

EXPERIENTIAL UNION



ARTHUR W. PINK (1886-1952)

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Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| 1. Oneness in Heart with God..... | 3 |
| 2. The Nature and Character of Our Union..... | 8 |
| 3. The Maintenance of Our Union | 14 |
| 4. God's Present Relationship to Us | 20 |
| 5. Our Backsliding..... | 25 |
| First, "Remember from whence thou art fallen." | 28 |
| Second, "and repent." | 28 |
| Third, "And do the first works." | 29 |
| 6. The Restoration to Fellowship with Christ | 31 |

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EXPERIENTIAL UNION

1. Oneness in Heart with God

We now will discuss that which in some respects is the most blessed aspect of our theme: for what does our mystical, legal, vital, saving, and practical union with Christ amount to, unless it issues in experimental intimate, precious oneness of heart with Him? This is really the simplest branch of our many-sided subject, yet not a few find it the most difficult, not because of its intellectual intricacy, but because they find it so hard to believe, and harder still to carry out into practice. It seems too good to be true, too blissful for realization in this life, too far above the reach of poor worms of the dust wriggling in the mire. Was it not thus when as an awakened and convicted sinner you first heard that Christ was an all-sufficient Saviour? Ah, but *not for me*. Later, what difficulties presented themselves to your mind: your vileness, your utter unworthiness, your unbelief! What penances, reformations, labors, you supposed were necessary to qualify you for His salvation! But when the Spirit communicated faith, you were amazed at the simplicity of what before had baffled you.

It is much the same in the history of many Christians concerning experimental¹ union and communion with Christ—a conscious, intimate, joyous fellowship with Him Who is altogether lovely. When they hear or read of this, they conclude that such a blissful experience is not for *them*. Sin is too powerful, too active within to ever hope for close fellowship with the Holy One in this life. Others may be more favored; *their* corruptions may be more divinely subdued, but as for *me*, I can only expect to go halting and mourning the rest of my earthly pilgrimage. At best, I can only hope that God will not utterly cast me off, that He will mercifully preserve me from open transgressions which would bring dishonor upon His cause, that He will graciously bear with my innumerable failures, and at last take me to Heaven for *Christ's sake*; but that He should grant me any more than an occasional smile, a sip of His love by the way, is too much for me to expect.

“Ye were called unto *the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord*” (1Co 1:9). To whom were those words first addressed? To those who in their unregenerate days had been preserved from flagrant sins? No indeed; some of them had been guilty of the grossest crimes (see 1Co 6:9-11), but they were “washed...sanctified...justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and by the Spirit of our God.” Were they, then, now living unblemished lives, walking in flawless obedience to God’s commands? No, far from it; read through the epistle, and observe the many offences which the Corinthian saints had committed. Nevertheless, to them the apostle was moved to say “Ye were called unto the fellowship of his Son.” And if *they* were, rest assured Christian readers, that *we* are too.

¹ **experimental** – known by personal experience; experiential.

Though so utterly unworthy in ourselves, still having the flesh unchanged within us, sin ever harassing and tripping us up—*yet* “called unto the fellowship of his Son!”

Alas that so few understand of what that “fellowship” should consist. Alas that any Christian should conclude that indwelling sin, with its daily activities, outburstings, and defilements make “fellowship” with Christ an *impossibility*. Alas that so many suppose that this “fellowship” consists only of an ecstatic experience on the mountain-tops, enjoyed solely by those who gain a constant victory over indwelling corruptions and outward temptations. Were *that* the actual case, the writer would not be penning these lines—rather would he completely despair of attaining unto such “fellowship” with Christ in this life. Ah, my reader, it is those who are still vile sinners in themselves, who find *no* good thing dwelling in their flesh, who are called unto fellowship with God’s Son! Surely that is indeed “good news.” Blessed be His name, the Lord “is a very present help *in trouble*” (Psa 46:1) for those who are troubled by their futile efforts to heal the plague of their own hearts, troubled over unanswered prayers for grace to subdue their iniquities. Yes, divine love has made full provision for *such* to enjoy experimental fellowship with Christ in this life.

“This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save *sinners*; of whom I [not “was,” but] *am* chief” (1Ti 1:15), and it is equally true, blessedly true, that He has *fellowship* with *sinners*. If it were not so, there would be none in this world with whom He could have fellowship, for “there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not” (Ecc 7:20). True, the ineffably holy Christ will not have any fellowship with us in our *sins*, and no renewed heart would desire Him to do so. Nevertheless, it is equally true that He *does* have “fellowship” with sinners: saved sinners, yes; but *sinners* all the same. Did He not have the most intimate fellowship with the apostles? And were they not men of like passions with us? Very far from sinless perfection were they.

But let us now attempt to define *the nature* or character of experimental union and communion with Christ. “There is a friend which *sticketh closer* than a brother” (Pro 18:24) makes known *His* side of this union; “there was *leaning on Jesus’ bosom* one of his disciples, whom Jesus loved” (Joh 13:23) exhibits *our* side of this communion. The first of these remarkable and inexpressibly blessed Scriptures presents to us an aspect of truth which some find it difficult to lay hold of and enjoy. In certain circles the exalted dignity of Christ’s Person has received such emphasis, that a proportionate presentation has not been given of the intimate relations which He sustains to His people; a balance has not been preserved between that in Christ which *awes*, and that which *melts* the heart. It is possible to become so occupied with the Lordship of Christ, as to almost (if not quite) lose sight of His friendship: to be so engaged in rendering to Him the honors which are due Him as God, as to overlook the tender sympathy and compassion which He has for His people as Man.

We are not unmindful of the fact that in other circles there has been a deplorable lack of the reverence and homage to which Emmanuel is entitled, a fearful cheapening of the truth concerning Him, a light and unbecoming alluding to Him as “Jesus,” “our friend,”

“our elder brother,” which grates upon the ears and grieves the hearts of those who have been better taught. Yet in our revolt from this unholy familiarity with the Lord of *glory* and the almost total absence of giving to Him the worship which is His due, there is no sufficient reason why we should swing to the opposite extreme, and view Christ as so far above us as to preclude free approaches to and intimate fellowship with Him. He *is* our Lord, and as such we must prostrate ourselves before Him in the dust, and address Him with holy awe. He is *also* our Friend, and as such we should open our hearts to Him with the utmost freedom, casting all our care upon Him, knowing that He careth for us (1Pe 5:7).

Experimental union with Christ is made possible by, and is to issue from, our *practical* union with Him; that is, our “walking together” in agreement with His revealed will. Experimental communion with Christ is exercised in happy subjection to Him as our Lord, and in intimate intercourse with Him as our Friend. Christ Himself is that “friend which sticketh closer than a brother.” This term “friend” tells of the *closeness* of that relationship which divine grace has established between the Redeemer and the redeemed. It reveals the warm throbbings of His heart unto His own. It gives them full warrant for the fullest confidence and the most unreserved dealings with Him; as it assures of His loving sympathy and deep interest in all that concerns them. There is no aloofness on His part, and there should be no reserve on our part. There should be a readier unburdening of ourselves *to Him* than to our dearest earthly friend or nearest relative.

There are three things requisite in order to our having close communion with one of our fellows. First, that person must be real and present to us; fellowship is not possible with one we know not, or who is far removed from us. Second, we must have a free access to that person, with confidence and boldness toward him; fellowship is not possible where formalities bar our approach and where fear or awe dominates the soul. Third, there must be mutual affection and esteem. Fellowship is not possible where loves exists not or where it has cooled off. Now apply all of this to our present subject. If the soul is to enjoy real experimental union and communion with Christ, He must be a living reality to the heart; faith must bring Him near and give freedom of approach to Him: and the affections must be kept warm and active toward Him; otherwise our religion will quickly degenerate into a mechanical routine, devoid of reality and joy.

In the next place, let it be as definitely insisted upon that our communion with God and His Christ must be *in the light*. “This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another” (1Jo 1:5-7). We cannot now give an exposition of this important passage, but must confine ourselves to that which bears directly upon what we are now treating of, namely, the character of experimental communion with Christ. What is it “to walk in darkness” and what is it to “walk in the light”? The question is one: though viewed from both the negative and positive sides.

The first and most obvious answer must be that, to “walk in darkness” is to conduct ourselves unholily, to follow a course of sin; the works of darkness are the works of the flesh. But we must press the matter more closely home to our consciences. In order to do this, let us consider the leading characteristic of light. The most prominent property of light is its transparency and translucency; it is patent,² open, always and everywhere so, as far as its free influence extends. The entrance of light spreads reality all around. Clouds and shadows are unreal; they breed and foster unreality. Light, then, is the naked truth: it makes manifest; it exposes things. Thus the chief conception which this metaphor of “light” conveys is that of *openness*, clearness, transparency, reality. And that is what God is; that is what Christ—“the light of the world” (Joh 8:12)—is; that is what the Word of truth is—“a light that shineth in a dark place” (2Pet 1:19).

“The light shineth in darkness” (Joh 1:5). He Who is the light came to seek and to save those who “sat in darkness” (Mat 4:16). “For ye were sometime darkness” (Eph 5:8): what a word is that! Not only that in our unregenerate days we dwelt in darkness, but we *were* in ourselves “darkness.” By the fall we lost that element of clearness, brightness, openness, in which we were created at first. Sin entered, and with sin, shame. The clear and open sunshine of the presence and countenance of Him Who is light became intolerable; the covering of fig leaves and the hiding place of the trees of the garden was preferred. Henceforth, to fallen and unregenerate man, light became offensive; darkness is upon the face of the deep of his heart. Henceforth, darkness is his element; he loves darkness rather than light (Joh 3:19). Therefore, deception, insincerity, hypocrisy, concealment characterize him in his attitude toward God.

But at regeneration a miracle of grace takes place: divine light shines in the heart (2Co 4:6), and the consequence is “but now are ye light in the Lord” (Eph 5:8). The result of this is revolutionizing. Not only is the soul now enabled to see things, and to see itself in God’s light, but he renounces the works of darkness, the “hidden things of dishonesty” (2Co 4:2). He throws off his cloak of pretense; he comes out into the open and truthfully confesses to God what he is. He no longer attempts to cover his sins, or pose as a good and righteous person, but honestly owns himself to be a polluted leper, an incorrigible rebel, an inveterate transgressor, a hell-deserving sinner! “An *honest* and good heart” (Luk 8:15) is now his. Previously he thought highly of himself and wished others to flatter him; now he loves *the truth*, and abhors deception and hypocrisy. And, as pointed out in the last article, the believer must *continue* as he began.

It is into the fellowship of Him Who is “light” the believer has entered, and if real communion is to be preserved there must be openness and genuineness on his part. Christ will not tolerate any deception; any attempt at concealment or disguise is certain to displease Him. It is both our madness and our loss to try and hide anything from Him. But He is no hard taskmaster; instead, He is full of love and tender mercy. It is written “A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench” (Isa 42:3). His ears are ever open unto the cries of His erring people, and their tears of repentance are precious in His sight (Psa 56:8). Perfect openness and transparent honesty in our

² **patent** – open to all; generally accessible; unobstructed.

dealings with Him is what He requires; deceit and insincerity He will not tolerate. We cannot walk in the darkness of pretense and have fellowship with Him Who is the Light!

“But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another” (1Jo 1:7). Note it is not now “as he *is* light” (as in v. 5), but “as he is *in* the light.” The thought here is that the same clear and transparent atmosphere surrounds them both. We walk in the light in which God is: it is the light of His own pure truth, His own nature, of absolute reality. The light in which God dwells is His own light—the light which He *is* Himself. In that light He sits enthroned; in that light He sees and knows, surveys and judges all things. And the light in which we are to walk is identically the same light as that in which God is. The same pure medium of vision is given to us: “In *thy* light shall *we* see light” (Psa 36:9). In other words, we must measure everything by God’s pure truth and judge ourselves in the light of His holiness.

The same clear-shining, transparent atmosphere of holiness, truth, and love is to surround us, penetrating our inner man and purging our mind’s eye, our soul’s eye, our heart’s eye, that it may see sin as *God* sees it—as “this abominable thing that I hate” (Jer 44:4); that we may see holiness as *God* sees it—as the inestimable thing which He loves; that all things, all events, all men, all our motives, thoughts, words, deeds may appear exactly to us as what they appear to Him. It is into a fellowship of *light* we are invited to walk. If there is to be a *real* fellowship, it must be a fellowship of *light*, where there is no compromise, no pretense, no insincerity, where the things of darkness and dishonesty are renounced. But can I, who am so full of sin and corruption, go forth into that light, which is so pure and piercing? Not apart from the cleansing blood of Christ! Thank God for the perfect and ever-availing provision of divine grace, providing for the removal of every obstacle which my depravity might interpose against walking in the light.

Experimental communion with Christ is the blessed goal towards which all the other unions lead, that the Lord’s people may have personal, conscious, intimate, joyous union with Him Who loved them and gave Himself for them—an experience beginning in this life, continuing (more perfectly) throughout the endless ages of eternity. The grand end of our vital, saving, and practical union with Christ is to bring us into *experimental oneness* with Him, that we may drink into His spirit, have His mind, share His joy. Of all the experiences of God’s saints on earth *this* approximates nearest to the heavenly bliss. Experimental union consists of knowing, loving, enjoying Christ. It is having plain, practical, personal dealings with Him. A deeper and fuller knowledge of Christ will increase our confidence and joy in Him. The more we are enabled to realize Christ’s relation to us and His changeless love for us, the easier and freer will be our approaches to Him.

Experimental union is based upon *faith’s realization* of Christ’s relation to us and of our relation to Him, enabling the soul to say, “my beloved is mine, and I am his” (Song 2:16). It is faith, and nothing but faith, which makes God in Christ real, yea, present, to the soul; “*seeing* him who is invisible” (Heb 11:27). It is faith, and faith alone, which brings Christ down unto us “that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith” (Eph 3:17). It is faith which gives freedom of approach to Him: “we have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of him” (Eph 3:12)—the faith of which He is both the Author and the

Object. It is only by faith we can enjoy the fact that we were loved by Him from all eternity, and that He now bears us on His heart in the immediate presence of God. “I *live by the faith* of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20) contains the sum total of all spiritual life and spirituality.

Yet the cementing bond of this union is *love*. Faith unites savingly; love, experimentally. Love is as truly a uniting grace as is faith, though it does not unite in the same way. “God is love, and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him” (1Jo 4:16). Where two persons really love each other, their mutual affection makes them to be one; they are wrapped up in each other. So there is a mutual, hearty, reciprocal love between Christ and believers. He loves them, and they Him, and by virtue of that mutual love there is an intimate, experimental union between them. The husband and wife are one not merely by the marriage covenant—the legal tie and external relationship—but also and chiefly because of the love and affection there is between them. So it is betwixt Christ and His saints: *love*, stronger than death, knits them together.

Experimental communion with Christ, then, consists in basking in the sunshine of His conscious presence, sitting at His feet and receiving from Him as Mary did (Luk 10:39), leaning upon His bosom as John did (Joh 13:23). The more we are engaged in contemplating and resting in His wondrous and changeless love for us, the more will our poor hearts be warmed and our affections drawn out unto Him. Our daily aim should be a more full and free acquaintance with the Lover of our souls; and this not so much in a doctrinal way as in a personal and experimental way, in actual communion with Him. It is in real intercourse with our friends, and in their converse with us, that we get most and best acquainted with them. It is even so with the Lord Jesus Christ, our best Friend. Open your heart freely to Him, and beg Him to graciously open His heart freely to you. Humbly remind Him of His words, “Hence-forth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you *friends*; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you” (Joh 15:15).

2. The Nature and Character of Our Union

In seeking to define and describe the nature and character of our *experimental* union and communion with Christ it has been pointed out, first, that it consists in a ready submission to Him as our Lord and an intimate intercourse with Him as our Friend: there is no aloofness on His part, and there should be no reserve on ours. Second, it is a walking with Him in the light, where all is open, real, honest, with no concealment or pretense. Third, it is a knowing, loving, enjoying Christ, having plain, practical, personal dealings with Him. Fourth, it is based on *faith*'s realization of Christ's relation to us and of our relation to Him; only the exercise of faith will make Him real and consciously near us. Fifth, *love* is the cementing bond of this union: there is a reciprocal affection between the Redeemer and the redeemed. Sixth, it consists of a sitting at the feet of our Lord and receiving from Him, a leaning upon the bosom of our Friend and enjoying His

love. Seventh, it is exercised in a real personal intercourse with Him, opening our hearts freely to Him, and receiving free communications from Him.

The great thing for the Christian is to realize that Christ not only gave Himself *for* him, but that He has given Himself *to* him: Christ Himself is mine, my very own! Wondrous, blessed, glorious fact. Oh, for faith to realize it more fully. Oh, for grace to act more consistently with it. Yes, Christ Himself is mine—to live upon, to lean upon, to consult, to confide in, to *make use of* in every way I need Him, to have the freest possible dealings with Him. Christ is *mine*—to enjoy to the utmost extent of my heart, to commune with, to delight in. He is ever with me, and under no conceivable (or unconceivable) circumstances will He ever leave or forsake me. He is ever the same; His love for me never varies. He has my best interests at heart. He can satisfy every longing of the soul as nothing else and none other can. He is ready to share with me His peace and joy. Oh, what a happy soul I should be!

What a change it would make in the experience of both writer and reader if we could more fully grasp the amazing and precious truth that the Lord Jesus has not only given Himself *for* us, but that He has done much more—He has given Himself *to* us. *Christ* is ours! Most blessedly is that fact brought out in the wonderful type of Exodus 12: the self-same lamb whose blood sheltered the Israelites from the avenger was theirs to feed upon, to draw strength from, to enjoy (vv. 7-11). Alas how feebly do any of us apprehend the Antitype³ of this—evidenced in the complaints of our feebleness, leanness, fruitlessness. There is an infinite sufficiency in Christ for time and eternity, and that sufficiency or “fulness” is for us *to draw upon*; but alas, how little we do so. Surely our deepest experimental need is to be taught by the Spirit—for He alone *can* teach us this blessed secret, as He ever *does* where there is a heart really longing to know it—of *how* to make a right and full *use* of Christ.

It is only as we really live *upon* Christ that we can truly live *for* Him. Nor is this the vague, intangible, mysterious thing which human “religion” and Protestant priestcraft would make of it. It is, to the Spirit-taught, the most simple, natural, and practical thing for us. First, it is *faith’s* realization that Christ is truly and actually *mine*; my very own; mine in an infinitely nearer and dearer way than a mother or wife is mine. Second, it is *faith’s* realization that Christ is *with* me, near me, right by my side, “a very *present* help in trouble” (Psa 46:1); the Friend Who “sticketh closer than a brother.” Third, it is *faith’s* realization that *all He has is mine—is*, not shall be! We are even now “heirs of God and *joint-heirs* with Christ” (Rom 8:17). His wisdom, His righteousness, His holiness, His love, His peace, are *ours*. Fourth, it is *faith’s appropriation* of all this—ah, words easily written, easily understood at their letter-meaning—which enables me to draw from Him, share with Him, and enjoy what is mine in Him. *That* is “fellowship” with Christ!

Real and personal *fellowship* with Christ should be made the chief aim of our souls in all our approaches to Him in ordinances, means, and privileges. In public worship, in private reading of the Word, in our meditation, in prayer, in spiritual conversation with

³ **Antitype**—person (here Christ) or object represented or foreshadowed by an earlier type or symbol.

our brethren and sisters in Christ, free and intimate communion with Him should be our definite quest. “One thing have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to enquire in his temple” (Psa 27:4); that was the Old Testament way of expressing this truth. To “dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life” did not signify to spend all his time in the literal tabernacle or temple, but to abide in conscious communion with Him, enjoying His perfections. *This* the psalmist “desired” above everything else, and this he “sought after.” So also must we.

Let us now anticipate an objection: What you have described in the above paragraphs is indeed a beautiful ideal, but alas, it is utterly impracticable for one in such circumstances as I am in. It might be realized by those who are free from the carking⁴ cares of this life, who have not to battle with the world for daily bread for themselves and those dependent upon them, for such who have time and leisure for holy contemplation and spiritual luxuriation. But for a poor soul like me who scarcely knows where the next meal is coming from, delighting one’s self in the Lord is not to be attained unto in this life. First we would say, Be not unduly occupied with God’s temporal dealings with you, for His way in providence is often a great deep. Meditate upon the everlasting covenant of His grace and His boundless love to you. All God’s dealings, even in the most dark and trying dispensations, are in mercy and truth. He has sworn “I will not turn away from them to do them good” (Jer 32:40).

If you will but attend to that same word of promise, meditate upon it, and pray over it, your faith will be strengthened, and you will triumph in the Lord and rejoice in the God of your salvation. Remember the faith of Habakkuk. He said “*Although* the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: *yet* I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength” (Hab 3:17-19). On God’s Word the prophet relied. Even though all outward things should, *in appearance*, make against God’s Word, yet we should believe, with joyful hope, in its sure accomplishment. It will be your wisdom and comfort to leave yourself and every concern with the Lord, committing all, by simple faith, into His hands. “Cast thy burden upon the LORD, and he shall sustain thee” (Psa 55:22).

We can well imagine other readers saying, *That* is not my difficulty. *My* trouble lies deeper than being occupied with and worried over temporal circumstances, sorely trying though they often are. Such blissful communion with Christ as you have depicted above is impossible for me. How can one so depraved, such a mass of rottenness within, such a spiritual leper, such a miserable failure in everything, ever attain unto intimate intercourse with the Lord of Glory? Ah, *that* is the real problem which weighs so heavily on the hearts of the great majority of truly regenerated souls. Nor can the complacent, self-righteous religionists of the day understand such cases, still less can they minister any help and comfort. Being strangers themselves to the plague of their own heart, having

⁴ **carking** – distressing; perplexing; giving anxiety.

such low conceptions of sin, and still lower of the ineffable⁵ holiness of God, being blinded by pride and self-deception, it is utterly impossible that *they* should be able to enter into the anguish of those groaning under sin.

Permit a fellow-groaner to try in his feeble way to point you to “the balm in Gilead” (Jer 8:22). It is *with sin-harassed souls* that Christ holds communion! Ah, *that* is what the haughty Pharisees of the days of His flesh could not understand. They murmured at Him, saying “This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them” (Luk 15:2). It shocked their ideas of religious propriety that He should make so free with those whom *they* considered were so far beneath them spiritually. And if this book falls into the hands of their many successors we would be much surprised if they did not throw up hands of horror against the writer, and denounce such teaching as “dangerous,” as “antinomian,”⁶ as “making light of sin.” But this would move us not; it would indeed be deplorable did we receive the approval and commendation of such people. But as of old “the *common people*” heard Christ “gladly” (Mar 12:37), so to-day those who are poorest in spirit will most readily receive His glad tidings.

The Gospel is that it is the *Lamb* which is given us to feed on. *That* precious title speaks of Christ in His *sacrificial* character. It tells of His amazing grace and matchless love to give Himself to die the death of the Cross for hell-deserving sinners. It tells also of His giving Himself *to* His sinful people, for communion, nourishment, strength, and joy. But more particularly it reveals the perfect *suitability* of Christ for *sinners*. The blacker and viler we see ourselves to be, the better fitted are we for Him Whose name is called “Wonderful” (Isa 9:6)—wonderful in His compassion, in His condescension, His readiness to bind up the broken-hearted, His power to heal lepers. His unfulfilling promise is “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out” (Joh 6:37). Nothing honors Christ more than to come to Him *in faith* while feeling our wretchedness, filthiness, and utter unworthiness.

The precious blood of Christ is the only sufficient antidote for a wounded conscience. It is by new acts of faith in His blood that we experience afresh its virtue and efficacy. True, the believer feels the plague of his heart and groans under a body of sin and death, but this should not hinder him from believing—rather should it be an argument to encourage him in believing. The more conscious we are of our polluted condition, the more deeply should we realize our need of that open Fountain “for sin and uncleanness” (Zec 13:1). “The dying thief rejoiced to see that Fountain in his day, and there may I, though vile as he, wash all my sins away.” To it we should be constantly resorting. There is no danger whatsoever to be afraid of trusting that blood too much, or of having recourse to its cleansing too often—rather should we be afraid of trusting it too little. The more frequently we plead that blood before God the more Christ is honored.

“For we have not a High Priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us *therefore* come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help

⁵ **ineffable** – too great or extreme to be expressed in words.

⁶ **antinomian** – against the Law of God; lawless.

in time of need” (Heb 4:15-16). What a precious word is this for sin-harassed souls! First, we are reminded that Christ is our “High Priest,” the One Who maintains our interests before God. Second, we are assured of His unfailing sympathies: He is One Who has “compassion on the ignorant and on them that are out of the way” (Heb 5:2). Third, in view of Christ’s official relation to and personal interest in us, we are invited to “come boldly [unhesitatingly, confidently, freely pouring out our hearts] unto the throne of grace”—the mediatorial Throne, upon which the eternal Lover of our souls is seated. Fourth, we are to come to that Throne, not only as worshippers to present our offerings of praise, but as sinners “that we may obtain *mercy*.” Finally, access there is given that we may “find *grace* to help in time of need.”

What other assurance from Him could we ask for? What further revelation of His heart is needed? A sense of our misery and wretchedness, filthiness and unworthiness, so far from acting as a deterrent, should prove a stimulus for us to come unto the “friend of publicans and sinners” (Mat 11:19). Christ is not like a “fair weather” friend, who fails in the hour of direst need, who turns his back on you when his love, counsel, and help are the most needed. No, no! Christ is that Friend Who “loveth at *all* times,” that Brother Who is “born for *adversity*” (Pro 17:17). Troubled soul, did you but know Him better, you could not doubt, that; would you but put Him to the proof more, you would obtain fuller evidence thereof in your own experience. Instead of reproving you, He will cordially receive you. It is *faith* which He asks for—faith in His love, His grace, His mercy, His readiness to welcome, to hear our complaints, to heal, to cleanse you.

Faith, dear reader, is neither encouraged nor discouraged by anything we find in ourselves; it is neither encouraged by our graces, nor discouraged by our sinfulness, for faith *looks out of self unto Another*. Nothing will afford such encouragement to believing prayer as a sight of *the Lamb* on His mediatorial Throne (Rev 5:6). No matter how desperate may be our case, how often we have failed and fallen, how low we are sunk, it is *always* the believer’s privilege to turn unto his Redeemer and say, “Look thou upon me, and be merciful *unto me* as thou usest to do unto those that love thy name” (Psa 119:132). Oh, what incentives, what encouragements He has given us in His Word to pray thus: “very great are his mercies” (1Ch 21:13). Therein we read of “the multitude of thy tender mercies” (Psa 69:16), of “his abundant mercy (1Pe 1:3), that He is “plenteous in mercy” (Psa 86:5), and that “the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him” (Psa 103:17).

Very similar as the expressions are in sound, yet there is a vast difference between “Christian experience,” and the “experience of a Christian.” Real and normal “Christian experience” is for the heart to be occupied with Christ, delighting itself in Him. But “the experience of the average Christian” consists largely of an increasing knowledge of sin and self, and *that* fills him with misery and loathing, and with a sense of emptiness and helplessness. Nevertheless, that only *fits* him the more for Christ—all the fitness He requireth is to feel our need of Him. But alas, only too often *Christ* is excluded from our thoughts, and then the state of our poor minds is very variable, dark, and uncomfortable, afflicted with many disquietudes and sorrows. As we feel sin at work within, we cannot but sorrow;

and as we feel sorrow, we are often distracted. Yea, this is ever the case where God leaves us to *reason* about ourselves, to exercise our thoughts on what *we* are in ourselves.

It is in seasons of despondency and sorrow that we most need to turn to Christ and say, “Look thou upon me, and be merciful unto me, as thou usest to do unto those that love thy name.” *This* is to “make use” of Him, to honor Him, to own Him as our loving Friend. When everything appears to be hopeless, go to the Throne of grace, for Christ is exactly suited to thee and is all-sufficient for thee. Our desperate case will only serve to draw out His heart, to show forth His grace, to display His compassion, to exercise His mercy, to manifest His all-sufficiency, to endear Himself to our hearts. *His* heart is ever toward us. “Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, *they* may forget, yet *will I not* forget thee. Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands; thy walls are *continually* before me” (Isa 49:15-16), He declares. Then why should you doubt His love, or question His willingness to receive you graciously, hear you patiently, and cleanse you effectually?

Oh, my sin-stricken brother, my sin-mourning sister, return unto Him Who first sought you out when there was none other eye to pity. Say unto Him, “Hast thou not loved me with an everlasting love (Jer 31:3); wast Thou not wounded for my transgressions, bruised for my iniquities; so that the chastisement of my peace was upon Thee, that by Thy stripes I might be healed (Isa. 53:5)? Hast Thou not said ‘Oh, Israel, return unto the LORD thy God, for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity.’” Take with you words, and turn to the Lord, say unto Him, “Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously, and hast thou not promised ‘I *will* heal their backsliding, *I will* love them freely’ (Hos 14:1-2, 4)?” Ah, my Christian friend, cannot you see that the Lord permits these sad falls, with the sorrow of soul which they occasion us, to make way for the discovery of His gracious heart, that we may *prove for ourselves* that He *is* a Friend that “sticketh closer than a brother!” Earthly friends may fail and leave us; one day soothe, the next day grieve us; but there’s One Who’ll ne’er deceive us, O *how He loves*.

Experimental communion with Christ requires that we be continually *cleansed by Him*: a fuller consideration of this we must leave (D.V.)⁷ for the future; in the meanwhile, let it be pointed out that divine grace has made full provision for this: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1Jo 1:9). Note well that this comes immediately after, “If we say that we *have no sin*, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (vs. 8). Sometimes the newly converted soul is favored with such grace, with such communion with Christ, that iniquity hides its evil face, and it seems as though sin in us has been slain. But indwelling corruption soon re-asserts itself, yet pride is unwilling to *acknowledge* it, and the temptation is to gloss it over and call it by some pleasanter name than *sin*. But *that*, dear friend, is Satan’s effort to draw us back again to “walk in *darkness*”(vs. 6)—in deception and dishonesty, and it must be steadfastly resisted.

⁷ D.V. – *Deo volente*: if God is willing.

“If we *confess* our sins,” *that* is to “walk in *the light*”(1Jo 1:7)! To “confess our sins” to Him is to open our hearts to Him. It is to spread our case before Him, concealing, palliating⁸ nothing. It is to fully tell Him of all that damps our zeal after holiness, that quenches our love, that makes us miserable in ourselves. It is a laying bare of the whole of our inner man to the loving and wise Physician, Who alone knows how to deal with us. And *He* is to be trusted with all the secrets of your soul. He is “faithful and just:” He will not heal your wound slightly; He will set your sins before Him in the light of His countenance, and cause you to loathe them. As you *continue* this frank and open dealing with Him, He will not only “*forgive*” but “cleanse you from all *unrighteousness*”—deliver from deceit and guile, purge from reticence and reserve.

The more we walk in God’s light, the more clearly will we see what vile creatures we are, and how far, far short we come of God’s glory. The more we cultivate intimate communion with Christ, the more will He cause us to see that what we deemed “trifles” are grievous sins. But if we “confess” them, honestly, penitently, daily, He is “faithful and just to forgive us.” Ever remember that He requires “*truth* in the *inward* parts” (Psa 51:6), and lies and pretense He will not tolerate. Probably you say, *I have* confessed my sins to Him until now I am thoroughly ashamed to do so any more. *That* is pride and unbelief. When Peter asked if he was to forgive his erring brother seven times, the Lord answered, “Till seventy times seven”; *that* is what *grace* does! Oh my Christian reader, come to this Friend of sinners more frequently, rely upon His promise more fully, and He will not repulse you.

3. The Maintenance of Our Union

Having sought to describe at some length the nature or character of the intimate and precious experimental communion which it is the right and privilege of the believer to have with the everlasting Lover of his soul, we will now pass on to consider the *maintenance* of the same. The Lord has graciously provided full and adequate *means* for this, and it is entirely our own fault if we fail to avail ourselves of them. Neglect of those means produces the same effects upon the spiritual life as neglect of natural means does upon the physical and mental. The body cannot thrive if the laws of health be despised; the mind cannot be developed if its education and discipline be ignored; and the soul cannot be preserved in a healthy state if those things which make for our well-being be slighted. God’s blessing rests upon *the use of* those means of His appointing, but He places no premium on slothfulness; and if we are indifferent and careless, then we must expect to be lean and sickly, joyless and fruitless.

Each of us needs to honestly face and seriously answer this question. *How highly* do I *really* value communion with Christ? I am deeply concerned about my temporal prospects. I give much thought to my earthly circumstances. I am at great pains to obtain a living in the world, so that I may have a roof over my head and food and raiment. I am

⁸ **palliating** – making to appear less serious or offensive; excusing.

anxious to have a few close friends, and do all in my power to maintain good-will with them. I seek to do my duty by my family. Yes, all well and good; all right in their place. But their place is a subordinate one. *Christ* has the *first* claims upon me. Do I *realize* this? Am I acting accordingly? Am I making it my chief concern to cultivate closer communion with Him? Am I—amidst all the problems, frictions, trials of this life—making *Him* my principal Confidant, Counselor, Helper? Is it *Him* I am most seeking to please, honor and glorify? If not, is it not high time that I did so?

Do I not owe far, far more to the Lord Jesus than to all my earthly associates and friends, yea, than to my nearest and dearest relatives? And is He not desirous of my treating Him *as the* “friend that sticketh closer than a brother?” Has He not invited me to the most intimate dealings with Him? Is it not my privilege, yea, my bounden duty, *to* give Him the *first* place, each day, in my affections, my thoughts, my plans? Has He not supplied the utmost encouragement for me to cast *all* my care upon Him? Has He not given me promises exactly suited to every circumstance, every difficulty, every need, I may get into? Has He not plainly revealed the *means* which will promote my fellowship with Him? Has He not shown me that neither the presence of indwelling sin nor its breakings forth into activity need make communion with Him a practical impossibility?

But alas, what vile ingrates we are! What incorrigible wretches! How often have we given the Lord cause to say, “My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water” (Jer 2:13)? None but Christ can satisfy the heart, yet we are terribly slow in really believing it. We grasp at shadows, pursue phantoms, seek to feed on ashes, and then wonder why we are so miserable. God will not long allow His people to rest in *things*, or find contentment in their circumstances. He it is Who both gives and takes away, Who gratifies or thwarts our wishes. We brought nothing into the world, and it is certain we shall carry nothing out of it; therefore, there is nothing in the world which deserves a single anxious thought from us, for we shall soon be at the end of our journey through it.

None but Christ will be sufficient for us when we are called upon to pass through the valley of the shadow of death, and none but Christ can do us any real good now—what we need is to really *believe* that truth. And does not God take abundant pains to prove the truth of it to us? He removes this and withholds that, because He sees that our hearts are too much set upon them. We imagine that a certain thing would be very pleasant and profitable, and fancy that we cannot do without it; if we could but obtain it, we promise ourselves much satisfaction from it. If God grants it to us, do we not find that it is *not* what we expected? We dream dreams, build air castles, live in many a fancied paradise, only to be bitterly disappointed. God’s purpose in those disappointments is to wean us from the world, to make us sick of it, to teach us that all down here is but “Vanity and vexation of spirit” (Ecc 2:11).

O my reader, it would make much for our peace and blessedness if we committed the management of the whole of our affairs into the hands of Christ. We need to continually pray Him to save us from having any will of our own, to work in us complete subjection to

and satisfaction with His holy will. By nature we are full of restlessness, covetousness, discontent—never satisfied with what we do have, ever lusting after what we do not have. But by grace we may live more happily than a prince, even though we possess nothing more down here than bare food and raiment; yea, *shall* do so if we seek and find all our satisfaction in Christ alone. Here is the key to the extraordinary history of Paul and Silas, Bunyan (1628-1688) and Rutherford (1600-1661), Madame Guyon (1648-1717) and many others. Why were they so contented and joyful while lying—some of them for many years—in prison? No doubt God favored them with a double portion of His grace and comfort, yet the real explanation is that their hearts were completely absorbed with Christ.

Now the gracious provisions which the Lord has made for the maintaining of personal and experimental communion with Himself are revealed, first, in the Old Testament Scriptures, particularly in what is recorded therein of His dealings with Israel, and we lose much if we fail to give our best attention thereto. There we see the Lord taking unto Himself a peculiar people out of all the nations of the earth; that which moved Him thereto was His own sovereign grace, for there was nothing in them, more than in others, to commend them to His favor. They were a poor and afflicted people, enslaved, in cruel bondage to the Egyptians. They were an unbelieving and stiff-necked people, slow to appreciate the mercy of God toward them, and slower still to walk worthily of His goodness to them. They were a self-willed, and murmuring people, for after the Lord had wrought marvelously for them, each fresh testing they encountered found them full of distrust and grumbling. Nevertheless, the Lord patiently bore with their waywardness and ultimately brought them into the promised inheritance.

First, the Lord manifested His unfathomable *love* for them. He showed that, when there was none other eye to pity them in their low estate, *His* did; and that when there was no other arm to save them, *His* would. He heard their cries as they groaned under the lash of their cruel taskmasters, was moved with compassion toward them, and sent a deliverer. Second, He manifested His all-mighty *power*, working such wonders on their behalf as were never witnessed on earth before or since. Pharaoh withstood Him, but he and his hosts were swallowed up in the Red Sea as though they had been so many impotent ants. Wondrously did the Lord work, baring His arm, exhibiting His strength, and demonstrating that with Him all things are possible. Such displays of God's love to and of His might on behalf of Israel, was well calculated to draw their hearts to Him, establish their confidence in Him, and lead them to covet the high privilege of communion with Him. Such was the case, nor were they disappointed, as Exodus 15 shows.

Third, the Lord undertook to graciously act as their Guide, Protector, and Provider. On their journey to the promised land, a wilderness had to be crossed, but they were not left to their own poor resources—the Lord Himself cared for them. A pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night conducted them across the trackless desert. A supply of angel's food was given for the sustenance of their bodies: this fell within their own camp, so that no arduous journey was required to obtain it, and no charge was made for it. An unfailing supply of fresh water was provided for them by the living stream which gushed from the smitten rock. Infallible assurance was given that while they remained in obedience to God

no enemy should stand before them, that *He* would fight their battles for them. No sickness came upon them, their feet did not swell, nor did their clothes become old and worn. Full proof did they have that “Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD” (Psa 33:12).

The Lord was pleased to reveal Himself on the most intimate terms. Their leader, Moses, was permitted to speak with Him face to face, as a man speaketh to his friend; yea, it is recorded that “Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel...*saw* the God of Israel...and upon the nobles of the children of Israel he laid not his hand [in judgment]: also they saw God, and *did eat and drink*” (Exo 24:9-11) at perfect ease in His presence. Furthermore, God graciously acted as the Legislator of the nation, giving them a complete set of laws which covered every aspect of their life, social, political, and religious. No other people were so wondrously provided for: “He showed his word unto Jacob, his statutes and his judgments unto Israel. He hath not dealt so with any nation: and as for his judgments, they have not known them. Praise ye the LORD” (Psa 147:19-20). Those commandments were not grievous, but just, merciful and spiritual, and were designed for the good and well-being of His dear people. In keeping of them there is a great reward.

Finally, complete provision was made for Israel’s *failures*. Those laws were not given to sinless creatures, and divine wisdom devised a method whereby an erring people might continue in communion with Himself, and this in such a way that both His justice would be satisfied and His amazing grace evidenced. This method was a series of oblations⁹ and ablutions,¹⁰ sacrifices and cleansings. A priesthood was appointed to serve for God on behalf of the people, and an high priest as their special representative before Him. Peace offerings, sin offerings, and trespass offerings (Lev 3-5) were appointed to cover the varied offenses of individuals, while atonement was made for all the iniquities of the whole nation on one particular day in the year (Lev 16). Most blessed of all was the provision made for those who had been defiled by contact with death: here the value of sacrificial atonement was *applied* to them. Obviously the blood of a slain animal could not be preserved, so its “ashes” were laid up, placed in a vessel, and running water put therein, and then sprinkled upon the one needing cleansing (Num 19).

Full provision, then, was made for the removing of everything unsuited to the holy presence of the Lord. The appointed means were at hand for His people to approach Him without tarnishing the purity of His sanctuary. In the above type (Num 19) “water” was *not* a figure of the Word, rather was it *the means* for applying the death of the atoning sacrifice. As long as a child of God continues in this sin-cursed world, where everything is defiling and under the sentence of death, and as long as the evil nature remains in him, will pollution be contracted and offenses be committed; and therefore will he need a daily pardon. Therefore, in addition to the general remission of sins which he received at his conversion, he requires a constant application to his conscience—by the Spirit—of the atoning sacrifice of Christ. The blood of the Lamb was *shed* once for all at the

⁹ **oblations** – all things offered or presented in worship or sacred services; offerings; sacrifices.

¹⁰ **ablutions** –washings of the body preparatory for religious duties.

Cross, but it is *sprinkled* on the believer (that is, the efficacy of it is applied to him) as often as he needs and his faith appropriates it.

The above type is such a beautiful one that we cannot forbear dwelling on it a little longer. The sacrificial animal was to be a *red* heifer (Num 19:3)—the color of guilt (Isa 1:18); yet it must be “without spot or blemish.” It had to be one on which a yoke had never been bound, for Christ came to be the Sacrifice of His people of His own free will. It had to be led forth “without the camp” (compare Heb 13:11). It was slain before the priest, but not by the priest himself; so our Saviour was slain by others. The heifer was burned and its ashes mixed with pure water. Now when an Israelite became ceremonially defiled, he was excluded both from the tabernacle and the congregation. But here was the gracious provision made to *restore* him and maintain him in communion with God. Those ashes mixed with water were sprinkled upon him; so it is by the Spirit’s re-application of the blood of Christ that those out of communion with the Lord are restored.

Now to His Old Testament people God gave a wondrous manifestation of His love, a full exhibition of His all-sufficiency and readiness to meet their every need, a complete revelation of His will for them in all the details of their daily lives—and then made a most gracious provision to meet their failures and maintain them in fellowship with Himself. Thereby God showed that He was infinitely worthy of their love, confidence, and obedience. But it is in the New Testament that we find the *fullest* occasion for the drawing out of our hearts unto Him, the revelation of the means which He has provided for our personal and experimental communion with Himself, and of the provisions He has made for the maintaining of the same. He has done far, far more for us than He ever did for the nation of Israel; they had but the shadows and the types, whereas He has given us the Substance and the Antitype. Abundant cause, then, is there for the assuring of our hearts and the drawing out of them in adoring gratitude and praise.

We have received a more signal proof of God’s love than did the Hebrews: instead of providing an animal to shelter us from the avenging angel, He gave His own precious Son to be the sacrifice for our sins. He has granted us a more remarkable exhibition of His power: instead of swallowing up Pharaoh and his hosts in death, He has triumphantly brought Christ out of death. So, too, the provisions He has made for us while here in this wilderness-world far excels theirs. We have His completed Word for a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path, and the Spirit Himself indwelling to guide and govern our wills. Far more intimately has God revealed Himself to us than ever He did to Israel: “For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2Co 4:6). Even more perfect provision has been made for our failures than was for theirs, for Christ Himself has gone, “into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us” (Heb 9:24), and there “He ever liveth to make intercession” for us (7:25).

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; (For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and show unto you

that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;) That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full” (1Jo 1:1-4). We will not give an exposition of these verses, but ask the reader to note well *the order of* truth presented in them. Verse 4 speaks of fulness of joy; and of what is that the outcome? Verse 3 tells us: it is based upon “fellowship” with the Father and His Son; and in what does that fellowship consist? Verses 1-2 tell us: in a personal, intimate, experimental knowledge of Christ Himself—seeing, hearing, *handling* Him—you only “handle” one close by your side, and one who is dear to you.

It is in intimate fellowship with Christ that real communion with Him consists. It is by the mind being daily engaged with the knowledge-passing love of Christ—meditating thereon, believably—that the heart is drawn out unto Him. The Christian should seek, above all else, to be occupied with Christ’s *love* for him, to value that love far above his own enjoyment of it—the one being the cause, the other but the effect of it. We should esteem Christ’s love beyond all the benefits and blessings that flow from it. We should labor to apprehend from the Scriptures the freeness, the eternity, the immutability of that love. It is our contemplation of His *love* which admits us into the freest and fullest heart-communion with Him. *That* was the source and spring of Christ’s own joy and blessedness—His occupation with the Father’s love to Him. Note how often He dwelt upon it: John 3:35; 5:20; 15:9; 17:26. The Father’s love was precious to Christ, and Christ’s should be unto us.

Now all our *enjoyment* of Christ’s love is the fruit of knowing and resting in the same, just as it is the true spiritual *knowledge of* Christ which makes way for the exercise of faith in Him. Our deepest need is to know Christ as He is exactly *suited to us*—as the tender mother is suited to her wailing child, as the physician is suited to a suffering patient, as a firm anchor is suited to a storm-tossed ship, as a guide is suited to a traveler who knows not the way, as food is suited to a starving man. Christ, dear reader, is exactly suited to the Christian: suited to everything which concerns him, suited to his every need, his every problem and trial, his every state or case. Oh, to *live on* Christ exactly as He is revealed in the Word. Oh, to *bring in* Christ continually, to make Him our closest Confident, our constant Counselor, our All in all. He is received into our minds by spiritual meditation in our hearts.

As another has said, “I simply address the Lord Jesus, inwardly in my mind, saying Lord Jesus, look upon me, take notice of all within me, exercise Thy compassion upon me, exactly as my necessities require. Keep, O keep me; bless, O bless, me; defend me for Thy mercies’ sake, from sin, the world, and Satan; let me be content to be nothing; do Thou be my all. I call this *communion*. If this be so, then I find it to be more or less my constant practice; because as I cannot live but I must feel sin, so I cannot live but I must look to Jesus for salvation from it, and call on Him to exercise His grace and pity towards me, so long as I am the subject of it. Indeed, I think the greatest communion with Christ, and the Father in Him, through the Spirit, in this present state, is, and doth

principally consist in a total renunciation of self, and in a real and actual dependence on the Lord; and the more *simple* this dependence, so much the better.”

The *helps* to the promotion of an increased knowledge of, communion with, and joy in Christ, are the reading of the Word—regarding the same as a series of love letters from Him to me personally—spiritual meditation upon what I have read, turning the same into simple prayer.

4. God’s Present Relationship to Us

Christ Himself is mine! *Christ Himself* is thine, dear Christian reader. Oh, that our poor finite hearts could apprehend a little of what that means. Think for a moment of *Who He is*: the Brightness of God’s glory, the express Image of His person; Immanuel, God manifest in flesh. In Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. What then cannot He do! All power in heaven and earth is His. Think too of *what He has done for* His people. He became poor that we might become rich; He came to earth that we might go to heaven; He died that we might live. What must be His love for us! Think of His *present relationship* to us—His righteousness is imputed to our own account; His blood is our purity before God; His fulness is ours to draw upon (Joh 1:16); His Spirit indwells us. He is our great High Priest on high, ever living to make intercession for us.

Christ is the “friend that sticketh closer than a brother.” He would have us *come to Him continually* (1Pe 2:4) with all our wants, cares, sins, and sorrows; He is able to lift our hearts above them all. None outside Christ is worth a serious thought. Oh, to bask in the sunshine of His conscious presence, to rejoice in His love, to dwell upon the perfect righteousness He has wrought out for us, to be daily occupied with the sufficiency of His atoning blood, to find in Him all that we need for time as well as for eternity. Oh, to *live upon* Christ continually, no matter what you feel or experience in yourself. Let nothing hinder you, my brother, my sister, from keeping up an unbroken communion with your precious Lord and Saviour. This is your right, your privilege, your portion.

Nothing should hinder the Christian from experimental communion with Christ. He should turn *everything* he experiences with regard to circumstances, temptations, sins, friends and enemies, into seeking unto Christ, and finding in *Him* the opposite of all that grieves him in *them*. Oh, to live freely, fully, wholly, on Christ. We shall do so in heaven, why not do so on earth! Only as the heart is fixed steadfastly on Him is peace and joy our conscious portion. It is only by living *out of* our wretched selves that we can enjoy the Person, the work, the fulness of the Lord Jesus. This is the secret of true happiness, and only so far as we find our happiness in Him is practical holiness promoted. His eye is ever upon us; why is not ours ever upon Him? He is the Sum of perfection, the “altogether lovely” One (Song 5:16). While we view Him in His peerless excellency, our souls cannot but be enamored of Him.

The greatest loss and misery which can befall us this side of eternity is to be looking off from Christ. None other can do us any real good. But the trouble is in our own proud, legal, self-righteous, deceitful hearts. We are not content to be *nothing* in ourselves, and

for Christ to be *everything*. We want to be something, spiritual “Somebodies.” We want to experience something within which will feed our pride and give us satisfaction. We want to feel that we are *better* than when we first came to the Saviour as hopelessly lost, utterly undone, woe-begone, despairing sinners. We may not be quite conscious of this subtle working of pride, but that is what it is, nevertheless. All the fitness He requireth is to feel my need of Him, is as true now as when I first fell at His feet owning myself to be a foul leper.

The whole of practical godliness is summed up in the *denial* or repudiation of *self*. We cannot make Christ our all in all till self be loathed and renounced—by which we mean *all* that pertains to self, good, bad, and indifferent. But this is only possible by the exercise of *faith*, for faith consists in going outside of ourselves to Christ for everything—for strength, for wisdom, for holiness, for peace, for joy. The whole of our salvation is in Him. Oh, to be able to truly say, “My soul shall make her boast *in the LORD*” (Psa 34:2)—not in my “consecration,” not in my growth in grace, not in my knowledge of spiritual mysteries, not in my service,” not in my “victory over sin,” not in my spiritual attainments, not in the number of souls I have “won”; but *in the Lord*. Oh, to be done with *religious self*!

Having sought, then, to show again wherein experimental communion with Christ consists, and dwelt upon the means and maintenance thereof, we must now turn to the darker side of our subject and consider the interruption and severance of the same. And in this connection we cannot do better than devote the remainder of this chapter to a careful examination of our Lord’s words in Revelation 2:4, “I have against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.” As an assembly is but the aggregate of its members and officers, the rebuke to the Ephesian church applies directly unto individual Christians who are in the condition here described. It is one in which *the heart* is not so deeply affected as it once was with the love of God in Christ, nor is there now such devotion toward nor delight in Him; and in consequence, there is a feebler resistance to sin and slackening pursuit of holiness.

It is to be carefully noted that the charge which is here preferred by Christ is not “thou hast *lost* thy first love” (as it is frequently misquoted), but “thou hast *left* thy first love,” which is a more definite act, and emphasizes the failure of responsibility. The sad state here depicted signifies a decay in grace, a declension in spirituality, a waning of affection, with the resultant loss of relish for divine things, growing carelessness in the use of means, and formality in the performance of duty. It is a state of heart that is here in view, which may or may not be accompanied by outward backsliding. The fine gold has become dim. Christ no longer holds the first place in the soul’s affections. Some are conscious of this decay in love, while others aware of it draw the erroneous conclusion they have never sincerely loved Christ at all.

Genuine Christians may find their love for Christ languishing. Just as the body will soon be chilled if on a winter’s day it leaves the fireside, so the soul’s ardor and fervor will quickly wane if the things of time and sense are allowed to crowd out close communion with Christ. But though grace may decay, it is never utterly destroyed; hence

the error of speaking about “losing” our first love. The “seed” of God (1Jo 3:9) remains in His people even when they backslide: it did in David, and in Peter. There is a vital principle communicated in regeneration which is indestructible. So, then, though the Christian’s love may suffer a sad abatement, it is never totally extinguished; the acts and fruits of it may be few, its measure may greatly diminish, but the root of it is still present.

That we may the better understand this spiritual disease (and thus be fortified against Satan’s lies) let us point out *what it is not*. First, not every distemper or ailment which the renewed heart perceives and mourns over is a leaving of our first love. Every act of known sin is not apostasy, nor even a degree of it; as every rise of bodily temperature after a meal is not a fever. There are infirmities and failures in the most spiritual saints. As said an old writer, “Alas for the generation of the just, if every vain thought, idle word, or distempered passion, were a decay of love.” Nothing is so uncertain as to judge ourselves by particular acts, for in every act love does not put forth itself so strongly as at other times. Some obstructions of love there may be for the present, which the soul takes notice of and retracts with sorrow, but still we hold on our course.

Second, every abatement or absence of transports of soul and mountain-top elations is not a leaving of first love. At conversion there are strong joys and liftings up of soul upon our first acquaintance with God in Christ, but such an experience is not sustained, nor meant to be so. A healthy person will regularly relish his food, yet he must not expect it to produce such sensations of pleasure as does the first meal to a starving man. At conversion our love shows itself in sensitive expressions, for as yet it is not dispersed and diffused in the several channels of obedience; but when the Christian learns how many ways he is to express his love to God, he may have a true zeal and affection for Him, and become “rooted and grounded in love” (Eph 3:17), without those ravishments of soul which he experienced when first realizing that his sins were all pardoned and that he was accepted in Christ.

Third, nor must the Christian conclude that his love has decayed because he no longer experiences those conscious goings forth of heart to God as he had *in special seasons* when God granted him a high day in His courts. There are occasions when God feasts the soul so that it is constrained to say, “My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and with fatness, and my mouth shall praise thee with joyful lips” (Psa 63:5). There are times when we are favored with rich experiences of God’s love, to which all the pleasures of the creature are no ways comparable. Such are very great mercies, but they are never intended for us to try our state by. A settled calm, a quiet peace of soul, is an even greater mercy than occasional transports of joy. If we preserve our relish for spiritual things it is a surer proof of our standing in grace than in any spasmodic or sporadic raptures.

Though Christians ought not to lightly or rashly judge themselves guilty of a decay in their love, yet on the other hand they should not readily acquit themselves of it, for it is a great evil. The highest degree of love does not answer to the infinite worthiness of Christ, nor to what we owe Him for having rescued us from hell and secured for us an eternity with Himself in heaven. But when a believer falls from that measure of love whereunto he had already attained, it is the more grievous because to now seek his happiness in things, to settle down with a measure of contentment in his backslidden state,

is tantamount to saying that he had formerly loved Christ too much, and had been more earnest and diligent in seeking to please Him than was necessary. Thereby he condemns his former love and disesteems Christ as not worthy to be loved with *all* heart, mind, and strength. Moreover, as love decays, so do all our other graces, with their fruits and works. Nor will Christ, Who is jealous of His peoples' affection, ignore their growing coldness, but will make them smart for their sin and folly.

It is not without reason then that Christians are exhorted to "keep yourselves in the love of God" (Jude 21). The healthy Christian is still apt to remit something of his delighting himself in the Lord, and his constant duty to honor Him in all things; and at no point does he need to be more upon his guard than in *the preserving of his love*. There is much of self-pleasing in us, love of our own ease and carnal gratification, much lusting after the things of this world, and such a continual opposition of the flesh to the Spirit which ever seeks to draw off from God and heavenly things, that we cannot be sufficiently watchful against everything which has a tendency to quench that spiritual fire which should always be burning in our hearts. Unless we daily heed that exhortation, "Keep thy heart with all diligence" (Pro 4:23) we shall quickly lapse into that careless and cold state which is the case with the great majority of professing Christians. How much we need to pray for one another "the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God" (2Th 3:5).

Many who have left their first love *are little sensible* of the sad fact. One reason for this is that spiritual ailments are not laid to heart till they openly appear in their effects and fruits. A believer may be active in external duties while his love has become cold; the life of his duties may be decayed, though the duties themselves be not left off—as the Pharisees were scrupulous in tithing mint and rue, but omitted "the love of God" (Luk 11:42). A correct outward deportment is no proof that the affections are still warm toward Christ. As the glory of God is seen leaving the temple of Ezekiel by degrees—first from the holy place, then to the outer court, then to the city, then resting on one of its encircling hills, so it is when Christians grow cold to God. The Lord no longer has the throne of the heart, then secret prayer is neglected, then family worship declines, then public duties become irksome, and then sin begins to lead us into practices dishonoring to Christ; and all because we did not observe and judge the *first declinings*.

Now *the decay of love* is seen in two things: first, in the diminishings of its degree. That love which we are required to give to the Lord consists in valuing and esteeming Him above all else; and this is to be manifested by us in a constant care to please Him, a fear to offend Him, a desire to enjoy Him, a steady delighting in Him. When any of these are abated, as to any considerable degree, then our love is chilling or growing cold. Where love is healthy and the favor of God is highly valued, there is a sincere effort made "that we might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing" (Col 1:10). But when the heart grows more or less indifferent whether our conduct is honouring to God, and we are more set upon gratifying the flesh, then love is decayed. While His fear be truly upon us we will say, "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (Gen 39:9).

Now there is in the Christian a yearning to enjoy God in Christ, and a strong tendency of heart toward Him argues a healthy love. When we cannot regard ourselves as happy

apart from Him and count all else as dung and dross (Phi 3:7-9), when we desire a sense of His love and are deeply affected by a lack thereof, we cry “my soul followeth hard after thee” (Psa 63:8). The Christian longs for sanctifying grace, hungers and thirsts after righteousness, and the perpetual vision of Christ hereafter. But as these desires decrease, so there is a diminishing in the degree of our love. The soul esteems communion with God above all else: “Thou hast put gladness in my heart, more than in the time their corn and their wine increased” (Psa 4:7); “I have rejoiced in the way of thy testimonies as in all riches” (Psa 119:14). But when we mourn not for the absence of the light of God’s countenance shining upon us, when we cease to esteem His Word more than our necessary food, then our love is waning.

Second, the decay of love is evidenced by the intermission of its acts or effects, for when the heart grows cold and listless it becomes unfruitful. Let us consider some of the principal workings of love *Godward*. These are seen in our thinking and speaking of Him: “I remember thee upon my bed, and meditate on thee in the night watches” (Psa 63:6); “my meditation of him shall be sweet” (Psa 104:34). As the wicked are described as those who seldom think upon Him (Psa 10: 4), contrariwise, it is the pleasure of a renewed soul to be much occupied with God’s perfections. But when our hearts and minds swarm with vain imaginations and idle dreamings, and thoughts about God are repelled as unwelcome guests, love has decayed. The less our love for God, the less we shall think upon and speak of Him. Again; where love is vigorous, communion with God in prayer and holy duties is ardently desired and earnestly sought: “Seven times a day do I praise thee” (Psa 119:164). But when communion is neglected, and a sense of God’s presence is not our main object in the use of means, He has to say, “My people have forgotten me days without number” (Jer 2:32).

Consider the effects of love with respect to *sin*. When the sense of our deep obligations to Christ is warm upon the heart, we are constrained to strive against sin, to resist the lustings of the flesh, and turn with loathing from the temptations of Satan. When overtaken by a fault we bewail it, as she who loved much, wept much (Luk 7:47). The more vigorous our love for God, the stronger our hatred of all which is opposed to Him. But when the conscience has lost its tenderness, evil imaginations are tolerated without remorse, the heart is no longer diligently kept, nor the tongue bridled; then spiritual decay has set in. When a believer makes light of the things which once deeply distressed him, when he grows careless and vain, is venturesome upon temptations and snares, and ceases to groan over his corruptions, then he has left his first love.

Consider the effects of love with regard to *the duties of obedience*. Where it retains its strength love works self-denial, so that the impediments of obedience are more easily overcome. Love begrudges not some expense for the one beloved, and will serve God whatever it costs (2Sa 24:24). But when every trifle is made an excuse, and that which God requires is deemed too much and exacting, love has waned; an unwilling heart is soon turned out of the way. Again; love makes actions easy and pleasant, and says “His commandments are not grievous” (1Jo 5:3); therefore when obedience has become a burden and the doing of God’s will a hard task, the affections must have cooled off. Fi-

nally, love puts life into duties: “fervent in spirit serving the Lord” (Rom 12:11); without this, His worship is performed perfunctorily,¹¹ sin is confessed without remorse, and praise is offered without any spiritual melody in our hearts.

In conclusion, let us mention some of *the causes of* love’s decay. The evil times in which we live is one “because iniquity doth abound the love of many waxes cold” (Mat 24:12). But though it be hard to maintain our spiritual fires when the world is pouring cold water on them, yet the darker the night the more brightly should real Christians shine. Again, multiplied privileges cloy. The Israelites wearied even of heaven’s manna: “a full stomach loatheth a honey comb.” When we were first acquainted with the things of Christ and communion with God, we were greatly enamored, but now they no longer charm. But this should not be; while healthy, the babe wearies not of the breast. Again; neglect and carelessness. The Christian life is a race, a wrestling, a warfare; it calls for diligence and pains. If we neglect prayer, meditation, watchfulness against the encroachments of the world, love will quickly wane. Again, allowed sins: neglect is like not blowing the fire hid in the ashes, sinning is like pouring on oil. To dally with the pleasures of sin soon brings a deadness upon the heart.

Note. For much in the latter part of the above, we are indebted to a sermon by the Puritan Manton (1620-1677).

5. Our Backsliding

“The backslider in heart shall be filled with his own ways” (Pro 14:14). What a sad case is that of the Christian who has lost touch with the Lord, whose sins and iniquities have hidden His face from him (Isa 59:2)! Formerly he walked in happy fellowship with Christ, but the light of His countenance no longer shines upon him. Once he was in possession of that peace which passeth all understanding, but now the joy of salvation is no more his portion. One who has “left his first love” has, of course, grieved the Holy Spirit, and hence He *withholds* His comforts from his heart, and consequently he is full of darkness, doubts, and fears as to his state, and can find no rest unto his soul. He has given place to the devil, only to find him as merciless as the Egyptian taskmasters. He has returned for a season to the pleasures of sin, and now he lies by the wayside, robbed, stripped, wounded, half-dead.

There is no sorer object in this world than a backslidden believer. His communion with Christ is broken; he has lost his relish for the Word; the spirit of prayer in him is quenched. On the other hand, he has been spoiled for the world, and cannot find that measure of satisfaction in carnal things which the ungodly do. Is, then, his case hopeless? Yes, so far as self-recovery is concerned, for a strayed sheep never finds its own way back again to the fold. The work of restoring back-sliders from their spiritual decays is an act of sovereign grace, wrought in them by Him Who is of infinite patience and abundant in mercy. When God designs to heal the backsliding of His people, He does so by giving them

¹¹ **perfunctorily** – carelessly; negligently; in a manner to satisfy external form.

an effectual call to repentance, and by moving them to use and by blessing unto them those means which He has appointed for their recovery.

To the backslider himself his case appears, at first, desperate, for it is (alas) very much easier to depart from the Lord than it is to return to Him. Having turned his back upon God, it is difficult for him to now seek His face. Why so? Because his heart is so heavily oppressed, his conscience under such a load of guilt, his whole soul filled with shame, while a spiritual deadness seems to paralyze all his faculties. Moreover severed as he is from communion with the Lord, unbelief is dominant within him, so that he is unable to apprehend the plentitude of divine grace and the sufficiency of Christ's atoning blood. In such a state he is fully prepared to listen to Satan's lies, telling him that his case is hopeless, that it is quite useless to seek God's forgiveness. Memory, too, will remind him that he has so often in the past confessed his miserable failure to God, that to do so now would be worse than a mockery.

But presently, under the renewing operations of the blessed Spirit, a fresh hope is born within him, and he is made to feel that all is not irretrievably lost. Yet at this stage, it is of deep importance that no means of recovery from spiritual decays be sought unto save those which, for the matter and manner of them, are of *divine* institution. Alas that so many are misled here. As is often the case with newly awakened souls—who betake themselves to physicians of no value and unto cisterns which hold no water—so not a few convicted backsliders enter upon a course which affords no remedy. It is at this point that Romanism so often gains power over souls who are seeking a relief from a conscience which gives them no respite, for unless the transgressor be under the actual guidance of *evangelical* light, he is easily imposed upon; his distress is so great, his burden so intolerable, that he is ready to listen to almost any comforter, be he a true or a false one.

There are numerous priests and preachers at hand who will counsel those whose conscience is causing them sore anguish to enter upon a course of duties which *God* has nowhere commanded—the confessional, bodily lacerations, pilgrimages, parting with large sums of money for charitable or religious enterprises, are advocated as sure sources of relief; while Protestant quacks will tell the suffering soul that he must quit this habit and give up that form of recreation, and so forth and so on, if he would obtain the ear of God. This same principle is illustrated in “Wherewith shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before the high God? shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? shall I give my firstborn *for my transgression*, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” (Mic 6:6-7)—by such means they hoped to make reparation for their sins and be restored to their former condition. Let great care be taken, then, that the means used for recovery from backsliding be those prescribed *in the Scriptures*.

At no point does the amazing grace of our God appear more conspicuous than is His attitude toward His wayward and wandering children. Their base ingratitude against the inestimable favors they have already received, their wicked unfaithfulness in allowing the worthless things of time and sense to draw their hearts away from the Lord, and the grievous dishonor brought upon His name by their excuseless conduct, instead of caus-

ing Him to cast them off in utter disgust, only serve to bring out the changelessness, faithfulness, and abundancy of *His* love. Oh, the superabounding mercies and loving-kindnesses of our blessed Lord unto such worthless wretches as we are. Because God knew how prone His people are unto grievous declensions and spiritual decays, He has graciously recorded in His Word “exceeding great and precious promises” (2Pe 1:4) which are exactly suited to their case: “Return, ye backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings” (Jer 3:22); “I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely; for mine anger is turned away from him” (Hos 14:4).

Such promises are made good to us by faith’s appropriation and by our use of the duly appointed means. But right here a further word of counsel and warning is needed if the exercised backslider is not to miss the goal of his desires: beware of attempting to use those means, and discharge those duties which God requires, in *your own strength*. When backsliders perceive clearly that certain duties are appointed them by God, and they are convinced that they must perform them, they are very apt to act as though such duties were to be executed in their own might. Convicted of carelessness, realizing their sinful neglect of prayer, the reading of the Word, the mortifying of their members, and other spiritual exercises, and knowing it was their failure to use these means of grace which brought them into their present woeful state, they are now inclined to rush ahead and perform with a will those outward works wherein the duties consist.

Alas, what ignorant, erring creatures we are; how intractable and self-sufficient. When we should be using the strength God has given us we pretend to have “no prompting of the Spirit,” and so rest on our oars. When we should be waiting on the Lord for fresh supplies of grace, we feverishly attempt to act in the energy of the flesh. How slow we are to really believe that humbling Word of Christ’s “without me ye can do nothing” (Joh 15:5). Ah, that does not accord with the pride of our hearts, does it, and hence God suffers us to experience many painful failures ere we are willing to receive its truth. Let us, then, seek to be much upon our guard against rushing ahead to perform the duties required unto our restoration, and *leaving the Lord out of* the whole of our efforts. Only God can “heal” us (Exo 15:26), only He can “restore” the soul (Psa 23:3). Faith, then, must humbly engage the assistance of Christ and His grace both unto and in those duties, otherwise no matter how earnestly we perform them or how zealously they be multiplied, they will not be effectual unto our recovery.

But it is time for us now to consider those duties which our blessed Lord has appointed for the recovery of His people. “I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works” (Rev 2:4-5). Having in the previous chapter dwelt upon what is signified by “leaving our first love,” we will now turn to the remedy here specified. This, it will be seen, is threefold, addressing the principal centers of our inner being: “remember” is a word for the understanding and conscience; “repent” is spoken to the affections; while “do the first works” is a call to the will. The whole man is guilty when we backslide, and the whole man (all the faculties of the soul) must be operative in returning to our Lord and Saviour. The way of recovery is here clearly defined, and though it involves that

which is distasteful to the flesh, namely, the humbling of our proud hearts, yet there will be no restoration to real experimental communion with Christ, and no consequent peace, assurance and joy, until he submits thereto.

First, “Remember from whence thou art fallen.”

This is a call to the backslider to seriously consider his condition, particularly to contrast his present sad case with his former happy one. Recollect what a difference there is between thee and thyself: thyself living and acting in the consciousness and power of the love of Christ, and thyself now in bondage to the power of some worldly or fleshly lust. Call to remembrance that while communion with Christ was maintained that “the joy of the LORD” was thy “strength” (Neh 8:10), but now that communion is broken, you have neither joy nor strength. Consider what an advantage you once had against the temptations of the devil and the solicitations of the flesh and the world when your love for Christ was fresh and vigorous, and how much the case is altered with you now—how feeble you present resistance of any sin. Surely you have cause to bemoan “Oh, that I were as in months past, as in the days when God preserved me; When his candle shined upon my head” (Job 29:2-3).

“Remember from whence thou art fallen.” Recall the “mount of myrrh” and the “hill of frankincense” (Song 4:6) which once were trodden in fellowship with the eternal Lover of your soul. “In our returning we should have such thoughts as these: I was wont to spend some time every day with God; it was a delight to me to think of Him, or speak of Him, or to Him; now I have no heart to pray or meditate. It was the joy of my soul to wait upon His ordinances; the return of the Sabbath was welcome unto me, but now what a weariness is it! Time was when my heart did rise up in arms against sin, when a vain thought was a grief to my soul; why is it so different with me now? Is sin grown less odious, or God less lovely?” (Thomas Manton).

Second, “and repent.”

What is evangelical repentance? Its leading elements are conviction, contrition, and confession. Where real repentance is present in the heart there is a true sense of sin, a sincere sorrow for sin, a hearty loathing of sin, and a holy shame for sin. It is called by many names in Scripture, such as the afflicting of our souls (Lev 16:29), humbling ourselves (2Ch 7:14), a broken heart (Psa 51:17), a contrite spirit (Isa 66:2), a smiting upon the thigh (Jer 31:19), mourning (Zec 12:10), weeping bitterly (Mat 26:75). The goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance” (Rom 2:4), which means, first, it is *by* His goodness that repentance is wrought in us by the gracious operations of His Spirit; and second, that it is *a sense of* His goodness which melts and breaks our hard and stubborn hearts.

The convicted conscience is made to feel how vilely I have requited God for His great goodness to me, and thus sin is embittered to my soul. Thereby I am brought to take sides with God against myself and condemn my wicked wanderings from Him: so far from excusing my iniquities, I now accuse them. The heart is deeply affected by the exceeding sinfulness of sin, and grieves for having offended my loving Lord, for disregarding and opposing my blessed Benefactor, for having so evilly repaid Him, for having so

little concern for His pleasure and honor. The soul will now sincerely confess its transgressions, not in a cold and formal way, but out of the abundance of the heart the mouth will now speak. “O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee” (Ezr 9:6) will be my language.

True Christian repentance is the heart turning from sin and returning to God. In the hour of penitence sin is hated and self is loathed. The deeper the repentance, the fuller will be the confession; there will be a detailed acknowledgement of our wicked conduct, an emphasizing of the enormity of the evil course we have followed. As examples of this let the reader turn to Daniel 9:5-6 and Acts 26:9-11, and observe *how many aggravations* of the sinning is there mentioned! Further, genuine repentance is always attended with sincere desires and earnest endeavors after reformation of life: “He that covereth his sins shall not prosper; but whoso confesseth *and forsaketh them* shall have mercy” (Pro 28:13)—as sin is a forsaking of God, so repentance is a forsaking of sin. The language of a contrite soul is, “What have I to do any more with idols?” (Hos 14:8).

Deeply humbling though the work of repentance be unto us, it is *glorifying to God*. “And Joshua said unto Achan, My son, give, I pray thee glory to the God of Israel, and make confession unto him” (Jos 7:19); “And if ye will not lay it to heart, to give glory unto my name, saith the LORD of hosts, I will even send a curse upon you” (Mal 2:2); “And they repented not to give him glory” (Rev 16:9). It must be so, for repentance is taking sides with God against sin. Oh, how each of us needs to pray for a deeper repentance. Painful though the work of repentance be, yet it issues in pleasant fruits. As one of the Puritans said, “Groans unutterable make way for joys unspeakable.” If we sorrowed more for sin, we would rejoice more in the Lord. But let us add that, in cases where true penitents are so bound up within that they cannot pour out their souls in heart-melting confessions before the Lord, yet they can mourn over the hardness of their hearts, and grieve because their sorrow is so shallow.

*“Where is the blessedness I knew When first I saw the Lord?
Where is the soul-refreshing view Of Jesus and His Word?
What peaceful hours I then enjoy’d; How sweet their memory still;
But now I find an aching void The world can never fill.
Return, O holy Dove! return, Sweet Messenger of rest!
I hate the sins that made Thee mourn, And drove Thee from my breast.
The dearest idol I have known, Whate’er that idol be;
Help me to tear it from Thy throne, And worship only Thee.”*

—Cowper (1731-1800)

Third, “And do the first works.”

Negatively this means, turn your back upon the world, re-enter the lists against Satan, resume the task of denying self and mortifying your members which are upon the earth. Positively it means, return unto the One from Whom you so grievously departed, surrender yourself afresh to His lordship, render to Him that whole-hearted obedience which He requires. Make the pleasing of Christ your chief concern, walking with Him your daily business, communing with Him your supreme joy. Re-engage in the fight of

faith, take unto you the armor which God has appointed, and give no quarter to your foes. Be diligent in using the means of grace: prayer, the reading of the Word, spiritual meditation thereon, and communing with God's people. Express your gratitude for the Lord's pardoning mercy and restoring grace by now being out and out for Him. "He restoreth my soul" is at once followed by "he leadeth me in *the paths of righteousness* for his name's sake" (Psa 23:3)!

"And do the first works," then, signifies return to God in Christ. As our departure from the Lord was the cause of all our woes, so our case admits of no remedy till we repent and turn again unto Him. It is blessedly true that Christ purchased grace and pardon for His people, yet these are communicated to them in a way which is becoming to His holiness and wisdom. It would not be for His honor that we should be pardoned and restored without a penitent confession of past sins and an honest resolution of future obedience. Our case is not compassionable without it; who will pity those in misery that are unwilling to come out of it! The sincerity of our repentance is to be evidenced by a hearty determination for the future to live in obedience. In other words, it is not enough that we "cease to do evil," we are also required to "learn to do well" (Isa 1:16-17).

"And do the first works." It is not sufficient to bemoan the follies of the past; time present must be redeemed. As there are some sensible of their backslidings who do not actually repent thereof, so there are others who bemoan their sad case yet languish in idle complaints for their lack of love, and make no efforts to recover the same by serious endeavors. Those who are guilty of spiritual decays must not rest until they regain their former mindfulness of God and devotedness to Christ. Spare no efforts in so yielding up thyself to the Lord that *His* interests may again prevail in your heart above all sinful solicitations and vile inclinations. Engage your heart afresh to Christ, make no reservation; let your work be sin-abhorring and sin-resisting each day.

"And do the first works." When a Nazarite had broken his vow, he had to start all over again (Num 6:12). When we have forsaken the narrow way of obedience to and communion with Christ, God requires us to return to the point from which we wandered. Thus it was with the father of all who believe. Abraham's descent into Egypt was a divergence from the path of faith and duty. And what was the consequence? This: the time he spent there was lost, and he had to return to the point from whence he swerved and begin over again. "And he went on his journeys from the south even to Bethel, unto the place where his tent had been *at the beginning*, between Bethel and Hai; unto the place of the altar which he had made there *at the first*" (Gen 13:3-4).

Observe well *the order* which God has specified for the recovery of those who had left their first love. Perhaps we may grasp the force of it better if we transpose it. "Do the first works": "As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him" (Col 2:6). Ah, but do not overlook the fact that "repent" must precede this renewed activity in the Lord's service; *the past must be put right* before we can again enjoy real communion with Him! God will not gloss over our sins, nor will He suffer us to do so. They are to be judged, confessed, forsaken, before new obedience is acceptable to Him. And "repent" is, in turn, preceded by "remember therefore from whence thou art fallen." The more we heed *this*

injunction the quicker will our conscience be convicted and the deeper will be our contritions. Oh, that it may please the Lord to bless this chapter to the recovery of some backsliders.

6. The Restoration to Fellowship with Christ

We would ask our readers to please bear with us for writing further on the present aspect of our many-sided subject, namely, the restoration to fellowship with Christ of a backslidden believer. The need for it appears to us so pressing that we feel constrained to make another effort toward helping some of our brethren and sisters who have fallen by the wayside. How many there are who for a year or two seem very earnest and zealous in the Christian life, and then become cold and careless, semi-worldly or weighted down with the cares of this life. Frequently such cases settle down in a state of partial despair; they feel that they are “utter failures,” and conclude that daily communion with Christ is not for such as they. Instead of humbly confessing their failures to the Lord and trustfully seeking pardon and fresh supplies of grace, they go halting and mourning the rest of their days.

We greatly fear that there are not a few of God’s dear children who, to a greater or less degree, are held captives by the devil, and are largely ignorant of the means for recovery. It is the duty of God’s servants to seek out such and acquaint them with the provisions of divine grace; not to make light of sin and excuse backsliding, but to faithfully and tenderly point out how much Christ is being dishonored and what they are losing by their conduct—and then to set forth the means which God has appointed for their restoration, particularly emphasizing the fact we have a great High Priest who has compassion on them that are out of the way (Heb 5:2), and is willing and able to save unto the uttermost them that come to God by Him (Heb 7:25).

Perhaps one of our readers says, But the Lord has turned away from me the light of His countenance, and therefore I have much reason to fear that I am not in His favor. Such an objection is answered in the *charter of grace*: “I *will not* turn away from doing them good” (Jer 32:40). The Lord has withheld from thee His smile, His comforts, and thou art troubled about it, but that very trouble is for good—it should put thee upon inquiring into the reason for His strangeness toward thee. It should humble thee. It should bring thee into the dust before Him in sincere and contrite confession. And then, thou shouldest exercise thy faith on such a Scripture as this, “For the iniquity of his covetousness was I wroth, and smote him: I hid me, and was wroth, and he went on forwardly¹² in the way of his heart. I have seen his ways, and will heal him: I will lead him also, and restore comforts unto him” (Isa 57:17-18). It was Fatherly chastisement which smote thee, but His love is unchanged, and He is ready to heal and comfort.

Perhaps another fears that God has not only hidden His face, but has quite forsaken him. He may have done so to thy sense and feeling, yet not so as to His own gracious pur-

¹² **fowardly** – with stubborn contrariness and disobedience.

pose, which changeth not. Hear how He speaks to thee, distressed one. “For a small moment have I forsaken thee; but with great mercies, will I gather thee. In a little wrath I hid my face from thee for a moment; but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the LORD thy Redeemer” (Isa 54:7-8): how that should silence thy doubts. How gracious is thy God! How infinitely merciful was it that He should give thee such promises, so suited to thy needs, thy case. How well-fitted is such a Word as this to preserve thee under the trials of faith and to bring thee out of them. Read it over and over until the clouds of unbelief are dispersed, and thou art again assured that God has a loving and royal welcome for every returning prodigal.

But possibly there is a reader who says, My case is much more desperate. God is incensed against me, and justly so. He has cast me off, and I can expect no more favor at His hands. Once, indeed, I thought that He loved me, and that I loved Him, but I have fouled my garments, fallen into great sin, disgraced my profession. My conscience accuses me of being a dog which has returned to his vomit. I deliberately flouted my privileges, sinned against light and conviction, and I am verily guilty of that which is not to be found in the truly regenerate. Ah, dear friend, sad indeed as is such a case, yet your language is not that of a reprobate. Thou art fallen into the mire, but are you determined to remain there? You are under a load of guilt, but wilt thou *nurse it*, and so add sin to sin? No matter how vile thy fall, thou canst not be truly humbled for it until thou turnest to God and trustest the plenteous redemption which is in Christ Jesus.

Let us anticipate a possible objection at this point. Is it altogether *wise* to speak so freely of the relief available for even a desperate case? None but a self-righteous Pharisee would ask such a question, therefore it is hardly deserving of any answer at all. But for the sake of any who may be perturbed by such a question, let it be pointed out that there is no subject revealed in Scripture but that the wicked may pervert it (2Pe 3:16). No matter how carefully the truth be presented, how guarded the language used, how well balanced the presentation, those who are determined to do so will wrest it to their own destruction. It is a great pity that some of God’s servants do not recognize this fact more clearly, and act accordingly. They are so afraid that a wrong use may be made of what they say, or that their teaching may be denounced as “dangerous,” that they are muzzled, and often hold back a most needful and precious part of “the children’s bread” (Mar 7:27).

Let us not attempt to be wiser than the Holy Spirit. He hesitates not to tell forth the riches of divine grace unto the most notorious sinners and the worst backsliders. “My little children, these write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” (1Jo 2:1). Here is a guide for us. First, there is a presentation of the exalted standard which God sets before His people, a pressing of the requirements of His holiness. Second, there is a plain declaration of God’s gracious provision for those who sadly fail to measure up to His standard, announcing the freeness of divine mercy. This is the order for us to follow, and this is the “balance which we are to observe. First, a stressing of God’s unchanging claims, with His hatred of all sin, and then the recounting of the gracious provision made for His failing

people. "If any one [of His children] sin," *not* they are cast off by God and forfeit their salvation, but "they have *an advocate* with the Father." Naught but the apprehension of this latter fact will melt the backslider's heart.

So it is all through the Scriptures. Take Numbers 6, which treats of Nazarite dedication to God. There we have in type the *highest* form of separation from carnal delights and devotedness to the Lord, yet even here we find God anticipating failure and providing for it. "And if any man die very suddenly by him, and he hath *defiled* the head of his consecration, then he shall shave his head" and so on (vv. 9-12). God knows what we are even after our regeneration, and that there is never a day passes but what we need His pardoning mercy. He knows that while we are left down here, there will always be sin to be confessed, judged, forgiven and put away. And therefore, while He never lowers the requirements of His holiness, yet His grace is ever found amply sufficient for His failing peoples' need, even though that very need be the result of their sins. The preacher is never to excuse sin or lightly regard the declension of saints; yet he must not fail to make clear and present the rich and full provision which a gracious and compassionate God has made for those that wander from Him.

As a further example of what has just been said, let us for a while consider together the precious contents of Hosea 14:1-6. "O Israel, return unto the LORD thy God; for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity. Take with you words, and turn to the LORD; say unto him, Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously: so will we render the calves of our lips. Asshur shall not save us; we will not ride upon horses: neither will we say any more to the works of our hands, Ye are our gods: for in thee the fatherless findeth mercy. I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely; for mine anger is turned away from him. I will be as the dew unto Israel: he shall grow as the lily, and cast forth his roots as Lebanon. His branches shall spread, and his beauty shall be as the olive tree, and his smell as Lebanon." This passage belongs as truly unto spiritual Israel to-day, as it applied to natural Israel in the past (Rom 15:4; 1Co 10:11).

The name "Israel" is used in Scripture with varying latitude: it has a wider scope when employed nationally, and a narrower when used spiritually. It belongs to all the fleshly descendants of Jacob, but it had a special force unto the elect remnant among them. Inside the nation as a whole were "Israelites indeed" (Joh 1:47), concerning whom it was said "Truly God is good to Israel, even to such as are of a clean heart (Psa 73:1). This distinction is clearly recognized in the New Testament: "For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly...but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly" (Rom 2:28-29); "Behold Israel *after the flesh*" (1Co 10:18), which clearly implies there is another Israel "after the spirit!" It has helped the writer much to perceive that the nation of Israel in Old Testament times was a type of Christendom as a whole, and that the godly remnant in that nation foreshadowed the little flock of the regenerate amid the great mass of professing Christians.

"O Israel, return unto the LORD thy God: for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity." These words, then, had a wider and a narrower application. They were addressed first to the nation as a whole; they were spoken secondly to saved individuals in the nation. Ho-

sea prophesied in very dark times. He lived during the reign of wicked Jeroboam, of whom it is said so often, he “caused Israel to sin;” and while Uzziah, Jotham, and Ahab were over Judah. Idolatry was rampant, yet seven thousand had been preserved from bowing the knee to Baal. History has repeated itself, for our lot is cast in a day when spiritual idolatry is sadly rife, and when many of God’s own people are infected and affected by the evil spirit which is abroad. There is much in Hosea 14 which is truly pertinent and of great practical importance for us now. Once we get beneath the different figures there used, their spiritual significance will be readily seen.

“O Israel, return unto the LORD thy God: for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity.” How blessedly has God here revealed His desire for backsliders to return unto Himself! The manner in which this call is given is very impressive and heart-melting. “O” is a note of exclamation. It is like one who has done much to help an indigent friend, now surprised and grieved at his base requital, saying, “O John!” or a devoted husband saying to his unfaithful spouse “O wife!” So God says to those for whom He had done so much, and whose waywardness He has borne with such patience, “O Israel.” It is a note of exclamation addressed to their affections. God does not barely say “Israel, return unto me,” still less does He gruffly command them so to do; but He tenderly entreats them “O Israel return.” What *love* that expresses!

The backslider must seriously examine his condition and solemnly consider his sad plight. He has forsaken the paths of righteousness; unless he retraces his steps what will his end be! Let him heed, then, this divine injunction. “Return.” The Hebrew word is very emphatic, yet difficult to reproduce in English—“return *even* unto” or “*quite up to*” is the thought; no partial return will satisfy *His* heart. “Return unto the LORD *thy* God”: unto Him Who has taken thee into covenant relationship with Himself, Who has shown thee such favors; unto Him Who alone can do thee any real good. Return unto the One Whom thou hast so grievously wronged, so excuselessly insulted, by allowing forbidden objects to draw away thy heart from Him. “For thou *hast fallen* by thine iniquity”—into spiritual sloth, into sickness of soul, into a joyless state, out of which none but God can lift you. Then return to Him, for none but He can pardon, cleanse, heal, deliver you from the toils of Satan.

But what is meant by “*return unto* the LORD thy God?” First of all it denotes that the backslider honestly and solemnly face the fact that he has departed from the Lord, that he has followed the evil devices of his own heart, yielded to the temptations of the devil, entered forbidden paths. Second, it signifies that he must now consider his ways and cease to do evil. Third, it implies that he judge himself unsparingly for his folly and wickedness, taking sides with God against himself. Fourth, it means that he must humble himself before God, acknowledging his transgressions, confessing his unworthiness, earnestly seeking the divine mercy. Finally, it includes the setting of his affections again on things above, diligently seeking grace to live as becometh a child of God.

It is not difficult for us to write down what is intended by a “return to the LORD,” but it is far from easy for a backslider to carry it out. Satan will make a strenuous effort to retain his victim; if he can no longer allure him with his baits, he will seek to drive

him to despair with his accusations, telling him that he has sinned away the day of grace, that he has committed the great transgression, that his case is quite hopeless. Unto any such who may read these lines let us say, Abraham, the father of the faithful, fell into the same sin again and again; David transgressed very grievously; Peter, though definitely forewarned, denied his Master—yet *they* recovered themselves out of the snare of the devil. Remember it is written, “The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from *all* sin” (1Jo 1:7).

Read through Hosea 13 and note well the condition of Israel at that time. They were guilty of great wickedness, and under the threatening of divine wrath, yet to them came this tender appeal, “O Israel, return unto the LORD thy God.” How that shows us there are no seasons or circumstances which shall obstruct sovereign grace when God is pleased to exercise it toward His erring people. There is “A fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and uncleanness” (Zec 13:1). That Fountain possesses an infinite virtue to wash away every spot and stain of sin. It is a public Fountain standing available for daily use, that befouled believers may wash therein. Does not God say to His erring people “Their sins and iniquities will I remember no more” (Heb 10:17): then why reject the comfort of such a promise; it is perfectly suited to thy present distress and is the remedy.

“Take with you words, and turn to the LORD: say unto him, Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously.” So desirous is God that His backslidden people turn to Him, He here dictates a prayer for their use; the injured One instructs them! Here God graciously makes known the means of recovery, for so ignorant are we of the way of return that we have to be *told* what to do—“we know not what we should pray for as we ought” (Rom 8:26)! Yet simple as the remedy appears, it is far from easy to carry out; as a child is slow to acknowledge its naughtiness, so pride of heart in a backslider makes him reluctant to own his iniquities. Alas, how many postpone their restoration by delaying their confession; yet it is to their own great loss and harm that they refuse to acknowledge their sins.

The worse be our case, the greater is our need of coming to Christ. On a bitterly cold day the genial heart of a fire can only be enjoyed by our *drawing near to it*. We cannot bask in the warmth of Christ’s love while we determine to remain away from Him, hence the “O Israel, return unto the LORD thy God” of Hosea 14:1 is at once followed by “Take with you words and turn *to* the LORD.” No empty “words” will suffice; the whole soul must go out to God, so that out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The one who is conscious that he has left his first love and has a real purpose to return to the Lord, must definitely look to the Holy Spirit to work in his heart the substance of this prayer, so that it truly voices his deep desires.

But why does God order that we “take with us words”? Is He not fully acquainted with the thoughts and intents of our hearts? Yes, but He requires us to humble ourselves beneath His mighty hand, to take unto ourselves the shame of our fall, to stir us up to *feel* the enormity of our crimes. “Say unto him, Take away all *iniquity*.” *This* is what is to deeply exercise the penitent’s heart—that which has so grievously dishonored the Lord, be-

fouled his own garments, and occasioned such a stumbling block unto his fellows. Repentance is to act itself in prayer, requesting that God will do for us what we cannot do for ourselves—either remove the guilt and defilement of our sins or subdue their raging within. “Take away” the love of, the bondage of, the pollution of, from heart, conscience and life. “Take away *all* iniquity.” There must be no reservation; all sin is equally burdensome and hateful to a penitent soul.

“And receive us graciously.” Faith must individualize it and say “receive *me* graciously”; deal with me not according to my evil deserts but according to Thine infinite mercy. Look upon the atoning blood and pardon me; regard me no longer with displeasure, but grant me fresh tokens of Thy favor and acceptance. “So will we render the calves of our lips” (Hos 14:2), that is, offer praise unto thee (Heb 13:15). The *order* is unchangeable; only as the backslider returns to the Lord, humbles himself before Him, repents of his sins, seeks His forgiveness, is he experimentally fitted to be a *worshipper* once more. God will not accept praise of rebels!

“Asshur shall not save us; we will not ride upon horses: neither will we say any more to the work of our hands, Ye are our gods: for in thee the fatherless findeth mercy.” The force of these words can best be understood by reading Hosea 5:13; 7:11; 8:8, 9; 12:1—“horses” were what the unbelieving Hebrews put their trust in during times of war. Fleshly confidence and idolatry were *their* two worst sins, and here they are confessed and disowned; so we must acknowledge and renounce (in detail) our sins. The “fatherless” are those conscious of their deep need, helplessness, dependency. O turn to Him and find the Lord “a very present help in trouble.”

“I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely; for mine anger is turned away from him.” This is ever God’s response to a returning backslider who penitently confesses his sins and truly desires to be delivered from a repetition of them. Sin is a disease which wounds the soul, and only God can “heal” it. When He loves us “freely” He “manifests himself to” us (Joh 14:21). “I will be as the dew unto Israel: he shall grow as the lily.” “Dew” comes from above, falls insensibly, cooling the air, refreshing vegetation, making fruitful; it is a beautiful figure of the Spirit’s *renewing* the restored believer, granting him fresh supplies of grace. The “lily” speaks of lowliness, purity, fragrance. “And cast forth his roots as Lebanon,” that is, be more firmly fixed in the love of Christ, and so less easily swayed by the customs of the world and assaults of Satan. “His beauty shall be as the olive tree” useful and fruitful; “and his smell [the fragrance he emits] as Lebanon.” A restored Christian is a joy to God’s servants and an encouragement to his brethren (see vs. 7); others are encouraged to “return.” Oh, what inducements are here set before the backslider *to* “turn to the Lord”: yet *faith* must be exercised so as to *appropriate* the precious promises of verses 4-8. ❧