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STUDIES
IN THE
SCRIPTURES

“Search the Scriptures” John 5:39

EDITOR: Arthur W. Pink (1886-1952)

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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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STUDIES IN THE SCRIPTURES

“Search the Scriptures” John 5:39

EDITOR: Arthur W. Pink

HIS DELIGHTS

God, as God, being all-sufficient, delights *in Himself*, in all His perfections and the manifestation of them before His creatures. But there is one of His attributes in which He takes especial delight, namely, His *mercy*. “Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage? He retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy” (Mic 7:18). Those words express deep admiration of the Lord’s incomparable goodness in His pardoning mercy. They emphasize the blessed contrast there is between His character and that which the heathen conceive of their gods, for they are regarded as objects of cruelty and not of complacency, are known for their terrors instead of their benefits, and are dreaded for their revenges rather than loved for their excellencies. Whereas, with the living and true God, judgment is “His strange work” (Isa 28:21). Acts of punishment are never performed by Him spontaneously, or of His own accord, but because they are provoked by us; but acts of mercy flow from Him freely, uncaused, unmoved by anything in their recipients.

Had God been unwilling to show us mercy, Christ would not have taught us to ask for pardon (Mat 6:12). So far from bestowing it grudgingly, He does so freely, for He *delighteth therein*, and this it is which causes His people to exclaim, “Who is a God like unto thee?” those words show us what should most move our hearts; not so much God’s acts of power as those of His grace—though the former be more obvious to our apprehensions, the latter should most fire our affections. Everything about God is indeed marvellous, but particularly so His mercy. His very throne is designated “the mercy-seat” (Exo 25:20; 1Sa 4:4), and His elect are denominated “vessels of mercy” (Rom 9:23). He is entitled “the Father of mercies” (2Co 1:3), for they issue from His very nature and are therefore both His offspring and His delights. God is “abundant in mercy” (1Pe 1:3). It cannot be computed or measured. He bestows it not by halves, but fully, “Thou wilt cast *all* their sins into the depths of the sea” (Mic 7:19). “O give thanks unto the LORD; for he

is good: for his mercy endureth for ever” (Psa 136:1). For this perfection of the divine character, which God has so much pleasure in exercising, He is greatly to be praised. Three times over in as many verses, the Psalmist called upon the saints to give thanks unto the Lord for this adoring attribute.

Considered as the God-man Mediator, *the Lord Jesus Christ* is the Object of the Father’s delight (Isa 42:1). Referring to the counsels of eternity, He declared, “Then I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him” (Pro 8:30). Those words tell us of the blessed union and communion which existed between the Father and the Son (not excluding the Holy Spirit) before He became incarnate, yet, in view thereof. From all eternity there was an inconceivable intercourse of bliss between them, and an interchanging of love. They tell us of the ineffable joy the Father had in His dear Son, that He was an Object of infinite satisfaction to Him. Such are His person, glory, perfections, fullness, that the heart of the Father has in Him an Object of absolute complacency, one which gratifies His vast mind for ever. When Christ declared He was “in the bosom of the Father” (Joh 1:18), He used language of greatness, dearness and intimacy (Joh 13:23), signifying that He was the Darling of His heart.

His delight in the Mediator is seen in those remarkable words of Isaiah 49:1, “The LORD hath called me from the womb; from the bowels of my mother hath he made mention of my name”. Christ’s name being continually in JEHOVAH’s mouth shows it was His joy to be always thinking of and speaking about Him. Says the Father, “Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth” (Isa 42:1). Those words express the most ardent love and evince that He was completely wrapped up in Him. He bore testimony thereto when He declared audibly from heaven, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Mat 3:17). He was so because in Christ was found perfect holiness of heart, and because He did “always those things that please him” (Joh 8:29). Every faculty of His soul and body was constantly employed in the flawless performance of the whole will of God.

The Father’s delight in His Son appeared in His appointing of Him to the office and work of mediatorship, anointing Him to be Prophet, Priest, and Potentate, saying, “I have laid help upon one that is *mighty*” (Psa 89:19). The Father beheld the Son of His love with infinite delight while He hung suspended upon the cross of shame. Though divine justice was never more terribly incensed against sin than it was then, yet, the divine holiness was infinitely satisfied with the offering of Christ for sin, “It *pleased* the LORD to bruise him” (Isa 53:10). The death of Christ, considered merely in itself, could not please the Lord, but, as it respected those ends and designs to be accomplished by it—the manifestation of God’s love to the world, the magnifying of His Law, the redemption of His people, the bringing in of an everlasting righteousness for them—He was well pleased. And when the Son had completed His work upon earth, the Father gave full proof of His delight in Him by saying, “Sit thou at my right hand” (Psa 110:1), where a state of mutual enjoyment ensues between Them which is altogether beyond our conception.

The next object of the divine complacency is *the Church*. Speaking by the language of prophecy, Christ referred to its favoured members as “The saints that are in the earth, and the excellent, in whom is all my delight” (Psa 16:3). What an amazing thing it is that

creatures like ourselves can give the all-sufficient One delight! Yet, we are told that Enoch “pleased God” (Heb 11:6), and he was a man like unto ourselves. It is to be duly noted that in Psalm 16:3, Christ speaks thus of His people unto the Father Himself. There is none upon earth or in heaven that He values like them. He delights in them because they were chosen by the Father and bestowed upon Him as His love gift. He delights in them as the members of His mystical body. He delights in them as those in whom His glory shall yet be fully displayed, and who are to dwell with Him forever. Despite all their infirmities, He delights in them as His own children—the travail of His soul.

As Proverbs 8 reveals, the saints were on the heart of Christ and in His eye from before the foundation of the world (Pro 8:23-31). As He then viewed them in the glass of God’s decrees, He declared, “My delights were with the sons of men.” The renowned Hebraist, John Gill (1697-1771), tells us, “Delights not only in the plural number, but its first two letters are *doubled*, which, in the Hebrew language, increased the signification of the word, and so expressed the exceeding great delight and pleasure which Christ took in His people from everlasting.” His delights were not with the holy angels, but with those given to Him by the Father, whose cause He should espouse, whose nature He should assume, and for whom He should shed His blood. *They* were “the joy set before him” when He endured the cross (Heb 12:2). It was the strength of His love to the Father and to His saints which brought Him down from heaven’s glory to earth’s humiliation.

It is in the Song of Solomon that we have most fully revealed the high regard which Christ has for His spouse. There, we hear Him saying, “Behold, thou art fair, my love: behold, thou art fair; thou hast doves’ eyes. Behold, thou art fair, my beloved, yea, pleasant” (Song 1:15-16). What endearing titles are those! In what great esteem does He hold her! “How fair”—incomparably and inexpressibly so in His eyes. Is Christ “fairer than the children of men” (Psa 45:2)? So to Him is His bride “fairest among women” (Song 1:8). His estimate of them is the very opposite of theirs. They count themselves nobodies, but He makes much of them, and says, “I will rejoice over them to do them good” (Jer 32:41). “How fair and how pleasant art thou, O love, for delights!” (Song 7:6). He exclaims—comely and lovely in His esteem. He has made her so inherently by the new birth, and there is nothing so lovely in all the world to Him as grace in a believer. She is so judicially, because cleansed by His blood. She will be so experientially when He shall “present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing” (Eph 5:27). Because He delights in her, He has gone to prepare a place for her (Joh 14:2), and when she enters the same, we are told, “He will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love” (Zep 3:17).

Yes, “the LORD taketh pleasure in his people” (Psa 149:4). He does so because He has taken them into covenant relationship, accepted them in the Beloved, quickened them by His Spirit. So highly are they valued by Him that He has numbered the very hairs of their heads (Mat 10:30), orders their steps (Psa 37:23), and makes all things work together for their good. Lack of space prevents us from making more than a bare comment on, “Such as are upright in their way are his delight” (Pro 11:20), because they sincerely desire and resolve to keep His commandments. “The prayer of the upright is his delight” (Pro 15:8), because it is inwrought by His Spirit, comes out of unfeigned lips, is the cry of the humble, is perfumed with the incense of Christ’s merits, and because they ascribe all blessings unto

divine grace and express thankfulness for mercies received. Oh, that the Spirit may impress our minds with a real sense of the whole of the above, fill our souls with wonderment, and lead us to admire the Lord increasingly.

EXPOSITION OF JOHN'S FIRST EPISTLE

35. The Promise (2:25)

“And this is the promise that he hath promised us, even eternal life.”

“Let that therefore abide in you, which ye have heard from the beginning” (verse 24) means, in the light of the context, Suffer no enemy of Christ to rob you of the Gospel which was blessed to your conversion; but rather see to it that it becomes more deeply rooted in your hearts. It is of the utmost importance that the perfect revelation of God that has been made in and by Christ should have a permanent dwelling in your souls. Make it your deep concern that it abides in your minds and regulates your thoughts; in your consciences, to convict of sin and restrain it, and by stirring you up to the practice of holiness; in your affections, melting you with sorrow for sin, promoting a higher esteem of Christ and spiritual things; in your wills, bringing them into compliance with those things which are pleasing to God. Let it abide just as you first received it, living thereon. You need not any new revelation from God, but rather a better understanding and closer conformity to what He has vouchsafed to you. “If that which ye have heard from the beginning shall remain in you, ye also shall continue in the Son and in the Father.” Here John names one of the benefits derived from obedience to the foregoing precept, namely *maintenance of fellowship with God*.

Many are the blessings, great the advantages that issue from a steadfast adherence to the hope of the Gospel and the ordering of our lives thereby. *First*, it secures us against being deceived by the plausible lies of false teachers. He who feeds upon and delights in wholesome and sweet fruits will refuse that which is bitter and poisonous. He who drinks from the River of life, “clear as crystal,” will disdain foul and brackish water. *Second*, it provides sure evidence of our saving oneness with Christ, and preserves and promotes our communion with Him. The privilege mentioned in the second half of the verse follows, obviously and necessarily, from the performance of the duty enjoined in the first half. The one cannot be without the other: where the Gospel is believingly received and affectionately cherished in the heart, there is fellowship with Christ; but where the former occurs not, the latter is unknown. The Lord Himself joined both together when He said, “If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you” (Joh 15:7). It is by means of the Word that we receive Christ into our understandings, and by exercising faith thereon that He dwells in our hearts, and thereby we continue in fellowship with Him. The Son is the Medium and Mediator by whom we are one with the Father.

Other passages make known further results of the Word abiding in the soul. For instance, "The law of his God is in his heart; none of his steps shall slide" (Psa 37:31). As Charles H. Spurgeon (1834-1892) expressed it, "The best thing in the best place, producing the best results." Where holiness is loved and obedience is predominant we are delivered from the slippery paths of sin and error. "Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee" (Psa 119:11), for taking heed thereto the heart is cleansed (verse 9). "My son, forget not my law; but let thine heart keep my commandment: for length of days, and long life, and peace, shall they add to thee" (Pro 3:1-2). Herein lies our interest, not less than our obligation. Long life is the highest earthly good, especially so when peace be added. "My son, let them not depart from thine eyes: keep sound wisdom and discretion: so shall they be life unto thy soul, and grace to thy neck" (Pro 3:21-22). If the divine precepts be kept as thy much-loved treasure, as thy daily companion and guide, thou shalt find them to quicken thy soul and adorn thy profession. "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you" (Joh 15:7), for then our desires are regulated spiritually, and we ask not amiss. If the Word dwell in us richly, "all wisdom" is ours (Col 3:16); strength too, and we "overcome the wicked one" (1Jo 2:14).

"And this is the promise that He hath promised us, even eternal life" (verse 25). The commentators differ as to whether this statement is to be understood as receiving its fulfillment in the present or in the future: whether it has reference to that which is made good in the believer's experience in this life, or to the celestial bliss in the life to come. That this verse is closely linked to the one immediately preceding is intimated by its opening word. There, two distinct things are in view: an exhortation, and an incentive to heed the same. Personally, it seems to us that the double idea is continued: the precept being enforced, and the injunction amplified. It is by the truth remaining and operating in us that we have communion with God in Christ, and thereby the promise is realized now, for "this is life eternal, that they might know thee [i.e. the triune Jehovah], the only true God, and Jesus Christ [the alone Mediator], whom thou hast sent" (Joh 17:3). As to the future, heaven is reached only by those who hold fast the hope of the Gospel and abide in Christ.

"The sum of what is said is, that we cannot live otherwise than by nourishing to the end the seed of life sown in the heart. John insists much on this point, that not only the beginning of a blessed life is to be found in the knowledge of Christ, but also its perfection" (John Calvin, 1509-1564).

It will be evident to the careful student that our perception of the precise connection between and the relation of verses 24 and 25 will largely turn upon what we understand to be signified by and included in "eternal life." As we shall show below, that expression has a twofold force and application: a present and a future one; and in both senses the promise of it supplies a strong encouragement for believers to heed the injunction to let the truth abide and work within them. For it is by adhering to the Gospel that fellowship with Christ is maintained, and in that fellowship "eternal life" is experienced in the soul. Equally so, it

is by faith's keeping constantly in view the joy set before us in the promise, that we are encouraged and strengthened to persevere in the faith.

"As surely as you continue in the faith of the Gospel, you may be fully persuaded that this eternal life is actually bestowed on you, belongs to you, and shall be enjoyed by you, in uninterrupted communion with the Father and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, in the house eternal in the heavens, forever and ever" (S.E. Pierce, 1746-1829).

We shall now consider: the Promiser—"He"; the blessing announced—"eternal life"; the form of the announcement—by "promise"; and the implications thereof.

The Promiser: the Father

"And this is the promise that he hath promised us." Without a doubt, the pronoun refers to the Father. *First*, because that is the nearest antecedent, the One mentioned at the close of verse 24. *Second*, because of the "order and economy of the sacred Trinity in their operations and actings in the economy of grace. The Father plans all. He proposes all. He provides all. He promises all. He gives all. The Son works from the Father. He performs all. He acts all. He obtains all. The Holy Spirit, in the order and dispensation of grace, witnesseth to all, and sets His seal to all the Father hath revealed and declared concerning His love in Christ Jesus to the elect; as also concerning the person and mediatorial work of our Lord Jesus Christ. So that it can be only that which belongs to the Father which is here asserted. It is a peculiar glory which is the very perfection of the sacred writers to keep up in all their discourses the trinity and proper distinction of the co-equal Persons in the Godhead; and also the order in which they act distinct one from the other; as also the distinct way and manner in which they operate in us, upon us, and within us" (S.E. Pierce). Let the reader note how this order is observed in Matthew 28:19; Ephesians 1:3-4; 1 Peter 1:2-3. *Third*, because of the clear testimony of 1 John 5:11, "God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son."

The blessing announced: "eternal life"

The blessing announced is "eternal life," which in the following Scriptures is spoken of as the present possession of all who savingly trust in Christ. "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life," "Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life," "I give unto them eternal life" (Joh 3:36; 5:24; 10:28). "God hath given to us eternal life" (1Jo 5:11). On the other hand, eternal life is viewed as a future prospect in "he shall receive...in the world to come eternal life" (Mar 10:30), "Ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life" (Rom 6:22), "he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting" (Gal 6:8), "in the hope of eternal life" (Ti 1:2). Those two sets of passages need "rightly dividing" and adjusting thus. The Christian now has eternal life in divine promise, and therefore it is certain. He has a title and right to it, because the same has been purchased for him by Christ. He already has it in Christ (Col 3:3). He has it by faith, which is the substance of things hoped for. He has it in hope (Ti 3:7), which is a confident expectation of a future good, and therefore he rejoices therein. He has the earnest in the gift of the Holy Spirit

(2Co 5:5). He has the seed (1Jo 3:9) or beginning of it in the spiritual nature that he received at the new birth. But he has it not yet in full possession and fruition.¹

The form of the announcement: by “promise”

We come now to consider the form in which the blessing is announced, namely by the Father’s *promise*. That is more than a purpose, a doctrinal declaration or prophetic prediction. His eternal purpose was something hid in Himself. A doctrinal declaration is a matter making known to us the divine purpose or will. A prophecy is the foretelling of things yet to be, and may concern that which is evil as much as that which is good. But a promise concerns only that which is good. Moreover, the accomplishment of a prophecy is dependent upon God’s power and veracity, but the making good of His promise is secured by His faithfulness and righteousness also. The divine promises are so many assurances unto us of God’s solemn engagements, by which He has graciously bound Himself to do some good unto or bestow some blessing upon His people. They are so many certifications of His good pleasure concerning them. They declare that He will lavish upon them the riches of His grace, out of His own mere bounty, according to His royal benignity. They are the revealed testifications of His heart who loved them from all eternity and foreappointed all things for them and respecting them. That they might have a true, clear, and spiritual knowledge of His good will and favour to them, God has been pleased to set the same before them in hundreds of promises scattered throughout His Word.

The divine promises, then, are so many declarations to remove some ill or to impart some good unto the objects upon whom God set His heart from all eternity. As such they are a most blessed manifestation of His love unto His saints. Speaking after the manner of men, there are three steps in connection with the operations of God’s love. The first, His inward purpose to exercise it; the last, the actual execution of His purpose; but in between there is the gracious making known of that purpose to the beneficiaries of it—so that they may be assured of and enjoy the same by faith’s anticipation before the realization thereof. While love is concealed we cannot be comforted therewith. Now God, who is “love,” not only loves His own, and will in due time fully display His love unto them, but in the interim He will have them informed of His benevolent designs, that even now they may rest in His love and stretch themselves comfortably upon His sure promises. Thereby each of them has reason to exclaim adoringly, “How precious also are thy thoughts unto me, O God! how great is the sum of them!” (Psa 139:17), for his promises make evident to us that assertion, “For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil” (Jer 29:11).

The triune God is not only the Author and Giver of the promises, but is the sum and substance of them too. All the Persons of the Godhead form the subject of these blessed assurances. God the Father is not only the Promiser, but the matter of the promises, for He declares unto His saints, “I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” Thus He gives Himself unto them, so that they may have a propriety in Him and all His perfections. God the Son, in His person, His fullness, His suitability and sufficiency, is the promise of His redeemed, being expressly termed “the mercy promised to our fathers” (Luk 1:72)—given

¹ **fruition** – coming to fulfillment; realization.

not only *for* but *to* them. God the Spirit, in His sevenfold gifts and graces, is equally the promise of the Church: one of His titles is “that holy Spirit of promise” (Eph 1:13). Thus the triune Jehovah makes Himself over unto His elect. No wonder that an apostle says, “whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises” (2Pe 1:4). Rightly did Spurgeon remark: “Greatness and preciousness seldom go together, but in this instance they are united in an exceeding degree: they come from a great God, they come to great sinners, they deal with great matters, and they work for us great results.” Everything in the way of blessing, temporal, spiritual, and eternal, comes to the believer by way of promise.

What is “eternal life”?

“*And this is the promise that he hath promised us, even eternal life.*” Observe the perfect harmony there is between this statement and “there [namely Zion] the LORD commanded the blessing, *even* life for evermore” (Psa 133:3)—how greatly they do err who assert that Israel’s portion was a temporal one only! This is the grand promise, the all-inclusive one, that embraces and comprehends all others. This is the sum of all felicity: of all blessings, *life* is the most desired (Job 2:4), and therefore it is made the emblem of spiritual and eternal bliss. Many things are promised the children of God, but this chiefly, outstandingly; yea, all other things are but steps and means thereto. As eternal death contains the essence of all evils, so eternal life contains the essence of all good. As the good Shepherd assured His sheep, “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly” (Joh 10:10). “Life” there is to be regarded in its widest possible latitude, as including the whole of God’s so-great salvation. It is a being enstated in His favour for evermore. It consists of a satisfying knowledge of the triune God (Joh 17:3). It is the inward enjoyment of Him, and the conforming of the soul to the image of His Son.

“*And this is the promise that he hath promised us.*” Why that duplicating of language? For a double reason: first, because the promise was made originally unto Christ as the covenant head of His people, and then to the believer in the Gospel; second, because “eternal life” has both a present and a future aspect. The former is in view in 2 Timothy 1:9, “Who hath saved us [in His eternal decree], and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began”—given to us in Him by solemn compact as our Surety. So again in Titus 1:2: “In hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began.” There was not only a purpose of grace in the heart of God from all eternity, but a real donation of eternal life unto us. “But hath in due times manifested his word through preaching” (Ti 1:3): that which was secretly and eternally agreed upon between God and Christ is now made known in the Gospel.

The Gospel message is, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up; that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have *everlasting life*” (Joh 3:14-15). There too “everlasting life” is an expression which is to be regarded as comprehending everything that Christ purchased for His people. Briefly summarized, eternal life is union with God Himself, in, through, and by Christ. “It is the most perfect fruition of God Himself, and that for evermore” (Hermann Witsius, 1636-1708). It begins with the divine operation of grace in our hearts, “to give the light of the

knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2Co 4:6). It continues in our beholding by faith the glory of the Lord as it shines in the Word, by which we are experientially and progressively “changed into the same image from glory to glory” (2Co 3:18). It is consummated at Christ’s return, when He will “change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto His glorious body” (Phi 3:21); when in spirit and soul and body “we shall be like Him” (1Jo 3:2). It eventuates in dwelling with Him forever in heaven.

The essential elements of eternal life

But let us consider more definitely its essential elements. First, it is a life-in-law. When Adam transgressed he incurred a double death—a legal and an experiential one; being cast out of God’s favour and losing the impress of His moral image in his soul. Correspondingly, God’s elect are given both a legal and a spiritual life. It was to the former that Christ referred when He defined eternal life as “and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life” (Joh 5:24). That is entirely a judicial thing. In His atoning work Christ did two things: He bore the sins of His people and suffered the penalty of the Law; He wrought out for them a perfect righteousness by obeying the precept of the Law. Having met all its requirements, Christ merited its reward, which is “life” (Rom 7:10; 10:5), namely, a standing accepted before God in His cloudless favour; and that life is eternal because it is the award of the “everlasting righteousness” that He brought in (Dan 9:24). When the first Adam sinned, he forfeited God’s favour and came under the curse of the Law; because the last Adam obeyed, He earned for His people the approbation of God and the blessing of the Law. Thus they are not only delivered from condemnation or legal death, but they have legal life, which is justification (Rom 6:10-11).

It is most important to see that the believer has life in Christ before he has life from Him. In Christ he has met every requirement of the Law, and not only is there now no condemnation to him, but he has received “the gift of righteousness,” and must “reign in life by one, Jesus Christ” (Rom 5:17). In consequence of this, *second*, “eternal life” is a life of grace in the soul, for at the new birth the life of God is imparted and we are made vitally one with Christ. It is then that we pass “from death unto life” (1Jo 3:14) experientially, being divinely quickened. The faculties of the soul are restored to their proper exercise: the eyes of the understanding are opened to see the glory of God, the ears unstopped to hear His voice, the affections raised unto things above, the tongue loosed in praise and petition. And they are infallibly assured that “He who has begun a good work in you will perform [or “finish”] it” (Phi 1:6). This too is an intrinsic part of the fruit of the Saviour’s travail (Ti 3:5-7).

Third, eternal life is consummated in everlasting celestial bliss, for God “hath begotten us again unto a lively [living] hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for us” (1Pe 1:3-4). The spiritual life begun here is fully realized there. Now it is but the bud, then the lovely flower. “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now we know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (1Co 13:12). Even now we are made partakers of the divine nature (2Pe 1:4), but then shall we be perfectly conformed to the image of His Son (Rom 8:29), and eternally share with Him that “fullness of joy,” and those pleasures that are at God’s right hand. Thus “eternal life”

includes a life-in-law, a life in the soul, and a life in heaven; or justification, regeneration, and glorification.

The implications of the promises

A few words on the implications of the particular form in which eternal life is presented. *First*, since it be by divine “promise,” then it is a free gift. A promise supposes that the party making it is under no obligation to grant, and that the one to whom it is made can urge no claim. It is entirely gratuitous (see Galatians 3:18, 21). That eternal life is a “gift” is asserted in John 10:28, Romans 6:23. *Second*, it implies acceptance on our part, and that as a “gift.” Yet the very act of receiving it involves certain exercises of soul. There must be repentance, or a being sensible of our guilt and the desire for its removal; [and] the exercise of faith, or the extending of an empty hand to receive alms. Those exercises will necessarily be followed by obedience and a holy life. Where there be repentance, there is hatred of sin. Where there be faith, there is gratitude to the bounteous Giver and the longing to please Him. *Third*, everlasting bliss is also certain, for it is promised by Him who cannot lie. The unchanging faithfulness of God is the guarantee of endless felicity.

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JOSHUA

87. Cities of Refuge, Part 1

“The LORD also spake unto Joshua, saying, Speak to the children of Israel, saying, Appoint out for you cities of refuge, whereof I spake unto you by the hand of Moses: that the slayer that killeth any person unawares and unwittingly may flee thither: and they shall be your refuge from the avenger of blood. And when he that doth flee unto one of those cities shall stand at the entering of the gate of the city, and shall declare his cause in the ears of the elders of that city, they shall take him into the city unto them, and give him a place, that he may dwell among them. And if the avenger of blood pursue after him, then they shall not deliver the slayer up into his hand: because he smote his neighbour unwittingly, and hated him not beforetime. And he shall dwell in that city, until he stand before the congregation for judgment, and until the death of the high priest that shall be in those days: then shall the slayer return, and come unto his own city, and unto his own house, unto the city from whence he fled” (Jos 20:1-6).

In that passage, we are furnished with a condensed account of the statutes with regard to murder which the Lord gave to Israel for the maintenance of righteousness in their midst. On the one hand, there must be a strict enforcing of justice—on the other, the exercising of mercy. The guilty were not to be cleared—the innocent must not be executed. Due and orderly investigation must be made, and each case tried on its own merits before a court of law. Where guilt was established, malice aforethought being proved by witnesses, the death penalty was to be inflicted upon the murderer. But when a neighbour had been inadvertently killed, extreme measures were not to be taken against the one occasioning his death. Nor was the next-of-kin to the one slain permitted to take matters into his own hands

and wreak vengeance upon him, who by misadventure had tragically terminated his life. Instead, there was a sanctuary provided for the innocent, to which he could fly, shelter afforded for one who had involuntarily committed homicide.

The original statute pertaining to the subject was, "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: *for* in the image of God made He man" (Gen 9:6). There is nothing whatever "Jewish" about that injunction, for it was given centuries before the nation of Israel had any existence. It needs emphasizing today that capital punishment as the penalty for murder was ordained by God Himself long before the giving of the Mosaic law, and, since it has never been repealed by Him, that precept is binding until the end of time. It is important to observe that the reason for this law is not here based upon the well-being of human society, but is grounded upon the fact that man is made "in the image of God" (Gen 1:27). That expression has a twofold significance—a natural and a moral—the moral image of God (inherent holiness) was lost at the fall, but the natural still exists, as is clear from 1 Corinthians 11:7 and James 3:9. Thus, the primary reason why it is sinful to slay a man is because he is made in the image of God. "To deface the king's image is a sort of treason among men, implying a hatred against him, and that, if he himself were within reach, he would be served in the same manner. How much more heinous, then, must it be to destroy, curse, oppress, or in any way abuse the image of the King of kings!" (Andrew Fuller, 1754-1815).

Whereas that original statute of God has never yet been repealed, it has been more fully explained, amplified, and safeguarded in later passages, and to them we now turn. The first one having a direct bearing upon our present subject is found in Exodus 21:12-14, "He that smiteth a man, so that he die, shall be surely put to death." There is the general principle, but it is *qualified* thus, "And if a man lie not in wait, but God deliver him into his hand, then I will appoint thee a place whither he shall flee. But if a man come presumptuously upon his neighbour, to slay him with guile; thou shalt take him from mine altar, that he may die." A sharp distinction was thus drawn between deliberate murder and involuntary manslaughter. In the former instance, when one smote his fellow intentionally, whether from premeditated malice or in the heat of sudden passion, so that he expired from the injury, then the deed must be regarded as murder, and the death penalty be enforced. But where one unwittingly and unwillingly inflicted an injury upon another, even though it proved to be a fatal one, he was not to be executed for the act. Instead, there was a place appointed by God to which he might flee, and where he could be sheltered from any who sought vengeance upon him.

We have been much impressed by the fact that the above passage is found in the very next chapter after the one which records the Ten Commandments. Let those who have such a penchant for drawing invidious and odious comparisons between that which obtained under the old covenant and that which pertains to the new, take careful note that this gracious provision was made by God under that very economy which dispensationalists are so fond of terming "a forbidding and unrelieved regime of stern law." It was nothing of the kind, as any impartial student of the Word is aware. In all ages, God has tempered His justice with mercy and caused His grace to reign through righteousness. Let it not be overlooked that such declarations as the following are found in the *Old Testament* Scriptures, "Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear him"

(Psa 103:13). "Great are thy tender mercies, O LORD" (Psa 119:156). The putting forth of His wrath is spoken of as His "strange work" (Isa 28:21). "Thou art a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness" (Neh 9:17). "He restraineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy" (Mic 7:18), and most evidently did the cities of refuge testify to that fact.

Ere passing on from Exodus 21:13-14, let us also duly attend to the wording of verse 13. It is *not*, "And if a man lie not in wait, but *accidentally* slay another," but instead, "And if a man lie not in wait [having no intention to injure his neighbour], but *God deliver him* into his hand." In full accord with the uniform teaching of Holy Writ concerning the divine superintendence of all events, such a calamity, as is here supposed, is not ascribed to "chance" or "ill fortune" (for there is nothing fortuitous in a world governed by God), but instead is attributed to an act of God—i.e. the Lord being pleased to take away in that manner the life which He had given. "Unto God the LORD belong the issues from death" (Psa 68:20). The gates of the grave open unto none except at the command of the Most High, and when He gives the word none can withstand it. "My times [to be born and to die, Ecc 3:2] are in *thy hand*" (Psa 31:15), and not in my own. "Seeing his days are determined, the number of his months are with thee, thou hast appointed his bounds that he cannot pass" (Job 14:5). Not only is the hour of death divinely decreed, but *the form* in which it comes. "Then the Jews took up stones again to stone him" (Joh 10:31), but in vain, for God had ordained that He should be crucified. No matter in what manner death comes, it is the Lord who kills and "bringeth down to the grave" (1Sa 2:6).

"And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, When ye be come over Jordan into the land of Canaan: then ye shall appoint you cities to be cities of refuge for you; that the slayer may flee thither, which killeth any person at unawares" (Num 35:9-11). That which is mentioned in Exodus 21 had reference to God's merciful provision for Israel during the time they remained in the wilderness. There was, even then, "a place" appointed by the Lord to which the manslayer might turn for sanctuary. We are not told where that place was. Some of the ancient Jewish writers suppose that it was located "outside the camp," but, since all the cities of refuge were cities which pertained to *the Levites*, we consider it more in keeping with the Analogy of Faith to conclude that the "place" was within that part of the camp assigned to the priests. That temporal provision was to give way to a more permanent arrangement after the children of Israel became settled in their inheritance.

"And of these cities which ye shall give six cities shall ye have for refuge. Ye shall give three cities on this side Jordan, and three cities shall ye give in the land of Canaan, which shall be cities of refuge" (Num 35:13-14). Two and a half of the tribes, namely the children of Gad, the children of Reuben, and half the tribe of Manasseh, had been assigned their place and portion on the eastern side of the Jordan (Num 32:33), in the fertile valley which had been occupied by Sihon king of the Amorites and Og king of Bashan, who, refusing Israel's request to pass through that country, had been slain in battle and their territory seized by the conquerors (Num 21:21-31). The remaining three were to be situated in convenient sections in Palestine, where they would be accessible at short notice unto those who might have need of the same. Nor was their use restricted to those who were of the natural seed of Abraham, "These six cities shall be a refuge, both for the children of

Israel, and for the stranger, and for the sojourner among them: that every one that killeth any person unawares may flee thither' (Num 35:15). Thus, even under the Mosaic economy, divine mercy was extended unto those who threw in their lot with the people of God!

In the verses that follow, various cases are described in detail, so that there might be no miscarriage of justice when the magistrates were adjudicating thereon. "And if he smite him with an instrument of iron, so that he die, he is a murderer: the murderer shall surely be put to death. And if he smite him with throwing a stone, wherewith he may die, and he die, he is a murderer: the murderer shall surely be put to death. Or if he smite him with an hand weapon of wood, wherewith he may die, and he die, he is a murderer: the murderer shall surely be put to death. The revenger of blood himself shall slay the murderer: when he meeteth him he shall slay him. But [or "and"] if he thrust him of hatred, or hurl at him by laying of wait, that he die; or in enmity smite him with his hand, that he die: he that smote him shall surely be put to death: for he is a murderer: the revenger of blood shall slay the murderer, when he meeteth him" (Num 35:17-21). Thus, those cities of refuge were not meant to afford shelter for murderers as such. Therein they differed noticeably from the sacred precincts of the heathen gods, which provided a safe asylum for any violent or wicked man. The divine statute insisted on the sanctity of life and the inflexible maintenance of righteousness.

Equally express were the instructions on the other side. "But if he thrust him suddenly without enmity, or have cast upon him any thing without laying of wait; or with any stone, wherewith a man may die, seeing him not, and cast it upon him, that he die, and was not his enemy, neither sought his harm: then the congregation shall judge between the slayer and the revenger of blood according to these judgments. And the congregation shall deliver the slayer out of the hand of the revenger of blood, and the congregation shall restore him to the city of his refuge, whither he was fled: and he shall abide in it unto the death of the high priest, which was anointed with the holy oil" (Num 35:22-25). Shelter and security were provided only for one who had brought about the death of another without deliberate design, yea, with no intention of inflicting any injury upon him. Murder, strictly speaking, involves more than the overt act. It includes the spirit behind the act, the motive prompting it. If the act be performed "without enmity" and with no desire to harm another, then it is a case of involuntary manslaughter and not of murder.

To prevent any guilty one taking advantage of this provision for the innocent, the accused must "stand before the congregation in judgment" (Num 35:12). That is, he was to be brought before a court of justice, where the magistrates were to give him a fair trial. Full and formal investigation was to be made, so that the accused had every opportunity to prove his innocence. "Then the congregation shall judge between the slayer and the revenger of blood according to these judgments" (Num 35:24). Once the manslayer had been received into the city of refuge, the avenger of blood could act only as prosecutor (previously he had the right to be the executioner—verse 19), and his case had to be determined by the rules God had specified. If it were proved that death had ensued where no malicious attempt upon life had been made, but, instead, the injury had been inflicted casually, "unawares," then the death penalty was not to be visited upon him.

It is highly important in the administration of law that no innocent person should be made to suffer, and equally so that the guilty should not be exempted from the due reward of his iniquities. In the case of murder, the divine law required proof of previous malice, a laying in wait to slay the victim, deliberate measures taken to encompass his death, an assault with some weapon of violence to accomplish the fell deed. "Whoso killeth any person, the murderer shall be put to death by the mouth of witnesses: but one witness shall not testify against any person to cause him to die. Moreover ye shall take no satisfaction for the life of a murderer, which is guilty of death: but he shall be surely put to death" (Num 35:30-31). Thereby did the Lord manifest His abhorrence of this crime—no atoning sacrifice was available for it, nor could any ransom be accepted for its perpetrator. Justice must be administered impartially, the law strictly enforced without fear or favour. Very solemn and impressive is it to note what follows.

"So ye shall not pollute the land wherein ye are: for *blood defileth the land*: and the land cannot be cleansed of the blood that is shed therein, but by the blood of him that shed it. Defile not therefore the land which ye shall inhabit, wherein I dwell: for I the LORD dwell among the children of Israel" (Num 35:33-34). Such shedding of blood not only defiles the conscience of the murderer, who is thereby proved not to have eternal life abiding in him (1Jo 3:15), but also pollutes the land in which the crime was committed, being abominable to God and to all good men. Nor can that land be cleansed from the blood of murder but by executing condign judgment upon the murderer himself. Thus, we are informed that there was far more involved in the enforcing of these statutes than the maintenance of righteousness between man and man. As another has pointed out, "The glory of God, the purity of His land, and the integrity of His government, had to be duly maintained. If those were touched, there could be no security for anyone."

The same things are taught, substantially, in the New Testament, particularly in Romans 13:1-4. There the civil ruler or magistrate is twice denominated "the minister of God"—first, in protecting the law-abiding; second, in penalizing the law-defiant. He is divinely appointed to maintain civic righteousness, for if the restraints of government be removed, a state of anarchy and bedlam at once ensues. The "sword" is the symbol of the ultimate power of life and death (Gen 3:24; Zec 13:7), and the "he beareth not the sword in vain" signifies that God has invested him with the authority to inflict capital punishment—the common method of which in olden times was by decapitating with the sword. It is an essential part of the governor's office to be "a revenger, to execute [God's] wrath upon him that doeth evil." Nothing is said about its being his duty to reform criminals, rather is it his business to redress wrongs and to instill fear into those who contemplate doing wrong. Romans 13:1-4 is silent upon any efforts being required to reclaim the refractory, the emphasis being placed upon his alarming them and imposing the full penalty of the law. Compare 1 Peter 2:14. It is a sure sign of a nation's moral degeneracy, and a dishonouring and incurring of God's displeasure, when capital punishment is abolished, or magistrates become lax and yield to sentimentality.

Reverting to the case of the one who is not guilty of deliberate murder, there are four other details which require to be noticed. First, when one unintentionally killed a neighbour, there must usually have been, in such cases, a culpable degree of carelessness, and therefore, though his life was spared, his freedom was curtailed. Second, accordingly,

he was required to leave his home and family, and take up residence in the city of refuge. Third, if he forsook that city, he forfeited legal protection, and then, should the revenger of blood find him without its borders, he was entitled to kill him (Num 35:27). Fourth, it was required that he remain within the city of refuge until the death of the high priest, and then, he was free to return to his home and reside there unmolested (Num 35:28). By limiting the time of his banishment by the high priest's death, honour was put upon the priesthood—as it had been in selecting those cities, for they all belonged to the Levites. “The high priest was to be looked upon as so great a blessing to his country, that when he died their sorrow upon that occasion should swallow up all other resentments” (Matthew Henry, 1662-1714).

Further reference is made to our subject in Deuteronomy 4:41-43, wherein we see illustrated the law of progressive development. First, bare mention of an unspecified “place” is referred to (Exo 21:13). Next, instructions are given for the appointing of six cities of refuge, without stating more than that three of them are to be on the wilderness side of the Jordan, and three within Canaan (Num 35:14-15). Then, the first three are actually named (Deu 4:43), while in Joshua 20:7-8, the locations of all six are given. In Deuteronomy 19, more definite instructions were communicated as to the precise situations of those cities. The land was to be divided into three parts, so that one of them would be the more readily accessible for those in any particular section (verses 2-3). A “way” which led to each city was to be prepared (verse 3) so as to guide the fugitive who was fleeing unto it. Joshua 20:4 supplies the additional information that when the manslayer arrived at the gate of the city of refuge he received a preliminary hearing from the elders ere he was admitted, which was followed by a fuller and more formal investigation of his case in a court of justice (verse 6). The typical and spiritual meaning of the whole of the foregoing will be considered in our next article.

THE DOCTRINE OF MORTIFICATION

2. An Outline, Part 1

We have given this article the above title because Romans 8:13 supplies the most comprehensive description of our subject to be found in any single verse of the Bible, setting forth as it does the greatest number of its principal features, “For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.” This is a most solemn and searching verse, and one which has little place in modern ministry, be it oral or written. If Arminians have sadly wrested it, many Calvinists have refused to face its plain affirmations and implications. Five things in it claim our best attention. First, the persons addressed. Second, the awful warning here set before them. Third, the duty enjoined upon them. Fourth, the effectual Helper provided. Fifth, the promise made to them. The better to focus our minds, and to enable us to grapple with the difficulties which not a few have found in the verse, ere seeking to fill in our outline, we will ask a number of pertinent questions.

What is the relation between our text and the context? Why are both of its members in the hypothetical form—"if"? Does the "ye" in each half of the verse have reference to the same persons, or are there two entirely different classes in view? If the latter be the case, then by what valid principle of exegesis can we account for such? Why not change one of them to "any" or "they"? What is meant by "live after the flesh"? Is it possible for a real Christian to do so? If not, and it is unregenerate persons who are mentioned, then why say they "shall die," seeing that they are dead already spiritually? Are the terms "die" and "live" here used figuratively and relatively, or literally and absolutely? What is imported by "mortify" and why "the deeds of the body" rather than "the lusts of the flesh"? If the "ye" perform that task, then how "through the Spirit"? If He be the prime Worker, then why is the mortifying predicated of them? If there be conjoint action, then how are the two factors to be adjusted? In what manner will the promise "ye shall live" be made good, seeing they already be alive spiritually? We know of no commentator who has made any real attempt to grapple with these problems.

The whole context makes it quite evident *what* particular classes of people are here addressed. First, it is those who are in Christ Jesus, upon whom there is now no condemnation (Rom 8:1). Second, it is those who have been made free from the law of sin and death, and had the righteousness of Christ imputed to them (Rom 8:2-4). Third, it is those who give proof that they are the beneficiaries of Christ, by walking not after the flesh, but after the spirit (Rom 8:4). In what immediately follows, a description is given of two radically different classes—they who are after the flesh, carnally minded, and they whose legal standing is not in the flesh, but in the spirit, who are spiritually minded because indwelt by the Spirit of God (Rom 8:5-11). Fourth, concerning the latter—"we" as opposed to the "they" of verse 8—the apostle draws a plain and practical conclusion. "Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh" (Rom 8:12)—the endearing appellation there used by Paul leaves us in no doubt as to the particular type of characters he was addressing. Thomas Manton (1620-1677) had a most able sermon on this verse, and we will mostly, in our own language, epitomize his exposition.

Man would fain be at his own disposal. The language of his heart is "our lips are our own: who is lord over us?" (Psa 12:4). He affects supremacy and claims the right of dominion over his own actions. But his claim is invalid. He was made by Another and for Another, and therefore, he is a "debtor." Negatively, not to the flesh, which is mentioned because that corrupt principle is ever demanding subjection to it. Positively, he is debtor to the One who gave him being. Christians are debtors both as creatures and as new creatures, being entirely dependent upon God alike for their being and their well-being, for their existence and preservation. As our Maker, God is our Owner, and being our Owner, He is, therefore, our Governor, and, by consequence, our Judge. He has an absolute propriety in us, an unchallengeable power over us, to command and dispose of us as He pleases. We have nothing but what we receive from Him. We are accountable to Him for our time and our talents. Every benefit we receive increases our obligation to Him. We have no right to please ourselves in anything. This debt is indissoluble. As long as we are dependent upon God for being and support, so long are we bound to Him. Sin has in no wise cancelled our obligation, for though fallen man has lost his power to obey, the Lord has not lost His power to command.

By virtue of his spiritual being, the saint is still more a debtor to God. First, because of his redemption by Christ, for he is not his own, but bought with a price (1Co 6:19). The state *from which* he was redeemed was one of woeful bondage, for he was a slave of Satan. Now when a captive was ransomed, he became the absolute property of the purchaser (Lev 25:45-46). The *end* which Christ had in view proves the same thing. He has “redeemed us to God” (Rev 5:9). Second, because of his regeneration. The new nature then received inclines to God. We are created in Christ Jesus unto good works (Eph 2:10). Having brought us from death unto life, renewed us in His image, bestowed upon us the status and privileges of sonship, we owe ourselves, our strength and our service unto God as His beneficiaries. The new creature is diverted from its proper use if we live after the flesh. Third, because of our own dedication (Rom 12:1). A genuine conversion involves the renunciation of the world, the flesh, and the devil, and the giving up of ourselves unto the Lord (2Co 8:5). Since our obedience to God is a *debt*, there can be no merit in it (Luk 17:10). But if we pay it not, we incur the debt of punishment (Mat 6:12, 15). Since the flesh has no right to command, the gratification of it is the yielding to a tyrannous usurper (Rom 6:12, 14). When solicited by the flesh, the believer should reply, “I am the Lord’s.”

“For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die; but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live” (Rom 8:13). Here are two sharply contrasted propositions, each one being expressed conditionally. Two eventualities are plainly set forth. Two suppositions are mentioned, and the inevitable outcome of each clearly stated. Both parts of the verse affirm that if a certain course of conduct be steadily followed (for it is far from being isolated actions which are referred to) a certain result would inevitably follow. This hypothetical form of presenting the truth is quite a common one in the Scriptures. Servants of Christ are informed that, “*If* any man’s [literally, “any one’s,” i.e. of the “ministers” of verse 5, the “labourers” of verse 9] work abide which he hath built thereon, he shall receive a reward. *If* any man’s [“one’s,” “minister’s”] work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss” (1Co 3:14-15). Other well-known examples are, “For if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ,” and “For if I build again the things which I destroyed [renounced], I make myself a transgressor” (Gal 1:10; 2:18). “How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation?” (Heb 2:3 and cf. 10:26). Our text, then, is parallel with, “For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption: but he that soweth to the spirit shall of the spirit reap life everlasting” (Gal 6:8).

There are two things which the people of God are ever in need of—faithful warnings, kindly encouragements—the one to curb their sinful propensities, the other to animate their spiritual graces to the performing of duty, especially when they be cast down by the difficulties of the way or are mourning over their failures. Here, too, a balance needs to be carefully preserved. Inexperienced believers have little realization of the difficulties and perils before them, and the hearts of older ones are so deceitful that each alike needs to be plainly and frequently corrected, and exhorted to pay attention to the danger-signals which God has set up along our way. It is both striking and solemn to note how often the Saviour sounded the note of warning, not only unto the wicked, but more especially unto His disciples. He bade them, “Take heed what ye hear” (Mar 4:24); “Beware of false prophets” (Mat 7:15); “Take heed therefore that the light which is in thee be not darkness” (Luk 11:35); “Remember Lot’s wife” (Luk 17:32); “Take heed to yourselves, lest at any time

your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting, and drunkenness, and cares of this life" (Luk 21:34). To one He had healed, "Sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee" (Joh 5:14).

The word "flesh" is used in Scripture in a number of senses, but throughout Romans 8, it signifies that corrupt and depraved nature which is in us when we enter this world. That evil nature or principle is variously designated. It is termed "sin" (Rom 7:8), "warring against the law of my mind" (verse 23). In James 4:5, "the *spirit* that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy," to indicate that it is not a tangible or material entity. But more commonly it is called "the flesh" (Joh 3:6; Rom 7:25; Gal 5:17). It is so termed because it is transmitted from parent to child as the body is, because it is propagated by natural generation, because it is strengthened and drawn forth by carnal objects, because of its base character and degeneracy. It was not in man when he left the hand of his Creator and was pronounced by Him "very good." Rather was it something that he acquired by the fall. The principle of sin as a foreign element, as a thing *ab extra*, as an invading agent, entered into him, vitiating the whole of his natural being—as frost enters into and ruins vegetables, and as blight seizes and mars fruit.

The "flesh" is the open, implacable, inveterate, irreconcilable enemy of holiness, yea, it is "enmity against God" (Rom 8:7)—an "enemy" may be reconciled, not so "enmity" itself. Then, what an evil and abominable thing is the flesh—at variance with the Holy One, a rebel against His Law! It is, therefore, our enemy. Yea, it is far and away the worst one the believer has. The devil and the world without do all their mischief to the souls of men by the flesh within them. "The flesh is the womb where all sin is conceived and formed, the anvil upon which all is wrought, the false Judas that betrays us, the secret enemy within that is ready on all occasions to open the gates to the besiegers" (Thomas Jacomb, 1622-1687). We must distinguish sharply between *being* in the flesh and *living after* the flesh. Thus, "For when we were in the flesh" (Rom 7:5) has reference to Christians in their unregenerate condition, as "They that are in the flesh cannot please God" speaks of the unsaved. Whereas, "But ye are not in the flesh, but in the spirit" (8:8-9) is predicated of believers. "In the flesh" imports a person's standing and state before God. Living after the flesh describes his course and conversation. The one inevitably follows and corresponds to the other. A person's character and conduct agree with his condition and case.

The flesh is radically and wholly evil, as Romans 7:18 declares, there is "no good thing" in it. It is beyond reclamation, being incapable of any improvement. It may indeed put on a religious garb, as did the Pharisees, but beneath is nothing but rottenness. Fire may as soon be struck out of ice as holy dispositions and motions be produced by indwelling sin. As the "flesh" continually opposes that which is good, so it ever disposes the soul unto what is evil. To "walk after" or to "live after the flesh" (both terms have the same force) is for a person to conduct himself as do all the unregenerate, who are dominated, motivated and actuated by nothing but their fallen nature. To "live after the flesh" refers not to a single act, nor even to a habit or a series of acts in one direction, but rather to the whole man being governed and guided by this vile principle. That is the case with all who are out of Christ. Their desires, thoughts, speech, and deeds all proceed from this corrupt fount. It is by the flesh that the whole of their souls are set in motion and their

entire course steered. All is directed by some fleshly consideration. They act *from* self, or base principle. They act *for* self, or base end. The glory of God is nothing to them. The flesh is all in all.

The flesh is a dynamical, active, ambitious principle, and, therefore, is it spoken of as a *lusting* thing. Thus, we read of “the lusts of the flesh,” yea, of “the wills of the flesh” (Eph 2:3—margin) for its desires are vehement and imperious. “But [indwelling] sin, taking occasion [being aggravated] by the commandment [“Thou shalt not covet”], wrought in me all manner of concupiscence” [or “lust”] (Rom 7:8). Education and culture may result in a refined exterior; family training and other influences may lead to an espousal of religion, as is the case with the great majority of the heathen. Selfish considerations may even issue in voluntarily undergoing great austerities and deprivations, as the Buddhist to attain unto Nirvana, the Mohammedan to gain paradise, the romanist to merit heaven—but the love of God prompts none of them, nor is His glory their aim. Though the Christian be “not in the flesh” as to his status and state, yet the flesh as an evil principle (unchanged) is still in him, and it “lusteth against the spirit” (Gal 5:17) or new nature, and therefore are we exhorted, “Let not sin [i.e. the flesh] therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof” (Rom 6:12).

It requires to be pointed out that there is a *twofold* walking or living after the flesh—the one more gross and manifest, the other more indiscernible. The first breaks forth into open and bodily lusts and acts, such as gluttony, drunkenness, moral uncleanness. This is “the filthiness of the flesh.” The second is when the flesh exerts itself in internal heart lusts, which are more or less concealed from our fellows, which lie smouldering and festering within the soul, such as pride, unbelief, self-love, envy, covetousness. This is the filthiness “of the spirit” (2Co 7:1). In Galatians 5:18-19, the apostle gives a catalogue of the lustings of the flesh in *both* of these respects. He does so to expose a common fallacy. It is generally assumed that walking or living “according to the flesh” is limited to the first form mentioned, and the second one is little considered or regarded. So long as men abstain from gross intemperance, open profanity, brutish sensuality, they think that all is well with them, whereas they may be quite free from all gross practices and still be guilty of living after the flesh. Yea, such *is* the case with all in whose hearts there are inordinate affections after the world, a spirit of self-exaltation, covetousness, malice, hatred, uncharitableness, and many other reprehensible lusts.

Our text makes crystal clear to us the fundamental and vital importance of the duty here enjoined, for our performance or non-performance thereof is literally a matter of life and death. Mortification is not optional, but imperative. The solemn alternatives are plainly stated—neglect ensures everlasting misery, compliance therewith is assured eternal felicity. The whole verse is manifestly addressed unto saints, and they are faithfully warned, “If ye live after the flesh, ye shall die,” that is, die eternally, for as in verse Rom 6:12, 21; 6:23; 8:6, “death” includes all the penal consequences of sin both here and hereafter. So, in our text, “die” manifestly signifies “shall suffer the second death,” which is “the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone” (Rev 21:8). The express reason is here advanced why Christians should not live after the flesh. They are not debtors to it to do so (verse 12). If they surrender to its dominion, the wages of sin will most certainly be paid them. “The flesh belongs to the world, and the man who is yielding to its promptings is in

the world, living like the world, and must perish with the world" (J. Stifler, c. 1840-c. 1910).

It was by yielding to the lusts of the flesh that Adam brought death upon himself and all his posterity. And if I live after the flesh, that is, am governed and guided by my old nature, acting habitually according to its inclinations—for it is a persistent and continuous course of conduct which is here mentioned—then, no matter what be my profession, I shall perish in my sin. It is the gratifying and serving of the flesh, instead of the will of God, which eternally ruins souls. "It may be asked whether one who has received the grace of God in truth can live after the flesh. To live in a continued course of sin is contrary to the grace of God, but flesh may prevail and greatly influence the life and conversation for a while. How long this may be the case of a true believer under backsliding, through the power of corruptions and temptations, cannot be known, but certain it is that it shall not be always thus with him" (John Gill, 1697-1771).

The whole of our verse pertains to professing Christians, and at the present moment. The apostle did not simply say, "If ye have lived after the flesh," for that is the case with every unregenerate soul, but if ye now live after the flesh, "ye shall die"—in the full meaning of that word. It is a general statement of a universal truth. We fully agree with the explanation furnished by Benjamin W. Newton (1807-1899), who was a decided Calvinist. "An expression of this kind is addressed to us for two reasons. First, because in the professing church the apostle knew there were and would be false professors. So, whenever collective bodies are addressed, he always uses words implying uncertainty and doubt, for tares will be among the wheat. And second, true believers themselves (though grace can preserve them) have now, nevertheless, always a tendency in them to the same paths. Therefore, descriptions like this, which are true to the full of those who merely profess, may yet be rightly applied to all who are wandering into those paths." Examples of the one are found in such passages as Galatians 4:20 and 6:8; Ephesians 5:5-7; Colossians 3:5-6. Of the second, it must be borne in mind that a backsliding Christian had turned aside from the narrow way of denying self, and that, if he follows the course of self-pleasing to the bitter end, destruction awaits him."

See here the *faithfulness* of God in so plainly warning of the terrible doom awaiting all who live after the flesh. Instead of thinking hardly of God for His threatenings, we should be grateful for them. See the *justice* of God. To be pleasing self is to continue in the apostasy of mankind, and therefore, the original sentence (Gen 2:17) is in force against them. It is contempt of God, and the heinousness of the sin is measured by the greatness of Him who is affronted (1Sa 2:25). Moreover, they refuse the remedy, and therefore are doubly guilty. See here the *wisdom* of God in appointing the greater punishment to curb the greatness of the temptation. The pleasures of sin are but for a season, but the pains of sin are for evermore. If the latter were soundly believed and seriously considered, the former would not so easily prevail with us. Behold the *holiness* of God. An unmortified soul is unfit for His presence. Vessels of glory must first be seasoned with grace. Conformity to Christ fits for heaven, and where that be lacking there can be no entrance.

JOHN THE BAPTIST

Part 1

It might well be supposed that our Lord's forerunner was no ordinary man. Before assenting to that idea, it is necessary to determine what is meant in that connection by "no ordinary man." If it implies that John must have been one of social prestige and prominence, a highly educated and learned man, possessed of more than average talents, then, a serious doubt at once enters our mind, for it accords not with what is revealed elsewhere of the thoughts and ways of Him which are so different from ours. "The LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart" (1Sa 16:7). He is pleased to choose "the foolish things to confound the wise" and "the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty: and base things of the world, and things which are despised...that no flesh should glory in his presence" (1Co 1:27-29)—the primary reference being to His ministers, and the wider application to His saints in general. Thus, the ambassadors of Christ were for the most part unlettered fishermen, and when the Messiah appeared, he had no form nor comeliness in the sight of men.

Nevertheless, from the spiritual and divine side of things, the above expectation *was* fully realized. The one appointed to introduce the Saviour unto Israel was the subject of Old Testament prediction. He came from exceptionally pious parents. His very name was given to him by an angel before his conception (Luk 1:13). He was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb (Luk 1:15). His mission was a unique one. Yea, we are fully warranted in saying that God conferred upon him higher honours than on any other of the sons of men either before or since. He was "the prophet of the Highest" and sent "before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways" (Luk 1:76). He was the first administrator of the holy ordinance of baptism (and accordingly is named "the Baptist"), and had the great privilege of baptizing the Lord Jesus. It was announced that "He shall be great in the sight of the Lord" (Luk 1:15), and blessedly was that fulfilled, for he was most eminently characterized by "a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price" (1Pe 3:4). In that respect, as in many others, he was closely conformed unto Him who was "meek and lowly in heart."

There are a number of striking paradoxes in the career of John which are deserving of mention. Though both of his parents were of the tribe of Levi, and his father an officiating priest (Luk 1:5), yet, he himself filled no ecclesiastical position and was never seen in the temple. Though his task was such a momentous one, there is no hint that he was trained in any of the schools of earth or that he consorted with men of letters. Instead, we are informed that he "was in the deserts till the day of his showing unto Israel" (Luk 1:80). Though he was appointed to make the Messiah "manifest to Israel" (Joh 1:31), instead of using Jerusalem for his headquarters, his sphere of operations was the wilderness! Though invested with such high dignity, nevertheless, his garb was of the meanest and his food the plainest. Though a prophet and filled with the Holy Spirit, yet, he performed no miracles. Though his mission and ministry were of such deep importance, yet, they began and ended

within the space of a few weeks! Though he was highly esteemed by the multitudes, yet, he ended his days in prison, and God suffered the one who had so faithfully discharged his duty to be beheaded.

Luke 1:5 records a situation which must have deeply exercised the hearts of the godly remnant then to be found in Israel. Their beloved land was in the hands of enemies. The throne was occupied by a heathen—the wicked Herod then being king of Judaea. Long centuries had passed since any of the seed of David had wielded the scepter. It looked as though JEHOVAH had ceased to be gracious. But the saints walk by faith, and not by sight. God's sure Word, and not that which appears to outward sight, is the ground of their confidence, the basis of their hopes, and the comfort of their hearts. Faith may indeed be sorely tested, patience tried to its limits; the vision may tarry long, but in God's good time, it is certain of realization. It has been so all through the past, it was then—it will be so to the end of human history. Those words, "And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him" (Mat 25:6) enunciate a principle which has received frequent fulfilment, "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning" (Psa 30:5).

Against that dark background of Herod's being king of Judaea, we are told, "A certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless" (Luk 1:5-6). Those were the parents of John the Baptist, and profoundly significant were their names. Zacharias means "JEHOVAH remembers." How blessed! Our own memories are treacherous, and those about us are often forgetful, but not so the omniscient One. And *what is it* that He particularly "remembers"? The name of Zacharias's wife tells us, for Elisabeth means "The oath of God." Ah, *that* is what JEHOVAH never forgets, never falsifies, never fails to execute. Of old, He declared, "I have made a covenant with my chosen, I have sworn unto David my servant, thy seed will I establish for ever, and build up thy throne to all generations" (Psa 89:3-4). "And God remembered his covenant" (Exo 2:24), when the children of Israel were groaning under their Egyptian bondage. In the days of the Judges, they provoked Him, and He brought them low for their iniquity, yet, "He remembered for them his covenant, and repented according to the multitude of his mercies" (Psa 106:42-45). That He kept His covenant was Daniel's comfort in Babylon (Dan 9:4), so too Nehemiah's (Neh 1:5).

It was the covenant "ordered in all things and sure" (2Sa 23:5), which the Lord now remembered—the next step unto the fulfilment of which He was about to perform. This is abundantly clear from what follows in Luke 1. First, the words of the Saviour's mother to Elisabeth after she had been informed of her own supernatural conception and upon visiting her cousin, "He hath holpen his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy," which is explained by what immediately follows. "As he spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever" (Luk 1:54-55). And second, the language of Zacharias himself, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people...to perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant; the oath which he swore to our father Abraham" (Luk 1:68, 72-73). It is not without reason that the Spirit has informed us that Zacharias was a priest "after the course of Abia" for a reference

to 1 Chronicles 24:10 (“Abijah” is the Hebrew form of Abia, and means “Jah is father”), shows that his was the *eighth* of the twenty-four, and in the language of scriptural numerics, it is the number which speaks of a new beginning—a new dispensation was now dawning not only for Israel, but for the whole world.

The testimony borne to the parents of the Baptist shows that they were of exceptional piety, “They were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless” (Luk 1:6). That does not mean they were morally perfect, for “There is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not” (Ecc 7:20). “Righteous before God” signifies that they were saved souls. More specifically, they were righteous both legally and experientially—justified by faith in Christ, had received a holy nature at regeneration. But more—they supplied proof thereof—not merely by words, but by their works. Note the *uniformity* of their conduct. They not only complied with the divinely appointed “ordinances” of worship, but also performed the moral “commandments.” They not only approved themselves unto God, but they led exemplary lives before men, so that none could charge them with open sin. They were heedful of their ways, and, therefore, were kept from proving an occasion to others of stumbling. Their *walk* was highly honouring to God, for their lot was cast in a day of sadly low spirituality, and not of revival. Nevertheless, divine grace was sufficient for them. Ponder Philippians 2:15!

“And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years” (Luk 1:7). The barrenness of Elisabeth was emblematic of the condition of her nation at that time—though very punctilious in ceremonial formalism, there was no fruit for God—nor could there be, until His might sovereignly and graciously interposed. A situation existed which was altogether beyond the capacity of man to remedy. Elisabeth was not only barren, but “in her old age” (Luk 1:36), so that, like Sarah of yore, her womb was now dead. Thus, there must be a supernatural operation from on high if she was to bear a son. The spiritual truth which is here illustrated is not only of deep importance, but plainly set forth. A power above and beyond that of mere nature has to come in before there can be any deliverance from the surrounding darkness and death, and any real revival of godliness be set in motion. Genuine servants of God are not the product of human might, natural wisdom, or earthly training. Instead, they are heaven’s gift. Divinely raised up and supernaturally called and qualified, fitted and empowered by the Holy Spirit. That is why God’s people are bidden, “Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that He will send forth labourers into His harvest” (Mat 9:38). Yet how little is that heeded today!

Next, we are told that while Zacharias was officiating in the temple, an angel of the Lord stood on the right side of the altar of incense, saying to him, “Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard, and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. And thou shalt have joy and gladness, and many shall rejoice at his birth” (verses 13-14). Valuable instruction is there here for us. Zacharias did not allow the appalling state of Judaism, nor the disappointing barrenness of his wife, to fill him with despondency and despair. Instead, he continued to serve the Lord, and to wait upon the throne of grace. So in this present day of declension and darkness, even though to carnal reason the situation appears to be hopeless, it is our responsibility to adhere steadfastly to

the discharge of duty and to make known our requests unto God. Here, too, is real encouragement for us; the harbinger of Christ was given in answer to supplication! The incident now before us records one of the many examples contained in the Scriptures for our comfort. It illustrates the need of importunity in believing prayer. No doubt Zacharias had often besought God to give him a son, yet, apparently his petitions were in vain. But it is written, "Men ought always to pray, and *not to faint*" (Luk 18:1). Now he received assurance that his petition was granted, "Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving" (Col 4:2).

"For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luk 1:15-17). First, Christ's forerunner should be "great in the sight of the Lord," employed by Him in most eminent service, signally honoured by the unique position accorded him. Second, he was to be a total abstainer from liquor all the days of his life, which means that he was to be a "Nazarite" (Num 6:1-3) or one "separated," wholly devoted unto God, which was a signal honour for his parents (Amo 2:11). Third, his being filled with the Holy Spirit from being conceived was the divine appointing and anointing of him to the prophetic office (compare Jer 1:5). Fourth, he would be abundantly successful in his mission, for he would be instrumental in the conversion of many, and thereby prepare them to receive Christ for themselves when He appeared. He was to be named John, which means "The favour of God," and many would rejoice at his birth (Luk 1:58), so that in this respect, too, he was another Isaac, producing the "laughter" of joy. "He was a distinguished favourite of heaven, and a distinguished blessing to the earth" (Matthew Henry).

And what was the response made by the recipient of this blessed and wondrous revelation from the celestial messenger? Was Zacharias overwhelmed with wonderment and praise unto God for such favours? Alas, far from it. He was full of doubts and fears. "And Zacharias said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years" (Luk 1:18). That is very sad and solemn. Though definitely assured, "Elisabeth *shall* bear thee a son" (Luk 1:13), he questioned it, being occupied entirely with the difficulties of the case, and was skeptical about the good news communicated to him. This also is recorded for our instruction—as a warning for us to take to heart. It is a tragic reminder that unbelief still lurks within the hearts of the saints, and needs to be sternly resisted. It gives point to that exhortation, "Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God" (Heb 3:12). The chastening hand of God now fell upon the priest. Let us see in God's striking Zacharias dumb for his unbelief (verse 20) what a grave offence it is to supplicate the throne of grace and not expect an answer. Still graver to receive a promise from Him and, then, turn from it in unbelief. Those lips which ought to be employed in thanksgiving were now silent—the Lord will not use the mouths of those who distrust Him.

But despite the skepticism of Zacharias, in due time (Luk 1:57), the divine promise *was* fulfilled—"If we believe not, yet he abideth faithful: he cannot deny himself" (2Ti 2:13)—

and the child was born unto him. His birth was extraordinary, due to the direct intervention of God, and therein it, too, “prepared the way of the Lord.” As Matthew Henry pointed out, it was “*next* to miraculous, so that the people might be prepared to receive and believe a virgin’s bringing forth of a son, which was *perfectly* miraculous.” Another link in the wondrous operations of divine providence had been supplied, and the unborn babe leaped in his mother’s womb as he heard the salutation of Mary (Luk 1:41). What proof was this that he was then “filled with the Holy Spirit”! The relations and neighbours gathered together at the happy event. *They* wanted to name the child after his father, but his mother insisted that he should be called John—“God’s gift.” Signs were made to Zacharias and he confirmed his wife. Whereupon the chastening hand of God was at once removed, speech was restored to him again, and he praised the Lord (Luk 1:59-66). When natural inclinations were subordinated to spiritual considerations, communion was recovered!

The immediate sequel is very blessed. “Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied” (Luk 1:67). Most important is the practical lesson therein inculcated. Now that Zacharias had righted the wrong and was back again in full fellowship with the One whose word he had doubted, the Holy Spirit was morally free to use him as His messenger. That is the key to that oft-quoted, but little-understood, petition of the contrite Psalmist, “O LORD, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall show forth thy praise” (Psa 51:15). David had been smitten with spiritual dumbness by his sad fall, and until God sealed his pardon, there could be no peace in his heart or praise from his lips. It was a request that God would unstop his shame-silenced mouth. It was a further evidence of David’s deep penitence that he desired to present again an offering of thanksgiving. As he was forgiven, restored, and became a happy worshipper, so Zacharias was now lifted entirely above himself, giving expression to God-honouring language which has been preserved unto this day. His inspired song became an imperishable part of Holy Writ, and the father of the Baptist was numbered among the “holy men” who, of old, “spake as they were moved by the Holy Spirit” (2Pe 1:21).

Filled with the Spirit, Zacharias was given discernment to perceive that which was hidden from those who were wise and prudent in their own esteem. He had spiritual understanding of the times. He knew that the long-promised Redeemer was at hand, that a mighty Saviour was being raised up (Luk 1:68-69). He realized that God was on the point of fulfilling the everlasting covenant (Luk 1:72). He recognized that God’s redeemed would serve Him “in holiness and righteousness” (Luk 1:75). He understood that the son which had been given to him was the predicted forerunner of the Messiah (Luk 1:76). He apprehended that salvation is entirely of the Lord, that He alone can give light to those in darkness, and “*guide* our feet into the way of peace” (Luk 1:79).

