to fear God, to incline his heart toward God's testimonies. It is like a servant who finds the child he is caring for too wild and unruly to be controlled by him, and calls for the father — who no sooner speaks than the child is quiet. No doubt holy David found his heart beyond his own skill and power, which is why he kept bringing it to God. God has indeed promised to order His children's steps (Psalm 37:23) — but He expects them to bring their hearts to Him for that purpose. 'Commit your work to the Lord, and your thoughts will be established' (Proverbs 16:3) — or ordered. Are you heading toward a time of worship, where you know Satan will be waiting to disturb you with worldly thoughts and worse? Tell God where you are going and what you fear. The soul never marches in finer order than when it puts itself under God's command.

Second, keep a strong guard over your outward senses — these are Satan's landing points, especially the eye and the ear. Be careful what you let in through them. Vain talk rarely passes through without leaving some stain on the heart, just as unhealthy air tends to cause corruption in things that are sweet in themselves.

Unwholesome conversation corrupts a pure mind. Make sure you breathe clean air. For your eye — do not let it wander. Corrupting sights produce corrupting thoughts. Job understood that his eye and his thoughts were likely to travel together, and so to secure one, he made a covenant with the other (Job 31:1).

Third, pause often during the day to examine yourself and observe what company your heart is keeping. A careful master periodically checks on his workshop to see what his servants are doing — a wise Christian should do the same. We can tell a schoolroom has no teacher by the noise coming from it. Much of the disorder in our hearts comes from neglecting to visit them. When you look in on your soul, make this threefold inquiry.

First, ask whether what your heart is dwelling on is good or evil. If it is evil — proud thoughts, impure desires, doubting and distrustful thoughts — show your hatred of them. Rebuke your soul sharply for even entertaining them, since nothing can come from it but dishonor to God and harm to your own soul. Stir up your heart to mourn for the very presence of such thoughts nearby — and by doing this you will give testimony of your faithfulness to God. When David mourned for Abner, all Israel understood that day that it was not by the king's will that Abner had died. Your mourning over these thoughts will show they are not truly yours — they are Satan's.

Second, if the thoughts are not clearly wicked, ask whether they are nevertheless empty, fruitless, and vain — with no service to God's glory, your own good, or anyone else's. If so, do not rest until you have recognized what Satan is doing through them. Such thoughts may not serve your purposes, but they serve his — they keep you from better ones. All water that runs past the mill wheel

is wasted, and all thoughts that do not help you do God's work in your calling or daily life are waste. A bee will not settle on a flower where no honey can be gathered — neither should the Christian. 'Why are you sitting here idle,' you should say to your soul, 'when you have so much to do for God and for your own soul, and so little time to do it?'

Third, if you find your heart is engaged with something genuinely good, then ask whether it is good in terms of timing and manner — because without those, even good things can go wrong.

First, the timing: good fruit is the fruit brought forth in its season. Christ approved the work His mother wanted Him to do (John 2), but His time had not yet come. Good thoughts and meditations out of place are like sound ideas used to interpret the wrong Scripture passage — the truth may be good in itself, but it does not fit where it is applied. To be praying when you should be listening, or musing on a sermon when you should be praying, is to rob God on one side to pay Him on the other.

Second, carefully watch the manner. Your heart may dwell on something good and still ruin it in the doing. You may be meditating on your sins and working your heart toward a genuine sense of them — but doing it in such a way that in stirring up your sorrow you are weakening your faith in the promise. That itself becomes your sin. A bad surgeon, when opening a vein, goes so deep he cuts an artery — laming the arm, if not killing the patient. Or you may be thinking about your family and how to provide for them — which you should do, and would be worse than an unbeliever if you neglected. But perhaps those thoughts have become so anxious and distrustful as if there were no promise, no providence to sustain you. God takes this ill, because it reflects on His care for

you. How close our duty stands to our sin in this! A certain measure of care is necessary ballast for the soul; a little more sinks it under the waves of unbelief — like some medicines that are very good at the right dose but become poison if slightly too strong or too weak.

## CHAPTER 8. HOW SATAN LABORS TO CORRUPT THE CHRISTIAN'S MIND WITH ERROR



**T**he second kind of spiritual sins are those that are not only carried out in the spirit, but are also directed toward spiritual objects that belong to the soul's own nature as a spirit — not the carnal passions of fleshly lusts, in which the soul only acts as a servant to the body and shares in those pleasures indirectly through its closeness to the body. Just as the soul feels the body's pain through that connection, so it shares in fleshly pleasures the same way — by proximity, not by any proper taste of its own. But in spiritual wickednesses that corrupt the mind, the soul moves in its own sphere, with delights proper to itself. These are no fewer in number than the other kind. There is hardly a fleshly lust that does not have a corresponding spiritual sin — just as naturalists say there is no species on land that does not have a counterpart in the sea. The human heart can produce spiritual sins that answer to every carnal lust: for physical immorality and impurity, there is idolatry — called spiritual adultery in Scripture, which is why the seat of Antichrist is called spiritual Sodom. For sensual drunkenness, there is a drunkenness of the mind, intoxicated by error, and a

drunkenness of the heart in cares and anxieties. For carnal pride in beauty, wealth, or honor, there is spiritual pride in gifts and graces, and so on. Satan assaults the Christian with these in a particular way. A full treatment of every kind would require more space than I can give here — I will select two or three from the many. First, Satan works to corrupt the mind with false doctrine. He was at work at the very beginning of the church's planting, sowing his weeds almost as soon as Christ sowed His wheat. Dangerous errors sprang up even in the apostles' time, which is why they took up the weeding tool in all their letters, working to undermine Satan's campaign. Satan has a double purpose in his effort to corrupt people's minds — especially those who profess faith — with error.

### SECTION 1.

First, he does this out of spite toward God, against whom he cannot vent his malice more effectively than by corrupting God's truth — which God has honored above everything else (Psalm 138:2): 'You have exalted Your word above all Your name.' Every creature bears some reflection of God's name, but in His Word and the truth it contains, that name is written out in full. He guards this more carefully than all His other works. He is not overly concerned what becomes of the world and everything in it, so long as He keeps His Word and preserves His truth. Before long we will see this world consumed in flame — the heavens and earth will pass away — but the Word of the Lord endures forever. God can make countless worlds like this one, but He cannot make another truth, and therefore He will not surrender a single word of it. Satan knows this, and sets all his cunning to work to deface this truth

and distort it through false teaching. The Word is the mirror in which we see God — and seeing Him, we are changed into His likeness by His Spirit. If that mirror is cracked, our understanding of God will distort Him, whereas the Word in its native clarity shows Him to our eyes in all His glory.

Second, Satan pursues this spiritual sin of error as the most subtle and effective way to weaken — if not destroy — the power of godliness in people's lives. The apostle connects the spirit of power and a sound mind (2 Timothy 1:7). The power of holiness in practice depends greatly on soundness of judgment. Godliness is the child of truth, and if we want it to thrive, it must be nourished on no other milk than its own mother's. This is why we are urged to crave the pure milk of the Word so that we may grow (1 Peter 2:2). If that milk is even slightly mixed with error, it loses its nourishment. Every error, however innocent it may appear — like ivy on a wall — draws away the soul's strength and love from holiness. Hosea tells us that harlotry and wine take away the heart (Hosea 4:11), and error is spiritual adultery. Paul describes his work as presenting believers as a pure bride to Christ. When a person receives an error, they take a stranger into Christ's bed — and the nature of an adulterous relationship is to turn the wife's heart away from her true husband, so she no longer delights in his company as she does in her lover's. Do we not see this happening today? Many show more passion in defending one error than in holding many truths. The hearts of countless people have been pulled away from God's ways, their love for the Word and ministers of Christ grown cold — and it all comes from some corrupt principle lodged in their hearts, ruling over Christ and His truth as Hagar and her son did over Sarah and her child. Christ will never receive true whole-

hearted love from the soul until, like Abraham, He drives those out. Error is not as harmless a thing as many think. It is like unwholesome food to the body — it poisons the system and overloads the whole constitution, and it rarely passes through without breaking out into sores. Just as the knowledge of Christ lifts a soul above the corruptions of the world, so error entangles it and delivers it back to the very lusts it had once escaped.

Third, Satan's design in drawing souls into this spiritual sin has another purpose: to disturb the peace of the church, which is torn apart when this fire-ship sails into it. 'I hear there are divisions among you,' Paul says, 'and I partly believe it, for there must be factions' (1 Corinthians 11:18-19) — implying that divisions are the natural product of heresy. Error cannot well agree with error, except when both are united against truth. In that case — like Pilate and Herod — they become easy allies. But once truth appears to have been overcome and the battle against it is won, they fall out among themselves. No wonder, then, that error is such a troublesome neighbor to truth. O friends, what a quiet and sweet peace there was among Christians a dozen years ago. Looking back to those blessed days — even though they had their own troubles, which were far less disheartening, since that storm united the saints while this one scatters their spirits — it is a joy to remember the unity and love in which Christians walked together. Their persecutors in those days could have said, as their predecessors said of the saints in the early church: 'See how they love one another.' But now, alas, those same persecutors might mockingly say: 'See how those who once loved so dearly are ready to tear each other's throats out.'

## SECTION 2.

The application of this will be a brief word of exhortation to all, especially those who bear Christ's name in a more visible and serious profession. Beware of this soul-infection, this leprosy of the mind. I trust you do not think this warning unnecessary — for this is the disease of our times. This plague has begun, and indeed spreads rapidly. There is hardly a congregation that does not have this sore among its members. Paul is the preacher all of us may well aspire to follow, and he pressed this home on the saints — indeed, it was a regular part of his preaching: 'I know that after my departure, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert' (Acts 20:29-31). He then points to his own example: that for many years, he hardly preached a sermon without warning everyone, night and day, with tears. We do not need to prophesy what false teachers may appear after we are gone — there are already too many openly at work, drawing disciples after them. If it is our duty to warn you of them, surely it is your duty to watch, so that none of them may lead you into temptation in this hour — when Satan has been let loose to deceive on a large scale. Are you somehow more immune than those famous churches of Galatia and Corinth, many of whose members were bewitched by false teachers and almost turned to a different gospel? Has Satan become orthodox? Have his instruments lost their skill in hunting for souls? In a word — is there not a natural sympathy between your corrupt heart and error? Do you not have a disposition, like fertile soil, that makes these weeds grow naturally in you? Do you not see many who have been thrown down by this enemy — people who

once stood on the mountain of their faith, sure it could never be moved? They would have been deeply offended if told beforehand: 'You are the very people who will come to despise the Sabbath, which you now consider holy; who will drift into the belief that human will saves itself, though you now reject that notion; who will despise preaching itself, though you now seem to honor preachers so highly; who will abandon family prayer, though you dare not leave the house without it now.' Yet all of this and more has come to pass. Ought you not, therefore, to take heed lest you also fall? And so that you may not:

First, make it your chief concern to have a genuine change of heart. If the root of the matter is truly in you, and you are grounded by a living faith in Christ, then you are safe — I do not say completely free from all error, but certainly free from being swallowed up in error that damns the soul. 'They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us' (1 John 2:19). As if John had said: they had some outward profession and common work of the Spirit alongside us, which they have either lost or carried over to the devil's side — but they never had the anointing of the sanctifying Spirit. By this (verse 20) he distinguishes them from true believers and comforts those who were sincere, who were perhaps afraid they too might fall after seeing others depart: 'But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you all know.' It is one thing to know a truth and another to know it by that anointing. A hypocrite may do the former; the saint alone does the latter. It is this anointing that gives the soul a genuine taste of the knowledge of Christ. Those who are easiest prey for false teachers are people who have been enlightened but not enlivened. It is good to have the heart estab-

lished by grace — this acts as an anchor, keeping us from being set adrift and carried around by every novel and strange teaching, as the apostle tells us (Hebrews 13:9).

Second, press on in the work of mortification. Put the flesh to death daily. Heresy, though a spiritual sin, is counted by the apostle among the deeds of the flesh (Galatians 5:20) — because it is motivated by fleshly interests and fed by carnal fuel. No one has ever turned heretic without flesh at the root of it — whether they served their appetites, fed their pride, sought advancement at court, protected their estates, or saved their lives when holding to truth might cost them fire and execution. There is always something hidden in the straw, even when it is least visible. No wonder, then, that heresies tend to end in the flesh, when they largely spring from it. Mucus in the head rises as vapors from the stomach and returns there, or to the lungs, which eventually become inflamed and ulcerated. In the same way, carnal desires send their fumes up to the understanding, clouding it — indeed, bribing it to accept certain false principles as truths. Once accepted, these principles descend into the life and corrupt it with the ulcer of ungodliness. So, Christian, if you can once free yourself from your entanglement with the flesh — becoming truly free, no longer casting your vote to satisfy your carnal fears or hopes — you will be a trustworthy friend of truth.

Third, attend faithfully on the preaching of the Word. Satan commonly stops a person's ear to sound doctrine before he opens it to false teaching. This is the typical pattern of souls falling away from truth (2 Timothy 4:3-4): 'They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.' Satan, like a clever thief, draws the soul off the main road into some side lane or corner, and robs

it of the truth there. By neglecting one ordinance, we cut ourselves off from the blessing of all the others. Do not say you are praying to be led into truth while you are turning your ear from the preaching of God's Word — God will not hear that prayer. A father who loves his child and sees him playing truant will bring him back to school. If God loves a soul, He will bring it back to the Word, even if it takes shame and sorrow to get it there.

Fourth, when you hear unusual doctrine — however appealing it sounds — do not rush into a relationship with it. Seek better testimony of it before you open your heart to it. The apostle tells us to welcome strangers, for some have entertained angels without knowing it (Hebrews 13:2). But he also warns us not to be carried away by strange teachings (verse 9). By the latter, I am certain some have entertained devils. I acknowledge it is not enough to reject a teaching simply because it is unfamiliar — there is good reason to wait and inquire carefully. Paul was astonished that the Galatians were so quickly pulled away from the one who had called them to the grace of Christ, turning to a different gospel. Surely they could have waited, gone to Paul, and asked his judgment. Is that how we should act — no sooner does a traveling teacher arrive and open his pack than we buy all his goods at first sight? O friends, would it not be wiser to pray over such new ideas again and again, to search the Word and examine your hearts by it, and indeed, not to trust your own judgment alone but to call in the counsel of others? If your own minister does not have that credibility with you, then at least seek out the most holy, humble, and grounded Christians you can find. Error is like fish — it must be eaten fresh or it will rot. When those dangerous errors first arose in New England, the churches were thrown into great confusion.

There was a clamor as if a gold mine had been found. But in time, when those errors showed their true face and it became clear where they were heading — toward the destruction of churches, ordinances, and the power of godliness — those who feared God who had wandered aside came back with shame and sorrow.

## CHAPTER 9. OF PRIDE OF GIFTS AND HOW SATAN TEMPTS THE CHRISTIAN THERE TO



**T**he second spiritual wickedness Satan provokes — especially in the saint — is spiritual pride. This was the sin that turned a blessed angel into a cursed devil. As it was his own personal sin, so he works hardest to pass it on to the children of men. He succeeded so well with our first parents that ever since, this sin has claimed a kind of sovereignty in the human heart, using both bad things and good to pull its chariot. First, it uses evil. Pride seizes the fruits of other sins — they do all the labor to make pride great, as subjects exist to uphold the state and splendor of their prince. You see some people toil and strain, cheat and oppress. What for? To accumulate an estate that feeds their pride. Others flatter, lie, and put on false faces — all in order to lift pride up some hill of honor. Pride also uses what is good. It can work with God's own instruments — the ordinances through which the Holy Spirit advances His kingdom of grace in the saints' hearts. These are frequently prostituted to pride. A man may be very zealous in prayer and diligent in preaching, and all the while pride is the master he serves, even though he wears God's livery. Pride can

take sanctuary in the holiest acts and hide itself under the skirt of virtue itself. While a man is practicing charity, pride may be the hidden idol for which he lavishes his money so freely. This sin is very hard to starve, because it can feed on almost anything. There is nothing so base that a proud heart will not be lifted up by it, and nothing so sacred that pride will not defile it — it will even drink from the sacred vessels of the sanctuary, and rather than starve it will feed on the corpses of other sins. As the saying goes: it is very hard to avoid the sin that is born from the defeat of other sins. This ruling sin of pride will stir the soul to resist and even crush some other sins so that it can boast of having defeated them and inflate itself above others — as the Pharisee, who out of pride bragged that he was not like the tax collector. Left unchecked, pride will insert itself everywhere and moves in a wide sphere. There is almost nothing a person has or does — without divine help — that will not become prey to this devourer. But I am not treating it in its full breadth. Pride is either directed at worldly things — beauty, strength, wealth, and the like — or at spiritual things. I will speak briefly to the latter. For the former: a saint may perhaps be caught in it, and no sin should be taken lightly. Yet it is less common, because ordinarily pride fastens to the perfections that fit and belong to the station and calling one holds. A musician is proud of his skill in music, through which he excels others of his rank. A scholar, though he might play music just as well, does not pride himself in that — he regards it as beneath him. No, he takes pride in his learning and fine ideas. And so with others. Now the life of a Christian, as a Christian, is higher than the life of a person as a mere person. So the Christian does not value himself by things that are beneath him, but by the higher and more elevated perfections

that fit a Christian's calling. Just as a natural person is proud of perfections suited to his natural condition — like honor or beauty — so the Christian is chiefly prone to be puffed up with perfections suited to his spiritual life. I will name three: pride of gifts, pride of grace, and pride of privileges. These are what Satan chiefly labors to snare him in.

### SECTION 1.

First, pride of gifts. By gifts I mean those supernatural abilities with which the Spirit of God enriches and equips the minds of people for building up the body of Christ. The apostle tells us there is great variety of such gifts, all from the same Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:4). There is no greater variety of colors and qualities in all the plants and flowers that carpet the earth for human delight and use than there is of gifts in the minds of people — natural and spiritual — to make them useful to one another in civil society and Christian fellowship. The Christian, like any person, is designed to be a social creature. To manage this spiritual community well, God wisely and graciously provides and distributes gifts suited to each person's place in the body — just as the vessels in the human body are larger or smaller depending on their function. Satan does everything he can to taint these gifts and spoil them with pride in the Christian, so that he may disrupt the Christian's trade and fellowship, which depends on the gifts and graces that believers share with each other. Pride of gifts hinders the Christian's spiritual commerce and trade in two ways.

First, pride of gifts is the reason we do so little good with them to others.

Second, it is the reason we receive so little good from the gifts of others.

First, pride of gifts hinders doing good to others in three ways.

First, pride turns a person away from the right aim. To the degree that pride prevails, the person prays or preaches more to be thought well of by others than to do good to others — more to put himself on a throne than to put Christ on one, in the minds and hearts of his hearers. Pride carries the man upward, to be admired for the height of his ideas, and will not let him stoop low enough to speak plain truths plainly. There must always be some fine ornament, even on simple material. Such a person may please the ear, but will do little genuine good to souls — and alas, that is not what he is after.

Second, if this painted Jezebel of pride is visible in any exercise — preaching, prayer, or conversation — it produces contempt in the spirits of those who hear it, both the godly and the ungodly. Pride is a sin that is deeply offensive to a gracious heart, and it often causes them to turn away from what is being offered, even if the content is sound, because of their revulsion at the pride they see in the one delivering it. This is their weakness — but woe to those whose pride leads others into that temptation. Even those who are ungodly and who may struggle with the same sin themselves do not like seeing it in another, and go away as unreached as when they came.

Third, pride of gifts robs us of God's blessing in the use of them. The humble person may have Satan standing at his right hand to oppose him — but the proud person will find God Himself standing there to resist him whenever he takes up any duty. God

declares this openly and would have every proud person know it: wherever He meets him, He will oppose him. He resists the proud. Great gifts are as beautiful as Rachel, but pride makes them as barren as she was. Either we must set self aside, or God will set us aside.

Second, pride of gifts also hinders receiving good from others. Pride fills the soul, and a full soul takes nothing from God — much less from any person — for its own benefit. Such a person is very particular. Not every sermon, however wholesome, and not every prayer, however sincere, will go down easily. He must have something exceptional. He thinks he has better at home and is unlikely to gain anything from what is offered. And we can observe the effect: the plain laborer who can eat any simple, wholesome food is healthier and does more work in a day than many who are fussy and refined in what they will eat can manage in their whole lives. In the same way, the humble Christian who can feed on plain truths and ordinary means of grace — not adorned with great human skill — enjoys more of God and does more for God than the more discriminating kind of professor who must be served only in the finest vessel. The church at Corinth was famous above other churches for gifts (1 Corinthians 1) — but not for grace. None were more sharply rebuked for weakness in grace (1 Corinthians 3:2). Paul calls them carnal, babes in Christ, so weak they could not handle solid food: 'I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it, and even now you are not yet ready.' Why? The answer comes in verse 3: 'You are still carnal, for there is jealousy and strife among you' (verse 4). One says 'I follow Paul,' another 'I follow Apollos.' Pride made them take sides, championing one preacher over another according to personal preference. That is

not the way to grow. Pride destroys love, and without love, edification is lost. The devil has done terrible damage in the church through this tool. Zanchius tells of a man in Geneva who, when invited to hear Viretus — who preached at the same time as Calvin — replied, 'If Paul himself were preaching, I would leave Paul to hear Calvin.' If pride in someone else's gifts can carry a person that far — almost to the edge of blasphemy — what damage will pride do when the gifts are one's own?

## SECTION 2.

First application: Does Satan stir up the saints to this spiritual pride of gifts? Here is a word for those who have modest gifts but genuine grace — be content with your condition. Perhaps when you hear others pray with great liberty and speak powerfully about the truths of God, you are ready to retreat into a corner and mourn over your weak memory, your dull understanding, your constrained spirit — barely able even in private to express your heart to God in prayer. You are tempted to think those people are the truly fortunate ones, and nearly to complain about your own condition. But can you say: 'Though I have few words, I hope I have faith. I cannot debate for the truth, but I am willing to suffer for it. I cannot remember a sermon, but I never hear the Word without hating sin and loving Christ more than before. Lord, You know I love You'? Truly, Christian, you have the better part. You have little idea what mercy may be wrapped up in the modesty of your gifts, or what temptations their gifts expose them to — which God in His mercy may be withholding from you. Joseph's coat made him finer than his brothers — but it caused all his trouble; it set the archers shooting arrows at him. Great gifts lift a saint a little

higher in the eyes of people, but they bring temptations you never encounter — envy from fellow believers, malice from Satan, and pride in the gifted person's own heart. I dare say, none find the road to heaven harder than such people, with many waves and winds to fight, while you creep safely along the shore under the shelter of the wind toward heaven. It is like a great lord with a small estate — a plainer man often has money in his pocket when the lord has none and can lend him some in a pinch. Great gifts and abilities are titles of honor among people, but many such gifted people may need to come and borrow grace and comfort from a less gifted brother — possibly the preacher from his own poor neighbor. O poor Christian, do not complain or envy them — rather pity and pray for them. They need it more than others. His gifts work for your benefit; your grace is for yourself. You are like a merchant who has a factor out at sea, sharing in the profit without the personal risk. You join with him in prayer and benefit from his gifts, but you do not carry the temptation of his pride.

Second application: Does Satan work to draw the gifted into pride? Then here is a word for those to whom God has given more than ordinary gifts — beware of pride. That is now your snare. Satan is at work. If he can, he will turn your own weapons against you. Your safety lies in your humility — if that lock is broken, the legions of hell are upon you. Remember who your enemy is: spiritual forces of wickedness, whose tactic is to lift you up in order to give you a harder fall. To stir your heart more fully against this, consider the following humbling truths.

First, consider: these spiritual gifts are not your own. Will you be proud of someone else's generosity? Is not God the One who gave them? Can He not just as quickly take them away? You who

are proud of your gourd — what will you be when it withers? You will be bitter and resentful. And the course you are taking is exactly how to be stripped of what you have. Gifts come on different terms than grace. God gives grace as a permanent inheritance with promises for this life and the next. But gifts are given conditionally. Though a father will not disown his child, he may take back his fine coat and ornaments if the child becomes proud of them.

Second, gifts are not merely for yourself. The light of the sun is ministerial — it does not shine for itself. In the same way, all your gifts are for others: 'gifts for building up the body' (Ephesians 4:12). Suppose someone left a chest of money in your hands to distribute to others — what foolishness it would be for this man to enter it in his own inventory and congratulate himself on how much he has. Poor soul — you are only God's executor. By the time you have paid out all the bequests, you will find very little left to boast about.

Third, know, Christian, that you will be accountable for these talents. How will a proud soul face God at that reckoning? Suppose someone appointed as executor to pay out bequests paid them all as if they were his own gifts — not the gifts of the one who left them. Christ at His ascension gave gifts for His people to receive. You hold some in your hand. Now a proud soul distributes them all as if they were his own, claiming the credit entirely for himself. How abominable it is to claim Christ's honor as our own!

Fourth, your gifts do not commend you to God. People may be impressed by your expression and your ideas in prayer. But all of that is stripped away when your prayer comes before God. 'O woman, great is your faith!' Christ said — not your polished and eloquent language. It would do us good after any spiritual duty to

sort through the ingredients it was made of: how much came from grace, how much from gifts, and how much from pride. When all the mixed material is separated out, you will see how small a space the actual workings of grace in our duties occupy.

Fifth, consider: while you are taking pride in your gifts, you are quietly shriveling in your grace. Such people are like grain that runs up tall in straw but produces a thin, light ear. Grace is too easily neglected where gifts are too highly prized. We are commanded to clothe ourselves with humility. Our clothes cover the shame of our bodies; humility covers the beauty of the soul. Just as a body cannot live without clothing, so grace cannot live without this covering of humility. Pride kills the spirit of praise — when you should be blessing God, you are applauding yourself. It destroys Christian love and stabs fellowship with the saints to the heart. A proud person cannot walk in company without feeling that everyone else's gifts are in his way. Pride so corrupts the spiritual appetite that it cannot enjoy anything drawn from another's vessel.

Sixth, pride is the forerunner of some great sin or some great affliction. God will not permit a weed like pride to grow in His garden without taking some action to uproot it. He may allow you to fall into some serious sin, and that will bring you home with shame. God sometimes uses a thorn in the flesh to puncture the balloon of pride in the spirit — or at least some heavy affliction, whose very purpose is to hide pride from a person. It is like handling a hot-blooded horse: you ride it over plowed fields to tame it, and then you can sit safely on its back. If God's honor is at risk because of your pride, expect a rod — and most likely the affliction will strike the very thing you are most proud of. Hezekiah boasted

of his treasures, and God sent the Babylonians to plunder them. Jonah was fond of his vine, and it was struck down. If your spirit is inflated with pride in your gifts, you are in danger of having them diminished — at least in the opinion of others whose breath of praise may have been what destabilized your unballasted soul in the first place.

### SECTION 3.

Question: How would you direct us against this?

Answer. You have already heard the arguments. I will simply point to two or three doors through which your enemy comes at you — and the mere sight of them, if you are loyal to Christ, should stir you up to take action against it.

First, pride shows itself in dwelling on thoughts of your own gifts with a secret pleasure — like catching your own reflection until you fall in love with what you see. We read of some whose eyes are full of the adulteress and cannot stop sinning (2 Peter 2:14). A proud heart is full of itself — its own abilities are always in view wherever it goes. The great subject and theme of its thoughts is what it is and what it has above others, applauding itself constantly. Bernard confesses that even while preaching — when one would think his mind would have little room for such things — pride would whisper in his ear: 'Well done, Bernard.' Be on guard, Christian, against entertaining such company. Run from such thoughts as you would from a bear. If the devil can get you to stand on this high place while he spreads before you the glory of your spiritual attainments for you to gaze on, your unsteady head will soon spin with pride. Therefore, work to keep the sense of your

own weaknesses alive and present in your soul, to redirect your attention when the temptation comes. Those who are subject to certain fits carry remedies with them suited to their condition, so that when a fit comes on — often triggered by a pleasant fragrance — they can use them for relief. Sweet fragrances are not more dangerous for them than anything that flatters you is to your soul. Be on guard not only against nursing such thoughts in your own heart, but also against keeping company with those who bring you the pleasant scent of your own qualities through their flattery.

Second, this kind of pride appears in an eagerness to put yourself on display. David's brothers misjudged him in this respect, but often the pride and corrupt ambition of the heart breaks out through this door. Christ's worldly-minded relatives urged Him to show Himself publicly. Pride loves to climb up — not as Zacchaeus climbed, to see Christ, but to be seen itself. 'A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his own opinion' (Proverbs 18:2). Pride wants to be somebody, and so comes out to court the crowd. Humility, by contrast, loves privacy — as leaves cover and shade the fruit so that a hand must gently lift them before the fruit can be seen. So humility and a holy modesty should conceal the soul's gifts until the hand of Providence, through some clear calling, draws them out. There is pride in displaying gifts just as there is in immodest dress. Humility is a necessary covering for all other graces. So first, Christian: whenever you come forward for any public duty, make sure you have a genuine calling. It is obedience to be ready when God calls you out; it is pride to run before God speaks. Second, when you are called: earnestly seek divine strength against this enemy. Do not avoid a duty out of fear of

pride — you may show pride in the very act of appearing to flee it. Go in God's strength against it. There is more hope of overcoming it through obedience than through avoidance.

Third, pride also shows itself in envying the gifts of others when they seem to outshine our own or block our view. This is a weed that can grow too freely even in good soil. Aaron and Miriam could not bear Moses's honor (Numbers 12:1). That was the real issue — though they picked a quarrel with him over his wife (because she was Ethiopian), as verse 2 makes plain: 'Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us also?' They thought Moses was getting too much of the honor, and they resented that God used him more than themselves. It is worth noting that the craving for meat broke out among the rabble and the lower sort of people (Numbers 11:4-5), but this pride and envy caught fire in the hearts of the most prominent and godly. How much more, then, do we poor souls need to watch our hearts, when we see such honored servants of God being led into temptation? 'The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously' (James 4:5). Our corrupt nature constantly pushes us toward this sin. It is as hard to keep our hearts apart from this sin as it is to keep two lovers from meeting. Thatch is no more ready to catch fire at every flash of lightning than the heart is to be kindled at the sight of any outstanding gift or grace in another. Envy was one of the first windows corrupt nature looked out of — it was the sin that shed the first blood. Cain's envy hatched Abel's murder. Now if you ever mean to get the mastery over this sin:

First, call in help from heaven. No sooner does the apostle describe how full the human heart is with envy than he points to where grace flows in more than enough supply to match it: 'The

Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously, but He gives more grace' (James 4:5-6). Do not simply lie down under this sin — it is not unconquerable. God can give you more grace than you have sin, more humility than you have pride. Be humble enough to earnestly ask for His grace, and you will not be proud enough to wickedly envy His gifts or grace in others.

Second, make this sin look as dark and ugly as you possibly can in your own mind, so that when it presents itself, you will recoil from it all the more. In truth, nothing more is needed than a clear look at its own face to make you want nothing to do with it. For first, envying others' gifts casts great contempt on God — and in more than one way.

First, when you envy the gifts of your brothers and sisters, you are presuming to instruct God about what He should give and to whom — as if the great God should take your advice or ask your permission before distributing His gifts. Do you dare stand by your own envious thoughts with that interpretation? You will find Christ's own answer to it in Matthew 20:15: 'Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own?' As if Christ had said: what does anyone have to complain about how I dispose of what belongs to Me, not to them?

Second, you are resenting the goodness of God. It troubles you, apparently, that God should be good to anyone besides yourself. Your eye is evil because His is good. Would you not have God be good? You might as well come out and say you would not have Him be God at all — for He can no sooner stop being good than He can stop being God.

Third, you are an enemy to the glory of God, defacing what should display it. Every gift is a ray of divine excellence, and as all the beams of the sun declare its glory, so all the gifts God distributes declare the glory of God. Envy labors to tarnish and smear these representations of God — it always has something to diminish the excellence it sees in another. God showed Miriam her sin through her punishment. She set out to bespatter Moses, who shone so prominently with the gifts and graces of God — and God struck her with leprosy from head to toe (Numbers 12). Do you genuinely wish well to God's honor? Then why do you hang your head instead of rejoicing when you see Him glorified through the gifts of others? Could a pagan man take it so well — when he himself was passed over and others were chosen for positions of honor and leadership — that he said he was glad his city could find so many more worthy than himself? And shall a Christian resent that anyone is found fit to honor God besides himself?

Second, you wrong your brother, sinning against the law of love that obliges you to rejoice in his good as if it were your own — indeed, to prefer him in honor above yourself. You cannot both love and envy the same person. Envy is as contrary to love as a raging fever is to the body's natural warmth. 'Love does not envy' (1 Corinthians 13:4). How could it, when it lives where it loves? And when you stop loving, you begin to hate and destroy — do you not tremble to discover yourself a murderer in the end?

Third, you make the worst possible choice for yourself. God is beyond your reach. Whatever you spit toward heaven will eventually fall back on your own face. And the brother you envy — God is committed to defend him against your envy, precisely because he is being attacked for what is of God in him. This is how God de-

fended Joseph's cause against his envious brothers, and David's cause against wicked Saul. You yourself are the only one who suffers real harm.

First, you rob yourself of what you could have received from others' gifts. That old saying rings true: 'Remove envy, and what is yours is mine and what is mine is yours.' When envy is gone, we share freely in one another's gifts. But right now, like a leech that draws out only the worst blood, you draw nothing from others' gifts but what swells your mind with resentment and is then vomited out in strife and conflict. What a sad thing it is that a person could come away from a precious sermon or a beautiful prayer and bring nothing home but a grudge against the instrument God used — as we see in the Pharisees and others who heard Christ preach.

Second, you rob yourself of the joy of your life. 'He who is cruel brings trouble on himself' (Proverbs 11:17). The envious person does this thoroughly — he drives the honor and esteem of others like thorns into his own heart. He cannot think of them without pain and anguish, and the person who is always in pain will inevitably waste away.

Third, you throw yourself into the mouth of temptation. You need give the devil no greater advantage over you. Envy is a root on which almost any other sin will grow. What would the patriarchs not do to rid themselves of Joseph, whom they envied? The very same pride that made them recoil at the thought of bowing to his sheaf made them stoop far lower — debasing themselves to the level of hell, becoming the devil's instruments to sell their dear brother into slavery. This could have destroyed him entirely had God not provided otherwise. What a powerless and cruel mind Saul revealed against David once envy had poisoned his heart!

From the day he heard David praised above himself in the women's songs, he could never get that melody out of his head. From then on he devoted this innocent man to death in his thoughts — a man who had done him no wrong at all, but had only kept the crown on Saul's head by risking his own life against Goliath. Envy is a bloody sin. It is the womb in which a whole brood of other sins is formed: 'full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice' and more (Romans 1:29). Therefore, unless you are resolved to welcome the devil and his entire company, resist him at this point — for he sends envy ahead first to take up lodging for everything else.

## CHAPTER 10. OF PRIDE OF GRACE



**S** econd, pride of grace. This is another way Satan attacks the Christian. True grace cannot itself be proud — yet it is possible for a saint to be proud of his grace. There is nothing the Christian has or does that this worm of pride will not breed in. The world we live in is subject to decay, and everything here is prone to corruption, like goods stored in a damp, musty room that grows moldy. It is not the nature of grace itself, but the salt of the covenant, that preserves its purity. In heaven we will be safe from this. But how can a saint be said to be proud of his grace? A soul is proud of his grace when he trusts in his grace. Trust and confidence is an attribute that belongs to God alone as sovereign Lord — and even among people it goes with royalty. Set up a king, and he expects this as the undeniable right of his position. To seek protection from any other source is, in effect, to set up a rival king. 'If in truth you anoint me king over you, then come and take refuge in my shadow' (Judges 9:15). So when a soul places its trust in anything besides God, it sets up a prince, a king, an idol — and gives to it the glory that belongs to God. It does not make the sin any less to have our trust rest in the grace of God rather than in a lust. It is idolatry to worship a holy angel just as much as to worship a cursed devil. To make our grace our god is as much idolatry as to

make our belly our god — in fact it is worse, because the very thing that should have brought God the greatest glory is now used to rob Him of it. Certainly, the more treasure you put into a servant's hands, the greater the wrong if he runs off with it. I have no doubt David could have borne it more easily to see a Philistine drive him from his throne than to see his own son — an Absalom — do it. But in what ways can a saint be said to trust in his grace?

First, by trusting in the strength of his grace.

Second, by trusting in the worth of his grace. An openly declared trust in grace, I believe, cannot truly coexist with genuine grace. But there is an indirect kind of trust — one that by its character smacks of this sin. Satan is subtle in his assaults.

## SECTION 1.

First, trusting in the strength of grace is to be proud of grace. This is the opposite of the poverty of spirit so commended by our Savior (Matthew 5:3) — by which a person lives in a continual awareness of his own spiritual poverty and emptiness, and therefore goes to Christ as a poor man goes to the door of a rich man, knowing he has nothing at home to live on. Paul was like this — unable to do anything from himself. He is not ashamed to let the world know that Christ carries his purse: 'Our sufficiency is from God' (2 Corinthians 3:5). After many years of walking with God, this holy man counts nothing as his own gain: 'I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet' (Philippians 3:13). He is still pressing forward. Ask him how he lives, and he will tell you Who keeps house for him: 'I live, yet not I' (Galatians 2:20). As you would ask a beggar where he gets his food and clothing, and he would say, 'I thank

my good master' — so Paul. Satan's chief goal is to inflate the soul with an excessive confidence in its own ability, as the surest way to bring it into his trap. Satan knows that God's method is to hand His children over to the tempter once they grow proud and self-confident. Hezekiah was left to be tested (2 Chronicles 32:31). Why? God had already tested him well through affliction just before. Was that not enough? No — because Hezekiah's heart had been lifted up after his affliction. It was time for God to let the tempter loose on him for a while, to bring him down. Hezekiah was probably now thinking very highly of his own grace — that he would never fail as he had before. And God would let him see what a weak creature he was. Peter made a whip for his own back with that boast: 'Even if everyone else falls away, I will not.' In sheer mercy, Christ now had to let Satan have at him — to lay him flat on his back, so that seeing the weakness of his faith, he might be dismounted from his high opinion of himself. All I will add from this is to urge you, Christian, to be on guard against this kind of pride. You know what Joab said to David when he saw the king's heart lifted up with the strength of his kingdom, and David wanted to count the people: 'May the Lord your God add to the people a hundred times as many as they are, but why does my lord the king delight in this thing?' (2 Samuel 24:3). May the Lord add to the strength of your grace a hundred times over — but why do you take pride in it? Why should you be lifted up? Is it not grace? Should the groom be proud because he rides his master's horse? Should the mud wall be proud because the sun shines on it? Can you not say of every measure of grace, as the young man said of the borrowed axe: 'Alas, Master, it is borrowed'? In fact, not only borrowed — but you cannot even use it without the skill and strength

of the One who lent it to you. Beware of this. Do not let these vain thoughts lodge in you, lest you enter into temptation. It is a breach through which a whole army of sins may enter — and will, unless it is quickly closed.

First, trusting in your own spiritual strength will make you lazy and careless in your duties. It is the sense of need that keeps the soul active in prayer and in hearing the Word — just as an empty pantry drives a man to market. No one goes there to buy what he already has at home. 'Come,' Jacob said, 'go down to Egypt and buy grain, so that we may live and not die.' So the needy Christian says: 'Up, soul, go to your God — your faith is weak, your patience nearly spent. Come to the throne of grace; bring your measure to the means of grace and get some fresh supply.' But a soul conceited of its own spiritual stock sings a different tune: 'Soul, take your ease — you are well stocked for many days. Let the doubting soul pray; your faith is strong. Let the weak cling to the means of grace; you are well grown up.' In fact, it is a wonder if such a soul does not go further and begin to despise the ordinary means of grace unless they come with some exceptional quality. This is exactly the condition the Corinthians had reached (1 Corinthians 4:8): 'You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us.' Notice how Paul puts the accent on the word 'already.' As if he said: I remember when Paul came to town and word spread that he was going to preach — you would have flocked to hear him and blessed God for the opportunity. But that was when you were poor and empty. Now you are full. You have reached a higher level. Paul is too simple for you now — he can

take his preaching to those who are still hungry. You have moved past all that. And once a heart has arrived at that place, it is easy to see what will follow.

Second, this trust in the strength of grace will make the soul bold and reckless. The humble Christian is the cautious Christian — he knows his weakness, and that knowledge makes him careful. 'My head is not strong enough,' he says. 'I could easily be drawn into error through clever arguments, so I will not go where such things are being taught, lest my weak mind be intoxicated.' But the self-confident person will sample every cup — he fears nothing. He is settled in the truth; a whole team of heretics could not move him. 'I have a vain and light heart,' the humble soul says. 'I dare not go among wicked, corrupt company, lest I end up bringing the wickedness home with me.' But the one who trusts in the strength of his grace will venture into the devil's territory. This is what Peter did when he followed into the midst of Christ's enemies — and you know how that ended. His faith would have been destroyed on the spot, had Christ not sounded the retreat with that timely look of love. I have read of boastful philosophers who thought it was not enough to be temperate unless they were surrounded by temptation — so they would go into taverns and houses of immorality, as if to beat the devil on his own ground. But the Christian knows an enemy far closer than they ever imagined. He need not step over his own doorstep to pick a fight with the devil — he has lust in his own heart that will keep him fully occupied all his days, without giving it any additional advantage. Christian, I know of no sin that you might not be left to commit — except one. It was a bold claim — though made by a good man, as I have heard — 'If I die of the plague, say I had no faith.' And on that basis he would go boldly

among the infected. If you are a Christian, you will not die of spiritual plague — but you may still have the running sores of serious sins on you for a time. Is that not bad enough? Therefore, walk humbly with your God.

Third, this high opinion of the strength of your grace will make you harsh and unmerciful toward your weak brothers and sisters in their failings — a sin that least becomes a saint (Galatians 6:1). 'If anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.' But how does one get such a gentle spirit? The verse continues: 'considering yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.' What makes people hard on the poor? The fact that they cannot imagine being poor themselves. Why are so many people sharp in their judgments? Because they trust too much in their own grace, as if they could never fall. O but you are still in the body, and the body of sin is still in you — so fear. Bernard used to say, whenever he heard of some scandalous sin in a professing believer: 'He fell today; I may stumble tomorrow.'

## SECTION 2.

The second way a soul can be proud of its grace is by resting on it for acceptance with God. Scripture calls the grace within us 'our own righteousness' — though God is truly its source — and contrasts it with the righteousness of Christ, which alone is called 'the righteousness of God' (Romans 10:3). To rest on any inherent grace is to exalt our own righteousness above the righteousness of God. What an act of pride that is. If it were so, a saint arriving in heaven might say: 'This is heaven, which I have built. My grace has purchased it.' And the God of heaven would become His creature's

tenant. No — God has designed salvation on a different plan: of grace, but not grace in us, but grace to us. Inherent grace has its place and function accompanying salvation (Hebrews 6:9), but it does not purchase it. That is Christ's work alone. When Israel waited at Mount Sinai, boundaries were set — no one could come up the mountain besides Moses to meet with God, not even to touch the mountain without dying. In the same way, all the graces of the Spirit wait on God, but none of them comes forward to claim acceptance with God except faith — which is the grace that presents the soul not in its own garments, but in Christ's. But you may ask: why is all this needed? Where is the person who actually trusts in his grace? Alas, where is the Christian who fully and freely comes off his own righteousness? The pilot who can steer his faith in so direct a course as never to run aground on some duty or hit the rocks of some grace is exceedingly rare. Abraham went in to Hagar. And the children of Abraham's faith are not perfectly free from the law — they may sometimes be found in Hagar's arms. The evidence is the rising and falling of our faith according to the condition of our obedience. When obedience seems full, faith is at high tide and covers all the mountains of our fears. But when it seems to ebb in any service or duty, the Jordan of our faith pulls back and leaves the soul exposed. The devil's spite is against Christ. Since he could not prevent Christ's coming — which he tried with everything he had — or work his will on Christ when He came, he now works in a more refined way: to dim the glory of Christ's sufferings and the sufficiency of His righteousness by blending ours with His. The doctrine of justification by faith has had more assaults and siegeworks built against it than any other teaching in Scripture. Many other errors were only his subtle ap-

proaches to get closer and undermine this one. And finally, when he cannot hide this truth — which now shines in the church like the sun at full strength — he works to prevent people from living by it in practice. If he can help it, we will profess acceptance through Christ alone in our beliefs while contradicting ourselves in how we live. There are two forms of pride the devil uses for this purpose. One I might call a mannerly pride, and the other a self-applauding pride.

First, mannerly pride comes dressed in the appearance of humility. It shows itself either when the soul first comes to Christ — keeping it from embracing the promise — or afterward in the daily course of the Christian's walk with God, preventing comfortable reliance on Christ.

First, this shows itself when a poor soul is pushed back from the promise by a sense of its own unworthiness and great unrighteousness. Tell him of forgiveness, and he is so wrapped up in thoughts of his own filthiness that the good news cannot reach him. Would God really take such a wretch as he is into His embrace, cancel so many great sins at once, and receive into His favor someone who has been so long in open rebellion against Him? He cannot believe it — even when he hears what Christ has done and suffered for sin, he refuses to be comforted. The soul has little idea what a bitter root such thoughts spring from. You think you are doing well to condemn yourself and magnify your sins — and indeed, you cannot paint them black enough, nor entertain thoughts too low and base about yourself for what you have done. But what wrong has God done you, that you should cast such dishonor on His mercy? What wrong has Christ done you, that you should so unworthily reflect on the worth of what He has earned? Can you

not mourn for your sins while still being careful of God's reputation? Is there no way to show your sense of sin except by slandering your Savior? Can you not charge yourself without condemning God — and putting Christ and His blood to shame before Satan, who takes more satisfaction in this than in all your other sins? In short: you like a wretched creature have undone yourself and brought ruin on your soul through sin. But are you unwilling that God should have the glory of pardoning it, and Christ the honor of having purchased that pardon? Are you like the man in the Gospel (Luke 16:3) who could not work and was too proud to beg? You cannot earn heaven by your own righteousness — and is your spirit so stiff that you will not take it as a gift for Christ's sake? Will you not receive it from the hands of God, who in the Gospel comes to you as a beggar, pleading with you to be reconciled to Him? Ah, soul — who would have thought such pride could lurk under such a modest veil? And yet nothing is quite like it. It is outrageous pride for a beggar to starve rather than accept charity from a wealthy hand. It is madness for a convicted criminal to choose the noose over a pardon from a merciful king. But here is something infinitely worse: a soul perishing in sin, and yet rejecting the mercy of God and the helping hand of Christ that would save it. Though Abigail did not think herself worthy to be David's wife, she thought David worthy of her — and so she humbly accepted his offer and made haste to go with his servants. That is the right frame of heart: to lie low in the sense of your own unworthiness, and yet to believe; to renounce all claim to worthiness in yourself, and yet not therefore renounce all hope of mercy — but rather to run all the more quickly to Christ, who is wooing you. All the pride and rudeness lies in making Christ wait — He who has already sent His

messengers to invite poor sinners and tell them all things are ready. But perhaps you will still say that it is not pride keeping you back — you simply cannot believe God would ever receive someone like you. That does little to improve your case. Either you are holding on to some lust you will not give up in order to receive the promise — in which case you are a notorious hypocrite who, under all this outcry over your sins, is secretly still trading with hell. Or, if that is not the case, you reveal even more pride in that you dare to hold out against the many plain and clear promises of the Gospel, with nothing to oppose them but your own stubborn refusal to believe. God bids the wicked forsake his ways and return to Him, promising abundant pardon — but you say you cannot believe this applies to you. Now who is speaking the truth? One of you two must be the liar. Either you must take the shame on yourself for what you have said against God and His promise — which is your best option — or you must proudly, even blasphemously, make God out to be a liar, which is what every unbeliever does (1 John 5:10). In fact, you make Him out to be false to His oath — for God, in order to give poor sinners all the more assurance as they flee to Christ (who is that hope set before them), has sworn with an oath that they would have strong consolation (Hebrews 6:17-18). As Tertullian wrote: O happy we, for whose sake God puts Himself under an oath! But O miserable we, who will not believe God — not even when He swears!

Second, once the soul has crossed the great gulf and entered a state of peace and life by embracing Christ, Satan still uses this subtle form of pride to disturb the Christian's daily walk of duty and obedience, robbing him of peace and comfort. Oh, how cheerlessly -- even joylessly -- many precious souls pass their days! If

you ask what causes it, you will find that all their joy drains out through the cracks of their imperfect duties and weak graces. They cannot pray the way they want to, or walk with the steadiness and consistency they desire. They see how far short they fall of the holy standard in Scripture and the example set by others who are more mature in grace. And although this does not make them throw away the promises entirely or give up all hope in Christ, it breeds many anxious fears and suspicions. It makes them sit at the feast Christ has prepared without knowing whether they are allowed to eat. In short, it robs them of their joy and robs Christ of the glory He should receive from their rejoicing in Him. I am not saying, Christian, that you should not mourn for the flaws you find in your graces and duties. In fact, you could not prove yourself sincere if you did not. A gracious heart, seeing how far its present renewed condition falls short of humanity's original holiness at creation, cannot help but weep and mourn -- just as the Jews wept when they saw the second temple. Yet, Christian, even while the tears are in your eyes over your imperfect graces (for a soul rises still wearing its grave clothes), you should rejoice -- even triumph -- over all these failings by faith in Christ, in whom you are complete (Colossians 1:10), even while imperfect in yourself. Christ's presence in the second temple -- which the first temple did not have -- made it more glorious than the first, even though it looked inferior by comparison (Haggai 2:9). How much more does His presence in the spiritual temple of a gracious heart, crediting His righteousness to cover all its flaws, make the soul more glorious than humanity was at the beginning! This is a garment for which, as Christ says of the lily, we neither spin nor labor. Yet Adam in all his created splendor was not so clothed as the weakest believer is when

wearing this on his soul. Now, Christian, think carefully about what you are doing when you sit languishing under the awareness of your own weaknesses and refuse to rejoice in Christ or live comfortably in the sweet privileges that are yours through your union with Him. Are you not revealing some of this spiritual pride at work in you? Oh, if you could pray without wandering, walk without stumbling, believe without wavering -- then you could rejoice and live cheerfully! It seems, soul, that you are waiting to bring the basis of your comfort with you rather than receiving it purely from Christ. How much better it would be if you would say with David: "Though my house -- my heart -- is not all it should be before God, yet He has made with me a covenant ordered in all things and sure. This is all my desire and all my confidence. Christ I set against all my sins. Christ I set against all my lack. He is my all in all, and more than all." Indeed, all those complaints about our shortcomings and weaknesses -- insofar as they pull our hearts away from relying cheerfully on Christ -- are really just the language of pride, longing for the covenant of works. Oh, it is hard to forget our mother tongue, which comes so naturally to us! Work hard, then, to recognize this tendency and understand how offensive it is to the Spirit of Christ. What would a husband say if his wife, instead of expressing her love and delight in him, did nothing day and night but weep and cry, thinking about her former husband who had died? The law (as a covenant) and Christ are compared to two husbands in Romans 7:4. "You have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another -- to Him who was raised from the dead." Now your sorrow over the shortcomings of your own righteousness, when it keeps you from rejoicing in Christ, is really just pining after your former husband.

Christ cannot help but take this personally -- that you are not as content to rest in His embrace and receive your happiness from Him as you were with your old husband, the law.

Second, there is a self-congratulating pride -- when the heart is secretly puffed up, promising itself acceptance before God for some duty or act of obedience it has performed. It fails, even when most helped by grace, to look beyond its own efforts and place the full weight of its expectation on Christ alone. Every such sideways glance of the soul is adulterous -- even idolatrous. If your heart, Christian, is ever secretly enticed (as Job speaks of another kind of idolatry), or if your mouth kisses your hand -- that is, if you become so fond of your own duties or righteousness that you give them this inward worship of your confidence and trust -- this is a great sin indeed. For in doing this, you deny the God who is above, who has directed your faith to another object. You are trying to open heaven's gate with the old key, when God has put on a new lock. Do you not acknowledge that your first entrance into your justified state was purely by His grace? You were justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ (Romans 3:24). And to whom are you indebted now that you are reconciled, for your continued acceptance in every duty or holy action? To your duty? Your obedience? Yourself? Or Christ? The same apostle will tell you in Romans 5:2: "Through Him we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand." If Christ did not lead you in -- along with everything you do -- you would certainly find the door shut on you. There is no more room for earning merit now that you are in grace than there was when you were without it. As Romans 1:17 says: "The righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, for the just shall live by faith." We are not only made alive by

Christ but we continue to live by Christ. Faith continually draws in pardoning, helping, and comforting mercy from Him, the way our lungs continually draw in air. The road to heaven is paved with grace and mercy from beginning to end.

Be warned above all to watch against this tactic of Satan — do not rest in your own righteousness. You are standing under a collapsing wall. The very cracks you see in your graces and duties, even at your best, are warning you to step back, lest it fall on your head. The greatest step toward heaven is out of your own front door, over your own threshold. Many men have lost their lives in a house fire because they could not let go of their possessions — they went back into the flames to save their things and perished with them. Even more have lost their souls by trying to carry some of their own works with them to heaven. Such a good work or duty — while they, like slow Lot, were reluctant to leave it in terms of their confidence — has been the ruin of them. O friends, come out, come out! Leave what is yours in the fire. Flee to Christ empty-handed — He has clothing far better than your own. Come to Christ poor, and He has gold — not like yours, which melts and proves impure under fire, but the kind that comes through the fiery trial of God's righteous judgment as pure and full weight. You cannot be found in two places at once. Choose: will you be found in your own righteousness or in Christ's? Those who have had far more to show than you have thrown everything away and gone to Christ as beggars. Read Paul's inventory in Philippians 3 — what he had, what he did — and yet all of it is waste and loss. Give him Christ, and let anyone else take the rest who wants it. So Job — as holy a man as ever walked the earth, God Himself being witness — yet says: "Though I were perfect, I would not acknowledge it in my own soul; I would

despise my life' (Job 9:20-21). He had already acknowledged his imperfection. Now he makes a hypothetical — one which is in fact impossible: 'If I were perfect, I would not know it about my own soul; I would not entertain thoughts that would inflate me into such confidence in my holiness as to make it my case before God.' It is like our common saying about a person: 'He has excellent ability, but he knows it' — meaning he is proud of it. Beware of 'knowing your own grace' in that sense. You cannot strike a worse blow against both your grace and your comfort than by taking pride in it.

### SECTION 3.

First, your grace cannot thrive as long as you rest in it. A legal spirit is no friend to grace — it is, in fact, grace's bitter enemy, as the Pharisees in Christ's time made plain. Grace does not come by the law, but by Christ. You may stand beside the law as long as you like and never receive a drop of life from it — neither fresh life for your soul nor further growth in the grace you already have. If you want growth, you must place yourself under Christ's wings by faith. From His Spirit alone in the Gospel comes the warm and natural heat that hatches the soul into the life of holiness and increases what you already have. And you cannot come under Christ's wings until you come out from under the shadow of the other — by renouncing all expectation from your own works and services. You know Reuben's curse: that he would not excel, because he had gone up to his father's bed. While other tribes increased, he stagnated. By trusting in your own works you do worse to Christ. Will you then excel in grace? Perhaps some of you have been professing Christians for many years, yet have seen little

growth in love to God, humility, heavenly-mindedness, or mortification of sin. It is worth digging to see what lies at the root of your profession — whether a legal principle has not been governing you more than you realize. Have you been trying to win everything with God through your duties and services, and laying too much of your hope on your own activity? Alas — that is dead soil, which must be dug out, and Gospel principles planted in its place. Try this approach and see whether the spring of your grace does not begin to come on quickly. David explains how he came to stand and flourish while others who were rich and powerful suddenly withered: 'Behold, the man who would not make God his refuge, but trusted in the abundance of his riches... But as for me, I am like a green olive tree in the house of God; I trust in the lovingkindness of God forever and ever' (Psalm 52:7-8). While others trust in the riches of their own righteousness and services, and do not make Christ their strength — you renounce all that and trust in the mercy of God in Christ, and you will be like a green olive tree when they fade and wither.

Second, Christian — you will not flourish in true comfort as long as you rest in any inner work of grace and fail to stand clear of your own efforts and righteousness. Gospel comfort springs from a Gospel root, which is Christ: 'We are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh' (Philippians 3:3). A soul that rests on any holiness within itself has grafted its comfort onto itself, not onto Christ. It nurses from its own breast, not from Christ's — and so makes Christ a dry nurse. What comfort can grow from that barren source? The Spirit is our Comforter as well as our Teacher and Counselor. Now just as the Spirit, when He teaches, brings no new

or strange truth but takes from Christ's own — what He finds in the Word — so when He comforts, He takes from Christ's own: Christ's righteousness, not ours. Christ is the substance and foundation of the Spirit's comfort. Every restorative in the Christian life is simply Christ distilled and made available in the various promises: His acting, not ours; His suffering, not ours; His holiness, not ours. The Spirit does not say, 'Soul, rejoice — you are holy.' He says, 'Soul, triumph — Christ is righteous, and He is the Lord your righteousness.' Not, 'Soul, you prayed so beautifully — do not fear,' but rather, 'You have an Advocate with the Father, Christ the righteous.' Therefore the first step toward receiving comfort from the Spirit is to dismiss every comfort we have fashioned for ourselves. Just as in learning from the Spirit — the person who will be taught by Him must first become a fool (meaning, not lean at all on his own understanding) — so the person who would be comforted must first be emptied of every self-made support and must not lean on his own manufactured comfort. A physician first requires his patient to set aside every other remedy he has been using. He asks what medicines the other doctors prescribed, removes their bandages, throws out their prescriptions, and begins the treatment fresh. So the Spirit, when He comes to comfort a poor soul, first persuades that soul to dismiss all its former physicians. 'I have been in the hands of this duty and this course of obedience,' says the soul, 'and have been sure each time that now I would be well — now I will have comfort, now that I am doing this duty and pursuing this holy course.' 'Well,' says the Spirit, 'if you will have Me do anything for you, all of that must be dismissed as a source of confidence.' Now — and only now — is the soul a fit recipient for the Spirit's comfort. Therefore, friends, as you love your inward peace,

take careful notice of what vessel you draw your comfort from. Grace is limited, and so it cannot supply much. It leaks, and so it cannot hold long. You are drinking from a cracked cup if you draw your comfort from your own grace. It is mixed, and therefore weak. Weak grace cannot give strong comfort — and strong comfort is exactly what you need, especially in times of heavy conflict. And finally, the comfort you draw from your own grace is stolen. You do not come by it honestly, and stolen comforts will never prosper. What folly it is for the child to steal what he could receive freely and more fully from his Father, who gives generously and without shaming? That comfort you would pry out of your own righteousness and duties — behold, it is laid up for you in Christ, from whose fullness you may carry away as much as your faith can hold, and no one will stop you. In fact, the more you draw on Christ for your comfort, the more warmly welcome you are. We are told to open our mouths wide, and He will fill them.

## CHAPTER 11. THE THIRD KIND OF SPIRITUAL PRIDE — PRIDE OF PRIVILEGES



**T**he third kind of spiritual pride is pride of privileges — with which these wicked spirits labor to inflate the Christian.

Three may be named:

First, when God calls a person to some prominent position or uses him to do some special work of service.

Second, when God honors a saint to suffer for His truth or cause.

Third, when God pours out more than ordinary manifestations of His love and fills the soul with joy and comfort. These are privileges not equally distributed to all, and wherever they are present, Satan takes the advantage of attacking such a person with pride.

### SECTION 1.

First, when God calls a person to a prominent position or uses him to do some special service. Indeed, it takes a great measure of grace to keep the heart low when a person stands high. The apostle, speaking of the qualifications of a minister of the Gospel (1

Timothy 3:6), says he must not be a new convert, lest he be lifted up with pride and fall into the condemnation the devil fell into. As if he said: this calling is honorable. If the person is not well ballasted with humility, even a small gust from Satan will tip him into this sin. The seventy whom Christ first sent out to preach the Gospel prevailed so miraculously over Satan that even as they trampled on the serpent's head, he turned and nearly stung them with pride. Our Savior saw this when they returned in triumph reporting the great miracles they had worked. So He redirected their glory before it could degenerate into vainglory, telling them not to rejoice that demons were subject to them, but rather that their names were written in heaven. As if He said: the honor of your calling and the success of your ministry will not save you. Some will be cast away who will say on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not cast out demons in Your name?' Do not value yourselves by that. Rather, secure evidence to your souls that you are among My elect — that will serve you far better on the great day than any of this.

## SECTION 2.

The second privilege is when God honors a person to suffer for His truth. This is a great privilege. 'It has been granted to you not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake' (Philippians 1:29). God does not usually give worthless gifts to His saints — there is a preciousness in suffering that a worldly eye cannot see. Faith, you will say, is a great gift. But perseverance is greater — without it, faith would be of little worth. And perseverance through suffering is above both in honor. This is what led John Careless, the English martyr — who, though he did not die at the stake, died in prison for Christ — to write: 'Such an honor as this, even angels

are not permitted to have. Therefore, God forgive me my unthankfulness.' When Satan cannot frighten a soul away from prison, he will try to inflate him in prison. When he cannot make him feel sorry for himself, he will flatter him until he begins to take pride in himself. Affliction from God exposes us to impatience; honor from God exposes us to pride. Therefore, Christians, labor to fortify yourselves against this temptation. You do not know how soon you may be called to suffering — such clouds often do not take long to gather. To keep your heart humble when you are honored to suffer for the truth, consider:

First, though you may not deserve these sufferings at human hands — and you can rightly take comfort in your innocence, for you are not suffering as an evildoer — yet you cannot deny that it is a just affliction from God in view of the sin still in you. That thought should keep you humble. The same suffering may be martyrdom in relation to humanity and yet a fatherly chastening for sin in relation to God. No one suffered without sin except Christ, and therefore no one may glory in sufferings except through Him. 'Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Galatians 6:14). This is what kept Mr. Bradford humble in his sufferings for the truth. None rejoiced in them more or thanked God for them more freely — yet none were more humble under them than he was. And what kept him in that humble frame? Read his godly letters, and in nearly all of them you will find how he mourned over his own sins and the sins of the Protestants during the reign of King Edward. 'It was time,' he said, 'for God to put His rod into the hands of the papists — we had grown so proud, so formal, so fruitless; we had come to loathe and despise the means of

grace even while we enjoyed the freedom to use them. And so God has brought the wheel of persecution upon us.' He looked at the honor to make him thankful, and at his sin to keep him humble.

Second, consider who is holding you up and carrying you through your sufferings for Christ. Is it your grace or His that is sufficient for such a task? Is it your own spirit or Christ's by which you speak when called to bear witness to His truth? How is it that you are a sufferer and not a persecutor — a confessor and not a denier, or even a betrayer of Christ and His Gospel? You owe that entirely to God. He is not in your debt because you are willing to give up your estate, your reputation, or your life for His sake. If you had a thousand lives, you would owe them all to Him. But you are deeply indebted to God that He calls for them in this way — in a way that carries such honor and reward with it. He could have let you live in your lusts and at last lose everything for them. Many die on the gallows as martyrs in the devil's cause, for their crimes. Or He could withdraw His grace and leave you to your own cowardice and unbelief — and then you would quickly show your true colors. The boldest champions for Christ have been shown how weak they are the moment Christ steps aside. Some who gave great testimony of their faith and resolution in Christ's cause — even coming so close to death as to be bound to the stake with the fire being lit — have had their hearts fail them at that moment. Mr. Benbridge, in our English martyrology, pushed the faggots away and cried out: 'I recant! I recant!' Yet within a week after that painful failure, this same man — reinforced in his faith and given power from above — was able to die at the stake with cheerfulness. 'He who once overcame death for us is always overcoming death in us.' And who should be your song of praise but the One who is your strength?

Do not applaud yourself — bless Him. It is one of God's names: He is called the glory of His people's strength (Psalm 89:17). The more you glory in God who gives you strength to suffer for Him, the less you will boast of yourself. A thankful heart and a proud heart cannot live in the same chest.

Third, consider what a foul stain pride casts on all your sufferings. Where it is not mourned over and resisted, it changes the whole character of the suffering. The old saying is that it is not the punishment but the cause that makes a martyr. We may safely add: it is not merely the cause, but the sincere frame of heart in suffering for a good cause, that makes a person a martyr in God's sight. Though you were to give your body to be burned, if you lack the humble heart of one suffering for Christ, you have simply become a merchant trading for your own benefit. You are only denying one version of self in order to set up another — risking estate and life to gain applause, and perhaps raise a monument to your honor in people's opinions. You are doing nothing more than a soldier who plunges into mortal danger for the sake of a reputation for bravery. Only you are displaying your pride under a religious disguise — which does not help it, but makes it worse. If you would be in your sufferings a sacrifice acceptable to God, you must not only be ready to offer your life for His truth, but sacrifice your pride as well. Otherwise you may tumble from one fire into another — suffering here from people as an apparent champion for the Gospel, and in another world suffering from God for robbing Him of His glory in your sufferings.

### SECTION 3.

The third privilege is when God pours out more than ordinary manifestations of His love. At those times, the Christian is in danger of having his heart secretly lifted up in pride. The genuine and natural effect that such revelations of divine love have on a gracious soul is to humble it. The sight of mercy increases the sense of sin, and that sense of sin dissolves the soul gently into sorrow, as we see in Mary Magdalene. A heart that was perhaps hard and frozen in the shade will soften and thaw in the sunshine of love — and in that warmth, all pride is hidden from the person's own eye. 'Then,' says God in Ezekiel 36:31, 'you will remember your ways and your deeds that were not good, and you will loathe yourselves in your own sight.' And when does this happen? When God saves them from all their uncleannesses, as the context makes clear (verse 25). Yet despite this, such dregs of corruption remain unpurged even in the best of believers that Satan finds it quite possible to turn the manifestations of God's love into an occasion for pride in the Christian. And God lets us see how prone we are to this sin by how briefly He stays when He comes with any greater revelations of His love. The Comforter does abide forever in the believer's heart — but His joys come and go quickly. They are like a special feast God prepares for the believer, but the table is soon cleared. Why? Because we cannot handle such food as our daily diet. A brief glimpse of heaven, a vision of love now and then on the mountaintop of a worship service or an affliction, refreshes the spirits of downcast Christians. But if they were allowed to build their homes there and live under the constant shine of such manifestations, they would quickly forget themselves and begin to think they were lords of their own comfort. If the holy apostle Paul was in danger of falling into the disorder of pride from his brief rapture

into the third heaven — so much so that God found it necessary to let his blood with a thorn in the flesh — how much more would our blood grow too hot, and we too proud and self-indulgent, if we were to feed long on such rich spiritual food? Therefore, Christian, if there is ever a time to be on guard, it is when comforts abound and God holds you most tenderly in the arms of His love, when His face shines with the clearest manifestations of grace — lest the sin of pride, like a snuffer on a candle, extinguish your joy. To guard against this, do the following. First, do not measure your grace by your comfort, or you will be led into the false belief that your grace is strong simply because your comforts are strong. Satan will eagerly encourage such thinking, because it is a perfect tool to lift you up with pride and slacken your diligence in duty going forward. Such revelations do bear witness to the reality of your grace — but not to its degree or measure. The weak child is often more in the parent's lap than the strong one. Second, do not spend your time applauding yourself in your present comfort, but rather use it for the glory of God. 'Arise and eat,' the angel said to the prophet, 'because the journey is too great for you.' The manifestations of God's love are meant to equip us for our work. There is a difference between simply rejoicing in the light of your comfort and going forth in the power of the Spirit — refreshed like a strong man by wine — to run your course of duty and obedience with greater strength and eagerness. A person shows pride when he spends his time counting his money merely to see how rich he is. But he shows wisdom when he puts his money to work and trades with it. The person who boasts about his comforts will lose what he has. The one who invests his comforts in a fuller life of duty will add to what he already has. Third, remember that you depend on God for

the continuance of your comfort. The smiles you received yesterday cannot make you joyful today, any more than the bread you ate then can make you strong now without more food. You need new revelations for new comfort. Let God hide His face, and you will quickly lose the sight and forget the taste of what you just experienced. It is beyond our skill or power to preserve those impressions of joy and those comforting senses of God's favor that we sometimes experience. As God's presence brings them, so when He departs He carries them away with Him — as the setting sun takes the day. We would laugh at someone who, when the sun shone through his window, tried to imprison the sunbeams by shutting the window. But do you not show the same foolishness when you think that because you have comfort now, you will never again be in spiritual darkness? The believer's comfort is like Israel's manna: it is not like ordinary bread that you buy at market and lock in your cupboard, to go to whenever you wish. No — it is rained down from heaven, as the manna was. God provided for Israel in that way specifically to humble them (Deuteronomy 8:16): 'He fed you in the wilderness with manna which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you.' It was not the simplicity of the food that humbled them — manna was delicious, called 'angels' food' in Psalm 78:25, food fit even for angels. What humbled them was the manner of its delivery: hand to mouth, day by day, their portion and no more. God kept the key to their storehouse, and they depended entirely on His immediate provision. In the same way, God distributes our spiritual comforts — to humble us. This concludes our treatment of this second kind of spiritual wickedness.

I had intended to address some other kinds as well — such as hypocrisy, unbelief, and formality — but since the subject is broad, what I have already said may be seen as a digression, and one that has already gone on long enough.

I will therefore close this section on spiritual wickedness with a word to those who are still in an unconverted and unsanctified state — to stir them up by what I have said about Satan's assaulting believers with such temptations. Consider carefully that Satan's chief design against you also lies in these very same sins. These are the wickednesses he works hardest to draw you into above all others. If you ultimately perish, it will be at the hands of these sins. A frightened conscience, a darkened mind, and a deadened, unrepentant heart — these will be your undoing if you are finally lost. Other sins, Satan knows, are stepping stones toward these — and so he draws you into them as a way of leading you into these deeper ones. Outward sins prepare the way for spiritual sins in two ways. First, they naturally condition the sinner toward them. Sin has a nature that blinds the mind, numbs the conscience, and hardens the heart, as is implied in Hebrews 3:13: 'Lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.' Just as foot traffic pounds a road hard over time, so does walking in gross fleshly sins harden the heart. These sins deaden the conscience until, in time, the sinner loses all feeling — carrying his desires in his heart the way the deranged carry pins stuck in their own flesh, without pain or remorse. Second, they provoke God, as a judicial act, to give sinners over to these spiritual sins: 'Give them hardness of heart — Your curse is upon them' (Lamentations 3:65, marginal reading). And when the devil has brought sinners to this point, he has them under lock and key. These are the harbingers of damnation. If God

leaves your heart hard and unbroken, it is a grim sign that He does not intend to sow the seed of grace there. O sinners, pray — as Christ requested for Peter — that none of these things may come upon you. And to help ensure they do not, take heed that you do not reject the offers He makes to soften you. God's hardening of a heart is the consequence of, and punishment for, our own hardening of our hearts. What Prosper says is entirely true: a person may lose earthly things against his will, but not spiritual things — God will harden no one, damn no one, against their will.

CHAPTER 12. SHOWING WHAT THE  
PRIZE IS WHICH BELIEVERS  
WRESTLE FOR AGAINST  
PRINCIPALITIES, POWERS, AND  
SPIRITUAL WICKEDNESS IN HIGH  
PLACES



SECTION 1.

**T**hese words contain the last part of the description of our great enemy. They involve some ambiguity, since only the adjective is expressed in the original Greek — the word meaning 'in the heavenlies.' Because the phrase is incomplete on its own, our translators supplied 'in high places' or 'in heavenly places,' as if the apostle intended to describe the positional advantage our enemy has over us by being above us. Most interpreters follow this reading. However, some ancient and modern scholars read the phrase differently — not as 'in heavenly places' but as 'concerning heavenly things.' On this reading, the apostle is identifying not the location but the prize for which we wrestle against principalities and powers: heavenly things themselves. Oecumenius says the phrase is equivalent to the apostle saying:

'We wrestle not for small and trivial things, but truly for heaven itself and our adoption as sons.' Chrysostom takes the same view: 'in heavenly things, that is, for the heavenly things of God.' Musculus and other modern writers follow him in this. The reasons given for this interpretation carry real weight.

First, the word, wherever it appears without further qualification, refers to things rather than places — as in Hebrews 8:5. One scholar observes that the word is used nearly twenty times in the New Testament, and never for any aerial location, but always for things that are truly heavenly and spiritual. The word itself properly means 'supercelestial' — and if applied to a place, it would refer to somewhere the devil has never been since his fall.

Additionally, there is little reason to make Satan seem more formidable merely by placing him above us spatially. Height is an advantage for human soldiers — gaining the high ground against an enemy matters in physical combat — but it means nothing to spirits. But if we take the phrase as referring to heavenly things, it adds real weight to the rest of the description. We wrestle against principalities and powers and spiritual wickedness — and against all of these, not for the trivial things the earth offers, which hardly matter whether we keep them or lose them, but for what heaven holds out. Such an enemy and such a prize make it a matter of the greatest urgency to understand how to conduct this battle well. With the phrase understood this way, the teaching is as follows.

## SECTION 2.

The chief prize for which we wrestle against Satan is heavenly. Put another way: Satan's main design is to plunder the Christian of everything heavenly. Everything the Christian has or desires as a Christian is heavenly. The world is external to both his being and his happiness — it is a stranger to him, and plays no part in his deepest joy or grief. You can heap all the world's riches and honors on a person, and it will not make him a Christian. Heap them on a Christian, and it will not make him a better one. Likewise, take everything away from him — strip him bare — and he is still a Christian, and may even be a better one. Erasmus made a striking remark — if he meant it sincerely, and his wit did not outrun his conscience — that he desired wealth and honor no more than a weak horse desires a heavy pack-bag. I think every Christian in a right spiritual frame would agree with him. Satan would do the believer little real harm if he directed his forces only or mainly against outward possessions. The Christian does not value himself by them — attacking them is like trying to hurt someone by beating the clothes he has already taken off. To the degree that the Spirit of grace governs a believer's heart, he has already put off the world in terms of desire and delight. So those blows are barely felt. It is the Christian's heavenly treasures that Satan is really waiting to plunder.

### SECTION 3.

First, the Christian's nature is heavenly — born from above. As Christ is the Lord from heaven, all His offspring are heavenly and holy. Satan's design is to degrade and defile this. The precious life of the new creature is what he hunts for. Satan has lost the beauty of holiness that once shone so gloriously on his angelic nature —

and now, like a true apostate, he works to destroy in the Christian what he has lost himself. The seeds of this war are sown in the Christian's very nature. You are holy — and that Satan cannot endure. Julius Caesar, ordering his soldiers to fight Roman citizens, reportedly told them to aim for their faces, saying those citizens loved their looks, and that marring their faces would mar everything. The soul is the face on which God's image is stamped. Holiness is the beauty of that face — what makes us truly like God. Satan knows that God loves this, and that the believer prizes it above everything else. So Satan labors to wound and disfigure it, that he might at once glory in the Christian's shame and pour contempt on God by breaking His image. Is it not worth giving everything in battle against this enemy — one who would rob us of what makes us like God Himself? Have you forgotten the terrible terms of peace that Nahash offered the men of Jabesh-gilead? There would be no peace unless they would let him gouge out their right eyes as a disgrace upon all Israel. Read how that offer was received in 1 Samuel 11:6. A face that has lost an eye is not as disfigured as a soul that has lost its holiness. And no peace is to be expected from Satan except on terms that strip us of this. At the thought of this, the Spirit of the Lord should come upon the Christian, and his anger should be kindled far more fiercely against this cursed spirit than the anger of Saul and the men of Israel was against Nahash.

Second, the Christian's trade is heavenly. The goods he deals in come from that heavenly country, as Philippians 3:20 says: 'Our citizenship is in heaven.' Every person's way of life matches his calling. The one whose work is in the earth thinks about earthly things; the one whose work is heavenly stays close to that. Every person attends to his own business, as the apostle tells us. You

may sometimes find a tradesman away from his shop, but he is like a fish out of water — never in his element until he is back at his work. So when the Christian is absorbed in worldly affairs, or the worldly person is dabbling in heavenly matters, both are out of their proper place — off-balance until they return to what they are made for. This heavenly trade is what Satan works hardest to shut down. If the Christian could carry on free trade with heaven for a few years without interference, he would quickly grow rich — too rich, in fact, for this earth. But between the losses he sustains at the hands of this pirate Satan, and the betrayal he suffers from treacherous instincts within his own heart that secretly cooperate with the robber, he is kept poor in this life, and much of his gain is lost. The Christian's heavenly trade operates both privately and openly — and in neither sphere is he free from Satan, who is at his heels in both.

The first is his private trade — conducted in secret between God and his own soul. The Christian carries on a hidden commerce: he travels to heaven and back in his thoughts, richly loaded with heavenly meditations, before the world even knows where he has been. Every creature he sees becomes a text from which his heart draws some spiritual lesson. Every sermon he hears cuts out work for him to take up and develop when he gets alone. Every providence acts like wind in his sails, moving his heart toward some heavenly affection fitted to the moment. At times he is lifted up with joy in the contemplation of God's mercy; at other times he is melted into godly sorrow by the weight of his sins. Sometimes he exalts God in praise; sometimes he humbles himself before God for his own wretchedness. At one moment he is at the breast of the covenant, drawing out the consolations of the promises; at another

he is working his heart into a holy reverence for God's warnings. In this way the Christian walks in a high and elevated place, while the worldling below is licking the dust. One of these heavenly pearls that the Christian trades for is worth more than anything the worldling gains through all his sweat and labor in a lifetime. The Christian's feet stand where other men's heads are. He treads on the moon and is clothed with the sun. He looks down on earthly people — as one from a hilltop looks down on those living in some bog or marsh — and sees them buried in a fog of worldly pleasures and profits, while he breathes pure heavenly air. Yet he is not so high as to be free from all storms and tempests. He still feels many painful blasts from sin and Satan. What else explains those grieving complaints and groans that come from God's children — that their hearts are so dead and dull, their thoughts so wandering and unfixed in prayer, and sometimes so wicked and filthy that they scarcely dare name what passes through their minds for fear of staining their own lips and offending others? Surely the Christian finds in his heart a will and desire to meditate, pray, hear God's Word, and live in a different way than this — does he not? Yes, I would confidently vouch for it. But as long as there is a devil to tempt us, and we remain within his reach, this will be our condition to some degree. As fast as we work to clear the spring of our hearts, he will work to muddy or block it again. We have two things to do at once: perform our duty and watch the enemy who opposes us — trowel in one hand and sword in the other. Those who are trying to build must work hard indeed, when others are continually pulling down what they are laboring to raise up.

The second part of the Christian's trade — the part that operates publicly — is also heavenly. Look at a Christian in his relationships, his work, his neighborhood: he is a heavenly trader in all of it. The great business of his life is to be doing or receiving some spiritual good. Company that will neither give nor receive such good is not for him. What would a merchant do in a place where there is no buying or selling? Every person naturally seeks to place himself where trade is most active and his gains will be greatest. The Christian, where he has the choice, chooses those closest to him — spouse, servants, household — who will support his heavenly trade, not hinder it. He seeks out the most godly people as his dearest friends. If there is a believer in the town where he lives, he will find that person and make him his companion. In all his dealings with these and with everyone else, his chief work is for heaven — the heavenly principle within him inclines him to it. This puts hell on high alert. What — not content to go to heaven himself, but by his holy example, gracious words, wise counsel, and timely correction, will he also be drawing others in and working to carry them along with him? This brings the lion furiously out of his den. Those who live this way can be sure of finding the devil in their path to oppose them. 'I wanted to come to you,' says Paul, 'but Satan hindered me.' Whoever commits himself openly to God, and makes it plain by the pattern of his life that he is trading for God's kingdom, will have enemies enough — if the devil can help it.

Third, the Christian's hopes are all heavenly — he sets his lot on nothing the world has to offer. He would consider himself the most miserable of all people if this present life were the best his faith could produce. No — heaven and eternal life are what he expects. Though he may be so poor that he cannot leave a penny in

his will, he considers himself a greater heir than if he were the child of the greatest king on earth. He sees this inheritance by faith and can rejoice in the hope of the glory it will bring him. The hollow and deceptive glory of the powerful people of this world does not move him to envy their empty pomp. Even sitting on a dunghill himself, he can forget his own present sorrows to pity them in all their splendor — knowing that in a short time, the cross will be off his back and the crowns off their heads at the same moment. Their portion will be spent when he is just beginning to receive all of his. These truths fill him with such joy that he cannot acknowledge himself miserable, even when others think he is — and even when the devil tells him so. This is what torments the very soul of the devil: to see the Christian sailing toward heaven, filled with sweet hope of the joyful welcome awaiting him there. So Satan raises whatever storms and tempests he can, either to prevent the Christian from reaching that blessed port — which Satan most desires and does not completely give up hope of — or at least to make it a hard winter voyage, like Paul's journey in which so much was lost. And very often Satan succeeds to a degree: by his violent and relentless temptations battering the Christian, he causes him to throw overboard much precious cargo of joy and comfort. Sometimes, through the crushing pressure of temptation, he even brings the soul to consider abandoning the ship altogether, as all hope of being saved appears for a time to be gone. This is what we wrestle with devils for. We now turn to application.

#### SECTION 4.

Application 1. This is a word of rebuke for four kinds of people.

First, it rebukes those who are so far from wrestling against Satan for this heavenly prize that they actively resist the offer of it. Instead of taking heaven by force, they force it away. How long has the Lord been crying in our streets, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'? How long have the offers of the Gospel rung in our ears? And yet to this day, many devil-deluded souls drive furiously toward hell and will not be persuaded to turn back. They refuse to be called children of God and choose the devil's bondage over the glorious freedom Christ would give them, esteeming the fleeting pleasures of sin as greater treasure than the riches of heaven. There is a story told of Cato — Caesar's bitter enemy — that when he saw Caesar prevailing, rather than fall into his hands and depend on his mercy, he took his own life. On hearing of it, Caesar broke out passionately: 'O Cato, why did you deny me the honor of saving your life?' And do not many live as though they begrudged Christ the honor of saving their souls? What other explanation can you give for sinners rejecting His grace? Are not heaven and happiness desirable things — to be preferred above sin and misery? Why then do you not embrace them? Or are they worse in your eyes because they come to you through the blood of Christ? How bitterly must Christ take it to be treated this way when He comes on such a gracious mission? May He not say to you what He once said to those sent to arrest Him: 'Have you come out against me as you would against a thief, with swords and clubs?' If He is a thief, it is only in this sense: He would steal your sins from you and leave heaven in their place. For the love of God, think about what you are doing. It is eternal life you are pushing away — and in doing so, you judge yourself unworthy of it, as Acts 13:46 says.

Second, it rebukes those who serve as Satan's instruments to rob souls of what is heavenly. Among thieves there are those called 'setters' — scouts who identify where a valuable target can be found. Once they know that someone is traveling with valuables, they send others to do the actual robbery while staying out of sight themselves. The devil is the master setter. He watches the Christian — how he walks, what places and company he frequents, what grace or heavenly treasure he carries in his heart. Once he has done this reconnaissance, he has ready instruments to carry out his plan. This is how he studied Job's remarkable graces and plotted how best to rob him of his heavenly treasure — and who better to use than Job's own wife and friends? He knew their words would be believed. Friends, ask your consciences whether you have not done the devil this kind of service at some point in your life. Perhaps you have a child or servant who once looked heavenward, but your harsh treatment scared them away from it — and now they may be as worldly as you wanted. Or perhaps your spouse, before she knew you, was full of life in the ways of God, but since being transplanted into your cold soil — through your empty talk and fruitless conversation, or at best your worldliness and mere religious form — she has now both declined in her graces and lost her spiritual comfort. What an indictment will be brought against you for this at God's bar? You would answer better for robbing someone of money and jewels than for robbing them of their graces and spiritual joy.

Third, it rebukes the terrible negligence that most people show in pursuing this heavenly prize. Everyone would be glad for their soul to be saved in the end — but where is the man or woman whose vigorous effort actually shows they mean it? What warlike

preparation do they make against Satan, who stands between them and home? Where are their weapons? Where is their skill to use them, their resolve to stand firm, and their conscientious daily practice in using them? This kind of Christian is a rarity — not to be found in every house that hangs out the sign of religious profession. If wishing and wanting could bring them to heaven, perhaps they might get there. But as for this wrestling and fighting, this making religion their serious business — they are as far from these things as they are likely to be from heaven in the end. They are of the mind of the man described by the Latin writer who, lazing in the grass on a summer's day, said: 'If only this were work! If only I could lie here and count it as a day's labor!' Many in the same way melt away their lives in sloth and say in their hearts: 'If only this were the road to heaven!' But they will use no means to equip themselves with the grace needed for such an undertaking. I have read of a great prince in Germany who was invaded by a more powerful enemy, but whose allies flocked to his aid until he had a strong army. He claimed to have no money to pay them — but the truth was he was reluctant to spend it. Some soldiers left in frustration; others did not give their full effort to his cause. He was soon driven from his kingdom, and when his palace was searched, his coffers were found stuffed with treasure. He was ruined the way some sick men die — because they are unwilling to bear the cost of paying the physician. It will add to the misery of damned souls when, in eternity, they have all the time they need to consider what they have lost in losing God — to remember what means, what Gospel offers, what gifts and opportunities they once had toward obtaining eternal life, and yet had no heart to use them.

Fourth, it rebukes those who make a great show and noise in religion — who are eager in their profession, busy with the strictest duties, as if heaven had captured their whole heart — but who, like an eagle at its highest point in the sky, have their eye and their prey on what is down below. There has always been such a generation, and there always will be: people who mix with the saints of God, claiming heaven, whose outward manner is edged and trimmed with heavenly words and duties, while their hearts are lined with hypocrisy. By this they deceive others — but most of all themselves. Such people may be the world's saints, but in Christ's assessment they are devils. 'Have I not chosen twelve? And one of you is a devil.' Of all devils, none is as dangerous as the professing devil — the preaching, praying devil. Be sincere. Religion is as sensitive as the eye — it cannot be trifled with. Remember the judgment that fell on Belshazzar as he drank from the vessels of the sanctuary. Religion and its duties are sacred things, not tools for drinking your lusts out of. God has repeatedly shown Himself in exposing and overthrowing those who have prostituted sacred things to worldly ends. Jezebel fasted and prayed all the better to devour Naboth's vineyard — and was devoured by it. Absalom was as consumed with seizing his father's crown as his brother Amnon had been with his own wickedness. To disguise his treachery, Absalom put on a religious cloak and begged to go pay his vow at Hebron — when he had a very different game in mind. And did he not fall by the hand of his own hypocrisy? Of all people, judgment falls most swiftly on those who silver over worldly or wicked schemes with a veneer of heavenly religion. Such were those described in 2 Peter 2:3, of whom the apostle says, 'Their condemnation has not been idle.' And such were those addressed in Ezekiel

14:7-8, where God says: 'I the Lord will answer him Myself, and I will set My face against that man and will make him a sign and a proverb, and I will cut him off from the midst of My people; and you will know that I am the Lord.'

Application 2. Test yourself: are the things you chiefly pursue heavenly or earthly? Surely, friends, we need not be ignorant of our own soul's condition. If we spent more time examining our thoughts and watching where our hearts most naturally wander, we would soon discover what kind of food our souls crave most. Can you not tell whether heaven or earth is the more satisfying meal to your soul? And if you ask how you can know whether heaven is truly the prize you most desire, I offer this twofold test.

First, is your pursuit consistent? Do you strive for heaven and also for what leads to heaven? Earthly things God is pleased to distribute in portions — everyone gets some, no one gets all. But with heavenly treasure He will not break off pieces and sell them in fragments. If you want heaven, you must have Christ. If you want Christ, you must embrace His service as much as His sacrifice. There is no happiness without holiness. If God were willing to cut away the parts that people find inconvenient, He would have customers enough. Even Balaam liked one end of the package — he wanted to die the death of a righteous man, though he lived like the sorcerer he was. But God will not deal with such petty merchants. The person who is truly for God, and for whom God is fully committed, is the one who comes fully to God's offer and takes the whole of it. Someone aptly compared holiness and happiness to the two sisters Leah and Rachel. Happiness, like Rachel, appears the fairer of the two — even a worldly heart can fall in love with that. But holiness, like Leah, is the elder, and beautiful in her own

right — though in this life she appears at some disadvantage, her eyes reddened with tears of repentance and her face marked by the work of self-denial. But this is the law of that heavenly country: the younger sister may not be given before the elder. We cannot enjoy the lovely Rachel — heaven and happiness — without first embracing tender-eyed Leah, holiness, with all her demanding duties of repentance and mortification. So how do you feel about this arrangement? Are you willing to marry Christ and His grace, and then — serving a hard apprenticeship through temptations of both prosperity and adversity, enduring the heat of the one and the cold of the other — to wait until at last the other is given into your arms?

Second, if heaven and heavenly things are truly the prize you are wrestling for, you will show a heavenly orientation of heart even in earthly things. Wherever you find a Christian, he is on his way to heaven — heaven is at the bottom of his most ordinary actions. Examine your heart in three areas: in the getting, the using, and the keeping of earthly things — whether you do all of this in a heavenly manner.

First, in getting earthly things. If heaven is your chief prize, you will be governed by a heavenly law in how you gather these things. Take a worldly person, and whatever his heart is set on, he will have it — by whatever means necessary. A lie comes easily enough to Gehazi's mouth if it will fill his pockets. Jezebel dares to mock God and murder an innocent man for an acre or two of ground. Absalom will stop at nothing for the sake of power. God's fence is too low to keep a graceless heart within bounds when the prize is in front of him. But a soul with heaven in view is governed by heaven's law. He will not step off heaven's road to pick up a crown

— as David's conduct toward Saul shows. In fact, to do so would be to work against his own greatest purpose, which is the glory of God and the happiness of his own soul in enjoying God. On precisely these terms, the servants of God have refused wealth and worldly greatness when either of those things was at stake. Moses threw away his court advancement and refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter. Abraham refused to be made wealthy by the king of Sodom (Genesis 14:22), to avoid any suspicion of greed and self-seeking. He would not have it said afterward that he had gone to battle to enrich himself with plunder rather than to rescue his kinsmen. Nehemiah refused to collect the tax and tribute to which he was entitled because he knew the people were already impoverished and burdened — and he did it out of fear of the Lord. Do you live by this rule? Would you gather no more wealth or honor than you can obtain with God's blessing and in a way consistent with your hope of heaven?

Second, do you show a heavenly spirit in how you use these things?

First, the believer uses his earthly possessions for a heavenly purpose. Where do you lay up your treasure? Do you spend it on your own indulgence, your recreation, your pleasures — or do you invest it in the lives of Christ's poor members? What do you do with your influence and position — do you use them to strengthen the godly or the wicked? The same question applies to all your other earthly resources. A gracious heart turns everything toward God. When a believer prays for earthly things, he has a heavenly purpose in view. When David prayed for life, it was not merely to go on living, but to live and praise God (Psalm 119:175). When he was driven from his throne by Absalom's rebellion, see what his

longing was in 2 Samuel 15:25: 'The king said to Zadok, "Carry the ark of God back into the city. If I find favor in the eyes of the Lord, He will bring me back and let me see it and His dwelling place.'" Notice — not 'let me see my crown, my palace,' but 'the ark, the house of God.'

Second, a gracious heart pursues earthly things with a holy indifference, saving the full strength and passion of his spirit for the things of heaven. He engages the former as though he were barely engaged at all — his mind and heart are occupied with higher things: how he might please God, grow in grace, and experience deeper communion with Christ through His appointed means. In these things he sets every sail, plies every oar, and strains every part of himself. This is how we find David at full intensity: 'My soul clings to You' (Psalm 63:8). And before the ark we find him dancing with all his might. The worldly heart is the exact opposite: his passion is for the world and his indifference is in the things of God. He prays as if he were not really praying. He sweats in his shop but grows cold and stiff in his private devotions. It is a struggle to drag him to worship or get him to a service. No weather keeps him from the market — rain, wind, or snow, he goes. But if the path to church is a little muddy or the air somewhat cold, that is reason enough for his pew to be empty. When he is at any worldly business, he is as intense as the idol-maker hammering away at his image — who, as the prophet says, works it with the full strength of his arms, even when he is hungry and faint, not stopping to eat or drink (Isaiah 44:12). The worldly person is so consumed with his earthly pursuits that he will deny himself meals at proper times to keep at it. The kitchen waits on the shop. But in the worship of God, a sermon that runs past the hour makes him sick of it and an-

gry at the preacher. Here, the sermon gives way to the kitchen. When it comes to his pleasures and pastimes, he loses track of time entirely — when night comes, he is irritated that it pulls him away. But at any spiritual work, how punishing it all feels! Time seems to crawl. He spends the whole sermon watching the clock and counting the minutes. If people were not so determined to deceive themselves, they could easily tell which way their heart runs by how eagerly or how sluggishly it moves — just as clearly as a rower knows whether he is rowing with the tide or against it.

Third, the Christian uses earthly things with a holy fear, lest the earth steal from heaven and his outward comforts damage his heavenly interests. He eats with fear, works with fear, and rejoices in abundance with fear. Just as Job offered sacrifices for his children out of fear that they might have sinned, the Christian is constantly consecrating his earthly enjoyments through prayer, so that he might be delivered from the snare they present.

Third, the Christian is heavenly in how he holds on to earthly things. The same heavenly law that governed him in getting them governs him in keeping them. Just as he will not claim he will be rich and honored in this world unless God wills it, neither will he claim he will hold what he has. He keeps his possessions only as long as his heavenly Father — who first gave them — allows him to. If God continues them and passes them on to his children, he blesses God. And he desires to bless God equally when He takes them away. Indeed, when God abundantly provides worldly goods for the saints, His chief purpose is to give them a greater opportunity to show their love for Him by giving those things up for His sake. God never intended, when He brought Moses into Pharaoh's court through that remarkable providence, to settle him there in

worldly comfort and grandeur. A worldly heart would have read that providence as God's way of opening the door for Moses to advance himself to the throne — which some say was within reach. But God's purpose was to make Moses's faith and self-denial all the more conspicuously glorious when he threw all of that away — for which he is so honorably remembered among the Lord's faithful in Hebrews 11:24-25. A gracious soul believes he cannot make the most of his earthly interests in any other way than by offering them up for Christ's sake. Though a certain traitor thought Mary's ointment could have been put to better use, no doubt the woman herself was only sorry that she had no more precious ointment to pour on her dear Savior's head. This keeps the Christian always with the sacrificial knife at the throat of his earthly enjoyments, ready to offer them up when God calls. Overboard they go rather than risk a wreck to his faith or a good conscience. He sought them last, and so he will part with them first. Naboth risked the king's anger — which ultimately cost him his life — rather than sell an acre or two of his ancestral land. The Christian will expose everything he has in this world to preserve his hope for the next. When Jacob marched toward Esau, he sent his servants with his flocks ahead and followed behind with his wives. If anything could be saved from his brother's rage, it would be what he loved most. If the Christian can save anything, it will be his soul — his interest in Christ and heaven. And if everything else goes, even then he can say not what Esau said to Jacob — 'I have enough' — but what Jacob said to him: 'I have all, all I want, all I desire,' as David expressed it: 'This is all my salvation and all my desire' (2 Samuel 23:5). Now test yourself: does heaven govern your earthly enjoyments? Would you refuse to keep your honor, your wealth — even

your life itself — if doing so would damage your heavenly nature and hopes? If you could not keep both, which would you choose: a whole skin or a clear conscience? There is a striking answer, if true, that a historian attributes to Henry V. His father, who had seized the crown unlawfully, was dying and called his son to his bedside. 'Fair son,' he said, 'take the crown' — which lay on the pillow beside his head — 'but God knows how I came by it.' To which his son reportedly replied: 'I care not how you came by it. Now that I have it, I will keep it as long as my sword can defend it.' The one who keeps the earth by wrong cannot expect to receive heaven by right.

## CHAPTER 13. AN EXHORTATION TO THE PURSUIT OF HEAVEN AND HEAVENLY THINGS



**A**pplication 3. Since it is heaven and everything heavenly that Satan seeks to keep us from, let this motivate us all the more earnestly to pursue those things. If our enemy came only to plunder us of earthly trifles — if honors, wealth, and what the world offers were enough to satisfy him — a soul with hopes of heaven might reasonably debate whether it was worth fighting to protect such worthless stuff. But Christ and heaven — these are far too precious to surrender on any terms. 'Ask for the kingdom for him as well,' Solomon said to Bathsheba, when she came requesting Abishag for Adonijah. What would the devil leave you that is worth anything if he strips you of these? Yet I confess I have heard of one who wished God would leave him alone and not take him away from what he had here. What a wretched thought — the voice of a pig and not a man, one who would choose to wallow in the filth of his carnal pleasures and wish himself locked up forever in the sty of this earthly life, rather than leave it all to live in heaven's palace and enjoy pleasures no less than what God Himself enjoys with His saints. It would almost be fitting if God gave such people

the face of a swine to match their swinish hearts. But how few would then have the face of a man — for the greater part of the world, all who are worldly and carnal, are of the same mind, just not so brazen as to say aloud what they think. The lives of people speak clearly enough: they say in their hearts, 'It is good to be here.' They would rather build permanent homes on earth than occupy the mansions being prepared for them in heaven. David wrote that the sins of the wicked revealed to his heart that those people had no fear of God before their eyes (Psalm 36:1). And can the worldliness of a greedy heart not reveal to any reasonable person that heaven and its excellencies are nowhere in their thoughts? What a deep silence there is about these things in most people's conversations. Heaven is so foreign to most people that very few are heard asking the way there — or even sincerely asking what they must do to be saved. Most people show no more desire for heaven than the blessed souls now in heaven show for coming back to live on earth. Their heads are full of other plans. Like Israel scattered to gather straw, they are either out in the world scrambling after what they want or busy enjoying what they have already got. So it is more than necessary to offer some reasons to call people away from the world and toward the pursuit of heaven and heavenly things.

First, earthly things are not necessary. Something is truly necessary only when nothing else can take its place. But there is no earthly possession for which a substitute cannot be found — a substitute that can make you better off without it than with it. In heaven there will be light without a sun, a great feast without physical food, glorious robes without clothing — nothing will be lacking, and yet none of the world's glories will be there. And even

while we are here, earthly losses can be compensated. You may suffer bodily weakness and yet be better off than if you had health: 'The inhabitant will not say, "I am sick"; the people who dwell in it will be forgiven their iniquity' (Isaiah 33:24). You may miss worldly honor and yet attain, with those faithful heroes of Hebrews 11, a good testimony through faith — a name far better than any the great ones of the earth can claim. You may be poor in the world and yet rich in grace, and 'godliness with contentment is great gain.' In short: if you give up your temporal life and find eternal life in its place, what have you lost by the exchange? But heaven and heavenly things are such that nothing else can replace them. You have an immortal soul — lose it, and where will you find another? There is only one heaven — miss it, and where will you take up your dwelling but in hell? There is only one Christ who can lead you there — reject Him, and there remains no more sacrifice for sin. O that people would think on these things! Go, sinner, to the world, and see what it can offer you in place of these. Perhaps it will try to satisfy you with its pleasures and delights. What a pitiful exchange for the loss of Christ and heaven! Is that all you get? Does Satan rob you of heaven and happiness and give you only this little flower to smell as you are led to your execution? Will these pleasures quench the fire of hell, or so much as cool those flames you are falling into? Who but someone who has lost their mind would trade Christ and heaven for such toys and empty nothings? While Satan is entertaining your imagination with these rattles and baubles, his hand is in your treasury, robbing you of the one thing that is truly necessary. It is more necessary to be saved than to exist at all. It is better not to exist than to exist in hell.

Second, earthly things are such that even with all your labor, there is no guarantee you will ever obtain them. The world, though thousands of years old, has never taught the merchant a method of trading that will guarantee him an estate in the end, nor given the courtier rules for pleasing his prince that will assure his rise. Few carry away the prize in the world's lottery. The greater number are left only with the weariness of their effort and the painful memory of their own great folly — having chased after something that at last deceived them. But for heaven and the things of heaven, there is a clear and certain rule laid down: if we will simply follow the counsel of the Word, we can neither miss the way nor fail to reach the end while walking in it. As many as walk by this rule — peace be on them, and on all the Israel of God. There are some who run and yet do not obtain this prize, who seek and do not find, who knock and find the door shut. But it is because they do it either in the wrong manner or at the wrong time. Some want heaven, but they expect God to save their sins along with them — they have no intention of parting with those sins. You can judge for yourself whether heaven can hold God and that kind of company at the same time. As they come in one door, Christ and all those holy spirits with Him would run out the other. Ungrateful wretches — unwilling to come to this glorious feast unless they may bring with them what would ruin the joy of that blessed state and offend every guest at the table, and indeed drive God out of His own house. A second kind want heaven, but like the man in Ruth 4 who wanted his kinsman Elimelech's land and was willing to pay for it but refused to do it by marrying Ruth — and so missed it — these seem very eager for heaven and salvation, provided their own righteousness can secure it. They store up every good deed and act

of obedience as a down payment. But in the end they perish, because they never come to Christ and never receive heaven on His terms. A third kind are willing to have it through Christ, but their desire is so weak and listless that it drives them to no vigorous use of the means by which He is obtained. Like the sluggard, they starve — because they will not pull their hands out of the lap of their laziness to reach the food set before them. For the world they have energy and more than enough: they will travel far and wide for it, and when they have run themselves breathless, can still stand panting after 'the dust of the earth,' as the prophet puts it in Amos 2:7. But for Christ and obtaining an interest in Him — how cold they are! A kind of paralysis seizes all the powers of their souls the moment they should pray, listen, examine their hearts, or stir up hunger and thirst for His grace and Spirit. It is remarkable to see how those who were just now racing at full speed after the world are suddenly becalmed — not a breath of wind stirring in their souls toward these things. Is it any wonder that Christ and heaven are denied to those who want them so little? Finally, some have zeal enough to want Christ and heaven — but they come when the master of the house has risen and shut the door. And truly, they may stand knocking for a long time before anyone opens. There is no Gospel preached in the next world. But for you, poor soul, who are being persuaded to renounce your sins, throw away all confidence in your own righteousness, and run all the more quickly to Christ — you who are so gripped by the worth of Christ, your own present need of Him, and the salvation He offers that you long for Him more than for life itself — in God's name, go forward and be of good courage. He calls you by name to come to Him and find rest for your soul. There is an assurance offered in

the Word, where your soul and its eternal happiness may be secured. Those who come to Him He will by no means cast away — and He will not allow anyone else to take them from Him. 'This day,' Christ said to Zacchaeus, 'salvation has come to this house' (Luke 19:9). Salvation comes to you, poor soul, who open your heart to receive Christ. You have eternal life already — as surely as if you were already a glorified saint walking in that heavenly city. If a free trade were opened to the Indies — unlimited gold available to all who went, with a guaranteed safe voyage — who would stay home? But of course, nothing like that exists. All of this, and infinitely more, can be said for heaven — and yet how few leave their uncertain hopes in the world to pursue it. What can explain this except the deep unbelief in people's hearts? They are not yet fully convinced whether Scripture speaks the truth — whether they can trust what God reveals in His Word about this new-found country and the spiritual treasures there to be had for certain. May God open the eyes of the unbelieving world — as He opened the eyes of the prophet's servant — so that they may see these things as realities and not as fantasies. It is faith alone that makes these things real in our hearts. By faith Moses saw Him who is invisible.

Third, even when we have earthly things, we have no guarantee of keeping them. Like birds that hop from branch to branch, they cannot be held as our own. Rich today, poor tomorrow. In good health when we lie down, and seized by the pains of death before midnight. Joyful parents, comforting ourselves with hopes for our growing children — and then perhaps one of Job's messengers knocks at the door to tell us they are all dead. Honored today — and who knows whether we will live to see that honor buried in shame and reproach? Scripture compares the multitude of people

to waters. The great ones of the world sit upon those waters — their honors float on the breath and favor of the crowd just as a ship floats on waves. And how long can a person sit steadily when carried on a wave? One moment they are lifted up to heaven, as David describes the ship, and the next they plunge down into the deep. 'We have ten shares in the king!' say the men of Israel (2 Samuel 19:43). And in the very next verse, Sheba sounds a single trumpet of rebellion, crying, 'We have no portion in David, no inheritance in the son of Jesse' — and the wind has shifted completely. 'Every man of Israel went up from following David, and followed Sheba.' So David was celebrated and then abandoned, and nearly in the same breath. Miserable is the person whose only portion is what this unstable world will give him. The time of mourning for the departure of all earthly things is approaching. We will see them as Eglon's servants saw their lord — fallen dead before us — and weep because they are gone. What folly, then, to hold this vain world close in our affections — when its joy, like a child's laughter on a mother's knee, is sure to end in crying at last — while we neglect heaven and heavenly things, which endure forever? Remember the rich man settling into his pillow and composing himself to rest, only to be awakened by the news of death before he was warm in his bed of ease, and then laid in sorrow on another bed that God had prepared for him in flames — from which we hear him crying out in the anguish of his conscience. Soul, if only you could secure an interest in the heavenly things we are speaking of — these would not slip out from under you. Heaven is a kingdom that cannot be shaken. Christ is an enduring portion. His graces and comforts are waters that never fail, but spring up to eternal life. The quail that fed Israel's desire soon stopped coming,

but the rock that gave them drink for their faith followed them throughout their journey — and that rock is Christ. Make sure of Him, and He will make sure of you. He will follow you to your sickbed and lie at your side, warming your heart with His sweet comfort when the joys of the world lie cold upon you, giving no warmth at all. When your senses are shut down and you can neither see the faces of those you love nor hear their words of comfort, He will come — even through those closed doors — and say: 'Peace be with you, My dear child. Do not fear death or the devil. I am here to receive your last breath. My angels are waiting, and the moment your soul leaves your body, they will carry it and lay it in My arms of love, where I will nourish you with the eternal joys My blood has purchased and My love has prepared for you.'

Fourth, earthly things are empty and unsatisfying. We can have too much of them, but never enough. They often breed disgust but never contentment. And how could they do otherwise, being so out of proportion to the vast desires of the immortal spirits within us? A spirit is not made of flesh and bone, and cannot be fed on such things — and what does the world offer but a few bones covered over with some fleshly pleasures? The lesser is blessed by the greater, not the other way around. These earthly things are so far beneath the nature of the human soul that a person must look higher if he would truly be blessed — all the way up to God Himself, the Father of spirits. God designed these things for our use, not for our ultimate fulfillment. What folly to think we can squeeze from them something God never put in them. They are like breasts that, drawn on moderately, yield good milk and sweet refreshment — but wrung too hard, they give nothing but wind and blood. We lose what they do have by expecting them to give what

they do not have. Those who try hardest to satisfy themselves with earthly things find the least sweetness and the most disappointment in them. The cream of the created world floats at the top. The one who is not content to skim it, but keeps drinking deeper hoping to find more, goes further and fares worse — and the disappointment he meets will pierce him through with many sorrows. But all these fears could happily be escaped if you would turn your back on the creature and face toward heaven. Work to gain Christ, and through Him a hope of heaven — and you will have found the right road to contentment. You will see it ahead of you and enjoy the view as you travel. Indeed, you will find that every step draws you closer. What a sweet change you would discover — like a sick man leaving a polluted, unhealthy climate where he was never well, and stepping into fresh air and his native soil. You would feel a lifting of your spirits and a revival of your soul with unspeakable peace and contentment. Once you have come to Christ, first the guilt of all your sins is gone — and that guilt had been poisoning all your joy before. A child who is dancing will not be made quiet or cheerful while a pin is pricking it. Well, that pin has now been removed — the one that robbed you of the joy of your life. Second, your nature is renewed and sanctified. And when is a person at ease if not when he is well? And what is holiness but the soul restored to the right condition in which God created it? Third, you become a child of God — and that cannot fail to please you, being a son or daughter to so great a King. Fourth, you have a right to heaven's glory, where you will before long be led to take and hold possession of your inheritance forever. And who can fully describe what that will be? Nicephorus tells us of one Agbarus, a great man, who, hearing so much of Christ's fame because of the miracles He

worked, sent a painter to capture His likeness. The painter, when he arrived, was unable to do it because of the radiance and divine splendor that shone from Christ's face. Whether this story is accurate I leave to others. But there is certainly such a brightness on the face of Christ in His glory, and such happiness awaiting the saints in heaven with Him, that those of us dwelling in mortal bodies cannot rightly conceive of it, much less express it. We will need to go there to find out. And when we do, we will confess that everything we heard of it on earth was not half of what we find there — and that our present ideas of that glory are no more like the actual vision than a painting of the sun is like the sun itself shining in the sky. If all this is true, then why do you spend your money on what is not bread, and your labor on what cannot satisfy — indeed, on what keeps you from the one thing that can? Earthly things are like junk food: they not only fail to nourish, they take away your appetite for what would. Heaven and heavenly things cannot be savored by a soul that has been spoiled by the taste of earthly things. Manna — though it was called angels' food for its sweetness — was nothing but light bread to a palate accustomed to Egypt. But these spiritual things do not depend on your opinion, whoever you are — they are not like earthly things whose value rises and falls with the market and with what vain people decide they are worth. Think gold is worthless, and to you it is — royal stamp and all. Call the grand titles of worldly honor mere vanity, and that is what they are. But think poorly of Christ, and He is no worse for it. Despise heaven all you like, and it will be heaven still. And when you come to your senses, as the prodigal son did, and know which is better fare — husks or bread, life among the pigs or life in your Father's house — then you will know how to judge these heavenly things

rightly. Until then, go and make the best deal you can with the world. But do not expect to find this pearl of great price, this true satisfaction for your soul, in any of the world's shops. And would it not be far better to take it now while it is offered, than to exhaust yourself chasing the creature in vain, and then come back in shame — perhaps to find it is no longer available, because you refused it when it was?

Verse 13: Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.

In these words the apostle returns to the exhortation he gave in verse 11 and presses it with fresh urgency — drawn from the fuller portrait of the enemy he has just given in verse 12. There, like a faithful scout, he made a complete report of Satan's great power and malice, and also revealed the dangerous design he has against the saints: nothing less than plundering them of everything heavenly. From all of this he now sounds a second alarm and calls them to arm themselves: 'Therefore, take up the full armor of God.' In these words, consider the following.

First, the exhortation itself and its logical connection to what came before: 'Therefore, take up the full armor of God.'

Second, the argument with which he presses this exhortation, which is twofold.

First argument: 'So that you will be able to resist in the evil day.'

Second argument: 'Having done everything, to stand firm' — meaning both able to fight and able to prevail. As for the first main point — the exhortation itself — we will pass over most of it, since

it is essentially the same as what we already handled in verse 11. However, there are two things worth noting briefly. The first is the repetition of virtually the same exhortation so soon — with only one verse between them. The second is the verb the apostle uses here, which differs from the one in verse 11 and yields a slightly different emphasis. The two Greek verbs are distinct, and the difference is instructive.

CHAPTER 1. THE REASON WHY THE  
APOSTLE RENEWS THE SAME  
EXHORTATION, AND WHAT TRUTHS  
MINISTERS ARE OFTEN TO PREACH  
TO THEIR PEOPLE



**F**irst, concerning the repetition of the same exhortation in such a short space. Clearly the apostle repeated it not for lack of material, but out of an abundance of zeal — returning a second time to strike the same note. The better craftsman is the one who drives a nail home with repeated blows, rather than the one who tries to drive many nails and fastens none. Preachers who hop from one truth to another without dwelling on any are not likely to reach the conscience. Not every listener is as quick as the preacher to grasp a point the moment it is stated. And many people cannot carry away as much from a sermon that is full of variety — where a point is barely named before it is withdrawn, and another breaks in before the first has been driven home with a powerful application — as they can from one that is unified, where a single necessary truth is clarified, emphasized, and pressed home blow after blow. In a focused discourse, the whole subject is related, and remembering one part brings the memory toward the

rest. In a fragmented one, each new point pushes out the last in a weak memory. Brief hints and quick movement may please a scholar, but they are far less useful for most listeners. One approach suits the lecture room; the other suits the pulpit. If I were buying cloth in a shop, I would prefer the merchant who laid one or two good pieces before me that suited my need — which I could examine carefully — over the one who pulled down his entire stock and piled piece on piece merely to show how much he had, until I could barely look closely at any of them.

Furthermore, just as it is profitable to dwell on truths in this way, it is also entirely fitting for a minister to preach the same truths again and again. Paul goes over the same exhortation repeatedly — in verse 11, in verse 13 — and elsewhere tells us this is no hardship for him, and that for his hearers it is safe to hear the same things over and over (Philippians 3:1). There are three kinds of truths that must be preached frequently in our ministry.

First, foundational truths — what we call the basics of the faith: the truths necessary to know and believe. The weight of the whole building rests on these foundation stones more than on anything built upon them. In any nation there are certain essential industries without which the country could not survive — grain, wool, and the like in our land. These deserve more attention than decorative trades that add ornament and even wealth to the nation but are not essential to its life. The same is true here. Our other ministerial labors have excellent value in enriching the Christian with knowledge of spiritual mysteries. But what deserves first attention is the consistent, faithful opening of the core truths of the Gospel. These are the boundary markers of truth. Consider how towns that share borders behave: the inhabitants periodically walk the bound-

aries together to show the young people where they are. When the old markers are gone, the next generation may lose all their rights because encroaching neighbors have moved the lines — and the people cannot say what belongs to them. Every foundational truth has an evil neighbor — I mean a heresy — pressing up against it. The very reason error has encroached so much on truth in recent years is that we have not walked these boundaries with our people, acquainting them with and establishing their understanding of these fundamental points as frequently and carefully as is needed. And the people themselves are much at fault, because they show such contempt for this work — treating a sermon on foundational truth as a near waste and fit only for children.

Second, those truths must be frequently preached which ministers see being most undermined by Satan or his instruments in the minds and lives of their people. The preacher must study his people as diligently as any book in his library, and dispense truth to them as a faithful steward would, according to what he sees they need. Paul noticed that the Galatians had been badly handled by false apostles who had nearly bewitched them back to the law on that critical point of justification — and see how he hammers on that point throughout the letter. People sometimes complain that we rebuke the same error or sin too often. But the fault is their own, because they will not leave it. Who would blame a dog for continuing to bark when the thief is still in the yard? Alas — one or two warnings against sin are not enough. When people think a minister is being lazy because he preaches the same things, he may in fact be exercising patience — continuing to exhort and correct those who resist, waiting to see whether God will at last grant them repentance and a recognition of the truth. We are commanded to

lift up our voice like a trumpet. Would you have us stop while the battle is raging, or sound a retreat when the call should be to advance?

Third, truths of daily use and practice must be preached often. These are like bread and salt — whatever else is on the table, these must be there at every meal. The apostle Peter was of this mind (2 Peter 1:12): 'I will always be ready to remind you of these things, even though you already know them.' He had been speaking of graces and duties that could not be practiced without needing to be stirred up every day — and so he committed himself to being always their reminder, rousing their sincere minds to attend to these things. Something is wrong when a person grows weary of ordinary food and will eat nothing but rarities. The stomach is sick when it prefers to nibble at delicacies rather than eat solid food. And how far this appetite for novelty has advanced in this generation as a spiritual disease — I think few have come far enough to themselves to see and mourn it. Do not be weary of hearing the very truths you have daily need of, simply because you know them and have heard them often. Faith and repentance will be good doctrine to preach and hear until the end of the world. You might as well complain to God for having made only one heaven and one way to it as complain to the preacher for returning to these truths again and again. If your heart were humble and your spiritual appetite sound, old truths would be fresh to you every time you heard them. In heaven, the saints draw all their wine of joy — if I may put it that way — from a single source, and they will do so for all eternity, and it never grows stale. God is the one object their souls are filled with, and never tired of. Can anything of God and His love grow tiresome to you when you hear of it here? Let me be clear: I

am not defending any loiterer in the Lord's vineyard, any lazy servant in the work of the Gospel who wraps his talent in idleness or buries it in the ground — perhaps spending the week digging in his own worldly affairs and then having nothing to set before his people on the Lord's Day but a couple of stale loaves baked many years before. This is not the good steward. He has the old — but where are the new things he should be bringing from his treasury? If a minister does not labor to grow his own stock, he is the worst thief in the parish. It is wicked for one entrusted with a widow's estate to let it sit idle — and far more so for a minister not to develop his gifts, which are like public trust given for the good of all souls under his care. If the preacher described in Ecclesiastes 12:9 was wise — the one who continually taught the people knowledge, who kept pressing forward, working to build them higher in understanding, and who gave careful attention, sought out wisdom, and set his proverbs in order — then the preacher who wastes his time in idleness, or spends more energy on enriching himself at his people's expense than on enriching his own gifts and graces to serve them, will in the end be proved a fool.

CHAPTER 2. THE BEST OF SAINTS  
SUBJECT TO DECLINE IN THEIR  
GRACES, AND WHY WE ARE TO  
ENDEAVOR A RECOVERY OF DECAYS  
IN GRACE



**T**he second noteworthy feature in this exhortation comes from the verb the apostle uses — a word that means not only 'to take' but 'to take again,' to recover something that has been lost, or to re-assume something that has been set aside for a time. The apostle was writing to the saints at Ephesus, many of whom were not being called to put on this armor for the first time through conversion — the initial work of faith had no doubt already taken place in most of them. With their situation in mind, and with all believers in view to the end of the world, he has a further meaning: that they should fasten this armor more tightly where it hangs loose, and recover what they have let fall in any duty or allowed to decay in any grace. The teaching, then, is this.

The Christian should take special care to repair his damaged armor and recover his declining graces. This armor can be battered — and sad examples could be given for each individual piece. Was not Jacob's belt of truth and sincerity unbuckled when he used

that deceitful plan to obtain the blessing? He was not the straightforward man in that moment, but the schemer — though he might just as well have waited for God's timing. He was repaid in kind: he deceived his father, and did not Laban deceive him, giving him Leah instead of Rachel? What of David's breastplate of righteousness in the matter of Uriah? Was it not shot through, and that holy man terribly wounded? He lay nearly a year — as far as we can tell from Scripture — before he came to himself enough to be thoroughly aware of his sin, until Nathan, a faithful surgeon, was sent to probe the wound and clean out the dead flesh that had grown over it. And Jonah — otherwise a holy prophet — when God called him to go to Nineveh, his shoes were missing, so to speak: the readiness and willingness of heart with which he should have been equipped from the first word of the call. Good Hezekiah — we see how close his helmet of hope came to being knocked from his head. He tells us himself what his thoughts were in the day of his distress: that he would not see the Lord in the land of the living, convinced that God would not relent until, like a lion, He had broken all his bones and at last finished him off. Even Abraham — famous for his faith — had his seasons of unbelief and fearful doubts passing over his otherwise valiant heart. In all such cases, the Christian's duty is to get his armor repaired as quickly as possible. A battered helmet is almost no helmet at all in the moment it is needed. Grace in decay is like a man whose legs have been taken out from under him by illness — if no means are taken to recover it, little service will come from it and little comfort will be received from it. This is why Christ gave the church at Ephesus — to whom

Paul wrote this letter — the counsel to remember from where she had fallen, to repent, and to do her first works again. How many people does a declining Christian wrong all at once?

First, he wrongs God, and that in a serious way, because God counts on receiving more honor from His saints' graces than from all the other gifts His creatures use in the world. In a certain sense, God can better endure the open sins of the world than the decay of His saints' graces. The worldly, by wasting their gifts, rob Him only of His outward goods. But the Christian, by letting his grace decline, robs God of the glory that should flow to Him from that person's faith, zeal, patience, self-denial, and sincerity. Suppose a master entrusted one servant with his money and another with his child. Would he not be far more grieved to see his dear child neglected or nearly killed through carelessness than to have his money stolen through the other's negligence? Grace is the new creature — the birth of the Spirit. When this comes to harm through a Christian's careless walk, it must surely wound God's heart far more deeply than the wrongs done to Him by the world, which has been entrusted with nothing like this.

Second, the one who declines in grace and does not labor to repair it wrongs his fellow believers, who have a share in one another's grace. A person who fails to seek healing for a wound in one member wrongs the whole body. We are told to love one another (2 John 5). But how is that love to be shown? The very next words tell us: 'And this is love, that we walk according to His commandments.' We show little love to our brothers and sisters by sinning — which is sure either to entangle them or to grieve them. And how declining grace and rising sin can coexist in a person is a puzzle to anyone who understands what both of those things are.

Third, the Christian wrongs himself by not working to repair his damaged armor and recover his declining grace. In doing so he loses the evidence of his inheritance — or at least so obscures it that he can no longer see it clearly. A declining Christian is almost inevitably a doubting Christian, because the common mark of a hypocrite is to wear away and waste like a post driven into the ground — which rots in place, while true grace, like a tree, grows. Is this not the very knot the devil ties many poor souls in, giving them years of work to untie it? 'If you were a Christian, you would be growing. True saints go from strength to strength — but you go from strength to weakness. They climb the hill toward Zion; every ordinance and providence is a step that carries them closer to heaven. But you are going downhill, further from your salvation than when you first believed' — or so you feel. And does it reflect good wisdom, Christian, to put a weapon in the devil's hand — an argument in his mouth to use against your salvation? If you held an estate that depended on the life of a child — one that would be forfeit if the child died — that child would certainly be well looked after. His head would not ache without you rushing to the physician for advice. Now then: what is the evidence for that glorious estate you hope for? Is it not Christ within you? Is not this new creature — rightly called 'Christ' for its likeness to Him — the young heir of heaven's glory? And when that is sick or weak, is it not time to use every available means for its recovery? While in this condition, you can neither live nor die comfortably. You cannot live well. A person with a wasting disease takes little joy in life — he finds no sweetness in his food, no delight in his work, as a healthy person does. How sweet the promise is to an active and vigorous faith! How light the yoke of the command to the Christian whose con-

science is not chafed with guilt and whose strength is not weakened by temptation! But the Christian in a declining state — he cannot taste the promise. Every command is a weight, every duty a burden. He goes through life in pain, like someone with a dislocated foot, however pleasant the road. He is as unfit to die as he is to live. Such a person welcomes news of death as little as a tenant who is behind on rent welcomes the news that the landlord is coming. This is what moved David to pray: 'Spare me a little, that I may recover my strength.'

Having shown why the Christian should work to recover his declining graces, it is now necessary to offer some practical guidance.

First, direction on how to assess the declining state of grace, so that a person does not make a false judgment about himself in this matter.

Second, direction on how, once a decline in grace is recognized, a person may recover it.

## CHAPTER 3. A CAUTIONARY DIRECTION FROM WHAT WE MAY NOT, AND FROM WHAT WE MAY JUDGE OUR GRACES TO BE IN A DECLINATION



**Q**uestion: How can a Christian tell whether grace is declining in him or not?

Answer. First, I will answer this negatively — showing what should not be taken as evidence of declining grace.

Second, I will answer positively — showing what can reliably be taken as evidence of a decay of grace.

First, the negative answer, with several particulars.

First, Christian, do not conclude that grace has grown weaker simply because your sense of corruption has grown stronger. This is often the root of poor souls' complaints in this area: they feel they have never been so haunted by pride, hypocrisy, and other corruptions as they are now, and no one knows how troubled they are by these things. Let me ask you who make this sad complaint: do you not think these corruptions were in you before you felt them so keenly? How often have you prayed just as formally with-

out being troubled at all? How often have you entertained the same lusts without your soul being brought low before God in such self-abasement as you feel now? Deal honestly between God and your soul — do not tell a lie in God's name by bearing false witness against yourself. If this is your situation, you have more of a comforting sign that grace is growing than that it is decaying. Sin cannot be gaining ground if the sense of sin is becoming sharper. That sharpened sensitivity is a mark of a thriving soul. No one complains more about their own heart than those who are growing in grace — the smallest sin now cuts them to the core, making them think more poorly of themselves than ever. But it is not that sin has increased in them: it is that their love for Christ has grown, which makes them judge more severely. When the sun shines with some strength and the year advances, we notice that even when frosts and snow come, they do not lie long — they are soon melted by the sun. It is a sweet sign that the love of Christ is shining with power on your soul when no corruption can remain long in your heart without melting into sorrow and bitter complaint. The truly decaying soul is the one where sin lies bound up and frozen — with little sense of it and little sorrow for it.

Second, be careful not to conclude that grace is decaying simply because your comfort has withdrawn. The influence of the sun reaches where its light is not directly seen — as is evident in the mines of gold and silver formed underground by that same heat. In the same way, grace may be working vigorously in you even when you are least enjoying the sunshine of God's countenance. Did faith ever triumph more gloriously than in our Savior's cry, 'My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?' There faith was at its highest, while joy was at its darkest midnight. Perhaps you come

away from a worship service without the sheaves of comfort you usually bring home, and you conclude that grace was not at work in you as before. Honestly, if that is all you have to go on, you may be doing a great injustice to the grace of God in you. Comfort is external to duty — it is a gift God may give or withhold. In fact, He often gives it to the weak and withholds it from the strong. A traveler may walk just as far and cover just as much ground when the sun is not shining as when it is — though perhaps not as cheerfully. In fact, he sometimes makes better progress: the warm sun tempts him to lie down and dawdle, while the cold and dark drive him on faster. Some graces thrive best in the shade — like certain flowers — such as humility and dependence on God.

Third, be careful not to mistake an increase in your temptations for a decrease in your grace. If you heard a man say that because he cannot run as fast today with a hundred-pound pack on his back as he could yesterday without any burden, he must have grown weaker — you would quickly point out his mistake. Temptation does not always press on the Christian with the same weight. Observe, therefore, whether Satan has not been unusually let loose against you — whether your temptations are not coming with more force and violence than before. Even if you are not overcoming them as easily as you handled smaller ones in the past, grace may actually be working harder in struggling with the greater ones than it did in overcoming the lesser. A ship that rides light and sails with a fair wind makes fast and easy progress. The same ship, heavily laden and sailing against wind and tide, moves slowly — and yet the crew is working far harder than they were when it sailed faster.

Second, positively: how you may conclude that grace is declining — and this in three areas.

First, in relation to temptations to sin.

Second, in relation to the duties of worship.

Third, by the condition of your heart in worldly occupations.

First, in relation to sin — and this is threefold.

First, when you are no longer as alert to the inroads of sin as you once were. At one point we find David's heart smiting him when he merely cut off the corner of Saul's robe. At another time, when his eye glanced at Bathsheba, he took no notice of the snare Satan had laid for him — and was led from one sin to the next. This clearly showed that grace in him had grown sluggish and his heart was not in as holy a condition as it had been. If an enemy approaches the gates and the sentinel gives no alarm, it shows he is off his guard — either asleep or worse. If grace were awake and your conscience had not grown somewhat hardened, it would do its job.

Second, when a temptation to sin is recognized and you find your heart closed — not praying against it, or not with the same zeal and holy indignation as before. This is a bad sign: it shows that sinful desire has gotten the upper hand over your grace, and you cannot readily take up your weapons. Your affections have been won over — and this is why you are such a cold petitioner at the throne of grace when you need help against your enemy.

Third, when the arguments that most move you to resist temptation or mourn for sin committed have become more worldly and less shaped by the Gospel than they once were. Perhaps you remember a time when your love for Christ would have spit fire in

the face of Satan tempting you to such a sin. But now that holy fire has so diminished that without some worldly motive tipping the scales, you might well give in rather than resist. And when you do mourn over sin, there may now be more of a servile, forced quality to it — like an onion in the eye that makes you weep — rather than the genuine sorrow arising from love to God whom you have offended. This speaks of serious decay. The more such worldly arguments mix into your resistance to sin or your mourning over it, the greater the decline of grace. David's natural warmth was surely much diminished when so many blankets were piled on him and he still felt no heat — there was a time when he would have been warm with far less. I fear that in these declining times, many people's love for Christ will be found to have lost so much of its early vigor that what once would have stirred them into holy fury and burning zeal against sins such as Sabbath-breaking, pride in dress, and neglect of family duties now has trouble keeping any warmth at all.

Second, in the area of the duties of worship.

First, if your heart no longer prompts you with the same eagerness and readiness to seek communion with God in any duty. Perhaps you remember a time when your heart echoed back to the stirrings of God's Spirit saying, 'Seek His face' — and you answered, 'Your face, Lord, I will seek.' You once longed as much for the Sabbath or a time of preaching to arrive as the worldly person longs for it to be over. But now your pulse does not beat as quickly toward either public or private means of grace. Just as the body must decay when the appetite for food disappears, so grace de-

clines when this spiritual hunger is lost. A hungry soul is a growing soul — like a child who will not let his mother rest but keeps crying for the breast.

Second, when you begin to neglect performing your duties in a truly spiritual manner, and stop attending to those inner failures that only you yourself can check. It is not the frequency of duty but the spiritual quality of it that produces growth. Neglect in this area quickly brings grace into a wasting condition. Perhaps, soul, there was a time when you were not satisfied with merely having prayed — you also watched your heart carefully, as a person counts every coin they pay to make sure none are counterfeit. You wanted God to receive not just the duty but the duty stamped with living faith, carrying the zeal and sincerity that make it acceptable. But now you have grown more careless and formal. O take care, poor soul — if you continue in this carelessness, your spiritual estate will melt away quickly. Such careless dealing will ruin your trade with heaven. God will not accept these thin, hollow duties from your hands.

Third, when a Christian draws little spiritual nourishment from communion with God compared to what he once did. Perhaps there was a time when you could point to what came of your praying, hearing, and fasting. But now the picture is different. Communion with God gives the soul two kinds of strength when it is in healthy condition: strength for faith, and strength for obedient living. Do you hear and pray and come away with no greater grip on a promise, no more power over your habitual sins, no deeper brokenness of heart under them? Do you come down from the mountain and break the tablets of God's law as soon as you step off the holy ground — back to your old passions, as unsteady

as before? This is a sure sign of decay in the inward fire that, if it were in its right condition, would draw some nourishment from these very things.

Third, by your conduct in your worldly occupations.

First, when your worldly activities no longer leave you in the free and spiritual frame you once had for returning to God's presence. Perhaps you could once come from your work and household duties to your private prayer and find that they had kept you in a right spirit — perhaps even brought you to prayer in a better condition than before. But now it is different. You cannot shake them off — they cling to your spirit and give an earthly flavor to your praying and hearing. You have reason to mourn this. When health declines, people walk more stooped — and it is a sign of similar decay in you that you can no longer lift your heart from earthly to spiritual things as you once did. Earthly activities were meant to serve as guards against temptation. When they become snares instead, something is wrong with us. If we wake from sleep feeling worse, the body is not right — sleep's nature is to refresh. If exercise leaves us unfit for work, the problem is in our bodies. The same principle applies here.

Second, when your diligence in your particular calling has become more self-serving. Perhaps you once worked in your shop or applied yourself to your studies primarily out of obedience to God's command — your personal interests played little part. But now you trade more for yourself and less for God. Take careful notice of this.

Third, when you can no longer bear disappointment in your earthly work as you once could — when you work and gain little, or preach and are not much respected, and you do not know how to accept this. There was a time when you could withdraw into God and find in Him all you were lacking elsewhere. But now you are less content with your situation, your position, your circumstances. Your heart is reaching for more than God allows you. This is a sign of decline. Children are hard to please, and so are old men — whose natural decline makes them more irritable, in a sense becoming children again. Work therefore to recover your declining grace. As it grows, so will your strength to rest in whatever God's providence arranges for you.

## CHAPTER 4. A WORD OF COUNSEL FOR THE RECOVERY OF DECLINING GRACE



**W**e now offer some practical directions to the Christian on how to recover declining grace.

First, investigate honestly the cause of your decline. A Christian's armor decays in two ways: either through violent battering, when the Christian is overcome by temptation and falls into sin, or through neglect in maintaining it with those means that act like oil to keep it clean and bright. Investigate which of these has caused your decay. Most likely both play a part.

First, if your grace has been weakened by a blow delivered through some sin you have committed, three duties rest on you toward recovery.

First, renew your repentance. This is Christ's counsel to Ephesus in Revelation 2:5: 'Repent, and do the deeds you did at first.' There it is not only commanded as a duty but prescribed as a means of recovery — as if Christ were saying, 'Repent, so that you may do your first works again.' So in Hosea 14:2, the Lord directs backsliding Israel to this same work, telling her to take words and return to the Lord. And in verse 4 He promises to take her in hand

for restoration: 'I will heal their waywardness.' A repenting soul is under the promise of healing. Therefore, Christian, search your heart as you would search your house if you knew a thief or murderer was hiding there, waiting to harm you in the night. Once you have found the sin that has done you the damage, fill your heart with shame for it and righteous anger against it. Then come before the Lord heavy with sorrow and cast it out in a heartfelt confession. It is far better for you to do this yourself than to let Satan carry your report to God on your behalf.

Second, once you have renewed your repentance, do not forget — do not delay — to renew your faith on the promise of pardon. Repentance is like a purging medicine that removes what is poisoning the soul. But if faith does not follow immediately with its restorative power, the soul will never regain its strength. A soul can die from a flood of sorrow just as surely as from sin. Faith has a rebuilding and nourishing power, as certain strengthening foods are said to have. It feeds on the promise, which is 'perfect, restoring the soul' (Psalm 19:7). Though you were wasted to skin and bones and all your strength were spent, faith would quickly recruit you and enable every grace to carry out its work with cheerfulness. Faith draws peace from the promise — called 'peace in believing.' From peace flows joy: 'Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God' (Romans 5:1). And from verse 2: 'We exult in hope of the glory of God.' And joy produces strength: 'The joy of the Lord is your strength.'

Third, back both of these with a daily effort to put to death those sins that most overpower your grace. Weeds and flowers cannot both thrive. When grace does not act freely and with vigor, conclude that some contrary sinful desire is pressing on it and

weighing its spirit down — just as excess fluids in the body load down the natural spirits, so that we have little energy to move or work until they are cleared out. Apply yourself diligently to this work. It is not a two-day effort once a year, like the medicine some take at the change of seasons. Nothing is more empty than making a great show of zeal, as the Catholics do at Lent, or as some insincere professing Christians do before a Communion service or day of fasting — and then letting those very sins live quietly in them for the rest of the year. No — this kind of doing and undoing is child's play. You must put sin to death daily by the Spirit (Romans 8:13). Follow this work consistently throughout your Christian life — making it as habitual as the laborer who goes out every day to work in his field — watching your heart, using every means to expose sin, humbling yourself as it breaks out, and cutting at its root with the axe of mortification. You will see, by God's blessing, what a change for the better comes over the condition of your grace. You who are now so depleted and pale that you are afraid to look at your own face in the mirror of your conscience will then be able to look at your own conscience with joy. You will be able to live with yourself without those sudden attacks of horror and fear that once dismayed you. Your grace — though it will not be your boasting — will serve as evidence for Christ in whom it lives, and lead you forward with boldness to claim Him. Meanwhile the loose Christian, whose grace is choked with sins for want of this weeding, will stand trembling at the door, unsure whether his grace is genuine — and doubting whether he will be welcome.

Second, if on examination you find your armor decaying more from lack of maintenance than from any blow dealt by deliberate sin — and this is actually the more common cause, since rust

quickly ruins even the best armor, and negligence damages grace just as surely as gross sins do — then apply yourself to the means God has appointed for strengthening grace. If the fire goes out because you stopped adding wood, the only way to revive it is to add wood again.

First, turn to the Word of God and spend more time in it. David tells us where he repeatedly renewed his spiritual life and brought his soul back into a heavenly warmth when grace in him began to grow cold: the Word quickened him. The Word was the sunny bank he sat under. The Word draws out the Christian's graces by setting before each one an object suited to stir it into action — and this has great power to rouse them. It is like the arrival of a dear friend, which makes us shake off drowsiness and become alert to enjoy his company. Our affections are stirred when their proper object is before them. If we love someone, that love is kindled by seeing them or by anything that reminds us of them. If we hate someone, our blood rises when they stand before us. The Word brings the Christian's graces and their proper objects together. In the Word, love may feast its eyes on Christ — who is there set forth vividly in all His love and beauty. There the Christian may see his sins in a mirror that will not flatter him. Can any godly sorrow, any hatred of sin, lie dormant in the heart while a person reads what those sins cost Christ on his behalf?

Second, from the Word move to meditation — this is like bellows to a fire. Grace that has been smothered and worn down by lack of exercise will be cleared and kindled through meditation. As you think deeply, this fire will burn and your heart will grow warm within you, according to the nature of whatever your thoughts dwell upon. Resolve, Christian, to shut out all worldly distractions

and set apart some time each day — if at all possible — to review the most significant dealings God has had with you that day. First, ask your soul what it has received — what mercies heaven has sent in to you. And when you have asked the question, do not leave the room as Pilate did, but stay until your soul has given a full account of God's gracious dealings with you. If you are wise to observe and honest to report, your conscience must tell you that the faucet was never turned off — the breast of mercy was never put away all day. And as you look at these fresh mercies, counting this new currency hot from the mint of God's generosity, older mercies will crowd in alongside them and take their place in your thoughts, telling you what God has done for you months and years ago. Old debts should not be paid last — give them all a hearing in their turn, and see how they will work on your grateful spirit. The Christian in this matter is like a merchant's employee who manages his master's accounts. He tells the master he has a large sum in hand and asks him to look over the books — but can never find him with a free moment. There is always a great treasure of mercy in the Christian's hands, and conscience often urges him to take stock and see what God has done for him. But rarely does he find time to count his mercies. Is it any wonder that those who take so little notice of God's gracious dealings with them fall behind in their spiritual lives? How can a person be thankful who rarely thinks about what he receives? How can he be patient in affliction when he lacks one of the most powerful arguments to calm a restless spirit under trouble — namely, the remembrance of the abundant good he receives from the Lord alongside any small measure of hardship? How can such a soul's love for God flame up when it is kept at such a distance from the very mercies that are its fuel? The same could

be said of every other grace. Second, turn your attention to yourself, and give a few serious thoughts to how you have actually behaved toward God and toward others throughout the day. Ask your soul, as Elisha asked his servant: 'Where have you come from, O my soul? Where have you been? What have you done for God today, and how?' And when you go about this inquiry, be careful not to be sidetracked from a thorough examination — as Jacob was by Rachel's plausible excuse — nor to indulge yourself when you catch your heart falling short in any duty, as Eli did with his sons. Take care what you do: you are judging on God's behalf, who receives the wrong from your sin and will do Himself justice if you will not.

Third, from meditation move to prayer. In fact, a soul in meditation is already on its way to prayer. Meditation leads the Christian to prayer, and prayer brings help back to meditation. After the Christian has done his best through meditation to stir his graces and work his spirit toward some holy heat, he knows that all of this is only laying the wood in order. The fire must come from above to kindle it — and that must be obtained through prayer. They say stars have their greatest influence when they are in conjunction with the sun. So surely the graces of a believer should never work more powerfully than in prayer, for that is when he is in the closest union and communion with God. The ordinance that has such power with God must also have a powerful effect on us. Prayer will not let God rest but moves Him to come to His people's aid — and is it any wonder if it is also the means to stir up and excite the Christian's own grace? How often do we see a dark cloud over David's spirit at the beginning of a psalm, which begins to lift as he grows warm in his praying, and before the end breaks out into strong expressions of faith and shouts of praise? Only here,

Christian, beware of formal, empty praying — it is as harmful to grace as not praying at all. A remedy, however excellent and exactly suited to the condition, does more harm than good if it is applied cold.

Fourth, add to all the above the fellowship and communion of the saints around you. It is no surprise to hear that a house standing far from its neighbors has been robbed. The person who walks in communion with other believers travels in company — he lives in a city where each house supports the others, to which Jerusalem itself is compared. It is worth noting that the house in whose ruins Job's children were buried was struck by a wind from the wilderness at all four corners — it stood alone. The devil knows exactly what he is doing when he hinders this great ordinance of fellowship among the saints. By doing so, he stops the progress of grace and brings what grace believers do have into a declining and wasting condition. The apostle links two duties closely together: holding fast to our profession, and considering one another so as to stir up love and good works (Hebrews 10:23-24). In fact, forsaking the communion of saints is a dangerous step toward falling away — as shown by the case of Demas: 'He has left us, having loved this present world.' O what damage Satan has done us in these past few years through this single thing — the breakdown of fellowship among believers. What has become of the communion of saints? Where can two or three be found who can agree to walk together? Those who once suffered side by side cannot sit together at their Father's table, can barely pray with or for one another. The breath of one Christian is strange to another who once lay close to his heart. This is a grief, and must be grieved over.

## CHAPTER 5. THE WORDS OPENED, AND WHAT IS MEANT BY THE EVIL DAY



**W**e now come to the argument the apostle uses to press his exhortation, which is twofold.

The first argument looks at the moment of battle: 'so that you will be able to resist in the evil day.'

The second looks at the happy outcome of the war — which will crown the Christian who is properly armed — and that outcome is certain victory: 'and having done everything, to stand firm.'

First, concerning 'the evil day': what is this evil day? Some take the evil day to mean the whole span of the Christian's life here in this valley of tears. On this reading, the argument runs: take up the full armor of God so that you may be able to persevere to the end of your life, which you will find to be, as it were, one long continuous day of trouble and trial. Jacob drew a dark line over his whole life in these words: 'Few and unpleasant have been the years of my life' (Genesis 47:9). What day shines so fair that it does not cloud over before nightfall? What day passes without the Christian meeting some storm or other, enough to be called an evil day? Each day has its portion — indeed, its proportion: 'Sufficient for the day is

its own trouble.' We need not borrow sorrows from tomorrow to make up our present load. As we read of daily bread, so we read of a daily cross (Luke 9:23) — which we are told to take up, not to manufacture for ourselves, as we are prone to do. God in His providence will provide one. We are told to take it up — but we hear nothing of setting it down until the cross and we lie down together. Our troubles and our lives are of the same age — they live and die together. Where joy comes, sorrow is at its heels; staff and rod travel together. Even Job — whose prosperity the devil so resented, and which is displayed in all its brilliance and abundance in Job 1:10, as if his sun cast no shadow — hear what this good man says about even his most flourishing time (Job 3:26): 'I was not at ease, nor was I quiet, nor was I at rest.' Some troubles broke his rest even when his bed was, by all appearances, as comfortable as heart could wish. Even then this good man tossed and turned and found no peace. If someone had come to Job in those days and congratulated him on his happy condition, saying, 'Surely, Job, you could be content with your portion, if only all of this could be settled on you and your children after you,' Job would have said, as Luther once said, that God should not put him off with such things. The condition of the saints in this world is such that their very life here, with all its splendid comforts, becomes their cross — because it keeps them from their crown. Nothing more is needed to make our life an evil day than our separation from our chief good, which cannot be compensated by the world and cannot be enjoyed alongside it. Only this mercy lies in the evil: it is short. Our life is but an evil day — it will not last long. And it was surely a mercy that God shortened human life so much in these latter days, in which so much of Christ and heaven has been revealed. It would have tried

the saints' patience severely to know so much of the glory of the world above and then be kept from it as long as the fathers of the early age were. Comfort one another with this, Christians. Though your life is full of troubles, it is brief. A few more steps, and you are out of the rain. There is a great difference between a saint and a wicked person in regard to the troubles they encounter — like two travelers riding in opposite directions, both caught in the rain and getting wet. One rides away from the storm and is soon out of it. The other rides into the heart of the rain; the further he goes, the worse it gets. The saint meets with troubles just as the wicked do — but he is soon out of the downpour. When death comes, fair weather arrives. But for the wicked, the further he goes the worse it becomes. What he meets here is only a few drops. The great storm is the last. The outpouring of God's wrath falls in hell, where all the depths of horror are opened — from above in God's righteous fury, and from within through the accusing and tormenting of their own consciences.

Second, others take the phrase in a narrower sense, referring to those particular seasons of life when afflictions and sufferings press in with special force. Beza reads it as 'in the time of adversity.' Though our whole life is evil compared to the blessedness of heaven — our clearest day being night compared to that glorious morning — still one part of our life compared to another may be called good, and another evil. We have our seasons here. God's providences toward His saints while they are on this low ground are mixed and varied, as was pictured by the spotted horses in Zechariah's vision. Red and white, peace and war, joy and sorrow — all checker our days. Earth is a middle place between heaven and hell, and our condition here reflects both. We go uphill and

down until we reach our journey's end — and we find the deepest swamp nearest our Father's house. I mean death — into which all the other troubles of our life flow, as streams into a great river, and in which they all end and are swallowed up. This — being the all-encompassing evil — is what I believe is meant here by 'that day, that evil day,' without excluding the other days of trial that come before it. Those are but so many smaller deaths, each snatching away a piece of our life, or like heralds sent ahead to announce the arrival of this king of terrors who comes behind.

With the phrase explained, let us consider the force of this first argument with which the apostle reinforces his exhortation to take up the full armor of God. The argument rests on three weighty points.

First, the nature and character of this day of affliction: it is an evil day.

Second, the unavoidability of this evil day, implied in the wording: 'so that you may be able to resist in the evil day.' This shuts out all hope of escape — as if the apostle were saying: your only option is to resist. Do not comfort yourself with thoughts of avoiding the battle. The evil day will come, whether you are armed or not.

Third, the absolute necessity of this armor in order to resist. Just as we cannot run from the evil day, neither can we stand against it and resist the force that comes against us — except we are clothed with armor. These points could each be developed at length, but for brevity we will bring them together in a single conclusion.

CHAPTER 6. SHOWING THAT THE  
DAY OF AFFLICTION IS EVIL AND IN  
WHAT RESPECTS, ALSO  
UNAVOIDABLE, AND WHY TO BE  
PREPARED FOR



**E**veryone is obligated to arm and prepare himself for the evil day of affliction and death, with which he must inevitably contend. This teaching has three parts.

First, the day of affliction and death is an evil day.

Second, this evil day is unavoidable.

Third, it is everyone's duty to prepare for this evil day.

First, how the day of affliction — and especially death — is an evil day. We must show in what sense affliction is evil, and in what sense it is not.

First, affliction is not morally or inherently evil. If it were evil in that sense, God could not be its author — for His nature is so pure that such evil could no more come from Him than the sun's light could produce darkness. Yet God openly claims affliction as His own act: 'Against this family I am planning disaster' (Micah 3:2). More than that, He claims it so entirely as His own that He

will not have us think anyone else can truly harm us besides Himself. This is the prerogative He glories in: 'If a calamity occurs in a city has not the Lord done it?' (Amos 3:6). And it is well for the saints that their crosses are all made in heaven — otherwise they would not fit their backs as perfectly as they do. But the evil of sin God disclaims entirely, with a strict warning that we not lay this offspring — conceived by Satan in our corrupt hearts — at His door: 'Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone' (James 1:13).

Second, if affliction were inherently evil, it could in no sense be something we should desire — and yet sometimes it can and should be. We are to choose affliction over sin — indeed, the greatest affliction before the smallest sin. Moses chose to suffer affliction with the people of God rather than enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. We are told to rejoice when we fall into various trials — that is, afflictions.

In what sense, then, may the day of affliction be called evil?

First, it is evil in the sense that it is painful and distressing. In Scripture, evil is often used as the opposite of joy and comfort: 'We hoped for peace, but no good has come.' A merry heart is called a good heart, a troubled spirit an evil spirit — because our nature recoils from anything that opposes its joy, and every affliction does this to some degree. No affliction, while it is present, is joyful — it is grievous. Like medicine, it leaves an unpleasant impression on the senses. This is why Solomon, speaking of the evil days of sickness, says they are so distasteful to our nature that we will say we have no pleasure in them. They take away the joy of life. Natural joy is truly a flower of the sunshine of prosperity — it opens and

closes with it. It is true that saints often have their greatest joy in the midst of affliction — but this comes in through another channel entirely. They have a good God who sends it in. Without Him, they would be as miserable under affliction as anyone else. It is no more natural for comfort to spring from affliction than for grapes to grow on thorns, or manna to appear in the wilderness. The Israelites could have looked a long time for such bread if heaven had not miraculously rained it down. God chooses that season to make the power of His love all the more conspicuous. As Elijah, to magnify the miracle, first had great quantities of water poured on the wood and the sacrifice — so much that it filled the trench — and then called fire down from heaven by prayer to consume it all, so God pours out the flood of affliction on His children, and then kindles inward joy in their hearts that consumes all their sorrow. He even makes the very waters of affliction they are swimming in add a deeper sweetness to the music of their spiritual joy. But still — it is God who is good, and affliction that is evil.

Second, the day of affliction is an evil day in that it is an unwelcome reminder of the sinful evils of our past. It revives the memory of old sins that may have been buried for many years in the grave of forgetfulness. The night of affliction is when such ghosts tend to walk through a person's conscience. And just as darkness makes a frightening thing more terrifying, so the misery of affliction — itself already uncomfortable — deepens the terror of the sins then brought to mind. The patriarchs' sin never looked so awful to them as when it came back to haunt them in their distress (Genesis 42:21). In affliction, the sinner has a more vivid sense of divine wrath than at any other time. Affliction feels like a summons calling him before God — which produces a dreadful confu-

sion and dread in his spirit. O that people would think about this: how they could bear to have all their sins rehearsed before them in that day! Blessed is the person who, like the psalmist, can look at his sins in that moment and triumph over them through faith. This is indeed a difficult mystery — as the psalmist himself calls it, few understand it: 'I will expound my riddle upon the harp: why should I fear in days of adversity, when the iniquity of my foes surrounds me?' (Psalm 49:3-4).

Third, the day of affliction exposes much evil in the heart that was not visible before. Affliction shakes and stirs the soul — and if there is any sediment at the bottom, it will rise to the surface. Sometimes it reveals the heart to be thoroughly corrupt — one that had appeared somewhat good before. Affliction washes off the hypocrite's paint. When corrupt nature is troubled, it shows itself, and some afflictions do this with great force. We read of some who are offended when persecution comes — they break entirely with their profession because it costs them too much. Others, in their distress, curse their God (Isaiah 8:21). It is impossible for a corrupt heart to think well of a God who afflicts it. The hired servant, if his master takes up a stick to strike him, throws down his work and runs away. A false heart does the same with God. Even where the person is genuinely gracious, affliction often reveals that corruption is stronger, and grace weaker, than they had imagined. Peter set out boldly to walk on the water — but when the wind rose, he began to sink. Now he saw there was far more unbelief in his heart than he had suspected. Severe afflictions are to the soul as a driving rain is to a house: we do not know there are cracks and holes in the house until we see it dripping here and there. In the same way, we do not perceive how undefeated this corruption is,

or how weak that grace is, until we are tested in this way and made to know more fully what lies within our hearts. This is why those most acquainted with affliction tend to have the humblest view of themselves and the most compassionate and patient view of others in their weaknesses. They have met with so many setbacks in their conflicts that they carry a low opinion of their own grace, and a tender regard for their brothers and sisters — more ready to pity than to judge them in their failures.

Fourth, the season of affliction is also the season when the evil one, Satan, comes to tempt. What one Gospel account calls 'the time of tribulation' (Matthew 13:22), the parallel account in Luke 8:13 calls 'the time of temptation.' The two come together — God rarely afflicts us without Satan adding temptation to our wilderness. 'This is your hour,' Jesus told those who arrested Him, 'and the power of darkness' (Luke 22:53). Christ's sufferings from human hands and temptation from the devil arrived together. Esau, who hated his brother for receiving the blessing, said in his heart: 'The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob' (Genesis 27:41). Times of affliction are the days of mourning — and those are the seasons Satan waits for to do us harm.

Fifth and finally, the day of affliction often has a bad outcome — and in that respect it truly proves to be an evil day. We say all is well that ends well. For the Christian, afflictions produce good fruit: the rod of correction yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness, and so believers can call their afflictions good — as a good surgeon's instrument that lets out only the bad blood. 'It was good for me that I was afflicted,' says David. I have read of a godly woman who used to compare her afflictions to her children: both

caused her great pain in the bearing. But just as she would not have wanted to be without any of her children — despite the pain of bringing them forth — so she would not have wanted to be without any of her afflictions, despite the sorrow of enduring them. But for the wicked, the outcome is grievous. First, in relation to sin: afflictions leave them worse — more unrepentant, hardened in sin, and more violent in their wicked ways. Every plague on Egypt added to the hardness of Pharaoh's heart. The man who for a time could beg Moses to pray for him at last reached the point of threatening to kill him if he came near again. What prodigious heights of sin we see many reach after some great sickness or divine judgment! Children shoot up in height after a fever — and the wicked shoot up in their lusts after afflictions. How voracious and ravenous they become after what they want, once the weight and chain are off their heels! When medicine does not work properly, it not only fails to cure the disease — the poison of the medicine itself stays in the body. Many appear in just this poisoned condition after their afflictions, as their lusts break out more violently than before. Second, in relation to sorrow: each affliction on a wicked person produces another, greater than itself. The last wedge comes last — the one that will split him and fit him for the fire. The sinner is driven from affliction to affliction, like a vagrant passed from one officer to the next, until at last he arrives at hell — his proper place and permanent dwelling — where all sorrows will meet in one that is endless.

The second part of the teaching follows: this evil day is unavoidable. We might as well stop the sun's chariot as it races toward night and drive away the shadows of evening as escape this hour of darkness that is coming upon us all. 'No man has authority

over the wind to restrain the wind, or authority over the day of death; and there is no discharge in time of war' (Ecclesiastes 8:8). Among men, it is possible in some circumstances to get out of military service — by claiming the privilege of age, wealth, physical weakness, or the protection of a powerful patron. Or if all else fails, sending someone in your place or offering a bribe might do it. But in this war the draft is absolute — there are no exemptions. David would gladly have gone in place of his son; we hear him crying, 'Would God I had died for you, O Absalom, my son, my son!' But his son would not be spared — that young man had to go himself. We must in our own person enter the field and look death in the face. Some are foolish enough to promise themselves immunity from this day, as if they carried a guarantee inside their chest. They say they have made a covenant with death and reached an agreement with hell — that when the overwhelming flood passes through, it will not reach them. Like debtors who have bribed the sheriff, they walk about boldly, fearing no arrest. But God tells them that as fast as they tie the knot, He will undo it: 'Your covenant with death will be canceled, and your agreement with Sheol will not stand.' And how could it stand, if God will not seal it? There is a divine law behind this evil day, which came into force at Adam's first sin. That sin laid the fatal blade at the throat of the human race and has been draining its lifeblood ever since. To prevent all escape, God has sown the seeds of death in our very nature and constitution. We can no more run from death than from ourselves. No violent hand need come to cut us down. There is already a worm within the tree, growing from its own substance, that will destroy it. So it is with us: the frailties of our nature will bring us down to the dust. Our death was bred at the moment our life was

conceived. Just as a pregnant woman cannot hold back the hour of labor — which follows naturally from conception — neither can man prevent the death his life is carrying. All the pains and aches a person feels throughout life are but the groans of dying nature — signals that dissolution is approaching. Even if you are a prince sitting in all your state and splendor, death dares to enter your palace and come through all your guards to deliver its fatal message from God — running its blade to your heart. Were you surrounded by a college of physicians consulting over your health, both art and nature must surrender you when that moment arrives. Even when your strength is at its fullest and you eat your bread with a glad heart, the very food that sustains your life carries within it an advance payment toward death — leaving in you the residue that will in time accomplish it. How inescapable must this evil day be, when the very thing our life leans on and is sustained by is the same thing that ultimately knocks us down to the grave! God has a debt to pay to both the first Adam and the second. To the first He owes the wages of sin. To the second He owes the reward of His sufferings. Both debts are paid in full in the world to come — and so death is necessary to carry each person there. Without death, the wicked who are the offspring of the first Adam would not receive the full payment for their sins that the divine threat requires and God is bound to execute. And the godly — the seed of Christ — would not receive the full purchase of His blood, which He would never have shed except on the guarantee of eternal life God promised them before the world began. This is why God has made this day so certain: in it He discharges both bonds.

The third part of the teaching follows: it is every person's duty to prepare and effectively provide for this evil day that so inevitably approaches. This obligation rests on two grounds: first, in terms of duty; second, in terms of wisdom.

First, in terms of duty. We owe it to the great God as an act of loyalty to prepare and arm ourselves for this day. Suppose a subject were entrusted with one of his prince's castles, and this man heard that a powerful enemy was coming to besiege it — yet took no care to stockpile weapons and supplies for the defense, and so the castle fell. How could such a person be cleared of treason? Has he not basely betrayed the fortress — and with it his prince's honor — into enemy hands? Our souls are the castle each of us is called to keep for God. We have clear intelligence that Satan has a design on them, and that the evil day is the time he intends to come against them with all the powers of darkness. To be found faithful to our trust, we are obligated to stand on our guard and equip ourselves with whatever will enable us to make a vigorous defense.

Second, we are obligated to prepare for that day as a fitting response to and use of the opportunities and means God provides for exactly this purpose. We cannot, without shameful ingratitude toward God, waste the helps He gives us for this great work. Everyone would cry out against a man who spent in reckless living the money sent to secure his release from prison. Should we not blush to spend on our sins and Satan the gifts God graciously extends to deliver us from them and from His wrath at the hour of death? What are our Bibles for? What are ministers and preaching for — if not to equip us with armor for the evil day? In short: what is God's intention in lengthening our days and continuing us for a time in the land of the living? Was it so we might have time to

revel in the pleasures of this empty world? Does He give us our precious time to be spent chasing such butterflies as earthly honors and wealth? It cannot be. Wise masters do not set their servants to work that will not justify the cost of a candle to do it by. And truly, nothing short of glorifying God and securing the salvation of our souls is worth the precious time we spend here. The great God has a far greater purpose in this arrangement than most people realize. If we would judge rightly, we should take His own interpretation of His actions. The apostle Peter tells us to 'regard the patience of our Lord as salvation' (2 Peter 3:15). And Paul in Romans 2:4 says: 'Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?' Both passages teach us the mind of God and what He is saying to us in every moment of patience He extends and every inch of time He grants. It is time given for repentance. God sees that as we are, death and judgment could bring us no good news. We are in no condition to welcome the evil day. So mercy pleads within God's heart for the poor creature and asks that a little more time be added to its life — so that by this extension it may be moved to repent before being called to the bar. This is how we come by every additional day that continues to be given to us on earth. And does this not lay on us a strong obligation to use every moment of that time for the very end for which it has been pleaded and granted?

Second, in terms of wisdom. A person's wisdom shows itself most clearly in two things.

First, in what he chooses to make his primary concern.

Second, in choosing the right time for that primary concern.

First, a wise person makes the matter of greatest importance and consequence the subject of his chief care and effort. Only fools and children are intensely occupied with toys and trifles. They are as busy and earnest building a house out of dirt or cards as Solomon was in building the temple. Those childish games are just as satisfying to their limited understanding as great enterprises are to wise men. Now, such is the importance of the evil day — especially the day of death — that how a person responds to it proves him wise or foolish. The end of a thing gives all the actions leading to it their name — good or evil, wise or foolish. The evil day of death is the end of our days, and so it is to be the end — the defining purpose — of all the actions of our life. Our life will ultimately be judged by how it was oriented toward this one day. When all the items of our life — the plans and pursuits we followed — are finally tallied up, if they add up to a blessed death, then we will be seen as truly wise. But if, after all our clever schemes and strategies for other things, we are unprepared for that hour, we must accept the verdict of dying as fools. And there is no greater fool than the dying fool. The Christian goes through life labeled a fool in the world's estimation. But when death comes, the wise world will admit it mislabeled him and will turn the title on itself: 'We fools regarded his life as madness and his death as without honor — but how is he now counted among the children of God, and his lot is among the saints? We have gone astray from the way of truth' (Wisdom of Solomon 5:4-5). That passage is from the Apocrypha — but sinners will find its substance to be quite canonical. It is true that the saints are often outwitted by the world in worldly matters — and no wonder. Nor does this reflect poorly on their wisdom, any more than it reflects on a scholar's ability that a cobbler is bet-

ter at his own trade. Where nature intends higher excellence in a person, it tends to be less attentive to lower things — as we see in humans, who are made to surpass the animals in rational thought, yet are themselves surpassed by one animal or another in each of the physical senses. In the same way, the Christian may well be outpaced in worldly commerce, because he has a nobler object before his eyes that makes him engage with the things of the world with a kind of intentional detachment. He is not very anxious about such matters. If he can die well at last and be vindicated as a wise man at the day of resurrection, all is well. He considers it no shame to wait until then for the public clearing of his wisdom — God can wait even longer for the vindication of His own glorious nature, which will not be fully displayed until that day when He will convict the ungodly of all their harsh thoughts and words about Him. On that day they will be convinced — not before.

Second, a wise person works to time his efforts rightly in pursuing what he has set as his goal. The fool is the one who arrives after the market has closed. As the evil day is of the greatest consequence in what it will bring, so placing our preparation for it in the right season is of the highest importance — and that season must be before it arrives. There are many doors through which the messenger bearing bad news may enter — and we do not know which one he will knock on. We do not know where we will be arrested: in bed or at table, at home or in the open field, among friends who will counsel and comfort us or among enemies who will add cruelty to our sorrow. We do not know when — by day or by night. Many of us do not even know whether it will come in the morning, the noon, or the evening of our lives. As God calls people to work at all hours of the day, so He calls them to their final rest. Death

may come while you are praying or preaching — and how sad to depart in the middle of profaning those sacred things and the name of God in them. Or it may strike your drinking cup from your hand while you sit in a tavern with your companions, or meet you as you reel home and make some ditch your grave — so that as you lived like a beast, you die like a beast. In a word, we do not know what form of evil God will use as His instrument to bring us down — whether a violent hand, or a disease rising from within our own bodies; whether some acute illness or a long, lingering sickness; whether a sickness that destroys the mind while the body still lives — depriving us of our reason — or not; whether such wasting afflictions that our friends are afraid to breathe the same air or look us in the face; whether our afflictions will be accompanied by Satan's temptations and the terrors of an alarmed conscience, or not. Who knows where, when, or what the evil day will be? God conceals these things precisely so that we will prepare for all of them. Caesar never let his soldiers know when or where he intended to march. Knowing those things would torment us with paralyzing fear — not knowing them should awaken us to active preparation. It is a bad time to caulk a ship when she is already at sea, tossed in a storm. This should have been done while she sat safely in harbor. It is equally bad to begin preparing the soul for heaven while tossing on a sickbed. Things done in haste are rarely done well. A man roused from sleep at midnight by a fire blazing on his roof cannot stop to dress properly as he would at any other time — he runs out with one stocking half on and the other not on at all. Those who begin to prepare for eternity on a deathbed, when conscience wakes them with the cry of hell-fire in their chest, I fear go into the next world just as poorly dressed. But they must go,

even without time to put on their armor. And so they are left to repent at leisure in hell for having scrambled together a hasty repentance here. We now come to the application of this teaching.

## CHAPTER 7. THE APPLICATION OF THE POINT



**A**pplication 1. First, this rebukes those who are so far from preparing for the evil day that they will not allow any thought of it to remain with them. They are as unwilling to be drawn into a conversation on this topic as a child is to be carried into a dark room and left there. It is a kind of death for them to think of death, or of what leads to it. Some foolishly believe they will die sooner if they make their will, just as these people believe they hasten the sorrowful day by thinking about it. The thought of death is no more welcome to them than Moses was to Pharaoh. So they say to it what Pharaoh said to Moses: 'Get away from me! Do not see my face again.' Their fear of it drives them to silence and destroy every thought that conscience stirs up about it. At last they gain such control over their consciences that they reach a kind of practical atheism — it becomes as rare for them to think or speak of such things as to see a fly in winter. Nothing is welcome to them now but what is cheerful and pleasurable. Any thought that promises merriment and worldly comfort is welcomed aboard and given a seat beside them; all other thoughts are sent to walk behind. Alas, poor wretches! There might be something to be said for them if this evil day of death and judgment were a mere imaginary thing

with no existence beyond our fears — like the sting of a person's contempt, which hurts only because we think about it and means nothing if we ignore it. But banishing thoughts of this evil day from your mind will give you only a brief and shallow relief. You cannot prevent its coming, and you cannot remove its sting when it arrives simply by refusing to think about it. You are like a passenger on a ship — sleeping or awake, you are moving toward your destination. You are behaving like the foolish bird that buries its head in a bush and thinks itself safe from the hunter because it cannot see him. You are a clear target for God's judgment. He sees you and is taking aim, even when you do not see Him. In fact, by not thinking of this day, you are placing yourself under the unavoidable necessity of perishing. The first step toward safety is recognizing the danger.

Application 2. This also rebukes those who, if they do think about the evil day at all, place it so far in the future that the thought accomplishes almost nothing. They are careful to keep it at such a distance that it loses all power to strike them with a deep sense of urgency and fear. A cannon that would blow you apart if you stood at its mouth does not even frighten those who have moved far enough out of its range. The further away we push the evil day, the weaker its impression on us. 'It cannot be helped,' sinners say. 'We owe a debt to nature — it must be paid. Sickness will come, death will follow, and judgment will bring up the rear.' But they are not expecting these visitors yet. They prophesy of these things as belonging to a distant future. Many fair days will intervene, they hope. And so people are very kind to themselves in this way. First they wish it may be long before it comes, and then, because they want it to be so, they boldly promise themselves it will

be so. Having made that promise, they live according to their vain hopes, deferring the settling of their accounts until the winter evening of old age — when the pleasures of this life will have fewer charms to lure them away. Then, they tell themselves, they will make great preparations for the evil day. Bold man! Who gave you leave to carve out such a large portion of time that is not yours but God's? Who sets the terms of a lease — the tenant or the landlord? Or have you forgotten that you hold your life on lease, and do not own it? This is Satan's device — to make you delay. A present expectation of the evil day would not allow you to sit idle and unprepared. Why do you let your soul idle and rest from its true work by feeding it promises of long life — while death creeps up on you unawares? What shame your unfaithful heart will feel — now telling yourself that your husband is far away and you may fill your time with other loves — if he should arrive before you expected and find you in bed with your sins? And let me tell you: sudden destruction is specifically threatened to people who live in this kind of careless security. Read Matthew 24:48-51, where judgment is declared against the servant who pleases himself with his master's delay: 'The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know.' God would have to go entirely out of His usual ways of dealing with sinners for people like these to escape a sudden ruin. Someone has rightly challenged anyone to show a single example in Scripture of a person marked out for this kind of carelessness who was not overtaken by some striking and sudden judgment. Sodom — how quickly after a sunlit morning did the sky darken and bury them in hours under a storm of fire and their own ashes? Careless Laish, cut off almost before they realized what was happening. Agag — when the clouds of his

fear broke and he saw clear skies on his face, judgment came back on him immediately and shut him up in death. He was cut to pieces at once. The Amalekites slaughtered by David before the triumph of their recent victory had even grown cold. Nebuchadnezzar strutting through his palace with these boastful words in his mouth: 'Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built?' — and before he can finish the sentence, another voice falls from heaven: 'O king, to you it is declared: sovereignty has been removed from you.' And that very hour it was fulfilled, and he was sent to graze with the animals. The rich man blessing himself with plans for many years, and within hours the pillow is pulled from under his head — and you hear no more from him until he is crying out from hell. Indeed, an entire world — with few exceptions — drowned, and they did not know until the day the flood came (Matthew 24:38-39) and swept them all away. And who are you, O man, to promise yourself an exemption, when kings, cities, and entire populations have been ruined in exactly this way?

Application 3. This rebukes those who do think often of this evil day — much against their will — because an awakened conscience is always pricking them and preaching to them as Paul did before Felix, until it makes them tremble as he did. Yet such is the power of sin in their hearts that they press on regardless, continuing in their old ways of sin despite every rebuke from conscience and every frightening thought about the evil day. These wretched people deserve our deepest pity. The person whose conscience is completely dulled — who has broken out of its prison — is like a strong-stomached drunkard: he swallows his sin with pleasure and is not troubled at all. But here is a man who is, if I may say it, spiritually nauseated — his conscience is constantly throwing up the

pleasures he has swallowed, and yet he keeps sinning, though it causes him pain and anguish. Consider, poor wretches, what you are doing. Instead of arming yourselves against the evil day, you are arming the evil day against yourselves. You are lining the bed with pins and needles on which you must soon lie. You are throwing wood into the furnace in which you will at last be thrown — and all this in spite of consciences that God in His mercy has placed in your path so that their stings might serve as a hedge of thorns to block your pursuit of sin. Know therefore, if you press on: as your conscience now robs you of some of the pleasure of your sin, it will add to the horror of your torment hereafter.

Application 4. This rebukes those who, though they are not so violent and outrageous in sin as to be a stench to those around them, still rest in an unprotected condition — they have not fled to Christ for covering and shelter against this day of storm. The reason is that they have a lie in their right hand. They feed on an empty shell, and a deceived heart has led them away from seeking Christ. It would make anyone tremble to see how confidently many rest in false hopes and self-reliance — coming as boldly as Korah with his censer, as undaunted as Moses himself, right up to the mouth of the grave, until suddenly they are swallowed up by destruction and sent to be undeceived in hell — having refused to be moved from their refuges of lies here. Whoever you are, O man, whatever you have to glory in — even the most saint-like life that was ever lived on earth — if that is your shelter against the evil day, you will perish. There is no salvation when that flood comes except Christ. And merely hanging on the outside of the ark by a respectable profession will not save. I can picture how those in the ancient world ran for their lives — some to this hill, others to that

tall tree — and how the waves pursued them until at last they were swept into the consuming flood. Such will be your end, if you turn anywhere else for help than to Christ. But the ark is still waiting for you — it has come right up to your door to take you in. Noah did not put out his hand more willingly to receive the dove than Christ does to receive those who flee to Him for refuge. Do not reject your own mercy for the sake of lying vanity.

Application 5. Let this prompt you — whoever you are — to examine honestly whether you are in any position of readiness for this evil day. Ask your soul soberly and seriously: are you prepared for this day, this evil day? Could you let go of what it will take away, and welcome what it will certainly bring? Death comes like a servant clearing the table — to carry away all your worldly comforts and to call you to give an account of them. Can you say farewell to the one and read the other with peace and confidence? Will it not alarm you to have your health and strength turned into faintness and weakness, your peaceful nights into wakeful, restless hours, your voice that has so often sung to music now acquainted with nothing but sighs and groans? How will you face saying good-bye to those you love most? Can you even now look, so to speak, at the instrument being sharpened that will deliver the fatal stroke separating soul from body? Consider that you were half dead in your limbs — those furthest from the heart — and death had only a few moments' journey before arriving at your heart and driving your last breath from your body. Perhaps the sheer unavoidability of these things makes you harden yourself against them. That reasoning might help a pagan somewhat — one who has not settled whether there is another world — to somewhat blunt the terror that would otherwise cut deeper into his bewildered heart. But if

you believe in another world and in the judgment that stands just behind death, ready to assign you your unchangeable state in joy or misery — surely you cannot comfort an awakened conscience with so weak a remedy. Think, therefore, what answer you intend to give to the great God at your appearance before Him, when He asks what you can say why the sentence of eternal condemnation should not be pronounced against you. We deal unfaithfully with our own souls if we do not bring our thinking to this question. If you are now asking how to prepare against the evil day — so that you may stand before that dreadful bar and live in the meantime without being crushed by a slavish fear of it — take these directions.

First, if you would have a blessed outcome in this evil day — so as to stand in judgment before the great God — do not rest until you have entered into a covenant relationship with Christ. The living comfort of dying David was drawn from the covenant God had made with him. 'This is all my salvation and all my desire.' How can you put your head into the other world without horror if you have no solid ground for knowing that Christ will claim you as His own? Heaven has its proper heirs, and so does hell. The heirs of heaven are those who are in covenant with God. The foundation of heaven was laid through a covenant, and all the mansions there are prepared for a people in covenant with Him: 'Gather My godly ones to Me, those who have made a covenant with Me.' But how may you enter into this covenant relationship? First, break your covenant with sin. By nature you are a covenant-servant to sin and Satan. Perhaps you have not explicitly and formally sealed this covenant in words as witches do — yet in effect you have done so: by doing Satan's work, obeying your sinful desires, and accepting

the reward of unrighteousness — the pleasure and worldly advantages they have paid you — you have declared yourself his. If you would ever be taken into covenant with God, you must break with this. A covenant with hell and a covenant with heaven cannot stand together.

Second, betroth yourself to Christ. The covenant of grace is the inheritance God settles only on Christ's bride. Rebekah did not receive the jewelry and fine clothing until she had agreed to become Isaac's wife (Genesis 24:53). All the promises are 'Yes' and 'Amen' in Christ. Receive Christ, and with Him you receive all of them. The one who owns the tree has the right to all its fruit. Now, so that you do not rush into a hasty union with Christ that Christ will later disown — making it null and void in the end — you must look carefully to see whether what Christ requires in every soul He takes as His own is truly found in you. First, consider whether you can genuinely love the person of Christ. Look at Him long and carefully as He is set forth in all His spiritual excellence. Are these qualities that your heart can truly embrace? Does His holy nature and all the heavenly grace that adorns Him make Him desirable to you? Or would you actually prefer Him if He were less perfectly holy? More than that — is your heart so inflamed with longing for Him that you can love Him with the love of a spouse? A woman may love someone as a friend without being able to love him as a husband. A friendly love can coexist with love for someone else equally strong, or even stronger. But the love of a spouse will tolerate neither rival. Can you find in your heart to forsake all others and cling to Christ? Does your heart say it is ready — that you are willing to go with your dear Jesus, even if He takes you away from father and home? Is your confidence in His power to protect you

from all your enemies — sin, wrath, and hell — such that you can resolutely place the life of your soul in His hands, to be saved by the sole virtue of His blood and the strength of His almighty arm? And is your trust in His care to provide for you in this life and the next such that you can rest in whatever He has promised to do for you? In short, if you have Christ, you must not only love Him but also, for His sake, all your new family — those to whom your union with Him makes you related. Can you bring yourself to call the saints your brothers and sisters? Can you love them sincerely, setting aside all the old grudges you have carried against them? Some of them you will find poor and persecuted — yet Christ is not ashamed to call them brothers, and you must not be either. If you find your heart now in the condition these questions describe, I dare not refuse the match — I dare declare Christ and you husband and wife. Go, poor soul — if I may call so glorious a bride poor — go and comfort yourself with the expectation of your Bridegroom's coming for you. And when the evil day approaches and death itself draws near, do not look at it with terror. Instead, revive as old Jacob did when he heard the news: the chariot is coming to carry you over to the embrace of your husband, who is even now in such great honor and majesty in heaven that you may be sure He is able to welcome you when you arrive. Among all things that are ours through being Christ's, the apostle includes this one: death is ours. He was right to say so — otherwise we would never have looked on death as a gift, but only as a judgment. Soul, you are now beyond any danger that the evil day can truly do you. Yet there remains something for you to do if you would walk in a comfortable expectation of the evil day. We see that even gracious people may, through lack of holy watchfulness, fall into conditions that put a

sting back into their thoughts of the evil day. David, who at one time would not fear to walk through the valley of the shadow of death, is at another time so frightened as he is led toward it that he cries: 'Spare me, O Lord, that I may recover strength before I go and am no more' (Psalm 39:13). A child who loves his father may still do something that makes him afraid to come home. Now, Christian, if you would live in a comfortable expectation of the evil day —

First, work to die to this life and its enjoyments more and more every day. Death does not come with the same force to the person whose strength has been spent by a long wasting illness as it does to one who has lain sick only a few days and still has the physical strength to resist strongly. The same is true here. The Christian whose love for this life and its pleasures has been slowly dying for many years will let go of them more easily than the one whose attachment is still strong. Not all Christians are mortified to the world in equal measure. Paul tells us he died daily. He was constantly sending more and more of his heart out of the world, so that by the time he actually came to die, all his affections had already packed up and gone ahead of him — which made him all the more ready to follow: 'I am already being poured out as a drink offering' (2 Timothy 4:6). If only a tooth needs pulling, the tighter it is rooted, the more pain there is in the drawing. Loosen the roots of your affections from the world, and the tree will fall more easily.

Second, take care to prove yourself diligent and faithful to God in your place and calling. The clearer you stand in your own thoughts about the uprightness of your heart throughout your Christian life, the greater composure you will have when the evil day comes. 'I beseech You, O Lord,' said good Hezekiah when he

thought he was at the point of death, 'remember now how I have walked before You in truth and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in Your sight.' This cannot serve as our confidence before God, but it will be a much better companion in the dying hour than a scolding conscience. If the blood is bad, the spirits will be tainted too. The more our life has been corrupted by hypocrisy and unfaithfulness, the weaker our faith will be when the hour of death arrives. There is a great difference between two children coming home at evening — one from the field, where he has been diligent and faithful in his father's work, and another who has been playing truant most of the day. The first comes in with confidence and can stand before his father. The other sneaks off to bed and is afraid his father will see him or ask where he has been. Take care of your walk before God. These have been as trying times as England has ever seen. It has required more care and courage than in former times to maintain sincerity. And that is why it is now so rare to find Christians — especially those whose place and calling have put them most in the wind of temptation — leaving the stage of life at death with the applause of inward peace in their hearts.

Third, make the thoughts of the evil day familiar to your soul. Handle this serpent. Walk in regular, serious meditation on it. Do not run from these thoughts simply because they are unpleasant to the flesh — that is exactly the way to increase your terror of it. Deal with your soul when it shies away from thoughts of affliction or death as you would deal with a horse that startles and bolts as you ride. When the horse shies from something, you do not give in to his fear and turn back — that only makes him worse the next time. Instead, you ride him straight up to the thing he is afraid of, and in time you break him of the habit. The evil day is not such a frighten-

ing thing to you as a Christian that you should shy away from it. Bring your heart close to it. Show your soul what Christ has done to remove the sting from it, what sweet promises have been given precisely to overcome the fear of it, and what you will gain through it. These things will settle and compose your spirit. Avoiding thoughts of the evil day will only increase your fear of it and keep you more in bondage to it.

CHAPTER 8. THE SECOND  
ARGUMENT WITH WHICH THE  
EXHORTATION IS PRESSED, DRAWN  
FROM THE ASSURED VICTORY  
WHICH SHALL CROWN THE SOUL'S  
CONFLICT IN THIS ARMOR



**W**e come now to the second argument the apostle uses to press the exhortation: the glorious victory that hovers over the heads of believers during the fight and will surely crown them in the end. This is contained in the words: 'and having done everything, to stand firm.' The phrase is brief, but full.

SECTION 1.

First, observe: heaven is not won with fine words and a fair profession — 'having done everything.' The Christian who actually does the work is the one who will stand firm when the empty boaster of his faith falls. The great talkers about religion are often the least doers. A religion that does not produce a holy life as its credential is empty. Sacrifice without obedience is sacrilege — it robs God of what He values most. A great captain once struck one of his sol-

diers for railing against the enemy, saying he had not called him to rail against the enemy but to fight him and kill him. It is not crying out against the devil and denouncing sin in prayer or conversation, but actually fighting and putting sin to death, that God primarily looks for. Without this, a person is merely beating the air — there are no marks of battle on his flesh or his unmortified sins to show he has fought. Paul was in earnest — he bore witness on his body, marked and bruised by the blows of self-mortification. It was not a little showing off in front of the Philistines that won David his wife, but shedding their blood. And is it so small a thing to be a son of the King of Heaven that you think you can obtain it without giving real proof of your zeal for God and your hatred of sin? Not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work — 'this man,' says the apostle, 'will be blessed in what he does' (James 1:25). Notice: not by his doing, but in his doing — he will find blessedness in the very path of obedience he walks in. The empty professor disappoints others who, seeing his leaves, expect fruit and find none. And at last he disappoints himself — he expects to reach heaven and will miss it. Tertullian speaks of some who think that God is satisfied if He is feared and respected in the heart, even if it shows little in their actions — and therefore they suppose they can sin and believe in God and reverence Him just the same. 'This,' he says, 'is to be an adulteress and yet claim to be chaste, to poison one's father and yet claim to be dutiful.' But let such people know, the same writer says, that if they can sin and believe, God will pardon them with a contradiction as well — He will forgive them, but they will go to hell for all that. If you would stand firm at last, make sure you are found doing the work your Lord has left you to complete — and do not trust in empty words, as the prophet warns in Jeremiah 7.

## SECTION 2.

Second, observe: such is God's mercy in Christ toward His children that He accepts their weak efforts — joined with sincerity and perseverance in His service — as if they were full obedience. This is why they are here said to have 'done everything.' Who would not serve such a Lord! Servants sometimes complain that their masters are so demanding that nothing satisfies them, not even their best effort. But this cannot be charged against God. Be as faithful as to give your best, and God is so gracious that He will pardon your worst. David understood this grace of the Gospel when he said, 'Then I shall not be ashamed when I have regard for all Your commandments' (Psalm 119:6) — 'when my eye is toward all Your commandments.' A traveler has his eye on his destination, even though he has not yet reached it. He is heading there and pushing on with all he has to arrive. So it is with the saint's heart toward all of God's commands — pressing forward, drawing closer and closer to full obedience. Such a soul will never be put to shame. But woe to those who use weakness as a cover for laziness — who spend their energy and strength chasing the world or their sins, and then, when called to account, blame it all on their infirmity, saying they simply cannot serve God any better. These people do to God what two men did to their king — Francis I of France — who each cut off the other's right hand and then used their lameness as an excuse not to serve in his galleys, for which they were sent to the gallows. In the same way, many will be found at last to have disabled themselves — by refusing the help the Spirit offered them and wasting what they were given. They will receive the reward of hypocrites, as they are. God knows how to distinguish between the sincere

struggles of a saint amid his genuine weaknesses and the excuses of a false heart. But we will pass over these and briefly address four points that stand clearly in the words.

First, here is the necessity of perseverance: 'having done everything.'

Second, here is the necessity of divine armor in order to persevere until we have done everything. Why else would the apostle tell them to take up this armor for this purpose, if they could manage without it?

Third, here is the certainty of persevering and overcoming at last — if clothed with this armor. Otherwise, it would be little encouragement to tell them to take armor that would not reliably defend them.

Fourth, here is the glorious result of the saint's perseverance — set before us as that which will amply repay all the pain and patience of the war: 'having done everything, to stand firm.' From these four observations flow four distinct teachings.

First, whoever would be a soldier of Christ must persevere.

Second, there can be no perseverance without true grace in the heart.

Third, where true grace is present, that soul will persevere.

Fourth, to stand firm at the end of this war will abundantly repay all the danger and hardship endured throughout it.

### SECTION 3.

Whoever would be a soldier of Christ must persevere to the end of his life in this war against Satan. The phrase 'having done everything' comes after our conflict with death: 'that you may be able to resist in the evil day; and having done everything, to stand firm.' We have not done everything until that final battle is fought. The last enemy is death. The Greek word carries the sense of finishing a matter and bringing it to a complete conclusion — just as Philippians 2:12 is well translated, 'Work out your salvation,' meaning bring it to completion. Be not half-Christians — go all the way through. The thoroughgoing Christian is the true Christian. Not the one who enters the field, but the one who holds the field. Not the one who sets out, but the one who holds out in this holy war, deserves the name of a saint. There is no such thing in Christianity as an honorable retreat — no such command in all of Christ's military discipline as 'fall back and lay down your arms.' No — you must press forward and hold your position until called off by death.

First, we are under a covenant and oath to do this. In former times, soldiers would take an oath not to desert their banner but to remain faithful to their commander — this was called the military oath. Every Christian is under such an oath. It is so essential to being a saint that believers are described by it in Psalm 50:5: 'Gather My godly ones to Me, those who have made a covenant with Me.' We are not yet Christians until we have signed this covenant — and without any reservation. When we take on the profession of Christ's name, we enlist ourselves on His muster-roll, pledging to live and die with Him in opposition to all His enemies. 'Every people will walk in the name of its god, and we will walk in the name of the Lord our God' — and what does it mean to walk in the name

of our God if not to fight under the banner of His Gospel, where His name is displayed, by giving an eternal defiance to sin and Satan? If a captain had no such bond on his soldiers, he might find himself without them when the day of battle comes. That is why Christ states plainly the terms on which He will enlist us among His disciples: 'If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.' He will not receive us until we have freely surrendered ourselves to His disposal — so that there will be no arguing with His commands afterward, but going and coming at His word, as one under His authority.

Second, perseverance is necessary because our enemy perseveres in opposing us. There is no truce in the devil's heart, no ceasefire in our enemy's camp. If an enemy continues to assault a city and those within stop resisting, the outcome is easy to predict. The prophet sent to Bethel did his errand faithfully and withstood Jeroboam's temptation — but on his way home he was drawn aside by the old prophet and at last killed by a lion. In the same way, many flee one temptation but, not persevering, are conquered by another. Those who escape Satan's sword at one time are slain by it at another. Joash was full of promise in his youth, but it did not last long. Indeed, many precious servants of God — not maintaining as vigorous a resistance in their later years as in their earlier ones — have fallen badly, as we see with Solomon, Asa, and others. It is hard, when a line is drawn to a great length, to keep it from slackening. It is hard to hold something in your hand for a long time without a numbness creeping in and your grip loosening. This is why we are so often told to hold fast to our profession of faith. But when we see an enemy crouching to catch us when we fall, that should sharpen our grip all the more.

Third, because the promise of life and glory is given to the persevering soul. The crown stands at the finish line — it belongs to the one who reaches the end of the race. 'To him who overcomes I will give' — not in a single skirmish, but in the whole war. 'For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised' (Hebrews 10:36). There is a remarkable emphasis in the word 'henceforth' that Paul uses in 2 Timothy 4:7-8: 'I have fought the good fight... henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness.' Was it not laid up before? Yes — but having persevered and drawn near the finish line, being within sight of home and ready to die, he now takes a firmer hold of the promise. In this sense a gracious soul is nearer to its salvation after every victory than it was before — because it draws closer to the end of the race, which is the appointed time for receiving the promised salvation. At that moment, and not before, the crown drops onto his head.

Here we may pause to lament the many apostate professors of our own day. This spiritual disease of falling away was never more widespread. How many are sick with it at this moment, and not a few have already fallen into a spiritual sleep from it. These troubled times have produced more broken professors than broken merchants. Where is the congregation that cannot point to some who have outlived their profession? They are like the silkworm, which — after all its spinning — works its way out of its own cocoon and ends up a common fly. Are there not many whose forwardness in religion we once stood gazing at with admiration, as the disciples marveled at the temple — saying to one another, as they said to Christ, 'See what stones these are!' What polished gifts and shining graces were here! And now not one stone is left on an-

other. Did you ever think that those who once walked in such goodly array toward heaven beside you would afterward turn about and run over to the devil's side — becoming blasphemers, worldlings, and atheists, as some have done? What a grievous change this is! 'It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them' (2 Peter 2:21). Better never to have taken one step toward heaven than to pour such scorn and reproach on the ways of God. Tertullian writes: the one who has known both services — Satan's and God's — and then revolts from God to the devil, appears by his choice to have compared the two and, as the conclusion of his mature judgment, to have declared the devil's service — which he has chosen — better than God's — which he has abandoned. How is it possible for anyone to sin under a heavier guilt or go to hell under a greater weight of wrath? These are the ones God finds most repulsive. He who hates putting away a wife is far more offended at being so put away Himself. 'If he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him' (Hebrews 10:38). The apostate is said to trample on the Son of God (Hebrews 10:29) — as though He were no better than the dirt under his feet. Well — he will have trampling for trampling. God Himself will set His foot on him (Psalm 119:118): 'You have rejected all those who wander from Your statutes.' And who do you think will tire out first? The one under the foot bears the full weight of the person standing on him. To be under the foot of God is to lie under the full weight of God's wrath. Pity and pray for such ruined souls. They deserve our pity, and they are the object of our prayer. Though they have fallen very low, they have not yet fallen

into hell. Now and then we see an Eutychus raised — someone who has fallen from such a height. And you who stand: take heed, lest you fall.

#### SECTION 4.

Second, a soul without divine armor cannot persevere. I have described what this divine armor is, as the apostle sets out its individual pieces. The sanctifying graces of God's Spirit are this armor. A person in whom these have not been genuinely worked will never hold out to pass through all the stages of the Christian race — to fight all the battles that must be fought before victory is won. Common gifts of the Spirit — such as enlightenment, conviction, sudden emotional surges and flashes of warm feeling — may carry a person forward for a time with an impressive appearance of zeal for God and eagerness in his profession. But the strength these provide is quickly spent. The hearers of John the Baptist mentioned in John 5:35 received some light and warmth from sitting under his burning ministry — but how long did it last? 'You were willing to rejoice for a while.' The colors painted on them were vivid, but they were not laid in oil — and so they washed off quickly. The foolish virgins had lamps that burned just as brightly as those of the wise virgins, and they expected the same glad day when Christ would come. But their lamps were out before He appeared — and the outcome was no better than if they had never carried lamps at all. The stony ground was more forward than the best soil: the seed sprang up immediately, as if a harvest were soon to follow — but a few sharp frosts turned it pale, and the harvest day proved a day of desperate sorrow. All these examples, and many more in Scripture, demonstrate that nothing short of gen-

uine, solid grace — a living principle of divine life in the soul — will persevere. However eager formalists and superficial professors may be in promising themselves hopes of reaching heaven, they will find it too great a leap for their short-winded souls to make. The reasons are as follows.

First, they lack a living principle to draw strength from Christ to carry them through their course. What enables the gracious soul to persevere is the constant supply it receives from Christ — just as the arm and foot are kept alive by the vital flow they receive from the heart. 'I live,' says Paul, 'yet not I, but Christ lives in me' — meaning: I live at Christ's expense; He sustains not only my soul but my grace. The worldly person, lacking this union, must inevitably waste and decline over time. He has no root to stand on. Once a corpse begins to decay, it never recovers — it grows worse every day until it dissolves entirely into corruption. No remedy will do it any good. But where there is a living principle, when a member is wounded, nature sends a supply of strength and cooperates with the treatment toward a cure. The same difference exists between a gracious and an ungracious person. See them contrasted in Proverbs 24:16: 'For a righteous man falls seven times, and rises again, but the wicked stumble in time of calamity' — that is, in falling he falls further and has no power to recover himself. When Cain sinned, watch how he falls further and further — like a stone rolling down a hill — never stopping until he reaches the bottom of despair: from envying his brother to malice, from malice to murder, from murder to brazen lying and open defiance of God Himself, and from there to despair. How true it is: 'Evil men will proceed from bad to worse' (2 Timothy 3:13). But when a saint falls, he rises — because in falling he has a living principle to cry

out to Christ, and such an interest in Christ that Christ moves to help him. 'Lord, save me!' said Peter when he began to sink — and immediately Christ's hand was extended. He rebuked Peter for his unbelief, but He helped him.

Second, an unregenerate soul has no guarantee that the common gifts of the Spirit he currently possesses will continue. They come to him on the same terms as his temporal blessings. A worldly person, when his table is most richly spread, cannot produce any word of promise from God's hand that he will be provided for at the next meal. God gives these things to the wicked as we might give a crust of bread or a night's shelter in the barn to a beggar. It is our generosity — the beggar could not take us to court for refusing. In the same way, God was not bound to give these common gifts of the Spirit, and He is not bound to maintain them. You have some knowledge of the things of God — but you may still die without real understanding in the end. You are a sinner in chains: restraining grace is what keeps you in. That may be removed, and you may be released to your sins as freely as you ever were. And how can a person persevere when in a single day he may go from praying to cursing, from a conscience that is troubled and complaining to one that is seared and hardened?

Third, every unregenerate person, however busy he may be in his religious profession, carries commitments that will, when put to the test, inevitably pull him away sooner or later. One is bound to the world — and when a good opportunity comes, he goes away for it. He cannot have both, and now he will show which he loved most. 'Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world.' Another is enslaved to a particular sin — and when that calls, he must answer it in spite of his profession, his conscience, God, and

everything else. Herod feared John and did many things — but love is stronger than fear. His love for Herodias overcame his fear of John, and in one stroke he cut off John's head and extinguished the promising signs of tenderness in his conscience and the early stirrings of reformation. One root of bitterness or another will spring up in such a person. If the fundamental disposition of the soul is ungodly, it will eventually come out — however much a religious surface may appear for a time from some external cause.

This shows us the root of all final apostasy: the absence of a thorough change of heart. The apostate does not lose the grace he once had — he reveals that he never had any. It is no surprise to hear of someone going bankrupt who was worse than nothing when he first set up business. Many take up their sainthood on borrowed credit, and carry on their religious duties on the reputation they have gained from others' opinions of them. They believe themselves to be Christians because others seem to think they are — and so their main business is to keep up their outward reputation by visible zeal in the more public exercises of religion, without ever building up a genuine stock of grace within. This proves their undoing in the end. Let this move us, in the fear of God, to examine carefully the basis on which we hold our profession. Is there something within you that corresponds to your outward zeal? Have you laid a solid foundation? Is the superstructure not too top-heavy for the weak foundation beneath it? They say that trees grow as much below ground in their roots as above ground in their branches — and so does true grace. Remember what destroyed the seed in the stony ground: it had no root. And why? Because the ground was stony. Be willing to let the plow go deep enough to humble you for sin and tear your heart away from sin. A soul that

has been truly and thoroughly brought out of love for sin as sin will never be on fully friendly terms with it again. In short, examine seriously the great motive force behind all your religious activity. Do as someone who wants to know his true financial worth: he sets what he owes on one side and what he actually owns on the other. When he has set aside enough to cover all debts and obligations, whatever remains is truly his. Do the same: consider what you are committed to — your worldly reputation, your financial interests, a servile fear of God, a selfish desire for happiness. When you have allowed for all of these, see what remains of your genuine fear of God and love for God. If nothing remains, you are spiritually bankrupt. If something remains — the less there is, the weaker a Christian you are. And when you are tested in God's fire, you will suffer the loss of everything else, which will burn up like hay and stubble.

## SECTION 5.

Every soul clothed with this armor of God will stand and persevere. Or put another way: true grace can never be conquered. The Christian is born a conqueror — the gates of hell will not prevail against him. 'Whatever is born of God overcomes the world' (1 John 5:4). Notice from where the victory is dated: from his new birth. Victory is sown into his new nature — that seed of God which will keep him from being swallowed up by sin or Satan. As Christ rose to die no more, so He raises souls from the grave of sin, never again to come under the power of spiritual death. These holy ones of God will not see decay. This is why the one who believes is said, in the present tense, to already have eternal life. As the law that came four hundred years later could not nullify the promise

made to Abraham, so nothing that intervenes can prevent the fulfillment of that promise of eternal life given to Christ on their behalf before the foundation of the world. If a saint could ever finally fall short of eternal life, it could only be for one of three reasons: first, because God might forsake the Christian and withdraw His grace and help; second, because the believer might forsake God; or third, because Satan might pluck him out of God's hands. I know of no fourth possibility. But none of these can happen.

First, God can never forsake the Christian. Some hasty words have been spoken by souls under severe temptation, expressing fear that God might cast them off — but those fears have been refuted, and those souls have retracted their words with shame, as we see with Job and David. What remarkable security the great God has given His children in this regard!

First, in His promises. He has said: 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.' Five negatives are packed into that promise like seals to ratify it for our faith. He assures us that no second thought about His purposes of love and special grace toward His children has ever arisen, or ever can arise, in His heart (Romans 11:29): 'The gifts and calling of God are irrevocable.' Even when His people sin against Him, their stubborn behavior does not stir up thoughts of abandoning them — but of restoring them: 'Because of the iniquity of his unjust gain I was angry and struck him; I hid My face and was angry, and he went on turning away in the way of his heart. I have seen his ways, but I will heal him' (Isaiah 57:17-18). The water of the saints' failures, poured on the fire of God's love, cannot quench it. Whom He loves, He loves to the end.

Second, to give even greater weight and assurance to our doubting and wavering hearts, God seals His promise with an oath. See Isaiah 54:8-10: 'With everlasting lovingkindness I will have compassion on you, says the Lord your Redeemer. For this is like the days of Noah to Me, when I swore that the waters of Noah would not flood the earth again; so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you nor will I rebuke you.' He goes on to say: 'For the mountains may be removed and the hills may shake, but My lovingkindness will not be removed from you, and My covenant of peace will not be shaken.' And lest anyone think this was a charter belonging only to the Jews, we find it established in verse 17 as the heritage of every servant of God: 'This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their vindication is from Me, declares the Lord.' Surely God, who takes such care to make His children's inheritance secure, will have little patience with those who use their ingenuity to undermine and weaken His deeds of assurance — to disprove His own testament. They could not serve Satan's cause better if they had been bribed to do it.

Third, God has confirmed these promises in their actual fulfillment to Christ, the believers' attorney. As God before the foundation of the world gave the promise of eternal life to Christ on their behalf, so He has now given Christ actual possession of that glorious place — as their advocate and representative — where that eternal life will be enjoyed by them. As Christ came from heaven on their behalf, so He returned there to take and hold possession of the inheritance that God had promised from of old, and that He paid for in full at His death. What ground for fear, then, can remain in the believer's heart about God's love standing firm toward him — when he sees the whole covenant already fulfilled to Christ

on his behalf? God not only called Christ to, sustained Him in, and upheld Him through the great work He was to complete for us, but also justified Him in His resurrection and release from the grave, and received Him into heaven to sit at the right hand of the Majesty on high — by which Christ has not only possession of our inheritance, but full authority to give it to all who believe.

A second source of fear to the believer about his perseverance may come from within himself. He has many fears and trembling moments — fears that he will ultimately forsake God. The road to heaven is long, and his grace is weak. 'Is it not possible,' he says, 'that this small measure of grace will fail, and I fall short of glory in the end?' Here too the covenant has made full provision to scatter this cloud.

First, the Spirit of God is given precisely to prevent this. Christ left His mother in the care of John, but He left His saints in the care of His Spirit — to guide and guard them so they would not lose their way on the journey to heaven. How sweet is Ezekiel 36:27: 'I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.' He does not say they will have His Spirit if they walk in His statutes. No — His Spirit will cause them to do it. But perhaps you fear you may grieve the Spirit, and that in His anger He will leave you, and you will perish for lack of His help and guidance. Answer: The Spirit of God is indeed sensitive to unkindness, and when a saint sins, the Spirit may withdraw in terms of present comfort and assistance — but never in terms of His care. Like a mother who lets her difficult child walk on its own until it stumbles and starts crying to be picked up again, but who never takes her eye off it so as to let it come to real harm. The Spirit withdrew from Samson, and

he fell into the Philistines' hands — and this made him cry to God, and the Spirit put forth His strength in him again. In fact, the Spirit's appointed office is to abide with the saints forever: 'He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever' (John 14:16).

Second, one of the main purposes of Christ's intercession is to obtain perseverance for our weak graces from God. 'I have prayed for you,' Christ said to Peter, 'that your faith may not fail.' But was that not a special privilege granted to him alone, which might be denied to another? Do we think that Christ's love plays favorites? Does He pray for one child more than another? Children are prone to such jealousies — and so Christ heads them off by saying to Peter in the very next words: 'When you have turned back, strengthen your brothers' (Luke 22:32). Meaning: when you experience the power and effectiveness of My prayer for your faith, carry this good news to them, that their hearts may be strengthened too. But what comfort would that carry if Christ were not praying for them just as He prayed for Peter? Does Christ pray for us? Does He not, in fact, live for the very purpose of interceding for us? How can children who are the subject of so many prayers — such prayers — ever perish? The prayers of the saints carry great power. Jacob wrestled and prevailed with God. This was his sword and bow — by which he won the victory and had power with God. This was the key with which Elijah opened and shut heaven. If the weak prayers of the saints, coming in Christ's name, have such credit in heaven that they can go to God's treasury and carry away as much as the arms of faith can hold — O then, what prevailing power does Christ's intercession have! He is the Son — the obedient Son — who has come from completing His great work on earth,

and now asks His Father for nothing except what the Father has bid Him ask. Indeed, He asks for nothing that the Father has not already anticipated in His own heart. And all of this for a Father who loves those Christ prays for as much as He loves Christ Himself. Tell Satan to be gone. Do not say your weak faith will perish — not until you hear that Christ has stopped praying, or that He has been refused.

Third, let us examine whether Satan is able to tear the Christian away and step between him and home. I have had occasion to address this subject elsewhere, so less needs to be said here. Abundant provision has been made against his assaults. The saint is wrapped in the everlasting arms of Almighty power — and what can a cursed devil do against God, who fastened those chains on the devil that he cannot shake off? When Satan is able to pull out the dart of divine wrath from his own conscience that God has lodged there, then let him think about plucking souls from God's hand. How can he overcome you when he cannot even tempt you except at the time God appoints? And if God sets Satan a time to assault the Christian He loves so dearly, He will surely choose the time when Satan will be repulsed with the greatest shame.

Application 1. Away, then, with the doctrine that says a person may be a saint today and not a saint tomorrow — a Peter one moment and a Judas the next. What a bitter and unwholesome thing this is! It is a principle that at once cuts across the whole design of God in the Gospel covenant, casts a dark shadow on the honor of Christ, and wounds the saints' comfort to the heart.

First, it contradicts God's design in the Gospel covenant, which is plainly this: that His children might be placed in a state that is secure and safe from finally falling — a security they did not have

under the first covenant. See Romans 4:16: 'For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants.' God, precisely because of the weakness of the first covenant — arising from the changeable nature of man — made a new covenant of an entirely different structure. Not of works, as the first was, but of faith. Why? The apostle tells us: so that the promise would be guaranteed to all the descendants — so that not one soul who by faith would be adopted into Abraham's family and become a child of the promise would fail to inherit what the promise offers, which is eternal life (Titus 1:2). And the reason it is guaranteed is that the promise rests on grace — God's unchangeable, sovereign goodwill in Christ — and not on the variable and unstable obedience of man, as the first covenant did. But if a saint may finally fall away, then the promise is no more secure under this covenant than under the first — and God would have failed to achieve the very end He set for Himself.

Second, the doctrine of final apostasy casts a dark shadow on Christ's honor — both as the one entrusted with the saints' salvation and as the one who has a personal stake in it. First, as He is entrusted with the saints' salvation: He tells us that they have been given to Him by His Father for this very purpose — that He would give them eternal life. The authority He has been given over all mankind was given precisely to equip Him to accomplish this one task (John 17:2). He accepts the charge, claims them as His sheep, knows every one of them personally, and promises to give them eternal life — they will never perish, and no one will pluck them out of His hand (John 10:27-28). How well does it honor Christ, then, to say His sheep may still die in the ditch of final apostasy,

for all of this? Second, as He has a personal interest in the salvation of every saint: the life of His own glory is bound up in the eternal life of His saints. It is true that when Adam fell, God preserved His own honor — but how can Christ do otherwise, when He is so closely united to every believing soul? Between God and Adam there was a covenant of friendship. But there is no such union there as here, where Christ and His saints form one Christ — which is why His church is called Christ in 1 Corinthians 12:12: '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.' Christ and His members make one Christ. Is it possible that a part of Christ could one day be found burning in hell? Could Christ be a crippled Christ? Could a member drop off here and another there? It is as possible for all of them to be lost as for any one of them — and how can Christ lose a member of His mystical body without losing His glory? Does not every member contribute something to the body, indeed add to its honor? The church is called His fullness (Ephesians 1:23). How dishonoring to Christ to think that He will be without part of His fullness — and how can a body be full and complete while missing a member?

Third, this doctrine wounds the saints' comfort to the heart and leaves their joy bleeding. Paul says he did not water down what he gave his hearers. He did not dilute the rich wine of God's Word with the water of human speculation — he gave them pure Gospel. This principle of saints falling from grace gives a painful dilution to the sweet wine of the promises. The soul-reviving comfort that sparkles in them arises from the firm assurance with which they are made over to believers in Christ — to have and to hold forever. Hence they are called 'the sure mercies of David'

(Acts 13:34) — mercies that will never fail. This, this is the wine that truly gladdens the heart of a saint. Though he may be disciplined within the house when he sins, he will not be turned out of it. As God promised to David's descendants in the type (Psalm 89:33): 'Nevertheless My lovingkindness I will not utterly take from him, nor deal falsely in My faithfulness.' And verse 36: 'His descendants shall endure forever.' If anything could separate the believer from the love of God in Christ, it would be as a hole in the bottom of his cup, draining out all his joy. He would then have reason to fear that every temptation or affliction might destroy him — and so the curse of the wicked would become the saint's portion too. His life would hang in constant uncertainty, and the dreaded expectation of his possible final ruin would consume the joy of his present hope. How contrary such a condition is to the spirit of adoption and the full assurance of hope that the grace of the new covenant gives — anyone can see by reading the Word.

Application 2. This truth provides a powerful remedy to restore the fainting spirits of weak believers who are overwhelmed by fears about whether they will persevere and hold out to the end of their war. Be of good courage, poor soul. God has given Christ responsibility for the life of every soul within the ark of His covenant. Your eternal safety has been provided for. 'Having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end' (John 13:1). Has He made you willing in the day of His power to march under His banner and take up His cause against sin and hell? The same power that overcame your rebellious heart and drew it to Himself will overcome all your enemies — within and without — for you. Do not say you are a bruised reed. With that very reed He will break Satan's head and will not stop until He has brought judgment to

complete victory in your soul. He who can take a small band of wounded men and give them a strong city can take a wounded spirit and bring it to triumph over sin and devils. The ark stood in the middle of the Jordan until the whole camp of Israel had safely crossed into Canaan (Joshua 3). And so does the covenant — which the ark represented — stand firm. Indeed, Christ, the covenant, and all God's purposes stand together to secure the saints' safe passage to heaven. If but one believer drowns, the covenant must drown with him. Christ and the saint are set together as co-heirs of the same inheritance (Romans 8:17): 'If children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.' You cannot challenge the one without questioning the security of the other's title. When you hear that Christ has been turned out of heaven, or that He Himself is willing to sell His inheritance there — then, poor Christian, begin to fear your coming there, and not until then. Co-heirs cannot sell an inheritance unless both surrender their rights — and Christ will never do that, nor will He permit you to.

Application 3. This truth calls for a word or two of caution. While there is no danger of a true saint falling from grace, there is real danger that others may take this comfortable doctrine and fall into careless security and presumptuous boldness. A guard rail is therefore necessary here, so that we may stand safely and look at the pleasant view this truth presents. The same flower from which the bee draws honey, the spider draws poison. What serves as a restorative to the saint's grace becomes an incentive to the lusts of a wicked man. What Paul said of the law, we may truly say of the Gospel as well: sin, taking occasion from the grace of the Gospel and its sweet promises, deceives the worldly heart and stirs up in

him all manner of wickedness. Indeed, sin rarely grows as rank as it does in those who water its roots with the grace of the Gospel. There are two ways this doctrine may be abused.

First, into a neglect of duty.

Second, into a license to sin. Beware of both.

First, beware of falling into neglect of duty on the reasoning that, if you are a Christian, you cannot fall from grace. Against this misuse, take these three points as an antidote.

First, there are other reasons to invite — indeed, to compel — you to a constant, vigorous performance of duty, quite apart from any fear of falling away. If nothing else moves you, you are likely not a Christian at all. What — is nothing enough to make a child diligent about his father's business except fear of being disinherited and put out of doors? Surely there are better motives to duty in a saint's heart than that, or else religion is nothing but a gloomy burden. Speak for yourselves, O you saints: is self-preservation all you pray and hear for? If a messenger came from heaven and told you that heaven was surely yours, would you stop your spiritual walk and not care whether you had any more acquaintance with God until you arrived there? How harsh that sounds in your ears! There are principles engraved in the Christian's heart that will not allow a long coldness to grow between God and him. He is under the law of a new life — one that naturally carries him toward communion with God, as a child is naturally drawn to see the face of a dear father. Every act of worship is a mountaintop where God presents Himself to be seen and enjoyed by the Christian.

Second, to neglect duty on the grounds of this assurance is contrary to both Christ's practice and His counsel. First, His practice: though Christ never doubted His Father's love or questioned the happy outcome of His temptations, sufferings, and agony, He prayed — and prayed more earnestly (Luke 22:44). Second, His counsel and command: He told Peter that Satan had requested permission to sift the disciples like wheat. But at the same time He comforted him — Peter, who would be the hardest tested — with this: 'But I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail.' Did Christ intend by this provision, made for Peter and the rest, to spare them the effort of watching and praying themselves? Not at all. As you can see in verse 40, He immediately calls them to duty: 'Pray that you may not enter into temptation.' Christ's prayer for them was to strengthen their faith when they themselves would pray for the same mercy — not to cultivate their laziness so that they need not pray. Christ's prayers in heaven on behalf of His saints have already been heard by God. But the return of those prayers is reserved to be delivered in the answers God sends to their own prayers. The Christian cannot in faith expect to receive the mercies Christ prays for in heaven while he neglects his duty on earth. Those mercies stand ready and waiting until he calls for them by the prayer of faith. And if they are not worth sending prayer as a messenger to heaven to receive, they are worth very little.

Third, consider that although the Christian is secured from complete and final apostasy, he may still fall badly — bruising his conscience, weakening his grace, and bringing reproach on the Gospel. Surely these are sufficient reasons to keep the Christian on guard. And the more so, because in ordinary course a saint's de-

cline begins in his duties. It is the same with a tradesman in the world: first he grows careless about his business, often absent from his shop — and then he falls behind financially. So here: first slackness in duty, and then a decay in grace and spiritual comfort — sometimes even into ways that are shameful. Cloth loses its sheen before it wears out. The Christian loses the luster of his grace in the lively exercise of duty, and then the strength of it.

Second, beware of abusing this doctrine as a license to sin. Shall we sin because grace abounds? Shall we grow loose because we have God firmly bound in His promise? God forbid — only a devil would teach us such logic. The wicked Jews reached a great height of sin when they could drink and feast while death was looking in at their windows: 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.' They revealed their practical atheism in it. But what a monstrous height in sin must that person have reached who can sin under the protection of the promise and draw encouragement to sin from the everlasting love of God — saying, in effect: 'Let us eat and drink, for we are sure to be saved.' Grace cannot dwell in a heart that draws such a cursed conclusion from the premises of God's grace. The saints have not learned Christ in that way. The conclusion the apostle draws from the great privileges we enjoy in the covenant of grace is not to wallow in sin — but, 'having these promises, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit' (2 Corinthians 7:1). It is the nature of faith — the grace that trades with promises — to purify the heart. The more clearly faith reports God's love from the promise to the soul, the more it purifies the heart. Why? Because the love through which faith works is thereby more inflamed toward God. And once that love catches fire, the room becomes too hot for sin to remain in it.

## SECTION 6.

The fourth and final teaching is this: it will abundantly repay all the hardship and trouble the Christian endures in this war against sin and Satan that he will be able, when the war is over, to stand firm. In the wars of men, not everyone who fights comes out ahead. The gains typically go into a few pockets. The common soldiers endure most of the hardship and go away with little of the profit. They fight to make the already great even greater, and are often discharged at the end with barely enough to cover the healing of their wounds or keep them from starving in some poor hospital. But in this war, no one loses except the one who deserts. A glorious reward awaits every faithful soldier in Christ's army — and it is contained in this phrase: 'having done everything, to stand firm.' In this context, to stand firm carries three meanings, which taken together will make the point clear.

First, to stand in this place means to stand as a conqueror. When an army is defeated, it is said to fall before the enemy, and the conqueror to stand. Every Christian will, at the end of the war, stand as a conqueror over his vanquished sins and over Satan who led them. The Christian wins many sweet victories over Satan in this life — but the joy of these conquests is repeatedly interrupted by fresh alarms as the enemy rallies. One day he has the advantage; the next day he is pressed into another battle. He struggles to hold what he has gained. Indeed, even his victories are the kind that send him limping and bleeding from the field: though he repels the temptation in the end, the wounds his conscience receives in the fight cloud over the glory of the victory. Rarely does the Christian come away without some sad complaint about the treachery of his own heart, which nearly lost the day and almost

handed him over to his enemy. But for your eternal comfort — know this, poor Christian: a blessed day is coming that will bring a full and final resolution of the conflict between you and Satan. You will see his camp entirely broken up, not a weapon left in his hand to lift against you. You will walk over the high ground from which he has fired so many shots at you. You will see it all torn down and demolished, until there is not one remaining stronghold of corruption left in your heart for a devil to hide in. Satan — at whose approach you have trembled so often — will then be crushed under your feet. The one who has so often commanded you to bow down so he could walk over your soul and trample your glory will now have his neck laid for you to tread on. Were there nothing else to be gained from all our watching and praying, weeping and mourning, severe mortification and self-denial, and everything else our Christian warfare demands but this — our labor would assuredly not be in vain in the Lord. Blessed, then, are the watching and praying — happy the tears and wounds suffered in this war — if they come at last to a full and eternal victory over sin and Satan. Bondage is among the worst of evils. The baser the enemy, the more intolerable the captivity to a noble spirit. Saul feared falling into the hands of the uncircumcised Philistines and suffering their taunts and abuse more than he feared a bloody death. Who is baser than Satan? What more degrading tyrant than sin? Glorious, then, will that day be in which we will praise God for delivering us out of the hands of all our sins and from the hand of Satan. But it will be a dreadful day for you, sinners, who at the very moment when you see the saints standing with crowns of victory on their heads will be dragged like fettered captives to hell's dungeon — there to have your ear bored to an eternal bondage under your

sins. And what more wretched sentence could even God Himself pronounce upon you? Here sin is pleasure; there it will be your torment. Here it is a sweet morsel that goes down smoothly; there it will stick in your throat. Here you have suitable provision to entertain your lusts: palaces in which pride can live and strut itself; rich food for your self-indulgent appetites; houses and lands, coffers of silver and gold on which your greedy hearts can sit and brood. But you will find none of these in hell. Hell is a barren place — nothing grows in that land of darkness to comfort or refresh the sinner's mind. You will have your lusts there — but none of the food they hunger for. What a torment it must be for a soul sharpened to a ravenous hunger for sin but chained up where it can reach nothing it craves! For the proud person who could wish to lord it over the whole world — indeed, over God Himself if he could — to be held down in such a dungeon as hell: how it will cut! For the malicious sinner whose heart swells with hatred toward God and His saints — who would tear them from God's arms, and pull God from His throne if he had the power — to find his hands so bound that he can do nothing against those he hates so intensely: how this will torment! Speak, O you saints, whose partial victory over sin even now is so sweet that you would choose a thousand deaths before returning to your old bondage under your sins: how glorious does that day appear to you when this will be completed in a full and eternal conquest — never again to have anything to do with sin or Satan.

Second, to stand means to stand justified and acquitted at the great day of judgment. The phrase is common in Scripture, where it describes the solemn vindication believers will receive at that day — standing in judgment (Psalm 1:5): 'The wicked will not

stand in the judgment' — that is, they will not be justified. Psalm 130:3: 'If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?' — that is, who would be discharged? The great God, on whose errand we come into the world, has appointed a day on which He will judge the world through Jesus Christ. It will be a solemn day when all who have ever lived on earth — high and low, good and bad — will gather in one assembly to make their personal appearance before Christ. From His mouth they will receive their eternal sentence. He will ascend the awesome seat of judgment in His majestic robes of glory, attended by His brilliant company of angels — so many officers ready to carry out His pleasure according to the final verdict He pronounces: either to conduct those blessed ones He has justified into His glorious kingdom, or to bind hand and foot and cast into hell's unquenchable flames those He condemns. I do not wonder that Paul's sermon on this subject sent an earthquake through Felix's conscience. I wonder far more that anyone could be so deep in a spiritual stupor and numbness of conscience that even the thought of this day cannot revive them to feeling. Do you not count them happy, the men and women who will fare well on that day? Are your thoughts not asking who those blessed souls are who will be acquitted by the living voice of Christ the Judge? You need not climb up to search the rolls of election in heaven — here you may know who they are. They are those who fight the Lord's battles on earth against Satan, in the Lord's armor, and do so to the end of their lives. These, having done everything, will stand in judgment. Even at a human court — say a court-martial, where a soldier stands trial for his life, either to be condemned as a traitor to his prince or cleared as faithful to his duty — how intently such a person would listen for the verdict, and how over-

joyed he would be when the judge pronounces him innocent! Such a man might rightly be told to fall on his knees and thank God and the judge who spared his life. How much more will the sweet voice of Christ in the saints' ears thrill them when He publicly declares their righteousness before men and angels! How utterly confounded Satan will be then — he who had been their accuser before God and before their own consciences, constantly threatening them with the terror of that day! How dismayed the wicked world will be to see the filth they had splattered on the saints with their slanders and lies — wiped away by Christ's own hand! To hear those whom they had called hypocrites publicly pronounced sincere by Christ Himself! Will this not, O saints, be more than enough recompense for all the scorn you endured from the world and all the conflict you faced with the prince of the world? But this is not all — therefore:

Third, to stand here also denotes — as the fullness of their reward — the saints standing in heaven's glory. When princes wish to reward subjects who have done outstanding service to the crown in their wars, the highest honor they can bestow is to bring them to court, there to enjoy the royal favor and stand before them continually in some position of honored service. Solomon presents it as the greatest reward of faithful subjects to stand before kings. Heaven is the royal city where the great God holds His court. The happiness of the glorious angels is to stand there before God. 'I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God' (Luke 1:19) — meaning: I am one of those heavenly spirits who attend the great God and stand before His face, as courtiers do in the presence of their prince. And this same honor will belong to every faithful soul. 'Thus says the Lord of hosts: If you will walk in My ways and if you

will perform My service, then you will also govern My house and also have charge of My courts, and I will grant you free access among these who are standing here' (Zechariah 3:7). The reference is to the temple, which had rooms attached to it for the priests who waited on the Lord in His holy service. Or it alludes to courtiers who are provided with fine galleries and lodgings suited to their station in the palace where they serve. So all the saints — of whom Joshua was a representative — after keeping the Lord's charge in a brief lifetime of service on earth, will be called up to stand before God in heaven. There, alongside the angels, they will have their own galleries and mansions of glory. O happy those who will stand before the Lord in glory! The greatest peers of a realm — earls, marquesses, and dukes — count it a greater honor to stand before their king, though bareheaded and often on one knee, than to live in the country where everyone bows and uncovers at their approach. In fact, if their prince were to forbid them from coming to court, no amount of wealth or respect at home would satisfy them. It is better to serve in heaven than to reign on earth. It is sweet to stand before the Lord here in a time of worship — one day in the house of God is better than a thousand elsewhere. What then must it be to stand before God in glory! If the saint's perfume sends out such fragrance even now while the King sits at His table in a sermon or a sacrament, what joy must flow from their close attendance on Him as He sits at His table in heaven — that chamber of presence which God created from the beginning to be the place where He would reveal Himself to be seen and enjoyed by His saints in all His glory. I know nothing that would have a more powerful and universal effect on a saint's spirit than the frequent and heartfelt contemplation of that blessed state in heaven which

will at last crown all his painful conflicts here on earth. Nothing cuts the sinews of temptation more cleanly than this — nothing beheads those sins that boldly defy every other argument. It is almost impossible to sin with lively thoughts and hopes of that glory fixed in view. It is when thoughts of heaven have been long absent from the Christian's mind, when he no longer knows what has become of his hopes for that glorious place, that he begins to set up some idol — as Israel made the calf when Moses was absent — to dance before. But let heaven come into view, and the Christian's heart will be warmed with the thought of it. You might as easily persuade a king to throw his royal crown into the gutter and roll in his robes through the mud as persuade a saint to sin with the expectation of heaven's glory before him. Sin is a devil's work, not a saint's — one who is a peer of heaven and waits every hour for the call that will summon him to stand with angels and glorified saints before the throne of God. This thought would cheer the Christian's heart and steady him when the fighting is hardest and the bullets fly thickest from men and devils — to remember that all of this is for heaven, where it is worth having a place even if we go through fire and water to get there. 'It was before the Lord,' said David to scoffing Michal, 'who chose me above your father and all his house — therefore I will dance before the Lord, and I will be even more undignified than this' (2 Samuel 6:21). So, Christian, when the snake-like reproaches fly at you from the fire of the world's malice, say this: 'It is for God that I pray, hear, put sin to death, and deny myself worldly pleasures and profits — that God who has passed over kings and princes to choose me, a poor wretch, to stand before Him in glory. Therefore I will be even more undignified than this in the world's eyes.' O friends, even if there were no other

world to enjoy God in — should we not, while we have our being, serve our Maker? The heavens and the earth obey His law, though they are capable of receiving no reward for doing His will. 'Quench hell, burn heaven,' said one holy man, 'yet will I love and fear my God.' How much more should we — when the everlasting arms of mercy are outstretched, ready to carry us, as soon as the fight is over, into the blessed presence of God. You have servants so loyal and devoted that they will work hard in all weathers — and if at the end of the day, weary and hungry, they receive only a kind look and a small act of care from you, they are deeply grateful. Indeed, as someone has said to shame the sluggish Christian: how many hundreds of miles will a poor spaniel run after his master on a journey, getting nothing but a few crumbs or a bone from the master's table? In short — which is greater: the devil's slaves, who will do and dare anything at his command, though he has less to give them than you give your dog — not a crust, not a drop of water to cool their tongue? And shall not the joy of heaven set before the Christian — into which he will most certainly enter — make him run his race, endure a brief struggle of temptation and affliction, and reckon even these not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in him?

## THANKS FOR READING



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