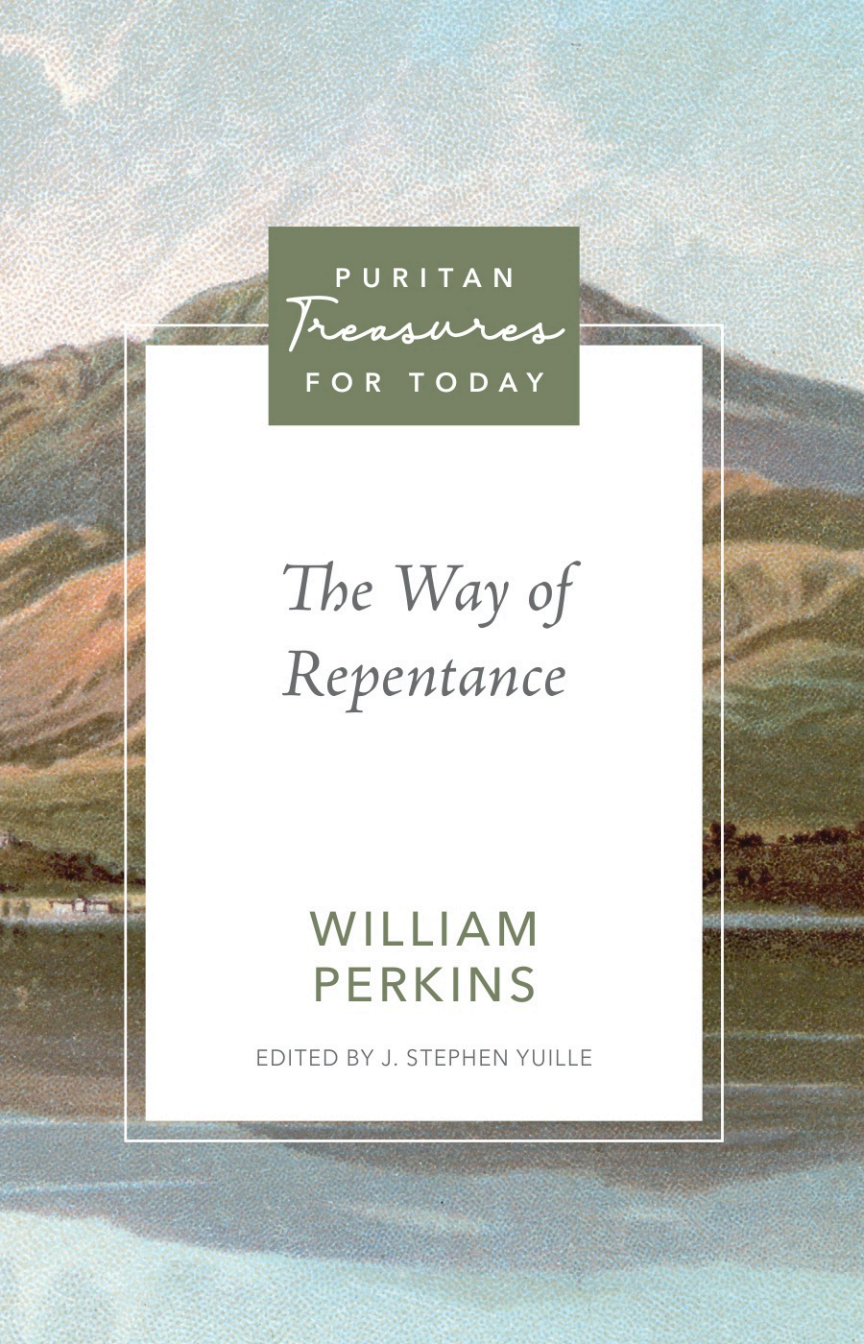




PURITAN
Treasures
FOR TODAY

*The Way of
Repentance*

WILLIAM
PERKINS

EDITED BY J. STEPHEN YUILLE

*Do not expect to arrive in heaven
without walking the way of repentance.*

Consider the weight of Jesus's words: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 4:17). If repentance is necessary for eternal life, we would do well to understand it, take it to heart, and put it into action.

In *The Way of Repentance*, William Perkins carefully explains the nature and practice of repentance in the Christian life. He goes on to remind us that it is a matter of kingdom warfare, describing this call to repentance as a lifelong battle with our sinful flesh. Finally, Perkins extends a powerful exhortation to personal repentance. The way of repentance is not easy, but by God's grace, you will see that the destination is more than worth the fight.

"Christians in all ages are tempted to take a therapeutic approach to sin, as something to be managed versus fiercely combated. Through the outstanding editorial work of Stephen Yuille, the church is richly blessed to have William Perkins still speaking about sin with such relevance. May we read, meditate on, and ultimately heed the timeless truths of this volume for the sake of our souls and God's glory."

W. Britt Stokes, founder and president of Propago Ministries, Charleston, South Carolina

WILLIAM PERKINS (1558–1602) was a preacher at Great St. Andrew's Church in Cambridge and a fellow at Christ's College. He was an ardent defender of the faith of the Church of England and one of the leading proponents of spiritual vitality within it.



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The Way of Repentance

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William Perkins

Edited and abridged by
J. Stephen Yuille

Puritan Treasures for Today
Series editor: J. Stephen Yuille



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The Way of Repentance

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Table of Contents

Preface.....	vii
Introduction.....	1

The Nature and Practice of Repentance

1. The Nature of Repentance	5
2. The Cause of Repentance	11
3. The Work of Repentance	15
4. The Parts of Repentance	17
5. The Degrees of Repentance	21
6. Examining the Conscience	23
7. Confessing Sin	27
8. Seeking Forgiveness	31
9. The Misery of Sin.....	33
10. The Fear of Judgment	39
11. God's Purpose and Promise	43
12. The Time of Repentance.....	47
13. Troubling Questions	49
14. Counterfeit Repentance.....	53

The Combat Between the Flesh and the Spirit

15. The Combat	59
16. The Nature of the Combat	63
17. The Manner of the Combat	67
18. In the Mind	69
19. In the Will	73
20. The Purpose of the Combat	75
21. The Subject of the Combat	79
22. The Result of the Combat	81
23. Lessons	85

A Powerful Exhortation to Repentance

24. Searching	89
25. Searching Closely	95
26. Searching Carefully	99
27. Searching Profitably	103
28. The Guilt of Original Sin	105
29. The Corruption of Original Sin	107
30. The Consequence of Original Sin	111
31. An Exhortation	115
32. The Object of Searching	119
33. The Subject of Searching	123
34. The Time of Searching	127
35. The Reason for Searching	131
36. A Winnowing Time	135
37. One Thing Needed	139
38. A Free Offer	143

Preface

Have you ever experienced restless nights, frayed nerves, or mood swings? What about a long face, a lack of joy and peace, a disinterest in prayer and study, an avoidance of deeper things, or an unwillingness to get close to others for fear of discovery? Have you ever found yourself withdrawing from Christian fellowship or dismissing godliness as legalism and extremism? What about harshness in censuring others? Do you know what these things are? They are marks of a troubled conscience arising from a refusal to deal with past sins, to mortify present lusts, to release future worries, or to obey God's commands. In brief, your sin has dampened your enjoyment of the indwelling sense of God's love.

At times like these, it is important that we do not attempt to excuse or justify the severity of our sin. Instead, we ought to plead with God to forgive us. "Lord, hear my voice! Let Your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications" (Ps. 130:2). Because of our sin, this is the only appeal we can make to God. When the

Pharisee and the tax collector visit the temple to pray, they approach God from two very different angles (Luke 18:10–13). The Pharisee seeks to stand before God on the basis of his own merit. “God, I thank You that I am not like other men.” But the tax collector asks God to deal with him contrary to merit. “God, be merciful to me a sinner!” As John Bunyan observes, the Pharisee and the tax collector are “two men in whose condition the whole world is comprehended.”¹ In other words, there are only two kinds of people: Pharisees (the proud who ignore their sin) and tax collectors (the humble who confess their sin). Which of the two returned to his house justified? The tax collector. “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled,” declares Christ, “and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (v. 14).

Approaching God with a humble heart, we acknowledge our need for His forgiveness. “If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?” (Ps. 130:3). In the first part of this verse, the psalmist addresses God as “LORD” (*Yah*), thereby emphasizing His eternality and immortality. His point is that God sees all. In the second part of the verse, the psalmist addresses God as “Lord” (*Adonai*), thereby emphasizing His authority and sovereignty. His point is that God judges all. There

1. John Bunyan, *The Miscellaneous Works of John Bunyan*, 12 vols., ed. Owen Watkins (Clarendon, 1988), 10:111.

is, therefore, what John Owen calls “a double marking of sin.”² God sees and judges our iniquities.

If this God who sees all and judges all were to “mark” (i.e., reserve for punishment) our iniquities, we would not be able to stand—judicially speaking—in His presence for even a moment. To put it another way, if God were to deal with us on the basis of what we truly deserve, His holiness would consume us. This harsh reality serves to highlight the psalmist’s next statement: “But there is forgiveness with You” (Ps. 130:4). Essentially, the psalmist celebrates the wondrous truth that forgiveness is God’s nature. He is “merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin” (Ex. 34:6–7). Because forgiveness is God’s nature, He is forgiving. We do not need to coax or convince Him to forgive. The psalmist, therefore, is confident that—as he cries from the depths for mercy—God will hear him.

And what is the fruit of God’s forgiveness? The psalmist tells us, “That You may be feared” (Ps. 130:4). In short, we realize we have placed ourselves where God deserves to be—on the throne—and that God has placed Himself where we deserve to be—on the cross. By sovereign grace, He has made us one with His beloved Son. As a result, we enjoy the benefits of the

2. John Owen, *A Practical Exposition upon Psalm CXXX*, in *The Works of John Owen*, 16 vols., ed. W. H. Gould (London, 1850; repr., Banner of Truth, 1977), 6:360.

cross for His forgiveness supersedes our sinfulness, and His righteousness supersedes our filthiness. From a deep sense of awe and reverence, we fear Him, meaning we seek to do what pleases Him and avoid what displeases Him. In other words, we seek to obey His commands. All that to say, God's forgiveness is transformative. We fear to lose one look of His love, one word of His kindness, one touch of His tenderness. "Great love," says John Owen, "springs out of great forgiveness."³

This transformative effect of forgiveness is crucial to understand because far too many people are in the grip of what is called the feel-good doctrine of automatic forgiveness. Simply put, they believe in a gospel that promises forgiveness without requiring change. They are sorely mistaken. As Thomas Watson explains, repentance is "a grace of God's Spirit whereby a sinner is inwardly humbled and visibly transformed."⁴ We must not err here: we have only repented of our sin when we are prepared to let go of our sin. Plenty of people *regret* their sin. They regret their poor choices and the mess they have made of their lives. They regret the negative consequences of their sins—the suffering, disappointment, frustration, and shame. When we regret, we feel the pain, anguish, and discomfort, simply wanting the mess to go away. We are frustrated and perplexed and

3. Owen, *Exposition upon Psalm CXXX*, in *Works*, 6:396.

4. Thomas Watson, *The Doctrine of Repentance* (Banner of Truth, 1994), 17.

wish things were different, but we dare not confuse regretting with repenting. Esau regretted. Saul regretted. Ahab regretted. Judas regretted. But none of them ever repented.

As George Swinnock explains, "There are two words used by the Holy Spirit for repentance, *metameleia* (Matt. 27:3) and *metanoia* (2 Tim. 2:25). The first signifies sorrow for a fault committed, whereas the second signifies a change of the mind."⁵ Unbelievers may experience the first, but never the second. They never experience godly sorrow (or true repentance) because they never feel the burden of their sin as committed against a glorious God. They have not embraced God as the cream of their affections; therefore, their heart never breaks on account of their sin and, consequently, there is no change in behavior. Jeremiah Burroughs explains,

There are many who are struck with many fears and terrors for sin, but these are never humbled for sin aright.... Why? Because the humiliation for sin that is right must be a humiliation for it as it is the greatest evil of all; and it is the greatest evil as it is against God.... This is not the thing that usually takes the hearts of men and women in their trouble for sin. It is the fear of the wrath of God, the fear of hell, and an accusing conscience

5. George Swinnock, *The Door of Salvation Opened by the Key of Regeneration*, in *The Works of George Swinnock*, 5 vols. (Edinburgh, 1868; repr., Banner of Truth, 1992), 5:68.

that flashes the very fire of hell in their faces....
There can be no humiliation deep enough unless
the soul is humbled for sin because it has sinned
against God.⁶

Comprehending sin's severity in the light of God's holiness is paramount to the development of godly sorrow. We see our sin as God sees it, and we understand that it springs from our heart's departure from Him. Sin is rebellion against God's sovereignty, arrogance against God's power, and unrighteousness against God's justice. It is ignorance against God's wisdom, stubbornness against God's will, evil against God's goodness, and transgression against God's law. Sin is hatred against God's love and murder against God's being. When we see our sin as it truly is, we cry with David from the depths: "I have sinned against the LORD" (2 Sam. 12:13).

We are guilty of disobeying God's law, despising God's goodness, and grieving God's Spirit. Moreover, we are guilty of provoking the One who is the source of all life, light, joy, peace, and comfort. But we cry to God for mercy, knowing that He redeems us from all our iniquities. "For with the LORD there is mercy, and with Him is abundant redemption" (Ps. 130:7). When Christ shed His blood upon Calvary's cross, He paid the penalty for our sin, which God had reckoned to Him. God's

6. Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Evil of Evils; or, The Exceeding Sinfulness of Sin* (London, 1654), 85.

offended justice was fully satisfied by Christ's sacrifice under divine judgment, righteously due to us. That is all the motivation we need to cry to God from the depths of a disturbed conscience, tormented mind, and troubled heart. And that is why we sing:

My sin—oh, the bliss of this glorious thought!
My sin, not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!⁷

Unsurprisingly, repentance figured prominently in Puritan literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The father of Puritanism, William Perkins (1558–1602), devoted three small works to the subject. The present volume brings these works together in an easily accessible and readable format. Chapters 1–14 unpack Perkins's definition of repentance as “a work of God's grace arising from godly sorrow, whereby a person turns to God from all his sins and brings forth fruit worthy of a changed life.”⁸ According to Perkins, such repentance necessitates two commitments. The first is the subjugation of the flesh. In chapters 15–23, he expounds what this means in the context of Galatians 5:16–17, “Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfil the

7. Horatio Spafford, “It Is Well with My Soul,” stanza 3.

8. See William Perkins, *The Nature and Practice of Repentance*, in *The Works of William Perkins*, 10 vols. (Reformation Heritage Books, 2014–2020), 9:123–68.

lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish.”⁹ The second commitment is the searching of the heart. This is Perkins’s theme in chapters 24–38, in which he turns his attention to expounding Zephaniah 2:1–2, “Gather yourselves together, yes, gather together, O undesirable nation, before the decree is issued, or the day passes like chaff, before the LORD’s fierce anger comes upon you, before the day of the LORD’s anger comes upon you!”¹⁰

For Perkins, the way of salvation is summed up in repentance. He is adamant that repentance is not a cause of salvation but the path which we must walk to eternal life. We become members of Christ’s spiritual body (thereby gaining Him and His benefits) through faith alone. In other words, the instrument by which we lay hold of Christ is faith alone—the knowledge and application of Him and His benefits. However, when we speak of the way of salvation, repentance is essential because it is the necessary operation of faith.

Perkins’s conviction is on full display in the present volume. It is my prayer that his pastoral insights

9. See William Perkins, *The Combat of the Flesh and Spirit*, in *Works*, 9:169–80.

10. See William Perkins, *A Faithful and Plain Exposition upon Zephaniah 2:1–2, Containing a Powerful Exhortation to Repentance*, in *Works*, 9:79–122.

will encourage you and cause you to rejoice in the assurance that “if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

J. Stephen Yuille
Fort Worth, TX

Introduction

God has bestowed on us great peace and prosperity with plenty of temporal blessings. But our abuse of His blessings has been the occasion of many grievous sins against the first and second tables of the law, especially the sins of neglecting God's worship, despising God's Word, abusing God's sacraments, and scorning the Lord's Day. These and other sins call for God's judgment to fall from heaven upon us, especially because the preaching of God's Word has produced little change in our lives. God has now begun to cause His judgments to seize us, whereby He proclaims repentance to us as He opens our "ears in oppression" (Job 36:15).

For this reason, we need to look to ourselves, and if we have not repented, then we need to begin to repent; and if we have repented in former times, then we need to do it more earnestly. If we harden our heart against God's Word, we must undoubtedly look for judgments far more terrible than any we have ever felt—namely, eternal destruction. Let us be advised by the old world.

The people of Noah's day ignored his warning and, therefore, they were drowned in the flood (2 Peter 3:6). Lot's sons-in-law took his counsel in jest, and they were burned with fire from heaven (Gen. 19:14, 23–24). The foolish virgins, who were sleeping when they should have been furnishing their lamps, were excluded from the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 25:1–13).

These examples call us to give careful attention to repentance. I have penned this treatise to direct us in the practice of repentance. I pray you will use it for your benefit, and I beg you to give heed to it; otherwise, you will shed the blood of your own soul.

*The Nature and Practice
of Repentance*

CHAPTER 1

The Nature of Repentance

By way of clarification, it is important to note that the term *repentance* is used in two ways—generally and particularly. When used in a general sense, it refers to the whole conversion of a sinner (i.e., regeneration), and so it contains faith, sorrow, and new obedience. When it is used in a particular sense, it refers only to the renovation of our life and behavior, and so it is a fruit of faith. In this treatise I am using the term in this second sense. With that said, I define repentance as a work of God's grace arising from godly sorrow, whereby a person turns to God from all his sins and brings forth fruit worthy of a changed life.

First, I call repentance *a work* because it is not a quality, virtue, or habit, but an action. This appears from the numerous sermons which were preached by the prophets and apostles. “Repent!” “Turn to God!” “Amend your lives!” All these expressions indicate that repentance is a work that we are to do.

Second, I call repentance a work of *God's grace* because it is unlike other works. How so? Only those who are in a state of grace can practice it. The reasons are as follows. (1) People cannot repent unless they first hate sin and love righteousness, but they cannot hate sin and love righteousness unless they are sanctified. Only the justified are sanctified, and those who are justified must have that faith which unites us to Christ and makes us bone of His bone and flesh of His flesh (Gen. 2:23; Eph. 5:31). Therefore, those who repent are justified and sanctified, and they are members of Christ by faith. (2) Those who turn to God must first of all be turned to God and, after they have turned, they repent. "Surely, after my turning, I repented; and after I was instructed, I struck myself on the thigh; I was ashamed, yes, even humiliated, because I bore the reproach of my youth" (Jer. 31:19).

Some people object to this, contending that repentance goes before all other graces because it is preached first. They say that the first sermon was one of repentance, delivered by God in paradise to our first parents (Genesis 3). Ever since, the sermons of all the prophets and apostles and of all faithful ministers have had repentance for their beginning and scope. My answer to this objection is as follows: in respect of the order of nature, there are other graces which go before repentance because a person's conscience must in some way be settled touching his reconciliation to God in Christ before he can repent. Therefore, in order of nature, justification

and sanctification go before repentance. But in respect of time, grace and repentance are together. As soon as there is fire, it is hot, and as soon as a person is regenerate, he repents. In respect of the outward manifestation of these two, repentance goes before all other graces because it appears first. Regeneration is like the sap of the tree that lies hidden within the bark. Repentance is like the bud that shows itself before the blossom, leaf, or fruit appear. All other graces of the heart, which are necessary to salvation, are made manifest by repentance. For this cause, repentance is preached first.

Third, I call repentance a work of God's grace *arising from godly sorrow*. The apostle Paul writes, "For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death" (2 Cor. 7:10). It is called "godly sorrow" (or sorrow according to God) to distinguish it from worldly sorrow, which is a grief arising from the apprehension of God's wrath and other miseries (e.g., the fear of man, the loss of a good name, the loss of possessions, and so on) which are punishments for sin in this life. But godly sorrow causes grief for sin because it is sin, and it makes people of a different mind and disposition, whereby if there were no conscience to accuse, no devil to terrify, no judge to condemn, and no hell to torment, they would still be brought to their knees for their sins because they have offended a loving, merciful, and longsuffering God.

Fourth, I call repentance a work of God's grace arising from godly sorrow, *whereby a person turns*. Repentance does not abolish or change the substance of our body or soul or any of our faculties; rather, it amends and rectifies them by removing the corruption. It turns melancholy to godly sorrow, anger to godly zeal, timidity to meekness of spirit, and levity to Christian joy. It reforms us according to our natural constitution, not abolishing it but rectifying its fault.

Fifth, I call repentance a work of God's grace arising from godly sorrow, whereby a person turns *to God*. In the state of innocence, Adam and Eve were created in the image of God, enjoying fellowship with Him, whereby they dwelt with Him and He with them. But by sin, a partition has arisen between God and humanity (Isa. 59:2). By nature, we are alienated and estranged from God (Eph. 4:18), and we have become the children of God's wrath (Eph. 2:1–3). Like the prodigal son, we have wandered far from God into a distant country (Luke 15:11–32). Now, when people have grace to repent, they begin to renew this fellowship and turn again to God. The very essence of repentance consists in this turning. The apostle Paul seems to indicate this when he says that he proclaimed to Jews and Gentiles “that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance” (Acts 26:20).

Sixth, I call repentance a work of God's grace arising from godly sorrow, whereby a person turns to God *from*

all his sins. This excludes many actions that are mistakenly called repentance. The first is when a person turns from one sin to another, as when the disorderly person leaves his indulgence and gives himself to the practice of covetousness. This is not repentance; it is simply going from one extreme to another. True repentance is leaving the extremes and keeping the mean. The second action is when a person does not turn from sin, but it turns from him and leaves him, as when the drunkard leaves his drunkenness because his stomach is diseased, the fornicator leaves his uncleanness because the strength of nature fails him, or the quarreler leaves his fighting because he is physically injured. The third action is when a person turns from many sins but will not turn from all of them. Herod did many things in response to John the Baptist's preaching, but he would not give up his incestuous relationship with his brother's wife (Mark 6:20–28). This kind of repentance is meaningless.

Those who are truly regenerate are wholly regenerate in body and soul. Likewise, those who truly repent turn from all their sins to God. There is a purpose and resolution in their mind, an inclination in their will and affections, and an endeavor in their life and conduct to abandon all their former sins and obey God's commandments.

Seventh, I call repentance a work of God's grace arising from godly sorrow, whereby a person turns to God from all his sins and *brings forth fruit worthy of a changed*

life. Without such fruit, we do not know if repentance is sincere. Sinners who repent are “trees of righteousness” of God’s own “planting” (Isa. 61:3). They grow by the water that “flows from the sanctuary,” and therefore “their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for medicine” (Ezek. 47:12). If they do not bear such fruit, the ax of God’s judgment is laid to their roots to cut them down and throw them into the fire (Matt. 3:10).

CHAPTER 2

The Cause of Repentance

The principal cause of repentance is the Holy Spirit. Paul says we are to correct “those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth” (2 Tim. 2:25). Jeremiah declares, “Restore me, and I will return” (Jer. 31:18). The instrument the Holy Spirit uses in producing repentance is the ministry of the gospel, not the law. The reasons are as follows.

First, faith is begotten by the preaching of the gospel, not the law. Paul says, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16). Therefore, repentance, which follows faith as a fruit, must come by the preaching of the gospel.

Second, the law is the “ministry of death” (2 Cor. 3:7) because it reveals our wretched condition but does not show us a remedy. Therefore, it cannot be an instrumental cause of that repentance which is effectual to salvation.

Third, the doctrine of repentance is a part of the gospel, evidenced by the fact that the preaching of repentance

and the preaching of the gospel are considered to be the same thing (Mark 6:12; Luke 9:6). Our Savior divides the gospel into two parts: the preaching of repentance and the remission of sins in His name (Luke 24:47).

Fourth, the part of God's Word that works repentance must reveal its nature and set out the promise of life that belongs to it. But the law does not reveal faith or repentance. This is a proper work of the gospel.

If it is said that the law is "our tutor to bring us to Christ" (Gal. 3:24), the answer is that it brings people to Christ, not by teaching them the way or by alluring them, but by forcing or urging them. We do not abolish the law in ascribing the work of repentance to the gospel alone. Though it is not a cause, it is an occasion of true repentance because it represents to the eye of the soul our damnable estate and smites the conscience with fear and terror. Though these are not tokens of grace (for they are in their own nature the very gates to hell), they are certain occasions of receiving grace. The physician is sometimes constrained to recover the health of his patient by inducing fever. Likewise, because we are deadly sick with the disease of sin, we must be cast into some fits of legal terrors by the ministry of the law so that we may recover our former estate and come to eternal life.

Repentance is also furthered by calamities which often come in place of the law. When Joseph's brothers were in distress in Egypt, they said to one another, "We are truly guilty concerning our brother, for we saw the

anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us, and we would not hear; therefore this distress has come upon us" (Gen. 42:21). The Lord says, "I will return again to My place till they acknowledge their offense. Then they will seek My face; in their affliction they will earnestly seek Me" (Hos. 5:15). The Israelites say, "My soul still remembers and sinks within me" (Lam. 3:20). When he was in tribulation, Manasseh prayed to the Lord and "humbled himself greatly" (2 Chron. 33:12). David says, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes" (Ps. 119:71).

CHAPTER 3

The Work of Repentance

Repentance is produced in the heart by certain steps. The first is to know (1) the content of God's law, (2) the nature of sin as it is against God's law, (3) the guilt of sin under God's law, and (4) the judgment of God against sin.

The second step is to apply this knowledge to ourselves by the work of our conscience assisted by the Holy Spirit, who for this reason is called "the spirit of bondage" (Rom. 8:15). This application is made by a form of reasoning called a practical syllogism.

Major premise: Those who break God's law are guilty of eternal death.

Minor premise: I break God's law.

Conclusion: Therefore, I am guilty of eternal death.

This personal application gives rise to fear and sorrow in respect to God's judgment, and it is commonly called the sting of the conscience. We are "cut to the heart" (Acts 2:37). Unless this shame is allayed by the comforts of the gospel, it will bring people to despair and

eventually eternal damnation. Therefore, those who truly repent do not stop here.

The third step is to gain a knowledge of the gospel and to consider God's mercy as revealed in it. The application of our knowledge of our sin, of God's wrath against our sin, and of God's mercy in the gospel must be renewed and assisted by "the Spirit of adoption" (Rom. 8:15) by means of another practical syllogism.

Major premise: Those who deny themselves and put their trust in Christ's death will have righteousness and eternal life.

Minor premise: I deny myself and put all my trust in Christ's death.

Conclusion: Therefore, I have righteousness and eternal life in Christ.

This personal application of the gospel gives rise to joy and sorrow: joy because our sins are pardoned in Christ, and sorrow because our sins have displeased Him who has been so loving and merciful to us. And it is this godly sorrow that produces repentance—a turning of the mind whereby we resolve to sin no more but to live in newness of life.

CHAPTER 4

The Parts of Repentance

Repentance has two parts: mortification and vivification. The first is to turn from sin. We do so when we not only abstain from actual sin but use all means to weaken and suppress the corruption of our nature. When surgeons remove a lump or cyst from the body, they first numb the area so that it is without sense or feeling. They can then remove the lump with less pain. In the same manner, we must use all helps and remedies prescribed in God's Word to weaken and kill sin.

It is true that, by nature, we cannot do anything acceptable to God, but—being quickened and moved by the Holy Spirit—we stir and move ourselves to do that which is good. Therefore, as believers, we have God's grace in us whereby we mortify our sins. The apostle Paul says, "But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection" (1 Cor. 9:27). "And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal. 5:24). "Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil

desire, and covetousness" (Col. 3:5). "Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master" (2 Tim. 2:21). The apostle John says, "And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (1 John 3:3). "We know that whoever is born of God does not sin; but he who has been born of God keeps himself, and the wicked one does not touch him" (1 John 5:18).

Mortification has three parts: (1) a purpose in mind; (2) an inclination in will; and (3) an endeavor in life to leave all sin.

The second part of repentance is vivification, which is rising to newness of life. It too has three parts. The first two are a resolution in the mind and an inclination in the will to obey God in all things. Barnabas exhorts those at Antioch, "that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord" (Acts 11:23). There are many examples of these two in Scripture. Joshua says,

And if it seems evil to you to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD. (Josh. 24:15)

David says, "You are my portion, O LORD; I have said that I would keep Your words" (Ps. 119:57). "I have sworn and confirmed that I will keep Your righteous

judgments" (v. 106). "Blessed are You, O LORD! Teach me Your statutes" (v. 12). "When You said, 'Seek My face,' my heart said to You, 'Your face, LORD, I will seek'" (Ps. 27:8).

The third part of vivification is an endeavor to obey God in all of life. Paul writes, "This being so, I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men" (Acts 24:16). David declares, "Then I would not be ashamed, when I look into all Your commandments" (Ps. 119:6). "I have chosen the way of truth; Your judgments I have laid before me. I cling to Your testimonies.... Make me walk in the path of Your commandments, for I delight in it" (v. 30–31, 35).

No one should think that a penitent sinner fulfills the law by his obedience, for his best works are still faulty before God. The faithful in Scriptures are said to be "complete" (2 Tim. 3:17), but we must understand that there are two degrees of perfection: perfection in substance and perfection in the highest degree. Perfection in substance is when we sincerely endeavor to perform perfect obedience to God in all His commandments. This is the only perfection that we can have in this life. A Christian's perfection is to bewail his imperfection. His obedience consists in his good will more than his good work, and it is to be measured by the affection more than the effect.

CHAPTER 5

The Degrees of Repentance

Repentance has two degrees: ordinary and extraordinary. Ordinary repentance is what we are to perform every day. We fall daily, and so the graces of God are proportionally weakened day by day. Therefore, we must engage in the daily renewal of repentance. We are the temple of the Holy Spirit, and we must sweep our life regularly so that it is fit to entertain so worthy a guest.

Extraordinary repentance is the same in nature with ordinary repentance. It only differs in degree and measure of grace. We practice extraordinary repentance when we fall into grievous offenses, whereby we wound our conscience and offend the church. We have an example of this kind of repentance in Peter when he “went out and wept bitterly” after denying our Savior (Luke 22:62). Another example is David’s repentance after he had committed adultery and murder (Psalms 32; 51).

There are two sorts of people: unregenerate and regenerate. Both need to repent. The unregenerate need to repent so that they may be turned from their sins and

renewed in the image of God. Some argue that those who live civilly and abstain from outrageous behavior do not need to repent. I disagree. A civil life without grace in Christ is nothing else in God's sight but a beautiful abomination. The Pharisees were very civil, but Christ said of them, "Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:20).

The regenerate must also repent because they have many unknown and hidden corruptions which must be mortified, and sometimes they fall grievously. They must daily practice the spiritual exercises of repentance that they might rise again.

CHAPTER 6

Examining the Conscience

The practice of repentance requires three special duties: (1) we must examine our conscience for sins, (2) we must confess our sins to God, and (3) we must seek forgiveness for our sins from God. The first is the focus of this chapter.

We engage in a diligent and serious examination of our conscience when we look for all manner of sin (original and actual) in the light of God's laws and commandments. "Why should a living man complain, a man for the punishment of his sins? Let us search out and examine our ways, and turn back to the LORD" (Lam. 3:39–40). "I thought about my ways, and turned my feet to Your testimonies" (Ps. 119:59).

In looking for original sin, we must remember that we have received the whole human nature from Adam, and we have received original sin wholly. Therefore, everyone (except Christ, who was extraordinarily sanctified by the Holy Spirit in the womb of Mary) has from his parents the seed and corruption of all sin, which is a

natural disposition and proneness to commit all sin. Let us consider all the horrible sins that are practiced in the world against the first and second tables of God's law. The seed of them all is in that person who is considered to be the best inclined by nature.

Some argue that experience shows the opposite because there are those who (without any religion) are more civil and orderly than others. I answer that this does not come to pass because some people are by nature less wicked than others, but because God (by His providence) limits and restrains people's corruptions. He does so for the good of humanity, for if people were completely left to themselves, corruption would so exceedingly break out into all manner of sin that no one would be left alive in this world.

In looking for actual sin, we must follow three rules. First, we must search not only our gross sins but even the very thoughts of our heart. Repentance is not only a change in speech and outward behavior but a change in the inward and secret thoughts of the heart. For this reason, the prophet Joel bids the Jews, "Rend your heart, and not your garments" (Joel 2:13). Paul tells the Ephesians that they must "be renewed in the spirit of [their] mind" (Eph. 4:23). Peter bids Simon Magus to repent and pray to God that "the thought of [his] heart may be forgiven [him]" (Acts 8:22).

Second, we must consider the circumstances of the sins we commit: the time (when), place (where), and

manner (how). By manner, I mean that we must consider whether they were done in ignorance or knowledge, in weakness or presumption, in carelessness or obstinacy.

Third, we must pass through all the commandments of the moral law and lay them as absolute rules upon our hearts and lives. By this we will be able to make a catalog of all our sins from the cradle to the present (Job 9:3; Ps. 19:12). As a result, it will come to pass that we will plainly see our wretched estate and acknowledge that our sins are as numerous as the hairs on our head and the grains of sand on the seashore.

CHAPTER 7

Confessing Sin

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the practice of repentance requires three special duties: (1) we must examine our conscience for sins, (2) we must confess our sins to God, and (3) we must seek forgiveness for our sins from God. Having considered the first, we turn our attention to the second.

The right way to have our sins covered before God is to uncover and acknowledge them before Him. He will justify us if we condemn ourselves. He will pardon us if we accuse ourselves. He will forget our sins if we remember them. When we are vile in our own eyes, we are precious in His. When we are lost to ourselves, we are found by Him.

To confess our sins rightly, we must perform an important duty; namely, we must judge ourselves. "For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged" (1 Cor. 11:31). This includes three steps.

First, we must bring ourselves before the bar of God's judgment. We do so when we set ourselves in

God's presence as though the day of judgment were upon us. Jerome always imagined that he heard these words, "Rise you dead and come to judgment!"¹

Second, we must accuse ourselves before God by acknowledging our known sins particularly and our unknown sins generally without any excuse or defense. David says, "For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight.... Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me" (Ps. 51:3–5). Again, "I have sinned greatly, because I have done this thing; but now, I pray, take away the iniquity of Your servant, for I have done very foolishly" (1 Chron. 21:8). Ezra proclaims, "O my God, I am too ashamed and humiliated to lift up my face to You, my God; for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has grown up to the heavens" (Ezra 9:6).

Third, we must, with heaviness of heart as a judge upon the bench, pass sentence against ourselves, acknowledging that we are worthy of everlasting hell, death, and damnation. The prodigal son cries, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son" (Luke 15:18–19). Daniel prays, "We have sinned and committed iniquity, we have done wickedly and rebelled, even by departing

1. Jerome (ca.345–420) was a theologian and historian. He is best known for his translation of the Bible into Latin (the Vulgate).

from Your precepts and Your judgments.... O Lord, righteousness belongs to You, but to us shame of face" (Dan. 9:5, 7). Job says, "Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer You? I lay my hand over my mouth" (Job 40:4). "Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:6). Finally, the tax collector, who was "standing afar off" and "would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast," says, "God, be merciful to me a sinner" (Luke 18:13).

As for confessing our sins to others, we are only to do so in two cases: first, when we have committed an offence against our neighbor (Matt. 5:24); and second, when we are seeking ease and comfort for a troubled conscience (James 5:16).

CHAPTER 8

Seeking Forgiveness

In this chapter, we will consider the third special duty in the practice of repentance; namely, we must seek forgiveness for our sins from God. This includes praying to God for the pardon of those sins that we have confessed with contrition of heart.

We must remember to behave before God as the prisoner does before the judge in the courtroom. When the judge is about to pass sentence, the prisoner cries out for mercy. We must do as the cripple or leper in the street. He sits down, unfolds his legs and arms to show his sores, and cries out for charity from those who pass by. Likewise, we must lay bare our sins and call upon God, “Look with Your eye, and pity with Your heart!”

Hosea instructs the people, “O Israel, return to the LORD your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity; take words with you, and return to the LORD. Say to Him, ‘Take away all iniquity; receive us graciously, for we will offer the sacrifices of our lips’” (Hos. 14:1–2). Daniel prays, “We do not present our supplications

before You because of our righteous deeds, but because of Your great mercies. O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen and act! Do not delay for Your own sake, my God" (Dan. 9:18–19). David prays, "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions" (Ps. 51:1).

We must pray to God for grace and strength whereby we are enabled to walk in newness of life. David says, "Behold, I long for Your precepts; revive me in Your righteousness" (Ps. 119:40). Again, "Teach me to do Your will, for You are my God; Your Spirit is good. Lead me in the land of uprightness" (Ps. 143:10).

CHAPTER 9

The Misery of Sin

People are brought to repentance by means of legal and evangelical motives. Legal motives arise from the law whereas evangelical motives arise from the gospel. There are chiefly two legal motives. The first is the subject of this chapter. In brief, every impenitent sinner is in a cursed condition in this life by reason of his sins. This leads to seven miseries.

The first is a guilty conscience, which is a living hell to the ungodly. They are like prisoners, and their conscience is like a jailer who follows them wherever they go so that he may observe all they say and do. The conscience is like a registrar who sits with pen in hand, ready to record all their wickedness for everlasting memory. It is like a judge who sits inside their heart to accuse them of their sins. Therefore, the fears and terrors of all impenitent sinners are like flashes of the flames of hell. Belshazzar was in the midst of his entertainment, but when he saw the handwriting on the wall, he was struck with great fear so that his "countenance changed, and his

thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his hips were loosened, and his knees knocked against each other" (Dan. 5:6).

The second misery is bondage under the power of Satan, the prince of darkness. The ungodly person's mind, will, and affections are so glued to the devil's will that he can do nothing but obey him and rebel against God. This is why Satan is called "the god of this age" (2 Cor. 4:4). He keeps hold of the heart as an armed guard watches over a castle.

The third misery is the dangerous snare that the devil lays for the destruction of the soul. It is made of three ropes. With the first he brings people into his snare by hiding the poison of sin and by magnifying its profit and pleasure. With the second rope he ensnares them. After drawing people to this or that sin, he convinces them that they cannot live without it. With the third rope he draws the snare tight. When he sees a fit opportunity, especially in the time of calamity or death, he removes sin's mask and shows its true ugliness. Then, he rages and accuses so that the soul is swallowed up in a gulf of despair.

The fourth misery is past sins. The Lord says to Cain: "If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door" (Gen. 4:7). Here, sin is compared to a wild beast that follows a person wherever he goes, and it prowls at his heels. Though it seems to be harmless because it lies asleep for a time

(unless people repent), it will eventually rise, seize them, and tear their souls. Job says, "For You write bitter things against me, and make me inherit the iniquities of my youth" (Job 13:26). David prays, "Do not remember the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions" (Ps. 25:7). If the memory of past sins is a trouble to a godly man, what a rack, what a scaffold it will be to the hearts of those who lack grace!

The fifth misery is ease and prosperity. By reason of a person's sins, prosperity is an occasion of many judgments. In prosperity people practice the horrible sins of Sodom (Ezek. 16:49). It puffs up the heart with such devilish pride that people think they are like God. This was the case with Sennacherib, Nebuchadnezzar, Antiochus, Alexander, Herod, and Domitian. It steals away a person's heart from God and quenches the sparks of grace. The Lord complains of the Israelites, "I spoke to you in your prosperity, but you said, 'I will not hear.' This has been your manner from your youth, that you did not obey My voice" (Jer. 22:21). Prosperity is like the ivy that embraces the tree, wraps around it, and draws out its sap. Hence it is that many people turn it into an occasion of their destruction. Solomon says, "The complacency of fools will destroy them" (Prov. 1:32). When the spleen swells, the rest of the body pines away, and when the heart is puffed with pride, the whole person is in danger of destruction. The sheep that feeds in the best pasture soon comes to the slaughterhouse. Likewise, the ungodly

man who fattens himself with continual prosperity will soon come to damnation.

The sixth misery is adversity. It includes all manner of loss and calamity in possessions, friends, health, and so on (Deut. 28:15–44). The curses that come upon the Israelites and overtake them are expressions of God's wrath. He sends all manner of judgments from heaven, and every impenitent sinner is in danger of these. "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31). He has storehouses that are filled with all kinds of judgments (Deut. 32:34). God's wrath is a fire that makes havoc and brings to nothing whatever it touches. Because He is slow to anger, God's wrath is even more terrible. As the creatures and mountains melt and vanish away at His presence when He is angry (Ps. 9:7; Nah. 1:4–9), so too frail humans cannot stand before Him. If the roaring of a lion makes people afraid, and if the voice of thunder makes them tremble, how then should they be overwhelmed by God's threats!

The seventh misery is hell. Unless they repent, everyone is in danger of damnation. Let us imagine a person who falls into a deep pit that is full of venomous snakes. As he falls, he catches hold of a twig that grows at the mouth of the pit. He hangs from that twig over the pit. Soon, a wild beast passes by, and it begins to gnaw at the twig. Now, what is this person's danger? Surely, it is that he will fall into the pit. Well, this is every impenitent sinner. The pit is hell, prepared for the devil and his

angels. The small twig is a person's frail life. The wild beast is death, which is ready at any moment to break our life asunder. The danger is fearful, for everyone hangs (as it were) over the mouth of hell. When life is over, unless they have repented, they will fall to the bottom of hell itself.

This is the misery that encompasses every careless person. Why do so many people lie in such a dead sleep of security? They should take up the voice of bitter lamentation and bewail their sins and offenses. If people could weep tears of blood for their sins, if they could die a thousand times on account of their sorrow, they could never be grieved enough for their sins!

CHAPTER 10

The Fear of Judgment

The second legal motive to draw people to repentance is the wretched estate of an impenitent sinner at death (Rom. 6:23). The apostle Paul compares death to a scorpion that carries a “sting” in its tail. The sting is death (1 Cor. 15:55–56). When impenitent sinners die, the scorpion grips them with its legs and stabs them with its stinger. For this reason, the best thing to do, before death comes, is to remove the sting of death. The only thing that can do this is the blood of Christ. Therefore, people must break off their sins by repentance, and they must come to the throne of grace with cries for mercy. They must pray for the pardon of their personal and particular sins. If they obtain but one drop of God’s special mercy in Christ, all danger is past, for death has lost its sting.

Otherwise, when the day of judgment comes, they will be set before Christ’s tribunal seat, and they will not be able to escape. All the books will be brought out, and all their sins will be revealed before God’s saints and angels. The devil will accuse them, and there will be no

advocate to plead their cause. They will be speechless, and at length they will hear the dreadful sentence of damnation, "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt. 25:41).

This should move the vilest atheist to leave his wicked ways and change his life. By nature, all people are traitors and criminals against God. While we live in this world, we are on the way to the bar of God's judgment. Whether we are asleep or awake, we are always coming nearer to our end. Therefore, people must daily humble themselves for their sins and pray to God to be reconciled to Him in Christ. And let them endeavor to obey all His commandments in their callings.

After the last judgment, eternal death is appointed for them. It consists of these three things: (1) separation from all the joy and comfort of God's presence; (2) eternal fellowship with the devil and his angels; and (3) the horrible wrath of God, which will seize upon body, soul, and conscience and will torment them as a worm crawling in the body and gnawing on the heart. They will always be dying and never dead, always in woe and never at ease. This death is all the more grievous because it is eternal. Let us imagine that the whole world is a mountain of sand, and that a bird must carry one grain of sand from it every thousand years. An incalculable number of years will have passed before it moves the whole mountain. If a person should stay as long as this in hell and then have an end of his woe, it would be some

comfort. But, alas, at every moment, he is as far from the end of his anguish and torment as he ever was. This consideration should drive people from their wicked ways!

People should reason with themselves when they are about to sin. No one would do anything that would cause so much as their finger or tooth to ache. If a person wants to snuff out a candle, he first moistens his finger because he cannot abide the heat of a small flame. Therefore, we ought to have great care to leave our sins whereby we bring endless torment to body and soul in hell.

CHAPTER 11

God's Purpose and Promise

In chapter 9, we noted that there are both legal and evangelical motives to repentance. The legal motives include the misery of sin and the fear of judgment. We now turn our attention to the two principal evangelical motives.

The first is God's work of redemption. The apostle Paul writes, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). Our sin is so vile and heinous in God's sight that no angel or creature is able to appease His wrath for the least offense. The Son of God must descend from heaven and assume human nature to Himself. Furthermore, He must suffer the most accursed death on the cross and shed His most precious blood on our behalf to satisfy God's justice. Seeing that nothing but the blood of Christ can cure the deadly wound of our sin, we should acknowledge our pitiful case and the seriousness of the least of our sins, and this should stir us up to newness of life. The end of God's work of redemption is to deliver us from our sin and unrighteousness; hence, we are not to continue in sin. If we do, we are like

the prisoner who, although he has been released from prison and freed from his chains, desires to return to the dungeon.

The second evangelical motive is God's promise to those who repent. First, He promises remission of sins. "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil.... Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (Isa. 1:16, 18). Again, "Seek the LORD while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; Let him return to the LORD, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon" (Isa. 55:6-7).

Second, God promises eternal life. "For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies," says the Lord GOD. "Therefore turn and live!" (Ezek. 18:32). "For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel: 'Seek Me and live'" (Amos 5:4).

Third, God promises to mitigate or remove temporal calamities. "Stand in the court of the LORD's house, and speak to all the cities of Judah.... Perhaps everyone will listen and turn from his evil way, that I may relent concerning the calamity which I purpose to bring on them because of the evil of their doings" (Jer. 26:2-3). "For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged" (1 Cor. 11:31), that is, afflicted with temporal punishments.

Temporal calamities are not always removed when a person repents. David repented, but his son died, and the sword did not depart from his house (2 Sam. 12:14). The prophet Micah speaks of the people humbling themselves before God under a temporal punishment, saying, "I will bear the indignation of the LORD, because I have sinned against Him" (Mic. 7:9). At times, it is God's pleasure that the punishment remains after the person is reconciled to Him so that he may be admonished for his sin and serve as an example to others.

As God makes these merciful promises to penitent sinners, so He faithfully performs them as soon as they begin to repent. "David said to Nathan, 'I have sinned against the LORD.' And Nathan said to David, 'The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die'" (2 Sam. 12:13). "When [Manasseh] was in affliction, he implored the LORD his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers, and prayed to Him; and He received his entreaty, heard his supplication" (2 Chron. 33:12–13). "The tax collector...beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner! I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other'" (Luke 18:13–14). "[The thief] said to Jesus, 'Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.' And Jesus said to him, 'Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise'" (Luke 23:42–43).

Because God makes such notable promises to those who repent, we should not draw back from practicing

repentance. The multitude of our sins should not dissuade us but compel us. The Pharisees asked Christ's disciples, "Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" When Jesus heard that, He said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.... I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance" (Matt. 9:11-13). Elsewhere, He says, "Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you" (Matt. 21:31).

CHAPTER 12

The Time of Repentance

The time of repentance is now without further delay. The Holy Spirit says, "Today, if you will hear His voice" (Heb. 3:7). Again, "Exhort one another daily, while it is called 'Today,' lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin" (Heb. 3:13). The reasons for this urgency are as follows.

First, life is uncertain. No one knows when or how they will depart this world. "Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect" (Luke 12:40). This should make everyone quick to repent. Many are now dead who purposed within themselves to repent in the future, but they never did.

Second, the longer a person lives in sin, the greater the danger. This is the case because sin strengthens over time. Habit is of such force that people usually act and speak at the time of death as they did during their lifetime. By deferring repentance, people store up wrath for "the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God" (Rom. 2:5). Those who neglect to repent

from day to day heap up the coals of God's wrath to burn their soul in hell when the day of death comes.

Third, it is more difficult to repent when the time is delayed. The longer a person is sick without medicine, the more difficult is his recovery. When the devil dwells in a place for a long time, he will not be moved without great difficulty. The best way to kill a snake is to crush its head when it is still young.

Fourth, delayed repentance is seldom (if ever) true repentance. If a person repents when he cannot sin as he did in former times, then he does not leave his sin, but his sin leaves him. Therefore, it is likely that the repentance, which so many people claim to have when they are dying, dies with them. It is just that those who condemned God in their life should be condemned by God at their death.

CHAPTER 13

Troubling Questions

When speaking of repentance, several troubling questions often arise. These require a thoughtful answer.

Question 1. Can a person who professes to believe in Jesus Christ yet denies Him in a time of persecution repent and be saved?

Answer. It is a serious condition but, yes, such a person can come to repentance. Manasseh fell into idolatry and witchcraft, and yet he received mercy (2 Chron. 33:13). Solomon also fell into idolatry, but he recovered and was received to eternal life. I can affirm this because he wrote several books of the Bible, and we know that the Scriptures were penned by those who were “holy men of God” (2 Peter 1:21). Peter denied all knowledge of Christ against his own conscience, and yet he later repented. “But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren” (Luke 22:32).

Some people object to my answer by appealing to Matthew 10:33 where Christ declares, “Whoever denies

Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven." But we must understand this verse as describing those who make a final denial of Christ.

Others object to my answer by appealing to Hebrews 6:4–6, "It is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift...if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance." They also appeal to Hebrews 10:26, "If we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins." But we must understand these passages of Scripture as referring to the sin that is to death by which those who are malicious toward Christ wholly fall away from Him. The Holy Spirit does not say "if they fall," but "if they fall away." If they do, "they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame" (Heb. 6:6); trample "the Son of God underfoot;" count "the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing;" and insult "the Spirit of grace" (Heb. 10:29). The word translated "willfully" in verse 26 means to sin because a person wills it; that is, he does so deliberately.

Question 2. Can a child of God who repents for a grievous sin yet falls again into the same sin come to repentance a second time?

Answer. This situation is dangerous. Christ said to the man who had been sick thirty-eight years, "See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you" (John 5:14). Although we do not find

an example of such a recovery (as described in the question) in Scripture, there is no doubt that it is possible. The reasons are these. First, God promises to forgive sins in Christ (Acts 10:43). He does not limit His promise to any kind of sin except blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Nor does He limit His promise to any number of sins. Therefore, repentance is possible after a relapse. Second, Christ tells Peter that he must forgive not seven times but seventy-seven times (Matt. 18:22). Now, if we must do this, then He will no doubt forgive if people return and say, "I repent," for "with Him is abundant redemption" (Ps. 130:7).

Question 3. When a person repents of taking something from his neighbor, is he supposed to make restitution?

Answer. Yes. When Zacchaeus repented and received Christ, he gave half of his goods to the poor, and if he had "taken anything from anyone by false accusation," he restored it fourfold (Luke 19:8). If a person is unable to make restitution, he should acknowledge his fault, and God will accept the will for the deed. "For if there is first a willing mind, it is accepted according to what one has, and not according to what he does not have" (2 Cor. 8:12). If the wronged party is dead, he should make restitution to the heirs and successors. If there are none, then he can surrender it to God by giving it to the church or the poor.

Question 4. Do tears always accompany repentance?

Answer. No. Even pride and hypocrisy can produce tears. A godly person with dry cheeks may mourn to God for his sins, plead for pardon, and receive it. In instances of deep sorrow for sin, tears will usually appear unless people have stony hearts. But they do not always appear immediately. When the body receives a deep wound, we do not see anything right away except a white line in the skin, but soon the blood flows from the wound. Likewise, in repentance, the mind is often astonished, but there are no tears. It is only after a time of consideration that they begin to flow.

CHAPTER 14

Counterfeit Repentance

The opposite of repentance is impenitence whereby people continue in their sinful condition, refusing to sorrow for sin and turn from it. If it is final, impenitence is one of the most grievous of judgments. As a sick person is most sick when he thinks he is well, so an impenitent sinner is most miserable when he thinks he is in a good estate. This sin befalls those who assume they are righteous and, therefore, think they have no need to repent. They have hardened their hearts such that they cannot discern between good and evil, nor do they tremble at God's judgments but fret and rage against them until God, in His wrath, either destroys them or casts them into final despair.

Between the two extremes of repentance and impenitence stands counterfeit repentance. Wicked human nature can pretend and counterfeit God's grace. The Lord complains of the Jews, "And yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah has not turned to Me with her whole heart, but in pretense" (Jer. 3:10). When people turn to

God in “pretense,” they repent in outward show but not with their “whole heart.”

Saul is an example of this. “Then Saul said to Samuel, ‘I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandment of the LORD and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice. Now therefore, please pardon my sin, and return with me, that I may worship the LORD’” (1 Sam. 15:24–25). Again, “I have sinned; yet honor me now, please, before the elders of my people and before Israel, and return with me, that I may worship the LORD your God” (v. 30). Ahab is another example. “So it was, when Ahab heard those words, that he tore his clothes and put sackcloth on his body, and fasted and lay in sackcloth, and went about mourning. And the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, ‘See how Ahab has humbled himself before Me?’” (1 Kings 21:27–29).

Such counterfeit repentance is easily discerned because after a time people return to their old ways. Pharaoh said to Moses and Aaron, “Entreat the LORD that He may take away the frogs from me and from my people; and I will let the people go” (Ex. 8:8). Again, after God struck Egypt with hail, Pharaoh said, “I have sinned this time. The LORD is righteous, and my people and I are wicked. Entreat the LORD, that there may be no more mighty thundering and hail” (Ex. 9:27–28). Again, troubled with grasshoppers, he said, “I have sinned against the LORD your God and against you. Now therefore, please forgive my sin only this once” (Ex. 10:16–17). But

what was the result of all his repentance? "When Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he hardened his heart and did not heed them, as the LORD had said" (Ex. 8:15).

Most people practice counterfeit repentance. When the threat of God's judgment is before their eyes, their conscience horrifies them. They crave assurance of God's mercy but fall into despair in the end. This was how Judas repented. "Seeing that [Jesus] had been condemned, [Judas] was remorseful and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders" (Matt. 27:3). Then what did he do? He "went and hanged himself" (v. 5).

*The Combat Between
the Flesh and the Spirit*

CHAPTER 15

The Combat

Key to a proper understanding of repentance is the combat that exists between the flesh and the spirit. The apostle Paul writes, “For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish” (Gal. 5:17).¹ Repentance is so joined to this combat that it is impossible to practice one without the other.

This is evident in Psalm 51 where the spirit says, “Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness” (v. 1).

1. English Bibles typically translate *pneuma* as “Spirit.” The reader should be aware that the term is not capitalized in the Greek text. By capitalizing the term in English, translators are indicating their opinion that Paul is speaking of the Holy Spirit. Perkins disagrees. For him, the flesh and the spirit are two semi-intact motivational systems in the regenerate person’s soul (i.e., mind, affections, and will). The “flesh” is love for self, whereas the “spirit” is love for God. These two are mixed in the regenerate, and this is the cause of the combat. Perkins explains this in greater detail in the next chapter.

The flesh says, "Your adultery is a heinous sin; therefore, you must not expect any pardon." But the spirit says, "According to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions" (v. 1).

The flesh says, "This sin occupies such a deep place in your heart and life that it will never be pardoned." But the spirit says, "Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin" (v. 2).

The flesh says, "Your transgression is against man." But the spirit says, "Against You, You only, have I sinned" (v. 4).

The flesh says, "Apart from this one sin, your life is blameless." But the spirit says, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity" (v. 5).

This combat takes place in every believer. Oftentimes, soon after the spirit triumphs over the flesh, the devil, and the world, the flesh quickly strikes back and makes us groan and mourn. Moses was courageous at the Red Sea but failed at the water of Meribah (Ex. 14:13; Num. 20:11–12). Job praised God and then blasphemed (Job 1:21; 3:1). David was revived and then often fainted in misery (Pss. 6:1, 8; 10:17; 41:9–11). This is why it is important to see the relationship between the practice of repentance and the combat that rages within us. We should never imagine that, after we have repented, it will be smooth sailing to heaven. Rather, we should be resolved that, whenever we do anything that pleases God, we can expect continual harassment from our vile

and wicked nature. "For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish" (Gal. 5:17).

CHAPTER 16

The Nature of the Combat

To understand the combat described in Galatians 5:17, we must answer three questions. First, what are the flesh and the spirit? These terms have various meanings. (1) The spirit is the soul, and the flesh is the body. This is not the meaning in our text, for there is no combat between the soul and the body, both of which make one person. (2) The spirit is natural reason, and the flesh is natural appetite. This cannot be the meaning in our text, for the spirit fights against natural reason as much as it does against natural appetite. Though natural reason serves to make a person without excuse (Rom. 1:18–32), it is an enemy to the spirit. (3) The spirit is Christ's deity, and the flesh is His humanity. But this cannot be the meaning in our verse; otherwise, it would imply that all believers are deified. (4) The spirit is a created quality of holiness which, by the Holy Spirit, is produced in an individual's mind, will, and affections, and the flesh is the natural corruption (or inclination) of the mind, will, and affections against God's law. This is the sense in our text.

The flesh and the spirit are engaged in this combat because of the opposition that exists between them. The apostle Paul says, "The carnal mind is enmity against God" (Rom. 8:7). The flesh is our natural disposition, and we are nothing else but flesh by nature. The spirit then comes by grace, and it makes us do that which is pleasing to God. The flesh is flat contrary to the spirit, showing that it is a slave to sin. From this we learn the true nature of sin. The spirit is not a substance but a quality; therefore, the flesh, which is nothing else but original sin, must also be a quality. In the faculties of the soul there is a contagion (or corruption) which carries them against God's law. This is properly sin (or the flesh), which is contrary to the spirit.

Second, how can the flesh and the spirit fight against each other, seeing as they are but qualities? We must understand that they are not severed as though the flesh were located in one part of the soul and the spirit in another. Rather, they are mingled together in all the faculties of the soul. The mind is not one part flesh and one part spirit, but the whole mind is flesh and the whole mind is spirit, partly the one and partly the other. The whole will is partly flesh and partly spirit. The flesh and the spirit (that is, corruption and grace) are not severed in their location. At the dawn of the day the air is not wholly light or wholly dark as it is at midnight and noon-day, nor is one part light and another part dark; rather, the whole air is partly light and partly dark. In a vessel of

lukewarm water, the water is not only hot or only cold, or hot in one part and cold in another, but heat and cold are mixed together in every part of the water. Likewise, the flesh and the spirit are mingled together in our soul. This is why these two contrary qualities fight against each other.

Third, are the flesh and the spirit equal combatants in this struggle? The answer is that the flesh is usually greater in measure than the spirit. The flesh is like the giant Goliath while the spirit is like little David. This is the reason why the apostle Paul calls the Corinthians, who were justified and sanctified, "carnal." "And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ" (1 Cor. 3:1). No one can come "to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" until after this life (Eph. 4:13). Some divines often speak of the regenerate man as having but the relics of sin in him. This statement must be understood carefully or else it leads to an untruth. We only receive "the firstfruits of the Spirit" in this life (Rom. 8:23), and we must wait for the accomplishment of our redemption in the life to come.

That said, the power and efficacy of the spirit is such that it is able to prevail ordinarily against the flesh. The flesh receives its deadly wound at the moment a person is first converted, and it begins to die little by little, and therefore it fights like a maimed soldier. On the other hand, the spirit is continually confirmed and increased

by the Holy Spirit, and it is lively. Some people say that the godly do feel the flesh more than the spirit, and therefore the flesh is in every way greater than the spirit. But I answer that we must not measure our condition by our feelings, which can easily deceive us. A person feels a pain in the tip of his finger more sensibly than he feels the health of his whole body, yet the health of the body is greater than the pain in a finger. We feel corruption not by corruption but by grace. Therefore, the more we feel our inward corruption, the more grace we have.

CHAPTER 17

The Manner of the Combat

Now that we understand the nature of this combat, let us turn to the manner by which it is fought. The apostle Paul says, "The flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh" (Gal. 5:17). To lust is to stir up motions and inclinations in the heart, either to good or evil. Such lust is twofold: the lust of the flesh and the lust of the spirit.

The lust of the flesh consists of two actions. The first is to engender evil motions and passions of self-love, envy, pride, unbelief, anger, and so on. James says that "each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed" (James 1:14). This enticing occurs by the suggestion of bad desires. This action of the flesh led Paul to say that he was "carnal, sold under sin" (Rom. 7:14).

The second action of the flesh is to hinder, quench, and overwhelm the good motions of the spirit. Paul found this hindrance in himself. "But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and

bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members" (Rom. 7:23).

The lust of the spirit also consists of two actions. The first is to beget good motions, inclinations, and desires in the mind, will, and affections. David says, "My heart also instructs me in the night seasons" (Ps. 16:7). That is, his mind, affection, and will (his whole soul), being sanctified and guided by the Spirit of God, minister to him considerations of the way in which he ought to walk. Prophesying of the church of the New Testament, Isaiah says, "Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way, walk in it,' whenever you turn to the right hand or whenever you turn to the left" (Isa. 30:21).

The second action of the spirit is to hinder and suppress the bad motions and suggestions of the flesh. The apostle John writes, "Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him" (1 John 3:9). This "seed" is the grace that the Holy Spirit formed in the heart. It resists the rebellious desires of the flesh.

The manner of this fight may more clearly appear if we examine it as it relates to the two special parts of the soul: the mind and the will.

CHAPTER 18

In the Mind

There is a double combat in the mind. The first is between natural ignorance (or blindness) and the knowledge of God's Word. Seeing as we only know in part in this life, the knowledge of the truth must be mixed with ignorance in all who are enlightened. Because these are contrary to each other, they strive to overshadow each other.

Hence, we learn the reason why excellent divines differ in various points of religion. It is because natural blindness remains in the mind, and it prevails to varying degrees. Those who have poor eyesight and cannot see without glasses disagree as to the objects they see far away. Likewise, those who are enlightened and regenerate in this life, "see in a mirror, dimly" (1 Cor. 13:12).

This teaches all students of divinity to suspect their opinions, seeing as the minds of those who are of the soundest judgment have the light of understanding mixed with the darkness of ignorance. They are like the man in the gospel who, after Christ partly opened his eyes, saw "men like trees, walking" (Mark 8:24).

This also teaches those who read the Scriptures to call upon the name of God, that He might enlighten them by His Spirit and abolish the mist of natural blindness. David was so enlightened with the knowledge of God's Word that he excelled his teachers and the ancients in wisdom. Yet he was still aware of his own blindness and often prayed, "Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law" (Ps. 119:18).

When natural blindness prevails, the child of God (enlightened with knowledge to eternal life) might still err not only in lesser points of religion but even in the very foundation of religion. We see this in the case of the Corinthians and the Galatians. As one person can err, so too can a whole church. And as one church can err, so too can a hundred churches. From this it appears that the church militant on earth is subject to error. But as diseases of the body are of two sorts (some curable and some incurable), so too are errors. Though the church is subject to various falls, it cannot err in the foundation to death. The errors of God's children are always curable.

At this point someone might say, "If all men and churches are subject to error, then there is no point in joining with any of them. We should separate from them all." My answer is that, though they might err, we must not separate from them as long as they do not separate from Christ.

The second combat in the mind is between faith and unbelief. Faith is imperfect and mixed with unbelief,

doubt, and presumption. As the man in the gospel says, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). By reason of this fight, the child of God might fall into fits of despair when unbelief prevails. Both Job and David fell into despair amid their afflictions and temptations. This despair might be so extreme that it weakens the body and consumes it more than any sickness. No one is to think that this is strange, for though the child of God despairs of his salvation in Christ, his desperation is not total or final. It is not total because he does not despair with his whole heart, as faith continues to "lust" against despair. And it is not final because he will recover before the end of his life.

CHAPTER 19

In the Will

The will is also engaged in a combat. It is partly willing and partly unwilling to do that which is good, and at the same time, it is partly willing and partly unwilling to do that which is evil. This is the case because it is partly regenerate and partly unregenerate. Likewise, the affections (which are placed in the will) partly embrace and partly reject their objects. For example, love partly loves and partly does not love God. Fear is partly *filial* and partly *servile*, causing the believer to stand in awe of God not only for His mercies but also for His judgments and punishments. The will of a regenerate man is like the person who has one good leg and one lame leg. When he takes a step, he does not wholly proceed or wholly stop, but partly proceeds and partly stops.

Because of this combat, when corruption prevails against grace in the believer's will and affections, the result is a certain deadness (or hardness) of heart. This deadness is a lack of sense (or feeling). Some people might think that this is a fearful judgment, but we must

remember that there are two kinds of hardness of heart. The first possesses the heart without being felt or perceived. It occurs in those whose conscience has been seared with a hot iron. By reason of their familiarity with sin, they are "past feeling" (Eph. 4:19). Moreover, they despise those means which are given to soften their hearts. "But they refused to heed, shrugged their shoulders, and stopped their ears so that they could not hear" (Zech. 7:11). Indeed, this is a fearful judgment. The second kind of hardness of heart is felt and perceived. It is not as dangerous as the first because it points to the presence of God's grace and also speaks to a measure of softness of heart. The children of Israel speak of this when they say, "O LORD, why have You made us stray from Your ways, and hardened our heart from Your fear?" (Isa. 63:17).

CHAPTER 20

The Purpose of the Combat

“The flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh” (Gal. 5:17). To this point, we have considered the nature and manner of this combat. Let us turn our attention to its purpose. In brief, the aim of this combat is to prevail against the flesh. And so, the apostle Paul writes, “Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh” (v. 16). The spirit prevails against the flesh in the course of life and at the end of life.

For the first, the spirit prevails over the flesh during the whole course of life. John says, “We know that whoever is born of God does not sin; but he who has been born of God keeps himself, and the wicked one does not touch him” (1 John 5:18). The grace of God is in the believer’s heart, and it ordinarily prevails within him. Paul says it is the property of the regenerate to walk “according to the Spirit” (Rom. 8:4). In other words, we do not occasionally take one step forward; rather, our ordinary course is in the way of godliness. When a person travels between two cities, he might take a wrong

turn now and then, but he speedily returns to the way and continues on his course.

For the second, the spirit prevails over the flesh at the end of life, for then it is utterly abolished, and sanctification is accomplished. No unclean thing can enter the kingdom of heaven.

It must be observed that when the spirit prevails over the flesh in this life, it is not without striving on our part. Paul testifies, "For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice" (Rom. 7:19). We are not to understand Paul's words as referring only to inward thoughts and motions (as some interpret it) nor of particular offenses but of the general practice of his duty (or calling) through the whole course of his life. It is like the sick man who, having recovered from a serious illness, takes a few steps in his bedroom, saying, "Oh, I wish I could walk, but I cannot." He does not mean that he cannot walk at all but that he cannot walk as he would like because he soon grows faint and weary.

There are occasions when the flesh, for a time, vanquishes and subdues the spirit. In this case, the regenerate man is like a soldier who takes a blow to his head and, as a result, is unable to fight. This leads some people to ask if the flesh can so extinguish the spirit that it severs the individual from Christ until such time as he might be engrafted again. The answer is that there are two sorts of Christians. First, there are those who profess the name of Christ in show only. They are no more

members of Christ's spiritual body than a wooden leg is a member of a man's body. Second, there are those who are lively members of Christ in name and deed. If the first type of Christian falls, we cannot say that he has been cut off because he was never engrafted in the first place. If the second type of Christian falls, he might be cut off from Christ. But he is not cut off in respect of conjunction with Him but only in respect of inward fellowship and communion with Him. And so, after a grievous fall, the child of God feels no inward peace and comfort but is troubled in conscience for his offense. But he still remains a member of Christ in respect of conjunction with Him, and he will be restored to his former condition after repentance.

God permits such occasions for the following reasons. The first is that we might be humbled by considering our evil natures and thereby learn not to swell with pride because of God's grace. After he was "caught up into Paradise," Paul says that "a messenger of Satan" was sent to "buffet" him so that he might not be "exalted above measure" (2 Cor. 12:4, 7). The second reason is that we might learn to deny ourselves and cleave to the Lord with all our heart. Paul says that he was sick to death, that he should not trust in himself but "in God who raises the dead" (2 Cor. 1:9).

CHAPTER 21

The Subject of the Combat

In whom does this combat occur? “For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish” (Gal. 5:17). Here, Paul says that the combat takes place in “you,” that is, in those who are justified and sanctified.

The unregenerate never experience this combat. It is true that the worst person in the world, when he is about to sin, might experience a struggle within him. But that is a combat between his heart and his conscience. His heart (namely, his affections and will) draws and pulls him toward the sin, while his conscience troubles and terrifies him for it. His heart wishes that sin was not sin and that God’s commandments were abolished, but his conscience proclaims (with a loud voice) that sin is sin. We see this fight in Pilate. By the force of his conscience, he feared to condemn Christ, and yet he condemned Him that he might please the people (Luke 23:18–25).

This combat in the regenerate only lasts for the present life. Those who are perfectly sanctified feel no strife. Some might say that this combat was in Christ when He said, "Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done" (Luke 22:42). Indeed, this is a combat, but it is of another sort. It is a fight between two desires: (1) a desire to do His Father's will in suffering the death of the cross, and (2) a desire to have the cursed death of the cross removed from Him. This second desire was not a sin but an infirmity of human nature, whereby in His manhood He seeks (as is the manner of nature) the preservation of His nature.

CHAPTER 22

The Result of the Combat

Finally, what is the result of this combat? Paul states, "That you do not do the things that you wish" (Gal. 5:17). We must understand this statement in relation to both evil and good things.

First, the regenerate cannot do the evil "things" that they wish. This means that they cannot commit sin whenever they wish. John says, "Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God" (1 John 3:9). In other words, he cannot sin at his pleasure or whenever he wills. When Joseph was tempted by Potiphar's wife to commit adultery, because the grace of God abounded in him, he answered her, "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (Gen. 39:9). He could not sin. From this it appears that those who live in the daily practice of sin against their own conscience (though they are professors of Christ) have no soundness of grace in them.

It also means that the regenerate cannot sin however they wish. There are two reasons for this. First, they cannot sin with all their heart because the will (so far as it is regenerate) resists and draws back. Even when a person is carried headlong by the passions of the flesh, he feels some contrary motions of a regenerate conscience. It is true that sin does not reign in the regenerate, for as much grace as is wrought in the mind, will, and affections, so much is abated proportionally of the strength of the flesh. Therefore, when a person commits any sin, he does it partly willingly and partly unwillingly. Here we see the difference between two people who commit the same sin. The unregenerate person sins with all his heart and with full consent. The regenerate person does not. Although he falls into sin, yet he does not remain in it but speedily recovers himself by reason of God's grace in his heart.

Second, the regenerate cannot do the good "things" that they wish. This is the case because they cannot do them perfectly and soundly according to God's will. Paul says, "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find" (Rom. 7:18). The godly are like a prisoner who escapes from jail and then strives to run one hundred miles in a single day in order to escape the prison guards. But he has chains shackled to his ankles, and therefore he can barely travel a mile or two, all the while his chains chafing his skin and tormenting him. Likewise, God's servants desire

and endeavor to obey God in all His commandments as Josiah “who turned to the LORD with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the Law of Moses” (2 Kings 23:25). But they are obstructed by the chains of the flesh, and therefore they obey slowly and weakly with various slips and falls.

CHAPTER 23

Lessons

We have considered the nature, manner, purpose, subject, and result of the combat between the flesh and the spirit. There are several important lessons to be learned.

First, we learn what is our condition in this life. As Christians, we are not free from all evil thoughts, rebellious inclinations, and unruly motions of the will and affections, nor are we free from all manner of slips in our life and conduct. To think otherwise is a mere invention of man's brain. A sound Christian is one who is burdened with the corruptions of his vile and rebellious nature, bewails them from his heart, and fights against them by the grace of God's Spirit.

Second, we learn to reject any notion that we can merit justification by works of grace. The cause of our works is our sanctified mind, will, and affections in which the flesh and the spirit are mixed together. Therefore, works of grace, even the best of them, are mixed works, partly holy and partly unholy. It is common sense that such works are not answerable to the righteousness

of the law, and therefore they cannot merit eternal life or justify us before God. If anyone says that good works are the fruit of God's Spirit and, for that reason, are perfectly righteous, I answer that it is true that they come from the Holy Spirit who cannot sin, but they do not come from Him immediately, but mediately from our corrupt mind and will. For this reason, they are corrupted, just as clean water flowing from a pure fountain is corrupted by a filthy channel.

Third, we learn that original sin remains in us. There are three things in original sin: guilt, punishment, and corruption. The first two are abolished by the merit of Christ's death. However, the third remains. But we must be careful to note how it remains in us; namely, it is weakened, and it is no longer imputed against our person.

Fourth, we learn to be watchful in prayer. Christ declares, "Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matt. 26:41). When the twins struggled in her womb, Rebekah was troubled: "Why am I like this?" (Gen. 25:22). As a result, she went to inquire of the Lord. Likewise, when we feel this inward combat, we must turn to God in prayer, that thereby the spirit may be strengthened against the flesh.

*A Powerful Exhortation
to Repentance*

CHAPTER 24

Searching

“Gather yourselves together, yes, gather together, O undesirable nation, before the decree is issued, or the day passes like chaff, before the LORD’s fierce anger comes upon you, before the day of the LORD’s anger comes upon you!” (Zeph. 2:1–2). In the first chapter of this book, the prophet rebukes the Jews for three notable sins: idolatry, fraud, and cruelty. In the second chapter, he exhorts them to repent. In the first three verses, he explains what it means to repent and adds some special reasons to move them to practice repentance.

The Holy Spirit says, “Gather yourselves together, yes, gather together.” This is the common reading, and it is a good translation, for when we repent, we gather all our wits (or faculties) together, which were formerly dispersed in vanity. Others translate it as follows: “Search (or sift) yourselves.” Either translation will suffice because the word in the original includes both meanings. But it seems to me that “search (or sift) yourselves” fits the context better, considering the same figure

of speech is implied in the word “chaff.” Hence, the Holy Spirit’s meaning seems to be this: “Search, try, sift, and fan yourselves, lest you are found to be chaff, and so carried away and consumed by God’s justice.” I want to make three observations.

The first is that the Holy Spirit wants the Jews to repent, but He does not use the word “repent”; rather, He commands them to “search” themselves. This shows us that we cannot have true and sound repentance without first searching and examining ourselves. This stands with good reason, for we cannot repent if we do not first of all know ourselves and our own wretchedness. But we cannot know ourselves if we do not diligently search ourselves. Hence, the beginning of all grace is for us to search, sift, and fan ourselves that thereby we may know what is in us. As a result of this search, we see our fearful and damnable condition, and we forsake our ways and turn to the Lord. “Let us search out and examine our ways, and turn back to the LORD” (Lam. 3:40). This testimony of the Holy Spirit is confirmed by the testimony of every believer’s conscience. They know that the beginning of their turning to the Lord was a searching of themselves. Let every penitent sinner call to mind his conversion, and he will remember that the first thing in his repentance was that he searched himself and looked carefully into his ways. Finding his case fearful, he resolved to take a new course and turn to the Lord for pardon, mercy, and grace.

The person who walks over a mountain ridge or narrow bridge at midnight does not see any danger and therefore does not fear. But let him walk the same ridge or bridge in the daylight, and he will see the violent waters below and the dangerous rocks above. He will wonder at his own boldness, and he will shrink for fear as he thinks about it. He will never venture that way again, for now he sees the height of the mountains, the steepness of the hills, the craginess of the rocks, and the violence of the river, and he sees the extreme danger that he did not see before. He wonders and rejoices that he has escaped so great a danger, and he will never walk that way again. He now seeks another path, even if it means a longer journey.

Likewise, in our corrupt and sinful condition, we have a veil over our eyes so that we see nothing. We do not see God's wrath or curse seeking to devour us, nor do we see that we walk in the very jaws of hell. Because we do not see this fearful danger, we do not refuse sin but rush boldly into all manner of sin. The night of impenitence and the mist of ignorance so blind our eyes that we do not see the narrow bridge of this life from which, if we slip, we fall immediately into the bottomless pit of hell.

But when God's Spirit, by the light of God's Word, opens our eyes and touches our heart to consider our condition, then we see the frail bridge of this narrow life and how little a step there is between us and damnation.

Then, we see ourselves on a dangerous path, sin being the craggy rock and hell the gaping chasm under it. We then wonder at our miserable estate, admire God's mercy in keeping us from falling into hell, and wonder at the presumptuous boldness of our corruption that so securely marched on toward destruction. Being ashamed of ourselves, we turn to the God who saved us from this danger, we set ourselves in more holy ways and more comfortable courses, and we confess that ignorance made us bold while blindness made us presumptuous. But now, we see the danger, and we will never go that way again.

Thus, the searching of sin and its danger is the beginning of repentance. This teaches us what faith and repentance are in the world's eyes. Many people say they have believed and repented, but test them, and you will discover that they are blind and ignorant as to their condition. They do not know themselves. They say that, because they are baptized and attend church, they are in God's favor. But they have never been reconciled to God, and they are so far from it that they have never seen any sins for which they should repent. As a person traveling in the night sees no danger but plods on without fear, so most people, in the night of their ignorance, presume they love God, love their neighbor, and have always done so. Alas, they are poor and simple souls who have never known what sin is. They have never searched their heart in the light of God's law. If they had, they would have seen such a sea of corruption that they would have

confessed it to be the hardest thing in the world to love God, believe in Christ, and forsake sin. It is evident, therefore, that they have not even begun to believe or repent, nor have they entered into the first step of grace which leads to repentance. They have not learned this lesson, which the prophet teaches: "Search yourself!"

CHAPTER 25

Searching Closely

The second observation is that the word *search* means to examine narrowly or closely, as people would do if they were searching for a precious jewel that was lost in a big house, or as people would do if they were searching for gold in a mine in a great mountain.

Here we learn that we must not only search for scandalous and obvious sins but for those that the world accounts to be of less importance, namely, our secret faults and private corruptions. Some corruptions seem to be a part of our nature, and for this reason people hope to be excused for them so long as they forsake greater sins. But a true penitent sinner must ransack his heart for those corruptions in which he takes special delight. He must not think that some sins are so small that they can be spared. We must search out every sin (great or small) as being a traitor to God's majesty.

But the world's practice is very different. In the world's eyes, great sins are little sins, and little sins are not sins. Even great sins, due to custom and familiarity,

become little or nothing, whereby people make no bones about committing gross and grievous sins. For the most part, people search their heart and life so superficially that they scarcely find anything to call *sins*. They make so many excuses, distinctions, mitigations, and qualifications that even scandalous sins are called into question whether they are sins or not, and the greatest transgressions of the law are counted small matters, necessary evils, or inconveniences to be tolerated to avoid other evils.

For many people, ignorance after thirty-five years of listening to the preaching of God's Word is not counted a sin; blind devotion in God's service is not a sin; lip service in prayer, vain swearing, and mocking religion are not sins; profaning the Sabbath, condemning preachers, and abusing parents are not sins; pride in apparel, greed in diet, drunkenness, and fornication are not sins; deceit, oppression, bribery, and covetousness are not counted as sins. Profane people turn these planks into specks (Matt. 7:1-5). They argue for their necessity, or they varnish them over with excuses, thereby turning them into little sins or no sins at all. Alas, is this not a silly search of the heart and life when such planks go undetected? And how likely are we to see anthills when such mountains are not seen? Specks will be little regarded when planks are not discerned.

It is clear that most people do not make a diligent search of themselves. True converts will search their heart for all sins, and they will spare none. They do

not seek superficially but closely. They leave no corner unsearched. They think great sins to be infinite and little sins to be great. They judge no sin so small but that it deserves God's anger. And therefore, they wonder at God's mercy and cry out with Jeremiah, "Through the LORD's mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not" (Lam. 3:22).

We must reject this superficial and hypocritical search whereby so many sins are spared and ignored. The world is full of Pharisees, superficial searchers, who cannot (because they will not) find any sins to confess to God. Those who are overseers and searchers of their heart yet find no sins to present to the Lord hazard their soul. When the Lord comes in judgment, those who would not search themselves will undergo the strict and severe search of the Almighty. Let every professing believer give attention to this duty. Otherwise, when God comes to search him, his hypocrisy will be discovered, and his nakedness will be laid open in the view of all, to his eternal loss.

It is a godly rule for everyone to search his heart and conscience and not to spare his secret sins, his dearest sins, and those that are nearest allied to his nature. That is the kind of search that the prophet commands in our text. The godly are never satisfied in their search. The more sins they find, the more they suspect are still to be found. Therefore, they continue searching their heart throughout all of life.

CHAPTER 26

Searching Carefully

The third observation is that the prophet Zephaniah is not content to utter his command only once. He repeats it. "Gather yourselves together, yes, gather together." By this repetition the Holy Spirit teaches us that searching our heart and life is a duty of great moment and special importance. It is a principal duty in repentance, even the beginning and foundation of all true grace. Moreover, it is a means to prevent God's judgments. When people do not search themselves, God sends the fire of affliction to search them. But when they search themselves, He does not search them with His just judgments.

Because this duty is the beginning of all true grace and the means to stay God's judgments, we must make every effort to search ourselves. God has commanded us to do so, and we will reap two great benefits thereby. (1) We will lay a sure foundation for the good work of grace in us. (2) We will stay the hand of God and His judgments from being executed upon us.

Let us, therefore, hearken to the Holy Spirit's counsel, and take God's law, and with it search our heart for secret and hidden corruptions, and search our life for sins of commission and omission. We must do with our hearts what people do with their wheat. They do not allow their wheat to remain for a long time among the chaff lest the chaff hurt it; and so, they commit it to the fan so that the wind may separate it from the chaff. Similarly, the graces of God in our heart are wheat, whereas our sins and corruptions are chaff. If we look carefully, we will find much chaff and little wheat in us. We must not let the chaff remain mingled too long with the wheat lest it corrupts it; that is, we must not let our sins remain mingled with the graces of God in us. If we do, they will choke them in the end and so deprive us of all grace. Therefore, we must look into our heart and life, and when we have sinned, we must ask our conscience what we have done. We must not be quiet until we have discovered our sin and its filth. We must never think we know anything in religion until we know what is in our heart, namely, our most private corruptions. We must look into our own faults, not with a partial eye but with a critical judgment.

But our times are very different. We may cry out, even as Jeremiah did, "No man repented of his wickedness, saying, 'What have I done?'" (Jer. 8:6). This is the sickness of our day. Everyone runs carelessly from sin to sin. It is a rare thing to find someone who daily searches

himself and examines how he lives and how the case stands between God and him and enters the closet of his heart and disputes the case with himself, saying, "What have I done? O, what have I done against God and against my own soul?" If people dealt with themselves like this, their conscience would tell them exactly what they have done. They would take heed and look closely and carefully to themselves all the days of their life. Seeing this is so necessary a duty, let everyone endeavor to practice it, namely, to ransack their heart and search their ways.

CHAPTER 27

Searching Profitably

In the performance of this searching, we must know that it is to be carried out by God's law, for nothing else can help us. If we search by any other means, we will seek and search long enough before we find anything that will be a matter of repentance. If we ask the devil, he will tell us that all is well and that we are in an excellent condition, God loves us, and we can be sure of heaven. The devil always sings this song until a person is about to die. He labors to sing all people to sleep in the cradle of security. If we ask the flesh (our corrupt nature), it will say that all is well and safe and that we have believed, loved, and feared God all our days. If we ask the world, it will tell us that all is well. It will also say that we are good people and that we should not be such curious fools who concern themselves with things like swearing, drinking, and so on. The world responds like this because unbelievers seek approval for their own profane lives.

Turning away from the devil, the flesh, and the world, the only thing that remains is God's law. Its light

will disclose the darkness of our heart, and its justice will reveal the unrighteousness and perverseness of our nature. Therefore, we must turn to God's law to help us in this search. To do so profitably, we must embrace three truths. (1) Everyone sinned in Adam and is, therefore, guilty before God. (2) Everyone by nature possesses the seeds of all sins. (3) Everyone by nature is God's enemy and a child of wrath.

Unless we know and feel these truths, we will never see our estate or profit by this search. Instead, we will plod on from sin to sin until we plunge into hell.

CHAPTER 28

The Guilt of Original Sin

The first truth is that everyone who comes from Adam sinned in him. We must know that his sin in eating the forbidden fruit is our sin and that we are guilty of his sin before God. We must answer for it to God's justice unless Christ does so for us.

This is the case because we are Adam's seed and posterity. We were in his loins, and he was the father of us all. He was not a private person as we are but a public person, the pledge of all humanity, and he bore the person of us all at that time. Therefore, what he did, he did for himself and us. What covenant God made with him, He made with him and us. What he promised to God, he promised for himself and us. What he received from God, he received for himself and us. What he gained and lost by his fall, he gained and lost for himself and us. He lost the favor of God and original purity; therefore, he lost it for all his posterity. He gained the anger of God and corruption of nature; therefore, he gained it for all his posterity.

The apostle Paul proves this point when he says, "Just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned...even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam" (Rom. 5:12, 14). Our children are born not only tainted with original corruption but guilty of Adam's sin. This is a most certain truth, though it seems strange. Few people ever think of it, that they will answer for Adam's sin. Someone might object, "Why should I answer for another man's sin?" The answer is that it was not Adam's sin alone; it was his and yours and mine. He was our father, and he stood in our place. And ever since the moment we were born, we have confirmed what he did.

Therefore, though very few people think seriously of this (namely, that they stand guilty of a sin committed thousands of years before they were born), seeing it is most true, let everyone subscribe in his conscience to this truth. And let this be our first resolution in this search, that we stand guilty of Adam's transgression.

CHAPTER 29

The Corruption of Original Sin

As mentioned, to search our hearts profitably, we must embrace three truths. (1) Everyone sinned in Adam and is, therefore, guilty before God. (2) Everyone by nature possesses the seeds of all sins. (3) Everyone by nature is God's enemy and a child of wrath.

The first was the subject of the last chapter. Here we turn to the second. All sins are in every person. More plainly, everyone by nature possesses the seeds of all sins. If we choose the best person, the worst sin is found in him. If anyone doubts this, let them consider what original sin is, namely, the corruption of all the powers of the soul. This corruption has two parts: (1) a lack of all good inclination (all goodness), and (2) a proneness to all evil. Original sin infuses into everyone's heart the seed of all corruption.

Many people stand upon their good intention and upright heart and brag of possessing a good nature, but they are deceived. The seeds of all sins in the world are

by nature in the most civil person upon the earth. To explain this point fully, we need to observe two points.

First, I say that the seeds of all sins, not the practice of all sins, is in everyone. In other words, I am not saying that all people practice all sins. The seeds of all sins are in their nature, but their practice is restrained, sometimes by education, sometimes by good and wholesome laws. Sometimes the constitution of the body prevents people from committing certain sins. Sometimes the country where a person lives or the calling which a person pursues keeps him from practicing some sins. God's general and limiting grace always restrains corrupt human nature from running into many sins. If God were to take His hand away and leave everyone to their nature, we would see that everyone would practice every sin in the world. All those who know themselves know this is true, and the more a person knows his heart, the more he sees that his heart is a sea of all wickedness and that it is only by God's mercy and grace that he has not fallen into the most monstrous sins in the world.

Second, I say that everyone by nature possesses the seeds of all sins. I know that it is otherwise by God's grace. Grace rectifies corrupt human nature, but that is no thanks to nature, for it is as evil and corrupt as ever, being severed from grace. I do not say that sin breaks out in all natures alike, though all natures are alike corrupt, for the course of nature is restrained in some people more than in others by the means mentioned above.

But whereas some are not so angry, some not so wanton, some not so cruel, some not so covetous, some not so ambitious as others, it does not come from any goodness in their nature but from God's hand. He tempers, restrains, and moderates everyone's nature as He pleases.

If God did not moderate and restrain people's natures but allowed them to break out to the full, there would be no order but only confusion in the world. Therefore, for the church's benefit and for the preservation of public peace and for the continuance of society, the Lord holds a hand over everyone's nature and keeps everyone in a certain compass limited by the wisdom of His power. If the Lord were to take away His restraining hand, all societies and countries would be turned upside down because everyone, by the universal corruption of his nature, would break out into every sin.

Do you not find in your nature an inclination to the filthiest sins in the world? If there were no fear of shame and judgment, if there were no such thing as God's common grace, is there anything that would restrain you from committing such sins? Even the best people know very well what difficulty they have in keeping their corrupt nature within the compass of obedience.

The use of this second truth is notable. It shows us exactly what we are, and it fully reveals to us the ugliness of our corrupt nature. It teaches us how to think of ourselves when we hear of Cain's murder (Genesis 4), Pharaoh's cruelty (Exodus 1), the Sodomites' lust

(Genesis 18), Ahithophel's scheming (2 Samuel 15–16), Sennacherib's blasphemy (Isaiah 36), and Judas's betrayal (Luke 22). When we hear of murders, treasons, perjuries, blasphemies, betrayals, apostasies, witchcrafts, and other horrible sins in the world, let us look homeward, even to our own heart, and confess that these would have been our sins if God's grace had not prevented us.

This will humble us and make us think basely of ourselves and so bring us to repentance. The reason why people do not repent of their sins is because they are Pharisees by nature and think highly of themselves and their natural inclinations. This is a harsh and strange truth to most people because they think that they have excellent natures, and they say that they cannot endure such and such sins, and they thank God that they are not as bad as other people. But they must learn to cease magnifying human nature and learn to magnify God's grace. They must learn that their nature (in the root) is as corrupt as that of the worst person in the world and that their heart is a bottomless fountain of all sins. They should praise God for His grace in restraining their corrupt nature, and they should desire that God would bestow upon them His saving grace whereby He might lead them into the way of salvation, which is something that the best nature in the world can never attain.

CHAPTER 30

The Consequence of Original Sin

As stated in chapter 27, a profitable search of the heart by God's law requires the acceptance of three truths. (1) Everyone sinned in Adam and is, therefore, guilty before God. (2) Everyone by nature possesses the seeds of all sins. (3) Everyone by nature is God's enemy and a child of wrath. We have examined the first two.

The third truth is that everyone born of Adam is by nature God's enemy. This applies to all without exception: high or low, rich or poor, noble or simple. This means that everyone is born subject to hell, damnation, and all other curses. As a convicted traitor stands in his king's displeasure and is certain of death without pardon, so everyone stands, when they are born, convicted of high treason and in danger of hell, which is the fulfilling of God's wrath.

David says, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me" (Ps. 51:5). If he was conceived "in sin," then he was conceived in God's wrath and in danger of damnation. How is this possible?

The fairness of this third truth depends on the first two. Because everyone is born guilty of Adam's sin and because everyone is tainted with the corruption of all sin, it follows in equity and justice that everyone is born under God's wrath and curse.

This is an evident truth, yet most people do not think of it, and that is why they do not repent of their sins. They assume that by nature they stand in God's favor and, therefore, do not need to ask for it by way of humiliation and repentance. They imagine that they must only live civilly and not openly wrong anyone, and all will be well. But the truth is that, unless God's favor is sought by faith and repentance, they are under His curse.

For the better understanding of this third truth, let us consider that God's curse has three parts. The first is bondage to Satan. It is a certain truth that everyone, until they repent, is a slave of Satan. In this sense Satan is the king of the nations and the god of this world. He lodges in the heart where he sets up his throne and reigns until the Holy Spirit dispossesses him by regeneration. Until then, the human heart by nature is subject to Satan, the prince of darkness. Our bondage is more fearful than that of men in a galley ship, for their bodies are in bondage, but our best part (our soul) is captive to Satan and under his command. He is the king of cruelty and confusion and the lord of hell.

The second part of God's curse is the first death—the separation of the soul and body. This death is duly

and justly the punishment for the least sin. It is a most terrible curse, for it is the very gates of hell to all people, except to those who by faith and repentance get their death sanctified by Christ's death. For believers, death is not a curse but a gracious and glorious blessing, for it is altered by Christ's death. But for those who do not repent, death is the heavy curse of God's wrath and the very downfall into the pit of hell.

The third part of God's curse is the second death—the death of the soul and body, which is their eternal absence from God's presence, the accomplishment of His wrath, and the apprehension and feeling of that wrath seizing on body, soul, and conscience. The first curse was a spiritual death, the death of the soul. The second was a temporal death, the death of the body. The third is an eternal death, the death of soul and body forever. This eternal death is the curse of all curses, the misery of all miseries, and the torment of all torments.

Sometimes when your tooth aches or your head aches or you pass a stone, you would give all that you have in the world to be eased of the pain. Now, if the pain of one tooth can affect your mind and body to such an extent that you find no relief in all the pleasures of this life, what a torment will it be when the whole vial of God's wrath is poured out on your soul, body, and conscience? It will not be for a brief period of time but for all eternity. It might serve as a good warning to us all, when we feel the extremity of some bodily pain, to consider the

eternal misery and torment of the soul, body, and conscience when they are racked and tormented in the feeling and apprehension of the anger of the Lord of Hosts.

The curse of God stands in these three points, which correspond to the three degrees of sin in us: (1) the guilt of Adam's sin, (2) the taint of original corruption, and (3) the practice of actual sins. The first is the beginning of sin, the second is the continuance of sin, and the third is the perfection of sin. And so God's wrath answers each. It begins by leaving us to the bondage of Satan; it continues by death (the separation of the body and soul), and it is accomplished in eternal damnation.

CHAPTER 31

An Exhortation

I commend these three truths for your careful consideration. I declare to you that you can never be saved unless you repent, and you can never repent unless you search yourself. Likewise, you can never search yourself profitably unless you are persuaded of these three truths in your heart and conscience. (1) You are guilty of Adam's sin. (2) You are prone by nature to all the evil in the world. (3) You are subject to God's wrath and to all its curses.

When you are resolved that these are true, then you are a fit student for the prophet's lesson, "Search yourself!" When you are thus prepared for this search, seeing yourself as the three truths describe you, then you will find your condition to be such as will cause you to repent, return, and take a new course. Therefore, what the prophet said to the Jews, I say to you, "Search yourself!" Do not remain indifferent but know that God commands you, if ever you will come to salvation, to search yourself. By these three truths you see how much chaff of corruption is in your nature, and you see that it

needs to be searched and fanned by repentance. There is so much chaff in you that if you do not sift it, you will prove to be nothing but chaff at the last day, and you will be blown away with the wind of God's justice. Take heed, therefore, to this exhortation.

You do not allow the wheat to remain too long among the chaff for fear of hurting it. Well then, is it safe to permit the chaff of your sins and corruptions to remain rotting in your heart? If you do, you can be certain that the little portion of grace, which you attain by living in the church and under the ministry of God's Word, will be corrupted by the chaff of your sins. Therefore, I exhort you to give attention to this duty. Search yourself, sift out your presumption, your esteem for your own nature, and your conceit regarding God's favor so that the Lord may blow it away and then bestow soundness of grace and the foundation of all goodness, which is a holy and humble heart.

Salvation is such a building as its foundation must be sure and strong. Ignorance, blindness, and presumption are not sufficient foundations for such a building. Therefore, as no one will build a strong house without first testing the earth lest it proves to be sandy and unable to support the house, so a wise believer will not build his salvation upon conceit and natural presumption, but he will search and look into his heart. Finding these to be sandy and rotten, and therefore too weak for the foundation of so glorious a building, he will refuse

them and labor to furnish his heart with sound grace upon which he may trust so weighty a work as the salvation of his soul.

If you will stand in the day of trial, then search your heart and discern between the chaff and wheat. Chaff flies away before the wind, but wheat endures the fan and the fury of the wind. Likewise, in the day of trial, temptation, sickness, or persecution, the chaff of natural presumption and outward formality will fly away. It is only the penitent, humble, and believing heart that will abide and endure the fan of temptations and persecutions.

In conclusion, do not let the devil deceive you into thinking that you can please God while leaving your corruptions unseen and your sins unsearched. You do not store wheat in your granaries unless it is purged from the chaff. Likewise, do not think that you can store any saving knowledge or any grace of God in your heart while the chaff remains. It must first be blown away so that the holy graces of God may be laid up in your soul.

Without question, all knowledge that is stored up in an impure and unsearched heart is like wheat laid up in chaff. It is sure to be eaten up by the chaff. When the winnowing time of trial and persecution comes, I fear that such people will (for all their knowledge) shrink away and betray the truth. Their knowledge will prove to be no better than chaff because it is laid up in an unholy heart. If, therefore, you would stand when persecution and affliction come, if you would abide the fury of the

fan of temptation, you must exercise your heart with the fan of God's law. Search it, purge out the chaff of corruption, and store up knowledge in a holy heart and good conscience. Such knowledge will abide the violence of all temptation. When God suffers the devil to do with us as he did with Peter, to winnow us like wheat, to try us as he did Job with the furious wind of all his malice, this knowledge will prove to be wheat that abides the wind and to be gold that abides the fire. It will be glorious in the end if we follow this holy prophet's counsel by searching our heart.

CHAPTER 32

The Object of Searching

“Gather yourselves together, yes, gather together, O undesirable nation, before the decree is issued, or the day passes like chaff, before the LORD’s fierce anger comes upon you, before the day of the LORD’s anger comes upon you!” (Zeph. 2:1–2). The prophet’s words contain five key points concerning repentance: (1) the duty of searching; (2) the object of searching: “yourselves”; (3) the subject of searching: “O undesirable nation”; (4) the time for searching: “before the decree is issued”; and (5) the reason for searching: a decree has been “issued” against them.

We have spent a lot of time on the first point because it is the foundation of all the rest. Now that it is well laid, the rest of the building will go up quickly. And so, we come to the second point, that is, the object of searching: “yourselves.” We are not to search other people’s hearts and lives but our own. Our heart is our responsibility, but we are not responsible for other people’s hearts. As every soul must be saved by itself, so it must believe, repent, and search by itself.

Here the Holy Spirit addresses a common practice in this world whereby people are eagle-eyed when it comes to looking into the lives of others but as blind as moles when it comes to looking into their own heart and life. They can see the specks in other people's lives, but do not discern the planks in their own (Matt. 7:1–5). It comes to pass, therefore, that they stumble and fall, for their eyes are set on others and not on themselves. It is for this reason that an evil person, looking at others and not himself, thinks the best of himself and the worst of others. In marked contrast, a good person, looking at himself and not others, thinks the worst of himself and the best of others. An evil person looks outward and judges others, but a good person looks inward and judges himself. A believer condemns himself far more than other people because, by searching his heart and ways, he knows what no other person in the world knows.

Therefore, we must not search other people's lives but our own life. Our heart and life are our charge and responsibility. The lives of others do not concern us, unless it is to follow those who are good and take heed of those who are evil. But to search into them is not our duty but a base vice which God forbids. Indeed, magistrates are to search their people, pastors their congregations, and parents their families, but they can only search for open and actual sins. No one can search anyone else's heart. Few people are called to inquire into other people's lives, but everyone is called to search himself. Alas, how

many people do the opposite! They allow themselves to rot in their own sins while inquiring into other people's lives. It is to be seen in daily experience that those who are the great searchers of others are the greatest neglecters and forgetters of themselves. Conversely, those who narrowly search themselves and their ways and look into the corners of their heart find so much work to do that they do not busy themselves with others.

CHAPTER 33

The Subject of Searching

The third point concerning the doctrine of repentance is the subject of searching: "O undesirable nation." The Jews are bid to search themselves so that upon their repentance they might be beloved. Here we see God's unspeakable love and wonderful mercy, offering grace to those who are unworthy of it. God's children are by nature like other people, and He finds nothing in them that causes Him to respect them above others. Out of His own mercy, He makes them worthy. How worthy is God to have all our love! He loved us when we were not worthy to be loved.

Let us examine more carefully why God calls the Jews an "undesirable nation." He blessed them above all other nations. He gave them His covenant of grace and thereby made them His people, and He committed His Word and oracles to their trust (Rom. 3:2). He did not deal in this way with other nations. Besides all this, they had a better land than the nations around them. It flowed with milk and honey (that is, with all commodities and

delights). Though their country was small, they were so populous and powerful that while they pleased God, no enemy would dare attack them.

All that to say, the Jews were in every way a nation that was blessed and beloved by God. How did they respond to His love, which they had no more deserved than any other nation? They responded with sin, rebellion, and disobedience. They tempted Him, and they provoked Him to wrath. They presumed upon His mercy, and they proved to be a stubborn and stiff-necked people. Moses saw this in his own experience. Wondering at their wickedness, he cried, "Do you thus deal with the LORD, O foolish and unwise people? Is He not your Father, who bought you? Has He not made you and established you?" (Deut. 32:6). Sin and disobedience are the only means to displease the Lord and to provoke Him to wrath. For this cause, they are worthily called a "foolish and unwise people" and, in the words of Zephaniah, an "undesirable nation." They were not only slack and careless in their performance of those duties that God required, but they multiplied their sins and committed those rebellions that He hates.

The prophet notes three, from among many, of their chief sins: covetousness, cruelty, and deceit. These were all the more heinous and intolerable because they were the sins of their princes, rulers, and priests, who should have been lights and examples to everyone else. Although every sin is enough to cast us out of God's favor and

deprive us of His love, yet God complains here of their exceeding unthankfulness and unkindness because they, of all others, should have loved Him.

A person cares little when he is mistreated by someone whom he does not esteem, but he is greatly grieved when he suffers a little unkindness from someone whom he loves and respects. And it is so with our God. He did not love the Gentiles as He loved the Jews, nor was He so bountiful toward them (Psalm 147). Though the Gentiles lived in disobedience, “these times of ignorance God overlooked” (Acts 17:30). But when the Jews became unkind, unthankful, forgetful, stubborn, and rebellious, the Lord complained of the indignity. “Do you thus deal with the LORD, O foolish and unwise people? Is He not your Father, who bought you? Has He not made you and established you?” (Deut. 32:6). And this is why the prophet says, “O undesirable nation.” They were worthy of all God’s plagues because they had abused His love and mercy.

But is this true of the Jews alone? No. I might cry out with as good a cause, “O, England, an undesirable nation.” God has been good to us, and we have been unkind to Him. He has poured great mercy upon us. He has called us out of darkness. He has confirmed His covenant of grace and salvation with us. He has imparted the treasure of His Word and sacraments to us. But how have we responded to God’s kindness? Certainly, with a great measure of unkindness! There is widespread

ignorance of His worship, contempt of His religion, and disregard for His Sabbath. There is blasphemy, dishonesty, adultery, usury, bribery, and extortion. These sins are a burden under which our earth groans. And they cry against us to heaven so that it might be said of us, "O undesirable nation."

When we look at the outward face of our church, at the signs of God's love and His dealing with us, we appear to be a beautiful church and glorious nation. But when we look at the lives of most professors of religion, we see that they are like the people of Sodom, full of iniquity. Our sins are so many, so rife, and so ripe that we will undoubtedly bring down God's judgment upon us unless we repent. Therefore, let us learn this duty, to search our heart and life so that they lie open to our sight. We must remember our sins, and God will forget them. We must lay them open before our face, and God will hide them from His. If, on the contrary, we hide them, then we may be assured that they lie open before God's face. Therefore, I exhort you in the name of God to search yourself, find out your sins, confess them to God, humble your heart, call for pardon, begin a new course of life, and do not doubt God's pardon and forgiveness in Christ's blood.

CHAPTER 34

The Time of Searching

The fourth point in Zephaniah's exhortation is the time of searching: "before the decree is issued." It is as though he had said, "Israel, repent before God executes His judgment on you!" Here we behold God's gracious dealing with sinners. People's sins deserve judgment, but God defers it. Ordinarily, He puts a space of time between the sin and the punishment. He does this to show His mercy in that He will withhold His judgment if they repent. He does not smite immediately but puts off His punishment so that people have time to repent. However, when the time is come and people still do not repent of their sin, then God's justice is delivered.

Thus, the old world (before the flood) was granted one hundred and twenty years to repent (Gen. 6:3). During all that time, God withheld His judgment. At last, when their sins were ripe and there was no hope of amendment, God brought forth the universal flood to wash away the universal iniquities of those times.

God also gave hundreds of years to the Jews to repent. He delayed their destruction, and oftentimes He foreshadowed it as in the Babylonian captivity, yet His mercy postponed it. He sent the prophet to tell them that the decree, though conceived, had not yet come forth. But when Israel would not repent but grew worse and worse (as in Christ's time), then God contained it no longer. He brought forth an utter desolation of their kingdom and country, their city and temple, and a dispersion of the nation throughout the world. Although God brought forth this judgment, He did so unwillingly. He is loath, as it were, to execute His judgment on those who have professed His name. He often touched the Jews a little and then drew back His hand. But when their sins grew so strong, then He executed His judgment on them with much bewailing of their great misery as we see in Christ's weeping over them (Luke 19:41-42).

Because God's judgments are so long in coming, they are much heavier when they arrive. As a child grows bigger and stronger after the passage of time, so do God's judgments. The longer He defers, the heavier are His judgments when they finally come. That was certainly the case with the Jews, for He destroyed their land with an irrecoverable destruction, and He struck their posterity with a blindness of mind so that to this day, when the Old Testament is read, a veil covers their eyes so that they cannot see the light of Christ Jesus, but they plod on in fearful and palpable blindness (2 Cor. 3:14).

This doctrine has a special use in our day, for it teaches us to look to ourselves, try our ways, and turn to the Lord. We cannot tell how far off His judgment is. Certainly, God has been long preparing judgments for our sins, and often His hand has been upon us. And yet, it has been pulled back, and His sword has been put back into its sheath. We have escaped, even as a person whose neck has been upon the block and the ax held up to strike. The day has not yet come, and we still have time. This is indeed a happy day if we have grace to repent and search our hearts, for then we will stay His judgment so that it will not come against us. But if we neglect repentance, then we must know for certain that, as the decree is established, so it must come, and then it will be too late.

CHAPTER 35

The Reason for Searching

The fifth and final point regarding the doctrine of repentance is the reason for searching. It is implied in the prophet's words: "before the decree is issued." Although the execution of judgment is delayed, and although God is unwilling to carry it out, yet without repentance it is most certain that it will be executed in the end. In one word, here is the reason we must search our heart: God will most certainly take vengeance upon those who do not repent.

People will ask, "Is this really true?" Others will say that these words are spoken simply to frighten us and keep us in line. By way of an answer, I encourage you to look at the content of our verse. The prophet commands them to search and repent or else, as certainly as judgment was conceived (or decreed), so it will certainly be executed upon them. But they refuse to listen. They will not hear or search or repent. So, what follows? We all know what awful judgment fell upon them.

It was threatened to the Jews, and it was performed. Certainly, it has been threatened to us, and it will be performed unless we prevent the judgment that is coming. God is the same as He ever was, and He is as just and jealous as He ever was. Our sins are much worse than the Jews' sins were. What do we think is going to happen? Therefore, my zeal for God's glory and my desire for your salvation make me tell you the truth. If you do not search yourself and repent, God is preparing judgment for you. Certainly, the decree is out, and the only thing that can stop its execution is repentance.

The gospel is preached, yet there is widespread ignorance as if there were no preaching at all. It seems that the more people hear the gospel, the less they esteem it and the more they condemn it. The more God calls, the more they turn a deaf ear. The more they are commanded, the more they disobey. We preachers may cry until our lungs fly, and people are moved no more than stones. Do people endure mocking? No. Well then, how long has God been mocked? If we want an example of what it is to condemn the gospel and refuse to repent when the Word is so abundantly preached, we can read the story of Eli's sons. He spoke to them, giving them godly counsel: "If a man sins against the LORD, who will intercede for him?" (1 Sam. 2:25). But they refused to "heed the voice of their father."

It stands with God's justice, according as He has revealed it in the Scripture, that He will curse those who

break His laws (Deuteronomy 28). Unless we repent, it cannot be but that a most fearful tempest will come in the end. And when it comes, it will be too late to repent. Therefore, I entreat and exhort you to search yourself so that, repenting and changing your ways, you may get God's sword back into its sheath.

CHAPTER 36

A Winnowing Time

The prophet Zephaniah proceeds to describe in plain terms the manner and state of that judgment which God will send upon the Jews: "the day passes like chaff." The meaning is that they must search themselves lest God takes His fan and, finding them to be chaff, blows them into hell with the wind of His wrath. This is clearly a metaphor. The prophet compares God to a farmer, and the whole world is His wheat field. Now, a wise farmer lets the wheat and chaff remain together until the wind blows, and then he appoints a winnowing time to separate the wheat from the chaff and to blow away the chaff while storing up the wheat. Likewise, God will not let the chaff and wheat remain together forever. He has appointed a winnowing time when He will blow the chaff into hell and gather His wheat into heavenly barns.

Now, God has two winnowing times. The first is on the last day after this life. It is the great winnowing day of all people when the bad will be separated from the

good and be blown into hell by the strong and powerful fan of the last judgment. The wind of God's wrath will be stronger than all the wind in the world.

The second winnowing time is in this world, and it is primarily the preached Word. When the gospel is preached, it fans people, tries them, and purges them so that they may see a difference between the chaff and the wheat, that is, between the ungodly and the godly. John the Baptist expressly calls such preaching a fan. Speaking of Christ, he says, "His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Matt. 3:12). This wind is so strong that it separates the chaff from the wheat—that is, hypocrites from sincere believers—and it blows so strongly upon the wicked that it brings them to the beginning of hell even in this world. It does so by working upon their conscience. If it cannot convert them, it strikes them with fear and terror, which is the very flash of hellfire.

When this fan of the preached Word does not serve to bring people to repentance, then God has another fan, namely, the fan of His judgments. This winnowing fan is when He executes His judgments on people. It encompassed the old world and swept them all away in the flood, and it went over the nation of the Jews when the Romans destroyed the city of Jerusalem.

With the fan of His Word, God separates people in their affection and disposition, thereby making a distinction between them. Generally, by the preaching of the Word, the wheat is known to be wheat, and the chaff is discerned to be chaff. But this fan of God's judgment is more violent, for thereby He separates them in soul, gathering the godly as His wheat into the heavens and blowing the souls of the wicked into hell. But the bodies of both lie together as partakers of the same judgment, so subject to the same corruption. Death has dominion over them all. But at the last day, at the time of God's great harvest and winnowing, He will, with the wind of His power, separate them asunder in soul and body (the wheat from the chaff and the sheep from the goats), and they will never again be mingled. Then, with the wind of His wrath, He will blow the chaff into unquenchable fire, and with His loving favor, He will gather His wheat into the eternal and glorious stores of heaven.

In sum, the first winnowing time (the preached Word) separates them in affection; the second (death) separates them in soul for a time; and the third (the final judgment) separates them in soul and body forever.

Of these three winnowing times, the Holy Spirit speaks in our text of the second, namely, the fan of God's judgments. The meaning of the metaphor is this: you must search yourself and repent, lest God come upon you with some fearful judgment because you have so long condemned the fan of the Word and, finding you

too light to abide the trial, He takes you away in judgment and casts you into hell. As sure as the fan of the Word has made a difference between those who are chaff and those who are wheat, so sure will the fan of His judgments blow away the chaff into hell and damnation.

CHAPTER 37

One Thing Needed

Without question, we must confess that this land is full of chaff, that is, profane and wicked hypocrites whose hearts and minds abound in sin and rebellion. Many professors of the faith are too full of chaff (that is, corruption), and they give themselves too much liberty in many sins. How hard it is to find someone who dedicates himself to the Lord in holy and sincere obedience and labors to confess and forsake all sins! That being the case, God will winnow us to discover the true wheat. If He has only one kernel of wheat in a handful of chaff, one righteous among many wicked, He will stir the entire heap for the sake of those few kernels. He will blow all the chaff to hell to discover those few kernels of wheat, to lay them up in heaven.

The first fan (the preaching of God's Word) is used as powerfully and plentifully in this country as anywhere in the world, and yet there are countless ignorant, godless, and profane people. Wickedness grows and the chaff increases more than the wheat. We can be sure, therefore,

that God will bring His second fan (His judgments) upon us because so many people will not permit the first fan to search them. He will bring the fearful fan of His judgments, and He will blow soul and body into hell with all their sin and corruption that people would not allow the fan of God's Word to blow from them.

Therefore, we must strengthen ourselves by God's grace to be able to stand against the blast of His judgment. It will come, and when it does, no worldly thing will enable us to endure it. Only our faith and repentance, and God's grace, will stand in that day. What should be our care but to labor to avoid this fearful fan of God's wrath? If your heart is touched to ask how this may be, I answer that you must follow the prophet's advice by searching yourself. The way to escape God's trial is to try yourself, and the way to escape God's judgment is to judge your own soul. Thus, the way to escape the fearful fan of God is to fan your heart by His law. If the first fan (that is, the preaching of God's Word) works upon us, we will never be blown away by the fan of God's judgments. You must, therefore, receive the Word of God in your heart, and let it reveal your wretched and sinful estate. When you see your nakedness and misery, confess it, bewail it, be humbled for it, cry and call for mercy and forgiveness, pray against your sins, strive to purge them out of your soul, and crave God's grace for all your sins. If you discover any sins dearer to you, that

prevail against you more than others do, then pray and strive against them. Endeavor that by the fan of God's Word they may be blown away from you. When you have done this, mark what will come of it. When you have fanned yourself, God will not fan you. When the fan of His judgment comes and blows strongly upon the wicked, then the Lord, finding you already fanned and cleansed by His Word, will spare you, and His judgment will either blow over you (as over Lot in the destruction of Sodom), or else it will fan out all your corruptions and blow you up to heaven to be stored as pure wheat in the heavenly stores and mansions of glory, which Christ ascended to prepare for you.

Now then, among those businesses with which the world encumbers us, let us spare some time for this great business. Martha may be encumbered with many things, "but one thing is needed" (Luke 10:42). Therefore, once a day, put yourself and your life under the fan of God's law, try yourself (what you are) and your life (how you live). Once a day, keep a court in your conscience, calling your thoughts, words, and deeds to trial. Let the Ten Commandments pass upon them. Whatever you find to be chaff—your sin and corruption—blow them away by repentance. Thus, you will remain pure and clean wheat, fit for the house of God in this world and fit for His kingdom in heaven. But if we will not do this, then what will follow? My heart grieves to utter it, but I must,

lest I would be a false prophet. Our great sins will draw down judgments from God upon us. When they come, they will be so powerful and violent that they will blow us away like chaff. O, therefore, how happy are we if we receive this doctrine and practice it!

CHAPTER 38

A Free Offer

How happy are you if you learn how to abide the trial of God's judgments and how to be made pure wheat, fit to replenish the barns of heaven! If you go away with this lesson, you have a jewel that is worth more than all the wealth in this world. If you learn this lesson well, then you may say that this was the fairest day that ever shone upon you since you were born. This precious jewel, of which I have been speaking, I offer to you. I bring it from heaven, and all the earth cannot yield it. Since it is from heaven, it is of heavenly virtue, and it will work that which all the wealth in this world cannot do. I pronounce to you from the Lord that this blessed doctrine is offered to you in His name and that you may "take the water of life freely" (Rev. 22:17). Happy is that day when you meet with so precious a jewel that is able to save your soul, and you pay nothing for it!

Therefore, in conclusion, I once again commend this doctrine to you. I commend it to you from the mouth of God. At the last day, you will appear before the face

of Jesus Christ, the great Judge. If you would escape the rigor of His judgment, you must now enter into judgment with yourself and search yourself. If you will not receive this doctrine, then it will be a bill of indictment against you on the last day. If it does not save you, it will condemn you. You must think of it, therefore, as a matter that concerns your soul and body.

If those whose hearts are wedded to this world will not entertain this doctrine, then I turn to those who fear the Lord, and I direct my last warning to them: search your heart and life; renew and revive your faith and repentance, that you may have a testimony to your conscience that you did not pull down God's judgments, but, for your part, you labored to prevent it by your earnest prayer and hearty repentance. And when we have renewed our repentance, let us deal with the Lord in prayer for this church and nation, that the Lord would show His mercy upon us and continue to bestow His peace and gospel upon us. It is nothing for the Lord to do it. His powerful hand is not shortened, and He can continue our peace. Let us set ourselves with Moses in the breach and pray for the ignorant multitude and bewail their sins. Noah, Daniel, and Job did the same. If we do so, then when judgments come, we will either turn them away from our nation, or at the least we will deliver our own soul.

Let us turn to the Lord in prayer. Because it is expected that our general sinfulness will end with some

heavy judgment, let us ask Him to defer our deserved punishments, spare us, and give us time to repent so that, when His wrath does indeed burn, we may then be counted worthy in Christ to escape those things which must come upon the world. "Let us search out and examine our ways, and turn back to the LORD" (Lam. 3:40).

