

April to June 2021

“Hearts”

by
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About the Author



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THURSDAY, APRIL 1

PROVERBS 4:23

PHILIPPIANS 4:7

*“Keep thy heart with
all diligence...”*

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE HEART

Man as created by God consists of a material part (the body) and a non-material part (often called the soul, or spirit). The term “heart,” as it is commonly used today, may refer to either of these parts: so we may speak of the “heart” in terms of physiology, or psychology. Biblically, however, the term “heart” is used in reference to the non-material part of man – and not usually to the emotions, but rather to the mind or will.

It is in this sense that we are to understand Solomon’s exhortation in Proverbs 4:23 that we “*keep*” (or guard) our hearts “*with all diligence.*” The non-material part of man, as much as the material part, is God’s domain, and ought to be governed by His law. God did not merely make our hands, and command us not to steal; He also made our hearts, and commands us not to covet. Indeed, the heart, if anything, is more important because it is the heart (the mind and the will) that directs the hands, the feet, the mouth, and so on: informing what we do, where we go, and what we say. Thus Jesus warns us: “*out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh*” (Matt 12:34, cf. Luke 6:45).

This is what Solomon means when he goes on to speak of the “*issues of life.*” The word “*issue*” here does not refer to a matter or subject, but to an outgoing flow or stream (cf. the woman with the “*issue of blood,*” Matt 9:20 – not a *problem* of blood, but a literal *flow* of blood). It is from the heart that all the decisions and activities of life flow forth; the heart is the source, in other words, that determines how our life is lived.

How important, therefore, that we guard our hearts “*with all diligence*”! What goes on in the inner recesses of our minds? What thoughts do we savour in times of solitude and idleness? What is the inclination of your will, and the bent of your desire? Be assured that what is in your heart will not remain hidden: it will flow out into your life, and if it is evil, the results may be disastrous for you and those dear to you. Dear reader, be warned! In the following days we will consider various aspects of the heart we as Christians ought (and ought not) to have. May the Lord help us diligently to “*keep*” our hearts, according to this biblical pattern.

THOUGHT: God searches and tries the heart; nothing is hid from Him.

PRAYER: Father, help me to guard my heart diligently!

A BROKEN HEART (I)

We often speak today of a “broken heart” as a synonym for personal disappointment - we are “broken-hearted” when we don’t get what we want. This is not what David means when he speaks of “*a broken and a contrite heart*” (Ps 51:17). Psalm 51 records David’s response to his own sin; and it is not his own disappointment that moves him, but God’s disappointment. What then is this “broken heart” that a Christian ought to have, when he or she falls into sin?

A broken heart desires mercy from God. David begins the psalm with an impassioned plea, the central thought on his mind: “*Have mercy upon me, O God.*” There are three crucial acknowledgements involved in this plea. First, David recognises that God is willing to show mercy. He speaks of God’s “*lovingkindness*” and “*tender mercies*” (v 1). Such is God’s nature that He delights to show mercy: He is a gracious and merciful God!

Second, David realises that God is *able* to show mercy. As much as He is merciful, God is also holy and just, and it would be utter presumption for David simply to ask God, “*Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity*” (v 2). Imagine a convicted criminal simply asking the judge to let him off the hook! But David knows that God is able to show mercy, because He has already made provision for it - God has already prepared a sacrifice (none other than His only begotten Son) to satisfy His justice, and so mercy is available.

Third, David acknowledges that he himself is in great *need* of mercy (vv 3-4). Notice that he makes no attempt to excuse himself, but fully acknowledges his guilt. In fact his clear concern is not for *himself* to be vindicated, but for *God* to be vindicated; to be “*justified*” when He speaks. He is genuinely asking for mercy: he knows he does not deserve it. How common it is for us to respond to our sin by making excuses and blaming others (a practice as old as Adam, cf. Gen 3:12)! If only we would simply acknowledge our guilt and seek mercy from God - He is merciful, and forgiveness is freely available in Christ.

THOUGHT: Sin is transgression against God’s law (1 John 3:4).

PRAYER: Merciful Father, please cleanse me from my sins.

SATURDAY, APRIL 3

PSALM 51:5-12

2 SAMUEL 11:5-27

“Purge me with hyssop, and

I shall be clean...”

A BROKEN HEART (II)

A broken heart desires mending by God. In Psalm 51, David acknowledges how far he has fallen from God’s standard – God desires “*truth in the inward parts,*” while he was “*shapen in iniquity*” (vv 5-6). Nor is this falling short a matter merely of academic fact: there is a recognition throughout this passage of sin as something genuinely heinous, and producing terrible debilitating effects. Sin brings filth that needs to be cleansed and washed (v 7); sin brings spiritual sorrow so great that the burden is bone-crushing (v 8).

We must beware lest the oft-repeated statement that “*all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God*” (Rom 3:23) lose its seriousness in our minds. Like children who play, and make themselves filthy with dirt, then traipse into the house and across the floor with their muddy shoes; even so we often treat our sin as something inconsequential and easily covered up. Even David made that mistake, when he thought to cover up his adultery! How we need to see sin for the God-defying, soul-destroying canker that it is!

Such a view of sin will then lead us, with David in this psalm, not to minimise or ignore the problem, nor to wallow in self-pity, but to find a solution. So great is the problem of sin, that we are utterly helpless to fix it – but God is not helpless. Thus we see that as much as David feels all the terrible effects of his sin, he also recognises that God can remedy the situation: not just by forgiving him and blotting out his iniquities (v 9), but also by sanctifying him and creating in him a clean heart (v 10), restoring his joy and enabling him to serve God once more (vv 11-12).

When David’s thoughts were centred on self, he sought to hide his sin from the world, but as soon as his thoughts turned to God, he sought instead for spiritual restoration. The broken heart that we ought to have when we sin, will lead us to seek God’s help in urgent desire that He would mend what has been broken, and cleanse what has been made filthy.

THOUGHT: Do I have a light-hearted attitude towards sin?

PRAYER: Father, renew a right spirit within me!

A BROKEN HEART (III)

A broken heart desires to magnify God. David's desire for cleansing was not motivated merely by a desire to be free of the personal distress of guilt. In Psalm 51, he expresses his desire to serve God once more: praising Him publicly and telling others of His mercy and saving grace (vv 12-15). David's desire, in other words, was for God's glory, and not his personal comfort; he recognised that the true evil of his sin lay not in the personal distress it brought upon him as he was burdened by guilt, but in the dishonour it brought to the name of God. Hence his desire was not only for his own joy to be restored, but that he might once more glorify God - to repair, as it were, his testimony for the Lord.

We can see the sincerity of David's desire (vv 16-17). He is not concerned to put on a show, offering sacrifices with grand pomp and ceremony. He knows what God desires - *“a broken and a contrite heart,”* not mere ritual observance. How different David was from Saul! Even though Saul, when confronted by Samuel, appeared to confess his sin and even expressed a desire to worship God (1 Sam 15:24-26), this was in fact a sham. He wanted to put on a show for the elders of Israel, in order to preserve his own reputation (1 Sam 15:30-31). Saul's concern was not for God's glory, but his own; his was not the sacrifice of a truly broken heart.

This illustrates an important point for us to remember. In all that we have considered of the broken heart that we ought to have when we sin, the common feature is a focus centred on God, and not on self. In our desire for mercy, we seek not for ourselves to be vindicated, but for God's justice to be vindicated. In our desire for mending, we do not try to fix the problem ourselves with cover-ups nor wallow in self-pity, but turn to God for cleansing and sanctification. In our desire to magnify God, we put away all thoughts of promoting ourselves or maintaining our reputation before others.

Dear reader, examine yourself. Is your heart truly broken by sin? Is yours a heart that desires mercy from God, desires mending by God, and desires to magnify God?

THOUGHT: Is my response to sin all about self, or all about God?

PRAYER: O Father, give me a heart that pleases Thee.

MONDAY, APRIL 5

2 KINGS 22:8-20

JEREMIAH 36:5-24

“...*thine heart was tender, and
thou hast humbled thyself...*”

A TENDER HEART

The word “*tender*” here (2 Kings 22:19) has the idea of softness, and is often used in the sense of fear. The context of this passage is God’s judgment: the discovery of the book of the law revealed the failure of the nation to keep God’s commandments, and so the great wrath of God was kindled against them (v 13). The “tender heart” of Josiah (v 19), therefore, describes his response to the warning of God’s impending judgment. As soft cement readily receives impressions, so Josiah’s tender heart was readily affected by the warning of God’s judgment - he rent his clothes, and wept (v 19). Not only that, he embarked on an extensive program of reformation, removing all traces of idolatry from Judah. He did this, even though God had said the judgment could not be averted (v 17)! Josiah’s tender heart, in other words, did not consist only of a desire to escape judgment, but a sincere desire to “*perform the words of the law*” (2 Kings 23:24).

By contrast, once cement is set, it becomes impervious and rigid: so those whose hearts are hardened do not respond when God’s judgment is declared. We find an example of such a hardened heart in Josiah’s own son, Jehoiakim. The prophet Jeremiah wrote the words of God’s judgment on a roll, so that the king and the nation might repent of their evil ways (Jer 36:1-3). Instead, when the roll was read before the king, he cut it up and cast it into a fire. “*Yet, they were not afraid, nor rent their garments, neither the king, nor any of his servants,*” when they heard the words of judgment (Jer 36:24).

Many in the last days, like Jehoiakim, will scoff at God’s judgment (cf. 2 Pet 3:3-4). But the day of the Lord will surely come, as a thief in the night. The old adage that nothing is certain except death and *taxes* needs biblical refinement: two things are certain for every man, death and *judgment* (cf. Heb 9:27). What is your response to this warning of judgment? Will you harden your heart, discard God’s Word, and go about your life as you please? Or will you, with a tender heart, knowing that this judgment cannot be averted, nevertheless repent of your sins and seek to do what is right in God’s sight (cf. 2 Pet 3:11-12)?

THOUGHT: Is my heart tender, or hard, towards God’s judgment?

PRAYER: Father, help me to respond rightly to Thy coming judgment.

TUESDAY, APRIL 6

1 CHRONICLES 28:1-10

1 KINGS 2:1-4

“...the LORD searcheth
all hearts...”

A PERFECT HEART (I)

David's charge to Solomon, when the latter was to begin his reign, includes this exhortation to serve God with a “*perfect heart*” (1 Chron 28:9). The word “*perfect*” here comes from the same Hebrew root as the word for “*peace*” (also the root of Solomon's name). The idea is of a heart that is peaceful, unwavering, fully fixed and set on a particular goal and course. A “*perfect heart*” then, in this context, is a heart that is fixed, unwavering on seeking after the Lord and walking in His ways, without restlessness or agitation.

This perfect heart is founded on a recognition of God's sovereign person, not an academic knowledge, but the knowledge of personal relationship. It is not enough to rely on his father's piety or the fact of his father's instruction; Solomon must know God for himself: hence David charges him, “*know thou the God of thy father*” (v 9). This personal relationship involves a recognition also of God's sovereign knowledge. He is the God who “*searcheth all hearts*” (v 9), and knows even what is hidden to all others. The kind of perfect heart that Solomon must have is one that can withstand, not merely man's scrutiny, but God's.

There is finally a recognition of God's sovereign judgment. God's knowledge of the heart is not the knowledge of a mere observer, but the knowledge of a judge: there are consequences if our hearts are not perfect before Him. The perfect heart that seeks fixedly after God will find Him, and find Him to be gracious; the heart that forsakes God will be cast off for ever (v 9).

This charge was given to Solomon in the context of service. God had called him to a particular task, the building of the temple (v 6) - as a servant of the God who searches all hearts, and understands “*all the imaginations of the thoughts*,” Solomon was to “*serve... with a perfect heart and with a willing mind*” (v 9). The same charge therefore applies to us, for we each have our particular calling from God. Dear reader, are you faithful to do what God has called you to do, with a heart perfect and unwaveringly fixed on following Him?

THOUGHT: Am I serving God with a perfect heart and willing mind?

PRAYER: “*Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?*” (Acts 9:6)

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 7

1 KINGS 11:1-6

LUKE 14:25-33

“...when Solomon was old
...his wives turned away his heart...”

A PERFECT HEART (II)

Despite the charge that was given to Solomon by his father David, Solomon's failure is well-known. We read that when Solomon was old, “his wives turned away his heart after other gods: and his heart was not perfect with the LORD his God” (1 Kings 11:4). His heart was no longer fixed steadily on the LORD, but turned away after other gods.

In Solomon's case it was his wives who turned away his heart - wives that he had taken from the surrounding pagan nations (v 1). How easily an unwise attachment to an ungodly person can cause a Christian to stumble - reader, beware! In fact any earthly affection can turn our hearts away from God. For the rich young ruler it was the love of money and possessions that turned his heart away and caused him to depart from Christ, sorrowing (cf. Matt 19:22). How easily such an idolatrous materialism can creep in, and turn our hearts away from being perfect before God - reader, beware! For the disciples, especially Peter, it was a regard for self-preservation that caused them to forsake the Lord and even deny Him, on the night of His arrest (cf. Mark 14:50; John 20:19). How easily persecution and affliction may cause us to falter in our testimony and service to God, if we do not take care to keep our hearts fixed on Him - O reader, beware!

We must not fail to notice also that specifically mentioned in the account of Solomon's failure is the fact that he acted against the clear warning of God's Word: God had told the Israelites not to take wives of these pagan nations, lest these wives turn away the hearts of God's people (1 Kings 11:2). Solomon, wise as he was in the administration of his kingdom, was foolish in his disobedience to God's command. We ought not to repeat his mistake, but rather pay heed to God's prohibition of an unequal yoke between believer and unbeliever (cf. 2 Cor 6:14). Likewise God's Word warns us against the love of money (cf. 1 Tim 6:6-11), and of the need to deny self in order to follow Christ (cf. Luke 14:33).

Let us therefore take care to keep ourselves from all such attractions, to maintain our hearts perfect and fixed on seeking after and obeying God.

THOUGHT: “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.” (1 John 5:21)

PRAYER: O Father, help me to walk before Thee with a perfect heart.

THURSDAY, APRIL 8

PROVERBS 14:30

PROVERBS 3:1-8

*“A sound heart
is the life of the flesh...”*

A SOUND HEART

The word “*sound*” in Proverbs 14:30 refers to health or healing. Here the soundness of a heart describes not biological but spiritual health: a sound heart is one that has its spiritual crisis remediated. This remedy, of course, can come only from the Lord (cf. Jer 33:6); yet we can deprive ourselves of it, when we refuse to hearken to Him. Thus Solomon elsewhere warns that the one who “*being often reproved hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy*” (Prov 29:1; the word for “*remedy*” is the same as that which is translated “*sound*” in our text).

A sound heart, then, is a heart not obstinate in pursuing its own sinful ways, but mindful of God’s Word and obedient to His reproofs. And the consequence of possessing such a heart is described here – somewhat surprisingly, perhaps – as “*the life of the flesh.*” A sound heart brings life, not only to the soul, but even to the flesh! The spiritual repair of the sin-scarred heart, effected by humble obedience to God’s Word, leads to the well-being of the whole person.

Conversely, “*envy*” is revealed to be “*the rottenness of the bones.*” The word “*envy*” signifies strong desire and determination. It may be used in a good sense, as indicating one’s zeal for the Lord (cf. Ps 69:9); here, evidently, it describes a desire directed not towards the Lord but towards the self. Such selfish and stubborn desires, which refuse the yoke of divine law, are the source of a deep-seated and far-ranging decay: corrupting a man from the inside out, even to his very bones.

So many these days are searching for the secret of long life – so many are turning to methods exotic and esoteric to promote their health and “wellness.” But, dear reader, will you receive God’s instruction in the matter? If you would have health and long life, you must look to your heart. A heart cured of obstinacy will bring health to the whole man; a heart inured to self-will leads to death. If you will but obey the law of God from the heart, you will find that it adds to you “*length of days, and long life, and peace*” (Prov 3:2).

THOUGHT: Is my heart healthy?

PRAYER: Father, I submit all the desires of my heart to Thee.

FRIDAY, APRIL 9

PSALM 24:1-4

JOHN 4:23

*“Who shall ascend into the hill
of the LORD?”*

A PURE HEART (I)

The question asked in Psalm 24:3 ought immediately to arrest our attention. In order for us to appreciate its import, however, we must first consider the occasion of the psalm. This is generally taken to be the entrance of the ark into Jerusalem (2 Sam 6; cf. Ps 24:7-10), especially as it pointed towards the eventual establishment of the temple as God’s fixed “dwelling-place” on earth. The LORD to whom belongs the whole earth, with all its fulness (v 1), has chosen the hill of Zion to be specially His; and has chosen one place on earth to be holy, consecrated unto Himself. But now concerning this one place David asks, *“Who shall ascend into the hill of the LORD? Or who shall stand in his holy place?”* (v 3).

The true worshippers of God are described first positively: they are those who have clean hands and pure hearts (v 4). The emphasis here is on the extent of the purity required. Of course, those who come into God’s house must have “*clean hands*” – just as modern travellers must undergo extensive checks before boarding an aeroplane, to ensure they are “clean” of any dangerous item, and of any particular criminal record.

But God’s standard is much higher than that of man, for while man cannot police the heart, God sees and knows, and has authority over, even our very thoughts. He that would enter into the presence of the thrice-holy God, must have not only clean hands, but also “*a pure heart.*” Even our imaginations, our desires, and our motives must be pure, if we would worship God!

Dear reader, it is fashionable in these last days to scoff at the thought of yielding reverence to a higher power. Yet do you not recognise that the worship of God is man’s chief end, and highest honour, and greatest joy? And in that light will you not acknowledge how crucial it is, that we examine our hearts as we come to the Lord’s house each week? Check your motives as you get out of bed this Lord’s Day! Think it not trivial or routine to gather with God’s people for holy worship, but take the time to prepare and purify your heart, that you may *“ascend into the hill of the LORD.”*

THOUGHT: *“Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.”*
(Matt 5:8)

PRAYER: Merciful Father, help me to examine and purify my heart.

SATURDAY, APRIL 10

PSALM 24:4-6

JEREMIAH 7:8-11

*“He that hath clean hands,
and a pure heart...”*

A PURE HEART (II)

David’s description of God’s true worshippers continues. Now they are described negatively, giving us more detail as to the kind of purity that is in view here. In the first place, a true worshipper is one who *“hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity”* (Ps 24:4). To lift up the soul is an expression of worship, as we see in the next psalm (Ps 25:1). But the object of worship here is *“vanity”* – this word has the idea of falsehood, and refers here to false gods or idols (cf. Ps 31:6). To lift up the soul unto vanity, then, is a description of false worship, rendered to a false god; a placing of one’s trust in that which is not worthy of such allegiance.

In the second place, a true worshipper is one who has not *“sworn deceitfully.”* To swear deceitfully is the epitome of falsehood: a deliberate pretence put on to convince others of a lie. In this context it describes the hypocrisy of pretended worship, which is an abomination to the Lord. Be warned that He is the one who can *“search the heart”* and *“try the reins”* (Jer 17:10); He knows that *“though they say, The LORD liveth; surely they swear falsely”* (Jer 5:2).

Dear reader, those whose loyalties are divided – who have lifted up their souls as an offering to the world, in exchange for its fleeting pleasures and imagined security – disqualify themselves from the company of the saints. Many, it is to be feared, fill the pews with their bodies who are spiritually absent from the house of prayer; many, sadly, fill the building with sweet voices, while the courts of the Lord echo hollow and devoid of true praise.

But those who truly seek the Lord shall find Him. Those who single-mindedly and full-heartedly hunger and thirst after a righteousness they do not possess in themselves, will surely be fed, and welcomed into His holy place. They *“shall receive the blessing from the LORD, and righteousness from the God of [their] salvation”* (v 5). As you prepare to meet the Lord this week, ask yourself: Do I come to God’s house lifting up my soul to Him, or to the world? Do I come sincerely, or hypocritically?

THOUGHT: *“Unto thee, O LORD, do I lift up my soul.”* (Ps 25:1)

PRAYER: *“Remove far from me vanity and lies...”* (Prov 30:8)

LORD'S DAY, APRIL 11

EXODUS 35:1-29

PSALM 50:12

“...whosoever is of a willing heart,
let him bring... an offering...”

A WILLING HEART (I)

In the wilderness, God spoke to Moses and commanded a Tabernacle to be built. The design of the building was divine; the material was to be provided by the people. They were commanded to give “*an offering unto the LORD*,” and there was only one qualification: whoever brought an offering was to be “*of a willing heart*” (Exod 35:5).

The words “*willing*” (v 5, 22), “*made willing*” (v 21, 29), and “*willing offering*” (v 29) are all from the same root, and describe a heart that is inclined; an offering that is voluntary, without reluctance or constraint. This is the kind of heart that we must have, when we bring an offering to God. Here are three features of this “*willing heart*,” for our consideration.

A willing heart is required. This was a command and a necessary qualification - those whose hearts were not willing, were not to give! In other words, it was not the offering itself that was required. God did not need the help of the Israelites: He had supernaturally provided for them food, water, shade, light - all without any demand for their assistance. If He had so desired, He could have supernaturally provided all the materials necessary for the construction of the Tabernacle. Indeed, He could simply have commanded the Tabernacle to come into existence, fully formed! Instead, God graciously chose to give His people the privilege of contributing the materials and performing the work for the building of His Tabernacle.

So also in the advance of God's kingdom today, it is not our contribution that God requires, but a willing heart. For the Tabernacle, some were specially gifted in the required workmanship, and these were “*called by name*” (Exod 31:2); but all the people were called willingly to contribute their material offerings. Likewise today, some are specially called to be missionaries; some to preach or pastor - but all are called to contribute, willingly, to God's work. Whatever we bring to God, therefore, whether it be an offering of our substance, a sacrifice of praise, or intercessory prayer, let us make sure that our hearts are not grudging, but willing.

THOUGHT: It is a privilege to contribute to God's work.

PRAYER: Gracious Father, help me to give willingly to Thee.

MONDAY, APRIL 12

EXODUS 12:35-36

MARK 12:41-44

“...she of her want did cast in
all that she had...”

A WILLING HEART (II)

A willing heart is reasonable. There is a natural question that arises when we read God’s command to the Israelites to bring their offerings of “*gold, and silver, and brass, and blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine linen...*” (Exod 35:5-6). The Israelites were slaves, rescued from bondage in Egypt; they were in the wilderness, without access to any resources - where did they get all this gold, and silver, and fine linen?

The answer is that God provided it for them. As they were leaving Egypt, the Israelites were told to borrow (the word simply means to ask, without our modern-day implication of an eventual return of the item thus “borrowed”) from the Egyptians “*jewels of silver, and jewels of gold, and raiment*” (v 35). It was God who moved the Egyptians to give their valuables to their former slaves (v 36); and so when God commanded materials to be brought for the Tabernacle, He was asking His people to give willingly to Him what He had first given to them.

This is a perspective that we very much need today. So many are proud of their giving, as though they have done some great thing by bringing a large amount to God - they do not recognise God as the source of all their wealth; they do not praise Him for His grace; and they are put to shame by a poor widow who gave all that she had (cf. Mark 12:41-44). So many, on the other hand, are grudging and stingy, thinking of their money and their time as their own, and unwilling to give these up for God’s use. The basis of a willing heart in this context is an attitude of stewardship: recognising that what we have comes from God, and has been entrusted to us not to fulfil our own purposes, but God’s.

It has been said that “God’s work done in God’s way will never lack God’s supply” - but what is God’s supply? Not a chest of gold dropped from heaven! God’s supply is His people, who as stewards of His gracious gifts give willingly to the work of His kingdom. Dear reader, when the call comes, when resources are needed for God’s work, will your heart be willing? Will you look at your possessions with the eyes of a steward willing to serve the Master?

THOUGHT: All that I have comes from God.

PRAYER: Father, make me a good steward of Thy gracious gifts.

TUESDAY, APRIL 13

EXODUS 40:33-38

2 CORINTHIANS 9:6-7

“...he which soweth bountifully shall
reap also bountifully.”

A WILLING HEART (III)

A willing heart is rewarded. The Israelites gave willingly to the building of the Tabernacle: those who were gifted to work on the construction, worked; those enabled to give material, gave. All these willing hands were rewarded - not by a multiplication of their material wealth, but by God's acceptance of their offering. The cloud of God's glory filled the Tabernacle, and His presence was with them throughout their journeys (Exod 40:38).

So also in our time, the reward of a willing heart does not lie in material wealth! There are those today who promote so-called Christian wealth plans, promising that what is given to God will be multiplied and returned to the giver. These are but thinly-veiled schemes exploiting our natural sinful tendency toward covetousness and greed. The reward of a willing heart is simply that God is pleased with such a heart - indeed, this was the motivation used by the apostle Paul in his exhortation to the Corinthian church (cf. 2 Cor 9:7).

If we are to obtain this reward, our giving must not be a cover for covetousness. Nor can it be grudging (the phrase used in 2 Cor 9:7 is, literally, “not out of sorrow”), as if our hearts are grieved to part with these possessions of ours. Nor can it be “*of necessity*,” forced by peer pressure or public opinion or some other such consideration. Rather, we are to bring our offerings willingly to God, motivated by a desire to please Him.

Dear reader, is it not enough to know that such cheerful giving pleases God? What more do we need as a motivation than the good pleasure of our gracious heavenly Father who has given so much for us, and to us? Is it not enough of a reward for us to look forward to hearing those wonderful words from the lips of our Master, “*Well done, thou good and faithful servant*” (Matt 25:21)? Let us each then fulfil the role of a good steward - not chasing after personal gain or grudgingly doing the bare minimum that God requires - but cheerfully applying all the time, talents, and resources that God has given us to the furtherance of His work and His kingdom.

THOUGHT: “*God loveth a cheerful giver.*” (2 Cor 9:7)

PRAYER: Father, give me a willing heart to serve Thee with my all!

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 14

PROVERBS 8:5

1 KINGS 3:5-10

“O ye simple... ye fools...”

AN UNDERSTANDING HEART

Wisdom is personified in Proverbs 8 as a woman lifting up her voice to cry *“at the gates, at the entry of the city, at the coming in at the doors”* (Prov 8:3). She exhorts all to hear, for she *“will speak of excellent things; and... right things”* (v 6). Surely wisdom and understanding are desirable to all of us, yet if we would possess them, we must take note of two things which are brought out in personified wisdom’s address.

First, the source of the address. Significantly, wisdom is pictured here as something external to man, calling for the attention of man. It does not lie within, but without; it is not something invented by man, or self-defined, but something to be sought out and found. This external source of wisdom and understanding is God Himself (cf. vv 13, 22).

Second, we must realise the condition of those addressed. Wisdom does not here speak to the intelligent, or to the noble, or to the mighty - but to the *“simple”* and to the *“fools.”* Yet her address is to all mankind (v 4)! Dear reader, note well the link established in Scripture between wisdom and humility; and between foolishness and pride (cf. Prov 10:8, 11:2, 12:15, 15:33). Genuine understanding begins with the humbling recognition that of ourselves we are all simple and foolish. Only from this vantage point can we begin to seek the true wisdom that is to be found in God’s Word.

Would you be *“of an understanding heart”*? Then start with humility: let us confess that whatever our earthly expertise may be, with regard to spiritual truth and moral reality we are by ourselves fools. Thus prostrate before God, let us look to the Lord Jesus Christ, and find hid in Him *“all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge”* (Col 2:3). Let us look into God’s Word, and find contained therein all that is profitable for us to be *“perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works”* (2 Tim 3:16-17). Whatever the world may say, the truth of the matter is, an understanding heart is one that humbly treasures the truth of God’s Word, and faithfully applies it to every aspect of life.

THOUGHT: It has been said that the half of knowledge is knowing where to find it - if so, the other half is knowing that you lack it.

PRAYER: *“Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart...”*
(1 Kings 3:9)

THURSDAY, APRIL 15

EZRA 7:6-10

MATTHEW 7:7-8

“...to seek the law of
the LORD...”

A PREPARED HEART (I)

The word “*prepared*” describes something that has been established on a firm foundation, and speaks here of an inner determination, a resoluteness of will. Ezra was firmly committed to his calling from God. Surely each one of us can attest to the rarity of such a prepared heart! We are innately vacillating and unstable - so often we set a course with steadfast intent, only to wander from it a moment later - and nature’s bent is pressed yet further by the “advancements” of our modern age. We go through life beset by distraction, and wooed by a tumult of voices designed to fragment our attention and divert our aim. If we are to serve God, we need a heart like Ezra’s.

Prepared to seek. In the first place, Ezra had resolved to “*seek the law of the LORD*” (v 10). He found himself in the heart of the Persian empire, a pagan and idolatrous metropolis full of its own laws, customs, and religious practices. Yet there was one law that he sought; one that he esteemed above all. And where was this law? It was “*not hidden*,” nor “*far off... beyond the sea*,” but “*very nigh*” (Deut 30:11-14), because it had been given by God through His servants the prophets. God had made it available and accessible to all who prized it enough to seek it.

Consider the excellence of God’s law: it is “*more to be desired... than much fine gold*” (Ps 19:10), to be “*rejoiced in... as much as in all riches*” (Ps 119:14), to occupy our meditations “*day and night*” (Ps 1:2); and it is more easily accessible to us, perhaps, than to any previous generation. But though a multitude today may profess to love God’s law, it remains to be seen how many have truly prepared their hearts to seek it, and to pursue the knowledge of it. How many actually devote more time to the study of God’s Word, than to the idle entertainment of the world? How many, in the quiet of the evening, will sit before the Lord with gladness of heart?

It would be foolish to expect any half-hearted attempts or careless efforts to yield lasting fruit in this endeavour. If we would reap the blessings of the Lord, we must really prepare our hearts to seek His law - with diligence and full commitment.

THOUGHT: Is my heart prepared to study God’s Word?

PRAYER: Forgive me, Father, for my contempt of Thy law.

FRIDAY, APRIL 16

EZRA 7:6-10

JAMES 1:22-25

“...be ye doers of the word,
and not hearers only...”

A PREPARED HEART (II)

Prepared to do. In the second place, Ezra was not seeking the law of God merely out of interest, or a desire for self-promotion, or some vestigial loyalty to antiquated tradition: he sought out God's law that he might apply it in his life, to obey and “do it.” Following his example, then, we must take care that our heart is prepared to seek God's law, with the right motive.

We know of some who appear to seek God's law, yet with no more pressing motive than idle curiosity. Such were the Athenians, who actively sought out Paul's teaching, but whose only interest in his doctrine was its newness (Acts 17:16-21). Contrast the Bereans, who “received” the apostolic teaching “with all readiness of mind” (Acts 17:11)! This “readiness of mind” was for the doing, not the dissecting, of God's Word.

We know of some, also, who study and acquire a vast technical knowledge of God's law, with no actual profit to themselves or others. Such were the Pharisees, whose vaunted familiarity with the texts of the Old Testament was vitiated by their shallow appreciation of its real spiritual importance. They knew from whence the consolation of Israel was to come (Matt 2:4-6), but would not lift an eyelid to look for Him, and could not see Him when He stood before them. Thus the Lord dismantled their expertise with the simple question, “Have ye not read?” (Matt 12:3; 12:5; 19:4; 21:16; 22:31, etc.) - what a rebuke to their pride and self-conceit!

Dear reader, we have no desire to discourage curiosity in spiritual matters, nor to disparage theological credentials in and of themselves: nevertheless, these things are not sufficient. If you are seeking God's law, well; but what is your reason? To what end do you seek it? Let no false motive colour or corrupt your quest. Be warned that there is only one true purpose for which God's will is to be sought - that we may yield ourselves in full surrender to obey it. A heart that is prepared to seek, without being prepared to do, is a heart that is self-deceived (cf. James 1:22).

THOUGHT: Do I study God's Word in order to do it?

PRAYER: (Use Psalm 119:5.)

SATURDAY, APRIL 17

EZRA 7:6-10

HEBREWS 5:11-14

“...ye ought to be teachers...”

A PREPARED HEART (III)

Prepared to teach. Finally, in the third place, Ezra’s purpose extended beyond the confines of his own life. His heart was prepared not only to seek God’s law and obey it for himself, but also “*to teach in Israel statutes and judgments*” (Ezra 7:10). Everything led up to this ultimate goal: he could not effectively teach what he had not himself practised, and he could not correctly practise what he had not diligently sought out and understood.

Dear reader, do not be lulled into thinking that Ezra’s example in this case is relevant only for pastors and preachers. Yes, there is an ordained ministry of teaching in the church; some are specially appointed of God to be “*pastors and teachers*” (Eph 4:11) - but there is an important sense in which all Christians are to be “*teachers.*” Consider the admonishment in Hebrews 5:12, which is addressed not narrowly to pastors but broadly to all believers!

If we are one body in Christ; if we have a mutual duty to “*bear... one another’s burdens*” (Gal 6:2); if we are all of us to “*seek that [we] may excel to the edifying of the church*” (1 Cor 14:12); if we are to be “*exhorting one another,*” and more than ever now in these last days (Heb 10:25) - can you not see how the performance of all these duties involves teaching God’s law to others? When you see your brothers or sisters erring in doctrine or practice, ought you not to teach them the truth? Should you not serve those younger in the faith by your godly instruction and counsel? Parents, are you heedless of your responsibility before the Lord, to teach your children?

Of course, we must hearken to the warning of Scripture: “*be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation*” (James 3:1). Yet this is precisely where Ezra’s example applies. We cannot avoid the charge to teach; nor can we take up the role proudly, seeking to show off our “wisdom” without actually practising what we preach. Therefore we must first “do,” before we can “teach,” and we must first “seek,” so that we can “do.” In the end, each one of us must have a heart just like Ezra’s: prepared to seek, do, and teach God’s law.

THOUGHT: Am I able to teach others the truth?

PRAYER: “Teach me thy way, O LORD,” that I may teach others also.

AN INCLINED HEART

The people of Israel stood together at Shechem, and the leaders “*presented themselves before God*” (Josh 24:1). Joshua, by then “*old and stricken in age*” (Josh 23:1), after rehearsing with the people the history of God’s gracious dealings with them, charged them to serve their God “*in sincerity and in truth*” (Josh 24:14). The people were surrounded by idols: those of their ancestors (“*the gods which your fathers served,*” v 14), and of their neighbours (“*the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell,*” v 15) - but they were to put away all these, and serve the LORD.

It is interesting to note that after the people’s initial assent (vv 16-18), Joshua’s response is surprisingly negative (v 19). He does not suggest that God is unforgiving or malicious, but shows instead an awareness of the people’s stubbornness and corruption. In other words, Joshua is emphasizing the fact that they cannot afford to be complacent: first, because they are dealing with “*an holy God... a jealous God,*” who will judge and punish iniquity; second, because they themselves are a people prone to “*transgressions*” and “*sins.*”

This is the context of Joshua’s charge to the people (v 23). They cannot be complacent, but must be active in cleaving to the LORD. Their idols must not be tolerated or ignored, but “*put away*” - and their hearts must not sway, but actively “*incline*” towards the LORD God of Israel.

Dear reader, there are two ways that our hearts can incline: to God, or to idols. And remember, idols come in many shapes and forms, not all of them tangible! Even if we live today in a secular society, we are surrounded by idols such as wealth and popularity (cf. Col 3:5). Just as a metal rod placed between two magnets may lean towards one or the other, and a small nudge in the wrong direction can easily lead to greater and greater deviation: so we must not be complacent regarding the leanings of our hearts. Many are the homes which have Joshua’s words (v 15b) hanging on the wall - but in how many of those homes are their hearts truly and actively inclined towards God?

THOUGHT: If I am complacent, my heart will incline the wrong way.

PRAYER: “*Incline not my heart to any evil thing*” (Ps 141:4), O Father, but to Thee.

MONDAY, APRIL 19

DEUTERONOMY 10:12-16

PSALM 19

*“The law of the LORD
is perfect...”*

A CIRCUMCISED HEART (I)

Standing in the plains of Moab, Moses addresses the people of Israel. They are about to enter the promised land of Canaan; Moses is about to depart for its heavenly equivalent. He reminds the people of God’s law, and lays before them God’s requirements (v 12).

These are not small requirements. God’s demands of His people are comprehensive, including both the outer and the inner life. They are to “fear” Him in their hearts, and to “walk” outwardly in His ways. They are to “love” Him inwardly, and to “serve” Him in their lives. In short, God requires of His people total and complete consecration - “*serve the LORD thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul.*”

At the same time, God’s requirements are not unreasonable. In the first place, they are codified in good commandments. This is a crucial realisation. God’s law is not a perverse mechanism of sadistic pleasure. It is not an evil instrument of divinely-sanctioned oppression. It is not the inconsistent product of capricious carelessness. No! God’s law is meant “for thy good.” God has set forth in the moral law His just and holy standards, that we might know them and live by them. He is the Creator of the universe! What other standard could we possibly adopt? Who could surpass or even rival the wisdom of God, in devising a “better” rule by which to order our lives? It would be no lesser folly for the celestial bodies to conspire against the natural laws, than for human creatures to think of “emancipation” from God’s moral law as an endeavour capable of promoting human flourishing.

Plainly, we live in times of staggering moral blindness. The world is set, it seems, on overturning God’s moral order. Vice has been turned into virtue: carnality has become the new chastity; fornication the new fidelity; perversion the new piety. Human “autonomy” has been enthroned in the place of God - but for a man to be “set free” from the law of God is no less disastrous than for a train to be “set free” of its rails. Do you recognise that God’s law is meant for your good? Will you commit yourself, by God’s grace, to obeying this good law with all your heart and soul?

THOUGHT: God’s law ought to be embraced, not chafed against.

PRAYER: (Use Psalm 119:97.)

TUESDAY, APRIL 20

DEUTERONOMY 10:12-16

GENESIS 17:1-14

*“Circumcise therefore...
your heart...”*

A CIRCUMCISED HEART (II)

In the second place, God’s requirements for His people are founded on His gracious choice of them. Moses reminds the Israelites that to God belongs all that is in heaven and earth - *“the heaven and the heaven of heavens is the LORD’s thy God, the earth also, with all that therein is”* (v 14). What then motivated the God who owns everything, to choose Israel?

It was not any merit in themselves. In an earlier verse, Moses said, *“The LORD did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people”* (Deut 7:7). Instead, it was the covenant love of God, expressed in His gracious choice of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The reason for Israel’s elevation above all other peoples lies *“only”* in God: *“only the LORD had a delight in thy fathers to love them, and he chose their seed after them, even you above all people”* (v 15).

Against this backdrop of a loving, covenant-keeping God, with His good commandments and gracious choice, comes the injunction for God’s people to *“circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart”* (v 16). Now circumcision was instituted by God as a visible sign of His covenant grace: it was first given to Abraham in this context, and God even marked His choice of Abraham by changing his name on that occasion to reflect the promise of the covenant (Gen 17:5). But this outward sign was not an end in itself! Thus Moses reminds the people that it is their hearts that must be circumcised, and not only their flesh. They must be yielded wholeheartedly to their covenant relationship with God.

Do you realise, Christian reader, that God’s choice of us is no less gracious than His choice of Israel; and that His covenant relationship with us likewise marks our obligation to a consecration not merely outward and ritual, but genuine and heart-felt? It is true that circumcision as a sacrament is no more in this New Testament era - yet surely the need for a “circumcised heart” remains!

THOUGHT: Is my heart “circumcised”? Am I yielded fully to God?

PRAYER: “Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee.”

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 21

DEUTERONOMY 10:12-16

ACTS 7:51-53

“...and be no more stiffnecked.”

A CIRCUMCISED HEART (III)

The final injunction given by Moses to Israel in Deuteronomy 10:12-16, in parallel with the requirement of a “circumcised” heart, is that they “*be no more stiffnecked*” (v 16). This is significant, in light of Moses’ earlier rehearsal before the people of their many failures (cf. Deut 9:6, 13). To be “*stiffnecked*” is to be stubborn, resistant to guidance, as oxen who chafe against the yoke. Israel had certainly demonstrated this tendency in their history up to that point: but now they are called on to be stiffnecked no more.

It is significant to note that, centuries later, the martyr Stephen used the same terms in connection with his rebuke of the Jewish religious council (Acts 7:51). These were the religious leaders of the people, who prided themselves on a meticulous observance of the law - Paul, one of their number at the time (cf. Acts 7:58), later described his former “*trust in the flesh*” as including his circumcision on “*the eighth day*” (Phil 3:4-5).

Yet though their flesh was marked with the covenant sign, their hearts were devoid of true covenant submission. While boasting of obedience, they were in fact of a rebellious spirit. Like the wicked husbandmen in the parable (Matt 21:33-40), they claimed possession of the Lord’s vineyard, but reneged on their obligation to provide Him with any of the fruit: even going to the extent of persecution and murder (cf. Acts 7:52). Though the recipients of God’s gracious law, they refused to keep it.

Dear reader, do we not witness a parallel situation in our day? Multitudes are outwardly identified as “Christian” - but how many truly yield obedience to Christ, from the heart? How many “*resist the Holy Ghost*” (Acts 7:51) in His convicting work? How many seek to amend or “update” the law of God which they have received, to make it more palatable to their modern sensibilities? Ah, may the words of Moses ring out today with equal urgency: “*Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked*”!

THOUGHT: The true measure of a “circumcised heart” is willing submission and obedience to the law of God.

PRAYER: Gracious Father, help me to obey Thee from the heart!

THURSDAY, APRIL 22

PSALM 57

1 SAMUEL 23

*“My heart is fixed, O God,
my heart is fixed...”*

A FIXED HEART (I)

The title of Psalm 57 tells us that it was penned by David “when he fled from Saul in the cave.” This was a sorely trying period of David’s life. In fact, so many and so frequent were his flights that it is difficult to tell which cave, in particular, is referred to in the title! Once David knew of Saul’s determination to kill him, he went first to the priest at Nob (1 Sam 21:1), and thence briefly to Gath (1 Sam 21:10); after that to the cave Adullam (1 Sam 22:1), and on to Keilah (1 Sam 23:5); from there he was forced again to flee, to the wilderness of Ziph (1 Sam 23:14), where he was betrayed by the Ziphites, and driven first to the wilderness of Maon (1 Sam 23:25), and then to Engedi (1 Sam 23:29). And that was not the end of his wanderings!

On what could David rely in circumstances such as these? He had few resources, as a fugitive. He had no real place of refuge: no fortress or castle in which to hide; no foreign power with whom he could seek asylum (though he tried; cf. 1 Sam 21:10-15). He had hardly any friends at hand: apart from his own family, those who did gather themselves to him were those “*in debt*,” and “*discontented*,” and themselves “*in distress*” (1 Sam 22:1-2). His was pre-eminently a life of instability and uncertainty – yet David was able to say, even while his body was tossed from place to place, that his heart was “*fixed*.” His soul had found a sanctuary in the Lord his God.

Do you feel overwhelmed by the waves and billows of life’s changing circumstances? Naturally, we look for stability; we seek firm ground to anchor our souls; but so often our hearts are fixed on the wrong things! We fasten our hopes on our own abilities, on our own plans, on our own foresight. We steady our nerves with the assurance of friends, with the promises of strangers, with arrangements and connections we have made. These are a feeble security! When your soul is “*among lions*,” when you lie “*among them that are set on fire... whose teeth are spears and arrows, and their tongue a sharp sword*” (v 4) – dear reader, is your heart truly fixed on God?

THOUGHT: A heart not fixed on God, will find no rest anywhere else.

PRAYER: “*Yea, in the shadow of thy wings will I make my refuge.*” (Ps 57:1)

FRIDAY, APRIL 23

PSALM 57:1-5

EXODUS 34:5-7

“...my soul trusteth
in thee...”

A FIXED HEART (II)

In order to understand how it is that David was able to fix his heart so securely on God, it behoves us to examine the matter more closely. We may identify two themes in Psalm 57 that can help us here: in the first half (vv 1-5), David relates his trust in God; while in the second half (vv 6-11), he recites his praise to God.

The word “*trusteth*” (v 1) has the idea of seeking shelter, or taking refuge (the same word is used later in the verse, translated “*make my refuge*”). It pictures one fleeing to a place of safety, in which he knows he will be protected from the storm about him. But whereas the ungodly can think only of earthly help, which is vain (cf. Isa 30:1-3), the psalmist hides in the shadow of the Almighty.

David trusted in God’s mercy (v 1). This is an interesting thought, for it is the very same expression used by David in his well-known penitential psalm (Ps 51:1). There, David sought God’s mercy because of his transgressions - yet here, it does not appear that he has committed any sin: he is fleeing from Saul; if anything, it is Saul who needs to plead for God’s mercy! But David recognises that he is a sinner, and constantly in need of mercy. He can never demand help or protection from God. Still, he comes to God with confidence: not in his worth or his prerogative or his righteousness, but in God’s nature. Though an unworthy sinner, he can seek help from a just and holy God, because he knows that God is a merciful God.

Dear reader, have you placed your trust in God’s mercy? You and I have nothing of our own to plead, but if we come to God on His terms, we can come boldly. He is a merciful God, and has extended His mercy to all who will believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. When troubled and distressed, then, let us echo the words of David - or, if we may borrow the more contemporary paraphrase in Wesley’s great hymn: “Jesus, lover of my soul, let me to thy bosom fly, while the nearer waters roll, while the tempest still is high: hide me, O my Saviour, hide, till the storm of life is past; safe into the haven guide; O receive my soul at last.”

THOUGHT: The basis of my trust is God’s nature, not my merit.

PRAYER: “*In thee, O LORD, do I put my trust.*” (Ps 31:1; 71:1)

SATURDAY, APRIL 24

PSALM 57:1-5

PSALM 20

*"I will cry unto God... that performeth
all things for me."*

A FIXED HEART (III)

David trusted in God's might (vv 2-3). It was God's mercy that gave David confidence that He would be inclined to show favour and pity towards a desperate fugitive. It is God's mighty power which now settles his assurance that God will not only be willing, but able to act on his behalf.

In fact, it was God's wise providence that had placed David in this seemingly precarious position: for this was the best school in which the boy-who-would-be-king could learn where his true security lay. While on the run, travelling the length and breadth of the land, encountering hostilities from all sides - none but an omniscient, omnipotent God could ensure protection. It was during these years that David learned to "*cry unto God most High*" (v 2); until he was able to say, "*Some trust in chariots, and some in horses: but we will remember the name of the LORD our God*" (Ps 20:7).

This trust in God's might would serve him well in those years when he finally sat on the throne of Israel. The dangers and decisions of a fugitive, though pressing and immediate, would have been relatively uncontroversial and inconsequential, compared to the vastly greater pressures of kingship, when the future of an entire nation could potentially hang in the balance! Is it not the pattern of God's wise providence sometimes to permit great difficulties to overtake us that we might learn to "*stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD*" (Exod 14:13)?

David trusted in God's majesty (vv 4-5). His earthly circumstances were dire. Enemies surrounded, intent on causing him hurt and harm. Threats abounded on every side. Yet rather than look around and despair, David looked up - he looked to God's exalted majesty, and made that the centre of his hope. In other words, his confidence was in the fact that God's glory was and always would be paramount: no power in all the universe could ever thwart the glory of God from being displayed. Since David had consecrated his life to God's purpose, he was able to "*be still,*" knowing that God would certainly be "*exalted among the heathen... exalted in the earth*" (Ps 46:10).

THOUGHT: Do I hope in my own might, my own exaltation; or God's?

PRAYER: "*Be thou exalted, O God, above the heavens*" (Ps 57:5, 11)!

LORD'S DAY, APRIL 25

PSALM 57:6-11

PSALM 147

“...I will sing and give praise.”

A FIXED HEART (IV)

The note of trust in God's majesty provides a bridge to the second part of the psalm where David turns to that greatest of all expressions of trust: he praises God. In fact this is the focal point of the fixedness of David's heart - his statement in verse 7 leads to this. His heart is fixed on God, and fixed on trusting in God; therefore he is fixed in his determination to “*sing and give praise*” (v 7).

Thus we find him rising up early in the morning (v 8), with his instruments of music, to render worship and praise to God at the beginning of the day. Is it not a fact of common experience, that those thoughts with which we begin the day, are often the same ones which occupy us throughout the day? Yet how many of us will rise from our beds with an immediate and settled commitment to begin the day by praising God?

And without this commitment, how easily will our thoughts become distracted from God, and bogged down by the difficulties of the hour! If we begin each day with our thoughts enmeshed in worldly concerns and rituals, then the clouds which gather over the course of the day may easily obscure our view of heaven; but if each morning finds us rising already above the clouds, to kneel before the throne of God...! If God is to be “*exalted... above the heavens,*” if His glory is “*above all the earth*” (v 11), then let us meet Him “*above the heavens*” and “*above all the earth,*” and praise Him there: it will be to us a foretaste of eternity that will soothe the bitter taste of earthly calamity.

Then, indeed, our commitment to praise God, even in the midst of distress, becomes not only a private affair but a public witness and testimony. Like David, we will praise the Lord “*among the people,*” and sing to Him “*among the nations*” (v 9). It is by this spirit and attitude of constant praise that our trust in God may most clearly and most effectively be manifested to the world. Dear reader, know that a heart fixed on praising God always will lead to a life of continual testimony to the mercy and truth of God!

THOUGHT: “...it is good to sing praises unto our God; for it is pleasant; and praise is comely.” (Ps 147:1)

PRAYER: “I will praise thee, O Lord, among the people...” (Ps 57:9)

A HEART SET ON THINGS ABOVE (I)

The Apostle Paul begins Colossians 3 with a statement of spiritual reality. The “*if*” with which he opens the first verse, has really the sense of “*since*” (especially in light of his earlier statements, eg. in Col 2:12). Christians are indeed “*risen*” together with Christ - but we must consider more deeply what this means, before we can proceed to consider what Paul makes of this spiritual reality.

The thought, first, is that of union. Christians are “*risen*” together with Christ, because Christians are united to Christ: we are “*dead with Christ*” (Col 2:20), “*buried with [Christ]*” (Col 2:12), and therefore “*risen with Christ*” (Col 3:1). The Christian life is a life of vital union and connection with Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. This the Lord Himself described using the figure of a branch abiding in the vine (cf. John 15:1-5).

Second, and more specifically, however, the thought focuses on the resurrection of Christ as both a triumph and transformation. The Lord Jesus rose from the grave, victorious over death; this victory then applies to all Christians who are united with Him. The Lord Jesus ascended from death to glorious life; this transformation is then the daily experience of all Christians who are abiding in Him.

But Paul uses this fundamental fact of the Christian life, this spiritual reality that ought to be the experience of every Christian, as the basis for a stirring exhortation. He is calling for a concord between the spiritual reality of being “*risen with Christ,*” and its implications in our daily life. The two must match! The fact of being “*risen with Christ*” must be evident in the direction, motive, and goal toward which a Christian lives his life on this earth. Paul goes on in the following verses to describe what the Christian ought to seek and how to seek it, then reiterates why it must be those things in particular for which the Christian seeks. Dear reader, what are you seeking after in this life? What is the target toward which your life is directed? Does it accord with the spiritual reality of being “*risen with Christ*”?

THOUGHT: Is the direction of my life a witness to the resurrection?

PRAYER: Father, help me to set my heart aright!

TUESDAY, APRIL 27

COLOSSIANS 3:1-3

COLOSSIANS 3:12-17

“...seek those things
which are above...”

A HEART SET ON THINGS ABOVE (II)

What we are to seek. We are to seek “*those things which are above*” (Col 3:1). Now “*above*” here is not to be interpreted in a physical or spatial sense: Paul is not talking about the sky, or “outer space” (though this may be the object of many a childish fancy)! This is “*above*” in the spiritual sense: we are to seek the things pertaining to that realm “*where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God*” (v 1).

What then are the things of this realm, which we are to seek? There are the occupations of that realm, such as worship, praise, and service to God. The Apostle John describes a glorious vision of that heavenly worship (Rev 4) and of the heavenly city in which is “*the throne of God and of the Lamb... and his servants shall serve him*” (Rev 22:3). We have a taste of those occupations even now, on earth: in the corporate worship of the Christian church; in the worship of the Christian family and the Christian individual; in the daily joyful service of the Christian life. But how many actually have any true savour for these things, and genuinely think of them as “heavenly”?

Then there are also the virtues of that realm. Some of these the Apostle Paul goes on to describe (Col 3:12-17) - Christian kindness; Christian humility; Christian patience and forbearance: all of which really flow from that fountain of all virtues: “*charity, which is the bond of perfectness*” (v 14). It is in fact a heavenly thing to see these virtues displayed on earth in one who has by the power and grace of God “*put off the old man with his deeds,*” and has “*put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him*” (v 9-10). But we must be active and diligent in “putting off” and “putting on”!

Dear reader, are not these “*things which are above*” worth seeking? And we can be assured of obtaining them, because of the Lord’s promise - “*seek, and ye shall find*” (Matt 7:7). The Lord Jesus warns us against an undue focus even on the earthly necessities of life, but reminds us, “*But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you*” (Matt 6:33).

THOUGHT: What am I seeking?

PRAYER: Father, direct my heart to seek Thy kingdom first.

A HEART SET ON THINGS ABOVE (III)

How we are to seek. In the first place, we must notice the contrast that is here brought out between the “*things above*” and the “*things on the earth*” (Col 3:2). This is the choice which daily, constantly, faces the Christian because we are, as it were, a people placed between two spheres: in the world, but not of the world. It may be harmless enough for a pilgrim in a foreign land to feel or grow fonder of the place of his sojourn than for his homeland; but the issue becomes deadly when translated into the spiritual realm.

It is precisely because we are “*strangers and pilgrims*” in a spiritual sense, that we must be reminded to “*abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul*” (1 Pet 2:11). It is because “*all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world*” (1 John 2:16) - and yet these things are powerfully attractive to the vestiges of the old nature that remain within us! - that even Christians must be exhorted to “*love not the world, neither the things that are in the world*” (1 John 2:15).

It is because of this contrast, in other words, that seeking the things above requires us to “*set*” our “*affection*” (our hearts and minds) on those things, while removing our affections from the things of the earth (Col 3:2). Dear reader, realise that the “*things above*” are actually lovely, beautiful, desirable; but they do not easily or naturally appear to us to be so. We do not find them desirable, because we do not naturally think of them as they actually are. We tend toward what is immediately, sensually gratifying or pleasing, and the god of this world is well-practised in providing this!

But just as a traveller with map and compass must set down his compass first, and only then orient his map with respect to the direction indicated by the compass, so also the Christian must give regard to Scripture, and orient his heart with respect to the direction indicated therein. Our affections must not be allowed to set themselves! But as we set them according to the Word of God, we will find that the “*things above*” are indeed infinitely more worthy of our affection and attention.

THOUGHT: I must actively and diligently set my affections rightly.

PRAYER: Father, help me to turn my eyes upon Jesus!

THURSDAY, APRIL 29

COLOSSIANS 3:1-3

ROMANS 6:1-13

“...*your life is hid with Christ
in God.*”

A HEART SET ON THINGS ABOVE (IV)

Why we are to seek. Now Paul restates the motivating factor behind the Christian's seeking the “*things above,*” as opposed to the “*things on the earth*” (Col 3:2). It is because we are “*dead,*” and our lives are “*hid with Christ in God*” (v 3).

This “*deadness*” goes back to the thought of union with Christ. As Paul puts it elsewhere, “*so many of us as were baptised into Jesus Christ were baptised into his death*” (Rom 6:3). Thus, we are “*dead to sin*” (Rom 6:2), and since “*he that is dead is freed from sin*” (Rom 6:7), we who have believed in the Lord Jesus Christ are now “*alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord*” (Rom 6:11).

A transformation has taken place, in other words, as drastic as the difference between physical life and physical death. The enslaving passions of sin ought to have as much effect on the Christian, as the finest of earthly delights would have on a dead man! Ah, but the life of the Christian is now no longer below, but above: no longer under the dominion of Satan, but “*hid with Christ in God.*”

Dear reader, do you see what a blessing and a privilege it is, to have been “*delivered... from the power of darkness,*” and “*translated... into the kingdom of [God's] dear Son*” (Col 1:13)? We are dead to those things that kept us in bondage, and alive to those things that have set us free! Dead to the enemy that sought to keep us under the power of death, and would have brought us to eternal death! Alive to the Saviour who came to “*destroy him that had the power of death*” (Heb 2:14), and now brings us into eternal life! O Christian, has it not truly been said, by the very embodiment of Truth Himself that “*where your treasure is, there will your heart be also*” (Matt 6:21)? Then if you consider life a thing to be treasured; if you cherish in Christ a Friend most precious; if you count God to be your soul's greatest thirst and longing – if your life is hid with Christ in God: surely your heart, your mind, your affection will be there!

THOUGHT: If my affection is not fixed on Christ, then I have no life.

PRAYER: Eternal God, I thank Thee for giving me life!

FRIDAY, APRIL 30

PROVERBS 15:13

ECCLESIASTES 2:1-3

*“A merry heart maketh a
cheerful countenance...”*

A MERRY HEART (I)

Happiness is a precious commodity in this world. Surveys are frequently conducted, and published in newspapers, listing the “happiest countries in the world” - prompting pride, in those at the top of the list, and envy, from those near the bottom. Meanwhile, depression continues to be identified as a major problem; and alarmingly, suicide rates are on the rise, especially among teenagers.

Scripture also extols the value of happiness. “*A merry heart maketh a cheerful countenance,*” says the proverb, “*but by sorrow of the heart the spirit is broken*” (Prov 15:13). Indeed, the Christian ought to have a merry heart - but how is this to be achieved? Perhaps the obvious place to begin is with the writer of the proverb himself. If we are right in identifying Solomon as the author of the book of Ecclesiastes, we have a first-hand account of his search for the very thing the world now seeks after.

Solomon tried worldly entertainment. “*I said in mine heart, Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth, therefore enjoy pleasure*” (Eccles 2:1) - and how many of us have said the same? An entire industry has been built on this foundation; fortunes have been expended on vast campaigns to drive this philosophy into the minds of people around the globe. Plastered across highways, perched atop skyscrapers, flashing on screens and devices everywhere, billboards and slogans and advertisements preach to humanity the same deadly message: “*therefore enjoy pleasure.*” Should we not pay heed to the voice of one who had resources far beyond ours to expend on this endeavour? And what was his conclusion? “*Behold, this also is vanity. I said of laughter, It is mad: and of mirth, What doeth it?*” (Eccles 2:1-2).

Dear reader, there is no profit in the entertainment of the world. It may put a smile on your face for a moment, but it can bring no true, lasting, secure happiness to your heart. Those who centre their lives around such fleeting pleasures may find only too late the truth of the psalmist’s words, “*Their sorrows shall be multiplied that hasten after another god*” (Ps 16:4).

THOUGHT: What joy can the godly find from a godless world?

PRAYER: Help me to know that “*in thy presence is fulness of joy*” (Ps 16:11)!

SATURDAY, MAY 1

PROVERBS 17:22

ECCLESIASTES 2:4-11

*“A merry heart doeth good
like a medicine...”*

A MERRY HEART (II)

Solomon tried worldly achievement. *“I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards: I made me gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all kind of fruits: I made me pools of water, to water therewith the wood that bringeth forth trees”* (Eccles 2:4-6). We are told elsewhere how he built *“the house of the forest of Lebanon,”* with *“four rows”* of *“forty five pillars,”* and *“windows in three rows,”* where *“light was against light in three ranks”* (1 Kings 7:2-4) - so beautiful that when the *“queen of Sheba had seen... the house that he had built,”* she was utterly deflated: *“there was no more spirit in her”* (1 Kings 10:4-5).

Solomon tried worldly enrichment. *“I had great possessions of great and small cattle above all that were in Jerusalem before me: I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces”* (Eccles 2:7-8). He was, by all accounts, one of the richest men who ever lived. Yet once again we must ask, what was his final conclusion? *“Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun”* (Eccles 2:11).

Ah, how many there are who walk the same path, today! How many there are who take wealth and accomplishment to be the key to success in life; how many, who fix this as the greatest and most worthwhile of human pursuits! A famous thinker of the not-so-distant past opined, *“Religion is... the opium of the people”* - as though true happiness can only be found through economic liberation, and religion is a stupefying hindrance lying in the way of progress! The very opposite is the case. It was One wiser than Solomon who said, *“what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?”* (Mark 8:36).

Dear reader, have you been taken in by this deception? Have you only *“heaped treasure together for the last days”* (James 5:3)?

THOUGHT: If I have my *“portion in this life”* (Ps 17:14), I will never be able to find true happiness.

PRAYER: *“As for me, I will behold thy face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness.”* (Ps 17:15)

A MERRY HEART (III)

If, as we have seen, no worldly pursuit can yield a truly merry heart, how then is the Christian to pursue true happiness?

A merry heart is full of praise. James exhorts us, *"Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms"* (James 5:13). Christians, as spiritual people, ought to recognise the spiritual dimension of life. Before salvation, when we were afflicted, we did not think of prayer: we called on our friends; we panicked; we complained; we vented our frustrations or sought to drown our sorrows - but now, after our eyes are opened, and we have entered into a new relationship with our God, affliction drives us to seek Him in prayer: and not as a desperate throw of the dice "in case anybody is listening," or as a last resort; but immediately, in full faith and confidence.

The most distinctive mark of this spiritual consciousness and of this relationship, however, is displayed in our response, not to seasons of affliction, but to times of plenty. The latter are far more likely to dull our spiritual senses. Yet after tasting the grace of God, any good thing we experience in life should drive us to thank Him, and sing psalms attributing all glory and praise to Him. And really, it is this practice of praise that settles and establishes the peace and joy of our hearts! If we remember as the *"benefits"* of the Lord, His forgiveness and His tender mercies (Ps 103:1-5), how can sorrow ever overwhelm us, or happiness ever leave us? For whatever tempest rages in the material realm, yet in the spiritual dimension of life we are safe and secure.

Dear reader, just as the cares of life ought not to take our time away from God, but drive us all the more to Him: so also the temporary successes of life ought not to make us forget God or discard Him as unnecessary, but drive us all the more to praise Him! Let us therefore seek to cultivate this habit of praise, that we may sing with the psalmist, *"Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing: thou hast put off my sackcloth, and girded me with gladness; to the end that my glory may sing praise to thee, and not be silent"* (Ps 30:11-12).

THOUGHT: A *"merry heart"* cannot last without praising God.

PRAYER: (Ps 30:12)

MONDAY, MAY 3

1 PETER 1:3-5

1 CORINTHIANS 15:19-26

*"If in this life only we have
hope in Christ..."*

A MERRY HEART (IV)

A merry heart is full of hope. Whereas the heart of the worldling is like a ship untethered, drifting with the wind, bobbing with the waves, tossed with the tempests, never very merry for long; the Christian has *"an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast"* (Heb 6:19). Whereas the hope of the worldling fades with the horizon, the Christian looks for *"a better country, that is, an heavenly"* (Heb 11:16).

Without this hope, we would have no defence against the miseries of life in this fallen world. Who can face unmoved the prospect of his own imminent death? Who can endure the pain of a loved one lost? A secular poet steeped in melancholia writes, "O, for the touch of a vanished hand, and the sound of a voice that is still!" But the Apostle urges, *"I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope"* (1 Thess 4:13). Indeed, a "Christian" life without this hope, can hardly be called "Christian" at all! *"If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable"* (1 Cor 15:19).

Dear reader, do you see what it is that secures and anchors this hope most firmly? *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time"* (1 Pet 1:3-5). It is that Christ is *"risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept"* (1 Cor 15:20). Only in this hope can we stand firm against that most stubborn of human griefs, *"the last enemy"* (1 Cor 15:26), death.

If you would have a merry heart, then, seek it not from the treacherous fountain of worldly delights: but meditate, with hope and praise, on the glorious resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, and look for His soon return!

THOUGHT: Where my hope is, my joy is.

PRAYER: Father, help me to remember and to hope in the resurrection!

A FORGIVING HEART (I)

Forgiveness is not a concept held in high regard by the world. Indeed, it is often seen as a sign of weakness; an unnecessary concession. The world today loudly demands “justice,” but men by and large do not recognise the beauty of forgiveness, nor their own need of it.

Yet to the Christian, forgiveness means everything. At its very core the Christian gospel is a message of forgiveness, offered to all in the Lord Jesus Christ. The abiding joy and hope of the penitent sinner lies in the revelation that “*thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive; and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon thee*” (Ps 86:5) – that because of the substitutionary death, atoning sacrifice, and triumphant resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, “*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).

If this is so, then God’s forgiveness, once believed, received, and enjoyed, must have an impact on our own hearts. Typical of the carnal mind is the focus on self, and the wrong that we ourselves have suffered: exemplified in Peter’s question, “*how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive...*” (Matt 18:21, emphasis added). But the recognition of the greatness of our sins against God, and the extent of His forgiveness towards us, ought to put into perspective the relatively trivial slights we suffer at the hands of others.

Hence the Lord Jesus makes this comparison to a debt that is owed. Such is the kingdom of heaven (v 23), that those who serve the King of kings are those who owe Him what they cannot possibly hope to repay (a debt of “*ten thousand talents,*” v 24), and who rightly deserve condemnation on account of their debt; but they have been freely forgiven (v 27). How unthinkable, in such a case, for an uncharitable and unforgiving spirit to be found in God’s people! Would this not imply that the unforgiving servant has never truly experienced for himself the Lord’s forgiveness?

THOUGHT: “*Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellowservant, even as I had pity on thee?*” (Matt 18:33)

PRAYER: Father, help me to forgive, as I have been forgiven.

WEDNESDAY, MAY 5

LUKE 17:3-4

GALATIANS 6:1-5

*“If thy brother trespass against thee,
rebuke him...”*

A FORGIVING HEART (II)

It behoves us briefly to consider, then, just what a forgiving heart is; how we can cultivate such a heart; and what fruit we may expect to be produced from this effort - the *properties* of a forgiving heart; the *progress* of developing it in ourselves, and the *products* we will then enjoy in our lives.

Properties. In the first place, we must recognise that a forgiving heart is not one that is entirely ignorant of sin, or careless in attitude towards sin. Speaking to His disciples, the Lord Jesus commanded, *“If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him”* (Luke 17:3). The first part of this command has much to teach us about the nature of forgiveness.

There are some who think that “forgiveness” means simply ignoring wrongdoing - saying nothing at all when one is sinned against. To such people, a rebuke is itself a trespass; and the one who gives a rebuke, in their eyes, manifests an unforgiving spirit. But note what the Lord says here! The charge is not, “If thy brother trespass against thee, ignore it”! We are not dealing here with the hostility of an unbeliever, whom we cannot expect fully to understand the seriousness of sin, and to whom we must prayerfully preach the gospel: this is a trespass committed by a “*brother.*” No, dear reader, sin is not something to take lightly, especially not in the life of a Christian. A forgiving heart will move us to rebuke our brother, precisely because we desire him to repent, that he may be forgiven by God and man!

Yet we must also be careful, and apply the warnings and exhortations we find elsewhere in Scripture as well. Even as we recognise the trespass of a brother, we ought to remind ourselves, *“Why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?”* (Matt 7:3). Or as the Apostle Paul puts it, *“Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted”* (Gal 6:1).

THOUGHT: Forgiveness does not mean taking sin lightly.

PRAYER: Father, grant me wisdom to understand forgiveness.

THURSDAY, MAY 6

LUKE 17:3-4

JAMES 5:9

“...and if he repent, forgive him.”

A FORGIVING HEART (III)

Properties (continued). In the second place, however, a forgiving heart is not one that broods over sin, or holds on to sin. Although the Lord commands us to “rebuke” a brother who trespasses against us, He goes on immediately to say, “and if he repent, forgive him” (Luke 17:3).

But this leads us to a question that some do find troubling. Does forgiveness depend on repentance? Or to put it another way, am I entitled to withhold forgiveness, if I claim to doubt the genuineness of my brother’s repentance?

Here again, the Lord’s teaching brings clarity. He goes on to say, “And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him” (v 4). Now, if someone commits a trespass (perhaps even the same one) seven times in a single day, and apologises each time, yet continues to sin - clearly anyone would have reason to doubt the genuineness of this individual’s repentance. Yet the instruction we are given is clear: “thou shalt forgive him.” We are to be ready and willing to forgive, as a matter of the condition of our own hearts, independent of any such consideration of another’s repentance. There is no cause for us to withhold forgiveness, and claim justification with the accusation, “He said sorry, but he didn’t really mean it!”

We need to recognise that it is not up to us to “test” the genuineness of anyone’s repentance (anyone’s but our own, that is). We are not in the place of God, all-knowing, and able to see and know all the deceitful depths of the human heart. Nor are we in the place of God, as the sovereign judge of all the earth, required to pass judgment on others. This does not mean we should be naïve; and where trust has been broken by some grievous sin, it may legitimately take time to rebuild - but a forgiving heart does not keep a catalogue of past wrongs, such that each successive trespass becomes harder and harder to let go. Only one who is willing to “wipe the slate clean” each time, will be able seven times in a day to say, “Brother, I forgive you.”

THOUGHT: The sins I committed against God, He has cast behind His back - what should I do with the sins others commit against me?

PRAYER: O Father, grant me a forgiving heart!

FRIDAY, MAY 7

LUKE 17:5-10

1 CORINTHIANS 9:16-17

"We are unprofitable servants..."

A FORGIVING HEART (IV)

Progress. We have seen the high standard of forgiveness God requires of us. Anyone with any experience at all of human relationships will know that it is not easy to forgive in this way! Certainly Jesus' disciples recognised this difficulty: hence their exclamation, *"Increase our faith"* (Luke 17:5).

But once again, we must consider the Lord's response to help us understand how we are to approach and overcome this difficulty. He immediately makes it clear that forgiveness is in fact not a "faith issue," in the sense that God's high standard cannot be waved off with the excuse, "I don't have enough faith to do that." All we need is faith *"as a grain of mustard seed,"* and even what appears impossible may become possible for us - *"ye might say unto this sycamine tree, Be thou plucked up by the root, and be thou planted in the sea; and it should obey you"* (v 6). In other words, a failure to forgive on our part can straightforwardly and plainly be diagnosed as disobedience! Even a modicum of genuine faith would lead us to lay hold of God's Word and obey it, trusting in Him to supply our lack of ability.

The point is then driven home with an illustration (vv 7-9). Though a servant may be toiling hard in the field, and so return to his master's house worn out and hungry, he is still required and expected to do his duty. It will certainly be difficult for him to pick up his tired hands and feet, and *"make ready"* the master's meal, and *"serve"* him until he has *"eaten and drunken,"* and only then sit down to his own food! Yet difficult or not, he must still do it: such is the lot of a servant. So also with regard to ourselves as servants of God.

Dear reader, it is not for us to complain that any of God's requirements are too harsh, or any of His standards too high. Nor is it for us to boast if we are able to obey any particular instruction - either way, it is the Lord Himself who supplies us the grace that we need to keep His law. And when we have done all that is required of us, we will have nothing better to say of ourselves than, *"We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do"* (v 10).

THOUGHT: Forgiveness may be difficult, but it is my duty.

PRAYER: Father, grant me grace to do my duty!

SATURDAY, MAY 8

LUKE 7:36-50

1 TIMOTHY 1:12-15

“...to whom little is forgiven,
the same loveth little.”

A FORGIVING HEART (V)

Progress (continued). Of course, we should not think of forgiveness as an onerous burden! It is in fact a joyful duty, because it rests on the great forgiveness of God which is revealed in the gospel. It is here that we may find help in cultivating a forgiving heart.

Luke records an illuminating incident, when the Lord was invited to the house of Simon the Pharisee. He was met in that house by a woman, who “*stood at his feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment*” (Luke 7:38). The Pharisee disapproved of what, to him, must have seemed like extravagant and unnecessary behaviour – the woman was touching Jesus, and she was a sinner (v 39)!

But the Lord, in His wise and gentle way, rebuked Simon. He compared the reception He had received from the Pharisee, with what He had received from the sinner (vv 44-46), and pointed out the link between love and forgiveness (v 47). Ah, dear reader, it is not those who are puffed up with dreams of their own righteousness, who love God and obey Him gladly! It is those who confess themselves abject sinners, who rejoice that their many sins have been forgiven. To borrow the words of Newton’s famous hymn: where there is no admission of “a wretch like me,” there is no appreciation of “amazing grace.”

After all, it is not that there are some who are actually forgiven “*little*,” and who therefore only need to love “*little*” (v 47)! The fact is that all of us are in the position of this sinful woman, utterly depraved and lost, dead in trespasses and sins. Every one of us who has believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, has been forgiven much! If we would find help to perform the difficult duty of forgiving others, then, let us meditate on our own wretchedness, and on God’s gracious forgiveness. May we by such thoughts be stirred up to love Him truly, to worship Him gladly, and to serve Him humbly!

THOUGHT: Have I been greatly forgiven?

PRAYER: “Chosen not for good in me, wakened up from wrath to flee... Teach me, Lord, on earth to show, by my love, how much I owe.”
(M’Cheyne)

LORD'S DAY, MAY 9

EPHESIANS 4:17-32

ROMANS 12:17-21

“...forgiving one another, even as God
for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.”

A FORGIVING HEART (VI)

Products. There is further encouragement for us in the consideration of the many blessed outcomes that may be produced by the manifestation of a forgiving heart. First of all, such a display of forgiveness can serve as a powerful witness to the transformation brought about through the gospel.

For example, the Apostle Paul exhorts the Ephesian believers to “*walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind,*” and to “*put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts,*” and to “*put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness*” (Eph 4:17-24) - after which he goes on to command, as one of the features of this new life, that believers should be “*kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another*” (v 32). Such a reflection of divine forgiveness can be a moving and effective testimony of the reality of the gospel offer; while a lack of willingness to forgive may tragically hinder a soul from coming to Christ.

In this way a willingness to forgive can be infinitely more fruitful than a willingness to revenge. This Paul makes clear when he commands, “*Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath,*” and then concludes, “*Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good*” (Rom 12:19, 21). After all, if evil is met with revenge, all that can be hoped for is the destruction of the enemy. But with forgiveness, the hungry enemy finding himself fed may be forced to reconsider his enmity, and in this manner he may be won rather than destroyed: and so evil is overcome with good.

In addition to all this it is evident that a forgiving heart is a necessary component of peaceful, stable relationships. No marriage and no family can survive for long where there is no forgiveness! Dear reader, consider how Joseph was able to forgive his brethren, even after their wicked betrayal (cf. Gen 50:15-21) - what would have become of that family, if he had instead been consumed by revenge? And what then would have become of the “*Lion of the tribe of Juda*” (Rev 5:5)?

THOUGHT: If I am to live in peace, I must learn to forgive.

PRAYER: Father, help me to “*give place unto wrath*”!

MONDAY, MAY 10

PSALM 86

PSALM 25

*“Unite my heart to fear
thy name.”*

A UNITED HEART (I)

Psalm 86 is a prayer of David, earnestly seeking help from the Lord. He faces great difficulty and opposition – *“the proud are risen against me, and the assemblies of violent men have sought after my soul”* (Ps 86:14) – yet he is continually trusting in God (v 2). He confides in God’s goodness, forgiveness, and mercy (v 5); he gratefully acknowledges God’s almighty power, exclaiming, *“there is none like unto thee, O Lord; neither are there any works like unto thy works”* (v 8).

Significantly, however, David does more than plead for God’s deliverance from the immediate threats he faces. That same confession of God’s absolute uniqueness *“among the gods”* (v 8) prompts David to ask, *“Teach me thy way, O LORD; I will walk in thy truth: unite my heart to fear thy name”* (v 11).

Here is a key recognition for the Christian. The fact that there is but one living and true God has a clear implication: it means that there is only one right way to live. If there is only one God, then there is only one proper object of worship, fear, reverence, and obedience. Thus in his response to the present trial, and in all of his life, David desires to know only the Lord’s way, and to walk only in His truth. He does not want his heart to be divided, or his loyalties to be split! He asks for a united heart, to seek after God alone, without deviation or distraction. This, after all, is what distinguishes God’s faithful servants from their enemies, who *“have not set [God] before them”* (v 14).

Dear reader, let us pay heed to David’s example here. When in distress we ask for the Lord’s deliverance, let it not be with the thought that once delivered, we will embark on a course of our own design! Let us rather commit ourselves to walking in God’s truth with a united heart. Only then can we, with full assurance, plead, *“O turn unto me, and have mercy upon me; give thy strength unto thy servant”* (v 16).

THOUGHT: A divided heart cannot please God.

PRAYER: *“Teach me thy way, O LORD; I will walk in thy truth: unite my heart to fear thy name.”* (Ps 86:11)

TUESDAY, MAY 11

DEUTERONOMY 6:4-5

1 KINGS 18:17-40

“...if the LORD be God,
follow him...”

A UNITED HEART (II)

The need for a united heart is emphasized by the Lord Himself who said, “No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other” (Matt 6:24). But there is a reason why Israel was charged by the prophet Hosea with having a divided heart; there is a reason why even God’s chosen nation was so strongly and so often drawn to the many altars and varied images of their pagan neighbours (Hosea 10:1-2).

In fact, the allure of idolatry lies precisely in its contradiction of the reality expressed in that famous declaration: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD” (Deut 6:4). If having one God means only one way to live, and only one proper object of devotion; then having many gods means many ways to live, and the luxury of choosing whatever life one desires. Do we not see this displayed in the idolatrous pantheons of ancient civilisations? For those who desired war and battle - there was a god for that; they could worship him, and justify their violence. For those who desired lust and sensuality - there was a god for that; they could worship him, and justify their promiscuity. For those who desired feasting and drunkenness - there was a god for that; they could worship him, and justify their gluttony.

Yet the Lord’s words are perfectly true. There are only two masters: one is true, and the other false. One is the God of heaven and earth, the almighty Creator and God of truth; the other is the “god of this world” (2 Cor 4:4), the “old serpent” (Rev 12:9; 20:2) and the father of lies (John 8:44).

Dear reader, in this age of “inclusion,” it is well for us to recognise that the one living and true God has an “exclusive” claim on our hearts and lives. After being told that “the LORD our God is one LORD,” Israel was commanded, “And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might” (Deut 6:4-5). And some centuries later, when they wavered in that commitment, they were chided, “How long halt ye between two opinions? if the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him” (1 Kings 18:21).

THOUGHT: “No man can serve two masters” - that includes me!

PRAYER: “Search me, O God, and know my heart” (Ps 139:23)!

WEDNESDAY, MAY 12

1 PETER 2

1 CORINTHIANS 4:9-13

“...even hereunto were ye called:
because Christ also suffered for us...”

A HEART IN WHICH GOD IS SANCTIFIED (I)

The Apostle Peter deals in his first epistle head-on with a difficult subject: the relationship between Christian witness and Christian submission. He is writing to believers who are *“in heaviness through manifold temptations”* (1 Pet 1:6), evidently suffering under persecution. Yet even in their predicament he exhorts them to holy living (1:13-22), and reminds them of their great privilege as those born again *“by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever,”* and able now to *“grow thereby”* into *“a spiritual house, an holy priesthood,”* as they are *“a peculiar people... the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy”* (1:23-2:10).

Then the Apostle exhorts them more particularly concerning their behaviour *“among the Gentiles”* (v 12). These are words which have an especial impact on Christians who experience very keenly the hostility of a godless world: *“Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake... For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men”* (vv 13-15). The point here is that Christians ought to behave as Christians, even when persecuted - even when *“suffering wrongfully”* (v 19). This the Apostle commends in the strongest possible terms, calling it *“the will of God”* (v 15), *“thankworthy”* (v 19), and *“acceptable with God”* (v 20).

The rationale for this kind of conduct, which certainly lies completely against the grain of human nature, turns on the example of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Christians are *“called”* to manifest this character when unjustly treated, *“because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps”* (v 21). In other words, suffering and persecution actually afford us a unique opportunity to reflect to the world the character of Christ.

This may seem a strange and radical concept. We may not like to think of our witness as coming at such great personal cost! But therein lies the importance of the heart. What is it that is most important to us? What is our driving motivation? Who sits enthroned in our hearts? Is it God, or self?

THOUGHT: Suffering brings out the truth about my heart.

PRAYER: Father, help me to serve Thee even in suffering.

THURSDAY, MAY 13

1 PETER 3:1-17

ACTS 16:16-34

“...give an answer to every man
that asketh...”

A HEART IN WHICH GOD IS SANCTIFIED (II)

After going through an example of Christian submission within the family (1 Pet 3:1-7), the Apostle Peter returns to the subject of suffering “for righteousness’ sake” (v 14), and the opportunity it affords for witness. By following in the example of Christ, and bearing suffering and injustice patiently, Christians are manifesting to the world the “hope” (v 15) of the gospel. And we must be “ready always to give an answer,” to explain and defend this hope, to any who would ask.

Our need to give an answer. This leads us to the first question we must seek to answer: why must we, Christians, be the ones to give an answer? We can come to terms with this by asking another question. Why would we, Christians, be the ones who are asked to give an answer? Because others see something in us - “the hope that is in you.” This particular response of patience in the face of wrongful suffering is evidence of a particular hope that the world does not naturally possess.

We see an example of this in the account of the interaction between Paul and Silas, and the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:16-34). When the earthquake opened all the doors of the prison, and loosed the prisoners’ bands, the jailer “would have killed himself” (v 27). He had lost hope, “supposing that the prisoners had been fled,” and that he would be blamed for it. But he saw in Paul and Silas something special: a hope he did not have, and now desperately wanted. These men were not angry, not afraid, not despondent and resigned to their fate; in fact, they had been singing in the prison! And when the doors opened, they did not even try to escape. It seems likely that the jailer would have known about the controversy which had led to the pair’s imprisonment, and so he would have heard that they were preachers of “the way of salvation” (Acts 16:17). Now, he asked them for that way: and they were ready with the answer (Acts 16:30-32).

Dear reader, Christians have a hope that is uniquely sure, because it is founded on the truth. This is why we have to give an answer: we know the truth that God has revealed, and thus have a sure foundation for our hope. We must be ready to share this truth and this hope with others.

THOUGHT: Do I have a hope founded on God’s truth?

PRAYER: “But I will hope continually, and will yet praise thee...”

FRIDAY, MAY 14

1 PETER 3:1-17

ACTS 17:16-32

“...a reason of the hope
that is in you...”

A HEART IN WHICH GOD IS SANCTIFIED (III)

Our need to give an answer (continued). As Christians, we are called to be witnesses to the truth; and that in the midst of a world that has abandoned the truth, and hence lost any firm ground for hope. Now “*hope*” here relates primarily to the hope of the gospel, but the principle of it extends to every aspect of life, to all the deep questions of life in this world. After all, the gospel is about a whole life that is transformed: rescued from sin and condemnation through Jesus Christ, and now conformed to the will of God.

The Apostle Peter’s exhortation, therefore, has implications that extend beyond its immediate application to the case of Christians suffering persecution patiently. Christians ought to live in such a way as to manifest the hope of the gospel in all the various arenas of life, and so must be ready to give an answer to questions that come dressed in the garb of all these various contexts. Not all of us will be placed in the position of Paul and Silas – the question will not always be, “Why did you remain in the prison, when the bars were opened?” It may be, “Why are you able to rejoice even in the passing of a loved one, and speak of it as a ‘homegoing’?” Or it may be something else entirely.

After all, the Bible has something to say about all the deep questions of life; even the moral and philosophical controversies of the present day. And as Christians who have the undeserved privilege of knowing God’s Word, and holding it in our hands, we have a duty to bear witness to the truth in all these areas. Our position may not always be popular, but because we are convinced it is true, we must stand up and make that truth known. We cannot be silent, and hope to remain unnoticed. We cannot cower in the shadows, and practise our hope in the dark!

Now, that is not at all to say that we should seek to stir up controversy by making inflammatory remarks, or anything of the sort. But we do have a need to “*give an answer*” – and that means we need the right preparation to give that answer. And that preparation comes down to the heart.

THOUGHT: Is my hope evident to others? Can I explain it, if asked?

PRAYER: Father, give me wisdom from Thy Word!

SATURDAY, MAY 15

1 PETER 3:13-16

ISAIAH 8:11-15

“...sanctify the Lord God
in your hearts...”

A HEART IN WHICH GOD IS SANCTIFIED (IV)

Our preparation to give an answer. Two parts or aspects of this preparation are laid out here by the Apostle Peter; both of these are linked. The first is that we should “*sanctify the Lord God*” in our hearts (1 Pet 3:15). To “*sanctify*” means to set apart or to consecrate. The sense here is that God must have a special place in our hearts: in other words, He must be enthroned in our hearts. Even in that innermost core of our being, He must rule and direct - not anyone or anything else! Specifically, the context here has to do with fear. In the midst of suffering and persecution, the natural temptation would be to fear man, and to act accordingly. But it is the fear of God, not the fear of man, which must fill our hearts. Thus we are commanded, “*be not afraid of their terror, neither be troubled*” (v 14).

These words find an echo in the Old Testament, where the prophet Isaiah was told, “*Neither fear ye their fear, nor be afraid. Sanctify the LORD of hosts himself; and let him be your fear, and let him be your dread*” (Isa 8:12-13). Judah at the time was facing the threat of a coalition of enemies, the king of Syria and the king of Israel (Isa 7:1-2). The people were terrified. But instead of fearing God, and trusting in His aid, the wicked king Ahaz had sought help from the Assyrians (cf. 2 Kings 16:7).

Dear reader, it is obvious that what we fear will greatly impact our confidence. If it is the fear of man; or the fear of some uncertain future; or any other fear that reigns supreme in our hearts, then it is that fear that will dictate our reactions to life’s circumstances. We will deny God, and forsake His way, because we fear something else more than Him - this was what happened to Ahaz: and, tragically, to the Apostle Peter as well. Surely he speaks here with a bitter consciousness of his own failure when he, out of fear, denied the Lord three times!

But we have the same tendency, and the same weakness. How we need the fear of God so that we are not afraid to stand on what He has revealed to be true! Sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and trust in Him to give you utterance as you speak for Him.

THOUGHT: What I fear takes the place of God in my heart.

PRAYER: O Father, help me to fear Thee as I ought!

A HEART IN WHICH GOD IS SANCTIFIED (V)

Our preparation to give an answer (continued). The second of our preparation mentioned by the Apostle Peter is to be “*ready always*” (1 Pet 3:15). This spirit of constant readiness has important implications for the convictions that ought to be found in a heart where God is sanctified – it means that we must have settled convictions. We must have thought things out and worked through them ourselves such that we are clear in our own minds. We know what the issues are in the world around us, after all; and if we really believe that God’s Word speaks to these issues, we cannot be content with ignorance, or a superficial knowledge of what the Bible says. Nor can we afford simply to borrow what others have said: we must have worked it out for ourselves!

This does not mean that we cannot learn from others, but whatever we learn, we must as it were make them our own. The Berean Christians are a good example of this (Acts 17:11). They were very ready to learn, and did not approach Paul’s preaching with anything like a skeptical attitude! But they did make sure of everything themselves, from Scripture, so that their convictions were firmly grounded in God’s Word.

This is important because God’s people are called to be witnesses, not to some vague ideals, but to a very definite truth. And our witness cannot merely be verbal: “*be ready always to give an answer*” implies that we have been living out these convictions in our own lives. Take for instance the Apostle Paul’s testimony recorded in Acts 22 and 26. Clearly, that is a man who really believes what he is saying; a man whose own life has been transformed by the message he preaches. Dear reader, that note of genuine conviction will be noticed by the people who hear you speak and watch you live! And if that note is missing, the whole symphony, however brilliant it may be technically, will sound flat and dull, and it will ultimately have very little impact.

Let us have a heart directed by the fear of God, filled with love for Him, knowledge of His Word, conviction of its truth; and a life transformed and now entirely conformed to biblical principles.

THOUGHT: Are my convictions genuine and grounded in Scripture?

PRAYER: Father, help me to be ready always to give an answer.

MONDAY, MAY 17

1 PETER 3:15-16

COLOSSIANS 4:5-6

“...to give an answer...
with meekness...”

A HEART IN WHICH GOD IS SANCTIFIED (VI)

Our attitude in giving an answer. The last part of Peter’s exhortation concerns the attitude which ought to be manifested from a heart in which God is sanctified. This attitude is, fundamentally, one of meekness: a crucial aspect of Christian witness, especially in this context of “giving an answer.” After all, we can easily understand how “giving an answer” can imply superiority (“I know this, you don’t”) - but the hope that we have as Christians is not something that makes us superior to others! In fact, this hope stems from the recognition that we are no better than others; if anything, we are worse. Hence the Apostle Paul gives the “*faithful saying*,” to which every Christian ought to subscribe (1 Tim 1:15).

Seeing yourself as the “chief of sinners” is central to the Christian attitude in giving an answer. We stand for and live out the truth of God’s Word; we proclaim that truth as it relates to all the deep and controversial issues of life in this world: not because we know more than others and want to show that off; not because we are better than others and look down on them; not because they are sinners and we are not! But because I, being the chief of sinners, wretched, depraved, and condemned, have found salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ. Because I, once lost and confused, wandering in darkness, have found the truth that set me free. And now we want others to know Jesus, who is the way, the truth, and the life.

Dear reader, a lack of meekness, an ugly stain of pride, is the surest way to destroy your witness for Christ. Remember, the “*answer*” that we have as Christians, is not the product of our own ingenuity; it is God’s revelation! We are really pointing people away from ourselves; to God’s truth, not our truth - and that really requires meekness.

As the Apostle Paul puts it, “*Walk in wisdom toward them that are without... Let your speech be alway with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man*” (Col 4:5-6). If God is to be sanctified in our hearts, then self must be well and truly abased.

THOUGHT: “Boasting excluded, pride I abase; I’m only a sinner, saved by grace!” (Gray)

PRAYER: Father, keep me from pride!

TUESDAY, MAY 18

1 PETER 3:15

2 CORINTHIANS 2:12-17

“...with meekness and fear.”

A HEART IN WHICH GOD IS SANCTIFIED (VII)

Our attitude in giving an answer (continued). Finally, Peter once again mentions “*fear*” (1 Pet 3:15) as a key component of the attitude we ought to express, if God is sanctified in our hearts. Now Peter has already mentioned the fear of God that must rule in our hearts, but it seems that this “*fear*,” here, has a slightly different emphasis; and it is linked to the thought of meekness, which we have just considered. We are to be “fearful” as we give an answer, in the sense that we recognise the great responsibility and privilege with which we have been bestowed.

Think for a moment! The almighty God, Creator of heaven and earth, has commissioned us as the ambassadors of His glorious kingdom - not angels, beautiful and resplendent, at whose sight men might be expected to quake and tremble; not the best of men, the strongest, the most intelligent, the most capable, the most fearless - but you and I: weak, frail, trembling, doubting, unworthy as we are. We are the ones who are called on to give an answer! Not for ourselves, but on behalf of God. We are the ones who are called on to proclaim the truth of God to the world.

We “*give an answer*” with “*fear*,” because we recognise the awesome responsibility and duty of speaking for God. The truths which we speak have the power of life and death: this is spiritual truth that can set people free from the worst kind of bondage. The Apostle Paul certainly acknowledged this burden when he wrote, “*For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: to the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things?*” (2 Cor 2:15-16). Thus it was surely with the same “*fear*” to which Peter adverts, that Paul goes on to say, “*For we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God: but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ*” (2 Cor 2:17).

Christian reader, how we ought likewise to tremble, lest by speaking unwisely we bring the truth of God into disrepute; or lest by our failure to stand for the truth, some precious soul may be lost to the enemy!

THOUGHT: There are “*many, which corrupt the word of God*” - do I?

PRAYER: Help me, Father, to bear the burden of the truth!

WEDNESDAY, MAY 19

1 SAMUEL 13:8-14

1 SAMUEL 15:10-31

“...the LORD hath sought him a man
after his own heart...”

A HEART AFTER GOD’S HEART

It was a wonderful description of King David (described even before his birth!), when the prophet Samuel called him “*a man after [God’s] own heart*” (1 Sam 13:14). “*After*” here has the sense of “patterned after” – David is being described as someone whose heart is like God’s heart: essentially someone who loves what God loves, and hates what God hates. To understand this more fully, it is helpful for us to recognise that the phrase is used in the context of a contrast. It is Saul who is rejected, because his heart was not patterned after God’s; while David is chosen, because his was.

Saul’s heart is revealed quite clearly in the account narrated in a later chapter (1 Sam 15:10-31). We can see Saul’s flippant attitude toward God’s commands: freely reinterpreting them according to the dictates of his own convenience and preference (vv 9-11); and considering any excuse sufficient to justify his disobedience (vv 20-21). We can see a similar laxness in his approach to God’s worship: counting it a trivial thing to come before the presence of the thrice-holy God with an impure heart (v 25); and even stooping so low as to use public worship as an occasion to exalt himself before the people (v 30). Are there not many today who pollute God’s sanctuary with the same corrupt motives?

David’s heart, by contrast, follows an entirely different pattern. While he falls even into grievous sin, his attitude toward God’s commands is anything but flippant: he admits his sin without excuse (2 Sam 12:13); and repents sincerely and fervently (Ps 51). And his approach to God’s worship is anything but lax: he is willing to abase rather than exalt himself in public worship (2 Sam 6:20-22); and goes to great lengths to promote and beautify the worship of God (1 Chron 28:11-29:9).

Dear reader, is your heart patterned after God’s heart? Do you love what He loves, and hate what He hates? It would be well for us to examine ourselves in the same two areas that we have considered: our attitude to God’s commands, and our approach to His worship – lest we should find ourselves rejected, as was Saul.

THOUGHT: God is not ambivalent to sin or to worship.

PRAYER: “Take thou my heart, and make it all thine own.” (Gabriel)

THURSDAY, MAY 20
ACTS 2:41-47
ACTS 4:32-37

“...the multitude of them
that believed were of
one heart and of one soul...”

A SINGLE HEART (I)

The first picture of the early church is truly beautiful. That initial company of “*three thousand souls*” (Acts 2:41), to which “*the Lord added... daily*” (v 47), was united in the truth and power of the Spirit: “*they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers*” (v 42). Their unity is strongly emphasized: “*all that believed were together, and had all things common*” (v 44); and this joy and generosity are described as a “*gladness and singleness of heart*” (v 46).

Even after the early church’s first experience of persecution, when Peter and John were arrested and “*put... in hold*” (Acts 4:3) by the priests and rulers of the Jews, the unity of the church was not shaken. When news of the persecution reached them, “*they lifted up their voice to God with one accord*” in prayer (v 24), which He graciously answered (v 31). Thus even in the face of external threat and opposition, “*the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul*” (v 32). There was the same mutuality and sense of community.

What a shock, then, to read that only a short time later, “*when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration*” (Acts 6:1)! That community which had seemed so united, was so easily put in danger of division - and it was that very same generous spirit, which became the cause of controversy! The “*daily ministration*” seems to refer to the “*distribution*” that was “*made unto every man according as he had need*” (Acts 4:35). The contention here, then, was that the “*distribution*” was not equal; it was not apportioned strictly according to need, but there was a bias in favour of the “*Hebrews*” over against the “*Grecians*.”

Now we do not intend to minimise the issue in this case, nor to suggest that the Grecians were necessarily wrong to raise it. But we must recognise the reality and danger of division in every community of fallen human beings - including the church. And recognising this danger, we must work diligently to avoid it.

THOUGHT: A single heart is not easy for a church, or even a family!

PRAYER: Bless Thy church, O Father, with singleness of heart!

FRIDAY, MAY 21
1 CORINTHIANS 3:1-4
PHILIPPIANS 4:1-3

“...whereas there is among you
...strife, and divisions,
are ye not carnal...?”

A SINGLE HEART (II)

Hindrances to a single heart. It is not only in the early chapters of the book of Acts, that we see fractures and tensions present within the local church. We see strife on a very personal level in the Philippian church: a discord so deep and serious that Paul feels bound to address it in a public letter, and to “*besech Euodias, and besech Syntyche, that they be of the same mind in the Lord*” (Phil 4:2).

But perhaps the clearest example of the kinds of contentions and conflicts that can arise is found in the Corinthian church. The problem is so severe that it is almost the first thing Paul mentions in his first epistle - “*it hath been declared unto me... that there are contentions among you*” (1 Cor 1:11). Factions had developed in the church, with each group attaching themselves to some prominent personage, and this had progressed to the point that practically every member of the church was involved: “*every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ*” (v 12). The situation pointed to a fundamental misunderstanding, or lack of appreciation, concerning the nature of Christ and His gospel, prompting Paul to ask, “*Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you?*” (v 13).

What was the root of the problem? The problem was carnality. “*For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?*” (1 Cor 3:3). Now when Paul says “*carnal*,” he is not referring to them as unbelievers, but as “*babes in Christ*” (v 1) - that is, they were displaying, in their divisions, a great immaturity in the faith. They remain “*yet carnal*” in their thinking.

Dear reader, this sort of strife and division is everywhere in the world, in every sphere from the political to the familial. We are fallen creatures, after all, and “*the spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy*” (James 4:5). Yet at the same time, “*if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new*” (2 Cor 5:17). Let us therefore put away the old, carnal ways of thinking!

THOUGHT: One body should have one heart - and the church is one body in Christ.

PRAYER: Father, help me not to remain a “babe in Christ”!

SATURDAY, MAY 22

ACTS 6:1-7

COLOSSIANS 3:12-16

*“It is not reason that we should leave
the word of God...”*

A SINGLE HEART (III)

Helps to a single heart. If in any community of people (of any significant size) strife and conflict are inevitable, we must seek to discover how such potential for division should be met in the context of the local church. How may we work toward that “*singleness of heart*” (Acts 2:46) which is meant to be our ideal?

It will be helpful for us, in the first place, to go back to that initial eruption of disagreement, and consider how the Apostles dealt with it. We find in the first place that they took the matter seriously: they did not simply ignore it, or dismiss it as an exaggeration on the part of the Grecians. They called for “*seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom,*” whom they could “*appoint over this business*” (Acts 6:3). They prayed for these men, and “*laid their hands on them*” (v 6). We need to recognise that not all complaints are frivolous! Some may be legitimate, and all should at least be considered rather than dismissed out of hand.

In the second place, however, they refused to allow this controversy to distract them from “*prayer, and... the ministry of the word*” (v 4). When the Apostles “*called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables*” (v 2), they were expressing an important truth to which we would do well to take heed. Controversies, disagreements, complaints, accusations - these certainly need to be dealt with if the church is to be united. But it does not help the unity of the church if undue focus is placed on these things that prayer and the ministry of the Word are neglected! Indeed, that “*singleness of heart*” toward which we aspire does not come through the human effort of solving every difficulty as it arises. Instead, it comes as each heart is ministered to by the faithful preaching of Scripture, and strengthened by earnest intercessory prayer.

The apostolic example is one which we ought to emulate. Let faithful, qualified men be appointed to look into such matters when necessary; but let prayer and preaching continue uninterrupted.

THOUGHT: Prayer and preaching are means of grace: far more effective than worldly methods of handling controversy.

PRAYER: Sanctify us, Father, through Thy Word.

A SINGLE HEART (IV)

Helps to a single heart (continued). On an individual level, we are taught in Scripture how we also may do our part in working toward "*singleness of heart*." Writing to the Philippian church, knowing that there were some problems of disunity in that congregation (cf. Phil 4:2), the Apostle Paul exhorts them to "*be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind*" (Phil 2:2).

The greatest barrier standing in the way of this is pride. It is pride that disregards others and elevates one's own concerns above all. It is pride that leads to "*strife and vainglory*" (v 3a). Therefore the beating heart of Christian unity lies in humility: "*in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves*" (v 3b).

Ultimately, this is nothing less than a call to Christ-likeness. "*Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus*" (v 5). It was He who left His exalted station, and "*made himself of no reputation,*" even taking upon Himself "*the form of a servant*" when He was "*made in the likeness of men*" (v 7). It was He who "*humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross*" (v 8). And did He not suffer all this that we might be reconciled to God "*in one body,*" all "*fellowcitizens*" now with one another, of the same "*household of God,*" and "*builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit*" (Eph 2:16-22)? Do we not then despise His sacrifice and misappropriate His gift when we allow "*strife and vainglory*" to rend what He has purchased with His own blood?

Dear reader, let us examine ourselves. Are we in our own churches helping or hindering that "*singleness of heart*" which ought to prevail in every congregation? Are we proudly clinging to some selfish conceit, and so standing in the way of unity? Ah, but how can we allow this to continue, if we are all members of "*one body,*" filled with "*one Spirit,*" and "*called in one hope*" of our calling, if there is "*one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all*" (Eph 4:4-6)? Let us lay aside our pride that we all may enjoy "*singleness of heart*"!

THOUGHT: Am I prepared to suffer for my Lord?

PRAYER: Father, I look forward to Thy promise of eternal life.

MONDAY, MAY 24

1 CORINTHIANS 11:17-34

MARK 14:22-25

“...you come together not for the better, but for the worse.”

A SINGLE HEART (V)

Helps to a single heart (continued). We must also consider a particular means of grace designed by God to foster “*singleness of heart*” within the church: and that is the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. It is one of the purposes of God in this sacrament to bring His children to the same table that they may be brought to see their mutual union with the same Mediator and Saviour. Hence we find in the early church that the disciples “*came together to break bread*” (Acts 20:7).

Surely this recognition also helps us to understand how it was that the Corinthian church could become so riven with strife and factionalism, once we remember that the same church was also charged with an abuse of the Lord’s Supper! Paul declares that they “*come together not for the better, but for the worse*” (1 Cor 11:17), because “*in eating every one taketh before other his own supper: and one is hungry, and another is drunken*” (v 21). The sacred occasion became an excuse for them to indulge in their selfishness as one fed himself to wanton excess, while his brother by his side went hungry! By disrespecting and disregarding the Lord’s Table in this way they were robbing themselves of a means of grace which might have broken down the divisions between them, and united them in love.

Let us not make the same mistake! When we come together to partake of the Lord’s Supper, let us not neglect to meditate on our unity as members of the body of Christ. Let us not fail to examine our hearts for envy and bitterness, and to repent of such things! Let us ask the Lord for spiritual strength to exercise the grace of forgiveness that wounds and divisions may be healed, and relationships among brothers and sisters restored.

Dear reader, consider the hymn writer’s description of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ: “Elect from ev’ry nation, yet one o’er all the earth, her charter of salvation: one Lord, one faith, one birth; one holy name she blesses, partakes one holy food, and to one hope she presses, with ev’ry grace endued.” May this biblical ideal be reflected in each of our congregations!

THOUGHT: The Lord’s Supper is a means of grace.

PRAYER: Father, use this means of grace to unite our hearts!

TUESDAY, MAY 25

HEBREWS 10:19-22

HEBREWS 9:15-28

*“...having our hearts sprinkled
from an evil conscience...”*

A HEART SPRINKLED FROM AN EVIL CONSCIENCE (I)

The conscience of man is part of the image of God in which we are all created: it is that moral sense that exists even in those “*which have not the law*,” causing them to “*do by nature the things contained in the law*” (Rom 2:14). Yet the conscience is marred and corrupted by sin, and functions in the natural man only to condemn. Ours is an “*evil conscience*” (Heb 10:22), not so much here in the sense that it is seared or malfunctioning, but in the sense that it is burdened and weighed down by the condemnation of sin. Our conscience bears witness to the fact that we are guilty and deserving of God’s judgment.

Now under the Old Testament law, the picture of cleansing was that of sprinkling. As the writer of the Book of Hebrews earlier noted, “*when Moses had spoken every precept to all the people according to the law, he took the blood of calves and of goats... and sprinkled both the book, and all the people*” (Heb 9:19). This was a ceremonial gesture, and incapable of cleansing the heart (cf Heb 10:4).

But the blood of Christ is that which sprinkles and cleanses the heart, removing once and for all the guilt and condemnation of sin. “*There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit*” (Rom 8:1). A heart thus sprinkled from an evil conscience is a heart knowing peace with God: not on one’s own merits, but on the merits of Christ. It is a heart no longer fearful and trembling, but able to serve God freely.

Dear reader, have you been sprinkled by the blood of Christ? Have you trusted in Him alone for your salvation? Then let your sin and guilt weigh you down no longer! Certain it is that no Christian can ever take sin lightly; yet it is equally certain that the blood of Christ is sufficient to purify every stain. “*How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?*” (Heb 9:14).

THOUGHT: Only Christ’s blood can cleanse my heart.

PRAYER: “Jesus, thy blood and righteousness my beauty are, my glorious dress; ‘midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed, with joy shall I lift up my head.” (Zinzendorf)

WEDNESDAY, MAY 26

HEBREWS 10:19-22

HEBREWS 10:26-31

*“Let us draw near with a true heart
in full assurance of faith...”*

A HEART SPRINKLED FROM AN EVIL CONSCIENCE (II)

In Hebrews 10:19-22, the writer draws out the benefits of such a heart. We have *“boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus”* (Heb 10:19). Though in ourselves guilty sinners, absolutely barred from the presence of the thrice-holy God, once sprinkled by that precious blood we can come with boldness. This is that *“full assurance of faith”* of which the writer speaks (v 22), that we rest not in our own works, but in Christ’s. Just as nothing we did could ever have qualified us to approach God; so also, if we come in Christ, we have confidence that nothing we have ever done can disqualify us. Everything depends on Him!

In Christ, we have complete freedom of access to the throne of grace. Let not the devil rob you of this liberty with his fiery darts of doubt! Raise up the shield of faith to quench those attacks! To quote the words of the well-known hymn: *“My faith has found a resting place, from guilt my soul is freed; I trust the ever-living One, his wounds for me shall plead. I need no other argument, I need no other plea, it is enough that Jesus died, and that he died for me”* (Hewitt).

But such is the craft of the devil that he tries to pull us to both sides of the path. If we will not stray to the right, he will come from the left. Thus the writer, after speaking of the blessedness purchased for us by the blood of Christ, must still go on to warn of the *“much sorer punishment”* awaiting the one *“who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace”* (v 29).

Dear reader, we must remember that our boldness of access to God can never be confused with frivolity. It is, after all, *“a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God”* (v 31). A heart sprinkled from an evil conscience is not only a heart that flies with joyful confidence to the Father in heaven - it is also a heart that trembles at the thought of displeasing the Lord, and endeavours to serve Him patiently, without ceasing, resisting the allures and temptations of the world.

THOUGHT: The throne of grace is still a most holy place.

PRAYER: Father, help me to be holy, as Thou art holy.

THURSDAY, MAY 27
LUKE 8:4-18
MATTHEW 13:18-23

“...then cometh the devil,
and taketh away the word
out of their hearts...”

AN HONEST AND GOOD HEART (I)

The parable of the sower (found also in Matthew 13 and Mark 4) has to do with different responses to God’s Word. The parable is presented as occasioned by the gathering of “*much people*” who came to Jesus “*out of every city*” (Luke 8:4), and presents the important truth that not all who hear the Word of God hear in the same way, come to the same conclusion, or manifest the same result. We are called to examine ourselves and “*take heed... how [we] hear*” (v 18); to make sure that we hear the Word “*in an honest and good heart*” (v 15). What would such a heart be like? Following the structure of the parable, it will be helpful for us to begin by considering what it is not, and then what it is.

In the first place, an “*honest and good heart*” is not like the way side (v 12). This is where in the parable some of the seed fell, and “*was trodden down, and the fowls of the air devoured it*” (v 5). Jesus explains, “*Those by the way side are they that hear; then cometh the devil, and taketh away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved*” (v 12). The description is of those who do not believe at all: they hear, but do not appropriate it for themselves. It remains like the seed on the hard ground, sitting on the surface of the heart (as it were), easily taken away. And this indeed the devil does, by his various devices, for his aim is to prevent belief and salvation.

It may be asked, if it is the devil who “*taketh away the word out of their hearts*” (v 12), how is this the fault of the one who hears? Yet it is precisely the condition of the heart that permits the word to be taken away. This hearer “*heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not*” (Matt 13:19) – there is no spiritual understanding, appreciation, or reception of God’s Word. It is indeed “*the word of God*” (Luke 8:11); there is no deficiency in the word itself. But it is snatched away, because the heart was hardened, and not prepared to receive it.

Dear reader, it is the “*minds of them which believe not*” that are “*blinded*” by the devil (2 Cor 4:4). Yet the “*light of the glorious gospel of Christ*” shines out, if only they are willing to see it!

THOUGHT: Is my heart hardened to the Word of God?

PRAYER: O Father, soften my heart to hear and understand Thy Word.

FRIDAY, MAY 28

LUKE 8:4-15

2 TIMOTHY 3:10-16

“...these have no root... and in time
of temptation fall away.”

AN HONEST AND GOOD HEART (II)

In the second place, an *“honest and good heart”* is not like the rock. *“They on the rock are they, which, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, which for a while believe, and in time of temptation fall away”* (Luke 8:13).

The description is of those who initially do appear to *“receive the word”* and that even *“with joy”* – a very promising beginning! Yet this appearance is in fact deceptive, for these hearers *“have no root.”* There appears to be an impact of the Word, there appears to be growth – but none of it is actually grounded. The Word of God is not truly rooted in their hearts. It may superficially have been received, but it has not been received *“as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in [those] that believe”* (1 Thess 2:13). Without this effectual working, there is no resistance to temptation. The *“temptation”* mentioned here is further described as *“affliction or persecution”* that arises *“for the word’s sake,”* whereupon these rootless hearers *“are offended”* (Mark 4:17).

Many, it is to be feared, are like this! They may attend upon the regular services of the church with joy, and sit often under the preaching of God’s Word, but when the time comes that they must face persecution because of the Word, they will not hold it fast. When some trouble arises, and it may afford them temporary release to relinquish the Word, they will do so. When they find that the gospel is *“foolishness”* to the world, they will not conclude that *“the foolishness of God is wiser than men”* (1 Cor 1:23-25) – instead, upon realising that the followers of Him who was *“mocked, and spitefully entreated, and spitted on”* (Luke 18:32) must suffer the same, they will give up the gospel, and give up the Lord.

Christian reader, let it now be settled in your heart: *“all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution”* (2 Tim 3:12). *“But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them”* (2 Tim 3:14).

THOUGHT: God’s Word takes root in the heart only when it is received as God’s Word, not man’s.

PRAYER: Father, establish my heart in the truth of Thy Word!

SATURDAY, MAY 29

LUKE 8:4-15

MATTHEW 6:19-34

“... they... are choked
with cares and riches
and pleasures of this life...”

AN HONEST AND GOOD HEART (III)

In the third place, an *“honest and good heart”* is not like the thorns. *“And that which fell among thorns are they, which, when they have heard, go forth, and are choked with cares and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection”* (Luke 8:14).

An example of such a hearer may be found in Demas. He is mentioned, together with Luke, bringing greetings to the Colossian church (Col 4:14). Paul elsewhere mentions him as a *“fellowlabourer”* (Philem 24). Yet towards the end of his life Paul had occasion to lament, *“Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica”* (2 Tim 4:10). The love of the world - the *“cares and riches and pleasures of this life”* (Luke 8:14) - caused him to become unfruitful. He left Paul, and left the ministry and labour of the gospel.

Dear reader, it is not for nothing that we are warned concerning the *“deceitfulness of riches”* (Matt 13:22)! What a distraction they can be, so much so that the Lord proclaimed, *“How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through a needle’s eye, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God”* (Luke 18:24-25). Once the love of money enters into the heart, we begin to build our treasures on earth, and then our heart is on earth also (cf. Matt 6:19-21). Is this not the *“temptation”* and *“snare”* of which Scripture warns (1 Tim 6:9)?

But even the *“pleasures of this life”* can be a distraction - yes, even the *“cares”* of life if not properly viewed and handled. How many, while never really tasting the allure of riches, are ensnared by the lustful entertainment of this world? How many allow cares and anxieties to fill their minds, and forget to seek the kingdom (cf. Matt 6:33)? Lest we should come to that tragic end of having brought *“no fruit to perfection”* (Luke 8:14), let us heed the exhortation of the Apostle Paul: *“No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier”* (2 Tim 2:4).

THOUGHT: My heart should be filled with God’s Word, not with the *“cares and riches and pleasures of this life.”*

PRAYER: Father, let not my heart be choked by the world!

LORD'S DAY, MAY 30
LUKE 8:4-15
JAMES 1:22-25

...they, which
...having heard the word,
keep it, and bring forth fruit..."

AN HONEST AND GOOD HEART (IV)

Finally, having considered what an *"honest and good heart"* is not, we must consider what it is - it is like the good ground. *"But that on the good ground are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience"* (Luke 8:15).

In other words, an *"honest and good heart"* is defined in terms of both hearing and keeping God's Word. This is what ultimately distinguishes such a heart from the other types of ground that have been considered. In all those cases, the Word was heard, but not truly kept. As James puts it, *"be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves"* (James 1:22). Where there is no true obedience to God's Word, there can be no true salvation: only self-deception.

God's Word is that *"perfect law of liberty,"* by which we live (James 1:25). It is *"quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart"* (Heb 4:12). It reveals both the way of life, and our own waywardness. To hear, and not to do, is likened to *"a man beholding his natural face in a glass,"* who *"beholdeth himself,"* with all his stains and blemishes, yet simply *"goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was"* (James 1:23-24).

But those with an *"honest and good heart"* take heed to examine themselves in light of Scripture: giving all diligence to bring their lives more and more into conformity with what they see therein. Such a man *"looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work"* (James 1:25). And so doing, he *"bring[s] forth fruit with patience"* (Luke 8:15). Dear reader, have you such a heart? Do you hear the Word of God, keep it, and persevere in obeying it? Then you may look forward with sure hope and assurance to that blessed day when the Lord will say to those who are His, *"Well done, thou good and faithful servant"* (Matt 25:21).

THOUGHT: "Thy Word is a lamp to my feet... to guide and to save me from sin, and show me the heav'nly way." (Sellers)

PRAYER: "Thy word have I hid in mine heart..." (Ps 119:11)

A HEART THAT FEARS GOD

Moses, in the fifth chapter of Deuteronomy, has just finished recounting to the people the ten commandments, given to the people by God Himself at Sinai. He reminds them that *“these words the LORD spake unto all your assembly... and he added no more”* (Deut 5:22); and that the people themselves, upon hearing *“the voice out of the midst of the darkness,”* said to Moses, *“the LORD our God hath shewed us his glory and his greatness... if we hear the voice of the LORD our God any more, then we shall die”* (vv 23-25). They asked Moses to speak on their behalf to God, and relay His words to the people.

The LORD was pleased with this response. *“I have heard the voice of the words of this people, which they have spoken unto thee: they have well said all that they have spoken”* (v 28). The people had demonstrated a genuine fear of God: this was something that pleased God. *“O that there were such an heart in them, that they would fear me...!”* (v 29). Mark well these words, dear reader! We have here an insight into the heart of God Himself. He desires that His people should fear Him.

We are not talking here of a craven fear, such as the demons have (cf. James 2:19), which is really a kind of loathing; but of a filial fear and awesome reverence - a fear that drives us not away from God in hatred, but toward Him in worship. The result of this fear would be that God's people *“keep all [His] commandments always,”* the consequence of that in turn being that it would *“be well with them, and with their children for ever”* (v 29).

The people of Israel, as we know, did not maintain that fear. A scant few days after that commendable confession, we find them idolatrous and debauched, made naked to their shame, yet shameless and unafraid. It did not go well with them, for *“there fell of the people that day about three thousand men”* (Exod 32:28). What will it be, for you and for me?

THOUGHT: *“The transgression of the wicked saith within my heart, that there is no fear of God before his eyes.”* (Ps 36:1)

PRAYER: *“Let all the earth fear the LORD: let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him”* (Ps 33:8)

A WISE HEART

One aspect of wisdom that is often emphasized in the book of Proverbs, is the receptiveness of the wise to reproof and correction. *“Rebuke a wise man, and he will love thee”* (Prov 9:8). Thus a wise heart is one that will *“receive commandments”* (Prov 10:8) - *“commandments”* here being a reference to instruction in the right way to live. The implication is clearly that these *“commandments”* and instructions are true and biblical. Those who are truly wise will be happy to listen and to receive even sharp rebuke if it will help him to walk uprightly before the Lord. *“Let the righteous smite me; it shall be a kindness: and let him reprove me; it shall be an excellent oil”* (Ps 141:5).

The outcome of this humble willingness to receive instruction is an increase in wisdom: *“Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be yet wiser; teach a just man, and he will increase in learning”* (Prov 9:9). The wise in heart are able to grow and to mature in their walk with the Lord; they are able to benefit from the godly and wise counsel of their brethren.

By contrast, *“a prating fool shall fall”* (Prov 10:8). The *“prating fool”* is the one who does not guard his lips: he is full of pride, and thus responds to rebuke with loud declamatory tirades and even vicious invective against those who correct him. Such was wicked King Ahab, who said of the faithful prophet Micaiah, *“I hate him; for he doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil”* (1 Kings 22:8). And did not this wicked king soon after *“fall”* in battle (1 Kings 22:34-35)?

Dear reader, it is not for nothing that Scripture warns us, *“Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall”* (Prov 16:18). Let us not be like those who in their pride resist rebuke and avoid instruction! Let us, with a humble heart, listen to the correction of those around us - let us, like David, say to our counsellors, whomever they may be, *“Blessed be the LORD God of Israel, which sent thee this day to meet me: and blessed be thy advice, and blessed be thou”* (1 Sam 25:32-33)!

THOUGHT: Defensiveness is usually not a mark of wisdom.

PRAYER: Father, I have much to learn - help me to receive rebuke well!

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 2

DANIEL 1:1-21

2 CHRONICLES 36:1-21

“...Daniel purposed in
his heart...”

A HEART OF PURPOSE (I)

The book of Daniel can be divided into two sections: historical (chapters 1-6) and prophetic (chapters 7-12). Studies of this book often focus on the prophetic section. Volumes have been written discussing the interpretation of these prophecies and their interconnections with other prophecies in the Bible. But the historical section offers a wealth of value, a goldmine of spiritual lessons that may be drawn from the life of one of the most remarkable individuals in the Old Testament – whose righteousness was highly praised by God Himself (Ezek 14:14).

Little is known of Daniel’s early years. It seems likely, however, that he would have grown up during the reign of Josiah, Judah’s last good king, and would thus have been exposed to the religious revival of those times. Furthermore, it has been pointed out that Daniel’s Hebrew name (meaning “God is my judge”), with its reference to the God of Israel, points to the fact that his parents may have been faithful believers. Whatever the case, it is clear that from an early age, Daniel had received a thorough grounding in the Word of God. This was important preparation. His convictions needed a firm foundation, if they were to endure the fires of testing that were to come.

Sadly, the revival instituted by Josiah did not last long. Following his death, the kingdom passed to a series of wicked kings, and soon ended in the exile of the Jewish people as Jerusalem was besieged by the Babylonian army. Many of the people, including Daniel, were taken captive. Daniel’s age at this point cannot be determined precisely, but estimates range from 12 to 18 years old. For a young boy in his teens, the experience must have been profoundly disorienting: to be separated from his family and homeland, thrust into an alien land and plunged into a strange and foreign culture.

But Daniel had something that even this shocking experience could not remove from him. He had a settled purpose in his heart, to glorify God and to obey Him, no matter the earthly consequences. This heart of purpose, established early, would carry Daniel through his whole life.

THOUGHT: “Train up a child in the way he should go...” (Prov 22:6).

PRAYER: Give me, O Father, a heart of purpose to obey Thee!

THURSDAY, JUNE 3

DANIEL 1:1-8

HEBREWS 11:24-27

“...he would not defile himself...”

A HEART OF PURPOSE (II)

Rudely snatched from their homeland, Daniel and the other captives were taken to Babylon, where they would have been immediately exposed to the great splendour and luxury of the capital city of the Babylonian empire. In addition, Daniel was among those selected for special training who were identified as having “*ability in them to stand in the king’s palace*” (Dan 1:4). This would surely have been a powerful temptation for these “*children of Israel*” (v 3) - on the one hand taken from their homeland, apparently forsaken by their God; and on the other hand brought to a city overflowing with riches, and promised a position of honour and wealth.

This indeed appears to have been Nebuchadnezzar’s design, and his deliberate policy. Daniel and his fellows were “*appointed... a daily provision of the king’s meat, and of the wine which he drank,*” for three years (v 5); and taught “*the learning and the tongue of the Chaldeans*” (v 4); in order that they might forget their heritage, abandon their God, and effectively become Babylonian in their thinking and their loyalty.

Dear reader, is this not the enemy’s tactic today? If he would bring before Daniel the splendour of Babylon; and bring even before the Lord Himself “*all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them*” (Matt 4:8) - will he not try the same with us? Does he not aim to entice us into renouncing the Lord, and dissolving our allegiance to Him?

How we need a heart of purpose, like Daniel’s! Whether in the midst of decadence, we must not be lured away from loving God and serving Him; whether in the midst of deprivation, we must not be tempted to despair or indignation against God. Satan may attempt first to incite resentment against God in our afflictions, and then turn resentment to rebellion by offering to exalt us. But Daniel was able both to “*endure hardness*” (2 Tim 2:3) and, like Moses, to esteem the reproach of Christ greater riches than all the earthly treasures around him (Heb 11:26). As Daniel did not falter (neither when torn from his home, nor when offered the choicest delicacies of a mighty empire), so also must we likewise strive to persevere in living a life consecrated to God.

THOUGHT: I am surrounded by temptations.

PRAYER: “*Give me neither poverty nor riches...*” (Prov 30:8)

FRIDAY, JUNE 4
DANIEL 1:8
ROMANS 12:1-2

“...with the portion
of the king’s meat,
nor with the wine...”

A HEART OF PURPOSE (III)

As one of those chosen for the royal training, Daniel was given a new name: “Belteshazzar,” taking from the false Babylonian god Bel. With the other trainees Daniel was also taught “*the learning and the tongue of the Chaldeans*” (Dan 1:4). The question thus arises: how can these apparent concessions on Daniel’s part be reconciled with his purposing in his heart not to defile himself? In other words, why did he draw the line at partaking the king’s food when he consented to be named after a Babylonian deity, and to learning the heathen mythologies?

In the first place, Daniel would have had no control over what others chose to name him, and it would have been neither prudent nor profitable for him to protest. Nor is it necessary to assume that Daniel was willing to give up his Hebrew name - after all, decades later, we find even Daniel’s enemies still using his Hebrew name (cf. Dan 6:13). Second, it would have been possible for Daniel to learn of the false religion and practice of his captors without assenting to it or actually performing it.

But the king’s meat was a different matter. The Babylonians, of course, did not observe the strict dietary laws observed by the Israelites since the time of Moses. To eat such unclean food would be to go against the very purpose of the law, and violate the separation that God intended for His people, above all other peoples on the face of the earth. Thus after establishing the details of the dietary laws, God said, “*I am the LORD your God: ye shall therefore sanctify yourselves, and ye shall be holy; for I am holy*” (Lev 11:44).

Dear reader, these dietary laws are not applicable to the church (cf. Acts 10:9-16); yet the principle of holiness remains. Just as for the nation of Israel, we as Christians are to be totally consecrated to God; and this consecration must extend to every aspect of our lives. Like Daniel, we do not live surrounded by a culture that has been designed by God; we live surrounded by godlessness. We need to “*walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise*” (Eph 5:15) - and above all, we need a heart of purpose, not to defile ourselves, but to be holy unto our God.

THOUGHT: Holiness is not a theory, but a practice.

PRAYER: Father, help me to be holy in every area of my life!

SATURDAY, JUNE 5

DANIEL 1:8-16

COLOSSIANS 4:5-6

“...therefore he requested
...that he might not defile himself.”

A HEART OF PURPOSE (IV)

It is instructive for us to consider how this purpose of Daniel’s heart worked itself out in practical terms. After all, such a settled conviction cannot remain in the heart, but must be expressed in our actions, choices, and decisions.

In the first place, Daniel was not afraid to express his convictions. He could conceivably have abstained from the king’s meat in secret: perhaps only pretending to eat, trying to smuggle in food from elsewhere. Instead, he openly approached the “*prince of the eunuchs*” (Dan 1:8). He was not rude or obnoxious but calm and reasonable. He “*requested*,” rather than demanded. Then again, he explained the situation to the prince of the eunuchs and did not try to make up excuses. It is implied here that Daniel made sure the prince of the eunuchs understood why he would “*defile himself*” (v 8) if he ate the king’s meat.

Second, Daniel was not quick to abandon his convictions, but persevered in them. The prince of the eunuchs was initially reluctant to accede to Daniel’s request. “*I fear my lord the king... for why should he see your faces worse liking than the children which are of your sort? Then shall ye make me endanger my head to the king*” (v 10). But Daniel did not give up; nor did he try to insist or press his case forcefully. Instead, he proposed a test of sorts, very specifically designed so that Melzar’s fears might be allayed (vv 11-13). This was done by faith probably in response to revelation from God given the specificity of Daniel’s proposal.

Dear reader, it is not enough for us to have right convictions. A heart of purpose must know how to express its convictions in the world! We must learn not to be silent regarding our convictions, for then what sort of witness can we be? At the same time, we must learn when and how to speak, lest we only cause needless strife. “*Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time. Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man*” (Col 4:5-6).

THOUGHT: Right convictions must be paired with wise actions.

PRAYER: Father, help me to “*walk in wisdom*”!

LORD'S DAY, JUNE 6

DANIEL 1:8

PSALM 119:41-48

*"I will speak of thy testimonies also
before kings..."*

A HEART OF PURPOSE (V)

Finally, we ought to consider the consequences of Daniel's purposed heart as an encouragement for us to follow his example. Scripture tells us that after Daniel made his stand, he was rewarded: God gave him *"knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom: and... understanding in all visions and dreams"* (Dan 1:17). That this verse immediately follows the narrative of Daniel's stand implies a close relationship between the two events.

In other words, one consequence of Daniel's heart-purpose, and his faithful outworking of it, was an increased usefulness in the service of God: having tried and tested His servant, God was pleased to endow Daniel with the gifts necessary for the ministry prepared for him – Daniel was to be a prophet (for he was so called by Christ, Matt 24:15), a receiver and interpreter of visions and dreams. Having therefore proved himself *"faithful in that which is least,"* God would now give him the opportunity to be *"faithful also in much"* (Luke 16:10). Likewise, if we would be true servants of the living God, we must make our beginning with a heart-purpose like Daniel's: to honour God above all, and never compromise.

A further aspect of Daniel's ministry was his witness for God. From the very beginning, when Daniel purposed in his heart, his witness encouraged his three friends to join him in his stand. Soon after we read of Daniel's heart of purpose, the eunuch speaks of *"your faces"* (Dan 1:10). Clearly, Daniel's friends had already joined him in making the same request, that they not defile themselves.

And as his service for God grew, Daniel would exemplify the words of the psalmist: *"I will speak of thy testimonies also before kings, and will not be ashamed"* (Ps 119:46); and of the proverb, *"When a man's ways please the LORD, he maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him"* (Prov 16:7). The strength of his witness would influence even powerful rulers like Nebuchadnezzar and Darius (cf. Dan 2:47; 6:20). If we want to be witnesses for God, we must, like Daniel, purpose and strive to live an undefiled life.

THOUGHT: "Dare to have a purpose firm! Dare to make it known!"
(Bliss)

PRAYER: O Father, be pleased to use me as Thy witness!

MONDAY, JUNE 7

2 THESSALONIANS 3:5

1 THESSALONIANS 4:9-12

“...the Lord direct your hearts into
the love of God...”

A DIRECTED HEART (I)

The Apostle Paul closes his second epistle to the Thessalonians with a prayer that their hearts might be “directed” by the Lord (2 Thess 3:5). The word “*direct*” here has the sense of making a straight path and removing all obstacles. His prayer is that their hearts may thus be enabled to walk always in the path of “*the love of God*” - in other words, that they might continue to love God.

Why did their hearts need thus to be directed? Paul opened the epistle with a thanksgiving for the Thessalonian Christians: “*We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is meet, because that your faith groweth exceedingly, and the charity of every one of you all toward each other aboundeth*” (2 Thess 1:3). Clearly their hearts were already full of love for God; this was evident in their abounding charity toward each other, for love of God and love of neighbour go hand in hand.

But, of course, it could not be taken for granted that such love would continue to abound. Obstacles could easily come in the way. Their focus might shift to rituals and ceremonies, to the observance of man-made rules such that, like the Pharisees, they might “*pass over judgment and the love of God*” (Luke 11:42). They might be tempted and drawn away to love the world; and as we are reminded by the Apostle John, “*If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him*” (1 John 2:15). Though even in his first epistle to them Paul wrote, “*as touching brotherly love ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another. And indeed ye do it toward all the brethren which are in all Macedonia*” - yet he had cause to go on, “*but we beseech you, brethren, that ye increase more and more*” (1 Thess 4:9-10).

So it is also with us! Dear reader, ought we not also to pray that our hearts would be directed into the love of God: that all obstacles hindering us from walking that path might be removed, and that we might “*increase more and more*” in the enjoyment and exercise of this love?

THOUGHT: I need to abound in the love of God.

PRAYER: Father, help me to love Thee more and more!

TUESDAY, JUNE 8

2 THESSALONIANS 3:5

REVELATION 21:1-5

“...*the Lord direct your hearts into*

...*the patient waiting for Christ.*”

A DIRECTED HEART (II)

Additionally, Paul’s prayer for the Thessalonians was that their hearts might be directed also “*into the patient waiting for Christ*” (2 Thess 3:5). Now, once again, their patience (like their love) was something Paul had already commended: both in his previous epistle to them (“*Remembering without ceasing your... patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ,*” 1 Thess 1:3), and also in this second epistle (“*your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that ye endure,*” 2 Thess 1:4). Yet, just as with their love, their patience also needed to be persevering; and it could not be taken for granted that their patience would continue to hold out.

Those who are facing such “*persecutions and tribulations*” need much prayer that their hearts would continue and remain in the path of patience. Just as “*the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain*” (James 5:7), so also we are to persevere in patience.

Yet, it is difficult, if not impossible, to have “*patient waiting*” without a specific object toward which such patience is directed. Here, the object is clear: it is a “*patient waiting for Christ.*” Thus James also exhorts us to “*be patient... unto the coming of the Lord*” (James 5:7). It is as we continually remember that “*the coming of the Lord draweth nigh*” (James 5:8) that we are strengthened and enabled to endure afflictions. This is the hope of the one who suffers injustice: that the day draws near when the righteous Judge will sit on the throne and all accounts will be settled! This is the hope of the one who suffers pain and affliction: that the day draws near when the kingdom of heaven will be established forever, and “*there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away*” (Rev 21:4)!

Let us therefore, by faith, keep our eyes on this horizon, and may the Lord direct our hearts “*into the patient waiting for Christ.*”

THOUGHT: “*He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly*” (Rev 22:20).

PRAYER: “*Even so, come, Lord Jesus*” (Rev 22:20)!

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 9

HEBREWS 13:9

EPHESIANS 2:8-10

*“For it is a good thing that the heart
be established with grace...”*

AN ESTABLISHED HEART (I)

There are many *“divers and strange doctrines”* (Heb 13:9) in the world. The particular reference here in Hebrews 13:9, however, seems to be those doctrines that would replace the grace of God with the works of man. Hence, the exhortation: *“it is a good thing that the heart be established with grace; not with meats.”*

Dear reader, the biblical gospel presents salvation as entirely the work of God. We, as sinners lost and dead, play no part in accomplishing our own salvation. It is a gift that we simply receive by faith, and even that is the result of God’s regenerative work in our hearts. *“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them”* (Eph 2:8-10).

But what a powerful temptation it is to have something of which we can *“boast”*! Pride seeks constantly to ask, *“What good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?”* (Matt 19:16), with the underlying assumption, concerning God’s law, *“All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet?”* (Matt 19:20). Many, it is to be feared, are like the Pharisees who *“trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others”* (Luke 18:9), and many who say secretly within their hearts, *“I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers... I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess”* (Luke 18:11-12).

Then also, doubt and uncertainty seek constantly to ask, *“What good thing have I done, in which I may confidently rest?”* So many are searching for assurance of salvation! And when they will not rest by faith in God’s promises, they run desperately to and fro, even sometimes afflicting and torturing themselves, if only they might secure that elusive goal. Yet, *“it is a good thing that the heart be established with grace; not with meats”* (Heb 13:9)! Let us find our security by trusting in the finished work of Christ, on our behalf, and nothing else.

THOUGHT: *“Naught of good that I have done, Nothing but the blood of Jesus.”* (Lowry)

PRAYER: Father, help me to rest secure, only in Thee!

THURSDAY, JUNE 10

HEBREWS 13:9

GALATIANS 5:1-12

“...not with meats,
which have not profited them
that have been occupied therein.”

AN ESTABLISHED HEART (II)

It is “a good thing” for the heart to be established “with grace,” not only because this is according to the truth of God revealed in His Word, but also because the alternative is entirely unprofitable. This the writer of the book of Hebrews expressly mentions as an argument to strengthen his case and encourage his readers: “not with meats, which have not profited them that have been occupied therein” (Heb 13:9).

The tragedy of those who seek to rest even partly in their own works, rather than entirely in the grace of God, is that even this partial dependence on their own ability will utterly fail them. The Apostle Paul makes this case very forcefully in his epistle to the Galatians. “For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them” (Gal 3:10). And speaking specifically of circumcision, which those who sought to deceive the Galatians especially pressed as necessary for salvation, Paul states in no uncertain terms, “For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law. Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace” (Gal 5:3-4).

Dear reader, it is simply not possible for us to earn any merit or favour with God by keeping His law on our own strength. We cannot on our own progress even one step towards salvation. Those who try to mix grace with works, end up fallen from grace, and burdened with works that are no better than “filthy rags” (Isa 64:6).

It is not that works are irrelevant, of course, but they are the fruit of God’s work in us, rather than the root of our approach to Him. Yes, “we know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren” (1 John 3:14), yet this love is not our own work, but God’s workmanship (cf. Eph 2:10). We ought to be “occupied” (Heb 13:9), therefore, not in seeking to earn merit for ourselves, but in working to glorify God: in the former, there is no prospect but failure; in the latter, there is infinite profit.

THOUGHT: “Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?” (Hoffman)

PRAYER: “Thank You, Lord, for saving my soul”! (Sykes)

FRIDAY, JUNE 11

ACTS 5:1-11

MARK 12:41-44

“...why hath Satan filled thine heart
to lie to the Holy Ghost...”

NOT A HEART FILLED BY SATAN (I)

From the beginning of the church “*all that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need*” (Acts 2:44-45). And this practice continued, to the extent that “*the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common*” (Acts 4:32). There were remarkable examples of selfless generosity, “*for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, and laid them down at the apostles’ feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need*” (Acts 4:34-35).

But this sublime picture is soon broken by the sober reminder that even within the church, sin may rear its ugly head. Wherever there is sincerity, there may be hypocrisy; wherever there is truth, the father of lies will seek to infiltrate and deceive.

So we find Ananias pretending to give as generously as the others, but in reality bringing only “*a certain part*” of what he made a show of giving (Acts 5:2). It was not the love of money that brought about his downfall, for he was willing to part with at least some of his money; but the love of fame and popularity, of accolade and applause.

Dear reader, from this account it should be evident to us that God both knows and will judge our hearts, as well as our actions. It would have been better for Ananias to have given two mites with a pure heart (cf. Mark 12:43), than half a fortune with a heart filled by Satan! But are we any less guilty when we come before God’s presence pretending to give Him the full measure of our attention, though in truth part of our focus is elsewhere? Or when we pretend to love God with all our hearts, when really some portion of our affection has been given to the world? Ah, let us beware, and may the Lord fill our hearts with holy fear, lest we should be found to have lied “*not... unto men, but unto God*” (Acts 5:4).

THOUGHT: “*Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor... and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.*” (1 Cor 13:3)

PRAYER: Search me, O Father, and root out my hypocrisy!

SATURDAY, JUNE 12

ACTS 5:1-11

1 PETER 5:8

“Be sober, be vigilant...”

NOT A HEART FILLED BY SATAN (II)

In all the working out of his devices, Satan remains consistent in his general character and motive. Having fallen in his pride, he remains motivated by the same desire to usurp the worship and adoration due to God alone: thus he sought to bring mankind under his dominion, and thus he rules as the god of this age. Having departed from the truth, he seeks to keep mankind in the same darkness: both by the “snatching away” of God’s truth, and the introduction of his own deceptive lies. Having settled himself in hatred and enmity towards God, he persists in a malignant campaign against mankind: thus in the garden he brought man under the power of death, and aims to keep him in that state; so Satan continues a *“murderer from the beginning”* (John 8:44).

Satan’s designs against mankind may succinctly be summarized thus: he seeks ultimately to destroy man, by separating man from God. The primary sphere of his influence over man seems to be the mind and heart. Hence, in those outside the pale of the church, he achieves this separation by blinding their minds (cf. 2 Cor 4:4), or taking the Word of God out of their hearts (cf. Luke 8:12). And even for those within the community of the church, he seeks to achieve separation from God by temptations to sin: targeting the mind (cf. 2 Cor 11:3), or filling the heart (cf. Acts 5:3).

It is against this great spiritual adversary that the believer is called to fight: never in his own strength, but in the power of the Lord’s might; clad in the armour of God; and assured of victory only by virtue of vital connection with Christ the Victor.

Dear reader, in all that we have said thus far regarding our hearts, it is well for us to be aware that there is another, an enemy, who seeks also to work in and to influence our hearts. Let this recognition then cause us to redouble our efforts, with sober vigilance (cf. 1 Pet 5:8) – our hearts are a battleground, and we dare not be complacent!

THOUGHT: If I do not seek actively to fill my heart with God’s truth, the devil will fill it with his lies.

PRAYER: “Oh, for a heart whiter than snow! Saviour divine, to whom else shall I go? Thou who didst die, loving me so, give me a heart that is whiter than snow!” (Hewitt)

NOT A PROUD HEART (I)

Pride, so the proverb warns, "*goeth before destruction*" (Prov 16:18). It was the very first sin to be found in God's creation, for we are told of the devil that his "*heart was lifted up*" because of his own "*beauty*" (Ezek 28:17).

Dear reader, consider the staggering import of these words. Here we have an "*anointed cherub,*" who is "*full of wisdom, and perfect in beauty,*" covered with "*every precious stone,*" and stationed "*upon the holy mountain of God*" (Ezek 28:12-14). Here we have a creature exalted to high office, sinless, "*perfect in [his] ways*" – until "*iniquity was found*" in him (v 15). The nature of his pride is revealed in the similar passage found in Isaiah where we learn that this "*anointed cherub*" said in his heart, "*I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High*" (Isa 14:12-14).

In a universe without sin, rebellion was born in this beautiful creature's heart! And it was his very beauty that caused his heart to be lifted up; his very brightness that caused his wisdom to be corrupted. Thus the "*covering cherub*" is "*cast... as profane out of the mountain of God,*" and "*cast... to the ground,*" and brought "*to ashes upon the earth*" (Ezek 28:16-18).

We see here the terrible nature of pride. It arises from within, even in the absence of external temptation: it is a self-deception. Then also, the tendency to pride increases with privilege: the more one is gifted, the more one is prone to pride. The nature of this corruption is such that it strikes exactly where we think we are strongest, and turns that very strength into our most debilitating weakness. The greatest champion in God's army may be turned into the greatest traitor to His cause! So it happened with the devil; and so it can happen with us, if we are not constantly on guard. Truly, as it is written, "*let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall*" (1 Cor 10:12).

THOUGHT: I do not need to be great to be proud – I only need to think more highly of myself than I should.

PRAYER: Father, keep me humble according to Thy truth!

MONDAY, JUNE 14

1 TIMOTHY 3:1-6

2 CORINTHIANS 12:6-10

“...lest being lifted up with pride
he fall into the condemnation
of the devil.”

NOT A PROUD HEART (II)

Pride is not a sin unique to the devil. The Apostle Paul issues this warning, that a “*novice*,” or new believer, should not be made an elder “*lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil*” (1 Tim 3:6). In other words, a new believer, raised unwisely to a position of great responsibility in the church, may find himself falling into the same sin for which the devil stands condemned.

The Apostle’s comparison really drives home the great peril of pride, and how easily we may fall into it. Merely being given a position of responsibility and authority, when we are not ready for it, is enough to put us in grave danger. How we need to guard our hearts, lest we be found “*an abomination to the LORD*” (Prov 16:5)!

How then can we defend ourselves against pride? We must take to heart the warning given to Baruch: “*seekest thou great things for thyself? seek them not*” (Jer 45:5). This requires a dedicated and vigilant commitment to self-examination; and temperance regarding our desires, passions, and ambitions. We must learn to be aware of our motivations, and in control of our cogitations, so as to bring “*into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ*” (2 Cor 10:5). The first stirrings of rebellion must quickly be quelled by a patient and deliberate submission to the will of God.

Finally, let us remember that in this great struggle against pride, the Lord Himself often fights for us; although not in the way we might hope. It was God Himself who protected the Apostle Paul from pride, by permitting his affliction through “*a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan*,” to prevent his being “*exalted above measure*” (2 Cor 12:7). God protected Paul – by afflicting him. It is not for us, therefore, to despise affliction, but to “*glory in [our] infirmities*” (v 9). If we would be greatly used of the Lord, we should expect to be greatly humbled by Him; nor should we be grumbling, but full of gratitude, because our heavenly Father is holding us back from falling into “*the condemnation of the devil*.”

THOUGHT: Pride has no place in any creature.

PRAYER: “O heaven’s grace – humility! Thy cherished charm I’ll wear; I must be humble, Lord, like Thee, Thy holy image bear.” (Orr)

TUESDAY, JUNE 15

PSALM 66:13-20

JAMES 4:8-10

*“If I regard iniquity in my heart,
the Lord will not hear...”*

NOT A HEART THAT REGARDS INIQUITY

In Psalm 66:18 (*“If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me”*), David expresses a significant truth. He has just described the afflictions of the righteous, which the Lord permits: *“Thou broughtest us into the net; thou laidst affliction upon our loins. Thou hast caused men to ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water”* (vv 11-12). But out of all these afflictions the Lord has brought deliverance and even blessing: *“but thou broughtest us out into a wealthy place”* (v 12). This is because, as David affirms, *“God hath heard me; he hath attended to the voice of my prayer”* (v 19).

How we need the Lord, if we are to endure through the afflictions of life! Is it not our greatest comfort and stay that we can go to Him in time of trouble, and be assured that He will hear us? Then, dear reader, we must surely be greatly concerned about anything that might cause Him to turn away our prayers!

But if we *“regard iniquity”* in our hearts, we can be certain that He will not hear our prayers. The word *“regard”* here has the sense of looking on something with approbation. In other words, if we but harbour in our hearts an approval of what the Lord forbids, we disqualify ourselves from His presence.

Make no mistake, our God is holy. To His own people He said, *“when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood”* (Isa 1:15). What is the use of the prayers loudly and loquaciously offered to God in professing churches full of idolatry? What is the use of the frenzied chants and screaming multitudes that attend some modern “evangelistic” rallies? As well might these latter-day prophets call upon the name of Baal, and leap upon his altar (cf. 1 Kings 18:26), as think to gain an audience with the thrice-holy God, while their hearts are full of sin! No, if we would truly *“draw nigh to God,”* we must heed the accompanying commands: *“Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded”* (James 4:8).

THOUGHT: *“Ye that love the LORD, hate evil.”* (Ps 97:10)

PRAYER: Father, help me to hide Thy word (not iniquity) in my heart.

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 16

LUKE 24:13-27

LUKE 16:19-31

“...O fools, and slow of heart to believe
all that the prophets have spoken...”

NOT A SLOW HEART

The Lord Jesus, before His death, repeatedly taught His disciples that He would rise from the dead on the third day. *“From that time forth began Jesus to shew unto his disciples, how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day”* (Matt 16:21; cf. also Matt 17:23; 20:19).

Yet it is a sad fact that those same disciples repeatedly disbelieved the reports of their Lord’s resurrection. They heard the testimony of Mary Magdalene, but *“they, when they had heard that he was alive, and had been seen of her, believed not”* (Mark 16:11). They heard the testimony of the two who had gone *“into the country,”* but again, *“neither believed they them”* (Mark 16:12-13). Indeed, when *“Mary Magdalene, and Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, and other women that were with them... told these things unto the apostles... their words seemed to them as idle tales, and they believed them not”* (Luke 24:10-11).

What was the cause of their incredulity? The Lord identifies it in His words to the two walking to Emmaus: they were *“slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken”* (Luke 24:25). Mark well, God expects us to believe His Word; all of it! Ah, it is fashionable in these days to deny biblical revelation, simply because it seems outlandish to our modern sensibilities. Even professing Christians have taken to turning up their noses at the miracles recorded in Scripture, employing various tricks of exegetical sleight-of-hand to vanish the offending passages from view.

The “enlightened” mind demands “evidence” - but the plain truth is, if we do not believe God’s Word, no amount of “empirical evidence” can substitute for faith. Was it not said in the parable to the rich man in his torments, regarding his brethren, *“If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead”* (Luke 16:31)?

THOUGHT: *“Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe”* (John 4:48) - is this a description of me?

PRAYER: O Father, help me to believe Thy Word!

THURSDAY, JUNE 17

ROMANS 1:18-23

PSALM 14

*“...their foolish heart
was darkened...”*

NOT A FOOLISH HEART (I)

The Apostle Paul begins his epistle to the Romans with a systematic presentation of the gospel message. While the gospel is indeed a message of “good news,” the Apostle begins with the “bad news” of human depravity - and the fearful reality of God’s wrath, which is *“revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness”* (Rom 1:18).

Man knows the truth about God, Paul contends, *“because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them”* (v 19). God has revealed Himself to mankind unmistakably in the creation of the world. As the psalmist proclaims, *“The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge. There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard. Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world”* (Ps 19:1-4). This renders man *“without excuse”* (Rom 1:20), for *“when they knew God, they glorified him not as God”* (v 21).

We live in an age that prides itself on advancements and achievements in knowledge. The concept of “God” is by many considered an “unnecessary hypothesis.” Yet the fact remains that the more we discover and learn of the natural world, the more complexity and wonder we uncover. The more we explain, the more remains to be explained! Though it is often claimed that belief in God is “irrational,” the truth as God reveals it is that the problem is not so much with the mind (that is, with the logical and rational faculty of man), but with the will, the inclination, the heart: *“The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God”* (Ps 14:1).

Now no one likes to be called a fool. But this is no childish insult; it is a sober statement of fact. Man is a creature, and ought both to acknowledge and to worship his Creator. The Lord grant that our foolish hearts may be humbled, and our eyes opened, to see the truth of God’s Word!

THOUGHT: *“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.”*
(Gen 1:1)

PRAYER: Father, humble my heart to see this truth!

FRIDAY, JUNE 18
ROMANS 1:18-23
ROMANS 3:21-26

*“Professing themselves to be wise,
they became fools...”*

NOT A FOOLISH HEART (II)

The Apostle Paul goes on to describe the behaviour that accompanies such a foolish heart. In the first place, mankind is guilty of ingratitude - in our failure to acknowledge God, we have failed to thank Him for all His blessings (*“neither were thankful,”* Rom 1:21). God has made *“his sun to rise on the evil and on the good,”* and sent *“rain on the just and on the unjust”* (Matt 5:45); also *“he did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness”* (Acts 14:17). Yet man, enjoying all these blessings, returns not a word of thanks to his benefactor.

In the second place, mankind is guilty of idolatry. Having removed in their minds the Creator from His rightful position, we have exalted the creature in His place - we have *“changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things”* (Rom 1:23). We have forsaken God’s way, and *“sought out many inventions”* (Eccles 7:29). The only solution to all this, for the unbelieving, is repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Rom 3:21-26).

But, Christian reader, let us not think that we are exempt from these wicked tendencies! It is well for us to examine ourselves, even we who name the name of Christ: are we truly grateful to God, as we ought to be? Do we praise Him for His grace and great salvation? Do we render unto Him our thanksgivings, *“the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name”* (Heb 13:15)? Do we take for granted the daily blessings we receive? If He *“sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust,”* ought not the just to thank Him, even if the unjust do not?

Then also, are we guilty of idolatry? Has something other than God taken His rightful place in our hearts? Has some philosophy been guiding us, other than His Word; some ambition, other than His glory? *“Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil”* (Eccles 12:13-14).

THOUGHT: I need a fearing heart, not a foolish heart.

PRAYER: Preserve me from the sin of ingratitude, and from idolatry!

SATURDAY, JUNE 19

MATTHEW 15:1-9

LUKE 18:9-14

“...but their heart is
far from me.”

NOT A HEART FAR FROM GOD (I)

The Lord Jesus had many encounters with the Pharisees. On one particular occasion, they challenged Him concerning the actions of His disciples - “*Why do thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? for they wash not their hands when they eat bread*” (Matt 15:2). The Pharisees, and all the Jews who followed them, placed great stock in their traditions. By these they thought themselves holy and righteous, and therefore close to God: closer than those who did not hold their traditions. They “*trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others*” (Luke 18:9).

But the Lord rebuked them soundly, calling them “*hypocrites*” (Matt 15:7). They pretended to honour God, and to draw near to Him “*with their mouth*.” In other words, they made grand professions of their closeness to Him, as the Pharisee in the parable “*stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess*” (Luke 18:11-12).

Yet for all that they claimed with their lips, their hearts were far from God. The humble publican, who “*would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven*” (Luke 18:13), was nearer to God in the contrition of his heart than the Pharisee.

Dear reader, the Christian faith is not merely a costume that one puts on externally. Christian worship does not consist of chants that are to be repeated mindlessly. Just as it is not profession of Christ that saves, but possession of Him; so it is not our lips that must be near to God, but our hearts. This is the pressing question for us! Our feet may be in the pews of a faithful church; our lips may be employed in the singing of wonderful hymns; our hands may be practised in the act of tithing and offering - but where are our hearts?

THOUGHT: Is my heart near to God, or far from Him?

PRAYER: “Thy nature, gracious Lord, impart, come quickly from above; write Thy new name upon my heart, Thy new best name of Love.” (Wesley)

LORD'S DAY, JUNE 20

MATTHEW 15:1-9

PSALM 73:21-28

*"...in vain they do
worship me..."*

NOT A HEART FAR FROM GOD (II)

The consequences of such a heart are very serious. Where hearts are far from God, there is no genuine worship – whatever passes under the name of “worship,” God does not accept. Where hearts are far from God, the truth of biblical doctrine is quickly corrupted – it is replaced by the artifice and invention of man. *“But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men”* (Matt 15:9).

What is it then that draws the heart to God? Clearly it is not *“the tradition of the elders”* (v 2), for this did the Pharisees no good. However well-meaning, however nobly conceived, no man-made ritual or ceremony can bring us close to God. Faith cannot lay hold of these things, because they are not of God! Nor do all the grand buildings of Christendom by themselves avail anything; nor all the bright lights and expensive equipment found in modern churches. Yes, in a grand cathedral the eyes may be drawn upward to the ceiling, but is the heart drawn to God by architecture? Yes, in a contemporary “worship” concert the emotions may be powerfully moved, but is the heart drawn to God by rhythm? What can draw our hearts to God but His Word, and His Spirit?

Dear reader, know that where there is no faithful preaching of God’s Word, and no fervent prayer for His Spirit, hearts cannot truly be blessed. If we would have hearts near to God, we must attend upon the means of grace that He Himself has provided. In the words of Wesley, “Come Holy Ghost, our hearts inspire, let us thine influence prove; source of the old prophetic fire, fountain of life and love. Come, Holy Ghost, for, moved by thee, thy prophets wrote and spoke: unlock the truth, thyself the key, unseal the sacred book.”

THOUGHT: *“For, lo, they that are far from thee shall perish: thou hast destroyed all them that go a whoring from thee. But it is good for me to draw near to God.”* (Ps 73:27-28)

PRAYER: “God, through Himself, we then shall know, if Thou within us shine; and sound, with all Thy saints below, the depths of love divine.” (Wesley)

MONDAY, JUNE 21

ACTS 7:1-53

PSALM 119:33-40

*“Teach me, O LORD, the way
of thy statutes...”*

NOT A HEART TURNED BACK TO EGYPT (I)

Stephen had been accused of speaking *“blasphemous words against this holy place [the temple], and the law”* (Acts 6:13). He was charged with saying that *“Jesus of Nazareth”* would destroy the temple, and *“change the customs which Moses delivered”* (v 14). When challenged, Stephen essentially preaches a sermon in his defence.

The first part of Stephen’s sermon is a marvellous recounting of Israel’s history, from the time of Abraham to the Exodus under Moses. Stephen’s point is that God had been working from the beginning of Israel’s history, through certain men whom He had chosen – first Abraham, then also Jacob and Joseph, and finally Moses. These all believed God’s promise, though they did not personally receive the fullness of it: Abraham, Jacob and Joseph did not even see the multiplication of the people, but in faith they were buried not in Egypt but in the land of Canaan (Acts 7:16-17). Later, however, the people had already begun to disbelieve God’s promise, so that though Moses thought the people would realise that he was their deliverer sent by God, they instead rejected him (vv 25-28), forcing Moses to flee. But *“this Moses whom they refused... the same did God send to be a ruler and a deliverer”* (v 35).

Stephen then applies his account of Israel’s history to show to his immediate audience their stubbornness and hard-heartedness: Moses prophesied of the coming of Christ (v 37), but the Israelites rejected Moses and God and went after false gods, for which God judged them (vv 39-42). The point is that the present generation of those who are opposing Stephen, are no better than their fathers, who resisted and rejected all those prophets from Moses on whom God had sent to them – and now this present generation have killed the great Prophet Himself, Jesus Christ (v 52).

Dear reader, our response to the faithful preaching of God’s Word says much about the condition of our hearts! Do we also *“resist the Holy Ghost,”* when He speaks to us through the Word?

THOUGHT: To reject God’s Word and God’s messengers is to reject God Himself.

PRAYER: Father, make me attentive to Thy preached Word!

TUESDAY, JUNE 22

ACTS 7:37-41

EXODUS 32:1-14

“...and in their hearts
turned back again into Egypt...”

NOT A HEART TURNED BACK TO EGYPT (II)

In particular, Stephen describes how the Israelites at Mount Sinai “*would not obey*” the prophet of God, but “*thrust him from them, and in their hearts turned back again into Egypt, saying unto Aaron, Make us gods to go before us*” (Acts 7:39-40). The reference here is to the events described in the book of Exodus when the Israelites “*saw that Moses delayed to come down out of the mount*” (Exod 32:1) and persuaded Aaron to make them “*gods*” to lead them; and he in wicked foolishness “*fashioned... a molten calf: and they said, These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt*” (v 4).

Stephen describes this in terms of the hearts of the people turning back to Egypt, it seems partly because they were returning in their hearts to the idolatry that they witnessed in Egypt. Growing tired of waiting for Moses to descend from the mount, they wanted “*gods*” that they could see and touch, and in whose worship they could indulge their sensuality - so they “*sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play*” (Exod 32:6).

Even more than that, however, in grossly imagining that they could “*make... gods*” to lead them, the people were implicitly rejecting in their hearts the God who had brought them out of Egypt: and so, effectively, bringing themselves back into the house of bondage. This seems to be the significance of the repeated emphasis in this passage on the one who brought them out of Egypt (cf. Exod 32:1, 4, 7-8, 11). They were behaving like those “*who draw back unto perdition*” (Heb 10:39).

Dear reader, we do indeed “*have need of patience*” (Heb 10:36)! Let us not have such a heart, which is quick to return to the things that once held us in bondage! It can be a powerful temptation for we may once have found solace in those things; and in times when God seems to be silent and distant, it may seem acceptable to compromise for the sake of comfort. But we need to remember that whatever we had from our past idolatries was in fact a false satisfaction. We ought rather to persevere, and seek God than ever to turn back to Egypt.

THOUGHT: Faith looks forward and presses on; not backward.

PRAYER: O Father, let me never “*draw back unto perdition*”!

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 23

HEBREWS 3

PSALM 95

“...lest there be in any of you an
evil heart of unbelief...”

NOT AN EVIL HEART OF UNBELIEF

The Israelites in the wilderness also furnish an example of what the Hebrews writer calls “*an evil heart of unbelief*” (Heb 3:12). The reference here is to the many times in the wilderness when the Israelites “*tempted*” and “*proved*” God; they “*saw [His] works forty years*” (v 9), and yet persisted in their murmurings and rebellions against Him, such that He swore in His wrath, “*They shall not enter into my rest*” (v 11). We are reminded of God’s word to Moses: “*all those men which have seen my glory, and my miracles, which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have tempted me now these ten times, and have not hearkened to my voice; surely they shall not see the land which I sware unto their fathers, neither shall any of them that provoked me see it*” (Num 14:22-23).

Significantly, the writer in this passage quotes not from the Pentateuch, but from the Psalms (Ps 95:7-11). The psalmist himself was using the history of Israel to exhort the people of his day to “*worship and bow down,*” and “*kneel before the LORD*” (v 6). The writer has a similar aim, and uses the same history with the implication that even those within the church are to “*take heed*” (Heb 3:12), lest such a heart be found in them.

Dear reader, mere membership in the visible communion of the church cannot save, any more than physical presence among the mass of those who left Egypt was a certain sign of salvation (cf. Jude 5). It is possible for such an “*evil heart of unbelief*” to be found in any one of us, such that we depart “*from the living God*” (Heb 3:12).

Let us therefore obey the biblical injunction, to “*take heed,*” and “*exhort one another daily*” (vv 12-13). While the day of salvation and grace remains, there is hope for repentance; there is hope that such an evil, unbelieving heart may be transformed by God’s power into a pure and truly believing heart!

THOUGHT: “[I]n the day of temptation” (Heb 3:8), the hearts of the people were revealed. What will be revealed of my heart, when I am tempted?

PRAYER: “Remove this hardness from my heart, this unbelief remove; to me the rest of faith impart, the Sabbath of Thy love.” (Wesley)

THURSDAY, JUNE 24

PSALM 119:65-72

PROVERBS 27:7

*“Their heart is as fat
as grease...”*

NOT A HEART AS FAT AS GREASE

The psalmist describes a contrast between himself and his enemies, *“the proud”* who have *“forged a lie”* against him (Ps 119:69). Their heart, he says, is *“as fat as grease”* (v 70) – the phrase describes something that is thick or calloused, so that nothing can penetrate. In this case the contrast makes it clear that what is being described is the insensitivity of the wicked to the law and the precepts of God: thus the psalmist says of himself by contrast: *“I will keep thy precepts with my whole heart... I delight in thy law”* (vv 69-70).

We need to realise that God’s law is given not for our intellectual assent, but for our willing obedience. But there are those who refuse to accept God’s law as a rule of life, and display a deliberate disregard of His precepts – indeed, that is the natural condition of humanity since the fall.

How then did the psalmist come to think differently of God’s law? What was it that softened his heart? Interestingly, what he mentions here as the turning point for him is his affliction. *“Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word”* (v 67). Indeed, he counts it a good thing: *“It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes”* (v 71). It is because of his affliction, which was at the hand of God, that he is able to say, *“The law of thy mouth is better unto me than thousands of gold and silver”* (v 72).

Dear reader, sometimes the Lord uses affliction to soften our hearts, and make us receptive to His Word. *“The full soul loatheth a honeycomb”* (Prov 27:7) and so those who are full of the luxuries of this life often find the sweet truths of Scripture distasteful; *“but to the hungry soul every bitter thing is sweet,”* and so those who are deprived of earthly pleasures may come to appreciate even the stern rebukes and warnings of Scripture. Let us then not complain if the Lord uses hard times to cause us to embrace His Word as *“better... than thousands of gold and silver”* – because it actually is.

THOUGHT: Have life’s luxuries made my heart *“fat as grease”*?

PRAYER: “Yet I have found ‘tis good for me to bear my Father’s rod; afflictions make me learn Thy law, and live upon my God.” (Watts)

NOT A HARDENED HEART (I)

A “hardened” heart is one that is not responsive to God. The thought here in Proverbs 28:14 is particularly that of unresponsiveness to God’s judgment. One thinks immediately of Pharaoh, who again and again, having witnessed the great power and wrath of God, and trembling before it, yet hardened his heart as soon as the plague was lifted. His foolishness became proverbial even among the heathen, so that the Philistines much later argued among themselves, *“Wherefore then do ye harden your hearts, as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts?”* (1 Sam 6:6).

Often God shows patience and longsuffering in His dealings with mankind, and the foolishness of a hardened heart is well expressed by the Apostle Paul: *“despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?”* (Rom 2:4). When, instead of repenting, we respond to God’s longsuffering by continuing in our sins, we are but treasuring up to ourselves *“wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God”* (Rom 2:5).

“Happy is the man,” rather, *“that feareth always”* (Prov 28:14). We may perhaps think of fear as a detriment, and constant fear as disabling; we may have a conception of courage as a lack of fear, but this is not true. It may perhaps, with greater accuracy, be said that courage is about knowing what to fear: *“fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell”* (Matt 10:28). This kind of fear will lead us to be *“happy”* or blessed in life, for those who are *“in the fear of the LORD all the day long”* (Prov 23:17) will be preserved from all thoughts, words, and deeds that will bring His wrath down upon them.

Dear reader, when God’s wrath is revealed to us, it would be well for us to fear, and repent quickly! Let us not delay, but be sensitive to the spiritual danger of sin and the reality of divine judgment. Let not a hardened heart keep us from blessedness, and doom us to a just destruction.

THOUGHT: The fear of God preserves life.

PRAYER: Father, give me a heart of flesh, not a heart of stone!

SATURDAY, JUNE 26

PROVERBS 28:14

MARK 6:45-52

“...but he that hardeneth his heart
shall fall into mischief.”

NOT A HARDENED HEART (II)

Then also, the concept of a “hardened heart” is sometimes applied in Scripture with reference more specifically to God’s Word, rather than His wrath. For example, the prophet Zechariah was sent to rebuke God’s people thus: *“They refused to hearken, and pulled away the shoulder, and stopped their ears, that they should not hear. Yea, they made their hearts as an adamant stone, lest they should hear the law, and the words which the LORD of hosts hath sent in his spirit by the former prophets: therefore came a great wrath from the LORD of hosts”* (Zech 7:11-12).

Nor is such hardness only found in unbelievers. Even genuine believers may become inured to God’s Word in this way. When the disciples of Jesus were toiling in the boat, and the Lord came to them walking on the sea, they were troubled; and when He came into the boat with them, and the wind immediately ceased, they were *“sore amazed in themselves beyond measure, and wondered”* – and this, for the reason that *“they considered not the miracle of the loaves: for their heart was hardened”* (Mark 6:51-52).

Not long after, when He warned them about *“the leaven of the Pharisees, and... of Herod,”* they *“reasoned among themselves, saying, It is because we have no bread.”* Here the Lord had cause to rebuke them: *“Why reason ye, because ye have no bread? perceive ye not yet, neither understand? have ye your heart yet hardened? Having eyes, see ye not? and having ears, hear ye not? and do ye not remember?”* (Mark 8:15-18). Even after His death and resurrection, *“he appeared unto the eleven as they sat at meat, and upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them which had seen him after he was risen”* (Mark 16:14).

Dear reader, let us beware of such a hardness of heart, when we read or hear God’s Word. Let us respond with child-like faith, trusting God’s Word and believing it whole-heartedly. Let us, indeed, *“receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls”* (James 1:21)!

THOUGHT: *“Be not faithless, but believing”* (John 20:27).

PRAYER: O God, help me to respond with faith to Thy Word.

NOT A HEART EXERCISED WITH COVETOUS PRACTICES

The Apostle Peter writes witheringly concerning the “*false prophets*” and “*false teachers*” who will come into the church, bringing in “*damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them*” (2 Pet 2:1). They will “*bring upon themselves swift destruction,*” but the great danger is that “*many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of*” (vv 1-2).

One of their great motives and methods is that of covetousness. “*Through covetousness shall they with feigned words make merchandise of you*” (v 3). We see here that these false teachers are driven by covetousness and greed: they want money. Yet they also make use of the same desires in others to manipulate and “*make merchandise*” of them. This is something we see also all too often today. Prosperity preachers and televangelists typically play on the greed of their audience in order to feed their own greed - they promise that those who send money to them, will be blessed by God with more money. Multitudes are taken in, because they are blinded by their own covetousness.

The Apostle goes on to describe these false teachers as having hearts “*exercised with covetous practices*” (v 14). What began perhaps as a desire or inkling has been fed and watered; it has been “*exercised,*” that is, they have trained their hearts in covetousness, the way an athlete trains the body. Yet the only prize that they shall win for all this exercise and training is their own destruction. “*The love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows*” (1 Tim 6:10).

If such a heart of covetousness is found in us then we are vulnerable to deception. The devil and his agents will surely use this inclination to deceive and lead astray. Dear reader, let us examine ourselves! We should much rather practise, train, and exercise our hearts in godliness, than in covetousness; for “*godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come*” (1 Tim 4:8).

THOUGHT: How am I exercising my heart?

PRAYER: Father, help me to practise godliness in my life.

MONDAY, JUNE 28
ZECHARIAH 7:8-10
PROVERBS 6:16-19

“...let none of you imagine evil against
his brother in your heart.”

NOT A HEART THAT IMAGINES EVIL (I)

The Word of the LORD that came to the people through Zechariah reminded them of their duty to love their neighbour. This was not to be a theory, but something practised and lived out. They were supposed to be a holy witness; and yet oppression, injustice, and unkindness abounded!

But the duty to love one's neighbour extends beyond merely external acts. Just as the law against adultery prohibits lust in the heart, and the law against murder prohibits anger in speech (cf. Matt 5:21-22, 27-28), so also the law prohibits even a thought of malice and evil against others. This is, after all, one of the things God hates (cf. Prov 6:16-19), and He will surely judge and punish those who harbour such evil in their hearts.

But, dear reader, how easy it is for us to cherish malice and bitterness in our hearts! When we feel ourselves cheated, we behave like Esau who hated his brother and plotted to slay him (Gen 27:41). When we see others blessed instead of ourselves, we behave like Cain who also hated his brother and rose up against him (Gen 4:8); or like Joseph's brethren, who hated him (Gen 37:4) and sold him to merchants. Even when those whom we love are mistreated, we may respond likewise: as Absalom did, hating his half-brother Amnon for two full years, and plotting evil against him in his heart (2 Sam 13:22); or as Simeon and Levi did to avenge their sister (Gen 34:25-31).

How we need to check our hearts for bitterness! “*Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice*” (Eph 4:31) - lest we “*grieve... the holy Spirit of God*” (v 30); or lest we find ourselves unable to study or learn from God's Word because we have not laid aside “*all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speakings*” (1 Pet 2:1-2).

THOUGHT: What God hates, how can I even begin to do?

PRAYER: Father, search my heart, root out all bitterness and evil imagination, and fill me with love and forgiveness!

NOT A HEART THAT IMAGINES EVIL (II)

What we need instead of a heart that imagines evil is a heart that is full of love: for *“charity... thinketh no evil”* (1 Cor 13:5). Such evil thoughts often come from hasty, proud, censorious judgments made against others; justified by assumptions and false conclusions; and manifested in complaints and criticisms. How can it be that a child of God harbours hatred in his heart, when hatred is as the sin of murder (1 John 3:15), and utterly abominable to the God of love?

The answer is that hatred has small beginnings. It begins with just a thought, a little unspoken criticism of another. A little thought in the back of your mind that so-and-so is no good; so-and-so really shouldn't be doing this, or doing that. A thought that is never voiced; but slowly begins to gather around it other thoughts – other criticisms of the same person. Slowly an image of that person is built up in your mind; slowly you begin to indulge in speculation about that person's motives; slowly you begin to invent scenarios where that person displays his “true colours.”

You begin to latch on to any evil gossip or rumour concerning that person, and add it to this growing body of “evidence” that this person is no good. You begin to hate that person, and justify that hatred based on this picture you have built up: nothing that person does can be seen in anything other than an evil light. Finally, when opportunity arises, you take the chance to destroy that person – again, justifying your actions.

It is a testament to the devil's wicked subtlety that he can make us hate another human being, made in the image of God – even a Christian, bought by the precious blood of Christ – over nothing at all. Hatred can be built on the flimsiest of foundations. It all starts with a little thought of evil concerning another person. A little thought that we do not immediately cast out; a little thought that we make room for, and allow to stay. A little seed of bitterness that we do not cast out but allow to rest on a little patch of soil in our hearts, and by and by we water it by dwelling on it mentally until it has blossomed into a full-grown tree, bringing forth evil fruit.

THOUGHT: Imagination is not a realm without accountability.

PRAYER: Father, help me to think no evil!

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 30

1 CORINTHIANS 13:5

PHILIPPIANS 4:8

“...whatsoever things are
true... honest... just... pure... lovely...”

NOT A HEART THAT IMAGINES EVIL (III)

How can this be avoided? How can we cultivate the contrary practice, of not thinking evil of one another? Here are three points for our consideration.

Be objective. Don't judge what you don't know - the hearts of others are outside the realm of your knowledge. Instead, judge what you do know: your own heart. We ought to be willing to think evil of ourselves, before we think evil of others! Don't judge what is outside your domain - we ought rather to give others, especially our brothers and sisters in Christ, the benefit of the doubt wherever possible. Don't allow feelings to direct your judgment - how often we feel hurt, and so assume that someone must have intended to hurt us; when it could easily have been nothing more than a misunderstanding!

Be forgiving. Don't collect grievances or objections against another person - don't allow criticism to build up in your heart. Of course there are times when a person's past behaviour must be taken into account, but in general such things should be cast aside, and not kept in some “bank” of grievance that we hide in our hearts. How easily that vault of venom can cause us to overreact even to minute provocations! Instead, why don't we allow true, just, honest, pure, lovely thoughts of others to build up in our hearts (cf. Phil 4:8)? Why don't we collect a “bank” of the virtuous and praiseworthy things they have done? Instead of keeping a catalogue of evil, and adding to it every unfounded rumour that we hear!

Don't be silent. Don't allow a genuine objection to turn into a poisonous resentment by keeping silent and brooding over a wrong - or worse still telling it to everyone except the person in question! Far too often we see a brother err, but instead of telling him, and lovingly seeking to help him, we keep it to ourselves, or gossip among our friends. We think evil, and cause others to think evil, and all the while that erring brother is not helped. These things ought not to be! If only we would gently help and correct one another instead of harbouring - and spreading - such self-righteous resentment!

THOUGHT: My heart inclines to think evil; I must actively think well.

PRAYER: Father, help me to “*think on these things*” (Phil 4:8)!

Notes

Notes

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