The Heart Of The Gospel

Forgiveness of sin is the heart of the gospel. Election is the beginning of the gospel. Eternal glory with Christ is the end of the gospel. But peace with God through sins forgiven is the beating heart of gospel grace.

When forgiveness is little valued the gospel is held in low esteem. If sin appears as a small thing, a matter of no real gravity or consequence, then the gospel will not be treasured in God’s church and God’s testimony will be diminished in the estimation of sinful men.

This is the curse of our day. Men and women have little sense of sin, no dread of judgment and no felt need for forgiveness. We call good evil and evil good, morality is stood on its head and we have become so inured to our own evil nature we don’t even notice it. Well did the Lord Jesus say “blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness”. Those unconcerned about their lack of righteousness are doubly cursed, first with a soul steeped in sin and second with a mind too dark to discern their perilous state. We are sinking slowly into hell and we are ignorant and careless of our dilemma.

Now, I do not doubt most of you who read these words will heartily agree. After all, Scripture is its own witness. “And”, writes the Apostle John, “this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.”

Yet, I fear many of us are more content in our sin than we realise, even within the professing church. Many are lulled into false security by preachers who declare peace when there is none. We accept the applause of ministers who themselves set the standard for heaven and eulogize the ‘successful’ dead, though they die in their sins.

We are like the wicked king in Daniel 4:4 who declared, “I ... was at rest in mine house, and flourishing in my palace”. We are self-possessed, self-satisfied, self-assured. We have lost sight of the holiness of God and therefore measure ourselves wrongly. We are ignorant of the true state of our soul and the miracle of forgiveness is mere talk. We fail to see ourselves, like Nebuchadnezzar, as the beasts we really are.

The achievement of the atonement was Christ taking away the sins of God’s elect people, a remnant and a little flock. Never forget, salvation is God’s work, not the will of man. There are millions in the world today who believe Jesus took away their sins on the cross. In their heads they will it and want it to be so. They have the theory, even the theology, but they have never experienced the reality. They have not known sins forgiven nor have they yet discovered the depth of their own depraved nature. They have not, like the prodigal son, come to themselves and consequently can never come to Christ. They are content to remain in theirpigsty of self-righteous effort with an aerosol and a filthy rag. Hear this, there are adulterers, thieves, brawlers, drunkards and extortioners in glory today, who have been forgiven all of their sin, but there are no self-righteous people in heaven. And there never will be.

Those who have been forgiven much love much, says our Saviour. They love the Lord Jesus Christ. They love His family, His people. They love to be where the Lord is well-spoken of, to fellowship with the church, to worship His glorious name. They love to serve Him, and sacrifice for Him which is really no sacrifice at all. They are men and women who know what it means to be sinners, and know what it means to be forgiven of their sin. “These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”
Often times we look forward with forebodings to the time of old age, forgetful that at eventide it shall be light. To many saints, old age is the choicest season in their lives. A balmier air fans the mariner’s cheek as he nears the shore of immortality, fewer waves ruffle his sea, quiet reigns, deep, still and solemn. From the altar of age the flashes of the fire of youth are gone, but the more real flame of earnest feeling remains. The pilgrims have reached the land Beulah, that happy country, whose days are as the days of heaven upon earth. Angels visit it, celestial gales blow over it, flowers of paradise grow in it, and the air is filled with seraphic music. Some dwell here for years, and others come to it but a few hours before their departure, but it is an Eden on earth. We may well long for the time when we shall recline in its shady groves and be satisfied with hope until the time of fruition comes. The setting sun seems larger than when aloft in the sky, and a splendour of glory tinges all the clouds which surround his going down. Pain breaks not the calm of the sweet twilight of age, for strength made perfect in weakness bears up with patience under it all. Ripe fruits of choice experience are gathered as the rare repast of life’s evening, and the soul prepares itself for rest.

The Lord’s people shall also enjoy light in the hour of death. Unbelief laments; the shadows fall, the night is coming, existence is ending. Ah no, crieth faith, the night is far spent, the true day is at hand. Light is come, the light of immortality, the light of a Father’s countenance. Gather up thy feet in the bed, see the waiting bands of spirits! Angels waft thee away. Farewell, beloved one, thou art gone, thou wavest thine hand. Ah, now it is light. The pearly gates are open, the golden streets shine in the jasper light. We cover our eyes, but thou beholdest the unseen; adieu, brother, thou hast light at even-tide, such as we have not yet.
For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.

(Revelation 7:17)

Oh, how I long to reach my home,
My glorious home in heaven!
And wish the joyful hour were come,
The welcome mandate given!

Oh, how I long to lay aside
These worn out weeds of clay;
And, led by my celestial Guide,
To explore the eternal day!

Oh, how I long to be with Christ,
Where all His glory beams!
To be from all my sin set free,
And worship as I’ve dreamed!

Oh, how I long to see His smile,
To sit before His feet!
Lord, grant me soon my heart’s desire,
Soon, soon Thy work complete.

Charlotte Elliot
This I know, “To die is gain.” Therefore I have “a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better.”

What does heaven look like? Where is it? How big is heaven? What will we have when we get there? These are the questions about heaven which interest carnal religionists. I hope they are not your primary concern. Still, our minds need some idea of heaven. We need to know something about it. Though much more about heaven is hidden than is revealed, the Lord has revealed as much as we need to know while we are still in our earthly tabernacles of clay.

Heaven is a real place. Our Lord Jesus is there in a real human body (Hebrews 2:9; 10:12-14). All the dead in Christ are there (Hebrews 12:22-24). The angels of God are there, too. Heaven is a place prepared by God and purchased by Christ for God’s elect (Matthew 25:34; Hebrews 6:20). It is a place of perfect rest. It is a place of perfect peace. It is a place of perfect love. It is a place of perfect satisfaction. Yet, the fulness, the beauty, and the glory of heaven are things beyond the scope of human understanding or description (2 Corinthians 12:4). Heaven is not a place of carnal sense. It is not a place of human imagination. “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9). Your highest, noblest, grandest, most spiritual thoughts about heaven fall far short of its reality. “Beloved, it doth not yet appear what we shall be” (1 John 3:2). Heaven is not a place of human intellect either, a place discovered, gained, or comprehended by man’s genius. The fact is, we do not know what the fulness of heaven shall be. However, of this one thing I am sure, there will be no tears in heaven. It is written, “God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.” This is one of the most delightful and comforting aspects of our heavenly inheritance to consider.

Much Weeping

Without question, there is much weeping in the way to heaven. Experimentally, faith in Christ brings deliverance from all curse and condemnation, but not from pain and trouble. There are many things which believers suffer along with other men. God’s children in this world experience physical pain and sickness, financial losses, bereavement, domestic troubles, and disappointments. Ask Job and David if these things are not so. The most eminent men of faith and obedience are not exempted from trouble and sorrow in this world. Let no one dupe you into thinking that your troubles and sorrows here are an indication of God’s disfavour.

In fact, there are many things which bring tears to our eyes which the world knows nothing about. Nothing troubles regenerate souls so much or so persistently as their awareness of their inward sin. Though every saint resigns himself to the rule and will of God his Saviour. Yet, our unceasing lack of resignation is a constant cause of turmoil in our souls. Unbelief, wounded, injured pride, anger, rash speech, coldness of heart, and fretfulness are but a few of the things that every believing heart struggles with daily. Those who experience the grace of God have no difficulty understanding Paul’s language in Romans 7:14-24. We experience the warfare daily.

There are even some precious tears which we shed here, that shall be dried on the other side of Jordan. Tears of repentance are bittersweet things that we shall never experience, once we have no experience of sin for which to repent. Tears of sympathy will never more be shed when sickness, sorrow, and death are no more. Tears of concern will all be dried when we see all things as our heavenly Father sees them. Our longings for Christ’s presence, painfully delightful as those longings are, shall come to an end when we are forever with the Lord.

Tears Dried

Even now our heavenly Father does much to dry our tears. The life of a believer is not a morbid life of sorrow, even here. The Lord graciously does much to comfort our hearts in the midst of our troubles (Isaiah 43:1-6). He gives us resignation to His will, faith in His providence, and reminds us of His gracious purpose. He causes us to remember His promises, blesses us with His presence, granting tastes of heaven on earth in seasons of sweet communion. Sometimes He floods our hearts with the knowledge of Christ’s love. When anything that causes us pain has done the work for which it was sent, He removes the cause of our pain.

Our Father never allows us to suffer anything unnecessarily. Even in the midst of great trials, troubles, and sorrows, He eases our burden by causing our hearts to be fixed upon the things of Christ (2 Corinthians 4:15-18). Then, when He brings us home, in heaven God will remove all tears from our eyes. Heaven is a place of sure, eternal, and ever-increasing
DON FORTNER

bliss. The source of that bliss is God Himself.
If God did not wipe away all tears from our eyes, there would be much weeping in heaven. We would never cease to weep over our past sins, were it not for the fact that the Lord God will then take away the cause of weeping, and show us that even our sins were overruled by His gracious and wise hand for our eternal good and His glory. Imagine what such knowledge shall be! We would weep forever over unconverted loved ones and friends left behind, were it not for the fact that then we shall be fully reconciled to the purpose of God, seeing all things as He sees them. We would certainly weep forever over all the wasted opportunities we squandered in this world, did not our Father show us how He has used even our neglect to accomplish His purpose. How we would weep over the great and terrible price of our redemption, if we were not in heaven made to see perfectly the glory of God in the sacrifice of His darling Son. In that world of perfect love, we would weep much over our unkindness and lack of love to our brethren upon the earth, did not our heavenly Father wipe all tears from our eyes.
What a great promise this is — God shall wipe away all tears from our eyes. He will remove every cause of outward grief. He will remove us from all sin and all sin from us. All fear of change shall be shut out. Every desire of our hearts shall be gratified. We will see Christ, be like Christ, love Christ perfectly, serve Christ unceasingly, worship Christ without sin, know Christ fully, rest in Christ completely, have Christ entirely, and enjoy Christ completely, perfectly, and eternally!

A Question
Will you be among the happy company of the redeemed? Not everyone will be among the people of God in heaven. No one deserves to be with Christ in heaven. Yet, many will be there. All who were chosen of God in electing love will be there. The purpose of God cannot be thwarted. All who are washed in Christ’s blood will be there. The cross of our Lord Jesus Christ shall never be discovered a miscarriage. The Son of God did not shed His blood in vain. All for whom He endured the travail of the cross, He shall see by His side in heaven. All who are clothed with His righteousness will be there. All who love His name will be there. All who believe Christ will be there. God has promised eternal life to all who trust His Son; and He will give what He has promised. “Dost thou believe on the Son of God?”

Sin, when viewed by scripture light,
Is a horrid, hateful sight;
But when seen in Satan’s glass,
Then it wears a pleasing face.

When the gospel trumpet sounds,
When I think how grace abounds,
When I feel sweet peace within,
Then I’d rather die than sin.

When the cross I view by faith,
Sin is madness, poison, death;
Tempt me not, ‘tis all in vain,
Sure I ne’er can yield again.

Satan, for awhile debarred,
When he finds me off my guard,
Puts his glass before my eyes,
Quickly other thoughts arise.

What before excited fears,
Rather pleasing now appears;
If a sin, it seems so small,
Or, perhaps, no sin at all.

Often thus, through sin’s deceit,
Grief, and shame, and loss I meet,
Like a fish, my soul mistook,
Saw the bait, but not the hook.

O my Lord, what shall I say?
How can I presume to pray?
Not a word have I to plead,
Sins, like mine, are black indeed!

Made, by past experience, wise,
Let me learn thy word to prize;
Taught by what I’ve felt before,
Let me Satan’s glass abhor.

John Newton
Olney Hymns Book 3 Hymn 76
Without question there is tremendous mystery surrounding our Lord’s temptation in the wilderness by Satan. I confess that there is much here that I do not understand. How can a man fast for forty days and forty nights and still be alive? How can a sinless man be tempted by the devil at all? How did the devil take our Saviour, with what appears to be great speed and relative ease, from the wilderness to the temple, and then to an exceedingly high mountain? How did Satan show our Saviour all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them in a single moment of time? We are not given the answers to these mysteries; but we are given the record of these mysteries. And for that reason alone they are to be believed as indisputably faithful and true.

Satan’s Failure

For forty days and forty nights the Lord Jesus was all alone in the wilderness; and for forty days and forty nights He was relentlessly assaulted by the devil. If the devil could prevail with just one temptation, if he could somehow manage to induce the Lord Jesus to sin just once the purpose of God would be overthrown; the work of redemption would be undone; no sinner would ever be saved; and we would have no gospel to preach. Why is that? Because sinners cannot be saved by another sinner. Sinners need a sinless Saviour to atone for their sin. Righteousness can only be fulfilled by one who is righteous and without spot. If Satan could succeed in just one of his temptations then all would be lost and none would be saved. But Satan did not succeed—he failed miserably! Our Saviour was, is, and will ever be that sinless man of God, that Holy One who has no sin, knows no sin, and cannot sin. Our dear Saviour “was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.” Satan did his worst and failed. Christ triumphed gloriously over the devil and did not succumb to his temptations because unlike us He had no sinful nature to appeal to. The account of our Lord’s temptation in the wilderness gives us great insight into the twisted workings and evil machinations of our great enemy the devil. If we rightly understand our Lord’s temptation that understanding will give us great advantage over him who always seeks to gain advantage over us “for we are not ignorant of his devices.”

Real Adversary

If Satan was brazen enough to tempt the spotless Son of God to sin then no lesser mortal is safe from his trickery. If the Lord Jesus was led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil then His disciples must expect the same. Brethren, forget all that you have seen on television concerning this fiend of hell. He is a ruthless, powerful, vicious killer—an invisible terror to the sons of men; and apart from the grace of God he will destroy us! This malignant spirit arrogantly waged war against God in heaven; single-handedly ruined the human race; turned Job’s life upside down; and induced Peter to deny that he even knew the Saviour! Does that sound like someone to trifle with? Oh my friends, “Pray that ye enter not into temptation ... Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about seeking whom he may devour: whom resist stedfast in the faith.”

A Tempted Saviour

We know that God cannot be tempted to do evil and that He will never tempt any man to evil. But anyone who understands anything about the absolute sovereignty of God knows that God works all things after the counsel of His own will. Nothing has ever taken our God by surprise: not the fall of Lucifer, the fall of man, and not our Saviour’s temptation in the wilderness. All things unfold according to God’s sovereign purpose of grace. The Lord Jesus was not merely tempted of the devil; He was “led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil.” Why? Because tempted sinners need a tempted Saviour, One who is touched with the feeling of their infirmities. The first Adam fell through the work of the devil; and the last Adam was manifested to destroy the works of the devil. The last Adam came to undo all the wrongs of the first Adam. What the
first Adam threw away and lost Christ came to restore and recover; and He did so as One in the likeness of sinful flesh, who was tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin. Our Saviour’s temptations were necessary on our account, “for in that he himself hath suffered, being tempted, he is able to succor (help, relieve, and assist) them that are tempted.” The account of our Redeemer’s temptations in the wilderness is specifically recorded for our learning, comfort, and edification.

**God’s Will**

As our Saviour’s temptations were designed and executed by the sovereign will and purpose of God so are ours. The time, sort, duration, frequency, and severity of every temptation we endure in this life are perfectly measured out in the balances of infinite wisdom and grace. We will not suffer a drop more than we need to nor an ounce less than is absolutely necessary and most conducive to God’s glory and our everlasting good. If it were up to us we would not be tempted at all, but it is not up to us—it is up to God. As an old preacher once said, “If we had God’s power we would change everything, but if we had God’s wisdom we wouldn’t change a thing.” We often think that God overdoes it, but God’s thoughts and ways are altogether different than ours. He is wisdom—He knows best. We are ignorance—we know nothing. My tempted, Christian brethren, hear the words of your God, “There hath no temptation taken you but such is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way of escape, that ye may be able to bear it.” Are you tempted and sorely tried? “Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks: (Why?) Because this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.” Remember children of God, “We have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.”

**A Sad Reality**

Three times our sinless Lord was grievously assaulted by the devil; and three times Satan was defeated with these three words: “It is written!” In the light of our sinless Master’s perfect example I cannot help but notice the sad reality that even though the Bible is the most popular and most circulated book in the history of the world most people only have a superficial knowledge of its contents. Many people own a Bible, but very few read it. Many people claim to believe what the Bible says, but few can tell you what it says. Some will defend the Bible, but few use the scriptures to defend themselves from the temptations of the devil. There are some people who never open their Bibles, who actually believe that there is something virtuous in Bible ownership. There is about as much virtue in owning an unread Bible as there is in having an unloved child. It is utterly sinful—not virtuous! An unread Bible is as useless as an unloaded gun! As Charles Spurgeon shockingly observed so long ago, “There is dust enough on some of your Bibles to write ‘damnation’ on them with your fingers.” This may come as a shock to some, but it is true nonetheless: There is no greater evidence of living without God in the world than living without intimate communion with the Holy Bible.

**Our Defence**

“It is written” was the weapon of choice for the Son of God in His conflict with the devil; and it should be ours as well. When tempted of the devil let us ever resort to the word of our God. Are we tempted to despair of help in time of need? It is written, “Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness.” Are we tempted to distrust God’s providence and lean on the arm of the flesh for help? It is written, “Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.” Are we tempted to give ourselves more to the world and less to our Saviour? It is written, “Love not the world ... No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other.” Are we tempted to deny the gospel for the sake of gaining or keeping the approval of ungodly men? It is written, “Whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven.” We will be tempted, but if we faithfully wield the sword of the Spirit, we need not fear of ever being taken in the snare of the devil.

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When God threatens, Isaiah 27:11, He that made them, will not have mercy upon them, and He that formed them, will shew them no favour; He in the same verse gives the reason of His severity, and says, they were a people of no understanding; i.e. a brutish and sottish people, that understood nothing that was good. God in determining the eternal state of persons in the great day, will not act merely as a sovereign, to say this or that soul shall go to hell because He will have it so, but as a just Judge because they deserve it should be so. There is one text may give great light into this matter, Revelation 20:12. And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in those books, according to their works. Observe, here is a representation of the awful Day of Judgment; and observe, here was the Book of Life, so called, as containing the names of all such as God had decreed unto eternal life. But here were other books besides that, as containing the good and evil deeds of men, and it is said the dead were judged out of those things that were written in the books; not any one of them only, but all of them, according to their works. From whence it seems clear, that respect will be had both to the decrees of God, and works of men, in order to determine the eternal state of man, either as to happiness, or misery; so as their names being found written in the book of life shall not secure their entrance into Heaven without those good works they were chosen to, nor the best works secure their entrance into Heaven whose names are not written in the book of life. On the other hand, none shall be sent to Hell merely because their names are not found written in the Book of Life, who have not done
some evil; for all the books were opened. To clear this further, let us suppose an elect soul called to the bar, and Christ the Judge to say to the angels that are to attend the service of that day, “Search the Book of Life, and see if this man’s name is found there”; they answer, “It is done as thou commandest, and here we find it written with thy own hand, that this man by name, living at such a time, and in such a place, should enter into Life.” Let us suppose the Judge further to say, “Search the other books, wherein all good deeds are recorded”; they answer, “It is done, and here we find it recorded of the same man by name, that such a day he heartily closed with Christ, and from that time truly repented of, and turned from sin, and solemnly devoted himself to the Service of God, and continued exercising himself to keep a conscience void of offence towards God and man to the day of his death.” Hereupon the Judge acquits him, saying, as Matthew 25:21. 

Well done, good and faithful servant;—enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.

In the next place, to suppose some Reprobates to come trembling at the bar, and the Judge commands the angels to search the Book of Life if their names are found therein, the angels answer, “It is done, and none of their names are found there, let them die.” But let us suppose the Judge to say, “Before I give sentence of death, search the other book of all evil deeds done”; they answer, “It is done, and here we find it recorded of one of the prisoners at the bar by name, that he lived where the Gospel was purely preached, yet would not so much as hear it; yea, that he was a scoffer at, and a persecutor of, such as were better than himself; and a hater of all that was good.” “Of another of the prisoners it is found, that though he heard the Gospel, and had many a sweet call, yet he never would comply therewith, but lived in omission of those duties that thy faithful servants with the most pressing motives oft exhorted him unto; yea, that he was guilty of gross impieties, though often warned against them, and of the punishment that would certainly be inflicted for them.” “Of a third it is found, that he indeed was cast in the dark parts of the earth, and never so much as heard the joyful sound, and doth not stand chargeable of refusing to comply with the calls of grace, as the former was, yet he sinned in not obeying the dictates of conscience, which proves him to be worthy of death. Hereupon the Judge says to the prisoners, “Guilty, or not guilty?” What have you to say for yourselves why sentence should not pass upon you? They stand trembling, pale, and speechless, like that man that wanted the wedding garment. The Judge then denounces the sentence of death, as Matthew 25:4, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, &c. not because not elected, but because they had omitted what they ought to have done, and had done what they ought not to have done: As Isaiah 3:11, Woe unto the wicked! it shall be ill with him: for the reward of his hands shall be given him. And thus this great day is concluded, according to that general rule, John 5:28, 29; All that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation: Thus we read Revelation 20:15. And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire. Nor is there the least shew of injustice, or unrighteousness; since God herein inflicts no more upon them, than was deserved by them. Nay, it would look much like unrighteousness not to do it; since it is as much the part of a righteous Judge to condemn and punish the guilty, as to clear the innocent. Says the Apostle, Romans 3:5, 6; Is God unrighteous who taketh vengeance; God forbid: for then how shall God judge the world?

What? Will any, instead of trembling at God’s judgments, charge Him with unrighteousness? Let them rather accuse themselves than God; and admire His patience, that He hath not long ago executed His decrees upon them as vessels of wrath, thus by sin fitted for destruction. Let such God-provoking sinners duly consider that text, Job 36:18, Because there is wrath, beware, lest he take thee away with his stroke; then a great ransom cannot deliver thee.
Words must be poor when we attempt to speak upon such a subject as the Lord Jesus Christ in His office as a great high Priest, but after all, the life-blood of the Gospel centres in the Priesthood of the Lord Jesus. There has never been a priest like Him and there never will be. We may read about the high priests and the priests in the Old Testament but none can compare with Him. He has no comparison; the main point here consists in the fact that He is able to save to the uttermost poor lost people, not through what somebody else has done for Him, but what He Himself has accomplished.

In this office are three things that might be mentioned that are necessary and are involved in the Priesthood of Christ. One point consists in taking our nature upon Him, without which He could not be a priest; another, the sacrifice that He offered without which He could not take away sin; and the third the position that He occupies as having passed into the heavens where He exercises that blessed office and disposes the blessings of grace to His poor, needy people upon the earth. There He is, our great High Priest. He is great here particularly in His sympathy, but He is great in a number of different ways, He is great in His love. 'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends'; but our blessed High Priest did, and that for some of you. I hope it may be His blessed will that it proves to be for everyone, even as we have been singing.

He is great in His knowledge, wisdom and understanding; nothing is concealed from His penetrating eye. There is no creature that is not manifest in His sight; all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of Him with whom we have to do. He is our great High Priest. This comes into our lives. Do we feel to need wisdom? Then this great High Priest is made

**A Sympathising High Priest**

Hebrews 4:14-16

**Jesse Delves (1891-1980)**
this unto us for He of God is made unto us wisdom. Do you need a righteousness? It must come from this Priest. Do you need strength? It must come from Him as a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec.

Every grace and every favour
Comes to us through Jesus’ blood

‘Seeing then that we have a great High Priest that is passed into the heavens.’ This is a blessed proof of His divine personality, as was His resurrection from the dead. When the work of redemption was completed He ascended up from this earth to heaven. We read that His disciples saw Him go up until He vanished out of their sight; He ascended up and passed into the heavens. I do not know how you may feel about this, but I know it has been a consoling thought in my heart many and many a time that we have a Priest in heaven, a living Jesus, made a priest mediatorially after the order of Melchisedec, and His life now as a Priest is an evidence and demonstration of the satisfaction and acceptance of His sacrifice, and all His dear people stand perfect in Him. All their sins are washed away forever and they are justified by His obedience unto death. O what a glorious Person He is. I am sure I may repeat what I said this morning; as you may be helped keep your eye fixed on Him when you pray; also, when you read keep that eye fixed on Him for that is where your blessing must come from.

He is a great High Priest passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, therefore, ‘let us hold fast our profession’. This will present many difficulties because of the opposition that necessarily attends this holding fast our profession. There is the power of unbelief within us, temptations without, cross providences, hard things, afflictions, losses, a path of tribulation, darkness, fears, apprehensions; many, many things will make it a difficult matter; but, as I believe I mentioned this morning, it is a profession of faith in Christ, for that is where the soul anchors, it is a profession of faith and confidence in His precious blood to purge our load of guilt away. It is a profession of the perfection of His righteousness to present us without spot before God one day.

The secret of this holding fast is union with Him; ‘I in them’. The vine and the branches indicate this; when the branches are in union with the vine then it lives and is fruitful. So does a living soul that is in union with Christ. There is no continuing without this, no holding fast in a gracious saving way if there is no union. This holding fast is looking to Him, trusting in Him, casting our care upon Him, committing our way to Him, leaning upon Him, holding fast with a ‘Lord help me’. ‘Hold up my goings in thy paths, that my footsteps slip not.’ O what a wonder it will be to come through, to be brought through, to overcome at last, to be victorious. We need grace to keep our eyes fixed on Him in spite of all opposition. ‘Let not all this terrify, pursue the narrow path.’ Press on, ‘forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before’. Press toward the mark.

The point I would like to speak on for a little while is just this matter of the priesthood of Christ in His compassion and sympathy. It is said by the Apostle here that ‘He is touched with the feeling of our infirmities’. By infirmities you know we may understand some kind of weakness or disability or affliction. Indeed, it may apply to any trial that we may have to walk in, in which we may feel we have not strength of ourselves to do so. He is touched with our infirmities, the feeling of our infirmities. They can be infirmities of the body, in some particular limb, or an infirmity in relation to the hearing or the sight, as we read of one who had an infirmity for so many years who was waiting at the pool. We read of what the Lord said to the ministers of John, ‘Go your way, and tell John what things ye have seen and heard; how that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised’. All these are infirmities. We may term them afflictions, I know, but they are infirmities in the sense that they indicate some particular weakness. As a deaf person is not able to hear because of that infirmity, so a dumb person is not able to speak because of this infirmity. There are many infirmities, and sometimes these can be for the time being through taking a mistaken view of things. This was the case with Asaph; he came to mistaken, premature conclusions. This can be an infirmity. Good Asaph said, ‘Has God forgotten to be gracious? … Will He be favourable no more?’ This was an infirmity, a mistaken conclusion, he said so. He said ‘This is my infirmity: but I will remember the years of the right hand of the most High’.

Now, dear friends, we are all subject to these infirmities. Do you not feel it? Sometimes this can refer to the matter of prayer. We have an infirmity in this matter. What is this? The Apostle refers to it in the Romans, ‘The Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not
what we should pray for as we ought'. Here is an infirmity. This may seem difficult to understand; but we may not always know what is best for us or what the will of the Lord is concerning us. We can be very much in the dark, and may pray for things that nature desires, without real subjection to the Lord’s will. Here is an infirmity; but ‘The Spirit helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered’. How does the Spirit help these infirmities? By strengthening us, holding up our hands in prayer and imparting that importunity so that we feel able to come boldly unto the Throne of Grace in the boldness of a living faith. This is how the Spirit helps our infirmities. He may also do this by presenting Christ before our view as all-sufficient to supply every need, and thereby urge us to earnest pleading by the Spirit of grace and of supplication.

Here are these infirmities, then. Now the Lord Jesus Christ Himself has no infirmities that are consequent upon inherent weakness and sin. We know all afflictions and death itself result from sin, from the fall of man. The dear Redeemer has no infirmities inherent in Himself, but He understands the infirmities of His poor dear people because of what He has passed through Himself. Whatever infirmity you may labour under He can understand it sympathetically. Are you suffering pain? He can understand that pain because He suffered such pain, as He did when He suffered that cruel death. Are you insulted, persecuted, opposed? So was He. He was insulted, persecuted, opposed and hated. He can understand your trials and afflictions in this way. Oh, say you, but I am tempted by the devil—so was He. As you know, He was tempted in the wilderness. Say you, I am tempted to unbelief and distrust of God; so was He by Satan, tempted to a distrust of God’s providence; for when He was hungry He was tempted to turn stones to bread. That was a temptation from Satan. When you feel to be assailed by Satan you may remember that so was your Saviour assailed by Satan. Oh, say you, I am tempted to pride and presumption—so was He. Are you tempted to idolatry?—so was He.

The point then is that, whatever your temptations are, this great High Priest can understand them. But there is something more than this, more than understanding them. This is that He is touched by them. He is touched by the feeling of your infirmities. This can be
very, very sweet. This being touched with the feeling of our infirmities appears to be first that He walks with us in them. As it is in the prophecy by Isaiah, ‘When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee’. You are afflicted by these infirmities, but He walks with you in them, He is touched by the feeling of your infirmities, and not only so but He supports you under them, He does not leave you to shift for yourself; He supports you in them. He bears you through them. He supports you with His staff and rod; He does not leave you to fight your battles alone; He is the captain of your salvation made perfect through sufferings. Some of you may understand me; you may have felt a particular sense of the Lord’s presence with you in a furnace of trial, supporting you with a promise, holding you up, walking with you in the trial, carrying the burden for you, bearing you through it. So it has been a sanctified trial, because the Lord was with you in it, and blessed His word to you when you were passing through the waters.

He is touched with the feeling of our infirmities. He may touch your heart with His love, melt you in repentance and contrition for sin, bring you near to Himself, carry you as a lamb in His bosom through the rough and rugged track that you may have to travel along in this path of tribulation. He is touched with the feeling of our infirmities, and was in all points tempted like as we are yet without sin. We are poor sinful mortals. We are liable to fall a prey to temptation. He was tempted in all points, yet He was perfectly holy. Although He was tempted He was never tainted, although He suffered being tempted, He never fell by any temptation. Oh no, He knows just how to take you up in His arms and carry you through, as though He would whisper in your heart, I have suffered all for you. He will take you up in His arms, so to speak, and carry you through a furnace or bear you through a river, help you, bring you through and give you to feel a sweet peace and quietness in it. This is being touched with the feeling of your infirmities.

Touched with a sympathy within,
He knows our feeble frame;
He knows what sore temptations mean,
For He has felt the same.

This is an incentive in the mind of the Apostle to come boldly unto the Throne of grace, as though he would say, You have these infirmities. How can you carry them, how can you walk in them, how can you endure them? Here is a direction, ‘Come boldly unto the throne of grace’ with your infirmities, your weakness, your temptation, your sins, your fears, your failings. This boldness is the boldness of faith. Faith is what I may term a confidence, not a presumptuous boldness. It is described in one of the Psalms, ‘I am the Lord thy God, which brought thee out of the land of Egypt: open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it’. Ask for great things, ‘large petitions with thee bring’. ‘Open thy mouth wide.’ This is a confidence then. Why go to this throne of grace? Because we have nowhere else to go. It is the only avenue of soul relief, of deliverance.
Let us come boldly. You may say, my case is too bad. Who said that? The Lord never said so. We need to be careful about listening to what the devil says. The Apostle James says, ‘Resist the devil and he will flee from you’. How can we poor things resist the devil? I would say the best way is to come boldly to the throne of grace, for that is what the devil cannot abide. The weakest saint upon his knees can gain the victory.

Satan trembles when he sees
The weakest saint upon his knees

This is the best way of resisting him.

What various matters there are, your soul, your body, your providences, your circumstances and many things. This is an open door. ‘Let us come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.’ That is the reason why we are exhorted to venture with this boldness. First of all that we may obtain mercy. What is it that we need mercy for? Mercy in forgiveness, grace to strengthen. When it comes to the matter of mercy this is a great thing, for this forgiveness is an act of mercy; this can take us to Psalm 51 where the Psalmist says, ‘Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions’, and so on down through the Psalm. If the Lord should be pleased to bring that forgiveness into your heart and give you to feel it, He will only do it as an act of mercy toward you or me or anyone else, not because we have any claim upon Him. It must be an act of mercy; in fact it is mercy all the way. ‘Have mercy upon me, O God.’ This is what the Lord Jesus is exalted to give. He is ‘a Prince and a Saviour to give repentance to Israel and remission of sins’. Oh what blessed peace He gives, what joy, what life, what liberty, what assurance! All is an act of mercy. In this blessed word we read that she said, ‘Lord help me’. ‘Grace to help in time of need.’ This can be when we are under some infirmity, pressing hard upon us, some particular affliction, some trial, some hard thing that you may have to walk in that is like water wearing the stones. These things bring us down so that we feel to have no strength left except it be to pray, ‘Lord help me’. Then this grace is given, ‘grace to help in time of need’. Venture boldly to the throne of grace that you may find grace, obtain it, feel it, experience it. It is a confirming word. It is what so many of the Lord’s people have felt in a time of trouble, sorrow, affliction, when life has been in jeopardy, heavy outward trials that have been very hard to bear, but not too hard for the Lord to give strength to hold you up and bring you through.

The Lord said to the Apostle, ‘My grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness’. In this way you may find and feel your shoes to be as iron and brass; you can walk in them and they will be sure to fit. You have to bring these infirmities to a mercy seat that you may find grace to help in time of need. They are sure to come, they have come, they do come; and what a mercy it is when a waiting soul finds the Lord in a time of need, and feels that inward support, that divine sympathy; this is when this great High Priest is touched with the feeling of our infirmities. I hope I have been helped to say a few things that are according to the Gospel and according to the experience of the Lord’s people. May we be favoured to prove that we have such an High Priest who is touched with the feeling of our infirmities and that a throne of grace is open for us to venture to, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Amen

Jesse Delves (1891-1980) was pastor of Ebenezer Strict Baptist Chapel, Clapham, London from 1935-1980. He was born of godly parents, the third of four boys. He was married to Edith and worked in the boot and shoe trade in various places, mainly in Sussex from the age of twelve, later having his own business in the trade, until called to the ministry in 1935. He had commenced his ministry in 1929 being sent out having been authorised to preach by Mr J. K. Popham the pastor and the members of Galeed Strict Baptist Chapel, Brighton, where Mr Delves was a member.
John Bunyan

Part 2. From Birth To New Birth

John Bunyan was born in November, 1628 just outside the village of Elstow which looks back on a long history connected with the 11th century Norman abbey there. Many scenes described in Bunyan’s works remind us of buildings still standing in Elstow and the surrounding districts. Bunyan’s family had lived close to the village since Norman times and his parents and sister are buried in the graveyard of the old 13th century Abbey Church of St Helen and St Mary.

Our subject was the son of Thomas Bunyan and his wife Margaret neé Bentley and was baptised in the Abbey Church on 30th November, 1628. It is thought that as baptisms were often carried out on the third day of a person’s birth, John was therefore born on the 28th of November. Though Bunyan tells us much about his spiritual life in Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners (1678), he gives few biographical details.

1628 was a notable year in Britain’s history as twenty-nine-year-old farmer Oliver Cromwell began to climb up the ladder of power on becoming MP for Huntington not far from the Bunyans’ home. It was the year of Charles I’s third Parliament after his coronation in 1625. The young King was naive in state matters and, when opposing factions appeared in Parliament, he demanded that MPs should show more respect for one another and the House they represented. Instead of following the King’s commonsense the dissidents claimed he should keep out of politics. Cromwell hoped that his new position of power within the Establishment would enable him to acquire rights from Crown and Church property to extend the area he farmed. State and Church opposition to this plan caused Cromwell’s initial rebellion.

Bunyan’s father has been described as a chapman, tinker and brazier who had inherited some small property and his wife’s family was fairly well-to-do. So the story that the Bunyans were impoverished may be exaggerated but as Bunyan’s grandfather did not die until 1641 when his family then inherited a little property, the years from 1628 to 1641 may well have been
hard. Nevertheless, the Bunyans managed to send John to school where he learnt his ABC and even tackled so-called ‘adult literature’ which ought perhaps to have been left unread. Many biographers claim that Bunyan’s parents could afford to send their son to Bedford Grammar School where he received a sound classical education. Caution, however, must be exercised here. Bunyan opens his Scriptural Poems where, after apologizing for his unpolished style, he affirms:

Nor could'st thou hope to have it better done
I am no poet, nor a poet's son
But a mechanic, guided by no rule
But what I gained in a grammar school,
In my minority.¹

Here Bunyan is not boasting of his good education but of the opposite. Believing like William Hale White, that Bunyan was too poor to attend an expensive grammar school, a number of biographers thus challenge the authenticity of this poem. However, Edward VI founded the Free Grammar School at Bedford as a charity school for the poorest children. It still had this status in Bunyan’s day with only one master and one usher². Indeed, the term ‘grammar school’ was often used in those days for charity schools which taught the mere basics of ‘grammar’, though this usually included some Latin constructions which Bunyan never mentions. Another argument, used by White against John having attended Bedford Grammar School was that it was a mile or two from his home and thus too far for a child to walk. In my own school days, in the nineteen forties and early fifties, we working class pupils had often to walk much further than that to school.

However, the history of Bedford’s schools reveals that there were so-called Petty Schools which taught basic reading and writing and Scriverner’s Schools which taught at a more advanced level and called themselves Grammar Schools though no Latin was taught. Whatever school Bunyan attended, this indicates that his family were not quite on the poverty line as poorer families needed their children to help at home or earn money and so could not send them to school. Bunyan thus sums up his education in Grace Abounding with the words:

For my descent then, it was, as is well known by many, of a low and inconsiderable generation; my father’s house being of that rank that is meanest and most despised of all the families in the land. Wherefore I have not here, as others, to boast of noble blood, or of a high-born state, according to the flesh; though, all things considered, I magnify the heavenly Majesty, for that by this door he brought me into this world, to partake of the grace and life that is in Christ by the gospel.

But yet notwithstanding the meanness and inconsiderableness of my parents, it pleased God to put it into their hearts to put me to school to learn both to read and write; that which I also attained, according to the rate of other poor men’s children; though, to my shame I confess, I did soon lose that little I learnt and that

¹ Elstow Church where John attended as a boy and was baptised as a new born.
John Bunyan

even almost utterly, and that long before the Lord did work his gracious work of conversion upon my soul.

Nearly all Bunyan’s vocabulary comes from the Genevan and King James’ Bibles but the exceptions he uses are often technical and academic and are derived from the Greek and Latin besides good old English. Indeed, Bunyan’s language reveals a fine linguistic background and a skilled use of general knowledge, and gives clear evidence of a good basic education. Apart from reading and writing, it appears that young John picked up many less edifying things during his school days such as ‘cursing, swearing, lying and blasphemying the holy name of God’ whilst still only nine or ten years of age. Even as a youngster, given to bad company, he could not run away from the hand of God and had terrible nightmares which he called ‘apprehensions of devils and wicked spirits’. Bunyan did not attribute these nightmares to the work of the devil but believed it was the Lord who was chastising him. Thus, as a child of nine or ten years of age, he was often depressed and afflicted in mind because he could not let go of his sin. This did not prevent him from becoming the ringleader of a gang of youths all of whom he says ‘kept me company, into all manner of vice and ungodliness.’ Gradually he found himself saying to God ‘Depart from me, for I desire not the knowledge of thy ways,’ and put later accidents and negative escapades, such as falling out of a boat and almost drowning or having a dangerous encounter with a snake, down to the chastising hand of God.

Bunyan joins the army

Bunyan’s mother died when he had just turned sixteen but his father married again within weeks of her death. This shocked John who became bitter against his father and especially his new step-mother, so he left home and joined the army around 1644 and remained a soldier for about three years. Whether John joined the Royal side or the side of the rebels, he never says. Professional soldiers at the time moved from one army to another according to what the chances of winning battles, and remaining alive were and how much plunder could be made as the latter was usually the only income the soldiers had. Soldiering was a profession, not a sign of political adherence.

We find the name ‘John Bunion’ on the Newport Pagnell muster rolls of Sir Samuel Luke (1603-1670), formerly a member of the Church of England who had transferred to the Parliamentary side. However, this is no certain indication that our Bunyan is meant as various forms of the name were frequent at the time and referred to different families. There is, however, a connection between Luke and our Bunyan. Luke became MP for Bedford from 1640 on until his eviction by Colonel Pride in 1648 when Cromwell turned against the Presbyterians. Luke also kept up friendly relationships with former royalists such as the Earl of Essex. Charles II gave Luke his seat back in 1660 with a great number of Presbyterian politicians, but Luke lost it a year later when the Presbyterians again fell out of favour. Luke cannot have been a firm Presbyterian as he joined the Independent, or rather non-denominational, Bedford Church of which Bunyan became a member. Indeed, it appears that Luke left the Presbyterians after the Independents gained political superiority. The shift from Church of England to Presbyterianism then to the Independents and Baptists was a common occurrence in these turbulent years when each dominant party invariably became the persecutor of the others. Even Cromwell lacked a permanent spiritual home after leaving the Church of England he had first sworn to defend, before declaring that the army was his church. His famous minister, the poet John Milton, also changed his denomination according to which rebel split-off wielded the power at the time, until he, like Cromwell, mistrusted all.

Evidence Bunyan fought on the King’s side

The usual argument that Bunyan fought against the King appears to be used to justify the myth that it was because of Bunyan’s alleged enmity towards the King that he was imprisoned. However, Charles I had nothing whatsoever to do with Bunyan’s various arrests and imprisonments and was long dead before they occurred. Another myth is that it was Charles II who put and kept Bunyan in prison. Actually, Charles II did his level best to have Bunyan and his Dissenting friends released but a rebel Parliament opposed him denying that kings had any such powers.

However, the scanty internal evidence in Bunyan’s works does rather point to his soldiering on the King’s side. Speaking of being delivered from danger by God’s intervention many times in Grace Abounding, Bunyan relates:
This also have I taken notice of with thanksgiving; when I was a soldier, I, with others, were drawn out to go to such a place to besiege it; but when I was just ready to go, one of the company desired to go in my room; to which, when I had consented, he took my place; and coming to the siege, as he stood sentinel, he was shocked into the head with a musket ball hit, and died.⁵

Though the famous Carlyle places Bunyan in the Leicester garrison fighting on the Cromwellian side, Froude points out that Bunyan’s words cited above are proof that he was on the King’s side because his company was ordered to besiege Leicester. However, Bunyan did not fight in the battle. He tells us that lots were drawn and he was included in the besiegers but another soldier asked to take his place to which Bunyan agreed. The soldier who replaced him was shot in the head during the battle.⁶ This fact causes Venables to write:

Bunyan’s presence at the siege of Leicester, which has been so often reported that it has almost been regarded as an historical truth, must therefore take its place among the baseless creations of a fertile fancy.⁷

Soon after Leicester, the King’s troops were soundly defeated at Naseby and all hope for the Royalists seemed to fade. It was at this time that Bunyan ceased to be a soldier; a further indication that he was on the King’s side. George Offor, Bunyan’s major editor, does place Bunyan on the King’s side but is guilty of prejudiced speculation when claiming:

Bunyan served in the wars between Charles I and his country, but it is not known on which side. Judging from his quote “delight in all transgressions against the law of God,” as he describes his conduct to have been at that time, he must have served on the King’s side, as one of his drunken cavaliers, probably this event took place when Leicester was besieged by the king’s troops.⁸

Oddly enough, Offor places this remark in an editor’s footnote to the very page where Bunyan says he did not take part in the Leicester siege. So, too, Bunyan confesses all the sins of his pre-conversion days but being a drunkard was never one of them. Offor is further guilty of prejudiced comment when he claims that Bunyan was not only a drunkard but also a Cavalier. The term ‘Cavalier’ was a Parliamentarian nickname for the rich, fashionable officers who served Charles I. However, the biographical evidence which Offor gives concerning Bunyan depicts him as being of humble stock. Offor, is also most prejudiced when he claims that Charles was fighting a war against his own country and not against Cromwell and his rebel lords. He also has not taken into account the fact that Cromwell sent his troops throughout the country to force civilians to bow before his name, be press-ganged into enlisting as his soldiers or, where age or gender prevented this, either provide money, horses or victuals for his troops. Church of England ministers after 1643 who had been robbed of their livings were further punished by having to provide Cromwell with horses and arms as true Puritan Bishop Hall found out. Furthermore, stories of excessive drinking are not only told of Charles’ cavaliers but of Cromwell’s closest associates such as Governor and Mayor, Peter Stubbers, said to be the man who beheaded Charles I. Cromwell fans must acknowledge that the brutality of his troops when it came to plundering, murdering and thieving and the slaughter of civilians was far in excess of any known records of Cavalier behaviour. Indeed, Cromwell financed his land forces by allowing them to act as robbers and plunderers of civilian property and his sea forces through state-organised piracy as witnessed by the navy’s attacking Swedish gold-carrying ships sailing up the English Channel or North Sea. This plunder was stored in Greenwich to finance Cromwell’s policies. Cromwell also hoped, as his correspondence clearly shows, to finance schools, colleges and theological training through funds plundered from the Irish Protestants as well as Roman Catholics. His massacres and atrocities in Scotland seem to have been forgotten in modern Dissenting histories. The King’s men were united under their allegiance to the King but there was no such allegiance to Cromwell. His Model Army was only a fraction of the Commonwealth army and Poyntz’ and Massie’s armies greatly outnumbered his ‘Model Army’. Then there were the, at times rival, Presbyterian forces, each competing for the same booty.⁹ Byfield’s minutes of the Westminster Assembly relate how the so-called Puritans enforced their stringent ecclesiastical laws by means of noblemen’s private armies and the secular magistrates.
JOHN BUNYAN

Bunyan marries, and starts to read edifying works
In 1648 or 1649, Bunyan married. Sadly, his wife died in 1655 just as Bunyan was having trouble with the local magistrates. We know little about his first wife apart from the fact that she was of a godly, though poor, family but possessed two spiritual gems which she brought into the marriage. These were Arthur Dent’s *The Plain Man’s Pathway to Heaven* and Lewis Bayly’s *The Practice of Piety*. At this time Bunyan testifies to the fact that the young couple had not a dish or spoon between them. However, he began to study the two volumes seriously and with great profit to his soul, writing later in *Grace Abounding*, Section 16:

Wherefore these books with this relation, though they did not reach my heart, to awaken it about my sad and sinful state, yet they did beget within me some desires to religion: so that, because I knew no better, I fell in very eagerly with the religion of the times; to wit, to go to church twice a day, and that too with the foremost; and there should very devoutly, both say and sing as others did, yet retaining my wicked life; but withal, I was so overrun with a spirit of superstition, that I adored, and that with great devotion, even all things, both the high place, priest, clerk, vestment, service, and what else belonging to the church; counting all things holy that were therein contained, and especially the priest and clerk most happy, and without doubt, greatly blessed, because they were the servants, as I then thought, of God.

Bunyan’s fears breaking the Sabbath and hears the Good News
Bunyan became increasingly convinced that his life was displeasing to God. However, the sins he confessed would probably not trouble most modern Christians, who under the pressure of a loose-living society do not recognize sin as sin. Bunyan had even a very bad conscience for playing tip-cat on Sundays. Even in my strict Sabbatarian childhood of the forties, this one-time adult game was regarded as harmless fun for children on the Lord’s Day just as were ‘Farmer, Farmer’; ‘Hop-Scotch’; ‘Marbles’ and ‘Conkers’. There was not a father on our Bradford Street who did not cut a stick and carve a ‘piggie’ (our name for the ‘cat’) for his children.

One Sunday, Bunyan had just struck the end of the cat so that it flew into the air and was about to strike it again when a voice, he records ‘did suddenly dart from heaven into my soul which said “Wilt thou leave thy sins and go to heaven, or have thy sins and go to hell?”’ He also had taken to bell-ringing but suddenly his conscience struck him and he found he could not climb up the steeple for fear it would collapse on him.

Bunyan’s remarks about Commonwealth Highchurchmanship are revealing. Church services were regulated by the General Assembly Directory of 1643 which ousted the Book of Common Prayer. Bunyan became very fond of the ritual, externalism and ceremonial repetition which was apparently allowed in its usage and to which he now slavishly adhered. Of course this was one of the major causes of the division after 1660 which split the Dissenters down the middle and the resulting Savoy Conference showed how far the High Church Dissenters had departed from the simplicity of the Reformed forms of worship.

One day, however, whilst going about his work as a tinker, Bunyan heard a small group of poor women speaking in terms quite strange to him. They were sitting in a doorway enjoying the sunshine and talking about the things of the Lord. Bunyan was fascinated by their language which was not just ‘religious’ but showed a deep knowledge of spiritual matters and a deep trust in God. Bunyan tells us, again in *Grace Abounding*:

They spoke of their own wretchedness of heart, of their unbelief, of their miserable state by nature, of the new birth, and the work of God in their souls, and how the Lord refreshed them, and supported them against the temptations of the Devil by His words and promises.

Here was food for thought for Bunyan who had been struggling to live a moral life through his own energies. He discovered that the ladies were members of St. John’s congregation, pastored by the Rector John Gifford who also ran an infirmary attached to the church building. Gifford, born in Kent, had had a most chequered career. He had been a major in the King’s army fighting against the Rebellion and had allegedly led a life of debauchery. After losing heavily through gambling, he became disgusted with himself and began to read Christian literature.
which led to his conversion. He then joined St. John’s and eventually became Pastor. Soon, Bunyan, more than ever sensitive to his lost condition and encouraged by the pious women, joined Gifford’s church. With the approval of the Town Council who after outlawing the Church of England were now suppressing Presbyterianism in favour of the Independents, Gifford registered his congregation as an Independent Meeting. However, he read a statement out to the congregation once a year declaring it would be a great evil for his flock to thus denounce the Church of England.

The new ruling about registering former Church of England congregations as Independent enabled Church of England ministers like Thomas Fuller and his co-worker Henry Jessey to keep their flocks providing they did not use the Prayer Book. Gifford proved to be a fine pastor indeed and spent several years teaching Bunyan the gospel in a way that Bunyan never forgot as he was gradually drawn to Christ and found healing for his troubled soul around 1653. This testimony of Bunyan’s is a great comfort to many Christians who only gradually came to belief in the face of those who demand an instant conversion. It is quite obvious that The Pilgrim’s Progress also describes Bunyan’s own experience of having the burden of sin gradually cast off. As Bunyan’s sensitivity to sin was enormously fine and painful, so is his advice to those who wish to flee from sin, patient, exact, detailed and most healing. Bunyan now spent several years lay-preaching though he never obtained a license.

Bunyan was never a Denominational Baptist

Bunyan’s re-baptism at St. John’s has caused much discussion. In George E. Page’s Baptist Historical Society Magazine article entitled ‘Baptist Churches in the Bedford District’, he emphasizes that though Bunyan was baptised as an adult his church was ‘never Baptist in the strict sense’. Bunyan made his thoughts clear on this subject in his 1672 Confession of Faith:

As for those titles of Anabaptists, Independents, Presbyterians, or the like, I conclude that they come neither from Jerusalem nor from Antioch, but rather from hell and Babylon, for they naturally tend to division.

Thus Bunyan showed his abhorrence at the church splitting which has hindered Christian witness from his day until ours.

(Endnotes)
2 Assistant teacher.
7 Venables’ Life of John Bunyan, p. 27.
To spiritual and exercised souls it is often a question as to what the reprobation and hatred of God really is, and some years since the writer heard a Calvinistic Strict Baptist minister please human nature and its Arminians exceedingly, calling the hatred of God a negative and lesser degree of love. And the moment he expressed himself thus, the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, as in the spirit of prophecy declared, struck my mind: Do not I hate them, O LORD, that hate thee? And am not I grieved with those that rise up against Thee? I hate them with perfect hatred: I count them mine enemies (Psalm 139:21, 22). I shall therefore as briefly and as best I can now treat of these solemn matters.

First, let us observe that whatever may be conveyed through one’s mind in the word hate, God does not forsooth really hate or dislike any creature of His power, wisdom and goodness as His creature. No, let not my reader one thought of the kind ever find lodging. God is in fact so holy and so good in Himself – He loveth the stranger in giving him food and raiment (Deuteronomy 10:18), and is good to all the creatures He hath made (Psalm 145:9). Yea, He hears the cry of the meanest, even the young lions and the croaking raven (Psalm 147:9), and is in fact very long-suffering with non-elect wicked, or the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction (Romans 9:22). Nor is there, nor will there ever be, a soul in hell who shall justly say that God was not good to them while here. And this goodness of God's nature is resolved in what may be termed His natural love, or the love of His nature to all the creatures He made.

Seeing, however, that Esau is in our text, as also in the prophet Malachi, spoken of as being hated, and his posterity (Edom) as being a nation against whom Jehovah hath indignation for ever (Malachi 1:4), and seeing also that Christ in the spirit of prophecy speaks of hating those that hate His Father, and with a perfect hatred, it becomes us, who are ministers of the word, to show what the hatred of a holy and good God arises from.

And observe, the apostle in this 9th of Romans treats of eternal, sovereign election, as also of the purpose of God in harmony therewith. And in order to show that God’s purpose according to election might (in scripture) stand upon a sovereign free grace bottom, he cites what the Holy Ghost told Rebekah, and that before the children were born to have done either good or evil, viz. That this manner of people should be separated from her bowels, that the one should be greater or stronger than the other people, and that the elder (Esau) should serve the younger (Jacob). And then he quotes from the prophet: As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated. And the only conclusion one can arrive at is that there is evidently an especial, peculiar, eternal, sovereign, love to Jacob, as also an aversion or hatred to Esau, and independently too of any works whatever.

Observe however, reader, one thing here – yea, take particular notice that although Esau

**Reprobation**

**Jehovah’s Love And Hatred Considered**

*As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.*

*Romans 9:13*
was not born before hated, he was conceived and alive in his mother’s womb, and was of course a sinner in the nature conceived. Yes, like David, and all Adam’s posterity, Esau was shapen in the iniquity of his father’s nature, and in the sin of his mother’s nature was conceived (Psalm 51:5). Consequently he was a sinner in God’s estimation before brought into this world. And often in my poor preaching I remind my hearers that it is not altogether what we have done – it is what we are. Herein then, is this point established, viz. that it is not a pure or holy creature that is hated of God. And having drawn my readers’ attention to this peculiar fact, viz. that God hates not a pure or simple creature of His power, let us from this draw into what reprobation means.

First then, it is plain that God loved Jacob, as in His own eternal Son, eternally, and before the world began. Consequently, although Jacob falls in Adam, and partakes with Esau in the womb of the mother the fallen or corrupt nature of both parents, it alters not that eternal, sovereign and peculiar love of God in Christ Jesus towards him as God’s child, nor do the subsequent sinful actions alter or turn away that immutable love. Hence Paul’s persuasion is that neither death (in sin) nor life (in sin) or all its dangers, nor angels, nor principalities (of them), nor powers (of darkness), nor things present (however trying), nor things to come (which may be worse), nor height (of rebellion), nor depth (of despair), nor any other creature (beside oneself) shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38, 39).

Secondly observe, Esau not being loved of God in Christ as was Jacob, although not born to merit by sinful works – Jehovah’s displeasure – is hated or thoroughly disliked because of the vileness of his nature, and to my mind this is God’s reprobation. Nor do I find any other reprobation of God in the whole of the sacred scriptures – and mind that which the glaringly and daringly presumptuous and profane are given up to. In other words, those that are, as Paul saith, unto every good work reprobate (Titus 1:16) have themselves to thank, and strictly speaking it is their own reprobation and not God’s. And so the sum is this: God’s reprobation (or leaving a soul in sin) arises from His dislike or hatred of a vile nature.

And again, let the reader search the scriptures through, and if the Lord the Spirit shines into his heart, and upon the sacred pages, he or she will find a people so loved of God, and chosen and blessed in and through His son, that despite all the evil works God loves them still. Such a reader shall also find in the same search, and under the same illumination, a people however morally good before men hated because of a sinful nature, as saith our text: Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated. And in this light indeed we see Cain and Abel. Abel’s person is accepted, with all the fruits of his toil. Abel’s lamb offered in faith of the atonement emits a sweet savour; Cain’s fruits offered in pride and self-righteousness emit a stench. And thus it follows that all non-elect persons are with their offerings disliked, Yea, the very prayers and sacrifices of the wicked (non-elect) are an abomination to the Lord (Proverbs 15:8).

And lastly, as Christ loved poor sinners and so came to live and die here for the ungodly, yea, for the millions of us poor, wicked wretches, who are by nature His very enemies (Romans 5:7-10), yea, as He prayed upon the cross for those who crucified Him: Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do (Luke 23:34), and as He commanded His own disciples to love their enemies (Matthew 5:44), yea, as this was, and still is a faithful saying in the whole of the church that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, and the very chief of them (1 Timothy 1:15), I say, as things are thus, the fact is clear, that those He in Psalm 139 by David is said to hate with a perfect hatred, and to count them His Father’s enemies, must be the Cains and Esaus, the non-elect, or the reprobate race, viz. that world He never prayed for either upon the cross or anywhere else (John 17:9).
We are delighted to announce that the 2017 New Focus Conference will be hosted by Merton Evangelical (Baptist) Church in south London beginning Friday evening 26 May, 2017 and running through Saturday afternoon, finishing with a service on Sunday morning 28 May. Our friends from Christian Bookshop Ossett will provide a bookstall.

Don Fortner will be preaching three times, once on each of the days. Other preachers are yet to be confirmed.

Those wishing to travel to the event and requiring accommodation should note hotels in the area get booked up very quickly. The church building is less than ¼ mile from South Wimbledon tube station on the Northern Line for those within commuting distance. Car parking is not at all easy in the area. Those seeking hotel accommodation should look for the London district SW19. The church’s postcode is SW19 2LG and there is Premier Inn, Holiday Inn Express, the Antoinette and many other venues within a mile or two’s distance.

Full travelling details are available on the New Focus website showing car, tube and train and parking suggestions as well as numerous hotel options for which we thank Pastor Harry Qazi. Further information is available from:

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As always we will be grateful to hear from those planning to attend so we can plan for catering. The conference is free to attend. Collections will be uplifted to help cover the costs. We encourage all who can join us to do so. We believe in the importance of faithful men preaching the gospel of free sovereign grace and value the blessings granted by God the Holy Spirit in the mutual fellowship of the Lord’s people gathered to worship their Lord and Saviour.