

SCRIPTURE STUDIES

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

Old Testament Study:

Malachi 2:17-3:5 3
"Where is the God of Justice?"

A Classic Study:

Patience in Affliction, pt. 10, by Richard Baxter 6
Oppression and Injustice by Men of Wealth and Power - II

New Testament Study:

Matthew 13:1-23 10
Jesus Speaks in Parables

A Topical Study:

The Shortness of Life 14
Indifference to Life Urged, pt. 5, by Samuel Davies

A Poem for Reflection:

Sonnet CXLVI, by William Shakespeare 17

A Study in Psalms:

Psalms 51 18
A Prayer for Forgiveness

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May God bless you as you study His Word.



Old Testament Study: Malachi 2:17-3:5

“Where is the God of Justice?”

¹⁷You have wearied the LORD with your words.
“How have we wearied Him?” you ask.

By saying, “All who do evil are good in the eyes of the LORD, and He is pleased with them” or “Where is the God of justice?”

¹⁶“See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to His temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty.

²But who can endure the day of His coming? Who can stand when He appears? For He will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. ³He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; He will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, ⁴and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.

⁵“So I will come near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me,” says the LORD Almighty.

The Lord next rebukes the people for a complaint that they had: “**You have wearied the Lord with your words. ‘How have we wearied Him?’ you ask. By saying, ‘All who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord, and He is pleased with them’ or ‘Where is the God of justice?’**” (vs. 2:17). This complaint of the children of Israel was one that many through the ages have expressed (and, indeed, still do): If God is a God of justice, why is there evil in the world? And moreover, why do many who are evil prosper? Jeremiah complained to God about this: “**You are always righteous, O LORD, when I bring a case before you. Yet I would speak with you about your justice: Why does the way of**

the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?” (Jer. 12:1). Habakkuk also brings this to God’s attention: **“How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, ‘Violence!’, but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong?”** (Hab. 1:2–3).

So, you may ask, if these prophets, these men of God, made similar complaints to God, why did God get mad at the children of Israel in Malachi’s time for their complaint? He was mad because of their attitude. “The age-old problem raised by the apparent prosperity of the evil man was a live issue in Malachi’s day. It appeared that God favoured the wicked, and both Jeremiah (Jer. 12:1) and Habakkuk (Hab. 1:2-4) had questioned God’s just ordering of providence, while at the same time maintaining their faith in God’s ultimate righteousness. Malachi’s contemporaries, by contrast, had become cynical and unbelieving, and because they had given up all intention of taking right and wrong seriously Malachi faces them with coming judgment” [Baldwin, 241]. Note the difference between Jeremiah’s and Habakkuk’s attitudes, with the attitude the children of Israel present. Jeremiah acknowledges God’s righteousness, and presents the complaints as a conundrum that he does not understand. In contrast, Malachi’s contemporaries reject God’s righteousness, saying, **“All who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord, and He is pleased with them.”** Habakkuk, though more critical of God than Jeremiah, makes a plea to God in prayer. In contrast, Malachi’s contemporaries doubt God’s presence, saying, **“Where is the God of justice?”**

God answers their complaint by speaking of the time when He Himself will come to the earth to make everything right: **“See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to His temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,”** says the Lord Almighty” (vs. 3:1). So, yes, the justice of God will come, but it will come in His time, not theirs. The execution of God’s justice is intertwined with the execution of His plan of salvation. God graciously delayed the execution of His justice until after the time when He sent His Son to die for us, so that He could be just, and that we sinners could be spared the judgment that we deserve.

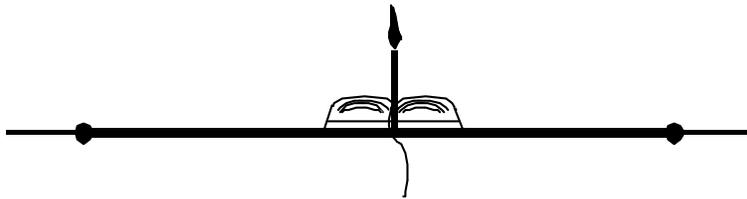
I don’t think Malachi’s contemporaries who were complaining realized the consequences of what they were asking. Those who ask for God’s justice to be executed immediately had better be sure that they themselves can withstand His judgment. Malachi tries to get them to realize the seriousness of what they were asking: **“But who can endure the day of His coming? Who can stand when He appears?”** (vss. 2–3). The implication here is that *no one* could, at that time, **“endure the day of His coming.”** God’s plan of salvation had not been fully executed. The children of Israel performed, at times, the ritualistic sacrifices of atonement as prescribed in the Law, but these were just a foreshadow, symbolically point-

ing to the perfect sacrifice of atonement that would be made by God's Son, Jesus Christ. Malachi continues: **"For He will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; He will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver."** A **"refiner"** takes raw materials, and separates the impure from the pure, keeping the pure and discarding the impure. Were those who were complaining ready for such a refining process? After such a refining process, would they find themselves gathered with the pure, or discarded with the impure?

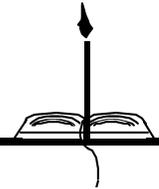
By His grace, God delayed His day of judgment until after His Son died for our sins, so that, by Jesus' blood, we can be cleansed, and purified. Through Christ, we can **"endure the day of His coming"**, and we can **"stand when He appears."** Those who have been purified can serve the Lord effectively: **"Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the Lord, as in days gone by, as in former years"** (vss. 3–4).

To conclude, the Lord assures them that the injustice they see perpetrated by men against men will be punished: **"So I will come near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me,"** says the Lord Almighty" (vs. 5). When it comes, God's justice will be **"quick"**. There will be no long, drawn out trials. God is all-knowing, and will execute His justice with no mistakes.

Oh, Father, we, who cannot **"endure the day of His coming"**, thank You that You have delayed Your righteous judgment, so that we may have an opportunity to accept the gracious gift of salvation that You have offered to us. By Your Spirit, purify us and refine us so that we may live lives worthy of those who are God's people. In the name of Your Son, who died so that we may live, we pray these things, Amen.



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.*

Oppression and Injustice by Men of Wealth and Power - II

(This continues the article started in the previous issue.)

You will better be able to bear your oppressions by considering these things:

1. God permitteth it for your sin, or for your trial; therefore be humbled under it as God's hand, and bear it obediently till He deliver you.
2. If wealth and power be so liable to make men oppressors, do not you desire them, but thank God for a safer station, and bear that which keeps you from it.
3. The sin of oppression is a far greater evil than the suffering of the oppressed; therefore rather pity them as miserable, than yourselves.
4. Consider how much more many millions have suffered by oppressions, than ever you did, or are like to do. How many thousands were killed and ruined by Alexander! How many thousands by Julius Caesar! How many thousands in many Roman civil wars, under Antony, Marius, Scylla, Sejanus, etc.! How many churches corrupted and persecuted by Constantius, Valens, Gensericus, Hunnericus, etc.! What a multitude did Justinian murder in Egypt, in blind zeal for Christ! How few ages have escaped the guilt of innocent blood! How many thousands did the pope's cause slay in the Palestine wars, and in the Italian frequent wars, and the rebellions against the emperors Fredericks, Henrys, etc.! How many thousand Christians, Albigenses, Waldenses, and Bohemians, did they murder! How many destroyed in Piedmont, Rhetia, and Germany! How many thousands murdered at once in France, and oft besides! What dreadful work hath the inquisition made in Flanders, Holland, Spain, and Italy? What a dreadful case was Ireland in, when two hundred thousand

protestants were murdered, and thousands were stripped and utterly undone! Queen Mary's bonfires were sharper than we have yet felt. While Satan in all ages fills the world with wars and blood, a little tolerable oppression by landlords or inferior rulers, should not be over-tenderly and impatiently complained of, by tenants, servants, or any others.

5. Innocency is a sound and healthful state, and can bear much: Peter bids servants be patient when they suffer undeservedly; but it is not thank-worthy to be patient when they are beaten for their faults. Peace of conscience maketh all sound within; and then a man may bear the more easily all that befalleth him from without: when he can say, 'It is not for my sins', he may comfortably commit his cause to God.

6. Whoever oppressteth you, God will never do you wrong, and it is His hands that your great concerns are in: He will use you with merciful justice, yea, and deliver you from all the oppressions of men.

He suffereth men of the world to oppress the just, that they may be driven to Him by prayer and faith, and may be saved from damning worldly love, and God may have the glory of their deliverance. How great a part of the Psalms are written upon the occasion of oppression, plots, and cruelties of wicked enemies! And what abundance of promises of deliverance from such are recorded in the sacred Scriptures!

7. Patience and faith are a thousand times better than money, or liberty, or anything that oppressors can take from you: do you but take the advantage of oppression to exercise these, and all is turned to your exceeding gain.

8. In this also nothing befalleth you, but what Christ foretold you of, and taught you in what manner to bear. The prosperity, power, and oppression of the wicked had almost stumbled David himself, till he went into the house of God, and understood their end: they are like gallants sporting and feasting in a sumptuous house, which is to be blown up or set on fire before the frolic is well ended, and then who would be found among them? He will think himself happy that can say, I was none of them: yea, in judgment, how fain would they, as Pilate, wash their hands from innocent blood! And even of omissions, much more of oppressions, say, "Lord, when saw we thee hungry, naked, in prison," etc. Christ hath foretold you of all this, and taught you to love your enemies, and bless them that curse you, and pray for them that hate and persecute you, and turn the other cheek to him that striketh you, and go two miles with him that commandeth you to go one, and give him your coat that sueth you for another garment: that is, rather suffer, than seek private revenge; yea, or seek to right yourselves, when it will do more hurt to the souls of others by scandal, or alienation, or exasperation, than it will do good.

Righting oneself against injuries, especially of powerful oppressions,

will cost one more than patient putting up all will do. As I went along the street, a tory in Latin reviled me, and struck me on the head with his staff; I took little notice of him, and went on my way, and the hurt was small: I saw another stricken, and he struck again, and it raised a tumult, and he and others were sorely hurt, and went to law after for reparation.

He that cannot bear one blow, must bear many; and he that cannot bear to be oppressed in his estate, perhaps may lose his liberty or life; we live in a world of wicked men; and the wicked will do wickedly: and two rogues by perjury may take away the lives of the most innocent and excellent members of the commonwealth or city! And what conscience do such wretches make of a malicious oath, that use to adorn their sentences with vile talk and direful oaths?

Is not your oppressions a reproof for your unthankfulness, that God, by wonderful restraint, hath saved your lives from perjury and oppression so long? Is it not a wonder of providence that perjury hath murdered no more?

And why should all this seem strange or intolerable to us, when Christ doth so often tell us, that rich men are usually the worst, and that he sent out his apostles as lambs among wolves? And when we know how Christ and His apostles were used by the rulers and teachers of the people; yea, and Christians after them, in most ages to this day?

9. Consider how great the temptations are, of men that are in power, wealth, and pleasure; and then you will pity them, and pray for them. Who knoweth what you would have done yourselves, if you had their temptations? They have a stronger worldly interest to tempt them against that law of Christ, which calls them another way, than other men have. They have more full and constant provision for all the desires of the flesh. They are more than any other men assaulted by subtle, designing seducers, who have their worldly ends (on church pretences usually) to attain by their seduction. They are more in danger of the infectiousness breath of flatterers, and the false accusers of godliness and good men, than any others: they use to be of faithful and plain-dealing friends and monitors, and truth is usually kept far from them, and out of such a hearing as is needful for conviction. And to live continually under such dangerous temptations, needeth more than man for their preservation, from deceit, and sin, and the ruin of themselves and hurt of others.

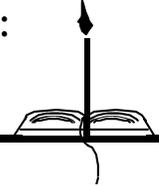
10. Our obedience to God is far from a tried praise-worthy degree, if it costs us little or nothing; and doubtless Christ will bear all your charges. Oh what an excellent servant is that, who will cheerfully do all his duty to an unjust and abusive master! What an excellent child is that, who useth all due reverence, obedience, love, and patience, to a froward, harsh, yea, and a malignant father; not disobeying God, nor hazarding his soul by

willful sin, or forsaking godliness, and yet not dishonouring his parents, or disobeying them in any lawful thing! What an excellent wife is that, who constantly and patiently performeth all loving and cheerful duty, to an abusive, furious, drunken, profane, malignant husband! This requireth abundance more grace, than to live in cheerful love and duty, to a godly, tender, loving husband. The former sort is called more acceptable to God, and the latter sort of duty is no glory (see I Pet. 2:20). To suffer for sin is indeed a bitter suffering, even for that which is worse than suffering. **“It is better, if the will of God be so, that we suffer for well-doing than for evil-doing: for Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust,”** (I Pet. 3:17,18). **“For hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: who did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth: who, when He was reviled, reviled not again; when He suffered, He threatened not; but committed all to Him that judgeth righteously,”** (I Pet. 2:21–23). O follow this excellent example: there lieth more of Christianity in learning of Christ to suffer from foolish, wicked men, than most will think of.

“Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eye-service as men-pleasers, but in singleness of heart, fearing God: and whatever ye do, do it heartily as to the Lord, and not to men, knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance” (Col. 3:22). **“Not only to the good and gentle, but also to the froward”** (I Pet. 2:18). These are the excellent precepts of Christ.

It is therefore inconsiderately said by many, ‘If I had deserved such usage, I could have borne it.’ As if suffering without sin were not a lighter burden than sin and suffering for it. The oppressor hurts himself a hundred times more than he can hurt you (if you do no worse to yourself than he doth), as guilt of oppression is a cause to such to weep and howl for the miseries that shall come upon them: their riches are corrupted, and their gold and silver cankered, and the rust of them shall eat their flesh as fire, and they heap up treasure for the last days. The cries of the poor labourers oppressed by them are entered into the ears of the Lord. **“They live in pleasures and wantonness on earth, and nourish their hearts in feasting and fullness, and condemn and kill the just, who resist them not. Be patient therefore, brethren, to the coming of the Lord,”** (James 5:5-7). God will speedily avenge His elect that cry to Him, though now He delay (see Luke 18).

New Testament Study: Matthew 13:1-23



Jesus Speaks in Parables

¹That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. ²Such large crowds gathered around Him that He got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. ³Then He told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. ⁸Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. ⁹He who has ears, let him hear."

¹⁰The disciples came to Him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?"

¹¹He replied, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. ¹²Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. ¹³This is why I speak to them in parables:

"Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand."

¹⁴"In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:

"You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. ¹⁵For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with

their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.’

¹⁶“But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. ¹⁷For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.

¹⁸“Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: ¹⁹When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path. ²⁰The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. ²¹But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. ²²The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. ²³But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”

(This study will span two issues. In this issue we will deal with the reasons Jesus was speaking in parables, by looking at verses 10-17)

Chapter 13 of the Gospel of Matthew is, for the most part, a chapter of parables: “**That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered around Him that He got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then He told them many things in parables**” (vss. 1–3). It seems that, on “**that same day**”, Jesus began to speak more in parables than He had previously. The disciples noticed that the teaching was in a manner that was more obscure than what had preceded it. It is probably significant that the change came on the same day that the Pharisees ascribed to the devil the power that Jesus was using for His miracles. This, it seems, was the straw that broke the camel’s back. Whereas before, Jesus taught everyone in a clear, unambiguous way, now He begins to speak to the general public in a veiled way, and reserves clear teaching to those disciples who seek it out.

The disciples, noticing the different style of teaching, asked Jesus about it: “**The disciples came to Him and asked, ‘Why do you speak**

to the people in parables?” (vs. 10). The answer that Jesus gave may seem surprising: **“He replied, ‘The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. This is why I speak to them in parables: ‘Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand’”**” (vss. 11–13). “Jesus’ answer cannot legitimately be softened: at least one of the functions of parables is to conceal the truth, or at least to present it in a veiled way” [Carson, 307]. We tend to think of parables as aids to understanding, but Jesus tells us, and the disciples seem to agree, that the parables hinder understanding.

The main reason the parables hindered understanding was that Jesus did not reveal the interpretation of the parables to His hearers. If one is provided with the proper interpretation of the parables, then yes, parables can be a great aid in understanding spiritual things, because a parable takes that which is well-known in ordinary life and compares it to a spiritual concept. But when one is not given the interpretation, a parable can lead to confusion, because if one’s personal interpretation is incorrect, the parable can actually lead to a misunderstanding of spiritual truths. And so, here in this chapter, since Jesus was speaking to the crowd entirely in parables, the spiritual truths were veiled to them. To truly understand the spiritual truth behind a parable, without being given the interpretation, requires some measure of commitment by the hearer: requires thought, meditation, and prayer. Why, even the disciples needed to ask Jesus for proper interpretations. The difficulty of properly understanding the parables will become apparent as we study them, because, as we will see in our discussion of them, some of the parables for which no interpretation is provided by Jesus, have been historically given radically differing interpretations.

In Jesus’ answer to the disciples, we have, as happens many places in the Bible, the concept of God’s sovereignty juxtaposed with the idea of man’s responsibility. God’s sovereignty is expressed when Jesus says: **“The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them”** (vs. 11). “It is not a merit in the disciples that they understand where others do not; their comprehension is due to the fact that God has chosen them and given them the gift of understanding” [Morris, 339]. And yet, Jesus’ decision to hide the secrets of the kingdom seems to be due to the stubbornness of the people, who do not heed His clear teachings: **“This is why I speak to them in parables: ‘Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand’”** (vs. 13). “By its nature the Word of God is always light;

but its light is quenched by men's darkness... It is always a settled principle that God's Word is not obscure save insofar as the world darkens it by its blindness" [Calvin, II, 64].

Many people nowadays think that the concepts of God's sovereignty in election, and man's responsibility to have faith in the Gospel message, are in contradiction. The Biblical writers (and thus the Holy Spirit of God) did not consider these concepts as contradictory, because the same writer will refer to one, and then the other, in the same passage. "Biblical writers in both the OT and the NT have, on the whole, fewer problems about the tension between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility than do many moderns. This is not because they fail to distinguish purpose and consequence, as many affirm, but because they do not see divine sovereignty and human responsibility as antitheses. In short they are compatibilists and therefore juxtapose the two themes with little self-conscious awareness of any problem" [Carson, 309].

The stubborn attitude of those who heard the clear teaching of Jesus, yet rejected it, was prophesied by Isaiah, as Jesus points out: **"In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them'"** (vss. 14–15; see Isa. 6:9–10). This prophecy seems to be a general prophecy of the stubbornness of those through the ages who reject God's Word. Many who heard Jesus first-hand had this stubbornness, had **"calloused"** hearts; many today have this same stubbornness. We who believe are frustrated to see some of our closest friends, neighbors and relatives show this same stubbornness in rejecting the Word and call of God. If only they would cast aside their obstinate refusal to believe the Word of God, **"they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and [God] would heal them."**

But for those who have cast aside their obstinacy, and have put their faith in the Word of God, they are blessed, even blessed by Jesus Himself: **"But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear"** (vs. 16). And especially blessed are we, who have the revelation of God through Jesus Christ; we who can read the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life and teachings; we who know of God's plan of salvation, as brought about by Jesus' offering of Himself on the cross. As Jesus points out: **"For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it"** (vs. 17).

A Topical Study: The Shortness of Life



[Here we conclude 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, pt. 5, 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).

Finally, let “those that use this world use it as not abusing it.” This is the fifth branch of the inference from the shortness of time; and it seems to have a particular reference to such as have had such success in their pursuit of the world, that they have now retired from business, and appear to themselves to have nothing to do but enjoy the world, for which they so long toiled. Or it may refer to those who are born heirs of plentiful estates, and therefore are not concerned to acquire the world, but to use and enjoy it. To such I say, “Use this world as not abusing it;” that is, use it, enjoy it, take moderate pleasure in it, but do not abuse it by prostituting it to sinful purposes, making provision for the flesh to fulfill the lusts thereof, indulging yourselves in debauchery and extravagance, placing your confidence in it, and singing a *requiem* to your souls: “Soul, take thine ease; eat, drink, and be merry; for thou hast much goods laid up in store for many years.” Oh! Presumptuous “fool, this night thy soul may be required of thee” (Luke 12:19–20). Do not use this world to excess (so the word may be translated), by placing your hearts excessively upon it as your favourite portion and principal happiness, and by

suffering it to draw off your thoughts and affections from the superior blessedness of the world to come. Use the world, but let it not tempt you to excess in eating, drinking, dress, equipage, or in any article of the parade of riches. Religion by no means enjoins a sordid, niggardly, churlish manner of living; it allows you to enjoy the blessings of life, but then it forbids all excess, and requires you to keep within the bounds of moderation in your enjoyments. Thus, **“use this world as not abusing it.”**

The apostle’s inference is not only drawn from strong premises, but also enforced with a very weighty reason; **“for the fashion of this world passeth away.”** The whole scheme and system of worldly affairs, all this marrying and rejoicing, and weeping, and buying, and enjoying *passeth away*, passeth away this moment; it not only will pass away, but it is even now passing away. The stream of time, with all the trifles that float on it, and all the eager pursuers of these bubbles, is in motion, in swift, incessant motion to empty itself and all that sail upon it into the shoreless ocean of eternity, where all will be absorbed and lost forever. And shall we excessively doat upon things that are perpetually flying from us, and in a little time will be no more our property than the riches of the world before the flood? **“O ye sons of men, how long will ye follow after vanity? Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which profiteth not?”** (Isa. 55:2).

Some critics apprehend this sentence, *the fashion of this world passeth away*, contains a fine striking allusion to the stage, and that it might be rendered, “the scene of this world passeth away.” “You know,” says a fine writer upon this text, “that upon the stage the actors assume imaginary characters, and appear in borrowed forms. One mimics the courage and triumph of the hero; another appears with a crown and a sceptre, and struts about with all the solemnity and majesty of a prince; a third puts on the fawning smile of a courtier, or the haughtiness of a successful favourite; and the fourth is represented in the dress of a scholar or a divine. An hour or two they act their several parts on the stage, and amuse the spectators; but the scenes are constantly shifting; and when the play is concluded, the feigned characters are laid aside, and the imaginary kings and emperors are immediately divested of their pretended authority and ensigns of royalty, and appear in their native meanness.

“Just so this world is a great stage that presents as variable scenes, and as fantastical characters: princes, politicians, and warriors, the rich, the learned, and the wise; and, on the other hand, the poor, weak, and despised part of mankind possess their several places on the theatre; some lurk absolutely in a corner, seldom come from behind the scenes, or creep along unnoticed; others make a splendid show and a loud noise, are adorned with the honors of a crown, or possessed of large estates and great powers; fill the world with the glory of their names and actions, conquer in the field, or are laboriously employed in the cabinet. Well, in a little

time the scene is shifted, and all these vain phantoms disappear. The king of terrors clears the stage of the busy actors, strips them of all their fictitious ornaments, and ends the vain farce of life; and being brought all upon a level, they go down to the grave in their original nakedness, are jumbled together undistinguished, and pass away as a tale that is told."

Farther: "Upon the Greek or Roman theatres, to which the apostle alludes, the actors, if I mistake not, frequently, if not always, came upon the stage in a disguise, with a false face, which was adapted to the different person or character they designed to assume; so that no man was to be seen with his real face, but all put on borrowed visages. And in allusion to this, the text might be rendered, 'The masquerade of the world passeth away,' pointing out the fraud and disguises which mankind put on, and the flattering forms in which they generally appear, which will all pass away when the grave shall pull off the mask; and 'they go down to the other world naked and open,' and appear at the supreme tribunal in their due characters, 'and can no more be varnished over with fraudulent coloring.'" [Dunlop's Sermons, Vol. I, pp. 212-215].

Others apprehend that the apostle here alludes to some grand procession, in which pageants or emblematical figures pass along the crowded streets. The staring crowd wait their appearance with eager eyes, and place themselves in the most convenient posture of observation: they gape at the passing show, they follow it with a wondering gaze;—and now it is past, and now it begins to look dim to the sight, and now it disappears. Just such is this transitory world. Thus it begins to attract the eager gaze of mankind; thus it marches by in swift procession from our eyes to meet the eyes of others; and thus it soon vanishes and disappears.

And shall we always be stupidly staring upon this empty parade, and forget that world of substantial realities to which we are hastening? No; let us live and act as the expectants of that world, and as having nothing to do with this world, but only as a school, a state of discipline, to educate and prepare us for another.

Oh! That I could successfully impress this exhortation upon all your hearts! Oh! That I could prevail upon you all this day to break off your over-fond attachment to earth, and to make ready for immortality! Could I carry this point, it would be a greater advantage than all the dead could receive from any funeral panegyrics from me. I speak for the advantage of the living upon such occasions, and not to celebrate the virtues of those who have passed the trial, and received their sentence from the supreme Judge. And I am well satisfied the mourning relatives of our deceased friend, who best knew and esteemed his worth, would be rather offended than pleased, if I should prostitute the present hour to so mean a purpose. Indeed, many a character less worthy of praise, often makes a shining figure in funeral sermons. Many that have not been such tender husbands, such affectionate fathers, such kind masters, such sincere, upright friends, so honest and punctual in trade, such zealous lovers of religion and good

men, have had their putrefying remains perfumed with public praise from a place so solemn as the pulpit; but you can witness for me, it is not my usual foible to run to this extreme. My business is with you, who are as yet alive to hear me. To you I call, as with the voice of your deceased friend and neighbor: Prepare! Prepare for eternity! Oh! If the spirits that you once knew, while clothed in flesh, should take my place, would not this be their united voice, "Prepare, prepare for eternity, ye frail short-lived mortals! Ye near neighbors of the world of spirits! Ye borderers upon heaven and hell, make ready, loosen your hearts from earth, and all that it contains: weigh anchor, and prepare to launch away into the boundless ocean of eternity, which methinks is now within your ken, and roars within hearing!" And remember, "**this I say, brethren,**" with great confidence, "**the time is short: it remaineth therefore,**" for the future—"that they that have wives, be as if they had none; and they that weep, as if they wept not; and they that rejoice, as if they rejoiced not; and they that buy, as if they possessed not; and they that use this world, as not abusing it; for the fashion of this world," all its schemes of affairs, all the vain parade, all the idle farce of life, "**passeth away.**" And away let it pass, if we may at last obtain a better country; that is, a heavenly one: which may God grant for Jesus' sake! Amen.

Sonnet CXLVI

Poor soul, the centre of my sinful earth,
Fooled by these rebel powers that thee array,
Why dost thou pine within and suffer dearth,
Painting thy outward walls so costly gay?
Why so large cost, having so short a lease,
Dost thou upon thy fading mansion spend?
Shall worms, inheritors of this excess,
Eat up thy charge? Is this thy body's end?
Then, soul, live thou upon thy servant's loss,
And let that pine to aggravate thy store;
Buy terms divine in selling hours of dross;
Within be fed, without be rich no more:
So shalt thou feed on Death, that feeds on men,
And Death once dead, there's no more dying then.

-- William Shakespeare (1564-1616)

A Study in Psalms: Psalms 51



Psalm 51 - A Prayer for Forgiveness

For the director of music. A psalm of David.
When the prophet Nathan came to him
after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.

- ¹Have mercy on me, O God,
according to Your unfailing love;
According to Your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.
- ²Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.
- ³For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.
- ⁴Against You, You only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in Your sight,
So that You are proved right when You speak
and justified when You judge.
- ⁵Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother conceived me.
- ⁶Surely You desire truth in the inner parts;
You teach me wisdom in the inmost place.
- ⁷Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.
- ⁸Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones You have crushed rejoice.
- ⁹Hide Your face from my sins
and blot out all my iniquity.
- ¹⁰Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
- ¹¹Do not cast me from Your presence
or take Your Holy Spirit from me.
- ¹²Restore to me the joy of Your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

¹³Then I will teach transgressors Your ways,
and sinners will turn back to You.
¹⁴Save me from bloodguilt, O God,
the God who saves me,
and my tongue will sing of Your righteousness.
¹⁵O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare Your praise.
¹⁶You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;
You do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.
¹⁷The sacrifices of God
are a broken spirit;
A broken and contrite heart, O God,
You will not despise.

¹⁸In Your good pleasure make Zion prosper;
build up the walls of Jerusalem.
¹⁹Then there will be righteous sacrifices,
whole burnt offerings to delight You;
Then bulls will be offered on Your altar.

As noted in the inscription of this psalm, the occasion of this psalm was David's repentance after being confronted by Nathan with his sin of adultery and murder. As you may recall, David, after seducing and committing adultery with Bathsheba, effectively murdered her husband (Uriah) by putting him in the front line of battle and then ordering the rest of the soldiers to retreat (see II Sam. 11 and 12 for the complete history of this event). David had thought that he had hidden his sins, until the prophet Nathan confronted him with his sins. Indeed, David had hidden his sins from men, but he had not hidden them from God. Nathan brought this fact to David's attention. Nathan caused David to realize that, ultimately, it doesn't matter if sins are hidden from men. Your sin will find you out in the end, because God sees all.

This psalm is David's pleading for God's mercy. "When the divine message had aroused his dormant conscience and made him see the greatness of his guilt, he wrote this Psalm" [Spurg, 401]. David begins: "**Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your unfailing love; according to Your great compassion blot out my transgressions**" (vs. 1). David realizes the enormity of his sin, for He appeals to God's "**unfailing love**" and "**great compassion**" as he seeks "**mercy**". Admittedly, David's sins were large, but even those who have not stumbled as far as David are in great need of God's mercy. We are all sinners who have broken, repeatedly, God's laws. "Without God's mercy, we should all be undone" [Plumer, 555].

Not only did David need God's mercy, he also needed God to purify

him: **“Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me”** (vs. 2–3). Mercy provides pardon, but purification is also needed. “The pollution of sin goes through the whole powers of the soul and body, which have been serviceable to it; through mind, will, affections, senses, bodily and all; and nothing can quiet the soul here, except it find pardoning mercy, and sanctifying mercy following all the foul footsteps of sin, and doing away the filthiness thereof” [Dickson, 304].

In order to console his conscience, David needed to realize that God had washed him clean: **“For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.”** The conscience has enormous sway over our lives. It is a weapon of the Holy Spirit to break *our* spirits, and to bring us to repentance. The pangs of conscience can be more devastating than even physical maladies. “Sorrow for sin exceeds sorrow for suffering, in the continuance and durability thereof: the other, like a landflood, quickly come, quickly gone; this is a continual dropping or running river, keeping a constant stream” [Spurgeon, 411]. David’s conscience gave him no rest: **“My sin is always before me.”**

David’s conscience brought him to acknowledgment of his sin before God: **“Against You, You only have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are proved right when You speak and justified when You judge”** (vs. 4). A necessary first step to receive the mercy of God is an acknowledgment of one’s sin to God. God welcomes such an acknowledgment of sin, and has promised through the pen of John: **“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness”** (I John 1:9). This is a wonderful promise for the child of God.

Though David’s sin harmed Bathsheba and Uriah, David saw God as the primary party wronged by his sin: **“Against You, You only, have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight.”** It is the law of God that defines sin, and so, though we hurt men, it is against God that we sin. “We never see sin aright until we see it as against God” [Plumer, 557]. If we realize this, we also realize that there is nothing on earth that we can do to atone for our sin, except what God demands for atonement. And we are blessed in this respect, for God’s Son has paid the price of atonement for our sins. God demands only that we accept from Jesus this gift of sacrifice.

Next David notes that God’s pardon and purification was needed in his life long before his sin with Bathsheba: **“Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me”** (vs. 5). “It is as if he said, not only have I sinned this once, but I am in my very nature a sinner. The fountain of my life is polluted as well as its streams. My birth-tendencies are out of the square of equity; I naturally lean to forbid-den” [Spurgeon, 403]. But God requires holiness of His people: **“Surely You desire truth in the inner parts; You teach me wisdom in the in-**

most place" (vs. 6). And so, David asks for an especially vigorous cleansing: **"Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow"** (vss. 7). Hyssop was, notably, used in the ceremony that allowed a healed leper back into the congregation of worshipers. So also, David wants to be allowed back into the congregation of worshipers, after God's healing of his putrid sin: **"Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones You have crushed rejoice. Hide Your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity"** (vss. 8–9). This is the love of God: that He can bring us from the miserable mire of sin, to the joy and gladness of being numbered as one of His children.

David's analogy comparing the pangs of conscience to **"bones that [God] has crushed"** describes the great pain that the conscience can inflict. "A broken bone gives great and constant pain. For a moment the mind may be diverted from it, or sleep may supervene and a man may forget his pain; but as soon as one is fully awake, or his mind released from that which had called it away, it reverts to the old pain. Where many bones are broken the condition is truly deplorable" [Plumer, 558]. If we would but remember the pain experienced after sin, we might possibly be deterred from sinning in the first place. "The grief and torment which follow sin, and are felt by a wounded spirit, are greater, even in the children of God, in the time of their repentance, than ever the pleasure of sin was to them" [Dickson, 308].

"It is the error of some that they seek knowledge but not holiness, hope of pardon and acceptance, but not the image and spirit of Christ" [Plumer, 562]. David has asked for pardon and purification to deal with his past sins, now he asks for a remedy to keep him from future sin: **"Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from Your presence or take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me"** (vss. 10–12). Note that David prays that God would **"create"** in him a new heart, not correct his old heart. His old heart, as is all of our hearts, is beyond correction. "What! Has sin so destroyed us, that the Creator must be called in again? What ruin then doth evil work among mankind!" [Spurgeon, 405]. David also asks for a **"steadfast spirit"**, so that he would not fall so easily into sin, in order that the new, **"pure heart"** may remain pure. Then also, David asks that God would restore his soul to the state of a new believer: **"Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me"** (vs. 12). Do you remember the **"joy of salvation"** that you had as a new believer? Do you remember the **"willing spirit"** you had, willing to obey the commands of God? We would all do well to pray these things.

In the next few verses, David speaks of how he plans to express his thankfulness for God's mercy. First, he plans to use his experience to turn others to repentance: **"Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners will turn back to You"** (vs. 13). "We see our duty craves that

when we have received mercy from God for ourselves, we should make vantage of it for the edification of others” [Cowper, in Spurgeon, 420]. “A degree of S.S., or Sinner Saved, is more needful for a soul-winning evangelist than either M.A. or D.D.” [Spurgeon, 406]. Often God uses those who had fallen the farthest into sin, and then received mercy, to be an example to sinners that they can also receive mercy. Paul was used in this way. He wrote Timothy: **“Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display His unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on Him and receive eternal life”** (I Tim. 1:15–16).

David also plans to express his thankfulness for God’s mercy by singing praises to the Lord: **“Save me from bloodguilt, O God, the God who saves me, and my tongue will sing of Your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare Your praise”** (vss. 14–15). Singing praise should be a natural response by anyone who receives a great gift from the Lord.

Now, David offers praise to the Lord, but does not offer sacrifices: **“You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; You do not take pleasure in burnt offerings”** (vs. 16). Sacrifices of atonement were a part God’s laws, part of His eternal plan of salvation. The Old Testament sacrifices foreshadowed the sacrifice of atonement that Jesus would make on our behalf. So, though sacrifices were required under the Old Testament law, they weren’t something that God delighted in. Moreover, on top of the required sacrifices, God did not desire any more. It wasn’t like David could offer more sacrifices to get more mercy. What God desires is that we truly repent, as demonstrated by an attitude of repentance: **“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise”** (vs. 17).

To conclude, David prays for the people over whom he rules: **“In Your good pleasure make Zion prosper; build up the walls of Jerusalem. Then there will be righteous sacrifices, whole burnt offerings to delight You; then bulls will be offered on Your altar”** (vss. 18–19). David did not want his people to be adversely affected by his sin. We must all realize that our sin affects other people, directly and indirectly. Others are affected, of course, by sins we commit that harm them. But even those who are not affected directly by our sins, may be affected by the results of our sins. Our sins may cause others to sin, and thus, a pyramid effect may occur, so that one sin affects many. Our sins may bring discipline from God, and this discipline may affect others. We do not sin in a vacuum. David was concerned that Jerusalem would be adversely affected by his sin. Likewise, we should be concerned that our families, and our friends may be affected by our sins.

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A Sign from God

"Were God, in open day, before [the eyes of agnostics], miraculously to suspend the laws of nature, they might for a time, perhaps, be impressed and confess that here was the finger of God. It is probable, however, that this impression would not be lasting. For in His ceaseless support and maintenance of the course of nature, such men perceive nothing to admire, nothing to adore. Were the hand that moves all worlds to arrest the sun in the heavens and cause him to stand still for even an hour, they might say, 'This is the Lord.' But the sun may rise, and run his race, and duly set three hundred and sixty-five times in the year, and nothing is said or thought of Him, at whose rebuke the pillars of heaven tremble, and by whose ordinance the everlasting mountains and the order of universal nature have their stability."

-- William S. Plumer
(1802-1880)

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