

A dramatic landscape painting in a dark, monochromatic style. A lone figure, seen from behind, stands on a rocky path in a deep valley. The figure is wearing a long, dark coat and a hat, and is leaning on a walking stick. The valley is flanked by steep, rocky hills. In the distance, a bright light source, possibly the sun or moon, is partially obscured by dark, swirling clouds, creating a powerful beam of light that illuminates the path and the valley floor. The overall mood is one of solitude and contemplation.

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ON REPENTANCE

TWO SERMONS

SERMON I

“Gather yourselves together, yes, gather together, O nation not desired; before the decree brings forth, before the day passes

like chaff, before the fierce anger of the Lord comes upon you, before the day of the Lord's anger comes upon you. Seek the Lord, all you meek of the earth, who have carried out His justice; seek righteousness, seek meekness: it may be that you will be hidden in the day of the Lord's anger." — Zephaniah 2:1–3

The first chapter is entirely devoted to a terrifying declaration and description of an imminent and comprehensive judgment decreed against the land of Judah, along with the reasons for it. Yet the prophet concludes with the words I have read, offering a gracious call to repentance to avert the execution of that judgment.

Consider first the people to whom this exhortation is directed. He speaks, first, collectively to the entire nation: "Gather yourselves together, O nation," calling them to a solemn and public act of repentance. Secondly, the call applies particularly and individually to each person within the nation, especially the unrepentant: "Search yourselves, O you who are not desired." And thirdly, if none will heed him, he then directs his message especially to the godly in the land who have already repented—"who have carried out His justice." To them he says, "Seek the Lord," and so on.

Next, consider the duties he urges upon them all. Though some are addressed more directly to the ungodly and others to the godly, all are applicable to everyone alike. As laid out in the text, these express the essential elements of repentance and their proper order:

1. All, collectively, are to gather solemnly together.
2. Once gathered, they are to search out (for the word also carries this meaning) the sins of the nation that have provoked the threatened judgment.

Individually, each person is urged:

1. To search his own heart—"Search yourselves regarding your sins and your condition before God."
2. To judge yourselves as those not to be desired, that is, out of God's favor and under His wrath. For God has judged you thus—"O nation not desired"—and He says this so that you may rightly judge yourselves.
3. To be moved by this sense of guilt to seek the Lord, to seek His favor and to appease His wrath.
4. To be sincere in this search, they must also "seek righteousness"—grace as well as mercy—otherwise, they seek Him in hypocrisy.
5. Especially, they must seek Him with humility and meekness of spirit, with meekness above all other graces.
6. And all this must be done urgently—"before the decree brings forth."

Finally, to awaken everyone—both the wicked and the godly—he adds various motivations.

First, those meant to stir the ungodly:

1. God's patience is already heavy with a decree, and that decree is of wrath.
2. A fixed day is appointed for its fulfillment.
3. That day will reveal itself as "the fierce anger of the Lord."

4. It will consume them like chaff, and they will be helpless to resist it.

Secondly, he gives a special encouragement to the godly: that even if the day of the Lord's anger comes upon the impenitent, they who now seek the Lord may yet be hidden in that day.

In addressing these points, I have chosen rather to convey their essence and weight as distilled into application and exhortation—as the prophet himself does—than to spend this precious time in merely doctrinal exposition.

If my speech is plain and direct, rather than smooth and flattering, remember that sackcloth is fitting for this day—not only for praying, but also for preaching, as it is said of the two witnesses in Revelation 11:3.

The prophet speaks first to the whole nation in general; and so I have a special commission today to do the same. Every individual congregation gathered today is to represent and embody the whole nation, taking upon itself the sins of the entire people and confessing them as its own—as the saints of old, like Ezra and Daniel, did in their fasts. But especially we, who are a nation within a nation (a “toga-wearing people”), selected and drawn from all its corners—our sins serve as a sample of the sins of the nation, not only reflecting them but in many ways serving as their source.

The first thing he calls the nation to do is to “gather together.” As we see it interpreted in Joel 2:15–16: “Sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the people,” and so on. God will require public repentance before He grants a general pardon. And here we are today, gathered together for this very purpose. So this exhortation has not passed its time. Let us bless the zeal and wisdom of those in

authority who have summoned us before “the decree brings forth.” For this is the right season for this great ordinance. Preventative medicine is best, and such is prescribed here—and has always been practiced by the saints.

In Ezra 9, when the people had intermarried with the daughters of foreign nations, and even the princes were foremost in this sin, Ezra, upon hearing of it, tore his garment, sat astonished, and fasted and prayed—foreseeing a coming storm when such gross corruptions had risen. “For though we remain as yet escaped,” he said, “would You not be angry until You had consumed us?” (verses 14–15).

But to gather together and to call a general assembly is not all that the prophet exhorts. He calls for a searching as well: “Search yourselves.” The original word, all interpreters agree, means both gathering and searching. And since these two are companion duties, the Holy Spirit joins them in one word, which equally signifies both. Hence, being twice repeated, it is rendered first as “gather,” and then as “search.” Searching, which is the beginning of wisdom and repentance, is indeed the goal of fasting.

Moreover, not only does the word literally signify both, it does so metaphorically as well. For repentance—which begins with self-searching—is in Scripture described as gathering a man’s thoughts or senses, which have long been wandering after worldly ambitions: promotions, learning, honor, and such like. But now the heart is to be recollected and drawn inward, as the prodigal son’s repentance is expressed in Luke 15:17—“he came to himself.” Likewise, in 1 Kings 8:47, true repentance is described as “bringing back to one’s heart,” or as the margin renders it, “bethinking themselves.” Thus, you see, by both sense and wording, these duties go hand in hand.

And moreover, the motive which the prophet employs both before and after strengthens this interpretation, and it is the only motive I shall use to stir you to this duty at this time. In verse 12 of the preceding, first chapter: “I will search Jerusalem with candles.” And what does that mean? “I will punish,” and so forth. For God’s judgments are as bloodhounds that eventually track down sin and sinners, as in Psalm 10:15: “Break the arm of the wicked: seek out his wickedness until You find none,” that is, until no sin remains unpunished. Therefore, says the prophet, to prevent God’s search, “Search yourselves,” just as it is said elsewhere, “Judge yourselves,” and so on.

First, search into national sins, for he speaks to them as a nation: “O nation not desired.” Let us search, I say, for if we leave any of Rachel’s idols hidden in the straw, any of Achan’s garments concealed in the baggage, which we would rather keep secret, God will come and search with candles, and He will certainly discover them. David inquired of God to know what national sin had brought the famine, and it was revealed to be Saul’s oppression of the Gibeonites (2 Samuel 21:1). And desperate indeed is the condition of that nation and people who, though they “declare their sins as Sodom,” and their plague-sores run and fester and emit a stench in the nostrils of God and godly men, yet, like those infected with the plague, they cannot endure correction—not even the gentlest touch administered by the most tender and discreet hand. And whoever would make too thorough an inquiry may well fear to be ensnared himself. Much more so must that nation be near its downfall, ready to perish, when the deadly and ruinous sins of it are covered over and healed superficially, as by the flattering prophets of old, until, as the Spirit elsewhere says, “there is no healing.”

It is for this very cause—namely, to search into our wounds and confess them—that we are gathered together this day. For of us it may truly be said, with regard to both sins and punishments, what Isaiah declared of his people in the days of Hezekiah: “From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but wounds and bruises and putrefying sores: the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint.”

Yet I do not intend to search into the disorders of the head and nerves—that is, the rulers and magistrates who give motion and direction to the whole body—for that is not the purpose of this assembly.

And secondly, I need not search into the outward sores of gross and visible sins which break out in the body of the people; these are plainly evident to every man’s view and to his conscience.

But it is the inward corruptions of the blood and spirits—that is, of religion and the worship of God—which are the root cause of all those other disorders, that I would rather have you examine.

First, because it properly belongs to this congregation to search into such matters, who are as the liver and the heart, the very fountain and reservoir of both. For “the priest’s lips should preserve knowledge, and the people should seek the law from his mouth” (Malachi 2:7); and from us especially proceed all those veins and arteries which carry and disperse the corrupt blood and spirits throughout the entire body of the nation.

Secondly, also because it is the corruption in these very things that the prophet first and chiefly, and indeed primarily, points out in this first chapter, from verse 4 to verse 7. Therefore, I am warranted to apply what is found to resemble this to our own nation, as the object

of our search, and as the reason why God does not desire us, and the reason for the threatened ruin.

For indeed, thirdly, nothing so causes Christ to loathe a church—which once received from Him a pure and undefiled religion (as He Himself speaks of it)—more than corruption in these matters. You may observe this from the seven letters He wrote after His ascension, found in Revelation chapters 2 and 3. For this is the corruption of the vitals; for the life resides in the blood. And if that blood be restored and preserved in purity, then the external sores will soon fall away like scabs.

Let us then consider the condition of religion and the worship of God which this prophet found in Judah, and let us use this discovery as a guide for searching out our own.

First, we find open and outright idolaters, professedly so, not yet purged from that state; for whom God says He will “stretch out His hand against the inhabitants, to cut off those who had not previously been cut off” (verse 4).

Which idolatry is revealed in three particular aspects.

First, in the presence of relics of Baal—idolatrous images, altars, and rites used in his worship.

Second, in the appointment of priests as instruments of idolatry—both the *chemarim* (so called from the word *kamar*, signifying “heat”), who are marked by their fervent zeal in seducing others and their energetic efforts to promote idolatry, as commentators have noted; and, additionally, the ordinary priests—household chaplains resident in private dwellings.

Third, their idolatry was further practiced in the worship of the host of heaven—performed by night, and therefore in secret, though conducted on rooftops.

I need not exhort you to go and uncover these corruptions; your consciences, I dare affirm, have already taken note of popish altars, crucifixes, indulgences (which some, as here, also call relics—relics of Baal indeed); and of the Jesuits, who are even hotter than the ancient *chemarim*, being not only seducers but incendiaries to the state—such spirits as inflame passions and stir the blood to such heat as to plunge nations into burning fevers, civil dissensions; and along with them, the secular priests also. For the purging of both, our government has wisely prescribed bloodletting. As for their worship of the host of heaven—meaning the host of glorious martyrs, saints, and angels, along with a consecrated wafer as a bredden host—no one is ignorant of this, for it is not done secretly by night, as among them of old, but openly and by day.

The second group the prophet addresses are not idolaters by open profession, but they claim adherence to the same “reformed religion,” established, they claim, by God. That is, they swear by Him (for you all know that to swear by God is an act of worship), and yet they swear by Malcham also—maintaining allegiance to both, and perhaps striving to reconcile the two. Examine whether such individuals exist among us, those who attempt to blend light with darkness—who introduce a twilight in doctrine, which is certain to lead to the midnight of confusion; who, for that purpose, revive practices discarded by our reformers as superstitious, which were the forerunners of popery in earlier days, and who may do so to create affinity and compliance with popery, making the transition back to it all the easier.

The third group are those who have turned back from the Lord—apostates either in doctrine or in practice, or in both, having once professed and acknowledged the truth. And if in doctrine, then certainly in practice; for no man acts better than he believes, and many behave worse. Doctrines that undermine the practice of religion are more dangerous than even the grossest acts of sin, just as an act of treason is less severe than a law permitting it, or than an opinion that such treason might be lawful. And when men are forced to re-prove the foundational principles once laid down by glorious martyrs and apostles, it is a sign of a deep, grievous, and perhaps irreparable fall in some, as Hebrews 6:1–2, compared with verse 4, suggests.

However, even if we still retain the right doctrines, yet as to the practice of godliness and our approval of it, “evil men grow worse and worse.” Compare our times with those early days of our first Reformation. The fires of Queen Mary kindled a spiritual fervor in England, and the example of those blessed men who sealed the truth with their blood left behind a general approval of their faith and the godly practices they maintained. Spiritual preaching was then valued; people would travel far to hear sermons, and would recount them to their families, and be held in reverence. One could then profess the fear of God in its highest expression, and live conscientiously, without incurring reproach. One could uphold the Sabbath and sanctify it with the strictest observance, devoting it entirely to holy exercises (as our homilies express it), without being accused of Judaizing. But the memory of those godly men and their ways has now faded, and a new generation has arisen that does not know those Josephs. And now, their brethren who worship God in the same manner are vilified.

If gross sins must be condemned and sinners punished, people may indeed strike at them—but it is only with a dull and feeble blow, with the back of the sword. But if even a small fault be found in a godly man, men turn the sharp edge of the blade upon him and strike with all their might.

And whereas drunkenness, profaneness, contempt of God and all that is good may pass freely through the world without warrant from law or conscience to justify or defend it, godliness—though it carries with it a passport of conformity—is treated as a suspicious intruder. It is everywhere halted, interrogated, and, at times, even scourged out of town as a renegade.

Indeed, is it not like Samson, brought forth upon the stage, which often serves as the devil’s pulpit, though it wears another mask, to entertain the Philistines? Yea, it is set up as a target to be shot at from the very pulpit of God, while “puritanism” is made the stalking-horse behind which they fire their arrows straight through the heart of true godliness.

Men have not merely “turned from the Lord” (as the prophet says here), but have turned against Him.

The fourth and final group that Zephaniah speaks of are those who have never embraced any form of religion—those who have neither sought after God nor inquired concerning Him, but live in this world without God, like atheists and ignorant souls, having no knowledge of Him, nor making any effort to seek after it. These include civil, outwardly moral individuals who neglect calling upon God and disregard the holy duties by which He is to be sought; like Gallio, who “cared for none of these things.” To search for such people within the kingdom would be like seeking out trees in a forest—the whole world abounds with them.

Rather, go and run through the streets, as God commanded Jeremiah (Jeremiah 5:1–2), and see whether you can find even one person who sincerely seeks after God, especially when compared to the multitudes who do not—or find one person truly inquisitive after Him in His ordinances, as the church was in the Song of Songs, chapter 5, verse 6. Indeed, go even to the remote corners of the kingdom and you will find thousands of villages where people “sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,” and if, by God’s mercy, they should begin to seek after Him, it would be only by “feeling after Him,” as Paul describes the Gentiles in Acts 17:27.

And how should they seek Him otherwise? For as Paul asks in Romans 10:14, “How shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?” But has not the sound of the gospel gone forth to them all? Yes, as the apostle says. But let me add one further question: “How shall they preach unless they be sent?”—that is, sent to dwell among their people, to live among the souls of men, over whom not men, but God Himself, has appointed them overseers.

It is no wonder, then, that Israel is said to be without God when it is without “a teaching priest” (2 Chronicles 15:2–3)—not merely a reading priest, but one who teaches and explains the Word of life. A schoolmaster does not teach a student merely by reading a lesson aloud, but by opening its meaning. Why, then, is there such a lack of such ministers to instruct the people?

Is it that Christ—who, when He ascended on high, gave gifts unto men for the work of the ministry, not only to convert but also to build up His saints (Ephesians 4:8–12)—has dealt sparingly with our church, withholding gifts, or not giving them to enough men to serve

as laborers in His vineyard? Or are we to think that the chief benefit of Christ's ascension, the great legacy He left behind, was merely the reading of Scripture? Neither of these things can be affirmed without casting dishonor upon His goodness and the power and efficacy of His ascension.

Rather, the fault lies with us, that the lights God has kindled—full of fuel, oil, and luminous matter such as learning, ability, and spiritual gifts—remain as blind lights, undispersed. They are not set, as they should be, like your lamps in the streets on a dark night, fixed in their proper candlesticks.

It was one of the first reforms that good King Jehoshaphat enacted (2 Chronicles 17). First, he planted military forces throughout the cities of Judah, and set garrisons in the lands of Judah and Ephraim, which Asa his father had conquered (verse 2). Then, in the third year of his reign, he sent out both Levites and princes to teach throughout all the cities. "They went throughout all the cities of Judah and taught the people" (verse 9). And what was the result? "The fear of the Lord fell upon all the kingdoms around Judah, so that they did not make war against Jehoshaphat" (verse 10). His garrisons of teaching priests, supported by the authority of princes, proved a greater defense for his kingdom than all his armed forces; for such instructors are the true "chariots and horsemen of Israel," which, in those days, were considered the chief military strength, just as horsemen and artillery are today.

Had we shown the same care in fortifying every village (in this time of abundant, qualified men) as our forefathers did when they drew people away from popery, then the souls of millions would not have been left exposed to the devouring lion, the devil, and the Jesuits—his janissaries—as they have been. Nor would we be fearing invasions

as we now do, but would rather be a terror to those surrounding us, as they currently are to us.

Had it not been for the auxiliary and secondary preachers—who have borne the heat of the day and have been graciously permitted by the authorities—many would have been lost by now. And yet, have there not been those who have spoken against them, as if they were mere mercenaries—dangerous to the church—and predicted they would bring harm to the people?

Yet this is not the only cause why our people do not seek after God. Even where preaching exists, sift the sermons, and see how much chaff you will find compared to a few grains of good corn (this is Jeremiah's image in Jeremiah 23:28). And when men sow chaff, what kind of harvest can be expected? Or what blessing from heaven can rest upon it?

Or if some preach more solidly, yet they still neglect the great themes of the gospel—the way and evidences of faith in Christ, and repentance toward God. Yet these are the very points that the great apostle to the Gentiles, Paul, declared to be the sum of all his preaching (Acts 20:21). The reason, often, is that even among those like Nicodemus—who was a teacher in Israel—there remains a blindness to these central truths. “Who is as blind as My servant?” says God through Isaiah (Isaiah 42:19), whose very name means “seer.” Such blindness leads them to confuse truth and error; for, as the saying goes, “all colors are alike in the dark.” Thus they say, “All the people are holy” (Numbers 16:2), sending men hastily and unrepentantly to hell in their own self-deceptions, and by the flattery of a supposed universal grace, leading them blindfolded to destruction.

But the prophet, who is God's mouthpiece, is commanded to "distinguish between the precious and the vile" (Jeremiah 15:19). Any doctrine that erases this distinction must inevitably cause men to forsake seeking after God—since they are already told they are good Christians.

Or lastly, even if they do preach these things, yet their lives do not align with their message: "My covenant," says the Lord in Malachi 2:6, "was with Levi, of life and peace; and I gave them to him for the fear with which he feared Me, and stood in awe of My name. The law of truth was in his mouth, and injustice was not found on his lips. He walked with Me in peace and equity, and turned many away from iniquity." But now, they have "departed from the way," and through scandalous lives have "caused many to stumble." Therefore, the Lord says, "I have made you despised and abased before all the people." The clergy of England frequently complain of being held in contempt. See here the root of it. No wealth or outward honor can remove such reproach. That which makes our steps beautiful and our persons honorable is to preach the gospel and to live in accordance with it.

And now, my brethren, to conclude this examination: if the blood and life-force of the nation—its inward vitality—upon careful inspection is found to be so corrupted and weakened, and lacking proper flow throughout the body, we may pronounce it either already dead, or at the very least fear that its death and destruction (which the prophet, in similar circumstances, so decisively declares in Zephaniah 1:7) is near at hand. For there the Lord speaks without further debate: "Be silent in the presence of the Lord God, for the day of the Lord is at hand." And this He says concerning Judah, although, as the passage shows, "all the meek of the earth" were yet found in it.

Besides, consider the general principle found in Jeremiah 5:9: “Shall I not punish them for these things? says the Lord: and shall not My soul be avenged on such a nation as this?” God has, and can at any time raise up, another people who will yield more fruit than we have borne. For we are, at best, but “branches of the wild olive tree grafted in” (Romans 11:17) in place of the Jewish nation. That nation was the natural olive tree. “And if God did not spare the natural branches, take heed lest He also spare not you” (verse 20).

Yet, even so, “His judgments are unsearchable, and His ways past finding out” (Romans 11:33). He does not always follow the same course in regard to time or manner, so that the depth of His wisdom might be revealed.

Thus I have concluded speaking of the nation collectively. Let me now address every individual person here present, each one hearing me today under the shadow of a decreed destruction—as it is declared in the seventh verse of the first chapter of Zephaniah. For God, in all likelihood, has summoned His guests (as the verse implies), and they are already preparing themselves, having in their pride perhaps imagined our ruin to be assured.

Let each of us, then, in the fear of this judgment, turn inward —“Search yourselves, O nation”—that is, let every man examine himself.

Indeed, this duty of self-examination is the very foundation and cornerstone of true repentance. So says Lamentations 3:40: “Let us search and try our ways, and turn again to the Lord.” A man who is walking in the wrong path never turns back until he realizes his error by inquiry. This is why travelers often ask directions. So too should we.

Secondly, this must be a searching of ourselves. The prophet does not call you to examine the general faults of kingdoms and states for the purpose of complaining about them, while ignoring your own sins. No, the prophet's lament in Jeremiah 8:6 is this: "No man repented of his wickedness, saying, What have I done?" But the prodigal son, when he repented, "came to himself."

Thirdly, this personal searching is most fitting and necessary in times of public danger and when days of fasting are proclaimed. When people are called to assemble before God, then is the time for self-examination. Therefore, both are joined together here in our text, and again in 1 Kings 8:38: "If there be famine in the land, or if the enemy besiege a city, what prayer or supplication soever be made by any man" (that is, by any man individually), "who shall know every man the plague of his own heart" (mark that phrase): "then hear in heaven Your dwelling place, and forgive, and act," and so forth.

First, because God does not hear such prayers until this point is reached. For even the priest, when offering sacrifice, was required to do so for his own sins as well as the sins of the people (Hebrews 5:3).

Second, God does not forgive until this takes place. In the act of pardoning, God must receive the glory both for His justice, which was provoked, and for the richness of His mercy in forgiveness. Therefore, a detailed reckoning is necessary with each man, so that he may know the debt he owed and the mercy shown in its remission. Though God cancels the debt, He must not be deprived of the acknowledgment and glory of His grace.

Third, because—as it is written in the same passage—God gives and acts "according to every man's ways, whose heart He knows." That is, God searches the hearts of individuals and deals with each person

accordingly during times of widespread judgment. For though such judgments are often called “common,” yet they fall upon particular individuals. And as there is national guilt requiring national repentance, so too there are personal sins that bring personal affliction. As Isaiah 10:22 declares, “A consumption is decreed, overflowing with righteousness.” Therefore, just as national sins must be examined in order to remove national judgment, so also every man must search into his own sins. If every man sweeps his own doorstep, the whole street is cleansed, and so the judgment may be lifted.

Consider the Ninevites, of whom Christ said that they repented at the preaching of Jonah. When their king proclaimed a public fast, they did not stop at a general observance. They cried mightily unto God, but the royal edict specially commanded: “Yea, let every one turn from his evil way” (Jonah 3:8). And what was the result? “God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil that He had said He would do unto them, and He did it not” (verse 10).

If now you ask what it is that you are to search within yourselves, I answer: examine your sins and your spiritual condition before God —“Search, O nation not desired.” For it is sin alone that turns God's heart away from us and causes Him to take no pleasure in us.

Let every man, therefore, go home and commune with his own heart. Unlock its depths and examine all the written records and testimonies stored within the conscience, which perhaps have not been reviewed since first they were inscribed. And to help you order these confused accounts, assign to each particular commandment its own ledger of debts.

You who have been a profane swearer, consider what a dreadful account the third commandment will render against you—that commandment concerning which God has solemnly declared that He “will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain.”

You who have broken the Sabbath, think what a reckoning the fourth commandment will produce. Concerning this commandment, God has given you a special reminder: “Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day,” not only in outward acts, but in thoughts, words, and deeds. Perhaps your conscience reminds you of this, and yet you, like those of whom the prophet speaks, “shut your eyes from the Sabbath” (Ezekiel 22:26). Beware, lest God swear against you, “You shall never enter into My rest” (Hebrews 4:3), that rest which, as Hebrews 4:9 tells us, is “the Sabbath-rest for the people of God” (*sabbatismos*).

Consider what innumerable sins committed by others—whether those under your care, as pupils or dependents—will be charged to your account under the sixth commandment. Souls murdered through your evil example or by your negligent failure to instruct them: “Their blood” (the blood of their souls) “I will require at your hand” (Ezekiel 3:18–20).

Consider how many sins are listed against you under the seventh commandment—how many countless thoughts sacrificed to the idol of lust and speculative adultery, if not the act itself; or sins committed in secret, which the Apostle Paul calls, in Romans 1:24, “defiling their own bodies” (*en heautois*, “in or by themselves”). And reflect deeply on how often this terrible sentence hangs over such actions: “The Lord knows how to reserve the unjust for the day of judgment to be punished, especially those who walk according to the lust of uncleanness” (2 Peter 2:10).

Turn over the immense heap of your actions, sift through them, and observe how few faithful prayers you can find among them; how few gracious, godly words amid a multitude of sins more numerous than the sands of the sea.

Yes, unravel the whole of your life—untwist every action—and see how many sins, due to many aggravating circumstances, are tightly woven into even a single deed.

Go down into the treasury of your thoughts—as Scripture calls them in Matthew 12:35, both for their abundance and for their value. Reflect with yourself: if your thoughts were to be melted and tested, as God will one day examine every work by fire (1 Corinthians 3:13), when all the dross of covetous, proud, lustful, envious, blasphemous, and foolish thoughts (as Christ enumerates them in Mark 7:21) are separated and removed, how little pure gold remains—how few thoughts of real spiritual worth endure. Thus, Solomon declares, “The heart of the wicked is of little value” (Proverbs 10:20).

So also, feel the pulse of your desires and affections—of all your longings, joys, and sorrows—and observe how quickly and strongly it beats toward what is evil, and how sluggishly, faintly, or not at all it moves toward what is good.

Sift and scrutinize the purpose and ultimate aim in every affection, thought, and action. Examine how often self-love, personal pleasure, reputation, or ease serves as the ruling purpose—the *finis architectonicus*, the governing end—that sets everything in motion, consumes all, and directs all.

Observe what inward bribes and secret motives your heart accepts before it will stir to anything that is truly good.

Trace and discern the winding paths, evasions, and subtle reasonings of your thoughts—those inward arguments and justifications that seek to paint evil in fair colors and excuse what conscience condemns.

Lastly, calculate what your spiritual income has been—what gifts of intellect, learning, godly examples from others, convictions of conscience, promptings of the Spirit, foretastes of heavenly blessings, the rich ordinances and spiritual opportunities you have been made a partaker of. Then reckon what you have expended for God, how you have traded with these blessings, and what gain you have brought to Him by them.

After this is done, let your next inquiry be: in what spiritual condition do you now stand before God? Are you in a state of His favor? This is the very matter the prophet presses upon their conscience—to search whether they are desirable in God’s sight, that is, whether they are in a condition in which God’s acceptance and delight rest upon them. He speaks of the unrepentant in the nation as contrasted with the meek in those three verses—those who are in a state of favor and gracious acceptance with God: as in Song of Solomon 7:10, “I am my beloved’s, and his desire is toward me”; and in Ephesians 1:6, “He has made us accepted in the Beloved.” So that although they have sins which in themselves render them undeserving of desire, yet God’s desire is toward them. Now this, above all other matters, is a weighty and solemn controversy—one which, sadly, few fear or labor to resolve—whether they are indeed in a state of divine favor. Few scholars trouble their minds over the fear of living in the very state they dread to die in.

To settle this controversy, do not rest merely in examining the church’s records and finding that you are baptized. For Christ says in

Mark 16:16, “He that believes and is baptized shall be saved, but he that does not believe shall be condemned.” Suppose a person is baptized—do you think Christ’s words will fail? Look at Simon Magus, to whom they certainly applied. God made no more difference between a Turk and an unregenerate man, though baptized, than He did of old between a Jew and a Gentile. As we read in Jeremiah 9:26, one may be uncircumcised in the flesh, the other in the heart. For just as circumcision did not avail apart from inward grace, so neither does baptism. “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation” (Galatians 6:15).

Instead, examine that sacred register of heaven—the final and authoritative inquiry into life and death—where all evidences are recorded either to acquit the godly or condemn the wicked.

There you will find that “he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin” (1 Peter 4:1); therefore, anyone who continues in known sin cannot be saved.

There you will find that if you make wealth, promotion, or anything other than the glory of God your ultimate goal, you cannot truly believe: “How can you believe, who receive honor from one another, and do not seek the honor that comes from God alone?” (John 5:44).

There you will find that flatterers and those who live to please men are not the servants of Christ: “For if I still pleased men, I would not be the servant of Christ” (Galatians 1:10).

There you will find that he who does not love the Lord Jesus Christ is accursed: “If anyone does not love the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be anathema” (1 Corinthians 16:22). And, “Peter, do you love Me? Feed

My sheep”—you know who said that, and He is the one who must judge you also.

There you will find that he who hates his brother—especially if that brother makes conscience of sin and strives to obey God—hates God Himself, whom he has not seen, for God is the one who gave the very law that man seeks to keep (1 John 4:20).

There you will find that he who treats any of God’s commandments lightly, or despises the path God has appointed for him, shall surely die: “He who keeps the commandment keeps his soul, but he who is careless of his ways will die” (Proverbs 19:16).

There you will find that the one who neglects prayer is a worker of iniquity: “The workers of iniquity have no knowledge, who do not call upon God” (Psalm 53:4). For continued sinning will either make a man give up prayer, or else prayer, if sincere, will make him forsake sin.

And this applies not only to public prayer, but also to private devotion. When God pours out the spirit of grace and supplication, it causes both men and women to pray alone: as seen in Zechariah 12, from verse 10 to the end.

Moreover, if men do not continue steadfastly in such private prayer, and take no delight in communion with God, they are no better than hypocrites. Job 27:8, compared with verse 10, speaks of this: “What is the hope of the hypocrite... Will he always call upon God?”

If one were to take the keys to your heart, open its inner chambers, and search its cupboards, what delights would he find there? Would he discover sweet morsels of fellowship with God, or rather uncleanness, ease, worldly pleasures, and carnal comforts? What is it

that your heart savors most—God and communion with Him in His ordinances, or the base and passing enjoyments of the flesh?

And if upon such self-examination, your condition is found to be unsound and undesirable—unworthy of rest or confidence—do not be ashamed or afraid to judge rightly of yourself, and to pronounce sentence accordingly. For God, who is greater than your heart, already judges you thus. Therefore, think of yourself as God thinks of you; conform your judgment to His. This is not a hindrance to coming into God's favor, but rather the necessary preparation for it. For just as one who is a fool must first acknowledge himself to be so before he can become wise (1 Corinthians 3:18), so he who will be justified must first see himself condemned. Romans 4:5 declares, "To him who does not work, but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness."

In legal matters, a man cannot receive a pardon until he has first been judged and condemned, and a sentence passed upon him as guilty. So it is in the court of heaven.

And therefore, it is the greatest kindness that others can do for you—and the greatest injury you can do to yourselves—if they tell you that your condition is good and blessed when it is not, or if you are not deeply aware of the truth of your state. For it is written in Psalm 7:11, "God is angry with the wicked every day; if he does not turn, He has prepared His instruments of death."

The next exhortation in the text is to "seek the Lord," for you cannot remain in the condition in which you now stand. There is no way of escape except by seeking Him and turning to Him.

As that wise king in the parable (Luke 14:32), when he perceived by consultation that the king coming against him would be too

powerful, sent ambassadors to desire conditions of peace, so must you seek terms of peace from God. Send up prayers, day and night, as ambassadors to the court of heaven, and entreat Christ that the mighty preparations of wrath made against you may be restrained. Know this: God will only be found by those who diligently seek Him. He does not throw away pardons lightly—those pardons that cost Him the blood of His own Son. He will have them valued to the highest degree. That which we consider to be of little worth, we do not think worth seeking. But God's pardons are precious, and therefore He will be sought after for them.

Indeed, God stands so unchangeably upon this principle that, even though He has bound Himself by the most faithful promises to show mercy to His church, yet, as He says in Ezekiel 36:36–37, “I will do this for them; nevertheless, I will be inquired of by the house of Israel to do it.” He expects not only that we seek Him, but that His Son also, our Lord Jesus Christ—who according to His divine nature is equal to the Father, and who, by His own merit, has purchased all that God intends to do for us—should ask for these blessings. In John 17, He prays for the glory He had with the Father before the world was. And in Psalm 2:8, the Father says, “Ask of Me, and I will give You the nations for Your inheritance,” even though they were already His by purchase.

How much more, then, must He expect such seeking from one who is at such a distance from Him—who is but as chaff before the wind, wax before the fire, and dust on the scales; from one who, as a creature, is lower than nothing, and who, as a sinner, is His enemy until reconciled.

Yes, and He has determined to be sought in earnest—not with half-hearted or lazy seeking. In Luke 13:24, Christ says, “Strive to enter in

at the strait gate, for many shall seek to enter in and shall not be able.” If you would have peace with Him, you must strive for it. The word “seek” is too mild. You must wrestle, as Jacob did, all night and with all your might. You must put forth all your strength; use holy violence (Matthew 11:12). Besiege heaven with volleys of prayers and tears. As Jeremiah 29:13 declares, “You shall seek Me and find Me when you seek Me with all your heart.”

And faith in His gracious nature and readiness to pardon is absolutely essential as the foundation for seeking Him. On this basis, you shall indeed find Him to be such a God. Therefore, do not imagine Him to be of such a severe and furious disposition that He cannot be approached. Though He is a great God, He declares in Isaiah 27:5, “Fury is not in Me” toward those who desire to be at peace with Him. Though He is strong, yet He bids you “take hold of His strength” by faith. And then, out of that faith, pray to Him, seek Him, wrestle with Him—and you shall prevail, even as Jacob did. “Then He is gracious unto him, and he shall pray unto God, and He will be favorable unto him, and he shall see His face with joy” (Job 33:24, 26).

If you ask, What kind of heart will most powerfully prevail with Him along with faith? I answer: Seek Him in meekness—that is, in humility and submission. First, acknowledge that you deserve to be destroyed, like those in Ezekiel 36:31, and be willing to accept it if it may serve more to glorify God. This is what is meant in Leviticus 26:41 by “accepting the punishment of your iniquity”—placing yourself entirely in His hands and submitting to His will. As David said in 2 Samuel 15:26, “If He says thus, ‘I have no delight in you,’ behold, here I am; let Him do to me as seems good to Him.” Be content to wait patiently, if perhaps, at some time, God may be gracious to you. “Put your mouth in the dust,” as the prophet advises.

Thus, come to God with the spirit of a humble rebel guilty before Him, as in Romans 3:19, that all mouths may be stopped and the whole world become guilty before God. Do this so that His free grace may be revealed and glorified. In Ezekiel 36:31, they “loathe themselves”; or, as some interpret it, “judge themselves worthy to be destroyed.” Why? “Be it known to you,” says God, “that I do not this for your sakes,” that is, to pardon you, “but for My holy name’s sake” (Ezekiel 36:22).

And this is the greatest form of spiritual violence you can use—it is taking hold of His strength. This overcomes even the most honorable men; how much more will it prevail with God, who is the God of all grace and mercy? It overcame David. It was Shimei’s wise approach, when he saw David would be too strong for him. He threw himself into David’s hands (2 Samuel 19:20). Likewise, Ben-Hadad’s servants, knowing that the kings of Israel were merciful, advised their master to go with ropes on their necks, acknowledging thereby their guilt and that he deserved execution (1 Kings 20:31). They came to the king’s chariot, pleading and watching for any sign of mercy—and even the hard-hearted Ahab was overcome.

So now, go to God in the same way. Fall on your knees before Him. With a heart melted and broken, confess, as Shimei did, your treason and rebellion against Him, who has never wronged you. Confess with a rope, as it were, about your own neck, admitting that if He were to hang you, He would be just. He shall need no other judge than your own mouth, no other indictment than your own confession. Present yourself to Him as one ready for execution. Say to Him, He may glorify His justice upon you if He so wills. Offer your own soul, naked and guilty, as the target of His righteous wrath, if He so chooses—only plead with Him to remember that He has already plunged His

sword into the heart of His own Son (Zechariah 13:7), when He made His soul an offering for sin.

Take with you words, as Hosea commands (Hosea 14:2)—for He delights to be entreated. Say to Him, if His purpose is to satisfy His justice, then Christ has already done so—and more completely than you ever could, even if you were to be cast into hell forever. Tell Him that though He might cast you into the prison of eternal wrath, you could never repay the debt. But He will lose nothing by saving you. In fact, He will gain glory by showing grace to one who will be eternally thankful and is already grieved for having offended Him.

Plead for yourself—it is your life at stake. Ask, what gain will there be in your destruction? Will He break a bruised reed? Will He pursue dry stubble? (Job 13:25). Say to Him, you are not a suitable opponent against whom to display His power.

Remind Him that few in the world seek Him. And if He turns away those who do, there will be even fewer. Who would fear Him, if there were no mercy with Him? “A soft answer turns away wrath” (Proverbs 15:1), and a tender spirit breaks even the hardest heart. How much more will it touch His heart, who is full of compassion?

Oh, when God hears a poor broken soul sincerely bemoaning itself, how it stirs His heart, how His inward affections move within Him! Listen to what He says: Jeremiah 31:18–20—“When I heard Ephraim bemoaning himself... My heart yearns for him; I will surely have mercy on him.” Every sigh pierced His heart. Had He destroyed him, it would have grieved Him forever.

But be sure also (which is the fourth point) to seek righteousness—both that of justification and sanctification.

First, seek the righteousness of justification—what David often calls “God’s righteousness,” and what the prophet refers to when he says, “The Lord our righteousness.” It is a righteousness outside of yourself, laid hold of by faith, as described in Romans chapters 3–5, and testified by both the Law and the Prophets. This is the strength of God—whereby His heart is strengthened to forgive. Isaiah 53:1 speaks of “the arm of the Lord” being revealed—that is, Christ. When this righteousness is revealed by a messenger to a distressed soul, as in Job 33:23, and sought by that soul, God says, “Deliver him from going down to the pit; I have found a ransom.” God will give to that man the righteousness that belongs to him—the righteousness that was wrought for him, to justify him.

Second, seek the righteousness of sanctification. “The work of righteousness shall be peace.” For as long as sin reigns in you, how can there be peace? Isaiah 55:6 urges, “Seek the Lord while He may be found... let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts.” That is, change both your outward conduct and the inward desires, aims, affections of your heart—and then He will have mercy.

What is this true righteousness? First, in the heart: it is a new disposition, a new direction of the soul—a transformation of all its faculties so that it hates all known or suspected sin, and delights in holiness and righteousness as revealed in God’s Word. And all this, not for self-interest, but for God’s sake—hating sin because He hates it, loving righteousness because He loves it.

Second, in life: it is a constant striving to obey all of God’s commandments, and to avoid all that is contrary. It is to take pleasure in nothing more than in avoiding sin and doing what pleases God, approving your heart before Him, and grieving most

when you fall short of that aim. It is to always keep God's standard before your eyes, never resting in any level of obedience as sufficient.

Without this, with what face can you ask pardon from God? What honesty is there in seeking forgiveness for sin, while continuing to live in it? How can you dare to ask for the covering of Christ's all-sufficient righteousness while refusing to conform yourself, with all your effort, to be "righteous, even as He is righteous" (1 John 3:7), and to purify yourself, "even as He is pure" (verse 3)? In Luke 8:15, the good ground is described as bearing fruit from "an honest and good heart"—and so must yours be.

Or, secondly, if you should have the boldness to seek Him while neglecting this, do you think that God would ever pardon you? Would a king pardon a traitor, even if he pleaded ever so humbly, if he saw that the traitor intended to remain a traitor still? You yourself would not pardon any man in such a case.

If you plead that God has more mercy than man, for "His thoughts are not our thoughts," etc. (Isaiah 55:8), I answer: Yet even where He expresses Himself most mercifully, as in Exodus 34:6–7, He adds at the end, "yet by no means clearing the guilty"—that is, one who maintains a false and disloyal heart toward Him, refusing to submit in all things and unwilling to bring every thought into obedience to Him.

And the reason is this: first, "There is forgiveness with Thee, that Thou mayest be feared" (Psalm 130:4). Now, if He were to offer pardon while seeing no change in men's hearts to fear and obey Him, then His mercy would not be revered but despised.

Secondly, you must understand that God's mercy is joined with wisdom. One attribute never cancels out another. To pity a villain

who continues in his wickedness is foolish compassion. God forbids us to do it, and He Himself will not do it.

Therefore, until you turn from sin and choose the things that please Him, He will not take delight in you. As it is written in Isaiah 56:4–5: “Thus says the Lord unto the eunuchs that keep My Sabbaths, and choose the things that please Me, and hold fast My covenant: Even unto them will I give in My house and within My walls a place and a name better than of sons and daughters.” He mentions the Sabbath because that day, when truly sanctified in thought, speech, and action, is the Lord’s delight and joy (Isaiah 58:14). If you likewise make it your delight—especially a day such as this, of fasting and prayer—or if your heart is in those ordinances which He declares in His Word to be His joy, and if you prize them as He does (such as prayer, godly conversation, and worship), then He will take delight in you. Otherwise, not. “Can two walk together,” asks the prophet, “except they be agreed?” (Amos 3:3). You must hate what He hates, love what He loves.

Therefore, resolve either to forsake every known sin and submit to every known duty, or else never expect to find favor and mercy with God.

Now the final clause and condition that the prophet adds is this: to do all this “before the decree comes forth.” There is a space of time, as Solomon observes in Ecclesiastes 8:11, between a decree and the execution of it. That space is given for repentance. Revelation 2:21 speaks similarly: “I gave her space to repent.” But what God has decreed against you, and when He will execute it, you do not know. Just as we cannot know what is in the womb until it is brought forth, so you cannot know what decree is forming in the mind of God. Proverbs 27:1 declares, “You do not know what a day may bring

forth.” You are ignorant both of what is coming and when. He may serve upon you an execution of death even before tomorrow. As it was said to the rich fool, “This night your soul shall be required of you” (Luke 12:20). The messengers of death may arrest you and bring you before the Judge at any moment.

Therefore, take the counsel of Christ in such a case: “Agree with your adversary quickly while you are in the way with him, lest at any time the adversary deliver you to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be cast into prison” (Matthew 5:25). And how near God’s officer is to you, you cannot know. James warns you, “Behold, the Judge stands at the door” (James 5:9). And where the Judge stands, the officer—death—is not far behind.

But if God should yet spare you and permit you to live, yet in the meantime He may serve upon you another kind of execution—one far more dreadful—the execution of hardness of heart and blindness of mind, as He did upon the Pharisees: “He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, lest they should see with their eyes and understand with their hearts and be converted” (John 12:40). Or, even if that does not occur, yet a decree may go forth that you shall never again receive a pardon, though you seek it with tears—just as it did with Esau, who, in Hebrews 12, after despising his birthright, “found no place for repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.” Or as it did with the Israelites in the wilderness, against whom God swore, “They shall never enter into My rest,” though they lived many years afterward.

But the most dreadful execution of all—toward which all these previous judgments lead—is still to come. It is mentioned in the text: “the anger and wrath of the Almighty God.” This is the child which God’s decree is now conceiving and has already quickened in His

heart. “God is angry with the wicked every day” (Psalm 7:11). That child of wrath stirs daily in His divine heart, and He is ready to bring it forth at any moment. Only because it is not yet fully grown does He restrain Himself. Yet even now, He is “preparing His instruments of death,” as the same Psalm declares, for the execution of His wrath when it is brought to birth.

To this end, there is a fixed and appointed day—the “day of the Lord’s anger,” as it is called in the text. Though you do not know when it is, yet God sees it clearly coming: “The Lord shall laugh at him, for He sees that his day is coming” (Psalm 37:13). It is a day when God’s decree shall bring forth wrath, and your sin shall bring forth death, as James 1:15 says. And it will come when you least expect it: “For when they shall say, ‘Peace and safety,’ then sudden destruction comes upon them, as travail upon a woman with child, and they shall not escape” (1 Thessalonians 5:3).

Moreover, it will be the “fierce anger of the Lord”—fierce, because it is without mercy (James 2:13): “Judgment without mercy.” It is called “pure wrath,” because it is wrath unmixed—not one drop of mercy to temper its fierceness. And the longer it is delayed, the greater it will be, just as a child growing in the womb increases in size. The more time this wrath has to mature, the more terrible and unbearable it shall be when it is finally born.

And what are you, that this fierce wrath shall fall upon you? You are but “chaff” (Nahum 1:3). His anger is like a whirlwind; and if even a mild breeze scatters chaff, how much more a whirlwind? There is no resisting it. And even if you could withstand the whirlwind, yet His wrath is also described as being “poured out like fire”—which must certainly consume you. If His fury can rend the rocks, melt the hills, and burn the earth (verses 5–6), how much more will it consume

chaff? “Who can stand before His indignation? Who can endure the fierceness of His wrath?”

I should now, lastly, speak to those who are already truly turned to God—“the meek of the earth.” Here the prophet seems to speak almost as one who has little hope of prevailing with the impenitent. Yet to the godly, he says, “Seek ye,” just as in that great sin recorded in Ezra 9: though many were indifferent to the coming danger, yet everyone who feared the Lord gathered to Ezra to pray and to seek God (verse 4).

So here the prophet addresses the godly among them: “Seek ye.” As if he had said, Though others go on, according to their kind, in hardness of heart, treasuring up wrath against the day of wrath (as he has spoken of), yet you—who are, and profess to be, “the meek of the earth” (a common title for the saints in the Old Testament, encompassing the whole substance of godliness)—you, whose hearts the Word of God typically impresses, do you, according to your nature, receive this exhortation with meekness.

Which is, first of all, to seek your God. For in times of danger, this is what He expects from you—and He marvels if you do not do it. Isaiah 59:16 says, “He wondered that there was no intercessor.” This was during evil times, as the preceding verses show. God does not marvel that the wicked act wickedly—but that His people are negligent. “What!” He says, “Have I no children left on earth who, in such occasions and under such threatenings, should intercede for the nation in which they dwell? Where are My Noahs and Daniels?” We marvel when things do not act according to their nature—such as when the sun stands still or fire does not burn. Likewise, God marvels when His people are silent in evil times.

Secondly, you are to seek righteousness and meekness—so that you may stand as witnesses for God and condemn the wicked when judgment falls, just as Noah did by fearing God before the flood came (Hebrews 11:7). Also, so that you might save your own souls. For just as nothing but the ark saved Noah, so nothing but righteousness will save you. Ezekiel 14:14 says that if Noah, Daniel, and Job be saved, it will be by their own righteousness.

If you say, “We have already done this,” that answer will not suffice. God, though He acknowledges that they had “wrought His judgments,” still exhorts them all the more in such a season as this—when to be spared when judgment comes would be such a mercy, to have one’s life preserved in a time when life itself is dear. Though God does not forget what you have done in the past, He says to those who have sought Him before: Forget what is past, and seek righteousness afresh, as though you had never sought it before.

And to stir them up to do so, He tells them, “Ye shall be hid”—that is, when God comes to burn the chaff, He will preserve His wheat. He will not destroy the seed-corn that is meant to replenish the world after the harvest.

And if it be asked how it is possible for them to be hidden during a general judgment, consider that God has many secret chambers of providence. As Isaiah 26:20 says, “Come, My people, enter into your chambers and shut your doors behind you; hide yourselves, as it were, for a little moment, until the indignation be overpast.” Then, when others will have no place to hide, and will cry out for the rocks to fall on them, you shall be hidden.

But you will say, “This is only half a promise—‘it may be.’” Yet I would rather have God’s “it may be” than the firmest “it shall be” from all the kings of the earth. God loves to speak modestly, and to

act abundantly—to be better than His word. He is rich in kindness and truth. The phrase is not meant to express uncertainty (see Junius on this passage); it is used in the context of a sure promise, but with an acknowledgment of the difficulty involved in obtaining it—as when Peter says, “the righteous will scarcely be saved.”

And finally, lest any of His saints should be discouraged or slow to act—either thinking their prayers are too weak to make a difference, or supposing that there are enough others seeking God so that they may do less—He therefore commands them all: “Seek the Lord, all you meek of the earth.”

God has chambers enough to hide every one of you in. And it must be your own righteousness—not another’s—that prevails for you, as in Ezekiel 14:14. Moreover, He needs all your voices. Just as in elections or great assemblies, a single vote may turn the matter one way or another, so it is in the great affairs of the church. In Isaiah 37, when the children had come to the point of birth and there was no strength to bring forth, Hezekiah sought another voice. He sent for Isaiah the prophet, like a spiritual midwife, to help.

But you may say, “He was a prophet, a great man of God.” Yet know that God often takes account of the number, both great and small. He would have spared Sodom for ten righteous souls. How many tens of thousands are there in England today, proportionally, to that number for Sodom? We do not know. Now Europe is travailing to bring forth, and so is our own nation, even our parliament—and yet they lack strength. Therefore let all come and help.

It has never been known that when the whole lower house of earth—when all of God’s people—joined in petition to heaven, they were refused. Christ says, “If two shall agree on earth,” how much more if all? I will conclude with that which is written in Zephaniah 3:9.

Though God had determined to pour out His anger on the whole earth—as perhaps He has already begun to do—yet, meaning to spare His own in the midst of such general calamity, He says, “I will turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the Lord, to serve Him with one consent.”

So I say: lift up your prayers with pure hearts and lips; and do it—all of you—with one heart and one voice. And then God will visit you with mercy, even while He walks through the earth in judgment. And so let us do again this day.

SERMON II

Gather yourselves together, yes, gather together, O nation not desired; before the decree brings forth, before the day passes like chaff, before the fierce anger of the Lord comes upon you, before the day of the Lord's anger comes upon you. Seek the Lord, all you meek of the earth, who have worked His judgment; seek righteousness, seek meekness: it may be you shall be hidden in the day of the Lord's anger. — Zephaniah 2:1–3

The doctrine is this: In times when public and widespread calamities are threatened and feared, the people of God should especially engage in the holy duties mentioned here—“Seek the Lord,” and so forth.

I will demonstrate this truth, first generally, from Scripture and reason; and then, secondly, I will press the specific duties themselves upon their particular grounds.

First, in general, believers are to practice holy duties before public judgments come. For the promise of being hidden in the day of wrath is made only to those who practice these things, as we see here in the text. A godly man is a wise man, for “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding” (Proverbs 9:10). One chief benefit and privilege that he gains from this wisdom is that he “foresees the evil and hides himself” (Proverbs 22:3). “The wise man foresees the evil and hides himself; but the simple”—that is, the unregenerate—“pass on and are punished.”

For indeed, wherein does wisdom exceed folly? What is its advantage over it, if not this: that it discerns what is to come by insight into causes, and so uses appropriate means—either to prevent evil, or to attain good? Ecclesiastes 8:5 says, “Whoever keeps the commandment shall feel no evil thing.” Why? Because “a wise man’s heart discerns both time and judgment”—that is, the proper seasons, opportunities, and turning points of providence. The lack of this discernment is the great misery of all others, as verse 6 declares.

This absence of wisdom in the ungodly is something God complains of in Jeremiah 8:6. They are like a horse charging blindly into battle, fearing no danger, because they foresee none. Whereas even the stork, crane, and swallow have an instinctive wisdom to discern the proper times for migration before winter and cold set in; they know when to build their nests and prepare for change. But, says God, “My people do not know the judgments of the Lord”—that is, they fail to

perceive impending judgments through their causes, and so do not take measures to protect themselves accordingly.

In the parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25), although they all slept when the bridegroom was far off, yet when the cry came at midnight, announcing His arrival, the wise virgins arose and trimmed their lamps—they began to rekindle their zeal and prepare themselves. So also, in Isaiah 26:9, “When Your judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness.” Who are these inhabitants of the world? According to the Beatitudes (Matthew 5), they are the meek—those to whom the promise of inheriting the earth is made. For the wicked, their own place is in hell (Acts 1:25). If anyone is to learn righteousness, it is these meek ones; and if at any time they do so, it is especially when God’s judgments are moving through the earth.

But to cite no more passages for now, let me strengthen this truth further by reason.

First, consider that the chief purpose for which God employs the threat and sending of public calamities upon the world is to purify and make His own people better and more fit for heaven—to set them upon the path of seeking Him and seeking righteousness. As the winter and cold winds are sent for the benefit of the corn and herbs, just as the sunny days of summer and spring are for the good of nature, so also the winters of calamity which successively follow days of peace and prosperity are meant for the improvement of His own people; for “the world is His, both what is present and what is to come” (1 Corinthians 3:22). Winter chokes the weeds, softens the heart of the earth, and thus promotes the rooting and growth of the corn. The winds purify and ventilate the air, causing the flowers to emit a pleasing fragrance. In a similar manner, God deals with His

people in measure (Isaiah 27:8) when the seed first begins to bud; and though He restrains the harshness of the winds and storms that might otherwise blast, kill, and destroy the grace within them, yet in that same verse He deals with them in due measure. His ultimate purpose is to purify them: “By this shall the iniquity of Jacob be expunged”; indeed, this is entirely His purpose and all the fruit of His providence—to remove sin. Likewise, in Daniel 11:35, those heavy storms that befall the world serve only to purify and whiten the wise—He acts as a divine laundress to wash away their filth and to cleanse them, as one might hang and wet cloth in order to whiten it. And just as He does not send the rain of His word in vain (Isaiah 55) but ensures it returns with its intended effect, so too these storms will not prove futile; rather, they will accomplish the blessed result of teaching His people righteousness before His work is finished—they yield the quiet fruit of righteousness in the end, for those who are disciplined thereby (Hebrews 12:11). Now, if this indeed is God’s purpose, which He will accomplish before His work is fully complete, our duty is to prevent our delay in recognizing it, to extract the lesson therefrom, and therefore to especially seek Him and His righteousness and make that our singular aim and business. Otherwise, we despise God in the judgments He threatens, because they lead to this end and are ordained for it; even as such judgments cause us to despise His mercy (Romans 2:4), which leads to repentance. And so, rather than treasuring up mercy to be spared on that evil day, we instead heap up wrath.

Secondly, besides the fact that it is God’s direct purpose and foremost design, when He brings about these calamities, it is so that He may teach His people righteousness. Thus, in order to avenge His own cause as well as to redress the wicked misuse of His people, He forbearth long and permits many wrongs in which He could have immediately vindicated Himself. This, therefore, must be an

additional invitation for His people to learn and to seek greater righteousness in these times: “Do not destroy them for their sake” (Isaiah 65:8). He delays the main judgment for them, losing much glory that He might otherwise have promptly recovered; therefore, they must, in the meantime, labor to bring forth additional righteousness each day, and then gather it up to repay Him when the moment of judgment is near, when a decree is about to be executed. And as His forbearance is an engagement—a commitment that His coming to judge at such a time is to vindicate their cause—it is all the more imperative. That He acts thus is evident from Deuteronomy 32:35–36, where to exact vengeance on His enemies is to judge His people; as the following words interpret, “He shall repent for His servants,” and thus it is also called pleading their cause and exacting vengeance for them (Jeremiah 51:36). Have they not reason then to join with Him when He comes deliberately to take part with them—to walk in greater righteousness with Him as He comes to judge for their sake, to fight His battles when He fights theirs, to remember Him in their lives when He comes to examine their blood and their wrongdoings, and to call them to account? (Psalm 9:12).

Thirdly, if it were solely God’s purpose to vindicate His own cause, then His people are to be called forth as His witnesses, joining with Him in condemning the world at times of general visitation. Therefore, as recorded in Revelation 11:1–2, they are called witnesses who, as in verse 6, join with God in striking the earth with plagues; and, as in the latter days, on the day of great visitation, by their works they shall glorify God and testify that the condemnation of the wicked is just (1 Peter 2:12), and thus judge the world. So also, in times of lesser and more particular visitations. And thus, Noah, by fearing and believing God, and by having prepared an ark beforehand, condemned the world (Hebrews 11:7). God must have someone to justify His actions; now, He has none but you (Isaiah

43:12), “For you are My witnesses.” But if you are as unjust, unrighteous, guilty, negligent, and complacent as the wicked—that is, if you have sought God and His righteousness as little as they have—then you are unfit to be His witnesses. With what credibility could you testify if your own lives were so opposed to His? They would have just cause to condemn you, and how could God accept your testimony if it were so objectionable? As the law says, “He that gives testimony must have it.”

No, fourthly, He must otherwise be forced to cut you off along with the wicked, for He cannot spare you all if, knowing His name (Amos 3:2), you fail to honor it. For though He is a Father, He judges “without partiality” (1 Peter 1:17); and if there were not a great, broad, and obvious distinction between you and the wicked, He would appear to be a partial and indulgent Father—a Father who forbids and punishes in others, as the old Eli was himself not guilty of indulgence. Therefore, judgment begins in His own house; He is eager to instruct His own by chastising them beforehand (Psalm 94:12–14), so that when He comes as the Judge of the whole world to exact vengeance (verses 1–2 of that Psalm), He may then spare His own, and they shall find rest on the day of trouble (verse 13)—that is, “God may give him rest in the day of trouble”—executing judgment with justice and equity. And the reason given in verse 14 is that God is inclined to spare them and not cast them off; therefore, in wisdom and mercy, He corrects and teaches them according to the Law, until the pit is dug for the wicked (as also in 1 Corinthians 11:32, “we are disciplined, that we should not be condemned with the world”), but rather hidden and preserved while others are destroyed.

Fifthly, if He should spare you, yet you should not be unworthy to intercede on behalf of others, for that is your duty and honor, since you are His remembrancers and watchmen (Isaiah 62:6),

intercessors (Isaiah 59:16), the ones whom God seeks out and would gladly find before He destroys (Ezekiel 22:30). It is an extraordinarily sought righteousness that only can entreat you so far with Him as to secure the lives of others, as He did for those with Paul who were in the ship with him; not mere courtiers, but special favorites—men greatly beloved, as Daniel was. If you are to rescue the remnant, it must be by the purity of your hands (Job 22:30).

First, to seek the Lord. And because seeking has reference to and is defined by finding (Isaiah 55:6), it must be understood as involving those acts of the soul by which God's favor is sought and obtained in preparation for the evil day. Since this is mentioned as distinct from seeking righteousness—by which also God's favor is obtained—therefore I interpret "seeking the Lord" to refer to those inward and immediate acts and dispositions of the soul that are directly aimed at God Himself, and by which we gain favor in His sight. Then, to seek righteousness means to engage in the duties of repentance and new obedience, of which meekness is a particular expression, especially necessary in times of judgment.

Now the acts of the mind which have God as their immediate object, and which are necessary at such times, are:

First, to take Him as your portion and refuge. This is what all the saints have done in such times, in a more particular and intensified manner. So did David, again and again, whenever he was in distress.

So also the Church, when under the greatest pressure it had ever endured—in Lamentations 3, from the beginning to verse 17—she cries out in faith, "Yet the Lord is my portion, says my soul; therefore I will hope in Him. The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him" (verses 24–25).

Likewise, when the Church was surrounded with thorns, and every man was as “a thorn in her side” (Micah 7:4), she resolved in verse 7, “I will look to the Lord.” Since she could find comfort in none of her friends, she would look to Him alone.

And so did Jonah, in the belly of the whale, when the weeds were wrapped about his head and the waters closed around him, and he thought he would surely perish: “When my soul fainted within me,” Jonah 2:7, “then I remembered the Lord.” And “they that observe lying vanities”—verse 8—that is, those who look to other false hopes and solutions in such times—“forsake their own mercy.” They do as the sailors with Paul nearly did: leave the great ship in a storm and commit themselves to a small lifeboat, which any wave can overturn.

But God is truly worth something in such a time as this. For wherever you are, and in whatever distress you may be, He is “a very present help in trouble” (Psalm 46:1). And though you be at “the ends of the earth,” still “I will cry to You, when my heart is overwhelmed” (Psalm 61:2). And though “my flesh and my heart fail,” says David, yet “God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Psalm 73:26); He has never failed me, nor ever will. He is “a Rock that is higher than I” (Psalm 61:2); and if I could but get up onto Him, though the waters might soon drown me who am weak and low, though I might be quickly overwhelmed, yet He is a Rock, and a high Rock. So high, that when the floods come and the waves of great waters rise, “they shall not come near you” (Psalm 32:6). When the mountains and the great men of the earth are swallowed up, carried away by the seas, overwhelmed and buried (Psalm 46:2), still “you shall be safe.”

On the other hand, if you are in a dry and weary land, where no water is—as David elsewhere says (Psalm 63:1)—yet the one “who

trusts in the Lord and whose hope the Lord is,” as Jeremiah 17:7 affirms, “shall be like a tree planted by the waters, that spreads out its roots by the river, and shall not see when heat comes; but its leaf shall be green, and shall not be anxious in the year of drought, nor cease from yielding fruit.”

All other trees, whose roots are embedded only in dry ground, must receive rain from above to remain green; otherwise, in times of drought, they wither and die. Likewise, the person who makes flesh his strength (verse 5), whose soul is rooted only in riches or honors, rooted in the soil of this world—when drought comes and earthly comforts fail, he is like the heath in the wilderness (verse 6), with no moisture. All his joy and cheerfulness, which are like his leaves and fruit, wither, die, and fall away.

But a tree whose roots reach a river that never dries, and draws sap and nourishment from it unseen, is not troubled by drought above ground. So too the godly person, whose soul and all its faculties are rooted in Christ—the spring of all comforts and the God of all consolation—he neither sees nor feels when heat comes. That is, when persecution arises from without, drying up others’ strength and comforts, he remains unshaken. Such a soul is not anxious even in times of outward decay, for there is a secret river running beneath, nourishing his root continually—“a river that makes glad the city of God” (Psalm 46:4). Even if the Euphrates is dried up, as it was when Babylon fell (Jeremiah 51:36), yet this river cannot be dried, for it springs up to eternal life. No enemy can ever sever the streams from the source. And though the wild boars of the earth may root up other trees—though Spaniards or persecutors may strip you of your possessions, riches, or homes—yet what God has planted in His Son shall never be rooted up. For it is written, “Every plant which My

heavenly Father has not planted shall be rooted up” (Matthew 15:13), but His planting shall stand.

As God Himself says of His people: “My vineyard, and the trees within it, I the Lord do keep; I will water it every moment, lest any harm it; I will guard it night and day” (Isaiah 27:3).

Therefore, choose God now, and take Him as your portion in advance. For if you delay, when the evil day arrives, you will be sent back to the things you delighted in. As in Jeremiah 2:28, where God says, “In the time of their trouble, they will say, ‘Arise and save us.’ But where are your gods that you have made for yourselves? Let them arise, if they can save you in your time of trouble” (verse 28). And again, “Why do you contend with Me? You have all transgressed against Me” (verse 29).

Take Him now—before the storm comes. Seek Him now—while He may be found.

Secondly, trust perfectly in Him. In all the scriptures previously cited, this is the natural outcome of making Him your portion. Wait for mercy from Him, cast yourself upon Him for relief. Live by faith. Trust fully in the promises He has made, and in the proven experiences of His dealings with His people in times such as these. This is the only way to quiet your heart and mind.

Consider the counsel given to the Church, and what the Church herself did in similar times. Isaiah 26:4: “Trust in the Lord forever, for in the Lord Jehovah is everlasting strength.” That is, not strength only for the present moment, but strength that never fails or diminishes. Other things may strengthen your heart temporarily, but He strengthens forever. He is a rock—indeed, a rock of ages. Verse 5 adds this encouragement: “You will keep him in perfect peace whose

mind is stayed on You.” Thus, the soul that anchors itself in Jehovah, and casts anchor there, will enjoy peace—perfect peace—while the whole world rages with war around it. “According to your faith be it unto you.” If you would have perfect peace, then trust perfectly, as Peter exhorts; for if you are firmly settled on Him as your foundation, they must shake Him before they can shake you.

Evil tidings that terrify the hearts of hypocrites, as in Isaiah 33:14, shall never move the one who trusts in God: “He will not be afraid of evil tidings” (Psalm 112:7), for “his heart is fixed”—settled upon the good he expects, having found a firm footing—“trusting in the Lord.”

Now, in that same chapter—Isaiah 26—at verse 8, what does the Church say in response? “In the way of Your judgments, O Lord, we have waited for You.” That is, even when God appears most angry and comes forth as a Judge, the one who trusts in Him stands firm, waiting for mercy even then. Isaiah 64:1 describes God doing terrible things (verse 3) and being wroth (verse 5), yet the one who rejoices in Him and does righteousness meets Him and remembers Him, trusting in Him along His ways. “All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth to those who keep His covenant” (Psalm 25:10). He is never out of the road of mercy for such. Therefore, the Church says in Isaiah 8:17, along with His disciples (verse 16): “I will wait on the Lord, who hides His face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in Him.” That is, even when He looks in wrath upon others, I will still expect mercy from Him for myself, as He has promised in verse 14—that He would be “a sanctuary” for them, even while being “a stone of stumbling” and a snare to all others.

Therefore, trust in Him—and trust perfectly. Go and study all His promises, including the one in this very text. Distill the sweetness and comfort from them all, and drink them deeply. Every promise

He has ever made to His people, or any act of kindness He has ever shown, was written for our comfort. There is not a single promise that is not a tried and tested truth. In every age, under every condition, God's people have found the faithfulness, purity, and soundness of His promises—that there is no flaw or deceit in them. This is what David means when he says again and again in the Psalms, “The words of the Lord are pure” and “tried.” He especially refers to promises of deliverance from danger.

Consider Psalm 12:6, written during Saul's oppressive reign, when godly men were persecuted, priests were slain, and the vilest men exalted (verse 8). God says in verse 5, “Now I will arise... I will set him in the safety for which he yearns.” And what does David say about this promise? Verse 6: “The words of the Lord are pure words, like silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times.” That is, God's word has been tested in every furnace, every distress. It has never failed.

These promises have been tested again and again. Abraham tested them: “In the mount the Lord will be seen.” Jacob tested them when he was in distress (Genesis 32:9), and he found them to be true. David fell many times—seven times, even seventy times seven—and still the promises held. There are so many “probatum ests”—“it is proved”—to these promises that you may safely build your life upon every one of them.

“A friend,” says Solomon, “loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity” (Proverbs 17:17). Now, God has been a friend to you from eternity, and all the ages that have passed have not worn out His love. He is closer than a brother, more tender than a mother (Isaiah 49:15). You are “engraved on the palms of His hands,” and your welfare is continually before Him (verse 16). You are remembered

with everlasting kindness (Isaiah 54:8). He has never taken His thoughts off of you. Do you think He will forget you now, for a little adversity? That would not be the behavior of a true friend.

Now is the true test of His love for you. He will not fail you in your greatest need. Therefore, says David, “Trust in Him at all times” (Psalm 62:8), for “God is a refuge,” especially in the evil day. “O Lord, my strength and my refuge in the day of affliction” (Jeremiah 16:19). That is the very purpose for which He is most necessary. If He were not present then, we would be worse off than others, for all our hope is in Him. As Jeremiah says in 17:17, “Be not a terror to me; You are my hope in the day of evil.” That was all the hope he had. He would be utterly undone if God turned His face away at such a time. No—then is the blessedness of the godly most clearly seen: Psalm 2 says, “If He is angry, blessed are all they who put their trust in Him.” Especially then.

And even if He seems most angry, still trust Him, for He intends you no harm. In Jeremiah 29:11, when the people were taken into captivity and thought God meant to destroy them, He replies, “I know the thoughts that I think toward you—thoughts of peace, and not of evil—to give you a future and a hope.” In other words, a better end than you could have asked for, if you will only leave it in His hands and let Him work His purpose.

And this is the most powerful reason to trust Him: by doing so, you place yourself under His care, becoming as it were His ward, His charge. He is thereby committed to your protection. It is against the law of nations to betray those who flee to us for refuge. In the captivity of Babylon, God said to Ebed-melech in Jeremiah 39:18, “I will surely deliver you, and your life shall be as a prize to you, because you have put your trust in Me, says the Lord.” That alone

was the reason. So also Isaiah 26:3: “You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You.”

Thirdly, conduct yourself with a holy fear of offending Him; for this, too, is a way to gain His favor—as indeed even the best among us have reason to do. In times of judgment, Revelation 15:4 asks, “Who shall not fear Thee?” For He is a Father who judges each person without partiality, “according to his works” (1 Peter 1:17); therefore, fear Him.

When Uzzah was struck down for what is described as a small and even rash act, as the Holy Spirit Himself acknowledges (2 Samuel 6:7), it is said that David was afraid of the Lord that day. He thought to himself, “How shall the ark of the Lord come to me,” recognizing his own sinfulness, and that he had committed many worse errors—some not in rashness, but in presumption. So too, when you see God arise from His dwelling in fury to punish the inhabitants of the earth, you must remember—as Job was warned—“Because there is wrath, beware lest He take thee away with His stroke” (Job 36:18). That is, while considering your own guiltiness, it is wise to fear. It is a sign of a hardened heart not to do so. Even if children see their father strike only the servants, if they do not tremble, they are stubborn and undutiful.

Moreover, to fear is a way to prevent yourself from being struck in particular. If trembling under the rod brings reverence, then know this—God does not delight in striking. Therefore, as Habakkuk says, “When I heard, my belly trembled... that I might rest in the day of trouble” (Habakkuk 3:16).

Only, remember this—“Fear not their fear” (Isaiah 8:12), that is, do not fear punishment as the world does, but fear to sin; fear offending God. “Sanctify the Lord of hosts Himself; and let Him be your fear,

and let Him be your dread” (Isaiah 8:13). To fear punishment only is not to sanctify Him. My brethren, beware of walking rashly in these days—rashly, that is, carelessly and without consideration, not minding what you do. Leviticus 26:40 uses a word often translated “walking contrary,” but also meaning “walking rashly,” that is, without regard or fear. It is your duty now to walk with watchfulness, examining every step, lest by some heedlessness you offend God grievously without even realizing it. For if you do not take care, God may act toward you in a way that seems rash—strike suddenly, as if in haste—even cutting off one who was otherwise dear to Him, and that unexpectedly. Because there is wrath, be cautious, lest He take you away with His stroke.

Fourthly, make God now the ultimate end of all your actions, more than ever before. Revelation 15:4 says, “Who shall not glorify Thee, O Lord, for Thy judgments are made manifest?” For God’s holiness is revealed in His judgments as much as in any of His works. His aim, when He comes in judgment, is to glorify Himself in those who would not glorify Him beforehand—to recover His honor from those who had no regard for it. Ezekiel 28:22 declares, “Behold, I am against thee, and I will be glorified in the midst of thee, when I shall execute judgments.” Therefore, it is wise to give Him glory beforehand, as Jeremiah urges: “Give glory to the Lord your God, before He causes darkness” (Jeremiah 13:16). God will be glorified—either in you or on you—for He has made all things for Himself. If all things are by Him, then they are also for Him. And if He receives no glory from you, if you do not pay Him the fruit He is due, then expect to be cast out. Are you one of those vines that bears fruit for itself, as in Hosea 10:1? If God gains nothing from your life, if He cannot eat from the tree He planted, He will uproot it. Why should it take up space in His vineyard?

Especially take heed when His axe is already lifted and laid to the root of the tree (Matthew 3:10). Now is the time when all unfruitful trees shall be cut down—not only those that bear no fruit, but even those that bear fruit not unto God. Romans 7:4 tells us that believers are “to bring forth fruit unto God.” Hebrews 6:7–8 speaks of those who receive rain from heaven but bear no fruit “meet for Him that dressed them”—such a one is “near to cursing,” and the next step is burning.

But consider this: a soul that is fruitful, that longs to glorify God in all things, and seeks to bring forth much fruit for Him—it would not be to God’s benefit to cut off such a soul. Indeed, God would lose more by it. Deuteronomy 20:19 gives the law that one should not cut down fruit-bearing trees during siege, for they are useful. Shall God, then, cut down a tree full of fruit, and that fruit not even ripe yet? No, He will not. Psalm 44:12 records the people’s plea: “You sell Your people for nothing and gain no profit from their sale.” God will not do that. He has more to gain by letting them remain. In fact, Psalm 91 assures us that when “a thousand fall at your side,” the Lord will deliver you—why? “Because he has set his love upon Me,” says the Lord (verse 14).

Fifthly, pray to Him, call upon His name, and maintain communion with Him. This, indeed, is especially what it means to “seek Him,” and it is the next condition stated in Psalm 91:15: “He shall call upon Me, and I will answer him.” That promise contains three blessings: “I will be with him in trouble,” “I will deliver him,” and “I will honor him.”

First, He will be with you in trouble—manifesting His presence. Even if you are in the fiery furnace with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, if Christ walks with you, you will be safe. You have His

promise as well as they did: “When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned” (Isaiah 43:2). He will be with you as a friend—bearing your burden with you, which is a great relief. “In all their affliction He was afflicted” (Isaiah 63:9). He will be with you to comfort and care for you in sickness or in prison—to bring you consolations. Psalm 41:3 promises, “The Lord will strengthen him on his bed of illness; You will sustain him on his sickbed.”

Second, as He is with you, so He will devise your deliverance and not rest until it is accomplished. He will not only bring you out but will bring you out to greater honor—like Joseph from prison to a throne, or Daniel from the lions’ den to royal favor.

This He will do if you seek Him, keep communion with Him, and remain close, as the Church did in Isaiah 26:8–9: “In the night I have desired You... early will I seek You.” David likewise says in Psalm 139:18, “When I awake, I am still with You”—even in the night watches. In Psalm 73:23, he says, “I am continually with You.” He walked in God's presence and would not allow his heart to wander, knowing he could not survive without the Lord holding him by the hand—especially in times of trouble. When the waves come, how will you stand unless God holds you fast? Peter would have sunk if Christ had not stretched out His hand. Therefore, keep close to God; always be found holding His hand.

For the Lord says in Psalm 73:27, “Those who are far from You shall perish.” If you are not near Him, and trouble comes, you are in a perilous condition. Psalm 22:11 cries, “Be not far from me, for trouble is near.” There is no one else to help. So, if you would not have God far from you in trouble, do not walk far from Him now. “It is good,” says David in Psalm 73:28, “to draw near to God.” That is the safest path. Therefore, seek Him, pursue Him, as David in Psalm

63:8: “My soul follows hard after You,” unwilling to lose sight of Him. Follow Him wherever He goes; give Him no rest day or night. It is not enough merely to trust and fear Him—pour out your heart before Him (Psalm 62:8), “for He is a refuge for us.”

To strengthen your faith and encourage your prayers, remember this: “Power belongs to God” and “to You, O Lord, belongs mercy” (Psalm 62:11–12). He is both able and merciful—therefore willing—to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think. It is never in vain to seek Him or to trust in Him.

And this is what God expects before He delivers you. In Jeremiah 29, though He had promised to preserve them safely through the captivity, He still commands them to pray to Him for that peace (verse 7). Even after declaring that He would bring them back after seventy years (verse 10), He says, “Then shall you call upon Me, and you shall go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you shall seek Me and find Me, when you shall search for Me with all your heart” (verses 12–13).

And so much for seeking the Lord.

The second general exhortation directed to the godly is this: “Seek righteousness,” which refers, first, to the righteousness of justification—called “the righteousness of God,” that is, the righteousness of Christ. It is most necessary to obtain assurance of this, and to have your conscience sprinkled with His blood, as the doorposts of the Israelites were sprinkled with the blood of the lamb, so that God passed over them when He destroyed the Egyptians. For only this righteousness can pacify the wrath of God. Isaiah 32:1 declares, “Behold, a King shall reign in righteousness,” and in the next verse, “And a Man”—that is, Jesus Christ—“shall be as a hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; as rivers of

water in a dry place; as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.” He will shelter you, refresh you, and protect you from the outpouring of divine wrath when God rains down His judgments. “Kiss the Son,” as well as the Father, “lest you perish” (Psalm 2:12).

Or, secondly, if this refers to the righteousness of sanctification, then it also calls for the practice of repentance and new obedience more than ever before. For, as Isaiah 10:22 and Ezekiel 14:14 say, judgment shall overflow with righteousness.

First, then, turn from sin—put an end to it. This is what kindles God's anger. Isaiah 42:25 asks, “Why is Jacob given up to the spoil, and why does God's fury burn like fire?” Is it not because they have sinned? Sin is the fuel of God's wrath, making a person like tinder to the flame, so that the least spark can ignite destruction.

Secondly, the reason why God afflicts His people is to remove sin. Isaiah 27:7–9 says, “By this shall the iniquity of Jacob be purged.” Therefore, use lesser afflictions beforehand as God's purgatives to cleanse you, so that He is not provoked to bring stronger judgments both to remove the corruption and to chasten the soul. That is His only aim—“this is all the fruit,” the passage says—to take away sin. Do it ahead of time, and you will prevent the need for greater severity.

If you will not remove your sins, know that God will remove you. He will cleanse the land one way or another. Ezekiel 23:48 says that lewdness shall cease from the land. In verse 47, the guilty were to be stoned and slain, and so, “Thus will I cause lewdness to cease out of the land.” If you will not separate yourselves from sin, then God will remove both you and your sin together. So also in Isaiah 14:23, if the people would not sweep out the filth of their hearts—allowing piles of wicked thoughts, words, and desires to accumulate—then God

declares, “I will come with My broom, and cleanse all,” but it shall be “the broom of destruction.”

Let every man, therefore, put a stop to sin. As they reasoned in 2 Chronicles 28:13, “Have we not had enough sin already?” Especially guard yourself against that sin to which you are most inclined, whether by habit or natural disposition—whether pride, greed, uncleanness, or idleness. As David said in Psalm 18, which he composed on the day of his deliverance from all his enemies, “He delivered me from my strong enemy,” and why? Because he had “kept the ways of the Lord” and had not “wickedly departed from my God.” If he sinned, it was out of weakness, not wicked intent. “I was also upright before Him,” he says, “and I kept myself from my iniquity” (verse 23).

Likewise, the king of Nineveh commanded his people in Jonah 3:8 to turn every one from his evil way, and because their chief sin was oppression, he especially mentions violence in the land. And God delivered them, as you know.

In such times, nothing is more foolish than to be consumed with worldliness, unjust dealings, or ambitious pursuits of riches and honor. These are the most vain and senseless endeavors in times of judgment, for you do not know how soon it may be that “the buyer and the seller” shall be alike in ruin, as in Isaiah 24:2. “Do you seek great things for yourself?” Jeremiah says to Baruch in Jeremiah 45:5—when God is tearing down everything in the land, do not be like Gehazi, who sought vineyards and riches in a time of judgment (2 Kings 5:26).

Be equally cautious of drowning in sensual pleasures, gluttony, and drunkenness. Luke 21:34 and Matthew 24:38 warn that in Noah’s day, “they ate and drank,” and the flood came and swept them all

away. These pleasures lull men into a false security and leave them unfit for suffering or repentance.

Keep yourselves also free from the sins of the times. If you hope to be spared, then “do not partake in their sins, lest you partake in their plagues” (Revelation 18:4). This was the instruction God gave to Isaiah in chapter 8:11, “Do not walk in the way of this people.” This command came when God was threatening the invasion of the Assyrian. Having care for His own people, He bids them bind up His law and testimony (verse 16), and not to follow the stream of popular opinion and corruption. Then, He says, “I will be a sanctuary to them.”

What corrupt practices prevail in the state? What unsound doctrines are being raised up? Separate yourself from them. If they say, “A confederacy”—that is, an unlawful league or alliance—do not echo them. Instead, bring your concerns before God. Even if, in an evil time, a prudent man must remain silent before men (as Amos 5:13 says), yet bring your complaints before God. Mourn over these things, and by so doing, you will wash your hands of their guilt, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 7:11.

How did Lot wash his hands of Sodom’s sins? He was “vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked” (2 Peter 2:7), and God delivered him. How did Israel cleanse the land of murder when the murderer was unknown? Deuteronomy 21:6–7 instructs that the elders of the city were to wash their hands over a heifer and say, “Our hands have not shed this blood,” and so they removed the guilt from the land.

Not only mourn over the sins of the times and places in which you live, but also direct your zeal against them, insofar as your callings allow. Because Jeremiah (along with his faithful remnant) stood in

contention against the sins of his generation, they cursed him (Jeremiah 15:10). Therefore, the Lord said in verse 11, “Truly it shall be well with your remnant; I will cause the enemy to entreat you well in the time of evil and affliction.” Thus it seems just and good to our wise and gracious God, that when He recompenses tribulation to those who trouble His people, He gives rest to those who are troubled, as the apostle speaks in another context (2 Thessalonians 1:6–7). Because we contend for God against those who defy His glory, the enemies of our peace shall, in turn, be made to deal well with us.

Indeed, if ever there was a time for godly men’s zeal and courage for the truth to be stirred up, it is in times like these. For now, God Himself begins to be zealous—His displeasure against sin is kindled and grows hot. In Isaiah 59:13–15, when God beheld nothing but oppression, rebellion, and the forsaking of His ways; when judgment was turned backward, truth was fallen in the streets, and equity could not enter—then the Lord saw it, and it displeased Him. Verse 17 tells us that “He clad Himself with zeal as with a cloak” and came forth to repay men according to their deeds (verse 18). Therefore, when we see such times, when God begins to clothe Himself with wrath and step forth into the world in fury, we ought to sympathize with Him, and be moved as He is moved—just as the courtiers of a king reflect the emotions and concerns of their sovereign.

So also did Moses in Numbers 11:1, 10. When the people murmured and it displeased the Lord, and His anger was kindled greatly, the text adds, “and Moses also was displeased.” This is in keeping with the principle set forth in 1 John 4:17: that as God is, so are we to be in this world. We are to behave ourselves in the exercise of the same moral excellencies that He exhibits—showing kindness and patience to the evil and unthankful as He does, and being zealous against sin

according to our calling, just as He is—and especially when He manifests such zeal Himself.

Consider what God said of Phinehas in Numbers 25:11: “Phinehas... has turned My wrath away... because he was zealous with My jealousy.” So read the original interpreters, though our translation renders it “for My sake.” That is, Phinehas was inwardly affected as God was at the uncleanness committed in Israel. This, indeed, is one of the surest ways to diminish the heat of God’s wrath: when He sees us taking His part here below, rising up in holy boldness for His truth, He is moved to stay His anger. Though men may grow more enraged when others side with and support them, yet God does not. If we, in our places, and rulers in theirs, would strike through the loins of sinners—ourselves, with reproofs that pierce the conscience and awaken fear of hell; and they, by executing just laws—if all were done with God’s own zeal, as Phinehas did, with grief and holy indignation for His dishonor (for zeal is compounded of both those affections, as Christ exemplifies in Mark 3:5), then God would have no need to rise in fury. “Phinehas,” He says, “has turned away My wrath, for he was zealous with My zeal among them” (Numbers 25:11).

And even if you are not called to such public action as Phinehas, yet if you are truly zealous for God, He will still make a covenant with you, as He did with him—that both you and your children shall endure through coming judgments. This was true for his descendants through all the evils and captivities that befell Israel until Christ’s time. Ezra, for example, was of his lineage (Ezra 7:1, 5), and he came through the Babylonian captivity safely, as well as any of his brethren.

So, though we may not have the same public office or spirit that Phinehas had, yet as far as our own commission extends, let us be faithful to the utmost. Thrust the javelin of reproof into the hearts of sin; reform your households; exercise authority with godly fear. Contend against the world by keeping the law of God, as Solomon says in Proverbs 28:4. Remove iniquity far from your homes, as Job 22:23 exhorts, and you shall receive this promise in verse 29: “When men are cast down, you shall say, There is a lifting up.” God will remember your zeal for Him, as Nehemiah prayed in his final chapter.

Above all, my brethren, now be “zealous for good works,” as the apostle speaks in Titus 2:14. Be eager and hungry for every duty of new obedience, abounding more and more in all the fruits and works of righteousness. You who have “wrought His judgments,” as the prophet here addresses, “seek righteousness”—that is, continue, and increase in it more than ever. Whatever part of righteousness you were previously diligent in, take it up again with new strength, as though you had done nothing yet. Mend your pace, for these are not days to stand still. After John in the Revelation described the terrible things to come upon the world, the conclusion he draws is this: “Let the righteous be more righteous still” (Revelation 22:11).

To give a few particular examples, still building upon the same foundation:

You who have previously examined your hearts, examine them again and again. This is the exhortation found in the text, reinforced by the motive in Zephaniah 1:12: for God comes to “search Jerusalem with candles” when He comes to punish. Anticipate God’s searching. If a man can probe and treat his own wound, it is far less painful than having even the gentlest surgeon do it.

You who have previously guarded your corrupt hearts and sinful tendencies, now watch over them more diligently than ever. This is Christ's exhortation in light of such perilous times: Luke 21:34, 36, "Take heed lest your hearts be overcharged" and overwhelmed with various kinds of lusts; but "watch therefore and pray always, that you may be accounted worthy to escape all those things that shall come to pass." In Revelation 16, when the sixth vial is poured out and that great and final battle is fought wherein Antichrist is to be destroyed—just before the last and most dreadful judgment under the seventh vial—there is a warning given (which, for all we know, may apply to our own age). It is placed in parentheses: "Blessed is he that watches, and keeps his garments." That is, blessed is he who watches over his corruptions and does not allow them, like weeds, to grow while he sleeps; who watches so that the graces within him and their holy fire do not die out, as did those of the foolish virgins while they slumbered.

You who have been fruitful in gracious speech and heavenly meditation—out of the abundance of which the mouth speaks—be even more fruitful now. Consider Malachi 3:16–18 and the beginning of chapter 4. Who were those spared in the day when the wrath of God "burned like an oven" and others were consumed like stubble? It was they who, in evil times, spoke often to one another of the Lord and who "thought upon His name." "Then," says the Lord, "they shall be mine in that day," and "I will spare them as a man spares his own son that serves him." Those who have thought much of God before shall then be thought of by God, and in that day, "you shall discern between the righteous and the wicked"—God will make a clear and public distinction.

You who have strictly sanctified the Sabbath and diligently sought God in your fast-days, and who have made a sincere effort to humble

yourselves—continue in these practices. For observe what rich promises are laid up for you and your children in times of trouble. In Isaiah 58, where God calls for sincere observance of both fasting and Sabbath-keeping, He declares in verse 11: “The Lord shall guide you continually.” In times of judgment, one greatly needs the Lord’s guidance, to direct and lead into ways, places, and conditions of safety and deliverance—something all the wisdom of this world cannot achieve. He will also “satisfy your soul in drought,” when all outward comforts may fail (as we do not know how soon they may), and “you shall be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water whose waters do not fail.” Furthermore, in verse 12, “your descendants shall rebuild the ancient ruins,” referring to the restoration of the church. Even if this is not fulfilled in your lifetime, your children may become great builders of the church in future generations, and the prayers you offer in these times may lay a foundation for a lasting and settled church, as the martyrs of our faith did by their prayers and sufferings.

All these promises are attached to the strict observance of fasts and Sabbaths, which are here called “Sabbaths” because they are to be kept holy just as the weekly Sabbath is. This is evident from the verses before and after, including verse 13. If fasts must be kept with such solemnity, then certainly the weekly Sabbath must be kept as strictly, for it is the primary rule in this category of holy days. The fourth commandment—“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy”—is the principal and foundational command, and therefore becomes the rule for all others. It is to be observed with the same seriousness as a day of fasting, though the emphasis differs: the Sabbath leans more toward thanksgiving, and fast-days toward humiliation. Yet in both, we are not to speak our own words or pursue our own pleasures. If the Sabbath is not kept, then—as Leviticus 26:34–35 teaches—the land shall not keep her inhabitants,

and the people, instead of rest, shall find trouble. However, in Jeremiah 17:24–25, if the Sabbath is not profaned, God promises the city shall stand forever.

Be deeply engaged with the Word of God: in reading, meditation, and applying it to your hearts. Let the Word be implanted and transformed into genuine grace, strength, and Christlikeness within you. Pray it into your hearts now, as much as you can, for there may come a spiritual famine across the earth—you do not know how soon. As the angel said to Elijah, “Eat and drink again,” for the journey may be long. “Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly,” Colossians 3:16. Stockpile as much of that precious treasure as possible, for a little money will not sustain you through a long journey; it will quickly be spent. But trust not in your memory or intellect alone—hide it in your heart. Believe it, brothers, and you will never be robbed of it.

Become well-acquainted with the Word. Be intimate with it now, as God commands in Deuteronomy 6:7: “You shall teach them diligently to your children, and speak of them when you sit in your house,” and so forth. If you do so, it will become a constant and faithful companion. Proverbs 6:22 says, “When you walk, it shall guide you,” leading you into paths of peace and safety; “when you sleep,” and danger threatens, “it shall keep you”; and “when you awake,” it shall converse with you and comfort you in all affliction. Psalm 119:92 declares that David would have perished long ago if God's law had not been his delight. Indeed, all outward troubles only serve to make the Word sweeter: 1 Thessalonians 1:6, “They received the Word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit.”

Moreover, the Word will serve as an argument to God for your preservation when He cuts off others. Jeremiah uses it as such in

chapter 15:15–16, among other pleas for why God should spare him: “Your words were found, and I ate them, and your Word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart.” Similarly, in Job 22:22, 29, we read: “Receive, I pray you, the law from His mouth, and lay up His words in your heart.” Among the many promises that follow (beginning in verse 25), one is found in verse 29: “When men are cast down, you shall say, ‘There is lifting up’”—that is, for you. Because Josiah had a tender heart upon hearing the reading of the law, God did not bring the judgment in his days (2 Kings 22:11, 19).

Finally, do as much good as you can to others. Use all the gifts and opportunities God has given you to the fullest extent, to benefit the souls of others. Hebrews 10:25 exhorts, “Encourage one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” Focus especially on those nearest to you. Lead them to Christ before the day of evil comes and they are cut off in their sins. Warn them, as Peter did in Acts 2, to “save themselves from this crooked generation”—from the widespread destruction and judgment that will fall on this generation if we do not repent. Especially look after your children, your relatives, and your close friends. In Genesis 19:12, 14, when Sodom was about to be destroyed, the angels said to Lot, “Have you anyone else here—sons-in-law, sons, daughters?” Lot went out and warned his sons-in-law. Though they thought he was jesting and did not believe, still in doing so he fulfilled his duty.

If you can bring your friends or any of your children into Christ, then you need not be anxious for them any longer; for God binds Himself to care for them, and He surely will. Whatever times may come, they will be safe.

Also, do good with your possessions—especially to the bodies of others, and particularly to the saints—and for the advancement of

the gospel and the benefit of the church. I find this very duty urged by Solomon on the same grounds: Ecclesiastes 11:1–2, “Cast your bread upon the waters; give a portion to seven, and also to eight, for you do not know what evil shall be upon the earth.” You see that he exhorts to this very practice in evil times, and the motive is reasonable and compelling, especially when you consider the preceding verse: “For you shall find it after many days.” And again, “He who gives to the poor lends to the Lord,” Proverbs 19:17.

First, by doing so, a man directs and distributes his wealth himself; otherwise, the enemy who comes to seize everything may become his executor for all he knows.

Second, he gives it back to the Lord, who gave it to him in the first place. That is better by far, and he will find greater comfort in having entrusted it to God than in any earthly security.

Third, he does not simply give it away, nor does he cast it away in vain. Solomon's expression implies how freely a man should give; but indeed, he lends it to the Lord, who will return it in due season—after many days. And when evil days do come, when you shall have the greatest need of it, you will find not only men's promises but God's own surety standing for repayment.

To conclude this portion of the exhortation: abound in all these and similar expressions of righteousness, whatever their form. Let these general considerations stir you up to do so:

Labor diligently while it is still possible. For,

First, believe this—there is nothing truly desirable in this world but the ability, opportunity, and heart to serve God. Ecclesiastes 3:12

declares, “There is no good in them,” speaking of all worldly things, “but for a man to rejoice and to do good in his life.”

Second, consider that each one of you has a task appointed. You are each called to be profitable to God and man through the duties of your calling, your gifts, and the obligations of religion. All this must be done while it is still day. John 9:4, “I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day.” God appointed His own Son to labor; and it was this very knowledge—that He could only work while it was day—that made Him so zealous. God had commissioned a great amount of work and allotted only a short time for it. Therefore, our Savior hastened to finish it before nightfall. Though He made the first day and is Lord of time, He still had to seize His opportunity. For there was coming “an hour of darkness,” as He told the Pharisees in Luke 22:53, “This is your hour, and the power of darkness”—when they would act, and He must cease from His labor. And what was Christ’s case is ours also. “The night comes,” He says, “when no man can work,” just as Psalm 104:23 says: “Man goes forth to his work and to his labor until the evening”—for then the beasts come forth to prey, as the psalm continues.

Third, beyond the certainty of death for every man—“years of darkness,” and “many of them,” as Solomon says in Ecclesiastes 11:8—there are seasons of darkness for the church of God, when its enemies hold power, just as the Pharisees once did. Then no one can labor—or if they can, it is but little, as during the days of popery, when no man might buy or sell unless he bore the mark of the beast, Revelation 13:17. And we may fear that yet another hour of temptation and power of darkness is coming upon the world, as some interpret Revelation 3:10, when the witnesses shall be slain (Revelation 11). Popery may experience a revival, just as paganism did after Constantine’s reforms—during the reign of Julian, some

sixty years later. Then will be a time for suffering rather than doing. Your shop windows will be closed; the night will come when no one can work—or, if anything, only behind closed doors. Still, your hearts may pray, no matter what enemies do or attempt.

Therefore, let us bestir ourselves and do good while we have opportunity, just as the apostle exhorts in Galatians 6:10: “While we have time, let us do good.” And in truth, we have both time and opportunity now. The devil, knowing his time is short, rages all the more, Revelation 12:12. It is lawful even to learn from our enemies: *fas est et ab hoste doceri*. Learn this lesson from Satan’s fury. In 1 Corinthians 7:29, referring to times of persecution (as is evident from verse 26), Paul writes, “Brethren, the time is short.” Therefore, use the world as though you did not use it—for you do not know how long you shall have the liberty to enjoy it. Like travelers who, fearing that nightfall approaches, spur on their horses and ride more swiftly, so must you hasten now.

Fourth, remember that you may be cut off along with others; even the best may be taken. And “in the grave there is no work,” as Solomon says in Ecclesiastes 9:10. Therefore, whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might. It will be a grief in death to have brought so little glory to God, to have sown so little to the Spirit—sowing that would have reaped a harvest in heaven. To be cut down with many leaves and little fruit, and that fruit unripe—with many budding intentions to be more zealous, but never brought into full action—will be sorrow indeed.

Therefore, rise up and labor diligently. If you must die, what better way than while working faithfully for Christ? “Blessed is that servant whom his Master shall find so doing.” This will prepare you—make you ripe and heavy with spiritual fruit—for the harvest when the

sickle is brought. And when your work is done, you may say with Paul, “I have finished my course.” Then it does not matter if you are cut off—you will glorify God in your death and be a vessel prepared for glory, as saints are described in Romans 9:23.

Just as wise housewives polish and ready their vessels for a great day, so should you prepare yourselves for the Day of the Lord. That you may be “fit,” as Colossians 1:12 says, “to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light,” follow Peter’s exhortation in 2 Peter 1:5–12: add grace to grace and abound in them. “So shall you make your calling and election sure.” And when you come to die, “an abundant entrance shall be ministered unto you into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” You shall not scarcely be saved, creeping through some narrow gate with difficulty—but a wide and glorious entrance shall be opened before you.

The last duty is to seek meekness—that is, a readiness to be disposed by God either in doing or in suffering His will, without murmuring or complaint. Such meekness was evident in old Eli, in 1 Samuel 3:18, and in the church under its most severe afflictions, as in Lamentations 3:26–31. There it is described by quiet waiting, bearing the yoke, sitting alone. A meek person is silent, his mouth stopped, having nothing to complain of, because, as others read it, “he has laid it upon him.” He withdraws to meditate and mourn over his sins, puts his mouth in the dust, gives his cheek to the one who strikes him, and takes it patiently. As in Leviticus 26:41, he “accepts his punishment.” He clings steadfastly to God, even under His severest dealings, as the church confesses in Psalm 44:17–20: “All this is come upon us, yet we have not forgotten You, nor dealt falsely in Your covenant. Our heart is not turned back, neither have our steps declined from Your way, though You have sore broken us in the place of dragons, and covered us with the shadow of death. If we

have forgotten the name of our God, or stretched out our hands to a strange god..." They remained faithful, not breaking covenant, though God had grievously afflicted them.

This spirit of meekness arises from two things.

First, from a deep conviction of one's sins, of the offense given to God, and of one's own guilt and desert of destruction. Thus the church in Micah 7:9, "I will bear the indignation of the Lord, because I have sinned against Him." And again in Lamentations 3:39, "Why should a living man complain, a man for the punishment of his sins?" It is most unreasonable and improper that someone so guilty should resent correction—as if a thief who deserved hanging should complain of being branded. Especially when one considers, as Ezra 9:13 says, that "God punishes us less than our iniquities deserve."

Second, meekness is joined with hope of mercy. Without hope, the soul rises up in rebellion, like Cain, thinking the punishment too great to bear. Self-love, if not subdued by the love of God, makes a man feel wronged by divine justice. But where hope is joined with quiet waiting, as in Lamentations 3:26 and verse 29, it calms the soul: "He puts his mouth in the dust—if so be there may be hope." This sustains him, making him content, trusting that "the Lord will not cast off forever," but though He cause grief, "yet will He have compassion according to the multitude of His mercies."

This spirit of humble contentment in affliction is the grace that God especially requires to abound in His people during times of judgment. Therefore, addressing His people in Zephaniah, He calls them "you meek of the earth," and exhorts them, "seek meekness." This title suits the matter at hand—the proclamation of coming wrath. Just as when we speak to God we appeal to Him by the name corresponding to the grace we seek—if we desire wisdom, we call

Him “Father of lights,” or if we need comfort, “the God of all consolation”—so when God speaks to us, He names us by the grace He seeks to find in us. Here, “meek ones” is the name He gives, for meekness is the grace most becoming when God announces His anger.

When God declares a “day of anger,” a time of fierce wrath, it is fitting for us—who are as guilty as others—to be silent, meek, and still. Then we should “seek meekness,” not even allowing a murmuring thought to arise. For it is utterly unseemly that one deserving hell—and the lowest place in it—should complain about lighter punishments. Hence, in Lamentations 3:39, the prophet expresses amazement: “Why should a living man complain, a man for the punishment of his sins?” It is astonishing that someone guilty before God should resent correction. What! A man complain of punishment for his own sins, when there is no proportion between his guilt and the judgment? If a criminal who deserved to be hanged, drawn, and quartered were only sentenced to be whipped or branded, would he not fall on his knees and thank the judge for mercy? So should we. We are not consumed—this is the mercy of the Lord (Lamentations 3:22). Let us welcome the chastisement that is less than we deserve.

If anyone had reason to complain, it was Christ—He was innocent. Innocence often gives boldness to speak, while guilt closes the mouth. Yet “as a lamb led to the slaughter, He opened not His mouth.” He did pray that the cup might pass from Him—but only if possible: “Not My will, Father, but Yours be done.” And “He was heard in what He feared.” So must you act. The promise of a hiding place is given to the meek. If there is any refuge to be found on earth, the meek may claim it: Psalm 37:8, “The meek shall inherit the

earth.” Hence they are called “meek of the earth” and “inhabitants of the earth” in Isaiah 26:9.

And the reason God places such special regard upon this spirit of meekness and attaches promises of protection to it in troubled times is:

First, because God seeks only to be acknowledged as just when He comes in judgment—Romans 3:4, “that You may be justified in Your words, and overcome when You are judged.” A spirit that confesses its sin and submits to deserved chastisement already acknowledges God’s justice and is thus not a proper object for divine wrath. But a Pharaoh who refuses to bow—upon him God will demonstrate His power and break him. You discipline your children only until they kiss the rod—then you cast it aside.

Second, a meek soul remains thankful and gives God all the glory, no matter how He deals with it. Acknowledging itself worthy of destruction, it sees every mercy, even the least, as undeserved. It magnifies even the smallest grace in the midst of judgment, while it sees the punishment as just, and small in comparison to its sin. Lamentations 3:22: “It is of the Lord’s mercies that we are not consumed,” and “Great is Your faithfulness.” Ezra 9:13 intensifies the acknowledgment of sin—“All this has come upon us for our great trespass”—but diminishes the punishment: “You have punished us less than our iniquities deserve.” And he extols even a small deliverance: “You have given us such a deliverance as this”—with emphasis on “this.”

Third, a meek soul does not forsake God, but continues to obey and serve Him, whatever affliction He may bring. Psalm 44:17–18: “All this has come upon us, yet we have not forgotten You, nor dealt falsely in Your covenant. Our heart is not turned back, nor have our

steps declined from Your way, though You have broken us sore.” A meek heart understands that obedience is always due, and that suffering does not cancel one’s debt. Such a soul God cannot long bring Himself to afflict—and to such, the promise of preservation is made.

Now, to encourage this spirit of meekness, consider this one compelling reason: not only is man guilty and deserving of punishment, but God also holds absolute and unbounded authority to bring upon you whatever judgment He pleases. And if He determines to bring affliction upon you, no power in the world can prevent it or remove it. There is no way to contend with Him but to submit entirely. For He holds both prosperity and adversity under His sovereign control, and when He shuts a man in, no one can open the door. People must lie as prisoners until He is pleased to release them. This is the very expression Job uses in such a case: “Behold, He breaks down, and none can build up; He shuts a man in, and there can be no opening” (Job 12:14). And so he continues through the end of that chapter, magnifying God’s irresistible power.

Upon this very truth, observe what wise counsel Elihu gives in Job 34:29–31. God alone has the prerogative to “give quietness,” and when He does, no one can cause trouble. But if He hides His face, who can behold Him? Whether this be done to one man or to an entire nation, they cannot stop it. All the nations together cannot prevent affliction if God has purposed it, nor can they harm a people if He ordains peace. If He appoints an oppressor or a hypocrite to rule as a snare to them, they cannot overthrow him until God wills to remove him (verse 30). What, then, should our response be? Surely, it is fitting to say, “I have borne chastisement; I will not offend again.” There is no other way but to kiss the rod and say, “I will do so no more.” And even if a man does not see the reason why God should

chastise him and is tempted to murmur or complain, yet let him believe there is a reason, and pray as in verse 32: “That which I see not, teach Thou me; if I have done iniquity, I will do so no more.”

Let us adopt the same spirit of submission and humility that Jeremiah expresses, or rather, the church through his voice, in Jeremiah 10:22–24. When news came of a coming invasion from the north—a great calamity to make the cities desolate—what is their response? Verse 23: “O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man that walks to direct his steps.” Whether he shall walk in peace or in danger is not within his own power to determine. He does not know where to flee for safety. His life and all that he has are in God’s hands. Therefore the plea in verse 24: “O Lord, correct me, but with judgment.” The church is willing, in such a case, to accept chastisement, but humbly entreats God to deal gently. And so must we.

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