



“You will know them by their fruits.” Mt. 7:16

John Wesley SERMON 13

ON SIN IN BELIEVERS

“If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature.” 2 Cor. 5:17.

I.

1. Is there then sin in him that is in Christ? Does sin remain in one that believes in him? Is there any sin in them that are born of God, or are they wholly delivered from it? Let no one imagine this to be a question of mere curiosity; or that it is of little importance whether it be determined one way or the other. Rather it is a point of the utmost moment to every serious Christian; the resolving of which very nearly concerns both his present and eternal happiness.

2. And yet I do not know that ever it was controverted in the primitive Church. Indeed there was no room for disputing concerning it, as all Christians were agreed. And so far as I have observed, the whole body of ancient Christians, who have left us anything in writing, declare with one voice, that even believers in Christ, till they are “strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might,” have need to “wrestle with flesh and blood,” with an evil nature, as well as “with principalities and powers.”

3. And herein our own Church (as indeed in most points) exactly copies after the primitive; declaring in her Ninth Article, “Original sin is the corruption of the nature of every man, whereby man is in his own nature inclined to evil, so that the flesh lusteth contrary to the Spirit. And this infection of nature doth remain, yea, in them that are regenerated; whereby the lust of the flesh, called in Greek $\text{HTQPGOC}\acute{\text{Y}}\text{UCTMQL}$, is not subject to the law of God. And although there is no condemnation for them that believe, yet this lust hath of itself the nature of sin.”

4. The same testimony is given by all other Churches; not only by the Greek and Romish Church, but by every Reformed Church in Europe, of whatever denomination. Indeed some of these seem to carry the thing too far; so describing the corruption of heart in a believer, as scarce to allow that he has dominion over it, but rather is in bondage thereto; and, by this means, they leave hardly any distinction between a believer and an unbeliever.

5. To avoid this extreme, many well-meaning men, particularly those under the direction of the late Count Zinzendorf, ran into another; affirming, that “all true believers are not only saved from the dominion of sin, but from the being of inward as well as outward sin, so that it no longer remains in them.” And from them, about twenty years ago, many of our countrymen imbibed the same opinion, that even the corruption of nature is no more, in those who believe in Christ.

6. It is true that, when the Germans were pressed upon this head, they soon allowed, (many of them at least,) that “sin did still remain in the flesh, but not in the heart of a believer;” and, after a time, when the absurdity of this was shown, they fairly gave up the point; allowing that sin did still remain, though not reign, in him that is born of God.

7. But the English, who had received it from them, (some directly, some at second or third hand,) were not so easily prevailed upon to part with a favourite opinion: And even when the generality of them were convinced it was utterly indefensible, a few could not be persuaded to give it up, but maintain it to this day.

II.

1. For the sake of these who really fear God, and desire to know “the truth as it is in Jesus,” it may not be amiss to consider the point with calmness and impartiality. In doing this, I use indifferently the words, regenerate, justified, or believers; since, though they have not precisely the same meaning, (the First implying an inward, actual change, the Second a relative one, and the Third the means whereby both the one and the other are wrought,) yet they come to one and the same thing; as everyone that believes, is both justified and born of God.

2. By sin, I here understand inward sin; any sinful temper, passion, or affection; such as pride, self-will, love of the world, in any kind or degree; such as lust, anger, peevishness; any disposition contrary to the mind which was in Christ.

3. The question is not concerning outward sin; whether a child of God commits sin or no. We all agree and earnestly maintain, “He that committeth sin is of the devil.” We agree, “Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin.” Neither do we now inquire whether inward sin will always remain in the children of God; whether sin will continue in the soul as long as it continues in the body: Nor yet do we inquire whether a justified person may relapse either into inward or outward sin; but simply this, Is a justified or regenerate man freed from all sin as soon as he is justified? Is there then no sin in his heart? -- nor ever after, unless he fall from grace?

4. We allow that the state of a justified person is inexpressibly great and glorious. He is born again, “not of blood, nor of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” He is a child of God, a member of Christ, an heir of the kingdom of heaven. “The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, keepeth his heart and mind in Christ Jesus.” His very body is a “temple of the Holy Ghost,” and an “habitation of God through the Spirit.” He is “created anew in Christ Jesus:” He is washed, he is sanctified. His heart is purified by faith; he is cleansed “from the corruption that is in the world;” “the love of God is shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost which is given unto him.” And so long as he “walketh in love,” (which he may always do,) he worships God in spirit and in truth. He keepeth the commandments of God, and doeth those things that are pleasing in his sight; so exercising himself as to “have a conscience void of offence, toward God and toward man:” And he has power both over outward and inward sin, even from the moment he is justified.

III.

1. “But was he not then freed from all sin, so that there is no sin in his heart?” I cannot say this; I cannot believe it; because St. Paul says the contrary. He is speaking to believers, and describing the state of believers in general, when he says, “The flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: These are contrary the one to the other.” (Gal. 5:17) Nothing can be more express. The Apostle here directly affirms that the flesh, evil nature, opposes the Spirit, even in believers; that even in the regenerate there are two principles, “contrary the one to the other.”

2. Again: When he writes to the believers at Corinth, to those who were sanctified in Christ Jesus, (1 Cor. 1:2) he says, "I, brethren, could not speak unto you, as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, as unto babes in Christ. Ye are yet carnal: For whereas there is among you envying and strife, are ye not carnal?" (1 Cor. 3:1-3) Now here the Apostle speaks unto those who were unquestionably believers, -- whom, in the same breath, he styles his brethren in Christ, -- as being still, in a measure, carnal. He affirms, there was envying, (an evil temper,) occasioning strife among them, and yet does not give the least intimation that they had lost their faith. Nay, he manifestly declares they had not; for then they would not have been babes in Christ. And (what is most remarkable of all) he speaks of being carnal, and babes in Christ, as one and the same thing; plainly showing that every believer is (in a degree) carnal, while he is only a babe in Christ.

3. Indeed this grand point, that there are two contrary principles in believers, -- nature and grace, the flesh and the Spirit, runs through all the Epistles of St. Paul, yea, through all the Holy Scriptures; almost all the directions and exhortations therein are founded on this supposition; pointing at wrong tempers or practices in those who are, notwithstanding, acknowledged by the inspired writers to be believers. And they are continually exhorted to fight with and conquer these, by the power of the faith which was in them.

4. And who can doubt, but there was faith in the angel of the church of Ephesus, when our Lord said to him, "I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience: Thou hast patience, and for my name's sake hast labored, and hast not fainted?" (Rev. 2:2-4.) But was there, meantime, no sin in his heart? Yea, or Christ would not have added, "Nevertheless, I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love." This was real sin which God saw in his heart; of which, accordingly, he is exhorted to repent: And yet we have no authority to say, that even then he had no faith.

5. Nay, the angel of the church at Pergamos, also, is exhorted to repent, which implies sin, though our Lord expressly says, "Thou hast not denied my faith." (Rev. 2:13, 16) And to the angel of the church in Sardis, he says, "Strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die." The good which remained was ready to die; but was not actually dead. (Rev. 3:2) So there was still a spark of faith even in him; which he is accordingly commanded to hold fast. (Rev. 3:3.)

6. Once more: When the Apostle exhorts believers to "cleanse themselves from all filthiness of flesh and spirit," (2 Cor. 7:1,) he plainly teaches, that those believers were not yet cleansed therefrom.

Will you answer, "He that abstains from all appearance of evil, does ipso facto cleanse himself from all filthiness?" Not in any wise. For instance: A man reviles me: I feel resentment, which is filthiness of spirit; yet I say not a word. Here I "abstain from all appearance of evil;" but this does not cleanse me from that filthiness of spirit, as I experience to my sorrow.

7. And as this position, "There is no sin in a believer, no carnal mind, no bent to backsliding," is thus contrary to the word of God, so it is to the experience of his children. These continually feel an heart bent to backsliding; a natural tendency to evil; a proneness to depart from God, and cleave to the things of earth. They are daily sensible of sin remaining in their heart, -- pride, self-will, unbelief; and of sin cleaving to all they speak and do, even their best actions and holiest duties. Yet at the same time they "know that they are of God;" they cannot doubt of it for a moment. They feel his Spirit clearly "witnessing with their spirit, that they are the children of God." They "rejoice in God through Christ Jesus, by whom they have now received the atonement." So that they are equally assured, that sin is in them, and that "Christ is in them the hope of glory."

8. "But can Christ be in the same heart where sin is?" Undoubtedly he can; otherwise it never could be saved therefrom. Where the sickness is, there is the Physician, Carrying on his work within, Striving till he cast out sin.

Christ indeed cannot reign, where sin reigns; neither will he dwell where any sin is allowed. But he is and dwells in the heart of every believer, who is fighting against all sin; although it be not yet purified, according to the purification of the sanctuary.

9. It has been observed before, that the opposite doctrine, -- That there is no sin in believers, - is quite new in the church of Christ; that it was never heard of for seventeen hundred years; never till it was discovered by Count Zinzendorf. I do not remember to have seen the least intimation of it, either in any ancient or modern writer; unless perhaps in some of the wild, ranting Antinomians. (Calvinists)

And these likewise say and unsay, acknowledging there is sin in their flesh, although no sin in their heart. But whatever doctrine is new must be wrong; for the old religion is the only true one; and no doctrine can be right, unless it is the very same "which was from the beginning."

10. One argument more against this new, unscriptural doctrine may be drawn from the dreadful consequences of it. One says, "I felt anger to-day." Must I reply, "Then you have no faith?" Another says, "I know what you advise is good, but my will is quite averse to it." Must I tell him, "Then you are an unbeliever, under the wrath and the curse of God?" What will be the natural consequence of this? Why, if he believe what I say, his soul will not only be grieved and wounded, but perhaps utterly destroyed; inasmuch as he will "cast away" that "confidence which hath great recompense of reward." And having cast away his shield, how shall he "quench the fiery darts of the wicked one?" How shall he overcome the world? -- seeing "this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith." He stands disarmed in the midst of his enemies, open to all their assaults. What wonder then, if he be utterly overthrown; if they take him captive at their will; yea, if he fall from one wickedness to another, and never see good any more? I cannot, therefore, by any means receive this assertion, that there is no sin in a believer from the moment he is justified; First, because it is contrary to the whole tenor of Scripture; -- Secondly, because it is contrary to the experience of the children of God; -- Thirdly, because it is absolutely new, never heard of in the world till yesterday; -- and Lastly, because it is naturally attended with the most fatal consequences; not only grieving those whom God hath not grieved, but perhaps dragging them into everlasting perdition.

IV.

1. However, let us give a fair hearing to the chief arguments of those who endeavour to support it. And it is, First, from Scripture they attempt to prove that there is no sin in a believer. They argue thus: "The Scripture says, Every believer is born of God, is clean, is holy, is sanctified, is pure in heart, has a new heart, is a temple of the Holy Ghost. Now, as 'that which is born of the flesh is flesh,' is altogether evil, so 'that which is born of the Spirit is spirit,' is altogether good. Again: A man cannot be clean, sanctified, holy, and at the same time unclean, unsanctified, unholy. He cannot be pure and impure, or have a new and an old heart together. Neither can his soul be unholy, while it is a temple of the Holy Ghost.

I have put this objection as strong as possible, that its full weight may appear. Let us now examine it, part by part. And, 1. "That which is born of the Spirit is spirit, is altogether good." I allow the text, but not the comment. For the text affirms this, and no more, -- that every man who is "born of the Spirit," is a spiritual man. He is so: But so he may be, and yet not be altogether spiritual. The Christians at Corinth were spiritual men; else they had

been no Christians at all; and yet they were not altogether spiritual: they were still, in part, carnal. -- "But they were fallen from grace." St. Paul says, No. They were even then babes in Christ. 2. "But a man cannot be clean, sanctified, holy, and at the same time unclean, unsanctified, unholy." Indeed he may. So the Corinthians were. "Ye are washed," says the Apostle, "ye are sanctified;" namely, cleansed from "fornication, idolatry, drunkenness," and all other outward sin; (1 Cor. 6:9, 10, 11;) and yet at the same time, in another sense of the word, they were unsanctified; they were not washed, not inwardly cleansed from envy, evil surmising, partiality. -- "But sure, they had not a new heart and an old heart together." It is most sure they had, for at that very time, their hearts were truly, yet not entirely, renewed. Their carnal mind was nailed to the cross; yet it was not wholly destroyed. -- "But could they be unholy while they were `temples of the Holy Ghost?'" Yes; that they were temples of the Holy Ghost, is certain; (1 Cor. 6:19;) and it is equally certain, they were, in some degree, carnal, that is, unholy.

2. "However, there is one Scripture more which will put the matter out of question: `If any man be` a believer `in Christ, he is a new creature. Old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.` (2 Cor. 5:17.) Now certainly a man cannot be a new creature and an old creature at once." Yes, he may: He may be partly renewed, which was the very case with those at Corinth. They were doubtless "renewed in the spirit of their mind," or they could not have been so much as "babes in Christ." yet they had not the whole mind which was in Christ, for they envied one another. "But it is said expressly, `Old things are passed away: All things are become new.`" But we must not so interpret the Apostle's words, as to make him contradict himself. And if we will make him consistent with himself, the plain meaning of the words is this: His old judgment concerning justification, holiness, happiness, indeed concerning the things of God in general, is now passed away; so are his old desires, designs, affections, tempers, and conversation. All these are undeniably become new, greatly changed from what they were; and yet, though they are new, they are not wholly new. Still he feels, to his sorrow and shame, remains of the old man, too manifest taints of his former tempers and affections, though they cannot gain any advantage over him, as long as he watches unto prayer.

3. This whole argument, "If he is clean, he is clean;" "If he is holy, he is holy;" (and twenty more expressions of the same kind may easily be heaped together;) is really no better than playing upon words: It is the fallacy of arguing from a particular to a general; of inferring a general conclusion from particular premises. Propose the sentence entire, and it runs thus: "If he is holy at all, he is holy altogether." That does not follow: Every babe in Christ is holy, and yet not altogether so. He is saved from sin; yet not entirely: It remains, though it does not reign. If you think it does not remain, (in babes at least, whatever be the case with young men, or fathers) you certainly have not considered the height, and depth, and length, and breadth of the law of God; (even the law of love, laid down by St. Paul in the thirteenth of Corinthians;) and that every CPQOKC, disconformity to, or deviation from, this law is sin. Now, is there no disconformity to this in the heart or life of a believer? What may be in an adult Christian, is another question; but what a stranger must he be to human nature, who can possibly imagine, that this is the case with every babe in Christ!

4. "But believers walk after the Spirit, [What follows for some pages is an answer to a paper, published in the Christian Magazine, p. 577-582. I am surprised Mr. Dodd should give such a paper a place in his Magazine, which is directly contrary to our Ninth Article. -- Editor] (Rom. 8:1,) and the Spirit of God dwells in them; consequently, they are delivered from the guilt, the power, or, in one word, the being of sin."

These are coupled together, as if they were the same thing. But they are not the same

thing. The guilt is one thing, the power another, and the being yet another. That believers are delivered from the guilt and power of sin we allow; that they are delivered from the being of it we deny. Nor does it in any wise follow from these texts. A man may have the Spirit of God dwelling in him, and may "walk after the Spirit," though he still feels "the flesh lusting against the Spirit."

5. "But the 'church is the body of Christ;' (Col. 1:24;) this implies, that its members are washed from all filthiness; otherwise it will follow, that Christ and Belial are incorporated with each other." Nay, it will not follow from hence, "Those who are the mystical body of Christ, still feel the flesh lusting against the Spirit," that Christ has any fellowship with the devil; or with that sin which he enables them to resist and overcome.

6. "But are not Christians 'come to the heavenly Jerusalem,' where 'nothing defiled can enter?'" (Heb. 12:22.) Yes; "and to an innumerable company of angels, and to the spirits of just men made perfect." That is,

Earth and heaven all agree;
All is one great family.

And they are likewise holy and undefiled, while they "walk after the Spirit;" although sensible there is another principle in them, and that "these are contrary to each other."

7. "But Christians are reconciled to God. Now this could not be, if any of the carnal mind remained; for this is enmity against God: Consequently, no reconciliation can be effected, but by its total destruction."

We are "reconciled to God through the blood of the cross." And in that moment the HTQPGOCY UCTMQL, the corruption of nature, which is enmity with God, is put under our feet; the flesh has no more dominion over us. But it still exists; and it is still in its nature enmity with God, lusting against his Spirit.

8. "But 'they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh, with its affections and lusts.'" (Gal. 5:24.) They have so; yet it remains in them still, and often struggles to break from the cross. "Nay, but they have 'put off the old man with his deeds.'" (Col. 3:9.) They have; and, in the sense above described, "old things are passed away; all things are become new." A hundred texts may be cited to the same effect; and they will all admit of the same answer. -- "But, to say all in one word, 'Christ gave himself for the Church, that it might be holy and without blemish.'" (Eph. 5:25, 27.) And so it will be in the end: But it never was yet, from the beginning to this day.

9. "But let experience speak: All who are justified do at that time find an absolute freedom from all sin." That I doubt; But, if they do, do they find it ever after? Else you gain nothing. -- "If they do not, it is their own fault." That remains to be proved.

10. "But, in the very nature of things, can a man have pride in him, and not be proud; anger, and yet not be angry?"

A man may have pride in him, may think of himself in some particulars above what he ought to think, (and so be proud in that particular,) and yet not be a proud man in his general character. He may have anger in him, yea, and a strong propensity to furious anger, without giving way to it. - "But can anger and pride be in that heart, where only meekness and humility are felt?" No; but some pride and anger may be in that heart, where there is much humility and meekness.

"It avails not to say, These tempers are there, but they do not reign: For sin cannot, in any kind or degree, exist where it does not reign; for guilt and power are essential properties of sin. Therefore, where one of them is, all must be."

Strange indeed! "Sin cannot, in any kind or degree, exist where it does not reign?"

Absolutely contrary this to all experience, all Scripture, all common sense. Resentment of an affront is sin; it is CPQOKC, disconformity to the law of love. This has existed in me a thousand times. Yet it did not, and does not, reign. -- "But guilt and power are essential properties of sin; therefore where one is, all must be." No: In the instance before us, if the resentment I feel is not yielded to, even for a moment, there is no guilt at all, no condemnation from God upon that account. And in this case, it has no power: though it "lusteth against the Spirit," it cannot prevail. Here, therefore, as in ten thousand instances, there is sin without either guilt or power.

11. "But the supposing sin in a believer is pregnant with everything frightful and discouraging.

It implies the contending with a power that has the possession of our strength; maintains his usurpation of our hearts; and there prosecutes the war in defiance of our Redeemer." Not so: The supposing sin is in us, does not imply that it has the possession of our strength; no more than a man crucified has the possession of those that crucify him. As little does it imply, that "sin maintains its usurpation of our hearts." The usurper is dethroned. He remains indeed where he once reigned; but remains in chains. So that he does, in some sense, "prosecute the war," yet he grows weaker and weaker; while the believer goes on from strength to strength, conquering and to conquer.

12. "I am not satisfied yet: He that has sin in him, is a slave to sin. Therefore you suppose a man to be justified, while he is a slave to sin. Now, if you allow men may be justified while they have pride, anger, or unbelief in them; nay, if you aver, these are (at least for a time) in all that are justified; what wonder that we have so many proud, angry, unbelieving believers!

I do not suppose any man who is justified is a slave to sin: Yet I do suppose sin remains (at least for a time) in all that are justified.

"But, if sin remains in a believer, he is a sinful man: If pride, for instance, then he is proud; if self-will, then he is self-willed; if unbelief, then he is an unbeliever; consequently, no believer at all.

How then does he differ from unbelievers, from unregenerate men?" This is still mere playing upon words. It means no more than, if there is sin, pride, self-will in him, then -- there is sin, pride, self-will. And this nobody can deny. In that sense then he is proud, or self-willed. But he is not proud or self-willed in the same sense that unbelievers are; that is, governed by pride or self-will. Herein he differs from unregenerate men. They obey sin; he does not. Flesh is in them both. But they "walk after the flesh;" he "walks after the Spirit."

"But how can unbelief be in a believer?" That word has two meanings. It means either no faith, or little faith; either the absence of faith or the weakness of it. In the former sense, unbelief is not in a believer; in the latter, it is in all babes. Their faith is commonly mixed with doubt or fear; that is, in the latter sense, with unbelief. "Why are ye fearful," says our Lord, "O ye of little faith?" Again: "O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?" You see here was unbelief in believers; little faith and much unbelief.

13. "But this doctrine, that sin remains in a believer; that a man may be in the favour of God, while he has sin in his heart; certainly tends to encourage men in sin." Understand the proposition right, and no such consequence follows. A man may be in God's favour though he feel sin; but not if he yields to it. Having sin does not forfeit the favour of God; giving way to sin does. Though the flesh in you "lust against the Spirit," you may still be a child of God; but if you "walk after the flesh," you are a child of the devil. Now this doctrine does not encourage to obey sin, but to resist it with all our might.

V.

1. The sum of all is this: There are in every person, even after he is justified, two contrary principles, nature and grace, termed by St. Paul the flesh and the Spirit. Hence, although even babes in Christ are sanctified, yet it is only in part. In a degree, according to the measure of their faith, they are spiritual; yet, in a degree they are carnal. Accordingly, believers are continually exhorted to watch against the flesh, as well as the world and the devil. And to this agrees the constant experience of the children of God. While they feel this witness in themselves, they feel a will not wholly resigned to the will of God. They know they are in him; and yet find an heart ready to depart from him, a proneness to evil in many instances, and a backwardness to that which is good. The contrary doctrine is wholly new; never heard of in the church of Christ, from the time of his coming into the world, till the time of Count Zinzendorf; and it is attended with the most fatal consequences. It cuts off all watching against our evil nature, against the Delilah which we are told is gone, though she is still lying in our bosom. It tears away the shield of weak believers, deprives them of their faith and so leaves them exposed to all the assaults of the world, the flesh, and the devil.

2. Let us, therefore, hold fast the sound doctrine “once delivered to the saints,” and delivered down by them with the written word to all succeeding generations: That although we are renewed, cleansed, purified, sanctified, the moment we truly believe in Christ, yet we are not then renewed, cleansed, purified altogether; but the flesh, the evil nature, still remains (though subdued) and wars against the Spirit. So much the more let us use all diligence in “fighting the good fight of faith.” So much the more earnestly let us “watch and pray” against the enemy within. The more carefully let us take to ourselves, and “put on, the whole armor of God;” that, although “we wrestle” both “with flesh, and blood, and with the principalities, and with powers, and wicked spirits in high places,” we may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.”



John Wesley SERMON 44
(text from the 1872 edition)

ORIGINAL SIN

“And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” Gen. 6:5.

1. How widely different is this from the fair pictures of human nature which men have drawn in all ages! The writings of many of the ancients abound with gay descriptions of the dignity of man; whom some of them paint as having all virtue and happiness in his composition, or, at least, entirely in his power, without being beholden to any other being; yea, as self-sufficient, able to live on his own stock, and little inferior to God himself.

2. Nor have Heathens alone, men who are guided in their researches by little more than the dim light of reason, but many likewise of them that bear the name of Christ, and to whom are entrusted the oracles of God, spoken as magnificently concerning the nature of man, as if it were all innocence and perfection. Accounts of this kind have particularly abounded in the present (17th) century; and perhaps in no part of the world more than in our own country. Here not a few persons of strong understanding, as well as

extensive learning, have employed their utmost abilities to show, what they termed, "the fair side of human nature." And it must be acknowledged, that, if their accounts of him be just, man is still but "a little lower than the angels;" or, as the words may be more literally rendered, "a little less than God."

3. Is it any wonder, that these accounts are very readily received by the generality of men? For who is not easily persuaded to think favourably of himself? Accordingly, writers of this kind are most universally read, admired, applauded. And innumerable are the converts they have made, not only in the gay, but the learned world. So that it is now quite unfashionable to talk otherwise, to say any thing to the disparagement of human nature; which is generally allowed, notwithstanding a few infirmities, to be very innocent, and wise, and virtuous!

4. But, in the mean time, what must we do with our Bibles? -- for they will never agree with this.

These accounts, however pleasing to flesh and blood, are utterly irreconcilable with the scriptural.

The Scripture avers, that "by one man's disobedience all men were constituted sinners;" that "in Adam all died," spiritually died, lost the life and the image of God; that fallen, sinful Adam then "begat a son in his own likeness;" -- nor was it possible he should beget him in any other; for "who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean?" -- that consequently we, as well as other men, were by nature "dead in trespasses and sins," "without hope, without God in the world," and therefore "children of wrath;" that every man may say, "I was shapen in wickedness, and in sin did my mother conceive me;" that "there is no difference," in that "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God," of that glorious image of God wherein man was originally created. And hence, when "the Lord looked down from heaven upon the children of men, he saw they were all gone out of the way; they

were altogether become abominable, there was none righteous, no, not one," none that truly sought after God: Just agreeable this, to what is declared by the Holy Ghost in the words above recited, "God saw," when he looked down from heaven before, "that the wickedness of man was great in the earth;" so great, that "every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."

This is God's account of man: From which I shall take occasion, First, to show what men were before the flood: Secondly, to inquire, whether they are not the same now: And, Thirdly, to add some inferences.

I.

1. I am, First, by opening the words of the text, to show what men were before the flood. And we may fully depend on the account here given: For God saw it, and he cannot be deceived. He "saw that the wickedness of man was great:" -- Not of this or that man; not of a few men only; not barely of the greater part, but of man in general; of men universally. The word includes the whole human race, every partaker of human nature. And it is not easy for us to compute their numbers, to tell how many thousands and millions they were. The earth then retained much of its primeval beauty and original fruitfulness. The face of the globe was not rent and torn as it is now; and spring and summer went hand in hand. It is therefore probable, it afforded sustenance for far more inhabitants than it is now capable of sustaining; and these must be immensely multiplied, while men begat sons and daughters for seven or eight hundred years together. Yet, among all this inconceivable number, only "Noah found favour with God." He alone (perhaps including part of his household) was an exception from the universal wickedness, which, by the just judgment of God, in a short time after brought on universal

destruction. All the rest were partakers in the same guilt, as they were in the same punishment.

2. "God saw all the imaginations of the thoughts of his heart;" -- of his soul, his inward man, the spirit within him, the principle of all his inward and outward motions. He "saw all the imaginations:" It is not possible to find a word of a more extensive signification. It includes whatever is formed, made, fabricated within; all that is or passes in the soul; every inclination, affection, passion, appetite; every temper, design, thought. It must of consequence include every word and action, as naturally flowing from these fountains, and being either good or evil according to the fountain from which they severally flow.

3. Now God saw that all this, the whole thereof, was evil; -- contrary to moral rectitude; contrary to the nature of God, which necessarily includes all good; contrary to the divine will, the eternal standard of good and evil; contrary to the pure, holy image of God, wherein man was originally created, and wherein he stood when God, surveying the works of his hands, saw them all to be very good; contrary to justice, mercy, and truth, and to the essential relations which each man bore to his Creator and his fellow-creatures.

4. But was there not good mingled with the evil? Was there not light intermixed with the darkness? No; none at all: "God saw that the whole imagination of the heart of man was only evil." It cannot indeed be denied, but many of them, perhaps all, had good motions put into their hearts; for the Spirit of God did then also "strive with man," if haply he might repent, more especially during that gracious reprieve, the hundred and twenty years, while the ark was preparing. But still "in his flesh dwelt no good thing;" all his nature was purely evil: It was wholly consistent with itself, and unmixed with anything of an opposite nature.

5. However, it may still be matter of inquiry, "Was there no intermission of this evil? Were there no lucid intervals, wherein something good might be found in the heart of man?" We are not here to consider, what the grace of God might occasionally work in his soul; and, abstracted from this, we have no reason to believe, there was any intermission of that evil. For God, who "saw the whole imagination of the thoughts of his heart to be only evil," saw likewise, that it was always the same, that it "was only evil continually;" every year, every day, every hour, every moment. He never deviated into good.

II. Such is the authentic account of the whole race of mankind which He who knoweth what is in man, who searcheth the heart and trieth the reins, hath left upon record for our instruction. Such were all men before God brought the flood upon the earth. We are, Secondly, to inquire, whether they are the same now.

1. And this is certain, the Scripture gives us no reason to think any otherwise of them. On the contrary, all the above cited passages of Scripture refer to those who lived after the flood. It was above a thousand years after, that God declared by David concerning the children of men, "They are all gone out of the way, of truth and holiness; "there is none righteous, no, not one." And to this bear all the Prophets witness, in their several generations. So Isaiah, concerning God's peculiar people, (and certainly the Heathens were in no better condition,) "The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness; but wounds, and bruises, and putrifying sores." The same account is given by all the Apostles, yea, by the whole tenor of the oracles of God. From all these we learn, concerning man in his natural state, unassisted by the grace of God, that "every imagination of the thoughts of his heart is" still "evil, only evil," and that "continually."

2. And this account of the present state of man is confirmed by daily

experience. It is true, the natural man discerns it not: And this is not to be wondered at. So long as a man born blind continues so, he is scarce sensible of his want: Much less, could we suppose a place where all were born without sight, would they be sensible of the want of it. In like manner, so long as men remain in their natural blindness of understanding, they are not sensible of their spiritual wants, and of this in particular. But as soon as God opens the eyes of their understanding, they see the state they were in before; they are then deeply convinced, that “every man living,” themselves especially, are, by nature, “altogether vanity;” that is, folly and ignorance, sin and wickedness.

3. We see, when God opens our eyes, that we were before CSGQKýGPýVYKýMQUOYK – without God, or, rather, Atheists, in the world. We had, by nature, no knowledge of God, no acquaintance with him. It is true, as soon as we came to the use of reason, we learned “the invisible things of God, even his eternal power and Godhead, from the things that are made.” From the things that are seen we inferred the existence of an eternal, powerful Being, that is not seen. But still, although we acknowledged his being we had no acquaintance with him. As we know there is an Emperor of China, whom yet we do not know; so we knew there was a King of all the earth, yet we knew him not. Indeed we could not by any of our natural faculties. By none of these could we attain the knowledge of God. We could no more perceive him by our natural understanding, than we could see him with our eyes. For “no one knoweth the Father but the Son, and he to whom the Son willeth to reveal him. And no one knoweth the Son but the Father, and he to whom the Father revealeth him.”

4. We read of an ancient king, who, being desirous to know what was the natural language of men, in order to bring the matter to a certain issue, made the following experiment: He ordered two infants, as soon as they were born, to be conveyed to a place prepared for them, where they were brought up without any instruction at all, and without ever hearing a human voice. And what was the event? Why that when they were at length brought out of their confinement, they spoke no language at all; they uttered only inarticulate sounds, like those of other animals. Were two infants in like manner to be brought up from the womb without being instructed in any religion, there is little room to doubt but (unless the grace of God interposed) the event would be just the same. They would have no religion at all: They would have no more knowledge of God than the beasts of the field, than the wild ass’s colt. Such is natural religion, abstracted from traditional, and from the influences of God’s Spirit!

5. And having no knowledge, we can have no love of God: We cannot love him we know not.

Most men talk indeed of loving God, and perhaps imagine they do; at least, few will acknowledge they do not love him: But the fact is too plain to be denied. No man loves God by nature, any more than he does a stone, or the earth he treads upon. What we love we delight in: But no man has naturally any delight in God. In our natural state we cannot conceive how any one should delight in him. We take no pleasure in him at all; he is utterly tasteless to us. To love God! It is far above, out of our sight. We cannot, naturally, attain unto it.

6. We have by nature, not only no love, but no fear of God. It is allowed, indeed, that most men have, sooner or later, a kind of senseless, irrational fear, properly called superstition; though the blundering Epicureans gave it the name of religion. Yet even this is not natural, but acquired; chiefly by conversation or from example. By nature “God is not in all our thoughts:” We leave him to manage his own affairs, to sit quietly, as we imagine, in heaven, and leave us on earth to manage ours; so that we have no more of the fear of God before our eyes, than of the love of God in our hearts.

7. Thus are all men “Atheists in the world.” But Atheism itself does not screen

us from idolatry.

In his natural state, every man born into the world is a rank idolater. Perhaps, indeed, we may not be such in the vulgar sense of the word. We do not, like the idolatrous Heathens, worship molten or graven images. We do not bow down to the stock of a tree, to the work of our own hands. We do not pray to the angels or saints in heaven, any more than to the saints that are upon the earth. But what then? We have set up our idols in our hearts; and to these we bow down and worship them: We worship ourselves, when we pay that honour to ourselves which is due to God only. Therefore all pride is idolatry; it is ascribing to ourselves what is due to God alone. And although pride was not made for man, yet where is the man that is born without it? But hereby we rob God of his unalienable right, and idolatrously usurp his glory.

8. But pride is not the only sort of idolatry which we are all by nature guilty of. Satan has stamped his own image on our heart in self-will also. "I will," said he, before he was cast out of heaven, "I will sit upon the sides of the north;" I will do my own will and pleasure, independently on that of my Creator. The same does every man born into the world say, and that in a thousand instances; nay, and avow it too, without ever blushing upon the account, without either fear or shame. Ask the man, "Why did you do this?" He answers, "Because I had a mind to it." What is this but, "Because it was my will;" that is, in effect, because the devil and I agreed; because Satan and I govern our actions by one and the same principle. The will of God, mean time, is not in his thoughts, is not considered in the least degree; although it be the supreme rule of every intelligent creature, whether in heaven or earth, resulting from the essential, unalterable relation which all creature bear to their Creator.

9. So far we bear the image of the devil, and tread in his steps. But at the next step we leave Satan behind; we run into an idolatry whereof he is not guilty: I mean love of the world; which is now as natural to every man, as to love his own will. What is more natural to us than to seek happiness in the creature, instead of the Creator? -- to seek that satisfaction in the works of his hands, which can be found in God only? What more natural than "the desire of the flesh?" that is, of the pleasure of sense in every kind? Men indeed talk magnificently of despising these low pleasures, particularly men of learning and education. They affect to sit loose to the gratification of these appetites wherein they stand on a level with the beasts that perish. But it is mere affectation; for every man is conscious to himself, that in this respect he is, by nature, a very beast. Sensual appetites, even those of the lowest kind, have, more or less, the dominion over him. They lead him captive; they drag him to and fro, in spite of his boasted reason. The man, with all his good breeding, and other accomplishments, has no pre-eminence over the goat: Nay, it is much to be doubted, whether the beast has not the pre-eminence over him. Certainly he has, if we may hearken to one of their modern oracles, who very decently tells us,

Once in a season beasts too taste of love;
Only the beast of reason is its slave,
And in that folly drudges all the year.

A considerable difference indeed, it must be allowed, there is between man and man, arising (beside that wrought by preventing grace) from difference of constitution and of education. But, notwithstanding this, who, that is not utterly ignorant of himself, can here cast the first stone at another? Who can abide the test of our blessed Lord's comment on the Seventh Commandment: "He that looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart?" So that one knows not which to wonder at most, the ignorance or the insolence of those men who speak with such disdain of them that are overcome by desires which every man has felt in his own breast; the

desire of every pleasure of sense, innocent or not, being natural to every child of man.

10. And so is “the desire of the eye;” the desire of the pleasures of the imagination. These arise either from great, or beautiful, or uncommon objects; -- if the two former do not coincide with the latter; for perhaps it would appear, upon a diligent inquiry, that neither grand nor beautiful objects please any longer than they are new; that when the novelty of them is over, the greatest part, at least, of the pleasure they give is over; and in the same proportion as they become familiar, they become flat and insipid. But let us experience this ever so often, the same desire will remain still. The inbred thirst continues fixed in the soul; nay, the more it is indulged, the more it increases, and incites us to follow after another, and yet another object; although we leave every one with an abortive hope, and a deluded expectation. Yea,

The hoary fool, who many days
Has struggled with continued sorrow,
Renews his hope, and fondly lays
The desperate bet upon tomorrow!
To-morrow comes! ‘Tis noon! ‘Tis night!
This day, like all the former, flies:
Yet on he goes, to seek delight
To-morrow, till to-night he dies!

11. A third symptom of this fatal disease, the love of the world, which is so deeply rooted in our nature, is “the pride of life;” the desire of praise, of the honour that cometh of men. This the greatest admirers of human nature allow to be strictly natural; as natural as the sight, or hearing, or any other of the external senses. And are they ashamed of it, even men of letters, men of refined and improved understanding? So far from it that they glory therein! They applaud themselves for their love of applause! Yea, eminent Christians, so called, make no difficulty of adopting the saying of the old, vain Heathen, *Animi dissoluti est et nequam negligere quid de se homines sentiant*: “Not to regard what men think of us is the mark of a wicked and abandoned mind.” So that to go calm and unmoved through honour and dishonour, through evil report and good report, is with them a sign of one that is, indeed, not fit to live: “ Away with such a flow from the earth!” But would one imagine that these men had ever heard of Jesus Christ or his Apostles; or that they knew who it was that said, “How can ye believe who receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour which cometh of God only?” But if this is really so, if it be impossible to believe, and consequently to please God, so long as we receive or seek honour one of another, and seek not the honour which cometh of God only; then in what a condition are all mankind! The Christians as well as Heathens! Since they all seek honour one of another! Since it is as natural for them so to do, themselves being the judges, as it is to see the light which strikes upon their eye, or to hear the sound which enters their ear; yea, since they account it a sign of a virtuous mind, to seek the praise of men, and of a vicious one, to be content with the honour that cometh of God only!

III.

1. I proceed to draw a few inferences from what has been said. And, First, from hence we may learn one grand fundamental difference between Christianity, considered as a system of doctrines, and the most refined Heathenism. Many of the ancient Heathens have largely described the vices of particular men. They have spoken much against their covetousness, or cruelty; their luxury, or prodigality. Some have dared to say that “no man is born without vices of one kind or another.” But still as none of them were apprized of the fall of man, so none of them knew of his total corruption.

They knew not that all men were empty of all good, and filled with all manner of evil. They were wholly ignorant of the entire depravation of the whole human nature, of every

man born into the world, in every faculty of his soul, not so much by those particular vices which reign in particular persons, as by the general flood of Atheism and idolatry, of pride, self-will, and love of the world.

This, therefore, is the first grand distinguishing point between Heathenism and Christianity. The one acknowledges that many men are infected with many vices, and even born with a proneness to them; but supposes withal, that in some the natural good much over-balances the evil: The other declares

that all men are conceived in sin," and "shapen in wickedness;" -- that hence there is in every man a "carnal mind, which is enmity against God, which is not, cannot be, subject to" his "law;" and which so infects the whole soul, that "there dwelleth in" him, "in his flesh," in his natural state, "no good thing;" but "every imagination of the thoughts of his heart is evil," only evil, and that "continually."

2. Hence we may, Secondly, learn, that all who deny this, call it original sin, or by any other title, are put Heathens still, in the fundamental point which differences Heathenism from Christianity.

They may, indeed, allow, that men have many vices; that some are born with us; and that, consequently, we are not born altogether so wise or so virtuous as we should be; there being few that will roundly affirm, "We are born with as much propensity to good as to evil, and that every man is, by nature, as virtuous and wise as Adam was at his creation." But here is the shibboleth: Is man by nature filled with all manner of evil? Is he void of all good? Is he wholly fallen? Is his soul totally corrupted? Or, to come back to the text, is "every imagination of the thoughts of his heart only evil continually?" Allow this, and you are so far a Christian. Deny it, and you are but an Heathen still.

3. We may learn from hence, in the Third place, what is the proper nature of religion, of the religion of Jesus Christ. It is SGTCRGKCý[WEJGL, God's method of healing a soul which is thus diseased. Hereby the great Physician of souls applies medicines to heal this sickness; to restore human nature, totally corrupted in all its faculties. God heals all our Atheism by the knowledge of Himself, and of Jesus Christ whom he hath sent; by giving us faith, a divine evidence and conviction of God, and of the things of God, -- in particular, of this important truth, "Christ loved me" -- and gave himself for me." By repentance and lowliness of heart, the deadly disease of pride is healed; that of self-will by resignation, a meek and thankful submission to the will of God; and for the love of the world in all its branches, the love of God is the sovereign remedy. Now, this is properly religion, "faith" thus "working by love;" working the genuine meek humility, entire deadness to the world, with a loving, thankful acquiescence in, and conformity to, the whole will and word of God.

4. Indeed, if man were not thus fallen, there would be no need of all this. There would be no occasion for this work in the heart, this renewal in the spirit of our mind. The superfluity of godliness would then be a more proper expression than the "superfluity of naughtiness." For an outside religion, without any godliness at all, would suffice to all rational intents and purposes. It does, accordingly, suffice, in the judgment of those who deny this corruption of our nature. They make very little more of religion than the famous Mr. Hobbes did of reason. According to him, reason is only "a well-ordered train of words:" According to them, religion is only a well-ordered train of words and actions. And they speak consistently with themselves; for if the inside be not full of wickedness, if this be clean already, what remains, but to "cleanse the outside of the cup?" Outward reformation, if their supposition be just, is indeed the one thing needful.

5. But ye have not so learned the oracles of God. Ye know, that He who seeth what is in man gives a far different account both of nature and grace, of our fall and our

recovery. Ye know that the great end of religion is, to renew our hearts in the image of God, to repair that total loss of righteousness and true holiness which we sustained by the sin of our first parent. Ye know that all religion which does not answer this end, all that stops short of this, the renewal of our soul in the image of God, after the likeness of Him that created it, is no other than a poor farce, and a mere mockery of God, to the destruction of our own soul. O beware of all those teachers of lies, who would palm this upon you for Christianity! Regard them not, although they should come unto you with all the deceivableness of unrighteousness; with all smoothness of language, all decency, yea, beauty and elegance of expression, all professions of earnest good will to you, and reverence for the Holy Scriptures. Keep to the plain, old faith, “once delivered to the saints,” and delivered by the Spirit of God to our hearts. Know your disease! Know your cure! Ye were born in sin: Therefore, “ye must be born again,” born of God. By nature ye are wholly corrupted. By grace ye shall be wholly renewed. In Adam ye all died: In the second Adam, in Christ, ye all are made alive. “You that were dead in sins hath he quickened:” He hath already given you a principle of life, even faith in him who loved you and gave himself for you! Now, “go on from faith to faith,” until your whole sickness be healed; and all that “mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus!”



THE WILDERNESS STATE

John Wesley SERMON 46
(text from the 1872 edition)

“Ye now have sorrow: But I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you.” John 16:22.

1. After God had wrought a great deliverance for Israel, by bringing them out of the house of bondage, they did not immediately enter into the land which he had promised to their fathers; but “wandered out of the way in the wilderness,” and were variously tempted and distressed. In like manner, after God has delivered them that fear him from the bondage of sin and Satan; after they are “justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Jesus,” yet not many of them immediately enter into “the rest which remaineth for the people of God.” The greater part of them wander, more or less, out of the good way into which he hath brought them. They come, as it were, into a “waste and howling desert,” where they are variously tempted and tormented: And this, some, in allusion to the case of the Israelites, have termed “a wilderness state.”

2. Certain it is, that the condition wherein these are has a right the tenderest compassion. They labour under an evil and sore disease; though one that is not commonly understood; and for this very reason it is the more difficult for them to find a remedy. Being in darkness themselves, they cannot be supposed to understand the nature of their own disorder; and few of their brethren, nay, perhaps, of their teachers, know either what their sickness is, or how to heal it. So much the more need there is to inquire, First, What is the nature of this disease? Secondly, What is the cause? And, Thirdly, What is the cure of it?

I.

1. And, First, what is the nature of this disease, into which so many fall after they have believed? Wherein does it properly consist; and what are the genuine symptoms of it? It

properly consists in the loss of that faith which God once wrought in their heart. They that are in the wilderness, have not now that divine "evidence," that satisfactory conviction "of things not seen," which they once enjoyed. They have not now that inward demonstration of the Spirit which before enabled each of them to say, "The life I live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." The light of heaven does not now "shine in their hearts," neither do they "see him that is invisible;" but darkness is again on the face of their souls, and blindness on the eyes of their understanding. The Spirit no longer "witnesses with their spirits, that they are the children of God;" neither does he continue as the Spirit of adoption, "crying" in their hearts, "Abba, Father." They have not now a sure trust in his love, and a liberty of approaching him with holy boldness.

"Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him," is no more the language of their heart; but they are shorn of their strength, and become weak and feeble-minded, even as other men.

2. Hence, Secondly, proceeds the loss of love; which cannot but rise or fall, at the same time, and in the same proportion, with true, living faith. Accordingly, they that are deprived of their faith, are deprived of the love of God also. They cannot now say, "Lord, thou knowest all things, thou knowest that I love thee." They are not now happy in God, as everyone is that truly loves him. They do not delight in him as in time past, and "smell the odour of his ointments." Once, all their "desire was unto him, and to the remembrance of his name;" but now even their desires are cold and dead, if not utterly extinguished. And as their love of God is waxed cold, so is also their love of their neighbour.

They have not now that zeal for the souls of men, that longing after their welfare, that fervent, restless, active desire of their being reconciled to God. They do not feel those "bowels of mercies" for the sheep that are lost, -- that tender "compassion for the ignorant, and them that are out of the way." Once they were "gentle toward all men," meekly instructing such as opposed the truth; and, "if any was overtaken in a fault, restoring such an one in the spirit of meekness." But, after a suspense, perhaps of many days, anger begins to regain its power; yea, peevishness and impatience thrust sore at them that they may fall; and it is well if they are not sometimes driven, even to "render evil for evil and railing for railing."

3. In consequence of the loss of faith and love, follows, Thirdly, loss of joy in the Holy Ghost. For if the loving consciousness of pardon be no more, the joy resulting therefrom cannot remain. If the Spirit does not witness with our spirit that we are the children of God, the joy that flowed from that inward witness must also be at an end. And, in like manner, they who once "rejoiced with joy unspeakable," "in hope of the glory of God," now they are deprived of that "hope full of immortality," are deprived of the joy it occasioned; as also of that which resulted from a consciousness of "the love of God," then "shed abroad in their hearts." For the cause being removed, so is the effect: The fountain being dammed up, those living waters spring no more to refresh the thirsty soul.

4. With loss of faith, and love, and joy there is also joined, Fourthly, the loss of that peace which once passed all understanding. That sweet tranquillity of mind, that composure of spirit, is gone.

Painful doubt returns; doubt, whether we ever did, and perhaps whether we ever shall, believe. We begin to doubt, whether we ever did find in our hearts the real testimony of the Spirit; whether we did not rather deceive our own souls, and mistake the voice of nature for the voice of God. Nay, and perhaps, whether we shall ever hear his voice, and find favour in his sight. And these doubts are again joined with servile fear, with that fear which hath torment. We fear the wrath of God, even as before we believed: We fear, lest we should be cast out of his presence; and thence sink again into that fear of death, from which we were before wholly delivered.

5. But even this is not all; for loss of peace is accompanied with loss of power. We know everyone who has peace with God, through Jesus Christ, has power over all sin. But whenever he loses the peace of God, he loses also the power over sin. While that peace remained, power also remained, even over the besetting sin, whether it were the sin of his nature, his constitution, of his education, or that of his profession; yea, and over those evil tempers and desires which, till then, he could not conquer Sin had then no more dominion over him; but he hath now no more dominion over sin. He may struggle, indeed, but he cannot overcome; the crown is fallen from his head. His enemies again prevail over him, and, more or less, bring him into bondage. The glory is departed from him, even the kingdom of God which was in his heart. He is dispossessed of righteousness, as well as of peace and joy in the Holy Ghost.

II.

1. Such is the nature of what many have termed, and not improperly, "The wilderness state." But the nature of it may be more fully understood by inquiring, Secondly, What are the causes of it? These indeed are various. But I dare not rank among these the bare, arbitrary, sovereign will of God.

He "rejoiceth in the prosperity of his servants: He delighteth not to afflict or grieve the children of men." His invariable will is our sanctification, attended with "peace and joy in the Holy Ghost." These are his own free gifts; and we are assured "the gifts of God are," on his part, "without repentance." He never repenteth of what he hath given, or desires to withdraw them from us.

Therefore he never deserts us, as some speak; it is we only that desert him.

(I.) 2. The most usual cause of inward darkness is sin, of one kind or another. This it is which generally occasions what is often a complication of sin and misery. And, First, sin of commission.

This may frequently be observed to darken the soul in a moment; especially if it be a known, a wilful, or presumptuous sin. If, for instance, a person, who is now walking in the clear light of God's countenance, should be any way prevailed on to commit a single act of drunkenness, or uncleanness, it would be no wonder, if, in that very hour, he fell into utter darkness. It is true, there have been some very rare cases, wherein God has prevented this, by an extraordinary display of his pardoning mercy, almost in the very instant. But in general, such an abuse of the goodness of God, so gross an insult on his love, occasions an immediate estrangement from God, and a "darkness that may be felt."

3. But it may be hoped this case is not very frequent; that there are not many who so despise the riches of his goodness as, while they walk in his light, so grossly and presumptuously to rebel against him. That light is much more frequently lost by giving way to sins of omission. This, indeed, does not immediately quench the Spirit, but gradually and slowly. The former may be compared to pouring water upon a fire; the latter to withdrawing the fuel from it. And many times will that loving Spirit reprove our neglect, before he departs from us. Many are the inward checks, the secret notices, he gives, before his influences are withdrawn. So that only a train of omissions, wilfully persisted in, can bring us into utter darkness.

4. Perhaps no sin of omission more frequently occasions this than the neglect of private prayer; the want whereof cannot be supplied by any other ordinance whatever. Nothing can be more plain, than that the life of God in the soul does not continue, much less increase, unless we use all opportunities of communing with God, and pouring out our hearts before him. If therefore we are negligent of this, if we suffer business, company, or any avocation whatever, to prevent these secret exercises of the soul, (or, which comes to the same thing, to make us hurry them over in a slight and careless

manner,) that life will surely decay. And if we long or frequently intermit them, it will gradually die away.

5. Another sin of omission, which frequently brings the soul of a believer into darkness, is the neglect of what was so strongly enjoined, even under the Jewish dispensation: "Thou shalt, in anywise, rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him: Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thy heart." Now, if we do hate our brother in our heart, if we do not rebuke him when we see him in a fault, but suffer sin upon him, this will soon bring leanness to our own soul; seeing hereby we are partakers of his sin. By neglecting to reprove our neighbour, we make his sin our own: We become accountable for it to God: We saw his danger, and gave him no warning: So, "if he perish in his iniquity," God may justly require "his blood at our hands." No wonder then, if by thus grieving the Spirit, we lose the light of his countenance.

6. A Third cause of our losing this is, the giving way to some kind of inward sin. For example: We know, every one that is "proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord;" and that, although this pride of heart should not appear in the outward conversation. Now, how easily may a soul filled with peace and joy fall into this snare of the devil! How natural is it for him to imagine that he has more grace, more wisdom or strength, than he really has to "think more highly of himself than he ought to think!" How natural to glory in something he has received, as if he had not received it! But seeing God continually "resisteth the proud, and giveth grace" only "to the humble," this must certainly obscure, if not wholly destroy, the light which before shone on his heart.

7. The same effect may be produced by giving place to anger, whatever the provocation or occasion be; yea, though it were coloured over with the name of zeal for the truth, or for the glory of God. Indeed all zeal which is any other than the flame of love is "earthly, animal, devilish." It is the flame of wrath: It is flat, sinful anger, neither better nor worse. And nothing is a greater enemy to the mild, gentle love of God than this: They never did, they never can, subsist together in one breast. In the same proportion as this prevails, love and joy in the Holy Ghost decrease. This is particularly observable in the case of offence; I mean, anger at any of our brethren, at any of those who are united with us either by civil or religious ties. If we give way to the spirit of offence but one hour, we lose the sweet influences of the Holy Spirit; so that, instead of amending them, we destroy ourselves, and become an easy prey to any enemy that assaults us.

8. But suppose we are aware of this snare of the devil, we may be attacked from another quarter.

When fierceness and anger are asleep, and love alone is waking, we may be no less endangered by desire, which equally tends to darken the soul. This is the sure effect of any foolish desire, any vain or inordinate affection. If we set our affection on things of the earth, on any person or thing under the sun; if we desire anything but God, and what tends to God; if we seek happiness in any creature; the jealous God will surely contend with us, for he can admit of no rival. And if we will not hear his warning voice, and return to him with our whole soul, we continue to grieve him with our idols, and running after other gods, we shall soon be cold, barren, and dry; and the god of this world will blind and darken our hearts.

9. But this he frequently does, even when we do not give way to any positive sin. It is enough, it gives him sufficient advantage, if we do not "stir up the gift of God which is in us;" if we do not agonize continually "to enter in at the strait gate;" if we do not earnestly "strive for the mastery," and "take the kingdom of heaven by violence." There needs no more than not to fight, and we are sure to be conquered. Let us only be careless or "faint in our mind," let us be easy and indolent, and our natural darkness will soon return, and overspread our soul. It is enough, therefore, if we give way to spiritual

sloth; this will effectually darken the soul: It will as surely destroy the light of God, if not so swiftly, as murder or adultery.

10. But it is well to be observed, that the cause of our darkness (whatsoever it be, whether omission or commission, whether inward or outward sin) is not always nigh at hand. Sometimes the sin which occasioned the present distress may lie at a considerable distance. It might be committed days, or weeks, or months before. And that God now withdraws his light and peace on account of what was done so long ago is not (as one might at first imagine) an instance of his severity, but rather a proof of his longsuffering and tender mercy. He waited all this time if haply we would see, acknowledge, and correct what was amiss. And in default of this he at length shows his displeasure, if thus, at last, he may bring us to repentance.

(II). 1. Another general cause of this darkness is ignorance; which is likewise of various kinds.

If men know not the Scriptures, if they imagine there are passages either in the Old or New Testament which assert, that all believers without exception, must sometimes be in darkness; this ignorance will naturally bring upon them the darkness which they expect. And how common a case has this been among us! How few are there that do not expect it! And no wonder, seeing they are taught to expect it; seeing their guides lead them into this way. Not only the mystic writers of the Romish Church, but many of the most spiritual and experimental in our own, (very few of the last century excepted,) lay it down with all assurance as a plain, unquestionable Scripture doctrine, and cite many texts to prove it.

2. Ignorance also of the work of God in the soul frequent occasions this darkness. Men imagine (because so they have been taught, particularly by writers of the Romish communion, whose plausible assertions too many Protestants have received without due examination) that they are not always to walk in luminous faith; that this is only a lower dispensation; that as they rise higher they are to leave those sensible comforts, and to live by naked faith (naked indeed, if it be stripped both of love, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost!) that a state of light and joy is good, but a state of darkness and dryness is better; that it is by these alone we can be purified from pride, love of the world, and inordinate self-love; and that, therefore, we ought neither to expect nor desire to walk in the light always. Hence it is, (though other reasons may concur.) that the main body of pious men in the Romish Church generally walk in a dark uncomfortable way, and if ever they receive, soon lose the light of God.

(III). 1. A Third general cause of this darkness is temptation. When the candle of the Lord first shines on our head, temptation frequently flees away, and totally disappears. All is calm within; perhaps without too, while God makes our enemies to be at peace with us. It is then very natural to suppose that we shall not see war any more. And there are instances wherein this calm has continued, not only for weeks, but for months or years. But commonly it is otherwise: In a short time "the winds blow, the rains descend, and the floods arise" anew. They who know not either the Son or the Father, and consequently hate his children, when God slackens the bridle which is in their teeth, will show that hatred in various instances. As of old, "he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now;" the same cause still producing the same effect. The evil which yet remains in the heart will then also move afresh; anger, and many other roots of bitterness will endeavour to spring up. At the same time, Satan will not be wanting to cast in his fiery darts; and the soul will have to wrestle, not only with the world, not only "with flesh and blood, but with principalities and powers, with the rulers of the darkness of this world, with wicked spirits in high places." Now, when so various assaults are made at once, and perhaps with the utmost violence, it is not strange if it should occasion, not only heaviness, but even darkness in a weak believer; -- more

especially if he was not watching; if these assaults are made in an hour when he looked not for them; if he expected nothing less, but had fondly told himself, -- the day of evil would return no more.

2. The force of those temptations which arise from within will be exceedingly heightened if we before thought too highly of ourselves, as if we had been cleansed from all sin. And how naturally do we imagine this during the warmth of our first love! How ready are we to believe that God has “fulfilled in us the” whole “work of faith with power!” that because we feel no sin, we have none in us; but the soul is all love! And well may a sharp attack from an enemy whom we supposed to be not only conquered but slain, throw us into much heaviness of soul; yea, sometimes, into utter darkness: Particularly when we reason with this enemy, instead of instantly calling upon God, and casting ourselves upon Him, by simple faith, who “alone knoweth how to deliver” his “out of temptation.”

III. These are the usual causes of this second darkness. Inquire we, Thirdly, What is the cure of it?

1. To suppose that this is one and the same in all cases is a and fatal mistake; and yet extremely common, even among many, who pass for experienced Christians, yea, perhaps take upon them to be teachers in Israel, to be the guides of other souls. Accordingly, they know and use but one medicine, whatever be the cause of the distemper. They begin immediately to apply the promises; to preach the gospel, as they call it. To give comfort is the single point at which they aim; in order to which they say many soft and tender things, concerning the love of God to poor helpless sinners, and the efficacy of the blood of Christ. Now this is quackery indeed, and that of the worse sort, as it tends, if not to kill men’s bodies, yet without the peculiar mercy of God, “to destroy both their bodies and souls in hell.” It is hard to speak of these “daubers with untempered mortar,” these promise-mongers, as they deserve. They well deserve the title, which has been ignorantly given to others: They are spiritual mountebanks. They do, in effect, make “the blood of the covenant an unholy thing.” They vilely prostitute the promises of God by thus applying them to all without distinction. Whereas, indeed, the cure of spiritual, as of bodily diseases, must be as various as are the causes of them. The first thing, therefore, is to find out the cause; and this will naturally point out the cure.

2. For instance: Is it sin which occasions darkness? What sin? Is it outward sin of any kind? Does your conscience accuse you of committing any sin, whereby you grieve the Holy Spirit of God? Is it on this account that he is departed from you, and that joy and peace are departed with him? And how can you expect they should return, till you put away the accursed thing? “Let the wicked forsake his way;” “cleanse your hands, ye sinners;” “put away the evil of your doings;” so shall your “light break out of obscurity;” the Lord will return and “abundantly pardon.”

3. If, upon the closest search, you can find no sin of commission which causes the cloud upon your soul, inquire next, if there be not some sin of omission which separates between God and you.

Do you “not suffer sin upon your brother?” Do you reprove them that sin in your sight? Do you walk in all the ordinances of God? In public, family, private prayer? If not, if you habitually neglect any one of these known duties, how can you expect that the light of his countenance should continue to shine upon you? Make haste to “strengthen the things that remain;” then your soul shall live. “Today, if ye will hear his voice,” by his grace supply what is lacking. When you hear a voice behind you saying, “This is the way, walk thou in it,” harden not your heart; be no more “disobedient to the heavenly calling.” Till the sin, whether of omission or commission, be removed, all comfort is false and deceitful. It is only skinning the wound over, which still festers and rankles beneath. Look for no peace

within, till you are at peace with God; which cannot be without “fruits meet for repentance.”

4. But perhaps you are not conscious of even any sin of omission which impairs your peace and joy in the Holy Ghost. Is there not then some inward sin, which as a root of bitterness, springs up in your heart to trouble you? Is not your dryness, and barrenness of soul, occasioned by your heart’s “departing from the living God?” Has not “the foot of pride come against” you? Have you not thought of yourself “more highly than you ought to think?” Have you not, in any respect, “sacrificed to your own net, and burned incense to your own drag?” Have you not ascribed your success in any undertaking to your own courage, or strength, or wisdom? Have you not boasted of something “you have received, as though you had not received it?” Have you not gloried in anything, “save the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ?” Have you not sought after or desired the praise of men? Have you not taken pleasure in it? If so, you see the way you are to take. If you have fallen by pride, “humble yourself under the mighty hand of God, and he will exalt you in due time.” Have you not forced him to depart from you, by giving place to anger? Have you not “fretted yourself because of the ungodly” or “been envious against the evil-doers?” Have you not been offended at any of your brethren, looking at their (real or imagined) sin, so as to sin yourself against the great law of love, by estranging your heart from them? Then look unto the Lord, that you may renew your strength; that all this sharpness and coldness may be done away; that love and peace and joy may return together, and you may be invariably kind to each other, and “tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.” Have not you given way to any foolish desire? To any kind or degree of inordinate affection? How then can the love of God have place in your heart, till you put away your idols? “Be not deceived: God is not mocked:” He will not dwell in a divided heart.

As long, therefore, as you cherish Delilah in your bosom he has no place there. It is vain to hope for a recovery of his light, till you pluck out the right eye, and cast it from you. O let there be no longer delay! Cry to Him, that he may enable you so to do! Bewail your own impotence and helplessness; and, the Lord being your helper, enter in at the strait gate; take the kingdom of heaven by violence! Cast out every idol from his sanctuary, and the glory of the Lord shall soon appear.

5. Perhaps it is this very thing, the want of striving, spiritual sloth, which keeps your soul in darkness. You dwell at ease in the land; there is no war in your coasts; and so you are quiet and unconcerned. You go on in the same even track of outward duties, and are content there to abide.

And do you wonder, meantime, that your soul is dead? O stir yourself up before the Lord! Arise, and shake yourself from the dust; wrestle with God for the mighty blessing; pour out your soul unto God in prayer, and continue therein with all perseverance! Watch! Awake out of sleep; and keep awake! Otherwise there is nothing to be expected, but that you will be alienated more and more from the light and life of God.

6. If, upon the fullest and most impartial examination of yourself, you cannot discern that you at present give way either to spiritual sloth, or any other inward or outward sin, then call to mind the time that is past. Consider your former tempers, words, and actions. Have these been right before the Lord? “Commune with him in your chamber, and be still;” and desire of him to try the ground of your heart, and bring to your remembrance whatever has at any time offended the eyes of his glory.

If the guilt of any unrepented sin remain on our soul, it cannot be but you will remain in darkness,

till, having been renewed by repentance, you are again washed by faith in the “fountain

opened for sin and uncleanness.”

7. Entirely different will be the manner of the cure, if the cause of the disease be not sin, but ignorance. It may be, ignorance of the meaning of Scripture; perhaps occasioned by ignorant commentators; ignorant, at least, in this respect, however knowing and learned they may be in other particulars. And, in this case that ignorance must be removed before we can remove the darkness arising from it. We must show the true meaning of those texts which have been misunderstood. My design does not permit me to consider all the passages of Scripture which have been pressed into this service. I shall just mention two or three, which are frequently brought to prove that all believers must, sooner or later, “walk in darkness.”

8 One of these is Isaiah 50:10: “Who is among you that feareth the Lord, and obeyeth the voice of his servant, that walketh in darkness and hath no light? Let him trust in the name of the Lord and stay upon his God.” But how does it appear, either from the text or context, that the person here spoken of ever had light? One who is convinced of sin, “feareth the Lord, and obeyeth voice of his servant.” And him we should advise, though he was still dark of soul, and had never seen the light of God’s countenance, yet to “trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God.” This text, therefore, proves nothing less than that believer in Christ “must sometimes walk in darkness.”

9. Another text which has been supposed to speak the same doctrine is Hosea 2:14: “I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfortably unto her.” Hence it has been inferred, that God will bring every believer into the wilderness, into a state of deadness and darkness. But it is certain the text speaks no such thing; for it does not appear that it speaks of particular believers at all: It manifestly refers to the Jewish nation; and, perhaps, to that only. But if it be applicable to particular persons, the plain meaning of it is this: -- I will draw him by love; I will next convince him of sin; and then comfort him by pardoning mercy.

10. A third Scripture from whence the same inference has been drawn is that above recited, “Ye now have sorrow: But I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you.” This has been supposed to imply, that God would after a time withdraw himself from all believers; and that they could not, till after they had thus sorrowed, have the joy which no man could take from them. But the whole context shows that our Lord is here speaking personally to the Apostles, and no others; and that he is speaking concerning those particular events, his own death and resurrection. “A little while,” says he, “and ye shall not see me;” viz., whilst I am in the grave: “And again, a little while, and ye shall see me;” when I am risen from the dead. Ye will weep and lament, and the world will rejoice: But your sorrow shall be turned into joy.” -- “Ye now have sorrow,” because I am about to be taken from your head; “but I will see you again,” after my resurrection, “and your heart shall rejoice; and your joy,” which I will then give you, “no man taketh from you.” All this we know was literally fulfilled in the particular case of the Apostles. But no inference can be drawn from hence with regard to God’s dealings with believers in general.

11. A fourth text (to mention no more) which has been frequently cited in proof of the same doctrine, is 1 Peter 4:12: “Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you.” But this is full as foreign to the point as the preceding. The text, literally rendered, runs thus:

“Beloved, wonder not at the burning which is among you, which is for your trial.” Now, however, this may be accommodated to inward trials, in a secondary sense; yet, primarily, it doubtless refers to martyrdom, and the sufferings connected with it. Neither, therefore, is this text anything at all to the purpose for which it is cited. And we may challenge all men to bring one text, either from the Old or New Testament, which is any more to the

purpose than this.

12. "But is not darkness much more profitable for the soul than light? Is not the work of God in the heart most swiftly and effectually carried on during a state of inward suffering? Is not a believer more swiftly and thoroughly purified by sorrow, than by joy? -- by anguish, and pain, and distress, and spiritual martyrdoms, than by continual peace?" So the Mystics teach; so it is written in their books; but not in the oracles of God. The Scripture nowhere says, that the absence of God best perfects his work in the heart! Rather, his presence, and a clear communion with the Father and the Son: A strong consciousness of this will do more an hour, than his absence in an age. Joy in the Holy Ghost will far more effectually purify the soul than the want of that joy; and the peace of God is the best means of refining the soul from the dross of earthly affections. Away then with the idle conceit, that the kingdom of God is divided against itself; that the peace of God, and joy in the Holy Ghost, are obstructive of righteousness; and that we are saved, not by faith, but by unbelief; not by hope, but by despair!

13. So long as men dream thus, they may well "walk in darkness:" Nor can the effect cease, till the cause is removed. But yet we must not imagine it will immediately cease, even when the cause is no more. When either ignorance or sin has caused darkness, one or the other may be removed, and yet the light which was obstructed thereby may not immediately return. As it is the free gift of God, he may restore it, sooner or later, as it pleases him. In the case of sin, we cannot reasonably expect that it should immediately return. The sin began before the punishment, which may, therefore, justly remain after the sin is at an end. And even in the natural course of things, though a wound cannot be healed while the dart is sticking in the flesh; yet neither is it healed as soon as that is drawn out, but soreness and pain may remain long after.

14. Lastly. If darkness be occasioned by manifold and heavy and unexpected temptations, the best way of removing and preventing this is, to teach believers always to expect temptation, seeing they dwell in an evil world, among wicked, subtle, malicious spirits, and have an heart capable of all evil.

Convince them that the whole work of sanctification is not, as they imagined, wrought at once; that when they first believe they are but as new-born babes, who are gradually to grow up, and may expect many storms before they come to the full stature of Christ. Above all, let them be instructed, when the storm is upon them, not to reason with the devil, but to pray; to pour out their souls before God, and show him of their trouble. And these are the persons unto whom, chiefly, we are to apply the great and precious promises; not to the ignorant, till the ignorance is removed, much less to the impenitent sinner. To these we may largely and affectionately declare the loving kindness of God our Saviour, expatiate upon his tender mercies, which have been ever of old. Here we may dwell upon the faithfulness of God, whose "word is tried to the uttermost;" and upon the virtue of that blood which was shed for us, to "cleanse us from all sin:" And God will then bear witness to his word, and bring their souls out of trouble. He will say, "Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee." Yea, and that light, if thou walk humbly and closely with God, will "shine more and more unto the perfect day."



THE MYSTERY OF INIQUITY

“The mystery of iniquity doth already work.” 2 Thess. 2:7.

1. Without inquiring how far these words refer to any particular event in the Christian Church, I would at present take occasion from them to consider that important question, -- In what manner the mystery of iniquity hath wrought among us till it hath well-nigh covered the whole earth.

2. It is certain that “God made man upright;” perfectly holy and perfectly happy: But by rebelling against God, he destroyed himself, lost the favour and the image of God, and entailed sin, with its attendant, pain, on himself and all his posterity. Yet his merciful Creator did not leave him in this helpless, hopeless state: He immediately appointed his Son, his well-beloved Son, “who is the brightness of his glory, the express image of his person,” to be the Saviour of men; “the propitiation for the sins of the whole world;” the great Physician who, by his almighty Spirit, should heal the sickness of their souls, and restore them not only to the favour, but to “the image of God wherein they were created.”

3. This great mystery of godliness began to work from the very time of the original promise.

Accordingly, the Lamb being, in the purpose of God, “slain from the beginning of the world,” from the same period his sanctifying Spirit began to renew the souls of men. We have an undeniable instance of this in Abel, who “obtained a testimony” from God “that he was righteous.” (Heb. 11:4.) And from that very time all that were partakers of the same faith were partakers of the same salvation; were not only re-instated in the favour, but likewise restored to the image, of God.

4. But how exceeding small was the number of these even from the earliest ages! No sooner did “the sons of men multiply upon the face of the earth,” than God, looking down from heaven, “saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth;” so great that “every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was evil,” only evil, and that “continually.” (Gen. 6:1-5.) And so it remained, without any intermission, till God executed that terrible sentence, “I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth.” (Gen. 6:7.)

5. Only “Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord;” being “a just man, and perfect in his generations.” Him, therefore, with his wife, his sons, and their wives, God preserved from the general destruction. And one might have imagined that this small remnant would likewise have been “perfect in their generations.” But how far was this from being the case! Presently after this signal deliverance we find one of them, Ham, involved in sin, and under his father’s curse. And how did “the mystery of iniquity” afterwards work, not only in the posterity of Ham, but in the posterity of Japheth; yea, and of Shem, -- Abraham and his family only excepted!

6. Yea, how did it work even in the posterity of Abraham; in God’s chosen people! Were not these also, down to Moses, to David, to Malachi, to Herod the Great, a faithless and stubborn generation, a “sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity,” continually forsaking the Lord, and “provoking the Holy One of Israel?” And yet we have no reason to believe that these were worse than the nations that surrounded them, who were universally swallowed up in all manner of wickedness, as well as in damnable idolatries; not having the God of heaven “in all their thoughts,” but working all uncleanness with greediness.

7. In the fulness of time, when iniquity of every kind, when ungodliness and

unrighteousness, had spread over all nations, and covered the earth as a flood, it pleased God to lift up a standard against it by “bringing his first-begotten into the world.” Now, then, one would expect “the mystery of godliness” would totally prevail over “the mystery of iniquity;” that the Son of God would be “a light to lighten the Gentiles;” as well as “salvation to his people Israel.” All Israel, one would think, yea, and all the earth, will soon be filled with the glory of the Lord. Nay: “The mystery of iniquity” prevailed still, well-nigh over the face of the earth. How exceeding small was the number of those whose souls were healed by the Son of God himself! “When Peter stood up in the midst of them, the number of names was about a hundred and twenty.” (Acts 1:15.) And even these were but imperfectly healed; the chief of them being a little before so weak in faith that, though they did not, like Peter, forswear their Master, yet “they all forsook him and fled.” A plain proof that the sanctifying “Spirit was not” then “given, because Jesus was not glorified.”

8. It was then, when he had “ascended up on high, and led captivity captive,” that “the promise of the Father” was fulfilled, which they had heard from him. It was then he began to work like himself, showing that “all power was given to him in heaven and earth.” “When the day of Pentecost was fully come, suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and there appeared tongues as of fire; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost.” (Acts 2:1 &c.) In consequence of this, three thousand souls received medicine to heal their sickness, were restored to the favour and the image of God under one sermon of St. Peter’s. (Acts 2:41.) “And the Lord added to them daily, “not such as should be saved; a manifest perversion of the text; but “such as were saved.” The expression is peculiar; and so indeed is the position of the words, which run thus: “And the Lord added those that were saved daily to the church.” First, they “were saved” from the power of sin; then they “were added” to the assembly of the faithful.

9. In order clearly to see how they were already saved, we need only observe the short account of them which is recorded in the latter part of the second and in the fourth chapter. “They continued steadfastly in the Apostles’ doctrine, and in the fellowship, and in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers:” That is, they were daily taught by the Apostles, and had all things common, and received the Lord’s supper, and attended all the public service. (Acts 2:42.) “And all that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions, and parted them to all men, as every man had need.” (Acts 2:44, 45.) And again: “The multitude of them that believed,” now greatly increased, “were of one heart and of one soul: Neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common.” (Acts 4:32.) And yet again: “Great grace was upon them all. Neither was there any among them that lacked: For as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, and laid them at the Apostles’ feet: And distribution was made unto every man according as he had need.” (Acts 4:33-35.)

10. But here a question will naturally occur: “How came they to act thus, to have all things in common, seeing we do not read of any positive command to do this?” I answer, There needed no outward command: The command was written on their hearts. It naturally and necessarily resulted from the degree of love which they enjoyed. Observe! “They were of one heart, and of one soul:” And not so much as one (so the words run) said, (they could not, while their hearts so overflowed with love,) “that any of the things which he possessed was his own.” And wheresoever the same cause shall prevail, the same effect will naturally follow.

11. Here was the dawn of the proper gospel day. Here was a proper Christian Church. It was now “the Sun of Righteousness” rose upon the earth, “with healing in his wings.” He did now “save his people from their sins:” He “healed all their sickness.” He not only taught that religion which is the true “healing of the soul,” but effectually planted it in the

earth; filling the souls of all that believed in him with righteousness, -- gratitude to God, and good-will to man; attended with a peace that surpassed all understanding, and with joy unspeakable and full of glory.

12. But how soon did “the mystery of iniquity” work again, and obscure the glorious prospect! It began to work (not openly indeed, but covertly) in two of the Christians, Ananias and Sapphira.

“They sold their possession,” like the rest, and probably for the same motive; but afterwards, giving place to the devil, and reasoning with flesh and blood, they “kept back part of the price.” See the first Christians, that “made shipwreck of faith and a good conscience;” the first that “drew back to perdition;” instead of continuing to “believe to the” final “salvation of the soul!” Mark the first plague which infected the Christian Church; namely, the love of money! And will it not be the grand plague in all generations, whenever God shall revive the same work? O ye believers in Christ, take warning! Whether you are yet but little children, or young men that are strong in the faith, see the snare; your snare in particular, -- that which you will be peculiarly exposed to after you have escaped from gross pollutions. “Love not the world, neither the things of the world! If any man love the world,” whatever he was in times past, “the love of the Father is not” now “in him!”

13. However, this plague was stayed in the first Christian Church, by instantly cutting off the infected persons. By that signal judgment of God on the first offenders, “great fear came upon all;” (Acts 5:11;) so that, for the present at least, not one dared to follow their example. Meantime believers, men full of faith and love, who rejoiced to have all things in common, “were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women.” (Acts 5:14.)

14. If we inquire in what manner “the mystery of iniquity,” the energy of Satan, began to work again in the Christian Church, we shall find it wrought in quite a different way; putting on quite another shape: Partiality crept in among the Christian believers. Those by whom the distribution to everyone was made had respect of persons; largely supplying those of their own nation, while the other widows, who were not Hebrews, “were neglected in the daily administration.” (Acts 6:1.) Distribution was not made to them according as everyone had need. Here was a manifest breach of brotherly love in the Hebrews; a sin both against justice and mercy: Seeing the Grecians, as well as the Hebrews, had “sold all they had, and laid the price at the Apostles’ feet.” See the second plague that broke in upon the Christian Church! -- Partially; respect of persons; too much regard for those of our own side; and too little for others, though equally worthy.

15. The infection did not stop here, but one evil produced many more. From partiality in the Hebrews, “there arose in the Grecians a murmuring against” them; not only discontent and resentful thoughts, but words suitable thereto; unkind expressions, hard speeches, evil-speaking, and backbiting, naturally followed. And by the “root of bitterness” thus “springing up,” undoubtedly “many were defiled.” The Apostles indeed soon found out a means of removing the occasion of this murmuring; yet so much of the evil root remained, that God saw it needful to use a severer remedy.

He let loose the world upon them all; if haply by their sufferings, by the spoiling of their goods, by pain, imprisonment, and death itself, he might at once punish and amend them. And persecution, God’s last remedy for a backsliding people, had the happy effect for which he intended it. Both the partiality of the Hebrews ceased, and the murmuring of the Grecians: And “then had the churches rest, and were edified;” built up in the love of God and one another; “and, walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comforts of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied.” (Acts 9:31.)

16. It seems to have been some time after this, that “the mystery of iniquity” began to work in the form of zeal. Great troubles arose by means of some who zealously contended for circumcision, and the rest of the ceremonial law; till the Apostles and Elders put an end to the spreading evil, by that final determination, -- “It seemed good unto the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay on you no greater burden than these necessary things; that ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication.” (Acts 15:28, 29.) Yet was not this evil so thoroughly suppressed, but that it frequently broke out again; as we learn from various parts of St. Paul’s Epistles, particularly that to the Galatians.

17. Nearly allied to this was another grievous evil, which at the same time sprang up in the Church; -- want of mutual forbearance, and, of consequence, anger, strife, contention, variance. One very remarkable instance of this we find in this very chapter. When “Paul said to Barnabas, Let us visit the brethren where we have preached the word, Barnabas determined to take with him John;” because he was “his sister’s son.” “But Paul thought it not good to take him who had deserted them before.” And he had certainly reason on his side. But Barnabas resolved to have his own way. GIGPGVQYQWPYRCTQZWUOQL,-- and there was a fit of anger. It does not say, on St. Paul’s side: Barnabas only had passion, to supply the want of reason. Accordingly he departed from the work, and went home; while St. Paul went forward “through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the churches.” (Acts 15:41.)

18. The very first society of Christians at Rome were not altogether free from this evil leaven.

There were “divisions and offences” among them also; (Rom. 16:17;) although, in general, they seem to have “walked in love.” But how early did the “mystery of iniquity” work, and how powerfully, in the Church at Corinth! Not only schisms and heresies, animosities, fierce and bitter contentions were among them; but open, actual sins; yea, “such fornication as was not named among the Heathens.”

(1 Cor. 5:1.) Nay, there was need to remind them that “neither adulterers, nor thieves, nor drunkards” could “enter into the kingdom of heaven.” (1 Cor. 6:9, 10.) And in all St. Paul’s Epistles we meet with abundant proof, that tares grew up, with the wheat in all the Churches, and that “the mystery of iniquity” did every where, in a thousand forms, counterwork “the mystery of godliness.”

19. When St. James wrote his Epistle, directed more immediately “to the twelve tribes scattered abroad,” to the converted Jews, the tares sown among his wheat had produced a plentiful harvest.

That grand pest of Christianity, a faith without works, was spread far and wide; filling the Church with a “wisdom from beneath,” which was “earthly, sensual, devilish,” and which gave rise, not only to rash judging and evil-speaking, but to “envy, strife, confusion, and every evil work.” Indeed, whoever peruses the fourth and fifth chapters of this Epistle, with serious attention, will be inclined to believe, that even in this early period the tares had nigh choked the wheat, and that among most of those to whom St. James wrote, no more than the form of godliness, if so much, was left.

20. St. Peter wrote about the same time “to the strangers,” the Christians, “scattered abroad through” all those spacious provinces of “Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia” Minor, “and Bithynia.” These, probably, were some of the most eminent Christians that were then in the world. Yet how exceeding far were even these from being “without spot and blemish!” And what grievous tares were here also growing up with the wheat! Some of them were “bringing in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them:” (2 Pet. 2:1 &c. :) And “many followed their pernicious ways;” of whom the Apostle gives

that terrible character: "They walk after the flesh," in "the lust of uncleanness, like brute beasts, made to be taken and destroyed. Spots they are, and blemishes, while they feast with you;" (in the "feasts of charity," then celebrated throughout the whole Church:) "having eyes full of adultery, and that cannot cease from sin. These are wells without water, clouds that are carried with a tempest, for whom the mist of darkness is reserved for ever." And yet these very men were called Christians, and were even then in the bosom of the Church! Nor does the Apostle mention them as infesting any one particular church only; but as a general plague, which even then was dispersed far and wide among all the Christians to whom he wrote!

21. Such is the authentic account of "the mystery of iniquity" working even in the apostolic Churches! -- an account given, not by the Jews or Heathens, but by the Apostles themselves. To this we may add the account which is given by the Head and Founder of the Church; Him "who holds the stars in his right hand;" who is "the faithful and true Witness." We may easily infer what was the state of the Church in general, from the state of the seven Churches in Asia. One of these indeed, the Church of Philadelphia, had "kept his word, and had not denied his name;" (Rev. 3:8;) the Church of Smyrna was likewise in a flourishing state: But all the rest were corrupted, more or less; insomuch that many of them were not a jot better than the present race of Christians; and our Lord then threatened, what he has long since performed, to "remove the candlestick" from them.

22. Such was the real state of the Christian Church, even during the first century; while not only St. John, but most of the Apostles were present with and presided over it. But what a mystery is this, that the All-wise, the All-gracious, the Almighty, should suffer it so to be, not in one only, but as far as we can learn, in every Christian society, those of Smyrna and Philadelphia excepted! And how came these to be excepted? Why were these less corrupted (to go no farther) than the other Churches of Asia? It seems, because they were less wealthy. The Christians in Philadelphia were not literally "increased in goods," like those in Ephesus or Laodicea; and if the Christians at Smyrna had acquired more wealth, it was swept away by persecution. So that these, having less of this world's goods, retained more of the simplicity and purity of the gospel.

23. But how contrary is this scriptural account of the ancient Christians to the ordinary apprehensions of men! We have been apt to imagine, that the Primitive Church was all excellence and perfection; answerable to that strong description which St. Peter cites from Moses: "Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people." And such, without all doubt, the first Christian Church, which commenced at the day of Pentecost, was. But how soon did the fine gold become dim! How soon was the wine mixed with water! How little time elapsed, before the "god of this world" so far regained his empire, that Christians in general were scarce distinguishable from Heathens, save by their opinions and modes of worship!

24. And if the state of the Church in the very first century was so bad, we cannot suppose it was any better in the second. Undoubtedly it grew worse and worse. Tertullian, one of the most eminent Christians of that age, has given us an account of it in various parts of his writings, whence we learn that real, internal religion was hardly found; nay, that not only the tempers of the Christians were exactly the same with those of their heathen neighbours, (pride, passion, love of the world reigning alike in both,) but their lives and manners also. The bearing a faithful testimony against the general corruption of Christians, seems to have raised the outcry against Montanus; and against Tertullian himself, when he was convinced that the testimony of Montanus was true. As to the heresies fathered upon Montanus, it is not easy to find what they were. I believe his grand heresy was, the maintaining that "without" inward and outward "holiness no man shall see the Lord."

25. Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, in every respect an unexceptionable witness, who flourished about the middle of the third century, has left us abundance of letters, in which he gives a large and particular account of the state of religion in his time. In reading this, one would be apt to imagine, he was reading an account of the present century: So totally void of true religion were the generality both of the laity and clergy, so immersed in ambition, envy, covetousness, luxury, and all other vices, that the Christians of Africa were then exactly the same as the Christians of England are now.

26. It is true, that during this whole period, during the first three centuries, there were intermixed longer or shorter seasons wherein true Christianity revived. In those seasons the justice and mercy of God let loose the Heathens upon the Christians. Many of these were then called to resist unto blood. And “the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the Church.” The apostolic spirit returned; and many “counted not their lives dear unto themselves, so they might finish their course with joy.” Many others were reduced to happy poverty; and being stripped of what they had loved too well, they “remembered from whence they were fallen, and repented, and did their first works.”

27. Persecution never did, never could, give any lasting wound to genuine Christianity. But the greatest it ever received, the grand blow which was struck at the very root of that humble, gentle, patient love, which is the fulfilling of the Christian law, the whole essence of true religion, was struck in the fourth century by Constantine the Great, when he called himself a Christian, and poured in a flood of riches, honours, and power upon the Christians; more especially upon the Clergy. Then was fulfilled in the Christian Church, what Sallust says of the people of Rome: *Sublata imperii aemula, non sensim, sed praecipiti cursu, a virtutibus descitum, ad vitia transcursum.* [Mr. Wesley doubtless quoted from memory; and this accounts for the slight mistake into which he has here fallen. The passage referred to does not occur in Sallust, but in Velleius Paterculus, and reads thus: --*Remoto Carthaginis metu, sublataque imperii aemula, non gradu, sed praecipiti cursu, a virtute descitum, ad vitia transcursum.* Lib. ii. Cap. 1. -- Edit.] Just so, when the fear of persecution was removed, and wealth and honour attended the Christian profession, the Christians “did not gradually sink, but rushed headlong into all manner of vices.” Then “the mystery of iniquity” was no more hid, but stalked abroad in the face of the sun. Then, not the golden but the iron age of the Church commenced: Then one might truly say,

Protinus irrupit venae peioris in aevum
Omne nefas; fugere pudor, verumque fidesque,
In quorum subiere locum fraudesque, dolique,
Insidiaeque, et vis, et amor sceleratus habendi.
At once, in that unhappy age, broke in
All wickedness, and every deadly sin:
Truth, modesty, and love fled far away,
And force, and thirst of gold, claim'd universal sway,

28. And this is the event which most Christian expositors mention with such triumph! Yea, which some of them suppose to be typified in the Revelation, by “the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven!” Rather say, it was the coming of Satan and all his legions from the bottomless pit: Seeing from that very time he hath set up his throne over the face of the whole earth, and reigned over the Christian as well as the Pagan world with hardly any control. Historians, indeed, tell us, very gravely, of nations, in every century, who were by such and such (Saints without doubt!) converted to Christianity: But still these converts practised all kinds of abominations, exactly as they did before; no way differing, either in their tempers or in their lives, from the nations that were still called Heathens. Such has been the deplorable state of the Christian Church, from the time of Constantine

till the Reformation. A Christian nation, a Christian city, (according to the scriptural model,) was nowhere to be seen; but every city and country, a few individuals excepted, was plunged in all manner of wickedness.

29. Has the case been altered since the Reformation? Does “the mystery of iniquity” no longer work in the Church? No: The Reformation itself has not extended to above one third of the Western Church: so that two thirds of this remain as they were; so do the Eastern, Southern, and Northern Churches. They are as full of heathenish, or worse than heathenish, abominations, as ever they were before. And what is the condition of the Reformed Churches? It is certain that they were reformed in their opinions, as well as their modes of worship. But is not this all? Were either their tempers or lives reformed? Not at all. Indeed many of the Reformers themselves complained, that “the Reformation was not carried far enough.” But what did they mean? Why, that they did not sufficiently reform the rites and ceremonies of the Church. Ye fools and blind! To fix your whole attention on the circumstantial of religion! Your complaint ought to have been, the essentials of religion were not carried far enough! You ought vehemently to have insisted on an entire change of men’s tempers and lives; on their showing they had “the mind that was in Christ,” by “walking as he also walked.” Without this, how exquisitely trifling was the reformation of opinions and rites and ceremonies! Now, let any one survey the state of Christianity in the Reformed parts of Switzerland; in Germany, or France; in Sweden, Denmark, Holland; in Great Britain and Ireland. How little are any of these Reformed Christians better than heathen nations! Have they more, (I will not say, communion with God, although there is no Christianity without it,) but have they more justice, mercy, or truth, than the inhabitants of China, or Indostan? O no! We must acknowledge with sorrow and shame, that we are far beneath them!

That we, who by thy Name are named,
The heathens unbaptized out-sin!

30. Is not this the falling away or apostasy from God, foretold by St. Paul in his Second Epistle to the Thessalonians? (2 Thess. 2:3.) Indeed, I would not dare to say, with George Fox, that this apostasy was universal; that there never were any real Christians in the world, from the days of the Apostles till his time. But we may boldly say, that wherever Christianity has spread, the apostasy has spread also; insomuch that, although there are now, and always have been, individuals who were real Christians; yet the whole world never did, nor can at this day, show a Christian country or city.

31. I would now refer it to every man of reflection, who believes the Scriptures to be of God, whether this general apostasy does not imply the necessity of a general reformation? Without allowing this, how can we possibly justify either the wisdom or goodness of God? According to Scripture, the Christian religion was designed for “the healing of the nations;” for the saving from sin by means of the Second Adam, all that were “constituted sinners” by the first. But it does not answer this end: It never did; unless for a short time at Jerusalem. What can we say, but that if it has not yet, it surely will answer it? The time is coming, when not only “all Israel shall be saved,” but “the fullness of the Gentiles will come in.” The time cometh, when “violence shall no more be heard in the earth, wasting or destruction within our borders;” but every city shall call her “walls Salvation, and her gates Praise;” when the people, saith the Lord, “shall be all righteous, they shall inherit the land for ever; the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, that I may be glorified.” (Isa. 60:18, 21.)

32. From the preceding considerations we may learn the full answer to one of the grand objections of infidels against Christianity; namely, the lives of Christians. Of Christians, do you say? I doubt whether you ever knew a Christian in your life. When Tomo Chachi, the Indian Chief, keenly replied to those who spoke to him of being a Christian, “Why,

these are Christians at Savannah! These are Christians at Frederica!" -- the proper answer was, "No, they are not; they are no more Christians than you and Sinauky." "But are not those Christians in Canterbury, in London, in Westminster?" No: no more than they are angels. None are Christians, but they that have the mind which was in Christ, and walk as he walked. "Why, if these only are Christians," said an eminent wit, "I never saw a Christian yet." I believe it: You never did; and, perhaps, you never will; for you will never find them in the grand or the gay world. The few Christians that are upon the earth, are only to be found where you never look for them. Never therefore, urge this objection more: Never object to Christianity the lives or tempers of Heathens. Though they are called Christians, the name does not imply the thing: They are as far from this as hell from heaven!

33. We may learn from hence, Secondly, the extent of the fall, -- the astonishing spread of original corruption. What among so many thousands, so many millions, is there "none righteous, no, not one?" Not by nature. But including the grace of God, I will not say with the heathen poet, -- *Rari quippe boni: numero vix sunt totidem,* quot

Thebarum portae, vel divitis ostia Nili.

[The following is Gifford's translation of this quotation from Juvenal: --

-- The good are few! "the valued file"

Scarce pass the gates of Thebes, the mouths of Nile. -- Edit.]

As if he had allowed too much, in supposing there were a hundred good men in the Roman Empire, he comes to himself, and affirms there are hardly seven. Nay, surely, there were seven thousand! There were so many long ago in one small nation, where Elijah supposed there were none at all. But, allowing a few exceptions, we are authorized to say, "The whole world lieth in wickedness;" yea, "in the wicked one," as the words properly signify. "Yes, the whole heathen world." Yea, and the Christian too; (so called;) for where is the difference, save in a few externals? See with your own eyes! Look into that large country, Indostan. There are Christians and Heathens too. Which have more justice, mercy, and truth? The Christians or the Heathens? Which are most corrupt, infernal, devilish, in their tempers and practice? The English or the Indians? Which have desolated whole countries, and clogged the rivers with dead bodies?

O sacred name of Christian! How profaned!

O earth, earth, earth! How dost thou groan under the villainies of thy Christian inhabitants!

34. From many of the preceding circumstances we may learn, Thirdly, what is the genuine tendency of riches: What a baleful influence they have had, in all ages, upon pure and undefiled religion. Not that money is an evil of itself: It is applicable to good as well as bad purposes. But, nevertheless, it is an undoubted truth, that "the love of money is the root of all evil;" and also, that the possession of riches naturally breeds the love of them. Accordingly, it is an old remark, *Crescit amor nummi, quantum ipsa pecunia crescit:*

"As money increases, so does the love of it;" and always will, without a miracle of grace. Although, therefore, other causes may concur; yet this has been, in all ages, the principal cause of the decay of true religion in every Christian community. As long as the Christians in any place were poor, they were devoted to God. While they had little of the world, they did not love the world; but the more they had of it, the more they loved it. This constrained the Lover of their souls, at various times, to unchain their persecutors; who, by reducing them to their former poverty, reduced them to their former purity. But still remember, riches have, in all ages, been the bane of genuine Christianity!

35. We may learn hence, Fourthly, how great watchfulness they need who desire to be real Christians; considering what a state the world is in! May not each of them well say, Into a

world of ruffians sent,

I walk on hostile ground:

Wild human bears, on slaughter bent,
And ravening wolves surround?

They are the more dangerous, because they commonly appear in sheep's clothing. Even those who do not pretend to religion, yet make fair professions of good-will, of readiness to serve us, and, perhaps, of truth and honesty. But beware of taking their word! Trust not any man, until he fears God! It is a great truth,

He that fears no God, can love no friend:

Therefore stand upon your guard against every one that is not earnestly seeking to save his soul. We have need to keep both our heart and mouth as "with a bridle, while the ungodly are in our sight." Their conversation, their spirit, is infectious, and steals upon us unawares, we know not how. "Happy is the man that feareth always," in this sense also, lest he should partake of other men's sins. O "keep thyself pure!" "Watch and pray, that thou enter not into temptation!"

36. We may learn from hence, Lastly, what thankfulness becomes those who have escaped the corruption that is in the world; whom God hath chosen out of the world, to be holy and unblamable.

"Who is it that maketh thee to differ?" "And what hast thou which thou hast not received?" Is it not "God" alone "who worketh in thee both to will and to do of his good pleasure?" "And let those give thanks whom the Lord hath redeemed and delivered from the hand of the enemy." Let us praise him, that he hath given us to see the deplorable state of all that are round about us, to see the wickedness which overflows the earth, and yet not be borne away by the torrent! We see the general, the almost universal contagion; and yet it cannot approach to hurt us! Thanks be unto Him "who hath delivered us from so great a death, and doth still deliver!" And have we not farther ground for thankfulness, yea, and strong consolation, in the blessed hope which God hath given us, that the time is at hand, when righteousness shall be as universal as unrighteousness is now? Allowing that "the whole creation now groaneth together" under the sin of man, our comfort is, it will not always groan: God will arise and maintain his own cause; and the whole creation shall then be delivered both from moral and natural corruption. Sin, and its consequence, pain, shall be no more: Holiness and happiness will cover the earth. Then shall all the ends of the world see the salvation of our God; and the whole race of mankind shall know, and love, and serve God, and reign with him for ever and ever!



THE DECEITFULNESS OF THE HUMAN HEART

John Wesley SERMON 123
(text from the 1872 edition)

"The heart of man is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: Who can know it?" Jer. 17:9.

1. The most eminent of the ancient Heathens have left us many testimonies of this. It was indeed their common opinion that there was a time when men in general were virtuous and happy; this they termed the "golden age." And the account of this was spread

through almost all nations. But it was likewise generally believed that this happy age had expired long ago; and that men are now in the midst of the "iron age." At the commencement of this, says the poet, --

Irumpit venae peioris in aeuum
Omne nefas: fugere pudor, verumque, fidesque
In quorum subiere locum, fraudesque, dolique
Insidiaeque, et vis, et amor sceleratus habendi.
Immediately broke in,
With a full tide, all wickedness and sin:
Shame, truth, fidelity, swift fled away;
And cursed thirst of gold bore unresisted sway.

2. But how much more knowing than these old Pagans are the present generation of Christians! How many labored panegyrics do we now read and hear on the Dignity of Human Nature. One eminent preacher, in one of his sermons, preached and printed a few years ago, does not scruple to affirm, First, that men in general (if not every individual) are very wise; Secondly, that men in general are very virtuous; and Thirdly, that they are very happy: And I do not know that anyone yet has been so hardy as to controvert the assertion.

3. Nearly related to them were the sentiments of an ingenious gentleman who, being asked, "My Lord, what do you think of the Bible?" answered, "I think it is the finest book I ever read in my life.

Only that part of it which indicates the mediatorial scheme, I do not understand; for I do not conceive there is any need of a Mediator between God and man. If indeed," continued he, "I was a sinner, then I should need a Mediator; but I do not conceive I am. It is true, I often act wrong, for want of more understanding: And I frequently feel wrong tempers, particularly proneness to anger; but I cannot allow this to be a sin; for it depends on the motion of my blood and spirits, which I cannot help.

Therefore it cannot be a sin; or, if it be, the blame must fall, not on me, but on him that made me." The very sentiments of pious Lord Kames, and modest Mr. Hume!

4. Some years ago, a charitable woman discovered that there was no sinner in the world but the devil. "For," said she, "he forces men to act as they do; therefore they are unaccountable: The blame lights on Satan." But these more enlightened gentlemen have discovered that "there is no sinner in the world but God! For he forces men to think, speak, and act as they do; therefore the blame lights on God alone. Satan, avaunt! It may be doubted whether he himself ever uttered so fond a blasphemy as this!

5. But, whatever unbaptized or baptized infidels may say concerning the innocence of mankind, He that made man, and that best knows what he has made, gives a very different account of him. He informs us that "the heart of man," of all mankind, of every man born into the world, "is desperately wicked;" and that it is "deceitful above all things:" So that we may well ask, "Who can know it?"

I.

1. To begin with this: "The heart of man is desperately wicked." In considering this, we have no need to refer to any particular sins; these are no more than the leaves, or, at most, the fruits, which spring from that evil tree;) but rather to the general root of all. See how this was first planted in heaven itself, by "Lucifer, son of the morning;" -- till then undoubtedly "one of the first, if not the first archangel:" "Thou saidst, I will sit upon the side of the north." See self-will, the first-born of Satan! "I will be like the Most High." See pride, the twin sister of self-will. Here was the true origin of evil. Hence came the inexhaustible flood of evils upon the lower world. When Satan had once transfused his

own self-will and pride into the parents of mankind, together with a new species of sin, -- love of the world, the loving the creature above the Creator, -- all manner of wickedness soon rushed in; all ungodliness and unrighteousness; shooting out into crimes of every kind; soon covering the whole face of the earth with all manner of abominations. It would be an endless task to enumerate all the enormities that broke out. Now the fountains of the great deep were broken up. The earth soon became a field of blood: Revenge, cruelty, ambition, with all sorts of injustice, every species of public and private wrongs, were diffused through every part of the earth. Injustice, in ten thousand forms, hatred, envy, malice, blood-thirstiness, with every species of falsehood, rode triumphant; till the Creator, looking down from heaven, would be no more entreated for an incorrigible race, but swept them off from the face of the earth. But how little were the following generations improved by the severe judgment! They that lived after the flood do not appear to have been a whit better than those that lived before it. In a short time, probably before Noah was removed from the earth, all unrighteousness prevailed as before.

2. But is there not a God in the world? Doubtless there is: And it is "He that hath made us, not we ourselves." He made us gratuitously, of his own mere mercy; for we could merit nothing of him before we had a being. It is of his mercy that he made us at all; that he made us sensible, rational creatures, and above all, creatures capable of God. It is this, and this alone, which puts the essential difference between men and brutes. But if he has made us, and given us all we have, if we owe all we are and have to him; then surely he has a right to all we are and have, -- to all our love and obedience. This has been acknowledged by almost all who believed themselves to be his creatures, in all ages and nations. But a few years ago a learned man frankly confessed: "I could never apprehend that God's having created us, gave him any title to the government of us; or, that his having created us, laid us under any obligation to yield him our obedience." I believe that Dr. Hutcheson was the first man that ever made any doubt of this; or that ever doubted, much less denied, that a creature was obliged to obey his Creator. If Satan ever entertained this thought, (but it is not probable he ever did,) it would be no wonder he should rebel against God, and raise war in heaven. And hence would enmity against God arise in the hearts of men also; together with all the branches of ungodliness which abound therein at this day. Hence would naturally arise the neglect of every duty which we owe to him as our Creator, and all the passions and hopes which are directly opposite to every such duty.

3. From the devil the spirit of independence, self-will, and pride, productive of all ungodliness and unrighteousness, quickly infused themselves into the hearts of our first parents in paradise. After they had eaten of the tree of knowledge, wickedness and misery of every kind rushed in with a full tide upon the earth, alienated us from God, and made way for all the rest. Atheism, (now fashionably termed dissipation,) and idolatry, love of the world, seeking happiness in this or that creature, covered the whole earth.

Upright both in heart and will,
We by our God were made;
But we turn'd from good to ill,
And o'er the creatures stray'd;
Multiplied our wandering thought,
Which first was fix'd on God alone;
In ten thousand objects sought
The bliss we lost in one.

4. It would be endless to enumerate all the species of wickedness, whether in thought, word, or action, that now overspread the earth, in every nation, and city, and family. They all centre in this, -- Atheism, or idolatry; pride, either thinking of themselves

more highly than they ought to think, or glorying in something which they have received, as though they had not received it; independence and self-will, -- doing their own will, not the will of Him that made them. Add to this, seeking happiness out of God, in gratifying the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eye, and the pride of life.

Hence it is a melancholy truth that (unless when the Spirit of God has made the difference) all mankind now, as well as four thousand years ago, "have corrupted their ways before the Lord; and every imagination of the thought of man's heart is evil, only evil, and that continually." However therefore men may differ in their outward ways, (in which, undoubtedly, there are a thousand differences,) yet in the inward root, the enmity against God, Atheism, pride, self-will, and idolatry, it is true of all, that "the heart of man," of every natural man, "is desperately wicked."

5. But if this be the case, how is it that everyone is not conscious of it? For who should "know the things of a man, like the spirit of a man that is in him?" Why is it that so few know themselves? For this plain reason: Because the heart is not only "desperately wicked," but "deceitful above all things." So deceitful, that we may well ask, "Who can know it?" Who, indeed, save God that made it? By his assistance we may, in the Second place, consider this, -- the deceitfulness of man's heart.

II.

1. It is deceitful above all things;" that is, in the highest degree, above all that we can conceive.

So deceitful, that the generality of men are continually deceiving both themselves and others. How strangely do they deceive themselves, not knowing either their own tempers or characters, imagining themselves to be abundantly better and wiser than they are! The ancient poet supposes there is no exception to this rule, -- "that no man is willing to know his own heart." Ut nemo in sese tentat descendere, nemo! None but those who are taught of God!

2. And if men thus deceive themselves, is it any wonder that they deceive others also, and that we so seldom find "an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no guile?" In looking over my books, some years ago, I found the following memorandum: "I am this day thirty years old; and till this day I know not that I have met with one person of that age, except in my father's house, who did not use guile, more or less."

3. This is one of the sorts of desperate wickedness which cleaves to the nature of every man, proceeding from those fruitful roots, -- self-will, pride, and independence on God. Hence springs every species of vice and wickedness; hence every sin against God, our neighbour, and ourselves.

Against God, -- forgetfulness and contempt of God, of his name, his day, his word, his ordinances; Atheism on the one hand, and idolatry on the other; in particular, love of the world, the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and the pride of life; the love of money, the love of power, the love of ease, the love of the "honour that cometh of men," the love of the creature more than the Creator, the being lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God: -- Against our neighbour, ingratitude, revenge, hatred, envy, malice, uncharitableness.

4. Hence there is in the heart of every child of man, an inexhaustible fund of ungodliness and unrighteousness, so deeply and strongly rooted in the soul, that nothing less than almighty grace can cure it. From hence naturally arises a plentiful harvest of all evil words and works; and to complete the whole, that complex of all evils, -

That foul monster, War, that we meet,
Lays deep the noblest work of the creation;

Which wears in vain its Maker's glorious image,
Unprivileged from thee!

In the train of this fell monster are murder, adultery, rape, violence, and cruelty of every kind. And all these abominations are not only found in Mahometan or Pagan countries, where their horrid practice may seem to be the natural result of equally horrid principles; but in those that are called Christian countries, yea, in the most knowing and civilized states and kingdoms. And let it not be said, "This is only the case in Roman Catholic countries." Nay, we that are called Reformed are not one whit behind them in all manner of wickedness. Indeed, no crime ever prevailed among the Turks or Tartars, which we here cannot parallel in every part of Christendom. Nay, no sin ever appeared in heathen or papal Rome, which is not found at this day in Germany, France, Holland, England, and every other Protestant as well as popish country. So that it might now be said, with as much truth and as few exceptions, of every court in Europe, as it was formerly in the court of Saul: "There is none righteous, no not one; they are altogether become abominable: There is none that understandeth, and seeketh after God."

5. But is there no exception as to the wickedness of man's heart? Yes, in those that are born of God. "He that is born of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not." God has "purified his heart by faith," so that his wickedness is departed from him. "Old things are passed away, and all things" in him "are become new." So that his heart is no longer desperately wicked, but "renewed in righteousness and true holiness." Only let it be remembered, that the heart, even of a believer, is not wholly purified when he is justified. Sin is then overcome, but it is not rooted out; it is conquered, but not destroyed. Experience shows him, First, that the roots of sin, self-will, pride, and idolatry, remain still in his heart. But as long as he continues to watch and pray, none of them can prevail against him. Experience teaches him, Secondly, that sin (generally pride or self-will) cleaves to his best actions: So that, even with regard to these, he finds an absolute necessity for the blood of atonement.

6. But how artfully does this conceal itself, not only from others, but even from ourselves! Who can discover it in all the disguises it assumes, or trace it through all its latent mazes? And if it be so difficult to know the heart of a good man, who can know the heart of a wicked one, which is far more deceitful? No unregenerate man, however sensible, ever so experienced, ever so wise in his generation. And yet these are they who pique themselves upon "knowing the world," and imagine they see through all men. Vain men! One may boldly say they "know nothing yet as they ought to know." Even that politician in the late reign neither knew the heart of himself or of other men, whose favourite saying was: "Do not tell me of your virtue, or religion: I tell you, every man has his price." Yes, Sir R[obert]; every man like you; everyone that sells himself to the devil.

7. Did that right honourable wretch, compared to whom Sir R[obert] was a saint, know the heart of man, -- he that so earnestly advised his own son, "never to speak the truth, to lie or dissemble as often as he speaks, to wear a mask continually?" that earnestly counselled him, "not to debauch single women," (because some inconveniences might follow,) "but always married women?" Would one imagine this grovelling animal ever had a wife or a married daughter of his own? O rare Lord C[hesterfield]! Did ever man so well deserve, though he was a Peer of the realm, to die by the side of Newgate? Or did ever book so well deserve to be burned by the common hangman, as his Letters? Did Mr. David Hume, lower, if possible, than either of the former, know the heart of man? No more than a worm or a beetle does. After "playing so idly with the darts of death," do you now find it a laughing matter? What think you now of Charon? Has he ferried you over Styx? At length he has taught you to know a little of your own heart! At length you know it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God!

8. One of the ablest champions of infidelity (perhaps the most elegant, and the most decent writer that ever produced a system of religion without being in the least obliged to the Bible for it) breaks out in the fullness of his heart: "Who would not wish that there was full proof of the Christian revelation, since it is undoubtedly the most benevolent system that ever appeared in the world!" Might he not add a reason of another kind, -- Because without this man must be altogether a mystery to himself? Even with the help of Revelation, he knows exceeding little; but without it, he would know abundantly less, and nothing with any certainty. Without the light which is given us by the oracles of God, how could we reconcile his greatness with his meanness? While we acknowledged, with Sir John Davies, -

I know my soul has power to know all things,
Yet is she blind, and ignorant of all:
I know I'm one of nature's little kings;
Yet to the least and vilest things in thrall.

9. Who then knoweth the hearts of all men? Surely none but He that made them. Who knoweth his own heart? Who can tell the depth of its enmity against God? Who knoweth how deeply it is sunk into the nature of Satan?

III.

1. From the preceding considerations, may we not learn, First, "He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool?" For who that is wise would trust one whom he knows to be "desperately wicked?" especially, whom he hath known, by a thousand experiments, to be "deceitful above all things"? What can we expect, if we still trust a known liar and deceiver, but to be deceived and cheated to the end?

2. We may hence, in the Second place, infer the truth of that other reflection of Solomon: "Seest thou a man that is wise in his own eyes? There is more hope of a fool than of him." For at what a distance from wisdom must that man be who never suspected his want of it? And will not his thinking so well of himself prevent his receiving instruction from others? Will he not be apt to be displeased at admonition, and to construe reproof into reproach? Will he not therefore be less ready to receive instruction than even one that has little natural understanding? Surely no fool is so incapable of amendment as one that imagines himself to be wise. He that supposes himself not to need a physician, will hardly profit by his advice.

3. May we not learn hence, Thirdly, the wisdom of that caution, "Let him who thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall?" Or, to render the text more properly, "Let him that assuredly standeth take heed lest he fall." How firmly soever he may stand, he has still a deceitful heart. In how many instances has he been deceived already! And so he may again. Suppose he be not deceived now, does it follow that he never will? Does he not stand upon slippery ground? And is he not surrounded with snares? Into which he may fall and rise no more?

4. Is it not wisdom for him that is now standing, continually to cry to God, "Search me, O Lord, and prove me; try out my reins and my heart! Look well, if there be any way of wickedness in me, and lead me in the way everlasting?" Thou alone, O God, "knowest the hearts of all the children of men:" O show thou me what spirit I am of, and let me not deceive my own soul! Let me not "think of myself more highly than I ought to think." But let me always "think soberly, according as thou hast given me the measure of faith!"

Halifax, April 21, 1790

