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“Search the Scriptures” John 5:39

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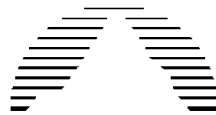
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Studies in the Scriptures appeared without interruption from 1922 to 1953, each issue including six to eight articles addressing a different topic in a series. While virtually unknown to the Christian world when he died, his writings continue to grow in their influence upon God's people around the world, through their clarity, careful exposition, and Christ-centeredness.

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THE CHRISTIAN OUTLOOK

The outlook of the natural man is bounded by the things of time and sense. Necessarily so: Being alienated from God and devoid of spiritual life, his interests are narrowed to this sphere, and where his treasure is, there will his heart be also. To "succeed" in this life, to obtain for himself a position of power and prestige in this perishing world, is as far as his ambitions go. To eat, drink, and be merry is the highest ideal of the vast majority of our fellows. Being of the world—as well as in it—the portion of the unregenerate I confined thereto. If his immediate portion be a disappointing one, he lives in hope of improving the same. And what is true of each of its units holds good of the whole: The world may not yet be the paradise they long for, yet they indulge in the wishful thinking that ere long a Golden Age will dawn.

There is much speculation and theorizing upon what is needed to usher in that Golden Age. Many have held that the only thing which obstructed it was some particular form of government, under which they lived: A government which confined the good things of this life to the privileged classes and withheld them from the labouring masses. In support of that theory, force has often been employed, ancient monarchies being overthrown, and republics taking their place. Every form of government that human wit could devise has been tried out: Absolute monarchy, limited monarchy, aristocratic rule, republicanism, democracy, communism—only to find that human nature remained unchanged and discontented as ever. More recently, it was said that Utopian conditions would eventually be reached by a natural process of evolution—that as civilization advanced, things would automatically improve. But such a chimera has been rudely shattered by the world tragedies of our own lifetime.

Others have pinned their faith to what is generally thought of as somewhat vaguely called "Religion." Its leaders and advocates have felt that the world is suffering from something more serious and radical than surface disorders, and therefore, that the remedy must deal with what is wrong within. They realise that it is sin which lies at the root of the world's miseries and sufferings, and they aver that religion is the only power which can overcome sin. There are, however, even more brands of religion than there are political philosophies, each one claiming to be the best, if not the only, panacea for all the world's ailments. The devotees of each of these types of religion hold to the idea that if only a sufficient number of their fellows can be induced to endorse their particular creed and adopt their mode of life, there would soon be a vast improvement—that selfishness and injustice would be replaced by righteousness, that wars and wretchedness would give way to peace and happiness.

But the Christian outlook is entirely different from that of either the profane or the religious worldling. Having had his eyes opened to see his own native depravity and made to feel the plague of his own heart, he is under no delusion concerning the state of his fellows. He knows from painful experience that the disease from which his fellows are suffering is far too desperate for any human means to alleviate—still less, to cure—and that priests and Levites are of no avail for the half-dead traveler on life's highway. He realises that all mankind lie under the curse of a holy and sin-hating God, and therefore, that "destruction and misery are in their ways: And the way of peace have they not known" (Rom 3:16-17). If his thoughts be regulated by the Word of Truth, he knows that "the whole world lieth in wickedness" (1Jo 5:19), and therefore, that the Ethiopian will sooner change his skin, or the leopard his spots, than that it should be capable of any change for the better.

"Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness" (2Pe 3:13). *There* is "The Christian outlook"! That "Nevertheless" is in view of what is stated in the preceding verses. There, we are told that "the heavens [the stellar and atmospheric heavens] shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up" (2Pe 3:10, and partly repeated in verse 12). We do not propose to now cross swords with either those who deny, or affirm, there is yet to be a "Millennium" (on that subject, the writer has no definite opinion); rather do we here call attention to the Divinely-revealed fact that at the close of human history—and in our judgment, no one on earth has or can have even an approximate idea of when that will be—this earth, and all its works, is going to be (not renovated nor purified, but) totally and finally destroyed. *That* will be the end of all the much-vaunted and admired productions of man.

But though the whole of this scene is doomed to destruction, so far from being dismayed and overwhelmed by such a prospect, Christians direct their gaze to something beyond and yet future, and "according to his promise, look for *new* heavens and a *new* earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness" (2Pe

3:13). The poor worldling has nought better than his own wishful thinking on which to base his hope of a coming Golden Age. The Christian, who not only knows that this world is going to perish when it has served its Maker's purpose, but has the definite promise of One who cannot lie that the present mundane system is going to be replaced by a new earth (which will endure not merely for a thousand years, but forever), in which sin shall never enter, but wherein righteousness shall dwell—and as the result thereof, where everlasting peace, blessing, and felicity shall obtain.

“We—whose eyes have been anointed with Divine salve and whose hearts rest upon the infallible Word of God (in such passages as Isaiah 65:17; 66:22)—look—with a spiritual vision—for new heavens and a new earth.” We look with the eyes of *faith*, which are able to see Objects invisible to physical sight (Heb 11:27) and behold things whose actualization lies in the future, rather than in the present (Heb 11:1). We look with the eyes of *hope*—not of a mere wishful expectation, but of a confident anticipation of what God will surely bring to pass. We look with the eyes of happiness, as Abraham looked forward to the day of Christ, “saw it, and was glad” (Joh 8:56). We look with the eyes of *contentment*—for the new heavens and earth wherein dwelleth righteousness will satisfy every holy longing and be the summum bonum of all pure desire. Yes, we look beyond the bounds of time to the glorious horizon of eternity.

As the unregenerate behold with horror the devastated cities of Europe and the rubble of what was not long ago its most venerated monuments (and the child of God cannot contemplate such ruins unmoved), as they look with faltering hearts after those things which they very much fear are soon to come upon the earth; as we are now witnessing the demolishing of Dagon—what man has termed “our Christian civilization”—the eye of faith looks for that which the Lord God shall yet call into existence, which will witness the consummation of His purpose and be the grand finale of redemption. “Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless” (2 Pe 3:14)—*that* is the practical application. O that grace may be granted both writer and reader to heed it.

THE PRAYERS OF THE APOSTLES

27. *Ephesians 3:14-21, Part 3*

“That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God” (Eph 3:16-19). What a prayer is this! As it was an apostle, one who in some respects was the most highly favoured of the apostles who made those petitions, so it requires one with his deep spiritual experience to open unto us the sublime contents of them. Far more than strength of intellect, or even exegetical skill, is required in opening up such a portion of the Scriptures as this—namely, spirituality of mind, elevation of heart, the soul in close communion with God. In proportion as the expositor realises that, will he be conscious of his own unfitness for such a task. Yet, since it pleases God to employ the most unlikely and unworthy instruments to the praise of the glory of His grace, we can but cast ourselves upon Him and hope He will deign to make some use of our feeble pen.

“That he would grant you...to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man” (Eph 3:16). That is the first great need, alike of the writer and of the reader, and happy for us if we be truly aware thereof. As none—but the Spirit of God—could impart spiritual life unto our souls, so He alone can maintain that life. It is true that, for the most part, the Spirit works by our concurrence, or blessing unto us the means of grace, as we make proper use of the same; yet, it is also true that it is the Spirit who first works in us the desire and the diligence in using those means, and it is only by His gracious operations in subduing our native pride that we are preserved from being complacent with our diligence. We are entirely dependent upon Him to strengthen that gracious principle, which He communicated to us at the new birth for the exercise and employment of it. If it be true that, naturally, “in him we live, and move, and have our being” (Act 17:28), it is nonetheless so spiritually, even as Christians, that we may have a deeper realisation of that, and conduct ourselves accordingly.

Expositors differ as to exactly what we are to understand by “the inner man” (Eph 3:16)—whether the reference be only to “the new nature” or principle of grace and holiness, or whether it includes the soul with all its faculties. Personally, we would define it as the soul, so far as it is renewed by Divine grace. The body, considered separately, is not the subject of moral good or evil—it is the soul which is the seat of all moral qualities. It is true that in many passages, indwelling sin or the principle of evil in fallen man is denominated “the flesh,” yet it must be borne in mind that the Scriptures speak of “the carnal *mind*” (Rom 8:7), and among its “works” or products, mentions “hatred, variance, emulations” (Gal 5:19-21), which are more than physical passions. When the apostle said, “For I delight in the law of God after the inward man” (Rom 7:22), he undoubtedly referred to the new nature within him, and when he added, “But I see [perceive] another law [or principle law of operation] in my members [the faculties of his soul], warring against the law of my mind” (Rom 7:22-23), he had in mind his native depravity.

Thus “the inner man” (Eph 3:16) signifies the soul, so far as it is renewed—for the principle of evil, or our original corruption, remains unchanged. That renewing consists of a supernatural enlightenment of the understanding, so that things are now viewed in God’s light; the spiritualizing of the affections, so that they are now drawn out unto new objects, and the heart is engaged with God; the freeing of the will from the dominion of sin, and the inclining of it unto holiness. In addition to that renewing and sublimating of the original faculties of the soul, there is communicated a new “spirit,” or principle of grace—a new life. Let it be recognised that what takes place at regeneration is but the *beginning* of God’s good work in the soul, and that the same work is “performed” or continued throughout the Christian life (Phi 1:6). We *are* “renewed” (Col 3:10), but there is also “the renewing of the Holy Ghost” (Ti 3:5), for “though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day” (2Co 4:16); yea, the Divine promise is: “I will water it every moment: lest any hurt it, I will keep it night and day” (Isa 27:3).

That continual renewing is necessitated by the incessant opposition made by indwelling sin, ever seeking to possess and direct the faculties of our soul, and because the new nature received at the new birth is but a *creature*—entirely dependent upon its Author. It is, therefore, both the duty and the privilege of the believer to turn unto that Author for a daily quickening and energizing, begging Him to strengthen him with might by His Spirit in the inner man, pleading His promise, “But they that wait upon the LORD shall

renew their strength” (Isa 40:31), until he is enabled to say, “But truly I am full of power by the spirit of the LORD” (Mic 3:8). It is, then, the vitalizing of the soul as the dwellingplace and organ of the Holy Spirit: the soul in its entirety, including all its faculties—intellectual, emotional, moral. It is also a request for the invigorating of the graces of the new man “in all holy dispositions: in faith reverential fear, love, gratitude, hatred of sin, hope, patience, that we might be steadfast amid temptations and persecutions, enjoy comfort, and glorify God in every situation and duty” (Thomas Scott, 1747-1821).

“In the day when I cried thou answeredst me, and strengthenedst [*rahab*] me with strength [better ‘might’—*oz*] in my soul” (Psa 138:3). *There* is the verse of the Old Testament, which is parallel with the petition of Ephesians 3:16, and as the “strengthened [*krataioo*] with might [*dunamis*]” exactly corresponds with the two Hebrew words, so “the inner man” is defined as “my soul.” David was in sore straits—walking “in the midst of trouble,” encountering the wrath of his enemies (Psa 138:7), and conscious of his own insufficiency, God responded and afforded him relief by strengthening the faculties of his soul and animating the grace of his “new man.” The effect of that strengthening would be courage, fortitude, spiritual heroism. The Spirit can make the feeble mighty, the trembler brave, and the weary cheerful. “He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength” (Isa 40:29).

But we must now consider more closely the relation of this first petition unto what immediately follows. The apostle yearned for an increased measure of grace to be granted the saints and for their spiritual abilities to be enlarged—not in this instance with a view to the performance of the outward acts of obedience and duty, but that the believing soul might be empowered to enjoy its spiritual portion and privileges. He longed that Christians might be more habituated to living by faith on Christ, so that He might be in them not by transient visits, but abide constantly in their thoughts and affections; and that thereby, they would be established in joy and abounding fruitfulness. He longed that they might not only have love, but be “rooted and grounded” (Eph 3:17) therein, so that their communion with Christ might be a steady experience, rather than an occasional luxury. But such is our native weakness for contemplating heavenly objects, that without continued grace preparing us thereunto, they would be altogether beyond our reach. We need the wind of Heaven to blow our barques forward.

That ye may be “strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man” (Eph 3:16) is here a request for the communication of energizing enablement that we may be fully absorbed with Christ. As the Christian owes his new life or nature to the Spirit, so it is by His power alone, it can be vigorous and flourishing. It is only by His strengthening of the heart that we are delivered from being engrossed by the things around us, and our earth-bound affections are drawn unto things above. He it is who creates the desire for Christ, who shows us the things of Christ, who causes us to make Him the grand subject of our spiritual meditations. So, too, it is only by the supernatural quickening of the Spirit that we can be girded for that extraordinary effort of mind, if we are to be “able to comprehend...And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge” (Eph 3:18-19). And beyond any peradventure, it is only by the operations and influences of the gracious Spirit that we may be “filled with all the fulness of God” (Eph 3:19). And that quickening, enablement, and girding, we are to daily seek from Him.

“That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith” (Eph 3:17) is the second petition. We certainly do not agree with Charles Hodge (1797-1878) when he says on this verse: “The indwelling of Christ does not differ from what is expressed in the preceding verse, further than as indicating the source or nature of that spiritual strength of which that verse speaks. When Paul prayed that his readers might be strengthened in the inner man, he prayed that Christ might dwell in them.” It seems strange that one of his perspicuity should confound things that differ and reduce unto a single request what the apostle so distinctly made two separate petitions. But one error always involves another, and unsoundness in any doctrine necessarily issues in unsound exegesis of a verse which involves that doctrine. And that leads us to point out what we cannot but consider a serious mistake made by many excellent men on the doctrine of Christ’s indwelling of His people—namely, that He does so *only by proxy*—that Christ does not personally reside in His saints, but indwells them only by His Spirit.

Hodge went on to say: “Christ’s being in us means that we have His Spirit, and to have His Spirit means that the Spirit of God dwells in us. When, therefore, the apostle speaks of Christ dwelling in our hearts, he refers to the indwelling of the Holy Ghost, for Christ dwells in His people by His Spirit.” That is the view held by the majority of orthodox theologians—yet that, by no means, proves it to be Scriptural. “If Christ be in you the body is dead” (Rom 8:10), “know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobate?” (2Co 13:5), “Christ liveth in me” (Gal 2:20), “Christ in you the hope of

glory” (Col 1:27). In view of those clear and repeated declarations, and in the absence of any statement in Holy Writ that “Christ...by his Spirit that dwelleth in you” (Rom 8:11), is it not the height of presumption for any man to aver that Christ does not personally indwell His people, but only resides in them by His deputy? Let no one rob us of the comfort of such promises as Matthew 18:20 and 28:20 by evacuating the “I” of its blessedness.

We readily grant that we are treating of a realm that is beyond the compass of any created mind, yet that does not warrant us in denying God’s Word. We freely admit that the God-man Mediator does not indwell the saints, for His humanity is localized in Heaven. But Christ is, essentially, a Divine person, co-equal with the Father and the Spirit, and in becoming flesh, the Word lost none of His Divine attributes. Omnipresence pertains as much to Him now as it did before He became incarnate, and as a Divine person, He indwells His people as really and truly as do the other persons of the Godhead. God the Father dwells in His children: If 1 John 4:12-15 be read attentively, it will be seen that in that passage, “God” clearly has reference to the *Father*. The Holy Spirit dwells in the saint individually, and in the Church corporately: Romans 8:8, 11; 1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19; and God the Son dwells in believers. When it was said, “God is in you of a truth” (1Co 14:25), it is to be understood of the Triune God.

Yet it is not only in the sense that He is omnipresent that Christ indwells His people. When we read, “Do not I fill heaven and earth? saith the LORD” (Jer 23:24), that refers alike to the omnipresence of each Person in the God-head. But when we are told that the infinite God “dwellest in the heavens” (Psa 123:1), “among the children of Israel” (Num 35:34), “in Zion” (Psa 9:11), “with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit” (Isa 57:15), it signifies a particular appropriation, where He is specifically manifested. “Surely He that dwells as He is God, in common in all creatures, His person and Godhead may well be thought to dwell in us by a special appropriated habitation ‘over his own house; whose house are we,’ says the apostle in Hebrews 3:6; yea, and not only His own ‘house,’ but His ‘body’ also.” Pointedly did Thomas Goodwin (1600-1679) also ask, “Can Satan, because he is a spirit, possess the bodies, and even the hearts of men; and cannot Christ, who as God is ‘Spirit’ (Joh 4:24), do the same?”

“What! Hath the addition of the manhood unto His person made that person, as He is God, incapable of dwelling in us immediately, as well as the person of the Spirit? Is He disprivileged thereby, whereas indeed by reason of His relation to us as God-man, it is that He doth dwell in us anyway? It has also seemed somewhat strange to me that He that is ordained to be the means of our union with God, and is the prime object and *terminus* of our union, the designed Bridgroom that is to be married, the person to be in conjunction with us: ‘That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us’ (Joh 17:21-23): That He also is the person in whom, and by whom, the union is effected with Himself and the other two Persons, and is the Person most concerned in this matter of union, that Himself should be married and come to be in His nearest conjunction with us only by a proxy, namely, by the Holy Spirit, and Him to be sent into our hearts only to dwell in His stead—that were indeed strange” (T. Goodwin).

Having sought to clear away this stumbling-stone concerning Christ’s indwelling His people, we must consider more closely the meaning of our petition. That Christ personally and immediately inhabits His people is a blessed fact, and therefore, there is no need to make request for the same. But over and above that, the apostle here prayed, “That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith” (Eph 3:17), by which we understand him to mean that by spiritual meditations upon and loving contemplations of His complex person, His glorious titles, His mediatorial offices, His precious promises, His wise precepts, He may have a constant place—the supreme place—in our thoughts and in our affections. That for which the apostle prayed was that the saints might have a spiritual sight of Christ, a spiritual knowledge of Him, a spiritual enjoyment of Him, so that He is *present* and precious to the soul; and that can only be by the exercise of faith upon Him, as He is revealed in the Scriptures. It is for the heart to be affected with the excellency of His person, with His love and grace, with His blood and righteousness.

It is an *objective* dwelling of Christ in the heart, which our text refers to—as the subjects which engage our thoughts obtain a dwelling-place in our minds, and as the objects of our love secure a place in our affections. As the eye beholds an object, an image of it is introduced and impressed upon the mind; and as the eye of the spirit—faith—is engaged with Christ, an image of Him is formed on the heart. The sun is stationed in the heavens, yet when we gaze upon it steadily, an image of it is formed upon the retina of the eye. As by opening the door or the window, the sun shines directly into our rooms, so by the exercise of faith upon Him, Christ obtains a real presence in our hearts. Christ is the grant Object of faith; and faith is the faculty whereby we—through the light of the Word and the power of the Spirit—receive and take into

our renewed minds the knowledge of His person and perfections. Thereby, He is admitted into our hearts, and we have real communion with Him.

As the fancy or that faculty of the mind by which it records and represents *making to appear* past images or impressions, forming a picture of them in the mind is an aid to our natural knowledge in the understanding of natural things; much more so does faith help our spiritual knowledge of Divine things—giving a real subsistence to them in the soul. The beholding of Christ is not by way of fancy, but by faith giving a subsistence to Him, so that the heart finds a reality of what it believes; yea, it has so great an influence and leaves such an impression that it changes the heart into the same image (2Co 3:18). Faith, by the Spirit, makes Christ a living actuality. Moreover, faith produces love, and then worketh by it, so that the object of faith is sealed upon the heart. As Christ was received by faith at first, so by the same principle of faith, we continue to receive out of His fulness, to feed upon Him and to commune with Him. And as the mind is exercised with believing meditations upon Christ, we give Him entertainment in our hearts.

“That he would grant you...to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith” (Eph 3:16-17). Cannot the reader now perceive more clearly the relation between those two petitions? There is no exercise of faith upon Christ apart from, and except by, the operations of the gracious Spirit within the believer’s soul. Said the Lord Jesus, “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him” (Joh 6:44). To “come” to Christ is the same as to “believe” on Him as verse 35 of the same chapter shows; and none can come or believe, unless his heart be drawn to Christ by the Father—and that “drawing” He does both personally and by the operations of His Spirit. True, John 6:44 has reference to our initial coming to or believing on Christ, yet we are equally dependent upon the Spirit for every subsequent exercise of faith. Thus, we read of “faith of the operation of God” (Col 2:12), and of Paul praying that God would “fulfil all the good pleasure of his goodness, and the work of faith with power” (2Th 1:11)—i.e., His power. Thus, the principal effect of our being strengthened by the Spirit is that our hearts are drawn out unto Christ, and our faith is exercised upon Him.

As the Spirit is from Christ (Joh 15:26; Act 2:33), so the great mission of the Spirit is to direct souls to Christ (Joh 16:14-15). If He first convicts of sin, it is but to convince of our need of a Saviour. If He communicates to us a new nature, it is that that new nature may be absorbed with Christ. If He strengthens us, it is in order that faith may act upon Christ. As the Spirit never acts but in and through Christ with respect to His people, so Christ is never received but by and with the influences of the Spirit. They are as undivided in Their operations, as in Their essence. A man cannot truly believe in Christ but by the power of the Holy Spirit, nor can a man have the Spirit who does not truly believe in Christ. There is a reciprocity in the two Divine offices which illustrate and magnifies Both, and for which respecting the Divine glory, They were covenanted and undertook. Christ is the Fountain of life, and the Holy Spirit is the Water of life. From that Fountain (Abrose Serle “*Horae Solitariae*”), and His watering of the soul is to fit it to act faith on Christ.

It is far too little realised by the majority of Christians that they are just as wholly dependent upon the gracious operations of the Spirit within them as they are upon the meritorious righteousness of Christ without them; and therefore, they need to seek unto God and count upon the enablings of the Former as definitely and as constantly as they trust in and rely upon the finished work of the Latter. As they are completely devoid of anything to commend themselves unto the notice of the Lord, so they are equally without any power of their own to serve and glorify Him, now that He has deigned to look upon and recover them from their lost estate. It is because of their helplessness that He has bestowed the Holy Spirit upon them—to maintain life in their souls and to draw forth that life into suitable exercise and action. Yet, it is both our privilege and duty to concur therein: Recognizing our dependency on His agency, avoiding those things which grieve Him, and seeking His daily renewings. “For I know that this shall turn to my salvation through your prayer, and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ” (Phi 1:19)—a fresh supply of the Spirit comes to us in response to prayer!

Until he has learned his dependency upon the Spirit’s workings within him, until he personally realises his urgent need of “a fresh supply of the Spirit”—and being daily renewed by Him—the Christian will not, and cannot, make any true spiritual progress: Faith upon Christ will not be operative, love for Him will not be warm and regular, communion with Him will not be enjoyed. That is why this request for the saints to be strengthened with might by the Spirit in the inner man precedes the other petitions. Christ has an objective and influential dwelling in our hearts, only as faith is kept in exercise upon Him and as our affections are set upon Him. As Christ was received by faith at first, so it is by the same faith we delight ourselves in Him, feed upon Him, have fellowship with Him, and draw from His fulness. But our faith is exercised by

us, only in proportion as we are first strengthened within by the Spirit. Faith is indeed an act of *ours*, yet it does not act by or from anything *of ours*—but only as it is stirred into action by the Spirit.

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JOSHUA

7. His Commission (1:7-9)

We turn now to the closing portion of the great commission which Joshua received from the Lord. We have already seen that it came to him after the death of Moses, and that it was concerned with Israel's conquest and occupation of the land of Canaan (Jos 1:1-4). We have contemplated the blessed assurances which Jehovah gave unto His servant, for the comforting of his heart and the strengthening of his hands (Jos 1:5). We have pondered the general injunction which God laid upon the new leader of His people (Jos 1:6), and sought to show its meaning and timeliness. We have also noted the particular application which the Lord made of that injunction unto Joshua, in requiring that he should be very courageous in regulating all his actions by the statutes He had given through Moses, and placed on permanent record as an authoritative Rule for all who should succeed him; and how that He enjoined implicit and undeviating obedience from him (Jos 1:7), and endeavoured to indicate the very real and practical bearing all of that has upon our spiritual lives today. In what we are now to ponder, we learn what more was demanded of Joshua in order to ensure a successful realisation of all the foregoing.

"This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success" (Jos 1:8). Joshua was to be guided and governed wholly by the written Word, which was something unprecedented, unique. No man before Joshua had received orders from God to regulate his conduct by the Words of a *Book*. True, Abram and his household obeyed God's voice in keeping His commandments and His statutes (Gen 26:5). Moses, too, had acted by Divine authority, but each had received his instructions from the mouth of the Lord. But Joshua, and all who succeeded him, must be governed by "this book of the law" (Jos 1:8). It is remarkable that Joshua and the Book come before us together without any introduction in the same passage: "And the LORD said unto Moses, Write this for a memorial in a book, and rehearse it in the ears of Joshua" (Exo 17:14)—the Book was prepared for Joshua; Joshua came to fulfill the words of the Book. The typical significance of that is at once apparent.

Let it be carefully noted that God's Word, from its very first appearance as a book, occupies the same position—namely, the position of unqualified *supremacy*. It was set above Joshua: All his actions were to be regulated by it. Let us also observe that the authority of this Book is quite independent of its quantity or size. "The law of Moses," "Moses, and in the prophets," "The law...the prophets, and in the psalms" (Luk 24:44) are descriptions of the same Book, differing in the quantity of its matter, but not differing in its authority, nor in its relation to the people of God. "Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy" (Rev 1:3) is a declaration that applies with equal force to the Holy Scriptures in every stage of their compilation, from the opening chapters of "The Book of the Law" till the completion of the Sacred Canon. Let us further remark that in this first title given to the Bible in its earliest form, we have emphasised its leading characteristic: It contains more than good advice or salutary counsel—it is a "Law" binding upon us, a Law clothed with Divine authority, a Rule for us to walk by.

"This Book of the Law" comprised the entire Pentateuch, the first five books (or chapters) of the Old Testament. It is not "these books of the Law," for all through the Old Testament, those five books are regarded as a unit. Now, it is very rare indeed that we turn aside and pay any attention to the ravings of sceptics and infidels, but on this occasion, we will depart from our custom. It is one of the many erroneous allegations of the self-styled "Higher Critics" that the Pentateuch was not written by Moses, but was composed at a very much later date—some say, in the time of king Manasseh; others, not until the days of Ezra. But over against this assertion stands the fact that a definite "Book" is spoken of all through the Old Testament as being constantly appealed to, with directions how it was to be preserved; and it should be of interest to our readers if we briefly outline the references to the same. The first mention of this "Book" is as stated above, in Exodus 17:14; and there, we see it was written by Jehovah's command, and (in the Hebrew) is designated "*the Book*."

"And Moses wrote all the words of the LORD...And he took the book of the covenant, and read in the audience of the people" (Exo 24:4, 7) tells who was its first penman. "And Moses wrote their goings out according to their journeys by the commandment of the LORD" (Num 33:2); and if we compare Deuteronomy 1:2, 3 and 2:14, it will be found that those "journeys" were from the early part of the first year after

Israel came out of Egypt, until the end of the thirty-eighth. “And Moses wrote this law, and delivered it unto the priests the sons of Levi” (Deu 31:9) entrusting it to their custody, and verse 26 of the same chapter informs us he bade the Levites, “Take this book of the law, and put it in the side of the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, that it may be there for a witness against thee” (Deu 31:26). It is clear from verse 19 that copies were made of parts of it at least, but the standard copy was preserved in the side of the ark, which vessel was kept in the holy of holies. From that Standard copy, each king of Israel was required to “write him a copy of this law in a book out of that which is before the priests the Levites” (Deu 17:18).

Once every seven years, the whole of the Book of the Law was to be read in the hearing of the entire congregation. “And Moses commanded them, saying, At the end of every seven years, in the solemnity of the year of release, in the feast of tabernacles, When all Israel is come to appear before the LORD thy God in the place which he shall choose, thou shalt read this law before all Israel in their hearing...that they may learn, and fear the LORD your God, and observe to do all the words of this law” (Deu 31:10-13). This was the Book by which Joshua was to be regulated. At a later date, the Spirit moved him to write therein (Jos 24:26), as Samuel also added portions thereto (1Sa 10:25). It was *this* Book that David had in mind when he prayed “teach me thy statutes,” “order my steps in thy word” (Psa 119:12, 133). When David drew nigh unto death, he gave this commission unto Solomon: “And keep the charge of the LORD thy God, to walk in his ways, to keep his statutes, and his commandments...as it is written in the law of Moses, that thou mayest prosper in all that thou doest” (1Ki 2:3).

Alas, Solomon failed to heed that injunction, following too much the evil devices of his heart. The decline which began in his reign accelerated and continued many generations, and during that time, “this book of the law” was lost to the people. In the days of Josiah, the high priest “found the book of the law in the house of the LORD” (2Ki 22:8), for *He* had guarded and preserved it despite Israel’s apostasy; and the godly king himself read “all the words of the book of the covenant” in the hearing of a vast assembly (2Ki 23:2-3). Later, we find Ezra doing the same thing (Neh 8:1, 8; 13:1). Daniel made reference to this Book: “The curse is poured upon us, and the oath that is written in the law of Moses the servant of God, because we have sinned against him” (Dan 9:11). While the very last chapter of the Old Testament contains this injunction, “Remember ye the law of Moses my servant, which I commanded unto him in Horeb for all Israel, with the statutes and judgments” (Mal 4:4); which completes the cycle.

“This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth” (Jos 1:8). No man—however dignified his position—is above the Law of God. Though exalted to be commander-in-chief over Israel, and thereby given great power and authority, Joshua himself must be in subjection to the Divine Law: He was to issue no orders, save those which were authorised by the Rule given to him. He was to invent no new statutes or ordinances, but be regulated solely by what was “written.” If Joshua was to complete the work which Moses began, then he must maintain the Law which Moses had established. There was no need for him to make new laws: He was already furnished with a Divine and complete Charter, and *that* it was his business to heed and enforce. “To the law and to the testimony” he was to be held accountable; and if he spake not according thereto, then there was no light in him (Isa 8:20), and those under him would be left in spiritual darkness. Just so far as he executed this commission, would the smile of God be upon him and prosperity attend his efforts.

“But thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein” (Jos 1:8). Meditation upon the Word of God is one of the most important of all the means of grace and growth in spirituality; yea, there can be no true progress in vital and practical godliness without it. Meditation on Divine things is not optional, but obligatory—for it is something which God has *commanded us* to attend unto. The order which Joshua received was not restricted to himself, but is addressed to all of God’s people. Nor does it by any means, stand alone. “Set your hearts unto all the words which I testify among you this day” (Deu 32:46). “Ponder the path of thy feet” (Pro 4:26); “Consider your ways” (Hag 1:7). “Let these sayings sink down into your ears” (Luk 9:44), which they cannot do, unless they be frequently turned over in our minds. “Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely...*think on* these things” (Phi 4:8).

Meditating in God’s Law day and night is one of the outstanding marks of the man whom He calls “Blessed” (Psa 1:1-2). It is a holy art and habit commended in the practice and example of the saints: Isaac (Gen 24:63), David (Psa 119), the mother of our Lord (Luk 1:49-51). But though meditation be a duty and a great moral spiritual aid, it is practised by few. The usual plea proffered by those who neglect it is, “I am

too busy, my life is so crowded with a multiplicity of duties and concerns, that, alas, I have not the necessary leisure for quiet ruminating." Our first reply is, "Then you are acting in the energy of the flesh and suffering yourself to be little better than a slave." God is no Egyptian taskmaster. Christ's yoke is easy and *His* burden is light, and if *your* "burden" be heavy, it is a self-imposed one. God calls you to no manner of life which crowds out the needs of your soul and entails the neglect of your eternal interests. "Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth" (Col 3:2) is His unchanging call, and He has given no harsh and unreasonable precepts.

But this plea, "I am too busy to engage in regular and spiritual meditation" is an idle excuse; yea, it is worse—it is a *deceit* of your evil heart. It is not because you are short of time, but because you *lack a heart* for the things of God! "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Mat 6:21), and that which most occupies our heart will most engage the mind, for our thoughts always follow our affections; consequently, the smallest actions—when we have no delight in them—are tedious and burdensome. Is it not money which most absorbs the attention of the miser? The voluptuary thinks only of satisfying his senses. The giddy youth is concerned mainly with the pursuit of pleasure. The man of the world devotes his time and energies to acquiring wealth and honours. It is not lack of opportunity, but of relish for the Word and a desire to please God which lies at the root of our failure here. Said David, "O how love I thy law! it is my meditation all the day" (Psa 119:97)—he *evidenced* his love for God's Law by constantly pondering it! To him, meditation was not a task, but a joy.

You may seek an extenuation by appealing to numerous obligations and heavy responsibilities, but it is invalid before God. You certainly do not hold a more important position than Joshua did, nor are your tasks more numerous and exacting. Well did Matthew Henry (1662-1714) point out, "If ever any man's business might have excused him from meditation, and other acts of devotion, one would think Joshua's might at this time. It was a great trust that was lodged in his hands: the conduct of it was sufficient to fill him if he had ten souls, and yet, he must find time and thoughts for meditation. Whatever affairs of this world we have on hand, we must not neglect the one thing needful." We cannot expect the God of Truth to be with us if we neglect the Truth of God. Nor is reading it and hearing it preached sufficient. They produce but a transient effect upon us, but *meditating* on some portion of the Word, going over it again and again in our minds deepens the impression, fastens the truth on our memory, and sets our hearts and hands a-work.

But let us carefully observe that meditation was not enjoined upon Joshua in a general way, but with a specific design: "Thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that [in order that] thou mayest observe *to do* according to all that is written therein" (Jos 1:8). His mind was to be exercised upon God's Word with a specific purpose and practical end: Not simply to rest in contemplation, but in order to be regulated by its precepts, through a serious inculcating of them upon his heart. Meditation was not to be an occasional luxury, but the regular discharge of a constant duty—"day and night"—and this in order to a prompter, fuller, and more acceptable obedience. God requires an intelligent, voluntary, and joyous obedience; and if we are really desirous of pleasing and glorifying Him, we shall not only familiarize ourselves with His Word, but habitually ponder how its holy precepts may best regulate all the details of our daily lives. "I will meditate in thy precepts, and have respect unto thy ways" (Psa 119:15)—the latter cannot properly be without the former.

It is easy to persuade ourselves we really desire that our lives may be well-pleasing to God, but what *evidence* can we produce that such a desire is genuine? That which is well-pleasing unto God is made known in His statutes: To what extent are our hearts and minds seriously engaged with them? It is by definitely recalling who is their Author that I am most likely to hold them in greater reverence and esteem, realise they are designed for my good, and bring my walk into fuller accord with them. It is only by repeated and prayerful meditation upon them that I shall perceive their spirituality and scope. For example, that the prohibition of any vice inculcates its opposite virtue—that the thing forbidden is not merely the overt act, but everything leading up to and stimulating the same. It is by meditating on the precepts we come to understand them, that our consciences are impressed by them, that our wills are moved to do them.

"My hands also will I lift up unto thy commandments, which I have loved; and I will meditate in thy statutes" (Psa 119:48). The moving cause of David's respect for the Divine commandments was his *love* for them, and that produced two practical effects. First, a "lifting up of the hands," which is an expression of varied significance; but here, it means to make a diligent application unto the keeping of them. "Without thee shall no man lift up his hand" (Gen 41:44)—attempt to do anything. "Arise, O LORD; O God, lift up thine hand: forget not the humble" (Psa 10:12)—put forth Thine active power for their assistance. "Where-

fore lift up the hands which hang down” (Heb 12:12)—set them to vigorous use. It is, then, a figurative expression, which imports a serious and deliberate setting about upon a course of action. “My hands also will I lift up unto thy commandments” (Psa 119:48): I will apply myself diligently to the keeping of them; I will earnestly endeavour to put them into practice; such is my solemn resolution.

Second, and in order to the carrying out of that resolution, “I will *meditate* in thy statutes” (Psa 119:48). It is not enough to barely approve of them: They must also be performed—see James 1:22, 1 John 2:4. If we would seriously address ourselves to a course of obedience, then we must use much forethought and meditation. God’s chief complaint against Israel of old was, “My people doth not consider” (Isa 1:3). God’s statutes must be kept in mind, and what they require from us constantly pondered. The longer we hold the Divine precept before the conscience, the more powerfully shall we be affected by it. We complain of our forgetfulness, but fail to take the right course to cure it: The Word is only fixed in our minds by turning it over and over in our thoughts. “Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is” (Eph 5:17): Grace does not act as a charm, but sets us a-work, and much care and labour is entailed in obtaining spiritual understanding—see Proverbs 2:1-5.

“For then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success” (Jos 1:8). Yes, “then”—but *only then*. We must comply with the required conditions. Walking in the path of God’s commandments alone ensures success in the spiritual warfare. God’s smile of approbation will not be upon us unless we walk as obedient children. Nor shall we possess our possessions and enjoy our heritage, except as we conduct ourselves by the Divinely-given Rule. And in order to “observe to *do* according to *all* that is written therein,” then we must “meditate therein day and night”! The designed use of this exercise is to bring the heart to a greater detestation of sin, and a more diligent care to please God, and thereby, we promote both our temporal and eternal welfare. We have dwelt the longer on these verses, because they are of incalculable importance to the Christian life. If we would *prosper* as Joshua did, then we must *act* as he did!

SPIRITUAL GROWTH OR CHRISTIAN PROGRESS

11c. Its Recovery

Its difficulty. Though reviving and restoration be needful, desirable, and possible, yet it is by no means easy. We do not mean that any problem is presented unto God in connection with the recovery of one who has suffered a spiritual relapse, but that it is far from being a simple matter for a backslider to comply with His requirements in order thereto. That difficulty is at least threefold: There is a difficulty in realising the sadness of his case, a difficulty in putting forth a real desire for recovery, and a difficulty in meeting God's stipulations. Sin has a blinding effect, and the more one falls under its power, the less discernment will he possess. It is only in God's light that we can see light, and the further we depart from Him, the more we engulf ourselves in darkness. It is only as the bitter effects of sin begin to be tasted, that the erring one becomes conscious of his sorry condition. Others may perceive it, and in loving faithfulness, tell him about it; but in most instances, he is quite unaware of his decline, and such warnings have no weight with him. Of course, the degree of the decay of his grace will determine the measure in which the "and knowest not" of Revelation 3:17 applies to him.

But even where there be some realisation that all is not well with himself, it by no means follows that there is also a real anxiety to return unto his "first love" (Rev 2:4). To some extent, the conscience of such an one is comatosed; and therefore, there is little sensibility of his condition, and still, less horror of it. Here, too, the natural adumbrates the spiritual. Have we not met with, or read, of those suffering from certain forms of sickness who lacked a desire to be healed? Certainly, there are not a few such in the religious world. If the reader dissents from such a statement, we ask him, "Why, then, did the great Physician of souls address Himself as He did to the one by the pool of Bethesda?" We are told that that man had suffered from an infirmity no less than thirty-eight years; yet the Saviour asked him, "Wilt thou be made whole?" (Joh 5:6)—are you really desirous to be? That question was neither meaningless, nor strange. The wretched are not always willing to be relieved. Some prefer to lie on a couch and be ministered to by friends than bestir themselves and perform their duties. Others become lethargic and indifferent, and are, as Scripture designates them, "at ease in Zion" (Amo 6:1)!

It is all too little realised among Christians that backsliding is a departing from God and a returning to the conditions they were in before conversion, and the further that departure be, the closer will become their approximation to the old manner of life. Observe the particular language used by David in his confession to God. First, he said, "Before I was afflicted I went astray" (Psa 119:67); but later, as spiritual discernment increased following upon his recovery, and as he then more clearly perceived what had been involved in his sad lapse, he declared, "I have gone astray like a *lost* sheep" (Psa 119:176)—the state of God's elect in the days of their unregeneracy (Isa 53:6). True, the case of David was a more extreme form of backsliding than many; nevertheless, it is a solemn warning unto all of us of what may befall, if we have left our "first love" and return not promptly to it. And how clearly his experiences serve to illustrate the point we are here seeking to set before the reader. Ponder carefully what follows the account of David's grievous fall in 2 Samuel 11, and behold the spirit of blindness and insensibility which deliberate sinning casts upon a backslidden saint.

In view of 2 Samuel 12:15, it is clear that almost a whole year—possibly more—had elapsed between the time of David's fall and the Lord's sending of Nathan unto him. There is not a hint that David was broken-hearted before God during those months. The prophet addressed him in the form of a parable—intimation of his moral distance from God (Mat 13:10-13)! Yet, if David's conscience had been active before God, he would have easily understood the purport of that parable. But sin had darkened his judgment, and he recognised not the application of it unto himself. In such a state of spiritual deadness was David then in, that Nathan had to interpret his parable and say, "Thou art the man" (2Sa 12:7). Verily, he *had* "gone astray like a lost sheep" (Psa 119:176); and at that time, the state of his heart differed little from the unconverted. Later, when his eyes were again opened, and he was deeply convicted of his sins, he perceived that he had lapsed into a condition perilously close to and scarcely distinguishable from that of the unregenerate—for he cried, "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and *renew* a right spirit within me" (Psa 51:10).

Does the reader now grasp more easily our meaning when we speak of the *difficulty* of being recovered from a spiritual relapse?—the difficulty of one in that case becoming sensible of his woeful plight, and the realisation that he needs delivering from it? Sin darkens the understanding and renders the heart hard or insensible. As it is with the unregenerate sinner, so it is become—to a greater or lesser extent; and in extreme cases, almost entirely—with the backslider. What is it that is the distinguishing mark of all who have never been born again? Not falling into gross and flagrant outward sin—for many of them are never guilty of that—but “having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness [margin, “hardness” or “insensibility”] of their heart” (Eph 4:18). That is the Divine diagnosis of all who are “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph 2:1); and we have but to change “alienated from the life of God” (Eph 4:18) to “severed from communion with God;” and that solemn description accurately depicts the inward state of the backslider, though until God begins to recover him, he will no more recognise his picture than David did when Nathan drew his.

It is much to be thankful for when a child of God becomes aware that he *is* in a spiritual decline, especially if he mourns over it. Such is rarely the case with an unregenerate professor, and never so on account of *inward* decay. A person who has always been weak and sickly knows not what it is to lack health and strength, for he never had experience of it; still less does one in the cemetery realise that he is totally devoid of life. But let one of robust constitution be laid upon a bed of sickness, and he is very definitely aware of the great change that has come over him. The reason why so many professing Christians are not troubled over any spiritual decline is because they never had any spiritual health; and therefore, it would be a waste of time to treat with such about a recovery. If you should speak of their departure from God and loss of communion with Him, you would seem unto them as Lot did unto his sons-in-law when he expostulated with them—as one that “mocked” or made sport with them (Gen 19:14), and would be laughed at for your pains. Never having experienced any love for Christ, it would be useless to urge them to return unto the same.

It is much to be feared. That is why these articles on spiritual decline and recovery—which are so much needed today by many of the saints—will be almost meaningless, and certainly wearisome, to some of our readers. The real Christian will not dismiss them lightly, but will rather seek to faithfully measure himself by them, searching himself before God, and being at some pains to ascertain the condition of his soul. But those who are content with a mere outward profession will see little in them either of importance or interest. Such as perceive neither evil, nor danger, in their present condition—supposing that all is well with them, because it is as good as it ever was—are the ones who most need to examine themselves as to whether the “root of the matter” (Job 19:28) was ever in them. And even those who *have* experienced something of “the power of godliness”—but through carelessness, are no longer making conscience of seeking to please the Lord in all things as they once did—are asleep in carnal security (which is hardly distinguishable from being dead in sin), if they be not exercised over their decline and anxious to be recovered from it.

The vast majority in Christendom today will acknowledge nothing as a decay *in themselves*. Rather are they like Ephraim: “Strangers have devoured his strength, and he knoweth it not;” and hence, it is added, “they do not return to the LORD their God, nor seek him for all this” (Hos 7:9-10). How is it with you, dear friend? Have *you* been able to maintain spiritual peace and joy in your soul?—for those are the inseparable fruits of a life of faith and an humble and daily walking with God. We mean not the fancies and imaginations of them, but the substance and reality—that peace which passeth all understanding and which “keeps” or “garrisons” the heart and mind; that joy which delights itself in the Lord and is “full of glory” (1Pe 1:8). Does that peace stay your mind upon God under trials and tribulations, or is it found wanting in the hour of testing? Is “the joy of the LORD...your strength” (Neh 8:10), so that it moves you to perform the duties of obedience with alacrity and pleasure?—or is it merely a fickle emotion which exerts no steady power for good upon your life? If you once enjoyed such peace and joy, but do so no longer, then you have suffered a spiritual decline.

Spirituality of mind and the exercise of a tender conscience in the performance of spiritual duties is another mark of health, for it is in those things grace is most requisite and operative. They are the very life of the new man, and the animating principle of all spiritual actions—and without which all our performances are but “dead works.” Our worship of God is but an empty show, a horrible mockery, if we draw nigh unto Him with our lips, while our hearts be far from Him. But to keep the mind in a spiritual frame in our approaches to the Lord, to bless Him with “all that is within us,” to keep our grace in vigorous exercise

in all holy duties, is only possible while the health of the soul be maintained. Slothfulness, formality, weariness of the flesh, the business and cares of this life, the seductions and opposition of Satan, all contend against the Christian to frustrate him at that point; yet, the grace of God is sufficient if it be duly sought. If you constantly stirreth up yourself to take hold of God (Isa 64:7), if you habitually “set [your]...face unto the Lord God, to *seek [Him]* by prayer and supplications” (Dan 9:3), that is evidence of spiritual health; but if the contrary be now your experience, then you have suffered a spiritual decline.

If you realise that things are not as flourishing with you now—either inwardly or outwardly—as they were formerly, that is a hopeful sign; yet it must not be rested in. Suffer not your heart one moment to be content with your present frame—for if you do, there will follow a more marked deterioration. Satan will tell you there is nothing yet for you to be worried about, that there will be time enough for that when you fall into some outward sin. But he lies, as Scripture says, “Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin” (Jam 4:17). You know it is good that you should return unto God and confess to Him your failures—even though those failures be more of omission than commission—but if you refuse to, that in itself is “*sin*.” To be conscious of decline is the first step toward recovery, yet not sufficient in itself. There must also be a laying of it to heart, a sensibility of the evil of it, a mourning over it—“For godly sorrow worketh repentance” (2Co 7:10). Yet, neither is that sufficient: Godly sorrow is not repentance itself, but only a means thereto. Moaning and groaning over our complaints—spiritual or natural—may relieve our feelings, but they will effect no cure.

Sensible of our decays, exercised at heart over them, we must now comply with God’s requirements for recovery if healing is to be obtained. And here, too, we shall experience difficulty. There are those who persuade themselves that it would be no hard matter to recover themselves from a state of backsliding, that they could easily do so if occasion required. But that is an entirely false notion.

There are many who think getting saved is one of the simplest things imaginable, but they are woefully mistaken. If nothing more were required from the sinner than an intellectual assent to the Gospel, no miracle of grace would be required in order to induce that. But before a stout-hearted rebel against God will throw down the weapons of his warfare, before one who is in love with sin can hate it, before one who lived only to please self will deny self, the exceeding greatness of God’s power must work upon him (Eph 1:19). And so it is in restoration. If nothing more were required from the backslider than a lip acknowledgement of his offences and a return to external duties, no great difficulty would be experienced; but to meet the requirements of God for recovery is a very different matter.

Rightly did John Owen (1616-1683) affirm, “Recovery from backsliding is the hardest task in the Christian religion: one which few make either comfortable or honourable work of.” Yea, it is a task entirely beyond the capabilities of any Christian. We cannot recover ourselves, and none but the great Physician can heal our backslidings. It is the operations of the Spirit of Christ which is the effectual cause of the revival under decays of grace. It is not by might, nor by power, but by the Spirit of God that any wanderer is brought back. It is God who makes us sensible of our deadness, and who causes us to make application unto Him, “Wilt thou not revive us again: that thy people may rejoice in thee?” (Psa 85:6). And when that request has been granted, each of them will own with David, “*He* restoreth my soul” (Psa 23:3). Nevertheless, in this too, our responsibility has to be discharged, for at no point does God treat with us as though we were mere automatons. There are certain duties He sets before us in this connection, specific requirements which He makes upon us, and until we definitely and earnestly set ourselves to the performance of the same, we have no warrant to look for deliverance.

Though the Holy Spirit alone can effect the much-to-be-desired change in the withered and barren believer, yet God has appointed certain means which are subservient to that end; and if we neglect those means, then no wonder we have reason to complain and cry out, “My leanness, my leanness, woe unto me! the treacherous dealers have dealt treacherously; yea, the treacherous dealers have dealt very treacherously” (Isa 24:16); and therefore, an alteration for the better cannot reasonably be expected. If we entertain hope of an improvement in our condition while we neglect the appointed means, our expectations will certainly issue in a sorrowful disappointment. Unless we be thoroughly persuaded of that, we shall remain inert. While we cherish the idea that we can do nothing, and must fatalistically wait a sovereign reviving from God, we shall go on waiting. But if we realise what God requires of us, it will serve to deepen our desires after a reviving and stimulate us unto a compliance with those things which we must do, if He is to grant us showers of refreshment and a strengthening of those things in us which are ready to die. There has to be an asking, a seeking, a knocking, if the door of deliverance is to be opened unto us (Mat 7:7; Luk 11:9).

It was not an Arminian, but a high Calvinist (John Brine, 1703-1765, whose works received a most favourable review in the Gospel Standard of Oct. 1852) who wrote to God's people two centuries ago: "Much labour and diligence are required unto this. It is not complaining of the sickly condition of our souls which will effect this cure: confession of our follies that have brought diseases upon us—though repeated ever so often—will avail nothing towards the removal of them. If we intend the recovery of our former health and vigour, we must *act* as well as complain and groan. We must keep at a distance from those persons and those snares which have drawn us into instances of folly, which have occasioned that disorder which is the matter of our complaint. Without this, we may multiply acknowledgements and expressions of concern for our past miscarriages to no purpose at all. It is very great folly to think of regaining our former strength, so long as we embrace and dally with those objects through whose evil influence we are fallen into a spiritual decline. It is not our bewailing the pernicious effects of sin that will prevent its baneful influence upon us for time to come, except we are determined to *forsake* that to which is owing our melancholy disorder."

It is not nearly so simple to act on that counsel as many may imagine. Habits are not easily broken, nor objects relinquished which have obtained a powerful hold upon our affections. The natural man is wholly regulated and dominated by "the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life" (1Jo 2:16); and the only way in which their prevalency over a Christian is broken is by an unsparing *mortification* of those lusts. Just so soon as we become slack in denying self—or in governing our affections and passions—alluring objects draw us unto a dalliance with them, to the blighting of our spirituality; and recovery is impossible, until we abandon such evil charmers. But just so far as they have obtained a hold upon us will be the difficulty of breaking from them. Difficult it will be, because contrary to all our natural inclinations and pre-regenerate lives, "If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell" (Mat 5:29). Christ did not teach that the mortifying of a favourite lust was a simple and painless matter.

As though His followers would be slow to take to heart that unpalatable injunction, the Lord Jesus went on to say, "And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell" (Mat 5:30).

As the "eye" is our most precious member, so (especially to a labouring man) the "right hand" is the most useful and valuable one. By that figurative language, Christ taught us that our dearest idol must be renounced, our bosom lust mortified. No matter how pleasing be the object which would beguile us, it must be denied. Such a task would prove as hard and painful as the cutting off of an hand—they had no anaesthetics in those days! But if men are willing to have a gangrened limb amputated to save their lives, why should we shrink from painful sacrifices unto the saving of our souls. Heaven and Hell are involved by whether grace or our senses rule our souls: "You must not expect to enjoy the pleasures of earth and heaven too, and think to pass from Delilah's lap into Abraham's bosom" (Thomas Manton, 1628-1688). That which is demanded of the Christian is far from being child's play.

Again, "We must do the first works" (Rev 2:5) if we design a revival of our graces. This calls for humility and diligence, to both which our proud and slothful hearts are too much disinclined. We must be content to begin afresh, both to learn and practise, since through carelessness and sloth, we are gone backward in knowledge and practice too. It sometimes is with the saints, as with school boys who, by their negligence, are so far from improvement that they have almost forgotten the rudiments of a language, or an art they have begun to learn; in which case, it is necessary that they must make a new beginning: this suits not with pride, but unto it, they must submit. So the Christian sometimes has need of being taught again what are the first principles of the oracles of God when, for the time he has been in the school of Christ, his improvement ought to be such as would fit him for giving instruction to others in these plain and easy principles. But through negligence, he has let them slip, and he must content to pass through the very same lessons of conviction, sorrow, humiliation, and repentance he learned long since of the Holy Spirit: whatever we think of the matter, a revival cannot be without it" (J. Brine). It is that humbling of our pride which makes recovery so difficult to a backslider!

THE DOCTRINE OF RECONCILIATION

9c. Its Reception

On this occasion, we propose to treat of the present aspect of our subject in connection with *the Covenant*. There is a pressing need for this today—for while on the one hand, most professing Christians are woefully ignorant about the Covenant, some others have been very faultily instructed therein. As on almost every other doctrinal and practical subject, the Puritans were much sounder than many of the outstanding Calvinists of the nineteenth century, for the sermons of the latter were sadly lacking in perspective. Those of men like Joseph Irons, and James Wells, were thoroughly lop-sided. While they rightly emphasised Divine sovereignty, they remissly ignored human responsibility; while they had much to say about God's grace, they had little to say about the demands of His holiness; while magnifying the finished work of Christ, they were silent upon what God required from sinners, before the benefits of it were applied to them. They were very fond of quoting: "He *hath made* with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things, and sure" (2Sa 23:5); but they scarcely ever cited, and never expounded: "Incline your ear, and come unto me: hear, and your soul shall live; and I *will make* an everlasting covenant with you" (Isa 55:3).

A covenant is a compact between two parties, wherein there is mutual stipulation and re-stipulation—the one promising certain benefits in return for the fulfilling of certain conditions by the other. Thus it was in the covenant or agreement entered into between Isaac and Abimelech (Gen 26:28-29) and between Jonathan and David (1Sa 20:16-17). God entered into covenant with Christ as the Head of the elect; and to that covenant, He attached the demand of repentance, faith, and obedience from them.

Let us first consider the passage we quoted above from Isaiah 55, and which is so much ignored by many Calvinists. That chapter opens with a most blessed Gospel invitation, though there are one or two things in it which have been both misunderstood and disregarded. "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters" (Isa 55:1) has been restricted unto a spiritual thirst, as though the invitation is made only unto souls Divinely quickened. That is an unwarrantable limitation. The Gospel call goes forth freely to all classes and conditions of men, addressing them simply as *sinners*—guilty, lost, needy sinners. Since they *are* sinners, they have no satisfying portion, yet they have a thirst for something more contenting—and hence, their quest for happiness. But since they are blinded by sin, they know not what that satisfying portion consists of, or where true happiness is found. They seek it, but seek it wrongly and in vain. Hence, the question is asked them, "Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labour for that which satisfieth not?" (Isa 55:2). Thereby is the Gospel call enforced.

"Come ye to the waters"—which *can* quench your thirst and satisfy your heart—"and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat" (Isa 55:1). The Inviter is a generous Benefactor who makes no charge for His benefits and bars not of them must "buy." That does not mean they must give something for those benefits and purchase them. But it does signify they must *part with* something, or otherwise the word "buy" would have no force. There are two things which the sinner must part with, if he would be a participant of the Gospel feast: He must abandon his idols, and he must renounce his own goodness or righteousness. That which Christ requires from the sinner is that he come to Him empty-handed. If, on the one hand, that means he must bring no price with him, nothing seeking to merit his acceptance; on the other hand, it also means he must drop the world, and no longer cherish and cling to those objects or pleasures in which hitherto he has sought to delight himself.

"Come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price" (Isa 55:1). Three times over in that first verse is the word "come" used. It is the response which is required to the invitation made. It is a word calling for action, for voluntary action. It is a word, too, of clear yet necessary implication—one cannot come to a place without *leaving* another! The prodigal son had to quit the "far country" (Luk 15:13) in order to turn unto the Father's house. The sinner must (in his affections and resolutions) turn his back upon the world, if he would embrace Christ. Twice is the word "buy" found in it, to emphasise the fact that it is a definite and personal transaction which is here in view; and as we have already pointed out, to denote that something must be relinquished or parted with—whatever stands in opposition to Christ as seeking to hold the sinner's heart. While the "no money," "without money and without price" stresses the truth that eternal life is not to be obtained by the works of the Law, but is a free gift—that we bring nothing with us to commend ourselves to God's favourable regard, but come simply as poverty-stricken beggars.

“Hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness” (Isa 55:2). Listen to the voice of Wisdom which pleads with you to waste no more of your money on that which ministers not to your spiritual and eternal needs and your efforts after what has no power to afford you real and lasting satisfaction. Appropriate unto yourselves the riches of Divine grace, as they are spread before you in the Gospel; and let your soul delight itself in that which will bring no disappointment with it, or regrets afterward. “Incline your ear, and come unto me” (Isa 55:3). Too long have you hearkened to the sirens of your lusts and to the false promises of this world. Too long have you been deaf to My counsels and precepts, to My expostulations and warnings. Incline your ear “as you do to that which you find yourselves concerned in, and pleased with; bow the ear, and let the proud heart stoop to the humbling methods of the Gospel; bend the ear this way that you may hear with attention” (Matthew Henry, 1662-1714). “Hear”—that is, heed, respond, obey, comply with My demands: “Incline your ear, and come unto me: hear, and your soul shall live; *and* I will make an everlasting covenant with *you*” (Isa 55:3).

Here, then, we learn plainly and definitely who are the characters with whom God proposes to make an everlasting covenant, and the terms with which they must comply if He is to do so. They are those who have freely sampled the lying vanities of this world, and like the poor prodigal, have found them to be naught but “husks.” They are those who hitherto had closed their ears against Him, refusing to meet His requirements and steeling themselves against His admonitions. “Incline your ear” signifies cease your rebellious attitude, submit yourselves to My righteous demand. They are those who are separated and alienated from the Holy One, at a guilty distance from Him—away in “a far country” (Luk 15:13). “Come unto me” means, throw down the weapons of your warfare and cast yourselves upon My mercy. They are those who are unquickened, destitute of spiritual life: As the “hear, and your soul *shall live*” clearly shows. Comply with those terms, says God, and I will make an everlasting covenant with you. It is human responsibility which is there being enforced. It is but another way of saying to sinners, “Be ye reconciled to God” (2Co 5:20).

As we pointed out in an article in November (Issue 38), this enforcing of man’s responsibility is most meet for the honour of God; and as the honour of the Father lies nearer to the heart of Christ than anything else, He will not dispense the benefits of His atonement, except in that way which is most becoming to God’s perfections. There is a complete accord between Christ’s impetration of God’s favour and the application of it—that is, between Christ’s purchase of it and our actual entrance into the same. As the justice of God deemed it meet that His wrath should be appeased, and his law vindicated by the satisfaction made by His Son, so His wisdom determined, and His holiness ordered it, that the sinner must be converted, before pardon be bestowed upon him (Act 3:19). We must be on our guard here, as everywhere, against extolling one of God’s attributes above another. True, the Covenant is entirely of *grace*—pure, free, sovereign grace—nevertheless, here, too, grace reigns “through *righteousness*” (Rom 5:21), and not at the expense of it. Christ died not to render any sinner secure in his carnality.

God will not disgrace His grace by entering into covenant with those who are impenitent and openly defying Him. To do so would make him the Condoner of sin, instead of the implacable Hater of it. It is not that the sinner must do something in order to earn the grand blessings of the covenant, or that he must add his quota to the redemptive work of Christ. No, no, *he* contributes not a mite to the procuring of them. That price—and infinitely costly it was—was fully paid by the Lord Jesus Himself. But though God requires naught from us by way of purchasing or meriting those blessings, He *does* in the matter of our *receiving* of them. “The honour of God would fall to the ground if we should be pardoned without our submission, without confession of past sin, or resolution of future obedience: for till then we neither know our true misery, nor are we willing to come out of it; for they that securely continue in their sins, despise both the curse of the Law and the grace of the Gospel” (T. Manton).

“I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David” (Isa 55:3). It is of course, the Messiah, the spiritual or antitypical David of whom God there speaks—as He is also called “David” in Psalm 89:3, Jeremiah 30:9, Ezekiel 34:23-24; 37:24, Hosea 3:5. If proof be needed that it *is* the Lord Jesus who is in view, Acts 13:34-37 supplies it. “The sure mercies of David” are the special and distinguishing favours which are reserved for, and in due time, bestowed upon God’s elect. They are the grand privileges and benefits of the Covenant, which God pledged Himself to impart unto Christ and His seed, upon the completion of His engagement. They are “sure” because of the promises of One who cannot lie, and because they are now dispensed by the victorious and risen Redeemer. They are revealed in the Gospel and presented for the acceptance of faith. “Behold, I have given him [the spiritual David] for a witness to

the people, a leader and commander to the people” (Isa 55:4). That tells us those “sure mercies” are dispensed in a way of righteousness and holiness. The Gospel presents Christ to us not only as Redeemer, but a Teacher and Ruler: We are required to surrender to Him as our absolute Lord, and voluntarily take His yoke upon us, before He becomes our Saviour and imparts rest unto our souls.

“For thus saith the LORD unto the eunuchs that keep my sabbaths, and choose the things that please me, and *take hold of my covenant*; Even unto them will I give in mine house and within my walls a place and a name better than of sons and of daughters: I will give them an everlasting name, that shall not be cut off. Also the sons of the stranger, that join themselves to the LORD, to serve him, and to love the name of the LORD, to be his servants, every one that keepeth the sabbath from polluting it, and *taketh hold of my covenant*” (Isa 56:4-6). Here, we have spiritual and eternal blessings presented under the imagery of the Mosaic economy. It was Old Testament prophecy announcing the distinctive favours of the New Testament dispensation. Under the Mosaic law, “eunuchs” were barred from entering the congregation of the Lord, and the “stranger” or Gentile was barred by the middle wall of partition; but under the Gospel era, these restrictions would no longer obtain, for the grace of God should flow forth unto all without distinction. That which we would specially observe is the clause placed in italics, which sets forth the *human* side of things.

Let us notice carefully what is here predicated of those who “take hold of” God’s covenant. They “keepeth the sabbath from polluting it” (Isa 56:2, 6)—that is, they have a concern for God’s honour and a respect for His Law, and therefore, keep holy that day which He has set apart unto Himself, requiring us to act as per the instructions of Isaiah 58:13. They “choose the things that please” the Holy One (Isa 56:4): They are not self-pleasers, or gratifiers of the flesh, but earnestly endeavour to abstain from whatever God has prohibited, and to perform whatever He has enjoined; and this not by constraint or fear, but freely and cheerfully. They “join themselves to the LORD” (Isa 56:6)—they seek unto and cleave to Him. They do so in order “to serve him, and to love the name of the LORD, to be his servants” (Isa 56:6). To “serve” Him means to be subject unto Him, to take their orders from Him, to promote His interests. They are resolved to “love his name” (Psa 69:36): Their service is that of friends and not slaves, their faith is one which worketh by love, and their obedience prompted by gratitude. Unless our service proceeds from love, it is valueless. They had given Him their hearts; and therefore, their faculties, talents, time, and strength are dedicated and devoted unto Him. Such are the ones who “taketh hold” of His covenant (Isa 56:6).

“In every covenant, there is something given and something required. To take hold of God’s covenant is to lay claim to the privileges and benefits promised and offered therein. Now this cannot be done unless we choose the things that please Him—that is, voluntarily and deliberately, not by chance, but by choice, enter into a course of obedience wherein we must be pleasing or acceptable to Him: this is the fixed determination of our hearts” (Thomas Manton, 1628-1688). And we never enter upon that course of obedience and do the things which are pleasing unto God, until we have first chosen Him as our absolute Lord, our supreme End, our highest Good, and our everlasting Portion. Negatively, there can be “no taking hold of the covenant,” until we cease all opposition to God. Positively, it is to embrace the Gospel offer and to comply with its terms. The covenant of grace is proffered to us in the Gospel, and to take hold of the former is to heartily consent unto the latter and meet its requirements, giving ourselves to the Lord (2Co 8:5)—freely, unreservedly, for time and eternity. Consent there must be, for none can enjoy the privileges of a charter which they never accepted and agreed to.

What has just been before us in Isaiah 56 is virtually parallel with Isaiah 27:4-5. “Fury is not in me [unless I am provoked by the rebellion of My creatures. In such case]: who would set the briers and thorns against me in battle? I would go through them, I would burn them together”: Such opposition against the Almighty is utterly futile. If they stir up His wrath, naught but the Lake of Fire can be their portion, unless they avail themselves of His amnesty, throw down the weapons of their warfare against Him, and be reconciled to Him—which is what is signified by “Or [as the only alternative to burning] let him take hold of my strength”: Let him grasp My arm which is uplifted to smite and crush him. And how shall that be done? Thus, “that he may make peace with me”: That he may cease this sinful fighting against Me; “and he shall make peace with me” (Isa 27:5). God is ready and willing—on the ground of Christ’s satisfaction—to lay aside His vengeance and be reconciled, if the sinner is willing to lay aside his awful enmity and become friends.

“This [Isa 27:4-5] may very well be construed as a summary of the doctrine of the Gospel, with which the church is to be watered every moment. Here is a quarrel supposed between God and man: for here is a battle fought and peace to be made. It is an old quarrel, ever since sin first entered: it is a gracious invitation

given us to make up this quarrel: let him that is desirous to be at peace with God take hold on God's strength, on His strong arm, which is lifted up against the sinner to strike him dead; let him by supplication keep back the stroke. Pardoning mercy is called the power of the Lord; let him take hold of that. Christ crucified is the power of God, let him by a lively faith take hold on Him, as a sinking man catches hold of a plank that is within his reach, or as the malefactor took hold on the horns of the altar...it is vain to think of contesting with Him: it is like setting briars and thorns before a consuming fire. We are not an equal match for Omnipotence. This is the only way, and it is a sure way to reconciliation: let him take this way to make peace with Me, and he shall make peace" (from M. Henry).

"In those days, and in that time, saith the LORD, the children of Israel shall come, they and the children of Judah together, going and weeping: they shall go, and seek the LORD their God. They shall ask the way to Zion with their faces thitherward, saying, Come, and let us join ourselves to the LORD in a perpetual covenant that shall not be forgotten" (Jer 50:4-5). The historical reference is to the liberty which Cyrus gave to the Hebrews to return unto their own land, consequent upon his overthrow of Belshazzar. Unacquainted with the road, the exiled Jews on leaving Babylon for Palestine made inquiry about it. Their case supplied a type of adumbration of the spiritual experiences of God's people. "In those days" is an Old Testament expression which pointed forward to this Christian era. It was, therefore, one of many evangelical prophecies couched in the language of an historical event. Whatever fulfillment that prophecy may or may not yet have for the Jewish people (and on that matter, we refrain from any dogmatic statement), its present application is to sinners who have been awakened and convicted by the Spirit, so that they are concerned about their spiritual and eternal interests.

Like those in the historical type, these seekers are issuing forth from a lifelong bondage—in sin. Convicted of their guilt and resolved to reform their ways, they are represented as "going and weeping" and determined to "seek the LORD their God" (Jer 50:4)—which, in the New Testament language, would be "repenting" and being "converted." As M. Henry says: "This represents the return of poor sinners to God. Heaven is the Zion they aim at as their end: on this, they have set their hearts, toward this they have set their faces, and therefore, they ask the way thither. They do not ask the way to heaven and set their faces to the world, nor set their faces toward heaven and go on at venture without asking the way. In all true converts, there are both a sincere desire to attain the end and a constant care to keep in the way." Their desire and design was to "join [themselves]...to the LORD in a perpetual covenant" (Jer 50:5). That was something *they* must do; and it is to that particular expression we would ask careful attention, for it has been totally ignored by hyper-Calvinists, who say nothing at all upon the human-responsibility side of the subject—what *we* must do before the benefits of the Covenant are actually made over to us.

