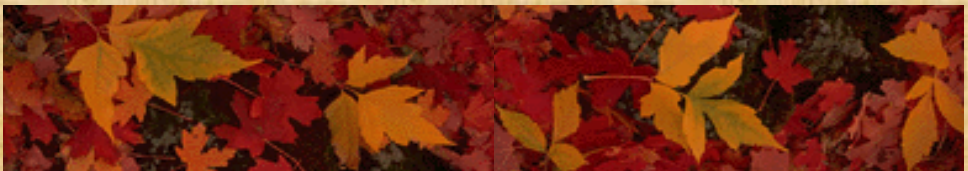


ENJOYING GOD'S BEST

Part One



A. W. Pink



Enjoying God's Best

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Introduction

In the January and February 1946 issues, we wrote two short articles entitled, “Enjoying God’s Best” and “Missing God’s Best;” and it must be confessed that we were rather surprised at receiving no criticisms, or at least questions, from some of our Calvinistic readers, for we felt it would be very difficult for them to “harmonize” their contents with what they had been taught. That is not said in any invidious or satirical spirit, for some of our closest and warmest friends are Calvinists, nor is the writer in the least afraid or ashamed to avow himself one, yea, a *high* Calvinist—though not a “hyper.” There is a very real difference between the two, though few today are aware of it. A “high” Calvinist not only believes in the absolute sovereignty of God, in His having predestinated everything which comes to pass in time, in the unconditional choice of His people in Christ from all eternity, in particular redemption, in the invincible operations and effectual call of the Holy Spirit, but he also believes that God made choice of His elect irrespective of or without any foreview of their fall in Adam; and thus, he is a “supralapsarian” regarding God’s act as influenced by nothing outside of Himself.

But a “hyper” Calvinist is one who goes beyond the teaching of Scripture—from which alone the great Reformer formulated his theology—resorting to reasoning and philosophizing upon various aspects of truth, which leads to his repudiating other aspects thereof. He makes an idol of “consistency”—i.e. what appears to be consistent to *his* mind. He attempts to square everything by the rule of logic. Since he finds that Scripture teaches particular redemption, that Christ obeyed and suffered only in the stead and on the behalf of God’s elect, he regards the “free offer” of the Gospel to all who hear it as “contradictory.” Since fallen man be totally depraved, dead in trespasses and sins, utterly incapable of

performing a spiritual act, he deems it “inconsistent” to exhort and call upon the unregenerate to repent and believe in order to their salvation. Since God be absolute sovereign, working in men both to will and to do of His good pleasure, bestowing or withholding as He pleases, he cannot see how that man is, at the same time, fully responsible for all his actions. Often he fails to perceive the connection which God has appointed between means and ends.

In like manner, since God has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass, to speak of an enjoying of His best (rather than His second or third best) and *missing* His best, strikes some as meaningless if not erroneous expressions. Before proceeding farther let us explain what we intend by “enjoying God’s best.” We mean (as we have written before) for the saint to have daily communion with God, to walk in the light of His countenance, for His Word to be sweet unto our taste, light to our understanding, strength to the inner man. It is for prayer to be a delight, for answers of peace to be received without intermission, for the channel of supplies to remain unchoked, open. It is to have the mind stayed upon Him, to have a conscience void of offence, to have full assurance of our acceptance in Christ. It is for our graces to be kept healthy and vigorous, so that faith, hope, love, meekness, patience, zeal, are in daily exercise. And such *should be* the experience of every Christian.

By God’s “best” we mean a personal experience of His approbation; a manifest enjoyment of His favour in grace, in providence, and in nature. It is not to be limited unto the receiving of His special favours in a spiritual way, but includes as well His interpositions on our temporal behalf. It is to have the blessing of the Lord upon our lives, in all their varied aspects and relations, upon the soul and body alike. It is to enjoy the sense of His approval, and have Him showing Himself strong in our behalf. Though it does not mean that such a one will be exempted from the ordinary vicissitudes and trials of life, but rather that such will be sanctified unto him and result in increased blessing, for they not only make a way for God to put forth His power in delivering him from them or elevating his heart above them, but they also serve

for the developing of his graces and provide opportunities for him to “glorify Him in the fire;” nevertheless, it *does* mean that such a one will escape those troubles and afflictions in which the follies of so many Christians involve them: it does mean that he will be immune from those sore chastisements which disobedience and a course of backsliding necessarily entail.

Before considering those just requirements of God which must be met if we are to enjoy His best, let us point out that the particular aspect of truth which is here engaging our attention concerns not the Divine decrees, but rather the Divine *government*: for the one consists solely of the exercise of God’s sovereign will, whereas the other is concerned also with the discharge of our responsibility. In no sense whatever is there the slightest failure in God’s accomplishment of His eternal purpose, either as a whole, or in any of its parts; but in many respects God’s people fail to possess their possessions and enjoy those privileges and blessings to which the blood of Christ entitles them. This subject presents no difficulty to the writer, except the finding of suitable language to accurately express his thoughts; nor should it to the reader. The formation and the effectuation of God’s eternal decrees are in no wise affected by man: he can neither delay nor hasten them. But the present government of this world by God *is*, in large measure, affected and determined by the actions of men (His own people included), so that in this life they are, to a very considerable extent, made to reap according as they sow, both in spirituals and in temporals.

It is not sufficiently realized that the Bible has far, very far, more to say about this *present life* than it has about the future one, that it makes known the secrets of temporal felicity as well as everlasting bliss. Granted that the latter is of immeasurably more importance than the former, yet the one is the prelude to the other, and unless God be our satisfying Portion here, He certainly will not be so hereafter. In their zeal to tell men how to escape from Hell and make sure of Heaven, many evangelical preachers have had all too little to say upon our conduct on earth, and consequently many who entertain no doubt whatever that they will inhabit a mansion

in the Father's house, are not nearly so much concerned about their present walk and warfare as they should be; and even though they reach their desired haven, such slackness results in great loss to them now and will do so for ever. The teaching of Holy Writ is the very reverse of the plan followed by many an "orthodox pulpit:" it not only gives much prominence to, but in Old and New Testament alike its main emphasis is on our life in *this* world, giving instruction how we are to conduct ourselves here now.

In like manner, there has been a grievous departure from the Analogy of Faith in the presentation of the attitude of God and His conduct towards men. Few indeed who have stressed the sovereignty of God have given even a proportionate place to His governmental dealings, either with nations or with individuals, the elect or the reprobate. Yet for every passage in His Word which speaks of God's eternal counsels, there are scores which describe His time dealings, and for every verse which alludes to God's secret or decretive will, there is a hundred which describe His revealed or preceptive will. Blessed indeed is it to ponder God's predestinating grace; equally important is it that we study those principles which regulate His providential dealings with us. The governmental ways of God, that is His dealings with us in this life, both in our spiritual and temporal affairs, are determined by something more than an arbitrary sovereignty. God has established an inseparable connection between our conduct and its consequences, and He acts in such a way toward us as to make manifest the pleasure He takes in righteousness and to give encouragement to those performing it; as He evidences His displeasure against the unrighteous and makes us to smart for the same.

It is a very great and serious mistake to conceive of the sovereignty of God as swallowing up all His perfections, and to attribute all His actions unto the mere exercise of His imperial will. Holy Writ does not; nor should we do so. Instead, much is said therein of God's acting both in mercy and righteousness, for *they* are the chief principles which regulate His governmental ways. It is true that mercy is shown by mere prerogative (Rom. 9:18), but

not so with righteousness. God can no more suspend the operation of His righteousness than He can cease to be. “The righteous Lord loveth righteousness” (Psa. 11:7); “the Lord is righteous in all His ways” (Psa. 145:17); “Righteousness and judgment are the habitation of His throne” (Psa. 97:2). It was predicted of the Messiah that “righteousness should be the girdle of His loins” (Isa. 11:5), and we are told that since He loved righteousness and hated iniquity “*therefore* God, Thy God, hath anointed Thee with the oil of gladness above Thy fellows” (Psa. 45:7). Alas that so many have completely lost the balance between God’s sovereignty and God’s righteousness. It is His *righteousness* which regulates all His dealings with the sons of men now, as it is “in righteousness He will judge” them in the Day to come. It is His righteousness which *requires* God to punish vice and reward virtue, and therefore does He bless His obedient children and chasten His refractory ones.

The central thing which we wish to make clear and to impress upon the reader is that God has established an inseparable connection between holiness and happiness, between our pleasing of Him and our enjoyment of His richest blessing; that since we are always the losers by sinning, so we are always the gainers by walking in the paths of righteousness, and that there will be an exact ratio between the measure in which we walk therein and our enjoyment of “the peaceable fruits of righteousness.” God has declared “them that honour Me, I will honour” (1 Sam. 2:30), and *that* expresses the general principle which we are here seeking to explain and illustrate, namely that God’s governmental dealings with us are regulated by our attitude toward Him and our conduct before Him: for in proportion as we honour the Lord, so will He honour us. But suppose we fail to honour God, suppose we do not obtain from Him that grace which He is ever ready to give unto those who earnestly seek it in a right way—what then? Why, we shall not enter into His best for us; we shall miss it. For as the same verse goes on to tell us, “and they that despise Me shall be lightly esteemed.” (1 Sam. 2:30)

“This Book of the Law shall not depart out of thy mouth, but thou shalt meditate therein; for *then* thou shalt make thy way

prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success” (Joshua 1:8). That expresses in plain and simple language the basis on which we may enter into and enjoy God’s best for us. The believer is not to be regulated by his own inclinations or lean unto his own understanding; he is not to be governed by any consideration of expediency or the pleasing of his fellows, but seek to please God in all things, being actuated by a “thus saith the Lord” in everything he does. Nothing less than full and constant obedience to God is what is required of him. However distasteful to the flesh, whatever sneers it may produce from professing Christians, the saint must rigidly and perpetually act by the Rule that God has given him to walk by. In so doing he will be immeasurably the gainer, for the path of *obedience* is the path of *prosperity*. Conformity unto the revealed will of God may indeed entail trial, nevertheless it will be richly compensated in this life, both in spiritual and temporal bounties.

It cannot be too strongly insisted upon that the path of God’s precepts is the way of *blessing*. Though the treading thereof incurs the frowns of the profane world, and the criticisms of not a few in the professing world, yet it ensures the smile and benediction of our Master! Those words “for then shalt thou make thy way *prosperous*” are from the mouth of “the God of Truth” and are to be received by us without the slightest quibbling, and treasured in our hearts. The “prosperity” does not always immediately appear, for faith has to be tried and patience developed, yet in the long run it will most surely be found that in keeping the Divine commandments “there is great reward” (Psa. 19:11). So Joshua found it: he adhered strictly to the Divine Law, and God crowned his labours with success; and that, dear reader, is recorded for our encouragement. Yet if we would prosper as Joshua did, then we must act as he did! That conditional promise made to Joshua was very far from being a special one made to him only—rather does it belong equally to every servant and child of God, for His governmental ways have been the same in all dispensations. From the beginning of human history it has always been true, and to the very end of history it will continue so to be, that “no good thing

will He withhold from them that walk uprightly” (Psa. 84:11).

Long before Joshua was born Elihu had affirmed “If they obey and serve Him they shall spend their days in prosperity and their years in pleasure” (Job 36:11); and centuries after Joshua’s death, the Holy Spirit declared through Zechariah “Thus saith God, why transgress ye the command of the Lord, that ye cannot prosper?” (2 Chron. 24:30). Nor is there any justification to insist that such statements pertained only to the Mosaic economy. If we unhesitatingly apply to our own day that precious word in Isaiah 1:18, “Come now, let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow, though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool,” is it honest to refuse taking unto ourselves the very next verse “If ye be willing and obedient ye shall eat the good of the Land?” The principles which regulate God’s providential dealings with His people are in no way altered by any change made in the outward form of His kingdom upon earth. The teaching of the New Testament is equally express: that “Godliness is profitable for *all* things: having promise of the life that *now is* and of that which is to come” (1 Tim. 4:8), yet the fulfilment of that promise is conditional upon our keeping of the Divine precepts, upon our personal piety.

There is a definite *proviso* on which we are warranted to hope for an enjoyment of God’s best. That was announced by Joshua and Caleb when they said unto Israel, “*If* the Lord delight in us then He will bring us into this land and give it us” (Num. 14:8). That term “delight” has no reference there unto that Divine love unto the souls of believers which is the source of their salvation, but rather to His complacency in their character and conduct. So also is it to be understood in the words used by David when he was fleeing from the conspiracy of Absalom: “Carry back the ark of God into the city: if I shall find favour in the eyes of the Lord, He will bring me again and show me both it and His habitation. But if He thus say, I have *no delight* in thee; behold, here am I, let Him do to me as seemeth good unto Him” (2 Sam. 15:25, 26). David certainly could not mean by that language, If God have no love for my soul, I am willing to be for ever banished from Him; for such

submission is required of none who lives under a dispensation of mercy. Rather did he signify, If God approve not of me as I am the head of His people, let Him take away my life if that so pleaseth Him.

As we must distinguish between the twofold “will,” the twofold “counsel” and the twofold “pleasure” of God, so we must between His eternal love for and His present delight in us, between His acceptance of us in Christ and the acceptableness of our character and conduct unto Him—it is the *latter* which determines His governmental smile upon us. If any reader deems that distinction an artificial and forced one, then we ask him, Is no differentiation to be made between those words of Christ unto the Father “Thou lovedst Me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24) and His declaration “Therefore doth My Father love Me because I lay down My life . . . This commandment have I received of My Father” (John 10:17, 18)? Is not one the Father’s love of Christ’s person, and the other His approbation of His obedience? So again, must we avoid confounding “I have loved thee with an everlasting love” (Jer. 31:3) and “For the Father loveth you *because* ye have loved Me and have believed that I came out from God” (John 16:27)? Of Enoch it is said “before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God” (Heb. 11:5), whereas of Israel in the wilderness He declared “I was grieved with that generation” (Heb. 3:10)!

It must not be inferred from what has been said above that the one who walks in the paths of righteousness brings God into his debt or that he merits favour at His hands. Not so, for nothing that we can do profits *God* anything, and if we rendered perfect obedience unto His every precept, we had merely performed our duty and rendered unto God what is His rightful due. On the other hand, it is very plain that *we* profit from and are the gainers by our obedience. Scripture has not a little to say upon the subject of *rewards*. It goes so far as to teach that the joys of the future will bear a definite relation and proportion to our conduct in the present, such as obtains between sowing and reaping (Gal. 6:7. 8). If then the future rewarding of the saints according to their work

(Rev. 22:12) clashes neither with the grace of God nor the merit of Christ, then the *present* rewarding of them cannot do so, for no difference in place or condition can make any difference as to the nature of things. Deity does not hesitate to take as one of His titles “The Lord God of recompenses” (Jer. 51:56), and many are the passages which show Him recompensing righteousness even in this world.

We have already alluded to Psalm 19:11, where we are told of God’s statutes and judgments that “in keeping of them there is great reward” and we simply call attention now to the tense of that statement: not “shall be,” but *is so* now. A part of that present “reward” is described in such verses as “Great peace have they which love Thy Law, and nothing shall offend [be a “stumbling-block” to] them” (Psa. 119:165); “the work of righteousness [right doing] shall be peace, and the effect of righteousness, quietness and assurance for ever” (Isaiah 32:17). Such too is the testimony of Psalm 58:11, “So that a man shall say, Verily there *is* a reward for the righteous; verily He is a God that judgeth in [governs, administers the affairs of] the earth.” “The righteous [i.e. the one whose practices conform to the Rule of Righteousness] shall flourish like the palm tree, he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon . . . to show that the Lord is upright” (Psa. 92:12-15), i.e. to make it evident that He takes notice of and richly blesses such. “Behold, the righteous shall be recompensed in the earth” (Prov. 11:31). On the other hand, “The Lord will punish Jacob according to his *ways*, according to his doings will He recompense him” (Hosea 12:2).

It is an unalterable law of the Divine government that as we sow, so shall we reap. That principle is enunciated and illustrated all through the Scriptures. On the one hand, “they have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind” (Hosea 8:7); on the other, “sow to yourselves in righteousness, reap in mercy” (Hosea 10:12). “Even as I have seen, they that plough iniquity and sow wickedness, reap the same” (Job 4:8). “Therefore shall they eat of the fruit of their own way” (Prov. 1:31). “But to him that soweth righteousness shall be a sure reward” (Prov. 11:18). Our Lord taught precisely the same thing when He said, “There is no man

that hath left house, or parents or brethren, or wife, or children, for the kingdom of God's sake, who shall not receive manifold more in this *present* time and in the world to come life everlasting" (Luke 18:29, 30). So too the apostles: "He which soweth sparingly, shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully" (2 Cor. 9:6). "The fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace" (James 3:18). It is lamentable that such passages are so rarely heard from the pulpit.

It is right here that we have the key to a class of passages which has puzzled and perplexed not a few, namely, those which speak of the Lord's *repenting*. To say that such an expression is a figure of speech, God's condescending to employ our language, though true, really *explains* nothing. But the difficulty is at once removed when it be seen that the reference is not to the modifying of God's eternal decrees, but rather unto His governmental ways; signifying that when men alter their attitude and conduct toward Him, the Lord changes in His *dealings* with them—withholding the judgment threatened, or bestowing the blessing which their sins had kept back. The general principle is clearly expressed in, "At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up and to pull down, and to destroy it, *If* that nation against whom I have pronounced turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them. And at what instant I shall speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it, *If* it do evil in My sight, that it obey not My voice, then I will repent of the good wherewith I said I would benefit them" (Jer. 18:7-10).

There is no "if" whatever about the Divine foreordination, but there *is* in connection with human responsibility. Necessarily so, for in the enforcing thereof the alternatives of recompense must be stated. Many of the woes which God pronounces against kingdoms are not declarations of His eternal decrees or infallible predictions of what is about to take place, but rather ethical intimations of His sore displeasure against sin, and solemn threatenings of what must inevitably follow if there be no change for the better in those

denounced: whether or no those impending judgments are to become historic realities is contingent upon their readiness to heed those warnings, or their refusal to do so. The passage quoted above enunciates that basic moral law by which God governs the world, telling us that He approves of obedience and righteousness wherever it be found, and rewards the same; whereas He hates the opposite and punishes it (see Prov. 14:34). Jeremiah 18 sets not before us God as the Determiner of human destiny, but as the Dispenser of temporal awards, governing in equity and in accordance with the discharge of human accountability, showing He is ever ready to prosper the righteous.

The same principle pertains unto the individual. “Then came the word of the Lord unto Samuel, saying, It repenteth Me that I have set up Saul to be king: for he is turned back from following Me and hath not performed My commandments” (1 Sam. 15:11). That does not mean God *regretted* His former act of enthroning Saul, but that because of his defection the Lord would *reverse* it and depose him (verse 26). Thus we see that God’s governmental actions are determined—in part, at least—by man’s conduct. We say “in part,” for God does not act uniformly, and some of His ways in providence are “past finding out,” as when He suffers the righteous to be severely afflicted, and the wicked to flourish like a green bay tree. If righteousness were always visibly rewarded and wickedness punished in this life, there would be no room for the exercise of faith in God’s justice, for the Day of Judgment would be anticipated instead of presaged. Nevertheless, if we strike a balance and take the history of each nation or individual as a whole, God’s moral government is now apparent, for we are daily made to see and feel that we are the losers by sinning and the gainers by holiness.

If the balance is to be duly preserved here and a proper concept formed of God’s moral government, then it requires to be pointed out that His justice is tempered with *mercy*, as well as patience. Therefore does He grant “space to repent,” and where that clemency be availed of, God acts accordingly. For as many of those Divine promises which respect earthly good are conditional

upon the performance of obedience, so many of the Divine judgments threatened are averted upon a reformation of manners. “If so be they will hearken, and turn every man from his evil way, that I may repent Me of the evil, which I purpose [better, “think”] to do unto them because of the evil of their doings” (Jer. 26:3). Perhaps the most remarkable example of that is seen in the case of wicked Ahab, who, when he heard the sentence of woe pronounced, “rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his flesh, and fasted, and lay in sackcloth, and went softly.” And we are told that the Lord said, “*Because* he humbleth himself before Me, I will not bring the evil in his days, but in his son’s days” (1 Kings 21:20-29).

Let us now consider more definitely a few of those Scriptures which make known what God requires of us if we are to enter into and enjoy His best. Some of them have already been before us in a general way, but they require to be examined from a more particular viewpoint. “This Book of the Law shall not depart out of thy mouth, but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein; for *then* thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and *then* thou shalt have good success” (Joshua 1:8). That is so plain no interpreter is needed. “Then,” first, when our speech is ordered by God’s Word, all of our converse being consonant thereto. “The mouth of the righteous speaketh wisdom and his tongue talketh of judgment.” And why? “The Law of God is in his heart” (Psa. 31:30, 31). Second, in order thereto, it must be made our constant “meditation.” It is by daily pondering the words of Scripture that we obtain a better understanding of them, fix the same in our memories, and become more fully conformed to them in our souls. Third, that our meditation must be with a definite design and practical end: to “do,” to walk obediently.

“For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong in the behalf of those whose heart is perfect toward Him” (2 Chron. 16:9). The word generally used for “perfect” (*tamim*) signifies sincere, but here a different one (*shalem*) is employed, meaning *whole*. A “whole heart” is in

contrast with a “divided” one (Hosea 10:2), which pertains to him who vainly seeks to serve two masters, the “double-minded man” who is “unstable in all his ways” (James 1:8). Those with a whole heart love the Lord their God with all their mind, soul and strength. They make Him their Portion, find their delight in Him, constantly seek to please and glorify Him. Their affections are undivided, their aim in life is one, like Caleb they “*wholly* follow the Lord” (Deut. 1:36). And such receive distinctive favours from Him. The “eyes of the Lord” speaks of His knowledge, and their “running to and fro throughout the earth” means that He governs this world in infinite wisdom. The reference is to His *providential* dealings: His eye directs His hand, and both are employed in His giving special supplies and support to those who make Him their All in all.

“And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper” (Psa. 1:3). *There* is what we intend by one’s enjoying God’s *best*. But to whom does the “he” refer? To the “blessed man” in the context. The one who has completely broken with the world: “who walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.” Observe that the man whom God pronounces “blessed” is one that is careful about his *walk*. He refuses to follow the advice of the unregenerate. They will urge him to be broad-minded and warn him against being too strict, and press upon him the maxims of the world, but he heeds them not. He is very particular about his associates, knowing that those with whom he is intimate will either be a help or a hindrance to him spiritually. Evil communications corrupt good manners, and therefore he refuses to fraternize with the Christless. And so must you, young Christian, if you desire the smile of God to be upon you.

This opening Psalm strikes the keynote of the whole Psalter, and has for its theme the blessedness of the righteous, i.e. those who tread the paths of righteousness; and contrasts the portion and doom of the ungodly. And the first thing emphasized of that righteous one is that he has turned his back upon the world, for it is

at *that* point practical godliness begins. There can be no walking with God, no real communing with Christ, no treading of “the way of peace,” until that word is heeded: “Come out from among them and be ye separate, saith the Lord,” (2 Cor. 6:17). Second, it is said of this blessed man, “But his delight is in the Law of the Lord, and in His Law doth he meditate day and night.” He is completely subject to God’s authority and makes His revealed will the rule of his life. Nor does he force himself to do so against his inclinations, for his *delight* is in the same. That is evidenced by its constantly engaging his thoughts, for “where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matt. 6:2 1). The mind is regulated by the affections: what the heart is most set upon most engages our thoughts—as gold does the covetous. And the one who conforms to the requirements of Psalm 1:1, 2, will certainly experience the blessings of 1:3.

There is the less need for us to dwell upon other passages, for they speak for themselves. “The young lions do lack and suffer hunger, but they that seek the Lord shall not want any good thing” (Psa. 34:10). That is, those who put Him first (Matt. 6:33), who seek Him wholeheartedly (Jer. 29:13), who diligently inquire after His will and earnestly endeavour to please and glorify Him in all things, shall not lack any good—which is assured them as an encouragement for obedience. “No good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly” (Psa. 84:11). As the Puritan, Thomas Brooks, pointed out, “Now this choice, this large promise, is made over only to the upright, and therefore as you would have any share in it maintain your uprightness.” In his explanation of “them that walk uprightly,” John Gill included “Who have their conversation according to the Gospel of Christ, and walk in the sincerity of their hearts.” “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: a good understanding [see margin] have all they that do His commandments” (61:10). Upon which John Gill said “Some understand it ‘good success’ or ‘prosperity,’” and added, “such usually have prosperity in soul and *body*, in things *temporal* and *spiritual*,” with which we fully concur.

“Let not mercy and truth forsake thee: bind them about thy neck,

write them upon the table of thine heart. *So shalt thou find favour and good success in the sight of God and man*” (Prov. 3:3, 4). Was it not so with Joseph in Egypt (Gen. 39)? Was it not so with David in Saul’s household (1 Sam. 18)? Was it not so with Daniel and his fellows in Babylon? “For God giveth to a man that is *good* in His sight, wisdom, and knowledge, and joy” (Eccles. 2:26): the phrase “a man that is good in His sight” is rendered “who pleaseth God” in Ecclesiastes 7:26. The passages which teach that God deals with men in this life according to their conduct are too many to cite, and the marvel is that the minds of so few professing Christians of this age are really affected by them. Take that well-known word, which has been illustrated all through history, “I will bless them that bless thee [Abram] and curse him that curseth thee” (Gen. 12:3), which so far from being exceptional, only exemplifies the principle we are seeking to demonstrate. Take again, “Blessed is he that considereth the poor, the Lord will deliver him in time of trouble; the Lord will preserve him and keep him alive: he shall be blessed upon the earth” (Psa. 41:1, 2).

Consider now some concrete cases. “And the Angel of the Lord called unto Abram out of heaven the second time and said, By Myself have I sworn saith the Lord, for *because* thou hast done this thing and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, that in blessing I will bless thee. . . and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, *because* thou hast obeyed My voice” (Gen. 22:15-18). What could possibly be plainer? So again God said to Isaac, “I will make thy seed to multiply as the stars of heaven and will give unto thy seed all these countries . . . *because* that Abram obeyed My voice, and kept My charge, My commandments” etc. (Gen. 26:4,5). “My servant Caleb *because* he had another spirit with him and followed Me fully, *him* will I bring into the land” (Num. 14:24). “Wherefore say, Behold I give unto him [Phinehas] My covenant of peace, and he shall have it, and his seed after him, even the covenant of an everlasting priesthood, *because* he was zealous for his God and made an atonement for the children of Israel” (Num. 25:12,13). “Hebron therefore became the inheritance of Caleb. . .*because* he wholly followed the Lord God” (Joshua

14:14).

Said David, “The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness, according to the cleanness of my hands hath He recompensed me” (2 Sam. 22:21). It seems strange that any one possessed of a spiritual mind should be perplexed by these words, for if they be understood according to their original and obvious meaning, there is nothing in them to occasion any difficulty. Let them be read in the light of their context, and they are clear and simple. David was alluding to God’s delivering of him from Goliath and Saul, and from others of his foes: what had been his conduct toward them? Had he committed any serious crimes such as warranted their hostility? Had he grievously wronged any of them? Had they justly or unjustly sought his life? Read the record of David’s history, and it will be found that it contains not a hint that he coveted the throne or hated Saul. As a fact, he was entirely innocent of any evil designs against any of them who so sorely persecuted him. This is plain from one of his prayers to God, “Let not those who are mine enemies *wrongfully* rejoice over me, neither let them wink with the eye that hated me without a cause” (Psa. 35:19).

It was because David had neither given his enemies just reason for their persecution and because so far from retaliating, he had borne them no malice, that he now enjoyed the testimony of a good conscience. His character had been grievously aspersed and many hideous things laid to his charge, but his conduct had been upright and conscientious to an uncommon degree. “In all his persecutions by Saul, he would not injure him or his party; nay, he employed every opportunity to serve the cause of Israel, though rewarded by envy, treachery and ingratitude” (Thomas Scott). When we are maligned and opposed by men, it is an inestimable consolation to have the assurance of our own heart unto our innocency and integrity, and therefore we should spare no pains when passing through a season of such trial in exercising ourselves “to have always a conscience void of offence, toward God and man” (Acts 24:14). David, then, was not here giving vent to the boasting of a pharisaical spirit, but was avowing his innocency before the bar of

human equity. One is not guilty of pride in knowing himself to be innocent, nor is he so when realizing that God is rewarding him in providence because of his integrity; for each is an evident matter of fact.

In saying “The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness” David enunciated one of the principles operative in the Divine government of this world. “Albeit that the dispensations of Divine grace are to the fullest degree sovereign and irrespective of human merit, yet in the dealings of Providence there is often discernible a rule of justice by which the injured are at length avenged and the righteous ultimately delivered” (C. H. Spurgeon). That statement evinces an intelligent grasp of the viewpoint from which David was writing, namely the governmental ways of God in time, and *not* the ground upon which He saves eternally. Those declarations of the Psalmist had nothing whatever to do with his justification in the high court of heaven, but concerned the guiltlessness of his conduct toward his enemies on earth, because of which God delivered him from them. It would indeed be most reprehensible for us to transfer such thoughts as are expressed in 2 Samuel 22:20-28, from the realm of providential government into the spiritual and everlasting kingdom, for *there* grace reigns not only supreme, but alone, in the distribution of Divine favours. On the other hand, a godly man with clear conscience must not deny his own consciousness and hypocritically make himself out to be worse than he is.

There are those who would dismiss by a wave of the hand what has been adduced above by saying, All that is Old Testament teaching, what occurred under the Dispensation of Law. But such an objection is utterly pointless, for the principles of the Divine government are *the same* in every era, and therefore the teaching of the New Testament on this subject is identical with that of the Old. For example: “Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy” (Matt. 5:7). That has nothing whatever to do with “salvation by works,” for in those verses Christ is describing the character of His true disciples. Here He tells us they are “merciful,” and in consequence “shall obtain mercy.” It is not that

God requires the unregenerate to be merciful in order to entitle them unto His saving mercy, but rather that the regenerate *are* merciful, and according as they act in their true character, so will God order His governmental ways and paternal discipline toward them—“with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again” (Matt. 7:2). On the one hand, “with the merciful, Thou wilt show Thyself merciful” (Psa. 18:25); on the other, “But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt. 6:15).

That both Christ and the Father act toward Christians in keeping with their conduct is clear from John 14:21, 23—such “manifestations” are withheld from those who fail to walk obediently. “For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love which ye have showed toward His name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister” (Heb. 6:10), which clearly implies that He would be unrighteous if He did not reward their benevolence. “For he that will love life and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil and his lips that they speak no guile. Let him eschew evil and do good; let him seek peace, and ensue it” (1 Pet. 3:10, 11). “We have here an excellent prescription for a comfortable, happy life in this querulous, ill-natured world” (Matthew Henry). To those who follow that prescription, John Gill said, “such shall inherit the blessing, both *here* and hereafter.” “Whatsoever we ask, we receive of Him, *because* we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight” (1 John 3:22)! “*Because* thou hast kept the Word of My patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation which shall come upon all the world to try them that dwell upon the earth” (Rev. 3:10).

Missing God’s Best

Having shown at some length that the Old and New Testament alike teach there *is* such a thing as entering into any enjoying God’s best—that if we meet His just requirements He will make our way prosperous—we must turn now to the darker side of the subject, and face the fact that it is sadly possible to *miss* God’s best

and bring down upon ourselves adversity. God has not only promised “no good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly” (Psa. 84:11), but He has also plainly informed us “Your iniquities have turned away these things, and your sins have withholden good things from you” (Jer. 5:25). Upon which John Gill said, “these mercies were kept back from them in order to humble them, and to bring them to a sense of their sins, and an acknowledgement of them.” Adversities do not come upon us at haphazard, but from the hand of God; nor does He appoint them arbitrarily, but righteously. God will no more wink at the sins of His people than He will at those of the worldlings: were He to do so, He would not maintain the honour of His house. As Thomas Manton also pointed out on Jeremiah 5:25, “If there be any restraint of God’s blessing it is because of man’s sin.”

“The way of transgressors is hard” (Prov. 13:15): while no doubt the primary reference there is unto the wicked, yet the principle expressed applies unmistakably to the redeemed as well. If, on the one hand, in keeping God’s commandments there is “great reward,” on the other hand, the breaking of them involves great loss. If it be true that Wisdom’s ways are ways of pleasantness and all her paths are peace (Prov. 3:17), certain it is that if we turn from her ways, we shall be made to smart for it. Alas, how often we stand in our own light and choke the current of God’s favours. It is not only an “evil thing” but a “bitter” one to forsake the Lord our God (Jer. 2:19). That is why sin is so often termed “folly,” for it is not only a crime against God, but madness toward ourselves. Many are the mischief’s caused by our sinning, the chief of which is that we obstruct the flow of God’s blessings. Sin costs us dear, for it not only immediately takes from us, but it prevents our future receiving of Divine bounties. In other words, wilful sinning prevents our receiving God’s best for us.

“Believe in the Lord your God, *so* shall ye be established; believe His prophets, *so* shall ye prosper” (2 Chron. 20:20) states the principle clearly enough. Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and your souls shall be settled in peace and joy; receive with submission every discovery of His will through His Word and

servants, and His providential smile shall be your portion. But, conversely, lean unto your own understanding and suffer unbelief to prevail, and assurance and tranquillity of soul will wane and vanish; let self-will and self-pleasing dominate, and His providences will frown upon you. The connection between conduct and its consequences cannot be broken. Walk in the way of faith and holiness and God is pleased, and will evidence His pleasure toward us; enter the paths of unrighteousness and God is provoked, and will visit His displeasure upon us. When Israel's land was laid waste and their cities were burned, they were told "Hast thou not procured this unto thyself, in that thou hast forsaken the Lord thy God, when He led thee by the way?" (Jer. 2:17). Upon which Matthew Henry said, "Whatever trouble we are in at any time, we may thank ourselves for it, for we bring it upon our own hands by our forsaking of God." "The curse causeless shall not come" (Prov. 26:2).

Missing God's best is true of the *unsaved*. As long as unbelievers are left in this world, opportunity is given them of escaping from the wrath to come. Therefore they are exhorted—in the Scriptures, if not from the pulpit—"Seek ye the Lord while He may be found, call ye upon Him while He is near" (Isa. 55:6). For the same reason there is a *door* represented as being *open* to them, which the Master of the house will one day rise up and shut to (Luke 13:24, 25). Nothing could more clearly express the danger of delay than the language used in such passages. Nor is there anything in them which at all clashes with the Divine decrees. As one has pointed out, "All allow that men have opportunity in *natural* things to do what they do not, and to obtain what they obtain not; and if that be consistent with a universal providence which performeth all things that are appointed for us (Job. 23:14), why cannot the other consist with the purpose of Him who does nothing without a plan, but 'worketh all things after the counsel of His own will' (Eph 1:11)."

Slothfulness is no excuse in those who refuse to improve their lot; nor is intemperance any extenuation for a man's bringing upon himself physical, financial, and moral disaster. Still less does either

prejudice or indolence release any from his accountability to accept the free offer of the Gospel. “Wherefore is there a price in the hand of a fool to get wisdom, seeing he hath no heart to it?” (Prov. 17:16). The “price in his hand” signifies the means and opportunity. “Wisdom” may be understood both naturally and spiritually. The “fool” is the one who fails to obtain what he might well and should procure. The reason he does not is simply that he lacks “a heart” or desire and determination. As Matthew Henry said, “He has set his heart upon other things, so that he has no heart to do his duty, or to the great concerns of his soul.” Such fools the world is full of: they prefer sin to holiness, this world rather than heaven. “He who in his bargains exchanges precious things for trifles is a fool. Thus do men sell their time which is their money given for eternity, and they sell it for things unsatisfying, they sell themselves for naught” (Thomas Goodwin); and thereby they miss God’s best.

“Wherefore is there a price in the hand of a fool to get wisdom, seeing he hath no heart to it?” (Prov. 17:16). After interpreting those words first as natural wisdom and knowledge, and “the price” as the worldly substance which a foolish man spends on riotous living, instead of purchasing useful books for the improvement of his mind, none other than John Gill said upon its higher application: “or spiritual wisdom and knowledge: the means of which are reading the Word, frequent opportunities for attending on a Gospel ministry. . . conversation with Gospel ministers and other Christians; but instead of making use of these he neglects, slights and despises them. And it is asked, with some degree of indignation and astonishment, why or to what purpose a fool is favoured with such means? *seeing* he hath no heart to it? to wisdom: he does not desire it, nor to make use of the price or means in order to obtain it; all is lost upon him, and it is hard to account for why he should have this price when he makes such an ill use of it.” But Gill created his own difficulty: God provides the non-elect with spiritual means and opportunities to enforce their responsibility, so that their blood shall be upon their own heads, that the blame is *theirs* for missing His best.

But it is the Christian's doing so that we have chiefly in mind. Sad indeed is it to behold so many of them living more under the frown of God than His smile, and sadder still that so few of them have been taught *why* it is so with them, and *how* to recover themselves. The New Testament makes it clear that many of the primitive saints "ran well" for a time, and then something hindered them. Observation shows that the majority of believers "follow the Lord fully" (Num. 14:24) at the *outset* but soon "leave their first love." At the beginning, they respond readily to the promptings of the Spirit and adjust their lives to the requirements of the Word, until some demand is made upon them, some self-denying duty is met with, and they balk. Then the Holy Spirit is grieved, His enabling power is withheld, their peace and joy wane, and a spiritual decline sets in. Unless they put right with God what is wrong—repent of and contritely confess their sad failure—the rod of chastisement falls upon them; but instead of being "exercised thereby" (Heb. 12:11) some fatalistically accept it as "their appointed lot," and are nothing bettered thereby.

Now the Lord has plainly warned His people that if they meet not His just requirements, so far from enjoying His best, adversity will be their portion. "Take good heed therefore unto yourselves, that ye love the Lord your God. *Else* if ye do in any wise go back, and cleave unto the remnant of these nations, even these that remain among you, and shall make marriages with them, and go in unto them and they to you: Know for a certainty that the Lord your God will no more drive out any of these nations from before you; but they shall be snares and traps unto you, and scourges in your sides, and thorns in your eyes, until ye perish from off this good land which the Lord your God hath given you" (Joshua 23:11-13). The Jews held Canaan by the tenure of their obedience, and so do those who belong to "the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:15) now possess and enjoy their spiritual Canaan in proportion to their obedience. But as God has forewarned, "If His children forsake My Law, and walk not in My judgments; if they break My statutes and keep not My commandments; then will I visit their transgression with the rod and their iniquity with stripes. Nevertheless my loving-

kindness will I not utterly take from him, nor suffer My faithfulness to fail” (Psa. 89:30-33).

That passage makes it unmistakably clear that while the chastenings from our Father proceed from both His faithfulness and holy love, yet they are also marks of His displeasure; and that while they are designed for our good—the recovery of us from our backsliding—yet they have been provoked by our own waywardness. The Father’s rod is not wielded by an arbitrary sovereignty, but by righteousness. It is expressly declared, “For He *doth not afflict willingly* nor grieve the children of men” (Lam. 3:33), but only as we give Him occasion to do so. That important statement has not received the attention it deserves, especially by those who have so focused their thoughts upon God’s eternal decrees as to quite lose sight of His governmental ways. Hence the tragic thing is that when chastisement becomes *their* portion, they know of nothing better than to “bow to God’s sovereign will,” which is very little different in principle from the world’s policy of “seeking to make the best of a bad job,” or “we must grit our teeth and endure it.” Such a fatalistic and supine attitude ill becomes a regenerate soul; instead, he is required to be “exercised thereby”(Heb 12:11).

Only too often such “bowing to the will of God” is so far from being a mark of spirituality, it rather evinces a sluggish conscience. God bids His people “*hear ye the rod*” (Mich. 6:9). It has a message for the heart, but we profit nothing unless we ascertain what the rod is saying to us—why it is God is now smiting us! In order to discover its message, we need to humbly ask the Lord “*show me* wherefore Thou contendest with me” (Job 10:2); “cause me to understand wherein I have erred” (Job. 6:24); reveal to me wherein I have displeased Thee, that I may contritely acknowledge my offence and be more on my guard against a repetition of it. The holiness of God will not tolerate sin in the saints, and when they go on in the same unrepentingly, then He declares, “Therefore, behold, I will hedge up thy way with thorns” (Hos. 2:6). Note well “*thy way*,” not “My way.” God sets the briars of trials and the sharp thorns of afflictions in the path of His disobedient children.

If that suffices not to bring them to their senses, then he adds “and make a wall that she shall not find her paths” (Hos. 2:6)—His providences block the realization of their carnal and covetous desires.

“But My people would not hearken to My voice, and Israel would have none of Me. So I gave them up unto their own heart’s lusts: they walked in their own counsels. Oh that My people had hearkened unto Me, Israel had walked in My ways! I *should* soon have subdued their enemies and turned My hand against their adversaries . . . He *should* have fed them also with the finest of the wheat, and with honey out of the rock should I have satisfied thee” (Psa. 81:11-16). When we meet with a passage like this our first duty is to receive it with meekness, and not to inquire, How is it to be harmonized with the invincibility of the Divine decrees? Our second duty is to prayerfully endeavour to understand its sense, and not to explain away its terms. We must not draw inferences from it which contradict other declarations of Holy Writ, either concerning the accomplishments of God’s purpose or His dealing with us according to our conduct. Instead of reasoning about their teaching, we need to turn these verses into earnest petition begging God to preserve us from such sinful folly as marked Israel on this occasion.

There is nothing in those verses which should occasion any difficulty for the Calvinist, for they treat not of the eternal foreordinations of God, but of His governmental ways with men in this life. For the same reason there is nothing in them which in any wise supports the Arminian delusion that, having created men free moral agents, God is unable to do for them and with them what He desires without reducing them to mere machines. We should then, proceed on that which is obvious in them, and not confuse ourselves by reading in them anything obscure. The key to them is found in verses 11, 12: Israel walked contrary to God’s will—not His decreative, but His preceptive. They acted not according to the Divine commandments, but, in their self-will and self-pleasing, determined to have their own way; and in consequence they forfeited God’s best for them. Instead of His subduing their

enemies, He allowed the heathen to vanquish them. Instead of providing abundant harvests, He sent them famines (2 Sam. 21:1). Instead of giving them pastors after His own heart, He suffered them to be deceived by false prophets (cf. 2 Thess. 2:10, 11).

“Oh that thou hadst hearkened to My commandments! then had thy peace been as a river, and thy righteousness as the waves of the sea” (Isa. 48:18). On which even John Gill said, “their prosperity, temporal and spiritual, had been abundant, and would always have continued, have been increasing and ever-flowing.” Failure to walk in the paths of God’s precepts deprives us of many a blessing. In his review of *The Life and Letters of the late James Bourne* (*Gospel Standard*, October 1861), Mr. Philpot said, “There is deep truth in the following extract”—a sentence or two of which we here quote: “If I pay no reverence to such a word as this, ‘Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good’ (Rom. 12:21), I shall fall into bondage, and find my prayer shut out. It will prove a hindrance to my approaches to God, for ‘If I regard iniquity in my heart the Lord will not hear me’ (Psa. 66:18) . . . If you attend not to the word of *exhortation*, you will find no communion with His people, no blessing of God upon the work of your hands.”

After describing the sore judgments of God which were about to fall upon the wayward children of Israel, His faithful servant told them plainly, “Thy way and thy doings have procured these things unto thee: this is thy wickedness, because it is bitter, because it reacheth unto thy heart” (Jer. 4:18). Upon which John Gill said “those calamities coming upon them, they had none to blame but themselves; it was their *own* sinful ways and works whereby that this ruin and destruction come on them.” Consider also this passage: “Ye looked for much and lo, it came to little: and when ye brought it home, I did blow upon it. *Why?* saith the Lord of host” (Hag. 1:9). This searching question was put for their sakes, “that they might be made sensible of it, and in order to introduce what follows: ‘because of mine house that is waste’: which they suffered to lie waste, and did not concern themselves about the rebuilding of it; this the Lord resented, and for this reason blasted all their labours; and ‘ye run every man unto his own

house” (John Gill). How many a Christian today might trace God’s “blowing upon” *his* temporal affairs unto his putting his carnal interests before the Lord’s!

Consider now some individual examples. Do not the closing incidents recorded in the life of Lot make plain demonstration that *he* “missed God’s best?” Witness his being forcibly conducted out of Sodom by the angels, where all his earthly possessions, his sons, and his sons-in-law perished; and when his wife was turned into a pillar of salt for her defiance. Behold his intemperance in the cave, then unwittingly committing incest with his own daughters—the last thing chronicled of him! But “was there not a cause?” Go back and mark him separating from godly Abraham, coveting the plain of Jordan, pitching his tent “toward Sodom” (Gen. 13:12). Though “the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners before the Lord exceedingly,” yet Lot settled in their midst, and even “sat in the gate of Sodom” (Gen. 19:1), i.e. held office there! Is it not equally evident that *Jacob* too missed God’s best? Hear his own sad confession near the close of his career: “few and evil have the days of my life been” (Gen. 47:9). And is the explanation far to seek? Read his history, and it should at once be apparent that he was made to reap exactly as he had sown.

The chequered life of David supplies us with more than one or two illustrations of the same principle. Few men have experienced such sore social and domestic trials as he did. Not only was David caused much trouble by political traitors in his kingdom, but, what was far more painful, the members of his own family brought down heavy sorrows upon him. The second book of Samuel records one calamity after another. His favourite wife turned against him (6:20-22), his daughter Tamar was raped by her half brother (13:14), and his son Ammon was murdered (13:28, 29). His favourite son, Absalom, sought to wrest the kingdom from him, and then met with an ignominious end (18:14). Before David’s death, yet another of his sons sought to obtain the throne (1 Kings 1:5), and he too was murdered (1 Kings 2:24,25). Since the Lord afflicts not willingly, but only as our sins give occasion, it behoves us to attend closely to what led up to and brought upon

David those great afflictions. Nor have we far to seek. Read 2 Samuel 3:2-5, and note his *six wives*: he gave way to the lusts of flesh, and of the flesh he “[reaped] corruption” (Gal 6:8)!

Painful though it be for us to dwell upon the failings and falls of the sweet Psalmist of Israel, especially since in so many respects he puts both writer and reader to shame, yet it must be remembered that “whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for *our learning*” (Rom. 15:4)—that we might heed such warnings, and be preserved from similar backslidings. His grievous offence against Uriah and Bathsheba is prefaced by the fact that he was indulging in slothful ease, instead of performing his duty (2 Sam. 11:1, 2)—observe well the ominous “But” at the close of verse 1! Though David sincerely and bitterly repented of those sins and obtained the Lord’s forgiveness, yet by them he missed His best, and for the rest of his days lived under more or less *adverse* providences and the “sword” never departed from his house (2 Sam. 12:10). Nothing could more plainly evince that a holy God takes notice of our actions and deals with us accordingly, or make it manifest that it is our own folly which brings down the rod of God upon us. We read the historical portions of Scripture to little purpose or profit unless their practical lessons are taken to heart by us. Our consciences require to be searched by these narratives far more than our minds be informed by them!

Let us now point out that the same principle holds good in connection with the Divine government under the new covenant as obtained under the old. “And He did not many mighty works there *because of* their unbelief” (Matt. 13:58). What place has such a statement as that in the theology of hyper-Calvinists? None whatever. Yet it should have, otherwise why has it been placed upon record if it has no analogy today? As Matthew Henry rightly insisted, “Unbelief is the great obstacle to Christ’s favour The Gospel is ‘the power of God unto salvation,’ but then it is ‘to every one that believeth’ (Rom. 1:16). So that if mighty works be not wrought in us it is not for want of power or grace in Christ, but want of faith in us.” That was putting the emphasis where it must be placed if human responsibility is to be enforced. It was nothing

but hardness of heart which precluded them from sharing the benefits of Christ's benevolence. When the father whose son was possessed by the demon that the disciples had failed to expel, said unto the great Physician, "If Thou canst do any thing, have compassion on us, and help us," He at once turned the "if" back again upon him, saying, "If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth" (Mark 9:22-23).

That we are the losers by our folly and that we bring trouble down upon ourselves by unbelief is illustrated in the case of the father of John the Baptist. When the angel of the Lord appeared unto him during the discharge of his priestly office in the temple, and announced that his prayer was answered and his wife would bear a son, instead of expressing gratitude at the good news and bursting forth in thanksgiving unto God, Zacharias voiced his doubts. saying, "Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years" (Luke 1:18). Whereupon the angel declared, "Behold thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak until the day that these things shall be performed, *because* thou believest not my words" (Luke 1:20), upon which John Gill said, "He was stricken with deafness because he hearkened not to the angel's words, and dumbness because from the unbelief of his heart he objected to them. We learn from hence, what an evil unbelief is, and how much resented by God, and how much it becomes us to heed that it prevails not in us." To which he might well have added: and how God manifests His resentment against such conduct by sending adverse providences upon us!

Should it be said that the above incident occurred before the day of Pentecost—a pointless objection—then let us call attention to the fact that at a very early date *after* the establishment of Christianity God, in an extraordinary manner, visited with temporal judgments those who displeased and provoked Him. A clear case in point is the visible manner in which He dealt with Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5). So too when Herod gratefully accepted the idolatrous adulation's of the populace, instead of rebuking their sinful flattery, we are told, "And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, *because* he gave not God the glory;

and he was eaten with worms” (Acts 12:23). God *does* suit His governmental ways according to the conduct of men, be they unbelievers. Not always so plainly or so promptly as in the examples just adduced, yet with sufficient clearness and frequency that all impartial and discerning observers may perceive that nothing happens by chance or mere accident, but is traceable to an antecedent cause or occasion; that His providences are regulated by righteousness.

“For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such a one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Cor. 5:3-5). A member of the Corinthian assembly had committed a grave offence, which was known publicly. For the same, he was dealt with drastically: something more than a bare act of excommunication or being “disfellowshipped” being meant in the above verses. The guilty one was committed unto Satan for him to severely afflict his body—which is evidently meant by “the flesh” being here contrasted with “the spirit.” That Satan has the power of afflicting the body we know from Job 2:7; Luke 13:16, etc. And that the apostles, in the early days of Christianity, were endowed with the authority to deliver erring ones unto Satan to be disciplined by him, is evident from 2 Corinthians 10:8; 13:10; 1 Timothy 1:20. Thus we see how a Christian was here visited with some painful disease because of his sins.

It is sadly possible for Christians to miss God’s best through failure in their *home life*. This is evident from 1 Peter 3:7, “Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife as unto the weaker vessel, and as heirs together of the grace of life; *that* your prayers be *not hindered*.” Incidentally that verse inculcates family worship, the husband and wife praying together. Further, it teaches that their treatment of one another will have a close bearing upon their joint supplications, for if domestic harmony does not obtain, what unity of spirit can there be when they come together before the throne of grace? By

necessary implication that also shows how essential it is that they be “equally yoked together,” for “what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?” (2 Cor 6:14). What joint act of worship is possible between a child of God and a child of the Devil, between a regenerate soul and a worldling? Yet even where both the husband and the wife be true Christians, they are required to regulate their individual conduct by the precepts which God has given unto each of them: the wife that she be “in subjection to” her husband and diligent in cultivating “a meek and quiet spirit” (1 Pet. 3:1-6): the husband that he heeds the injunctions here given; otherwise their petitions will be “hindered,” and God’s best forfeited.

First, the husband is to act according to his knowledge that his wife is “the weaker vessel,” which is not said in disparagement of her sex. As one has pointed out, “It is no insult to the vine to say that it is weaker than the tree to which it clings, or to the rose to say it is weaker than the bush that bears it. The strongest things are not always therefore the best—either the most beautiful or the most useful.” Second, as such he is to “give honour to her:” that is, his superior strength is to be engaged for her defence and welfare, rendering all possible assistance in lightening her burdens. Her very weakness is to serve as a constant appeal for a patient tenderness and forbearance toward her infirmities. Furthermore, he is ever to act in accordance with her spiritual equality, that they are “heirs together of the grace of life.” Not only should the love which he has for her make him diligent in promoting her well-being, but the grace of which he has been made a partaker should operate in seeking the good of her soul and furthering her spiritual interests: discussing together the things of God, reading edifying literature to her when she is relaxing, pouring out together their thanksgivings unto God and making known their requests at the family altar.

Then it is, when those Divine requirements are met by both wife and husband, that they may plead that promise, “If two of you *shall agree* on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be

done for them of My Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 18:19). That agreement is far more than verbal or even mental: it is a spiritual one. The Greek word is *sumphoneo*, and literally signifies “to sound together.” It is a musical term, as when two different notes or instruments make a harmonious sound. Thus, there must be oneness of heart, unity of spirit, concord of soul, in order for two Christians to “agree” before the throne of grace, for their joint petitions to be harmonious and melodious unto the Lord. It is music in the ear of their Father when the spiritual chords of a Christian husband and a Christian wife vibrate in unison at the family altar. But that can only obtain as they singly and mutually conduct themselves *as* “heirs together of the grace of life,” their home life being ordered by the Word of God, everything in it done for His glory: the wife acting toward her husband as the Church is required to do as the Lamb’s Wife, the husband treating her as Christ loves and cherishes His Church.

Contrariwise, if the wife rebels against the position which God has assigned her and refuses to own her husband as her head and lord, yielding obedience to him in everything which is not contrary to the Divine statutes, then friction and strife will soon obtain, for a godly husband must not yield to the compromising plea of “peace at any price.” Equally so, if the husband takes unlawful advantage of his headship and he tyrannical, then, though the wife bear it meekly, her spirit is crushed, and love is chilled. If he treat her more like a servant or slave than a wife, the Spirit will be grieved, and he will be made to smart. If he be selfishly forgetful of her infirmities, especially those involved in childbearing, if he be not increasingly diligent in seeking to lighten her load and brighten her lot as the family grows, if he exercises little concern and care for her health and comfort, then she will feel and grieve over such callousness, and harmony of spirit will be gone. In such a case, their prayers will be “hindered,” or, as the Greek word signifies, “cut off”—the very opposite of “agree” in Matthew 18:19! By domestic discord the heart is discomposed for supplication, and thus God’s best is missed.

From the second and third chapters of the Revelation we learn

that the Lord treats with local churches on the same principles as He does with individuals: that they too enter into or miss His best according to their own wisdom or folly. Thus, to the pastor of the Ephesian assembly, He declared, “I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; *or else* I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent” (2:4, 5)—how many such a “candlestick” *has* thus been removed! To the careless and compromising ones at Pergamos, who then suffered in their midst those who held doctrine which He hated, the Lord solemnly threatened, “Repent or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight *against* thee with the sword of My mouth” (2:14, 15)—those churches which are slack in maintaining holy discipline invite Divine judgment. While to the boastful and worldly Laodiceans the Lord declared, “I will spue thee out of My mouth” (3:16)—I will no longer own thee as My witness.

Writing on the need of members of a local church having “the same care of one another” (1 Cor. 12:25) and pointing out how that James 2:1-4, supplies an example of a company of saints where the opposite practice obtained, one wrote: “Instead of having the same care, when we make a difference between him ‘with a gold ring and goodly apparel’ and him or her with vile or poor clothing, we are being ‘partial’ ... Do not be deceived with the thought that God does not behold such partiality: He will not prosper that church, but the members of the whole body will be made to suffer from this lack of the ‘same care for one another.’” And we would point out that this brief quotation is not taken from any Arminian publication, but from a recent issue of a magazine by the most hyper-Calvinist body we know of in the U.S.A. What we would particularly direct attention to in it is that when such a carnal church is “made to suffer” because of the pride and selfishness of some of its officers or members, then it has *missed* God’s best. How many such churches are there in Christendom today!

“For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep” (1 Cor. 11:30). Here is a clear case in point where many

Christians missed God's best, and brought down upon themselves His temporal judgments because of their own misconduct. "For this cause" refers to their having eaten of the Lord's supper "unworthily" or unbecomingly—see verses 20 and 21. When numerous cases of sickness and death occur in a Christian assembly, they are not to be regarded as a matter of course, but made the subject of a searching examination before God and a humbling inquiring of Him. God was not dealing with these Corinthian saints in mere sovereignty, but in governmental righteousness, disciplining them for a grave offence. He was manifesting His displeasure at them because of their sins, afflicting them with bodily sickness—which in many instances ended fatally—on account of their irreverence and intemperance, as the "For this cause" unmistakably shows. This too has been recorded for our instruction, warning us to avoid sin in every form, and signifying that the commission of it will expose us to the Divine displeasure even though we be God's dear children. Here, too, we are shown that our entering into or missing of God's best has a real influence upon the health of our bodies!

That same passage goes on to inform us how we *may avert* such disciplinary affliction! "For if we would judge ourselves we should not be judged" (1 Cor. 11:31). There is a Divine judgment to which the saints are amenable, a judgment pertaining to this life, which is exercised by Christ as the Judge of His people (1 Pet. 4:17). To Him each local church is accountable; unto Him each individual believer is responsible for his thoughts, words and deeds. As such He walks "in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks" (Rev. 2:1). Nothing escapes His notice, for "His eyes are as a flame of fire" (Rev. 19:12) and before Him all things are naked and opened (Heb. 4:13). Not that He is strict to impute every iniquity, or rigorous to punish, for who then could stand before Him? The Lord is in no haste to correct His redeemed, but is slow to anger and loth to chasten. Nevertheless He is holy, and will maintain the honour of His own house, and therefore does He call upon His erring ones to repent under threat of judgment if they fail to do so. Not that He ever imposes any *penal* inflictions for their sins, for He personally

suffered and atoned for *them*; but out of the love He bears them He makes known how they may avoid His governmental corrections.

“If we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged.” There are some of the Lord’s people who, when they be overtaken in a fault, expect immediate chastisement at His hands, and through fear of it their knees are feeble and their hands hang down. But that is going to the opposite extreme from careless indifference: both of which are condemned by the above verse. It is a law of Christ’s judgment that “if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged.” That is, if we make conscience of having offended, and go directly to the Judge, unsparingly condemning ourselves and contritely confessing the fault to Him, He will pardon and *pass it by*. Though they be far from parallel, yet we may illustrate by the case of Nineveh under the preaching of Jonah. When the prophet announced “yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown” (Jonah 3:4), more was intended than was expressed. He was not there proclaiming God’s inexorable fiat, but was sounding an alarm to operate as a means of moral awakening. That “forty days” opened a door of hope for them, and was tantamount to saying, Upon genuine repentance and true reformation of conduct, a reprieve will be granted. That is no mere inference of ours, but a fact clearly attested in the immediate sequel.

“So the people of Nineveh *believed God*, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth” (verse 5); while the king published a decree to his subjects: “Cry mightily unto God: yea, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands. Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from His fierce anger, that we perish not?” And we are told, “And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil that He had said He would do unto them; and He did it not” (verses 5-10). God’s “repenting” here means that He altered in His *bearing* toward them because their conduct had changed for the better, thereby averting the judgment with which He had threatened them. Now if God dealt thus with a heathen people upon their repentance and reformation, how much more will Christ turn away the rod of chastisement from His redeemed when they

truly repent of their sins and humble themselves before Him! For *them* there is no mere “who can tell if God will turn and repent,” but the definite and blessed assurance that “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

“For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged.” O what tenderness and Divine longsufferance breathe in those words! That even when we have erred, yea, sinned grievously, a way is opened for us whereby we may escape the rod. Ah, but what Divine wisdom and righteousness are also evinced by them! “If we would *judge* ourselves” we should escape the disciplinary consequences of our sins. And why so? Because the rod is no longer needed by us. Why not? Because in such a case the desired effect has been wrought in us without the use of it! What is God’s design *in* chastisement? To bring the refractory one to his senses, to make him realize he has erred and displeased the Lord, to cause him to right what is wrong by repentance, confession, and reformation. When *those* fruits are borne, then we *have* “heard the rod” (Micah 6:9) and it has accomplished its intended work. Very well then, if we truly, unsparingly, and contritely “judge” ourselves before God for our sins, then the rod is not required. Having condemned himself, turned back into the way of holiness, sought and obtained cleansing from all unrighteousness, he is brought to the very point—only more quickly and easily!—to which chastening would bring him!

“For if we *would* judge ourselves:” those very words seem to imply there is both a slowness and a reluctance in the saints so to do a thought which is confirmed in the next verse. Alas, many of those who have left their first love are in such a backslidden and sickly case spiritually that they are incapable of judging themselves. Their conscience has become so dull through the frequent excusing of what they deemed trifling things, their walk is so careless, that they offend their Judge and are virtually unaware of doing so. “Strangers have devoured his strength, and he knoweth it not; yea, grey hairs [the mark of decline and decay] are here and there upon him, yet he knoweth not” (Hos. 7:9). Since,

then, they are *not* exercised over their sins, the rod must awaken them; for their holy Lord will not tolerate unconfessed sins in His own. But others, who have not deteriorated to such a sad degree, are conscious of their faults, yet nevertheless do not judge themselves for the same. Why? What causes such reluctance to humble themselves before God? What, but accursed pride! In such case, His mighty hand will bring them down, and hence it follows:

“For when we *are* judged, we are *chastened* of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world” (1 Cor. 11:32). Such was the case with the Corinthians. They sinned again and again in different ways, and were unexercised. They were “carnal,” and among them were envying and strife, yet they judged not themselves. The Lord gave them space for repentance, but they repented not, until, in the profanation of His holy supper, He was obliged to act, visiting them with bodily sickness and death. Thus, from the words, “when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord,” the conclusion is inescapable: we have failed *to condemn* ourselves. As it is a rule of Christ’s kingdom that when His people own their offences and turn from the same, He spares the rod; so it is equally a rule in His kingdom that when they sin and confess it not, but continue in the same, then He chastens them. And there is infinite mercy in that, for it is *that* they “should not be condemned with the world.” His own wayward children are chastised here in this world, but the ungodly will bear the full punishment of their sins for ever and ever in Hell! Sin *must be* “condemned:” either by us, or by the righteous Judge—here, or hereafter. How much better to judge ourselves and thereby escape His judgment!

The first of two booklets.

