

The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment

Jeremiah Burroughs



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ABOUT THIS BOOK



A masterwork of Puritan pastoral theology, this series of sermons expounds **Philippians 4:11** to unfold contentment as a profound **spiritual mystery** — not mere resignation, but an inward sufficiency rooted in Christ. Burroughs systematically defines true contentment, reveals how it is **learned through grace**, and demonstrates its excellence as the highest form of soul-worship. He then confronts the **pleas of a discontented heart** with penetrating honesty, offering practical directions for cultivating peace amid suffering and change. Warm, searching, and deeply practical — a timeless guide to finding rest in God's providence.



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TITLE PAGE



The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment: Wherein is shown,
1. What contentment is. 2. The holy art and mystery of it. 3.
Several lessons that Christ teaches to bring the heart to con-
tentment. 4. The excellencies of it. 5. The evils of murmuring. 6.
The aggravations of the sin of murmuring.

By Jeremiah Burroughs.

The first of the three volumes published by Thomas Goodwin,
William Greenhill, Sydrach Simpson, Philip Nye, William Bridge,
John Yates, and William Adderley.

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Cornhill, near the Royal Exchange. 1649.

TO THE READER



This worthy man, especially in his later years, was surrounded — through God's blessing — with a great abundance of everything that could bring contentment to a spirit as vast as his rank and calling required. He was richly gifted with great abilities and many opportunities to serve his Lord — and to glorify God and do good to others is the noblest part of a gracious person (which he was), bringing the highest and most lasting satisfaction, surpassing in many ways even what personal communion with God alone provides. Beyond this, he lived and died with the full honor and esteem of the best of men, of saints — and even of his worst enemies. He also enjoyed material provision and outward comforts fitting his rank and sphere, all of which contributed to his contentment in external things. Yet in the midst of all this, his great pursuit was a more elevated way — a hidden art of self-sufficiency — that lay beyond the power of any outward blessing to supply or teach. This was a skill that not only balanced and settled his spirit in the present enjoyment of all things, but also prepared and armed him for the future, against the possible loss of everything, in times when no one knows what evil will come upon the earth. His opening lines make clear that this was his aim. Some ancient philosophers claimed mastery of this art and offered to teach it to

others, relying on natural and moral principles elevated to their highest possible level — but they failed. Their efforts in this area produced nothing more than a sullen stubbornness and hardening of the mind. The natural spirit of a person, feeling itself greater than all created things, drawing itself together and consolidating within itself, is able — as Solomon says — to sustain its own infirmities and those of others. But the self-sufficiency this author presents here is a mystery that none of the great minds of this world knew, and that human wisdom cannot teach — only the Holy Spirit teaches it. Few but those who are mature attain it. It teaches the soul to deny itself into weakness and emptiness — in relation to itself and everything else — and, being thus emptied, to unite itself to Him who alone possesses blessedness and all-sufficiency. Associated with Him and made intimate with Him, the soul pours itself into all His interests, making them its own, and so comes to have the full all-sufficiency of the Most High God as its own self-sufficiency. In what condition, then, can that soul fail to be content? For it has God as its greatest comfort in its best times, and its only comfort in its worst. This contentment is the inheritance of every saint by right and title, yet the actual possession and enjoyment of it depends on how fully one enters into that inheritance — and that depends on a skill that must be learned through experience and much practice, as Paul says: 'I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content' (Philippians 4:11). This earnest man devoted himself to learning this skill, and — digging for it as one digs for rubies, as Solomon's student digs for wisdom — he found it. He has shaped this jewel — a title given neither by himself nor by us the publishers, but deserved by the material itself — out of the rock, and has cut it skillfully so that the inner light of

this glorious grace might shine forth to others. It is now presented to the reader, though set forth as the finest jewels often are — for a time in plainer metal, until a buyer is found, after which they are placed in settings worthy of them. The only setting this jewel is made for is the precious hearts of men and women, in and from which alone its true brilliance will be revealed. Reader, buy it, set it, and wear it there — and it shall, as Solomon says, be life to your soul and grace to your neck. You shall not be afraid when you lie down; your sleep shall be sweet, for the Lord will be your confidence.

Thomas Goodwin, Sidrach Simpson, William Greenhill, Philip Nye, William Bridge, John Yates. William Adderley.

SERMON 1



Philippians 4:11. For I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content.

Here is a timely remedy to revive the drooping spirits of God's people in these sad and troubled times. The hour of testing has already come upon all the world to try the inhabitants of the earth, and especially this is a day of Jacob's troubles within our own borders.

In this Gospel text, our great apostle speaks from personal experience the very heart and soul of all practical Christian teaching. Here we can clearly read his own growth in Christ's school, and see the lesson that every Christian who wants to show the power and progress of godliness in his own soul must necessarily learn from him.

Paul brings in these words as a plain argument to persuade the Philippians that he was not pursuing great things in the world, and that he sought not their goods but them. He did not care about building a large estate — he had better things to fill his heart. I do not speak, he says, out of a sense of need. Whether I have much or little, my heart is fully satisfied; I have enough: 'I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content.'

'I have learned.' Contentment in every condition is a great art, a spiritual mystery — it must be learned, and learned as a mystery. In verse 12 Paul confirms this: 'I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound; in every way and in all things I have been initiated.' The word translated 'initiated' comes from the same root as the word for 'mystery' — it is as if he said, 'I have learned the secret of this matter.' Contentment must be learned as a deep mystery, and those who are thoroughly trained in this art have indeed learned something profound. To a natural man, it is as baffling as Samson's riddle. 'I have learned it.' This is no longer something I am still working toward; I did not have it at first, but I attained it — though with great effort — and now by the grace of God I have become a master of this art.

'In whatever state I am.' The word 'state' is not in the original; it reads simply 'in what I am' — that is, in whatever concerns or happens to me, whether I have little or nothing at all.

'To be content.' The word we translate as 'content' carries in the original a rich and full meaning. Strictly speaking, this word is used only of God, who has named Himself 'God All-Sufficient,' resting wholly satisfied in and with Himself alone. But He graciously shares His fullness with His people, so that from God in Christ the saints receive grace upon grace (John 1:16). This means there is within them a corresponding measure of the same grace that is in Christ, in proportion to their capacity. In this sense Paul says, 'I have a self-sufficiency' — which is what the word conveys.

But does Paul have a self-sufficiency, you might ask? How can we be sufficient in ourselves? The apostle himself says in another place, 'Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to think anything as if it were from ourselves' (2 Corinthians 3:5). His meaning, there-

fore, must be this: I find a sufficiency of satisfaction in my own heart, through the grace of Christ that is in me. Though I lack outward comforts and worldly provisions to meet my needs, I enjoy between Christ and my own soul a portion more than enough to satisfy me in every condition. This interpretation fits the passage in Proverbs 14:14: 'A good man is satisfied from himself.' It also agrees with what Paul says about himself elsewhere — that though he had nothing, he possessed all things — because he had a share in the covenant and promise, which contains everything in seed form, and an interest in Christ, the fountain and sum of all good. Having that, it is no wonder he could say that in whatever state he was, he was content. That is the genuine meaning of this text. I will not divide the words further, because I take them simply to serve one essential purpose: quieting and comforting the hearts of God's people under the troubles and changes they face in these heart-shaking times. The doctrinal conclusion can be stated briefly.

Doctrine: Being well skilled in the mystery of Christian contentment is the duty, glory, and excellence of a Christian.

This truth is clearly taught throughout Scripture, but consider one or two parallel passages for further confirmation. In 1 Timothy 6:6 and 8, both the duty and the glory are expressed. In verse 8 Paul says, 'Having food and clothing, let us be content with these' — there is the duty. Verse 6 adds, 'Godliness with contentment is great gain' — there is the glory and excellence of it, as if godliness were not truly gain unless contentment accompanied it. The same exhortation appears in Hebrews 13:5: 'Let your way of life be free from the love of money, and be content with what you have.' I do

not find any other apostle or New Testament writer who deals as thoroughly with this spiritual mystery of contentment as Paul does throughout his letters.

To open and prove this practical truth clearly, I will work through four things.

First, the nature of Christian contentment — what it is.

Second, the art and mystery of it.

Third, what lessons must be learned to bring the heart to contentment.

Fourth, where the glorious excellence of this grace chiefly consists.

Concerning the first, take this description: Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious disposition of spirit that freely submits to and takes delight in God's wise and fatherly ordering of every condition.

I will unpack this description, for it is a container of precious medicine — very comforting and useful for troubled hearts in troubled times and conditions.

First, contentment is a sweet inward thing — it is a work of the Spirit inside. It is not merely refusing to seek help through outward force, nor simply holding back discontented complaints and irritable words or actions toward God or others. True contentment is the inward submission of the heart. Psalm 62:1 says, 'Truly my soul waits silently for God,' and verse 5 adds, 'My soul, wait silently for God alone.' The words can rightly be translated as 'My soul, be silent before God' or 'Hold your peace, O my soul.' Not only the tongue must be silent — the soul itself must be still. Many people

sit quietly and hold back complaining words, while inwardly they are swollen with discontentment. This reveals a troubled disorder and deep irritability in their hearts, and God — despite their outward silence — hears the peevish, fretting language of their souls. A shoe may look smooth and neat on the outside while the foot is pinched within. There may be great calm and stillness outwardly, and yet remarkable confusion, bitterness, disturbance, and torment within. Some are so spiritually weak that they cannot contain the unrest of their own spirits, and it spills out in words and behavior, revealing the terrible turmoil inside. Their spirits are like a raging sea casting up nothing but mud and filth — troublesome not only to themselves but to everyone around them. Others manage to suppress these inner disorders (as Judas did when he betrayed Christ with a kiss), but still they boil inwardly, and it eats away like a cancer. As David speaks of some whose words are smoother than honey and butter, and yet war is in their hearts — and as he says in another place, 'While I kept silent my bones wasted away' — so these people, though there is outward calm on their lips, have raging storms in their spirits. While they keep their silence, their hearts are troubled and worn away with anguish and distress — peace outwardly, but war within from the unruly workings of the heart. If true contentment were as easy as keeping quiet outwardly, there would be no need to learn it as a great art — it could be achieved with less skill and strength than an apostle had, or even than an ordinary Christian has. There is certainly far more to it than can be attained by common ability and ordinary reason, which often only bridles nature from the outside. Contentment is a heart business.

Second, it is the quieting of the heart — all is settled and still there. To understand this better, note that this quiet, gracious disposition is not opposed to certain things.

1. It is not opposed to a proper sense of affliction. God does allow His people to feel what they are suffering. Christ does not say, 'Do not count that a cross which truly is a cross' — He says, 'Take up your cross daily.' Think of how medicine works in the body: if the body cannot bear the medicine and quickly vomits it up, or if it does nothing at all to the body, the medicine does no good. Either way, something is seriously wrong and the body will be hard to cure. The same is true of people under affliction: if they cannot bear God's difficult dealings but cast them off, or if their souls are no more stirred by them than a body is by a sip of weak beer, it is a troubling sign that their souls are in a dangerous and nearly incurable condition. So this inward quietness is not opposed to feeling affliction. In fact, there would be no true contentment if you were not aware of and sensitive to your afflictions when God is dealing with you.

2. It is not opposed to bringing your complaint to God and to friends in an orderly way. Although a Christian ought to be quiet under God's correcting hand, he may still — without any breach of Christian contentment — bring his complaint to God. As one of the ancient writers says, though not in a frantic outburst or desperate screaming, yet in a quiet, still, and submissive manner, he may pour out his heart to God. He may also share his difficult situation with his godly friends, telling them how God has been dealing with him and how heavy the affliction is, so that they may speak a timely word to his weary soul.

3. It is not opposed to lawfully seeking help or trying to be delivered from the present affliction through lawful means. I may make provision for my deliverance and use the means God has given, waiting on Him — because I do not know but that it may be His will to change my condition. So far as He leads me, I may follow His providence — that is simply my duty. God in His mercy is gracious toward our weakness, and He will not take it wrongly if we seek Him earnestly and persistently in prayer for deliverance, until we come to know His good pleasure. Seeking help in this way — with a spirit of submission and holy surrender to be delivered when God wills, as God wills, and how God wills, so that our will is melted into His — is no contradiction to the quietness God requires in a contented heart.

Question: But then, what is this quietness of spirit opposed to?

Answer: It is opposed to murmuring and complaining against the hand of God, as the discontented Israelites so often did — which if we ourselves cannot endure in our own children or servants, how much less can God endure it from us.

2. It is opposed to vexing and fretting, which goes a step beyond murmuring. A pagan philosopher once said, 'A wise man may grieve under his afflictions, but he should not be vexed by them.' There is a vast difference between genuine grief and disordered vexation.

3. It is opposed to a turbulent spirit — when thoughts race in a confused and chaotic way, and the emotions resemble the unruly crowd in Acts who did not even know why they had gathered. The Lord expects you to be silent under His rod. As it says in Acts 19:36, 'You ought to be quiet and to do nothing rash.'

4. It is opposed to an unsettled and unstable spirit — one that is pulled away from the present duty God requires in our various relationships, toward Him, toward ourselves, and toward others. We should value duty too highly to be pulled away by every trivial distraction. A Christian values every service to God so much that — though some duties may seem insignificant, foolish, or worthless in the eyes of the world or of natural reason — because God calls for it, the authority of His command so overrules the heart that the Christian is willing to spend himself entirely in carrying it out. Luther once said that ordinary works done in faith and from faith are more precious than heaven and earth. If that is true, and a Christian knows it, then only a serious matter should ever divert him. He should meet every distraction and resist every temptation as Nehemiah did in Nehemiah 6:3, when Sanballat, Geshem, and Tobiah tried to stop the building of the wall: 'I am doing a great work,' he said, 'so that I cannot come down. Why should the work cease?'

5. It is opposed to distracting, heart-consuming fears and anxieties. A gracious heart values its union with Christ and the work God has set it to so highly that it will not willingly allow anything to choke or deaden that connection. A Christian wants the word of God to take such full possession that it divides between soul and spirit — but he will not allow the fear of bad news to take such a grip on his soul that it creates division and turmoil within, like the twins struggling in Rebekah's womb. A great man will allow ordinary people to stand outside his doors, but he will not let them come in and make noise in his private chamber when he has deliberately withdrawn from all the business of the world. In the same way, a well-ordered spirit may take note of things happening out in

the world, and allow ordinary worries to touch the outskirts of the soul with a light passing thought. But it will not under any circumstances allow them to intrude into the inner chamber, which must be kept wholly for Jesus Christ as His inward temple.

6. It is opposed to sinking discouragement — when things do not turn out as expected, when circumstances seem so hopeless that there appears to be little left in outward means to sustain our hope. Then the heart begins to reason like the man in the Kings who said, 'If the Lord should open the windows of heaven, how could this even happen?' Such thinking never considers that God can open the eyes of the blind with clay and spit; He can work above, beyond, and even contrary to means. He often allows the finest efforts of human endeavor to fail, and brings unlikely things to pass, so that the glory of accomplishment may be given to Himself. If His people need a miracle for their deliverance, miracles fall as easily from God's hands as giving His people their daily bread. God's blessing upon His servants is often hidden, so that they cannot tell how it comes — as in 2 Kings 3:17: 'You shall not see wind nor shall you see rain, yet that valley shall be filled with water.' God would have us depend on Him even when we cannot see how the thing could possibly be brought about. Without that, we are not showing a quiet spirit. Though an affliction is upon you, do not let your heart sink under it. To the degree your heart sinks and you grow discouraged under an affliction, that is the degree to which you still lack the lesson of contentment.

7. It is opposed to sinful scheming and dishonest maneuvering for relief. We see this in Saul running to the witch of Endor, and in his offering sacrifice before Samuel arrived. Even good king Jehoshaphat joined himself with Ahaziah (2 Chronicles 20, last

verse), and Asa went to Ben-hadad king of Assyria for help instead of relying on the Lord (2 Chronicles 16:7-8) — though the Lord had delivered an army of a million Ethiopians into his hands (2 Chronicles 14:11). And good Jacob, with his mother, joined in a lie to Isaac. He was not content to wait for God's time and use God's means, but was in too great a hurry and stepped out of his way to obtain the blessing God had already intended for him. Many do the same through the corruption of their hearts and the weakness of their faith, because they are not able to trust God fully and follow Him in all things at all times. For this reason the Lord often follows the saints with many painful earthly trials — as we see with Jacob — even though they do receive the mercy. It may be that your unbelieving heart thinks, 'I don't care how I get out of this, as long as I can get free from it.' Is that not sometimes the working of your heart when some trial or affliction comes upon you? Don't you sometimes feel something like this rising up: 'If only I could be delivered from this affliction — any way at all, I would not care'? If so, your heart is far from being quiet. This sinful maneuvering for escape is the final thing that stands in opposition to the quietness God requires in a contented spirit.

The eighth and final thing that this quietness of spirit is opposed to is a desperate rising of the heart against God in outright rebellion. That is the most abominable form of discontentment. I hope many of you have learned enough contentment to keep your hearts from such disorder. Yet the truth is that not only wicked people, but sometimes even the very saints of God, find the beginnings of this when an affliction has lasted long and pressed down very heavily — when it strikes them, as it were, in the deepest vein. They find something rising within them against God. Their

thoughts begin to bubble up, and their emotions begin to stir in rebellion against God Himself. This is especially true of those who, along with their corruptions, also struggle with melancholy, while the devil works on both the corruptions of their heart and the melancholic condition of their body. Though there may be much grace at the bottom, there can still be some stirring against God Himself under affliction. Now Christian quietness stands opposed to all these things. That is: when affliction comes — whatever it may be — you do not murmur. You may be sensitive to it. You may bring your complaint. You may desire and seek deliverance by every good means. And yet you do not murmur or complain. You do not fret or vex. There is no turbulence in your spirit, no instability, no consuming fears, no sinking discouragement, no dishonest scheming, and no rising in rebellion against God. This is the quietness of spirit under affliction — and that is the second element: the soul being able to bear an affliction while remaining quiet under it.

The third element to unpack from the description is this: it is an inward, quiet, gracious disposition of spirit. It is a disposition — and more specifically, a gracious disposition. Contentment is a matter of the soul: first, it is inward; second, it is quiet; and third, it is a quiet disposition of spirit. By 'disposition' I mean three things — three aspects of what it means to say that contentment consists in the quiet disposition of the spirit.

First, it is a grace that spreads through the whole soul. It works in the judgment — that is, the person's understanding tends toward quieting the heart. To be satisfied in one's understanding and judgment means something like this: 'This is the hand of God, and

this is what is fitting for my condition, or what is best for me.' Even if I cannot see the reason for it, I am satisfied in my judgment about it.

Then it works in the thoughts as well. Just as my judgment is satisfied, so my thoughts are kept in order.

Then it reaches the will. My will yields and submits. My emotions are kept in order as well — so that this contentment works through the whole soul. In some people there is only a partial contentment, and so it is not a disposition of the whole soul but only of some part. For instance, a person may be satisfied in his judgment about a thing and yet be utterly unable to govern his thoughts or emotions or will. I believe many of you know this from your own experience, if you observe the workings of your own hearts. Can you not say, when some affliction comes upon you, 'I can thank God that my judgment is settled about this — I have no complaint in my understanding. I see God's hand and I know I should be content. My judgment is satisfied that my condition is a good one — but I cannot for the life of me rule my thoughts, my will, or my emotions. My heart feels heavy and sad and troubled more than it should, even though my judgment is at peace.' This seemed to be David's experience in Psalm 43: 'Why are you in despair, O my soul?' As far as David's judgment went, there was a kind of contentment — his understanding was at peace with what God had done to him. He was troubled, but he could not say exactly why: 'Why are you cast down within me?' That psalm is a very good psalm for those who feel a fretting, discontented disorder in their hearts — good for reading or meditating on. It repeats the question once or twice: 'Why are you cast down, O my soul?' Verse 5 says, 'Why are you in despair within me? Hope in God, for I shall

again praise Him, the help of my countenance and my God.' David had enough to quiet him, and what he had prevailed with his judgment — but he could not get it to go further. He could not get this grace of contentment to move through the whole frame of the soul. There is often a great struggle to get contentment even into the judgment — that is, to satisfy the understanding about one's condition. Come to many who are under the heavy hand of God, and try to settle them, telling them there is no such great cause for distress. The troubled soul says back: 'No such cause? There has never been an affliction like mine!' — and they have a hundred objections to everything you say, so that you cannot even get through to their understanding to settle it. But there is good hope of contentment if once the judgment is satisfied — if they can sit down and say, 'My understanding sees cause to be content.' Yet even then, there is still much work to be done with the heart, because the thoughts and emotions are so unruly that the judgment alone cannot always govern them. That is why I say contentment is an inward, quiet, gracious disposition of spirit — meaning that the whole soul: understanding, thoughts, will, and emotions — is all satisfied and at rest. I expect that in simply unpacking this, you are beginning to see that this is a lesson you truly need to learn, and not something quickly gained, if contentment is really what I have been describing.

The second aspect is very worth noting: spiritual contentment comes from the disposition of the soul. A person who is truly contented does not find their contentment primarily from outward arguments or from any external thing that helps them settle down — it comes from the condition of their own heart. It is the disposition of their heart that produces this genuine contentment, not some-

thing brought to them from outside. Consider this example: if a child, or a man, or a woman is upset and you bring them something wonderful to please them, that may quiet them and they become content. But it is the thing you brought that quieted them — not any good quality in their own spirit, not any healthy disposition within their hearts. By contrast, when a Christian is contented in the right way, the quietness comes more from the inward character and condition of their heart than from any external argument or possession. Let me illustrate this further. Being content through some external thing is like warming a man's clothes by the fire. Being content through the inward disposition of the soul is like the warmth that clothes receive from the natural heat of the body. A healthy man puts on his clothes, and though they feel cold when he first puts them on during a cold morning, after a little while they are warm. Why are they warm? They were not held near a fire. The warmth came from the natural heat of his own body. Now a sickly man whose natural body heat has diminished — if he puts on cold clothes, they will stay cold for a long time, and he must have them warmed by the fire. And even then, they will quickly grow cold again. This illustrates the difference between kinds of contentment. Some people are truly gracious, and when affliction comes upon them, it feels a little cold at first — but after it has been on a while, the very disposition of their gracious hearts warms it, making the affliction easier to bear and keeping them at peace without complaint. But others who lack this inward disposition find their affliction very cold and grievous upon them. You may bring them external arguments — like warming clothes by the fire — and perhaps they will be quiet for a time. But lacking a gracious disposition within their own hearts, that warmth will not last long.

Warmth from the fire — that is, contentment coming merely from external arguments — does not hold for long. What holds is what comes from the gracious disposition of the spirit. True contentment comes from the inward disposition and character of the soul. But we will say more about this when we open the mystery of contentment.

The third aspect is this: it is the disposition of the spirit — which shows the habitual nature of this grace of contentment. Contentment is not merely a single act or a flash of feeling in a good moment. You will find some men and women who, if you catch them in a good mood, will be very calm and settled — but it does not last. This is not a constant state; there is not a steady, consistent pattern of holiness and grace under affliction. I say it is the quiet disposition of the spirit — by that I mean the habitual condition of the soul. It is not something that shows up now and then when you happen to catch a person at a good moment, but the constant character and tenor of the heart. A Christian who has truly learned this lesson of contentment is one who is content in the constant tenor and temper of heart — one who can carry himself quietly in a consistent way — or else it is worth nothing. For no one is so consumed by discontent that they cannot find a quiet moment now and then. So to summarize: first, it is a heart matter; second, it is the quieting of the heart; third, it is the disposition of the heart.

But fourth: it is the gracious disposition of the heart. In true contentment, if it is spiritual and genuinely Christian, there is a combination of all the graces. Just as some precious oils are composed of many valuable ingredients, so this grace of contentment

combines all the spiritual graces together — which we will speak of further when we discuss its excellencies. Now this gracious disposition of spirit stands in contrast to three things.

1. First, it is different from the natural stillness found in many people. Some people have such a naturally calm temperament and physical constitution that you will rarely see them upset. Others are of a fiery and intense nature, and are more impatient than most.

2. Second, it is different from stubborn resolution. Some people, through the strength of a determined resolve, appear not to be troubled by whatever may come. By sheer willpower, they may at times appear less disturbed than others.

3. Third, it is distinct from the strength of reason alone — even unsanctified reason — which can quiet the heart to some degree. But a gracious disposition is not mere bodily stillness from a natural temperament, nor stubbornness of will, nor simply the power of reason.

You might ask: in what way is gracious contentment different from all these? More will be said when we open the mystery of contentment and the lessons to be learned, but a few distinctions can be drawn here. First, take the natural stillness some people have. Many men and women have such a naturally calm spirit and physical constitution that you will rarely find them disturbed. But notice this: such people are also dull and sluggish in spiritual things — they have no quickness or liveliness in what is good. By contrast, where contentment is truly gracious, the heart is very active and alive in the service of God. In fact, the more a gracious heart brings itself to a contented disposition, the more fit it be-

comes for any service of God — very active and alive in God's work, not dull. And as a contented heart is active and energetic in the work of God, so it is also active and energetic in honoring God's name through the affliction that has come upon it. The difference is clear: a person of naturally still disposition is not disturbed as others are — but neither has he any active desire to honor God through the affliction. But one who is contented in a gracious way is not disturbed or distressed — and yet he is not dull or sluggish either; he is very active in honoring God's name in his affliction. For it is not enough merely not to murmur and not to be discontented and troubled — you must also be active in honoring God's name through the affliction. And this distinguishes it from stubborn resolution as well. You may have a determined resolve that you will not be troubled — but is there in you a genuine concern to honor God's name in your affliction? Does the quietness come from that? That is the main thing that brings quietness of heart and guards against discontentment in a gracious heart. The desire and care your soul has to honor God's name in affliction — that is what quiets the soul, which does not happen in the other cases. Nor does it happen when the contentment comes merely from reason. Socrates — though he was a pagan — is said never to have so much as changed his expression whatever happened to him, and he achieved this power over his spirit purely through the strength of reason and moral philosophy. But gracious contentment comes from principles that go beyond the strength of reason. I cannot explain where it comes from until we get to the mystery of spiritual contentment. Let me give you just one mark of difference between a person who is contented in a natural way and one who is contented in a spiritual way. Those who are contented in a natural way

overcome themselves when outward afflictions come — they are content. And they are equally content when they commit sin against God. Whether they themselves are crossed or God is dishonored, it is all the same to them. But a gracious heart that is content under its own affliction rises up powerfully when God is dishonored.

The fifth element is 'freely' — freely submitting to and taking delight in God's ordering. This is a free work of the spirit. There are four things to open in this freedom of spirit.

First, the heart is readily won over — what is done freely does not require a great struggle. Many people, when a heavy affliction is upon them, are brought to contentment only with great effort and much stirring of the heart. Eventually they may get there — but it does not come freely. If I want something from another person and only get it after a long and difficult struggle, there is no real freedom in that. But when a person is free in a thing, you only need to mention it and they immediately come around. So if you have truly learned this art of contentment, you will not only be contented after much effort to quiet your heart — but readily, as soon as you recognize that something is the hand of God, your heart at once settles and closes.

Second, 'freely' means not by compulsion — not patience by force, as the saying goes. Many people will say, 'You must be content — this is the hand of God and there is no help for it.' Yet this is too low an expression for Christians. Even when Christians visit one another in suffering, they often say, 'Friend, you must be content' — but this falls short. 'Must be content' is too low. Instead, readily and freely: 'I will be content. It is fitting for my heart to yield to God. I find that contentment comes naturally to my soul.'

When your friends come and tell you that you must be content, you should be able to say instead, 'No — I am willing to yield to God. I am freely content.' And a free act comes about in a rational way — that is what makes it freedom. It does not arise from ignorance, because you know no better or do not understand your affliction. Rather, it comes through a sanctified judgment — because true freedom belongs only to rational creatures. Liberty of action exists only in beings that reason, because freedom is that which proceeds rationally: my judgment sees what is to be done, I understand the situation, and then I close with what my judgment recognizes. That is freely done. But if a person does something without understanding what they are doing, they cannot be said to do it freely. So if people are contented merely because they do not understand the nature of their affliction, or because they know no better condition, that is not freedom. Consider a child born in prison who has never been anywhere else — the child is content. Why? Because he has never known anything better. But that is not a free act of contentment. When men and women who do know better — who know that their condition is an afflicted and painful one — and yet can bring their hearts to contentment through a sanctified judgment, that is freedom.

Third, this freedom is also opposed to numbness. A person may be content simply because they feel nothing — but that is not freedom. A man with complete paralysis who does not feel you pinching his flesh is not freely patient. But if someone whose flesh is pinched and who does feel it is still able to govern himself and bear it willingly — that is another matter entirely. So it is here:

many are content merely out of numbness — they have a spiritual paralysis. But a gracious heart feels the affliction fully, and yet is content — and therefore is truly free.

Sixth: 'Freely submitting to and taking delight in God's ordering.' What does submitting to God's ordering mean? The word 'submit' means simply to go under. A discontented heart is unruly and would, as far as discontentment prevails, rise above God. But then the grace of contentment comes and sends it down under. To submit is to place something beneath. When the soul sees the unruliness within — here is the hand of God bringing an affliction, and my heart is troubled and discontented — what does the soul say? 'Will you rise above God? Is this not God's hand? Must your will be regarded more than His?' Down, down — O soul, get down. Stay low. Stay under God's feet. You are under God's feet — remain there. Stay under the authority of God, the majesty of God, the sovereignty of God, the power God has over you. Stay under. That is what it means to submit: the soul is able to send itself under the power, authority, sovereignty, and dominion that God has over it. That is the sixth element. Yet even that is not enough — you have not yet arrived at this grace of contentment unless you also have the next thing.

Seventh: taking delight in God's ordering. This means: I am well pleased with what God does, as far as I can see God in it. As I said, I may feel the affliction, and I may desire that God in His own time would remove it, and use means to seek its removal. Yet I can still be well pleased, as far as God's hand is in it. To be well pleased with God's hand is a higher degree than mere submission. It comes not only from seeing that I should be content in this affliction, but from seeing that there is actual good in it. I find honey in this rock

— so I do not merely say 'I must' or 'I will' submit to God's hand. No — God's hand is good. 'It is good for me that I have been afflicted.' It may be that someone is convinced that God is acting justly — that God is righteous, that it is right to submit to what He has done, that the Lord has done righteously in all His ways. But that is not enough. You must say, 'Good is the hand of the Lord' — as old Eli said, 'Good is the word of the Lord,' when the word was hard and threatening great sufferings for him and his house. And yet Eli said, 'Good is the word of the Lord.' Perhaps some of you can say with David, 'It was good for me that I was afflicted.' But you must come further and say, 'It is good that I am afflicted' — not only after seeing the fruit it produced, but in the midst of it. Whatever the affliction may be, through God's mercy my condition is a good condition. This is truly the top and height of this art of contentment — to reach the point where you can say, 'My condition and afflictions are thus and thus, very grievous and heavy — and yet through God's mercy I am in a good condition, and the hand of God upon me is good.' I will give just one or two very notable Scriptures about this, since you may think this is a hard lesson to come this far — not only to be quiet, but to take delight in affliction. Proverbs 15:6: 'In the house of the righteous is much wealth, but in the income of the wicked there is trouble.' This Scripture shows that a gracious heart has reason to say it is in a good condition, whatever that condition may be. In the house of the righteous is much treasure. His house — what kind of house? Perhaps a poor cottage. Perhaps he barely has a stool to sit on — only a stump of wood for a seat. Perhaps he has scarce a bed to lie on, or a dish to eat from. Yet the Holy Spirit says, 'In the house of the righteous is much treasure.' Let the righteous man be the poor-

est person in the world. Perhaps creditors have taken everything from his house, perhaps his home has been stripped bare and everything is gone — yet still, in the house of the righteous is much treasure. The righteous man can never be brought so low that, however his house has been emptied and robbed, there will not remain much treasure within. As long as he is there, the presence of God and the blessing of God are upon him, and that is much treasure. But in the income of the wicked, there is trouble. There is more treasure in the poorest godly person's house than in the house of the greatest person in the world with his fine furnishings, his richly made beds, his chairs, couches, and shelves of silver plate — whatever he has, he does not have as much treasure as in the house of the poorest righteous soul. No wonder then that Paul, just a few verses after our text, says in Philippians 4:18: 'I have received everything in full, and have an abundance; I am amply supplied.' 'I have received everything in full.' But what did Paul have that could lead him to say that? Was there ever a man more afflicted than Paul? Many times he barely had rags to cover his body, no bread to eat, often in nakedness, put in stocks, whipped, and cruelly treated. 'Yet I have received everything in full,' says Paul — for all that. And in 2 Corinthians 6:10 he declares that he possessed all things — 'as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing all things.' Notice what he says: 'as having nothing' — but 'possessing all things.' He does not say 'as possessing all things' — he says 'possessing all things.' I have very little in the world, yet I possess all things. So you can see that a Christian has reason to take delight in God's hand, whatever His hand may be.

The eighth element of contentment is: 'in God's ordering' — submitting to and taking delight in God's ordering. That is, the soul that has learned contentment looks up to God in all things, rather than looking down at the instruments and means — at how such a person did this, how unreasonable such a person was, how brutal such a treatment was. It looks up to God. A contented heart looks to God's ordering and submits to God's ordering — seeing wisdom in all of it. In the submission it sees God's sovereignty, but what produces delight is God's wisdom. 'The Lord knows how to order things better than I do. The Lord sees further than I do. I see only the present, but the Lord sees far ahead. How do I know that without this affliction I would not have been ruined?' A contented spirit also reasons this way: 'I know that God's love may stand just as well with an afflicted condition as with a prosperous one.' These are the kinds of thoughts that move in a contented spirit as it submits to God's ordering.

The final element is: 'in every condition.' You might be able to be content in some things — many will say, 'If my affliction were only like so-and-so's, I could be content.' But contentment must be found in the present affliction that is actually upon you. There is a saying that there is great deception in generalities. Ask any man or woman in the abstract: 'Will you not be content with whatever God ordains?' They say, 'Yes — God forbid that we should not submit to God's hand, whatever it is.' It is easy to say this in the abstract. But when it comes to the specific — when the trial is truly hard, when it strikes you in what you consider the heaviest blow that could come upon you — what does your heart say then? Can you in every condition be content — not only regarding the kind of affliction, but also regarding its duration? That is, can you be content to remain

in a condition as long as God wills? To bear an affliction as long as God allows it to remain, without being willing to come out of it sooner than God would have you? Unless you can, you are not truly content in your condition. To be content only with the fact that God's hand is upon you, but not to be willing to stay under that hand — that is not contentment in every condition. But when you find your heart submitting to God's ordering in particular afflictions that are very hard and very heavy, and yet your heart is quiet — here is one who has learned the lesson of contentment. Contentment is the inward, quiet, gracious disposition of spirit, freely submitting to and taking delight in God's ordering in every condition. That is the description. Nine separate things have been opened in it.

1. First, contentment is a work of the heart, within the soul.
2. Second, it is the quieting of the heart.
3. Third, it is the disposition of the spirit.
4. Fourth, it is a gracious disposition.
5. Fifth, it is the free working of this gracious disposition.
6. Sixth, it involves submission to God — placing the soul under God.
7. Seventh, it involves taking delight in the hand of God.
8. Eighth, all this is in relation to God's ordering.
9. Ninth, it is in every condition — no matter how hard, no matter how long it continues. Those of you who have learned to be content have learned to attain all of these. I hope that even the unpacking of these things has worked on your hearts so that you may place your hand on your heart and say, 'Lord, I see there is more in Christian contentment than I thought, and I have been far from learning this lesson.' I have only learned my ABCs in this lesson of contentment. I am in the lower form of Christ's school — if I am in it at all. But we will say more about these things later. The main thing I aimed at in opening this is to

show how great a mystery there is in Christian contentment, and how many lessons must be learned before we can attain the heavenly disposition that Paul attained.

End.

SERMON 2



Philippians 4:11. For I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content.

We have begun — as you may remember — the subject of Christian contentment. We opened the text and showed what Christian contentment is: the inward, quiet, gracious disposition of spirit that freely submits to and takes delight in God's ordering of every condition. In that description we came to the final element, 'in every condition.' We will now expand on that and move forward.

1. Submitting to God in whatever affliction comes — regarding its kind.
2. Regarding the time and duration of the affliction.
3. Regarding the variety and changes of affliction — whatever they may be, there must be submission to God's ordering in every condition.

First, regarding the kind of affliction. Many people will say in a general way that they must submit to God in affliction. If you were to go from one end of a congregation to the other and ask each person, 'Would you not submit to God's ordering, whatever condition He brought you into?' they would say, 'God forbid it should be oth-

erwise.' But as the saying goes, there is great deception in generalities. In the abstract, you would submit to anything. But what about this or that specific trial — the one that crosses you most deeply? Then it is: 'Anything but that.' We are naturally prone to think that any condition is better than the one God has actually brought us into. That is not contentment. Contentment must extend not just to affliction in general, but to the specific kind — even the kind that is most painful to you. Perhaps God strikes you in your child. 'Oh,' says one, 'if it had been in my finances, I could be content.' Perhaps He strikes you in your marriage. 'Oh,' says another, 'I would rather have been struck in my health.' And if He had struck you in your health, you would say, 'If only it had been in my business, I would not have minded.' But we must not carve out for ourselves which particular afflictions God should bring upon us — we must be content in them as they actually come.

Second, we must submit to God in every affliction regarding its time and duration. Someone may say, 'I could submit and be content, but this affliction has been upon me for a long time — a quarter of a year, a year, several years — and my patience is worn out and broken.' Or perhaps it is a spiritual affliction. 'I could submit to any outward trial,' you say, 'but not to a trial of the soul — a troubled heart, the withdrawal of God's face. If it had only lasted a short time, I could submit. But I have been seeking God for so long, and He does not appear. How can I bear this?' We must not choose for ourselves when deliverance comes, any more than we choose the kind or manner of it. Here are one or two Scriptures to show that we must submit to God's timing just as much as to the kind of affliction. Consider the end of Ezekiel 1: 'When I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of One speaking.' The

prophet was cast down on his face — but how long must he lie there? 'And He said to me, \"Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak with you.\" And the Spirit entered me when He spoke to me and set me on my feet.' Ezekiel was cast down on his face, and there he must lie until God told him to stand up — and not only that, but until God's Spirit entered him and enabled him to stand. So when God casts us down, we must be content to lie there until He bids us rise, and until His Spirit enters to enable us to rise. Consider Noah: he was put into the ark. He certainly knew there was much trial in being shut in with all kinds of creatures for twelve months together — that was a great hardship. Yet with God having shut him in, Noah was not to come out of the ark — even when the waters had subsided — until God told him to. So though we may be shut up in great afflictions and can think of various ways to get out, we should be willing to wait until God opens the door. God put us in, and God must bring us out. We read in Acts of Paul, who when he had been shut in prison and they wanted to send him out quietly, said: 'They shut us in themselves — let them come and bring us out themselves.' In the same spirit, a soul should say in a holy and gracious way: 'This affliction I am in came by the hand of God. I am content to remain here until God brings me out Himself.' God requires this of us — that we not be in a hurry to come out until He comes and brings us out. In Joshua 4:10 there is a striking account that serves our purpose well. The priests carrying the ark stood in the middle of the Jordan River. When the children of Israel crossed into Canaan, they passed through the Jordan, which was a frightening thing to do — but God had commanded it. Notice what the text says: 'The priests who carried the ark stood in the middle of the Jordan until everything was

finished that the Lord had commanded Joshua to speak to the people, according to all that Moses had commanded Joshua, and the people hurried and crossed over. And when all the people had finished crossing, the ark of the Lord and the priests crossed over in the presence of the people.' God had ordered that all the people should cross first, safely reaching dry land. But the priests must stand still until all the people had passed over. They had to wait for permission to go — standing there in danger until God called them out. Surely there was great danger in staying, for the text says the people hurried across. But the priests had to wait until the people were safely gone — until God called them out of that dangerous place. It often proves to be the case that God orders things so that ministers and those in public office must remain in danger longer than ordinary people. This should lead people to be satisfied and content with the lower condition God has placed them in. Though your condition is low, you are not in the same danger as those in higher positions, whom God calls to stand longer in the gap and in the place of peril. We must be content to remain in our Jordan until the Lord is pleased to call us out.

Then there is the variety of our condition. We must be content with the particular affliction, with its timing, and with all the circumstances surrounding it — for sometimes the circumstances are more painful than the affliction itself. As for variety: if God sees fit to exercise us with one affliction after another, we must be content in that as well. This has been very observable even recently: many who have been stripped of their property and fled have afterward fallen sick and died. They escaped with their lives only to have plague come upon them — or if not plague, then some other trial. It is rare for one affliction to come alone. Afflictions commonly do

not arrive one at a time but pile on top of one another. God may strike someone in his estate, then in his health, then in his reputation, then in his wife or child or dear friend — and so it comes in varied forms. This is the ordinary way of God — as experience will show — that seldom does one affliction come alone. This is hard: when one affliction follows after another, when there is variety, when there is a mighty change of conditions — up and down, this way and that. That is the true test of a Christian. There must be submission to God's ordering in all of it. It is said of Cato, a pagan, that no one ever saw him changed — though he lived in a time when the state was constantly changing, he remained the same throughout every variety of condition. Oh that it could be said of many Christians that though their conditions changed, no one could see them changed. The same gracious, sweet, and holy spirit they had before — that they still have. This is what it means to submit to God's ordering in every condition.

Objection: But what you are describing is fine if we could attain it — but is it possible?

Answer: If you gain skill in the art of it, you can attain it — and it will not prove so difficult either, once you understand the mystery. There are many things that craftsmen do in their trades that a person from the countryside would look at and think impossibly hard — but only because he does not understand the art. There is a certain turn of the hand that makes it easy. That is what this teaching is about: to open to you the art and mystery of contentment — the way a Christian actually comes to contentment. There is great mystery and art in it. From what has already been opened, you can begin to see some of that mystery — for example, that a person should be content with his affliction and yet thoroughly feel his af-

fliction at the same time. To feel an affliction deeply, and to seek to remove it by every lawful means, and yet to remain content — there is a mystery in joining those two. To be as sensitive to the affliction as anyone who is not content, to seek deliverance just as earnestly as they do — and yet to have the heart remain at rest. That is a mystery that a worldly heart can barely grasp. But grace teaches such a combination — teaches us to mix grief and joy together, gracious sorrow and gracious joy blended. That combination is contentment: grace teaches us how to order an affliction so that there is both a real sense of it, and real contentment under it.

There are several further things to open in the mystery of contentment.

The first of these is to show that there is indeed a great mystery in contentment. A person who is content in the Christian way may be called both the most contented person in the world and the most unsatisfied person in the world — at the same time. Those two together must be mysterious. You have not truly learned the mystery of contentment unless it can be said of you that, while you are the most contented person, you are also the most unsatisfied.

How is that? you ask. A person who has learned the art of contentment is the most contented with whatever little they have in the world — and yet cannot be satisfied with the whole world as their portion. He can be content with a crust, with bread and water. That is: if God orders things so that bread and water is his condition for now, he is at peace with that. Yet if God were to give him kingdoms and empires — the entire world to rule — and offer it as his portion, he would not be satisfied by it. Here is the mystery: though his heart is so enlarged that all the world and ten thousand worlds could not satisfy it for a portion, yet he has a heart at peace

under God's ordering, even if all he is given is bread and water. To hold these two together — that must be a great art and mystery. Though he is content with very little from God, the things that would satisfy other people will not satisfy him. People of the world pursue wealth and think, 'If I only had this much or that much, I would be content.' They do not set their sights very high: 'If I had just two or three hundred a year,' one thinks, 'I would be fine. If I had a hundred, or a thousand,' says another, 'I would be satisfied.' But a gracious heart says: if he had ten hundred thousand times that much a year, it would not satisfy him. If he had the finest excellence of every created thing in the world, it could not satisfy him. And yet this same person can sing and be cheerful and joyful with nothing but a crust of bread and a little water in the world. Surely Christianity is a great mystery — 'great is the mystery of godliness' — not only in its doctrinal part but in its practical part as well. Godliness teaches us this mystery: not to be satisfied with all the world as our portion, and yet to be content with the lowest condition we are in. When great gifts were sent to Luther from dukes and princes, he refused them and said, 'I strongly insist that God will not put me off with this. That is not what will content me.' A little in this world will content a Christian for his journey through it. Notice where the mystery lies: a little in the world will content a Christian for his passage, but all the world and ten thousand times more will not content a Christian for his portion. A worldly heart can be satisfied with the things of the world as his portion — and that is the difference between a worldly heart and a gracious heart. But a gracious heart says, 'Lord, do with me what You will for my journey through this world — I will be content with that. But I cannot be content with all the world as my portion.' There is the mys-

tery of true contentment. A contented person, though most contented with the least things in the world, is the most unsatisfied person alive. A soul made capable of God can be filled with nothing but God. Nothing but God can fill a soul that is capable of God. A gracious heart knows it was made for God and is capable of God. Worldly hearts think of no such thing — but a gracious heart, enlarged to be capable of God and having tasted something of Him, finds that nothing in all the world can fill it. Only God Himself will do. And so you will observe: whatever God gives to a gracious and godly heart, unless He gives Himself, it will not be enough. A godly heart wants not only the mercy, but the God of that mercy — and then a little in the world is enough, as long as he has the God of the mercy he enjoys. Compare Philippians 4:7 with verse 9. Verse 7 says: 'And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.' The peace of God will guard your hearts. Then in verse 9: 'The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.' 'The peace of God will guard you, and the God of peace will be with you.' What I want to draw from this is: the peace of God is not enough for a gracious heart — it must also have the God of that peace. A worldly heart would be satisfied with outward peace, even if it is not the peace of God — peace in the land and in business would satisfy him. But a godly heart goes beyond this: all outward peace is not enough. I must have the peace of God. But suppose you have the peace of God — will that not settle you? No — I must have the God of peace. Not only the peace of God but the God of peace — that is, I must enjoy the very God who gives me the peace. I must have the cause as well as the effect; I must see where my peace comes from

and enjoy the fountain of it, as well as the stream of it. So with other blessings: if I have health from God, I must have the God of my health as my portion — or I am not satisfied. It is not life I need most, but the God of my life. It is not riches, but the God of those riches. The God of my preservation, as well as my preservation itself. A gracious heart is not satisfied without this: to have the God of the mercy, as well as the mercy. Psalm 73:25: 'Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth.' Nothing in heaven or on earth can satisfy me but You Yourself. If God were to give you not just the earth but heaven too, if you were to rule over sun, moon, and stars and over the greatest of men — it would not be enough unless you had God Himself. There lies the first mystery of contentment: a contented person, though the most contented in the world, is also the most unsatisfied — because the things that satisfy the world will not satisfy him.

Second, there is this mystery in Christian contentment: a Christian comes to contentment not so much by addition as by subtraction. That is his path to contentment, and it is a path the world has no skill in. Here is what I mean: the way to contentment is not so much by adding to what one has or wants, but by reducing one's desires — so that desires and condition come into proportion and balance. A worldly heart knows no way to be content except this: 'I have such-and-such an estate, and if I could just add this comfort and that one which I now lack, then I would be content. Perhaps I have lost my estate — if I could have it made up again, then I would be a contented man.' But contentment does not come that way. It comes not by adding to what you lack, but by reducing your desires. It is all the same to a Christian whether he rises up to what he desires, or brings his desires down to what he

has. Either he attains what he desires, or he brings his desires down to what he has already. His condition is equally suited to him either way — for it is just as fitting to lower your desires to match your condition as it is to raise your condition to match your desires. A heart without grace knows no path to contentment except to have its circumstances raised up to its desires. But a gracious heart has another way: it can bring its desires down to its circumstances, and so attains contentment. This is how the Lord shapes the hearts of people. If the heart is fitted to the condition, a person may have as much contentment as if the condition were fitted to the heart. Some have a very large heart but a small condition, and they can never have contentment while their hearts are big and their circumstances are small. But though a person cannot make his circumstances as large as his heart, if he can bring his heart to be as small as his circumstances — bringing them even together — that is where contentment is found. The world is utterly deceived in thinking that contentment lies in having more than you have. The root of all contentment is this: an evenness and proportion between our hearts and our conditions. That is why many godly people in low conditions live sweeter and more comfortable lives than those who are wealthier. Contentment is not always dressed in silk and velvet — contentment sometimes wears plain clothes, in a humble condition as much as in a higher one. Many who once had great estates and whom God has brought into lower ones have found more contentment there than they did before. How can that possibly be? Simply this: if you understand the root of contentment, it consists in the fitting and proportion of a person's spirit to his circumstances — an evenness, when one end is not longer or larger than the other. When the heart is fitted to its condition,

there is comfort in that condition. Now let God give a person great riches, but if He also gives him over to pride of heart, that person will never be contented. But let God bring someone into a humble condition and then fashion and fit his heart to that condition, and he will be content. Think of walking: suppose a man had one very long leg and one short leg. Even though one is longer than ordinary, he could not walk as well as a man whose legs are both shorter but equal. I compare the long leg — when one is longer than the other — to a person who has a high and prosperous condition but also an extremely proud heart that is larger than his condition. That man cannot help but be troubled. But another man in a humble condition has a low heart to match — his heart and his condition are even together — and this man walks through life with far greater ease. So a gracious heart works like this: 'The Lord has been pleased to lower my condition. If the Lord would now lower my heart and make it even with my condition, I will be well enough.' When God lowers his condition, a gracious person does not labor so much to raise his condition again as to bring his heart down to match it. Even the pagans had a glimpse of this. They could say that the best riches is poverty of desires — that is, if a person's desires are cut short and kept small, that person is rich. Another said: the way to be rich is not by increasing wealth, but by diminishing desires. The person whose desires are satisfied is truly rich. A contented person has desires that are satisfied — God satisfies his desires — so that, all things considered, he is at peace with his present condition as the best for him. He comes to contentment by subtraction, not addition.

The third thing in the art of contentment is this: a Christian comes to contentment not so much by removing the burden upon him as by adding another burden to him. That is a way that human nature has little skill in. How so? you ask. Consider: are you afflicted? Is there a heavy load upon you because of your affliction? You think there is no way to find contentment except for this burden to be lifted: 'Oh, it is such a heavy load — hardly anyone knows what a burden I carry!' Do you think there is no way for your spirit to find contentment except by getting rid of that burden? You are mistaken. The path to contentment is to add another burden — that is, labor to load and burden your heart with your sin. The heavier the burden of your sin becomes to your heart, the lighter the burden of your affliction will be to your soul, and so you will come to contentment. If your burden were lightened, that would satisfy you — and you think the only way to lighten it is to remove it entirely. But you are mistaken. If you can get your heart more burdened with your sin, you will be less burdened by your afflictions. You might say this is a strange way to find ease — when already burdened, to lay on a heavier load. When you are afflicted, you think the only remedy is to be cheerful and get out among company. Oh no — you are deceived. The burden will return. That is a poor way to quiet a troubled spirit. The burden will be back. But if you would have your burden feel lighter — get alone and examine your heart concerning your sin. Charge your own soul with its sin. If the burden is in your material loss, consider how you abused it. If it is in your body, consider how you abused your health and strength and the blessings God has now taken away. You have not honored God with those blessings as you should have — you have lived carelessly and without proper regard for God.

Mourn over that sin before the Lord, and you will quickly find the burden of your affliction lighter than it was before. Try this piece of skill and art — to get your soul content in whatever low condition God has placed you. Many times in a family, when affliction strikes, how much discontentment rises up between husband and wife — whether the estate is hit at home, or bad news comes from sea, or someone they trusted fails them. Perhaps something goes wrong within the family — between husband and wife, or concerning the children or servants — and there is nothing but quarreling and discontent. They are often burdened by their own discontentment, and may say to each other, 'This life is very unhappy, living so discontented as we do.' But have you ever tried this approach — husband and wife together? Have you ever found a quiet moment and said, 'Come, let us go and humble ourselves before God together. Let us go into our room and humble ourselves before the Lord for our sins — for how we abused the blessings God has taken from us, and how we provoked God against us.' 'Let us charge ourselves with our sin and be humbled before the Lord together.' Have you ever tried that? You would find the cloud would lift, the sun would shine in upon you, and you would have far more contentment than ever before. If a man's estate has been broken — whether by plundering or any other means — how is he to find contentment? How? By the breaking of his heart. God has broken your estate. Seek Him for the breaking of your heart as well. A broken estate and a hard heart will not fit together — there will be no contentment. But a broken estate and a broken heart fit together well, and will produce more contentment than there was before. Therefore, to the breaking of your estate, add as much as you can

the breaking of your heart — that is the way to be content in a Christian manner. That is the third mystery in Christian contentment.

The fourth thing is this: contentment comes not so much by removing the affliction as by transforming it — by a kind of metamorphosis of the affliction, where it is completely turned and changed into something else. I mean this in terms of its purpose and effect, even though the affliction itself may remain in substance. For a worldly heart, the only path to contentment is removing the affliction: 'Oh, if only it would be gone!' But a gracious heart says, 'God has taught me a way to contentment even while the affliction continues in substance.' Grace has the power to transform the affliction into something good — stripping it of its sting and poison. Consider poverty, for example. A man's estate is lost. Is there no way to be content until the estate is restored? Until the poverty is gone? Yes — Christianity teaches contentment even while poverty continues. It teaches you how to turn your poverty into spiritual riches. You may remain poor in outward circumstances, but this much changes: what was once a natural evil to you becomes a spiritual benefit. And so you come to contentment. Ambrose said it well: 'Even poverty itself is riches to holy men.' Godly people make their poverty turn into riches. They get more out of their poverty than they ever got from their revenues or all their trading in the world — greater income from their poverty than from anything else. A worldly heart will find that strange — that a man should make poverty the most profitable trade he ever had. But I am convinced that many Christians have found it so: that they have gotten more good from their poverty than they ever got from all their riches. You can find this in Scripture, so do not

think it strange. You will not find a single godly person who came out of an affliction worse than when he went in. He may have been shaken for a time, but he was better for the affliction in the end. But many godly men have been worse for their prosperity. Hardly a godly man in all of Scripture was better for his prosperity than he was before it — with the exception of Daniel and Nehemiah, of whom I read no harm done by the prosperity they had. Apart from those, I can hardly find a single example of a godly man who was better for prosperity rather than worse. So it should not seem at all strange that a gracious person would gain good from affliction. Luther writes in his commentary on Galatians 5:17: 'A Christian becomes a mighty worker and a wonderful creator' — that is, he says, creating out of heaviness joy, out of terror comfort, out of sin righteousness, out of death life, and bringing light out of darkness. It was God's prerogative and great power — His creative power — to command light to shine out of darkness. Now a Christian is a partaker of the divine nature, as Scripture says. Grace is part of the divine nature, and bearing an imprint of God's almighty power, it can create light out of darkness — bring good out of evil. By this way a Christian comes to contentment. God has given a Christian such a grace that it can turn afflictions into blessings, darkness into light. If Christ could turn water into wine, one could live on water and still be content — because the power to turn it into wine is there. A Christian has received this power from God, to work in this miraculous way. It is the nature of grace to turn water into wine — to turn the water of your affliction into the wine of heavenly comfort. I know this sounds ridiculous if understood in a worldly way — and many worldly people are ready to mock such talk, as Nicodemus did in John 3: 'How can a man be born when

he is old? Can he enter his mother's womb a second time and be born?' So when we speak of grace turning water into wine, turning poverty into riches, making poverty a profitable trade, the worldly heart says: 'Let them have that trade, and let them have their water to drink — and let's see them turn it into wine.' Be careful that you do not speak scornfully of the ways of God. Grace has the power to turn afflictions into blessings. Two people may have the same affliction — and to one it is as bitter as gall and wormwood, while to the other it is as wine and honey, delightful, joyful, profitable, and enriching. That is the mystery of contentment: not so much removing the evil as transforming it — changing the evil into good.

The fifth thing is this: a Christian comes to contentment by making up for the lacks of his condition through carrying out the duties of his condition. That is the way of contentment. I am in a condition with many lacks — I lack this comfort and that one. How do I become satisfied and content? A worldly heart thinks: my lacks must be supplied, or it is impossible for me to be content. But a gracious heart asks: what is the duty of the condition God has placed me in? My condition has changed — not long ago I was in a prosperous condition, but God has changed it. The Lord has called me no longer Naomi but Mara. What am I to do now? What does God require of me in the condition He has put me in? And let me put my strength into doing the duties of my present condition. Others spend their thoughts on things that disturb and unsettle them, and so they grow more and more discontented. But let me instead spend my thoughts on asking what my duty is — what the duties of my present condition require. A man whose condition has changed and who has lost his estate says, 'If I only had my estate back, how I would use it for God's glory!' But God has shown me

that I did not honor Him with my estate as I should have. 'Oh, if I had it again, I would do better than I did before!' But this may itself be a temptation — so you should instead ask: what does God require of me in the condition I am now in? Labor to bring your heart to quiet and contentment by setting your soul to work on the duties of your present condition. And truly, I know nothing more effective for quieting a Christian soul and gaining contentment than this: fixing your heart on the duties of the very condition you are in right now — and treating thoughts about other conditions as a mere temptation. The folly of those who think they will find contentment by dwelling on better conditions is like that of children on a hill who look far away and see another hill, and think, 'If I were on top of that hill, I could touch the clouds with my fingers.' But when they get to the top of that hill, they are no closer to the clouds than before. So it is with many who say, 'If I were in such-and-such a condition, I would have contentment.' Perhaps they reach that condition — and they are just as far from contentment as before. Then they think, 'If I were in yet another condition, I would be satisfied' — and when they get there, they are still just as far from contentment. No — consider what the duty of your present condition is, and settle your heart with this: 'Though I am in a low condition, I am serving God's purposes in the condition He has placed me in. It is God's purpose that has brought me here, and I desire to serve that purpose.' There is a notable Scripture about David: that he served his generation according to the will of God, and then he fell asleep — as Paul says of him in Acts 13:36. The word translated 'will' can also be translated 'counsel' — so it reads: 'After David in his generation had served the counsel of God, he fell asleep.' The common reading is that David served his

generation — that is, he did the work of his generation. But it is even more clearly put this way: after David in his generation had served the counsel of God, David fell asleep. Let that be the care of a Christian: to serve out God's counsel. What is the counsel of God? The condition I am in — God brought me into it by His own counsel and the purpose of His will. Now I must serve God's counsel in my generation — see what God's counsel is for my condition and serve that. And so I will have a quiet heart for the present, and will live and die peacefully and comfortably, if I am careful to serve God's counsel.

A sixth thing in the mystery of contentment is this: a gracious heart comes to contentment by melting his will and desires into God's will and desires. By this means he finds contentment — and this is a mystery to a worldly heart. It does not come by having his own desires satisfied as before, but by melting his will into God's will. So he comes to have — in one sense — his desires satisfied. He does not have the thing he formerly desired, yet he is satisfied, because he has made his will one with God's will. This is a step higher than merely submitting to the will of God. Everyone says they should submit to God's will — but a Christian has gone further: he can make God's will and his own will the same. It is said of believers that they are joined to the Lord and are one spirit — that is, whatever God's will is, I do not merely see reason to submit to it; God's will is my will. When the soul can hand over its will to God, contentment must follow. Others want to get the thing they desire. But a gracious heart says, 'What God would have, I would have too — not only will I yield to it, I want it.' A gracious heart has learned not only to make God's commanding will its own — that is, what God commands I will do — but also to make God's providential

will and ordering will its own too. God commands this thing, which you who are Christians may have some skill in submitting to. But whatever God works — not just what He commands — you must will it as well. You must make God's providential will and His ordering will as much your own will as you do His commandments. Here a Christian hands over his will to God — and in doing so, he has no other will but God's. Think of it this way: suppose a man assigns his debt to another. If the person to whom I owed the debt is now satisfied, then I am satisfied — because I have handed it over to him. I need not fret saying, 'My debt is not paid, I am not satisfied' — yes, I am satisfied, because the one I made the transfer to is satisfied. Just so between God and a Christian: a Christian hands over his will to God. If God's will is satisfied, then I am satisfied — because I no longer have a will of my own; it has been melted into the will of God. That is the excellence of grace: grace does not only subject the will to God, it melts the will into God's will, until they are one will. What sweet satisfaction the soul must then have, when everything is made over to God. You say this is difficult? Let me express it a little further. A gracious heart must find satisfaction in this way because godliness teaches it to see that its good is more in God than in itself. The good of my life, my comforts, my happiness, my glory, my riches — they are more in God than they are in me. We may speak more to this when we come to the lessons that must be learned. But on this basis a gracious heart finds contentment: it melts its will into God's. For it says: 'If God has glory, I have glory — God's glory is my glory. If God has riches, I have riches. If God is magnified, I am magnified. If God is satisfied, I am satisfied. God's wisdom and holiness are mine — and therefore His will must be mine, and my will must be His.' There is

the art of Christian contentment: melting his will into the will of God and handing his will over to God. 'Lord, You shall choose our inheritance for us' (Psalm 47:4).

The seventh thing in the art of contentment is this: the mystery consists not so much in bringing something from outside to make my condition more comfortable, as in purging out something that is within. The men of the world, when they want contentment and feel some lack, always look to get something from outside to satisfy them. But a godly person says, 'Let me get out what is already inside, and then I will come to contentment.' Think of a person with a bitter humor in the stomach that makes every drink taste bitter. He says, 'Put some sugar in my drink' — and his wife puts some in — but it still tastes bitter. Why? Because the bitterness comes from a bitter humor within. But let the doctor give him a strong medicine to purge out that inner bitterness, and then he can taste his drink well enough. So it is with worldly people: 'This condition is bitter — if I could add such-and-such a blessing to what I have, it would be sweet.' But if God were to put in a spoonful or two of sugar, it would still taste bitter. The way to contentment is to purge out your lusts and bitter humors. James 4:1: 'What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is it not the source, your pleasures that wage war in your members?' The trouble comes not so much from things outside, but from within. As I have said before, it is not the storms out at sea that cause an earthquake — it is the vapors that have built up within the earth. So if those lusts within your heart were removed, your condition would be a contented condition. These are the mysterious ways of godliness that worldly people never think of. When did you ever think of this as a remedy: to go and purge out the disorders of your heart within? Seven par-

particulars have now been named — there were many more I had considered. Without understanding and practicing these things, you will never come to true contentment. You will be clumsy and ineffective in the trade of Christianity. But a right understanding of these things will help you to be trained in it as in a mystery.

SERMON 3



Philippians 4:11. For I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content.

The mystery of contentment has more to show us. A gracious heart attains contentment in a mysterious way — a way the world knows nothing about.

Eighth: he lives on the dew of God's blessing. Adrian Junius once used a grasshopper to picture a contented man — leaping and jumping about, living on the dew, with this motto: 'I am content with what I have and hope for better.' A grasshopper does not live on grass as other creatures do. You cannot tell what it feeds on. Other small creatures feed on seeds or tiny insects, but the grasshopper — you simply cannot tell what sustains it. So a Christian can receive food the world knows nothing of. In a hidden way, a Christian is fed by the dew of God's blessing. A poor man or woman with little but with grace lives a more contented life than his rich neighbor with a great income. We see this regularly: though they have little, there is a secret blessing of God going into it that they cannot quite explain to anyone else. If you came to them and asked, 'How do you live so comfortably?' they could not fully tell you. But they know from experience that what they have

is sweeter than anything they had in days of greater plenty. We can point to some of the specific reasons why the little that godly people enjoy makes their condition sweet.

Consider these four or five reasons why godly people find contentment in what they have, however little it may be.

1. In what they have, they have the love of God. If a king sends a dish from his own table, it means far more to a courtier than twenty dishes from the ordinary allowance. If the king sends even one small thing with word that it is a token of his love, how delightful that is! When your husbands are at sea and send you a token of love, that one thing means more than forty times what you already have at home. Every good thing the people of God enjoy, they enjoy as a token of God's love — as something flowing from His eternal love toward them. That makes it very sweet.

2. What they have is sanctified to them for good. Other people have what they enjoy through common providence — but the saints have theirs in a special way. Others have food, drink, houses, clothes, and money — and that is all. But a gracious heart finds this contentment: 'I have it, and I have a sanctified use of it too. I find God working through what I enjoy to draw my heart closer to Him and to set it apart for Him. If my heart is being drawn nearer to God by what I enjoy, that is worth far more than having the same thing without any such sanctifying effect.' There is a secret dew that goes along with it — the dew of God's love, and the dew of sanctification.

3. What a gracious heart has, it has at no cost — it will not be called upon to pay for it. The difference between what a godly person has and what a wicked person has is like this: a godly person is

like a child staying at an inn kept by his own father. The innkeeper-father provides food, lodging, and everything the child needs. Then a stranger arrives and is also provided with meals and lodging — but the stranger must pay for everything. The child's meals may be plainer than the stranger's — the stranger may have boiled, roasted, and baked dishes — but a bill is coming. So it is with many of God's people: they may have plain fare, but God as a Father provides it, at no charge to them — it is already paid for. The wicked, for all their display and fine living, have what they ask for — but a reckoning is coming, and they must pay for everything in the end. Is it not better to have a little at no cost than to receive everything and have to pay for it all? Grace shows a person that what he has, he has freely from God as from a Father — and that makes it very sweet.

Fourth, a godly person may very well be content with little, because what he has he has by the right of Jesus Christ, by Christ's purchase. He has a far better right to what he has than any wicked person has to anything. Wicked people do have outward things — I am not saying they are thieves. They have a real right to them before God — but how? By mere gift. God in His free generosity gives these things to them. But the right the saints have is a right of purchase — it is paid for and truly theirs, and they may in a holy way claim whatever they need. The best way to express the difference between the right of a godly person and the right of the wicked is this illustration: a criminal condemned to die is, as a last favor, given a final meal before execution. You cannot say he steals it — though he has forfeited all his right to everything by his crime, once condemned he technically has no claim to so much as a crust of bread. Yet if a supper is given to him by grace, he does not steal

it. So it is with the wicked: they have forfeited all right to every comfort in this world. They are condemned by God as criminals on their way to execution. But if God in His generosity gives them something to sustain them here in the world, they cannot be called thieves. Yet is the meal granted a condemned man on the night before execution anything like the supper he used to have at home, with his wife and children around him, eating his own bread? A dish of simple herbs eaten at home in one's own house would be far better than the finest food in that last supper. But a child of God has not a right merely by gift — what he has is his own through the purchase of Christ. Every piece of bread you eat, if you are a godly person, Jesus Christ has bought it for you. You go to market and buy your food and drink with your money — but know that before you ever paid for it, Christ had already purchased it from God the Father with His blood. You receive it from people for money, but Christ obtained it from His Father by His blood. And that makes even a little far sweeter and better.

Fifth, there is another reason for the sweetness the saints find in their little — a reason that enables them to find contentment where others cannot. Every small blessing they have is like a deposit guaranteeing all the glory reserved for them — God gives it as a foretaste of the eternal mercies He intends for them. If a man receives even a small sum as a deposit payment on a great estate he is to receive, is that not more valuable than a much larger sum given with no such promise attached? So every comfort the saints have in this world is a deposit guaranteeing the eternal mercies the Lord has prepared for them. Just as every affliction the wicked suffer here is the beginning of sorrows and a foretaste of the eternal sorrows awaiting them in hell — so every comfort you have is a

foretaste of the eternal mercies you will enjoy with God in heaven. Not only the consolations of God's Spirit are foretastes of the eternal comforts of heaven. When you sit at your table and rejoice with your wife and children and friends, you may look on every one of those pleasures as a foretaste — yes, even a deposit payment — of eternal life. No wonder a Christian can be content. This is a mystery to the wicked. A Christian says: 'What I have, I have out of God's love. I have it sanctified to me by God. I have it freely, purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ. And I have it as a foretaste of the eternal mercies reserved for me. In this my soul rejoices.' There is a secret dew of God's goodness and blessing on his estate that others do not have. All of this helps you understand that Scripture in Proverbs 16:8: 'Better is a little with righteousness than great income with injustice.' A little with righteousness is better than the great revenues of the wicked. That is the next element in Christian contentment — the mystery that the godly person lives on the dew of God's blessing in all the good things he enjoys.

The ninth element in which the mystery of Christian contentment consists is this: not only does the godly person have God's blessing on the good things he possesses, making them sweet to him — but he can also see love in all his afflictions, and enjoy the sweetness of love in his trials just as much as in his blessings. Indeed, the afflictions of God's people flow from the same eternal love that sent Jesus Christ. Jerome said it well: 'He is a happy man who is struck, when the stroke is a stroke of love.' All of God's strokes are strokes of love and mercy. As Psalm 25:10 says, all the ways of God — the ways of affliction as much as the ways of prosperity — are mercy and love to those who fear and love Him. Grace gives a person a piercing eye to see into the eternal purposes of

God for his good — even in his afflictions — and to see God's love in every trial as much as in every blessing. This is a mystery to a worldly heart. Worldly people may think God loves them when He prospers them and makes them rich, but they think He does not love them when He afflicts them. That is the mystery. But grace instructs people in that mystery — grace enables them to see love even in the frowns of God's face, and so they receive contentment.

Tenth: a godly person finds contentment in a mysterious way because, just as he sees all his afflictions coming from the same love that sent Jesus Christ, he also sees them all sanctified in Jesus Christ, sanctified by Him as Mediator. He sees the sting, the venom, and the poison of every affliction taken out by the virtue of Jesus Christ, the Mediator between God and man. Here is how a Christian works through this: when he wants contentment, he asks, 'What is my affliction?' Is it poverty that God is striking me with? Jesus Christ had not a house to lay His head in. The birds of the air had nests and the foxes had holes, but the Son of Man had nowhere to lay His head. So my poverty is sanctified by Christ's poverty. By faith I can see the curse, the sting, and the venom of my poverty taken out by the poverty of Jesus Christ. Christ Jesus was poor in this world in order to deliver me from the curse of my poverty — so that it would not be a curse to me. Then my poverty is no longer purely afflictive, and I can be content in that condition. The way is not to stand and complain because I do not have what others have — but to say, 'I am poor, and Christ was poor precisely so that He might make my poverty a blessing to me.'

And again: am I disgraced and dishonored? Has my good name been taken from me? Jesus Christ had dishonor put upon Him — He was called Beelzebul and a Samaritan; they said He had a de-

mon in Him. Every foul slander that could be cast on anyone was cast on Jesus Christ — and this was for me, so that the disgrace placed on me might be sanctified. Where another man is overwhelmed by dishonor and disgrace, a Christian works through it this way. When others slander you, your only thought may be to slander them back — to fight insult with insult — thinking that will ease you. But a Christian has a very different way to find ease. 'Others rail and speak ill of me — but did they not rail upon Jesus Christ and speak ill of Him? And what am I compared to Christ?' Christ's subjection to that evil was for me — so that even if such a thing came upon me, I would know that the curse of it has been removed from me through Christ's endurance of it. In this way a Christian can be content when anyone speaks ill of him. This is a mystery: gaining contentment this way. So if people mock and scoff at you — did they not do the very same to Jesus Christ? They mocked and scorned Him when He was in His greatest extremity on the cross. They said, 'Here is the King of the Jews,' bowed the knee, hailed Him as King, put a reed in His hand, and mocked Him. I find contentment in the midst of scorn and mockery by considering that Christ was scorned, and by exercising faith in what Christ suffered for me. Am I in great physical pain? Jesus Christ endured as great pain in His body — though not the same kinds of sicknesses we have, yet He suffered pains and tortures just as severe, and they proved deadly. Exercising faith in what Christ endured is the way to find contentment in the midst of our own pain. One person lies fretting and vexing, unable to bear the pain. Are you a Christian? Have you ever tried this path to contentment — exercising your faith upon all the pains and sufferings Jesus Christ endured? That is the way to contentment, and a

Christian finds contentment in pain this way. Sometimes you will see a very godly and gracious person lying under terrible pain and difficulty with a remarkable cheerfulness — and you wonder at it. This is the way he gets it: by exercising his faith in what pains Jesus Christ suffered. Are you afraid of death? The way to contentment is by exercising faith in the death of Jesus Christ. Perhaps you have inward troubles of soul, and God has withdrawn Himself from you — then your faith must be exercised on the sufferings Christ endured in His soul. He poured out His soul before God. When He sweated drops of blood, He was in agony in His very spirit, and He found even God Himself seemingly forsaking Him. Exercising faith on Christ in this way brings contentment. And is this not a mystery to worldly hearts? A gracious heart finds contentment in a mysterious way. No wonder Paul says, 'I have been initiated into the mystery of being content in whatever condition I am in.'

In the eleventh place, there is yet a further mystery — one I hope you will find very practically useful. You will see, before we are done, what a clear path there is for a person skilled in godliness to find contentment, even though it is hard for a worldly person. The eleventh mystery in contentment is this: a gracious heart has contentment by drawing strength from Jesus Christ — it is able to bear its burden by receiving strength from another. That is indeed a riddle, and it would sound ridiculous in the schools of philosophers. To say that if a burden is on you, you must draw strength from another? They would understand having someone else come and stand under the burden with you — but to be strengthened by another's strength when that person is not visibly near you? That they would find absurd. But a Christian finds satis-

faction in every condition by drawing strength from another — by going outside himself to Jesus Christ, acting faith on Christ, and bringing the strength of Jesus Christ into his own soul. By that strength he is enabled to bear whatever God lays on him. 'From His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace' (John 1:16). There is strength in Christ not only to sanctify and save us, but to sustain us under all our burdens and afflictions. And Christ expects that when we are under any burden, we will exercise faith in Him to draw virtue and strength from Him. Faith is the great grace to be exercised under affliction. Other graces should also be exercised, but faith is the grace that draws strength from Christ — looking to Him who holds the fullness of all strength to convey it into the hearts of all believers. Now if a person has a burden on him but receives added strength, then even if the burden is doubled, the strength may be tripled — and the burden actually feels lighter than it did before under natural strength alone. Our afflictions may be heavy, and we cry out: 'I cannot bear this! I cannot bear such an affliction.' But though you cannot see how to bear it with your own strength, who can say what you might do with the strength of Jesus Christ? You say you cannot bear it — but do you think Christ could not bear it? If Christ could bear it, why may you not come to bear it through Him? You say, 'Can I have the strength of Christ?' Yes — it is made over to you by faith. Scripture says in many places that the Lord is our strength — God Himself is our strength, Christ is our strength. Christ's strength is made over to you, so that you may be able to bear whatever lies upon you. And that is why we find such a striking expression in Paul's letter to the Colossians, where he prays for the saints 'that they might be strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for

the attaining of all steadfastness and patience, joyously' (Colossians 1:11). Strengthened with all power according to the glorious might of God — for all patience and all endurance with joyfulness. Do not settle, then, for a little strength — just enough to bear what a person could bear through the power of reason and nature. You are to be strengthened with all might, according to the glorious power of God, unto all patience and all endurance. You who are now under heavy and extraordinary afflictions — look at this Scripture. Consider: why may not this Scripture be fulfilled in you, if you are godly? You should not be at peace in your own spirit unless in some measure you are experiencing this Scripture being fulfilled in you — so that you can say with some comfort, 'Through God's mercy I find the very strength spoken of in this Scripture coming into me.' When you are under a great affliction and you are godly, labor to walk in such a way that others can see this Scripture made true in you. Here is the glorious power of God strengthening His servants for all endurance — and that with joyfulness. It may be that you do not even show as much patience as a wise man or woman with only natural reason. But where is the power of God, the glorious power of God? Where is the strengthening with all might, unto all long-suffering and patience — with joyfulness? The natural spirit of a person can bear up under hardship to some degree. But how much more when that spirit is moved by grace and holiness, and filled with the strength of Jesus Christ. That is the way of a godly person's contentment — the mystery of it: drawing strength from Jesus Christ.

Twelfth, another mystery in contentment is this: a godly heart enjoys much of God in everything it has, and knows how to make up all its lacks in God Himself. That is another mystery. He has

God in what he has — I touched on this earlier when speaking of the dew of God's blessing on what he has. For God is able to pour a great deal of His power into small things — as His miracles have been as striking in small things as in great. Just as God pours His power into working miracles in lesser things, so He pours His goodness and mercy into comforting and rejoicing the hearts of His people in small things just as much as in great ones. There may be as much value in a pearl as in a great pile of lumber. But this is a distinct point.

Furthermore: a gracious heart lives on God's dew in the little it has — but what happens when that little is taken away? You might say: if a person has nothing, nothing can be drawn from nothing. But when the children of God have their little taken from them, they can make up all their loss in God Himself. A man has been stripped bare — plunderers came and took everything he had. What shall he do now? But when all is gone, godliness teaches an art — the ability to make up all losses in God. Many who lose their homes go around gathering help, slowly rebuilding through many hands. But a godly person knows where to go to recover everything — right into God Himself — and there enjoys the very essence of the same good and comfort he had before. For a godly person does not live as much in himself as he lives in God. This is a mystery to a worldly heart. A gracious person does not live so much in himself as he does in God — he lives in God continually. If anything is cut off from the stream, he knows how to go to the fountain and make up everything there. God is his all in all while he lives. As Elkanah said to Hannah, 'Am I not more to you than ten sons?' (1 Samuel 1:8) — so God says to a gracious heart: 'You have lost your estate, your livelihood has been taken. Am I not to you more than ten

houses and ten businesses? I am to you instead of everything — and not only instead of everything, but come to Me, and you shall have it all again in Me.' This is a wonderful art: being able to draw from God what you once had through created things. Christian, how did you enjoy comfort before? Was the created thing anything more to you than a pipe conveying God's goodness to you? 'The pipe is cut off,' God says. 'Come to Me — the fountain — and drink directly.' Though the beams of light are taken away, the sun remains the same in the sky as it always was. What is it that satisfies God Himself? It is that He enjoys all fullness in Himself — and so He is satisfied in Himself. Now if you enjoy God as your portion — if your soul can say with the church in Lamentations 3:24, 'The Lord is my portion, says my soul' — why should you not be satisfied and content as God Himself is? God is content; He rests in eternal contentment in Himself. If you have that God as your portion, why should you not be content with Him alone? God is content with Himself alone — and if you have Him, you may be content with Him alone. Perhaps that is the very reason your outward comforts have been taken away — so that God may be all in all to you. While you had those things, they shared in your affections. A large part of the stream of your love ran toward them, and God would have the full stream run to Him. As a man whose house is supplied by water through several pipes may find that the water comes too thinly into the place he needs it most — and so he stops the other pipes to get all the water flowing where he wants it. So here: when you enjoyed those things, perhaps some stream of your affection went to God — but a great deal ran toward created things, running to waste. The Lord does not want the affections of His children to run to waste. He may not care for others' affections in

the same way, but yours are precious to Him. So He cuts off your other pipes so that your heart might flow wholly toward Him. This is like parents who see a servant stealing away the hearts of their children. It would be hard to bear — you would be ready to dismiss such a servant. When the servant is gone, the child feels a great loss — the nurse is gone. But the father or mother intends by removing the servant to draw the child's affections more powerfully toward themselves. And what has the child actually lost, if the affections that once ran toward the servant now run toward the mother? So those affections that ran toward created things — God would have them run toward Himself, so that He may be all in all to you here in this world. And a gracious heart can indeed know how to enjoy God as all in all. That is the happiness of heaven: to have God as all in all. The saints in heaven have no houses, land, money, food, drink, or clothing — but why do they not need them? Because God is all in all to them directly. Now while you live in this world, you may come to enjoy much of God — much of heaven. While we live in this life we may enjoy much of the very life that is in heaven, and what is that but the enjoyment of God as all in all? There is a text in Revelation that speaks of the glorious condition the church will experience even here in this world. Revelation 21:22-23: 'I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. And the city has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp is the Lamb.' They had no need of sun or moon. This speaks of a glorious condition the church is to be in here in this world — not in heaven. That is clear from verses 24 and 26, which say that the kings of the earth will bring their glory and honor to it. The kings of the earth will not bring their glory into heaven — so

this must refer to a time here in the world when they will bring their glory and honor to the church. And verse 26 says, 'They will bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it' — so this must be in this world, not in heaven. If such a time is coming here in this world — when God will be all in all, and there will be far less need of created things than now — then the saints must labor to live as close to that life as possible, making up everything in God. Oh, if you would but take this mystery to heart, so that it becomes real to the hearts of the saints in times like these — they would find that what they gain through grace is worth more than thousands of worlds. Hence that remarkable speech of Jacob in Genesis 33. When his brother Esau met him, you find that Esau refused Jacob's gifts. In verse 8, Esau said when Jacob brought his present: 'What do you mean by all this company which I have met?' And Jacob answered, 'To find favor in the sight of my lord.' And Esau said, 'I have plenty.' Then in verse 11, Jacob urged him again: 'Please take my gift which has been brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me and because I have plenty.' In your Bible it reads the same in English: Esau said 'I have plenty' and Jacob said 'I have plenty.' But in the Hebrew, Jacob's word is different from Esau's. Jacob's word means 'I have everything' — and yet Jacob was poorer than Esau. This should humble us: that an Esau should say 'I have plenty.' But a Christian should say not only 'I have plenty' but 'I have everything.' How does he have everything? Because he has God, who is everything. As someone wisely said: 'He has all things who has Him who has all things.' Surely you have all things, because you have as your portion Him who has all things. God has all things in Himself, and you have

God as your portion — and in that you have all. This is the mystery of contentment: it makes up all lacks in God. This is what worldly people have little skill in.

Now I have several more things to open in the mystery of contentment. I should also show that a godly person not only makes up all his lacks in God, but also finds enough within himself to make up all — not from himself, but in himself. That may seem even stranger than the last: to make up all in God is remarkable enough, but to make up all in himself — not from himself, but in himself — that is, a gracious heart has so much of God within it that it has enough there to make up all outward lacks. Proverbs 14:14 says: 'A good man will be satisfied from himself' — that is, from what is within him. A gracious person has a bird in his own breast that makes enough music, even when he lacks outward music. As Luke 17:21 says, 'The kingdom of God is within you.' He has a kingdom within him — a kingdom of God. If people speak ill of him abroad, he has a conscience within that makes up for the loss of reputation and credit — standing in place of a thousand witnesses.

Thirteenth: a gracious heart draws contentment from the covenant God has made with him. This is a way of finding contentment that worldly people know nothing of. They can find contentment if created things satisfy them — but drawing contentment from the covenant of grace is a skill they lack entirely. I should open two things here. First, how to draw contentment from the covenant of grace in general — but I will address that in the next sermon. For now, just a word on the second: how he draws contentment from the specific promises of the covenant — from the particular promises that address every particular lack. There is no

condition a godly man or woman can be in without some promise in Scripture that speaks to that condition. And that is the way of contentment: to go out to the promises and draw from them what is needed. To a worldly heart this sounds dry and empty — but to a gracious heart it is the most real thing in the world. When contentment is lacking, a gracious person goes to the promises and the covenant, and pleads the promises God has made. I will mention just one promise to illustrate — for the heaviest of afflictions: the plague. Psalm 91 speaks to those who cannot have friends come to them because of the plague, or who cannot find other comforts. In other afflictions they might have friends and various things to comfort them, but not in this. Psalm 91:10: 'No evil will befall you, nor will any plague come near your tent.' There is a promise for the pestilence in verses 5 and 6 as well. This is a Scripture for those in danger of plague. You might say this promises the plague will not come near them — but notice what the two parts are joined together: 'No evil will befall you, nor will the plague come near you' — the evil of it shall not come near you.

Objection: But the plague does come upon many godly people. How can they use this Scripture? It seems like a Scripture that would trouble them rather than help them — because here is a promise that the plague shall not come near them, and yet it comes upon them just as much as upon others.

Answer: First, promises of outward deliverance made to God's people under the law were to be understood and fulfilled far more literally in that era than in the era of the Gospel. God now makes up for it in other ways with equal mercy. Though God made a covenant of grace and eternal life in Christ with His people even then, there was also another covenant by which God dealt with

them in outward things — either with outward prosperity or outward affliction — according to their ways, in a more precise and regular pattern than in the times of the Gospel. So when the Israelites sinned against God, they were sure to experience public judgments, and when they did well, public mercies. The consistent pattern of God's dealings with the Jewish people in the ordinary course was outward judgments for disobedience and outward mercies for obedience. But that is not how God works in the times of the Gospel. We cannot draw the same firm conclusions that because God once afflicted people with such-and-such punishments for sin, He will do exactly the same now — or that people will enjoy exactly the same outward prosperity they once experienced. That is the first thing to understand about this text and all similar ones.

The second answer is this: it may be that their faith does not reach to this promise. God often brings outward afflictions because His people's faith has not laid hold of the promise — and this is true not only in the Old Testament but in the New as well. Zechariah's experience may be said to belong to the era of the New Testament: he was struck silent because he did not believe, and that is given as the reason. But you might ask: does faith have the right to believe for full outward deliverance? I would not dare to say so — but it may act on the promise to believe that God will make it good in His own way. Perhaps you have not done even that much, and so this promise has not been fulfilled to you.

Third, when God makes such promises to His people, He always reserves the liberty to do three things.

1. Notwithstanding the promise, God retains the liberty to make use of anything for your correction.

2. He retains the liberty to make use of your estate, your freedom, or even your life to advance His own purposes. If it serves as a warning to wicked and ungodly people, God must have that liberty. Though He has made a promise to you, He will not surrender the ownership He holds over your estate and life.

3. God must retain the liberty to deal with what you have in order to show that His ways are unsearchable and His judgments past finding out. These three things God keeps in His own hand.

Objection: But then, what good is there in such a promise if God makes all these reservations?

First: you are under God's protection more than others. But what comfort is that if the affliction still comes upon me?

Answer: You have this comfort — that the evil of it will be taken from you. Even if God uses this affliction for other purposes, He will do so in a way that He makes it up to you in some other way. A parent may give a child something, but later come back and say, 'I need that back.' The child says, 'But you gave it to me.' And the parent says, 'I must have it — but I will make it up to you in another way.' The child does not think the parent loves him any less for it. So when God makes a promise of protection, and yet something still comes upon you, it is as though the Father says: 'I gave that to you, yes — but let Me have it back, and I will make it up to you in another way just as good.' God says: 'Let Me have your health, your freedom, your life — and it will be made up to you in another way.'

Second: whenever the plague or any such pestilence comes upon those who are under such a promise, it is for some special and notable purpose, and God calls them to search and examine

carefully to discover His meaning. There is so much to be learned from the promise God has made about this particular evil that God's people may come to quiet and content their hearts even in this affliction. 'I read in this psalm that God has promised to deliver His people from plague and pestilence — and yet I find it coming upon me.' Perhaps I have not previously exercised faith in this promise. And if God brings this affliction on me, He will still make it up in another way. God promised to deliver me, or at least to deliver me from all the evil of it. So if this thing comes upon me, and yet I have a promise from God, then certainly the evil of it has been taken away. This promise tells me that if it does come upon me, it is for some notable purpose — because God has use for my life and intends to bring about His glory in a way I do not yet know. And if He comes in a fatherly way of correction, I will be satisfied. So a Christian heart, by reasoning from the Word, comes to settle and satisfy its soul in the midst of a heavy hand of God — even in a condition as distressing as that. Worldly hearts do not find that power in the Word — that healing virtue that can heal their troubled anxieties and the unrest of their spirits. But godly people, when they come to the Word, find in it a plaster for every wound. And so they come to ease and contentment in conditions that are deeply grievous and miserable to others. As for how the saints draw contentment and satisfaction from particular promises, and more broadly from the covenant of grace, in what mysterious way — we will take that up next time.

SERMON 4



Philippians 4:11. For I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content.

In the last session we spoke of various aspects of the mystery of contentment, and toward the end we mentioned two more things that we had no time to open. I will open those more fully now, and then move on to a few more points before turning to other matters.

Here is the next point: a Christian heart has not only contentment in God — and certainly, whoever has God has everything, since he has the One who has all things — but he is also able to make up all his outward lacks of created comforts from what he finds within himself. That may seem even more surprising. We may be able to convince people, even without their feeling it by experience, that if they have the One who has everything, then they have everything — for there is such fullness in God, the infinite source and being of all things, that He can supply all their lacks. But here is something further still. A godly person can make up whatever he lacks without any created thing — he can supply it from within himself. Proverbs 14:14: 'A good man is satisfied from himself.' If he lacks outward comfort and good fellowship, a good

conscience is a continual feast — he makes up the lack of a feast by the peace he has in his own conscience. If he lacks music and pleasantness around him, he has a bird within him singing the most melodious and delightful songs in the world. Does he lack honor? He has his own conscience bearing witness for him — worth a thousand witnesses. As Luke 17:21 says: 'The kingdom of God is within you.' Whatever a Christian lacks, he can supply it, for he has a kingdom within himself — the kingdom of God. If a king meets with great trouble when he is abroad, he can comfort himself: 'I have a kingdom of my own.' Here it is said that the kingdom of God is within a person. Learned men who have studied the commentaries on this Gospel text will find a remarkable thought there about this verse. The commentator admits it is beyond expression — and so it is. 'The kingdom of God is within you': he suggests that there is such a presence of God and Christ within the soul that when the body dies, the soul enters into God and Christ who are within it. The soul's entering into God and Christ — and enjoying that communion with God and Christ already present within itself — is heaven to it. He confesses he cannot fully express what he means, nor can others fully understand it. But certainly, before death, there is a kingdom of God within the soul — such a manifestation of God in the soul as is enough to content the heart of any godly person in the world. The kingdom he has within him now — he need not wait for it until he goes to heaven. There is certainly a heaven in the soul of a godly person right now. When you comfort a friend in affliction, you say, 'Heaven will make up for all of this.' But you may say more: heaven is already making up for it. There is a heaven within the souls of the saints — that is a certain truth. No soul will ever enter heaven unless heaven first comes to that soul.

When you die you hope to go to heaven — but if you will go to heaven when you die, heaven will come to you before you die. Now this is a great mystery: to have the kingdom of heaven in the soul. No one can know this but the soul that has it. The heaven that is within the soul is like the white stone and the new name in Revelation — none but those who receive it can understand it. My friends, it is a wretched condition to depend entirely on created things for contentment. Rich people count it a great happiness not to have to go and buy things piece by piece as others do. They have everything they need for pleasure and profit on their own land, their whole estate lying together in one place. No one needs to come in to supply them — they have everything within themselves. Poorer people must go from market to market to provide for their needs, but great and wealthy people have sheep, cattle, grain, clothing, and everything they need from their own resources. But this is the happiness of a Christian: he has within himself something that satisfies him more than all of that. That passage in James 1:4 seems to point to the condition of those who have everything within themselves. 'And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.' The word translated 'complete' means to have the whole inheritance to oneself — not a scattered inheritance, but one where everything lies together within. The heart that is patient under affliction finds itself in such an estate: it finds its whole inheritance complete and together, all within itself. To illustrate this further: it is with the contented soul as it is with many a man who enjoys great abundance of comforts at home. God has given him a comfortable home, a good wife, pleasant walks and gardens, and everything at home that he could desire. Such a man does not much want to go

out. Other men go out to get fresh air — but he has sweet air at home. They go abroad to see friends because there is quarreling and strife at home. Many bad husbands use this as their excuse for going out constantly, telling their wives they can never find peace at home. But we rightly count those most happy who have everything at home. Those whose houses are close and stale love to go out for fresh air. But those who have good things at home have no such need. Those with nothing good on their table must go to friends for a meal — but those whose tables are furnished are just as happy to stay home. So a worldly person has little contentment in his own spirit. Augustine compared a bad conscience to a nagging wife: a person with a bad conscience cannot stand to look inward — he loves to be out and about, looking at other things, never looking at himself. But the person with a good conscience takes delight in looking into his own heart. So a worldly heart — because there is nothing within but filth and vileness — seeks contentment elsewhere. And as it is with a vessel full of liquid: if you strike it, it makes little sound — but if it is empty, it makes a loud noise. So it is with the heart. A heart full of grace and goodness within can bear many strokes without making noise. But an empty heart — strike it, and it rings loudly. Those who are always complaining and whining — it is a sign there is emptiness in their hearts. If their hearts were filled with grace, they would not make such noise. A person whose bones are filled with marrow and whose veins are filled with good blood does not complain of cold as others do. So a gracious heart, having the Spirit of God within and being filled with grace, has that within which produces contentment. Seneca said: "The things I suffer will seem incredibly heavy when I cannot bear myself. But if I am no burden to myself — if I have all

quiet within my own heart — then I can bear anything.' Many people through their sin carry burdens from without, but the greatest burden is the wickedness of their own hearts. They are not burdened with their sins in a godly way — which would actually ease their burden — but carry the power of their wickedness unbroken, and so they are a burden to themselves. The disorders of men's hearts are crushing burdens to them. Many times a godly person has enough within to content him. As Cicero says in one of his paradoxes: virtue is content with itself, finding enough within its own sphere to live happily. But how few understand this mystery. Many think, 'If only I had what that other person has, how happily and comfortably I would live.' But if you are a Christian, whatever your condition, you have enough within yourself. People admire those wealthy enough not to have to depend on anyone else. Many work hard in their youth so they will not be beholden to others: 'I love to live independently.' A Christian can do the same — not that he does not live upon God (I do not mean that), but upon what he has of God within himself. He can live upon that even when he does not have outward comforts. Those who are godly and who keep close to God in their communion with Him understand what I mean by this: that a Christian has the supply of all his needs within himself. You can see from this that the spirit of a Christian is a precious spirit, a godly spirit is valuable — precisely because it has enough within to make the person happy.

The next element in which the mystery of contentment consists is this: a gracious heart draws its supply of all things from the covenant and so finds contentment. This is a dry thing to a worldly spirit. There are two things here.

First, he draws contentment from the covenant in general — from the great covenant God has made with him in Christ.

Second, from the particular promises God has made to him in the covenant.

First, from the covenant in general. I will give you one remarkable Scripture for this: 2 Samuel 23:5. 'Truly is not my house so with God? For He has made an everlasting covenant with me, ordered in all things and secured; for all my salvation and all my desire, will He not indeed make it grow?' This is a remarkable verse from David, who did not have the covenant of grace opened as fully to him as we have it. Notice what David says: 'Although my house is not so' — that is, not in every way as I would like — 'He has made with me an everlasting covenant.' Someone might say: things are not well with me and God; I do not find God coming in fully as I hoped; my household is not in the condition I had hoped — perhaps the plague has come into my house, and it is not comfortable as it once was. But can you read this Scripture and say: 'Although my house is not so blessed with health as others'; 'Although it is not as it was' — 'yet He has made with me an everlasting covenant'? I am still in covenant with God. The Lord has made an everlasting covenant with me. As for things in this world — they are momentary, not everlasting. I see how a family that was fine only a week ago is now struck down, swept away by plague, the survivors left in sorrow and mourning. There is no resting in the things of this world. Yet the Lord has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things. I find disorder in my heart and in my household — but the everlasting covenant is ordered in all things. Yes, and it is sure. There is no sureness in anything of this world — especially in these times. No one can be sure of any-

thing they have. Who can be sure of their estate? Some of you who were living well and comfortably, with everything around you stable, thought your mountain was strong — and then within a day or two it was all taken away. There is no sureness in the things of this world. But the covenant is sure. What I venture at sea is not sure — but here is the great insurance office for the saints. They are not charged for it — it costs nothing but the exercise of grace. They may go to this assurance office and insure everything they venture: either they will receive the very thing they insured, or God will compensate them for it. In an ordinary insurance office, you cannot be guaranteed to have the actual goods arrive safely — but if they are lost, the insurer undertakes to make good the loss. The covenant of grace that God has made with His people is God's insurance office. In all their fears, the saints may and should go to the covenant to have everything assured to them — their estates, their lives. You may say: 'How are they assured? Their lives and estates are at risk just like others.' But God commits Himself to make up all. And then notice what follows: 'For this is all my salvation.' David, will you not have salvation from your enemies, from outward dangers, from plague and pestilence? His spirit is settled, as if to say: if that kind of salvation comes, well and good — I will praise God for it. But what I have in the covenant — that is my salvation. I look on that as enough. And then further: 'This is all my salvation, and all my desire.' David, is there nothing else you want beyond this covenant? No — he says — it is all contained in this. Those men and women must live contented lives who have all their desires. Here the holy man says, 'This is all my desire.' 'And though He does not make it grow' — even if God does not cause me

to prosper in the world as others do — I have made my peace with that. Though God does not cause my house to increase, I have all my desires.

So you can see how a godly heart finds contentment in the covenant. Many of you speak of God's covenant and the covenant of grace — but have you found it this effectual in your souls? Have you drawn this sweetness from the covenant and found contentment for your heart in your difficult conditions? It is a special evidence of the reality of grace in any soul that when affliction comes, in a kind of natural movement it immediately goes to the covenant. Just as a child in danger does not need to be told, 'When you are in danger, go to your father or mother' — nature tells him so. So it is with a gracious heart: as soon as it is in any trouble or affliction, a new nature carries it immediately to the covenant, and there it finds ease and rest. If you find your heart working this way — immediately running to the covenant — that is an excellent sign of the reality of grace in you.

Now for the particular promises of the covenant of grace. A gracious heart looks on every promise as flowing from the root of the great covenant of grace in Christ. Other people look at certain particular promises — that God will help them in difficult straits, that He will keep them, and so on — but they do not see how those particular promises are connected to the root, the covenant of grace. Christians often miss a great deal of comfort they could draw from particular promises in the Gospel, simply because they fail to see how they connect to the root — the great covenant God has made with them in Christ. I mentioned earlier that in the era of the law, people could rest more confidently on the literal fulfillment of outward promises than we can in the era of the Gospel.

The reason is that God made a special covenant — which He called a new covenant, distinct from the covenant for eternal life in Christ — that was expressly for outward blessings in the land of Canaan. Even the law was given to them in a more particular way as an external covenant of outward blessings. So God dealt with them in a more external and visible covenant than He does with His people now. Yet godliness has the promise of the present life and of the life to come. We may use the promises for this life — but not resting so much on their literal fulfillment as they could. Rather, we trust that God will make them good in some way — in a spiritual way, even if not in an outward way. We must not place more weight on outward promises than they are designed to bear, or we will make them carry more than they can. For example, to believe confidently that the plague will not come near a specific house — that is placing more on such a promise than it can support. I opened Psalm 91 earlier. If I had lived in the time of the law, I might have been somewhat more confident of a literal fulfillment of that promise. But in the era of the Gospel, the promise carries no more than this: that God has a special protection over His people, and that He will deliver them from the evil of such afflictions. And if He does bring such an affliction, it is more than ordinary providence — it is some special purpose that God has in it. I had intended to give you several promises for the comfort of the heart in times of affliction. Isaiah 43:2: 'When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, nor will the flame burn you.' Certainly, though this promise was made in the era of the law, it will be made good to all the saints now — either in its literal sense or in some other way.

We also see this plainly in the promise made to Joshua: 'I will not fail you or forsake you' (Joshua 1:5). That promise is applied directly to Christians in the era of the Gospel. So here is the way that faith brings contentment through the promises: all the promises ever made to our forefathers from the beginning of the world, the saints of God have an inheritance in them. They pass down from one generation to the next, and by them the saints come to have contentment — because they inherit all the promises in the whole book of God. Hebrews 13:5 makes this plain: it is our inheritance. And we do not inherit less now than they did in Joshua's time — we inherit more. In that passage in Hebrews, the promise is stated with more force than it was to Joshua. To Joshua, God said He would not leave him or forsake him. But in the Hebrews passage, in the Greek, there are five negatives in that short sentence — 'I will not, not, not, not, not' — five times over, with great intensity. As if God were saying with great earnestness, five times in a row: 'I will not leave you!' So we not only have the same promises they had, but we have them expanded and fuller — though still not primarily in the literal, outward sense, which is in fact the smallest part of the promise. In Isaiah 54:17: 'No weapon that is formed against you will prosper; and every tongue that accuses you in judgment you will condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their vindication is from Me, says the Lord.' That is a good promise for a soldier — though still not laying too much on the literal sense. It holds forth this much: God's protection is in a special way over godly soldiers. 'Every tongue that rises against you in judgment you will condemn' — this applies against false witnesses too. Some of you may say: 'My parents died and left me nothing — not a penny. But I thank God, God has provided for me.'

Even if your father or mother died and left you no inheritance, you have an inheritance in the promises: 'This is their heritage.' So there is no godly man or woman who is not a great heir. Therefore, when you open the book of God and find any promise there, you may make that promise your own. Just as an heir riding over various fields and meadows says, 'This meadow is my inheritance, this field is my inheritance,' and then sees a fine house and says, 'This house is my inheritance' — viewing it all with very different eyes than a stranger riding over the same ground. So a worldly heart reads the promises as mere stories, without feeling any real claim in them. But a godly person, every time he reads the Scriptures and meets a promise, should lay his hand on it and say, 'This is part of my inheritance. It is mine, and I am to live upon it.' Remember this when you read Scripture. This will make you contented. Here is a mysterious way of contentment. Psalm 34:10, Psalm 37:6, Isaiah 58:10 — there are various promises there that bring contentment. So much for the mystery of contentment by way of the covenant.

There are two or three more things that show how a godly person finds contentment in a way entirely different from any worldly heart. It is a mysterious way.

He finds contentment by making the glorious things of heaven real to himself — holding the kingdom of heaven and the glory to come as present realities. By faith he makes it present. This is how the martyrs found contentment in their sufferings. Some of them said: 'Though we have a hard breakfast, we shall have a good dinner — we shall presently be in heaven. Just close your eyes,' said one, 'and you shall be in heaven.' 2 Corinthians 4:16: 'We do not lose heart.' Why not? 'For our momentary light affliction is pro-

ducing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison.' They see heaven before them, and that contents them. When sailors can see the harbor ahead — though they were greatly troubled before they could see any land — as they draw near the shore and spot a landmark, it brings them great relief. A godly person in the midst of waves and storms can see the glory of heaven before him, and that contents him. One drop of the sweetness of heaven is enough to take away all the bitterness of every affliction in the world. In ordinary life, we know that one drop of something bitter will make a great deal of honey bitter too — a spoonful of sugar cannot sweeten a cup of gall and wormwood. But one spoonful of gall put into a cup of sugar will embitter it. Yet it works the other way in heaven: one drop of the sweet will sweeten a great deal of bitter affliction — but no amount of bitterness can embitter a soul that sees the glory of heaven that is to come. A worldly heart finds contentment only from what it sees before it in this world. A godly heart finds contentment from what it sees laid up for it in the highest heavens.

The final thing I want to name is this: a godly person finds contentment by opening his heart to God. When other people are discontented, how do they help themselves? By railing — by harsh words. Someone has crossed them, and their only relief is bitter speech and complaining. That is how they ease themselves. But when a godly person is crossed, how does he find ease? He feels his trial just as keenly as you do — and he goes to God in prayer, opens his heart to God, pours out his sorrows and fears, and then comes away with a cheerful face. Do you find that you can come away from prayer and not look sad? As it says of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1:18 — after she had been at prayer, her face was no longer sad.

She was comforted. That is the right way of contentment. So we have finished with the mystery of contentment. If you put together everything that has been said, you may see fully what a great art Christian contentment is. Paul had need to learn it. You can see that contentment is not the simple thing that many make it out to be when they say, 'You must just be content.' It is a great art and mystery of godliness to be content in the Christian way. And it will appear even more to be a mystery when we come to the third heading: what are the lessons that a gracious heart learns when it learns to be content? 'I have learned to be content.' Learned — what lessons have you learned? A scholar with great knowledge of arts and sciences — how did he begin? He started with his ABCs, and then moved to his primer, his Bible, his grammar, and then to other books. He learned one thing after another. So a Christian coming to contentment is like a student in Christ's school. There are various lessons that teach the soul to arrive at this learning. Every godly person is a scholar. It cannot be said of any Christian that he is unlearned — every Christian is a learned person. Now the lessons Christ teaches to bring us to contentment are these:

The first great lesson is the lesson of self-denial. It is a great and difficult lesson — as a child at first cries and finds it hard. Bradford the Martyr said: 'Whoever has not learned the lesson of the cross has not learned his ABCs in Christianity.' Here is where Christ begins with His students. Even those in the lowest form must start here. If you mean to be a Christian at all, you must buckle down to this — or you can never truly be one. No one can be a scholar without learning his ABCs. So you must learn the lesson of self-denial, or you can never be a student in Christ's school, or grow learned in this mystery of contentment. Self-denial is the first

lesson Christ teaches any soul. Self-denial brings contentment. It brings the heart down and softens it. A soft thing, when you strike it, makes no noise — but strike a hard thing and it rings out. Hearts that are full of themselves and hardened by self-love cry out at every stroke. But a self-denying Christian yields to God's hand and makes no noise. Just as striking a bag of wool makes no sound because it yields to the blow — so a self-denying heart yields to the stroke, and by that comes to contentment. Now in this lesson of self-denial there are several things. I will not open the full doctrine of self-denial, but only show how Christ teaches it and how it produces contentment.

First, such a person learns that he is nothing. He comes to be able to say genuinely: 'I see I am nothing in myself.' The person who truly knows he is nothing — and has thoroughly learned it — will be able to bear anything. The path to being able to bear anything is knowing we are nothing in ourselves. God says to us in Proverbs 23:5: 'Will you set your eyes on something that is not there?' — speaking of riches. And we might well say back to God: 'Blessed God, have You not set Your heart on us, and yet we are nothing?' God would not have us set our hearts on riches because they are nothing. And yet God is pleased to set His heart on us, even though we are nothing. That is God's grace — His free grace. And so it is no great matter what I suffer, for I am as nothing.

Second, I deserve nothing. I am nothing, and I deserve nothing. Suppose I do not have what others have — I know I deserve nothing but hell. You would answer a discontented servant that way: 'I wonder what you deserve?' Or a child — 'Do you deserve it that you want it so badly?' We think such an answer would silence them. So we may easily silence ourselves: we deserve nothing.

Then why should we be impatient when we do not have what we want? If we had deserved something, we might have some grounds for distress. A person who has served the government or his friends well, and receives no corresponding recognition, is understandably upset. But if he knows in his own heart that he has deserved nothing, he accepts rejection without complaint.

Third, I can do nothing. 'Apart from Me you can do nothing,' says Christ in John 15:5. Why should I be troubled and discontented because I do not have this or that, when the truth is I can do nothing? If someone is angry because he does not have the food he wants, you might say to him: 'I wonder what you actually do? What use are you?' Should someone who sits idle and is of no use still demand every comfort he desires? Consider what use you actually are in the world. If you consider how little God needs you, and how little you actually contribute, you will not be very discontented. If you have learned the lesson of self-denial — though God cuts you short of this or that comfort — since I do so little, why should I have much? That thought alone will bring a person's spirit down as much as anything.

Fourth, I am so corrupt that I cannot receive good from God without spoiling it. I am not only an empty vessel — I am a corrupt and unclean vessel that would ruin anything poured into it. This is the condition of every human heart: not only empty of good, but like a musty container that sours any good thing poured into it.

Fifth, even if God cleanses us to some degree and fills us with some measure of His grace, we cannot make good use of even that without His continued presence. If God were to withdraw Himself even for a moment — even after bestowing the greatest gifts and every ability we could desire — we could not move a single step

forward. If God were to say: 'I have given you these abilities; now go and use them' — and then leave us, we could do nothing. Does God give us gifts and capacities? Then let us fear and tremble lest God leave us to ourselves. For if He did, how shamefully we would abuse those gifts. You may think another person has a good memory, good gifts, and abilities, and wish you had them. But suppose God gave you those things and then left you — you would utterly ruin them.

Sixth, we are worse than nothing. Through sin we have become far worse than nothing. Sin makes us more corrupt than emptiness — it makes us contrary to all that is good. It is far worse to be actively opposed to all good than merely to be empty of all good. We are not empty pitchers in regard to good — we are pitchers filled with poison. Is it so much, then, for people like us to be cut short of outward comforts?

Seventh, if we perish there will be no loss in us. If God were to remove me entirely, what loss would there be? God can raise up another in my place who will serve Him far better than I have. Now put these seven things together and you will see what it means for Christ to teach self-denial. These are, as it were, the several words in our lesson of self-denial. Christ teaches the soul, so that in God's presence, with a real sight of itself, it can say: 'Lord, I am nothing. Lord, I deserve nothing. Lord, I can do nothing. I cannot receive good. I cannot make good use of anything. I am worse than nothing. And if I come to nothing and perish, there will be no loss at all.' Therefore, what does it matter that I am cut short here? A person who is little in his own eyes will count every affliction small and every mercy great. Saul, at one point in his life, was little in his own eyes — and in that season his afflictions seemed small

to him. When some despised him and would not have him as king, he held his peace. But when Saul began to be great in his own eyes, the afflictions became great upon him. There was never a more contented person than the self-denying person. There was never anyone who denied himself as much as Jesus Christ. He gave His cheeks to those who struck Him. He opened not His mouth. He was like a lamb led to slaughter. He made no noise in the streets. He denied Himself above all — He willingly emptied Himself — and so He was the most contented person who ever lived. The nearer we come to learning to deny ourselves as Christ did, the more contented we will be. And by knowing much of our own sinfulness, we come to justify God in whatever He lays upon us. Whatever the Lord brings, we can say: 'Righteous is the Lord, for He is dealing with a most wretched creature.' A discontented heart is troubled because it has no more comfort. But a self-denying person wonders that he has as much as he does. 'Oh,' says one, 'I have so little.' 'Yes,' says the one who has learned self-denial, 'but I rather wonder that God gives me the very breath I breathe — knowing how vile I am, and how much sin the Lord sees in me.' That is the path of contentment: learning self-denial.

Eighth, there is a further aspect of self-denial that brings contentment: by it the soul comes to rejoice and find satisfaction in all God's ways. Please take note of this. A selfish person — one in whom self-love rules — will be glad of things that suit his own purposes, but troubled by everything else. But a godly person who has denied himself will be glad of everything that suits God's purposes. A gracious heart says: 'God's purposes are my purposes. I have denied my own ends, and so I find contentment in all of God's purposes and ways.' His sources of comfort are multiplied — while the

comforts of other people are few and rare, since it is uncommon for God's ways to align with a person's selfish ends. But God's ways always align with His own purposes. If you will only be content when God's ways match your own ends, you will find contentment only occasionally. But a self-denying person gives up his own ends and looks only at God's ends, and is content in that. When a person is selfish, he cannot help but have great trouble and irritation — because if I care only about myself, my ends are so narrow that a hundred things will crowd in and bump against me. As in the city, narrow streets like Thames Street cause jostling and fighting — there is no room. But on the broad streets, people can walk quietly. So selfish people jostle and clash with one another, each pursuing their own narrow ends and creating great disorder. But those whose hearts are enlarged — who make God's purposes their own ends, and who can deny themselves — they walk freely and do not collide with one another in the same way. The lesson of self-denial is the first lesson that Jesus Christ teaches men in the pursuit of contentment.

The second lesson is the vanity of created things. That is the second lesson in Christ's school for those He would make skilled in this art. The vanity of created things — that whatever is found in created things has an emptiness in it. 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity' — that is the lesson the wise man learned. Created things in themselves can do us neither real good nor lasting harm; they are all as wind. There is nothing in created things that suits the gracious heart for its true good and happiness. My friends, the reason you have no contentment from the things of this world is not that you do not have enough of them. That is not the reason. The reason is that they are simply not fitted to that immortal soul of yours

that is capable of God Himself. Many people, when they are troubled and have no contentment, think it is because they have too little in the world — and if they had more, they would be content. Consider: suppose a hungry person, to satisfy his aching stomach, opened his mouth and tried to swallow the air — and then thought the reason he was not satisfied was that he had not swallowed enough air. No — the problem is that air is not suited to a craving stomach. And there is the same madness in the world: all the air a person could breathe will satisfy a starving stomach no more than all the comforts of the world can satisfy a soul that understands what true happiness means. You want to be happy, and you seek this or that comfort from created things. Have you gotten what you sought? Do you find your heart satisfied — having found the happiness suited to you? No — it is not there. But you think it must be because you still lack this or that. Poor deceived person — it is not that you do not have enough of these things. It is that these things are simply not fitted to that immortal soul God has given you. 'Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy?' (Isaiah 55:2). You are chasing wind. You will never find contentment in created things. All the creatures in the world declare: contentment is not in us. Riches say contentment is not in me. Pleasure says contentment is not in me. If you look for contentment in the creature, you will fail. Contentment is found higher. When you come into the school of Christ, He teaches you that there is vanity in all things in this world. The soul that comes into Christ's school — that through understanding the glorious mysteries of the Gospel comes to see the vanity of all earthly things — that is the soul that comes to true contentment. Many pagan philosophers spoke extensively about the vanity of all things in

the world — yet they did not learn it in the right school. When a soul comes into the school of Jesus Christ and there comes to see the vanity of all things in the world, that soul finds contentment. If you seek contentment elsewhere, you do as the unclean spirit did — seeking rest but finding none.

A third lesson that Christ teaches a Christian in His school is this: He teaches him to understand what the one truly necessary thing is — something he never truly understood before. You know what Christ said to Martha: 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things, but only one thing is necessary' (Luke 10:41-42). Before, the soul chased after this and that. But now the soul says: 'I see clearly that it is not necessary for me to be rich — but it is necessary for me to be at peace with God. It is not necessary for me to live a comfortable life in this world — but it is absolutely necessary for me to have pardon for my sin. It is not necessary for me to have honor and advancement — but it is necessary for me to have God as my portion, to have my share in Jesus Christ, to have my soul saved on the day of Christ.' The other things are fine and pleasant enough, and I would be glad if God gave them to me — a comfortable home, income, clothing, and good prospects for my wife and children. These are welcome things. But they are not the necessary things. I may have all of them and still perish forever. The other is absolutely necessary. No matter if I am poor, as long as I have what is absolutely necessary. This is how Christ instructs the soul. Many of you have had some thoughts that you should indeed be providing for your souls. But when you enter Christ's school, He causes the weight of eternity to fall upon you. He causes such a real and vivid sight of the great things of eternity — and of their absolute necessity — to fill your

heart with holy awe. And that takes you off from all other things in the world. I should have shown you how this brings contentment to the soul when it is instructed in what is absolutely necessary — but that must wait until next time.

SERMON 5



Philippians 4:11. For I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content.

Last time I mentioned three lessons that Christ teaches those who come into His school in order to arrive at contentment.

First, the lesson of self-denial.

Second, the lesson of the vanity of created things.

Third, the right understanding of the one thing that is truly necessary. Let me expand on this third lesson briefly before moving on to others.

It is said of Pompey that when he was carrying grain to Rome during a famine, he faced great danger from storms at sea. But he said, 'We must go on. It is necessary that Rome be supplied — but it is not necessary that we survive.' So it is when the soul is once gripped by what is absolutely necessary — it will not be greatly troubled by other things. What is it that actually unsettles us? Only side matters of this world. And that is because our hearts are not taken up with the one absolutely necessary thing. Who are the most discontented people? Idle people — those who have nothing to engage their minds. Every little thing disturbs and discontents them. But a person with weighty and serious business — if his

great concern is going well, he does not notice smaller inconveniences in the household. But a person who lies at home with nothing to do finds fault with everything. So it is with the heart. When the heart has nothing to do but concern itself with created comforts, every little thing troubles it. But when the heart is taken up with the weighty things of eternity — with the great matters of eternal life — those things that once disturbed it seem small in comparison. How things turn out down here is not of much concern, as long as the one necessary thing is secured.

The fourth lesson the soul is taught on the way to contentment is this: the soul comes to understand what its relationship to this world actually is. By that I mean: God through Christ and by His Spirit effectively teaches the soul on what terms it lives here in this world and what relationship it actually holds. While I live in this world, my condition is that of a pilgrim, a stranger, a traveler, and a soldier. A right understanding of this — not merely being able to recite the words, but actually having one's soul possessed by this truth — that God has placed me in this world not as in my home, but as a stranger and pilgrim passing through to another home, and that I am a soldier engaged in warfare here — this is a mighty help to contentment in whatever comes. To illustrate each of these: When a man is at home and things are not as he wishes, he complains and is discontented. But when he travels, perhaps he does not find the conveniences he is used to — the servants are not as attentive as his own, the food is not as at home, the bed is not as at home. Yet this very thought can moderate a man's spirit: 'I am a traveler. I must not find fault. I am in someone else's house, and it would be rude to complain when you are a guest in another family's home, even if things are not as in your own.' If a person

meets with bad weather, he must be content — traveler's fare, as they say: fair weather and foul weather alike. But if the same thing happened at home, if the roof leaked, he would call it a serious affliction he cannot bear. When traveling, though you meet rain and storms, you are not so troubled. When you are at sea and lack what you have at home, you are not distressed — because you are at sea. Sailors at sea do not mind their rough clothes, their pitch-stained garments, the plain cloth about their necks. They think: when I get home, I shall have my fine stockings and smart clothes and linen. And so they are content while away, thinking of what awaits them when they return. Though they have nothing but salt meat and hard rations, they know a good table awaits them at home. So it should be with us in this world. The truth is, we are all in this world like seafaring people, tossed on the waves of the sea of this world. Our harbor is heaven. We are traveling here, but our home is another world — that long home. Some people have better accommodations than others while traveling. It is a great mercy that in England we can travel with so much comfort and advantage compared to other countries. Through God's mercy we have as great accommodations in our journey to heaven as any place under heaven can offer — yet even when we meet with traveler's fare, it should not be grievous to us. Scripture tells us plainly that we must behave here as pilgrims and strangers (1 Peter 2:11): 'Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul.' Consider your condition — you are pilgrims and strangers. Do not expect to be fully satisfied here. When a man comes into an inn and sees a fine cupboard of silver plate, he is not troubled that it is not his — because he is just passing through. So let us not be troubled when we see others with great

estates and we have little. We are passing through to another country. You are lodging here for only a night — even if you live a hundred years, it is nothing compared to eternity, no more than a single night's lodging. Would it not be absurd for a person to be discontented because he does not have everything at the inn, when he may be leaving within half an hour? This is the argument David used to lift his heart from earthly things and set it on higher ones. Psalm 119:19: 'I am a stranger on the earth; do not hide Your commandments from me.' I am a stranger on the earth — therefore, Lord, let me have the knowledge of Your commandments, and that is sufficient. As for earthly things, it does not matter to me whether I have much or little. Just: do not hide Your commandments from me. Lord, let me know the rule by which I should guide my life.

Again, we are not only travelers but soldiers. This is the condition of the life we live in this world, and we must behave accordingly. The apostle uses this argument in writing to Timothy: 'Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus' (2 Timothy 2:3). The very thought of being a soldier quiets a discontented heart. A soldier away from home does not have the comforts he has in his own household. A man who at home has his bed and curtains and every comfort in his room may sometimes have to sleep on straw. And he thinks: 'I am a soldier — this is fitting for my condition.' He has his bed warmed at home, but in the field he sleeps on the ground — and the very thought of his condition in which God has placed him settles him in everything. Yes, and he goes forward rejoicing: 'This is appropriate for the condition God has put me in.' So it should be with us in this world. Would it not be an embarrassing sight to see a soldier going around whining with his lip trembling, complaining that he has no hot food at ev-

ery meal and his bed is not warmed as it was at home? Christians know they are at war — fighting and contending with the enemies of their souls and their eternal condition. They must be willing to endure hardship here. The right understanding that God has placed them in such a condition is what will content them. Especially when they consider that they are certain of the victory — and that before long they will triumph with Jesus Christ, and then all their sorrows will be removed and their tears wiped away. An ordinary soldier endures hardship not knowing whether he will win. But a Christian knows he is a soldier and knows he will conquer and triumph with Jesus Christ for all eternity. That is the fourth lesson Christ teaches the soul when He brings it into His school to learn the art of contentment: He makes the person thoroughly understand the relationship in which He has placed them in this world.

The fifth lesson Christ teaches is this: He teaches us where the true good of any created thing consists. It is true that created things in themselves are vain — we established that. But though they are vain in themselves, there is still some goodness in created things, some desirability — even if they cannot satisfy the soul for its ultimate portion. But where does that goodness lie? It does not lie in the nature of the created thing itself — that is nothing but vanity. It lies in the created thing's relationship to the first being of all things — to God. This is the lesson Christ teaches: if there is any good in an estate or in any comfort of this world, that good is not so much that it pleases my senses or suits my body. The good lies in the relationship it has to God — the first being. Through created things, something of God's goodness is conveyed to me. I can make a sanctified use of the created thing to draw me nearer to God, to

enjoy more of God, and to be made more useful for God's glory in the place where He has set me. There is the good of any created thing. If we were only instructed in this lesson — if we genuinely understood and believed that no created thing has any goodness in it beyond its relationship to the first, infinite, supreme good of all — then contentment would be easy. As far as I enjoy God in a thing, that far it is good to me. As far as I do not enjoy God in it, that far there is no goodness in anything I have from created things. Consider: suppose a man had a great estate a few years ago, and now it is all gone. Let me ask that man: when you had your estate, where did you think its goodness lay? A worldly heart would say: 'Obviously — it brought me income, I could eat well, I was a respected man in the community, people listened to me, I could dress as I pleased, and I could provide for my children.' That man never came into the school of Christ to learn where the good of an estate truly consists. No wonder he is upset when he has lost it. But a Christian who has been in the school of Christ, when he had an estate, thought: 'In having an estate above my brethren, the good of it for me consists in this — that I have an opportunity to serve God better, and I enjoy much of God's mercy to my soul conveyed through these created blessings. I am enabled to do much good — and in that I account the good of my estate.' Now God has taken it from me. If God is pleased to make up His own enjoyment another way — if He calls me to honor Him through suffering, and if I can do God as much service in suffering as I did in prosperity, showing forth the grace of His Spirit in the way of suffering — then I have as much of God as I had before. If I can be led to God in my low condition as much as in my prosperous one, I have as much comfort and contentment as I had before.

Objection: That may be true — if I could honor God in my low estate as much as in my prosperous estate, that would be something. But how can that be?

Answer: The special honor God receives from His creatures in this world is the manifestation of the graces of His Spirit. It is true that God receives great honor when a person is in a public position and able to do much good — encouraging godliness and discouraging sin. But the main thing is 'showing forth the virtues of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light' (1 Peter 2:9). Now if I can say that through God's mercy, in my affliction, I find the graces of God's Spirit working as powerfully in me as they ever did when I had my estate — then I am where I was. I am fully in as good a condition — because I have the same good now that I had in prosperity. For I counted the good of my estate in my enjoyment of God and my honoring of God. Now God has blessed the loss of it to stir up the graces of His Spirit in my soul. This is the work God now calls me to. And I must count that God is most honored when I do the work He calls me to. He set me to work in my prosperous estate to honor Him in that condition — and now He sets me to work in this condition to honor Him here. God is most honored when I can turn from one condition to another as He calls me. Consider: would you feel honored by a servant who, when you assigned him some excellent work, just kept on and on with it — and you could not get him to stop? Even if the work is good, when you call the servant to a different task, you expect him to show enough respect to willingly come away from the first work — even if the new task is humbler — if it better suits your purposes. So you were in a prosperous estate, and God called you to a service you took some pleasure in. But suppose God says,

'I will use you in a season of suffering — I will have you honor Me that way.' Here is the true honoring of God: that you can turn this way or that, as God calls you. Having learned that the good of any created thing consists in the enjoyment of God through it and the honoring of God by it, you can be content — because you have the same good you had before. That is the fifth lesson.

The sixth lesson Christ teaches those He brings into His school is this: He instructs them in knowing their own hearts. You must learn this or you will never learn contentment. You must learn to know your own heart well — to be a serious student of it. Not everyone can be a scholar in the arts and sciences of the world. But everyone can be a student of their own heart. Many of you cannot read in a book — but God expects that every day you should turn over a page in your own heart. You will never gain any skill in this mystery unless you study the book of your own heart. Sailors study navigation books to become good navigators. Students of logic study their logic texts; students of rhetoric and philosophy study theirs; students of theology study theirs. But a Christian, next to the book of God, must look into the book of his own heart and read it over. This helps you toward contentment in three ways.

1. By studying your heart, you will quickly discover where your discontent lies. When you are discontented, if you study your heart well you will find the root of that discontent — that it lies in such-and-such a corruption or disorder in my heart, which through God's mercy I have now identified. It is like a small child who is very fretful in the house. If a stranger comes in, he does not know what the matter is — perhaps he offers the child a toy or a sweet to quiet it. But when the nurse comes, she knows the child's temperament and disposition and knows best how to quiet it. So it is here

exactly: when we are strangers to our own hearts, we are greatly discontented and do not know how to settle ourselves — because we do not know where the unrest lies. When we are strangers to our own hearts, we cannot find the way to be quiet. But when we know our hearts well, when something occurs to disquiet us, we find the cause at once and quickly come to rest. A man who understands his watch — who knows the function of every wheel and pin — when it goes wrong, will immediately find the cause. But someone with no skill in watches, when it goes wrong, does not know what the matter is and cannot fix it. Our hearts are like a watch — with many wheels, windings, and turnings. We should labor to know them well, so that when they are out of tune we may know what the matter is.

2. This knowledge of our hearts will help us toward contentment because by it we come to know what is most suited to our condition. A person who does not know his own heart does not realize what affliction he actually needs — and on that account he is discontented when it comes. But a man or woman who has studied their own heart, when God brings afflictions upon them, can say: 'I would not for anything in the world have been without this affliction. God has suited this affliction so exactly to my condition, and has sent it in such a way, that if this affliction had not come, I am afraid I would have fallen into sin.' A poor countryman who takes medicine feels it working and thinks it will kill him — because he does not know the unhealthy humors in his body and does not understand how well-suited the medicine is to his condition. But a physician who takes a strong purge, and finds it makes him very ill, says: 'I like this all the better — it is working on exactly the humor I know to be the cause of my condition.' Because that man has

knowledge of his own body and the cause of his trouble, he is not disturbed or discontented. So it would be with us if we knew the disorders of our own hearts. Worldly men and women do not know their own spirits, and so they thrash about and vex at every affliction that comes — not knowing what disorders in their hearts might be healed by those afflictions, if God were pleased to give them a sanctified use of them.

3. By knowing their own hearts, they know what they are able to manage — and by this they come to be content. The Lord perhaps takes away many comforts they once had, or denies them things they hoped to receive. Now, by knowing their hearts, they know this: they were not able to manage such an estate, and they were not able to handle such prosperity. God saw it. And a poor soul can say: 'I am in some measure convinced by looking into my own heart that I was not able to manage that condition.' A person who greedily grasps for more than he can manage undoes himself. As farmers observe, if they overstock their land it will quickly ruin them. A wise farmer who knows how much his ground can support is not troubled that he does not have as large a herd as others — because he knows he does not have land enough for a larger one. That knowledge quiets him. So many men and women who do not know their own hearts would gladly have the prosperous estate that others have. But if they knew their own hearts, they would know they are not able to manage it. Consider a little child of three or four years old crying to have the coat of her twelve-year-old or twenty-year-old sister: 'Why may I not have a coat as long as hers?' If she had it, it would soon trip her up and cause her to fall. But when she comes to understanding, she is not discontented that her coat is not as long as her sister's — she says, 'My coat is right for

me,' and is content with it. So if we come to understanding in the school of Christ, we will not cry: 'Why do I not have the same estate as others?' The Lord sees that I am not able to manage it — and I can see it myself by knowing my own heart. Children, when they see a sharp knife, will cry for it — because they do not know their own strength or their inability to handle it safely. But you know they cannot manage it, so you will not give it to them. And when they are old enough to understand that they cannot handle it, they will stop crying for it. So we would stop crying for such-and-such things if we knew we were not able to manage them. When you fret and stew over what you do not have, I may say to you what Christ said: you do not know what spirit you are of. Oecolampadius once said to Parillus, when they were speaking about his extreme poverty: 'Not so poor — though I have been very poor, I could willingly be poorer still.' As if to say: 'The Lord knew that a poor condition suited me better, and I knew that my own heart was such that poverty served me better than wealth would have.' So we would all say, if we knew our own hearts: 'Such-and-such a condition is better for me than anything else would have been.'

The seventh lesson is the burden of a prosperous estate. No one who comes into Christ's school to be instructed in this art arrives at much skill in it until he comes to understand the burden that comes with a prosperous condition.

Objection: What burden is there in a prosperous estate?

Answer: A great burden indeed, and it takes great strength to bear it. Just as a person needs a strong constitution to handle strong wine without harm, so a person needs a strong spirit to bear prosperous conditions without damaging themselves. There is a

fourfold burden in a prosperous estate. Many men and women see only the shine and glitter of prosperity — they little think of the burden. But there is a fourfold burden.

1. There is the burden of trouble. A rose has thorns, and as Scripture says: 'Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction' (1 Timothy 6:9), and 'the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil' (1 Timothy 6:10). A person whose heart is set on becoming rich will pierce himself through with many sorrows. He sees the outward delight and glory of riches, but he does not consider what piercing sorrows may come with them. I have thought often about the trouble that comes with a prosperous condition, and the best illustration I can find is this: traveling through an open country, you see a town in the distance set in a valley, and think, 'What a fine situation that town is in!' But when you ride into the town, you find yourself going down a muddy lane and through a series of dreadful muddy holes that you could not see from two or three miles away. So we sometimes look at the prosperity of others and think, 'What a fine and comfortable life that man leads' — but if we knew what troubles he meets in his household, in his estate, in his dealings with others, we would not think his condition so happy. A fine new shoe may look perfect — but only the person wearing it knows where it pinches. So you may think certain people are very fortunate — but they may have many troubles you know nothing about.

2. There is the burden of danger in a prosperous estate. People in a prosperous condition are in great danger. Think of moths and gnats on a summer evening, flying about the candle — they sing their wings and fall dead. There is a great deal of danger in a pros-

perous estate. People set on a high pinnacle are in greater danger than others. Honey attracts bees and wasps — so the sweetness of prosperity attracts the devil and temptation. People in prosperous conditions are subject to many temptations that others are not. Scripture calls the devil Beelzebul — the lord of flies. And Beelzebul comes where the honey of prosperity is. Those in prosperous conditions are in very great danger of temptation. Those who are lower in station should think about the dangers facing those above them. Think: though they are above me, they are in more danger than I am. Tall trees are far more shattered by storms than low shrubs. A ship with all its sails up — topsail and all — is in more danger in a storm than one that has all its sails drawn in. So those who have all their sails up and look fine and impressive are more likely to be driven to ruin than others. And you know what Scripture says — how hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Such a text should make those who are poor content with their condition. We have a striking example of this in the sons of Kohath. They were in a more elevated position than the other Levites — but they were in greater danger and bore a greater burden.

First, that the sons of Kohath were in a higher position than the other Levites. Numbers 4:4 shows what their condition was: 'This is the work of the sons of Kohath in the tent of meeting, about the most holy things.' Notice: the Levites served around holy things — but the sons of Kohath served around the most holy things of all. And in Joshua 21:10, God honored the sons of Kohath in a more special way than the other Levites — the sons of Aaron, who were of the Kohathite family, had the first lot, and they were placed before the other families of Levi. Those employed in the

most honorable service received the most honorable portion — the first lot fell to them. God honored the Kohathites. The other Levites might ask: 'How has God preferred this family above us?' They were honored above the others. But now notice the burden that came with their honor. Numbers 7:6-9: 'So Moses took the carts and the oxen and gave them to the Levites. He gave two carts and four oxen to the sons of Gershon, according to their service, and four carts and eight oxen he gave to the sons of Merari, according to their service, under the direction of Ithamar the son of Aaron the priest. But to the sons of Kohath he gave none, because theirs was the service of the holy objects, which they carried on the shoulder.' Notice: the other Levites had oxen and carts given to them to ease their burden. But to the sons of Kohath, God gave none — they were to bear the holy things on their shoulders. And that is the reason God was so displeased when they sought to carry the ark on a cart — because they were to carry it on their shoulders. Here you see the first burden they bore beyond the other Levites. And those in more honorable positions than others often have burdens that those beneath them never think about. Many times those employed in ministry or in government — who sit at the helm directing the great affairs of the state — you think they live comfortably. They lie awake when you are asleep. If you knew the burden that rests on their spirits, you would count your own labor and load very light by comparison.

2. There is another burden of danger beyond the first, and it is found in Numbers 4:17-20. 'Then the Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, "Do not let the tribe of the families of the Kohathites be cut off from among the Levites. But do this to them so that they may live and not die when they approach the most

holy objects: Aaron and his sons shall go in and assign each of them to his work and to his load; but they shall not go in to see the holy objects even for a moment, or they will die." Notice what the Lord says to Moses and Aaron: 'Do not let the tribe of the Kohathites be cut off.' Cut them off — but what had they done? Had they sinned? No, they had not done anything to provoke God. What God means is: 'Take great care of the Kohathite family, and instruct them thoroughly in their duty — for they are in great danger, given that they serve in the most holy things.' If they were to look at the holy things more than God permitted, it would cost them their lives. Therefore, if you neglect to instruct them fully in their duties, you will be the means of destroying them. God says: they administer in the most holy things, and if they dared to presume to do anything differently from what God required in that service, it would cost them their lives. Therefore, do not be careless of them. You can see the danger the Kohathite family was in — they were placed above others, but they were also in greater danger. So you think of certain prominent people in a community who bear sway and serve in public positions — you don't consider their danger. Ministers, in particular, stand in the forefront of all the spite and malice of ungodly people. God employs them in honorable service — service that even angels would delight in — but though the service is honorable, above the employment of ordinary men, the burden of danger is likewise greater than that of men in lower positions. When a soul gains wisdom from Christ to think about the danger that comes with a high condition, it will be content with its own low estate. A poor man in a low condition thinks:

'I am low, and others are raised high — but I do not know what burden they carry.' If he is rightly taught in the school of Christ, he comes to be content.

3. In a prosperous estate there is the burden of duty. You look only at the pleasure, comfort, honor, and respect that come with a prosperous condition. But consider the duty those people owe to God. God requires more duty from those who have greater gifts and more from those who have greater estates. You may be discontented that you do not have the gifts and abilities that others have — but God requires more duty from those who have more. You would gladly have the honor — but can you carry the burden of the duty?

4. The last is the burden of account in a prosperous estate. Those who enjoy great estates and prosperous conditions will give a great account to God. We are all stewards. One steward serves a man of modest means — perhaps just a simple knight. Another serves a nobleman, an earl. The first steward has less under his management than the second. But should he be discontented because less passes through his hands? No — he thinks: I have less, and I give less account. So your account, compared to ministers and magistrates, will be nothing. You must give an account for your own soul — so must they. You must give an account for your own household — so must they. But you are not responsible for congregations, towns, cities, and regions. Think of princes and kings. 'Oh, what a glorious condition they are in!' But what do you think of a king giving account for all the disorder and wickedness in a kingdom that he could have prevented? What abundance of glory a prince could bring to God if he bent his soul and all his thoughts to lift up the name of God in a kingdom. Whatever God

loses for want of this — that king, prince, or governor must give an account for it. Chrysostom, commenting on the passage in Hebrews about giving account for souls, said he wondered how any man in public office could be saved, given the greatness of the account they must render. And I have read of Philip, King of Spain — of whom it is said that he had such a natural conscience that he would not do anything against it even in secret, not for the gaining of the whole world. Yet when this man was dying, he cried: 'Oh that I had never been a king! Oh that I had lived a solitary and private life all my days! Then I would have died far more securely. I would have gone before the throne of God to give my account with far more confidence. But here is the fruit of my kingdom: I had all its glory, and it has made my account to God far harder to give.' And so he cried out as he was dying. Therefore, you who live in private conditions — remember this. If you come into Christ's school and learn this lesson, you will be quiet in your afflictions and in your humble estate, because your account is not nearly as great as others'. Latimer used to say in his sermons: 'The half is more than the whole.' That is, when a man is in a modest condition, he is only halfway toward the height of prosperity that others enjoy — yet he is safer and more secure, even though his condition is humbler. Those in a high and prosperous condition have attached to it the burden of trouble, of danger, of duty, and of account. And so you see how Christ trains up His students in His school. Though they may be weak in other respects, His Spirit gives them wisdom to understand these things rightly.

The eighth lesson is this: Christ teaches them what a great and dreadful evil it is to be given over to one's heart's desires. Understanding this lesson — that being given over to one's own

heart's desires is one of the most terrible evils that can befall any person on the face of the earth — when the soul grasps this, together with the truth that spiritual judgments are more fearful than any outward judgment in the world, it will teach contentment when God crosses our desires. You are crossed in your desires, and you are discontented, vexed, and fretting. Is being crossed in your desires your only misery? No — you are infinitely mistaken. The greatest misery of all is for God to give you over to your heart's lusts and desires, to give you over to your own thinking. Psalm 81:11-12: 'But My people did not listen to My voice, and Israel did not obey Me. So I gave them over to the stubbornness of their heart, to walk in their own devices.' Bernard cried out: 'Let me not have such a misery as that — to be given what I would have, to have my heart's desires.' To be given over to one's heart's desires is one of the most hideous judgments in the world. We do not have in Scripture any certain and obvious sign of a person being reprobate — we cannot say of anyone (unless we knew they had committed the unpardonable sin) that they are reprobate, because we do not know what God may yet do in them. But the nearest thing to and the darkest sign of reprobation is this: for God to give a person over to their heart's desires. All the pain of diseases and all the calamities that can be imagined are no judgments compared to this — being given over to one's heart's desires. When the soul comes to understand this, it cries out: 'Why am I so troubled that I do not have my desires?' There is nothing through which God more often conveys His wrath than through a prosperous condition. I have read a Jewish tradition that when God struck Uzziah with leprosy, the beams of the sun fell on his forehead, and by this means the leprosy was caused. Whether that is true or not, this is

certainly true: the strong beams of the sun of prosperity upon many people makes them leprous. Would any poor man in the countryside have been discontented not to be in Uzziah's position? He was a great king — yes, but there was leprosy on his forehead. The poor man could say: 'Though I live plainly in the country, I thank God my body is whole and sound.' Would any man rather have satin and velvet with the plague in it, than plain rough cloth without it? The Lord conveys the plague of His curse through prosperity as much as through anything in the world. When the soul comes to understand this, it grows quiet and content.

And then spiritual judgments are the greatest judgments of all. The Lord has laid an affliction on my outward circumstances — but what if He had taken away my life? A man's health is a greater mercy than his estate — and you who are poor should consider that. But is the health of a man's body better than his estate? Then what is the health of a man's soul? That is far better still. The Lord has inflicted outward judgments on you — but He has not inflicted spiritual judgments. He has not given you over to a hard heart, and He has not taken away the spirit of prayer from you in your afflicted condition. Be of good comfort: though there are outward afflictions upon you, your soul — your more excellent part — is not afflicted. When the soul comes to understand that here is where the sore wrath of God truly lies — in being given over to one's own desires, and in having spiritual judgments fall — that understanding quiets and contents the soul, even when outward afflictions are heavy. Perhaps one of your children has a fever or a toothache, while your neighbor's children have died of the plague. Should you be discontented because your children have a toothache while your neighbor's children are dead? Think this way: 'Lord, You have laid

an afflicted condition on me — but Lord, You have not given me the plague of a hard heart.' Take these eight lessons together, and you may apply that Scripture in Isaiah 29:24: 'Those who erred in spirit will know the truth, and those who criticized will accept instruction.' Has any of you — as I fear many may be found — erred in spirit regarding these truths I have been preaching? Have many murmured? Oh, that today you might come to understand — that Christ would bring you into His school and teach you understanding. 'Those who criticized will accept instruction' — what instruction? These eight lessons I have opened to you. If you will thoroughly study these lessons set before your eyes, they will be a special help and means to cure your murmurings and complaints against the hand of God. By them you will come to learn Christian contentment. May the Lord thoroughly teach you by His Spirit these lessons of contentment.

SERMON 6



Philippians 4:11: "For I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content."

I have one more lesson to add on learning contentment, and then I will move to the fourth main topic: the excellence of contentment.

The ninth and final lesson Christ teaches those He instructs in the art of contentment is the right knowledge of God's providence, and it contains four elements.

The first is the universality of providence — the soul must be thoroughly grounded in this to master the art of contentment. God's providence does not merely rule the world in a general sense; it reaches into every particular. It extends not only to kingdoms and their great affairs, but to every family, every person within that family, every condition, every event — everything that touches your life. Not one hair falls from your head, not one sparrow falls to the ground, apart from the providence of God. Nothing happens to you — good or evil — without the involvement of the infinite, eternal, first-being God. This is where God's infiniteness shows itself: His care reaches down to the smallest worm beneath your feet. How much more, then, does it reach to you as a rational

creature — for God's providence is more specifically directed toward rational creatures than toward anything else. Understanding in a spiritual way the universality of providence — that from morning to night, every day, nothing befalls you apart from God's hand — is a powerful help toward contentment. Everyone will grant the truth of this in principle, but as the apostle says in Hebrews 11:3, "By faith we understand that the worlds were formed" — by faith, not merely by reason. Reason can tell us that no finite thing can be self-originating, and therefore the world could not have made itself. But when Christ brings us into His school, we come to understand providence by faith in a way that goes far deeper than reason ever could.

The second element is the efficacy of providence — the fact that God's providence moves forward in all things with strength and power, and our discontent cannot alter it. We may be discontented, vexed, troubled, fretting, raging — but we cannot change the course of providence by any of it. When Job's friends saw his impatience, one of them asked him: "Will the earth be forsaken for your sake? Or will the rock be moved from its place?" (Job 18:4). I would say the same to every discontented and impatient heart: do you think God's providence will change its course for you? Do you imagine it is so weak that it must bend to your preferences? Whether you are content or not, providence will move forward — it carries all things before it with irresistible power. Can you turn one hair black or white with all your fretting? Imagine a ship under full sail with a strong wind, moving swiftly forward — can you stop it by running back and forth on the deck? No more can your vexing

and fretting alter the course of God's providence. Understand the power and efficacy of providence, and it will be a great help in learning contentment.

The third element is the infinite variety of God's works in providence, and yet the orderly way in which each work connects to every other. In the ordinary workings of His providence, God causes an immense number of things to depend on one another. There are, in a sense, countless wheels in the mechanism of providence — and every work God has ever done, or ever will do from eternity to eternity, together forms one single unified work. All these works are like wheels that have moved in orderly sequence toward the end God appointed from eternity. We, however, look at things in fragments — we notice one particular event and fail to see how it connects to everything else. God sees all things at once, and He sees exactly how each thing relates to every other. Think of a child looking at a clock: he looks at one wheel, then another, never seeing them all together or understanding how they depend on each other. But the craftsman who built it sees all the wheels at once — he understands the relationship between them and the artistry in how they work together. So it is with God's providence. Consider how this leads to contentment: a particular event in your life is one wheel, and if that wheel were stopped, a thousand other wheels might stop with it. Stop one wheel in a clock and you stop every wheel, because they all depend on each other. So when God has ordered something to be a certain way right now, how do you know how many other things depend on that one thing? God may have a work to accomplish twenty years from now that depends entirely on this one event happening today or this week. This also shows us how much harm discontent does: you want God to alter His provi-

dence in some particular — but if that one thing were changed, you might be crossing God in a thousand other things He intends to bring about. It is possible that a thousand things depend on the very thing you wish were different — just as a child who asks for one wheel to stop is, without realizing it, asking for all the wheels to stop. Let me therefore be quiet and content, for though I am crossed in one thing, God is still accomplishing His purposes — and He may be furthering a thousand other ends through the very thing that crosses me. Consider: this is an act of providence, and I do not know what God is working toward, or how many things depend on this one event. We are willing to let a friend be disappointed in one thing if it means that friend achieves what he desires in a thousand others. If you love God, be willing to be crossed in some things so that His work may go forward in countless others. That is the third aspect of God's providence which Christ teaches those He is instructing in the art of contentment.

The fourth element Christ teaches is the knowledge of God's usual ways in His dealings with His people more particularly. The previous three points concern God's providence in general; this one concerns the specific pattern of how God deals with His people and saints — and understanding this pattern is a remarkable help toward contentment. Once we come to know a person's habits and ways, we can live with them far more peacefully than before we understood them. When someone joins a household for the first time, the people there may be good — but until he learns their ways and temperament, many things will seem strange or difficult. Once he becomes familiar with how they think and act, he can fit in with them quite comfortably. The trouble came simply from not understanding their ways. It is the same with God. Those who are

strangers to God and do not understand His ways are troubled by His providences — they find them strange and cannot make sense of them, because they have not learned God's ordinary patterns toward His people. A stranger entering a household may be puzzled by what he sees, while those who live there are not troubled at all. Servants who are new to each other may be prickly and unsettled at first, but once they learn each other's ways, contentment grows. It is just the same when we first begin to understand God's ways.

Objection: But what do you mean by God's ways?

Answer: By that I mean these three things. When we come to know them, we will not be so puzzled by God's providence, but will be quiet and content with it.

The first is this: God's ordinary pattern is that His people in this world live in an afflicted condition. God has revealed in His Word — and we can see it as His established way from the very beginning of the world down to our own day, especially in gospel times — that His people here should expect affliction. Those who do not understand this are startled when they see God's people suffering while their enemies prosper. When those who seek God and pursue reformation are routed and stripped bare while enemies gain the upper hand, it seems incomprehensible. But one who has been taught in Christ's school knows that God by His eternal counsel has set this as His course: to bring up His people in this world through affliction. Therefore the apostle says: "Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you" (1 Peter 4:12). Since God has established this as His way and we know it is His will, we have no reason to be discontented with it.

The second thing in God's way is this: when God intends the greatest mercy for His people, He usually brings them into the lowest condition first. God often appears to work in the opposite direction — moving contrary to what we expect. When He plans the greatest mercy, He first brings people very low. If He intends an outward, bodily blessing, He first allows them to sink low in body and circumstances. If He plans to bless their estate, He first lets it fall, then raises it. If their reputation is involved, He lets it suffer before He restores it. In their spirits as well, God ordinarily brings people low before He lifts them up. His people's greatest comforts are usually preceded by their greatest afflictions and sorrows. Those who do not understand this pattern think that when God brings His people into hard circumstances, He has abandoned them or has no great good in mind for them. But a child of God who has been taught God's ways is not troubled. He says: "My condition is very low — but this is God's way when He intends the greatest mercy: to bring people through the deepest affliction first." When God intended to raise Joseph to be second in the kingdom, He first cast him into a dungeon. When God intended to set David on the throne, He let him be hunted like a partridge in the mountains (1 Samuel 26:20). God followed this same path with His own Son — Christ entered glory through suffering (Hebrews 2:10). If God dealt this way with His own Son, how much more will He deal this way with His people. Just as the darkest moment of the night comes just before dawn, so God often makes our condition darkest just before the mercy arrives. When God gave the great mercy at Naseby, we were in a very low condition beforehand. God knew what He was going to do; He knew His time for

great mercy was coming. This is His way. Be rightly instructed in this course that God walks, and it will help you toward contentment enormously.

The third thing in God's way is this: it is His pattern to work by contraries — to turn the greatest evil into the greatest good. Granting great good after great evil is one thing, but actually turning the evil itself into good is something else entirely. Yet that is God's way: the greatest good He intends for His people is often worked out of the greatest evil. The greatest light is brought out of the greatest darkness. Luther expressed this memorably: "This is the way of God — He humbles in order to exalt; He kills in order to make alive; He confounds in order to glorify." But, he added, not everyone understands this. "This is the art of arts, the science of sciences, the knowledge of knowledges," he said — to understand that when God wills to bring life, He brings it out of death; He brings joy out of sorrow and prosperity out of adversity. Indeed, He often brings grace out of sin — making use of even sin to further the growth of grace. It is God's way not only to overcome evil, but to make the evil itself serve the good. This is God's way. When the soul comes to understand this, it takes away our murmuring and brings contentment into our spirits. But I fear few people truly understand it. They may read about it or hear it in a sermon, but they have not been taught by Jesus Christ to receive it as a living truth — that this is God's way: to bring the greatest good out of the greatest evil.

THE EXCELLENCY OF THIS GRACE OF CONTENTMENT



The apostle says, "I have learned." It is as if he were saying: "Blessed be God for this — what a mercy it is that I have learned this lesson. I find so much good in contentment that I would not trade it for the world."

Even the pagans caught a glimpse of the great excellence of contentment. I recall reading of Antistenes, a philosopher, who asked of his gods — speaking in the way of the pagans — for nothing in this world to make his life happy but contentment. If he could ask for one thing to make his life happy, he said he would ask for the spirit of Socrates — a spirit that could bear any wrong, any injury, without losing its inner calm. Whatever happened to Socrates, he remained the same man; no matter how great the trial, no one could see any change in his spirit. Antistenes achieved this through natural strength and a common work of the spirit, without grace. He saw such excellence in that kind of spirit — just as when God said to Solomon, "What shall I give you?" and Solomon asked for wisdom — so Antistenes said: "If the gods put that question to me, this is what I would ask: the spirit of Socrates." He saw something truly excellent in it. How much more

should a Christian see the abundance of excellence in contentment. I will try in this sermon to open it up to you, so that you may fall in love with this grace of contentment.

The first excellence of contentment is this: through contentment we give God the worship He is due. When we are content in a truly Christian way, as I have been describing, it is a special act of divine worship — the worship a creature owes to its infinite Creator. The Greek word for worship carries the idea of coming and crouching before another, as a dog comes crouching to you and lies down at your feet. So when the creature, grasping its own lowliness and God's infinite greatness above it, comes and crouches before God and lies down at His feet — that is worship. Think of how you can hold your hand over a dog and make him lie down before you. In the same way, you ought to come before the Lord, lying down in the dust before Him, willing for Him to do with you whatever He will — turning you whichever way He pleases, and there you rest before Him. In what posture of heart do we crouch before God more fully than when we have this contentment in whatever condition He places us? This is crouching to God's disposal — being like the Canaanite woman when Christ said it was not fitting to give the children's bread to dogs. She replied: "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs." "I am a dog, I confess — but let me have a crumb." When the soul comes to lie down and say, "Lord, I am but as a dog — yet let me have a crumb," it greatly honors God. Perhaps your table is not spread as others' are — God gives you crumbs. The poor woman said dogs eat crumbs, and when you can find your heart submitted to God in this way — willing to be as a dog, content and blessing God for any crumb — that is great worship. Indeed, you worship God more by this than

by hearing a sermon, or by spending half an hour or an hour in prayer, or by receiving a sacrament. Those are acts of worship, yes — but they are external acts: hearing, praying, receiving the sacraments. This is soul-worship: the soul subjecting itself to God. You who often worship God by hearing, praying, and receiving the sacraments, and yet afterward are prickly and discontented — know this: God does not regard that worship. He wants the soul-worship — the soul genuinely submitting itself to Him. Consider this carefully: in active obedience, we worship God by doing what pleases Him; in passive obedience, we worship God by being pleased with what He does. When I perform a duty, I worship God — I do what pleases God. So why should I not equally worship God when I am pleased with what God does? As it has been said of Christ's obedience — He was active in His passive obedience, and passive in His active obedience — so it is with believers. In their active obedience, they first received grace passively and then acted on it. And in their passive obedience, they are active — putting grace to work. When performing duties toward God, the soul says: "Oh, that I could do what pleases God." When suffering any trial, the soul says: "Oh, that what God does would please me." I labor to do what pleases God, and I labor to be pleased with what God does. This is a complete Christian — one who strives for both. Striving only to do what pleases God is only one side of the Christian life; you must equally strive to be pleased with what God does. When you can do both, you will be a complete Christian. That is the first excellence of this grace of contentment.

The second excellence of contentment is that it involves much exercise of grace, much strength of grace, and much beauty of grace — I will take all three together.

First, contentment involves much exercise of grace. Contentment is a blend of graces: faith, humility, love, patience, wisdom, and hope are all mixed together in it. It is like an oil that contains the essence of every kind of grace — you may not be able to identify each ingredient separately, but they are all present. God sees the graces of His Spirit exercised in a special way in contentment, and this pleases Him deeply. In any one particular action you might exercise one grace especially — but in contentment you exercise many graces at once.

Second, contentment demonstrates great strength of grace. Just as physical endurance — the ability to bear hard weather and difficult conditions without being greatly affected — shows bodily strength, so contentment shows strength of grace. You may complain that you have a weak memory or limited abilities, that you cannot do what others do — but if you have this heart-contentment in its truly spiritual form, as I have described it, know that you have attained to strength of grace. Think of a man whose body is out of sorts — his stomach is bad, his spleen and liver are obstructed — and yet his mind is perfectly clear. Even though harmful vapors rise from his disordered stomach, his brain is unaffected and he continues to reason and understand freely. Everyone can see that this man has a very strong mind — the kind of constitution that other things cannot disturb. A person with a weak mind, on the other hand, can go off course just from missing one meal — the fumes from his stomach cloud his thinking and make him useless for anything. But the person with a strong mind keeps his clarity even when his stomach is troubled. That is strength. It is the same in the spirit. Some people have weak spirits — let any misfortune arise and they immediately fall apart. But others, though trouble

rises up around them, remain steady: they keep using their reason and the other graces, and they possess their souls with patience. I recall reading that the eagle, unlike other birds, does not cry out when it is hungry. Other birds make noise when they lack food, but the eagle is never heard to complain — and this comes from the greatness of its spirit. It rises above hunger and thirst. In the same way, it is a sign of great strength of grace when a person, whatever befalls him, does not constantly whine and complain as others do, but continues steadily on his way, blessing God and maintaining an even spirit through everything. What causes others to be cast down, fretting and vexing, robbing them of all comfort — makes no alteration at all in the spirits of these men and women. That is a sign of great strength of grace.

Third, contentment also demonstrates great beauty of grace. Seneca, a pagan, once said: when you walk out into groves and forests and see the height of the trees and their shade, a kind of reverent awe of a divine power comes over you. When you see vast rivers and fountains and deep waters, a similar sense of God strikes you. But, he said, when you see a person who is calm in storms and lives happily in the midst of adversity — why would you not honor that person? He thought such a person deserved reverence — someone who could be quiet and live a happy life even in the midst of adversities. The glory of God appears in such a person more than in any of His other works. There is no work God has made — not the sun, moon, stars, or the whole world — in which so much of God's glory appears as in a person living quietly in the midst of adversity. This is what convinced the king when he saw the three young men walking in the midst of the fiery furnace without being harmed. The king was powerfully struck: surely their

God was a great God, and they were deeply loved by Him, to walk in the furnace untouched while those who merely approached the mouth of the furnace were consumed. In the same way, when a Christian can walk in the midst of fiery trials with his garments un-singed — finding comfort and joy in the midst of it all, as Paul did in the stocks, singing — it convinces others. That is what worked on the jailer. When people see the power of grace under afflictions that would make others roar — yet these people behave in a gracious and holy manner — it is the glory of a Christian. This is also what is said of Christ — at least interpreters believe it refers to Christ — in Micah 5:5: "And this man shall be their peace when the Assyrian comes into our land and when he treads in our palaces." This man shall be the peace when the Assyrian comes into our land. To be at peace when there are no enemies is not remarkable — but to be at peace when the Assyrian comes into the land, when everything is in an uproar, and still this man shall be peace — that is something. That is the proof of grace: finding Jesus Christ in your heart as your peace when the Assyrian comes into the land. You may think you find peace in Christ when there is no outward trouble — but is Christ your peace when the enemy comes? Suppose you heard that an enemy was marching toward the city, had broken through the defenses, and was plundering — what would be your peace? Jesus Christ would be peace to the soul even then. If any of you have lived through such a time when an enemy came — what sustained your soul? What is said of Christ may be applied to this grace of contentment: when the Assyrian, the plunderer, the enemy — when any affliction, trouble, or distress — comes upon such a heart, the grace of contentment brings peace to

the soul at that very moment. Contentment is an excellent grace: it has much beauty, much strength, and great worth. Fall in love with it.

The third excellence of contentment is this: contentment makes the soul fit to receive mercy and fit to do service. I will take those two together. No one in the world is better prepared to receive God's grace and to do God's work than those who have contented spirits.

First, those who are content are ready to receive mercy from the Lord. Think of it this way: if you want to fill a vessel with liquid, you must hold it still — if it is shaking and moving about, you cannot pour anything in. You say, "Hold still, so I can pour it in without spilling any." In the same way, if we would be vessels to receive God's mercy and have the Lord pour His mercy into us, we must have quiet and still hearts. We must not have hearts rushing about in trouble, discontent, and vexing — we must have still and quiet hearts. If a child throws a fit crying for something, you do not give it to him while he is in that state — though you may well intend to give it to him. You wait until the child is quiet, until he stands calmly before you and is content without it — and then you give it to him. This is exactly how the Lord deals with us. As soon as we want something from God and do not have it, we are immediately unsettled and our spirits are in an uproar. God intends to show mercy to us — but He says, "Not yet. I want to see you quiet first. Come to me in the quietness of your heart, and then see what I will do." I appeal to anyone who is at all acquainted with God's ways: have you not found this to be true? When you were troubled over the lack of some spiritual comfort and your heart was vexed about it, you received nothing from God during that time. But

when you quieted your heart and said, "It is right that the Lord should do with His poor creature as He wills — I am under His feet, and I am resolved to honor Him as best I can, and to seek Him as long as I live, content with whatever He gives, whether much or little" — were you in that frame of mind? Then God says: "Now you shall have comfort. Now I will give you the mercy." A prisoner cannot work off his chains by pulling and tearing — he will only tear his flesh to the bone, and he will not get free any sooner. If he wants his chains removed, he must calmly submit to another person to take them off. If a beggar knocks at the door once or twice and gets no answer, and then becomes vexed and resentful that you have left him waiting, you think that beggar is not in a fit state to receive charity. But suppose you heard two or three beggars at your door, and from your window you heard them say: "Let us wait patiently — they must be busy. It is right that we should wait. If we receive anything at the end, that is well. We deserve nothing, so we can certainly wait a while." You would quickly send them alms. This is how God deals with the heart: when it is unsettled, God withholds; when the heart lies quietly under God's hand, it is ready to receive mercy. As God says, "In returning and rest you will be saved" — you will not be delivered from Babylon by struggling, but by sitting still.

Second, just as contentment prepares us to receive mercy, it also prepares us to do service. The quiet fruits of righteousness — peaceable fruits of righteousness — thrive and multiply most when they grow in peace. Philosophers observe that everything that moves does so upon something that is itself unmoved. Anything moving on the earth depends on the earth being still — if the earth were not steady, nothing could move upon it.

Objection: But ships move on the sea, and the sea is not still.

Answer: The sea itself moves upon what is fixed and immovable beneath it. Nothing moves without something unmoved holding it up. The wheels of a carriage turn and spin, but the axle does not move up and down. The heavens move in their courses upon a fixed pole that does not move. So it is with the human heart: if a person is to move in serving God, he must have a steady heart within — a stillness that anchors and enables his activity. Those with unsettled, restless spirits, with no steadfastness in them, are not fit to do service for God. But those with steady spirits are fit for any service. This is why, when the Lord has a great work for one of His servants to do, He usually first quiets that person's spirit — bringing them into a calm, sweet frame of contentment with any condition — and then He sets them to work.

The fifth excellence is this: contentment delivers us from countless temptations. Those with discontented spirits are subject to temptations without number. The devil loves to fish in troubled waters — that is the common saying about people who stir up trouble to take advantage of it, and it is equally the devil's practice. Where the devil sees human spirits troubled and vexed, he says to himself: "Good fishing here." When he sees men and women wandering about discontented, and catches them alone, he comes with his temptations. "Will you put up with this?" he says. "Take this indirect, dishonest path. Look how poor you are while others live well. You don't know how you will get through winter — how you will get fuel, how you will feed yourself and your children." And so he tempts them toward unlawful ways. This is the specific weakness the devil seizes on. When he brings people to give up their souls to him, it is always on the ground of discontent. That has

been the root cause of those who have become witches and handed themselves over to the devil — it began with discontent. This is why the devil works upon certain kinds of people to make them witches: they are usually old and melancholy, often women, often from the poorer sort, discontented at home, vexed by their neighbors, with spirits too weak to bear it. The devil fastens his temptations on that weakness and draws them wherever he wants. If they are poor, he promises money. If they have bitter, vengeful spirits, he promises revenge against those who have wronged them. This is what quiets and contents them — but at a terrible price. There is rich material for temptation wherever the devil finds a discontented spirit. As Luther says of God: God does not dwell in Babylon, but in Salem — Babylon means confusion, and Salem means peace. God does not dwell in spirits that are in confusion; He dwells in peaceable, quiet spirits. If you want to free yourself from temptation, pursue contentment. It is the peace of God that guards the heart from temptation. I recall reading of Marius Curio, who was sitting at home eating a dish of turnips when men came to bribe him to betray his country. He said: "A man who can be content with the meal I am eating will not be tempted by your rewards. I am thankful for this fare — offer your bribes to those who cannot be content to dine on turnips." And the truth is, we can plainly see that the reason many men betray their trust — in public service, in civic life — is that they cannot be content in a modest condition. Let a man be content to live plainly and dress simply when God sees that fit, and he is protected — as I might say, bullet-proof — from thousands of temptations that bring others to the ruin of their souls. In times like these, when people face the loss of their estates, those without this grace are in a most pitiable condi-

tion. They are in greater danger for their souls than for their outward estates. You may think it is a terrible thing to face losing everything in a night — but without a contented spirit, you are in even greater danger of being spiritually plundered by the devil and led into sin. When men think they must maintain the standard of living they once had, they make themselves prey to the devil. But those who can say, "Let God do with me what He pleases — I am content to submit to His hand" — the devil will scarcely trouble such people. There is a striking saying from a philosopher who lived on simple food: as he was eating herbs and roots, someone said to him, "If you would just please Dionysius, you would not have to eat herbs and roots." He replied: "If you would be content with such simple food, you would not have to flatter Dionysius." Temptations have no more effect on a contented person than a dart thrown against a bronze wall. That is the fifth excellence.

The sixth excellence is this: contentment brings abundant comfort into a person's life. Contentment makes life exceedingly sweet and comfortable — nothing does more for this than the grace of contentment. I will show several ways in which it brings comfort.

First, what a contented person has, he possesses in a kind of independent way, without depending on outward circumstances for his comfort.

Second, if a contented person has a modest estate and God then raises it, he can receive that blessing as a gift of God's love — and it is abundantly sweeter than if he had obtained it while his heart was discontented. When a discontented person gets what he wants, he cannot be sure it comes from love. But when a person

has first quieted his spirit and then God grants his desire, he can receive it with greater comfort and greater confidence that it comes from God's love.

Third, contentment brings comfort by keeping comfort alive within us and shutting out whatever would dim or extinguish it. I would compare the grace of contentment to a sailor's lantern. A sailor at sea may have abundant provisions in his ship, but if he is thousands of miles from land, or in waters where he will not meet another ship for months, and he has no lantern — no way to keep a candle burning in a storm — he will be in a dire situation. He would give a great deal to have a lantern, or something to serve in its place. When a storm comes at night and any light carried above deck is immediately blown out, his situation is desperate. In the same way, many people can have the light of comfort when there is no storm — but let any affliction, any storm arise, and their light is instantly extinguished. What are they to do then? When the heart is furnished with the grace of contentment, that grace is like the lantern — it keeps comfort burning in the spirit even through storm and tempest. With a lantern in the midst of a storm, you can carry a light anywhere on the ship — all the way up to the top of the mast — and still keep it burning. In the same way, the comfort of a Christian, when it is sheltered by the grace of contentment, can be kept burning through whatever storms or tempests come. That soul can keep light within, whatever the outward weather. This is an enormous help to your comfort.

The seventh excellence is this: contentment draws in the comfort of things we do not actually possess. And those who lack outward things often have more comfort than those who actually have them. Think of how a person can distill herbs: even without having

the herbs themselves, by drawing out the distilled water from them, he can enjoy their benefit. In the same way, even without real possession of an outward estate or comfort, a person can draw it in by the grace of contentment. Just as navigation can bring the riches of the East and West Indies home to us, so the art of contentment can bring in the comfort of any condition — giving us the same benefit as if we actually possessed the thing itself. There is a notable story in Plutarch's life of Pyrrhus. Cineas came to him and wanted very much to persuade him to abandon his wars and stop fighting against the Romans. He said: "May it please your Majesty — it is reported that the Romans are very able soldiers. If the gods grant us victory over them, what benefit will that victory bring us?" Pyrrhus answered: "We will then easily conquer the rest of Italy." Cineas replied: "That is very likely, your Grace — but when we have won Italy, will our wars be over then?" "If the gods grant us that victory," said Pyrrhus, "the way will be wide open for great conquests — who would not then go into Africa, and on to Carthage?" "But when we have all that in our hands," said Cineas, "what shall we do in the end?" Pyrrhus laughed and said: "Then we will be at rest, take our ease, feast every day, and be as merry with each other as we can." Cineas replied: "What is stopping us from being just as quiet and merry together right now? We can enjoy that immediately, without further toil and danger — without shedding blood and risking everything. Can you not sit down and be merry now?" A person may think: "If I had this one thing, then I would want another, and if I had that, then I would want more." But what if you had everything you desired? Then you would be content. Well, you may be content now without any of it. Our contentment does not consist in getting what we desire, but in God

shaping our spirits to fit our conditions. There are men who own not a foot of land and yet live better than those who are heirs to great estates. I have seen this in the countryside: a man who owns his land and yet lives very poorly, while another man who farms rented land, through good management and care, lives better than the landowner. So by the art of contentment, a person may live better without an estate than another person can with one. This adds greatly to the comfort of a Christian. To take it even further: there is more comfort in the grace of contentment itself than in any possession whatsoever. A person has more comfort in being content without a thing than he can have in the very thing he was discontentedly craving.

You may think: "If I had such-and-such a thing, then I would be content." I say: there is more good in contentment itself than there is in the thing you want in order to cure your discontent. Let me show this in several ways.

First, if I had that thing I long for, it would only be a creature helping me to contentment. But as things stand now, it is the grace of God in my soul that makes me content. Surely it is better to be content through the grace of God within than through the enjoyment of some outward comfort.

Second, if I had that thing, my circumstances might improve — but my soul would not be better. But through contentment, my soul itself is made better — something that an estate, land, or friends could never accomplish. Contentment makes me better as a person. Therefore, contentment is a better portion than the very thing I would want to make my portion.

Third, if I gain contentment by having my desire satisfied, that is mere self-love. But when I am content with God's hand and willing to be at His disposal, that contentment flows from love to God. Getting what I want and feeling content about it — that is self-love. Being content through the grace of contentment — that is love to God. And is it not far better to be content from a principle of love to God than from a principle of self-love?

Fourth, if I am content because I have gotten what I wanted, I may be content in that one particular — but having it does not prepare me for contentment in other things. In fact, it may make me more demanding and irritable about other things. Give children what they want in one matter, and they often become more picky and discontented when they do not get what they want in the next. But if I have once overcome my heart and am content through the grace of God within me, that grace does not content me in one particular only — it contents me in general, whatever may come. When I am discontented and finally get the thing I longed for, does getting it prepare me to be content in other things? No. But when I have obtained this grace of contentment, I am prepared to be content in every condition. So you can see that contentment fills a person's life with comfort in this world. The truth is, it is a kind of heaven on earth. What is heaven, after all, but rest and quiet for the spirit? The chief things in heaven are rest, joy, and satisfaction in God. And the contented spirit has exactly these: rest, joy, and satisfaction in God. In heaven there is the singing of God's praises — and a contented heart is always praising and blessing God. You have a kind of heaven on earth when you have a contented spirit. And in some sense — let me say it carefully — there is an excellence in it that even heaven does not have.

In heaven there is no overcoming of temptations, no trials through affliction. The saints in heaven exercise grace — but they have nothing but encouragement to it. Their grace is perfect, which surpasses ours. But nothing crosses their grace; they have no trials at all pulling them in the opposite direction. Now consider: for a man or woman to be in the midst of afflictions, temptations, and troubles — and still exercise grace, still be satisfied in God and Christ and in His Word and promises through all of it — this brings God a kind of honor that He does not receive from the angels and saints in heaven. Is it so great a thing for someone in heaven, surrounded by nothing but good from God, with no trials and no temptations, to praise and bless God? Compare that with the poor soul in the midst of trials, temptations, afflictions, and troubles — who still goes on praising, blessing, and serving God. That is an excellence you will not have in heaven, and a kind of glory God will not receive from you there. Therefore be content, prize this contentment, and be willing to live in this world as long as God pleases. Do not think: "Oh, if only I were delivered from all these afflictions and troubles!" If you were, you would have more ease — but you would lose this way of honoring God. The display of grace's excellence in the conflict of temptation is something God will not receive from you in heaven. So be satisfied and quiet — be content with your contentment. You may lack things that others have, but blessed be God, you have a contented heart that many others do not have. That is a rich portion the Lord has granted you. If the Lord were to give you thousands in this world, it would not be as rich a portion as this — a contented spirit. Go and praise the name of God, and say: "Lord, it is true — there are comforts that others have that I would gladly receive. But You have cut me short.

Yet though I lack those things, You have given me something as good and better: a quiet, contented heart, willing to be at Your disposal."

SERMON 7



Philippians 4:11: "For I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content."

We continue. There are two or three more excellencies of contentment to cover, and then we will move to the application of this teaching.

The eighth excellence is this: contentment is a great blessing of God upon the soul. God's blessing rests on those who are content — on their lives, their estates, and everything they have. In Deuteronomy we read the blessing pronounced over Judah, the principal tribe: "Hear, Lord, the voice of Judah and bring him to his people. Let his hands be sufficient for him, and be a help to him against his enemies." "Let his hands be sufficient for him" — that is, let him have a sufficiency of good from his own, that he may be provided for. That is the blessing of Judah. So when God gives you a sufficiency from what you have — as He does for every contented person — the blessing of the principal tribe of Judah rests on you. It is the Lord who gives us all things to enjoy — we may have a thing and yet not enjoy it unless God comes with His blessing. But whatever you have, you do enjoy it. Many people

have estates and yet do not enjoy them. It is God's blessing that gives us all things to truly enjoy — it is God who, through His blessing, has shaped your heart to fit your condition.

The ninth excellence is this: those who are content may expect that God will give them the benefit of everything they are willing to go without. This brings enormous good to a contented spirit. If there is a mercy you think would be very comforting to you — but you can bring your heart to submit to God in not having it — you will receive the blessing of that mercy one way or another. If you do not have the thing itself, God will make it up to you somehow. He will give you something in place of it, as it were. There is no comfort that any soul is content to do without but that the Lord will give either that comfort or something equivalent. You will receive a reward for every good thing you are content to go without. You know what Scripture teaches about active obedience: the Lord accepts the willing heart even when the deed cannot be done. Though we may not accomplish a good thing, if our hearts are upright and truly desire to do it, we receive the blessing as if we had done it. You who complain of weakness — who cannot serve God as others do — if your hearts are just as sincere before God, and you genuinely desire to do what you see others doing, you would count it the greatest blessing in the world to be able to do it. Take comfort in this: dealing with God in the covenant of grace, you will receive from God the reward for all you would do, just as a wicked person will receive punishment for all the sin he would commit. So you will receive the reward for all the good you would do. Now, if this is true of active obedience, why not of passive obedience as well? There is just as good reason to expect that God will reward you for all you are willing to suffer as for all you are willing to do. If

you are willing to go without a comfort when God sees fit, you will not be the loser. God will certainly reward you either with that comfort itself or with something equally good. Consider how many things you have that others lack — and then ask: can I bring my heart into a quiet, contented frame to do without what others have? If so, I have the benefit of everything they have. God will either give me those things as well, or make it up to me in another way — here in this life, or in eternity. What riches these are. With contentment, you have every kind of riches.

The tenth and final excellence is this: through contentment the soul attains an excellence that comes near to God Himself — as near as a creature can come. The word translated "content" signifies self-sufficiency, as I explained at the start. A contented person is, in a sense, self-sufficient. What is the great glory of God but that He is happy and self-sufficient in Himself? He is called All-sufficient — but the word "All" is really just an intensification: to be sufficient is to be all-sufficient. The glory of God is that He is El Shaddai — God who is sufficient in Himself. Through the grace of contentment, you come close to sharing in this divine nature. You partake of the divine nature through grace in general, but in a particularly vivid way through this grace of contentment. Suppose there were no creatures in the world — suppose every created thing were annihilated. God would remain the same blessed God He is now. He would not be in a worse condition for the loss of all creation. In the same way, a contented heart would not be more miserable even if God took away every creature from him. A contented heart has enough even in the absence of all created things. Suppose God kept you alive but took away every creature in this

world. With God as your portion, you would be just as happy as you are now. That is how great an excellence contentment carries in it.

We have now laid out the excellence of this grace in many particulars, laboring to set its beauty before your souls so that you may fall in love with it.

What remains now but to practice it? The art of contentment is not a merely theoretical matter, something only for contemplation. It is a practical matter of godliness, and you must now work on your hearts to cultivate this grace — so that you may honor God and honor your Christian profession with it. No one honors God and honors their profession more than those who have this grace of contentment. To begin the practice, several things are required.

First, we must be humbled in our hearts for our lack of this grace — for having had so little of it in us. There is no way to pursue any duty with real profit until the heart has first been humbled for failing in that duty. Many people hear about a duty they should perform and immediately set about performing it — but first you must be humbled for the lack of it. That is what I will work toward in this application: bringing your hearts to genuine humility over the absence of this grace. "Oh, if I had had this grace of contentment, what a happy life I might have lived. What honor I might have brought to the name of God. How I might have honored my Christian profession. What comfort I might have enjoyed. But the Lord knows it has been far otherwise. How far I have been from this grace of contentment that has been set before me. I have had a murmuring, vexing, fretting heart — every little trial has thrown me off balance. What turbulence in my spirit. What evil God sees

in my heart — in all the fretting, vexing, murmuring, and complaining." Oh, that God would bring you to see this. To help you be humbled for the lack of this grace, I will address several things.

First, I will set before you the evil of a murmuring spirit — there is more evil in it than you may realize.

Second, I will show some of the aggravating factors that make this evil worse — it is an evil in everyone, but more so in some than in others.

Third, I will address and remove the excuses that a murmuring, discontented heart offers for its disorder.

These are the three elements in this application of humbling the soul for its lack of the grace of contentment.

For the first, we turn to it now. Here is the great evil in a murmuring, discontented heart.

First, your murmuring and discontent reveal deep corruption in the soul. Just as contentment reveals much grace — strong grace, beautiful grace — so murmuring reveals much corruption, strong corruption, and very vile corruption in the heart. Think of a person whose body is so unhealthy that a mere pinprick makes the flesh fester and become infected. You would say: this person's body is clearly corrupt — his blood and flesh are so out of order that even the smallest scratch produces infection. The same is true in the spirit: if every small trouble and affliction makes you discontented, makes you murmur, and makes your spirit fester within you, that reveals corruption. Think also of how a wound in the body works: the evil of a wound is not mainly in its size or in how much blood it draws, but in the inflammation or the festering humor within it. An unskilled person looking at a large gash full of

blood thinks that is the dangerous part. But a surgeon looks at that large wound and says: "This will heal in a few days." Then he looks at a smaller wound and says: "But this one has inflammation or a festering humor in it — this will take much longer to cure." His whole effort is not to apply ointments and healing salves, but to draw out the festering humor. The thing that will heal this wound, he says, is something taken internally to purge it out. "But," says the patient, "what good will drinking something do for my wound in my arm or leg?" "It purges out the festering humor and reduces the inflammation," the surgeon replies, "and until that is removed, the salves can do no good." So it is exactly with the souls of men and women. There may be some affliction on them — that is the wound. They think the size of the affliction is what makes their condition most miserable. But no — there is a festering humor, an inflammation in the heart, a murmuring spirit within — and that is the true misery of their condition. That must be purged out before healing can begin. Let God do what He will with you: until He purges out that festering spirit, your wound will not be healed. A murmuring heart is a very sinful heart. When you are troubled by some affliction, you would do better to turn your attention to being troubled by the murmuring of your heart — for that is the greater trouble. There is an affliction on you, and it is hard to bear — but there is a murmuring heart within you, and that is harder still. Oh, that we could convince people that a murmuring spirit is a greater evil than any affliction, whatever that affliction may be. We will show further on that a murmuring spirit is the evil of evils, the misery inside the misery.

Second, the evil of murmuring is such that when God speaks of wicked people and describes the mark of an ungodly man or woman, He singles out this sin in a particularly striking way. Many scriptures could be cited, but the passage in Jude is especially remarkable. Verses 14 and following say that "the Lord comes with tens of thousands of His holy ones to execute judgment upon all, and to convict all the ungodly of all their ungodly deeds which they have done in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him." Notice that in verse 15, the word "ungodly" appears four times: all who are ungodly, all their ungodly deeds which they have done in an ungodly way, and all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken. That is the general description. But then, when he comes to identify who these people are in particular, the very first word he uses is: murmurers. Would you know who the ungodly are — those whom God will come with ten thousand angels to punish for all their ungodly deeds, those who have spoken ungodly things? They are murmurers. In Scripture, murmurers are placed at the very front of the category of the ungodly. This is a fearful passage of Scripture. When God describes the ungodly, He puts murmurers at the very front of the list. Guard your spirit carefully. You can see that murmuring — the vice directly opposite to contentment — is no small matter. You may think you are not as ungodly as others because you do not swear or drink as they do. But you may be ungodly through murmuring. It is true that seeds and remnants of every sin remain even in those who are godly. But when someone is under the power of this sin of murmuring, it marks them as ungodly just as surely as being under the power of drunkenness, sexual immoral-

ity, or any other sin. God will regard you as ungodly for this sin just as much as for any other. This one passage of Scripture ought to make the heart tremble at the thought of murmuring.

Third, as murmuring is marked as the trait of the ungodly, so Scripture shows that God counts it as rebellion. Just as contentment is worship — crouching before God, lying down at His feet — murmuring is rebellion. You can see this by comparing two passages in Numbers. Numbers 16:41 says: "But on the next day all the congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron, saying, 'You are the ones who have caused the death of the Lord's people.'" They all murmured. Now compare that with Numbers 17:10: "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Put back the rod of Aaron before the testimony to be kept as a sign against the rebels.'" In chapter 16, they murmured against Moses and Aaron. In chapter 17, God calls them rebels. In Scripture's language, to be a murmurer and to be a rebel are the same thing. Murmuring is rebellion against God. Just as the beginning of rebellion in a kingdom starts with discontent — discontent grows into murmuring, and murmuring is found in nearly every house when people are discontented — so within a short time it breaks into open revolt. Murmuring is the smoke before the fire: first the smoke and smolder, then the flame of open rebellion. Because murmuring contains the seed of rebellion, God counts it as rebellion. Will you be a rebel against God? When you feel your heart discontented and murmuring against God's dealings with you, you should confront yourself: "You wretched heart — will you rebel against God? Will you rise up in rebellion against the infinite God? Yet that is what you have done." Charge your heart with this sin of rebellion. Those of you who are guilty of murmuring are today charged by God with rebel-

lion against Him. God expects that when you go home, you will humble your souls before Him for this sin and charge yourselves with being rebels against God. Many of you may say: "I never thought of myself as a rebel against God before. I thought I had many weaknesses, but I did not see them as rebellion." But Scripture speaks of sin differently than we do. Scripture marks those who are merely murmurers as rebels against God. What a rebellious heart you have had against the Lord, which has shown itself in this murmuring against Him. That is the third aspect of the evil of discontent.

The fourth aspect of the evil of discontent is this: it is a wickedness that is directly and powerfully opposed to grace, and especially opposed to the work of God in bringing the soul home to Himself. I know of no disorder more contrary to the work of God in the conversion of a sinner than this one.

Question: What is the work of God when He brings a sinner home to Himself?

Answer: God's usual way is to make the soul see and feel the dreadful evil of sin, and the great breach that sin has made between God and the soul. Jesus Christ can never be known in His beauty and excellence until the soul understands that. I am not speaking about what the secret work of the Holy Spirit may be within the soul, but this much is clear: before the soul can actually lay hold of Jesus Christ, it must come to know the evil of sin and the excellence of Christ. There may be a seed of faith planted in the soul first, but the soul must come to know Christ, know sin, and feel its weight. Now, how utterly contrary to this work of God is the sin of murmuring. If God has made me see the dreadful evil of sin — if my soul has been made to feel sin as the greatest burden —

how can I then be so troubled over every small affliction? If I truly saw what the evil of sin is, that sight would swallow up all other evils. If I were truly burdened by sin, that burden would swallow up every other burden. What am I doing, murmuring against God's hand, when not long ago the Lord made me see myself as a ruined wretch, and I counted it a wonder that I was not already in hell?

Second, murmuring is powerfully opposed to the sight of the infinite excellence and glory of Jesus Christ and of the things of the gospel. What — am I the soul to whom the Lord has revealed such infinite excellence in Jesus Christ? And shall I think some small affliction so grievous, when I have been given a sight of such glory in Christ — a glory worth more than ten thousand worlds? A true convert will say: "Oh, the Lord at such a time gave me a sight of Christ that I would not trade for ten thousand thousand worlds." But if God has given you that, will you be discontented over something trivial by comparison?

Third, a further work of God when He brings the soul home to Himself is the detaching of the heart from the creature — disengaging the heart from all creature-comforts. This is a work the soul can perceive in itself. God's work may at times be entirely below the surface in its beginnings, but in the soul's various acts of turning to God, these movements can be perceived. One of them is the disengagement of the heart from the creature — the calling of the soul away from the world. "Those whom the Lord has called, He has justified." (Romans 8:30). What is this calling of the soul? The soul that was previously seeking contentment in the world and clinging to created things hears the Lord calling it out of the world: "Soul, your happiness is not here. Your rest is not here. Your happiness is elsewhere, and your heart must be loosened from every-

thing below." This disengaging of the heart from the creature is God's work in the soul. How contrary, then, is a murmuring heart to this work. When one thing is glued to another, you cannot separate them without tearing. So it is a sign that your heart is glued to the world when, if God tries to detach you from something, your heart tears at the separation. But if God takes something away through affliction and you can part with it easily and without tearing, that is a sign your heart is not glued to the world.

Fourth, another work of God in converting a sinner is the casting of the soul upon Jesus Christ for all its good. Seeing in the gospel that Jesus Christ is the fountain of all good, and that God in free grace offers Him to me for life and salvation, my soul casts itself — rolls itself — upon the infinite grace of God in Christ for everything I need. Now: has God converted you and drawn you to His Son to cast your soul upon Him for all your good? And yet you are discontented for lack of some small creature-comfort? Are you the one who has cast your soul upon Jesus Christ for all good? As someone once said in another context: is this your faith?

Fifth, the soul is subdued to God — and then it comes to receive Jesus Christ as King, to rule and order and dispose of it however He pleases. How opposite, then, is a murmuring, discontented heart to a heart that has been subdued to Jesus Christ as King — a heart that has received Him as Lord, willing for Him to rule and dispose of it as He sees fit.

Sixth, in the work of your turning to God there is the giving of yourself to God in an everlasting covenant. Just as you take Christ, the head of the covenant, to be yours, so you give yourself to Christ. In conversion, the soul surrenders itself wholly to God in an everlasting covenant — to belong to Him. Have you ever surren-

dered yourself to God in such a covenant? Then this fretting, murmuring heart of yours is powerfully opposed to it. You are forgetting your covenant and the surrender you made of yourself to God. It would be of tremendous help in humbling your soul when you are in a murmuring condition, if you could find enough freedom in your spirit to look back and see what God's work was in converting you. Nothing would prevail more than to think of that. "I am now murmuring and discontented — but how did my soul feel when God turned it to Himself? How completely opposite is this murmuring to that work. How unseemly it is." What shame and confusion would come over people's spirits if they could only compare the corrupting work of murmuring and discontent with the work of God in their souls at conversion. We should labor to keep alive the work God did in us at conversion. Conversion must not be thought of as a single, finished event. People are mistaken if they think conversion was completed in a single moment. You must be in a continual process of turning to God all the days of your life. Christ said to His disciples: "Unless you are converted and become like children" — but were they not already converted? Yes — and yet they were still to continue the work of conversion all their lives. Whatever God worked in the soul at first conversion is meant to continue afterward. There must always remain some sight and sense of sin — perhaps not in the same way as at first, which was more of a preparation, but the sight and sense of sin is to continue. That is, you are still to feel the weight of sin as something that opposes God's holiness, goodness, and mercy to you. The sight of the excellence of Jesus Christ is to continue. The calling of your heart out of the creature is to continue. The casting of your soul upon Christ is to continue. The receiving of Christ as King — receive

Him daily. The subduing of your heart and the surrender of yourself to God in covenant — these are ongoing. If this were daily continued, there would be no room and no time for murmuring to take hold of your heart. That is the fourth aspect of the evil of discontent.

The fifth aspect of the evil of discontent is this: murmuring and discontent are exceedingly beneath a Christian. It is too low and base a disorder for a Christian to give in to. It is beneath a Christian in many respects.

First, how beneath a Christian it is in light of the relationships he stands in. What relationships do you mean, you ask?

First, consider your relationship to God. Do you not call God your Father? Do you not stand before Him as a child? And yet you murmur? In 2 Samuel 13:4, Jonadab says to Amnon: "Why are you, the king's son, so downcast morning after morning? Will you not tell me?" He could see that Amnon's spirit was troubled — otherwise he was healthy and well, but inner trouble had made him waste away. His point was: is there anything that could justify trouble in the heart of a king's son? In the same way, I would say to every Christian: are you a son or daughter of the King of heaven, and yet you are so unsettled, troubled, and vexed by every little thing that happens? Imagine a king's son weeping and crying that he is ruined over losing a toy — how unworthy that would be. Yet that is what you do: you cry out as though you are ruined, and yet you are a child of the King. You who stand in this relationship to God as a Father dishonor Him by your discontent, as though He lacked the wisdom, power, or mercy to provide for you.

Second, consider your relationship to Jesus Christ — you are His bride. One who is married to Jesus Christ, troubled and discontented? Do you not have enough in Him? Does not Christ say to His bride, as Elkanah said to Hannah, "Am I not better to you than ten sons?" (1 Samuel 1:8). Does not Christ your husband say to you: "Am I not better to you than all the riches and comforts you are longing for — all the things you murmur for lack of?" Has not God given you His Son? And will He not with Him freely give you all things? Has God's love extended to you so far as to give you His Son in a relationship as close as marriage? Why then are you discontented and murmuring? Consider your relationship to Jesus Christ as His bride: His person is yours, and therefore all the riches of Jesus Christ are yours — just as the wealth of a husband belongs to his wife. Some husbands are so careless that their wives must petition for provision; but Jesus Christ will never deny provision to His bride. It is a dishonor to a husband to have his wife going about in misery. You are matched with Christ and are His bride — will you murmur and be discontented? When a newly married couple shows discontent between them, their friends shake their heads and say: "It doesn't seem like they are finding what they hoped for. See how the man looks and how the woman looks since they were married — they are not as cheerful as they used to be. It looks like it may prove an unhappy match." But it is not so between you and Christ. Jesus Christ does not want to see His bride with a gloomy face. No husband wants to see discontent on his wife's face — and surely Christ does not want to see discontent on the face of His bride.

Third, you stand in relation to Christ not only as a bride, but as a member — you are bone of His bone and flesh of His flesh. For a member of Jesus Christ to be in such a condition of murmuring and discontent is utterly unworthy.

Fourth, Christ is also your elder brother, and you are a co-heir with Him.

Fifth, consider your relationship to the Spirit of God. You are the temple of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is your Comforter — the one appointed to convey all comfort from the Father and the Son to the souls of God's people. Are you the temple of the Holy Spirit, with Him dwelling in you — and yet you murmur over every small thing?

Sixth, consider your relationship to the angels. You are joined into one body with them. Christ has united principalities and powers with His church — they are ministering spirits sent to serve God's people and supply what they need. You and they are joined together, and Christ is the head of both you and the angels.

Seventh, consider your relationship to the saints. You are of the same body with them — they and you together form one mystical body with Jesus Christ. If they are blessed, you share in that blessing. How far beneath a Christian is a murmuring spirit, when he considers all the relationships in which he stands.

Second, a Christian should consider that murmuring and discontent are beneath the high dignity God has placed on him. Consider what high dignity God has given you. The most ordinary Christian in the world is a lord of heaven and earth. God has made us kings to Himself — not kings over other men to rule them, yet I say every Christian is lord of heaven and earth, even of life and

death. Just as Christ is Lord of all, He has made those who are His members to be lords of all. "All things are yours," says the apostle — even life and death, everything belongs to you. It is a remarkable expression: death is yours — meaning you are, in a sense, master over it. You have that which makes even death your servant, your slave. Your greatest enemies have been turned into your servants. Faith raises a Christian to be, in a sense, lord over all — lifted in excellence above every creature God has ever made, except the angels; and in some respects above even them. I say the poorest Christian alive is raised to an estate above all creatures in the world except angels, and above them in certain respects as well. And yet you are discontented. You who were as a firebrand of hell, who might have been burning and crying out there for eternity — God has raised you to an excellence greater than anything else in all creation except angels and your fellow believers. Indeed, you are nearer to the divine nature than the angels, because your nature is joined to the divine nature in the person of Christ in a hypostatic union. In that respect your nature is honored more than the nature of the angels. The death of Christ is yours — He died for you, not for angels. Therefore you are destined to be raised above the angels in many respects. You are in such an estate that God has set you apart to demonstrate throughout all eternity what His infinite power is able to raise a creature to. That is the condition of a saint, a believer — set apart to show for all eternity what God's infinite power can do to make a creature happy. Are you in that condition? How low and beneath it is a murmuring, discontented heart fretting over the lack of some outward comfort in this world. How unfitting that you should be a slave to every trial — that every affliction can say to your soul, "Bow down to us." We rightly counted

it a great outrage when men said to people's souls: "Bow down, that we may tread on you" — as cruel rulers once did when they imposed things on people's consciences, in effect demanding that their souls bow down and be trampled. That is the greatest slavery in the world — for one person to say to another: "Let your conscience, your soul, bow down that we may tread upon it." But will you let every affliction say that to you? That is exactly what happens when your heart is overcome with murmuring and discontent. Know this: every affliction that has caused you to murmur has said to you, "Bow down, that we may tread upon you." And it is not merely afflictions — the devil himself prevails against you in this. How utterly beneath the glorious estate God has raised a Christian to, to be like this. The son of a king — shall every low fellow come and tell him to bow down and be trampled? Yet that is what you do in every affliction: the trial, the cross, the trouble that comes your way says, "Bow down, that we may tread upon you."

Third, murmuring is beneath the spirit of a Christian. Every Christian's spirit should resemble the spirit of his Father. Every father loves to see his spirit reflected in his child — not just his physical features, though fathers delight in that too, but his spirit and character. A father of strong character loves to see that same strength in his child even more than his own physical likeness. The Lord who is our Father loves to see His Spirit in us. Great men love to see greatness of spirit in their children, and the great God loves to see a great spirit in His children. We are one spirit with God, with Christ, and with the Holy Spirit — and therefore our spirits should manifest the glory of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The spirit of a Christian should be lion-like. As Jesus Christ is called the Lion of the tribe of Judah, we should show something of that

lion-like spirit of Christ. Christ showed His lion-like spirit by passing through every affliction and trouble without murmuring against God. When He came to drink that bitter cup — even the very dregs of it — He prayed that if it were possible, the cup might pass from Him. But immediately: "Not My will, but Yours be done." The moment He mentioned the possibility of the cup passing, despite it being the most dreadful cup ever drunk since the world began, it was: "Not My will, but Yours be done." This was Christ's lion-like spirit — passing through every kind of affliction without any murmuring against God. A murmuring spirit, by contrast, is a low, dejected spirit — directly opposed to and contrary to the spirit of a Christian. Even the pagans considered it shameful. Plutarch reports that a certain people, to show their contempt for those who were overly cast down by affliction, punished them by requiring them to wear women's clothing for a set time — as a mark of shame and disgrace, because they had shown such an unmanly spirit. They thought excessive dejection was incompatible with the character of a man, and since such people had unmanned themselves, they should dress accordingly. If even pagans counted it unmanly to be overly cast down by affliction, should not a Christian count it unchristian to be overly cast down by any affliction? Another writer compares murmuring spirits to children being weaned. What a commotion a weaned child makes — how fretful and difficult it becomes. So when God would wean you from some outward comfort in this world, how you fret and become discontented. Children will not sleep themselves, nor let their mothers sleep, when they are being weaned. When God would wean us from the world and we fret, vex, and murmur — that is a childish spirit.

Fourth, murmuring and discontent are beneath the Christian's profession. What is a Christian's profession? It is to be dead to the world and alive to God — to have one's life hidden with Christ in God, to find satisfaction in God. Is that your profession? Then to murmur and be discontented whenever you lack some earthly thing is, in effect, to deny your own profession.

Fifth, discontent is beneath the special grace of faith. Faith is what overcomes the world; it is what makes all God's promises ours. Now, when you took on the Christian profession, did God ever promise you a life of ease, comfort, and freedom from trouble? Augustine expressed this well: "What is this faith of yours? What did I ever promise you — that you should flourish in this world? Is that why you became a Christian? Is that your faith? I made no such promise to you when you took on the Christian name." It is deeply contrary to your profession. You have no promise that you should be free from such-and-such affliction. A Christian is to live by faith — "the righteous shall live by faith." You should not be looking for any other life than the life you have by faith. You have no grounds for faith that you will be delivered from this particular affliction. So why should you count it such a great evil to be under it? The good that we have as the object of our faith is enough to satisfy the heart here and through all eternity. A Christian ought to be satisfied with what God has made the object of his faith. That object is high enough to satisfy the soul, even if the soul were capable of a thousand times more than it is. If you may have the full object of your faith, you have enough to content your soul. So when you are discontented for lack of certain comforts, think: God never promised me these comforts — not at this

time, not in the way I would have them. I am discontented over things God never promised me, and in this I sin greatly against the gospel and against the grace of faith.

There is yet more: discontent is also beneath the Christian's hope. The saints are waiting for the most glorious things imaginable.

And discontent works against the helps that Christians have — Christians have great resources available to them against murmuring.

And it is contrary to what God expects from Christians. God expects something very different from His people than this.

Indeed, it falls short even of what God receives from other Christians. These points I will open further at another time.

SERMON 8



Philippians 4:11: "For I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content."

Last time I named several things to show the evil of discontent. I will add two or three more.

Sixth, discontent is beneath a Christian because it falls below the resources a Christian has that others do not. Christians have God's promises to sustain them, which others lack. It is not surprising when someone like Nabal sinks in spirit, for he has nothing but earthly things to uphold him. But for a Christian, who has the promises and the means of grace to uphold his spirit, to collapse in discontent — that is something else entirely.

Seventh, discontent is beneath the expectation God has of Christians. God expects not only that they should be patient in afflictions, but that they should rejoice and triumph in them. When God expects this from you, to have not even reached simple contentment under affliction — that falls far short of what God expects.

Eighth, discontent falls below what God has received from other Christians. Other believers have not merely been content under small trials — they have triumphed under great afflictions and

accepted the plundering of their goods with joy. Read the latter part of Hebrews 11 and you will see what great things God has received from His people. To be unwilling to bear much smaller crosses, then, is a very great evil.

The sixth evil in a murmuring spirit is this: by murmuring, you undo your own prayers, because it directly contradicts what you ask of God. When you come to God in prayer, you acknowledge His sovereignty over you — you profess yourself to be at God's disposal. Why else do you petition Him, if not to acknowledge that you are subject to His will? If you will not stand at His disposal, you have no business petitioning Him. To come begging at your Father's door every day and yet insist on having your own way — that is a contradiction that undermines your prayers. Latimer once said, speaking of Peter who denied his Master, that Peter had forgotten his Lord's Prayer — for the prayer says, "Hallowed be Your name" and "Your kingdom come." In the same way, when you have a murmuring, discontented heart, you forget your own prayers — you forget what you have prayed for. The Lord's Prayer is meant to serve as a pattern for all your prayers, even when you do not use its exact words. What do you pray but "Give us this day our daily bread"? Christ means that to be a guide — a kind of directory — for how to pray. Notice that Christ does not teach you to pray: "Lord, give me such an income, such fine clothing, such a number of dishes at my table." He teaches you to pray: "Lord, give us our bread" — showing that you should be content with a little. Do you lack bread to eat? I hope there is no one here without that.

Objection: But I do not know what will become of my children if I die. Or, I have bread today but do not know where I will find it next week, or how I will have provision for the winter.

Answer: Where did Christ teach us to pray for provision over a long period of time? He did not. If we have bread for today, Christ would have us be content. When we murmur because we do not have the variety others enjoy, we are, in effect, forgetting the Lord's Prayer. It goes against what we pray for. We do not in our daily lives reflect the acknowledgment of God's sovereignty that we seem to profess in our prayers. So whenever you find your heart murmuring, pause and ask yourself: is this consistent with my prayers, in which I acknowledged the sovereign power and authority of God over me?

The seventh thing I add concerning the evil of discontent is the terrible effects that murmuring produces in a discontented heart. I will name five.

First, through murmuring and discontent you lose a great deal of time. How often do discontented people let their thoughts run unchecked for hours at a time — brooding, turning things over in their minds, feeding the discontent. When you are alone, you should be spending that time in holy meditation. Instead, you are spending it in discontented thoughts. You who complain that you cannot meditate, that you cannot keep your thoughts on good things — that your mind drifts away the moment you try — notice: when you are discontented about something, you have no trouble going off alone and brooding over it for as long as you like. Discontent provides its own fuel for thought. See this evil effect of murmuring: it wastes your time.

Second, discontent makes you unfit for duty. A person in a contented frame can be turned to any task at any moment — they are ready to come to God at any time. But a discontented person is extremely unfit for the service of God. Discontent causes constant

distractions in duty. When you hear bad news from distant places, or about a friend, or suffer some loss or cross — how it distracts you when you try to perform your duties before God. When you should be enjoying fellowship with God, your thoughts are pulled away to the cross that has come upon you. But if you had a quiet spirit, even great trials would not hinder your duty.

Third, consider what wicked risings of heart and desperate resolutions sometimes appear in a fit of discontent. In some discontented moments, the heart rises up against God and against others, and sometimes entertains desperate thoughts about how to take matters into its own hands. If the Lord had allowed you to carry out what you thought to do in some of those fits, what terrible misery you would have brought upon yourself. It was a mercy of God that stopped you. Had God not held you back, had He let you go ahead with the plans you were making to help yourself, it would have gone very badly for you. Remember those risings of heart and those wicked resolutions you have had in your discontented moods, and let them humble you.

Fourth, unthankfulness — this is a wicked and grievous effect that flows from discontent. Scripture ranks unthankfulness among very great sins. People who are discontented, though they enjoy many mercies from God, are thankful for none of them. This is the vile nature of discontent: it shrinks every mercy of God to nothing, because they do not have what they want. Sometimes this works even in spiritual things: if they have not all the spiritual comforts they desire, what they do have seems worthless to them. Do you think God accepts this? If you gave a friend a sum of money to trade with, and he came back saying, "What's this? These are just a few pennies — they won't do me any good" — you could not bear

that, simply because he did not receive as much as he wanted. In the same way, for you to say of all that God has given you, "It is nothing, it will do me no good, it is worthless" — even when those gifts are the precious graces of God's Spirit, worth more than thousands of worlds — to say they are nothing, merely common gifts, perhaps all counterfeit — what unthankfulness that is. The graces of God's Spirit count for nothing to a discontented heart that does not have everything it wants. The same with outward blessings: though God has given you health of body and strength, and has provided some sufficiency for your household and a way of making a living, yet because you are disappointed in some particular desire, everything is nothing to you. What unthankfulness. God expects that every day you spend some time blessing His name for the mercies He has given you. There is not one of you in the lowest condition who does not have an abundance of mercies to thank God for — but discontent makes them all vanish. Luther once made a striking observation about this. He said: "This is the rhetoric of the Spirit of God — to minimize evils and magnify good things. When a trial comes, to treat it as small; when a mercy comes, to treat it as great. If the Spirit of God prevails in a heart, that person will marvel that the trial is not worse, and bless God that though the trial is real, it is not greater. And when a mercy comes, such a person marvels at God's goodness in granting so great a mercy. The Spirit of God makes all afflictions seem small and all mercies seem great." "But," Luther continued, "the devil does exactly the opposite. The rhetoric of the devil is to shrink God's mercies and amplify evils. A godly person wonders that his trial is not worse; a wicked person wonders that his trial is so bad. 'No one,' he says, 'has ever suffered as I have.' When a trial comes,

the devil leads the soul to dwell on it and make it larger than it is — and so discontent takes root. When a mercy comes, the devil says: 'Yes, it is something, but what does it amount to? It is nothing special — for all this, I might still be miserable.'" The rhetoric of Satan shrinks God's mercies and magnifies afflictions. A clear example of this is found in Numbers 16:12-13, in the case of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. "Moses sent to summon Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab; but they said, 'We will not come up. Is it too small a thing that you have brought us up from a land flowing with milk and honey to have us die in the wilderness, but you would also lord it over us?'" Notice: they slighted the land of Canaan — the land God had promised them, which truly flowed with milk and honey. Because they encountered trouble in the wilderness, they cried out that it was killing them — they made their hardship in the wilderness far greater than it was. And their deliverance from Egypt, though a great mercy, they made nothing of it — calling Egypt "a land flowing with milk and honey." That was the land of their most cruel and unbearable bondage. They should have blessed God for the rest of their lives for delivering them from Egypt — but meeting with some small trial, they reduced that great mercy to nothing, and said they had been better off before. What baseness in a discontented spirit. Out of hostility toward God's grace, a discontented spirit will make great mercies seem small — indeed, make them seem like nothing at all. Who would ever have thought that such words could come from the mouth of an Israelite who had groaned under brutal bondage? And yet, meeting a little difficulty on the way to Canaan, they said: "You have brought us out of a land flowing with milk and honey" — claiming they were better off before, even though they had not been content then either. This is

the typical ungrateful language of a discontented heart. The same thing happens today. When we meet with trials — burdens of various kinds — we are quick to say we had more before, and to lament our present hardship. We even risk longing to return to forms of bondage we had been delivered from. Let us guard against this. A discontented heart produces this wretched fruit: it makes men and women unthankful for every mercy God has granted them. That is a serious and grievous evil.

Finally, this is another evil effect of murmuring: it leads to scheming — resorting to sinful and ungodly ways to help oneself. Discontent is the root cause of dishonest and unlawful courses of action. How many of you may have a conscience that convicts you of this — that in times of affliction you sought to help yourself through ways that were sinful against God, and your discontent was the very foundation of it? If you want to avoid taking matters into your own hands through wicked means, you must mortify the sin of discontent — strike it at the root.

The eighth evil in murmuring and discontent is this: there is extreme folly in a discontented heart. It is a foolish sin. I will show the folly of it in several ways.

First, discontent takes away the present comfort of what you have, simply because you do not have something else you want. What a foolish thing — to refuse to enjoy what I have because I do not have what I want. You see this folly in your own children: you give them something to eat, and they are not satisfied. "It is not enough," they say, crying for more — and if you do not immediately give them more, they throw away what they already have. You count that folly in your children. But you do exactly the same with God. God gives you many mercies, but you see others have

more, so you cry for more. God does not give you what you demand, and so you throw away what you have. Is that not foolish? It is unthankfulness.

Second, there is great folly in discontent because all your discontent cannot help you — you cannot gain anything by it. "Who of you by worrying can add a single cubit to your height?" or make one white hair black? You may vex and trouble yourself, but you gain nothing. Do you think the Lord will bring mercy any sooner because of your murmuring? No — mercy will be deferred longer because of it. Even if the Lord had been moving toward showing you that mercy, your discontented spirit is enough to turn Him aside from it. Though He had planned to give you the thing before, now you will not have it. If you had decided to give something to a child, and you see him fretting and whining for it, you will hold it back. This is the very reason so many mercies are withheld from you — your discontent. You are discontented for lack of them, and therefore you do not have them. You are depriving yourself of the very things you desire by your discontented attitude. Is that not folly?

Third, there is great folly in discontent because it commonly leads to foolish behavior toward both God and other people. A discontented heart produces words and actions that make even friends ashamed of that person. The behavior is so unbecoming that it brings shame on themselves and on those around them.

Fourth, there is great folly in discontent because it devours the goodness and sweetness of a mercy before it ever arrives. If God does grant a mercy you have been discontentedly craving, the blessing has been eaten out of it before you receive it. Discontent is like a worm that eats the meat out of a nut — and then you are

handed the empty shell. If a child cries for a nut that has been hollowed out by a worm, what good does receiving it do the child? So with any outward comfort you desperately want: the very trouble in your spirit is the worm that eats out the blessing. Then perhaps God gives it to you — but He gives it with a curse mixed in, so that you would have been better off without it. If a person is discontented for lack of something and God gives it before they have been humbled for their discontent, they will find no comfort in it — it will be more of an evil than a good. If I had a dear friend or a brother whom I saw discontented for lack of some comfort, I would rather pray: "Lord, keep this thing from them until You have been pleased to humble their heart for their discontent. Do not let them have this mercy until they come humbly before You for their discontent over lacking it — for if they receive it before that, they will have it without any blessing." So when you find your heart discontented for want of something, be humbled for it, and think: "Lord, if I receive what I so immoderately desire before I am humbled for my discontent, I know I can have no comfort from it — it will come as an affliction rather than a blessing." Many things people desire as desperately as they desire life itself, convinced they would be happy if only they had them — yet when they arrive, they find no such happiness. Instead those things prove to be the greatest burdens and afflictions they have ever borne, precisely because their hearts were set on them so immoderately beforehand. Think of Rachel, who said she would die if she did not have children. God granted her request — and she died, just as she had said: "Give me children, or I will die." The same principle applies to other outward comforts: a person may receive the thing, and yet find that it becomes the heaviest cross they have ever carried. The

child you were so discontented to be without — it may be God restored its health but allowed it to become a source of grief for the rest of your life. Someone has observed about the manna: when the people were content with their allotted portion, it was wholesome and good. But when they refused to be content with God's allowance and gathered more than He permitted, worms appeared in it. So it is with us: when we are content with our condition and with what God has appointed for us, there is blessing in it and sweetness. But if we insist on more, or hold on to it longer than God would have us, the worms come — and the good is gone.

Fifth, there is great folly in discontent because it makes our afflictions far worse than they would otherwise be. Discontent does not remove affliction — it only makes it heavier while it remains. A discontented heart is a proud heart, and a proud heart will not lower its sails when a storm comes. If a sailor, when a storm arose, refused to take down his sails because he was angry at the weather — would his condition be better for it? Would his refusal help him? Not at all. So it is with a discontented heart. Out of pride, it refuses to bow before God in its present condition. It will not humble itself and submit to God's hand. Is its condition better for refusing to bow? No — certainly far worse. The odds are overwhelming that the storm will overwhelm such a soul. So you can see how much folly there is in the sin of discontent.

The ninth evil of murmuring and discontent is this: there is great danger in the sin of discontent, because it greatly provokes God's wrath. It is a sin that stirs up God's anger against the creature powerfully. Scripture records, in both words and examples, how God has been provoked against many for their discontent. Numbers 14 contains a striking passage — one that should be

enough to make you fear murmuring for the rest of your life. Verse 26 reads: "The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying..." And what did He say? "How long shall I bear with this evil congregation who are grumbling against Me?" "How long shall I bear with them" — God calls them an evil congregation, a congregation that murmurs against Him. Those who have murmuring spirits and murmuring dispositions will murmur again and again. "How long shall I bear with this evil congregation who murmur against Me?" How justly might God say this of many here before Him: "How long shall I bear with this man, this woman, who murmurs against Me — who has murmured throughout the course of their life whenever things have not gone their way?" And note what follows: "I have heard the grumbling of the sons of Israel." You murmur — perhaps others do not hear you. Perhaps you do not even speak it aloud, or only mutter half-words. But God hears the language of your murmuring heart — those mutterings and half-spoken words. Notice further how the Lord repeats this sin of murmuring in that verse: "How long shall I bear with this evil congregation who murmur against Me?" — then "I have heard their murmuring" — then "which they murmur against Me." Murmur, murmur, murmur — three times in one verse. This repetition expresses God's indignation. When someone is deeply indignant about something, they repeat it again and again. Because God would express His indignation against this sin, He repeats it. And what follows in verse 28 is sobering: "Say to them, 'As I live,' says the Lord, 'just as you have spoken in My hearing, so I will surely do to you.'" Notice — God swears against a murmurer. Sometimes in your discontent you may be ready to swear. But so does God swear against you for your discontent. And what did God swear He would do? Verses 29-30:

"Your carcasses will fall in this wilderness — every one of you who was numbered, all your generation. You shall by no means come into the land in which I swore to settle you." As if God said: if I have any life in Me, your lives shall be the price of your murmuring. A discontented, murmuring fit of yours may cost you your life. You can see how it provokes God. There is more evil in it than you realize. It may cost you your life. Guard yourself, and learn to be humbled at the very first stirrings of this disorder in your heart. Psalm 106:24-25 adds further: "Yes, they despised the pleasant land; they did not believe in His word, but grumbled in their tents; they did not listen to the voice of the Lord. Therefore He swore to them that He would cast them down in the wilderness." There are several things worth noting carefully in this passage.

First, as we showed before, a murmuring heart slights God's mercies — and so it is here: "They despised the pleasant land." And a murmuring heart is contrary to faith: "they did not believe His word, but grumbled in their tents and did not listen to the voice of the Lord." Many people listen to the voice of their own base murmuring hearts and will not listen to the voice of the Lord. If you would listen to the Lord, there would not be such murmuring. But notice what follows — you must not think you can indulge in murmuring and discontent and escape without consequence. "Therefore He raised His hand against them to strike them down." You who are discontented lift up your hearts against God — and you cause God to lift up His hand against you. Perhaps God is now touching you gently with a mild affliction, as tenderly as a nurse lays her hand on a child. You cannot even bear that tender touch. He would be entirely just in lifting His hand against you in a far heavier affliction. A murmuring spirit provokes God deeply.

Compare Numbers 16:41 with verse 46. Verse 41: "But on the next day all the congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron, saying, 'You are the ones who have caused the death of the Lord's people.'" Then verse 46: "Moses said to Aaron, 'Take your censer and put in it fire from the altar and lay incense on it; then bring it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them, for wrath has gone forth from the Lord, the plague has begun!'" See how quickly God's wrath was kindled. In verse 41 the congregation murmured — and they murmured merely against Moses and Aaron, not directly against God Himself. To murmur against God's servants is to murmur against God, but indirectly. But your murmuring may be more directly against God's dealings with you — and if you murmur against those God uses as instruments in public life, because things have not gone your way, that is murmuring against God. The Israelites murmured against Moses and Aaron and claimed they had killed the Lord's people — though it was God's hand upon them for their earlier wickedness in murmuring. This is the habitual pattern of wicked and proud hearts: when God's hand touches them even lightly, they murmur again and again, bringing upon themselves ever-increasing evils. God's anger came swiftly. Moses said: Go, take the censer quickly — for wrath has gone out from the Lord, the plague has begun. So it is today: while you are murmuring in your households, the wrath of God may go out swiftly — in the morning or evening when you are murmuring, the judgment of God may suddenly fall on your family or your own person. Those who stand by and see you in a murmuring, discontented fit have reason to say: "Let us take the censer — let us go to prayer — for we are afraid that wrath is going out against this household." It would be very good for a godly wife,

when she sees her husband come home and begin murmuring because things have not gone his way, to go to prayer and say: "Lord, pardon the sin of my husband." And the husband who sees his wife murmuring should fall down before God and beg that wrath would not go out against their family for her sin. In truth, England has seen as much murmuring as ever, and even now this very judgment — the plague — has come in part upon households that are always discontented, always grumbling at whatever goes wrong. The text in Numbers clearly teaches this: God brings the plague upon people for the sin of murmuring — on kingdoms, on families, and on individuals. Though we cannot always identify the specific sin behind a particular judgment, we should search our hearts for murmuring, because Scripture sets this out so plainly. When Moses heard that they had murmured, he said: "Go quickly, seek to pacify God's anger — for wrath has gone out and the plague has begun." And 1 Corinthians 10:10 provides another striking warning: "Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer." Do not murmur as some of those Israelites in the wilderness did — and what happened to them? They were destroyed by the destroyer. The destroyer is thought to be the fiery serpents sent among them: they murmured and God sent fiery serpents to strike them. You may think the trial that stings you right now is hard enough — and yet you murmur and complain? God has far heavier crosses He could bring upon you. Those people murmured for lack of water, for lack of bread — and God sent fiery serpents. I say to a murmuring heart: woe to you who strive with your Maker. What else does your murmuring, discontented heart do but quarrel and contend with God Himself? Woe to those who strive against their Maker. I would further say to you what God

said to Job when Job was impatient — speaking out of the whirlwind: "Who is this who darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" (Job 38:1-2). Do you speak against God's ways, against the providences He has brought into your life regarding your circumstances and outward comforts? Who is this? Who has such a bold and brazen heart as to dare speak against the administration of God's providence?

The tenth evil of murmuring and discontent is this: God's curse rests upon it. In the wicked, where it fully prevails, the curse of God is upon it. Psalm 59:15 shows what God's curse upon wicked and ungodly people looks like: "They wander about for food and growl if they are not satisfied." That is the curse threatened against the wicked — that if they are not satisfied, they shall growl and grumble. When you are not satisfied in your desires and find your heart grumbling against God, apply this Scripture to yourself and ask: is the curse of the wicked resting on me? This is the curse threatened against the ungodly — that they shall grumble when they are not satisfied. Deuteronomy 28:67 threatens this as a curse of God: that people cannot be content with their present condition — "In the morning you will say, 'If only it were evening!' And at evening you will say, 'If only it were morning!'" They toss back and forth and cannot be content in any condition because of the afflictions upon them. Further, verse 34 threatens this as a curse: "that you will be driven mad by the sight of what you see." This is the extreme of discontent — to be so discontented as to go mad. Many discontented people behave like mad people — and though you may take pleasure in such extreme behavior, know this: it is a curse of God when He gives a person over to a kind of madness over the evils they imagine are upon them. Deuteronomy 28:45-47

contains a powerful statement about God's curse on murmuring hearts. God threatens to bring His curse upon them so severely as to make them a sign and a wonder — and then gives the reason: "because you did not serve the Lord your God with joy and a glad heart, for the abundance of all things." God would bring such a curse upon them as to make them a spectacle to everyone around them — and the reason? They did not serve the Lord with joyfulness of heart. How far, then, are those with murmuring hearts from serving the Lord with joyfulness?

The eleventh evil of discontent and murmuring is this: there is much of the spirit of Satan in a murmuring spirit. The devil is the most discontented creature in existence — the proudest, the most discontented, and the most wretched. Therefore, whatever measure of discontent you carry, that same measure you carry of Satan's spirit. It was the unclean spirit that wandered up and down and found no rest. So when a person's spirit can find no rest, it is a sign that it is filled with much of the unclean spirit — the spirit of Satan. You ought to think: "Lord, do I have the spirit of Satan in me? Satan is the most discontented spirit there is — and how much of his spirit do I carry, that I can find no rest at all?"

Twelfth, murmuring and discontent carry this evil: you are condemning yourself to a life of restlessness. It is like a person in a large crowd complaining that others are bumping into him. God has so ordered things in this world that afflictions will come. If we complain and are discontented at every trial, we must complain and be discontented every day of our lives. Indeed, God in His just judgment will allow things to fall out in ways that will especially vex those who have vexing spirits and discontented hearts. And

others will not go out of their way to spare those who are always grumbling. A murmuring person will have no peace for the rest of their days.

Finally, here is a dreadful evil in discontent and murmuring: God may justly withdraw His care and protection from you, since He cannot please you with anything He does. We say this to discontented servants: "If you are not pleased, then find a better situation for yourself." If a servant is unhappy with his food, wages, and work, the master says: "Find somewhere else if you will." In the same way, God might justly say this to us. We who claim to be His servants, engaged in His work, and yet are discontented with this or that in God's household — God might justly say, "Then take care of yourselves." What if God were to say to you: "If My care over you does not please you, then care for yourselves. If My protection over you does not please you, then protect yourselves." Everything that happens to you comes through the providence of God. If you belong to God, you live under God's protection and care. But what if God were to say: "You will no longer benefit from My protection — I will take no further care of you"? Would that not be the most dreadful judgment God could send from heaven? Guard yourself, then, against discontent with God's will toward you — for this can happen because of discontent. This is why many people, after enjoying God's very gracious protection for a time and thriving greatly, later seem to live as though God had cast off all care for them — as though God no longer concerned Himself with what happened to them. Now, brothers and sisters, put all these things together — everything we covered previously and these additional points from this morning about the evil of a murmuring, discontented spirit. What an ugly face this sin has. What

cause there is to lay our hands upon our hearts and go away humbled before the Lord because of it. Where once your thoughts were focused on gaining more comforts for yourself, let the stream of your thoughts now turn to humbling yourself for your discontent. Oh, that your hearts would break before God — otherwise you will fall right back into it. Oh, the wretchedness of the human heart. In Scripture, you can see how remarkably the Israelites fell back into murmuring again and again. Consider three texts. At the beginning of Exodus 15, Moses and the congregation are singing and blessing God for His mercy: "Then Moses and the sons of Israel sang this song to the Lord... I will sing to the Lord, for He is highly exalted; the horse and his rider He has hurled into the sea. The Lord is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation. He is my God, and I will praise Him... Who is like You among the gods, O Lord? Who is like You, majestic in holiness, awesome in praises, working wonders?" Their hearts were triumphant in God. But before the chapter ends, in verse 23: "When they came to Marah, they could not drink the waters of Marah, for they were bitter... and the people grumbled against Moses." After such a great mercy — what unthankfulness. Then God gave them water. But in the very next chapter they fell to murmuring again — they had not been humbled for the former murmuring, and so they murmured again. Exodus 16:2: "The whole congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, and the sons of Israel said to them, 'Would that we had died by the Lord's hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat, when we ate bread to the full.'" Now they wanted meat — before it was water, now it was food. They fell to murmuring again. They were not humbled even when God gave them what they wanted. They sim-

ply murmured again over the next thing. And in the very next chapter — they did not go far — Exodus 17:2-3: "The people quarreled with Moses and said, 'Give us water that we may drink.' And Moses said to them, 'Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?' But the people thirsted there for water, and they grumbled against Moses and said, 'Why, now, have you brought us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?'" Again and again: they received a mercy, were quieted for a moment, but were not humbled. I bring these passages to show this: if we have not been humbled for our murmuring, the next trial we encounter will send us right back into murmuring again.

Now there are several factors that aggravate this sin of murmuring. I will mention just one now and make a beginning on it. The first aggravation is this.

To murmur when we are enjoying abundant mercy — the greater and more abundant the mercy, the greater and more vile the sin of murmuring. Here the Israelites had just been delivered from the house of bondage, and now they murmured because they lacked a few particular things they wanted. To sin against God in the wake of great mercy — that is a tremendous aggravation, an abominable thing. Brothers and sisters, the Lord has granted us very great mercies. What mercies God has heaped upon us recently — one after another. What a condition we were in at the beginning of this season, and how different our condition is now. What a mercy it is that the Lord has not taken advantage of our failures — that He has not applied against us those scriptures we mentioned, for all our murmuring. The Lord has continued to go on with mercy after mercy. We hear of mercy at Bristol, and mercy to our brothers in Scotland. But if after all this, some small trial falls

upon us and we immediately murmur again — oh, let us not repay God so ill for His mercies. Let us not give God such a wretched return for all He has done. Give God praise in proportion to His excellent greatness, His excellent goodness, and His grace.

And now that God has given contentment to you — take care that you do not become the cause of grief to your brothers. Do not think that because God has been gracious to you, He has therefore given you license to bring others into bondage. Do not let the ill fruit of God's mercy to you be that you use petitions or other means to exclude the very brothers the Lord has been pleased to use as instruments of your peace. Do not reach for things you yourself do not yet fully understand. God is very jealous of the honor of His mercy. If mercy is badly used after we have received it, it grieves the heart of God deeply. Nothing is more grievous to God than the abuse of mercy. If a hard and harsh course were taken toward our brothers — especially those God has made such special instruments of good to us, who willingly risked their lives for our sake — and then, once we have gotten what we wanted, we leave God's people and servants to fend for themselves: that would be a great aggravation of sin, to sin against God's mercies in that way. We will speak to this aggravation more fully, particularly on this point, God willing, at our next meeting.

SERMON 9



Philippians 4:11: "For I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content."

Because it is very difficult to deal with a murmuring spirit, there are several aggravating factors we must consider to show more fully how serious this sin is. I introduced only the first one last time — we will continue with it now.

The first aggravation of the sin of discontent and murmuring is this: to be discontented in the midst of God's mercies, while enjoying an abundance of them. To be discontented in an afflicted condition is sinful and wrong. But to be discontented while surrounded by God's mercies — unable even to count them all — and yet to be unhappy because you do not have everything you want: that is a far greater evil. I mentioned this briefly last time to show what a great sin it is in such a season as ours. The Lord this summer has multiplied mercies one upon another — He has made this summer a continuing miracle of mercy. No kingdom in such a short span of time has seen such mercies stacked upon one another. Now, the public mercies of God should quiet our hearts and keep us from discontent. The sin of discontent over private troubles is made far worse by the public mercies God has shown to the

land. When the Lord has been so merciful to the nation, will you fret and murmur because your household lacks some comfort you desire? Just as it is a great aggravation of sin for a person to indulge himself excessively in private comfort when the church is suffering and the public cause is in great trouble, so on the other side — it is a great aggravation of sin for someone to be immoderately troubled over some private affliction when things are going well publicly and for the church. When the church of God was at its lowest and things were worst elsewhere, some of you did not reduce your personal comforts at all — you gave yourself full liberty to indulge as before. Know that this was your great sin. Conversely, when we have received such great public mercies, our private afflictions should be swallowed up in them. We should think: "Though I am personally afflicted, blessed be God — it is going well with the church and with the public cause." That consideration should powerfully quiet our hearts in all our private discontent. If it does not, our sin is greatly increased by the very mercies God has scattered abroad. Shall God's mercies make our sins worse? That is a sad state — to turn the mercies of God into our misery. Did you not pray for those mercies God has recently sent — those great victories He has given? Now that you have them, is there not enough in them to quiet your heart about some private trouble at home? Is there not enough goodness there to cure your discontent? Surely those mercies were worthy of prayer only if they have enough excellence in them to outweigh some private affliction. Public mercies are an aggravation of private discontent — and of public discontent as well. If we receive so many public mercies, and yet are still discontented whenever the public situation is not exactly as we wish, that greatly aggravates our sin. God might say: shall I pour

such mercies on a people, and yet if they do not have everything they want, they will be discontented? That is exceedingly evil. And in the particular sphere of your own life and family: if you would reflect carefully, you will find that you have far more mercies than afflictions. I boldly assert this for every person in this congregation — whatever your afflictions may be — there is not one of you who does not have more mercies than afflictions.

Objection: You will say, "But you do not know what our afflictions are. Our afflictions are so heavy that you cannot imagine them because you do not feel them yourself."

Answer: Though I cannot know the full weight of your afflictions, I know what your mercies are — and I know they are so great that no affliction in this world can outweigh them. Consider just this one mercy: that you have this present day of grace and salvation. That alone is a greater mercy than any affliction. Set any affliction beside this mercy and weigh them — this mercy is certainly heavier. That you have the day of grace and salvation, that you are not already in hell — that is a greater mercy. That the gospel still sounds in your ears, that you have the use of your reason — that is a greater mercy than your afflictions. That you have the use of your limbs, your senses, your health — bodily health is a greater mercy than poverty is an affliction. There is no wealthy but sick person who, if he is wise, would not trade all his riches for his health. Therefore your mercies exceed your afflictions. Scripture shows how the Holy Spirit uses the consideration of mercies to make murmuring even more inexcusable. A striking example is in Numbers 16:8-10, where Moses speaks to Korah and his company when they murmured. Moses said to Korah: "Hear now, you sons of Levi. Is it too small a thing for you that the God of Israel has

separated you from the rest of the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to Himself, to do the service of the tabernacle of the Lord, and to stand before the congregation to minister to them?" Korah and his company were murmuring — but notice how Moses aggravates their sin. "Does it seem a small thing to you that God has separated you from the congregation to bring you near to Himself, to serve in the tabernacle, to minister in holy things?" This is a great honor — a great mercy — when God sets a person apart from others for His own service, to draw near to Him. One would think that no one on whom God bestows such a mercy could have a murmuring heart over any affliction. It is true that ministers meet with hard things that could discourage and grieve them. But the consideration that God has been pleased to employ them in service so near to Himself — that though they cannot always benefit themselves, they may bring benefit to others — should quiet them. Yet in verse 10: "He has brought you near, and all your brothers the sons of Levi with you — and now you seek the priesthood also?" Have you not enough already? Still discontented with what you have — and wanting more? "You seek the priesthood also — for this reason you and all your company have gathered together against the Lord. What is Aaron that you grumble against him?" God has given you such things, and you still murmur because you cannot have more? This passage should keep ministers from murmuring even when they face the harshest afflictions, unkind treatment, and crosses — they should press on with hearts quieted and comforted by the work God has set them to do, and meet their afflictions by being all the more fruitful in the Lord's work. That is the first passage of Scripture showing how the mercies we enjoy make murmuring all the more inexcusable.

A second scripture is Job 2:10. When Job's wife urged him to curse God and die, Job answered her: "You speak as one of the foolish women speaks. Shall we accept good from God and not accept adversity?" Job used this consideration — that he had received so much good from God — to arm himself against every murmuring thought about God's ways. We receive evil, yes — but do we not also receive good? Set one against the other. That is the way to go. Ecclesiastes 7:14 also speaks to this: "In the day of prosperity be happy, but in the day of adversity, consider." Consider what? What follows: "God has made the one as well as the other so that man will not discover anything that will be after him." God has set the one over against the other. In prosperity, every man can be glad — but what when affliction comes? Then consider: God has set one over against the other. You have a great deal of affliction, and you have had a great deal of prosperity. You have many troubles, and you have had many mercies. Make one column of mercies and one column of afflictions, and write them against each other. See whether God has not filled one column as full as the other. You look only at your afflictions — but look also at your mercies. For instance: perhaps God has afflicted you in one child, but He has been merciful to you in another. Set one against the other. God afflicted David in Absalom, but He was merciful to David in Solomon. If, when David cried out "O Absalom, my son, my son!", he had turned his thoughts to Solomon and cried, "O Solomon, my son!" — that would have quieted him. Perhaps God has been merciful to you in your husband or wife — set that against your affliction. Perhaps God crosses you in your estate, but employs you in His service. Perhaps you are afflicted in some friends, but have other friends who are great mercies to you. Set

one against the other. And it matters greatly that you do so — for those mercies will either aggravate your sins or help to lessen them. You are better off letting God's mercies reduce your sins than letting them increase them. If you do not use God's mercies to work against your murmuring, they will become the very thing that makes your murmuring worse. Let me press one more consideration here, and if you will work it on your heart I believe you will find great power in it. You feel afflictions, and your heart is troubled and murmurs. Consider how God's mercies make this sin worse. Think of it this way: in the midst of all our sins, we still expect God to accept our worship and service. If, in the midst of our many sins, we hope that God will accept our poor services, why should we not — in the midst of our afflictions — bless God for His many mercies? Shall God be so gracious toward us that despite our many sins He will not cast off our poor worship and service? Then why should we not, in the midst of our sufferings, accept the mercies we have and not slight them? If you in the midst of God's mercies refuse to bear the afflictions God has laid on you, then God would be entirely just in refusing to regard your worship in the midst of your many sins. Is there not as much power in your many sins to cause God to reject your worship, as there is power in afflictions — in the midst of many mercies — to turn your heart away from being moved by God's mercy? That is the first aggravation of the sin of murmuring: to murmur in the midst of mercies.

The second aggravation of the sin of murmuring is when we murmur over small things. Naaman's servant said to him: "My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more then, when he tells you, 'Wash, and be clean?'" In the same way I say: if the Lord had required you

to suffer some great thing, would you not have been willing? How much more, then, when it is so small a thing. Seneca, a pagan writer, uses a fitting illustration to show the great evil of murmuring over minor afflictions. Suppose a man has a beautiful house with fine orchards and gardens, surrounded by tall, ornamental trees, and he has an abundance of every kind of fruit. If this man were to weep and wring his hands because the wind has blown a few leaves off his trees, how utterly unreasonable that would be. So it is with many people — though surrounded by many comforts, the loss of a few leaves is enough to throw them into misery. It was a great evil when Ahab, who had a whole kingdom, was so undone by the fact that his neighbor would not sell him his vineyard. So for us to murmur — not because we lack something we truly need, but simply because we do not have everything we could possibly want — is a very great sin. Suppose God gives a woman a child with all its limbs and features complete, a beautiful and bright child — but there is a small wart on one of the child's fingers. She murmurs over it, crying out what an affliction this is, so consumed by it that she forgets to thank God for the child and for all God's goodness in giving her that child. Would you not say that is folly and a very great evil? In truth, if we weighed our afflictions rightly against our mercies, they are just like that. Rebekah desperately wanted children — but when she felt some discomfort while pregnant, she said, "Why is this happening to me?" As if she meant: "I would almost rather not have children at all" — simply because of a little pain. To be discontented when the affliction is small and light greatly increases the sin of murmuring. It is already too much to murmur under the heaviest cross that can come in this world — but to murmur and be discontented over small things is even

worse. I have read of someone who, while lying on a bed of damask roses, complained that one rose petal was folded under him. We are just like that — ready to complain and be discontented over the most trivial inconveniences. That is the second aggravation.

The third aggravation is this: when people of ability and understanding — those to whom God has given wisdom — are discontented and murmur, that is a greater sin than when others do it. Murmuring is too much even in the weakest, yet we can make some allowance for it in children or those who are genuinely weak. But for mature men, men of understanding, men with wisdom, men whom God employs in public service — for them to be discontented at every turn is an exceedingly great evil. For men in their families, to whom God has given ability and wisdom, to be always murmuring and complaining when things go wrong — their sin is greater than if women or children did the same.

The fourth aggravation is the freeness of all God's mercies to us. Everything we have is given to us without cost. What if we do not have everything we want — seeing that what we have is freely given? If we had earned what we have, there would be some grounds for complaint. But knowing that everything is freely given by God, to murmur at His provision is very evil. Suppose a man is staying in a friend's household as a guest, not paying anything for his room and board. Such a person should not be quick to find fault with everything in the house — the servants, the food on the table, and so on. If someone receiving abundant provision entirely free of charge is discontented because his cup is not filled exactly as he likes, or because he has to wait a minute longer than he expected — we would count that a great wrong. So it is with us: we sit at God's table every day, and everything we have is free. It is con-

sidered very poor manners to find fault with things at a friend's table, even when you might speak more freely at home. We are at God's table — all His dealings with us are, so to speak, His table — and we are guests at no cost. For us to be finding fault and being discontented is a great aggravation of our sin.

The fifth aggravation of the sin of murmuring is this: when people murmur and are discontented and impatient even after God has given them the very things they were previously unhappy about lacking. This is sometimes how children behave — they cry for something, you give it to them, and then they throw it away and are just as unhappy as before. So it was with the people of Israel: nothing would satisfy them but having a king. Samuel tried to dissuade them and warned them what kind of king they would get. When they finally had a king, Hosea 10:3 records them saying: "What will a king do for us?" — still not content, even after having what they demanded. Rachel said she would die without children, and yet when she had some difficulty she was discontented even then. We are, as the saying goes, neither satisfied full nor at rest when hungry.

The sixth aggravation of the sin of murmuring is this: when those whom God has raised from low and humble circumstances are still discontented. This is a very great aggravation. There was a time when you were in a low enough condition, and perhaps you said then: "Oh, if God would only deliver me from this affliction, or give me just a little more in my estate, I would count myself well off." But now that God in His providence has raised you, you are just as greedy for more and just as discontented as before. It is a poor thing for those who had humble beginnings and were brought up in modest circumstances to be so picky and demanding that

nothing satisfies them. Yet it is very common for those raised from a low and mean condition to become the most demanding and proud of all when they are elevated. It is already too much for a child to be discontented in his own father's house. But suppose you took in a poor beggar boy off the street and seated him at your own table. Could you bear it if he complained that something was not properly cooked, or that some detail was not to his taste? You could not bear even your own children behaving that way — but you would find it far more offensive from someone you had taken in from begging at your door. You are a beggar whom God has, as it were, brought into His great household. If the Lord has been pleased to raise you higher — giving you a sufficiency so that you can live honestly and be of use in the place He has set you — will you now be discontented because you do not have everything you desire? Think of the prodigal son: when he came to himself, he said, "In my father's house there is bread enough." He did not say there were fine delicacies and great feasts. He thought of nothing but bread — "there is bread enough." It is ordinary for people in a low condition to say: "If I only had bread, any sufficiency at all, I would be content and bless God." But once they have their bread and the basic things they need, they must have more — or they are not content. Know that this is an exceedingly great aggravation of your discontent: when God has raised you from a very low condition, and yet you cannot be content with what you have.

The seventh aggravation of this sin is this: when those who have been very great sinners and ungodly in their earlier lives are now discontented and murmuring. When people carry the guilt of very many sins — people who have provoked God greatly against them and brought themselves under the sentence of God's justice

in a dreadful way — and yet God has been pleased to spare them: for such people to murmur and be discontented with God's dealings toward them is exceedingly evil. Oh, this thought alone ought to quiet all murmuring in our hearts: we are sinners — why should we not be sufferers? But then consider further: we who are such great sinners, guilty of such notorious sins, for whom it is a wonder that we are not already in hell — for us to be discontented and murmuring is to increase our sin enormously. Consider how we have defied God through our sins. If then God crosses us through our sufferings, should we not sit down quietly without murmuring? You have never truly known what it means to be humbled for your many sins, if you are discontented at any of God's dealings with you.

The eighth aggravation of the sin of murmuring is this: when people of little usefulness in the world are discontented. If you have an animal you make heavy use of, you feed it well. But if you have little use for it, you put it out to graze on the commons — very little provision serves, because you are not getting much from it. If we lived in a way that made us exceedingly useful to God and His church, we might expect God to encourage us in some special way. But when our conscience tells us we are doing very little service for God — what if God were to put us out on the commons? We would be fed according to our work, according to our usefulness. Why should any creature serve you, when you are so little in service to God? This one reflection would help greatly: "I am discontented because things are not serving me as I wish — but why should I expect them to serve me when I am not serving God?" That is the eighth aggravation.

The ninth aggravation of the sin of murmuring is this: when we are discontented at the very time God is working to humble us. It should be the care of a Christian to observe what God is doing in his life at any given moment. What is God about to do with me right now? Is God about to lift me up and comfort me? Then let me align with His goodness, bless His name, and receive the mercy He is offering. But again — is God about to humble me? Is He about to break my heart and bring it down to Him? Then let me join with God in that work. This is what it means to walk with God. It is said that Enoch and Noah walked with God. What does that mean? It means observing what God is doing and joining with Him in it — so that as God moves in one direction, the heart moves with Him, its inner workings matching God's workings toward it. Now consider: you are discontented and murmuring because you are afflicted. You are afflicted because God is seeking to humble you. God's great purpose in afflicting you is to break and humble your heart. And will you now maintain a spirit that is directly opposed to what God is doing? To murmur and be discontented is to resist the work of God. God is doing you good — if only you could see it. If He is pleased to use your affliction to break your hard heart and humble your proud spirit, it would be the greatest mercy you have ever received. And yet you stand against Him? It is as if you are saying: "God is trying to break me and humble me — but He will not succeed." That is the language of your murmuring and discontent, even if you would never say it in so many words. You may not say it with your mouth, but it is certainly the language your spirit is speaking. Consider what an aggravation this is: I am discontented

at the very moment God is working something in me that is exceedingly for my good — and yet I am standing against Him and resisting Him. That is another aggravation.

The tenth aggravation of the sin of murmuring and discontent is this: the more clearly and remarkably the hand of God appears in bringing an affliction, the greater the sin of murmuring under it. It is always an evil to murmur and be discontented. But not submitting to an ordinary providence is one level of sin — not submitting when God is clearly and remarkably at work is a greater one. When I see the Lord working in some extraordinary way in bringing about an affliction, beyond anything anyone could have foreseen — shall I resist such a plain and remarkable hand of God? Shall I stand against Him when He has made His will so unmistakably clear? Before God's will is evident, we may naturally seek to avoid an affliction and use whatever means are available. But when we see God expressing His will from heaven in an extraordinary and remarkable way, it is right for us to fall down and submit — not to push back when God comes against us with a mighty current. Our wisest course is to bow before Him, not resist. Just as disobedience is compounded when God commands not merely once but through a solemn and unmistakable declaration — the more solemn the command, the greater the sin in breaking it — so the more clearly God's hand appears in bringing an affliction, the greater the sin in murmuring against it. When God, as it were, speaks to you directly from heaven — saying, "I will have that proud spirit of yours brought low. Do you not see that My hand is stretched out, that My eyes and My thoughts are upon you? I will bring that pride of yours down" — then it is right for the creature to yield and submit. When you speak to your servants or children

in an ordinary way, you expect them to take notice. But when you call them to stand before you and speak to them in a more solemn and direct way, if they disregard you, your impatience is understandable. Certainly God cannot accept it when He appears from heaven in such a remarkable way to bring an affliction — and we still refuse to submit.

The eleventh aggravation of the sin of murmuring is this: to remain discontented even after God has been exercising you under affliction for a long time. When an affliction first falls upon a person and they have a murmuring heart, that is evil. But to have a murmuring heart after God has been exercising you with affliction for a long time is even more evil. A young heifer, when the yoke is first put on, pulls and wriggles and will not be still. But if after many months or years it still does not pull quietly, the farmer would rather fatten it for slaughter than be troubled with it any longer. In the same way, though the Lord may have overlooked your discontented spirit at first, God has now kept the yoke on you for a long time. You have been under His afflicting hand, perhaps for several years, and still you remain discontented. It would be entirely just for God to bear your murmuring no longer, and for your discontent under affliction to become the preparation for your destruction. So you see: when someone has been long under affliction and remains discontented, that is a great aggravation of the sin. Notice Hebrews 12:11: "For the moment, all discipline seems not to be pleasant, but painful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness." It is true — our afflictions are not pleasant but painful. But afterward, the text says, they yield the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by them. If you have been

long in the school of affliction and have not yet learned contentment, you are a very slow learner in Christ's school. Paul said, "I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content" — and Paul learned this lesson quickly. You have been learning for many years. Perhaps like Heman you can say you have been afflicted from your youth (Psalm 88). Then it is a very evil thing that after so long a time you are still not content. The eye is the most tender part of the body, and yet it can bear exposure to cold because it is accustomed to it. In the same way, those who have been long under affliction — even if their spirits are otherwise tender — ought by now to have learned contentedness. A new cart creaks and makes noise, but after some use it quiets down. When you were first a Christian, newly coming into the work of Christ, perhaps you made some noise and could not bear affliction easily. But are you an old Christian — and still a murmuring Christian? It is a shame for any who have been long-standing professors of faith, who have spent many years in the school of Jesus Christ, to have a murmuring, discontented spirit. And so you have heard eleven aggravations of this sin of murmuring and discontent.

But because this discontented tendency is a very stubborn one and very hard to deal with — and because no discontented person lacks some excuse for their discontent — I will now address and remove every defense that a discontented heart offers for itself.

THE PLEAS OF A DISCONTENTED HEART



First, a discontented person says: "It is not discontent — I am simply feeling the weight of my condition. Surely you want me to be aware of my affliction?" Perhaps when God takes away a friend or some other comfort, such people are overwhelmed with grief, wringing their hands as if they are ruined. If anyone speaks to them, they say: "Would you have me be unaware of my affliction?" Many people hide their sinful murmuring under this pretense — claiming it is merely sensitivity to their situation.

To that I answer: first, no genuine sense of affliction will block out the sense of God's mercies. In fact, the more truly and graciously we feel our afflictions, the more we will also feel God's mercies. But your sensitivity to affliction has swallowed up all awareness of your mercies. That is sinful discontent — not the godly awareness God intends, but something that has gone beyond its proper limits. Here is how you can know when your sorrow over affliction has exceeded its proper bounds: does the weight of your affliction take away your sense of God's mercies? If it does, you have gone too far.

Second, if it were merely a genuine sense of affliction, it would not prevent you from carrying out the duties of your calling. A true awareness of affliction never hinders us from doing what God has placed us here to do. But your sense of affliction has made you unfit for the duties of your calling. That is more than simple sensitivity to your situation.

Third, if it were only a genuine sense of affliction, you would still be able to bless God for the mercies others enjoy. But discontent usually breeds envy toward those who do not share your afflictions. When you are so overwhelmed by your own afflictions and so blind to your mercies that you are unfit for duty and envious of those not afflicted as you are — that is something sour and sinful, not merely sensitivity.

THE SECOND PLEA



A discontented heart may say: "I am not so much troubled by my afflictions as by my own sin. Surely you will allow that we should be troubled and distressed by our sin. If it were not for the sin I see in myself, I would not be as discontented as I am. Oh, it is sin that lies heavy on me — that troubles me more than my afflictions."

Do not deceive your own heart. There is a very great deception here. Many people, when God's hand is against them, say they are troubled for their sin — but the truth is, it is the affliction itself that troubles them. Their heart is greatly deceiving them in this, for several reasons.

First, they were never troubled for their sin before this affliction came. You may say: "That is true — but my prosperity blinded me, and now God has opened my eyes through affliction." Has He?

Second, if your sin were truly your concern, your great desire would be for the removal of your sin, not the removal of your affliction. Are you more concerned with having your sin taken away than your affliction taken away?

Third, if sin is what truly troubles you, then even if God removed the affliction, you would not be satisfied until your sin was also removed and your heart made better. But what we ordinarily see is this: if God removes the affliction, the distress over sin disappears with it. Many people deceive themselves in claiming to be troubled for their sin — especially those who are in such distress that they are in danger of harming themselves. In virtually every such case, it is the affliction and not the sin that has driven them to that edge. They may attribute everything to conviction of sin, as if it were the work of the Word or the Spirit of bondage — but it is not. I recall hearing recently of a wise minister who had experience with such situations. A man came to him in great distress over his sin, nearly in despair. The minister looked at him and asked: "Are you in debt?" The man confessed that he was. The minister gradually uncovered that it was his debt, not his sin, that was the true source of his trouble — and he helped arrange things so his creditors would not press him. At that point the man became much calmer and was no longer in danger of harming himself. This is common: when something crosses a person, they declare it is their sin that troubles them. Sometimes servants, when their employers deal harshly with them, become vexed and sullen — and when someone speaks with them, they claim it is sorrow for sin. We must be careful not to trifle with God, who sees and searches the secrets of every heart. Many of you go about your households gloomy and withdrawn, and then say it is the burden of sin — when God knows it is because you cannot have your own way.

Fourth, if you are truly troubled by your sin, your great concern will be not to sin in your trouble — not to add more sin through the way you handle affliction. But the truth is, you are

troubled in such a way that you have actually increased your sin through your trouble. Since you say you were troubled for sin, you have committed more sin than before.

Finally, if it truly is your sin that troubles you, then you have all the more reason to submit to God's hand and "accept the punishment of your iniquity," as Leviticus 26:41 puts it. There is no better remedy for murmuring than to look upon your sin as the cause of your affliction.

THE THIRD PLEA



Another discontented person says: "My affliction is such that God seems to have withdrawn Himself from me in it — and that is what troubles me. Can anyone be at peace when God has withdrawn Himself? However great my affliction, if I could sense God's presence with me in it, I believe I could be content. But I cannot find God's presence with me in this affliction as I have at other times. That is what troubles me and puts me in the state I am in."

To that I answer: first, it is a very evil thing for people to conclude, every time they suffer an affliction, that God has departed from them. When it is examined closely, often there is no reason for thinking God has withdrawn except the fact of the affliction itself. To draw that conclusion — that every time God lays an affliction on you He has abandoned you — is a sinful disorder of heart, very dishonorable to God, and grievous to His Spirit. Exodus 17:7 shows how displeased God was with exactly this kind of response: "He named the place Massah and Meribah because of the quarrel of the sons of Israel, and because they tested the Lord, saying, 'Is the Lord among us, or not?'" Notice: they were murmuring because they were brought into affliction, and the text calls it a testing of God. They asked, "Is the Lord among us or not?" — simply

because they were afflicted. God calls it a tempting of Him when those He afflicts conclude that He has departed from them. If a child were to cry out that his father had become his enemy simply because his father corrected him, the father would rightly take that badly. Consider this passage carefully — it may be of great use to you, so that you do not quickly conclude that God has left you simply because you are afflicted.

Second, if God has indeed departed, the greatest sign of His departure is your own restlessness. You claim your restlessness is the result of God's departure. But if it were examined, you would find it is actually the cause of it. If you could only cure your restlessness — if you could quiet your heart and bring it to a more contented frame under God's afflicting hand — you would find God's presence with you again. Will you remain restless until God comes back? Your restlessness is driving Him away. You can never expect God to manifest Himself comfortably to your soul until your heart is quiet under your afflictions. So you see how backward your reasoning is. You say: "I am restless because God has gone." The truth is: God has gone because you are restless. Reason the other way: "My restlessness has driven God from me — and if I ever want His presence back, I must quiet my heart under His hand."

Third, do you feel God departing from you in your affliction? Will you therefore depart from God as well? Is that how you help yourself? Because God has gone, will you go even further away? If I truly feel God withdrawing from me, what an unwise course I take — committing further sin, going further away from God. What a situation. God moves away from me, and I move away from God. If a child sees his mother walking away, the right response is not to walk in the opposite direction. The child runs crying after the

mother. So the soul ought to say: "I can see the Lord withdrawing His presence from me — now the best thing I can do is pursue Him with all my strength. I know for certain that this murmuring attitude is not a pursuing of God. By it I go further and further from Him — and how great a distance may open up between God and me before long?" These are some of the reasonings and pleas of a murmuring and discontented heart. There are many others that we will address, laboring to speak to your heart, so that this stubborn disorder of discontent may be pierced and softened by the Word, and driven out. Physicians, when they encounter a stubborn condition in the body, prescribe something with a penetrating quality. When a thick obstruction blocks the flow, they give something that can cut through and open a passage. In the same way, you need something piercing to break through the stubborn disposition in your spirit — the spirit that makes you live miserably, that makes life miserable for those around you, and that dishonors God greatly.

SERMON 10



Philippians 4:11: "For I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content."

There are many more pleas and reasonings that remain to be addressed, for a discontented, murmuring heart requires a great deal of work. I recall noting that the same Hebrew word that means "to lodge" or "to remain" also means "to murmur." The two meanings share one word — and fittingly so, for murmuring is a condition that lodges in a person. Once it gets in, it stays, settles in, and persists. And so, to dislodge it and drive it out, we will continue to address the further reasonings of a discontented heart.

THE FOURTH PLEA



Someone says: "I think I could be content with God's hand — as far as I can see God's hand in something, I can accept it. But when people deal with me so unreasonably and unjustly, I do not know how to bear it. I can accept being in God's hands, but not in the hands of men. When my friends or acquaintances treat me with such injustice — that is what is so hard to bear."

To remove this reasoning: first, though it is people who have brought this cross upon you, they are God's instruments. God has a hand in it, and they can go no further than God permits. This is what quieted David when Shimei cursed him. David said, in effect: God has a hand in this — though Shimei is a wicked man, I look beyond him to God. So, if anyone is dealing with you in a hurtful or difficult way, look past them to God and see that person as an instrument in God's hand.

Second, if your trouble is that people are wronging you, the right response is to pity them rather than to murmur or be discontented. The truth is: if you are wronged by others, you have the better of it — for it is far better to suffer wrong than to do wrong. If they wrong you and you cannot bring yourself to submit, you are still in a better condition than they are, because it is better to bear

wrong than to inflict it. Socrates was known for his patience when wronged. When asked how he managed it, he said: "If I meet someone in the street who is sick, would I be vexed and irritated with him for being sick? Those who wrong me I look upon as sick people — and so I pity them."

Third, though you encounter harsh dealings from men, you meet nothing but kind, good, and righteous dealings from God. When you experience unjust treatment from others, set one against the other. That is the answer to the fourth plea.

A FIFTH PLEA



"But the affliction that has come upon me is one I never expected. I never thought I would face anything like this — and that is why I cannot bear it. My heart is so unsettled because it was completely unexpected."

In answer to this: first, it reveals weakness and folly that you did not expect it. In Acts 20:22-23, see what Paul says about himself: "And now, behold, bound by the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that chains and afflictions await me." I do not know the particular form my affliction will take, he says, but this I know: the Spirit of God witnesses that chains and afflictions await me everywhere. He expected nothing else wherever he went. A Christian should be the same — expecting afflictions in every condition and every place. When any affliction comes, even if the specific form was not foreseen, the Christian should think: "This is no more than I expected in general." No affliction should come to a Christian as a complete surprise.

A second answer: if this affliction is unexpected, then the less preparation you made for it before it arrived, the more careful you should now be to honor God's name in it. It is the same with afflictions as with mercies. Many times mercies come unexpectedly — and that could be a third answer in itself. Set one against the other: I have received many mercies I never expected, just as I have received afflictions I never expected. Why should the one not rejoice me as much as the other disturbs me? With unexpected mercies, the less I prepared to receive them, the more careful I should be to give God the glory and to honor His name in the enjoyment of them. So it should be with us: we have received mercies this summer we never expected, and therefore we were not prepared for them — so we should be all the more diligent to give God the glory. When afflictions come that we did not expect, it shows we did not prepare for them beforehand. We should therefore be all the more careful to honor God's name in them now. We should have spent some effort preparing for afflictions and did not — then make up for it now by honoring God through this one. That is an answer to the fifth plea.

THE SIXTH PLEA



"**B**ut my affliction is very great — exceedingly great. You say we must be content, and that may be easy to say when you do not feel what I feel. If you suffered what I am suffering, you would find it hard to bear and hard to accept."

To that I answer: let the affliction be as great as it may — it is still not as great as your sin. "He has not punished you as much as your sins deserve" (Ezra 9:13).

Second, it could have been far worse — you might have been in hell. Bernard expressed it well: "It is easier to be pressed down than to perish." You might have been in hell, and therefore the greatness of your affliction is no reason to murmur — even granting that it is great.

Third, the affliction may feel greater because your heart is murmuring. Chains on a person's legs will hurt all the more if the legs are already sore. A burden on a bruised shoulder is heavier. It is because your heart is in such an unsound condition that your affliction feels so great to you. That is the answer to the sixth plea.

A SEVENTH PLEA



"However you may minimize my affliction, I am sure it is far greater than the afflictions of others."

First, it may be your discontent that makes it feel greater, when it is not actually so.

Second, even if your affliction is greater than others' — why should you be resentful because God is gracious to others? Why does His kindness to them make you discontented?

Third, if your affliction is greater than others', then you have a greater opportunity to honor God than others do. Think of it this way: God is afflicting me more than other people. He is giving me an opportunity to honor Him in affliction more than others can. He is giving me a chance to exercise more grace than others. Let me make the most of that.

Fourth, consider what the wise pagan Solon once observed. He said: suppose all the afflictions in the world were heaped together, and every person came to take an equal share. There is scarcely anyone, he said, who would not prefer to take back the afflictions they already had. An equal share of the world's total suffering would likely be more, not less, than what most people currently bear. Consider this for those of you who are poor but not in ex-

treme poverty: if all the wealth in the world were pooled and divided equally, you would actually be poorer than you are now. But if all the sorrows and afflictions in the world were pooled and divided equally, your share would likely be greater than your current portion. So do not complain that your afflictions are greater than others' — at least not to the point of murmuring.

AN EIGHTH PLEA



Another reasoning of murmuring hearts is this: they think that if the affliction were any other kind than it is, they could be more content.

First, you must understand that we are not the ones who choose the rod God uses to discipline us.

Second, if the affliction were any other, it might not be as suited to you as this one is. God may have chosen this particular affliction because it is the most contrary to your nature — and therefore the most fitted to purge out the disordered tendency in you. If a patient takes medicine and becomes sick from it, shall he say, "Oh, if it were any other medicine I could bear it"? Perhaps any other medicine would not treat his illness. Perhaps if it did not affect him this way, it would not address his condition at all. So when you say of an affliction, "If it were anything other than this I could bear it" — answer yourself with this: it may be that any other affliction would not suit me. It would not strike at the particular disordered tendency in my soul. God sees this one as the most fitting and the most suited to me.

Third, the excellence of grace in a Christian is to be fitted for any condition — not to say, "I could manage if it were this or that," but to be able to manage whatever it is. A skilled sailor would not say: "If the wind were blowing in any other direction, I could manage my ship — I can handle any wind but this." Other sailors would laugh at him. It would be a disgrace to claim skill in every situation except this one. In the same way, it should be a shame for a Christian to say he can manage any affliction but this one. A Christian should be able to steer his ship whichever way the wind blows — to guide his soul through any condition.

The fourth and final answer is this: the Lord has rewards and crowns for every kind of grace and for honoring Him in every kind of condition. Perhaps in the particular way you think you could honor God, God has a crown for that. But God also has a different crown to place on the heads of those who honor Him in exactly the kind of condition you are in now. He has, so to speak, different kinds of crowns in heaven — and those crowns must go on somebody's head. Therefore He places His people in a variety of conditions, so that they may receive the various rewards He has prepared for those who are faithful in each one.

A NINTH PLEA



"**B**ut the condition God has put me in makes me useless — and that is what troubles me. If the affliction only hurt me personally, it would not be so hard to bear. But this affliction has left me in a condition where I can do no service, and I am likely to contribute nothing further to God's work. God has placed me in a humble station — what good can I do? And how heavy my life feels when I can render no service to God. That is what grieves me."

If this truly is your great grief, it is actually a good sign. If you can honestly say before God that above all afflictions in this world, being set aside from usefulness in God's service is the greatest — that you would rather bear any trouble as long as you can serve, than be free of trouble and laid aside from service — that is a good sign of grace. Few people count the inability to serve God as an affliction at all.

Yet there may be a temptation lurking in this as well. To murmur at God's will because your calling is humble and your ability to serve seems small — this is a temptation that especially comes upon the poor, upon servants, and upon those of limited gifts who must work hard every day simply to provide bread for their fami-

lies. It is often a heavy burden to them to think: these other men are employed by God in public service, while I live in obscurity. What is the point of my life?

First, to help against this temptation and guard against murmuring in your condition: though your station is low and humble, you are in the body. You are a member of the body of Christ, even if a small one. The toe and the finger have their use in the body, even though they are not the eye, the head, or the heart. Augustine makes a wonderful observation about this: "It is better to be the least member joined to the body, than to be the greatest and most excellent member cut off from the body. It is better to be a small twig attached to the tree and joined to the root, than to be a large branch cut off from it." Other people who have merely common gifts in the world, who are not members of Christ — they may appear to have more outward excellence than a godly person of humble circumstances and modest gifts. But they are not in the body. They are not joined to the root. And therefore their condition is actually worse. A large branch cut from a tree may still have many leaves on it and look impressive — far more impressive than the small twig still on the tree. But the small twig is in a better condition, because it is connected to the tree, drawing sap from the root, and will continue to grow. The severed branch will wither and die. So it is with people of the world: they are like great branches cut from the tree. They may have outstanding gifts, large estates, and great pomp and glory. But they have no union with Jesus Christ, the root. The poor tradesman, the poor servant, the laboring man who works every day to feed his family — if he is godly, he can say: "Though I have little for now — little fame, little credit, little comfort — I am joined to the body. I am connected to the source of all

comfort, blessing, and mercy that will sustain me to all eternity." When thousands upon thousands of glorious, prosperous people of the world wither and perish forever, he who is joined to the body will live. So if you are in a humble condition in this world, but you are godly — remember: though you are small, you are in the body, joined to the root, connected to the very source of all comfort, goodness, blessing, and mercy that will last forever. Do not be troubled about your humble condition.

Second, though you may have a humble calling in this world and may not be seen as a person of much importance, if you are a Christian, God has called you to a higher calling. Your general calling as a Christian is a high calling, even if your particular occupation is low and humble. The apostle says in Philippians 3:14: "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." Every Christian has received the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. God has called them to the highest thing He has ever called any creature to. The angels in heaven have no higher calling than you have. You may spend your days in the humblest of occupations — cleaning streets, hauling waste, or whatever the most lowly work imaginable might be. Your general calling as a Christian raises you higher than any particular occupation can raise any person in the world. Others may be in high callings — managing affairs of state, or serving as ministers. But yours, in some respects, is higher. A poor servant who spends the day in humble, tedious work may be tempted to think: "What a poor condition God has placed me in. Will God take notice of someone in as low a place as I am?" Oh yes — Christ takes notice of His lowest and humblest members. Just as a man truly cares for his toe when

it is in pain and attends to it just as carefully as any other part of the body, so Christ has genuine care for His lowliest and most humble ones.

Third, though your outward calling may be low in the eyes of men, in the sight of God you stand in the same calling as the angels in heaven — and in some respects, in a calling that is even higher. For Scripture tells us that the angels themselves come to understand the mystery of the gospel through the church. You who are a Christian, in that general calling of yours, are joined with principalities and powers, with the angels of heaven, in the greatest work God has ever called any creature to. Let that comfort you.

Fourth, your calling may be low and humble — but do not be discontented with it, for if you are a godly person, you have a principle within you — the principle of grace — that raises your most ordinary actions to be higher in God's estimation than all the grand and glorious deeds done in the world. The principle of faith accomplishes this. For any man or woman to go on in obedience to God, by faith, in the calling He has placed them in — doing it through the principle of faith — that action is raised to be more glorious in God's sight than all the great victories of Alexander and Caesar, all their triumphs, all the pomp of their conquests. None of that compares to even the lowest action done out of faith. Luther made this point about a poor milkmaid who was a believer and did her work in faith — he compared that action to all the glorious deeds of Caesar, and said it was far more glorious in God's eyes. Faith raises even the most humble work into something truly glorious.

Indeed, there is more obedience in submitting to God within a humble calling than in submitting to Him in a higher one. When you continue quietly in a humble calling, it is pure obedience — obedience alone that keeps you there. But in a higher calling, self-interest often enters in: there are wealth, reputation, honor, and worldly rewards that come with it, which do not come with the lower calling. To press on quietly and faithfully in a humble calling is a purer form of obedience to God.

Fifth and finally, know that in a humble calling there is likely a greater reward waiting. When the Lord comes to reward His people, He does not examine what the nature of their work was, but how faithful they were in it. He says: "Well done, good and faithful servant" — not, "Well done, because you governed cities and managed the affairs of kingdoms. He says: "Well done, good and faithful servant." You may be just as faithful in little as others are in much. Going on each day in your labor, earning a small wage to support your family — you may be just as faithful in this as those who rule a kingdom. God looks at a person's faithfulness. A poor servant working in the kitchen all day may receive as great a reward for faithfulness as someone who sits on a throne. They may receive as great a crown of glory on the day of judgment as a king who has ruled for God. God does not measure primarily by the size of the work done, but by the faithfulness of the heart in doing it. So why should not every one of us press on cheerfully in our humble condition? Why could I not be as faithful as another? It is true: I may not be as rich or as honored as others. But I may be just as faithful as any person alive. Every one of you — even the poorest

and most humble — may be as faithful as the greatest. You may have as glorious a crown in heaven. Therefore press on cheerfully and contentedly in your way.

A TENTH PLEA



Another reasoning that murmuring hearts use is this: "I could bear much affliction in another form, but the unsettledness of my condition is what is so hard. Even if my circumstances were humble, I could be content if they were at least stable. But my situation is so changeable and uncertain that I never know what to depend on. I am tossed back and forth in an unsettled condition — and that is what is so difficult to accept."

To that I answer: first, the Psalmist says that "every man at his best estate is vanity" (Psalm 39:5). The word translated "best estate" actually refers to his settled estate. You think that if you were only settled, you could be content. But the truth is: even a person in a settled estate is vanity.

Second, perhaps God sees it is better for you to live in continual dependence on Him, not knowing what your condition will be tomorrow, than to have a more stable arrangement of outward comforts. Remember what we said earlier: Christ does not teach you to pray, "Lord, give me enough for the next two or three years." He teaches you to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread" — showing that we are to live in dependence on God, coming to Him for provision every day. Consider the difference between

Canaan and Egypt. Canaan depended on God for rain from heaven. Egypt had a predictable water supply through the river Nile, which overflowed the land at a known season. Because the Egyptians knew their land's watering depended on the river and not on heaven, they grew proud. Scripture expresses Pharaoh's pride by having him say, "The river is mine" — he could manage it as he pleased. Canaan, by contrast, depended on heaven. Even when rain came, the people of Canaan did not know whether it would come again, and so they lived in continual dependence on God. God considered this a better land for His people — more suited to those who were to live by faith, always looking to heaven rather than to some stable earthly source. And experience confirms this: when godly people live in the greatest dependence on God, with no guaranteed income from earthly means, they exercise more faith and are in a better condition spiritually than before. Often the worse your outward circumstances, the better your soul; and the better your outward circumstances, the worse your soul. We see this illustrated in Ezra 4:13, where Israel's enemies wrote to King Artaxerxes warning him: "If this city is rebuilt and its walls restored, they will stop paying tribute — and the king's revenue will suffer." Their point was: as long as Israel lives undefended and dependent on the king's mercy, they will pay their dues. But once they can defend themselves, they will no longer depend on the king as before — and they will stop paying. This is exactly how it is between God and men's souls. When a soul lives in clear, daily dependence on God — sensing that God has him at His disposal in every moment — that soul pays its dues to God. It exercises faith and comes daily for its daily bread. But when God surrounds that person with prosperity — an inheritance, a steady office, a fixed in-

come — the person is no longer as aware of dependence on God. He begins paying less to God than before, and God receives less from him. God sees it as better for His people to live in a dependent condition. We resist dependence on God — we would all be independent in this way if we could, sufficient in ourselves, with no need to rely on the Lord. But God sees it is better for us to live in dependence on Him.

And here is further comfort: though your outward circumstances may be greatly unsettled, in the great matters of your soul and eternal estate, you are settled. There you have a stable and constant way of drawing supply. "From His fullness we have all received, grace upon grace" (John 1:16). You have an abundance of treasure there to draw from, for everything you need. And notice: your condition is more settled under the covenant of grace than it was under the covenant of works. Under the covenant of works, God gave man a stock to trade with — but He put it in man's own hands, where it could be gained or lost. Under the covenant of grace, the stock is held in the hand of Christ. We must go to Him for every supply, because Christ keeps the stock. We may squander something in our trading, but God takes care that we will never exhaust the stock. It is like a father whose son has wasted everything given to him. Afterward, the father puts the family's resources in a trustworthy friend's hands — the son must now go to the friend, and the stock is no longer at the son's disposal. So in respect of our eternal estate, we are actually in a more secure condition than Adam was in innocence. Let that comfort us in all our unsettled conditions in worldly matters.

AN ELEVENTH PLEA



Here is another reasoning that many murmuring hearts use to feed their discontent: "If I had never been in a better condition, I could bear this affliction. If God had always kept me this low, I could be content. But there was a time when I prospered more and had things in greater abundance. That is what makes it harder to be brought low now. Perhaps a man who once had a substantial income has had nothing for a long time. If he had never enjoyed that prosperity, or had never risen above his current state, this affliction would feel less severe. Perhaps he has some money and support from friends to live on — but if he had never been better off, he would not count it such a hardship to be without what he once had. This — that we once were in a better condition — is often our greatest wound. And yet, of all the grounds for murmuring, this is the most unreasonable."

First, is your eye evil because God was once good to you? It is wrong to have an evil eye toward others because God is good to them. But it is equally wrong to look on your present condition with bitterness because God was once good to you. Has God wronged you because He was formerly more generous to you than He was to others?

Second, did God give you prosperity in the past? It was to prepare you for affliction. We should view all outward prosperity as a preparation for harder times. If you had done that then, it would not be so difficult to endure affliction now. When you had a large estate, if you had used that mercy to prepare yourself for a reduced estate, the change would not be so grievous. Every Christian should think this way: I have an estate now — let me prepare for poverty. I have health — let me prepare for sickness. I have freedom — let me prepare for imprisonment. I do not know what God may call me to. I have peace and comfort in my conscience now — while I have this, let me prepare for God's withdrawing from me. I am free from temptation now — let me prepare for a season of temptation. If you had reasoned this way, the change of your condition would not be so grievous. Sailors in calm seas prepare for storms. They do not say, "If we had never had calm weather, we could bear the storm." In the calm you should prepare for the storm — and then when the storm comes, it will be less. You should actually reason the opposite way and say: "Now I am in an afflicted condition — but blessed be God, I once was in a comfortable condition. Blessed be God that He was generous with me earlier in the ways of His mercy." Do you murmur because you were once better off? Remember that God was generous to you first. Think of it this way: I have lived many years — perhaps forty or more — in a comfortable condition: with health, peace, and plenty. What if the remaining portion of my time holds some sorrow and affliction? The Lord gave me a comfortable, sunny day all the way until late evening. What if it begins to rain at seven or eight o'clock at night? Let me thank God for the fair weather all day. If you have been on a voyage and enjoyed a favorable wind and fair sailing for

many months, and then encounter a little storm when land is within sight — will you murmur? No — you will bless God for such a comfortable voyage for so long. If God were to say: "You will have no more comfortable days in outward things in this world" — even then you would have cause to fall down and bless God's name for all the comfortable days you have already had. Instead, you reason backwards: you take what God gave you before as something that makes your present affliction worse, and so you murmur and are discontented. On what terms did you hold what God gave you before? Did you hold it as something guaranteed forever? God gives no such thing. In all of God's dealings, there is no promise of outward blessings "to have and to hold forever" for any person. But for grace — for the gift of Himself, of Christ, of His promises, and of His covenant — He does give these forever. If God gives me understanding of Himself, faith, humility, love, patience, and the graces of His Spirit — He gives those forever. What claim do I have, then, that the sun should always shine on me, that I should have fair weather every day of my life? Whatever God gives, He gives as a pledge of His love. Let us return it to Him as a pledge of our obedience. Everything a godly person receives from God comes as a pledge of God's love. So when affliction comes, God says: "Return to Me — as a pledge of your obedience — what I gave you as a pledge of My love." We should come to God cheerfully and bless Him that we have anything at all to render as a pledge of our obedience, and say: "Lord, it is Your love that gave us anything, and it is Your love that now enables us to offer it back to You as a pledge of our obedience." When God calls for your estate or any comfort you have, He is calling for it as a pledge of your obedience to Him.

A TWELFTH PLEA



Another reasoning of a murmuring heart is this: "After I have worked so hard to obtain a certain comfort, I am then crossed and denied it — and after all that labor, this is especially hard to bear."

First, the greater the cross, the more opportunity there is for obedience and submission.

Second, when you labored so hard, did you do it with submission to God? Did you work with a firm resolve that you must have this thing no matter what? If so, you were not laboring as a Christian. A Christian labors in his calling while remaining surrendered to God — saying, in effect: "Lord, I am working diligently in the path You have set before me, but I depend entirely on You for the outcome and the blessing." And what was the real goal of your labor? Was it not to walk with God in the place He placed you? A Christian should work hard in his outward calling — but the chief purpose is to obey God in it, not merely to secure a particular result. Yes, he works to provide for his family — but above all, he works to obey God in the path God has set before him. So if God now calls you to a different condition — even one that involves suffering — and your heart is right, you will follow Him there too.

Third, there is actually greater testimony of your love for God when you surrender to Him something that cost you dearly. David said: "Shall I offer to God something that cost me nothing?" Your outward comforts have cost you much — you labored hard to obtain them. Now, if you can submit to God in losing them, your love is proven all the more clearly: you are offering to God something that came at great personal cost. And with that, we have covered the main reasonings and pleas of a discontented heart.

A THIRTEENTH PLEA



There is one more plea worth naming: "Though I admit my affliction is somewhat hard and I feel real trouble within, I thank God I have not broken out into discontented behavior that dishonors Him — I keep it inside, even though I struggle greatly with my own heart."

Do not be satisfied with that — the disordered workings of your heart are as words before God. We said at the outset when opening this Scripture: it is not enough for your tongue to be silent — your soul must be silent. There can be a sullen discontent of heart just as sinful as discontent expressed in words. And if you do not put that inward sullenness to death, a little more affliction will cause it to break out in the open.

With this, I trust the Lord has addressed the chief reasonings and pleas that a discontented heart offers for its condition. I urge you in the name of God to take these things seriously. Because they concern your own hearts, you may remember them all the more readily. I had intended to make a brief start on the next topic — some practical ways of helping you attain the grace of contentment. It is a most excellent grace, of tremendous benefit as you have heard, and its opposite is deeply sinful and wretched.

SERMON 11



Philippians 4:11 — "For I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content."

We are now approaching the close of this study on contentment — the contentment that Christ teaches those who are enrolled in His school. We have opened up the subject and shown you where the art, skill, and mystery of Christian contentment lies. We have applied it in various ways, rebuking the lack of it. In our last session we finished examining the various reasonings of a murmuring and discontented heart. Now, eager to bring this to a conclusion, I will leave what has been said and move on to what remains. There are two things left that will help work your hearts toward this grace of Christian contentment.

First, a set of considerations for settling the heart in any afflicted condition.

Second, a set of practical directions for what should be done to work our hearts toward contentment.

THE FIRST CONSIDERATION



In all our needs and tendencies toward discontent, we should consider the greatness of the mercies we already have compared to the smallness of the things we lack. For the godly person, what is lacking is of very little importance compared to what is already possessed. Most of the time, people are discontented and murmuring because they do not have things that even an unbeliever can have. Why should you be so troubled by the lack of something a reprobate may possess — a larger estate, better health, or greater reputation? You could have all those things and still be a reprobate. Will you be discontent over something that an unbeliever may have? Consider the example of two godly men meeting together: Anthony and Diddimus. Diddimus was blind, yet a man of outstanding gifts and grace. Anthony asked him whether he was not troubled by his lack of sight. Diddimus admitted he was — but Anthony replied: should you be troubled by lacking what flies and dogs have, and not rather rejoice and be thankful that you have what angels have? God has given you the good things that make angels glorious — is that not enough, even if you lack what a fly possesses? So a Christian should reason with himself: What am I discontented about? I am discontented over something that a dog may have, that a devil may have, that an unbe-

liever may have. Shall I be discontent for not having that, when God has given me what makes angels glorious? The apostle says in Ephesians 1:3: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places." You may not have as great blessings in earthly places as others do — but if the Lord has blessed you in heavenly places, that should be enough. There are blessings in heaven, and He has set you here in the present as though in a heavenly place. Reflecting on the greatness of the mercies we have, and the smallness of the things God has withheld, is a powerful means of producing the grace of contentment.

THE SECOND CONSIDERATION



The fact that God has already gone before us with His mercies should bring us to contentment. I mentioned this earlier as an aggravation of discontent, but now I will use it as a consideration that helps us toward contentment. You may lack many comforts right now — but has God not already been generous to you in the past? You have already received enough mercy to keep you blessing God for the rest of your life. I recall reading of a godly man who lived to the age of fifty and enjoyed excellent health for forty-eight of those years, living in prosperity. In his final two years his body was severely afflicted with a painful disease. But he reasoned with himself this way: "Lord, You could have made my entire life one of torment and pain — but You gave me forty-eight years of health. I will praise Your mercy for what I have had, and praise Your justice for what I now suffer." It is a good practice to remember that God has already gone before us in mercy. Suppose God were to take away your estate after many years of comfortable living — you might say that having had it only makes the loss worse. But that response comes from unthankfulness. We should bless God for what we have had, not feel worse off because of it. We could have been miserable all our lives. And truly, a person's condition is not very miserable if the only aggravation is that he

was once happy. If that is the only thing making your situation feel hard, you can bear it — for there is much mercy in the fact that you once had good things, and that itself is reason for contentment.

A THIRD CONSIDERATION



Consider the abundance of mercies that God bestows on us and that we enjoy. Luther said it well: the sea of God's mercies should swallow up all our particular afflictions. Name any affliction you are under — there is a sea of mercy large enough to swallow it. If you pour a bucket of water on the floor of your house, it makes a noticeable mess. But throw that same bucket into the ocean, and it disappears completely. In the same way, afflictions considered on their own can seem very great. But set them against the sea of God's mercies we actually enjoy, and they are not so much — they are nothing by comparison.

A FOURTH CONSIDERATION



Consider how God deals with all created things. He carries all creatures through an alternating cycle of different conditions. We do not have summer always — winter follows summer. We do not have day always — night follows day. We do not have constant fair weather — fair and foul take turns. Plants do not always flourish — the sap retreats into the root and they appear as if dead. There is a constant alternation of conditions throughout all of creation. The sun does not shine on us without ceasing — darkness follows light. Since God has ordered all created things with this mixture of conditions, why should we be surprised that we too experience alternating seasons — sometimes prosperity, sometimes affliction?

A FIFTH CONSIDERATION



A further consideration is this: created things suffer for our sake — why should we not be willing to suffer in service to God? God subjects other creatures, and they willingly lose their lives, their beauty, and their excellence in order to serve us. Why should we not be willing to give up anything in service to God? Certainly the gap between other creatures and mankind is not as great as the gap between mankind and God. The martyr Master Hooper, as recorded in the Book of Martyrs, used this illustration in working toward contentment in the midst of his own sufferings — and to encourage the hearts of others. He said: I look at created things and see what they suffer to be useful to me. The brute animals must die, must be roasted in fire and boiled, must be placed on the table and cut in pieces, chewed in the mouth, and digested in the stomach into something that, if you looked at it, would be repulsive — and all of this to nourish me, to be useful to my body. Shall I not be willing to be made into whatever God requires, for His service? What a range of changes the creature undergoes to become useful for me, to sustain my life! If God does this with creatures for my use, why should I not rest content when He does something similar with me for His use? Whether God takes away my estate and makes me poor, takes away my life, puts

me in prison, or does whatever He will — I will not suffer for God more than the creature suffers for me. And I am infinitely more obligated to God than any creature is to me, and the distance between me and any creature is nothing compared to the distance between me and God. Such reflections worked the heart of that martyr toward contentment in his sufferings. Every time you sit down to eat, you can think: God makes the creature suffer for my use — not only for my nourishment but for my delight. What then am I, compared to the infinite God?

A SIXTH CONSIDERATION



Another consideration for working contentment into our hearts is to remember that we have only a little time in this world. If you are godly, you will suffer only in this present life — and if you simply close your eyes, another life will have come. One martyr said to his fellow martyr: "Just close your eyes — and the next time they open, you will be in another world." Athanasius, when he was sent into exile, said: it is only a little cloud, and it will pass soon. These afflictions are but for a moment. A sailor out at sea does not consider it too much when a storm arises — especially if he can see clear sky beyond it. He says: "It will pass soon." Remember that we do not have long to live. The affliction may well be over before our days end — but even if it is not, death will put an end to everything. All afflictions and troubles will soon be finished by death.

A SEVENTH CONSIDERATION IS THIS



Consider the conditions that others far greater than us have lived through. We touched on this earlier to show the sinfulness of discontent, but it is also a powerful argument for producing contentment in our hearts.

You often compare yourself to those above you — try instead comparing yourself to those below you.

Jacob was the heir of both Abraham and Isaac — the covenant blessing ran through him — and yet he lived in a poor and humble condition. Abraham his grandfather was able to field a kind of private army from his own household, three hundred men to fight a king. Yet Jacob his grandson crossed the Jordan with nothing but a staff and lived in a very poor state for a long time. Moses could have had all the treasures of Egypt — some historians say that Pharaoh's daughter adopted him as her son because Pharaoh had no heir to the throne, meaning Moses was in line to become king. Yet what a humble life he lived when he went to stay with his father-in-law Jethro for forty years. When he finally returned to Egypt with his wife and children and all his possessions, he had only one animal to carry them — he traveled in humble circumstances from his father-in-law's home back to Egypt.

Elijah was fed by ravens and forced to flee for his life from place to place, wandering in the wilderness. Elisha also was in very difficult circumstances at various times. God's prophets had to be hidden in a cave by Obadiah and kept alive on bread and water. The prophet Jeremiah was thrown into a dungeon and treated shamefully. It would take too long to list all the particular sufferings of God's people. Even in recent history, the great instruments of God in the Reformation lived in very difficult and humble conditions. Luther himself, on his deathbed — a man of enormous public influence, known at the courts of princes — said: "Lord, I have neither house nor land nor estate to leave to my wife or children, but I commit them to You." Musculus was another remarkable instrument of God in his day, a man whose spirit and learning were worth a kingdom — one of the most learned men of his time. Yet at times he was reduced to digging ditches in the public works to earn bread for his family. What would we do if we were in such a condition as these men? But above all, set Christ before you — the One who said that the birds of the air had nests and the foxes had dens, yet the Son of Man had no place to lay His head. That is the depth of lowness He entered. Reflecting on such things is very valuable. It is also helpful for those with means to visit the homes of the poor, to go to hospitals, to see the wounds of soldiers and others, and to observe the miserable conditions in which people in some almshouses live — the poor food they have, and the hardships they face. You hear about such things — but if you went to see them in person, it would not only stir up charity in you toward them, but gratitude toward God. It would be a particular help against discontent. You would come away blessing God and saying: if I were in their condition, what would I do? How could I bear it? And what

reason is there that God has ordered things so that they are so low and I am so much better off? I know of no reason except free grace — God will have mercy on whom He will have mercy. These are some good considerations for helping us grow in contentment.

THE EIGHTH CONSIDERATION



A further consideration: before your conversion, before God worked on your soul, you were content with the world without any grace — you had no claim on God or Christ, yet you were satisfied. Why then can you not now be content with grace and spiritual blessings without having the world as well? If you yourself were once content with the world without grace, there is every reason to be content with grace without the world. Certainly there is infinitely more reason for contentment now than there was then. You can see that many worldly people manage a kind of contentment, never murmuring or complaining, even though they have no interest in God or Christ. Can you not have at least as much contentment with God and Christ, even without the world, as they have with the world but without God and Christ? It is a profound shame if you cannot.

THE NINTH CONSIDERATION



Consider also this: when God has given you contentment and prosperity, you have not given Him the glory for it. When God let you have what your heart desired, what did you do with it? You were not made better by it — in many cases you were made worse. Let that satisfy you now: I am facing crosses, but when I had everything I wanted, God received little or no glory from me. Let that truth quiet my discontented thoughts.

THE TENTH CONSIDERATION



Finally, consider all the experience you have already had of God doing you good in times of want. When God has crossed you, have you never experienced real good coming through those afflictions? It is true that when a minister simply tells people God will bring good out of their afflictions, they hear it as something a godly man would say — but they feel little or no good in the moment, only pain. But when we can say not only that God has promised to bring good from afflictions, but that you yourself have experienced it — that former afflictions have proven great blessings, and that you would not have missed them or the good they produced for anything — such experience powerfully quiets the heart and works it toward contentment. So reason with yourself: Lord, why could this affliction not work as great a good in me as past afflictions have? You may find many other helpful considerations in your own meditation — these are the main ones I have thought of. I will add just one more, about a man who was once a great merchant and tradesman. On one occasion he suffered shipwreck — and he said afterward: I never made a better voyage than the one in which I was shipwrecked. That was a striking thing to say — his name was Zeno — that a shipwreck was his best voyage. To a sailor that would seem like a paradox: a good voyage in which

you were shipwrecked? But he meant that God was so pleased to bless the experience to his soul that he gained such riches of soul from it that he counted it the best voyage he had ever made. And truly, sometimes it is like that. For those of you who are godly, I have no doubt you have found it: your worst voyages have turned out to be your best. When you have met the greatest crosses in a journey, God has turned them to greater good in some other way. We should not seek out crosses hoping they will be turned to advantage — but when God in His providence allows hard voyages, you may expect Him to bring greater good from them. Those who have walked in godliness for a long time will, I am sure, have an abundance of such experiences to draw on. You also know that sometimes a smaller ship has advantages over a larger one in a storm: a small ship can slip into shallow waters and be safe, while great ships must remain in open water, tossed by the storm, and many times they are broken on the rocks. So it may be that God sees a storm coming, and if you were in your great ship you might be wrecked on the rocks. So He places you in a smaller vessel where you will be safer. I am now setting aside these considerations — but do not set them aside in your heart. Work to apply those that most concern you at the right moment — when you feel any stirring of discontent rising within you.

The main thing I intend for this next section is to set out practical directions for helping our hearts toward contentment. We have already covered much ground in the earlier lessons — showing what Christ teaches those in His school and what is most helpful for attaining contentment. What remains is simply to give some directions for the course we should take to actually attain this grace.

THE FIRST DIRECTION



The first direction is this: all the rules and helps in the world will do little good unless we first get the right disposition within our hearts. You cannot keep a ship steady by propping it up from the outside — there must be ballast inside the ship to make it sail steadily. In the same way, nothing outside us can keep our hearts in a steady, constant condition — only what is within us can do that. Grace within the soul is what produces contentment.

THE SECOND DIRECTION



S econd, if you want to live a contented life, do not grasp too much of the world. Do not take on more worldly business than God is calling you to, and do not be greedy in reaching for more of the world. If a man chooses to walk through a thorn bush when he could take a clear path, he has no reason to complain about being scratched. If the thorny path is your necessary way — if you must pass through it — that is a different matter. But if you freely choose that path when another is available, you have no grounds for complaint. So it is with men and women who throw themselves into worldly business they have no need to pursue — no wonder they are pricked and disturbed by it. Everything in this world has some kind of thorn in it. We are likely to meet with disappointments and discontent in everything we get involved with. Those who have the least unnecessary involvement in the world — apart from what God calls them to, which must always be done — are those most likely to avoid the discontentment that comes from overreaching.

THE THIRD DIRECTION



Third, make sure you have a clear sense of calling for every task you take on — even the smallest. When you are confident that God has called you to something, you can quiet your heart with this thought: I know I am where God wants me to be. Nothing in the world settles the heart as much as this. When I encounter any difficulty, I can say: I know I am in my proper place and calling — I am doing the work God has set before me. This will quiet and content you when trouble comes. Whatever God calls a person to, he can have peace in whatever happens to him within it. When you are in the work God has called you to, God takes responsibility for watching over you and seeing you blessed.

THE FOURTH DIRECTION



A fourth rule follows naturally from the third: walk by God's word in the work you are called to. You are called to a certain task — but you must manage that work according to God's will, ordering yourself in it by His word as best you can. Add this to the third direction, and your soul's peace can be made nearly complete: you know you did not choose this work yourself but that God called you to it, and you are walking in it according to the rule of His word. Whatever comes, then, God will care for you. A pagan philosopher once said: if you want everything subject to you, subject yourself to reason, and by that you will bring everything under your control. I can take that a step further: if you want everything under you, subject yourself to God — and truly, all things will be under you. You may have noticed that some among the powerful and well-connected have been the most hostile to godly living, because they are willing to be slaves to those above them at court, so long as they can keep their neighbors under their own power. Under arbitrary government, those who are willing to be servants to a prince can make all others servants to themselves. But be willing to be a servant to God — to be fully under God's command — and all things in the world will be under you. "All things are yours," says the apostle, "life and death" — everything is

yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's. Everything in the world serves the person who serves God. This is a great commendation of God's service: be willing to serve God, and God makes all things in the world your servants — for so they are. You may ask: how are they my servants when I cannot command them? They serve you in this way: God orders all things to work for your good. There is nothing in the world, God says, that will not work for your good and serve your needs, if you will serve Him. Who would not want to be God's servant on those terms? Subject yourself to God, and all things will be subjected to you. As long as we stay within our proper boundaries, we are under God's protection. But if we break those boundaries, we can expect what happens to deer that wander out of the enclosure. While the deer stay within the fence, no dogs trouble them — they feed in peace. But once the deer get outside the fence, every dog in the area will hunt them. So it is with men and women: keep within the boundaries of God's commands, within the rule He has set in His word, and you are under His protection. You can go about your work in peace, free from anxiety, casting all your care on God, and God provides for you. But step outside those boundaries, and you can expect to meet with trouble, affliction, and discontent. That is the fourth direction: walk by rule.

THE FIFTH DIRECTION



A fifth rule: exercise much faith — this is the path to contentment. After you have applied every consideration that reason can supply, if you find they are still not enough, call on the grace of faith. A person can go quite far using reason alone to help him toward contentment — but when reason has reached its limit, set faith to work. The Reverend Master Perkins, so greatly used by God in his time, once said: the life of faith is a true life — the only true life. Exercise faith not only in the promise that all things work together for good for those who fear God, but also in God Himself and in His attributes. Even the pagan Socrates said: since God is so careful for you, why do you need to be anxious about anything yourself? A striking thing to hear from a pagan.

Christian — if you have any faith, in times of extremity think this: this is the moment that calls for the exercise of faith. What use is your faith if it cannot quiet your heart when discontent rises? There was a man named Theodosius who had once been a king, but was brought so low that he had to earn his living as a schoolmaster. Someone came to him and asked: what have you gained from the philosophy you learned from Plato and others? He answered: I have gained this — that though my condition has changed from such a high estate to such a low one, I can still be

content. So what do you gain by being a believer, a Christian? What can your faith actually do for you? It can do this: in every situation, I can cast my care on God, lay my burden on God, and commit my way to God in peace. Faith can do that. So when reason can go no further, let faith climb up onto reason's shoulders and say: I see land, even though reason cannot — I see the good that will come out of all this evil.

Exercise faith by frequently surrendering yourself to God and giving yourself fully to Him and His ways. The more you surrender yourself to God in faith, the more peace and quiet you will have. That is the fifth direction.

THE SIXTH DIRECTION



The sixth direction for contentment is to labor to be spiritually minded — to spend time meditating on things above. Scripture says: "If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God." Be much occupied with spiritual thoughts and with the things of heaven. Many Christians who have a genuine interest in heavenly things spend very little time actually thinking about them — their meditations rarely dwell on what is above. Some have suggested that this is why Adam did not feel shame over his nakedness before the fall: he was so engaged with God and with things above the senses that he simply did not focus on it. Whether that is so or not I will not say — but this I can say with certainty: the reason we are so troubled by our lacks and wants is that we converse so little with God and so little with spiritual things. Conversing with spiritual things lifts us above the concerns of this world. People who are bitten by snakes are bitten because they are walking on the ground. If they could be lifted high above the earth, the snakes crawling below would never reach them. Discontent and murmuring, with all the temptations and evils that flow from

them, are like snakes crawling at ground level. If we could get higher, we would not be stung by them. A heavenly mind is the path to contentment.

THE SEVENTH DIRECTION



A seventh rule: do not promise yourself too much beforehand, and do not set your expectations too high. It is good to aim low rather than to fix your hopes on great things. Do not let your imagination soar and think: if only I had this and that — imagining wonderful things for yourself. Be like Jacob, who lived a very contented life in humble circumstances. He said simply: "Lord, if I may only have clothing to wear and food to eat." He looked no higher, and he was content with that. If we did not set our expectations so high — imagining we ought to have as much as others — we would not be so troubled when disappointments come. Paul says the same: "If we have food and clothing, let us be content with that." He did not aim too high. Those who fix their eyes on great worldly things meet with disappointments, and disappointment leads to discontent. Be as high as you like in spiritual meditation — God gives you full freedom to soar as high as you will, even above the angels. But in outward things, God does not want you aiming at great things. The Lord said to Baruch: "Are you seeking great things for yourself? Seek them not — you will have your life as a prize." Especially in times like these, it is very harmful to aim at great worldly things. Seek them not. Be willing to aim low and stay low — and if God raises you, you will have cause to

bless Him. But if He does not raise you, there will be little cause for pain. A person who stays low cannot fall far — but those who climb high are the ones whose fall injures them most. That is a good rule: do not promise yourself great things, and do not aim at anything great in this world.

THE EIGHTH DIRECTION



Work to get your heart mortified to the world — dead to the world. It is not enough to have reasoned through some arguments about the vanity of earthly things. We must actually practice mortification and be crucified to the world. Paul says: "I die daily" — we should die daily to the world. We are baptized into the death of Christ, which signifies that we have taken a profession that makes us as good as dead to the world. Troubles that occur in the world do not disturb the dead. If our hearts were truly dead to the world, the changes and upheavals of worldly things would not greatly trouble us. Consider what happened when the soldiers came to break the legs of those crucified with Christ: they broke the legs of the two others, but when they came to Christ they found He was already dead and did not break His legs. God's providence arranged this to fulfill a prophecy — but the point is: they found He was dead, so they did not break His bones. When affliction and trouble find you with a heart mortified to the world, they will not break your bones. The ones whose bones are broken by crosses and afflictions are those who are still alive to the world — those who have not died to it. But afflictions will not break the bones of one whose heart is mortified and dead to the world — that is, they will not be crushing or devastating to such a person. I fear

this remains a mystery and puzzle to many: to be dead to the world, mortified to the world. It is not my purpose here to fully explain what mortification is — but briefly: it is to have our hearts so detached from worldly things that we use them as though we were not using them, not treating them as the source of our life, comfort, and happiness. Our happiness consists in things of a different nature entirely. We can be truly happy without worldly things — this is what it means to be dead to the world.

THE NINTH DIRECTION



Do not dwell too much on your afflictions — do not let your thoughts burrow down into them and stay there. Many people have their thoughts entirely consumed by their crosses and hardships, always thinking and talking about them. It is just like a child with a sore on his body — his finger is always touching it. Some men and women are the same: their thoughts are always on their afflictions. When they wake in the night, they are thinking of their afflictions. When they are talking with others — even, perhaps, when they are praying — they are thinking of their afflictions. No wonder such people live discontented lives, if their thoughts are always fixed on such things. They should instead work to keep their thoughts on what can comfort them. Many people, when you give them a helpful rule, receive it gladly while you are with them and thank you for it — but when they leave, they quickly forget it. Notice what Jacob did when his wife died in childbirth: she had named the child Ben-oni, meaning "son of sorrows." Jacob thought to himself: if I call this child Ben-oni, every time I speak his name it will remind me of my dear wife's death and renew my grief — it will be a continual affliction. So he refused to give the child that name. The text says Jacob called him Benjamin, meaning "son of my right hand." This shows us that

when affliction falls on us, we should not give way to thoughts that dwell on it continually, but rather fix our minds on what will stir up gratitude to God for His mercies. Basil used a fitting comparison: people with sore, inflamed eyes should not stare into fire or into the beams of the sun. Those with weak eyes need to look at things suited to their condition — they choose green colors, which are easier on sensitive eyes, and hang green fabric before their faces because it soothes rather than irritates. The same principle applies to weak and troubled spirits. A man or woman with a fragile spirit should not keep staring into the fire of their afflictions, into the things that cast them down. Instead they should look at what will help heal and strengthen them — focusing on those things rather than on the affliction. It will be of great benefit to you if you take this to heart: do not dwell constantly on your afflictions, but on your mercies.

THE TENTH DIRECTION



Please take note of this, even if you forget much else that has been said. Put the best possible interpretation on God's ways toward you — wherever a good interpretation can be made, make it. You would think it unfair if a friend constantly put the worst construction on everything you did toward him. If you spent time with people who twisted every word you said into something negative, you would find their company exhausting. It is very grievous to the Spirit of God when we do the same to Him — putting the worst interpretation on everything He does toward us. When God deals with us differently from what we wanted, we tend to find the worst possible meaning in it. When affliction comes, many good interpretations of God's work are available to you. You could think: perhaps God is only testing me by this. Perhaps God saw that my heart was too set on earthly things, and He intends to show me what is in my heart. Perhaps God saw that if my prosperity continued, I would fall into sin — that the better my outward condition, the worse my soul would be. Perhaps God intends to exercise some particular grace in me. Perhaps God is preparing me for some greater work He has for me. This is how you should reason.

Instead, we do the opposite: we put the worst interpretation on God's dealings and say, "Surely the Lord is showing His wrath and displeasure against me, and this affliction is only the beginning of worse things to come." Just as Israel did in the wilderness: "God has brought us here to kill us." That is the worst possible interpretation of God's ways. Why make the worst interpretation when a better one is available? In 1 Corinthians 13:5, speaking of love, Scripture says: "Love thinks no evil." Love is such that if ten interpretations of a thing are possible — nine bad and one good — love will take the good one and leave the other nine. So even if ten interpretations of God's ways toward you presented themselves, and nine were bad and one was good, you should take the good one and leave the nine. Consider this: God does not deal with you the way you deal with Him. If God put the worst interpretation on all your ways toward Him, as you do on His toward you, things would go very badly for you. God shows His love to us by putting the best interpretation on what we do. He calls those who have even a little genuine uprightness of heart "perfect." "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" — in God's accounting, uprightness is perfection. When we look into our own hearts, we can barely see any good at all — and yet God is pleased to call it perfect. When we look inward, we see nothing but corruption. Yet God calls us His saints — He calls even the weakest Christian, with the least grace under the greatest corruption, His saint. We may say we cannot be saints in this life — but in God's sight we are. You know how the Holy Spirit addresses those with any grace, any uprightness, throughout the epistles: "To the saints" in such and such a place. See what interpretation God puts on them — they are saints to Him. God makes the best interpretation of things: where there is

much evil and a little good, God passes over the evil and takes notice of the good. Consider what we see in Peter's letter regarding Sarah. Sarah spoke to her husband in Genesis 18:12 — and it was an unbelieving speech, with only one good element: she called her husband "lord." Yet when the apostle references that speech in 1 Peter 3:6, the Holy Spirit passes over all the bad and commends her for giving her husband a title of respect. How graciously God deals with us! If there is even one good word among many bad ones, what an interpretation God makes of it. We should do the same: if there is any good interpretation available, take it rather than the bad one. My brothers and sisters — I wish I could now speak only to the godly — keep good thoughts of God. Guard against judging God to be a hard Master. Put good interpretations on His ways. That is a special means of helping you toward contentment in all of life.

THE ELEVENTH DIRECTION



Do not let other people's opinions shape your sense of your condition as much as your own actual experience of it. Much of our discontent comes not from what we actually feel as lacking, but from how others view our circumstances. We think poverty is a great evil — but why? Largely because others esteem it so, more than because of what the poor themselves actually feel, unless the poverty is extreme. Here is a clear demonstration that almost all the discontent in the world comes more from other people's opinions than from the actual hardship we experience. You think your estate is low and feel discontented and afflicted by it — but if every person in the world were poorer than you, you would not be discontented at all. You would actually rejoice in your condition, even with not a penny more than you have now. Take a man who earns only a modest wage each day — you might say that is barely enough to support a family. But suppose there was no one in the world who earned more than that, and in fact most others earned somewhat less than you — then you would consider your condition quite good, even though you would have exactly the same amount as before. This proves that it is largely other people's opinions, and not what you actually feel, that makes your condition seem so grievous. If everyone around you looked on you as

fortunate — more fortunate than themselves — you would be content. Do not let your happiness depend on other people's opinions. Chrysostom once said something fitting on exactly this point: just as we must not make other people lords of our faith, we must not make them lords of our comfort. We must not allow our sense of wellbeing to rest more on their imagination of our condition than on what we actually experience. Others may think you are in a miserable condition — but you can say: I thank God, for my own part I do not see it that way. If it were not for the scorn, contempt, and low opinion of others, my condition would not feel so bad to me. It is their disregard that makes it feel afflictive.

THE TWELFTH DIRECTION



Do not be excessively absorbed in the comforts of this world while you have them. When you have them, do not take too much pleasure in them. This is a reliable principle: however excessive a person's sorrow is when a comfort is taken away, that is how immoderate their delight was when they had it. For example: God takes away a child and the grief is beyond what is natural or fitting for a Christian. Though I had no prior knowledge of how your heart stood toward that child, when I see such excessive sorrow I can reasonably conclude — even if you are a complete stranger to me — that your heart was immoderately set upon that child, that spouse, or whatever comfort you are grieving so deeply. If you hear bad news about your finances and your heart sinks into deep discontent, your heart was immoderately attached to worldly wealth. If you hear others speaking ill of you and your heart is cast down because your reputation has suffered, your heart was immoderately set on your name and standing. The way to avoid excessive sorrow in affliction is not to have excessive love and delight in prosperity. These are the main directions for living quiet and contented lives.

Brothers and sisters, to conclude this topic: if I could show you a way to never be in want of anything, I have no doubt people would flock to hear that sermon. But what I have been preaching comes to very nearly the same thing — and in effect is the same thing. Is it not almost the same to never be in want, or to never be without contentment? The man or woman who is never without a contented spirit can truly never be said to want much. The Word of God offers a path full of comfort and peace for God's people, even in this world. You can live happy lives in the midst of all the storms and tempests around you. There is an ark you can enter — and no people on earth can live such comfortable, cheerful, and contented lives as the saints of God. Oh, that we had learned this lesson. I have spent many sermons on this lesson of contentment, and I fear you will take longer to learn it than I have taken to preach it. It is harder to learn than to speak about. I recall reading of a man who spent thirty-eight years working to learn the lesson of Psalm 39 — "I will keep watch over my ways so that I do not sin with my tongue" — and still felt he had not thoroughly mastered it. The truth is, there are many who have been professing faith for close to thirty-eight years and have barely learned that same lesson. It would be good for young believers to begin learning it early. This lesson of Christian contentment is just as hard — perhaps you will spend many years learning it. I fear there are some Christians who have not yet learned not to sin grossly with their tongues. Scripture says a person's religion is worthless if he cannot control his tongue — so any who make a profession of godliness would seem to have every reason to learn that lesson quickly, since without it their whole religion is in vain. But this lesson of Christian contentment may take even more time to learn, and many are still

studying it all their lives without becoming proficient. But God forbid it should be said of any of us what the apostle says of certain widows in Timothy — that they were always learning and never came to the knowledge of the truth. Let us not be always learning this lesson of contentment and yet never gaining skill in it. You would think it a serious failure if you had been at sea for twenty years and had still gained no skill in navigation. A sailor would say: I have worked at sea for twenty or thirty years — I ought to know my trade by now. Oh, that Christians would say the same about the art of Christian living! When something is spoken about a Christian's duty, how good it would be if a Christian could say: I have been a Christian for this many years — I hope I have not remained ignorant of something so essential. Here is an essential lesson — one that Paul said he had learned: in every situation to be content. Do not be satisfied with yourself until you have learned this lesson of Christian contentment and grown more skillful in it than you have been before.

There is another lesson in the text: "I have learned to abound." That is a hard lesson in its own right — but it does not as closely concern us at this time, because these are times of affliction, and there is now more than ordinary uncertainty in all things. In times like these, there are few who have such abundance that they need much instruction in that particular lesson.

THE SAINTS' DUTY IN TIMES OF EXTREMITY



What exactly lies behind the fears that weigh on people's hearts is not yet clear — but that there are many troubled and anxious hearts, that much is evident. Though I had prepared to continue on our usual course, I believe it is fitting for this occasion to turn to a word of Scripture that speaks directly to our present moment.

Exodus 14:13 — "Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord."

The full verse begins: "And Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid. Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord.'" In the previous chapter, Pharaoh had released Israel from Egypt. In this chapter, he pursues them with renewed fury — driven by rage beyond all common sense and reason, his malice having blinded him, because God intended to destroy him. Even though God had acted gloriously on behalf of His people, Pharaoh refused to acknowledge the majesty of the Lord — though he would soon be forced to. He gathered all the strength he could and rashly gave chase, overtaking Israel in the most disadvantageous position imaginable. The text tells us they were encamped before Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, opposite Baal-zephon — and all of this by

God's own appointment. That was where Pharaoh found them: the sea in front of them, the full strength of Egypt behind them, hemmed in at Pi-hahiroth. The name Pi-hahiroth — "pi" meaning "mouth" and "hahiroth" meaning an opening or pit — indicates they were, as it were, at the mouth of a hole, walled in by high rocks on either side. Not only that, but Migdol — meaning "tower" — signified that the Egyptians also had a fortress built in that very location, giving them still more military advantage over this unarmed people. And they were positioned opposite Baal-zephon as well. In our last meeting I explained what Baal was and the various Baals the pagans worshiped as gods — it is a general name for idols. Baal-zephon was a particular idol placed at the exit point of Egypt, intended to watch over and prevent runaway servants or any people leaving Egypt without permission — the name comes from a root meaning "to watch" or "to spy out." Just as sorcerers use their arts to place spells at boundaries to prevent people from crossing them, the Egyptians had erected this idol as a kind of spiritual barrier — a Baal-zephon, a god to stop people at the very spot where they wanted them stopped. You can see, then, what a desperate situation Israel was in when they left Egypt: the sea before them, all Egypt's army behind them, trapped in a rocky enclosure, a fortress nearby, and their idol standing guard against their escape. The Egyptians were certain they had them caught, and said that Israel was hemmed in by the wilderness. In that desperate situation, Israel's courage failed them. In deep distress and panic, they came to Moses with bitter complaints, saying in verse 11: "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us out here to die in the wilderness? Why did you do this to us, bringing us out of Egypt?" They would have rather remained in Egypt

than face any danger or hardship. This is the same baseness of spirit seen in many today: because the course the Parliament has taken involves some difficulty and hardship, they cry out, "I wish we were back as we were before — we were well enough, quiet enough — we never knew such turmoil as this." And so they are quick to murmur and complain. What an ungrateful and unworthy generation — men and women of such faint-hearted spirits. Cyrus once said to his soldiers — and the historian records the words — that it is the mark of a truly brave man to live honorably or die honorably, one or the other. But to live basely rather than die honorably, to choose any form of servitude over any risk of death — that is the mark of a coward. Philo tells us that even women among the ancients, when facing the threat of being enslaved by enemies, took their own children and threw them into the rivers, crying: "You will not be slaves — we would rather see you die than live in bondage." I do not commend that act as right — but it shows what spirit even pagan women had: to see their children die rather than suffer as slaves. And truly, what would our lives be worth if we returned to bondage? The worst that danger holds out is death — the death of our bodies — yet we trust God will preserve them. But suppose the worst: it is only death. If we should shrink now through base cowardice and forsake the cause of God, our lives would not be worth preserving. The life we would live — in bondage to those who blaspheme God — would be of very little value. Your children might even be raised in the errors of Rome, made to serve at a mass-priest's altar. But when these people were in this extremity and overtaken by panic, Moses, as the captain appointed by the Lord, came to them and spoke courageously, encouraging them. He said: "Do not be afraid. Stand still, and see the

salvation of the Lord." The word translated "stand still" carries the meaning of settling and composing oneself — bringing yourself into a calm, steady condition. It is reflexive in force: it means to work upon your own heart, to apply arguments to your spirit, and to keep working until you have brought your heart into a frame in which it can stand still and be quiet. At first, even the dearest servants of God will find their hearts shaking in times of danger and extremity. But when they begin working on their spirits — bringing arguments to bear on their hearts — they soon gain the upper hand, and their hearts grow quiet. We see a clear example of this in David in Psalm 62. David says in verses 1 and 2: "Truly my soul waits in silence for God; from Him comes my salvation. He only is my rock and my salvation, my stronghold; I shall not be greatly shaken." Notice: he begins exercising faith, and he says he shall not be "greatly" shaken — as if to say: I admit I cannot claim my heart is unmoved, I am somewhat afraid and feel some stirring within me, but I hope I will not be greatly shaken. He continues working on his heart, reflecting on his own integrity and on the wickedness of his enemies, and says: "How long will you devise harm against a man? You will all be killed." Then again in verse 5: "Wait in silence for God only, O my soul, for my hope is from Him. He only is my rock." After continuing to press the same meditation upon his heart, he returns to the words of verse 2 — but notice the gain: in verse 6 he says, "He only is my rock and my salvation, my stronghold — I shall not be shaken." Before, he said he would not be "greatly" shaken; after working further on his heart, he says simply: I shall not be shaken. He had overcome his fears and won the victory — he gloried and gave thanks to God. That is what it means to truly "stand still" — to work on your own heart until,

though stirred at first, you gain the victory. The word "stand still" can also be rendered "stand fast" — a word drawn from military life. When soldiers are in formation and danger approaches, they must not break ranks. To leave their position could cost them their lives — they must stand, they must hold firm, no matter how great the danger. That is the force of the word: stand fast in your ranks, do not abandon your position out of fear. This same word appears elsewhere in Scripture, as in Philippians 1:27: "Stand firm in one spirit," and 1 Corinthians 16:13: "Watch, stand firm in the faith." So this "stand" is not a passive standing but a standing fast — holding your position firmly, not running about in confusion. If soldiers panic and fall into disorder, what becomes of an army? In any place of danger — a city, anywhere — when people descend into confusion, they are lost. You must stand firm in your ranks. Now there are several kinds of "standing still" — some very wrong and harmful, and others very good.

First, there is a standing still out of shock and paralysis — when a person is so overcome by fear that he freezes and cannot move. This is not what the text means, because Moses says, "Do not be afraid — stand still." It is not a standstill born of terror or bewilderment.

Second, there is a standing still out of ignorance — not knowing which way to go. This is also not what the text means. Many in our day stand still on this ground, pleading that they do not know what to do — that one side says one thing and another says another, that the King commands one thing and the Parliament another, and they are uncertain which to follow. They ask: is it not rebellion to resist the King? And so they stand still, pleading ignorance and an uninformed conscience. It has been the work of vari-

ous ministers, at great personal risk, to open the counsel of God and set consciences free on this question. Much has been spoken here on this matter — and yet people still blind their own eyes and hide behind ignorance, even after so much light has been given. It is remarkable that any rational person would still speak of rebellion, when we know that the King himself sent aid to the Rochellers — people who took up arms to defend their liberties and religion against their own king, and he helped them. Surely he did not consider them rebels. And King James, in his reply to Byron who attacked the Protestants of France, defended what the Protestants did. Beyond that, we would have to condemn all the Protestant churches of the world as rebels if merely taking up arms is rebellion. We know our own King gave his daughter in marriage to the young Prince of Orange — who is the general of the forces of the States, just as the Earl of Essex is the general of our forces here. The Prince of Orange has been engaged in defending the liberties and religion of his people against the King of Spain, which has been counted to his praise. We desire nothing but the maintenance of our liberty and our religion. Our cause is the same as theirs. And if such actions were rebellion, our King would never have married his daughter to the son of such a rebel. Furthermore, the King himself has acknowledged our brethren in Scotland as loyal and loving subjects. They have done at least as much as we have — indeed more. If their actions are the mark of loyal subjects, how can ours be called rebellion? No one can honestly claim ignorance as a reason to stand still on that basis.

Third, there is a standing still that comes not from ignorance but from something worse: neutrality. This is when a person is well enough informed but deliberately waits to see which side will

prove stronger before committing. They are unwilling to show themselves yet, not knowing which way the balance will tip — but their guiding principle is simply to be on the winning side. Brothers and sisters, we cannot admit of neutrals in times like these. Things have reached too serious a point for anyone to remain neutral. Whatever is not for us at this time can only be counted against us.

Fourth, there is a wicked standing still born of sullenness. This is more particular, and it concerns many men and women who are in some spiritual struggle. While they are seeking God and performing the duties He requires, if they do not find the encouragement their hearts desire, they give up entirely. They sink into a sullen discouragement, stop pursuing their duties, and say: what is the point of going on? I get nothing from it. I am no better off than before. And so they stand still out of sullen despair. The devil is the most discouraged spirit in the world — and yet also the proudest. This kind of standing still out of discouragement may actually come from pride and hardness of heart, even if you think it comes from humility.

Fifth, there is a sluggish standing still — sinful and wicked, when people stand still simply because they are lazy and reluctant to exert themselves or take any trouble to move forward. The sluggard stands still and is quick to seize on any argument that justifies his inaction. Brothers and sisters, this is not the standing still commanded here — to do nothing and be idle. The standing still commanded here comes after we have done everything we are able to do: having acted to the full extent of our ability, we then stand still and commit the work to God, as though we had done nothing at all. That is the standing still intended. A godly minister once said

he would labor to preach as though he expected no divine assistance, and then expect that assistance as though he had not labored at all. In the same way, those in danger should prepare and use every available means as though they expected no further help — and then trust God for help as though they had used none. We must use every means available to us. Consider the brave words of Joab: "Let us be courageous and fight for our cities and for the people of our God, and may the Lord do what is good in His sight." Then he would stand still and look for God's salvation — that is a true standing still, not a sluggish one. It is no hindrance at all to taking every necessary action. All the previous kinds of standing still are wrong.

Sixth, there is an obedient standing still. This is when the hearts of men and women are still and waiting — ready to receive whatever God reveals, and resolved to yield to His will and walk accordingly. It means listening for what the Lord would have us do, with hearts fully surrendered to Him. This is good, and it is part of the meaning — but it is not all.

Seventh, there is a standing still born of faith — a believing standstill. This is when, even in the greatest extremity, having used every available means, I still find myself surrounded by impossible circumstances — and so I choose to exercise faith. First:

The first aspect of a believing standstill is quieting my heart — clearing away those distracting, restless, tumultuous thoughts, and silencing all the murmuring, confusion, and disorder that so often fill the heart in times of danger. By faith I come to quiet these, to get my heart to be still within me. "Be still, O my soul." Scripture expresses this faith-filled waiting on God with a word of silence in Psalm 62:1 and 5: "My soul waits in silence for God" — the Hebrew

word actually means "to be silenced in God." There is often, when danger is sensed, a great inward noise and commotion in people's hearts — everything is in uproar. It is a distressing thing to see a city in full riot and tumult. Many a person's heart is in just as great a turmoil in times of danger as a whole city in a panic. There is an uprising within, a great internal noise. Sometimes, in times of private or public crisis, people manage to keep their tongues silent — but their hearts boil within them. Your hearts must also be silent. You must speak to your heart: be still. When your heart is in a riot, cry "silence" to it, that your thoughts may be composed and settled. That is the meaning of the word: a settled, composed frame of spirit in times of extremity. That is the first aspect.

Second, when standing still is born of faith, it means holding our stations until God calls us out — not running back and forth looking for ways to escape, thinking of nothing but finding safety for ourselves. In times of danger, if we could look into the thoughts of many men and women, we would find they are almost entirely occupied with finding a way out — how to relocate, how to protect themselves. But we should not fill our thoughts with escape plans as much as with quieting our hearts through faith. Brothers and sisters, in times of extreme danger, God calls for courage more than for calculating self-preservation. Prudence is not excluded — but the particular kind of prudence that is called for now is not the prudence that tells you to protect yourself, but the prudence that strengthens and drives courage forward. The great task God calls for at this time is courage, guided by the kind of wisdom that deepens it rather than diminishes it. Hold your station.

But you will ask: in times of danger, may we not flee? Must men hold their stations? Is it not lawful to avoid danger and run? Surely we would be condemning many of our brothers who have fled in times of danger before.

The answer is this: the situation now is very different from what it was before. Previously, the danger was aimed primarily at specific individuals — at particular faithful ministers and godly men who bore the brunt of the opposition, even if there were broader plots behind it. When danger is aimed at particular persons rather than at the godly in general, every lawful means of escape — including flight — is legitimate. But when the danger is aimed at the godly in general, then everyone should hold their station, stay in their place, and add their strength to the public cause. Those who slip away and flee in such a time may rightly expect God to deal with them for it. Consider the contrast between Jeremiah and Urijah: Urijah the priest fled in a time of public danger, was pursued, captured, and put to death; Jeremiah stayed and was preserved. When the danger targets particular individuals, however, nothing in this text forbids flight by legitimate means. Many people criticize lawful flight in dangerous times — often because they themselves want an excuse to avoid the sacrifice, while being happy to let others face the danger they refuse to face. Peter Martyr answered this well with an analogy: a man with a dangerous illness is told by his physicians that he must take strong medicine, or have a limb removed. He refuses, saying he will not be so distrustful of God or so impatient of his present pain as to take such drastic measures — he will trust God and endure quietly. Is he showing greater patience than the man who takes the medicine or agrees to the amputation? No — he is showing weak-

ness of spirit. The other course involves a certain, painful ordeal, but it carries the hope of deliverance from something far worse. Similarly, the objection against flight is that flight itself is a certain great suffering — those who have fled know this well. Some would rather endure a small, uncertain suffering than commit to a certain and heavy one. That is the real reason for the reluctance. But that flight in personal danger is not against faith at all is clear from Scripture. In Matthew 10, Christ says: "When they persecute you in one city, flee to another" — He is speaking of persecution aimed at particular individuals, not at a whole nation. Now people may say: we should trust God and not be afraid — have we not a good cause, and is God not with us? But notice what Christ says immediately after giving the command to flee, in verse 28: "Do not fear those who kill the body." Both can coexist: not fearing those who can kill the body, and yet fleeing from them. Even Christ Himself fled in Matthew 12: when He heard what Herod had done to John, He withdrew Himself. Therefore, in cases of personal danger, fleeing can be fully consistent with faith. But when the persecution is general, we are to stand still and not abandon our station.

The third element of a faith-filled standing still is looking up for God's salvation — expecting a good outcome one way or another. I may not know how salvation will come, but that salvation will come — in one way or another — is what my soul rests on. I do not stand still out of stubborn confidence in my own resources, or because I think I have sufficient means to resist. Whether I have means or not, when I am in the greatest extremity, I can still stand still and look for salvation. "Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord?" — someone might have said to Moses — "What do you mean, salvation? There is nothing before us but destruction." True

— if you look in front of you, behind you, around you, and within yourself, there is nothing but destruction. Yet look up to heaven, and there is salvation. Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord. That is all I have done: opened the text and drawn out what is contained in it. There are four doctrinal points in the text.

First doctrine: when God is moving toward the salvation of His people, He often brings them into great difficulties — even at the very moment He is working salvation for them. Second doctrine: in times of great difficulty, even God's own people are subject to having their hearts overwhelmed with trouble, distracting fears, and anxiety. Third doctrine: it is our duty to stand still, keep quiet, and look for God's salvation in the time of our greatest need. Fourth doctrine: the sight of God's salvation arriving after great difficulty is a glorious sight to behold — "Stand still, and see the salvation of God." Those are the four. Now to the first.

First: when God is moving toward the salvation of His people, He may and often does bring them through very great difficulties first. The situation in our text is a striking example — but consider further how God worked to deliver Israel from their Egyptian bondage, which is a pattern for what God is doing among us now. After they were delivered from Pharaoh and all his army at the sea, you find in chapter 15 — the very next chapter — that they immediately had no water to drink, and the water they found was too bitter to be drunk. As soon as they were out of that crisis, chapter 16 shows them in another just as severe: they had no bread and were near starvation. Moses cried to God, and God delivered them. In the next chapter they were again in equally desperate need — they camped at Rephidim and had no water to drink. I could trace the story throughout the wilderness and show you crisis after crisis,

even while God was working salvation for them. When they came to enter the promised land — though time does not allow me to go through the whole account — they had to cross the Jordan with no bridge, and the text says that at that time the Jordan had overflowed all its banks. It was the worst possible time to cross — yet God delivered them. Once they had crossed, I could show you many more crises, but I will mention only one: in the very first battle the people of God fought in Canaan, they were defeated. They had barely begun fighting for the land when they were driven back at the battle of Ai. Joshua fell on his face before God: "Lord — what is this? After everything we have come through, we fight our first battle and they beat us, and our men flee before them? Now all the peoples of the land will come out against us." If people today have distracting fears, imagine how it would feel to hear that our army had fled before those who came out against us — what panic and confusion that would produce. Yet that is exactly what happened to Israel, even while God was moving in great power to deliver them and bring them into Canaan: at the very first encounter, they were beaten. It would take far too long to trace all the crises that David, Josiah, Jehoshaphat, and Hezekiah faced — I will say just a word about David, because it may be a great help to poor troubled souls in times of need. David was sometimes in such straits that he says he was overwhelmed — Psalm 61, from the very beginning. You will find in Psalm 77:4 that he could not speak. Many suffering souls, when urged to open their hearts to God and others, say: I cannot speak. David was in straits so severe he could not speak — and in Psalm 40:12 he says he could not even look up. He could not so much as lift his eyes to God — such was the depth of his distress. When Israel returned from Babylon, there were mountains

before them. Zechariah 4 records the cry: "What are you, O great mountain, standing before them?" But examples are hardly needed — the pattern is clear: this is how God deals with His people. With the wicked, when God is moving in wrath against them, He often allows them to flourish in the greatest prosperity they have ever known. With His saints, when He is moving toward their salvation, He often lets them sink to the lowest point they have ever reached. Job 20:22 puts it this way: "In the fullness of his sufficiency he will be in distress." What a phrase — the wicked man will be in distress even when he has everything he thinks he needs. But on the other side, a godly man in his greatest distress has a fullness of sufficiency. Second Corinthians 1:5 shows this clearly: "For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ." When suffering abounds, comfort abounds — and more than abounds, for in 2 Corinthians 7:4 Paul says: "I am filled with comfort; I am overflowing with joy in all our affliction." He is in tribulation and great difficulty, yet filled with comfort and overflowing — the word in that text means more than merely joyful, a superabounding joy. Worldly hearts know how to rejoice only in times of prosperity — when they can eat and drink and enjoy themselves. But the saints know how to rejoice, to be filled with joy, to abound in joy, to overflow with joy, even in the midst of tribulation. Just as the wicked are in distress amid their abundance, so when God is moving to comfort His people, they may be in a season of deep affliction — and there is a reason for this.

First reason: when God is moving toward salvation, He humbles His people. When God intends the greatest good for His people and plans to raise them the highest, He is very deliberate about

keeping them low first. This has always been the pattern of God's dealings. You see the reason for Israel's long ordeal in the wilderness stated plainly in Deuteronomy 8:2: "You shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, to humble you." That was the purpose: to humble them. If God is bringing us into difficulties now, it is because He is working salvation for England — doing us good in the end. But He is also bringing us into difficulties, and we can thank the pride of our own spirits for the fact that we have not yet been brought low enough. There have been seasons of fasting and prayer among God's people, seasons of outward humiliation. But the outward expressions have not been matched by truly humble hearts. After such days, many return with spirits as impatient and irritable as before — which clearly shows that the heart has not truly been broken and humbled. And as for the nation as a whole, how far we are from being a humbled people. We are not yet prepared to receive the mercy God intends for us, because we have not been humbled. There is excessive irritability, envy, and pride — and worse — not only among the general population but even among many who are godly and gracious. There is such opposition between brothers, such readiness to drive out anyone who differs on this point or that, that apart from God's restraining hand, many of God's dear servants who differ in some minor point of judgment might face serious suffering — even from fellow believers. That is the hardest kind of suffering. It is not nearly so hard for a godly man to suffer from wicked men as to suffer from another believer. The love and tenderness toward one another that should characterize us is deeply lacking. We have not yet been brought to our knees — and it is fitting, therefore, for God to lay us on our backs for a while, or to

have us with our faces to the ground, confounded in our own thoughts, before the great salvation God intends for us arrives. That is the first reason.

Second reason: God brings His people into difficulties because He delights greatly in the exercise of faith. Faith is among the most glorious things God has ever enabled any creature to do — especially now, when there is so much guilt and weakness in us. It is a more glorious work than Adam ever performed in his innocence: for a poor creature, burdened with guilt, to trust God for good in the midst of every extremity — this is a glorious act, and God is greatly pleased by it. That is why Scripture calls faith "precious faith" in 2 Peter 1:1. God delights to see His creatures active in the capacities He has given them — and when He has placed such a precious grace as faith in the heart, how He delights to see it exercised. For this reason, after making a promise of mercy and salvation, God has often seemed to move in exactly the opposite direction — seemingly working against His own promise — for the sole purpose of exercising faith. Consider Abraham: God made him two promises — that the land would flow with milk and honey, and that his seed would be as numerous as the stars. And how did God work toward those promises? As soon as Abraham arrived in Canaan, he was nearly starving there — is this the land flowing with milk and honey? As for his offspring being as numerous as the stars, Abraham waited twenty years before a child came; Isaac waited forty years; and then Isaac was commanded to be put to death. And though God promised Abraham the land, he never possessed a single foot of it during his lifetime — only a burial plot. Why all of this? To exercise his faith. God promised His Son Christ: "I will give You the nations as Your inheritance, and the

ends of the earth as Your possession" — yet Christ had no place to lay His head, not even what a fox or a bird has. This is God's way: to seem to move in the opposite direction, drawing out that glorious work of faith in which He so greatly delights. Since this present life is the only time for exercising this kind of faith — there will be no faith exercised in heaven in this same way — God, wanting the fullest possible expression of this precious grace, brings His people into difficulties even while He is moving toward their salvation.

Third reason: God delights greatly in the prayers of His people, and He brings them into difficulties in order to draw out those prayers. The voice of prayer is sweet and melodious to God. It is true, God also delights in a voice of praise — but in this present world He prizes prayer especially. Why? Because God's saints will be praising Him forever in eternity, but they will not be praying forever. Since God so greatly delights in the praying voice of His people, and since He knows He will receive great praise when they are delivered from great trouble, it is no wonder He exercises His people through difficulty. What pleases God more than anything else in the created world is the exercise of His people's faith and prayer — and for this reason He brings them into difficulties.

Fourth reason: God brings His people into difficulties in order to expose the wicked. Before He brings His great salvation, He intends to reveal those who are vile and corrupt, so they will not share in that salvation. In our own times, we have seen how every period of difficulty has served to expose many who revealed themselves to be wicked, people we had not known for what they were before. In Luke 2:35 the Lord says: "A sword will pierce through your own soul" — why? "So that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed." Great troubles come, and God's purpose in them is to

expose what is in people's hearts. When God was bringing His people into Canaan, He did not want a rebellious generation entering with them. Much of the trouble in the wilderness came from the mixed multitude that had joined Israel — Numbers 11 makes this plain. In verse 4, when Israel was in distress and murmuring, it was "the mixed multitude among them" who began the craving that infected the whole camp. If wicked people are not exposed before the time of reformation, then when God brings about a full reformation among us and leads us to the Canaan we seek, the mixed multitude would so trouble the church of God that there would be little peace. In mercy, therefore, God will expose them beforehand — He will reveal the mixed multitude before Canaan comes.

Fifth reason: God brings His people into difficulties to give the enemy opportunity to pour out his malice to the full, and for sin to ripen completely before God comes to deliver His people. The wicked are gathered together as a great sacrifice to the Lord. If they will blaspheme, let them blaspheme to the uttermost. In our own day, the greater the difficulties we have been brought into, the greater the blasphemies of the wicked have become. If God were to bring us into still greater difficulties and give our enemies the upper hand, I believe there would be blasphemy in England the like of which the world has never seen — blasphemies the heavens have never heard and the earth has never before witnessed. For the sake of fully ripening their sins and making them conspicuous objects of His judgment in this world, God may yet allow them more power over His people and bring His people into even greater difficulties. And the last reason is:

Sixth reason: the work of Jesus Christ will be the more clearly seen at the end for how great the difficulty was beforehand. Daniel 9:25 says: "He will build up the city even in troublesome times." Anyone can build in times of peace — but in troubled times, Christ will build up His city. And He rules in the midst of His enemies — Christ loves to exercise His rule precisely where opposition is greatest, so that His reign will be all the more visible.

The first application: since this is the case, take heed that your hearts do not sink when difficulties come. Do not ask: why is it like this for us? Do not be quick to conclude against the ways of God — to say that all is lost, that God has abandoned us, that whatever hope people had has come to nothing. God forbid that any of you should harbor such an unbelieving heart, or that such murmuring and complaining words should be heard among you, whatever difficulty you are brought into.

Second doctrine: in these times of difficulty, God's people are deeply troubled. It was so here in the text: at every difficulty they murmured and fell into confusion, and especially at this moment — Moses had to say, "Stand still! What are you doing?" — they were all in panic. As it was then, so it often is with God's saints. Consider Heman, the author of Psalm 88, who was reduced to deep anguish. Yet Heman was one of the wisest men on earth — 1 Kings 4:31 tells us that Solomon was wiser than all men, including Heman, which shows just how wise Heman was. And yet this very wise man was in terrible distress when brought into difficulty. In Isaiah 8, a situation similar to our own is described: there was a great alliance, a confederacy, and many joined together against God's people. At that point, the Lord spoke to the prophet with a strong hand, instructing him not to walk in the fear of the people

— not to say "confederacy" about everything they called a confederacy, and not to fear what they feared (verse 11). God had to speak to the prophet firmly to keep him from being as troubled as everyone else. Indeed, we find that many of God's saints who had been delivered in glorious ways have at other times been overwhelmed, their hearts in confusion, unable to stand before the difficulties they faced. The great example is Elijah in 1 Kings 19. In the previous chapter — chapter 18 — what a spirit Elijah had: he stood before Ahab, called down fire from heaven, destroyed the prophets of Baal, and brought rain on the land. Yet in chapter 19, Jezebel merely threatened him and he turned and ran. After such boldness in one chapter, such panic in the next. This is how it truly is with many people: at times their courage frightens their enemies, and at other times their fear shames their friends. Many have been a terror to their adversaries one day and an embarrassment to their friends the next.

First reason for this: because there is still much of the flesh in the best of us, and we are greatly led by what we can see and feel. Because we are not thoroughly skilled in God's ways, and because the fear of God is so weak in us, the fear of man is strong. We know so little of God's secrets — and the secret of the Lord is with those who fear Him. If we feared God more, we would know more of His hidden ways and be far less troubled.

Second reason: there is a great deal of guilt resting on even the best of us, and guilt makes a person afraid. Where there is much unconfessed and unresolved guilt in the heart, it produces deep trouble in the soul.

Third reason: God's people are too confident in themselves. Because of this self-reliance, God withdraws Himself — and when fear comes upon them, they find they cannot trust God in that moment. David speaks to this beautifully in Psalm 56:3: "What time I am afraid, I will trust in the Lord." Many a person thinks they can trust God — until the moment of actual fear arrives. When the fear rises, the faith disappears. Just as a person may seem meek and patient until a real temptation comes — can you remain meek when your passions are fully provoked? Can you, when your fears and troubles rise to their height, trust in God at that very moment? That is the real test. Because we lean so much on ourselves, when the time comes to trust God, God withdraws Himself and our fear is greatest.

The application: we should each lay our hand on our heart and take this before the Lord with shame. There is not one here who cannot say: I have had such experience of God — of His ways of helping and delivering me through trouble after trouble — and yet the Lord knows that at any new difficulty I am as lost as I ever was, as overcome by fear as ever. Be ashamed of this before the Lord. Yes, God's people may be like this, and you are like this — so let shame drive you to prepare for such times. Those subject to fainting spells carry something with them for the moment of need. So you who have been overwhelmed in times of trouble — lay up something that will help when those times return. A candle may do well enough to carry in a sheltered yard on a calm night, but in the wind you need a torch. What is enough for now may not be enough for times of extremity — lay up more.

First, lay up encouraging promises from Scripture.

Second, lay up encouraging past experiences — memories of God's faithfulness — that will help sustain you in future times of fear and trouble.

Second application: if even God's own saints are so easily overcome by distracting fears and anxieties in times of difficulty, what will become of the wicked and ungodly? When they are brought into distress, how their hearts must sink in horror — because every distress they face is only the beginning of eternal distress. Their present sorrows are making way for eternal sorrows. The only path out of their present difficulty is into something far worse. Consider a woman in labor: she has great pain, but she endures it knowing that relief and joy are coming when the child is born. But consider a woman who is condemned to die and has been reprieved only because she is pregnant. Though she has great pain in labor, she does not want it to end — because the moment she is delivered, she will be executed. If she could remain in labor for seven years, she could be content with the pain, because when it ends something far worse begins. So it is with wicked and ungodly people in their present difficulties: they may as well accept them, because when they are over, something greater and worse will come.

Third doctrine: in times of difficulty, it is our duty to stand still, look for God's salvation, quiet our spirits, and look up to God.

First, concerning the quieting of our spirits.

Just as Israel was to be delivered from Egyptian bondage in this way — by standing still and seeing God's salvation — they were later to be delivered from Babylonian captivity the same way. Isaiah 30:15 says plainly: "In quietness and confidence will be your strength — but you were not willing." God told them that quietness

and confidence would be their strength, and they refused. Come to someone in the depths of distress — a woman wringing her hands, clinging to her husband in fear — and tell her that her strength must lie in quietness and confidence, and she is likely to push you away. "But they would not," God says. And Isaiah 30:7 says: "I cried concerning this: their strength is to sit still." Brothers and sisters, today in the name of God I cry the same concerning all our difficulties: after we have done everything we can, we are to sit still and see the salvation of our God — to quiet our hearts in this believing standstill and look up to God for our salvation. The great failure of Israel in their captivity was that they did not do this. Jeremiah 31:22 puts it memorably: "How long will you go about, O faithless daughter? For the Lord has created a new thing in the earth." What does this mean? In the time of their deliverance from captivity, they met with great difficulties and kept resorting to one shifting scheme or another. When they were on the right path, they would turn back again. The prophet could not get them to hold steady. His message was: go forward on the right path, do not be discouraged by difficulties, do not look for clever escape routes, do not turn back — stand firm in the work God has set before you. "For the Lord has created a new thing" — as if to say: you think your situation is unlike anything before? God has a mercy unlike anything shown before. Many cry out in their difficulties: "My affliction, my distress, is like nothing the world has ever seen!" Very well — even granting that, is there no comfort for them? Yes, there is: Isaiah 64:4 says: "Since the world began, no one has heard nor perceived by ear, nor has the eye seen a God besides You, who acts on behalf of the one who waits for Him." Wait for Him, and the mercy He has laid up for you surpasses anything ever seen in the

world. So even granting that your affliction is the greatest of its kind, there is still every reason to wait and look for the salvation of God, even in your condition.

Let me give some reasons why we are to stand still and be quiet — for by our standing still and quieting our hearts in times of difficulty:

First reason: we are able to look to the wisdom, faithfulness, and power of God. We cannot see or draw upon God's wisdom, faithfulness, and power unless we first get our spirits quiet. Get quiet first, and then you can look up to God. Psalm 46:10 says: "Be still, and know that I am God." There is a God in heaven who can help and sustain in times of the greatest need — but as long as people are in a panic, wringing their hands, crying out in confusion, they cannot know that God is God. They cannot draw on any of His power, goodness, faithfulness, or mercy. First get your heart still and quiet — in your family and in your own spirit — and then you will know that God is God. God will not make Himself known until you are first still.

Second reason: we cannot make use of our own graces until we are quiet. If God has given us grace, but we are in a state of panic, we have no access to that grace at all. Psalm 4 says: "Stand in awe and sin not; commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still." Commune with your own heart — there may be something there that can quiet you. But you cannot commune with your heart until you have quieted it. First be still, then commune. A person with a steady, calm, settled spirit has an enormous advantage over those who are ruled by passion. Many of you are quick to be passionate at other times — and it is partly for that reason that in times of extremity you are so overwhelmed by emotion. Those who

are ruled by the passion of anger at ordinary times are, by God's just ordering, overtaken by the passion of fear in times of crisis. But if at ordinary times you had worked to govern your spirit, God would help you now.

Third reason: without this stillness, we cannot show God the submission we owe Him. Much sin, pride, and stubbornness against God is committed when we refuse to be quiet. The old Latin version of Psalm 4 reads: "My soul, be silent — my soul is subject to God." The submission of our souls to God depends greatly on the quieting of our hearts.

Fourth reason: our reverence for God also depends on this stillness. Psalm 4 again says: "Stand in awe and sin not; commune with your own heart, and be still." For people to behave in the way many do — throwing up their hands, wringing them in panic, making such a commotion — shows that they do not have in their hearts the reverence they owe to God. "Stand in awe" — if your heart were truly gripped by the fear of God, you would not carry on the way many do in times of great danger.

Fifth reason: a troubled, anxious spirit makes a person unfit to hear anything that is spoken to them. Whatever is said to help them, they cannot take it in. Exodus 6:9 describes this exactly: when Moses came to tell the people of Israel about their coming deliverance, "they did not listen to him because of their anguish of spirit." Many in spiritual distress or other kinds of crisis are in such anguish that they cannot hear anything said to them — and they come back with the same objection again and again, even in cases of conscience, a hundred times over.

Sixth reason: without quietness of spirit, you become a powerful hindrance to others. You discourage and unsettle the hearts of those around you. Many times a cause has failed simply because of the panic and instability of men and women in times of danger. Therefore be quiet, and look up to God for salvation. Faith has this excellence: it is able to bring life out of death and light out of darkness — it has a kind of creative power. Just as God brings one opposite out of another, so faith, when it is genuine, has extraordinary power in times of extremity to see God's salvation and draw on it. Consider David when he fled from Saul and hid in the cave. He prayed: "Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me, for my soul takes refuge in You — yes, in the shadow of Your wings I will take refuge." David was hiding in the dark shadow of a cave, the sun not reaching him — yet by faith he looked on himself as sheltered under the shadow of God's wings. You who live perhaps in cellars, in dark corners and lanes, the sun barely reaching you — if you are godly, you are by faith under God's wings.

I will now speak to the second part of the doctrine: that we are to expect salvation from God.

David fled from Absalom — and yet what confidence David had in God in that situation. Read Psalm 3 and you will see both: David fleeing, and David full of confidence in God. I will give several grounds and reasons why we must look up to God as well as be still.

First reason: by looking up to God for salvation, we sanctify His name. The text says: "Do not fear their fear, but sanctify God in your hearts." Without this, you do not sanctify God. Many of you would be horrified to take God's name in vain through outward

swearing — but through your distracting thoughts and your disordered conduct in times of danger, you are also taking God's name in vain and breaking the third commandment.

Second reason: looking up to God in times of extremity demonstrates the beauty and excellence of faith. As David said, "You will see what your servant can do" — now there is much talk of faith, but this is where we see what faith actually accomplishes. The truest expression of love is to love God for Himself alone, apart from His gifts. So the truest expression of faith is to believe God without requiring outward evidence — to trust Him on His word alone. Just as genuine love loves God for Himself, genuine faith takes God at His simple word, without demanding additional securities. When Christians feel they need outward helps and past experiences before they can trust, they are essentially asking for guarantors rather than trusting God on His own word. The excellence of faith is to trust God on His word alone.

Third reason: when we look up to God for salvation, we draw God into our cause. He does not fully own the cause until then — but when we look up in faith, He owns it. How wonderful it would be if we could do this in all our private and personal difficulties: stand still and look up to God for help and salvation. It is true — you may cry out that you have lost a dear husband or a dear friend, unlike any you have ever known, and that you are brought into great difficulties. But do not lose the quietness of your heart as well. That is a greater loss than any loss this world can bring. A philosopher once said that if the gods would grant him one wish, he would ask for the composed spirit of Socrates — who was observed to barely change his expression regardless of what befell him, always remaining in a quiet, settled frame of mind. And he

was only a pagan. How much more should a Christian say: if God would grant me one thing, that is what I would ask — for there is great glory and beauty in a composed spirit. This is worthy of the Gospel. Notice what the apostle says in Philippians 1:27: "Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that... I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit." To stand firm in one spirit — that is what it means to walk worthy of the Gospel. And observe: unless we stand firm and quiet our hearts, we lose every resource that should be helping us. When we are in an inner uproar, grasping desperately for help, we lose all our help. Philippians 4 says: "Let the peace of God guard your hearts" — the word in the original means to stand guard. The peace of God in your hearts is the best guard for your hearts in times of danger. And in your attempt to escape trouble, you cast away that guard — how great a madness. To cast away the peace of God is to throw away your guard. Keep it, whatever else you lose. Indeed, it is your armor. Consider what Ephesians 6 says the armor of a Christian consists of: the belt of truth — but fear loosens the heart and a man cannot gird himself; the helmet of salvation — but in fear, hope vanishes; the breastplate of righteousness — but in fear, a man has no use of his righteous conduct; the sword of the Spirit — useless in such distracting fear. Do not lay down your armor. It is striking how many times in Ephesians 6 the Holy Spirit calls us to stand: verse 10, "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might"; verse 11, "Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand"; verse 13, "Take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand." Four times we are called to stand. Our great advantage lies in standing. Yes, our difficulties are great — and the soul says, "The

Lord is my portion," even while temptations and afflictions seem to say otherwise. It is good to reason with yourself: I am full of sin, yet I am troubled by every difficulty and overcome with fear at every trouble that comes upon me. Why will I not yield to God's providential will as I yield to His commanding will? How do I know but that God may have glorious purposes to work out through these very extremities? Why will I not give myself up to God to do with me as He wills? Has He not already delivered me from far greater difficulties — from the wrath and justice of God itself? Those were far greater difficulties than what I now face. And if I do not trust God now but give way to anxiety, perhaps these present troubles will only lead to greater ones. It is fitting for God to let those fall into the difficulty of sin who cannot bear the difficulty of affliction. Therefore let me stand still and look up to God for salvation. Let our difficulties drive us to God in prayer — pray as much as you can, but keep your heart in a quiet frame. If your prayers are right, they will be to you what Luther said his prayers were to him: like leeches drawing out corruption. Luther had many corrupt cares — as a diseased body has corrupt blood — but his prayers were the means of drawing them out. When you are in distress, go to prayer, and then examine how much corrupt anxiety has been drawn out of your heart. As Hannah, after she had prayed, looked no more sad. There are many things I had hoped to share to steady your hearts in times of extremity. Let me close with this: "Perfect peace" is for the one whose heart is stayed on God — blessed is the person who stays his heart on God. If ever people had cause to stay their hearts on God, we certainly do now, for God is with us. It is unworthy of a Christian to have a disordered spirit. I recall reading that when Hannibal was at the very gates of Rome,

the Romans continued buying and selling land as calmly as at any other time — their hearts were that composed. When Antigonus was told of the vast multitude coming against him, he replied: how many do you count me for? So we may say: we hear of many thousands coming against us — but how many do you count Jesus Christ for? He is the Captain of all our forces. Have not prayers been sent up to God? Why do you despise the prayers of God's saints, as if they count for nothing? Is not God's own name engaged in this cause? Therefore stand still and do not be afraid. Let me speak a particular word to those of you who are naturally timid and fearful. Isaiah 35:4 says: "Say to those who are anxious of heart, 'Take courage, fear not.'" Do not excuse yourself by saying you are just a fearful person by nature. God says: say to those of a fearful heart, Fear not. And let me speak especially to women, for the Holy Spirit addresses this in 1 Peter 3:4-6: women should adorn themselves with a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight; and as Sarah obeyed Abraham and called him lord, "whose daughters you are if you do good and are not frightened by any fear." What does it mean to be daughters of Sarah on those terms? This: Abraham was brought into difficult circumstances many times, called away from his own country. Now, if Sarah had been like many women today, how she would have hindered Abraham at every difficulty he faced. She might have said: why are we leaving our country and our family? Why are we brought into such trouble? Please, husband, let us go back — do not put yourself at such risk. But Sarah was of a gracious spirit: she quieted herself in God and was not overcome by fear. If you would show yourselves to be daughters of Sarah, do the same: when God calls your husbands to some service that involves risk, do not hang

about their necks, wring your hands, and say: please, husband, consider what will become of me and the children — will you really leave us now? Take heed: at a time like this, if you hinder your husbands, you are not acting as daughters of Sarah.

Fourth doctrine: the sight of salvation after difficulty will be a glorious thing. If we are brought into difficulties, what is coming will more than repay everything. Do not be troubled by whatever difficulties may yet lie ahead. Suppose blood is shed — God has such mercy prepared for England that it will be worth all the blood of His saints that is shed. The blood of His people is precious. Every drop of the blood of God's people is of great value. The adversary will be held accountable for every drop — God will weigh it carefully, and a full reckoning will be given for every drop of blood. And the greater the difficulties we pass through in obtaining the mercy God is about to give, the greater that mercy will be. Isaiah 54:11 says: "O afflicted one, storm-tossed and not comforted, behold, I will set your stones in antimony, and your foundations I will lay in sapphires." If we are afflicted and tossed in storms, and the blood of God's people is part of the cost — comfort yourselves with this: the more precious blood that is shed in this cause, the greater the mercy that is to come. God will give a full and worthy reckoning for every drop of the blood of His saints.

The End.

THANKS FOR READING



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