

NEXT STEPS



WEEK 9

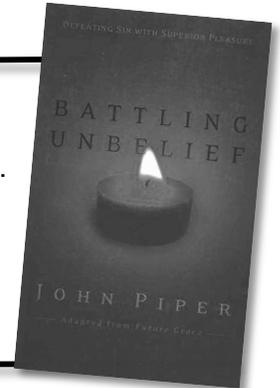
...keep your eye on what you're doing; accept the hard times along with the good;
keep the Message alive; do a thorough job as God's servant.

– 2 TIMOTHY 4:5 (MSG)

Belief and unbelief. We struggle with both as Christ followers. We can float back and forth between one or the other at any given time. Do you know what you believe? Do you understand what causes you to NOT believe? How can we learn to live with boldness and confidence in the promises of God in the midst of a world that seeks to cause us to doubt the God in whom we say we believe?

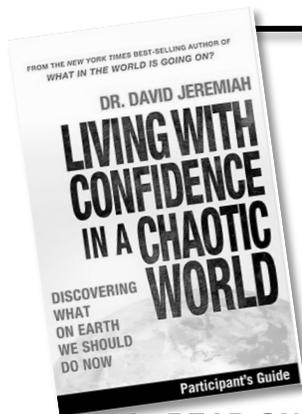
1. READ “BATTLING UNBELIEF” BY JOHN PIPER

No one sins out of duty. We sin because it offers some promise of happiness. That promise enslaves us – until we believe that God is more desirable than life itself (Psalm 63:3). Only the power of God's superior promises in the gospel can emancipate our hearts from servitude to the shallow promises and fleeting pleasures of sin. Available in the church bookstore.



2. READ “LIVING WITH CONFIDENCE IN A CHAOTIC WORLD” BY DAVID JEREMIAH

How can we continue to live a life of commitment and confidence? Dr. Jeremiah points us to the habits we must establish that will form a pattern for living with certain hope in our uncertain times. They include how to stay: Centered in Christ, Committed to the Word, Compassionate toward others, Connected to the church, Consistent in your walk, Calm in your heart, Certain of His coming, and Confident in your faith. Available in the church bookstore.



3. READ ONE OF THE FOLLOWING ARTICLES

This week we have a wide range of articles from which to choose. Read them, share them, and discuss them. Allow them to challenge and change you.

- *John Owen and the “Normal” Christian Life* by Dr. John Hannah
- *Gospel-Driven Sanctification* by Jerry Bridges
- *The Sin of Unbelief* by C. H. Spurgeon
- *Unbelief* by various authors

4. READ, STUDY, AND MEDITATE ON PHILIPPIANS 1:6; 9-11

Do you really believe that what God has started in your life He can finish? Spend some time reading over this passage and wrestling with what it means to your life. Is it true? If so, what difference is it making in your life?

5. LISTEN TO ONE OF THE CDS

Three great messages this week. Listen to them and then share them with someone else. Discuss them together and see what God has to teach you.



John Owen and the “Normal” Christian Life or Sanctification in an Era of Confusion

John D. Hannah

When methods promise a great deal more than they actually deliver, the net result is not victory over sin, but an even greater sense of guilt and heightened awareness of failure.

The lament of recent writers over the deplorable state of theological consciousness in the churches is alarming. David Wells’ judgment that evangelicalism (being an expression of the Enlightenment which it so professes to oppose) is on the verge of “losing its character, if not its soul,” has a ring of reality in it. (1) Many of the churches in the land seem content with the repetition of heart-warming, inspiring stories and the rehearsal of positive experiences, what is designated as “celebrative worship,” with a foreboding absence of doctrinal teaching. Negative, oft-discomforting statements in the Scriptures are glossed over, if not completely avoided, with the result that saints endure elemental pabulum and the unbelievers come away with the impression that Jesus looks remarkably like them! Though touted as a serious Bible-oriented movement, the lack of in-depth doctrinal interest in the churches belies a terrible tragedy. The pastor’s role has become that of an amiable good-fellow; the once profound emphasis on character has receded for an emphasis on personality. The result is that the Lord’s people have little instruction in the Scriptures; what they may receive is most likely a medley of diverse theological elements that are mutually contradictory and confusing.

Illustrative of the state of biblical teaching in the churches is what passes as instruction in the spiritual life. When presented with the question, “How do you walk with God?”, the rejoinder is often confusing, if not distressing. Generally, Christian advice-givers have seen the shallowness of secular approaches to life which deposit the roots of dysfunctional behavior in external forces that involuntarily impact the “victim,” and reject self-exertion and “correct” mental thoughts as resolute. For the Christian, at least generally, there is the recognition that we are responsible moral agents, and the solution to aberrance is without, not within. However, Christian counselors, theologians, and pastors have taught a dizzying array of procedures for dealing with behavioral dysfunction. While there is agreement, at least in the broadest of terms, that the fountainhead of all wrong is sin, the depth of the disfiguring effects of it are described with no consensus. And, because there is little agreement as to the human plight or the degree of debilitation, a variety of solutions has been offered. For example, whether it is a Holiness, Keswick, or Charismatic model for the Christian life, the emphasis on faith (i.e., “if you only believe,” “simply trust”) is often little more than psychological gymnastics. As sometimes presented, victory over sin is a matter of following correct procedures with wholehearted trust; the strength of inward resolve is made the key to progress. Such schemes promise too much, instantaneously bringing confusion to the tenderhearted realist. Approaches to the spiritual life of these sorts do not take into account the struggle with sin as an ever-enduring process and the result of such shallow ways of thinking results in discouragement for anyone hoping for a quick fix. When methods promise a great deal more than they actually deliver, the net result is not victory over sin, but an even greater sense of guilt and heightened awareness of failure. Theories that do not take into account the ever-present power of sin simply cannot deliver what they promise.

In the preface to an edition of John Owen’s works, J. I. Packer recounted his own struggle with the holiness theory of the victorious life and his sense of haunting failure. As a result, he turned to the saving insight of the biblically-oriented wisdom of that master counselor, the chancellor of Oxford University in the seventeenth century, the Puritan divine, John Owen. Packer wrote: “I still think after thirty-five years that Owen did more than anyone else to make me as much of a moral, spiritual, and theological realist as I have so far become . . . It is not too much to say that God used him to save my sanity.” (2) Packer’s judgment about the depth of Owen’s insights into the spiritual life is quite valid and it is for this reason that a summary of his thoughts is worth presenting. In essence, Owen offers perceptive counsel for the questions we face: What is the fundamental cause of behavioral dysfunction?; What debilitation has resulted from the dysfunction?; and What are the prospects for correction?

John Owen and the Human Dilemma

Every view of the spiritual life has at its starting point an understanding of the human plight in sin. Indeed, a weak view of the latter is at the base of every distortion in the former. Simply put, an inaccurate understanding of the power of sin in the believer's life will lead to distorted expectations of spiritual progress. Three principles emerge from Owen writings that provide insight into the doctrine of the Christian life. First, the grip of sin (what Owen speaks of as the dominion of sin) has been broken; its universal hold on the Christian's life came to an end in the miracle of rebirth. Commenting on Romans 6:14 ("For sin will have no dominion over you . . ."), he argues that the hold of sin both extensively and intensively has been forever abolished. "The dominion of sin is present when sin exercises control over the will of a man with no opposition from another principle" (*Works* 7:518). While sin, says Owen, remains in the believer, never to be eradicated in this life though immediately in the final resurrection, the believer has experienced the wonderful reality of degrees of victory over sin. To illustrate the point, Owen invokes the image of a forest. Prior to the Lord's mercies in redemption a person's life may be characterized as a dense tangle of trees, vines, and underbrush. The ground is completely covered; there are no clearings and light never penetrates to the soil. Sin, like a dense jungle, completely dominates the entire landscape of one's being: the intellect, emotions, and will. There neither is, nor can be, any virtue in the unbeliever in that his or her entire being is deformed and corrupted.

Second, despite the *grip* of sin having been broken, the presence of sin in the believer's life remains an ever-present reality. Though the Bible suggests that the dominion of sin has been utterly crushed, it also attests to the believer's continual struggle. In his treatise, "The Nature, Power, Deceit, and Prevalency of the Remainders of Indwelling Sin in Believers," Owen grapples with Paul's statement in Romans 7:21: "I find then the principle of sin in me." In dealing with the dual realities of sin's defeat yet presence, he argues that sin is very much alive though no longer universally so. He is quite explicit when he writes, "Grace changeth the nature of man, but nothing can change the nature of sin." The hold of sin continues in the believer, but not totally. Sinclair Ferguson has summarized Owen's point clearly: "The nature of sin does not change in regeneration or sanctification, but its status in us is radically altered." (3) To return to the illustration of the dense forest, Owen argues that the dominion of sin no longer exists for the believer, not because the forest has been completely cleared, but because many of the trees and some of the underbrush have been uprooted. Some areas (i.e., metaphorical trees) where sin once reigned without any influence to the contrary no longer exist. The forest is still present, but there are now clearings, areas where trees have been uprooted and the tangle of vines removed. To express it another way, in God's mighty act of redemption, his renovating, revivifying grace removed some of the towering tree-like sins in the believer's life. With some of the trees, however, the growth has been merely retarded by pruning; others remain untouched by grace. The believer may go years without a knowledge of the presence of this or that particular tree. In it all, however, sin no longer controls one's totality. The normal Christian life is one of struggle with the residual trees in all of our "forests".

Third, the constant potency of evil toward the believer is examined by Owen in his exposition of Matthew 26:41 ("Watch and pray that you enter not into temptation"). The frequency of solicitation to evil and the believer's proneness to its beckonings are ample evidence that the Christian life is one of serious labors, not of quick resolutions. Solicitations toward evil come from two sources, external and internal. For example, Owen lists four occasions when the hour of temptation is commonly at hand: times of unusual outward prosperity, times of spiritual coldness and periods of formality in duties, times of great spiritual success, and times of self-confidence as in Peter's affirmation, "I will not deny thee" (*Works* 6:130). To Owen, if sin is not an ever-present possibility, the Bible's warnings to be watchful are ludicrous. The presence of sin in the believer's experience mandates two responses. First, because sin is no longer extensively or intensively universal (the domination of sin has been broken), there is the ground of assurance that one has become the recipient of divine light and grace (therein is the saint's joy and confidence in the struggle with sin; that is, in our union with Christ). Second, the remnants of sin's dominance (now called indwelling sin), call for serious striving to limit its reign, realizing that the normal Christian life is one of struggle and ragings, though not to the exclusion of profound joy and advances. It is also in this context that part of the glorious hope for the Christian is magnified when he or she is aware that the fight with sin will end when we are in his presence.

John Owen and the Human Solution

For Owen, and his English contemporaries, the remedy for sin's dominion is Christ's victory given to us in the regenerating work of God the Spirit. The solution to indwelling sin in the believer involves a divine work also; it is the renewing work of the Spirit. In both supernatural first-causes, one is graciously acted upon and responds in gratitude and affection. Ferguson summarized the point thusly: "As in the inauguration of the new life, there is the *act* of regeneration, producing the *exercise* of God-given faith, so in sanctification, there is the *work* of grace, producing the exercise of duty, and the response of obedience." (4) While the objective cure for sin's destruction is the redemptive work of Jesus Christ applied by the grace of God and bestowed by the Holy Spirit, this is subjectively applied by the Spirit's work in the redeemed, whereby he calls them to obedience, the obedience of progressive conformity to Christ. The latter ministry of God's Spirit focuses on the progressive diminution of the power of indwelling sin. It has two aspects according to J. I. Packer: "Sanctification has a double aspect. Its positive side is *vivification*, the growing and maturing of the new man; its negative side is *mortification*, the weakening and killing of the old man." (5) In the explanation of these twin aspects, Owen is particularly helpful.

Vivification: The Renewal of Life in the Believer

According to Owen a number of actions promote spiritual progress. In his work, he capsulizes numerous important elements relative to the positive aspects of sanctification. One treatise pivots on Romans 8:6: "For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the spirit is life and peace." Private means for focusing the mind on God are, for example, prayer and meditation (he elsewhere takes up Bible reading and memorization). Of the importance of meditation he notes, "Whosoever shall sincerely engage in this duty and shall abide constant therein, he will make such a refreshing progress in his apprehension of heavenly things as he will be greatly satisfied withal" (*Works* 7:319).

Corporate aspects of positive steps toward the diminishment of the grip of indwelling sin (i.e., the fruit of the flesh) are also crucial. In fact, the elements of corporate worship--hearing the Word of God preached, and attendance upon the sacraments--are crucial. Sanctification can only occur to the extent that one's faith is in the proper object, God in Christ.

Mortification: The Death of Sin in the Believer

Returning to the forest image, the dark, dense impenetrable forest of huge trees and entangling underbrush has been broken forever; the dominion of sin, its universal power without any ameliorating influences, has been ended. There are now clearings in the jungle; some of the trees have been rooted out, others pruned. This new condition is the state of the believer in indwelling sin (i.e., sin remains, but it is no longer all-pervasive). The goal of the spiritual life is that of continuing the work of clearing the forest, opening ever-enlarged clearings, and the discovery of new trees to uproot (if uprooting is not possible, the goal should be to remove as many branches and cut away as much undergrowth as possible). The negative activity of putting sin to death is what Owen calls mortification. In the treatise, *On the Mortification of Sin in the Believer*, an exposition of Romans 8:13 ("If you by the Spirit put to death the deeds of the flesh, you shall live"), he states several salient principles. It must be remembered that Owen is no pacifist in the matter of mortification; it is not a matter of "letting go and letting God." For example, he writes, "He doth not so work our mortification in us as not to keep it still an act of our obedience" (*Works* 7:34).

Owen was a realist in his teaching concerning indwelling sin; he refused to offer promises about the outcome of duties that are contrary to experience and Scripture.

He strenuously argued, for example, that while sin can be weakened and some forms of wickedness uprooted, it cannot be utterly killed or destroyed (thus the distinguishing mark of the true saint is not "victory" so much as it is an unrelenting struggle until the burden of ourselves is lifted in the final redemption). Further, mortification is not simply the presence of a quiet, sedate demeanor; nor is it the creation of a diversion or cover-up; it is the actual killing of sin.

The "dysfunctional" human character, according to Owen, differs vastly from the description of secular psychologists and even some Christians in the same field of advice-giving. The human dilemma stems from a voluntary choice that has resulted in the corruption of the very core of his or her being (i.e., the heart), whence all subsequent actions find their source and cause. The remedy, as one would expect, is not to be found in the adjudication of the victim's rights; it comes only when a person, as a responsible, culpable agent, recognizes his or her own guilt and seeks forgiveness.

The place to begin the mortification of a particular sin is for the believer to recognize sin for all its terrible potential, meditate on its destructive power, and load the conscience with the heavy weight of its guilt. "Get a clear and abiding sense upon thy mind and conscience of the guilt, danger, and evil of that sin wherewith thou art perplexed" (*Works* 6:51). Hurriedly claiming a verse such as 1 John 1:9 may not only be a misapplication of Scripture to rid the burden of sin upon one's conscience; it may be a form of subterfuge. Owen suggests, on the contrary, that we should load our consciences with the awfulness of our sin and only then allow God to grant our minds peace! Further, he suggests that a careful analysis should be made to determine whether sin has a deeper cause than its external manifestation.

Also, he urges Christians to react quickly and decisively against sin, not minimizing its wickedness or neglecting to recognize its potential for destruction. "Rise mightily against the first actings of thy distemper, its first conceptions; suffer it not to get the least ground" (*Works* 6:62). The believer must become an astute observer of the occasions when he or she is vulnerable to sinning, and carefully endeavor to avoid them.

"Consider what ways, what companies, what opportunities, what studies, what business, what conditions, have at any time given, or do usually give, advantages to distempers, and set thyself heedfully against them all" (*Works* 6:62). Though Owen states several other points (this being only the briefest summary), he concludes the discussion arguing that the saint must carefully keep in view the wonder, majesty, and kindness of God, being ever-mindful of his or her own vileness (*Works* 6:63-70). It is the saint's union with Christ that allows one to be a persistent realist when it comes to the issue of struggle with sin. Jonathan Edwards' resolve makes sense if we are, indeed, united to God through the blood stains of our dying advocate. "Resolved: Never to give over, nor in the least to slacken my fight with my corruption, however unsuccessful I may be."

"Nothing comes from nothing, nothing ever did," is a romantic line from *Sound of Music*, Maria's impassioned statement to Colonel Van Trapp. It illustrates a truth that is the point of this article. While the new birth happens *to* us, we are *active* in our growth as Christians. Growth does not just happen. There are no easy short-cuts or quick victories. It is a journey that will inevitably lead to glory, but the road is long and circuitous. Do not be called aside by the lure of "the easy, higher way"; it simply does not exist. The mark of the saint is not victory; it is a struggle with the enemy who is already condemned, a struggle which is never eradicated until we hear our Savior's call to enter into his glory in the last day, the first day of our rest from the power of sin.

1 David F. Wells, *No Place For Truth, Or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 68.

2 James I. Packer, *Introduction to John Owen's Sin and Temptation: The Challenge To Personal Godliness*, ed. by James M. Houston (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1983), xxix.

3 Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 125-26.

4 *Ibid.*, 55.

5 James I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 199.

Gospel-Driven Sanctification

Jerry Bridges

Early in my Christian life I heard someone say, “The Bible was not given to increase your knowledge but to guide your conduct.” Later I came to realize that this statement was simplistic at best and erroneous at worst. The Bible is far more than a rulebook to follow. It is primarily the message of God’s saving grace through Jesus Christ, with everything in Scripture before the cross pointing to God’s redemptive work and everything after the cross—including our sanctification—flowing from that work.

There is an element of truth in this statement, however, and the Holy Spirit used it to help me to see that the Bible is not to be read just to gain knowledge. It is, indeed, to be obeyed and practically applied in our daily lives. As James says, “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (James 1:22).

With my new insight, I prayed that God would use the Bible to guide my conduct. Then I began diligently to seek to obey it. I had never heard the phrase “the pursuit of holiness,” but that became my primary goal in life. Unfortunately, I made two mistakes. First, I assumed the Bible was something of a rulebook and that all I needed to do was to learn what it says and go do it. I knew nothing of the necessity of depending on the Holy Spirit for his guidance and enablement.

Still worse, I assumed that God’s acceptance of me and his blessing in my life depended on how well I did. I knew I was saved by grace through faith in Christ apart from any works. I had assurance of my salvation and expected to go to heaven when I died. But in my daily life, I thought God’s blessing depended on the practice of certain spiritual disciplines, such as having a daily quiet time and not knowingly committing any sin. I did not think this out but just unconsciously assumed it, given the Christian culture in which I lived. Yet it determined my attitude toward the Christian life.

Performance-Based Discipleship

My story is not unusual. Evangelicals commonly think today that the gospel is only for unbelievers. Once we’re inside the kingdom’s door, we need the gospel only in order to share it with those who are still outside. Now, as believers, we need to hear the message of discipleship. We need to learn how to live the Christian life and be challenged to go do it. That’s what I believed and practiced in my life and ministry for some time. It is what most Christians seem to believe.

As I see it, the Christian community is largely a performance-based culture today. And the more deeply committed we are to following Jesus, the more deeply ingrained the performance mindset is. We think we earn God’s blessing or forfeit it by how well we live the Christian life.

Most Christians have a baseline of acceptable performance by which they gauge their acceptance by God. For many, this baseline is no more than regular church attendance and the avoidance of major sins. Such Christians are often characterized by some degree of self-righteousness. After all, they don’t indulge in the major sins we see happening around us. Such Christians would not think they need the gospel anymore. They would say the gospel is only for sinners.

For committed Christians, the baseline is much higher. It includes regular practice of spiritual disciplines, obedience to God’s Word, and involvement in some form of ministry. Here again, if we focus on outward behavior, many score fairly well. But these Christians are even more vulnerable to self-righteousness, for they can look down their spiritual noses not only at the sinful society around them but even at other believers who are not as committed as they are. These Christians don’t need the gospel either. For them, Christian growth means more discipline and more commitment.

Then there is a third group. The baseline of this group includes more than the outward performance of disciplines, obedience, and ministry. These Christians also recognize the need to deal with sins of the heart like a critical spirit, pride, selfishness, envy, resentment, and anxiety. They see their inconsistency in having their quiet times, their failure to witness at every opportunity, and their frequent failures in dealing with sins of the heart. This group of Christians is far more likely to be plagued by a sense of guilt because group members have not met their own expectations. And because they think God’s acceptance of them is based on their performance, they have little joy in their Christian lives. For them, life

is like a treadmill on which they keep slipping farther and farther behind. This group needs the gospel, but they don't realize it is for them. I know, because I was in this group.

The Gospel Is for Believers

Gradually over time, and from a deep sense of need, I came to realize that the gospel is for believers, too. When I finally realized this, every morning I would pray over a Scripture such as Isaiah 53:6, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all," and then say, "Lord, I have gone astray. I have turned to my own way, but you have laid all my sin on Christ and because of that I approach you and feel accepted by you."

I came to see that Paul's statement in Galatians 2:20, "The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me," was made in the context of justification (see vv. 15-21). Yet Paul was speaking in the present tense: "The life I now live" Because of the context, I realized Paul was not speaking about his sanctification but about his justification. For Paul, then, justification (being declared righteous by God on the basis of the righteousness of Christ) was not only a past-tense experience but also a present-day reality.

Paul lived every day by faith in the shed blood and righteousness of Christ. Every day he looked to Christ alone for his acceptance with the Father. He believed, like Peter (see 1 Pet. 2:4-5), that even our best deeds--our spiritual sacrifices--are acceptable to God only through Jesus Christ. Perhaps no one apart from Jesus himself has ever been as committed a disciple both in life and ministry as the Apostle Paul. Yet he did not look to his own performance but to Christ's "performance" as the sole basis of his acceptance with God.

So I learned that Christians need to hear the gospel all of their lives because it is the gospel that continues to remind us that our day-to-day acceptance with the Father is not based on what we do for God but upon what Christ did for us in his sinless life and sin-bearing death. I began to see that we stand before God today as righteous as we ever will be, even in heaven, because he has clothed us with the righteousness of his Son. Therefore, I don't have to perform to be accepted by God. Now I am free to obey him and serve him because I am already accepted in Christ (see Rom. 8:1). My driving motivation now is not guilt but gratitude.

Yet even when we understand that our acceptance with God is based on Christ's work, we still naturally tend to drift back into a performance mindset. Consequently, we must continually return to the gospel. To use an expression of the late Jack Miller, we must "preach the gospel to ourselves every day." For me that means I keep going back to Scriptures such as Isaiah 53:6, Galatians 2:20, and Romans 8:1. It means I frequently repeat the words from an old hymn, "My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness."

No "Easy Believism"

But doesn't this idea that our acceptance with God is based solely on Christ's work apart from our performance lead to a type of "easy believism"? In its most basic form, this is the notion that "Since I asked Christ to be my Savior, I am on my way to heaven regardless of how I live. It doesn't matter if I continue in my sinful lifestyle. God loves and will accept me anyway."

By a similar way of thinking, the claim that God's acceptance and blessing are based solely on Christ's work could be taken to mean that it really doesn't matter how I live right now. If Jesus has already "performed" in my place, then why go through all the effort and pain of dealing with sin in my life? Why bother with the spiritual disciplines and why expend any physical and emotional energy to serve God during this earthly life if everything depends on Christ?

The Apostle Paul anticipated such "easy believism" in Romans 6:1 when he wrote, "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" His response in Romans 6:2, "By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?" answers the question, "Why bother?" Paul was not responding with "How could you be so ungrateful as to think such a thing?" No, instead he is saying, in effect, "You don't understand the gospel. Don't you realize that you died to sin and if you died to sin, it's impossible for you to continue to live in it" (see Rom. 6:3-14).

We Died to Sin

Now, however, we come to a big question. What does Paul mean when he says we died to sin? It's fairly obvious he doesn't mean we died to the daily committal of sin. If that were true, no honest person could claim to be justified because we all sin daily. None of us truly loves God with our whole being and none of us actually loves our neighbor as ourselves (see Matt. 22:35-40). Nor does it mean we have died in the sense of being no longer responsive to sin's temptations, as some have taught. If that were true, Peter's admonition to abstain from the passions of the flesh would be pointless (see 1 Pet. 2:11). So what does Paul mean?

Some Bible commentators believe that Paul means only that we have died to the penalty of sin. That is, because of our union with Christ, when Christ died to sin's penalty we also died to sin's penalty. Well, it certainly means that, but it also means much more. It also means we died to sin's dominion. What is the dominion of sin? In Romans 5:21, Paul speaks of sin's *reign*. And in Colossians 1:13, he speaks of the *domain of darkness*. When Adam sinned in the Garden, we all sinned through our legal union with him (see Rom. 5:12-21). That is, because of our identity with Adam we all suffered the consequence of his sin. And a part of that consequence is to be born into this world under the reign or dominion of sin. Paul describes what it means to be under this dominion in Ephesians 2:1-3. He says we were spiritually dead; we followed the ways of the world and the devil; we lived in the passions of our sinful natures and were, by nature, objects of God's wrath.

This slavery to the dominion of sin then is part of the penalty due to our guilt of sin. Through our union with Christ in his death, however, our guilt both from Adam's and from our own personal sins was forever dealt with. Having died with Christ to the guilt of sin, we also as a consequence died to the dominion of sin. We cannot continue in sin as a dominant way of life because the reign of sin over us has forever been broken.

This death to the dominion of sin over us is known theologically as *definitive sanctification*. It refers to the decisive break with, or separation from, sin as a ruling power in a believer's life. It is a point-in-time event, occurring simultaneously with justification. It is the fundamental change wrought in us by the monergistic action of the Holy Spirit (that is, by the Spirit acting alone without human permission or assistance) when he delivers us from the kingdom of darkness and transfers us into the kingdom of Christ. This definitive break with the dominion of sin occurs in the life of everyone who trusts in Christ as Savior. There is no such thing as justification without definitive sanctification. They both come to us as a result of Christ's work for us.

Consider Yourselves Dead to Sin

So we are free from both the guilt and the dominion of sin. But what use is this information to us? How can it help us live out a gospel-based pursuit of sanctification? Here Paul's instructions in Romans 6:11 are helpful: "So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus."

It is important we understand what Paul is saying here because he is not telling us to *do* something but to *believe* something. We are to believe that we are dead through Christ to both sin's penalty and its dominion. But this is not something we *make* come true by believing it. We simply *are* dead to sin, whether we believe it or not. But the practical effects of our death to sin can be realized only as we believe it to be true.

The fact is that we are guilty in ourselves, but God no longer charges that guilt against us because it has already been borne by Christ as our substitute. The sentence has been served. The penalty has been paid. We have died to sin, both to its guilt and to its dominion. That is why Paul can write, "Blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin" (Rom. 4:8).

But the question arises, "If I've died to sin's dominion, why do I still struggle with sin patterns in my life?" The answer to that question lies in the word *struggle*. Unbelievers do not struggle with sin. They may seek to overcome some bad habit, but they do not see that habit as sin. They do not have a sense of sin against a holy God. Believers, on the other hand, struggle with sin as sin. We see our sinful words, thoughts, and deeds as sin against God; and we feel guilty because of it. This is where we must continue to go back to the gospel. To consider ourselves dead to sin is to believe the gospel.

This doesn't mean that we just believe the gospel and live complacently in our sin. Absolutely not! Go back again to Paul's words in Romans 6:1-2. We died both to sin's guilt and its dominion. Though sin can wage war against us (hence our struggle), it cannot reign over us. That is also part of the gospel. But

the success of our struggle with sin begins with our believing deep down in our hearts that regardless of our failures and our struggle, we have died to sin's guilt. We must believe that however often we fail, there is no condemnation for us (Rom. 8:1).

William Romaine, who was one of the leaders of the eighteenth-century revival in England, wrote, "No sin can be crucified either in heart or life unless it first be pardoned in conscience.... If it be not mortified in its guilt, it cannot be subdued in its power." What Romaine was saying is that if you do not believe you have died to sin's guilt, you cannot trust Christ for the strength to subdue its power in your life. So the place to begin in dealing with sin is to believe the gospel when it says you have died to sin's guilt.

Progressive Sanctification

Warring against our sinful habits and seeking to put on Christlike character is usually called sanctification. But because the term *definitive sanctification* is used to describe the point-in-time deliverance from the dominion of sin, it is helpful to speak of Christian growth in holiness as *progressive sanctification*. Additionally, the word *progressive* indicates continual growth in holiness over time. The New Testament writers both assume growth (see 1 Cor. 6:9-11; Eph. 2:19-21; Col. 2:19; 2 Thess. 1:3); and continually urge us to pursue it (see 2 Cor. 7:1; Heb. 12:14; 2 Pet. 3:18). There is no place in authentic Christianity for stagnant, self-satisfied, and self-righteous Christians. Rather we should be seeking to grow in Christlikeness until we die.

This progressive sanctification always involves our practice of spiritual disciplines, such as reading Scripture, praying, and regularly fellowshiping with other believers. It also involves putting to death the sinful deeds of the body (see Rom. 8:13) and putting on Christlike character (see Col. 3:12-14). And very importantly it involves a desperate dependence on Christ for the power to do these things, for we cannot grow by our own strength.

So sanctification involves hard work and dependence on Christ; what I call *dependent effort*. And it will always mean we are dissatisfied with our performance. For a growing Christian, desire will always outstrip performance or, at least, perceived performance. What is it then that will keep us going in the face of this tension between desire and performance? The answer is the gospel. It is the assurance in the gospel that we have indeed died to the guilt of sin and that there is no condemnation for us in Christ Jesus that will motivate us and keep us going even in the face of this tension.

We must always keep focused on the gospel because it is in the nature of sanctification that as we grow, we see more and more of our sinfulness. Instead of driving us to discouragement, though, this should drive us to the gospel. It is the gospel believed every day that is the only enduring motivation to pursue progressive sanctification even in those times when we don't seem to see progress. That is why I use the expression "gospel-driven sanctification" and that is why we need to "preach the gospel to ourselves every day."

The Sin of Unbelief

Delivered on Sabbath Morning, January 14, 1855, by the

REV. C. H. Spurgeon

At New Park Street Chapel, Southwark.

“And that lord answered the man of God, and said, Now, behold, if the Lord should make windows in heaven, might such a thing be? And he said, Behold, thou shalt see it with thine eyes but shalt not eat thereof.”—2 Kings 7:19

ONE WISE man may deliver a whole city; one good man may be the means of safety to a thousand others. The holy ones are “the salt of the earth,” the means of the preservation of the wicked. Without the godly as a conserve, the race would be utterly destroyed. In the city of Samaria there was one righteous man—Elisha, the servant of the Lord. Piety was altogether extinct in the court. The king was a sinner of the blackest dye, his iniquity was glaring and infamous. Jehoram walked in the ways of his father Ahab, and made unto himself false gods. The people of Samaria were fallen like their monarch: they had gone astray from Jehovah; they had forsaken the God of Israel; they remembered not the watchword of Jacob, “The Lord thy God is one God;” and in wicked idolatry they bowed before the idols of the heathens, and therefore the Lord of Hosts suffered their enemies to oppress them until the curse of Ebal was fulfilled in the streets of Samaria, for “the tender and delicate woman who would not adventure to set the sole of her foot upon the ground for delicateness,” had an evil eye to her own children, and devoured her offspring by reason of fierce hunger (Deut 28:56-58). In this awful extremity the one holy man was the medium of salvation. The one grain of salt preserved the entire city; the one warrior for God was the means of the deliverance of the whole beleaguered multitude. For Elisha’s sake the Lord sent the promise that the next day, food which could not be obtained at any price, should be had at the cheapest possible rate—at the very gates of Samaria. We may picture the joy of the multitude when first the seer uttered this prediction. They knew him to be a prophet of the Lord; he had divine credentials; all his past prophecies had been fulfilled. They knew that he was a man sent of God, and uttering Jehovah’s message. Surely the monarch’s eyes would glisten with delight, and the emaciated multitude would leap for joy at the prospects of so speedy a release from famine. “To-morrow,” would they shout, “*to-morrow* our hunger shall be over, and we shall feast to the full.”

However, the lord on whom the king leaned expressed his disbelief. We hear not that any of the common people, the plebeians, ever did so; but an aristocrat did it. Strange it is, that God has seldom chosen the great men of this world. High places and faith in Christ do seldom well agree. This great man said, “Impossible!” and, with an insult to the prophet, he added, “If the Lord should make windows in heaven, might such a thing be.” His sin lay in the fact, that after repeated seals of Elisha’s ministry, he yet disbelieved the assurances uttered by the prophet on God’s behalf. He had, doubtless, seen the marvelous defeat of Moab; he had been startled at tidings of the resurrection of the Shunamite’s son; he knew that Elisha had revealed Benhadad’s secrets and smitten his marauding hosts with blindness; he had seen the bands of Syria decoyed into the heart of Samaria; and he probably knew the story of the widow, whose oil filled all the vessels, and redeemed her sons; at all events the cure of Naaman was common conversation at court; and yet, in the face of all this accumulated evidence, in the teeth of all these credentials of the prophet’s mission, he yet doubted, and insultingly told him that heaven must become an open casement, ere the promise could be performed. Whereupon God pronounced his doom by the mouth of the man who had just now proclaimed the promise: “thou shalt see it with thine eyes, but shalt not eat thereof.” And providence—which always fulfills prophecy, just as the paper takes the stamp of the type—destroyed the man. Trodden down in the streets of Samaria, he

perished at its gates, beholding the plenty, but tasting not of it. Perhaps his carriage was haughty, and insulting to the people; or he tried to restrain their eager rush; or, as we would say, it might have been by mere accident that he was crushed to death; so that he saw the prophecy fulfilled, but never lived to enjoy it. In his case, seeing was believing, but it was not enjoying.

I shall this morning invite your attention to two things—the man's *sin* and his punishment. Perhaps I shall say but little of this man, since I have detailed the circumstances, but I shall discourse upon the sin of unbelief and the punishment thereof.

I. And first, the SIN.

His sin was *unbelief*. He doubted the promise of God. In this particular case unbelief took the form of a doubt of the divine veracity, or a mistrust of God's power. Either he doubted whether God really meant what he said, or whether it was within the range of possibility that God should fulfill his promise. Unbelief hath more phases than the moon, and more colors than the chameleon. Common people say of the devil, that he is seen sometimes in one shape, and sometimes in another. I am sure this is true of Satan's first-born child—unbelief, for its forms are legion. At one time I see unbelief dressed out as an angel of light. It calls itself humility, and it saith, "I would not be presumptuous; I dare not think that God would pardon me; I am too great a sinner." We call that humility, and thank God that our friend is in so good a condition. I do not thank God for any such delusion. It is the devil dressed as an angel of light; it is unbelief after all. At other times we detect unbelief in the shape of a doubt of God's immutability: "The Lord has loved me, but perhaps he will cast me off to-morrow. He helped me yesterday, and under the shadows of his wings I trust; but perhaps I shall receive no help in the next affliction. He may have cast me off; he may be unmindful of his covenant, and forget to be gracious." Sometimes this infidelity is embodied in a doubt of God's power. We see every day new straits, we are involved in a net of difficulties, and we think "surely the Lord cannot deliver us." We strive to get rid of our burden, and finding that we cannot do it, we think God's arm is as short as ours, and his power as little as human might. A fearful form of unbelief is that doubt which keeps men from coming to Christ; which leads the sinner to distrust the ability of Christ to save him, to doubt the willingness of Jesus to accept so great a transgressor. But the most hideous of all is the traitor, in its true colors, blaspheming God, and madly denying his existence. Infidelity, deism, and atheism, are the ripe fruits of this pernicious tree; they are the most terrific eruptions of the volcano of unbelief. Unbelief hath become of full stature, when quitting the mask and laying aside disguise, it profanely stalks the earth, uttering the rebellious cry, "No God," striving in vain to shake the throne of the divinity, by lifting up its arm against Jehovah, and in its arrogance would

"Snatch from his hand the balance and the rod,
Re-judge his justice—be the god of God."

Then truly unbelief has come to its full perfection, and then you see what it really is, for the least unbelief is of the same nature as the greatest.

I am astonished, and I am sure you will be, when I tell you that there are some strange people in the world who do not believe that unbelief is a sin. Strange people I must call them, because they are sound in their faith in every other respect; only, to make the articles of their creed consistent, as they imagine, they deny that unbelief is sinful. I remember a young man going into a circle of friends and ministers, who were disputing whether it was a sin in men that they did not believe the gospel. Whilst they were discussing it, he said, "Gentlemen am I in the presence of Christians? Are you believers in the Bible, or are you not?" They said, "We are Christians of course." "Then," said he, "does not the Scripture say, 'of sin, because they believed not on me?' And is it not the damning sin of sinners, that they do not believe on Christ?" I could not have thought that persons should be so fool-hardy as to venture to assert that, "it is no sin for

a sinner not to believe on Christ." I thought that, however far they might wish to push their sentiments, they would not tell a lie to uphold the truth, and, in my opinion this is what such men are really doing. Truth is a strong tower and never requires to be buttressed with error. God's Word will stand against all man's devices. I would never invent a sophism to prove that it is no sin on the part of the ungodly not to believe, for I am sure it is, when I am taught in the Scriptures that, "This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men love darkness rather than light," and when I read, "He that believeth not is condemned already, because he believeth not on the Son of God," I affirm, and the Word declares it, *unbelief is a sin*. Surely with rational and unprejudiced persons, it cannot require any reasoning to prove it. Is it not a sin for a creature to doubt the word of its Maker? Is it not a crime and an insult to the Divinity, for me, an atom, a particle of dust, to dare to deny his words? Is it not the very summit of arrogance and extremity of pride for a son of Adam to say, even in his heart, "God I doubt thy grace; God I doubt thy love; God I doubt thy power?" Oh! sirs believe me, could ye roll all sins into one mass,—could you take murder, and blasphemy, and lust, adultery, and fornication, and everything that is vile and unite them all into one vast globe of black corruption, they would not equal even then the sin of unbelief. This is the monarch sin, the quintessence of guilt; the mixture of the venom of all crimes; the dregs of the wine of Gomorrah; it is the A1 sin, the master-piece of Satan, the chief work of the devil.

I shall attempt this morning, for a little while, to shew the extremely evil nature of the sin of unbelief.

1. And first the sin of unbelief will appear to be extremely heinous when we remember that *it is the parent of every other iniquity*. There is no crime which unbelief will not beget. I think that the fall of man is very much owing to it. It was in this point that the devil tempted Eve. He said to her, "Yea, *hath* God said, ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?" He whispered and insinuated a doubt, "Yea, *hath* God said so?" as much as to say, "Are you *quite* sure he said so?" It was by means of unbelief—that thin part of the wedge—that the other sin entered; curiosity and the rest followed; she touched the fruit, and destruction came into this world. Since that time, unbelief has been the prolific parent of all guilt. An unbeliever is capable of the vilest crime that ever was committed. Unbelief, sirs! why it hardened the heart of Pharaoh—it gave license to the tongue of blaspheming Rabshaket—yea, it became a deicide, and murdered Jesus. Unbelief!—it has sharpened the knife of the suicide! it has mixed many a cup of poison; thousands it has brought to the halter; and many to a shameful grave, who have murdered themselves and rushed with bloody hands before their Creator's tribunal, because of unbelief. Give me an unbeliever—let me know that he doubts God's word—let me know that he distrusts his promise and his threatening; and with that for a premise, I will conclude that the man shall, by-and-bye unless there is amazing restraining power exerted upon him, be guilty of the foulest and blackest crimes. Ah! this is a Beelzebub sin; like Beelzebub, it is the leader of all evil spirits. It is said of Jeroboam that he sinned and made Israel to sin; and it may be said of unbelief that it not only sins itself, but makes others sin; it is the egg of all crime, the seed of every offence; in fact everything that is evil and vile lies couched in that one word—unbelief.

And let me say here, that unbelief in the Christian is of the self-same nature as unbelief in the sinner. It is not the same in its final issue, for it will be pardoned in the Christian; yea it is pardoned: it was laid upon the scapegoat's head of old: it was blotted out and atoned for; but it is of the same sinful nature. In fact, if there can be one sin more heinous than the unbelief of a sinner, it is the unbelief of a saint. For a saint to doubt God's word—for a saint to distrust God after innumerable instances of his love, after ten thousand proofs of his mercy, exceeds everything. In a saint, moreover, unbelief is the root of other sins. When I am perfect in faith, I shall be perfect in everything else; I should always fulfill the precept if I always believed the promise. But it is because my faith is weak, that I sin. Put me in trouble, and if I can fold my arms and say, "Jehovah-Jireh, the Lord will provide," you will not find me using wrong means to escape from it. But let me be in temporal distress and difficulty; if I distrust God, what then?

Perhaps I shall steal, or do a dishonest act to get out of the hands of my creditors; or if kept from such a transgression, I may plunge into excess to drown my anxieties. Once take away faith, the reins are broken; and who can ride an unbroken steed without rein or bridle? Like the chariot of the sun, with Phaeton for its driver, such should we be without faith. Unbelief is the mother of vice; it is the parent of sin; and, therefore, I say it is a pestilent evil—a master sin.

2. But secondly; *unbelief not only begets, but fosters sin*. How is it that men can keep their sin under the thunders of the Sinai preacher? How is it that, when Boanerges stands in the pulpit, and, by the grace of God, cries aloud, “Cursed is every man that keepeth not all the commands of the law,”—how is it that when the sinner hears the tremendous threatenings of God’s justice, still he is hardened, and walks on in his evil ways? I will tell you; it is because unbelief of that threatening prevents it from having any effect upon him. When our sappers and miners go to work around Sebastopol, they could not work in front of the walls, if they had not something to keep off the shots; so they raise earthworks, behind which they can do what they please. So with the ungodly man. The devil gives him unbelief; he thus puts up an earthwork, and finds refuge behind it. Ah! sinners, when once the Holy Ghost knocks down your unbelief—when once he brings home the truth in demonstration and in power, how the law will work upon your soul. If man did but believe that the law is holy, that the commandments are holy, just, and good, how he would be shaken over hell’s mouth; there would be no sitting and sleeping in God’s house; no careless hearers; no going away and straightway forgetting what manner of men ye are. Oh! once get rid of unbelief, how would ever ball from the batteries of the law fall upon the sinner, and the slain of the Lord would be many. Again, how is it that men can hear the wooing of the cross of Calvary, and yet come not to Christ? How is it that when we preach about the sufferings of Jesus, and close up by saying, “yet there is room,”—how is it that when we dwell upon his cross and passion, men are not broken in their hearts? It is said,

“Law and terrors do but harden,
All the while they work alone:
But a sense of blood-bought pardon
Will dissolve a heart of stone.”

Methinks the tale of Calvary is enough to break a rock. Rocks did rend when they saw Jesus die. Methinks the tragedy of Golgotha is enough to make a flint gush with tears, and to make the most hardened wretch weep out his eyes in drops of penitential love; but yet we tell it you, and repeat it oft, but who weeps over it? Who cares about it? Sirs, ye sit as unconcerned as if it did not signify to you. Oh! behold and see all ye that pass by. Is it nothing to you that Jesus should die? Ye seem to say “It is nothing.” What is the reason? Because there is unbelief between you and the cross. If there were not that thick veil between you and the Saviour’s eyes, his looks of love would melt you. But unbelief is the sin which keeps the power of the gospel from working in the sinner: and it is not till the Holy Ghost strikes that unbelief out—it is not till the Holy Spirit rends away that infidelity and takes it altogether down, that we can find the sinner coming to put his trust in Jesus.

3. But there is a third point. *Unbelief disables a man for the performance of any good work*. “Whatsoever is not of faith is sin,” is a great truth in more senses than one. “Without faith it is impossible to please God.” You shall never hear me say a word against morality; you shall never hear me say that honesty is not a good thing, or that sobriety is not a good thing; on the contrary, I would say they are commendable things; but I will tell you what I will say afterwards—I will tell you that they are just like the cowries of Hindostan; they may pass current among the Indians, but they will not do in England; these virtues may be current here below, but not above. If you have not something better than your own goodness, you will never get to heaven. Some of the Indian tribes use little strips of cloth instead of money, and I would not find fault with them if I lived there; but when I come to England, strips of cloth will not suffice. So

honesty, sobriety, and such things, may be very good amongst men—and the more you have of them the better. I exhort you, whatsoever things are lovely and pure, and of good report, have them—but they will not do up there. All these things put together, without faith, do not please God. Virtues without faith are whitewashed sins. Obedience without faith, if it is possible, is a gilded disobedience. Not to believe, nullifies everything. It is the fly in the ointment; it is the poison in the pot. Without faith, with all the virtues of purity, with all the benevolence of philanthropy, with all the kindness of disinterested sympathy, with all the talents of genius, with all the bravery of patriotism, and with all the decision of principle—“without faith it is impossible to please God.” Do you not see then, how bad unbelief is, because it prevents men from performing good works. Yea, even in Christians themselves, unbelief disables them. Let me just tell you a tale—a story of Christ’s life. A certain man had an afflicted son, possessed with an evil spirit. Jesus was up in Mount Tabor, transfigured; so the father brought his son to the disciples. What did the disciples do? They said, “Oh, we will cast him out.” They put their hands upon him, and they tried to do it; but they whispered among themselves and said, “We are afraid we shall not be able.” By-and-by the diseased man began to froth at the mouth; he foamed and scratched the earth, claspng it in his paroxysms. The demoniac spirit within him was alive. The devil was still there. In vain their repeated exorcism, the evil spirit remained like a lion in his den, nor could their efforts dislodge him. “Go!” said they; but he went not. “Away to the pit!” they cried; but he remained immoveable. The lips of unbelief cannot affright the Evil One, who might well have said, “Faith I know, Jesus I know, but who are ye? ye have no faith.” If they had faith, as a grain of mustard seed, they might have cast the devil out; but their faith was gone, and therefore they could do nothing. Look at poor Peter’s case, too. While he had faith, Peter walked on the waves of the sea. That was a splendid walk; I almost envy him treading upon the billows. Why, if Peter’s faith had continued, he might have walked across the Atlantic to America. But presently there came a billow behind him, and he said, “That will sweep me away;” and then another before, and he cried out, “That will overwhelm me;” and he thought—how could I be so presumptuous as to be walking on the top of these waves? Down goes Peter. Faith was Peter’s life-buoy; faith was Peter’s charm—it kept him up; but unbelief sent him down. Do you know that you and I, all our lifetime, will have to walk on the water? A Christian’s life is always walking on water—mine is—and every wave would swallow and devour him, but faith makes him stand. The moment you cease to believe, that moment distress comes in, and down you go. Oh! wherefore dost thou doubt, then?

Faith fosters every virtue; unbelief murders every one. Thousands of prayers have been strangled in their infancy by unbelief. Unbelief has been guilty of infanticide; it has murdered many an infant petition; many a song of praise that would have swelled the chorus of the skies, has been stifled by an unbelieving murmur; many a noble enterprise conceived in the heart has been blighted ere it could come forth, by unbelief. Many a man would have been a missionary; would have stood and preached his Master’s gospel boldly; but he had unbelief. Once make a giant unbelieving, and he becomes a dwarf. Faith is the Samsonian lock of the Christian; cut it off, and you may put out his eyes—and he can do nothing.

4. Our next remark is— *unbelief has been severely punished*. Turn you to the Scriptures! I see a world all fair and beautiful; its mountains laughing in the sun, and the fields rejoicing in the golden light. I see maidens dancing, and young men singing. How fair the vision! But lo! a grave and reverend sire lifts up his hand, and cries, “A flood is coming to deluge the earth: the fountains of the great deep will be broken up, and all things will be covered. See yonder ark! One hundred and twenty years have I toiled with these my hands to build it; flee there, and you are safe.” “Aha! old man; away with your empty predictions! Aha! let us be happy while we may! when the flood comes, then we will build an ark; but there is no flood coming; tell that to fools; we believe no such things.” See the unbelievers pursue their merry dance. Hark! Unbeliever. Dost thou not hear that rumbling noise? Earth’s bowels have begun to move, her rocky ribs are strained by dire convulsions from within; lo! they break with the enormous strain, and forth from between them

torrents rush unknown since God concealed them in the bosom of our world. Heaven is split in sunder! it rains. Not drops, but clouds descend. A cataract, like that of old Niagara, rolls from heaven with mighty noise. Both firmaments, both deeps—the deep below and deep above—do clasp their hands. Now unbelievers, where are you now! There is your last remnant. A man—his wife clasping him round the waist—stands on the last summit that is above the water. See him there? The water is up to his loins even now. Hear his last shriek! He is floating—he is drowned. And as Noah looks from the ark he sees nothing. Nothing! It is a void profound. “Sea monsters whelp and stable in the palaces of kings.” All is overthrown, covered, drowned. What hath done it? What brought the flood upon the earth? Unbelief. By faith Noah escaped from the flood. By unbelief the rest were drowned.

And, oh! do you not know that unbelief kept Moses and Aaron out of Canaan? They honored not God; they struck the rock when they ought to have spoken to it. They disbelieved: and therefore the punishment came upon them, that they should not inherit that good land, for which they had toiled and labored.

Let me take you where Moses and Aaron dwelt—to the vast and howling wilderness. We will walk about it for a time; sons of the weary foot, we will become like the wandering Bedouins, we will tread the desert for a while. There lies a carcass whitened in the sun; there another, and there another. What means these bleached bones? What are these bodies—there a man, and there a woman? What are all these? How came these corpses here? Surely some grand encampment must have been here cut off in a single night by a blast, or by bloodshed. Ah; no, no. Those bones are the bones of Israel; those skeletons are the old tribes of Jacob. They could not enter because of unbelief. They trusted not in God. Spies said they could not conquer the land. Unbelief was the cause of their death. It was not the Anakims that destroyed Israel; it was not the howling wilderness which devoured them; it was not the Jordan which proved a barrier to Canaan; neither Hivite or Jebusite slew them; it was unbelief alone which kept them out of Canaan. What a doom to be pronounced on Israel, after forty years of journeying: they could not enter because of unbelief!

Not to multiply instances, recollect Zechariah. He doubted, and the angel struck him dumb. His mouth was closed because of unbelief. But oh! if you would have the worst picture of the effects of unbelief—if you would see how God has punished it, I must take you to the siege of Jerusalem, that worst massacre which time has ever seen; when the Romans razed the walls to the ground, and put the whole of the inhabitants to the sword, or sold them as slaves in the market-place. Have you never read of the destruction of Jerusalem, by Titus? Did you never turn to the tragedy of Masada, when the Jews stabbed each other rather than fall into the hands of the Romans? Do you not know, that to this day the Jew walks through the earth a wanderer, without a home and without a land? He is cut off, as a branch is cut from a vine; and why? Because of unbelief. Each time ye see a Jew with a sad and somber countenance—each time ye mark him like a denizen of another land, treading as an exile in this our country—each time ye see him, pause and say, “Ah! it was unbelief which caused thee to murder Christ, and now it has driven thee to be a wanderer; and faith alone—faith in the crucified Nazarene—can fetch thee back to thy country, and restore it to its ancient grandeur.” Unbelief, you see, has the Cain-mark upon its forehead. God hates it; God has dealt hard blows upon it: and God will ultimately crush it. Unbelief dishonors God. Every other crime touches God’s territory; but unbelief aims a blow at his divinity, impeaches his veracity, denies his goodness, blasphemes his attributes, maligns his character; therefore, God of all things, hates first and chiefly, unbelief, wherever it is.

5. And now to close this point—for I have been already too long—let me remark that you will observe the heinous nature of unbelief in this—that *it is the damning sin*. There is one sin for which Christ never died; it is the sin against the Holy Ghost. There is one other sin for which Christ never made atonement. Mention every crime in the calendar of evil, and I will show you persons who have found forgiveness for it. But ask me whether the man who died in unbelief can be saved, and I reply there is no atonement for that man. There is an atonement made for the

unbelief of a Christian, because it is temporary; but the final unbelief—the unbelief with which men die—never was atoned for. You may turn over this whole Book, and you will find that there is no atonement for the man who died in unbelief; there is no mercy for him. Had he been guilty of every other sin, if he had but believed, he would have been pardoned; but this is the damning exception—he had no faith. Devils seize him! O fiends of the pit, drag him downward to his doom! He is faithless and unbelieving, and such are the tenants for whom hell was built. It is *their* portion, *their* prison, they are the chief prisoners, the fetters are marked with their names, and for ever shall they know that, “he that believeth not shall be damned.”

II. This brings us now to conclude with the PUNISHMENT.

“Thou shalt see it with thine eyes, but shalt not eat thereof.” Listen unbelievers! ye have heard this morning your sin; now listen to your doom: “Ye shall see it with your eyes, but shalt not eat thereof.” It is so often with God’s own saints. When they are unbelieving, they see the mercy with their eyes, but do not eat it. Now, here is corn in this land of Egypt; but there are some of God’s saints who come here on the Sabbath, and say, “I do not know whether the Lord will be with me or not.” Some of them say, “Well, the gospel is preached, but I do not know whether it will be successful.” They are always doubting and fearing. Listen to them when they get out of the chapel. “Well, did you get a good meal this morning?” “Nothing for me.” Of course not. Ye could see it with your eyes, but did not eat it, because you had no faith. If you had come up with faith, you would have had a morsel. I have found Christians, who have grown so very critical, that if the whole portion of the meat they are to have, in due season, is not cut up exactly into square pieces, and put upon some choice dish of porcelain, they cannot eat it. Then they ought to go without; and they will have to go without, until they are brought to their appetites. They will have some affliction, which will act like quinine upon them: they will be made to eat by means of bitters in their mouths; they will be put in prison for a day or two until their appetite returns, and then they will be glad to eat the most ordinary food, off the most common platter, or no platter at all. But the real reason why God’s people do not feed under a gospel ministry, is, because they have not faith. If you believed, if you did but hear one promise, that would be enough; if you only heard one good thing from the pulpit here would be food for your soul, for it is not the quantity we hear, but the quantity we believe, that does us good—it is that which we receive into our hearts with true and lively faith, that is our profit.

But, let me apply this chiefly to the unconverted. They often see great works of God done with their eyes, but they do not eat thereof. A crowd of people have come here this morning to see with their eyes, but I doubt whether all of them eat. Men cannot eat with their eyes, for if they could, most would be well fed. And, spiritually, persons cannot feed simply with their ears, nor simply with looking at the preacher; and so we find the majority of our congregations come just to see; “Ah, let us hear what this babbler would say, this reed shaken in the wind.” But they have no faith; they come, and they see, and see, and see, and never eat. There is some one in the front there, who gets converted; and some one down below, who is called by sovereign grace; some poor sinner is weeping under a sense of his blood-guiltiness; another is crying for mercy to God: and another is saying, “Have mercy upon me, a sinner.” A great work is going on in this chapel, but some of you do not know anything about it; you have no work going on in your hearts, and why? Because ye think it is impossible; ye think God is not at work. He has not promised to work for you who do not honor him. Unbelief makes you sit here in times of revival and of the outpouring of God’s grace, unmoved, uncalled, unsaved.

But, sirs, the worst fulfillment of this doom is to come! Good Whitefield used sometimes to lift up both his hands and shout, as I wish I could shout, but my voice fails me. “The wrath to come! the wrath to come!” It is not the wrath now you have to fear, but the wrath to come; and there shall be a doom to come, when “ye shall see it with your eyes, but shall not eat thereof.” Methinks I see the last great day. The last hour of time has struck. I heard the bell toll its death

knell—time was, eternity is ushered in; the sea is boiling; the waves are lit up with supernatural splendour. I see a rainbow—a flying cloud, and on it there is a throne, and on that throne sits one like unto the Son of Man. I know him. In his hand he holds a pair of balances; just before him the books,—the book of life, the book of death, the book of remembrance. I see his splendour, and I rejoice at it; I behold his pompous appearance, and I smile with gladness that he is come to be “admired of all his saints.” But there stands a throng of miserable wretches, crouching in horror to conceal themselves, and yet looking, for their eyes must look on him whom they have pierced; but when they look they cry, “Hide me from the face.” What face? “Rocks, hide me from the face.” What face? “The face of Jesus, the man who died, but now is come to judgment.” But ye cannot be hidden from his face; ye must see it with your eyes: but ye will not sit on the right hand, dressed in robes of grandeur; and when the triumphal procession of Jesus in the clouds shall come, ye shall not march in it; ye shall see it, but ye shall not be there. Oh! methinks I see it now, the mighty Saviour in his chariot, riding on the rainbow to heaven. See how his mighty coursers make the sky rattle while he drives them up heaven’s hill. A train girt in white follow behind him, and at his chariot wheels he drags the devil, death, and hell. Hark, how they clap their hands. Hark, how they shout. “Thou hast ascended up on high; thou hast led captivity captive.” Hark, how they chant the solemn lay, “Hallelujah, the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.” See the splendour of their appearance; mark the crown upon their brows; see their snow-white garments; mark the rapture of their countenances; hear how their song swells up to heaven while the Eternal joins therein, saying, “I will rejoice over them with joy, I will rejoice over them with singing, for I have betrothed thee unto me in everlasting lovingkindness.” But where are you all the while? Ye can see them up there, but where are you? Looking at it with your eyes, but you cannot eat thereof. The marriage banquet is spread; the good old wines of eternity are broached; they sit down to the feast of the king; but there are you, miserable, and famishing, and ye cannot eat thereof. Oh! how ye wring your hands. Might ye but have one morsel from the table—might ye but be dogs beneath the table. You shall be a dog in hell, but not a dog in heaven.

But to conclude. Methinks I see thee in some place in hell, tied to a rock, the vulture of remorse gnawing thy heart; and up there is Lazarus in Abraham’s bosom. You lift up your eyes and you see who it is. “That is the poor man who lay on my dunghill, and the dogs licked his sores; there he is in heaven, while I am cast down. Lazarus—yes, it is Lazarus; and I who was rich in the world of time am here in hell. Father Abraham, send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, to cool my tongue.” But no! it cannot be; it cannot be. And whilst you lie there, if there be one thing in hell worse than another, it will be seeing the saints in heaven. Oh, to think of seeing my mother in heaven while I am cast out! Oh, sinner, only think, to see thy brother in heaven—he who was rocked in the selfsame cradle, and played beneath the same roof-tree—yet thou art cast out. And, husband, there is thy wife in heaven, and thou art amongst the damned. And seest thou, father! thy child is before the throne; and thou! accursed of God and accursed of man, art in hell. Oh, the hell of hells will be to see our friends in heaven, and ourselves lost. I beseech you, my hearers, by the death of Christ—by his agony and bloody sweat—by his cross and passion—by all that is holy—by all that is sacred in heaven and earth—by all that is solemn in time or eternity—by all that is horrible in hell, or glorious in heaven—by that awful thought, “for ever,”—I beseech you lay these things to heart, and remember that if you are damned, it will be unbelief that damns you. If you are lost, it will be because ye believed not on Christ; and if you perish, this shall be the bitterest drop of gall—that ye did not trust in the Saviour.

Unbelief

“Unfaith turns Christianity into only a philosophy. Of course, Christianity is a philosophy -- though not a rationalistic one because we have not worked it out from ourselves. Rather, God has told us the answers. In this sense it is the true philosophy, for it gives the right answers to man’s philosophic and intellectual questions. However, while it is the true philosophy, our Father in heaven did not mean it to be only theoretical or abstract. He meant it to tell us about Himself -- how we can get to heaven, but equally, how we can live right now in the universe as it is with both the seen and the unseen portions standing in equal reality. If Christians just use Christianity as a matter of mental assent between conversion and death, if they only use it to answer intellectual questions, it is like using a silver spoon for a screwdriver. I can believe that a silver spoon makes a good screwdriver at certain times. But it is made for something else. To take the silver spoon that’s meant to feed you, moment by moment, and keep it in your tool box to use only as a screw driver is silly.”

– Francis Schaeffer
Death in the City (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press: 1969) 139-40

“It is not our circumstances on the outside which are our real problem. It is the circumstances on the inside of us, the unbelief in our hearts, which is the cause of our problems.”

– J. Vernon McGee

“Unbelief is actually perverted faith, for it puts its trust not in the living God but in dying men.”

– A.W. Tozer

“In all unbelief there are these two things; a good opinion of one’s self, and a bad opinion of God.”

– Horatius Bonar

“Unbelief is not a misfortune to be pitied; it is a sin to be deplored. Its sinfulness lies in the fact that it contradicts the word of the one true God and thus attributes falsehood to him.”

– John Stott

“Conversion, then, is repentance (turning from sin and unbelief) and faith (trusting in Christ alone for salvation). They are two sides of the same coin. One side is tails -- turn tail on the fruits of unbelief. The other side is heads -- head straight for Jesus and trust his promises. You can’t have the one without the other any more than you can face two ways at once, or serve two masters.”

– John Piper

“Unbelief, in distinction from disbelief, is a confession of ignorance where honest inquiry might easily find the truth. ‘Agnostic’ is but the Greek for ‘ignoramus.’”

– Tryon Edwards

“Our twentieth century, far from being notable for scientific skepticism, is one of the most credulous eras in all history. It is not that people believe in nothing - which would be bad enough - but that they believe in anything - which is really terrible.”

– Malcolm Muggeridge

- Turning to material things to satisfy your hunger
- Turning to people to feed your needs

NOTES

6. Christ-centered contentment

Stay away from the love of money; be satisfied with what you have. For God has said, "I will never fail you. I will never forsake you. That is why we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper, so I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?" –Hebrews 13:5-6 NLT

- Do you trust Him to never abandon or desert you?
- Do you have confidence in Him?
- How do you know if you don't?
 - You turn to money or material things to provide what He can't or won't
 - You put your hope and trust in other things
 - You fear the future
 - You fear men
 - A sense of never being satisfied

7. Divine counsel

"I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you." – John 14:16-17 NASB

- Do you really believe the Holy Spirit is with you?
- Do you sense His presence?
- Do you turn to Him for help?
- Do you rely on Him for power?
- How do you know if you're not?
 - Your times in the Word are meaningless
 - Your life seems to lack clear direction
 - Little or no conviction over sin
 - A tendency to seek counsel from men or yourself

