

The Triumphs of Mercy

by J.C. Philpot

God delights in showing mercy to those who are miserable and in need of it, and he will turn again to his people and show them mercy and compassion, even after they have sinned and backslidden.

Scripture: Psalm 103:12, Psalm 106:43, Isaiah 1:18, Isaiah 12:1, Isaiah 54:7, Jeremiah 31:34, Micah 7:18, Zechariah 3:3

Topics: "Divine Mercy", "Forgiveness Of Sin"

Description

J.C. Philpot preaches about the profound mercy of God as depicted in Micah 7:18-19, highlighting God's delight in mercy, manifestation of mercy in pardoning sins, and the challenge to find a God like Him who pardons iniquity and subdues sins. Philpot emphasizes that God's attributes are inseparable from Him, and His mercy is a delight to bestow upon repentant sinners. He explains how God's mercy manifests in turning away His anger, passing over transgressions, having compassion, and subduing iniquities, ultimately casting all sins into the depths of the sea, making them irrecoverable. Philpot encourages believers to trust in God's complete forgiveness and sanctification, challenging the worshipers of false gods to find a deity capable of pardoning sin like the God of Israel.

Transcript

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"Who is a God like unto you, that pardons iniquity, and passes by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage? He retains not his anger forever, because he delights in mercy. He will turn again, he will have compassion upon us; he will subdue our iniquities; and you will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea." Micah 7:18-19

Here we have the prophet bursting forth as it were into a transport of holy joy, in contemplating the character of God as pardoning iniquity, and not retaining his anger forever, because he delights in mercy. As mercy forms the chief as well as the delightful theme of our text, I shall speak of it under these three points of view-

First, Mercy in its delight.

Secondly, Mercy in its manifestation.

Thirdly, Mercy in its challenge.

I. Mercy in its DELIGHT- "Because he delights in mercy."

God is just, inflexibly, unspeakably just; nor can any one of his attributes suffer the least tarnish, be in any degree impaired, interfered with, or set aside by another. To our apprehension, they may seem at times to clash; but that is our dimness of sight; and indeed as our minds become more enlightened into the mysteries of divine truth, the more will every seeming contradiction disappear. The attributes of God are in fact himself. We speak of God's attributes because some such view of God's omniscience, omnipresence, holiness, justice, and mercy, seems necessary to lead our poor finite mind to gather up from various points a full view of his character. We speak therefore of the justice of God, of the grace of God, of the love of God, of the mercy of God, as being what are called attributes of the divine character. But God is all just; he is all merciful; he is all good; and he is all love; for these attributes, though we separate them for the sake of convenience and to help our finite minds, yet are not separate or separable from God; for God is all that his attributes, as we call them, represent him to be, and greater than they all.

Mercy then is one of these attributes; and as God speaks of it as in some way distinct from himself we may do the same, and view the attribute distinct from him who possesses it. This then is an attribute of God in which he is said especially to delight- "He delights in mercy." And because he delights in mercy it suits us well, for we delight in mercy too, as poor miserable sinners; and when we delight in mercy received, and God delights in mercy bestowed, the giving of mercy and the reception of mercy form a subject of delight to us as they form a subject of delight to God. His other attributes he ever keeps untarnished, unimpaired, uninterfered with; but according to the revelation which he has given us of his mind and will, he has not that supreme and sweet delight in executing justice which he has in manifesting mercy. We therefore read of "his work, his strange work," when justice is to be executed. It is work to be done, and yet is in some respects strange to the divine character. He therefore says, "For the Lord shall rise up as in mount Perazim, he shall be angry as in the valley of Gibeon, that he may do his work, his strange work; and bring to pass his act, his strange act."

To be angry towards his enemies, as in the valley of Gibeon, is God's work; but it is his strange work. As an earthly monarch must sometimes execute justice to show that he bears not the sword in vain, so it is with the great Sovereign of heaven and earth; for justice is so essentially a part of the character of God that if he could cease to be just he would cease to be God. But he does not, according to the Scripture declaration, take the same delight in manifesting justice as he takes in manifesting mercy. He does not rejoice over the destruction of a sinner as he rejoices over the salvation of the righteous. His compassion is moved towards the vessels of mercy, but not towards those who are unbelieving, hardened, and impenitent. They come under the stroke of his dreadful justice, but not under the affections of his compassion and the mercy in which his heart delights.

But what is mercy? It is that attribute of God (it is needful to speak of God's attributes, I will again remark, to give us clear conceptions)- it is that attribute of God which is suitable to our case as sinners. None but a sinner can value mercy. How we see this displayed in that memorable parable of the tax-collector and the Pharisee. How the Pharisee goes up to the temple lifting up his head in all the pride of pharisaism, ignorant of God, ignorant of self, unacquainted with the purity, majesty, and justice of that God whom he pretends to worship, and fixes his self-complacent eye on his own paltry performances, his own petty doings, his own self-devised observances, as if they merited the favor of God, and gave him a claim upon his salvation.

How different was the feeling and the language that sprang out of the bosom and lips of the poor dejected tax-collector. Viewed by the eye of man, there stood on one side an upright, consistent character, a man without moral blemish, diligent in every observance of the law, humane, charitable, and pious; and if he did look askance at the tax-collector, or if he did look condescendingly down from the height of his holiness upon men abandoned to every crime, such a self-complacent thought might surely be forgiven him. But farther down in the temple, yet not out of sight either of God or man, there stood one noted for his thefts, disgraced by his life, and an object of contempt and hatred to all. But grace, sovereign grace, had touched his heart. He knew that the temple was a representation of him who was to come, in whom the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily; at least he knew that in the temple God was to be worshiped and found. Crawling there with his dejected mind, penetrated and deeply possessed with a sense of God's purity and holiness, smitten in his conscience, and deeply sunk with apprehensions of eternal woe, he ventures to come within the holy precincts, we may suppose, in almost the same spirit as that in which Jonah spoke- "Yet will I look again toward your holy temple."

But though he came there, he dares not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven. There God dwelt in all his purity and majesty. He could not therefore lift up his eyes even to the place whence he knew mercy must come. All he could do was to smite upon his breast, and, in the agony of his soul, to breathe out that memorable prayer which has been the cry of thousands and tens of thousands, "God be merciful to me a sinner." But no sooner had that prayer come out of his heart and mouth than it entered the ears of the Lord

Almighty, and the sentence of justification, pardon, and peace was sent down from above, and, under the application of the Holy Spirit, reached his conscience, and he went down to his house with the justification, approbation, and mercy of God in his soul.

What an encouragement to any poor, sensible sinner, who can only just vent forth his piteous cry, "God be merciful to me a sinner." We all began there- it was the beginning of our cry to him who hears and answers prayer. We do not indeed usually receive justification as soon in answer to our cry as the tax-collector did, though we know not how many cries and groans he had secretly put up before. But we all come in through conviction of sin. We are not drawn, as people talk, by love, but driven by compulsion. The law threatens, conscience accuses, hell opens, heaven closes; and by this driving we come as the tax-collector, with the simple, earnest, sincere cry, "Mercy, mercy, mercy." "God be merciful to me a sinner."

Now God delights in mercy. It is not drawn from him unwillingly; it is not forced out of him even by importunity; it is not dragged out of his heart by the cries of his children; but he delights in it as being his darling attribute, the very pleasure of God being in showing mercy to the miserable. How hard it is for us to believe this until mercy visits the soul and a sweet sense of it is felt in the conscience. How we represent to ourselves God in his anger, in his justice, in his dreadful displeasure against sin and sinners; how unable to believe that there is mercy for us, and that he delights in manifesting mercy to poor, miserable, penitent sinners. Who ever would have thought of mercy unless it had first been in the bosom of God? Who could have ventured to entertain or suggest such a thought that "there is forgiveness with God;" that he can "pardon iniquity, and transgression, and sin;" that he can cast all our sins behind his back, and blot them out as a cloud, yes, as a thick cloud? This is what God has revealed of himself in his word, but it is only as mercy visits the troubled breast, and God displays his goodness and love in the revelation of his dear Son, that we can rise up into any sweet apprehension of what his mercy really is, and rejoice in it not only as suitable, but as saving.

II. Mercy in its MANIFESTATION.

Our text enters very largely and blessedly into the manifestation of that mercy in which God is said thus to delight. I shall, therefore, take up several points of our text, in which these manifestations of mercy are set forth.

A. The first manifestation of this mercy which I shall notice, is contained in the words, "He retains not his anger forever."

God is angry, and justly angry with the sins of his people. He hates sin with an absolute hatred. He cannot but entertain unceasing wrath against it. It is so contrary to the purity and perfection of his holy nature, that wherever he meets with sin, his indignation flashes out against it. Now as we are brought sensibly to feel that there is anger in God against our sins, we fear and tremble, especially in the first teaching of his Spirit and grace, that there is anger against our persons. We cannot separate the two. But they are separate in the mind of God. As chosen in Christ, accepted in the Beloved, washed in his blood, and clothed in his righteousness, there is no anger in God against the persons of his people; but there is anger in him against their sins. Now until we have some discovery and manifestation of Christ to assure us of a saving interest in his precious blood and finished work, we cannot separate the anger of God against our sins from the anger of God against our persons. But when the Lord is pleased to reveal a sense of his goodness and mercy in the Person and work of his dear Son, then we can see by the eye of faith that though he is angry with our sins, he is not angry with our persons, but accepts us in the Beloved, having chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love.

Thus he retains not his anger forever. And why? Because it is propitiated, put away, not retained so as to burn to the lowest hell. The blessed Lord has offered a sacrifice for sin; put away the punishment and penalty due to transgression, propitiated and appeased, and thus put away his indignation and fiery displeasure against the sins of his people; for all the anger of God due to their sins and to their persons was discharged upon the Person of Jesus as he stood our representative and hung upon the cross a bleeding sacrifice, putting away sin by the offering of himself. This is the reason why he retains not his anger forever, it being appeased and put away through the propitiation of our blessed Lord, that it should not burn against the persons of the people of God, nor consume them with the fiery indignation that shall burn up the wicked.

As a matter also of personal experience, God retains not his anger forever. You may have slipped, fallen, backslidden, and brought great guilt upon your conscience, and have a sense of the anger of God and his displeasure against you for your sad transgressions; but you are enabled to confess them, to forsake them, to mourn and sigh over them, and to seek for the manifest forgiveness of them. Now as this comes, there is more or less of a sweet sense that God retains not his anger forever, that his indignation is over-passed. It was this which made the Church so rejoice. "And in that day you shall say, O Lord, I will praise you; though you were angry with me, your anger is turned away, and you comforted me." (Isaiah. 12:1.)

And so God speaks in promise, "For a small moment have I forsaken you; but with great mercy will I gather you. In a little wrath I hid my face from you for a moment; but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on you, says the Lord your Redeemer." (Isaiah. 54:7, 8.) Now it seems necessary that the Lord should let down into our conscience a sense of his anger against our sins, not only that we may repent

and confess them, but also learn by painful experience what an evil and a bitter thing it is to sin against God. But "he retains not his anger forever." He makes us feel it, sometimes deeply feel it, sometimes long feel it, so as to mourn without the sun, and conclude that his mercy is clean gone forever, and that he will be favorable no more. But he retains not his anger forever, for "where sin abounded, grace did much more abound," and grace must reign through righteousness unto eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

B. We come now to another manifestation of his mercy- He "passes by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage." The prophet here clearly points out whom the Lord forgives and whose transgression he graciously passes by; that is, he does not visit it with his vindictive wrath, he does not treasure it up in the book of his memory, he does not write it down in his debt-book so as to bring it forth in the great day before men and angels; but he passes it by- not because he does not see it, not that he does not hate it, not that he is indifferent to it, not that he winks at it, but he passes it by for his dear Son's sake, having regard to the blood shedding, sacrifice, and death of the Son of his love.

We may observe, also, from the words, how few they are, comparatively speaking, whose transgression the Lord passes by. He calls them "the remnant of his heritage." They are but a small remnant compared with the mass. And this every day's observation makes more clearly manifest. How few seem even concerned about the salvation of their souls. How few manifest any godly fear in their hearts, lips, or lives. How few live separate from the world, and manifest by their life and conversation that the grace of God has taught them to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, and to live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world. Where shall we find that "peculiar people zealous of good works," for whom the Lord gave himself that he might redeem them from all iniquity? Surely in our days, as in the days of old, it is only a remnant, a remnant according to the election of grace. But they are God's heritage, that is, inheritance, in whom he delights, and whose transgressions he passes by. And may I not well ask, what personal evidences have we that we belong to this remnant, for unless we do, we have no proof that God passes our transgression by?

C. But we now come to another manifestation of this mercy. "He will TURN AGAIN; he will have compassion upon us; he will subdue our iniquities, and you will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea."

It is as if the Lord would unfold more and more what his mercy is in forgiving transgressions; as though he would overcome all our doubts and fears, by telling us over and over again what the thoughts of his heart are, what the purposes of his loving mind, and the displays of his sovereign grace. "He will turn again;" that is, return to the heritage which he seemed for a time to have forsaken. He may leave us for a time to reap the fruit of our own devices, to feel that we have sinned against him, and, by so doing, have brought into our consciences a sense of his displeasure; but he will turn again, for he retains not his anger forever. For a small moment he may hide his face from his people, as vexed and displeased with their sins and backslidings; but in the display of his infinite, sovereign, and super-abounding grace, he will turn again to give them one more look of love, one more glimpse of the way of salvation through the blood of his dear Son, one more discovery of the freeness of his grace, one more breaking in of the light of his countenance, one more softening touch of his gracious hand, and one more whisper of his peace-speaking voice.

This turning again implies that he has for a time turned away, turned his back upon us, and not his face, withdrawn himself on account of the cruel and unkind way in which we have neglected him, basely and shamefully treated him, wickedly and wantonly wandered from him, and, in the dreadful idolatry of our vile

hearts, hewn out to ourselves cisterns which hold no water, and forsaken him, the fountain of living waters. O how sad and grievous it is thus to sin and backslide and provoke the Lord to his face, as if we were stronger than he. But he turns again; he delights in mercy; he cannot bear to see his people afflicted, grieving, groaning, sighing, and crying under their sins on account of his absence; and, therefore, moved and softened by his own mercy, influenced by the grace of his own heart, he turns again, as the Lord turned to Peter to give him a look to break, and melt, and soften his heart into repentance and love.

It is these turnings again of the Lord which are so prized by his family. If he forsakes them, it is but for a time; if he withdraws, it is but for a little moment; if he hides his face, it is not forever; but there is a turning again, and a returning to the manifestations of his former goodness and love. If he did not thus turn again, our heart would grow harder and harder, colder and colder. Either sin would get stronger and stronger until it gained entire dominion, or despondency and despair would set in to leave us without hope. Of all these circumstances Satan would take great advantage, and the soul would either sit, as it were, in sackcloth and ashes; fearing and doubting lest all its past experience were a delusion, that the Lord never had appeared, therefore never would appear again, or else be given up to a hard and reckless despair.

But these gracious turnings again of the Lord, with the movings of his affections of compassion toward his people, the meltings of his heart, and the visitations of his presence and grace to renew and revive their souls, are the gracious remedy against these dreadful evils. It is this turning again of his mercy and love, which keeps his own work alive in the heart, maintains his own grace in active exercise, strengthens faith, encourages hope, draws out love, fortifies patience, and gives the soul inward strength still to go on resisting even to blood, striving against sin.

But if he always retained his anger, if he would never be entreated, if he ever shut up his compassion, if no prayer reached his ear and no cry touched his heart, and he withdrew himself no more to return, what would be our sad case and melancholy state, but to sink into despondency and despair, pine away in our iniquities and die? But these gracious turnings and returnings so move and melt, soften, break, and dissolve the heart, so stir up every grace of the Spirit, and so draw forth faith and hope and love, and every other fruit, that in these things is our life, and by them is maintained the work of faith, the labor of love, and the patience of hope.

D. Our text adds, "He will have compassion upon us." We are in a very pitiable state. No language can describe the lamentable state to which we are reduced by sin, original and actual. No tongue can describe what we are as involved in the Adam-fall, and the condition we have brought ourselves into by actual transgression. The child spoken of in Ezekiel 16, well represents our pitiable state and case by nature—cast out in the open field to the loathing of its person in the day it was born. We sometimes see and feel in what a pitiable state we are, what havoc sin has made, what a wreck and ruin we are through sin in our carnal mind, and what sin has done in us and for us by actual commission, bringing us into a most lamentable state before the eyes of God, and before the eyes of our own consciences.

Now the Lord pities the poor soul that feels itself brought into this lamentable case, this pitiable spot; which, seeing and feeling its deplorable condition, having in SELF neither help nor hope, can only pour forth a cry, a sigh, a groan, or drop a silent tear; can only lie before God with its mouth in the dust as a poor miserable sinner, whom he must save by his grace, or there is no possibility of salvation for it.

It is the Lord's grace that makes us feel thus. It is his stripping hand, which, by these secret dealings with our conscience, strips away our legality, pride, and self-righteousness. The Lord kills as well as makes

alive; the Lord makes poor as well as makes rich; the Lord brings down as well as lifts up; the Lord puts us into the dust and upon the ash-heap, as well as exalts us to sit with princes on the throne of glory. It is his hand in the soul which presses, lays low, and brings down; and as his hand is in your soul to bring you down, you learn thereby to see and feel in what a pitiable, lamentable state and case you are before the eyes of infinite Purity.

Then he will have compassion upon you. As the Samaritan is represented to have had compassion upon the man who fell among thieves; as our gracious Lord in the days of his flesh had compassion on the fainting multitudes; as he had compassion upon Jairus; had compassion upon the Centurion, and had compassion on the sick, the diseased, the lame, the halt, the blind, and the lepers who came from various quarters to seek help; as he had compassion upon the poor woman with the issue of blood, so he has compassion in his heart for all those in this pitiable state, who feel it, mourn over it, lament it, and confess it. These things drew forth the compassion of his heart toward poor miserable sinners in the days of his flesh; and so, now, every feeling of his sacred heart is touched with pity, as he looks from heaven, his dwelling place, on their pitiable case; and this moves him to stretch forth a kindly hand for their help and relief.

But how can we know a compassion which is infinite, and the multitude of his tender mercies? How can we enter, so to speak, into the very heart of God, and hear the sounding of his heart toward us, unless we see and feel our miserable state and case, and view his compassion as drawn out by our trials and afflictions? Sympathy is the fruit of affection; and even where there is not a sympathy from a distinct or peculiar feeling of love, as that of a husband to a suffering wife, or of a mother to an afflicted child, yet the mere sight of misery will often touch a compassionate heart. You visit the sick; you see them stretched upon their bed of languishing; you pity them, you compassionate their case, and you manifest some sympathy by your words and actions. So far as you believe they are partakers of grace, and are desirous of any spiritual help, you attempt to drop a word that may be suitable and encouraging; or even if not so fully persuaded, yet you are anxious to speak a word for eternity, if they are disposed to listen, for any such bendings of mind God-ward are soon discovered; and if poor, you relieve them as far as lies in your power.

Now this sympathy of yours, thus manifested in word and deed- not a mere heartless condolence in word, but a real affectionate sympathy with them in their sufferings, touches their heart and is a balm to their bleeding wounds. The widow, the orphan, the distressed in soul and circumstances, the poor afflicted outcasts for whom no man cares, all derive comfort and support from the sympathy of sympathizing friends, when they know and feel that it is sincere and genuine, and made manifest by corresponding actions.

So it is in things divine. The misery of man meets with the mercy of God and the mercy of God meets with the misery of man; and as man's misery draws out God's mercy, as the pitiable state of the sinner moves and melts the compassionate heart of a merciful Redeemer to manifest his power to save, God and man meet together in sweet accord. His sympathy meets your distress, his mercy meets your misery, his compassion suits your case, and God and man melt, as it were, into mutual love, and rejoice in and over one another. A hard, unfeeling, stubborn heart, insensible to its own wants and woes, to its lamentable condition by nature, and what must be the certain result unless saved by free and sovereign grace- what can it know of the compassions of God which are infinite? How can it enter into the sacred subject of the sounding of God's affections towards poor lost sinners, and the moving of his tender pity to the helpless, the hopeless, the houseless, the refugeless, and all who despairing of salvation by the works of the law

and the deeds of the flesh, cast themselves in all their misery at his gracious feet, waiting for a word from his lips that shall bring salvation with it.

It is only the heart that is broken, humbled, and softened by a sense of sin and sin's deserts, mingled at the same time with a sense of God's unmerited mercy to the vilest of the vile, which can and does enter into the compassion of God, whereby he remembers that we are dust. These can understand the meaning of the words- "Many times did he deliver them; but they provoked him with their counsel, and were brought low for their iniquity. Nevertheless he regarded their affliction when he heard their cry- and he remembered for them his covenant, and repented according to the multitude of his mercies." (Psalm 106:43-45.)

E. But I pass on to another fruit and manifestation of this mercy, which is, casting all our transgressions into the depths of the sea. Well sings the hymn, "If sin be pardoned I'm secure; Death has no sting beside." This then is the grand point, to have some manifestation of the pardon of sin as a fruit of God's infinite mercy.

But as this is a point on which very many of the living family are deeply exercised, because they cannot trace as clearly as they could wish, the manifestation to their soul of the forgiveness of all their sins, I feel that I must say a few words upon it. Judging then from what we see and hear of the experience generally of those who truly fear God, it is evident that many of the living family are much tried and exercised on this point who cannot deny that they have had from time to time encouraging testimonies of God's love and mercy, and that these were attended, while they were warm and fresh, with a sweet assurance of their saving interest in the blood and righteousness of the Son of God. But when these sweet testimonies are become dim, and darkness and unbelief seem to regain possession of their minds, they feel to lose sight of their standing, and sink down into the old spot of doubt and fear. What they want then is such a blessed sealing home of pardoned sin upon their consciences that they may be able, as they think, ever to hold it fast, and stand firm in the assurance of faith, so as never to doubt and fear again.

But however highly favored and blessed they might be with a knowledge of salvation by the remission of sins, they would still, for the most part, have their doubts and fears, not perhaps of perishing in their sins, but how it may be with them by the way, or at the end of the way; for when the Lord hides himself who can behold him? Fresh contracted guilt may again defile their conscience; storms of temptation may beset their soul; Satan may rage at a furious rate; all their evidences become dark and beclouded; and though they may not sink so low as before, yet they may find it hard work to maintain any good measure of their confidence, and may be reduced to very great extremity of exercise and fear.

Now God has filled his holy word with sweet promises of the full, complete, irreversible, and irrevocable pardon of sin to meet the case, satisfy the anxious desires, and fill up the pressing needs of his guilty family- his exercised, distressed children, who are mourning and sighing for one look of his love, for one gracious discovery of his pardoning mercy.

Look at the promise contained in our text, "You will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea." What a description this is of the way in which God takes all the iniquities of his people and casts them into the depths of the sea, so that they may be hidden forever from the sight of his eyes as a just, pure, and holy God, and be forever lost and buried in the depths of an unfathomable ocean. And what other sea, mystically viewed, can this be but the blood of Christ which cleanses from all sin, which has washed away all iniquity, purged all transgression, cast all the sins of God's heritage behind his back, and drowned them

in a sea unfathomable of grace, mercy, and love?

Now those sins never can be recovered. Satan with all his hosts can never drag up from the depths of the sea one of the sins of God's people which he has cast therein. It does not merely say the sea, but "the depths of the sea," the deepest place that can be found in the sea; so that sins cast into the depths of the sea are absolutely irrecoverable; for they have been cast there by God himself, and what he has cast out by his hand, his hand will never bring back. If you had taken your sins and cast them into the sea, they would have been found again. Like a floating corpse, they would have been thrown back upon the shore and been a witness against you, as the murdered body found upon the beach would testify against the murderer. The eye of justice would have seen your sins floating on the sea or stranded upon the beach, and the hand of justice would have laid hold of them, imputed them to you, and sent you headlong to hell with them, tied like a millstone round your neck.

But when God takes all our iniquities with his own hand, and casts them with his own arm into the depths of the sea, they will never come out of those depths to witness against the family of God in the great and terrible day. Your sins now may seem to be all alive in your breast, and every one of them to bring accusation upon accusation against you. This sin is crying out for vengeance; and that sin for punishment. This slip, this fall, this backsliding, this foolish word, this wrong action are all testifying against you in the court of conscience. Do what you may, be where you may, live how you may, watch and pray how you may, keep silent and separate from the world or even from your own family how you may- sin still moves, lives, acts, works, and often brings you into guilt and bondage.

But if our text is true, and most true it is, that if God has had mercy upon us he has cast all our sins with his own hands into the depths of the sea, those sins have no more eyes to look at us with angry indignation, have no more tongues to speak against us in voices of accusation, have no more life in them to rise up and testify that they have been committed by us, that God's law has been broken by them, and that therefore we are under its condemnation and curse.

But see the necessity for all our sins to be cast into the depths of the sea; for were one sin left between God and our soul, one thread of a sin, the smallest fiber, speck, spot, or wrinkle of evil, we could never stand before the God of heaven, or enter into his presence with eternal joy. We see this in the case of Joshua the high priest. "He was clothed with filthy garments and stood before the angel." Now, as so clothed, he could not stand with acceptance before the eyes of infinite Purity. The commandment therefore came, "Take away the filthy garments from him;" and when this was done the gracious words followed, "Behold, I have caused your iniquity to pass from you, and I will clothe you with change of clothing." (Zech. 3:3, 4.)

So with the saints of God. All their sins, with all their aggravations, these filthy garments, are taken off from them; they are clothed in change of clothing; and thus stand before God in the perfect righteousness of his dear Son, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing. The removal of their filthy garments means the same thing as their sins being cast into the depths of the sea. It is as if the Lord the Spirit would use various figures to show more clearly the truth and certainty of God's forgiving mercy. Thus sometimes he is said to "cast all their sins behind his back." (Isaiah. 38:17.) Sometimes that "in those days and in that time, the iniquity of Israel shall be sought for and there shall be none; and the sins of Judah and they shall not be found; for he will pardon them whom he reserves." (Jer. 50:20.) Sometimes he says, that "he has blotted out as a thick cloud their transgressions and as a cloud their sins." (Isaiah. 44:22.) Sometimes he declares that "as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us." (Psalm.

103:12.) Sometimes he says, "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." (Isaiah. 1:18.) And sometimes he says, "I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." (Jer. 31:34.)

Now if you look at all these passages and promises, you will see that in every one of them the full and complete forgiveness of sin is declared, and that all the iniquities of God's people are so completely put away, and that without priestly interposition or priestly absolution, that no speck or trace of them is left behind for God himself to see.

Some have feared lest in the great day their sins should be brought to light, and they put to shame by the exposure of their crimes to open view. But that will not be the case with the dear family of God. We read indeed that "many of them who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake;" and while some awake "to everlasting life," others will awake "to shame and everlasting contempt," because their sins will be remembered and brought against them as evidences of their just condemnation. But the wise, who "shall shine as the brightness of the skies," will rise to glory and honor and immortality, and not one of their sins will be remembered, charged, or brought against them. They will stand arrayed in Christ's perfect righteousness and washed in his blood, and will appear before the throne of God without spot or blemish. We could never lift up our heads with joy at the last day if any one of our sins were brought against us. If the debt book were opened and one charge read, or if the memory of God, so to speak, retained any one transgression in thought, word, or deed that we have ever committed- that one sin, were it only one evil thought, would sink us to rise no more.

We can scarcely bear the recollection of our sins now. But what would become of us if the spirit of one unburied sin could flit before our eyes in the day when the Lord makes up his jewels? If any one sin of the Lamb's wife could be remembered or brought against her, where would be the voice which John heard in Revelation, as "the voice of a great multitude, as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia; for the Lord God omnipotent reigns?" Now what was this voice? "Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honor to him; for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife has made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white- for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints." (Rev. 19:7, 8.) But suppose that any of the past transgressions of the Lamb's wife could be brought against her on that marriage day, any one instance of unfaithfulness to her promised betrothal, would it not be sufficient to prevent the marriage, mar the wedding supper, and drive the bride away for very shame? No, there is no truth in God's word more certain than the complete forgiveness of sins, and the presentation of the Church to Christ at the great day faultless before the presence of his glory, with exceeding joy.

F. One more manifestation and fruit of this mercy, as dear and as precious as those I have endeavored to open up, remain to be considered- "He shall subdue our iniquities."

Two things often perplex the inquiring child of God in the first communications of grace to his heart. 1. First, how his soul can be saved. 2. Secondly, how his soul can be sanctified; in other words, how his iniquities can be pardoned, and how his sins can be subdued. God has given an answer to both of these anxious inquiries, and the answer is in our text. He saves our soul by pardoning our sins; he sanctifies our soul by his regenerating grace; and as a part of this sanctification, he subdues by the operations of his Spirit, the sins we still feel working in us. Sin subdued is the next greatest blessing to sin pardoned; and wherever God does pardon sin, he subdues sin; for the same grace which saves sanctifies; the same grace which casts sin behind God's back, puts its foot upon the corruptions of the believer, and prevents

iniquity from having dominion over him.

The Scripture is very plain and express upon this point. "Sin shall not have dominion over you." Why? "Because you are not under the law," which gives sin its strength and power, "but under grace," which is able to subdue its dominion. Nor do I believe that any child of God can ever rest satisfied except by the subduing of his sins as well as the pardoning of them. To have his unbelief, infidelity, worldly-mindedness, pride, and covetousness subdued by the grace of God, its power taken out of it, its dominion dethroned, its authority destroyed, and its strength weakened and diminished, that he may not be under the dominion of any lust, or carried away by the strength of any secret or open sin, but may walk before God in the light of his countenance, as desirous to know his will and do it- this is the desire and breathing of every one that knows sin in its guilt, filth, and power.

But O what a struggle there is between the flesh and the spirit; what attempts, and, alas, too often successful ones, will sin make to establish his ancient dominion. How it will work by fraud or force; how it will seize every opportunity, avail itself of every opening, sometimes burst over the wall, sometimes slide in through the side gate. How it seems never to sleep, or if it sleeps, it is, as a fox, with its eyes open, watching, if it can, to take the soul by surprise, bind its hands, put grace into prison, thrust it anywhere out of sight, where neither its face may be seen or voice heard, that the flesh may again rule, and sin carry the day as before.

None can tell but those who have been severely tempted by sin what its power is; how it blinds the eyes, hardens the heart, deadens the conscience, dulls every spiritual affection, and hurries the soul along as if to destruction. How powerless are all our attempts to subdue the lusts of the flesh; how all our opposition melts before their seducing influence and almost irresistible strength. I am well satisfied from what I have known and felt in this matter, that a man can no more subdue his sins than pardon them; that none but the same voice which speaks salvation can say to those raging winds and waves, "Be still;" and that no hand but that which casts all our sins into the depths of the sea can either restrain or subdue them. How gracious, then, is the promise, how sweet the favor, that the Lord has promised to subdue our iniquities by the same grace as that whereby he pardons them; that, as we receive the blood of Christ to sprinkle the conscience, so we receive the grace of Christ to sanctify and renew the soul, and the strength of Christ to overcome all our inward and outward foes.

There is indeed no promise made that we shall be set free 'in this life' from the indwelling and the in-working of sin. Many think that they are to become progressively holier and holier, that sin after sin is to be removed gradually out of the heart, until at last they are almost made perfect in the flesh. But this is an idle dream, and one, which, sooner or later in the case of God's people, will be rudely and roughly broken to pieces. Nature will ever remain the same; and we shall ever find that the flesh will lust against the spirit. Our Adam nature is corrupt to the very core. It cannot be mended, it cannot be sanctified- it is at the last what it was at the first, inherently evil- and as such will never cease to be corrupt until we put off mortality, and with it the body of sin and death.

All we can hope for, long after, expect and pray for, is, that this evil nature may be subdued, kept down, mortified, crucified, and held in subjection under the power of grace; but as to any such change passing upon it or taking place in it as to make it holy, it is but a pharisaic delusion, which, promising a holiness in the flesh, leaves us still under the power of sin, while it opposes with deadly enmity that true sanctification of the man of grace, which is wrought by a divine power, and is utterly distinct from any fancied holiness in the flesh, or any vain dream of its progressive sanctification.

III. But we come now to what I have called mercy's CHALLENGE- "Who is a God like unto you?"

It seems as if the prophet was so deeply penetrated with a sense of the character of God, as pardoning iniquity and delighting in mercy that he gives a bold challenge to all the worshipers of false gods, daring them to come forward and hold up to view or worship a god who was able to pardon iniquity, or one who could cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. Their ash-heap gods were for the most part patrons of sin, such as she whom they called "the Queen of heaven" (Jer. 44:17), and "Tammuz," for whom the women wept at the door of the gate of the Lord's house (Ezek. 8:14), and in honor of whom was practiced all manner of licentiousness; or such cruel deities as Moloch, to whom they burned their children; or Baal, the beloved idol of bloodthirsty Jezebel.

But who of these idol gods was like unto the God of Israel? And amid all the false deities now worshiped, is there one who can give any proof or evidence that he can pardon sin? For this is the grand point. A god that cannot pardon sin cannot come into competition with the God who can. Well therefore may the prophet utter the bold challenge, "Who is a God like unto you?" Is there any other God that can pardon sin? any other God that can cast our iniquities into the depths of the sea? any other God who delights in mercy? any other God who retains not his anger forever? any other God who can subdue iniquity as well as forgive it?

Take the whole range of gods which men worship- money, power, reputation, all the false gods that men idolize (for though men have abandoned idols in stone and wood they set up idols in the chambers of imagery and bow down to them in the devotedness of their hearts)- do any of these profess to be able to pardon sin?

You may find a false god to idolize; you may offer him the daily incense of your devotions; but will this god pardon your sins when you are stretched upon a bed of death? Will money do it? Will fashion do it? Will respectability do it? Will the praise of men do it? Will your own legal, pharisaical, self-righteous heart do it? Turn to all these gods and see what they can do for you on a bed of sickness, in the hour of death, in nature's last extremity, against Satan's accusations, a guilty conscience, and the wrath of the Almighty. What can these idols do for you in that hour when flesh and heart fail? All they can do is to abandon you at the last to reap what you have sowed, and leave you in the hands of him who is a consuming fire.

But if we have been brought to know the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, and especially to know him as pardoning iniquity, well may we say, "Who is a God like unto you?" And will not every believing heart who has found this God reply, "Let this ever be our God- the God whom we believe in, the God whom we know, the God whom we worship, the God whom we adore, and the God whom we love."

I say with all my heart, "Let this God be my God; I want no other." Your heart responds to mine; there is an echo in your bosom, "Be this God my God- the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; the God who delights in mercy; the God who pardons sin; the God who cast all my transgressions into the depths of the sea; the God who subdues my iniquities as well as forgives them. Let this God be my God even unto the end; this God my God in life, in death, in time, and in eternity."

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