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THE SAINT'S GUIDE

IN THREE TREATISES



THOMAS HOOKER

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by **Thomas Hooker**

Minister in New England.

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THE MIRROR OF MERCY

And God said, "My Spirit shall not strive with Man, for that he also is flesh, yet his days shall be one hundred and twenty years." - GENESIS 6:13

The purpose of this chapter and the intention of God's Spirit within it is primarily to reveal two things: the different conditions or various types of people in the old world before the Flood in the first part of the chapter, and then the different ways in which God's providence dealt with them, corresponding to their individuals and their sins, in the second part of the chapter.

In the first part, first observe the conduct of the general population through various expressions from the fifth verse to the end of the seventh verse. Secondly, observe the righteous behavior of Noah in the eighth and ninth verses: "But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord. Noah was a just man and perfect in his generation, and he walked with God." Noah, in that wicked time and place, among a wicked people, was a holy and righteous man, as the text states.

Regarding the conduct and behavior of wicked people, note the severity of their sins in their unreasonable and unlawful desires and abominable actions against the natural order and God's law. The text states that "the sons of God saw the daughters of men, that they were fair, and they took them wives of all which they chose." It is as if to say that they did not care whether they pleased God or not; they were determined to please themselves, their own filthy appetites, and desires.

The sons of God were the descendants of Seth, who adhered to the ordinances and worship of God outwardly. And the daughters of men were the daughters of Cain, from a different lineage. Against reason, religion, common sense, and moral integrity, against the laws of God and the dictates of their own consciences, these sons of God entered into marriages with these daughters. And these mixed marriages produced not only physically deformed offspring but also individuals with monstrous dispositions and manners, characterized by excessive pride, profanity, and all sorts of wickedness.

Secondly, concerning God's actions and dealings with the generation of these men, observe it in the words of the text, where the Lord

pronounces a sentence of judgment against them. Therefore, note that as soon as sin is presented, God immediately enters into a counsel and makes a determination against the sinners.

Expect that when base and sinful actions are put into practice, Judgment comes suddenly. So, from the sins of these people, observe that marriages with a contrary religion always lead to destruction. Solomon took foreign wives, and as a result, his kingdom was torn from him. They chose new gods, forsaking Deborah's faith, and war broke out within their gates. As soon as the mention is made of mixing with religions opposed to their own, with Seth and his descendants mingling with Cain and his, Judgment immediately follows. And God said, "My spirit shall not strive with man, for he is also flesh; yet his days shall be one hundred and twenty years." In these words, take note first of God's determination of what he will do. Seeing that they insist on having their own ways and desires, God will not withhold His will. He will proceed to Judgment, and if God determines a Judgment, who can hinder it?

Secondly, consider the reason for God's determination here. In this determination, note: Firstly, what is assumed and must necessarily be acknowledged, that God destroys sinners.

Secondly, what is explicitly stated, both generally and specifically. Generally, God will strive with sinners before entering into Judgment. In the text, one hundred and twenty years, a significant time for repentance, longer than their remaining lifespan.

Specifically, there are the boundaries and limits of God's mercy. God will not always strive with man.

Secondly, observe that the reason is presented as an aggravation, for man is also flesh. It is as if to say, not only the wicked generation of Cain who rejected God's law and made lust their guide, but even Seth's descendants, even your servants, O Lord, who profess the faith and have the worship and ordinances of God, they too are driven by

fleshly and sensual desires. It is not just Rome, Spain, Italy, and the Turks, but even England, your people who have been baptized, professed your truth, and enjoyed your ordinances. They have become loose and profane. Thus, this also implies that not only the wicked descendants of Cain, but also the offspring of Seth, the Church of God, the members of the visible Church, though professing the truth, depart from it and engage in the abominations of the wicked.

Before we examine the various passages of the text, we must understand the words.

Firstly, what is meant by "spirit" here is the Holy Spirit, for God claims this spirit as His own—"My Spirit." It refers to the third person of the glorious Trinity. Now, God strives not only miraculously or directly through divination, but most commonly, and now mediately through the ministry of His Word. God strove with this generation of the old world through the ministries of Enoch and Noah. The Lord directly assisted and guided them. They spoke not their own words but those put into their mouths by the Spirit of God. In 2 Peter 1, the last verse, it is written, "Holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit." Therefore, by "spirit" here, we mean the Spirit of God, and through the ministry of the patriarchs and prophets, the Lord strove with the people of the old world and previous ages.

Secondly, let's clarify the meaning of "striving." The Greek interpreters translate the word in a way that does not align with the word "Spirit," and indeed, we will strive to aim for its meaning rather than fully explain it.

The word is derived from a theme that signifies judging or condemning in judgment. However, here it does not refer to judgment itself, but rather to a debate between God and a sinner. Now, if God were to call a person to account and enter into judgment with a sinner, who would be able to stand before Him? Who can

contend with the Almighty? In Ecclesiastes 6:10, it is stated that no one is able to withstand God or contend with Him in judgment. But in this context, God deals with humanity in a manner appropriate to human nature. He engages in reasoning and disputes, as if entering into a legal case with poor sinful individuals, proceeding judicially to reclaim a sinner who has strayed from the path of death and turned away from worshipping God. Just as people go to court, with one claiming that the land is theirs and another asserting their rightful ownership, their title is legally examined. Similarly, sin and Satan claim ownership of the soul, and the sinner is willing to go to Hell with them. But the Lord steps in, asserting a higher title, declaring that the soul is His. He created it, redeemed it, and intended it to honor its Creator and find happiness in its Savior. You will see how God strives in this matter later on. But in my understanding, this is the essence of the meaning. So, from the first part of the text, observe these four teachings:

First, the Spirit of God undoubtedly and inseparably accompanies the Ministry of the Word. God's Word and His Spirit always go hand in hand.

Second, by the power of His Spirit in the Word and through His Providence, the Lord strives with rebellious sinners for their own good, while they oppose both His Spirit and their own well-being.

Third, God strives with sinners for a long time, as seen in His striving with the people of the old world for one hundred and twenty years.

Fourth, even though God strives with sinners for an extended period, if they do not repent, He will leave them to themselves and their sins, subjecting them to the power and curse of sin, as well as the deserved judgments and plagues.

Regarding the first teaching, that God's Spirit always accompanies the Word and its ministry:

By the Spirit of God, I mean the eternal Spirit, the Holy Ghost, who, in a special manner, accompanies the Word. Understand that God is present everywhere and knows all things, but in a special way, He is present with His Word. When the Word commands, He commands; and when the Word forbids, He forbids. As stated in Romans 1:16, the Gospel is the power of God for the salvation of humankind.

But how does this become evident?

I will answer: It becomes evident in three ways. First, God has chosen to set apart this work, namely, the Ministry of the Word, to save and sanctify our souls, which all the knowledge in the world cannot accomplish.

Secondly, the Lord, by the power of His Spirit, constantly and continually accompanies this work as He sees fit, to refute the wicked and console the godly (2 Corinthians 2:16-17). To the wicked, it brings about death, while to the godly, it brings about life. It either kills the soul or saves the soul. Though it always accompanies the Word, this work of the Spirit is voluntary in nature.

Thirdly, it always accompanies the Word, but does not always produce its effects. Some may be converted after twenty or thirty years, showing that it does not always work immediately. Just as the brazen serpent was lifted up in the wilderness, and whoever looked at it after being bitten by the fiery serpents would be healed, there was a healing virtue in it. It was set apart for that purpose because it had no inherent virtue of its own, but God intended to work through it so that whoever looked upon it would be healed. The same applies to the Word of God. The ministers themselves are no more capable of converting than others, but God has promised to accompany them in the dispensation of it.

Now, let's reason. The first reason is drawn from the fruit and effect of this Word, which is capable of doing all things. In the beginning, it was able to do what men and angels cannot do. As stated in Hebrews

4:12, the Word of God is living and powerful, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and discerning the thoughts and intents of the heart. It is God's faithful word. This is why carnal individuals quarrel with the ministers of the Word and say, "You speak against me, I know you mean me." No, no, we do not know your hearts, but God does, and the Word of God knows them and reveals them, as stated in John 5:25, "The dead will hear the voice of the Son of God." This means those who are dead in sins, for by nature, every person is dead in sin. It must go beyond what all humans can do, as our Savior said to Lazarus when people stood weeping by, but Christ said, "Lazarus, come forth" (John 11:43). It must be God's Word that raises us from the death of sin to the life of righteousness.

Application: Firstly, as a lesson, be cautious of taking up arms against the Spirit of God. We witness the grave sin of those who despise the Ministry of the Gospel. Some may think it means nothing, but alas, you do not comprehend its significance. For the Word of God and the Spirit of God are inseparable, as the blessed martyr Stephen said to the Jews in Acts 7:51, "You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you." Therefore, beware, as you are approaching the sin against the Holy Spirit. It is not merely a human word but the Word of God. It is the Spirit through which salvation comes, and it is the Spirit that you have opposed. By disregarding the Gospel and treating it as inconsequential, you have sinned against God and His Spirit, which accompanies the Word. Oh, counsel one another and ask, "Do you truly understand what you are doing? It is God's Spirit that must comfort and save you. It is that very Spirit that you are opposing when you reject the Word. Take heed, for this transgression surpasses even the gravest sins." In Luke 3:19-20, we learn that Herod was guilty of incestuous sin, but his act of imprisoning John was even more abhorrent. In Matthew 11:21-22, it is proclaimed that the judgment upon those who oppress the Word of the Lord will be more severe than that upon Sodom and Gomorrah. This concludes the first point.

Now, I will focus on the second point, which I believe is the essence and substance, even the central theme of the text. It is that the Lord, through the power of His Spirit in the Word, strives with poor sinners for their own good, while they, in the meantime, oppose both His Spirit and their own well-being. The parties involved are God and humanity. God strives, and the sinner strives. The Lord devises ways to free the soul from its sins and destruction, while the sinner makes it their main concern, their utmost skill and cunning, to hinder the good Word of the Lord in its work upon their soul for their salvation. In common experience, we witness it. If God opens the eyes of a drunkard or awakens an adulterer, there is much resistance. One dismisses it, another brushes it off, and a third seals their soul with untempered mortar—anything or any way to prevent the good Spirit of the Lord from prevailing. If the Lord turns the face of a child or a servant in the family towards Him, immediately the father or master raises an outcry. They claim that the person is ruined, and then they strive by all possible means to suppress the work of grace in their heart. Thus, when God strives to rescue people from their sins, they persist in sinning and consequently subject themselves to eternal punishment. Therefore, the conflict intensifies. God strives, sin and Satan strive, and the individual persists until the end, as we see in Matthew 23:37, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!" The Father desires to draw people to His Son for salvation, but as stated in John 5:40, "But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life." While our Saviour strives with the cords of mercy to draw people to salvation, they strive to distance themselves from Him and plunge themselves into damnation. In Acts 18:5-6, Paul, strengthened by the Spirit, boldly convinced them and used powerful arguments to grasp their understanding, proving that Jesus was the Christ. However, they resisted his teachings as if in a pitched battle. The word used in the original signifies that they organized and came prepared for battle against those blessed truths he presented. In other parts of Acts, when Paul revealed the truth, some joined the apostles, some

sided with the Jews, some were convinced, and others opposed and resisted. Thus, observe how a poor sinner breaks all the cords of grace and mercy, as mentioned in Psalm 2:3, "Let us break Their bonds in pieces and cast away Their cords from us." They shatter God's counsel, commands, reproofs, and all the ties of mercy. They deliberately break everything and willingly distance themselves from salvation. We need no more witnesses to prove this case; woeful experiences provide us with too many examples. The only difficulty lies in the explanation of this. In that regard, observe three things.

First, I will explain how God draws and strives with the sinner, the great effort required to bring a sinner to everlasting life.

Secondly, I will explore the reason why God does so strive.

Thirdly, I will provide the application of this truth.

Let's begin with how the Lord strives. The good Spirit of the Lord personally engages with the sinner and pleads a case with them. I must confess that God's approach in this matter is incredibly unique, and I sincerely admit that I lack both the expertise and the ability to fully express God's pleas in this regard. However, God alone is capable of speaking for Himself, and with His gracious assistance, we will present to you the pleas that God offers in Scripture, demonstrating how the Lord has dealt with this matter. Now, regarding how the Lord pleads and strives with a sinner, we can categorise it into two aspects:

1. By means of persuasion.
2. By means of constraint and compulsion.

In these approaches, we will observe all the cords of mercy and bonds of compassion. Firstly, there is striving through persuasion, and if those methods do not succeed, there will be the execution of punishment. The sinner will experience terrors and the strong hand of God's pursuit in mercy. Ultimately, if all else fails, mercy prevails over the sinner. In this process, we see that God first reveals the

matter in dispute, proceeds to execution, and finally, through reprieve, mercy triumphs over judgment.

Now, let's focus on the first part, which involves examining the pleas of mercy in Scripture. We can divide our observations into four aspects:

Firstly, just as in a legal case, before the hearing can take place, the party is summoned to answer.

So, when the Lord has a dispute with a sinner, He summons the sinner into His court. The Lord issues a writ to apprehend a sinful creature who wallows in their sins, oblivious to their misery and needs, and never seeks mercy or salvation. Salvation is the furthest thing from their mind and the least of their concerns. Now, in His providence, the Lord brings this about by leading them to the Word, mercifully revealing the sinner's condition before they ever imagined it. Isaiah 65:1 states, "I was sought by those who did not ask for Me." In ordinary experience, many a poor sinful creature has been unexpectedly placed in a certain town or good family, and the Lord suddenly comes upon them when they never even dreamt of life and grace. When reflecting on God's mercy and providence, many souls wonder, "How is it that I have been brought into such a place, such a family, and encountered such opportunities? I desired nothing more than mischief, yet God stopped me on my way to Hell." Consider Saul's experience when he was journeying to Damascus. He thought, "I will apprehend these Puritans in their secret meetings." Suddenly, a light shone from heaven and nearly cast him into Hell. Similarly, a kind of light is shed upon the soul. It is not to be expected as a miracle or something new, but when the Word is brought home to the understanding, the soul perceives it as strange and unlike anything they have ever heard or thought of before.

Moreover, if the sinner becomes careless and neglects to pay attention, God calls upon the soul and draws the mind to listen. He holds the light to the eye and presents the Word in such a clear

manner that the soul cannot evade it. Ezekiel 16:2 says, "Son of man, cause Jerusalem to know her abominations." In 1 Kings 21:20, we witness how the sight of the prophet startles Ahab after his great wickedness, causing him to react with hostility, saying, "Have you found me, my enemy?" The Word exposes a person and compels the mind to pay attention. The soul may be careless and secure, unwilling to hear or attend. However, the Lord knocks on the door of the soul, finding them behind the pillar or awakening them from slumber in their pew. He exposes their sins and reveals their abominations. The Lord confronts the soul, saying, "You are the one who has sinned, and you shall be plagued." God wrestles with them, first taking hold and then coming in, until eventually, He brings them to a point of surrender and confession, where they admit, "I am the one." In this way, the Lord causes the mind to pay attention to the Word. He tells the drunkard that the pub is not the way to heaven and warns the adulterer that their path leads to destruction. He brings them to the Word and compels them to listen.

Furthermore, as the soul attentively listens to the Word, being ignorant and unaware of any good, the Lord enlightens the sinner and imparts a wisdom that allows them to understand the nature of sin and how they have provoked God. What was once unknown to them now confronts them, and they behold it with astonishment. They also begin to grasp, to some extent, the nature of grace. They start to see the value of faith and repentance, what it means to be in Christ, and what it means to lack Christ. The person becomes perceptive, as God says, "I will cause the house of Israel to know their abominations." Merely coming to hear the Word is not enough if one does not attend to it or consider its message. However, when God accompanies the Word, it causes the drunkard to understand the true meaning of drunkenness, and it reveals to the hypocrite what it is to deceive God and His truth. Job 36:9 declares, "He shows them their work and their transgressions." God exposes a person's iniquities, their pride, their vanity of mind, the threatened judgments, and the deserved punishment. At that moment, the sinner exclaims, "This is my sin, and this is the punishment I

deserve. This is the nature of my abomination, and that is God's judgment for it." Thus, I say, the Lord seizes hold of a sinner. This is the first approach, through summons or subpoena. If a sinner is secure, God leads them to the Word. If they are careless, God compels them to pay attention. If they are ignorant, He enlightens them. Just as in a legal case, a person is not only summoned to appear but, upon their appearance, there is a declaration of the facts. Similarly, the Lord reveals to the soul their sins, the need for Christ, grace, faith, and repentance, which they were previously unaware of.

Secondly, once the case is laid out, oh, the sinful heart devises marvellously strange schemes and evasions.

The day of trial is appointed, but what lawyer does the soul seek to plead its case? It summons carnal reason, just as Pharaoh summoned the magicians. When God opens the soul's eyes and reveals its true condition, it calls upon carnal reason to plead against the Word of God, fearing that it may prevail and that its sins may become too burdensome, leading to a desire to abandon them. Firstly, it excuses the severity of sin, claiming that the sin was not so great. It argues that although the minister speaks as if we are all saints, in reality, we are all sinners, so who among us shall go unpunished? We do not expect to be saved by ourselves or our works, but by Jesus Christ, who came to save sinners. It is enough to simply look towards Him and cry out for God's mercy in the end. But the minister says that we must be sanctified as well as saved. Acts 3:26 states that God, having raised up His Son Jesus, sent Him to bless us by turning each one of us from our evil ways. That is true blessedness. We must be transformed if we are to be comforted, humbled if we are to be glorified. What does the sinner say? Must I forsake my evil ways? We know that no one can do so. Why should one be so strict and meticulous? Thus, with these and many other arguments, carnal reason, like a cunning solicitor aided by the Devil, who plays the crafty lawyer, will surely present whatever is necessary to counter the power of the Word. It is remarkable to consider the contentions that arise and how the wicked heart of man will surpass

all the means under heaven until the Spirit of God comes upon the soul. Then, as the wisdom of God enlightens the sinner, the Spirit becomes the Advocate of God. That wise and holy Spirit, through the ministry of the Word, convicts the sinner, as John 16:8 says, "And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin." The Spirit answers all the pleas and arguments the sinner can make. In 2 Corinthians 10:4-5, it is written, "For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds, casting down imaginations and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ." When the soul raises objections, questioning the need for all this effort, asking if one cannot go to Heaven without praying, hearing sermons, and sanctifying the Sabbath, the Spirit of God fully convinces the person that they have no argument against the truth presented. The person surrenders and confesses, "I am the one. These are my sins. I must forsake them or perish. No, I must forsake all my sins; I cannot forsake only some. I see that I cannot be a good Christian and be a swearer, a proud and vain person, or live carelessly. If I do, a heathen or a profane atheist will be just as good a Christian as I am." Thus, once the case is laid out through the revelation of truth, and the sinner is convicted by the Spirit, then,

3. Lest the sinner, who now apprehends the gravity of his sins and the hopelessness of his condition, should be overwhelmed by the burden, the Lord reveals His goodness to his soul. The soul reflects on how kind God is in providing the means of grace to bring him back, to show him his waywardness. "Ah, I am a sinful, lost, and desperate creature," he thinks. "Yet the Gospel of grace and the word of grace invite me to receive mercy. Is it possible that someone as wicked as me can be restored? That I am still alive, still on this side of hell, still able to enjoy these means?" As Romans 2:4 says, "The goodness of the Lord leads to repentance," and it encourages the sinner to find comfort and seek amendment. If the Lord bestows these mercies upon me, why should my heart not be purified? Why should my corrupt

nature not be cleansed? Lord, you were merciful to Manasseh, who, despite his wickedness, repented and received mercy.

4. But if the sinner takes advantage of God's goodness and misuses the means of grace for selfish purposes, thinking that because he is still strong and healthy, he can continue in his sins and postpone repentance, saying that repentance can wait until later, the wisdom of God is almost inclined to abandon him. The sinner neglects all the ways of reformation that God has provided. God's goodness is resolved not to encourage him any further because it has been despised. Yet the patience of God intervenes. Even when the Lord is ready to leave the sinner and justice is about to take hold, God's blessed patience steps in and pleads, providing a new opportunity. It implores the Lord to grant one more year.

When the Lord came to the fig tree after three years and found no fruit, He said, "Cut it down." But the keeper of the vineyard said, "Wait, Lord, let it have another year, and perhaps it will bear fruit." So God's patience prevails, and He does not proceed with justice and judgment. Hosea 11:8-9 says, "How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my burning anger." See how patience pleads for a poor creature. "Lord, this sinner has delayed, but now he is resolved. He has put off the time, but now he promises that everything will be amended. Now he will truly embark on the work of self and familial reformation. Lord, give him one more month, one more year, and he will pray with his family, sanctify the Sabbath, and live a holy and strict life." However, if due to God's patience, the sinner becomes more careless and does not endeavour to amend, continuing in vain and secure ways, then patience begins to grow weary. Jeremiah 5:6-7 says, "Their transgressions are many; their backslidings are increased. How can I pardon you for this?" Patience reaches a limit and comes to a point. "How can I spare? I can go no further." Then the long-suffering of

God intervenes. Even though the contempt, neglect, and carelessness of a sinner persist, God endures. Jeremiah 13:27 says, "Woe to you, O Jerusalem! Will you not be made clean? When shall it be?" 140 years have passed in this text. It is remarkable how the Lord bears with a person until they become an old, gray-headed sinner. The long-suffering of God is admirable. If not for this, long before this day, we would have all been consumed. Jeremiah 15:6 says, "I am weary with relenting." Oh, you ancient sinners, you gray-headed and obstinate sinners, to continue in your sins for so many years. God is not only weary of your swearing, blasphemies, and profanity, but His long-suffering has also reached its limit. "Forty years long I was grieved with this generation." Psalm 95:10. What, for forty years, you have scorned God's word, despised the means of grace, and yet were spared? See and marvel, then, poor sinner, at how you strive to overcome God and exhaust His patience. Yet He bears and endures to gather you up. When the sinner was careless and ignorant, the Lord awakened and informed him. When the sinner was quarrelsome and contentious, the Lord convinced and cast him down. When the soul could have been discouraged and fallen into despair, the Lord quickened and raised him up. Yet the sinner delayed, and God endured. The sinner broke his promises, and still God endured. And now, will these fair promises come to nothing? Did you not think and resolve to leave your sins, to take a new path? Remember the time, the place, the bed of sickness, the ministry of the word. At such a sermon, under such circumstances, did you not say to yourself before leaving the congregation, "Now, if it pleases the Lord, His good word shall prevail. I will forsake my lusts; I will never walk in my former ways." But alas, it is all forgotten, and the Lord says, "Have I endured this long? Shall I endure you to continue in sin forever?" Now, both patience and long-suffering are for vengeance. God can no longer endure. He comes to execute judgment, as Isaiah 1:24 says, "Ah, I will ease myself of my adversaries and avenge myself on my enemies." This means that He will take hold of vengeance. He will rid Himself of the drunkard and the immoral person who refuse to give up their debauchery. He will bring sudden destruction upon them. He will also cast out the hypocritical professor who outwardly

shows godliness but denies its power. He will spew them out with shame and horror.

But let's discuss this in three specific points.

First, the fierce anger of the Lord breaks in upon the sinner, and God unleashes the veins of vengeance and His heavy displeasure upon the conscience. It is like a pursuivant forcefully breaking through the chamber door, and the wrath of God declares, "Go to Hell, away suddenly, descend into everlasting destruction." Psalm 42:7 says, "All your waves and your billows have gone over me."

The one who was once a kind and loving friend has now become a terrifying enemy, pursuing as fiercely as he once mercifully pleaded. Job 15:24-25 says, "Distress and anguish terrify him; they overpower him, like a king ready for battle. For he has stretched out his hand against God and defies the Almighty." Just as God ran upon Pharaoh, crushing the pride and vanity of his soul, even upon his neck and the thick shields of his bucklers, so too will God confront the sinner. The poor sinner, despite being informed in judgment, convinced in conscience, and patiently dealt with through long-suffering, defies the warnings of plagues and threats, saying, "Come, let us drink, etc. We do not see any such thing as going to hell and perishing." They brazenly challenge the Almighty and defy God's ministers. They remain stubborn and rebellious, thinking they can continue in their ways unscathed. But do they think they can get away with it? The Lord will confront them and crush them to pieces. God does not take advantage when the sinner is strongest and most arrogant, when their pride is shameless and audacious, and they defy ministers, magistrates, and all constraints. That is when God will even the score. Because of their indulgence in worldly pleasures, their carnality and carelessness, their excessive eating, drinking, and revelry, finding contentment in a secure, sensual, and stubborn path, the Lord will come upon their brows, terrorize their conscience, and confound their impudence. Thus, when the sinner appears strongest

and most secure in their sin, God will be most sharp and startle the soul. And thus, the soul is first arrested.

Secondly, the wrath of God proceeds to summon the sinner and drags him to prison. Once in prison, he is thrown into the dungeon. Justice and God's truth come to claim all the previously enjoyed favors and mercies that were not put to good use. It is like being cast into prison, where one after another, actions and executions are imposed upon a person until their back is broken, leaving them forever undone, as we say. This is how God's justice operates. Psalm 50:21-22 says, "These things you have done, and I kept silent; you thought I was just like you. But now I rebuke you and lay the charge before you. Mark this, then, you who forget God, or I will tear you apart, with no one to rescue you."

Oh, the good Spirit of God! Oh, the goodness of God, His patience, His long-suffering! Each one of them brings an action against the soul. Instead of refreshing my soul, they abandon it, and even worsen my anguish and torment. Job 14:16-17 says, "Surely then you will count my steps, but not keep watch over my sin; my offenses will be sealed up in a bag; you will cover over my sin." Remember what you did at that time, and how I showed forbearance, but I will forbear no longer. Finally, Justice enters the scene with full force, presenting all the bonds and reckonings, all the neglected exhortations, scorned reproofs, and the means of grace that were not embraced. Also, the accumulated and grave transgressions of old will prove to be overwhelming. They will break the back of mountains, and rocks will not be able to withstand the surging waves of wrath that have been ignited. And so, the soul is imprisoned and facing execution, likely to remain there, decay, and perish.

Yet again, and finally, after the wrath of God has arrested the soul and the justice, truth, mercy, patience, and forbearance of God have laid one action after another upon the soul, and the soul is in the midst of execution, with everlasting ruin ready to engulf it, then the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ intervenes. Mercy steps in and

undertakes that the soul will appear, or else mercy will pay the price for him. Thus, the sinner is granted a reprieve. Mercy triumphs when a sinner emerges from the horrors of conscience and the clutches of justice. Oh, the compassion of mercy! Oh, the mercy of a Father! Through the blood of Christ and the comfort of the Spirit, the soul is called out of prison. Oh, turn! Why do you choose death? Ezekiel 18:13. Remember the knocks and terrors of conscience, the beginnings of hell. They all come and mourn over a sinner. Oh, you drunkard, turn away from your ways, stop being drunk, come to me and be saved. And to the proud, profane, rebellious, and malicious sinners, why do you still oppose God and invite your own downfall? Why do you choose to go to hell, O sinful sons of men? Come to me and I will forgive your sins. Come to me and I will satisfy and pay all your debts, says the Spirit of God. I will subdue and crush all your rebellions. This is the final call. Now take note, if you accept the offered goodness, if you become a servant of the Lord your God, all your past iniquities will be forgiven, old debts will not be held against you. "By me," says Christ, "believe, and you will be justified from all things." Acts 13:39. Now, pay attention, this is the final strike, the last verdict. If you accept mercy for forgiveness, the blood of Christ for atonement, and the promptings of the Spirit for revival, it is well. But if you do not, what can be expected but fire from Heaven to destroy God's adversaries? This is how you see God striving and wrestling intensely before bringing individuals to repentance and salvation.

In conclusion, the Lord, upon finding a sinner careless and secure through His word, alerts him to his ways. When the sinner receives the word, it prompts him to pay attention. Attentiveness awakens and enlightens him. The sinner, upon realizing his state, begins to argue with God. Then God convicts him. When convinced, to prevent him from falling into despair, God comforts him. Encouraged, the sinner once again becomes careless and delays. God waits, enduring the sinner's abuse of His patience and long-suffering, which do not work effectively. Then God is compelled to act, seizing the sinner with a firm hand, and His wrath arrests the sinner while justice binds

him for judgment. However, in the end, mercy intervenes, offering grace, forgiveness of sins, and salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the progression of the legal case. The reasons why God strives with sinners in this manner can be summed up briefly.

First, God strives with sinners to express and glorify His attribute of mercy and for the world to acknowledge it and rejoice in it.

Secondly, He does so to leave the world without excuse, so that if they descend into the depths of hell, they must take responsibility themselves.

Now, let's turn to the implications. We witness what God does, how He strives with a sinner for their eternal welfare, and we see how the poor soul strives with God for their own eternal ruin. It is truly remarkable that the great Creator, who was happy before all worlds and would still be glorified even if thousands of us were to perish and descend into hell, should strive with a wretched sinful creature.

Firstly, we observe and stand in awe, marvelling at the incredible goodness and richness of the Lord's kindness, alongside the depth of stubbornness, rebellion, and wickedness within the soul. It is astonishing how strong the soul is in its wickedness, striving against the God of Heaven, and seeming (with reverence) to prevail. The Lord teaches, but the sinner refuses to listen. The Lord convicts, but the sinner refuses to yield. The Lord is good to him, but he despises Him. The Lord is patient, but he abuses that patience. God endures for a long time, yet he shows contempt. If it were not for God's justice alongside His patience, the sinner would triumph over God, but God will not allow His patience to be constantly abused. However, observe the wickedness and depravity within the human heart, that nothing can bring about its good. The leper is so foul that all the water in the sea cannot cleanse him. The spots are so deep that nothing can remove or erase them. What state is that body in which no diet can nourish it and no medicine can cure it? Death must surely be evident on its face. This is our state, yours and mine. Let us

go home and reflect privately: Good Lord, what kind of heart do I possess? Is there such a heart in hell? Even the Devil does not possess the patience to strive with them, nor the mercy to heal them, nor the good Spirit of God to contend with them. Oh, the Lord has called and revealed Himself to me, even found me when I was not seeking Him, and caused me to see my abominations, making me aware of the wickedness of my ways. Yet, oh, the secret grudges in my heart towards religion. How I taunted its followers and despised the profession itself. "You are one of those holy ones, must I be so strict?" Yet the Spirit of God did not abandon me but laid hold of me, surprising me in my bed and following me wherever I went. Still, I resisted it all, trying to escape from the power of the truth, grieving the good Spirit of God. Good Lord, what kind of heart do I possess, and it is right for You to be ashamed of such a base heart. A poor worm, sinful dust and ashes, a mere shadow, a wretched hellhound, daring to contend with the Almighty, striving against mercy and patience, yet not being cast into the bottomless pit of hell. It is an indescribable and astonishing mercy. Let us contemplate the depths of our misery and weep if we had an endless source of sorrow. Look, there is a drunkard, God has opened his eyes, and he has become a holy and gracious Christian. Consider this wretched adulterer, yet a marvel of mercy. Does anyone who goes into a harlot ever return? Yet the Lord has pardoned all his abominations. As for yourself, behold, you remain stagnant like a horse in a mill, as vain, vile, careless, and wicked as ever. Oh, marvel at God's goodness and be ashamed and confounded by your desperate state and wretchedness.

[Use 2] Look at the just condemnation of the wicked, it is marvellously deserved as a result of their own desires. They are damned because they choose damnation, perishing because they desire to perish. It is astonishing to observe the madness of people striving to go down to hell, competing to be the first. They strive to be the most vain, malicious, and to oppose truth and goodness. Well, the Lord has striven with you, and you have striven against Him, and now you will go to hell. Then the patience that has contended with you will silence every one of your mouths when your body lies in the

dust and your soul roars in the bottomless pit. Now you have your own desires, you have reaped what you sowed. You wanted to be proud, stubborn, loose, and profane, despising all means of reform. Now you are filled to the brim with sinning. Proverbs 30:31 says, "The Lord will satisfy them with their own ways and fill them with their own devices." It means you shall have what you desired. You wanted none of God's counsel, you despised all His reproof, and you will despise the word, oppose the minister, scorn God to His face, despite His Spirit, resist the work of the Lord, and evade the authority of the truth and the power of grace. Well, when you are in the depths of the bottomless pit, you will have plenty of space, liberty, and time to indulge in all evil, perpetually sinning against God and blaspheming Him. God's judgments will be just.

[Use 3] The third use is for reproof. If God strives with sinners for their good and salvation, what should we think of those who strive with others for their harm and ruin? Either God should be blamed for His dealings or they should be condemned for opposing God. Judge for yourselves; I will say nothing. The Lord strives, using mercy, justice, goodness, and all means to draw sinners towards Him for salvation. On the other hand, these people use every means possible, including threats, taunts, counsel, and examples, to turn people away from God, His ways, and His service. Surely, either God is to be blamed for His dealings or they are to be condemned for their mischievous actions. They are like the devil's captains, providing incentives and acting as his brokers. If a wife, child, servant, or neighbour begins to turn towards heaven, the husband frowns, the master scolds, the friend forsakes. Oh, examine your hearts! The devil himself, if incarnate, could not do more. Know that not only your own sins will condemn you, but also the blood of your wives, children, and servants. Oh brethren, I implore you to listen, fear, and tremble. Acts 15:8-9 tells us that Paul came to the island and found the deputy of the island eager to hear the word of God. Paul wanted to bring him to faith, but Elimas wanted to lead him away from faith. Notice what Paul said in verse 10, "You son of the devil!" Because Elimas didn't want to go to hell alone, he led others

astray. And Paul came with fiery condemnation, calling him an enemy of all righteousness.

The adulterer is an enemy of chastity, the drunkard of sobriety, and the unjust person of justice. However, those who strive to hinder anyone from reaching God are enemies of all righteousness. But you may say, "I would have prayed, but my husband would not let me. I would have gone to church, but my master would not let me." This will not suffice as an excuse. It will not be a plea for you to say that your masters hindered you. In Matthew 23:15, it is said, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves." It is bad enough to be a child of the devil, but if you hinder others from reaching God, you become twice as much a child of hell. So, fear and strive to help one another in amending your ways.

[Use 4] For exhortation, if the Lord strives and uses all means to draw us to Him, then you should do the same wherever you go. Strive to persuade people and lead them away from evil. Hebrews 3:13 says, "But exhort one another daily." Imitate God and Christ, who strive with poor sinners for their own good. You should also strive with people, even if they strive against you. If you have a wicked father or a profane mother, pray for them. If your friends and relatives oppose God and His worship, exhort them. Even if you see little hope of immediate change, continue to pray for them. Pray again and again, perhaps God will hear. Even when a person is laid in the grave, their stock of prayers remains and continues until judgment day. What a sweet comfort it will be for those who do good to others. Therefore, when you gather in groups or assemblies, strive to encourage them in goodness through exhortations and sometimes even through reproofs. If possible, persuade their hearts to accept mercy. Lastly, what remains? Oh, that I could follow God's lead, be entreated and exhorted in the Lord. If the Lord strives with you, what should you do but yield to the Lord? Strive no more against Him, contend no further with the Almighty. May this advice be accepted, and may the

Lord make it powerful to you. The Lord has a great case, it has lasted for many years. It is like a Chancery case that has gone on for ten, twenty, or forty years. Oh, you who are advanced in age, with reverence for your years, be persuaded to fear the Lord. Oh, you young ones, bless God that you have not resisted the work of God's grace for so long and opposed His patience. The Lord has an old dispute with you, from your very birth to this present moment. Like David, you can say, "O God, from my youth I have relied on You." Oh, the Sabbaths you have enjoyed, the sermons you have heard, the sweet opportunities for your soul that have been provided to you. Oh, the blessed movements of the Holy Spirit! How God has sent and pursued you, with mercies inviting you on one hand and justice threatening on the other. You have experienced comforts of mind and horrors of conscience.

Oh, finally listen and be persuaded to let the case come to an end. Oh, especially you ancient sinners, despite all this, still being an old drunkard, a habitual swearer, an aged adulterer, an old grey-headed sinner settled in wickedness—both father and son corrupt. Ah, vile wretches, the ruin of all goodness. The Lord has striven for forty, fifty, sixty years continuously, and don't you think the Lord has been remarkably patient? Now, now let the word of the Lord prevail, and let the counsel of God's poor servants take effect for your eternal good. Consider within yourselves, why should I continue to argue with God? Should I still resist His grace? Go into a corner and sigh, and grieve. Lament yourselves. Ah, miserable creatures that we are, how have we behaved ourselves before God all our lives? Ah, those cords of mercy that did not draw us, those powerful persuasions, those sharp rebukes, those compelling exhortations, all bestowed upon us with much goodness and longsuffering, and yet we have not been bettered by any of them to this very day. Therefore, it is high time (poor wretches) to abandon the case, renounce it, and yield to the word of God, without saying another word. Surrender the day to the work of God's grace and the power of His Spirit, as Job did in Job 40:4-5, when the Lord disciplined him out of the whirlwind, showing him His glory and power, and Job's own wretchedness and

insignificance. Then he cries out, "I am vile; what shall I answer You? I will lay my hand on my mouth. Once I have spoken, but I will not answer; yes, twice, but I will proceed no further." Let all of you who hear the word of God this day say the same, and encourage one another. Let us say, "We have been brethren in wickedness, but now we will submit. We will no longer delay." Well then, be encouraged. The Lord strives with you, and He promises that if you will finally yield, whatever wrongs have been committed before will be forgiven. Whatever is or shall be lacking will be provided. Why do you still contend? Has anyone ever resisted the Lord and prospered? Oh, you may have friends or possessions, and you may rely on them and similar supports, but all of these, and such like, are but broken crutches. Where are all the enemies of God? Where is the stout-hearted and stiff-necked Pharaoh? He refused to let the people of God go, and what happened? His body was drowned in the sea, and his soul is now tormented in hell, unless God was infinitely more merciful than we can conceive. What became of proud Nebuchadnezzar, who exalted himself to the heavens? He was brought down as low as hell. How many times does God strike down the drunkard and suddenly cut off the sinner? And, my Lord, what has become of their souls? Therefore, let every person consider that no one can resist God and succeed. Either you must overcome God or be confounded by Him. Also, remember this, you strong ones: the longer you persist against God, the harder it will be to settle the case.

A lawsuit at the beginning might be settled for a small amount or nothing, but if it continues, the costs of the lawsuit often grow to be greater than the debt. Think about this, you ancient sinners, grey-haired swearers, constant secret opponents of God and goodness. But don't forget it, I say again, you young ones, little ones, continuing in a path of sin. If you don't reconcile with God in time, God will recover His costs. He will not lose all those exhortations, rebukes, His patience, goodness, loving kindness, the mercy and blood of Christ. Christ paid dearly for these, and you make nothing of abusing all these. But Christ paid for every sermon not heeded, every prompting of the Spirit disregarded, every unimproved mercy. Oh,

this is enough to undo anyone. Oh, poor people, be wise in time, especially you young ones. Your account is not yet so heavy. If now you have a heart to yield to the counsel and reproofs of God, to submit and come in, your sins will be forgiven, your persons accepted, and your souls eternally saved. If not, you must pay the costs, answer for all the patience, long-suffering, and goodness of God. And consider now, even today, the Lord holds out the golden scepter of grace, and if you return to Him now, you shall be accepted by Him. It may be the last time you have an offer of mercy. How soon may death seize your body, and then judgment overtake your soul. This may be the last day of your life, even more so of hearing the word. If you accept now, all arrears shall be forgotten, God will abandon His lawsuit, all His anger and displeasure will be set aside. He will let go of everything if you embrace His mercy and accept Christ. This may be the final offer. And does the Lord offer mercy after all the stubbornness of the heart, after all the unprofitableness, after neglecting all the means of grace, after all your drunkenness and profanity, hypocrisy, after all your sins and wickedness? Yes, then hear what the Lord says: Are you willing to forsake these? Yes? Then the Lord will not forsake you. If you are willing to embrace the Lord above all these, He will embrace you. If you lay down your lusts and corruptions, He will forever embrace you in the everlasting arms of mercy. Say it, answer, and let every person's conscience respond, so that I may deliver my message. I think none of you should be so senseless, so unreasonable, so desperately wretched as to persist in resistance. Good Lord, will all my evils be pardoned if I am willing to receive Christ and His mercy? Will the Lord Jesus never abandon me if I am willing to leave my sins? Good Lord, take all my sins and cast them into a bottomless pit, never to be seen again. I will strive no more against Your word. Let Your word reveal my sins and subdue my sinful soul. Let Your good Spirit come in and rule over this heart of mine.

Now the matter is concluded, all disputes cease. When occasions arise, temptations renew, and corruptions stir, go to God and always remember the resolution of this day. Let the Lord take His place in

your heart, and He will preserve you to serve Him here and be saved eternally in the future.

I should proceed to the third and fourth doctrines, but time prevents me. I will only mention them briefly and conclude.

Though God strives with sinners for a long time, He gives them a long period for repentance. Look at the old world, given a hundred and twenty years, and every knock on the Ark was a sermon of repentance. Yet, after abusing God's mercy and patience for so long, and being unfruitful despite all the means of grace, the Lord ceases to strive with sinners. He either takes the means away from them or takes them away from the means, or withdraws His blessing from both. God has bounds to His bounty and patience. He will strive only up to a certain point, but not forever. When His appointed time is over, not a single moment more can be expected. Just as the sun has its time of increasing and the seasons of spring and harvest, it also has its time of decreasing, withering, and winter. There is a time for consuming the store as well as bringing it in. The same applies to the Son of Righteousness, who has a time to receive, quicken, and mature the graces of His people, and a time to leave men to the hardness of their hearts in the darkness of Egypt. He will remove His word from them, or they will hear but not understand. God's season of mercy does not last indefinitely. There is a term time and a break. The sunshine of God's goodness now comforts and causes grace to grow, but when the Gospel is gone, so is all mercy and comfort. When Ephraim turned to idolatry, God also turned away, saying, "Let him alone; he is joined to idols." Let him make his match with mischief and indulge in sin to his heart's content. I will no longer strive with him.

May the Lord make us wise to recognize the day of our visitation, lest He remove His candlestick from us and be seen no more, lest in His wrath He departs and leaves us to die and perish in our sins.

FINIS.

THE CARNAL MAN'S CONDITION.

The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness. - ROM. 1:18

In the beginning of this chapter, the Apostle Paul, as a preface, prepares the way for the many excellent truths that the Spirit of God had given him to send to the saints in Rome. And to ensure that these heavenly mysteries take deep root in their hearts and find better acceptance, he first establishes the authority of his calling, emphasizing that he did not come before being sent by God (verse 1). Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God. Therefore, as he was called in this manner, it was fitting for them to receive his doctrine not as mere ideas from his own mind, but as the word of the immortal God.

Secondly, in a subtle way, he commends them for the progress they have made in the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ (verse 8).

Thirdly, he reveals the tender love and unwavering desire he has for their well-being, expressing his constant and tireless efforts to do them good (from verse 9 to 16).

Fourthly, he presents the main and critical point, the pivot upon which the entirety of his glorious teachings revolves, namely, that a person is justified in the sight of God by faith and not by works. He proves this proposition first by referring to Scripture (verse 17), "The just shall live by faith."

Secondly, he supports it with reasoning, as stated in the text, showing that no one can be considered righteous before God by their

own works. This is because even the best works that a person can do on their own are wicked and unjust, and therefore deserving of God's punishment. All individuals outside of Christ are guilty of ungodliness and unrighteousness, and therefore subject to condemnation. Consequently, they must seek righteousness through some other means. His argument runs as follows: If no one can appease the wrath of God by the works of the law, then no one can be saved by the works of the law. And since no one can appease the wrath of God by the works of the law, it follows that no one can be saved by the works of the law. He presents this argument in the text and further develops it in the following chapters.

In the words of the text, we can observe these two main parts in general.

[1] Firstly, it pertains to the attitude and disposition of wicked individuals towards the Truth of God.

[2] Secondly, it concerns God's response to their conduct: they oppose the truth by holding it in unrighteousness. God, in turn, stands against them with wrath and vengeance. They treat the truth harshly, and God deals with them just as severely. Specifically, there is, first, the subject - the Wrath of God; second, the object - ungodly and unrighteous individuals; third, the universality of it - in the word "all." God does not show partiality, but all, regardless of who they are, those who hold the truth in unrighteousness, will experience the Wrath of God. No matter how insignificant a sin may appear to a worldly perspective, it shall not escape it.

Fourthly, the source from which this Wrath shall come is stated as heaven.

[Observation 1] By observing the order in which the Holy Spirit places ungodliness before unrighteousness, we can learn that sins against the first table of the law (sins against God) are of a more

serious and grievous nature than sins against the second table (sins against fellow human beings).

[Observation 2] Secondly, by noting that it is said "against ungodliness" and not "against ungodly men," we learn that God's Wrath is primarily and fundamentally directed against people's sins and wicked ways, rather than against their persons.

[Observation 3] Thirdly, by understanding that they "hold the truth in unrighteousness," we learn that the Gentiles naturally had within them an inherent capacity to acquire some knowledge of God, His almighty power, greatness, goodness, and eternal nature, simply by observing His creation. Consequently, their own reason could condemn them for their wickedness towards both God and humanity.

To better comprehend the words, we should consider:

First, what is meant by the wrath of God: The wrath of God is an act of His justice, punishing wicked individuals. Sometimes it refers to the actual judgments themselves, such as plagues, wars, famines, and similar events. In this context, it is set in contrast to the righteousness of God mentioned in verse 17, which represents God's merciful goodness and gracious dealings with fallen humanity.

Secondly, what is meant by truth: Here, truth refers to the residual light that remained within humanity after the fall. It represents the remnant of understanding present in every person's conscience, enabling them to perceive the power, glory, majesty, and bounty of God, and acknowledging the need to worship and fear Him above all. Sometimes, truth also signifies the effectiveness and power of the truth. For example, in Galatians 2:14, Paul reproves Peter and others for not walking according to the truth of the Gospel, because the truth had not been powerful enough in their lives to lead them away from the beggarly elements of the ceremonial law. Instead, they desired the Gentiles to conform to Jewish practices.

Thirdly, what is meant by holding the truth in unrighteousness. Holding the truth of God in unrighteousness can be either through a form of violence and suppression, seeking to restrain and confine it, preventing its clear manifestation. Not only is it not submitted to, followed, and obeyed, but it is resisted and contradicted. Practices that are directly contrary to the guidance of truth are embraced. Alternatively, it can be hindered by the bondage of certain lusts, which obstruct the powerful operation and effectiveness of the truth upon the soul. Consequently, the word is unable to accomplish the work it would otherwise do in the hearts of those to whom it is directed.

Fourthly, what is meant by the word unrighteousness. In some passages of scripture, it specifically refers to sins committed against the second Table of the Ten Commandments. However, in this context, it encompasses not only the violation of the Law of Nature concerning our obligations towards fellow human beings but also the violation of God's Law, particularly in relation to the homage and service owed to His Majesty. Therefore, it includes all sinful disorders and corruptions of the heart, as well as improper expressions of emotions. Based on the explanation provided, we can observe the following propositions:

[Observation] 1. Much can be known and learned about God's power, greatness, and goodness through the observation of His creation. [Observation] 2. All wicked individuals are enemies to and opponents of the truth of God. [Observation] 3. The root cause of hindering and opposing the word of God lies in the corruption present in their hearts. [Observation] 4. All unrighteous individuals who oppose the word of truth will inevitably face the wrath of God.

As for the main doctrine, I will summarize the points covered thus far in the following proposition:

Carnal and corrupt individuals impede the powerful effectiveness of the truth, preventing it from working upon their sinful hearts,

resisting its influence, and striving to subdue it. This is due to the inherent corruption embedded in their hearts.

It is indeed true that truth possesses great power and will ultimately prevail. When the Spirit of God impresses it upon the conscience, even the hardest heart will soften, and even the proudest heart will be humbled, considering itself lower than dust, as low as the deepest depths of hell. When God sends His truth to conquer a corrupt heart, He does not pause to ask the sinner whether they are willing to submit to the word of truth, to willingly surrender to the governance of Christ. Since the fall of Adam, it is natural for us to drift farther and farther away from God. Just like Cain, who slew his righteous brother and was banished from God's presence, dwelling in the Land of Nod, which means wandering. Once fellowship and communion with God are lost, no worldly satisfaction is sufficient to appease the immortal soul. This applies to all of us by nature. Therefore, the Lord not only provides us with means, help, and heavenly guidance for the benefit of our souls, but also works to conquer our wills, forcefully directing us on the path to eternal happiness.

However, God's Spirit does not always accompany the preaching of the word with its efficacious working. Often, God strives through His word and the common workings of His Spirit, providing instruction, conviction, and correction. Yet, carnal hearts resist, oppose, and exert efforts to keep the word of God out of their hearts. To better understand this, consider the following points. Firstly, heathens possess remnants of God's law in their consciences, although they are strangers to a life of faith and the covenant of grace. "For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law" (Romans 2:14). This demonstrates the impact of the law written in their hearts. Hence, many heathens have written extensively about vice and virtue, and have established just laws to punish acts such as murder, adultery, and drunkenness, even with death itself. Conscience prevents many carnal individuals from

engaging in sinful actions. Conscience stands over them with a whip, restraining them from pursuing many desires and longings.

Secondly, the works of creation reveal much about the power, wisdom, and sovereignty of God.

But thirdly, the word of God is what most clearly reveals God in all His glorious attributes. Although God reveals Himself through the light He has placed in every person's conscience, through His works of creation and providence, and through the powerful ministry of His word, carnal hearts refuse to yield to it or give credit to the truth. They do not express gratitude towards God for these glorious mercies. Instead, they do whatever they can to shut out and keep out the light that dares to enter their souls, extinguishing the movements of the Spirit and eclipsing the light of the Gospel, even when it shines brighter than the midday sun. This was the case with the Jews when Stephen brought the word close to their hearts, and it pierced them deeply. The text says in Acts 7:57-58, "Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and rushed together at him. And they cast him out of the city and stoned him." Similarly, the people of Sodom resisted all of Lot's persuasions and entreaties. They cried out, "This fellow came to sojourn, and he has become the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them" (Genesis 19:9). Every carnal heart responds to the word of God in the same way, rejecting the minister who comes with a sincere desire to benefit their souls, to guide them on the path to blessedness, to woo, entreat, and beseech them to be reconciled to God and no longer resist His truth, blaspheme His name, defile His holy things, and continue in their sinful ways. Instead of yielding to these blessed promptings, they cry out, "Stand back! Who made you a judge? We do not heed your counsel or fear your threats." In their hearts, they echo the words of Jeremiah 18:12, "We will follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart." Thus, they even take up arms against the ministers of God and the truths of God when they attempt to redirect them from their worldly ways.

To better understand this point, I will clarify it in these three aspects:

1. What is the power of truth?
2. How do wicked men hinder it?
3. Why do they hinder it?

[Question] Firstly, what is the power of truth, or what effect does it have on the soul that wicked men oppose it?

[Answer] The work and power of truth will become apparent in four particulars.

1. First, it is a word of information, revealing things in their true colours, removing the mask that carnal reasoning has placed upon them (Proverbs 6:23). The commandment is a lantern, an instruction, a light. Just as a light is useful in a dark and narrow path, the word of God directs and informs us on how to walk the narrow path that leads to life. It informs us on what to avoid, what to pursue, what to love, and what to hate. As long as we are guided by the light of truth, we cannot go astray or lose our way. It exposes all the hidden corners of the soul, such as envy, pride, hypocrisy, and blasphemy that reside within the heart. Ephesians 5:13 says, "But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light." In every doubtful matter of conscience, one can find resolution by weighing their thoughts, words, and actions on the balance of the Sanctuary.
2. Secondly, it is not only a word of information but also a word of quickening. It is a powerful and vibrant word that not only shows the way and points to the right path but also empowers a person to walk in that path by its strength. This enables one to walk joyfully on the path to Heaven, despite the obstacles and opposition encountered in the world. It is not only like the sun that shows the right way but also like a strong current that carries us forward on that way. David says in Psalm 119:50,

"This is my comfort in my affliction, that your promise gives me life."

3. Thirdly, the word has a drawing power. The Church confesses in Song of Solomon 1:3, "Draw me after you; let us run." The Church acknowledges that it cannot come to Christ unless it is drawn. The word of God has the power to draw and lead a person in the right path, even when corruption is strong and the outward struggles weigh heavy on the individual.
4. Fourthly, it is a word of conviction. It is powerful in overturning all human objections and has a supreme authority to refute all carnal reasoning when accompanied by the Lord. In 2 Corinthians 10:4, it is said, "For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds." The truth has a mighty operation, as stated by the Apostle in 2 Corinthians 13:8, "For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth." Thus, truth is powerful. Despite the strength of corruption, the allurements of the world, and the snares of the Devil, if the Lord chooses to impress the truth upon the soul, whether to inform, quicken, draw, or convict, no distractions or setbacks can hinder its work. This demonstrates the effectiveness of the truth.

[Quest.] Secondly, how does a carnal man hinder the powerful working of this word so that it does not prevail with his soul? The word desires the soul, but the soul desires its sins. The opposition of the carnal heart against the truth is evident in these four aspects.

[Answ.] 1. Firstly, a carnal heart is extremely unwilling and completely disinclined to listen to the truth of God in order to be instructed by it and to examine oneself. It is burdensome to flesh and blood to wait upon the truth. It is unwilling to know its duties and what the word says in certain cases, fearing that it may require giving up some of its cherished sins. It holds onto these cherished sins as dear as its right hand or right eye. Therefore, it is content to be

ignorant of the truth of God. Even though heavenly manna lies at its doorstep, it refuses to step out and gather it. Naturally, people stop their ears against the truth, as mentioned in Isaiah 30:10: "They say to the seers, 'Do not see,' and to the prophets, 'Do not prophesy to us what is right; speak to us pleasant words; prophesy illusions.'" They want the truth to be out of their way, cause the Holy One of Israel to cease from their presence. Similarly, in Job 21:14, it is said, "They say to God, 'Depart from us! We do not desire the knowledge of your ways.'" They desire nothing more than to be exempt from all submission to God. Acts 28:27 is also relevant here: "For the heart of this people has grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them." They close their eyes and pretend not to see what they see against their wills. Carnal men are reluctant to know the truth. If they do search for it, it is like a coward searching for an enemy, hoping not to find him and even fearing to find him. A natural man is fearful and unwilling to search for and find the truth. But if the truth glimmers in and conscience begins to react, then he seeks out merry company that can help him suppress these movements of the Spirit, just as Saul summoned David to play before him when the evil spirit came upon him. We tend to draw a curtain before the sun when it shines too brightly in our eyes. Similarly, every carnal heart, when the word shines in their soul, says, "Oh, draw a curtain before it, let me hear no more of this, lest it drive me out of my senses. I would have Christ, but I would also have the world. If God would allow me to indulge in a particular sin, referring to their beloved corruption, I would willingly come to Him and comply with everything else He requires of me." Conscience prompts them to do something, and the word has some effect on them, albeit superficially, like the seed that fell on stony ground. However, they refuse to part with their beloved corrupt desires. But when it touches the covetous person's gain or the pleasure of the sensual person, they cry out, "Draw a curtain before it."

Secondly, a carnal heart is always ready to spread an evil report about the blessed truth of God, making it appear deformed to those who start to show some desire for it. They treat it as the spies did with the land of Canaan in Numbers 13:32, bringing back an evil report of the land they had searched, saying that it devours its inhabitants, and so on. The giants were so cruel that they would eat one another and anyone who came among them. Upon hearing this report, the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron, wishing they were back in Egypt. They desired to be in Canaan and still cried out for the land flowing with milk and honey, but they were not willing to face any hardships along the way. Once they heard about the giants, they preferred the leeks and garlic of Egypt over the delicacies of Canaan. When Christ fed his followers, many followed him, but it was more for their love of the loaves than for his teachings. Many want to be happy but are not willing to be holy. When they are called to deny themselves, crucify their beloved sins, forsake all, and even give up their lives for the truth, they cry out that it is a hard saying and cannot bear it. They then scandalize the ways of God and raise evil reports about them.

[Object.] Can we then make the word effective through our own power?

[Answ.] No, but you can do more than you currently do. Your legs can carry you to the word just as easily as to a pub. Your ears can listen to the word just as well as to idle tales. You can sing psalms as well as idle songs. You can read good books as well as playbooks. Do what you are capable of doing. Put all your strength and diligence into it, and then surrender yourself to God. Tell His Majesty that you eagerly want to forsake every evil way, but you are not able to do so on your own. Although your spirit is somewhat willing, your flesh is weak, and you have a deceitful heart that is ready to embrace every opportunity to sin that comes your way. Therefore, beseech Him not only to begin but to complete every good work within you. While it is not within people's power to save themselves, their own consciences will tell them that they could do more than they currently do. In Luke

7:29-30, the tax collectors justified God by being baptized with the baptism of John, while the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the counsel of God against themselves and were not baptized by John. Terms of grace and salvation were offered to both tax collectors and Pharisees, but one group rejected God's good counsel while the other accepted it. Therefore, when we see others being called and converted through the same means we have access to, we should blame ourselves and reflect on our souls. We should say, "The word would have enlightened me if I had not despised it. It would have quickened me if I had not opposed it. I was almost converted, I had glimpses of heaven and happiness, but oh, wretched me! Company came, thoughts of the world came and choked it. The Lord has knocked at my heart many times, but I refused to open the doors of my soul for the King of glory to enter."

Thirdly, a carnal heart opposes the good word of God, preventing it from working on their soul by resisting the work of conviction. When the word of God has a powerful impact on the soul, awakening the sinner and stirring their conscience, they cannot help but acknowledge, "I am the man, these are my sins," which, unless prevented by the mercy of the Lord, will surely lead to their downfall. At this point, carnal reason seeks to either diminish the severity of the sins or vilify the word of God and its truth, which forms the basis of all opposition against the word. If people truly believed that it was the word of an Almighty God, and that every curse pronounced within it would surely fall upon those who transgress its divine ordinances, they would not dare to sin against its plain commands as they currently do.

When Balak sent for Balaam to curse the people of God, believing him to be a witch whose blessings and curses had power, God said to Balaam, "You shall not go with them," and he obeyed. However, when Balak sent more honourable men and promised him promotion, the sinful and covetous Balaam said, "Stay here overnight, and I will see what the Lord will say." Although the Lord had explicitly said, "You shall not go with them," Balaam's desires

lingered after the house full of gold, so he hoped that God would change His mind. Thus, he tempted God to go against His commandment, revealing his low esteem for the word of God as the cause of his fearful sin. There are many who follow the ways of Balaam, as mentioned by the Apostle Jude, being willing to obey the commands of God only as long as it aligns with their profit and honour. However, when faced with the opportunity to gain wealth through lying and deceit, such as a house full of gold being offered, they seek a dispensation and cast the Commandments behind their backs. Many usurers, who find sweetness in their sin and are determined to continue in it, will employ all possible arguments to justify it and eagerly grasp at anything that seems to even remotely support it. Yet, it is incredibly difficult to make them listen to what the word of God says against it.

When Moses stood before Pharaoh and his staff was transformed into a serpent by the direct finger of God, Pharaoh did not humble himself under the miracle. Instead, he summoned his magicians, who also turned their staffs into serpents. However, Moses' serpent devoured theirs. Nevertheless, the text states that Pharaoh's heart was hardened. This is the same with every carnal heart. When the word confronts and convicts them, filling their soul with terror and trouble, they summon their own magicians—carnal reasonings. Although the word of God refutes all their reasoning, the carnal heart remains satisfied and, like Pharaoh, grows harder and harder.

Fourthly, and finally, if carnal reason cannot defeat the truth, then individuals resort to outright opposition, violently opposing it and acting in defiance of the truth, following the suggestions of their wicked hearts. This was evident with the Children of Israel when their pride led them to demand a king. Samuel delivered a gracious sermon to dissuade them, explaining the nature of having a king and how he would enslave them, exerting control over their sons, daughters, and all they possessed. It is not that kings inherently have such authority by their office, but as this king was to rule in God's wrath, he would usurp power over his brethren. However, the people

refused to heed Samuel's voice and insisted, "No, we want a king over us." Similarly, every carnal heart, when the word reaches their conscience so intimately that they cannot escape it, in a desperate madness, declares, "I will not obey it." But let it be known that although God's command may not convert them here, it will ultimately prevail over them to condemn them forever (Matthew 25:46). They shall go into everlasting pain. The reasons for this point are as follows.

First, carnal individuals oppose the truth, as previously shown, because they are unwilling to have their sins exposed and removed. Their sins are as dear to them as their lives, even the life of their precious souls (which are worth more than the entire world). And would not a person fight for their life? So, when the word of God seeks to remove the cup from the drunkard, the prostitute from the adulterer, and pleasure from the indulgent, they cling to their sins as if holding onto their lives. They would rather let their sins destroy their immortal souls than allow the word to eradicate their sins.

Secondly, a carnal-minded person cannot find pleasure in anything if they are denied the liberty to sin. They consider it a plague and nuisance to live under a stirring ministry or in a godly household where they cannot indulge in sin as they desire. Oh, how tedious it is! Hence, they rejoice when the godly ones (who are the pillars of the land) are removed, as stated in Revelation 11:10. When the two witnesses are killed, those dwelling on the earth will rejoice, exchange gifts, and celebrate because these two prophets troubled them. The Gospel of Christ is not only a stumbling block but an affliction to the world, and the ministry thereof is the aroma of death unto death for those who perish (2 Corinthians 2:16).

Thirdly, carnal individuals oppose the truth because it does not allow them to enjoy any of their cherished sins. They may be willing to part with sins they are not greatly attached to. The young man in the Gospel went far, Herod reformed many things, and Agrippa was almost persuaded to be a Christian. However, when it came to their

besetting sins, they became stuck. Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen incited a riot against Paul when he began to challenge the belief in Diana's image, which brought them financial gain. When gain is cloaked in the guise of religion, it becomes the very reason why idolatry is staunchly and stubbornly defended.

[Use 1] For examination, is it true that corrupt hearts hinder the word from working effectively upon them? Then let us examine ourselves. Do we find the commandments of the Lord burdensome? Do we secretly wish that many of them, which forbid our beloved sins, were not in the Book of God? Do we consider God a harsh Master, laying strict charges and restrictions upon us? If this is the case, it is a clear indication that our hearts are carnal, deceitful above all, and desperately wicked, as Jeremiah spoke. Even in the best of God's children, there is some hidden resistance against the truth, for flesh will remain alongside the spirit as long as they are on this side of the grave. However, when this resistance arises, they do not yield to it but contend against their own hearts, taking up arms against those enemies of their peace and happiness. It is one thing to have remaining sin, and another to have sin ruling.

This truth specifically confronts two types of false-hearted individuals:

- Discreet hypocrites.
- Subtle hypocrites.

1. Discreet hypocrites: Discretion, when considered in itself, is a blessed work of God's Spirit, written in the hearts of His people. It always operates on sound principles, in good matters, and towards righteous ends. However, there is a worldly discretion that resides in hypocritical hearts, leading to the destruction of many souls. Hence, I refer to such individuals as discreet hypocrites. They always strive to be on the winning side, even if it means joining forces with the worst. They follow the proverbial saying of "hunting with the hound and running with

the hare." They do not care whether the cause of Christ succeeds or fails, as long as they can save themselves. They consider anyone who suffers for religion or conscience sake as mad, lacking their discretion and unwilling to go with the wind as they do. They can be zealous for the glory of God as long as it aligns with their own advantage. Just like false-hearted John, who zealously executed the Lord's command by annihilating the house of Ahab to secure his own position in the kingdom. However, when faced with the choice of forsaking Christ or the world, they choose the world. Their religion fluctuates with the prevailing trends of the times they live in. They can be wicked among the wicked and righteous among the righteous. Their religion is like a cloak that can be raised or lowered according to the circumstances. They can serve God on any terms, in any fashion, seeking to please everyone and gain a reputation among men. But the Lord will reject them because they are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold (Revelation 3:16). This is a discreet hypocrite.

2. The subtle hypocrite: This individual pretends to have nothing but love and admiration for religion, as if it were the sole purpose and goal of their life. They do not want to be known to think, let alone speak, anything against the truth. However, deep down, their own heart knows that they are secret underminers of it. They feign to seek the liberty of the Gospel, when in reality, they seek their own carnal liberty. It is similar to Saul, who pretended to keep the chief cattle alive for sacrifice, when it was purely driven by a covetous desire. Furthermore, this person pretends to possess remarkable humility. They appear to be willing to do anything and endure anything for the sake of the truth, all for the sake of vain ostentation. They seek their own interests in everything they do. Although they may deny themselves some lawful comforts, it is solely for their own self-centered motives, and thus, it is not acceptable to the Lord, as David says in Psalm 119:6, "I shall not be ashamed nor confounded when I have respect to all thy Commandments."

Now, this hypocrite does not have respect for all of God's Commandments, and therefore, they will certainly be confounded.

[Use 2] This is meant to bring comfort to all those who find that their hearts align with the teachings of the word, who are willing to let go of beloved sins (no matter how pleasant or profitable), and worldly ambitions, even willing to give up their lives when called upon by God. This can be a source of indescribable comfort to them, for they possess a distinguishing characteristic in their souls that cannot be found in the hearts of any hypocrites in the world. Therefore, consider within yourself how you can submit to both the commands and promises of the word, willing to embrace every blessed truth, desiring to know it, practice it, and delight in it day and night. Is there anyone here whose conscience testifies that this is true of them? That they are not only willing to hear, but also to accept every truth of God, even those that are most contrary to human desires? Can you sincerely say before the Lord that if there are any more truths to be discovered, you eagerly desire to hear them and understand them, and how willingly would you put them into practice? Can you say with the righteous man Job, "Surely it is fitting to be said to God: I have borne chastisement, and I will not offend anymore. Teach me what I do not see, and if I have done iniquity, I will do so no more." Such a person who loves and embraces the truth in this way is a citizen of Heaven, one of the blessed company of saints and angels, as stated in John 8:32, "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." This was the Apostle's great joy, as expressed in 3 John 4, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in the truth." If it brought such joy to him to see this blessed work in the souls of others, how much greater cause for joy do you have when it is accomplished in your own soul? God himself loves the truth and expects truthfulness from within. He delights in rewarding those who love the truth. If you love the truth of Christ, it will bear witness to your character, as it did to Demetrius, as mentioned in 3 John 12, "Demetrius has a good report of the truth itself." If the truth speaks well of you, do not fear what

the world, your friends, or enemies may say about you, for the testimony of the truth will bring you comfort when false witnesses step aside, and you will be able to hold your head high while those who have mocked the truth, and you for the sake of the truth, will hang their heads and feel their hearts fail within them. This will be a comfort to a humble soul when their conscience testifies that although they have had many weaknesses, they were always willing to accept any truth made known to their soul and instantly detested any sin revealed as such. Then the Truth will testify, "I bear witness, Lord, that they loved me, embraced me, and delighted in me, even enduring bitter persecution for my sake." And so, the truth will set them free, leaving no accusation for the devil to bring, and God the Father, God the Son, and the Holy Spirit will be ready to embrace such a soul, for God is the God of Truth, Christ is the Word of Truth, and the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth. Therefore, strive for the truth, no longer opposing its powerful work within your soul, but constantly implore the God of Truth to deeply impress every truth you hear upon your heart.

FINIS.

THE PLANTING OF THE RIGHTEOUS.

But they are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper. - PSALM 1:3

At the beginning of this Psalm, the Prophet David provides a somewhat general and vague overview of blessedness, which is the desire of our hearts, the goal of our hopes and efforts. Then he proceeds to point out the wrong paths that those who walk on them

will never reach this blessedness. Next, he reveals the true and direct path to happiness, which consists of two main aspects: delighting in and meditating on the word of God. In the words of the verse, he specifically and clearly describes this happiness, aiming to captivate people's affections and make their souls fall in love with it. He also portrays the woeful state and condition of those who do not walk on this path that leads to happiness. They are not like the righteous, but the wind of God's wrath will sweep them away like chaff. Finally, he provides the reasons for this distinction, for the Lord knows and approves the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

Now, in the third verse, a familiar simile of a tree is used, and this tree is further elaborated upon.

1. By its nature, it is a cultivated tree, not a wild tree.
2. By its location, it grows by the rivers of water.
3. By its characteristic, it bears fruit at the appropriate time.
4. By some effects:
 - It flourishes continuously, and its leaves do not wither.
 - It succeeds in all its endeavors; whatever it does, prospers. Just as a tree uprooted from a barren land and transplanted into a fertile soil, placed by a river of water, bears abundant fruit and remains in a flourishing state, so it is with those who have been rooted out of the dry wilderness of sin and have been transported by the great Husbandman, God the Father, into the true Vine, Jesus Christ, and placed by the rivers of His word and ordinances. They grow fruitful in grace and goodness, producing flourishing fruit at the appropriate time, when it brings the most glory to God and benefits His people. Their fruit will neither fade nor perish until they attain perfection and enjoy complete happiness with Christ in glory.

Therefore, this third verse specifically reveals the difference between a godly person and a godless person. They are opposed in their

principles and ways. They are distinct in their fruits, and they will have different accounts on the last day.

Now, for now, I will set aside all the other characteristics of a godly person and focus only on this: that as they bear fruit, it is fruit at the appropriate time. The important point to consider is this: it is the duty of a godly person not only to fulfill the obligations and perform the services that God requires of them but also to do them at the most suitable time. In short, the duties of saints should be timely.

This point may seem strange to some, as it is not well-known and is rarely practiced by most. Therefore, I will:

1. Prove this point.
2. Explain the grounds and reasons behind it.
3. Apply it to our lives.

First, for the proof of it, the Lord commands it, Numbers 9:2-3. The children of Israel were instructed to celebrate the Passover at the appointed time: "In the fourteenth day of this month at evening, you shall keep it in its due season, according to all its ordinances and ceremonies." In other words, they were to observe it exactly as the Lord had instituted it. If they did not observe the right time and season, the Lord would not accept it. And as the Lord commands it, so He practices it, as stated in Psalm 145:15: "The eyes of all wait upon thee, and thou givest them their meat in due season." The Prophet Isaiah also reveals that the Lord sent him to the people of Israel for this purpose in Isaiah 50:4: "The Lord God hath given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary." In the parable of the vineyard, Jesus Christ shows that God will entrust His vineyard to those vine-dressers who will deliver the fruits at the appointed time (Matthew 21:41). The steward of God's household is the one who will give his fellow servants their food at the proper time (Luke 12:42). Ecclesiastes 10:16-17 states, "Woe to thee, O land, when thy king is a child, and thy princes eat in the morning." This refers to acting out of

season and indulging in excess rather than necessity. On the other hand, blessed is the land whose king is noble in virtue and wisdom, and whose princes eat at the appropriate time for strength and not for drunkenness. Proverbs 15:23 affirms the value of a word spoken in due season. There is a season for words, just as there is for actions. Every good thing is fitting only in its proper place, and a praiseworthy thing loses its commendation if it is not in its proper context. Thus, it is evident that the saints of God should observe the most suitable seasons and opportunities for the performance of their duties, and this is both commanded and commended.

[Question] But now the question arises: How can a person discern the appropriate time for their services, the right moment for the duties they must discharge?

[Answer] Firstly, in general, when all circumstances and occasions align for a duty, that is the season and time for that duty. For example, daytime is the right time for a person to take a walk. There is enough time for it during the night, but that is not the appropriate season. Similarly, when the wind and tide are favorable, a sailor is to set forth on the sea. Otherwise, even if there is plenty of time afterwards, they may wait long enough for a suitable season. Likewise, when the Gospel is preached clearly, revealing the profound mysteries and emphasizing the dangers faced by those who neglect these opportunities, it is a fitting season for a person to reflect on repentance and returning to God. While a person may have time to repent in hell, they will lack a suitable season or opportunity. Therefore, a Christian should be wise in observing their season and taking advantage of occasions, opportunities, and abilities to perform their duties at the appropriate time.

In particular:

1. We must make sure to allocate the appropriate time for each matter that pertains to the present day; as Christ said, in Matthew 6:34, "Take no thought for tomorrow, for sufficient

unto the day is the evil thereof." Each day brings enough challenges and imperfections of its own, so there is no need to worry about the second or third day. It is fitting, therefore, to focus our thoughts on our present condition, for just as the challenges of the day are sufficient, so are the duties that accompany it. The daily tasks set by God may be enough to occupy our thoughts entirely. We are to seek our daily bread, seek forgiveness for our sins, and make peace with God every day. Since we do not know if we will live until tomorrow, we ought to fulfill the duties suited to the present day on a daily basis.

2. The most opportune time for performing our duties is when we find our bodies and spirits best disposed for such services. We should strike while the iron is hot, shape the vessel while the clay is soft. Thus, we should engage in our duties when we are in full strength and mental alertness. It is not suitable to pray when one is almost asleep or in bed but rather when the spirit is awake, active, and lively. It is not timely for a person to postpone repentance and making peace with God until they are old and weak in both body and spirit, only then thinking of serving the Lord when they can no longer serve the devil. This is not the right time. Who would accept such service? It is as if a young man in his prime strength says, "Here is a burden that I must carry upon the pain of death before I die. I will leave it until I am old and weak, and then I will carry it." Does this person not miss their opportunity? Just as watermen take advantage of the tide, we should learn to take advantage of our own nature. The Holy Spirit gives the charge to "Honour the Lord with thy substance, and with the first fruits of all thine increase" and attaches the promise, "So shall thy barns be filled with plenty" (Proverbs 3:9-10). In the old Law, the Lord required the firstborn of every womb. This is also worth considering, as mentioned in Malachi 1:13-14. The priests and the people were tired of serving the Lord and did not pay attention to the sacrifices they offered. Therefore, the Lord said, "Cursed be the deceiver, which hath in

his flock a male, and voweth, and sacrificeth unto the Lord a corrupt thing" (Malachi 1:14), meaning they served the Lord with a covetous mind.

3. To ensure that our duties are timely, we should discharge them in a way that is helpful rather than hindering to others. We should also learn to plan our worldly affairs in a way that does not cause us to miss opportunities for the benefit of our souls. Furthermore, we must fulfill our duties in a manner that does not contradict the general principles. We should not allocate so much time to our own affairs that we deprive ourselves of time and strength for the worship of God. Similarly, we should not exhaust ourselves in one duty to the point where we become unfit for others. Even if we have time for duties, if we lack strength and spirit, it cannot be the right time.

Now, concerning occasional duties, we must observe two rules.

First, if it is an occasional duty that can be omitted without harm to anyone, and if fulfilling it would mean neglecting the opportunity to do another good deed, then one may pass it by. However, if a duty arises in one's path that requires immediate attention and cannot be postponed or recovered later, while the duty of one's regular course can be resumed, it is a fitting time for an occasional duty. For example, it is one's daily duty to pray in their family. If a necessary occasional duty arises that cannot be fulfilled later, one must temporarily set aside prayer and discharge that other duty. In many cases, God desires mercy rather than sacrifice. If our neighbor's house is on fire and we have a duty to perform, we must temporarily set aside our duty and help our neighbor. Our Savior has shown that it is permissible to rescue one's ox or donkey from a pit on the Sabbath day. In such cases, God desires mercy rather than sacrifice.

[Question 2] If one duty must be forfeited and we cannot fulfill both, which one should we choose and perform?

We should prioritize the duty that is most excellent and necessary. Take up that duty and let the other pass. And know that duties pertaining to the worship of God should be discharged before duties pertaining to others. We must serve God before serving men. The duty that holds the highest position and value should be fulfilled first. This is the appropriate time.

How can one determine the preeminence of any duty?

That which concerns God's glory should take precedence over that which concerns one's self. What is for my own good must yield to what brings glory to God. We must focus more on God's glory than on the salvation of our souls in all the duties we perform.

Secondly, for duties that concern our neighbor, while we should not do to others what we would not want done to ourselves, we must also learn to do good to ourselves first. If the duties to be fulfilled regarding others are of the same rank and importance as those that concern ourselves, then we should prioritize our own needs, possessions, bodies, and lives over those of others. We should serve ourselves first and our neighbor second. However, we should not prioritize our bodies over their souls, our worldly possessions over their spiritual well-being, or our goods over their lives. If we follow these directions, our duties will be timely and thus acceptable to the Lord.

[Reason 1] Firstly, if we observe the appropriate season for performing our duties, it enhances all our actions. As Proverbs 25:11 says, "A word spoken in season is like apples of gold in pictures of silver." Just as striking while the iron is hot can produce magnificent forms, in the work of grace, seizing the opportunity when the wind of preaching is blowing, the Spirit is uplifting and stirring in the soul, can bring about a glorious work, a new creation. However, if individuals delay until their eyes grow dim, their limbs feeble, their strength depleted, their spirits weak, and corruption firmly rooted in the soul, it rarely becomes a suitable season for doing good to the

soul. When conscience is awakened at that point and the sinful soul realizes the opportunities God has granted, the offers that have been made, and the seasons for doing and receiving good that have been provided—all of which they have abused and wasted—the soul now fears that it will never have such opportunities again. It fears that the day of grace will pass, leading to despair.

[Reason 2] Secondly, things are sweetest and best received when they come in their season. How delightful is bread to the hungry and water to the thirsty because they are timely. When a full stomach rejects even honeycomb, it is evident that seed thrives best when sown in its season, and work progresses most effectively when undertaken at the right time. Therefore, the Preacher in Ecclesiastes 12:1 calls upon people to remember their Creator in the days of their youth, before the evil days come and the years approach when one will say, "I have no pleasure in them." For old age is likely to be filled with hardship unless we make peace with God in our youth. That is the season God expects and calls for us to remember Him in. God seldom grants the grace of repentance to those in their declining years who have despised it in their youth. Something out of season is like medicine brought to a dead person, which, if applied in a timely manner, could have done good. Be wise and seize every opportunity to do good to others and receive good for your own souls, lest you repent with a heavy heart when it is too late, when you have lost the season of grace and mercy. Consider what the Lord says in Proverbs 1:28-29: "Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently, but will not find me. Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the Lord, they would have none of my counsel and despised all my reproof, therefore they shall eat the fruit of their own way and be filled with their own devices."

Is it true that the saints of God should perform their duties in a timely manner? Then let this be a test for each of our souls, and let us examine ourselves to see if we have discharged the duties that the Lord requires of us, both in our general and specific callings. If we find ourselves to be at fault, let us humble ourselves. If we reflect on

our ways and look back at our past actions, considering the course of our entire lives, I fear that even the best of us will discover that many opportunities and blessed seasons for gathering provisions against the evil day have been neglected. How often have we heard this gracious proclamation from heaven, declaring that regardless of the nature or number of our sins, if we would come under the garment of Christ, submit to His royal scepter, and accept the promise of life in Jesus Christ, we would be saved by Christ? Yet how many of us have rejected these glorious offers of grace and unfathomable kindness extended to our souls? How many opportunities for spiritual nourishment have the Lord granted us, only for us to depart empty-handed? Let us now reflect and consider how many sermons we have heard, how many times we have partaken in the sacrament and renewed our covenant with the Lord, how many times God's Spirit has stirred our hearts to repent and return while hearing the word or during private meditation, saying to our souls, "Why will you die?" Yet, as sinful wretches, have we not disregarded these motions and cast them aside as if they did not concern us? Let us now reflect on all the times we have disregarded grace and mercy offered to us and say, like Pharaoh's butler, "I will remember my faults today," and let our souls be deeply humbled as we remember them before the Lord.

[Use 2] This instructs us that the life of a Christian is not idle but labour-intensive, requiring much effort and striving if one desires to be sincere in their profession and walk uprightly with the Lord in holy conduct. It involves being vigilant in all seasons and readily embracing every opportunity as one ought to, so that everything we do may contribute to God's glory and the well-being of His Church and people.

[Use 3] For encouragement, since God now grants us so many glorious seasons and opportunities that, if seized, could lead to the eternal welfare of our souls, let us step in and be healed while the Angel is stirring the waters of the Sanctuary. As long as the Gospel is preached to us and offers of mercy are extended, our season of grace continues. Therefore, we should seize these opportunities without

delay, for we do not know when they may be taken away from us or when we may be separated from them. Once the door is shut, even if we knock like the foolish virgins, it will not be opened to us. To help us in this, we should remember the previous instructions and learn to organize and oversee all our tasks so that we can allocate a suitable time to each one. We must always be careful that our duty to our neighbour never unjustly supersedes the homage and service we owe to our God. We should never overwhelm our spirits with numerous worldly affairs but keep our souls in a state where, whenever we come to commune with God in any holy ordinance, we set aside all worldly concerns so that our hearts and thoughts do not wander towards them.

[Use 4] As for guidance, we should strive to outpace time by being proactive, as David said, "My eyes anticipate the night watches, that I may meditate on your word" (Psalm 119:148). He was more earnest in studying God's word than the guards were in their duties. And in Psalm 63:6, he declared, "When I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the night watches." He rose before his nobles, while others were still asleep, and he was awake, having fulfilled his duty to God before any state matters were brought before him, before his thoughts were consumed by the affairs of his kingdom. He sets a good example for all of us to follow.

Lastly, we should learn to eliminate all unnecessary time wastage. If it is sinful to spend the time that should be devoted to spiritual matters on worldly businesses, which, if timely discharged, are lawful in themselves, how much more sinful is it to spend it on sinful sports and pleasures? We should therefore learn to reclaim time from the clutches of our lusts and corruptions, which have for too long occupied many precious hours and glorious opportunities in activities that directly lead to the eternal ruin of our immortal souls. We must do this now, while it is still called today, lest the Lord swear in His wrath that our souls shall never enter into His rest.

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