

SCRIPTURE STUDIES

VOL. IX, No. 2

MARCH
2002

"Come now, let us reason together," says the Lord..." Isaiah 1:18

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Scripture Studies (ISSN: 1520-4308) is edited by Scott Sperling and published ten times a year by Scripture Studies, Inc., a non-profit organization. It is distributed all over the world by postal mail and via the internet free of charge. If you would like to financially support the publication and distribution of *Scripture Studies*, send contributions to:

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20 Pastora
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May God bless you as you study His Word.



Old Testament Study: Malachi 2:1-9

Admonition for the Priests

¹“And now this admonition is for you, O priests. ²If you do not listen, and if you do not set your heart to honor my name,” says the LORD Almighty, “I will send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have already cursed them, because you have not set your heart to honor me.

³“Because of you I will rebuke your descendants; I will spread on your faces the offal from your festival sacrifices, and you will be carried off with it. ⁴And you will know that I have sent you this admonition so that my covenant with Levi may continue,” says the LORD Almighty. ⁵“My covenant was with him, a covenant of life and peace, and I gave them to him; this called for reverence and he revered me and stood in awe of my name. ⁶True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin.

⁷“For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, and from his mouth men should seek instruction—because he is the messenger of the LORD Almighty. ⁸But you have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble; you have violated the covenant with Levi,” says the LORD Almighty. ⁹“So I have caused you to be despised and humiliated before all the people, because you have not followed my ways but have shown partiality in matters of the law.”

The Lord, through Malachi, continues to rebuke to priests of the time: “‘And now this admonition is for you, O priests. If you do not listen, and if you do not set your heart to honor my name,’ says the LORD Almighty, ‘I will send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have already cursed them, because you have not set your heart to honor me’” (vss. 1–2). “Malachi’s message is clearly addressed to the priests. Naturally, more is expected from those who have the responsibility of leading and teaching the people” [Kaiser, 455]. “The priests in particular are reproved, as their part was to have led the people aright, and reproved sin, whereas they encouraged and led them into sin. Ministers

cannot sin or suffer alone. They drag down others with them if they fall" [JFB, 716].

The Lord points out to the priests that they failed in their chief and basic duty, that is, to **"set their heart to honor [the Lord's] name."** Note that their duty is not only to honor the Lord's name, but to **"set their heart"** to honor the Lord's name. They were not only to honor Him with their actions, but they were to have a pure heart as they did so. They were not only to honor Him with their actions, but with their whole life—inside and out.

As it was, the priests were not behaving in a way suitable for those who are servants of God, and so, God's name was being shamed. "God's name had been disgraced and made to appear shabby and despised by the way the priests had professed their faith, offered their gifts, entered into their service of God, and thought about the time they had invested for Him" [Kaiser, 456]. When the people of God stumble, it is God's name that suffers.

For their failure, God warns them of punishment: **"Because of you I will rebuke your descendants; I will spread on your faces the offal from your festival sacrifices, and you will be carried off with it. And you will know that I have sent you this admonition so that my covenant with Levi may continue," says the Lord Almighty**" (vss. 3–4). It was quite appropriate that the punishment for not offering to God a fragrant sacrifice was that God would **"spread on their faces the offal from their festival sacrifices."** Their sacrifices should have been fragrant ones, pleasing to God. And if they but sincerely followed His ordinances concerning offering sacrifices, the sacrifices would have been fragrant. Yet, the priests chose to serve the desires of man rather obey the commandments of God.

God's purpose in warning the priests of this punishment was not meant to be malicious, but constructive. God was hoping that the admonition would change their behavior and bring them back within the constraints of the Levitical covenant, in order that He may again bestow blessings upon them: **"And you will know that I have sent you this admonition so that my covenant with Levi may continue," says the LORD Almighty**" (vs. 4). "All the warnings of the Bible are similarly positive in their aim" [Baldwin, 233]. The Lord tells us: **"For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live!"** (Ezek. 18:32).

The Lord contrasts the behavior of the priests of Malachi's time with the original Levitical priests: **"My covenant was with him, a covenant of life and peace, and I gave them to him; this called for reverence and he revered me and stood in awe of my name. True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin. For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, and from his mouth**

men should seek instruction—because he is the messenger of the LORD Almighty” (vss. 5–6). The priests were the representatives of God to the people, and so, by delineating the proper behavior of priests, the Lord is telling how representatives of God should behave. Nowadays, pastors, preachers and ministers are the representatives of God before the people, and so we could properly apply the teachings concerning the proper behavior of priests to them.

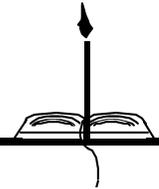
The first and basic attribute of a minister of God is reverence for God and His name: **“This called for reverence and he revered me and stood in awe of my name”** (vs. 5). Yes, God is loving and kind, and we can have a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ, but we must also remember that God is mighty and awesome, and indeed is the Lord of the Universe. We must revere Him and **“stand in awe of His name.”**

Such reverence for God will lead to the next attribute of the minister of God: **“True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips”** (vs. 6). Reverence for God will lead to reverence for His Word. Reverence for His Word will lead to diligent study of it, and persistence in seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit to gain a proper understanding of it. This will result in the giving of **“true instruction.”**

Such a knowledge and respect for God and His Word will naturally have an effect on the life of the minister, as well as a transforming effect on his hearers: **“He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin”** (vs. 6). “The goal of all faithful proclamation of the Word is to lead sinners to repentance—to turn ‘many from sin’. Faithful proclamation of God’s Word will ‘turn many to righteousness’ (Dan. 12:3)” [Kaiser, 458].

The minister of God should not preach confusion and disinformation, rather, **“the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, and from his mouth men should seek instruction—because he is the messenger of the LORD Almighty”** (vs. 7). Woe to him who is looked on as a **“messenger of God”**, and yet leads people astray. As the Lord tells the unfaithful priests: **“But you have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble; you have violated the covenant with Levi,”** says the LORD Almighty. **“So I have caused you to be despised and humiliated before all the people, because you have not followed my ways but have shown partiality in matters of the law”** (vss. 8–9). It is one thing to stumble; it is quite the worse to cause others to stumble. Jesus Himself seriously warned of this: **“But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come!”** (Matt. 18:6–7).

A Classic Study: PATIENCE in AFFLICTION



A Classic Study by Richard Baxter (1615–1691)

[Here, we continue a reprint of excerpts from Richard Baxter's work entitled *Obedient Patience*. In each article, Mr. Baxter gives advice on how to be patient through a specific type of affliction.]—*Ed.*

Injuries from Malicious Enemies - III

(Continued from the previous issue)

8. Do you suffer anything but what Christ foretold you of? Did He not tell you, that you must sit down and count what it will cost you to be a Christian, before you undertook it? Did He not tell you, that you shall be hated of the world, because you are not of the world? Yea, hated of all (worldly) men for His name's sake? And did you not profess to take Him and His salvation on these terms? And to consent to His conditions? If you thought them too hard, you might have refused them. What hypocrites are they that silence Christ's ministers for scrupling to engage them in covenant to Christ at their baptism, by the symbolical, transient image of a cross, as obliging them to be the soldiers of a crucified Christ, and when they have done, abhor all that in Christianity which will bring the cross, and will rather venture on hell than bear it! Yea, they will lay the cross by persecution upon others! It is true, that it was in your infancy that this covenant was made by others for you; but did not you own it at age, when you called yourselves Christians? Alas! Hypocrisy undoes the visible church: men mean nothing less than what they vow. They think that resolution for suffering, or martyrdom, is proper to some rare, extraordinary saints, and will not believe that none is a true Christian nor can be saved without it; that is, without preferring heaven before earth, and the soul before the body. Take any of these worldly hypocrites aside, and seriously ask him, (in France or Flanders), how dare you persecute the servants of Christ? And they will say, "It is not long of us, we cannot help it; the law and magistrates command us: we shall suffer ourselves if we do not obey them." Would you think that these men did stand to their baptism? As if they plainly said, "Whatever Christ saith, we will do anything against Him and His servants that man's law bids us, rather than we will

suffer ourselves. How far are these men from being ready for martyrdom, yea, or being Christians, or the servants of God! If you are Christians you have bound yourselves by covenant to take up the cross and follow Christ, though to the death, and to choose rather to suffer than willfully to sin.

9. And did not you, as Christians, list yourselves as soldiers under Christ, against the devil, flesh, and world? And is he a soldier indeed that expecteth no enemies? And that murmureth because he must come in danger, and see any war? Did you not know that there is a war throughout all the world, between Christ and Satan, between the woman's and serpent's seed? And is hurting and killing any wonder in a war? Or that he that is born after the flesh should persecute him that is born after the Spirit?

10. What hath a Christian to do in this life, but to prepare for a safe and happy death? And if you had done this, you had prepared for persecution and martyrdom itself. If you are ready to die by sickness, why not by fire or sword, by axe or halter, if God will have it so? Do you not know that most sicknesses do by their length put the body to more pain than ordinary martyrdom before they kill them? How easy a death is hanging, in comparison of dying by the stone in the bladder, or by the colic, or many other sicknesses! Yea, the painful death of burning, being soon despatched, is little to these. And sure a fine, or prison, or poverty, is yet less than any of these. O slothful men! Unfaithful to yourselves, that have lived so long unprepared for death, when you had nothing else to do in the world. Your flying from suffering by sin, doth show that you have neglected the great work of life, or that that which you lived for is yet undone. You would have been ready to suffer, if you had been ready to die. And doth this seem strange to you, after all your warnings and professions?

11. Have you a due estimate of worldly things? Are you crucified to the world, and it to you, by the cross of Christ? Do you account them as loss and dung for Him? Do you use them as if you used them not, and possess them as if you possessed them not? Do you judge of them as death will teach you to do? If you do, sure you will not count that persecution that taketh them from you an unsufferable thing; nor be impatient to be deprived of them.

12. Had you rather be in the case of the prosperous persecutor, or the persecuted believer? If the former, you are no true Christians: if the latter, murmur not when you have that which you prefer. Sure a true martyr at the stake, or with Daniel in the lions' den, would be loth to change states with Nebuchadnezzar or Darius.

13. Do you think Christ loved Stephen the first martyr, or James the first martyred apostle, or Peter and Paul that died for the gospel, less than He loved those that overlived them and suffered no such things? Is not the crown of martyrdom the most glorious? Why are they said to live be-

fore the rest a thousand years? Had you not now rather have Stephen's place in heaven, than theirs that suffered nothing for Christ? And if it be best at last, is it not most eligible now?

14. Are you afraid of men? You have a greater than man to fear, and greater hurt than man can do you: **"Fear not them that can kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do; but fear Him that can destroy soul and body in hell; yea, I say unto you, fear Him,"** (Luke 12:4). Are you afraid of a prison, or death, or fire? Fear more hell-fire and death everlasting. When Blinney burnt his finger in the candle, he remembered that hell-fire was more intolerable.

15. Wherein hath Christ been more an example to you, than in patient and obedient suffering, even unto death, and to the most accursed, shameful death? Do you think that He only suffered to keep us from all suffering? Peter saith, it was to leave us an example; and Paul saith, that we must be conformed to Him, and partakers of His sufferings. Why else doth Christ call us to bear the cross? And is it not joyful to see the footsteps of Christ in the way we go, and to know that we follow Him?

16. Sure that is not a state of greatest fear and sorrow, in which Christ hath commanded us to rejoice with the greatest joy: but so He hath done in the case of persecution: **"Blessed are they that are persecuted for righteousness' sake; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Rejoice and be exceeding glad, for great is your reward in heaven"** (Matt. 5:10,12). **"Think it not strange concerning the fiery trial, but rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory shall be revealed, you may be glad also with exceeding joy"** (1 Peter 4:12,13). **"They took joyfully the spoiling of their goods, knowing that in heaven they had a better and enduring substance"** (Heb. 10:34). So Heb. 11 throughout.

17. God hath promised you that all your sufferings shall work together for your good (see Rom. 8:28), and taught you how to make them your exceeding gain. Practice this art, and you will be more patient, when you find the benefit and feel that you are more than conquerors. Our victory is by patient suffering. The worst men may conquer our bodies by force, but our souls are unconquered, and we are conquerors of the temptation and real hurt, while we keep obedient patience. When it is said of Job, **"In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly;"** Satan was conquered, and missed his end, while he seemed to prevail upon his flesh.

By persecution you may learn, 1. What a nature is in lapsed men. 2. That there are devils that keep up a war against Christ. 3. How great their power is in the world, by God's permission, over wicked men. 4. How wonderful a work of God it is, that the godly can live in so much peace and safety as they do, among those that are the very servants of the devil; even as Daniel was kept in the den of lions, because God shut their mouths. 5. How great need there is of sanctifying grace. 6. How great a

mercy is our conversion, which cureth such a nature in us. 7. It calleth us to continual Christian watchfulness, to beware of men, and especially of their temptations, and to be wise as serpents, and innocent as doves. 8. It driveth us to constant prayer and dependence upon God for help and safety. 9. It teacheth us to keep up faith and hope, as having our eye continually on God, and on the heavenly inheritance, without which we have nothing to support us. 10. And it assureth us that there is a day of judgment, in which Christ will call over again in righteousness all the false judgments and actions of this world. He that maketh all this use of persecution, will have gain enough to plead for patience.

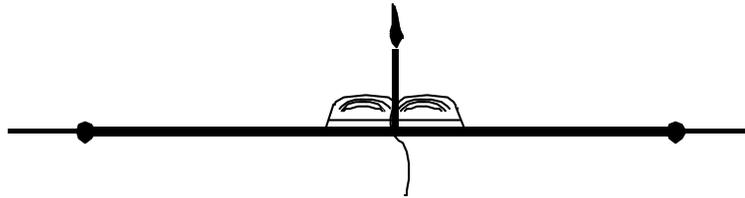
18. To review this last; if you believe in Christ indeed, you do believe that He will come again to judge the world in righteousness, and to set all straight that here was made crooked by the falsehood and malignity of men. And will not the foresight of that resolve you patiently to suffer? Faith may foresee how poor blinded persecutors will then have their eyes opened, and see him with terror, whom they persecuted in His servants, and how he will silence and condemn them, with, **“Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels”** (Matt. 25:41; see also II Thess. 1:6,10-12; II Thess. 2:12). If the forethoughts of that day do not quiet or resolve you, alas!, you have greater matter of fear and trouble than persecution, even your own unbelief. Pray more for faith, than for deliverance from men.

19. Consider comparatively what man is, that hurteth you; and what God is, who hath promised to help you and reward you. Man is a worm, blinded and mad by the deceit of Satan. They know not what they are doing against themselves and God, as well as against you: they are all the while going towards the grave, and their souls towards the dreadful bar of God: their bones and dust are no whit terrible. If God will here have mercy on them, He will make them know who it is they persecute, and how hard a work it is barefoot to kick against the pricks, and make them, as Paul, themselves undergo such persecutions for Christ, as they madly used against others; they will say, as Paul, **“I was mad against them”**: and his case tells you, that if the very captain of the persecutors were but converted, though by a voice and miracle from heaven, the rest, instead of taking it for a conviction, would presently persecute him themselves. But if God let them go on, alas!, where will they shortly be? O pray, pray hard for your persecutors, as Christ did, before they are past prayers and hope, in hell. But are these poor worms to be much feared? How oft are we charged not to fear them? (See Luke 12:4; Matt. 10:28; John 24:27; Jer. 46:27,18; Ezek. 3:8,9). The fearful (that fear men) are numbered with unbelievers, and are shut out among the dogs, if fear prevail against their faith (see Rev. 22).

And then think what God is, who hath promised our defence. When

Infinite power, wisdom, and love, is set against a few wasps and worms, shall our fear of them be greater than our trust in Him? If it were but an angel from heaven that appeared for our defence or encouragement, against a dog that barked at us, it were a shame to us not to trust Him. **“If God be for us, who shall be against us?”** Read Ps. 91; Rom. 8; Matt 4. See Isa. 8:13,14; Isa. 41:10,13,14.

20. Can anything do you greater good, that can outwardly befall you, than that which both assureth you of your right to heaven, and puts you presently in possession of it? And this will be the fruit of martyrdom. Oh what a change will that day make! From torment to our Master’s joy! From the raging army of the devil, to the heavenly choir of saints and angels! A strong faith would make us long for such a day. As children of God, joint heirs with Christ, if we suffer with Him, we shall be glorified with Him; and the present sufferings are not worthy to be compared to the glory (see Rom. 8:18). **“For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, our inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are not seen are eternal”** (II Cor. 4:16-18). **“Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God, commit the keeping of their souls to Him in well-doing, as to a faithful Creator”** (I Pet. 4:19).



“Accordingly this seems to me to be one principal reason why the good are chastised along with the wicked, when God is pleased to visit with temporal punishments the profligate manners of a community. They are punished together, not because they have spent an equally corrupt life, but because the good, as well as the wicked (though not equally with them), love this present life, while they ought to hold it cheap, and that the wicked, being admonished and reformed by their example, might lay hold of life eternal.”

-- Augustine



New Testament Study: Matthew 12:22-37

Blasphemy Against Jesus

²²Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. ²³All the people were astonished and said, "Could this be the Son of David?"

²⁴But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, "It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons."

²⁵Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. ²⁶If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? ²⁷And if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges.

²⁸"But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. ²⁹Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can rob his house.

³⁰"He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters. ³¹And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. ³²Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

³³"Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. ³⁴You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. ³⁵The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the

evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. ³⁶But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. ³⁷For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.”

Matthew here continues to present episodes in Jesus' life where He asserts His authority as the Messiah. In this section, He does so through actions and words. First, through actions, by performing a miraculous healing: **“Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. All the people were astonished and said, ‘Could this be the Son of David?’”** (vs. 22-23). This man was blessed to have such good friends, who would bring him to Jesus. “The evil spirit had secured himself by stopping up the windows and the door of the soul: the victim was blind and mute. How could he escape? He could not see his Savior, nor cry to Him... It is well when men take to bringing others to Jesus: good is sure to come of it” [Spurgeon, 152].

The miracle had a powerful effect on those who witnessed it, and turned their thoughts to thinking that Jesus could be the promised Messiah, the **“Son of David.”** The main obstacle, apparently, to their absolutely conceding that He was the Messiah was their own expectations of how the Messiah would act. They were expecting in the Messiah a mighty conqueror of their foes; in Jesus, they found a humble servant of the people.

The Pharisees, however, reacted to the miracle in a totally different way. Instead of advancing the more obvious conclusion that Jesus was sent by God to do these great works, they irrationally made the claim that Jesus' benevolent miracles were the work of the evil one: **“But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, ‘It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons’”** (vs. 24). Ironically, the Pharisees were apparently in a much worse condition than the blind and mute man, even before he was healed. For though they could see, the Pharisees chose to be blind to the great works of the Lord. And though they could speak, their words were a detriment to them, leading them to destruction.

Indeed, their words were so absurd that, undoubtedly, what they said was purposely malicious. “There is not one of us who does not perceive in this story, as in a mirror, the extraordinary power of God. From which we infer that the minds of the scribes were infected with a devilish venom, when they did not hesitate to speak ill of such a wonderful work of God” [Calvin, 39]. Clearly, the Pharisees understood that what they witnessed was extremely miraculous. Yet, they could not bring themselves to

ascribe to Jesus power from God. So they chose to blaspheme His work instead. They did this for selfish motives, for to acknowledge that Jesus acted with the power of God, would also be to acknowledge that Jesus spoke with the power of God. They did not want the people to follow the teachings of Jesus, because in many ways, Jesus' teachings contradicted their own. "The Pharisees saw that if His miracles were recognized the people would believe that He was sent from God (see John 3:2), and then all His teachings must be received as true, and all His claims admitted as just. They could not question the reality of the healing, nor ascribe it to mere human agency; they therefore resorted to the absurd idea of a league with Satan, though Jesus was really destroying Satan's work" [Broadus, 267]. Indeed, many absurd things are said by those who are stubbornly set against belief in the True and Living God.

In my mind, Jesus shows remarkable restraint in answering the Pharisees. Rather than replying with the wrath that the blasphemous charge deserved, Jesus first answered it with simple logic: **"Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, 'Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand'"** (vs. 25–26). Why would **"the prince of demons"** give Jesus the power to drive out demons? It doesn't make sense. "It is not to be presumed that Satan is stupid: the Pharisees were taking up an impossible position. Theoretically, of course, it might be argued that Satan could allow the expulsion of one demon in order to effect some diabolical purpose, but this would be met by the fact that Jesus kept on expelling demons; He carried on an unrelenting war against all the demonic forces" [Morris, 315].

Next, Jesus pointed out the hypocrisy of the Pharisees: **"And if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges"** (vs. 27). The Pharisees of the time sanctioned certain Jewish exorcists. And whatever work they did, whether actual exorcism or fraud, it could not have been as clear a miracle as what Jesus just did before their eyes. So, it made no sense that the Pharisees would sanction the work of their exorcists, and yet call Jesus' work, which was so much more clearly true exorcism, the work of the devil. Indeed, given the magnificence of Jesus' miracle, it should have caused the Pharisees to realize that a whole new age had been ushered in: **"But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you"** (vs. 28). For it is logical that part of the work of ushering in the kingdom of God would be to drive out demons: **"Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can rob his house"** (vs. 29).

In the rest of this section, Jesus speaks (in a more general way) of the seriousness of what the Pharisees were doing: **“He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters. And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come”** (vss. 30–32). “Our Lord now solemnly declares that a blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is the only unpardonable sin; and it is distinctly implied that their accusation, that He cast out demons by the help of Beelzebub, was a blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, and so was past forgiveness” [Broadus, 271]. By aligning themselves against the One who was sent by God to save them, the Pharisees were aligning themselves against God Himself. Moreover, to align themselves against Jesus, with full knowledge that He was sent by God (as testified by the Spirit of God in their hearts), was a sin that **“will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.”** This is the so-called unforgivable sin. The Pharisees were not just guilty of blaspheming against Jesus, they were blaspheming against the Spirit of God, because the Spirit revealed to them that Jesus was sent by God and was doing the work of God. Given this knowledge, they were under an obligation to treat Him as Lord, and to obey His teachings. They chose instead to reject this knowledge and blaspheme Him. As Jesus states, to blaspheme Jesus, in itself, is not unforgivable. Even Paul the Apostle (at one time) blasphemed Jesus, but he did so in ignorance (see I Tim. 1:13). The Pharisees blasphemed with full knowledge of who Jesus is, as given to them by the Spirit of God. And so, they were guilty of committing the unforgivable sin. This sin is spoken of elsewhere in the Bible. The writer of the book of Hebrews teaches: **“It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting Him to public disgrace”** (Heb. 6:4–6).

Given that the concept of the unforgivable sin is difficult, let us hear from some learned theologians concerning the matter: “Let us gather from these verses the exceeding sinfulness of sins against knowledge” [Ryle, 131]. “The sin that cannot be forgiven is not to be understood as the utterance of any particular form of words. It is impossible to hold that any form of words is unforgivable, granted that the sinner subsequently repents and turns to God. Jesus is talking about the set of the life, not any one isolated saying. When a person takes up a position like that

of the Pharisees, when, not by way of misunderstanding but through hostility to what is good, that person calls good evil and, on the other hand, makes evil his good, then that person has put himself in a state that prevents forgiveness. It is not that God refuses to forgive; it is that the person who sees good as evil and evil as good is quite unable to repent and thus to come humbly to God for forgiveness. And there is no way to forgiveness other than by the path of repentance and faith" [Morris, 318]. "It denotes the conscious and wicked rejection of the saving power and grace of God towards man" [Beyer, in Morris, 319]. "He who is guilty of this outrageous crime has sinned himself into a condition in which spiritual feeling is dead, and repentance has become morally impossible" [Spurgeon, 155]. "We do not hold that those who fight against His grace and power with determined malice are blaspheming the Spirit of God; but we do hold that such sacrilege is committed only when we strive knowingly to extinguish the Spirit dwelling within us. And the reason why the Spirit, rather than the Son or the Father Himself, is said to be blasphemed is that, in depreciating God's grace and power, we are making a direct assault on the Spirit, from whom they proceed and in whom they are manifest to us. Does some unbeliever curse God? It is as if a blind man came into collision with a wall. But he is not cursing the Spirit unless he has been enlightened by Him and is aware of his ungodly rebellion" [Calvin, 46].

Finally, Jesus points out that the blasphemous words that the Pharisees spoke reflected the state of their evil hearts: **"Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks"** (vs. 33–34). "The life of the scribes was not notorious for gross wickedness; yet their slanders were the symptoms of the poison of their pride, ambition and envy. Because all this was hidden from the ordinary folk, Christ draws the inner evil out of darkness into light" [Calvin, 48].

And in general, the speech of men reflect the state of their hearts: **"The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned"** (vs. 35–37). Have your words gotten you into trouble lately? Have you found recently your mouth to be uncontrollably speaking evil? Do not dismiss such lapses as merely **"careless words"**, for **"out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks."** Rather, seek help from the Lord, by His Spirit, to heal your heart, and purify your mind, so that what comes out of your mouth may be pure grace.

A Topical Study: The Shortness of Life



[Here we continue a series that urges a certain indifference to life, and the things of this world, due to the shortness of life, and the vanity of the things of this world. This series is taken from a funeral sermon by Samuel Davies.]—*Ed.*

Indifference to Life Urged from Its Shortness and Vanity by Samuel Davies (1724 –1761)

²⁹But this I say, brethren, the time is short: it remaineth, that both they that have wives be as though they had none; ³⁰And they that weep, as though they wept not; and they that rejoice, as though they rejoiced not; and they that buy, as though they possessed not; ³¹And they that use this world, as not abusing it: for the fashion of this world passeth away. (I Cor. 7:29-31 AV).

It is from such convictive premises as [those described in the previous issues] that St. Paul draws his inference in my text; “**It remaineth therefore that they that have wives be as though they had none; and they that weep, as though they wept not; and they that rejoice, as though they rejoiced not; and they that buy, as though they possessed not; and they that use this world as not abusing it.**”

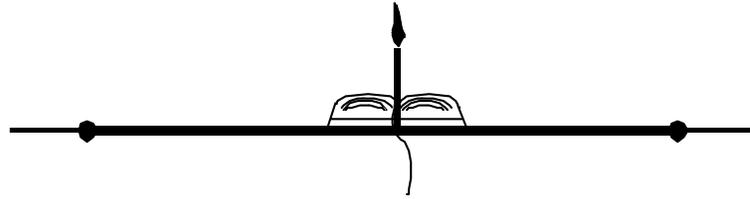
The first branch of the inference refers to the dear and tender relations that we sustain in this life. *It remaineth that those that have wives*, and by a parity of reason those that have husbands, parents, children, or friends dear as their own souls, *be as though they had none*. St. Paul is far from recommending a stoical neglect of these dear relations. That he tenderly felt the sensations, and warmly recommended the mutual duties of such relations, appears in the strongest light in other parts of his writings, where he is addressing himself to husbands and wives, parents and children. But his design here is to represent the insignificancy even of these dear relations, considering how short and vanishing they are, and comparing them with the infinite concerns of eternity. These dear creatures we

shall be able to call our own for so short a time, that it is hardly worthwhile to esteem them ours now. The concerns of eternity are of so much greater moment, that it is very little matter whether we enjoy these comforts or not. In a few years at most, it will be all one. The dear ties that now unite the hearts of husband and wife, parent and child, friend and friend, will be broken forever. In that world where we must all be in a little, little time, they neither marry nor are given in marriage; but are in this respect like the angels. And of how small consequence is it to creatures that are to exist forever in the most perfect happiness or misery, and that must so soon break off all their tender connections with the dear creatures that were united to their hearts in the present transitory state! Of how small consequence is it to such, whether they spend a few years of their existence in all the delights of the conjugal state and the social life, or are forlorn, bereaved, destitute, widowed, childless, fatherless, friendless! The grave and eternity will level all these little inequalities. The dust of Job has no more sense of his past calamities, than that of Solomon who felt so few; and their immortal parts are equally happy in heaven, if they were equally holy upon earth. And of how small consequence is it to Judas now, after he has been above seventeen hundred years in his own place, whether he died single or married, a parent or childless? This makes no distinction in heaven or hell, unless that, as relations increase, the duties belonging to them are multiplied, and the trust becomes the heavier; the discharge of which meets with a more glorious reward in heaven, and the neglect of which suffers a severer punishment in hell.

Farther, the apostle, in saying that *they who have wives should be as though they had none*, intends that we should not excessively set our hearts upon any of our dearest relatives so as to tempt us to neglect the superior concerns of the world to come, or draw off our affections from God. We should always remember who it was that said, **“He that loveth father, or mother, or wife, or children, more than me, is not worthy of me.”** (Matt. 10:37). **“He that is married,”** says St. Paul, in the context, **“careth for the things of the world, how he may please his wife”** (I Cor. 7:33). But we should beware lest this care should run to excess, and render us careless of the interests of our souls, and the concerns of immortality. To moderate excessive care and anxiety about the things of this world is the design the apostle has immediately in view in my text; for having taught **“those that have wives to be as though they had none,”** etc., he immediately adds, **“I would have you without carefulness”**; and this is the reason why I would have you form such an estimate of all the conditions of life, and count them as on a level. Those that have the agreeable weights of these relations ought no more to abandon themselves to the over-eager pursuit of this world, or place their happiness in it; ought no more to neglect the concerns of religion and eternity, than if they did not bear these relations. The busy head of a numerous family is

as much concerned to secure his everlasting interest as a single man. Whatever becomes of him and his in this vanishing world, he must by no means neglect to provide for his subsistence in the eternal world; and nothing in this world can at all excuse that neglect.

Oh, that these thoughts may deeply affect the hearts of such of us as are agreeably connected in such relations! And may they inspire us with a proper insensibility and indifference towards them when compared with the affairs of religion and eternity! May this consideration moderate the sorrows of the mourners on this melancholy occasion, and teach them to esteem the gain or loss of a happy eternity as that which should swallow up every other concern!



Splendidis Longum Valedico Nugis

(A Long Farewell to Glittering Trifles)

Leave me, O Love, which reachest but to dust;
 And thou, my mind, aspire to higher things;
 Grow rich in that which never taketh rust:
 What ever fades, but fading pleasure brings.
 Draw in thy beams, and humble all thy might
 To that sweet yoke where lasting freedoms be;
 Which breaks the clouds and opens forth the light
 That doth both shine and give us sight to see,
 O take fast hold; let that light be thy guide,
 In this small course which birth draws out to death;
 And think how evil becometh him to slide
 Who seeketh heaven, and comes of heavenly breath.
 Then farewell, world; thy uttermost I see:
 Eternal Love, maintain thy life in me.

-- Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586)



A Study in Psalms: Psalms 49

Psalm 49 - Why the Wicked Prosper

For the director of music.
Of the Sons of Korah. A psalm.

- ¹Hear this, all you peoples;
listen, all who live in this world,
²Both low and high, rich and poor alike:
³My mouth will speak words of wisdom;
the utterance from my heart
will give understanding.
- ⁴I will turn my ear to a proverb;
with the harp I will expound my riddle:
⁵Why should I fear when evil days come,
when wicked deceivers surround me—
⁶Those who trust in their wealth
and boast of their great riches?
- ⁷No man can redeem the life of another
or give to God a ransom for him—
⁸The ransom for a life is costly,
no payment is ever enough—
⁹That he should live on forever
and not see decay.
- ¹⁰For all can see that wise men die;
the foolish and the senseless alike
perish and leave their wealth to others.
¹¹Their tombs will remain their houses forever,
their dwellings for endless generations,
though they had named lands after themselves.
¹²But man, despite his riches, does not endure;
he is like the beasts that perish.
¹³This is the fate of those who trust in themselves,
and of their followers,
who approve their sayings. *Selah*

¹⁴Like sheep they are destined for the grave,
and death will feed on them.
The upright will rule over them in the morning;
their forms will decay in the grave,
far from their princely mansions.
¹⁵But God will redeem my life from the grave;
He will surely take me to Himself. *Selah*
¹⁶Do not be overawed when a man grows rich,
when the splendor of his house increases;
¹⁷For he will take nothing with him when he dies,
his splendor will not descend with him.
¹⁸Though while he lived
he counted himself blessed—
and men praise you when you prosper—
¹⁹He will join the generation of his fathers,
who will never see the light of life.
²⁰A man who has riches without understanding
is like the beasts that perish.

This psalm gives an answer to those, who throughout the ages, have struggled with the question (as did Jeremiah): **“Why does the way of the wicked prosper?”** (Jer. 12:1). To answer this, the psalm teaches us of the worthlessness of riches, when considered in the eternal scheme of things. The psalmist introduces this psalm by addressing his much-needed lesson to no less than all the people in the world: **“Hear this, all you peoples; listen, all who live in this world, both low and high, rich and poor alike”** (vs. 1). Indeed, this subject is one of universal interest. The poor need to hear it, because they are ever faulting God for prospering the wicked. The rich need to hear it, because they are ever resting in their riches, thinking they don’t need God. With this message the psalmist delivers, “the low will be encouraged, the high will be warned, the rich will be sobered, the poor consoled, there will be a useful lesson for each if they are willing to learn it” [Spurgeon, 369].

What the psalmist has to say is worth heeding: **“My mouth will speak words of wisdom; the utterance from my heart will give understanding”** (vs. 3). Though this assertion of the psalmist may sound arrogant, he is not so much boasting in himself, as declaring confidence in the inspiration by the Spirit of God, who is speaking through him. “Inspired and therefore lifted beyond himself, the prophet is not praising his own attainments, but extolling the divine Spirit which spoke in Him. He knew that the Spirit of truth and wisdom spoke through him” [Spurgeon, 369]. Indeed, all who have been saved by the Spirit of God have words of wisdom to speak to others, and we should strive to make use of this wisdom. The simple gospel message, spoken from the

heart, contains more wisdom than the writings of any number of Greek philosophers.

The Psalmist speaks (or rather sings) his words of wisdom: **“I will turn my ear to a proverb; with the harp I will expound my riddle: Why should I fear when evil days come, when wicked deceivers surround me—those who trust in their wealth and boast of their great riches?”** (vss. 4–6). The Psalmist calls this his **“riddle”**, and it is a riddle to most people that the Psalmist defiantly does not have fear when wicked and wealthy deceivers surround him.

The Psalmist spends the rest of the psalm answering the riddle of his fearlessness in the face of danger from **“those who trust in their wealth and boast of their great riches.”** First, he points out that, in the eternal scheme of things, riches are worthless: **“No man can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for him—the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough—that he should live on forever and not see decay”** (vss. 7–9). The Psalmist effectively turns the tables on the rich man here, because he points out that it is the ungodly rich man who must fear, not the godly poor man. The rich man can do a lot, can do, in fact, great and wonderful things with wealth, but he cannot on his own do the most important thing: redeem a life. Riches are worthless and hold no weight when compared to the tremendous weight of our sins against God. “Death laughs at bags of gold” [Plumer, 540]. Our ransom must be of greater value than stones stored in a safe, and it was. As Peter tells us: **“For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect”** (I Pet. 1:18–19).

The Psalmist strengthens his argument by pointing out the obvious, that death comes to all men: **“For all can see that wise men die; the foolish and the senseless alike perish and leave their wealth to others. Their tombs will remain their houses forever, their dwellings for endless generations, though they had named lands after themselves”** (vss. 10–11). Neither riches nor wisdom can help one escape the grave. “Death who visits the university, does not spare the tavern” [Spurgeon, 371]. Death is the great leveller. The rich and poor alike will cross death’s threshold naked and empty-handed. Moreover, any worldly fame and renown is left at death’s door. Even those who **“had named lands after themselves”** have no advantage over the anonymous beggar.

In fact, the ungodly man, no matter how rich in this world, will find himself no better off than even beasts in the next world: **“But man, despite his riches, does not endure; he is like the beasts that perish. This is the fate of those who trust in themselves, and of their followers, who approve their sayings”** (vss. 12–13). Aye, and if it be known, death for a man who trust in his riches is worse than death for a beast, for

the soulless beast will cease to exist, but the “rich” man will live on in torment. And sadly, the rich man does not die like this alone. This is the fate **“of their followers”**, as well—those who **“approve their sayings.”** “Those who follow them in descent follow them in folly, quote their worldly maxims, and accept their mad career as the most prudent mode of life. Why do they not see by their fathers’ failure, their father’s folly? No, the race transmits its weakness. Grace is not hereditary, but sordid worldliness goes from generation to generation. The race of fools never dies out. No need of missionaries to teach men to be earthworms, they crawl naturally to the dust” [Spurgeon, 372]. “At the call of Folly, what multitudes are always ready to assemble! But Wisdom, eternal and essential Wisdom, crieth without; she lifteth up her voice in the streets, and who is at leisure to attend her heavenly lectures?” [Horne, Plumer, 545].

Now at last, the Psalmist contrasts the fate of the upright man in death to that of the ungodly man: **“Like sheep they are destined for the grave, and death will feed on them. The upright will rule over them in the morning; their forms will decay in the grave, far from their princely mansions. But God will redeem my life from the grave; He will surely take me to Himself”** (vss. 14–15). We have here illustrated Old Testament saving faith. The Old Testament believer did not have the privilege of knowing Jesus Christ. But he could believe that through the rituals and sacrifices that foreshadowed the saving work of Christ, God would redeem him. The Old Testament believer says: **“But God will redeem my life from the grave; He will surely take me to Himself”** (vs. 15). He had faith that God would bring him to the **“princely mansions”** reserved for those who trust in God.

The Psalmist, to reenforce what he has said, concludes by summarizing: **“Do not be overawed when a man grows rich, when the splendor of his house increases; for he will take nothing with him when he dies, his splendor will not descend with him. Though while he lived he counted himself blessed—and men praise you when you prosper—he will join the generation of his fathers, who will never see the light of life. A man who has riches without understanding is like the beasts that perish”** (vss. 16–20). It is quite amazing that, though these words were written thousands of years ago, they still apply to the letter today. I mean, do we not tend to **“be overawed when a man grows rich”**? Does not the rich man **“count himself blessed”** by virtue of having riches? (“How foolish is it to account thyself a better man than another, only because thy dunghill is a little bigger than his!” [Hopkins, in Spurgeon, 382].) Do not men **“praise you when you prosper”**? And so, it also has not changed that **“a man who has riches without understanding is like the beasts that perish.”** You who are rich, be not like beasts. Seek the knowledge that comes through redemption. Cling to your redeemer, Jesus Christ.

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“And I, If I Be Lifted Up,
Shall Draw All Men”

“Three things there are,”
said one,

“That miracles are—
Dawn, and the setting sun
And a falling star.”

“Two things there be,” he said,
“Beyond man’s quest:
The white peace of the dead,
And a heart at rest.”

“One only thing,” he cried,
“Draws all men still—
A stark cross standing wide
On a windy hill.”

-- E. P. Dickie

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