

GOD MAKES MEN SENSIBLE OF THEIR MISERY BEFORE HE REVEALS HIS MERCY AND LOVE

By Jonathan Edwards

Hosea 5:15

I will go and return to my place, till they acknowledge their offense, and seek my face: in their affliction they will seek me early.

Subject: That 'tis God's manner to make men sensible of their misery and unworthiness, before he appears in his mercy and love to them.

IN the preceding part of the chapter is threatened the destruction of Ephraim. Ephraim, in the prophets, generally means the ten tribes, or the kingdom of Israel, as distinguished from the kingdom of Judah. When we read of Ephraim and Judah in the prophets, thereby is meant the whole people of Israel of the twelve tribes, as in verse 12 of this chapter, "Therefore will I be unto Ephraim as a moth, and to the house of Judah as rottenness." By Judah is meant the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin, which were under the king of Judah, and by Ephraim is meant the ten tribes under the king of Israel. Ephraim is put for the whole kingdom of Israel, because Samaria, the seat of the kingdom, the royal city, was in that tribe. In the verse immediately preceding the text it is declared in what a terrible manner God was about to deal with Ephraim. (Hos. 5:14) "For I will be unto Ephraim as a lion, and as a young lion to the house of Judah; I, even I, will tear and go away, and none shall rescue him." In the text God declares how he would deal with them after he had torn as a lion, etc. And here,

First, God declares how he would withdraw from them. "I will go and return to my place;" when I have torn as a lion. I will go away; I will leave them in that condition. I will depart from them, and they shall see no more of me.

Second, what God will wait for in them before he returns to them to show them mercy. There are three things here signified.

1. That they should be sensible of their guilt. "Till they acknowledge their offense." It is in the original, "till they become guilty." That is, till they become guilty in their own eyes, till they are sensible of their guilt; in the same sense as the same expression is used in Rom. 3:19, "That every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God:" that is, become guilty in their own eyes.

2. That they would be sensible of their misery, implied in the expression, "in their affliction they shall seek me." Their calamity was brought upon them, before God had torn them, and left them. But in their pride and perverseness, they were not well sensible of their own miserable condition, as this prophet observes in Hos. 7:9.

3. That they should be sensible of their need of God's help, which is implied in their seeking God's face, and seeking him early, that is, with great care and earnestness. Before, they would not seek God. They were not sensible of their helplessness, as we learn in the verse but one preceding the text. "When Ephraim saw his sickness, and Judah his wound, then went Ephraim to the Assyrian, and sent to king Jareb." But as we are there told, he could not heal him, nor cure his wound. And notwithstanding all the help he could afford, God wounded him, tore him as a young lion, and as he declares, would leave him, and he should cease going to any other, and should be sensible that no other could heal, and accordingly come to him for healing.

Doctrine. That it is God's manner to make men sensible of their misery and unworthiness, before he appears in his mercy and love to them.

I. That it is ordinarily thus with respect to the bestowment of great and signal mercies.

II. That it is particularly so with respect to revealing his love and mercy to their souls.

III. That they are made sensible of the desert of their sin.

I. This is God's ordinary way before great and signal expressions of his mercy and favor. He very commonly so orders it in his providence, and so influences men by his Spirit, that they are brought to see their miserable condition as they are in themselves, and to despair of help from themselves, or from an arm of flesh, before he appears for them, and also makes them sensible of their sin, and their unworthiness of God's help. This appears from the account which the Scriptures give us of God's dealings with his people. Joseph, before his great advancement in Egypt, must lie in the dungeon to humble him, and prepare him for such honor and prosperity. The children of Jacob, before Joseph reveals himself to them, and they receive that joy, and honor, and prosperity, which were consequent thereupon, pass through a train of difficulties and anxieties, till at last they are reduced to distress, and are brought to reflect upon their guilt, and to say, that they were verily guilty concerning their brother. God humbled them in his providence, and then an end was put to all their difficulties, and their sorrow was turned into joy upon Joseph's revealing himself to them. Jacob, before he hears the joyful news of Joseph's being yet alive, must be brought into great distress at the parting with Benjamin, and supposed loss of Simeon. He was reduced to great straits in his mind. He says in Gen. 42:36, "All these things are against me." But soon after this he had these gladsome tidings brought to him, "Joseph is yet alive, and he is governor over all the land of Egypt." And to confirm it, he sees the wagons and the noble presents, which Joseph sent to him, so that he was now brought to say, "It is enough; Joseph my son is yet alive. I will go and see him before I die." And so with the children of Israel in Egypt. Their bondage must wax more and more extreme. Their bondage had been very extreme. But yet Pharaoh gives commandment that more work should be laid upon them, and the task-masters tell them they must get their straw where they can find it, and nothing of their work should be diminished. And quickly upon this was their deliverance. So when the children of Israel were brought to the Red sea, the Egyptians pursued them, and were just at their heels, and they were reduced to the utmost distress. They see that they must assuredly perish, unless God work a miracle for them, for they were shut up on all sides: the Red sea was before them, and the army of the Egyptians encompassing them round behind. And they cried unto the Lord. And then God wonderfully appeared for their help, and made them pass through the Red sea, and put songs of deliverance into their mouths.

So before God brought the children of Israel into Canaan, he led them about in a great and terrible wilderness through a train of difficulties and temptations for forty years, that he might teach them their dependence on him, and the sinfulness of their own hearts. Deu. 32:10, "He found him in a desert land, and in the waste howling wilderness; he led him about, he instructed him, he kept him as the apple of his eye." God brought them into those trials and difficulties in the wilderness to humble them, and let them see what was in their hearts, that they might be convinced of their own perverseness by the many discoveries of it under those temptations, and so that they might be sensible that it was not for their righteousness that God made them his people, and gave them Canaan, seeing it was so evident that they were a stiff-necked people. Deu. 8:2, 3, "And thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee these forty

years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments, or no. And he humbled thee and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee with manna, which thou knewest not, neither did thy fathers know; that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord doth man live.” And Deu. 8:15-17, “Who led thee through that great and terrible wilderness, wherein were fiery serpents, and scorpions, and drought, where there was no water; who brought thee forth water out of the rock of flint; who fed thee in the wilderness with manna, which thy fathers knew not, that he might humble thee, and that he might prove thee, to do thee good at thy latter end; and thou say in thine heart, My power and the might of my hand hath gotten me this wealth.” And so we have examples of this from time to time in the history of the Judges. When Israel revolted, God gave them into the hands of their enemies. He let them continue in their hands, till they were reduced to great distress, and saw that they were in a helpless condition, and were brought to reflect on themselves, and to cry unto the Lord. And then God raised them up a deliverer. And when they cried unto God, he would not deliver them till he had humbled them, and brought them to own their unworthiness, and to own that they were in God’s hands. Judges 10 beginning with the 10th verse, “And the children of Israel cried unto the Lord, saying, We have sinned against thee, both because we have forsaken our God, and also served Balaam. And the Lord said unto the children of Israel, Did not I deliver you from the Egyptians, and from the Amorites, from the children of Ammon, and from the Philistines? The Zidonians also, and the Amalekites, and the Maonites, did oppress you; and ye cried to me, and I delivered you out of their hand. Yet ye have forsaken me, and served other gods; wherefore I will deliver you no more, Go and cry unto the gods which ye have chosen; let them deliver you in the time of your tribulation. And the children of Israel said unto the Lord, We have sinned; do thou unto us whatsoever seemeth good unto thee; deliver us only, we pray thee, this day. And they put away the strange gods from among them, and served the Lord; and his soul was grieved for the misery of Israel.” And this is the method in which God declared from the beginning he would proceed with his people. Lev. 26:40, etc. “If they shall confess their iniquity, and the iniquity of their fathers, with their trespass which they trespassed against me, and that also they have walked contrary unto me; and that I also have walked contrary unto them, and have brought them into the land of their enemies; if then their uncircumcised hearts be humbled, and they then accept of the punishment of their iniquity; then will I remember my covenant with Jacob, and also my covenant with Isaac, and also my covenant with Abraham will I remember; and I will remember the land. The land also shall be left of them, and shall enjoy her sabbaths, while she lieth desolate without them; and they shall accept the punishment of their iniquity; because, even because they despised my judgments, and because their soul abhorred my statutes. And yet for all that, when they be in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break my covenant with them; for I am the Lord their God. But I will for their sakes remember the covenant of their ancestors, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the heathen, that I might be their God.” It is God’s manner, when he will bestow signal blessings in answer to prayer, to make men seek them and pray for them with a sense of sin and misery. As 1 Kin. 8:38, 39, “What prayer and supplication soever be made by any man, or by all thy people Israel, which shall know every man the plague of his own heart, and spread forth his hands toward this house; then hear thou in heaven, thy dwelling-place, and forgive, and do, and give to every man according to his ways, whose heart thou knowest; for thou, even thou only, knowest the hearts of all the children of men.” By knowing the plague of their own hearts is meant both

their sin and misery. Being sensible of their misery is included, as is evident from the manner of expressing the same petition of Solomon's prayer, as it is related in 2 Chr. 6:29, "Then what prayer or supplication soever shall be made of any man, or of all thy people Israel, when every man shall know his own sore and his own grief." By which is probably meant his misery and his sin, which is the foundation of it. Paul gives us an account how God brought him to have despair in himself before a great deliverance, which he experienced. 2 Cor. 1:9, 10, "But we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God, which raiseth the dead; who delivered us from so great a death." How did Christ humble the woman of Canaan, or bring her to the exercise and expression of a sense of her own unworthiness before he answered her, and healed her daughter! When she continued to cry, after he answered her not a word, and seemed to take no notice of her, and his disciples desired him to send her away, and when she continued crying after him, he gave a very humbling answer, saying, "It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs." And when she took it well, as owning that being called a dog was not too bad, and owning that she was therefore unworthy of children's bread, she only sought the crumbs, then Christ answered her request. And the experience of God's people in all ages corresponds with those examples. It is God's usual method before remarkable discoveries of his mercy and love to them, especially by spiritual mercies, in a special manner to humble them, and make them sensible of their misery and helplessness in themselves, and of their vileness and unworthiness, either by some remarkably humbling dispensation of his providence or influence of his Spirit.

We are come now,

II. To show particularly that it is God's manner to make men sensible of their misery and unworthiness before he reveals his saving love and mercy to their souls. The mercy of God, which he shows to a sinner when he brings him home to the Lord Jesus Christ, is the greatest and most wonderful exhibition of mercy and love, of which men are ever the subjects. There are other things, in which God greatly expresses his mercy and goodness to men, many temporal favors. The mercies already mentioned, which God bestowed upon his people of old: his advancing Joseph in Egypt, his deliverance of the children of Israel out of Egypt, his leading them through the Red sea on dry land, his bringing them into Canaan, and driving out the heathen from before them, his delivering them from time to time from the hands of their enemies, were great mercies. But they were not equal to this of his people from under the guilt and dominion of sin. Several of them were typical of this, and as God would thus prepare men for the bestowment of those less mercies by making them sensible of their guilt and misery, so especially will he so do, before he makes known to them this great love of his in Jesus Christ. When God designs to show mercy to sinners, it is his manner thus to begin with them.

He first brings them to reflect upon themselves, and consider and be sensible what they are, and what condition they are in. What has already been said proves this. There is a harmony between God's dispensations. And as we see that this is God's manner of dealing with men when he gives them other great and remarkable mercies and manifestations of his favor, it is a confirmation that it is his method of proceeding with the souls of men, when about to reveal his mercy and love to them in Jesus Christ.

First, God makes men consider and be sensible of what sin they are guilty. Before, it may be, they were very regardless of this. They went on sinning, and never reflected upon what they did. [They] never considered or regarded what or how many sins they committed. They saw no cause why they should trouble their minds about it. But when God convinces them, he brings

them to reflect upon themselves. He sets their sins in order before their eyes. He brings their old sins to their minds, so that they are fresh in their memory — things which they had almost forgotten. And many things, which they used to regard as light offenses, which were not wont to be a burden to their consciences, nor to appear worthy to be taken notice of, they are now made to reflect upon. Thus they discover of what a multitude of transgressions they have been guilty, which they have heaped up till they are grown up to heaven. There are some sins especially, of which they have been guilty, which are ever before them, so that they cannot get them out of their minds. Sometimes when men are under conviction, their sins follow them, and haunt them like a specter. God makes them sensible of the sin of their hearts, how corrupt and depraved their hearts are. And there are two ways in which he does this. One is by setting before them the sins of their lives. They are so set in order before them, they appear so many and so aggravated, that they are convinced what a fountain of corruption there is in their hearts. Their sinful natures appear by their sinful lives. There is sin enough, which every man has committed, to convince him, that he is sold under sin, that his heart is full of nothing but corruption, if God by his Spirit leads him rightly to consider it.

Another way which God sometimes makes use of, is to leave men to such internal workings of corruption under the temptations which they have in their terrors and fears of hell, as shows them what a corrupt and wicked heart they have. God sometimes brings this good out of this evil, to make men see the corruption of their nature by the workings of it under temptations, which they have in their terrors about damnation. God leads them through the wilderness to prove them, and let them know what is in their hearts, as he did the children of Israel, as we have already observed. By means of the trials which the children of Israel had in the wilderness, they might be made sensible what a murmuring, perverse, rebellious, unfaithful, and idolatrous people they were. So God sometimes makes sinners sensible what wicked hearts they have, by their experience of the exercises of corruption, while they are under convictions. Not that this will in the least excuse men for allowing such workings of corruption in their hearts, because God sometimes leaves men to be wicked, that he may afterwards turn it to their good, when he in infinite wisdom sees meet so to do. We must not go and be wicked on purpose that we may get good by it. It will be very absurd, as well as horribly presumptuous, for us so to do. Though God sometimes in his sovereign mercy makes those workings of corruption, and a spirit of opposition and enmity against God, a means of showing them the vileness of their own hearts, and so to turn to their good. So God oftentimes is provoked thereby utterly to withdraw and forsake them, after the example of those murmurers, whose carcasses fell in the wilderness, of whom God swore in his wrath that they should never enter into his rest. And they who allow themselves therein, are the most likely so to provoke God. But it is God's manner to show men the plague of their own hearts by some means or other, before he reveals his redeeming love to their souls. While sinners are unconvinced, sin lies hid. They take no notice of it. But God makes the law effectual to bring men's own sins of heart and life to be reflected on, and observed. Rom. 7:9, "I was alive without the law once, but when the commandment came, sin revived." Then sin appeared and came to light, which was not before observed. Joseph's revealing himself to his brethren, is probably typical of Christ's revealing himself to the soul of a sinner, making known himself in his love, and in his near relation of a brother, and a redeemer of his soul. But before Joseph revealed himself to them, they were made to reflect upon themselves, and say, "we are verily guilty."

Second, God convinces sinners of the dreadful danger they are in by reason of their sin. Having their sins set before them, God makes them sensible of the relation which their sin has to misery. And here are two things of which they are convinced about their danger.

1. God makes them sensible that his displeasure is very dreadful. Before they heard often about the anger of God, and the fierceness of his wrath, but they were not moved by it. But now they are made sensible that it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. They are made in some measure sensible of the dreadfulfulness of hell. They are led with fixedness of impression to think what a dismal thing it will be to have God an enraged enemy, setting to work the misery of a soul, and how dismal it will be to dwell in such torment forever without hope. Isa. 33:14 "The sinners in Zion are afraid; fearfulness hath surprised the hypocrites. Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?" Other sinners are told of hell, but convinced sinners often have hell, as it were, in their view. Their being impressed with a sense of the dreadfulfulness of its misery, is the cause why it works upon their imagination oftentimes, and it will seem as though they saw the dismal flames of hell; as though they saw God in implacable wrath exerting his fury upon them; as though they heard the cries and shrieks of the damned.

2. They are made in some measure sensible of the connection there is between their sins and that wrath, or how their sin and guilt exposes them to that wrath, of the dreadfulfulness of which they have such lively apprehensions, and so fear takes hold of them. They are afraid that will be their portion. And they are sensible that they are in a miserable and doleful condition by reason of sin. Many things in the Scriptures make it evident that this is God's method. The account we have of our first parents confirms it. They had a sense of guilt and danger, before Christ was revealed to them. They were guilty, and were afraid of God's wrath, and ran and hid themselves. They were terribly afraid when they heard God coming. And doubtless their sense of their guilt and fear, when they were brought before God, and were called to an account, and God asked them what they had done, and whether they had eaten of that tree, whereof he commanded them that they should not eat, prepared them for a discovery of mercy. God made them sensible of their guilt and danger before he revealed to them the covenant of grace. And it is probable that their reflecting upon what God said about the seed of the woman bruising the serpent's head, soon wrought faith: that it was not long before the discovery God made of a merciful design towards them was a means of true consolation and hope to them. Joseph's brethren were brought into great distress for fear of their lives before Joseph revealed himself to them. Those who were converted by Peter's sermon were first pricked in their hearts in a sense of their guilt and their danger. Acts 2:37. And Paul, before he had his first comfort, trembled, and was astonished. Acts 9:6. And continued three days and three nights, and neither ate nor drank, which expressed his great distress. The jailer, before he was converted, was in terror. He called for a light, and sprang in and came trembling, and fell down before Paul and Silas. Acts 16:29, 30. Christ's invitation is made more especially to the weary and heavy laden, which doubtless has respect, at least partly, to laboring and being weary with a sense of guilt and danger. We read when David was in the cave, that everyone who was in distress, was gathered unto him. 1 Sam. 22:1. This doubtless was written as typifying Jesus Christ, and the referring of those who were in fear and distress unto him. The expression of flying for refuge, by which coming to Christ is signified, implies that before they come, they are in fear of some evil. They apprehend themselves in danger, and this fear gives wings to their feet. Pro. 18:10, "The name of the Lord is a strong tower." The voice of God to a sinner, when he gives him true comfort, is a still small voice. But this voice is preceded by a strong wind, and a terrible earthquake, and fire, as it was in Horeb when Elijah was there. 1 Kin. 19:11, 12, "And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind; and

after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice.”

Another thing in the Scriptures, which seems to evince this, is the frequent comparison made between the church spiritually bringing forth Christ, and a woman in travail, in pain to be delivered. John 16:21 and Rev. 12:2. The conversion of a sinner is represented by the same thing. It is bringing forth Christ in the heart. Paul speaks of men’s regeneration as of Christ being brought forth in them. Gal. 4:19. And therefore Christ calls believers his mother. Mat. 12:49, 50, “And he stretched forth his hand toward his disciples, and said, Behold my mother and my brethren! For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother.”

III. They are made sensible of the desert of their sin: that their sin deserves that wrath of God to which it exposes them. They are not only sensible of the dreadfulness of God’s wrath, how fearful a thing it would be to fall into the hands of the living God, and to sustain the eternal expressions of his fierce anger, as well as of the connection between their sins and this wrath, and how their sins expose them to it, but God is also wont, before he comforts them, to show them that their sins deserve this wrath. By a clear discovery of the connection between their sin and God’s wrath, they are sensible of their danger of hell, of which many are in a measure sensible, who are wholly insensible of their desert of hell. The threatenings of the law make them afraid indeed, that God will punish sins. Yet they have no thorough apprehension of their desert of the punishment threatened, and therefore many, who are afraid, murmur against God. They charge him foolishly with being hard and cruel. But it is God’s manner before he speaks peace to them, and reveals his redeeming love and mercy in Jesus Christ, to make them sensible that they also deserve it. Thus Mat. 18:24-26, “And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him which owed him ten thousand talents. But forasmuch as he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. The servant therefore fell down and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt.” Very commonly when men are first made sensible of their danger, their mouths are open against God and his dealings, that is, their hearts are full of murmurings. But it is God’s manner before he comforts and reveals his mercy and love to them, to stop their mouths, and make them acknowledge their guilt, or their desert of the threatened punishment. Rom. 3:19, 20, “Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore, by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight; for by the law is the knowledge of sin.” God would convince men of their guilt before he reveals a pardon to them. Now a man cannot be said to be thoroughly sensible of his guilt, till he is sensible that he deserves hell. A man must be sensible that he is guilty of death, or guilty of damnation, to use the scriptural mode of expression, before God will reveal to him his freedom from damnation. A sense of guilt consists in two things — in a sense of sin, and in a sense of the relation which sin has to punishment. Now the relation which sin has to punishment, is also twofold. *First*, the connection which it has with punishment, by which it exposes to it, and brings it. *Secondly*, its desert of punishment. When a man is truly convinced of his desert of the punishment to which his sin exposes him, then he may be said to be thoroughly sensible of his guilt. Then he is become guilty, in the sense of our text, and in the sense of Rom. 3:20.

Inquiry. How is it that a sinner is made sensible of his desert of God's wrath? A natural man may have a sense of this, though not the same sense which a person may have after conversion, because a natural man cannot have a true sight of sin, and of the evil of it. A man cannot truly know the evil of sin against God, except it be by a discovery of his glory and excellence. Then he will be sensible how great an evil it is to sin against him. Yet it cannot be denied that natural men are capable of a conviction of their desert of hell, or that their consciences may be convinced of it without a sight of God's glory. The consciences of wicked men will also be convinced of the justice of their sentence and of their punishment at the day of judgment, and doubtless will echo to the sentence of the Judge, and condemn them to the same punishment. Here, therefore, we would inquire how it is that a natural man may be made sensible of this. *First*, we shall show what is the principle assisted. *Second*, how it is assisted. And *third*, what are the chief external means which are used in order to this.

First, what principle in man is assisted in convincing him of his desert of eternal punishment? No new principle is infused. Natural men have only natural principles, and therefore all that is done by the Spirit of God before regeneration is by assisting natural principles. To observe, therefore, in answer to this inquiry,

That the principle, which is assisted in making natural men sensible of their desert of wrath, is natural conscience. Though man has lost a principle of love to God, and all spiritual principles, by the fall, yet natural conscience remains. Now there are two things, which are the proper work of natural conscience. One is to give man a sense of right and wrong. A natural man has no sense of the beauty and amiability of virtue, or of the turpitude and odiousness of vice. But yet every man has that naturally within, which testifies to him that some things are right, and others wrong. Thus if a man steals, or commits murder, there is something within, which tells him that he has done wrong. He knows that he has not done right. Rom. 2:14, 15, "For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these having not the law, are a law unto themselves; which show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing, or else excusing, one another." And the other work of natural conscience is to suggest the relation there is between right and wrong, and a retribution. Man has that in him, which suggests to him, when he has done ill, a relation between that ill and punishment. If a man has done that which his conscience tells him is wrong, is unjust, his conscience tells him that he deserves to be punished for it. Thus natural conscience has a twofold power; a teaching or accusing, and a condemning power. The Spirit of God, therefore, assists natural conscience the more thoroughly to do this, its work, and so convinces a man of sin. Conscience naturally suggests, when he has done a known evil, that he deserves punishment, and being assisted to its work thoroughly, a man is convinced that he deserves eternal punishment. Though natural conscience does remain in the man since the fall, yet it greatly needs assistance in order to its work. It is greatly hindered in doing its work by sin. Everything in man, which is part of his perfection, is hindered and impaired by sin. A faculty of reason remains since the fall, but it is greatly impaired and blinded. So natural conscience remains, but sin, in a great degree, stupefies it, and hinders it in its work. Now when God convinces a sinner, he assists his conscience against the stupefaction of sin, and helps it to do its work more freely and fully. The Spirit of God works immediately upon men's consciences. In conviction their consciences are awakened. They are convinced in their consciences. Their consciences smite them and condemn them.

Second, it may be inquired how God assists natural conscience so as to convince the sinner of his desert of hell? I answer,

1. In general, it is by light. The whole work of God is carried on in the heart of man from his first convictions to his conversion by light. It is by discoveries which are made to his soul. But by what light is it, that a sinner is made sensible that he deserves God's wrath? It is some discovery that he has, which makes him sensible of the heinousness of disobeying and casting contempt upon God. The light which gives evangelical humiliation, and which makes man sensible of the hateful and odious nature of sin, is a discovery of God's glory and excellence and grace. But what is it which a natural man sees of God, which makes him sensible that sin against God deserves his wrath. For he sees nothing of the excellence and loveliness of God's glory and grace? I answer,

2. Particularly, it seems to be a discovery of God's awful and terrible greatness. Natural men cannot see anything of God's loveliness, his amiable and glorious grace, or anything which should attract their love, but they may see his terrible greatness to excite their terror. Wicked men in another world, though they do not see his loveliness and grace, yet they see his awful greatness, and that makes them sensible of the heinousness of sin. The damned in hell are sensible of the heinousness of their sin. Their consciences declare it to them. And they are made sensible of it by what they see of the awful greatness of that Being, against whom they have sinned. And wicked men in this world are capable of being made sensible of the heinousness of sin the same way. If a wicked soul is capable while wicked of receiving the discoveries of God's terrible majesty in another world, it is capable of it in this. God may, if he pleases, make wicked men sensible of the same thing here. And in this way natural men may be so made sensible of the heinousness of sin, as to be convinced that they deserve hell, as is evident in that it is by this very means, that wicked men will be made sensible of the justice of their punishment in another world, and at the day of judgment. For then the wicked will see so much of the awful greatness of God, the Judge, that it will convince their consciences what a heinous thing it was in them to disobey and contemn such a God, and will convince them that they therefore deserve his wrath. Which shows that wicked men are capable of being convinced in the same way. A wicked man, while a wicked man, is capable of hearing the thunders, and seeing the devouring fire, of mount Sinai, that is, he is capable of being made sensible of that terrible majesty and greatness of God, which was discovered at the giving of the law. But this brings me to the

Third, thing, *viz.* the principal outward means, which the Spirit of God makes use of in this work of convincing men of their desert of hell. And that is *the law*. The Spirit of God in all his work upon the souls of men, works by his Word. And in this whole work of conviction of sin, that part of the word is principally made use of; *viz.* the Law. It is the law which makes men sensible of their sin; and it is the law, attended with its awful threatenings and curses, which gives a sense of the awful greatness, the authority, the power, the jealousy of God. Wicked men are made sensible of the tremendous greatness of God, as it were, in the same manner in which the children of Israel were, *viz.* by the thunders, and earthquake, and devouring fire, and sound of the trumpet, and terrible voice at mount Sinai. All the people who were in the camp trembled, and they said, "Let not God speak with us, lest we die." So that it is the law, which God makes use of in assisting the natural conscience to do its work. Gal. 3:24, "Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ." It is the law which God makes use of, to make men sensible of their guilt, and to stop their mouths. Rom. 3:19, "Now we know that whatsoever things the law saith, it saith to them that are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God." It is the law, which kills men as to trusting in their own righteousness. "For I was alive without the law once, but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died." Gal. 2:19, "For I through the law am dead to the law." Conviction, which

precedes conversion, is of sin and misery. But men are not thoroughly sensible of their sin or guilt, till they are sensible they deserve hell; nor thoroughly sensible of their misery, till they are sensible they are helpless.

Fourth, it is God's manner to make men sensible of their helplessness in their own strength. It is usual with sinners, when they are first made sensible of their danger of hell, to attempt by their own strength to save themselves. They in some measure see their danger, and endeavor to work out their own deliverance. They are striving to make themselves better. They strive to convert themselves, to work their hearts into a believing frame, and to exercise a saving trust in Christ. Having heard that if ever they believe, they must put their trust in Christ, and in him alone, for salvation, they think they will trust in Christ and cast their souls upon him. And this they endeavor to do in their own strength. This is very common with persons upon a sick bed, when they are afraid that they shall die and go to hell, and are told that they must put their trust in Christ alone for salvation. They attempt to do it in their own strength. So sinners will be striving without a sense of their insufficiency in themselves to bring their own hearts to love God, and to choose him for their portion, and to repent of their sins. Or they strive to make themselves better, that so God may be more willing to convert them and give them his grace, and enable them to believe in Christ, and love God, and repent of their sins. But before God appears to them as their help and deliverance, it is his manner to make them sensible that they are utterly helpless in themselves. They are brought to despair of help from themselves. There is a death to all their hopes from themselves. Rom. 7:9. Before God opens the prison doors, he makes them see that they are shut up, that they are close prisoners, and that there is no way in which they can escape. Christ tells us in Isa. 61:1 that he was sent to bind up the broken-hearted, and to proclaim liberty to captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound. Christ was sent to open the prison to them that are not only really, but sensibly, bound. Gal. 3:23, "But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith, that should afterwards be revealed." God makes men sensible that they are in a forlorn condition, that they are wretched, and miserable, and blind, and naked, before he comforts them. Christ tells us in John 9:39, "For judgment I am come into the world, that they which see not, might see; and that they which see, might be made blind;" meaning, partly at least, by those that see, those who think they see: having respect to the Pharisees, who were proud of their knowledge, and by the blind, those who are sensibly blind. This is emblematically represented by Saul's blindness before his first comfort. He was blind till Ananias came to him to open his eyes, probably designed to intimate to us that before God opens the eyes of men in conversion, he makes them sensibly blind. God brings men to this despair in their own strength in these ways.

1. God oftentimes makes use of men's own experience to convince them that they are helpless in themselves. When they first set out in seeking salvation, it may be they thought it an easy thing to be converted. They thought they should presently bring themselves to repent of their sins, and believe in Christ, and accordingly they strove in their own strength with hopes of success. But they were disappointed. And so God suffers them to go on striving to open their own eyes, and mend their own hearts. But they find no success. They have been striving to see for a long time, yet they are as blind as ever; and can see nothing. It is all Egyptian darkness. They have been striving to make themselves better; but they are bad as ever. They have often striven to do something which is good, to be in the exercise of good affections, which should be acceptable to God, but they have no success. And it seems to them, that instead of growing better, they grow worse and worse. Their hearts are fuller of wicked thoughts than they were at first. They see no more likelihood of their conversion than there was at first. So God suffers them

to strive in their own strength, till they are discouraged, and despair of helping themselves. The prodigal son first strove to fill his belly with the husks which the swine did eat. But when he despaired of being helped in that way, then he came to himself, and entertained thoughts of returning to his father's house.

2. God sometimes, by a particular assistance of the understanding, enables men to see so much of their own hearts, as at once causes them to despair of helping themselves. He sometimes convinces them by their own trials, suffering them to try a long time to effect their own salvation, until they are discouraged. But God, if he pleases, can convince men without such endeavors of their own, and sometimes he does so, as must be the case in many sudden conversions, of which the instances are not unfrequent. By revealing to them their own hearts, he sometimes enables them to perceive that they are so remote from the exercise of love to God, of faith, and of every other Christian grace, as well as from the possession of the least degree of spiritual light, that they despair of ever bringing themselves to it. They perceive that within their souls all is darkness as darkness itself, and as the shadow of death, and that it is too much for them to cause light. They find themselves dead to anything good, and therefore despair of bringing themselves to the performance of gracious acts. Thus we have shown that it is God's ordinary manner, before he reveals his redeeming mercy to the souls of men, to make them sensible of their sinfulness and danger, of their desert of the divine wrath, and of their utter helplessness in themselves. This we have shown to be most accordant with the Holy Scriptures, as well as with God's method of dealing with mankind in other things. And we have shown in an imperfect manner how, and by what means, it is that God thus convinces men. This work is what Christ speaks of, as one part of the work of the Holy Ghost, John 16:8, "When he is come, he will convince the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment." It is God's manner to convince men of sin, before he convinces them of righteousness.

I come now to show the reasons of the doctrine.

The propriety of such a method of proceeding is very obvious. How agreeable to the divine wisdom does it seem that the sinner should be brought to such a conviction of his danger and misery, as to perceive his utter incapacity to help himself by any strength or contrivance of his own, and his entire unworthiness of God's help, and desert of his wrath. That he should be brought to acknowledge that God, in the exercise of his holy sovereignty, may with perfect justice deal thus with him before he appears in his pardoning mercy and love as his helper and friend. A man who is converted is successively in two exceedingly different states: first, a very miserable, wretched state of condemnation, and then in a blessed condition, a state of justification. How agreeable, therefore, does it seem to the divine wisdom, that such a man should be conscious of this: first, of his miserable, condemned state, and then of his happy state; that, as he is really first guilty, and under a deep desert of hell, before he is really pardoned and admitted to God's favor, so he should first be conscious that he is guilty, and under such a desert of hell, before he is conscious of being the object of pardoning and redeeming mercy and grace. But the propriety of God's thus dealing with the souls of men will appear perhaps better by considering the following reasons:

1. It is the will of God that the discoveries of his terrible majesty, and awful holiness and justice, should accompany the discoveries of his grace and love, in order that he may give to his creatures worthy and just apprehensions of himself. It is the glory of God that these attributes are united in the divine nature, that as he is a being of infinite mercy and love and grace, so he is a being of infinite and tremendous majesty, and awful holiness and justice. The perfect and

harmonious union of these attributes in the divine nature, is what constitutes the chief part of their glory. God's awful and terrible attributes, and his mild and gentle attributes, reflect glory one on the other, and the exercise of the one is in perfect consistency and harmony with that of the other. If there were the exercise of the mild and gentle attributes without the other, [and] if there were love and mercy and grace in inconsistency with God's authority and justice and infinite hatred of sin, it would be no glory. If God's love and grace did not harmonize with his justice and the honor of his majesty, far from being an honor, they would be a dishonor to God. Therefore as God designs to glorify himself when he makes discoveries of the one, he will also make discoveries of the other. When he makes discoveries of his love and grace, it shall appear that they harmonize with those other attributes. Otherwise his true glory would not be discovered. If men were sensible of the love of God without a sense of those other attributes, they would be exposed to have improper and unworthy apprehensions of God, as though he were gracious to sinners in such a manner as did not become a Being of infinite majesty and infinite hatred of sin. And as it would expose to unworthy apprehensions of God, so it would expose the soul in some respects to behave unsuitably towards God. There would not be a due reverence blended with love and joy. Such discoveries of love, without answerable discoveries of awful greatness, would dispose the soul to come with an undue boldness to God. The very nature and design of the gospel show that this is the will of God, that those who have the discoveries of his love, should also have the discoveries of those other attributes. For this was the very end of Christ's laying down his life, and coming into the world, to render the glory of God's authority, holiness, and justice, consistent with his grace in pardoning and justifying sinners, that while God thus manifested his mercy, we might not conceive any unworthy thoughts of him with respect to those other attributes. Seeing, therefore, that this is the very end of Christ's coming into the world, we may conclude that those who are actually redeemed by Christ, and have a true discovery of Christ made to their souls, have a discovery of God's terribleness and justice to prepare them for the discovery of his love and mercy. God, of old, before the death and suffering of Christ were so fully revealed, was ever careful that the discoveries of both should be together, so that men might not apprehend God's mercy in pardoning sin and receiving sinners, to the disparagement of his justice. When God proclaimed his name to Moses, in answer to his desire that he might see God's glory, he indeed proclaimed his mercy: "The Lord, the Lord God, gracious and merciful, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth; keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, and transgression, and sin." (Exo. 34:6, 7) But he did not stop here, but also proclaimed his holy justice and vengeance: "and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children unto the third and fourth generation." (Exo. 34:7) Thus they are joined together again in the fourth commandment. "For I, the Lord thy God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me." (Exo. 20:5) Thus we find them joined together in passages too numerous to be mentioned. When God was about to speak to Elijah in Horeb, he was first prepared for such a familiar conversing with God by awful manifestations of the divine majesty. First there was a wind, which rent the rocks, and then an earthquake, and then a devouring fire. 1 Kin. 19:11, 12. God is careful even in heaven, where the discoveries of his love and grace are given in such an exalted degree, also to provide means for a proportional sense of his terribleness, and the dreadfulness of his displeasure, by their beholding it in the miseries and torments of the damned, at the same time that they enjoy his love. Even the man Christ Jesus was first made sensible of the wrath of God, before his exaltation to that transcendent height of enjoyment of the Father's love. And this is one reason that God gives

sinner a sense of his wrath against their sins, and of his justice, before he gives them the discoveries of his redeeming love.

2. Unless a man be thus convinced of his sin and misery before God makes him sensible of his redeeming love and mercy, he cannot be sensible of that love and mercy as it is, *viz.* that it is free and sovereign. When God reveals his redeeming grace to men, and makes them truly sensible of it, he would make them sensible of it as it is. God's grace and love towards sinners is in itself very wonderful, as it redeems from dreadful wrath. But men cannot be sensible of this until they perceive in some adequate degree how dreadful the wrath of God is. God's redeeming grace and love in Christ is free and sovereign, as it is altogether without any worthiness in those who are the objects of it. But men cannot be sensible of this, until they are sensible of their own unworthiness. The grace of God in Christ is glorious and wonderful, as it is not only as the objects of it are without worthiness, but as they deserve the everlasting wrath and displeasure of God. But they cannot be sensible of this until they are made sensible that they deserve God's eternal wrath. The grace of God in Christ is wonderful, as it saves and redeems from so many and so great sins, and from the punishment they have deserved. But sinners cannot be sensible of this till they are in some measure sensible of their sinfulness, and brought to reflect upon the sins of their lives, and to see the wickedness of their hearts. It is the glory of God's grace in Christ, that it is so free and sovereign. And doubtless it is the will of God, that when he reveals his grace to the soul, it should be seen in its proper glory, though not perfectly. When men see the glory of God's grace aright, they see it as free and unmerited, and contrary to the demerit of their sins. All who have a spiritual understanding of the grace of God in Christ, have a perception of the glory of that grace. But the glory of the divine grace appears chiefly in its being bestowed on the sinner when he is in a condition so exceedingly miserable and necessitous. In order, therefore, that the sinner may be sensible of this glory, he must first be sensible of the greatness of his misery, and then of the greatness of the divine mercy. The heart of man is not prepared to receive the mercy of God in Christ, as free and unmerited, till he is sensible of his own demerit. Indeed the soul is not capable of receiving a revelation or discovery of the redeeming grace of God in Christ, as redeeming grace, without being convinced of sin and misery. He must see his sin and misery before he can see the grace of God in redeeming him from that sin and misery.

3. Until the sinner is convinced of his sin and misery, he is not prepared to receive the redeeming mercy and grace of God, as through a Mediator, because he does not see his need of a Mediator till he sees his sin and misery. If there were, on the part of God, any exercise of absolute and immediate mercy towards sinners bestowed without any satisfaction or purchase, the soul might possibly see that without a conviction of its sin and misery. But there is not. All God's mercy to sinners is through a Savior. The redeeming mercy and grace of God is mercy and grace in Christ. And when God discovers his mercy to the soul, he will discover it as mercy in a Savior; and it is his will that the mercy should be received as in and through a Savior, with a full consciousness of its being through his righteousness and satisfaction. It is the will of God, that as all the spiritual comforts which his people receive are in and through Christ, so they should be sensible that they receive them through Christ, and that they can receive them in no other way. It is the will of God that his people should have their eyes directed to Christ, and should depend upon him for mercy and favor, [so] that whenever they receive comforts through his purchase, they should receive them as from him. And that because God would glorify his Son as Mediator, as the glory of man's salvation belongs to Christ, so it is the will of God that all the people of Christ, all who are saved by him, should receive their salvation as of him, and should attribute the glory of it to him. None who will not give the glory of salvation to Christ, should have the

benefit of it. Upon this account God insists upon it, and it is absolutely necessary, that a sinner's conviction of his sin, and misery, and helplessness in himself, should precede or accompany the revelation of the redeeming love and grace of God. I shall also mention two other ends which are hereby attained.

4. By this means the redeeming mercy and love of God are more highly prized and rejoiced in, when discovered. By the previous discoveries of danger, misery, and helplessness, and desert of wrath, the heart is prepared to embrace a discovery of mercy. When the soul stands trembling at the brink of the pit, and despairs of any help from itself, it is prepared joyfully to receive tidings of deliverance. If God is pleased at such a time to make the soul hear his still small voice, his call to himself and to a Savior, the soul is prepared to give it a joyful reception. The gospel then, if it be heard spiritually, will be glad tidings indeed, the most joyful which the sinner ever heard. The love of God and of Christ to the world, and to him in particular, will be admired, and Christ will be most precious. To remember what danger he was in, what seas surrounded him, and then to reflect how safe he now is in Christ, and how sufficient Christ is to defend him and to answer all his wants, will cause the greater exultation of soul. God, in this method of dealing with the souls of his elect, consults their happiness, as well as his own glory. And it increases happiness, to be made sensible of their misery and unworthiness, before God comforts them. For their comfort, when they receive it, is so much the sweeter.

5. The heart is more prepared and disposed to praise God for it. This follows from the reasons already mentioned: As they are hereby made sensible how free and sovereign the mercy of God is towards them and how great his grace in saving them, and as they more highly prize the mercy and love of God made known to them, all will dispose them to magnify the name of God, to exalt the love of God the Father in giving his Son to them, and to exalt Jesus Christ by their praise, who laid down his life for them to redeem them from all iniquity. They are ready to say, "How miserable should I have been, had not God had pity upon me, and provided me a Savior! In what a miserable condition should I have been, had not Christ loved me, and given himself for me! I must have endured that dreadful wrath of God; I must have suffered the punishment which I had deserved by all that great sin and wickedness of which I have been guilty."

APPLICATION

I. This subject admits of an application to unconverted sinners. If it be so, as has been represented, then let me exhort you to seek those convictions. Though you are at present sinners, and have no terrifying sense of your danger of hell, yet I presume to say concerning most of you at least, that you do not intend to go to hell. When you happen to think about another world, you flatter yourself, that in some way or other you shall escape eternal misery. Or at least, you do not think of it with a willingness to be damned. But if it be, that you do not suffer eternal damnation, you have a great work to do before you die. It ordinarily is a very difficult work, especially to those who have gone on for a considerable time in ways of wickedness under the means of grace. If you are ever truly converted, you must be convinced of your misery and unworthiness. You must be guilty in your own sense. Begin your work, then, and seek to be made sensible of your misery and unworthiness. Make haste, and set about this work speedily. You may defer it so long, that it will be too late. It may be too late, if you delay, in these two ways. It may be too late, as you may be overtaken with death, before you set about it, as thousands and millions have been before you. And if you should not die before you begin, yet it may be too late, as you may never

have an opportunity to get through. Some persons are a long time under convictions, before they are converted. There are some, whom God suffers to continue a long time seeking salvation in their own strength before he makes them despair of help from themselves. They continue many years trusting in their own righteousness, as it were, wandering from mountain to hill, from one hold to another, seeking rest and safety. They are a long time building castles in the air. They sometimes flatter themselves from one consideration, and sometimes from another. And if you should delay, there is danger that you may not have time. Some are many years under fears of damnation, and are seeking salvation. And there are many for whom death is too quick. Here we will consider briefly what are the occasions of the stupidity and senselessness of sinners, and thence shall take occasion to warn those who would seek the convictions of God's Spirit.

Some provoke God to withhold the strivings and convincing influences of his Spirit. Some provoke God to give them up to hardness of heart. God lets them alone, and intends to let them alone. Hos. 4:17, "Ephraim is joined to idols; let him alone." Psa. 81:11, 12, "But my people would not hearken to my voice; and Israel would none of me. So I gave them up to their own hearts' lust; and they walked in their own counsels."

II. To exhort those, who have some convictions of sin and danger, that they do not lose them. If you have the strivings of God's Spirit, God has met with you, led you to reflect upon your sins, and rendered you sensible that you are in danger of hell, and so made you concerned about your soul, and put you upon seeking salvation. Take heed that you do not lose your convictions, and grow senseless of eternal things, and negligent of your soul's concern. [Take heed] that you do not return to your former careless way of living, [and] that you do not return to your former sins. Here consider,

First, that there is danger in it. It is not all who are under concern for their souls, and who, by the strivings of God's Spirit, are put upon seeking and striving for salvation, who hold out. There are many more, who set out at the beginning of the race, who do not hold out to the end. Many things intervene between the beginning and the end of the race, which divert, and stop, and turn back many who commenced well. There are many, who seem to be under strong convictions, and to be very earnest in seeking, whose convictions are but short-lived. And some, who seem to be much concerned about salvation for a considerable time, it may be for years together, yet by degrees grow careless and negligent. There is much in your own heart which tends to stupefy you. It is the natural tendency of sin and lust to stupefy the conscience. And as corruption is reigning as yet in your heart, it will ever be ready to exert itself in such acts as will have a great tendency to drive away your convictions. And Satan is doubtless diligently watching over you, striving in all ways to abate, and to take off, your convictions. He joins in with the sloth and lusts of your heart to persuade to negligence, and to turn your mind to other things. And the world is full of objects which tend to take off your mind from the soul's concern, and are constantly, as it were, endeavoring to take possession of your mind, and to drive out the concerns of another world.

Second, consider, if you lose your convictions, it will be no advantage to you that ever you had them, as to any furtherance of your salvation. Whatever terrors you have been under about damnation, to whatever reflections you have been brought upon your sins, whatever strong desires you have had after deliverance, and whatever earnest prayers you have made, it will all be lost. What you have suffered of fear and concern will turn to no good account, and what you have done, the pains you have taken, will be utterly lost. When you have strove against sin, and labored in duty, have stemmed the stream, and have proceeded a considerable way up the hill,

and made some progress towards the kingdom of heaven, when once you have lost your convictions, you will be as far from salvation as you were before you began. You will lose all the ground you have gained. You will go quite down to the bottom of the hill. The stream will immediately carry you back. All will be lost: you had as good never have had those convictions, as to have had them, and then to lose them.

Third, you do not know that you shall ever have such an opportunity again. God is now striving with you by his Spirit. If you should lose the strivings of his Spirit, it may be that God's Spirit would never return again. If you are under convictions, you have a precious opportunity, which, if you knew the worth of it, you would esteem as better than any temporal advantages. You have a price in your hands to get wisdom, which is more valuable than gold or silver. It is a great privilege to live under means of grace, to enjoy the Word and ordinances of God, and to know the way of salvation. It is a greater thing still to live under a powerful dispensation of the means of grace under a very instructive, convincing ministry. But it is a much greater privilege still to be the subject of the convincing influences of the Spirit of God. If you have these, you have a precious advantage in your hands. And if you lose it, it is questionable whether you ever have the like advantage again. We are counseled to seek the Lord while he may be found, and to call upon him while he is near. Isa. 55:6. A time in which God's Spirit is striving with a man by convictions of his sin and danger, is especially such a time, that is a sinner's best opportunity. It is especially a day of salvation. God may be said to be near, when he pours out his Spirit upon many in the place where a person dwells. It is prudence for all then to be calling upon God as being near at such a time. But especially is God near, at a time when he is pouring out his Spirit in immediately convincing and awakening a man's own soul. If therefore God's Spirit is now at work with you, you have a precious opportunity. Take heed that you do not by any means let it slip. It may doubtless be said concerning many, that they have missed their opportunity. Most men, who live under the gospel, have a special opportunity. There is a certain season, which God appoints for them, which is, above all others, a day of grace with them, when men have a very fair opportunity for securing eternal salvation, if they did but know it, and had hearts for it. But the misery of man is great upon him, for man knows not his time. The wise man tells us, Ecc. 8:6, 7. that "To every purpose there is time and judgment, therefore the misery of man is great upon him. For he knoweth not that which shall be." And again, Ecc. 9:12, "Man knoweth not his time." If the Spirit of God is now striving with you, it may be it is your time, and it may be your only time. Be wise, therefore, and understand the things which belong to your peace, before they are hid from your eyes. You have not the influences of the Spirit of God in your own power. You cannot have convictions and awakenings when you please. God is sovereign as to the bestowment of them. If you are ready to flatter yourself, that although you neglect now, when you are young, yet you shall be awakened again, that is a vain and groundless presumption. It is a difficult thing for a man who has been going on in a sinful course, to reform. There are a great many difficulties in the way of thorough reformation. If you therefore have reformed, and returned again to your former sin, you will have all those difficulties to overcome again.

Fourth, if you lose your convictions, and return again to a way of allowed sinning, there will be less probability of your salvation than there was before you had any convictions. Backsliding is a very dangerous and pernicious thing to men's souls, and is often spoken of as such in God's Word, which was signified in that awful dispensation of God turning Lot's wife into a pillar of salt: to be a standing emblem of the danger of looking back after one has set out in a way of religion. The ill to which they are subject, who lose their convictions, is not merely the loss of their convictions. Their convictions are not only a means of no good to them, but they turn to

much ill. It would have been better for them that they had never had them. For they are now set more remote from salvation than they were before. For having risen some considerable way towards heaven, and falling back, they sink lower, and farther down towards hell, than ever they were. The way to heaven is now blocked up with greater difficulties than ever it was. Their hearts now are become harder for light, and convictions being once conquered, they evermore are an occasion of a greater hardness of heart than there was before. Yea, there is no one thing whatsoever, which has so great a tendency to it. Man's heart is hardened by losing convictions, as iron is hardened by being heated and cooled. If you are awakened, and afterwards lose your convictions, it will be a harder thing to awaken you again. If there were only that you are growing older, there would be less probability of your being awakened again. For as persons grow older they grow less and less susceptible of convictions. Evil habits grow stronger and more deeply rooted in the heart. You greatly offend God by quenching his Spirit, and returning as a dog to his vomit, and as a sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire. And there is danger that God will say concerning you, as he did concerning Jerusalem, Eze. 24:13, "Because I have purged thee, and thou wast not purged, thou shalt not be purged from thy filthiness any more, till I have caused my fury to rest upon thee." If you return again to your wicked course, if you should go to hell at last, you will lament that ever you have had any convictions. You will find your punishment so much the heavier. And if you should be hereafter awakened, and set about striving for salvation, yet you will probably find harder work in it. You do but make work for yourself by your backsliding. You will not only have all to do over again which you have done, and which you must have done, if you had gone on, but there will be new work for repentance. There probably must be greater and more dreadful terrors, and it may be, a much longer time spent in seeking and striving, a more difficult work with your own headstrong corruptions. If you were but sensible of one half of the disadvantages of backsliding, and the many woes and calamities in which it will involve you, you would be careful not to lose your convictions.

Fifth, consider the encouragement there is in Scripture to persevere in seeking salvation, as in Hos. 6:3, "Then shall we know if we follow on to know the Lord." Thence we may gather, that God usually gives success to those who diligently, and constantly, and perseveringly seek conversion. And that you be the better directed in taking care not to lose your convictions, it is convenient that you should be aware of those things which are common occasions of persons losing their convictions. I shall therefore briefly mention some of them.

1. Persons falling into sin is very often the occasion of their losing their convictions. Some temptation prevails, so that they are drawn into some sin. Some lust upon some occasion has been stirred up, and they have been overcome by their sinful appetites, and have provoked God to anger. It may be they have been drawn into some criminal act of sensuality, and so have quenched the Spirit. Or they have got into some quarrel with some persons. Their spirits are disturbed, and heated with malice and revenge, and they have acted sinfully, or have sinfully expressed themselves, and have driven away the Spirit of God. These are the most ready ways to put an end to convictions.

2. Sometimes there happens some diverting occasion: there is some incident which for the present diverts their minds. Their minds are taken off from their business for a short time. They are drawn into company. It may be they see something which revives a desire of worldly enjoyments and entertainments, or they are engaged in some exercise and business, which diverts their minds. And so afterwards they are more careless than they were before. They are not so

strict in attending private duties, and carelessness and stupidity by degrees steal upon them, till they wholly lose their convictions.

3. Some change in their circumstances takes off their minds from the concerns of their souls. Their minds are diverted by the new circumstances with which they are attended, or are taken up with new pleasures and enjoyments, or with new cares and business, in which they are involved. It may be they grow richer. They prosper in the world, and their worldly good things crowd in, and take possession of their minds. Or worldly cares are increased upon them, and they have so many things to look after, that their minds are taken up, and they have not time to look after their souls.

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