

# With Heart and Soul

*Rev. David VanBrugge*

Scripture reading: Deuteronomy 30

God knows you and sees you. He sees not only the things you do, but He sees straight into your heart.

God reminds us of that several times in Deuteronomy 30. Verse 10 says, “If thou shalt hearken unto the voice of the LORD thy God, to keep his commandments and his statutes which are written in this book of the law, and if thou turn unto the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul.” Much could be said about Deuteronomy 30, about God’s promises and how they are inseparable from obedience. However, what does it mean to turn to God *with heart and soul*? By considering six aspects of what it means to live with heart and soul, we will understand the level of relationship God is calling us to, and realize that only in obedience to Him will we find true blessing.

## **1. The Definition**

I don’t know about you, but growing up I was often confused by the biblical language of heart. Often when we think about the heart, we think of the organ that is beating in our chest, pumping blood. We know that the heart sometimes means more than that, because depictions of romance constantly use the heart as a symbol.

I was also confused about what the soul was. If your soul is the hidden, abstract, undying part of you, how could you love the Lord with your soul now? How could I know I was saved, if my soul was still thirsting for God?

We need to begin by putting away cultural and personal definitions of what these words mean, and try to understand what the Old Testament means when it speaks of “heart and soul.” So the first question we want to ask is: What does “with heart and soul” mean?

Let’s begin by taking each word individually and coming up with a biblical definition.

Heart is mentioned more than eight hundred times in the Bible. A very few times it does refer to the organ inside of someone’s chest, and a few more times it refers to a place of hiding or a place deep or far away, like the heart of the deep (oceans). But most often, including in Deuteronomy, heart is the center of one’s emotional, intellectual, or moral being. What we think of our brain doing, the Bible describes as coming from the heart. It understands, discerns, and gives insight. The heart thinks, remembers, reflects, and meditates. It is the most frequent word used for one’s personality.

For example, in Judges 16, Delilah complains Samson’s heart is not with her, that his emotions and will are far from her. In 2 Samuel 15:6, Absalom gains the loyalty of people by stealing their hearts—their emotions and will.

We must also consider the soul with the same biblical understanding. Before we do that, understand that the theological definition of “soul” is the undying, non-physical aspect of man. But we need to understand that when the Old Testament speaks of soul, it generally is not using that definition.

In the Old Testament, the word translated as soul (*nephesh*) is used more than 750 times. In the Old Testament, animals have *nephesh*, God has *nephesh*, *nephesh* die. So, as we come to many verses that use the word “soul,” it is not about the immortal soul, but about the breath, or the principle of life that God has given. And in that sense, the soul referred to in Deuteronomy is your

essence, the whole you. For example, in Genesis 27, Esau prepares venison for Isaac, that Isaac's soul would bless Esau. In Numbers, after eating manna, the soul of the people—their inner selves—becomes discouraged. Their souls begin to loathe that bread. In 1 Samuel 1:15, Hannah says she poured out her soul before the Lord—her desires, her life.

So, as far as the Old Testament describes people, it does not have the same contrast of body and soul that we think of today. It always describes people in terms of their inner self and outer appearance. And both the heart and soul are inner-self words. And yet, you cannot think of them as two separate things that are inside your body. No, you are a person, described as having heart and soul. You *are* heart and soul rather than just having a heart and soul attached to your physical body.

## **2. The Purpose**

The second question we want to ask is: Why do you have a heart and soul? Let me ask it a different way. Why are you here, and why have you been given a mind, a personality, energy? God has made you a complete, integrated person. He asks that you would give that heart and soul to Him.

His command is that you turn to Him with heart and soul! This command comes as a summary of the law: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: and thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might” (Deut. 6:4–5). That is the essence of God's law.

The reason you have a heart and soul is to be singularly devoted to God. You have a heart and soul so that you can obey the Lord with your heart and soul, so that you can love the Lord with heart and soul, so that you can turn to Him with heart and soul. “And now, Israel, what doth the LORD thy God require of thee, but to fear the

LORD thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the LORD thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul?" (Deut. 10:12).

As the people of Israel are about to go into the promised land, God makes clear to them the level of commitment that will be required. If they want to be blessed, they cannot just stand on the sidelines. God does not just want spectators or even benchwarmers. He wants active lives for His glory. "My son, give me thine heart" (Prov. 23:26). Give Him your whole life!

Despite this clear command, if you scan all the Scriptures regarding heart and soul, you will see there is something in the way.

### **3. The Impossibility**

By nature we cannot love God with our heart and soul. Because of the sin in the garden of Eden, we love ourselves. We live for ourselves. It only took until Genesis 6 for the conclusion to be: "And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (v. 5). "The imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Gen. 8:21). The wise preacher's conclusion is this: "God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions" (Eccl. 7:29).

As you are born on earth your soul is spiritually dead; your heart is spiritually evil. Do you realize how all-encompassing that is? This is not just about one organ within you. None of these passages say that if you just cut out the one corrupted pound of flesh you will be good. No, the whole person, the inward person, the center of who you are, is unable to turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and soul. It seeks out its own inventions.

The natural heart pours out rebellion: "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God" (Ps. 14:1).

The natural heart pours out selfishness: “He did evil, because he prepared not his heart to seek the LORD” (2 Chron. 12:14). Apart from grace, the natural heart will pursue rebellion and selfishness forever. Solomon’s conclusion in Ecclesiastes is: “The heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead” (Eccl. 9:3).

We almost instinctively know that, so we try to convince ourselves otherwise. We hear, believe, and maybe even teach it. We may say things like, “Man is naturally good; it is his environment that makes him do such bad things.” Or, “He was such a good person. He loved his grandkids so much.”

Even in church, we try to cover up our evil insides with externals. Instead of turning to the Lord with all our heart, all our being, all our energy, we change what people see about us; we hide our past, wear different clothes, mutter prayers and thanksgivings, come to church and think religious things one day a week, hoping God will be merciful.

But if that is your life, instead of looking at you and seeing you serve Him with all of your heart and all of your soul, God sees you hiding from Him, ignoring Him, diminishing Him. He sees you making excuses about how busy you are, or how tired you are, or how everybody else has it wrong. He sees you trying to cover that up with some pious words. We cannot serve God with just a fraction of ourselves.

We cannot turn to the Lord through mere memorization. Today people talk about learning by heart, and they mean rote memory. But learning by heart according to the Bible is not like memorizing the multiplication tables. Learning by heart should be learning with energy, desire, and purpose.

When will we admit we are not serving God with all of our heart, all of our soul? When will unbelievers admit they do not seek God with all of their heart? When will backsliders admit they do not love God with all of their heart?

Every time Israel wanders, they are reminded they must love the Lord with their heart. For example, Joshua reminds the people, “But take diligent heed to do the commandment and the law, which Moses the servant of the LORD charged you, to love the LORD your God, and to walk in all his ways, and to keep his commandments, and to cleave unto him, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul” (Josh. 22:5).

Samuel reminds them, “Serve the LORD with all your heart, and turn ye not aside” (1 Sam. 12:20–21).

Solomon says, “Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding” (Prov. 3:5).

And the prophet Joel reminds the people, “Therefore also now, saith the LORD, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting” (Joel 2:12).

Whether you are lost or backsliding, the question must become: How can I turn to the Lord with heart and soul?

Scripture gives us the answer. Moses tells the people, “This commandment which I command thee this day, it is not hidden from thee, neither is it far off” (Deut. 30:11). It is right here, simple to understand. You know what it is to give your energy, your zeal, yourself to something.

And don’t begin with the excuses: “The word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it” (v. 14). You know what is right—why are you not doing it?

God’s command is this: “Turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God: for he is gracious

and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness” (Joel 2:12–13). Repent with your whole being. Rend your hearts, not your garments!

This shows us again it is not about external things. Will you humble your heart, your mind, your will, your being, to say, “Lord, I am proud—humble me. Lord, I am living for myself—stop me. Lord, I am making excuses—teach me. Lord, I want to serve Thee with my whole heart—help me”?

This is the promise to those who seek: “And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart. And I will be found of you, saith the LORD” (Jer. 29:13–14). There is hope for those who turn with all their heart.

#### **4. The Hope**

The hope that people have is not in themselves, for their hearts are evil. The hope is in the One who reminds the Pharisees: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment” (Matt. 22:37–38).

When Christ came, He humbled himself, took on the form of a man, and lived perfectly for thirty-three years. He accomplished redemption by keeping that commandment: He loved the Lord His God with all of His heart, soul, and mind. His energy, His will, His mind, His zeal were all in, and were never against His Father’s.

It is only when you are united to Him by faith that you can have any hope of loving the Lord as you are required. Realize the change of heart that happens then. The Westminster Larger Catechism Question and Answer 67 puts it this way:

God savingly enlightens their minds, renewing and powerfully determining their wills, so as they (although in themselves dead in sin) are hereby

made willing and able freely to answer his call, and to accept and embrace the grace offered and conveyed therein.

It is God who gives the new heart. As the prophet Ezekiel says: “Then [after being brought back from idolatry] will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them.... Ye shall be my people, and I will be your God” (Ezek. 36:25–28).

This new heart is the transformation of the whole inner man—a new mind, new emotions, and new desires. The new spirit is the new principle of life to animate one’s personality. And that is to lead to new, holy living.

Imagine a hunter in the woods. To be continually successful, his whole person needs to be engaged. He cannot just march through the woods, thinking that as soon as he sees a deer it is going to go down. He prepares and approaches with care, his senses are aware, he shoots with precision. Why would you call yourself a hunter if you do not approach your task with intention?

## **5. The Action**

So what is it to live with “heart and soul”? To live with heart and soul begins with realizing how connected your inner person is with your actions. To live with heart and soul is to live totally and wholly for God, completely and honestly. Then living with heart and soul reflects a love of God.

That doesn’t mean some people don’t try to live with a shell around them that is not reflective of their heart. We



all do that sometimes, especially if we are uncomfortable. But God sees past all of that into our hearts.

Yet other people try to splinter their heart up, giving parts of it to God and things of the church, and other parts to themselves and things of material pleasures, and other parts to the world.

But if we really are to live with heart and soul, there should be no acceptable ratio other than 100 to 0. Every ounce of you ought to be living for God's glory.

We live with heart and soul when we give our minds to God, when we study so that we would know Him and His world more, when we worship Him with greater awe.

We live with heart and soul when we allow our emotions to be impacted by spiritual truth, when we admit our desire and need of God, when we admit the joy and peace of knowing God, when we bask in His promises and allow them to overwhelm us, when we trust the providence of God in spite of the trial.

We live with heart and soul when we realize every part of our lives is subject to His authority; not just Sunday, but Monday through Saturday as well; not just church, but also our career performance, our marriages, our parenting, our recreation; not just our tithes, but all of our financial, material, and emotional resources and energy.

We live with heart and soul when we desire to serve the kingdom of God, to live under His authority, to the benefit of our neighbors.

We live with heart and soul when we follow through on serving others, when we follow through the Spirit's prompting, when we follow biblical instruction.

We live with heart and soul when we worship with energy, with honest, sincere prayers, with songs that reflect the message of God, with confession and dependence—every day.

We live with heart and soul when we don't try to hide who God has made us, when we realize and use what He has given us, when we don't try to be two different people, and by feeding our minds good and true and lovely things.

If you really want to be a musician, you cannot sing just quarter notes half-heartedly. That is not music, nor musicianship. Real musicians need to think music, imagine music. They need to be able to sing fast notes, as well as really long, slow notes. They need the emotional involvement to be able to sing with zeal when singing loudly or softly. They need to make it real, not half-hearted or sloppy or careless. They need to put their whole being into making music.

Christians are not called just to know what Christianity is; they are called to live to God from within, from the heart. To live this way does not require a certain age, or a certain education, or a certain experience. It is possible for both young and old, for people from every walk of life.

Believers who live with heart and soul are a warning to others. "If thine heart turn away, so that thou wilt not hear, but shalt be drawn away, and worship other gods, and serve them; I denounce unto you this day, that ye shall surely perish, and that ye shall not prolong your days upon the land" (Deut. 30:17-18).

When you consider how God asks for total commitment, it is no wonder the church in North America asks for blessing. Our commitment has often been so half-hearted, so hypocritical.

Do you really love God? Do you really want to live a holy life for Him? "Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience.... Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering" (Heb. 10:22-23). Because to those who honor Him by living with heart and soul, God promises rich reward.

## 6. The Results

Deuteronomy makes the results and rewards clear. “I command thee this day to love the LORD thy God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commandments and his statutes and his judgments, that thou mayest live and multiply: and the LORD thy God shall bless thee in the land whither thou goest to possess it” (Deut. 30:16).

Or, as the psalmist puts it, “Delight thyself also in the LORD: and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart” (Ps. 37:4).

If we want to experience blessing as families, as churches, as nations, we need to learn this very basic lesson. We are to turn to God, to serve God, and to love God, with heart and soul.

Those who do turn to the Lord with their lives, their emotions, their wills, their understanding, and their personality receive the blessings: “Choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live: that thou mayest love the LORD thy God, and that thou mayest obey his voice, and that thou mayest cleave unto him: for he is thy life, and the length of thy days: that thou mayest dwell in the land” (Deut. 30:19–20).

It is those who learn by the Holy Spirit to live for God with heart and soul who will dwell in the land of eternal promise and truly and completely live. Don’t waste your heart; don’t waste your soul. “For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Matt. 16:26). Hear Jesus’s words: “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (v. 24).



## Contrasting Reactions to the Gospel

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Scripture reading: Acts 5:12–42

Newton's third law of motion states, "For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction." You might wonder what physics has to do with the gospel. It is this principle of action and reaction that runs through the Book of Acts as the gospel continues to be preached boldly, accompanied by signs and wonders. As Christ continues to build His church by the ministry of the Holy Spirit through the apostles, the kingdom of darkness unleashes its fury against the growing church. Coming on the heels of Ananias and Sapphira, Luke records three contrasting movements as it were of this action-reaction as the gospel continues to increase.

The first contrast that arises from our passage (vv. 12–16) is that of *crippling fear and vibrant faith*. In response to the sin and judgment upon Ananias and Sapphira we read that great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things. This fear has been described as an indefinable mixture of reverence, fear, pleasure, joy, awe, and love which overwhelms us when we realize who God is and what He has done for us. But it seems that another type of fear was manifesting itself as the apostles preached and worked their signs and wonders through the power of the Holy Spirit, and as the church gathered in unity and the fear of God. Verse 13 records for us this human fear, "And of the rest durst no man

[no man dared] join himself to them: but the people magnified them.”

Commentators struggle with what to do with this verse, but a straightforward reading of the text tells us that this is a reaction that comes not from the believers but from unbelievers. There were spiritual impressions being made upon their hearts and minds with what they witnessed. But there was this fear that held them back—an unhealthy fear of God’s judgment, and a fear of committing all to follow Christ. They were fence-sitters, you might say. They were impressed with what they witnessed and even magnified the apostles, but because of the judgment of God that they had witnessed, they held back. Their unhealthy fear of God and their fear of commitment crippled them spiritually. Perhaps they even moved with the crowds in the Temple identifying with the church, but after what had happened they hung back and did not dare to make the commitment for fear of what God or the temple guard might do to them. They did not want to end up like Ananias and Sapphira, so they thought it better to hang on to sin and hang back than be revealed to be hypocrites like they were.

There was not just this crippling fear, but there was also vibrant faith found in the church immediately after the death of Ananias and Sapphira. There is this principle at work—addition by subtraction. That sounds counterintuitive doesn’t it? How does something grow by subtracting from it? Because of the discipline that took place inside the church, the fear of God came upon all the church, and this fear of God in turn led to the addition of believers to the church and acted as a self-disciplining tool to keep the half-hearted and non-committed out of the church. And how do we know that the church was growing even though many were crippled by unhealthy fear? Because verse 14 tells us, “And believers were the

more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women.” In spite of the devil’s attempts to keep people half-hearted and non-committal about joining with Christ and His church, the Spirit of God is far more powerful in adding to the church. His methods are counterintuitive. He uses faithful discipline and faithful preaching of the Word of God to build His church. This is not something we immediately call a good strategy for church growth. But it is this that the Holy Spirit uses to add multitudes to the church and to keep out those who are half-hearted and non-committal to Christ.

But there is more going on in terms of vibrant faith. In verses 15 and 16 we read of the sick, both rich and poor, and those crowded with unclean spirits who were being healed as they were brought to the apostles. What these verses indicate is that there were multitudes of such people lying in the street, hoping for Peter’s shadow to touch them for healing. What is this but a similar picture to the faith of the woman with the issue of blood who simply wanted to touch the hem of Jesus’s garment for healing? And the power was not in Peter’s shadow. Here we have language that points sinners to the power of the Holy Spirit. The word here for “overshadow” is also used by Luke in his Gospel when the angel comes to Mary and says, “The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee” (Luke 1:35). It is also used of the glory cloud that descended upon the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration. This is nothing else but the power and presence of God the Holy Spirit moving along the streets of Jerusalem. It is here where the hope for healing of these sinners lay. (The original text actually has the emphasis simply on “the shadow,” and doesn’t necessarily identify it as Peter’s.) And we see that the Spirit draws others from beyond Jerusalem as we read in verse 16. This is not about Peter, but about the

Spirit working vibrant faith in the hearts of the sick and those possessed with unclean spirits as He draws these hearts and lives to Christ.

What do we learn from this contrast? The Holy Spirit is at work in the church, both in keeping His church pure from those who are non-committal and afraid of joining themselves to Christ, but also in building His church by working vibrant faith in the hearts of those who believe that a mere touch of the Spirit's power can make them whole. Where do you fit today in this contrast?

Do you face crippling fear today? Do you fear God's judgment because of sin and so continue in sin because that is better than ending like Ananias and Sapphira? Or is your fear motivated by what man might do and say if you would wholeheartedly bow to the claims of the Lord Jesus Christ on your life? Are you attracted to the preaching of the gospel and of Christ, but lack firm commitment because you do not want to die to your sin and yourself? Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, wrote, "When Jesus calls a man, he bids him come and die." It is that cost that keeps you out of the kingdom because you are not willing to surrender your entire heart and life to Christ. And you must not think that you do this willy-nilly without the drawing power of God. There was something in the preaching of the apostles that drew these people. And maybe you say, "There's no hope for me. I am hopelessly entangled in my fears." There is the other side of the contrast—the Spirit at work. Place yourself under His overshadowing grace—that is your responsibility under the gospel. He willingly overshadows and powerfully heals—that is His power and sovereignty. For the lukewarm, for the backslider, for the one who seeks the Spirit afresh, His overshadowing power is still the same being duplicated in lives today just as then. Oh,



that He would work again with such power and grace in our assembly!

The second contrasting reaction is *jealous anger and bold witness*. In verses 17–33 we see this contrast. The apostles have been preaching and doing miracles with great power. And as the Sadducees witness this, they are provoked to jealousy. When Scripture says in verse 17 that they were filled with “indignation,” it means “jealousy.” They wanted the power and the approval and following of the people that the apostles had. Their jealousy led them to want to silence the message and mute the power of the gospel. They had the apostles thrown into prison. They are careful not to rouse the anger of the crowds as the authorities come to detain the apostles for the second time after they are set free by the angel. It is a jealous anger that abuses their legitimate authority as religious leaders of the Jewish people. In verses 21–28 we see them abusing their authority by coming to retake the apostles. They remind the apostles of their command not to preach and teach the name of Jesus. They are afraid of the far-reaching effects of the apostle’s doctrine and the miracle of the healing of the lame man at the Beautiful Gate. They give the apostles a not-so-subtle reminder that they are the ones in charge. And in the final analysis as Peter preaches Christ both as a Prince and a Savior, their jealous anger turns to murderous rage. Their hearts are sawn asunder (cut to the core), and they want to do with the apostles what they did with Jesus—slay them.

In contrast to this jealous anger the bold witness of the apostles comes through. It is a witness that is aided by heavenly intervention. As the chief priests and Sadducees throw them into prison, the angel of the Lord comes and sets them free. Ironically, the Sadducees do not believe in angels and yet the Lord of the church sends angels to

free the apostles to continue witnessing. Their witness is reinforced through a heavenly command in verse 20, “Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life.” The angel does not say they are free to go home. No, they are free to proclaim the words of this life in Jesus to the people. This is the constraining command for all believers, to proclaim the words of this life in Jesus.

And the apostles do exactly that—long before the authorities are awake. They obey in all faithfulness without question as to the dangers they might face. And Peter once again stands before the council and speaks with Spirit-worked boldness the gospel of Jesus Christ. He tells them of their commitment to obey Christ over man, that a mere man cannot silence them and bar them from preaching the gospel. God is the supreme authority of the believer. No man can command us to stop speaking the gospel.

And as Peter preaches, he focuses on Christ as the heart of the gospel message even to these angry and jealous rulers. He finds common ground with these rulers, citing “the God of our fathers.” The gospel that Peter brings is nothing new. This God of our fathers has always been at work and especially so in the raising of Jesus from the dead. He has done this in faithfulness to His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is the God of *our* fathers. Even as Peter points out this common ground, he implicitly calls them to repentance because their view of God is different from what Peter will preach next.

Common ground gives way to presenting gospel truths that run counter to everything the Sadducees teach. They do not believe the resurrection and yet Peter does not hesitate to say, “The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree” (v. 30). The common theme reemerges in Peter’s message. There is this note of conviction that rings loudly. The evidence is

undeniable—Jesus is alive by the power of God, and you have blood on your hands. The goads are sharp and they saw through the hearts of these men.

Peter continues to proclaim the gospel, moving from the goads of conviction to the good news, this Jesus whom God has exalted with His right hand to be a Prince and a Savior. There is the double truth that the rulers cannot deny in the face of the proclamation of the gospel. Jesus is the Supreme Ruler (in contrast to their power and authority) and He is the Supreme Savior. And He is exalted with these titles with one purpose: to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. Here is tremendous hope for these men who deny Christ and who persecute His followers. Christ in all His fullness and power as a Prince will lead men in submission to Him, from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light and truth. Christ in all His mercy and grace as the Savior will grant men the forgiveness and removal of all their sins. This is the message the rulers needed. This is the message that you and I need.

This message is supported by a twofold witness. Peter says in verse 32, “And we are his witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him.” Peter is doing several things in his message. He says that this is irrefutable truth because the gospel has a dual witness—the apostolic message and the manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit in wonders and miracles. The rulers are striving against the very truth of God established by two witnesses. They are striving against God Himself. And then Peter makes a distinction—the Holy Spirit is given to those who obey God. He comes full circle to how he began his message. They obey God and so they have the Holy Spirit. The rulers are actually found to be disobeying God by rejecting Christ and the gospel and so lack the Holy Spirit. Could it be that you lack the Holy Spirit because you fail to obey

Him? You fail to obey Him as an unbeliever by denying His message of Christ. You fail to obey Him as a believer by doing what He tells you to do in His Word, by not living in compliance to His revealed will.

Which side of this second contrast are you on today? There are two responses to the gospel as evidenced in this contrast. One is anger and hostility because you don't want to submit to the claims of the gospel. The other is of Spirit-worked boldness because you seek to obey the command of Christ to repent and believe and then also bring the gospel to others no matter the cost.

The final contrast, that of *pragmatic reasoning and joyful suffering*, is interesting and perhaps less clear than the other contrasts. Luke now introduces us to Gamaliel, a man respected by the people, as verse 34 tells. He is a Pharisee, a doctor of the law. He commands that the disciples be put outside so the council can deliberate. And what he says next has received mixed reviews. Some think that his counsel to the Sanhedrin is wise counsel and applicable to the church today. Others think that his counsel is misleading and simply pragmatic. Though there is wisdom embedded in his counsel and the Holy Spirit uses it to protect His church from further persecution, yet it is largely pragmatic counsel.

It is driven by religious and political expediency. Gamaliel was a Pharisee and there was long-standing religious and political conflict with the Sadducees because of the resurrection and political involvement with the Roman authorities. The Pharisees believed in the resurrection and the Sadducees did not. The Pharisees did not want to work with the Romans while the Sadducees were happy to do so for their own promotion and power. And so as Gamaliel stands up, he expertly guides the conversation in such a way that temporarily trims the power of the

Sadducees. He calls them to examine what they are about to do with the apostles. He knows there is something afoot. He has seen what happened to Jesus and now what is happening to His apostles. Gamaliel is a smart man.

His counsel is reinforced through two negative examples in verses 36–37. Remember Theudas, this Messianic figure? He was killed and his four hundred followers were quickly dispersed. Oh, and do you remember Judas of Galilee, another supposed Messianic figure? He also died and his movement was dispersed rather quickly too. If history is a good indicator then this is what will happen to these men as well. Recall that Jesus was crucified, He who claimed to be Messiah. And here's his pious conclusion: If this movement is not of God, it will end the same way as Theudas and Judas. But if it is of God then it will continue and anything you will do will be fruitless, and you don't want to be found fighting against God, do you? We should leave them alone. There is a tremendous amount of truth to this reasoning, but it is a pragmatic way of getting out of a tough situation and clipping the wings of the Sadducees in the process. Gamaliel is not motivated by love for or the right fear of God, or for the apostles or for the cause of Christ.

Gamaliel's reasoning sounds good in the ears of the council, but not good enough to let the apostles go without their backs being ripped to shreds by a thorough whipping. Gamaliel does nothing to stop this and the consensus of the council is that the apostles should stop preaching the name of Jesus.

The other part of the contrast is joyful suffering. As the apostles leave the council, you would think they would rush home and take a few days off to nurse their wounds and regroup to think up a new strategy. But they don't do that. They leave the council "rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name." This, too,

is the work of the Spirit in the lives of the apostles—true spiritual joy in the midst of difficult circumstances. The focus of their joy is not on what they have received, but in how God views them. God found them worthy to suffer shame for His name. We often speak of the possibility of persecution, but do we take the same perspective? Do we fear persecution and shame, or do we embrace them? This joy is not produced by the apostles themselves, but is evidence again of the Holy Spirit who works in their hearts and lives. Their focus in the midst of suffering is on the name of Jesus which brings joy to their hearts and colors their horizons with light instead of darkness. This Spirit-induced joy and focus on the name of Jesus is what sets them apart from Theudas and Judas because Jesus is the true Messiah; while they will be dispersed, their dispersion is not the end of a movement, but the very progression of the gospel.

The fruit of their joyful suffering is faithfulness in proclaiming the gospel. They go right back to the temple and pick up their daily routine. With the voice of the angel still ringing in their ears, they return to the temple to speak the words of this life. They obey God rather than man and do not fear the rulers, as Luke records: “They ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ.” Their experiences only strengthen and embolden their witness. Believers, is that true of you? Do your experiences of intense suffering, persecution, or internal strife with sin strengthen you for further boldness and proclamation?

In light of these three contrasting reactions, what is your reaction to the gospel? Where does this sermon leave you?

## **Seals Five and Six: The Persecuted Church**

*Dr. Joel R. Beeke*

Scripture reading: Revelation 6:9–17

No one likes to be persecuted. Yet Scripture tells us that is part of the territory that we inherit if we are godly Christians, for all who live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution (2 Tim. 3:12).

How do you handle persecution? How should you handle persecution? How should you support Christians who are persecuted around the world today much more severely than you have ever faced?

And what about future persecution? As society becomes increasingly intolerant to Christianity even as it boasts of its tolerance, would you be prepared to go to jail for Christ's sake? We can find help in addressing these questions and many more from the second part of Revelation 6.

The message of the second cycle of visions of Revelation (chapters 4–7) is that behind this world and everything in it, there is a sovereign God who works not according to whim or caprice, but according to His purpose. He carries out that plan in every detail through the crucified and risen Savior, Jesus Christ, the Lamb that was slain.

In the first cycle of visions in the book of Revelation (chapters 1–3), the Lord gives John a vision of the church in the world and Christ's relationship to it. We see things on the surface, as it were. From chapter 4 onward, John is shown what is going on behind those scenes. He sees things from God's perspective. He sees a throne, a book,

and the One who alone is able to open the book and carry out the plan that is written inside it.

Revelation 6 and 7 detail the things that typically happen to us in this world before the Lord's return and what it means to be a Christian. The opening of the seven seals of the book reveals God's purposes for Christians in this world. These seven seals are not to be regarded as seven successive phases of history, but as the complete picture of what God has in store for Christians in this world.

The previous chapter addresses the opening of the first four of the seven seals, which launched the four horsemen of the apocalypse, bringing war, famine, and plague. The red horse, black horse, and pale horse come to our doors as well. We live under the same kind of pressures as the Christians of John's day. But the message of the first four seals is that if we are in Christ, we shall be victorious over these difficulties. All the terrible forces and influences that bear down on us like a stampede of horses will not conquer us, but will be conquered by us in the power of Christ.

The opening of the fifth and sixth seals also brings destruction. Wherever Christ comes in the power of His gospel, the sword is bound to follow. There is antagonism, opposition, hostility, and persecution.

Let us study the second cycle of visions in Revelation under the following headings: the outrage of persecution (Rev. 6:9); the outcry of the persecuted (v. 10); and the outcome of persecution (vv. 11–17).

### **The Outrage of Persecution**

When the fifth seal is opened (v. 9), John sees the souls of believers who were slain (butchered) for the Word of God and their testimony. This seal describes something that has happened throughout the ages to God's people, wherever they have been.



Genesis 3 records the first preaching of the gospel in the Garden of Eden by God Himself. He came looking for Adam, who was hiding because he had disobeyed God by eating the forbidden fruit. God asked, "Where art thou?" (v. 9). Then God preached the gospel to Adam and Eve, saying to the serpent, "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" (v. 15). That is the gospel. This promise foreshadowed what would happen on Calvary. Christ, as the seed of the woman, goes forth "conquering, and to conquer" (Rev. 6:2) the serpent.

But the sword is also involved. For God said, "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed." Hostility, hatred, antagonism, persecution, and murder follow in the wake of this enmity. Genesis 4 tells us that Cain killed his brother Abel, and Abel's blood cried out to God for vengeance. Likewise, being a Christian in this world means confronting the sword of this world and its anti-Christian agenda.

Jesus says in Matthew 10:34–39: "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me. He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it."

Jesus is saying that true Christians will suffer persecution. All Christians must take up their crosses. They must lose their lives for Christ's sake. That may be literally true, as in physical martyrdom in some countries, but it is also true metaphorically and spiritually. To

be a Christian in this world means to lose one's life for Christ's sake. It might happen in the context of an Islamic or North Korean prison, but it might also happen in a believer's own home. Mother will rise against daughter; brother against brother. This is part of what it means to be a Christian. It means suffering for Christ's sake.

Daniel certainly suffered for his faith. Though he knew he might be thrown to the lions if he didn't stop praying to his God in Babylon, Daniel did not shrink from doing his duty. He trusted in God even in the lions' den. And God preserved him. According to Daniel 6:23, "Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no manner of hurt was found upon him, because he believed in his God."

The apostle Paul viewed persecution as a constant reminder of his weakness and utter dependence on God (2 Cor. 12:9–10). The heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 learned through persecution that their focus must be on the eternal rather than the temporal (vv. 1–3). They were to trust the Lord in the midst of suffering, and they were to desire a "better country" (v. 16).

Many Christians have been martyred for their faith throughout church history. Consider the believers who were tortured to death under Roman emperors. Remember the Reformers who were driven from place to place, whipped, and then burned alive or beheaded. Today, more than fifty thousand churches in 115 countries hold a special service each year commemorating the worldwide persecution of Christians. We should not ignore the plight of persecuted Christians around the world.

Millions who profess the name of Christ around the world meet secretly for worship in their homes, because they are oppressed by hostile governments. If their allegiance to Christ is discovered, their homes are attacked and burned. The women and children are sold into slavery. Husbands and wives, parents and children, have their

throats slit in front of each other for no other reason than refusing to deny the name of Christ. Hundreds of thousands are brutally tortured and brainwashed in an effort to force them to recant their faith. They spend years in solitary prison cells and hard labor camps. They fear daily for their lives.

Tens of thousands of believers are martyred each year for their faith. More Christians have been martyred for their faith in the past century than in the previous nineteen centuries combined.<sup>1</sup> Millions more face discrimination in their daily lives. Their access to education is restricted. They are forced to take the most menial jobs. They are excluded from the political and judicial processes of their societies. They are ridiculed and despised.

This is still relatively hard to imagine here in the United States. We do face increasing opposition for our Christian beliefs, but not the intense persecution that millions of others suffer for the faith. The law of our land still allows us the freedom to worship. It is hard to imagine living in constant fear that your wife, husband, or neighbor might betray you. It is hard to imagine having no legal recourse, no hope for justice, and nowhere to hide. But that is precisely what millions of Christians face in other parts of the world.

When the fifth seal is opened, John sees the souls of these martyrs under the altar. This refers to the altar of burnt offerings, as described in Leviticus. When an animal was sacrificed on the altar of burnt offerings, the blood would be caught in a basin under the altar. In his vision, John doesn't see the blood of animals under the altar, but rather the souls of men, women, and children

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1. "Report: Christian Dies for Beliefs Every 5 Minutes" (<http://www.wnd.com/2011/06/311393/#!>—accessed June 21, 2016).

who have lost their lives for Christ's sake. He sees those who did not count their lives dear for Christ's sake.

In John's vision, these saints are not being slain, but have already passed through persecution and are now in heaven, waiting for their full glory. One purpose of this seal is to show that the martyrdom of the saints is controlled by Christ, for only when Christ opens the seal do the believers who were slain cry out for vengeance.

Being a Christian means laying down your life for Christ. It requires total commitment and consecration. It means you live your life as under the altar for Christ's sake. The Christian life is marked by consecration and sacrifice.

Paul describes this life in Romans 12: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service" (v. 1). He is saying: "Think of what Christ has done for you. He has poured out His soul unto death for you. Now the only reasonable thing you can do is to pour out your life as a thank offering to Him."

In 2 Corinthians 5:14–15, Paul explains what he means by reasonable service. He says, "The love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: and that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again." When he says, "The love of Christ constrains us," he is not talking about some sentimental feeling, but rather the love of Christ as demonstrated on the cross. Paul is saying, as it were: "When I consider Calvary, I think that if He did that for me, I can no longer live for myself. My life is not my own, but I have to put it under His altar. I have to give it up to Him and live for Him. That is the reasonable thing to do."

How much of your life is under the altar? How much have you sacrificed for your faith? Do you offer the Lord only leftovers or things you no longer want? A man was once given two calves. He said, “I will give one of them to the Lord.” One of the calves grew sick and died, so the farmer declared, “The Lord’s calf has died.” How easy it must have been, under the old covenant, to come to the Lord’s house with a diseased, weak, or dying animal from the flock. But that was sacrilege. God’s people were to bring Him the best of the flock and the firstfruits of their fields.

Likewise, we are to give God our best. If Christ died upon the cross, bearing God’s wrath for our sin, then it is sacrilege for us to hold anything back from Him. And the scandal is that people who are living not for themselves but for Christ—those whose lives are a fragrant offering to God—are the very people hounded, persecuted, and butchered by the world.

### **The Outcry of the Persecuted**

In Revelation 6:10, we read, “And they cried out with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?” To understand this verse, we must remember that it is part of a vision, not a literal picture of heaven. There is no literal altar in heaven, just as there is no literal throne. Also, there is no unhappiness, frustration, impatience, suffering, or thirst for revenge in heaven. No matter how we understand this outcry from beneath the altar, we are not to understand it as a thirst for revenge. It is clear from verse 11 that the glorified saints here are at rest and perfectly happy. The white robes they wear signify sinlessness, happiness, and acceptance with God.

So they do not cry out for revenge; rather, they pray for the vindication of God’s holy name as “Judge of the earth”

(Ps. 94:2). This outcry of the martyrs is similar to the prayers in the imprecatory psalms, the “cursing psalms,” in the Old Testament.

The wrong that was done to these slaughtered saints cries out to be put right. It reminds us of Abel’s blood in the ground crying out to God (Gen. 4:10). We are not to understand that literally, because blood is not able to cry out. Neither are we to understand it in a sinister sort of way. The slain Abel did not become some kind of malignant force, seeking to take revenge on Cain. No, Abel is in heaven with the spirits of just men made perfect, and he is perfectly happy. He did not ask for revenge. But what happened to Abel did not go unnoticed. It was dealt with; it was put right.

The same outcome is in view in this outcry of the souls under the altar. These glorified saints are not thirsting for mere personal revenge. They are yearning for God’s name to be vindicated and for His righteousness to be upheld.

Do you yearn for the vindication of God’s holy name? Can you say with the psalmist in Psalm 119:127–128: “Therefore I love thy commandments above gold; yea, above fine gold. Therefore I esteem all thy precepts concerning all things to be right; and I hate every false way”? Stephen, the first Christian martyr, died praying, “Lord, lay not this sin to their charge” (Acts 7:60). There was no personal vindictiveness or thirst for revenge in those words. Yet what happened to Stephen and millions like him cannot go unpunished. If God is God, these crimes must be punished.

So we cry out: “LORD, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked triumph? How long shall they utter and speak hard things? and all the workers of iniquity boast themselves?” (Ps. 94:3–4).

Christians are persecuted for various reasons. One is because we say there is only one way to salvation, and

that is through Jesus Christ, God's Son. This exclusive claim does not fit the New Age movement. Neither does it accommodate radical Islam.

Christians are also persecuted because Satan wants to destroy the people of God. Peter thus advises believers, "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8). Satan aims to swallow or destroy all believers.

Christians are persecuted so that they might be strengthened in faith. James 1:3-4 says: "The trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing." God tests the faith of His people to develop spiritual endurance in their walk with Him.

Persecution is also the pathway to God's gracious reward. Paul says to Timothy near the end of his life, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing" (2 Tim. 4:7-8).

But most of all, persecution is the way to God's kingdom of glory. The day of judgment, which follows a time of intense persecution, will make clear to the church and the entire world that Christ is holy and true, and that He represents God in His perfect justice.

The saints under the altar do not cry in vain. Everything is done to comfort them and to reassure them that the day on which God will judge the world in righteousness is not far off.

First, "white robes were given unto every one of them" (Rev. 6:11a). Christians who suffer persecution will one day be adorned in white robes as they praise the triune God. White is a symbol of eternal justification by Christ's

blood and acquittal by the Father. It is also a symbol of sanctification, for in heaven the saints are perfectly holy before God in Christ. And it is a symbol of their victory. Just as the rider on the white horse symbolizes Christ's victory, so the white robes given to souls under the altar symbolize that they are more than conquerors in the battle of faith. In short, white is the symbol of their perfected, glorified nature (Heb. 12:23).

Second, "it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellow-servants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled" (Rev. 6:11b). This promise is meant to reassure these souls that they have not cried out in vain. They must rest until the gathering in of all the elect, and especially the offering up of all the martyrs of God, has been accomplished. God knows all who are His, and He knows the exact number of people who will die for the faith. His timetable is also absolutely perfect. He is never one step out of sync with His glorious purposes to gather, preserve, defend and glorify His Son's church.

But we are inclined to ask: "When is Christ coming? Why does He tarry?" Peter tells us we are mistaken if we think that Christ is tarrying or delaying; rather, He is ever at work, gathering and building His church: "The Lord is not slack concerning his promise...but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance." He urges us therefore to "account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation," that is, salvation for all those who are ordained to eternal life through Christ (2 Peter 3:9, 15).

We have a significant responsibility to alleviate the suffering of Christians who are being persecuted for their faith. God will keep them, but we must do what lies in our power to do here on earth. Here are some ways to help persecuted Christians today:



First, *be informed*. Write to religious liberty advocacy groups, requesting updated information on worldwide persecution.

Second, *empathize with those who are suffering for Christ*. As 1 Corinthians 12:26 says, “And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it.”

Third, *pray for them*. When Peter was imprisoned, the church gathered to pray without ceasing for his release (Acts 12:5). We, too, must pray for those who are languishing in horrible conditions. We should pray also for Christians in specific countries.

For example, Afghanistan has 48,000 mosques and not one church building. It has seventy unreached people groups who have never heard the gospel. Of the fifty languages spoken, the New Testament has been translated into only two, while none of the fifty has a complete Bible.

Likewise, Sudanese Christians are often forced to flee *jihad* or holy war into the snake-infested bush. Thousands struggle to survive by eating leaves off trees. Thousands more are killed by government-backed militias.

Fourth, *support them*. Speak of their faithfulness in the church. As 2 Thessalonians 1:4 says, “So that we ourselves glory in you in the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that ye endure.” Speak of their plight to your friends. Write letters to the media. Write to your leaders in Congress and urge them to act on behalf of persecuted Christians around the world. Tell them a double crime is being committed: the crime of persecution by Communist and Islamic governments against Christians, and the crime of free nations like ours that ignore such wrongdoing out of self-interest or political cowardice.

Fifth, *go to them*. If we can't visit suffering Christians, we can find ways to contact them. Follow the example of

Peter, who wrote to brethren scattered far and wide in his day (1 Peter 1:1). At the very least, contribute to mission groups that work among persecuted people.

When the lives of her people were in jeopardy, Esther was tempted to avoid the plight of her fellow Jews until Mordecai, her guardian, said to her: “Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king’s house, more than all the Jews. For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father’s house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (Esth. 4:13–14).

Today, we are citizens of the most powerful nation in the world. Like Esther, we feel safe in the United States, secure in the possession of freedom of speech, religion, and assembly. But like Esther, we must speak out against the extermination of our brethren in other countries, even if it costs us something to do that. If we don’t speak out, no one is safe. We may be next in line for intense persecution.

We must heed the words of Hebrews 13:3: “Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body.”

### **The Outcome of Persecution**

If evil triumphs, the world gets worse, and the wicked prosper, what is the point of being a Christian? The opening of the sixth seal (Rev. 6:12–17) answers that question. It tells us that the day of judgment is coming, when God in His almighty power will right every wrong with the world. He will shake the world and everyone in it. He will move mountains and islands, darken the sun, turn the moon into blood, and cause the stars to fall from heaven.

It will be a terrifying day for those who are not right with God.

The symbols of this passage, including falling stars, the cries of the wicked, the quaking earth, and the rolling up of the sky as a scroll are all descriptive of the tremendous and terrifying upheaval that is coming on that day that God has appointed to judge the world. The opening of the sixth seal tells us about the complete overthrow of all earthly powers, rulers, movements, and systems. Every power and authority in earth and in hell will be confounded. No words could more powerfully express the total hopelessness, ruin, and despair of all earthly powers and interest.

The key figure in all of this is the Lamb. Verses 15–17 describe a dislocated universe and a terrified human race. People of all classes—kings of the earth, great and rich men, mighty men, and bondmen and free men—hide themselves in the dens and caves of the mountains and cry out, “Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: for the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?”

These hardened men have been slaughtering Christians without a pang of guilt, yet now they cannot look into the face of the Lamb. They call upon the rocks to fall upon them and cover them. They call to the mountains to collapse upon them. They would rather perish in a nuclear holocaust than look into the face of Jesus Christ.

The wrath of the Lamb is indeed terrifying to those who have rejected Him and scorned His love. There is nothing more frightening than the face of perfect love turned against you. That is what the day of judgment is all about. When God judges the world, He will judge through the Man He has appointed, His Son, Jesus Christ. The

very Jesus who went to the cross to die for sinners will be in charge on the day of judgment.

Unbelievers will plead to be delivered from the wrath of the Lamb. How horrible it will be to be damned by Him who came to save sinners! This reminds us of Psalm 130, which asks, “If thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?” (v. 3). But the psalm also offers this comfort: “But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared” (v. 4).

For many, it will be too late to repent. Before, they felt no need to repent of sin and cling to a Savior to deliver them from the wrath to come, because they thought they could get through it on their own. Now they are calling for the mountains to fall upon them. Is the Lord pleading with you even now to come to the Lamb who died to save sinners? If He is, it is comforting to know He is still speaking to you. The next time you hear His voice, it may be too late. Then you will have to bear the wrath of the Lamb.

Ultimately, the only thing that matters is that we are on the right side of Jesus. The only thing that matters is that you and I are able to look Him in the face on the day of judgment, clothed in His white robes of righteousness. Ultimately, it does not matter what kind of a nest we have made for ourselves in the short time we are here on earth. The only thing that matters is how we are related to Him. Philip Doddridge puts it like this:

Ye sinners seek His grace  
Whose wrath ye cannot bear;  
Fly to the shelter of His cross  
And find salvation there.<sup>2</sup>

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2. Phillip Doddridge, “And Will the Judge Descend” (1755).

Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. God has sent forth Jesus in this day of grace to be the covering, the propitiation for sin, to hide you from His anger and righteous judgment. Let me urge you, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, to flee to Jesus as the only Savior. Hide yourself in Him today.





