



**SEVEN
PASTOR'S**

Sketches

By Ichabod Spencer

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The Arrow Driven Deeper

Finding it impossible, on account of the number, to have much conversation with each individual at the inquiry meeting, I at one time abandoned the practice of conversation for a few weeks, and addressed them all together. I found this was unacceptable, and concluded, therefore, to return to the former custom. It was on one of those evenings, when about seventy persons were present, and I was passing rapidly from one to another, that I came to an individual who had never been there before.

Said I: "What is the state of *your* feelings on the subject of your salvation?"

"I feel," said he, "that I have a very wicked heart."

"It is a great deal more wicked than you think it," said I; and immediately left him, and addressed myself to the next person.

I thought no more of it till a few days afterwards, when he came to me with a new song in his mouth. He had found peace with God, as he thought, through faith in Jesus Christ. Said he: "I want to tell you how much good you did me. When I told you that I had a very wicked heart, and you answered that it was a great deal more wicked than I thought, and then said nothing more to me, I thought it a most cruel thing. I expected something different. I thought you would say more, and my soul was wonderfully cast down. I did not believe you. I was angry at your treatment. I thought you did not care whether I was ever saved or not; and I did not believe you knew anything about my feelings. But the words rung in my ears, 'A great deal more wicked than you think.' I could not get rid of them. They were in my mind the last thing when I went to sleep, and the first when I woke. And then I would be vexed at you for not saying something else. But that was the thing which drove me to Christ. I now know it was just what I needed. I thought, when I went to that meeting, my convictions were very deep. But I have found out they were very slight. You hit my case exactly. If you had talked to me, my burden would

have been diminished. But you fastened one idea on my mind. You drove the arrow deeper, when I expected you to do just the contrary; and I could find no relief till I gave up all into the hands of Christ. I know you read my heart exactly.”

After some few minutes’ conversation with him, he said to me, “I want to ask you a question. I have been thinking of it a great deal, and I cannot conceive how you know what to say to each one, where there are so many. We have been talking about it some of us, and we cannot understand how it is that you can know our thoughts and feelings, when nobody has told you. How can you know what to say to one after another, when there are so many, and some of them you have never seen before, and they say so little to you?”

“I have only one rule on that subject,” said I. “I aim to conspire with the Holy Spirit. If I perceive any one truth has impressed the mind, I aim to make its impression deeper; because the Holy Spirit has already made that impression, and I would not diminish it by leading the mind off to something else. If I perceive any error in the individual’s mind, I aim to remove it; for I know that the error is of sin, and not of the Holy Spirit.”

“But,” said he, “our impressions are so different.”

“No matter. They are of the Holy Spirit if truth has made them; and he can choose the kind of truth which is appropriate to any sinner, better than I can. I just aim to conspire with the Holy Spirit.”

Said he, “I am confident if you had said much to me, or anything, to turn my mind away from that one thing, it would have done me hurt. You have no idea how much you increased my trouble that night. I somehow wanted you to lighten my burden, — you made it heavier. Then I was soon led to see that none but God could help me. I had partly begun to think my heart was improving. I found out the contrary, and turned to God in despair. He gave me peace, through Jesus Christ.”

The Holy Spirit Resisted

As I was riding through a village, in which I was almost a

stranger, I saw a number of young people entering a schoolhouse. The clergyman of the place was standing by the door. He beckoned to me to stop. He told me he had appointed a meeting for inquiry, and was surprised to find so many assembling. He wished me to go in, and have some conversation with those who were there. I asked to be excused, as I was on my way to fulfil an engagement, where I *must be* punctually at the time. He would not excuse me, I must *stop*, if “only for five minutes.”

He conducted me into a room, where were fifteen young women. “Say *something*,” said he, “to every one of them.” I did, though I was not in the room ten minutes. At the same time, he was conversing with some young men in another apartment.

As I passed from one to another, in this rapid conversation, I came to a young lady about twenty years of age, whose countenance indicated great agitation of feeling. Said I, “Do you feel that you are a sinner, unreconciled to God?”

“Yes, I do; I am a *lost sinner!*”

“Can you save *yourself*?”

“None but Christ can save *me!*”

“Why, then, don’t you come to him? He is willing to save you; he *loves* to save sinners like you.”

“Indeed I do not know! My heart is hard and wicked; and I am afraid I never shall be saved! “ She burst into tears, which she seemed anxious to suppress, and buried her face in her handkerchief.

“How long have you been in such deep trouble of mind?”

“For three weeks,” said she, sobbing aloud.

“Then, *for three weeks you have done nothing but resist the Holy Spirit!*”

I left her and passed to the next individual. In a few minutes I left the room, and went on my way.

The next week, as I was riding in a carriage alone, a few miles from the same village, I saw before me a young gentleman and a young lady in a carriage, riding in an opposite direction, and I was just meeting them. She appeared to be trying to induce him to stop, and he did not seem to understand what she wanted. She

finally took hold of the reins herself, stopped the horse, and motioning to me, I reined up also; and we sat in our carriages, face to face, and close together.

“That was true — that was true, sir,” said she.

“What was true?” said I. For I did not know who she was, though I recognized her face as one that I had seen.

“What you told me at the inquiry meeting that morning, — that I had done nothing for three weeks but resist the Holy Spirit. That expression pierced my very heart. I did not believe it. I thought I was *yielding* to the Holy Spirit, because I was anxious and had begun to seek the Lord; and I thought you was most *cruel* to speak to me so. I did not believe you, but I could not get the idea out of my mind. It clung to me night and day, ‘For three weeks you have done nothing but resist the Holy Spirit.’ That expression opened my eyes. And I could not let you pass us here, without stopping to tell you how much I thank you for it.

She said this very rapidly, her eyes swimming with tears, and her countenance beaming with joy. Her whole heart seemed to be embarked in what she was saying.

By this time I fully recognized her, and recollected my former hurried interview with her. For a few minutes I conversed with her, as we sat in our carriages. She hoped that God had given her a new heart. She was at peace not only, but full of joy. “Oh, I am happy,” said she, “I am so happy. You opened my eyes. You told me just the truth. I thought you was a cruel man. I wanted you to explain yourself, but you would not stop to hear me. As I reflected on what you said, I hated you with all my heart. But the words would come up, ‘For three weeks you have done nothing but resist the Holy Spirit.’ It seems to me now, that if you had said anything else, or made any explanation as I wanted you to, I should not have been led to Christ. I can never thank you enough for the words which showed me my very heart.”

I have not seen her since. I learned that a few weeks afterwards she made a public profession of religion. Her pastor told me that he esteemed her highly, as one of the most intelligent and accomplished of his flock. She belonged to a very excellent

family. She possessed a discriminating mind; and did she err in thinking that for three weeks she had done nothing but resist the Holy Spirit?

Excitement

While God was pouring out his Spirit upon the congregation to which I ministered, and upon many other places around us, two individuals belonging to my parish went to a neighbouring town to attend a “camp meeting.” One of them was a young man of about twenty years of age, whose mother and sisters were members of the Church. The other was a man of about twenty-six years, whose wife and wife’s sister were also communicants with us. Both of these men returned from that meeting professed converts to Christ. They had gone to it, as they told me, without any serious impressions, impelled by mere curiosity. While there they became very much affected; so much so, that one or both of them fell to the ground, and remained prostrate for an hour, unable to stand. They earnestly besought the people to pray for them, and prayed for themselves. Their feelings became entirely changed. Instead of grief and fear, they were filled with joy and delight. And in this joyful frame of mind they returned home, having been absent only two or three days.

I soon visited them both, and conversed with them freely. At my first interview I had great confidence in their conversion. They seemed to me to be renewed men, so far as I could judge from their exercises of mind. They appeared humble, solemn, grateful, and happy. In future conversations with them, my mind was led to some distrust of the reality of their conversion. They did not seem to me to have an *experimental knowledge of the truth*, to such an extent as I believed a regenerated sinner would have. I could get no satisfactory answers when I asked, “What made you fall? How did you feel? What were you thinking of? What made you afterwards so happy? What makes you so happy now? What makes you think God has given you a new heart? What makes you think you will not return to the world and love it as well as ever?” They had ready answers to all such questions, but they did not

seem to me to be *right* answers. They appeared to have no clear and full ideas of the exceeding sinfulness of the heart, of remaining sin, or the danger of self-delusion. And yet these men were prayerful, thoughtful, serious, and happy. They studied their Bibles, forsook their old companions, and appeared to value and relish all the appointed means of grace. In this way of life they continued for months, I took pains to see and converse with them often; and though they did not appear to me to blend very happily in feeling with other young Christians, or to enjoy our religious services as if they were quite satisfied, yet my mind apologized for them, on the ground of the peculiar way in which their religion commenced. And with the exception of their imperfect views and feelings about the great doctrines of religion, I saw nothing in either of them to make me think them unfit for connection with the Church.

Some months after their professed conversion, I mentioned to them, separately, the subject of making a public profession of their faith. Each appeared to think this his duty, but each of them was rather reserved. I could not very definitely ascertain their feelings, though I aimed carefully and kindly, and repeatedly to do so. One season of communion after another passed by, and neither of them united with the Church. Their particular friends, who had made such frequent mention of their conversion, as if it were more worthy of mention than the conversion of scores of sinners around them, and who had so much rejoiced in their conversion, and had been so confident of its reality, began to be very silent about them. I found that their confidence in them was shaken.

Within a year from the time when they professed to have turned to Christ, the younger man had become entirely careless of religion; and, so far as I know, continues so to this day. The other one was a little more steadfast. But within three years he had become an intemperate man, and a shame and a torment to his family; and the last I heard of him, he was a drunkard! He had ceased to attend divine worship on the Sabbath; family prayer was abandoned; his children were neglected; and his broken-hearted wife, with prayer for him still on her lips, but almost without hope

that God would hear, was fast bending downward towards the grave, the only remaining spot of an earthly rest!

Mere excitements of mind on the subject of religion, however powerful, unless they arise from the known truth of God, are never safe. Excitement, however sudden or great, is not to be feared or deprecated, if it is originated simply by the truth, and will be guided by the truth. All other excitements are pernicious. It is easy to produce them, but their consequences are sad. A true history of spurious revivals would be one of the most melancholy books ever written.

The great leading doctrines of Christianity are the truths which the Holy Spirit employs when he regenerates souls. If young converts are really ignorant on such points, not having experimentally learnt them, they are only converts to error and deception. It is not to be expected, perhaps not to be desired, that young Christians should understand doctrines scholastically, or theologically, or metaphysically; but if they are Christians indeed, it is probable that their mind will be *substantially* right on such doctrines as human sinfulness, divine sovereignty, atonement, justification by faith in Jesus Christ, regeneration by the special power of the Holy Spirit, and the constant need of divine aid. God's children all have the same image, and same superscription — the family mark. Heaven has but one mould. "Beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, we are changed into the same image."

Reliance on Man

As I was leaving the place of a morning prayer meeting, which was attended, in a time of revival, very early in the morning, a young man about sixteen years of age came to me, and asked permission to accompany me home, for "he wanted to talk with me."

"What do you wish to say to me?" said I.

"Why, I want you to tell me what to do."

"I have told you again and again. I can tell you nothing different, nothing new. You must repent, if you would be saved. You must give up your self-righteousness and flee to Christ. The

law condemns you. The sovereign grace of God only can save you. You must give up your miserable and long-continued attempts to save yourself. You must give God your heart, as he requires, and as I have explained to you already many times.”

“Yes, I know that, but I am so distressed! I cannot live so! I want you to tell me something else.”

“I cannot relieve your distress. Christ alone can give you rest. I have nothing else to tell you. I have told you all the truth — all you need to know.”

“I thought,” said he, “perhaps you could say something that would help me, if I went to your house.”

“So you have said to me more than once, and I have told you better. God only can help you. You must rely on him.”

“But I should like to talk with you again about my feelings, in your study.”

“It would do you no good. You have nothing to say that you have not said before, and I have nothing new to say to you.”

“Well, may I go home with you?”

“No. Go home. Man cannot help you. The whole matter lies betwixt yourself and God.”

He turned away, the most downcast creature I ever saw. It seemed as if his last prop was gone. He walked as if his limbs could scarcely carry him.

I had not been at home an hour before he came to tell me that his burden was gone. He said that after I “had cast him off,” all hope forsook him, and he “had nowhere else to go but to God.” Before he reached his home, about a mile, he had given all into the hands of God, and he felt so much relieved of his burden of sin and fear, that he thought he “would turn right about, and come right back and tell me.” “But,” said he, “I do not believe I should have gone to God if you had not cast me off.”

Anxious sinners are often kept from Christ by their reliance on men. A great amount of religious conversation often diminishes their impressions. It tends to blunt the edge of truth. It keeps the heart in a kind of reliance on men. Conversation with judicious Christians and judicious ministers is vastly important for inquiring

sinners, but there is a point where it should cease. All that men can do is contained in two things — to make sinners understand God’s truth, and make its impression upon their hearts and consciences as deep as possible. If they aim at anything more, they are just trying to do the work of the Holy Spirit. Visiting among inquirers one morning, I called on five different individuals, one after another, in the course of a single hour, and in each case was sorry I had called at all; for in each case, after a very few minutes of conversation, I was fully persuaded that God’s truth was deeply felt, and that anything which I could say would tend to diminish the impressions which the Holy Spirit was making on their hearts. I aimed to say just enough not to have them think I did not care for them; and got away as soon as I could, for fear of doing an injury. Every one of these individuals afterwards dated her religious hope from the same day. No man can preach so powerfully as the Holy Spirit. It is vastly important to know when to stop. The divine writers understood this. They are perfect examples. Their silence is to be imitated, as well as their utterance.

Superficial Conviction

There was much opposition to religion, at one time, among a few men, in the place where I was settled. It was in a season of revival. Probably the gospel was then preached with more than ordinary plainness. The complaint was made, that there was too much said about the justice of God, the terrors of the Law, and the wickedness of the human heart. They said that I “exaggerated” in respect to the danger of sinners, and made God appear as a terrible and odious Being, which was (in their words) “no way to lead men to religion.”

Just at that time, I was informed, that some young men were determined to attend the meeting in the evening, with stones in their pockets to stone me on the spot, if I ventured to preach about “depravity,” and “sinners going to hell.” This was an indication, I thought, that the doctrines of divine justice and human wickedness had alarmed them, and that these arrows ought to be “made sharp in the heart of the king’s enemies.” Therefore, I preached, that

evening, on these two points, the wickedness of men, and the anger of God against the wicked. There was no disturbance. Nobody stoned me. The opposers were present, and were seated near together. In the first part of the sermon, there was an occasional whisper among them, but they soon became attentive, and our meeting was one of stillness and deep solemnity.

Immediately after the service, I attended an inquiry meeting, to which I had publicly invited all unconverted sinners, who were disposed prayerfully to study divine truth. Some of the young men met me at this meeting. Within a few months some of them united with the church. Among them, there was one, who told me, at the time of his examination for church membership, that what had been reported of him was not true, — that he “had *not* carried stones in his pockets prepared to stone me.” Said he, “I know my heart was wicked enough to do almost anything, but it never was bad enough to do that.”

I noticed this expression. It was an unusual thing to hear such a remark. Directly the opposite was common. I therefore examined this young man the more carefully. But he appeared so sensible of his natural depravity, so humble, so docile, and so determined to live a life of holiness, that he gained my confidence, and he was received into the church. I thought that he might be a true believer, and still his views of divine doctrine be erroneous; and I knew very well, that many people regarded me as too strict on points of doctrine. And though I believed, and had always acted on the principle, that true experimental religion will always lead its subjects to a knowledge of the great essential doctrines of the Christian system, — indeed, that to experience religion is just to experience these doctrines, — I came to the conclusion, that this principle would not adjudge him to be unfit to become a communicant.

As long as he remained in the place (about two years,) he lived apparently a Christian life. But after he removed to a neighbouring city, away from his religious associates, and under a new kind of influences; he soon began to neglect public worship, violate the Sabbath, and finally became a profane and intemperate man. I

called to see him, and conversed with him. He was entirely friendly to myself; but he appeared blinded and hardened. He said he did not think himself to be very wicked: "Indeed," says he, "I never *Did* think my heart was so bad as some people tell of. I never did much hurt; and as to being so bad that I can't reform. I know that I can turn from sin when I please."

Probably my exertions for him did no good. The last that I heard of him was, that he grew worse and worse, and would probably die a miserable and drunken man.

I have often thought, that a truly regenerate man cannot have any doubt of the entire depravity of the heart. If he does not see that, it is probable that he does not see his heart. And hence, his repentance, his faith in Christ, and his reliance upon the Holy Spirit, will probably, all of them, be only deceptions. My observation continues to confirm more and more in the opinion, that *to experience religion, is to experience the truth of the great doctrines of Divine grace.*

Business Hindrance

A member of my congregation, a young man who was an apprentice, became attentive to the subject of religion; and, finally, his convictions became very distressing. I had many conversations with him. It all appeared to be in vain. He continued in his distress, without hope, and almost in despair.

One day he said to me, that he believed he never should obtain religion, if he did not quit work and devote his whole time and thought to the subject of his salvation. I told him that that would do him no good — that his duty was to work — that if he would not work he ought not to eat — that neglecting an earthly duty would not lead him to the discharge of a spiritual one. I argued the case with him strenuously on the ground of the Scriptures, "Six days shalt thou labour." I insisted upon it, that the Bible gave no such directions about work as he was inclined to follow — that if he expected to do his duty to God, he must not omit doing his duty to the world — that, at most, he ought not to do without working, any longer than he could do without eating, — for, "if any would

not work, neither should he eat” — and that this want of time was only an excuse of a deceitful heart, to keep him from an instant duty, that is, fleeing to Christ in faith.

But I could not convince him. He said his mind was drawn off from religion by his daily employment; and in his opinion, if he had nothing to do, but to seek God, to read and pray, he should soon find salvation. I told him he would be more likely to find a delusion, and *call* it salvation. But I could not shake him from his purpose.

He did quit work. He went away over the river, beyond the reach of his companions, got a room alone in an obscure house, and shut himself up with his Bible. He remained there a week. At the end of that time he called himself to give an account, examining his heart, whether he had made any progress. It seemed to him that he had made none at all. He then determined to be more diligent in the study of his Bible, more anxious in prayer, and to compel his obstinate heart to yield. He often attended our religious meetings in the evenings, and then would return to his solitude. He remained there three weeks; and, to his utter astonishment, he found his religious impressions almost entirely gone. He abandoned his retirement and came back to his work in self-defence. “I found,” said he, “my own heart was the worst companion I could have. If I cannot come to repentance in the workshop I am sure I never can *alone*. If I had stayed there much longer, I should have cared nothing about religion.”

He went to work. His seriousness returned; and in about four weeks he entertained a hope in Christ. He united with the Church, and I knew him for years afterwards. He appeared to be a decided and happy Christian.

The human heart will weave an excuse for impenitence out of anything. This want of time is a very common excuse. But it is a falsehood. The advice given to anxious inquirers so frequently in times of revival, to shut themselves up alone till they have found salvation, just misleads them. It makes them think they lack time for religion, while, in fact, they only lack heart. Let us obey the Bible.

I Can't Repent

One of the most solemn assemblies that I have ever seen, was convened on the evening of the Sabbath, in a private house. It was an inquiry meeting; at which more than a hundred persons were present, the most of them young or in middle life. The structure of the house was rather peculiar. There was a spacious hall, about ten feet wide and about forty feet long, extending from the front door along the side of three parlours which opened into it, as well as into each other; and at the rear part of this hall was a staircase extending to the second story of the house. Moveable benches were introduced into this hall, and placed along each side of it, to afford seats for those who attended this meeting, and who could not all be accommodated in the parlours. After the meetings had been continued in this place for a few weeks; it became manifest, that the hall was the preferred place. As the different persons came in and took their seats 'where they pleased, the seats in the hall would be filled, and then the stairs would be used as seats entirely to the top, and then the upper hall would be occupied, and finally the parlours I was accustomed to stand, while addressing the assembly, in one of the doors opening from the hall into the parlour, where my eye had a full view of all those in the hall, on the stairs and in one of the parlours. Besides a general exhortation, it was my ordinary custom to speak to each individual, passing from one to another. And all those in the hall and on the stairs could hear every word, which I uttered in this conversation, and the most of what any one said to me. And for these reasons, as I supposed, the persons who resorted there would choose the hall or the stairs. This listening of others, to what passed in conversation betwixt any one individual and myself, was never very pleasant to me. I should greatly have preferred to converse with each one alone; as there would have been less restraint on their part, and on my own, more certainty, that what I was saying would be truly applicable and would not be applied by any one, for whom it was not intended. And besides this, individuals would sometimes make expressions to me so

erroneous, that I was unwilling others should hear them, lest they might be injured by it. To avoid this, I used to speak in a low tone of voice; and if the expressions of any individual were becoming such, as I feared might be injurious; I usually broke off the conversation suddenly, by saying, I will call and see you tomorrow.

On the evening, to which I now allude; all the seats were filled, and three persons were seated on each stair entirely to the top, and many had found their place in the hall above. It was a calm and mild summer evening; and perfect stillness reigned over the crowd assembled there, unbroken except by the long breathing or the deep sigh of some pensive soul. I thought I had never seen so still, so solemn, and thoughtful an assembly. I closed the front door, after all had entered, and took my stand in my accustomed place. I hesitated to speak. I was afraid to utter a word. It seemed to me, that anything I could say would be less solemn, impressive, instructive, than that tomb-like silence in an assembly of so many immortal souls, each visited by the Holy Spirit. I stood, for some time, in perfect silence. The power of that silence was painful. The people sat before me, like statues of marble, — not a movement, — not a sound. It appeared as if they had all ceased to breathe. I broke the silence by saying slowly and in a low voice: — “Each one of you is thinking of his own immortal soul and of his God.” Again I paused for the space of an entire minute; for I was overawed, and knew not what to say. Then falling on my knees, I commenced prayer. They all spontaneously knelt. After a short prayer, I proposed to speak a few words to each one of them, as far as it was possible; and requested all of them, except the individual with whom I should be conversing, to be engaged in reflection or in silent prayer to God. Passing rapidly from one to another, I had spoken to all those in the parlours and in the hall, till I had reached about the middle of it, where every word spoken could be heard, by the whole assembly. Coming to a man, about thirty years of age, whom I had seen there three times before, I said to him: -

“I did not expect to see *you* here tonight. I thought you would

have come to repentance, before this time; and would have no occasion any longer to ask, ‘what shall I do to be saved?’”

“I *can’t repent*,” said he, with a sort of determined and despairing accent, and so loudly as to startle us all. Instantly, I felt sorry for this expression. But I thought it would not do to avoid noticing it, and leave it sounding in the ears of so many impenitent sinners. I immediately answered, as I stood before him, as gently and yet solemnly as I could: -

“What an awfully *wicked heart* you must have! You can’t repent! You love sin so well; that you cannot be sorry for it — you cannot forsake it — you cannot hate it! — You must be in an awful condition indeed! You are so much the enemy of God; that you cannot be sorry for having offended him — you cannot cease to contend against him — and even now, while you are sensible of the impropriety and unhappiness of it, you cannot cease to resist the Holy Spirit, who strives with you to bring you to repentance! — You must have an awfully depraved heart!”

“I *can’t repent*,” said he again, (with an accent of grief and intolerable vexation) — “I can’t repent, with such a heart!”

“That means,” said I, “that you have become too wicked to desire to become any better; for nothing but wickedness makes repentance difficult. And then, you just plead one sin, as an excuse for another — the sin of your heart, as an excuse for the continued sin of your heart!”

Still he insisted. “I *can’t repent*! I should if I could!” — (and the tears rolled down his cheeks, of which he seemed to be utterly unconscious, as well as unconscious of the presence of any one but myself.)

“You would if you could,” said I, “is only a self-righteous and self-justifying excuse. Your deceitful heart means by it, that you are not so wicked as to continue in your impenitence *willingly*. It means that you are *willing* to repent, but you cannot. You are deceived. You are *not* willing. You think you are, but you are in an error. You never *will* be willing, unless God shall verify in you the promise, ‘My people shall be willing in the day of my power.’ In that power lies your only hope, as I have told you before, when

I urged you to pray. If you are willing to repent, what hinders you? I am willing you should repent. All of us here are willing. Every angel in heaven is willing you should repent. Christ who died to redeem you is willing. God the Father is willing. The Holy Spirit is willing, who, at this moment strives with you to bring you to repentance. What hinders you, then? Yourself only! And when you say you can't repent, you mean that you are not to be blamed for coming here tonight with an impenitent heart. You are woefully deceived! God blames you! The whole Bible blames you! Your own conscience, though you strive to silence it, blames you! — This excuse will not stand!”

“I *can't* repent!” said he again, (in a harsh, vociferating voice, as if in anger.)

“Then God can't save you,” said I; “for he cannot lie, and he has said the impenitent shall be destroyed! *You* say you cannot repent. *He* has not said so. He commands you to repent.”

He replied, with much agitation, but in a subdued tone: — “I am sure I have tried long; and my mind has been greatly tormented. All has done no good. I do not see as I *can* repent!”

“Other people have repented,” said I. “There are a great many penitents in the world. I find there are some here tonight, who think they have come to repentance, since they were here last Sabbath evening. One of them told me *then*, very much the same thing you tell me now, that it did not seem to him he ever could turn from sin; but he has found out he can. As to your having tried so long, the length of time will not save you if a man has got his face turned the wrong way, the longer he goes on, the worse off he becomes. He would do well to stop, and turn about. Such is the call of the Bible: ‘Turn ye, turn ye, for why will ye die?’ ‘Repent, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions, so iniquity shall not be your ruin.’ ‘Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him return unto the Lord.’ Other people have turned to God, and you ought to. But your mind has seized on the idea of your trying and your trouble, and you make an excuse and a self-righteousness of them.”

“Do you think I am self-righteous?” said he.

“I know you are. That is your grand difficulty. You have been trying to save yourself. You are trying now. When you tried to repent, your heart aimed after repentance, as something to recommend you to God, and constitute a reason why he should forgive and save you. It was just an operation of a self-righteous spirit. It was just an attempt to save yourself, to have your religion save you, instead of relying by faith upon Jesus Christ, to be saved from wrath through him. This is precisely the case with every impenitent sinner. The error is one. The forms of it may be various; but in all cases it is substantially the same thing. St. Paul has given a perfect description of it: ‘going about,’ (from one thing to another, from one device or attempt to another,) ‘going about to establish a righteousness of their own, they have not submitted themselves to the righteousness of God; for Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth.’ One man tries to establish a righteousness of his own, out of his reformations; another one, out of his duties; another, out of his painful attempts or painful convictions; as you just now mentioned your own torments of mind. It is evident, that you are trying to be righteous before God, through your pain — and your attempted penitence. And if you should find any peace of mind in that way; it would only be a deception, not an item of religion in it. You ought to betake yourself to the Lord Jesus Christ, a poor, guilty, undone sinner, to be saved by him alone — saved by grace. You ought to go to him, just as you are, to be washed in his blood, to be clothed in his righteousness, to be sheltered from the thunders of God’s eternal law, in the security of his all-sufficient atonement. You ought to flee to Christ, like the man-slayer to the city of refuge, before he is cut down by the sword of the avenger of blood. You ought to go instantly, like the prodigal to his father, in all his poverty, starvation, and rags, as well as guilt. You ought to cry, like Peter sinking in the waves, ‘Lord, save me.’ But instead of this, you are just looking to yourself, striving to find something, or make something in your own heart, which shall recommend you to God. And in this miserable way, you are making salvation a far more difficult matter, than God has made it.

You have forgotten the free grace of the gospel, the full atonement of Jesus Christ, by the sacrifice of himself.”

“But,” said he, “I can’t repent and come to Christ, *of myself*.”

“I certainly never said you could; and never wished you to think you could. In *my* opinion, God does not wish you to think so. And if you have found out, that you cannot repent of yourself, aside from divine aid, I am glad of it — you have found out an important truth. Most certainly God does not tell you to repent *of yourself*. He tells you, that ‘Christ is exalted to give repentance.’ He says to every sinner, ‘Thou hast destroyed thyself, in me is thy help: let him take hold on my strength that he may make peace with me, and he shall make peace with me.’ On the ground that they need it, he has promised ‘the Holy Spirit to them that ask him.’ God never expects you to repent, without divine aid, but with it. He knows you are too wicked to do it, that you are without strength, helpless, undone, a *lost* sinner! — And here lies the very heart of your error. You have been trying to repent, in a way that God never told you, just by your own powers, instead of trying to get God to have mercy upon you, and save you by his help. You have been looking to the powers within you, instead of looking to the aid above you. You have trusted to yourself, instead of trusting yourself to the grace of Christ. And that is the very reason why you have failed; and now you complain, that you cannot repent; while, in reality, you have exactly the same sufficiency, as the penitent all around you. What has been their help, may be your help. And the sooner you are driven off from all that self-seeking and self-reliance, the better it will be for you. You are in the double error of undervaluing the character of God, and over-valuing your own. God is more merciful and more gracious, than you think him to be. He is more ready to save you. And when he commands you to repent, he does not wish you to forget, that all your hope lies in the immediate aid of his Holy Spirit. Nor does he wish you to attempt to dispense with that proffered assistance, by your not believing, that you are as utterly helpless as you really are. He does not tell you to rely upon your own shattered strength; but you have done so. And when you have failed, you then turn

round and complain, that you ‘can’t repent.’ You reject his offered help — the help of the omnipotent Spirit. And for this reason, you will be the more criminal, if you do *not* repent. That Divine Spirit is your only hope. If he leaves you to yourself, you are lost — eternally lost! Tread softly, my dear friend! The ground whereon thou standest is holy ground! Let not the Holy Spirit, who presides over the souls here this evening, bear witness against you in the day of the final judgment, — ‘because I have called and ye refused!’ You *can* repent; just in the way that others repent; just because God is your help. Trust him; and rely upon yourself no longer.”

As I was saying these things, he appeared to become much less affected, but much more thoughtful. His tears and his agitations ceased; and he seemed to hang upon my lips, as if he was listening to some new wonder. When I had done, all was hushed as death; and in a deliberate, subdued, and solemn tone, he broke that expressive silence, saying: -

“I hope, my God will help me.”

“Let us pray,” said I; — and a short prayer, pleading for God’s help, closed the exercises of the evening.

I afterwards found numerous reasons for believing, that that was one of the most profitable religious exercises, that I ever attended. Among others was the case of my friend, whose expression had drawn me somewhat out of my proposed mode of conducting the exercises of the evening. He became, as he hoped, a true believer. He stated to me the exercises of his mind, his repentance, his faith in Christ, his peace and hope, and his reliance upon the Holy Spirit. His mind appeared to seize upon the great truths of the gospel, almost without emotion. He had no ecstasy, no exultation, no joy. He had only peace and hope. he told me, that his agitations had all been useless to him; that they were not faith and did not lead to faith; and that he thought “sinners ought to attend to the calls of God, in a believing and business manner.” And when I asked him what had kept him from Christ so long, he replied: “I was trying to make myself better — to have a religion instead of trusting in Christ. What you said to me that night, showed me my

mistake; and I went home with a deeper sense of my dependence, and a clear view of the free grace of God to sinners, through the redemption of Christ.”

About six months after this he united with the church, and has continued to manifest an established and uniform faith.

To cut off the sinner from all reliance upon himself, his merits and his powers; and throw him, naked and helpless, into the hands of the Holy Spirit to lead him to Christ in faith; should be the one great aim of the ministry.

Sinners certainly ought to repent, for God commands them to repent. But in my opinion, he does not design to have them understand his command, as having respect only to their own ability to repent, and not having respect to the proffered aids of the Holy Spirit. Such aids constitute one grand ground on which his command is obligatory, and sweep away every possible excuse. No man ever did repent without the Holy Spirit, or ever will; and this is no small amount of proof that no man ever can. Nothing seems to be gained by making a sinner believe that he is able to repent without divine assistance. Such a belief will be very likely to mislead him to a reliance upon his own shattered strength and as to his conviction of criminality for *not* coming to repentance, surely there is strong ground for such conviction, since God offers him all the ability he needs, — *in me is thy help, — let him take hold on my strength that he may make peace with me.*

From ‘A Pastor’s Sketches’ Volume One by Ichabod Spencer.

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