

All Things Working Together for Good

Dr. J.R. Beeke

- Psalter 30: 1-3
- Scripture: Romans 8:28-39
- Psalter 144: 1-6
- Psalter 386: 5,7
- Psalter 201: 1,5,6

Dear congregation, it is our heartfelt prayer that the Lord God may dwell among us as we gather for worship on yet another Sabbath that He has mercifully granted to us. Today we want to focus on a theme that is full of comfort for God's dear people — namely, how God works even some of the most difficult things in the lives of His own for their real good. Our text you can find in Romans 8:28, "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose. "

Our major theme will be: "All Things Working Together for Good for God's People." With God's help, we will limit ourselves to considering the following points:

1. How God works affliction together for the welfare of His people
2. How God works divine desertion together for the welfare of His people
3. How God causes even sin to serve the welfare of His people

1. How God works affliction together for the welfare of His people

The life of a true Christian resembles the internals of a watch. Open a watch, and what do you see? You see that certain wheels which turn in a counterclockwise direction are attached to other wheels that are working in a clockwise direction. Your first thought may be that the watchmaker is either foolish or confused. But he is neither.

Rather, he has so arranged the internals of this watch and put in a mainspring to govern all its wheels, that when wound, though one wheel turns clockwise and another counterclockwise, all work together to move the hands around the face of

the watch at precisely the right speed. Many wheels appear to counteract each other, but they all work together for the identical purpose of revealing accurate time.

A watch, dear congregation, is symbolic of the life of God's people. Some wheels in their life run clockwise, which provides hope that the events of their lives directed by God's providence are good for them, but other acts of God's providence seem to run counterclockwise, that is, seem to run against them. Only when their eye of faith is fixed on the great Watchmaker, who has planned everything in His all-wise decree, do they see and understand that He has placed the mainspring of free grace within their "watch-life" so that all providential and spiritual wheels work together for their welfare. Yes, dear child of God, though much often seems counterclockwise and against you when you see one wheel of providence work within or against another wheel of grace in various afflictions and riddles, yet your wise God knows exactly what He is doing. He shall work all things together to produce a divine and blessed result according to His sovereign good pleasure and eternal counsel.

Paul allows for no exceptions to this radical promise. He writes, "*All things*" -that is, all *good* things and all *evil* things -"shall work together for good." The best things -- including the attributes and works of God, the promises and providences of the Father, the work and Person of the Son, the graces and labors of the Spirit, the everlasting covenant of grace with all its accompanying benefits of salvation, and all divine ordinances, such as the Word and the sacraments, prayer, the communion of saints — shall all work together for your real good if you are one who genuinely loves the God of the Scriptures. Even the worst things -- including divine desertion, sin, Satan, infirmities, temptations, afflictions, persecutions - shall all work together for your welfare and God's glory.

No doubt some of us will say, "It is easy to understand how good things will work together for good, and I know that evil things are supposed to serve the spiritual welfare of God's people, but how affliction, divine desertion, and even sin can work together for their good I cannot comprehend."

Today I wish to show you in several ways how even these three things — *affliction, divine desertion, and sin* -- work together for the spiritual welfare of

God's children, and from this we shall be able to safely conclude that "all things work together for good to them that love God." First, let's focus on the good that flows out of affliction for the believer, and then after we sing we will focus on how good flows out of even divine desertion and sin for the believer.

No one naturally enjoys affliction. Afflictions can be very heavy and difficult to bear. "If sin is the head of the serpent," Ralph Erskine wrote, "affliction is its tail." And yet, dear believer, do not afflictions also serve as medicine for you in the hands of your great Physician, Jesus Christ? Let's look briefly at several different ways in which in His hands your afflictions serve your spiritual welfare and eternal health.

First, through affliction doesn't the Lord humble you deeply, showing you who you are and what you remain in yourself — nothing but sin and corruption apart from divine grace? Does not the Lord teach you through affliction the same truth He taught Israel in Deuteronomy 8, "I led thee through the great and terrible wilderness, wherein were fiery serpents, and scorpions, and drought, and I fed thee in the wilderness with manna, that I might humble thee, to prove thee, to do thee good at thy latter end" (v. 2)?

Affliction not only makes a true Christian humble before God, but it keeps him humble. Affliction vacuums away the fuel that feeds his pride. An afflicted believer resembles a fruit-laden tree; the tree that hangs lowest to the ground is usually the tree that bears the most fruit.

If God uses your afflictions to humble you before Him, do not your afflictions work together for good?

Second, through affliction God's people learn what sin is in its God-dishonoring, defiling, and damning nature. Through affliction they learn, as has been aptly stated, "that sin has the devil for its father, shame for its companion, and death for its wages. They learn through affliction that sin is actually an attack upon the very heart and being and attributes of God. As John Bunyan wrote, "Sin is the daring of God's justice, the rape of His mercy, the jeering of His patience, the slighting of His power, and the contempt of His love." They learn through affliction that sin is both the strength of their death and the death of their strength.

In affliction the believer's soul is, as it were, searched with candles (Zeph. 1:12) for secret and open sins. When affliction is sanctified by the Holy Spirit, sin is dragged out of its hiding place in the heart and set in the light of God's holy and all-searching eye. "Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance" (Psa 90:8). Affliction strips off the Adam-like fig-leaf covering God's child strives to cling to by nature, "The sins of God's people are like birds' nests," wrote William Bridge, "as long as leaves are on the trees you cannot see them, but in the winter of affliction when all the leaves are off, the bird nests appear plainly." When affliction is sanctified, sin becomes heinous and hated. Sin becomes exceeding sinful in its very nature. It becomes hated more for its nature than for its consequences.

Third, the Holy Spirit uses affliction as a medicine to destroy the deadly disease of sin in the children of God, causing them to bring forth healthy and godly fruit. When sin causes the believer to backslide from his Savior, the Lord Jesus as Good Shepherd must send the rod of affliction to set the crooked believer straight. Affliction is the Shepherd's dog, sent out not to devour the sheep, but to bring them back into the fold again. Sanctified affliction cures sin. "Before I was afflicted I went astray," David confesses, "but now have I kept thy word" (Ps. 119:67).

It is as good for a child of God to be chastised with affliction as it is for a young tree to be pruned (John 15:2), for the pressure of affliction not only presses out the awful stink of sin, but also sends forth the fragrant smells and fruits of divine graces. Do you know that in some countries trees will grow, but will bear no fruit because there is no winter there? The Christian needs winter-times of affliction if he is to experience spring-times of blossoming, summer-times of growing, and autumn-times of harvesting.

The life of God's children is like a bell — the harder it is hit, the better it sounds. They learn more under the rod that strikes them than under the staff that comforts them. No, the Good Shepherd is not drowning His sheep when He washes them nor killing them when He shears them. Rather, His washings are needed cleanings; His shearings are necessary strippings; His corrections are essential lessons.

Affliction reaps golden fruit. It mines, smelts, refines, and forms the believer until the divine goldsmith can see His reflection in the work of His own hands.

Then the child of God experiences with Job, "When he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold" (Job 23:10). "Affliction," wrote the godly Robert Leighton, "is the diamond dust that heaven polishes its jewels with."

Fourth, the Lord uses affliction as a means to cause His people to seek Him, to bring them back into communion with Himself, and to keep them close by His side. As sheep will stay close by their shepherd in storms, so the Lord said of Israel, "In their affliction they will seek me early" (Hos. 5:15). The storms and stones of affliction only force God's sheep closer to their Shepherd. All the stones that hit Stephen only knocked him closer to the chief cornerstone, Jesus Christ, and opened heaven all the more for his soul. Affliction drove a woman of Canaan to the Son of David; it drove a dying thief to a dying Savior. Not the crown of Manasseh, but his chains were used to bring him to the knowledge that "the Lord was God" (2 Chr. 33:11-13). Even the magnet of God's rich mercy does not bring nor keep His flock so close to the Great Shepherd as do the cords of affliction.

Fifth, the Lord uses afflictions for good to conform His flock to Christ, making them partakers of His suffering and His image. "Christ was chastened for our profit," the author to the Hebrews wrote, "that we might be partakers of his holiness" (12:10). God had but one Son without sin, but none without affliction. His afflicting rod is a pencil to draw Christ's image more fully upon His people. Through the way of suffering to glory they become followers of the Lamb of God who walks before His flock. Every path of affliction they encounter has already been traveled, overcome, and sanctified by their Shepherd whose stream of substitutional blood, from His circumcision to the cross, is their sure pledge that no affliction or trial shall be able to separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:39). Their deserved suffering leads them to Christ's substitutional suffering, which in turn, makes them exclaim, "His yoke is easy and his burden is light" (Mt. 11:30). Dear believer, are not the occasions of your sufferings usually the times when you have most communion with Jesus Christ in His sufferings — whose entire life was nothing but a series of sufferings, as you can read in Isaiah 53? Can you then complain for the light crosses you have to bear as guilty sinners (2 Cor. 4:17) when you behold the heavy crosses Christ had to bear as the innocent sufferer?

Sixth, spiritual afflictions work for good because the Lord balances them with spiritual comfort and joy. David wrote, "For his anger endureth but a moment; in his favour is life: weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning" (Psa 30:5). "Your sorrow," Christ told His disciples, "shall be turned into joy" (Jn. 16:20). He brings His people into the wilderness to speak comfortably to them (Hos. 2:14). Where godly suffering abounds, godly consolation abounds (2 Cor. 1:4-5). "God gives gifts that we may love Him, and stripes that we may fear Him," George Downname wrote; "yea, oftentimes He mixes His frowns with His favours."

The Shepherd's rod has honey at its end. God's Pauls have their prison-songs. The sweet shall follow the bitter. Joy shall come in the morning. The Lord turns their water into wine. Samuel Rutherford once wrote, "When I am in the cellar of affliction, I find the Lord's choicest wines." In affliction, God's sheep sometimes may experience sweet raptures of divine joy which lead them, as it were, to the very borders of the heavenly Canaan. At such moments they may confess with Eliphaz the Temanite, "Behold, happy is the man whom God correcteth: therefore despise not thou the chastening of the Almighty: for he maketh sore, and bindeth up: he woundeth and his hands make whole. He shall deliver thee in six troubles: yea, in seven there shall no evil touch thee" (Job 5:17-19).

Seventh, affliction also works for good by keeping God's children walking by faith and not by sight. If sensible enjoyments were always allowed to believers in this world, they would begin to love this life and live off of their spiritual provisions instead of the Provider Himself. Therefore, with their sweet meals, the Lord orders some sour sauce to help their digestion, in order that they may live not by sense, but by faith. In prosperity God's people talk of living by faith, and often darken counsel by words without knowledge; but in adversity they come to the experimental knowledge of what it means to live by faith. .

Eighth, affliction works for good in weaning Christians away from the world. A dog never bites those who live in its home, but only strangers. Affliction bites God's children so deeply because they are too little at home with the Word and ways of God, and too much at home with the world and ways of man. If they were more often at home with their Master and Shepherd in heavenly places, the afflictions would be far easier to bear. "God," says Thomas Watson, "would have

the world hang as a loose tooth which, being twitched away, doth not much trouble us."

Finally, affliction is profitable in preparing God's people for their heavenly inheritance. Affliction elevates their soul heavenwards, to look for "a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Heb. 11:10). Affliction paves their way for glory. "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory" (2 Cor. 4:17). "He that rides to be crowned," John Trapp wrote, "will not think much of a rainy day."

Children of God, is not this enough to convince you that affliction is for your spiritual welfare -- that you "shall not want" anything necessary or good for you, both temporally and spiritually? Though the wind of affliction is contrary to your flesh, yet it pleases God to use this crosswind to blow you toward heaven. Your afflictions are tailor-made to fit you with divine precision all the way to glory. As Downname profoundly points out, "The Lord does not measure out our afflictions according to our faults, but according to our strength, and looks not at what we have deserved, but what we are able to bear." Did you ever think of affliction *this* way, dear child of God? To think of affliction this way is to think exactly the opposite of Job's friends. Job's friends said, "If you are heavily afflicted, you have heavily sinned." But Downname says — please allow me to repeat this wonderful quotation: "The Lord does not measure out our afflictions according to our faults, but according to our strength, and looks not at what we have deserved, but what we are able to bear."

Therefore, shall not all things, even affliction, work together for the welfare of God's people? And therefore, your duty, dear believer, is to do what Paul calls you to do in 1 Thessalonians 5:18, "In *every thing* [even in affliction], give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you." Before we go further, let us first sing from Psalter 386:5 and 7.

II. How Jesus works divine desertion together for the welfare of His people.

I trust you are now persuaded that affliction works for good in the lives of genuine Christians. Now we need to turn our attention to the even deeper questions

of how God can overrule divine desertion and even sin itself for good in the lives of His people. Let's first look at divine desertion being overruled for God.

Perhaps you ask: What about the dreadful burden of divine desertion, that is, the burden of feeling that God has withdrawn Himself and become silent in my life? How can the groan of Zion, "The LORD hath forsaken me, and my Lord hath forgotten me" (Is. 49:14), ever work for good? If Thomas Watson called divine desertion "a short hell" and Samuel Rutherford called God's silence (which lies at the heart of experiencing apparent divine desertion) the most bitter ingredient that the believer has to drink in his cup of sorrow - how can such desertion work for good?

Perhaps the best way to persuade you, if you are a true Christian, that even God's apparent desertions of you are intended for your welfare by an ascended Jesus, is to ask you a series of questions:

- Does not divine desertion drive you to prayer to seek after and prize communion with God more than ever, causing you to knock at heaven's gates with unceasing petitions?
- Does not the Lord use divine desertion to cause you to examine your own soul in order to discover, pull, and cast away the accursed weeds of sin which have caused you to desert God and Him to desert you?
- When the Holy Spirit teaches you that the most common cause of divine absence is your own sin, does this not cause you to hate sin with a holy hatred?
- Does not God use His own withdrawals in your life like a rough file to scrape off spiritual rust which all too quickly develops on your faith, hope, love, and other graces of God when they are not used regularly?
- Does not an absent God cause you to value more what heaven has given you in a saving way, so that within your soul special grace does not become common grace, nor common grace become special grace?
- Does not God's desertion serve by the Spirit's secret influences to purge you of remaining infirmities, weaning you from worldly thinking, worldly conversations, and worldly actions?
- Have you not experienced that the Holy Spirit uses the withdrawals of God

to cut off your reliance upon anything within you, such as your experiences, your humility, your prayers, your faith, and your conversion, so that you may learn to more fully believe in and rely upon Jesus Christ alone?

- Has not the Holy Spirit used divine desertion to cut off your relying upon even the gracious benefits God has given you, so that what God gives does not lord over your soul over and above the Lord Himself?
- Through God's apparent desertions are you not often taught that His delays in your life are not denials, but rather, that at His time and in His way, He will again draw close to commune with you through His Word?
- Does not the Lord sometimes hold Himself back in order to teach you that He would be righteous never to commune with you again on account of your continued sinning against Him?
- Through divine desertion does not God persuade you that He alone must be honored in His presence and His absence?

Dear believer, if you are honest, are not these fruits of divine desertion taught by the Spirit of an ascended Mediator profitable for you even though you often fight against many of them? Can you not see that the Lord brings you into the depths of desertion before you die in order to keep you from the depths of damnation after you die? At times you may even fear that He holds you above hell by desertion, but afterwards must you not confess that He does so to keep you from hell for eternity? Your desertions work for your spiritual welfare to prepare you for heaven, and to make heaven all the more heavenly when you shall finally enter into glory. Truly, even when Christ appears to absent Himself from you, He is still secretly present with you at the Father's right hand, as the Heidelberg Catechism says so beautifully, with His Godhead, majesty, grace, and Spirit (Question 47).

Dear believer, keep courage. God's temporary, apparent desertion of you is just that — temporary and only apparent. As John Flavel wrote:

Christ's desertion (of God] prevents your final desertion. Because He was forsaken for a time you shall not be forsaken for ever. For He was forsaken for you.... [Moreover,] though God deserted Christ, yet at the same time He powerfully supported Him. His omnipotent arms were under Him, though His pleased face was hid from Him.... So, Christian, just so shall it be with

thee. Thy God may turn away His face, [but] He will not pluck away His arm.

Puritan Timothy Cruso put it this way: "He who hath engaged to be our Christ for ever, cannot depart for ever,"

III. How Jesus causes even sin to serve the welfare of His people.

"All things," Paul asserts, "work together for good to them that love God." All things includes not only affliction and divine desertion, but finally, even sin. Even sin shall work together for good — not for them that love sin, but for them that love God. Rightly, Augustine has written, "God would never permit evil, if He could not bring good out of evil." Here, of course, we tread upon cautious ground, for there is nothing worse than sin; we must do all in our power to discourage, and not encourage, sin.

We have to maintain at least three important guidelines when considering how sin works to the good of God's people. First, we have to maintain there is nothing good in sin itself. Sin is the evil of evils; in and of itself it can work nothing but death and damnation. Thomas Watson wrote, "Sin is like poison, which corrupts the blood, infects the heart, and without a sovereign antidote, brings death."

Second, we have to maintain that those who encourage themselves in sin by the argument that good will come out of it, wrest the Scriptures to their own damnation. Paul is clear in Romans 3:8 that to do evil that good may come is only to make our damnation just. One of the primary marks of being a Christian is to hate all sin and to love holiness and godliness,

Third, only corrupt human nature can abuse the doctrine of good resulting from sin, for true grace can never play lightly with sin. Sin will work for good only to them that hate sin. It will work for good to them that love God and abhor themselves on account of sin. It will work for good to those who are humbled by sin, who fly to Christ to be saved from it, and who dare not allow themselves the least sin to gain an entire world. It will work for good to those who count the least sin worse than the greatest affliction. It will work for good to those who, knowing their own weakness, fight earnestly against sin, using the Word of God, the blood

of Christ, the strength of the Spirit, and fervent prayer to wage holy war against it.

Yet, though sin is worse than hell in its essence, God, through Christ, and by His mighty overruling power, directs even sin to our spiritual welfare if we are true believers. Let me explain four ways in which this is so:

First, God causes the sinfulness of sin to bring us to true self-examination and self-knowledge. Scripture tells us that the Lord permitted Hezekiah to fall to teach him that which was in his heart. When we are in our right place before God, we will not shrink from knowing the worst about ourselves, just as a cancer patient requests to know the worst of his sickness. Therefore Job prayed, "Make me to know my transgression" (13:23). By nature our sins will find us out, but by grace we find our sins out. This leads us by the Spirit to a deep and profitable self-knowledge, causing us to confess with Paul, "I am the chief sinner," or with Martin Luther, "In myself I am not only miserable, but misery itself."

Second, God uses the sinfulness of sin to bring us to genuinely condemn ourselves. True Christians are led to pronounce a sentence of condemnation upon themselves, taking God's side against themselves, Thomas Watson profoundly notes, "When a man has judged himself, Satan is put out of office. When he lays anything to a saint's charge, he is able to retort, 'It is true, Satan, I am guilty of these sins, but I have judged myself already for them; and having condemned myself in the lower court of conscience, God (for the sake of Christ) will acquit me in the upper court of heaven!'" God will never step upon a self-condemning beggar who casts himself exclusively on divine mercy. Rather, the owning of my sin as a child of the first Adam works for good by making room for the righteousness of the second Adam, Jesus Christ. God uses the greatest evil of sin to make room for the greatest good of communion with Himself. He uses condemnation to unlock, as it were, the door to salvation.

Third, the sinfulness of sin works for good in the believer by keeping him engaged in the good fight of faith. The Christian not only leads a wayfaring life, but also a *warfaring* life. His heart is a castle that is in danger of being assaulted every hour. Daily a heavy duel is fought between two seeds, for "the spirit lusts against the flesh" (Gal. 5:17). "Watch and pray" should be the daily, yes, hourly motto of our lives as believers.

Fourth, an awareness of the sinfulness of sin can also yield the profitable fruit of spiritual reformation. When God permits His people to fall into sin, His normal design is to break the back of that sin they have fallen into. Abraham stumbled in faith, but became a champion of faith. Moses stumbled in meekness, but was a champion of meekness. Peter stumbled in zeal, but became the champion of godly zealousness. God makes His children's maladies their medicines when He gives grace to them not only to find out their sin, but also to drive out their sin.

I cannot conclude without a serious warning: Remember, dear believer, though the Lord directs even sin to end in good, allow me to warn you never to make light of sin, nor to become bold in sinning. Sin will always cost you a high price. Just as grace is always amazing, sin is always dreadful. Remember David. Sin cost him his peace, a broken family, and the terrors of the Almighty. Though the Lord shall never damn His child, He will have them taste something of the bitterness of hell in this life when they tamper with sin. He chastises sin by placing them into such bitter agonies and soul-distress that they can sometimes be filled with horror and be drawn to the brink of despair.

Oh, that the dread character of sin, as well as its consequences, might serve as flaming swords to keep you from eating of the forbidden tree of iniquity!

Dear unconverted friend, if you are not born again, no affliction and no sin, yes, nothing will serve your good. Sin can only work death and damnation for you unless you learn to flee to God by faith and in repentance, casting yourself upon His mercy in and through the ascended Mediator, Jesus Christ. By nature, through sin we ask God for the shortest way to hell. We would rather sleep our way into damnation than sweat our way into salvation.

Dear friend, dear teenagers, dear children, do not forget that the damned shall live in hell as long as God Himself shall live in heaven. If you refuse to believe in Christ, you will end in hell one day. And there you will be constantly dying without ever being dead. In hell there is no relief, no intermission, no end to the wrath of God.

Dear friends, allow me to ask you a final question: Can you answer on one hand with Chrysostom when sent a threatening message from the empress, "Go tell her that I fear nothing but sin," and can you answer on the other hand with a godly

forefather when offered promotion by King George III, "Sir, I want nothing but more grace"? For those who hate sin and love grace, God shall fulfil His own promise, notwithstanding affliction, desertion, and sin: "All things work together for good to them that love God." Amen.

God's Profound Declaration About Himself to Sinners

Bartel Elshout

- Psalter 399:3, 4
- Scripture: Ezekiel 33:1-20
- Text: Ezekiel 33:11
- Psalter 233:3-6
- Psalter 138:1, 4
- Psalter 431:4,5

Congregation, at the dawn of man's history God would come in the cool of the day to commune with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden - His sanctuary in the midst of the wonderful world He had created. What an inexpressibly blessed moment it must have been when Adam and Eve heard the voice of their Maker -- when God spoke to them and when He unveiled His heart of love to them! How they must have listened to His wondrous voice with holy adoration and have worshipped at His feet! Yet, this blessed state was of short duration, for not long afterward an evil spirit came into the Garden of Eden and whispered in Eve's ear, "Hath God said?" Satan came and suggested to her, and through her to our covenant head Adam, that in all that God had said and revealed to them, He was neither sincere. nor upright. He had withheld from them the fact that they too could be as God. Tragically, our first parents listened to that insinuation; they listened to that insidious lie. At once they began to doubt the integrity and sincerity of God. How tragic were the consequences, for our first parents fell into the sin of all sins: *unbelief!* Satan had successfully persuaded them that God was not upright, and that He was withholding something from them. In other words, he successfully maligned the character of God. Ever since that day, we are all too ready to listen to that liar from the beginning. Congregation, this is especially true when we live under the ministry of the gospel by means of which God also communes with us.

Satan works overtime in the hearts of the children of men. He is present in this worship service, and is ready to whisper in your ear as the Word of God is being

preached, "Hath God said?" When God comes to us with the sincere invitations of the gospel; when He calls us to turn unto Him; when He calls us to flee the wrath to come; when He declares in His Word that He stands ready with open arms to receive the vilest sinner; when He tells us that there is an open door in Jesus Christ for the vilest sinner - Satan is there to whisper, "Hath God said?" The great liar is ever ready to abuse God's Word and tell us, "It is all true what you hear, but remember, God has to do it. You cannot do anything yourself; you cannot convert yourself; you cannot give it to yourself." In doing so, he successfully engages our unbelieving and hostile hearts to make the Word of God of none effect, for by responding thus we are ultimately saying, "What God says in His Word is not true." When God says "Seek," we respond, "He does not really mean that because He knows that I cannot do it myself." What this means, however, is that we make God a liar, for we refuse to believe the express testimony of His Word.

The children of Israel were also guilty of that dreadful sin. They also dared to make God a liar. In Ezekiel 18 the Lord says twice to the children of Israel, "I have no pleasure in your death." They did not believe it, however, replying, "No; God's way is not equal." In other words, God is not sincere; He cannot demand this from us. Thus they piously excused their unbelief and unwillingness to repent by hiding behind their present condition.

My dear friends, how often have you done likewise under the preaching of the Word of God? How many times - perhaps you have never dared to verbalize it - have you not inwardly questioned the integrity of God's Word when it comes to us directly, speaks to us, invites us, exhorts us, and calls us to repentance?

The Lord knows, however, how inclined we are to not believe Him. There is no greater insult imaginable than when we call God a liar and that is what every unbeliever does. As long as we persevere in our unbelief, we call God a liar because we do not believe the record He has given of His Son. How righteous God would be if He would respond to such sheer wickedness by saying, "I am done; I will cut them off!" How many are there also not among us who have heard the gospel their entire lifetime! Righteously God could say now, "It is enough! They refuse to hear Me and will not believe My words. It is done! I will cut them off in the midst of their sin."

Yet, congregation, He does the contrary! Listen to His voice today; listen to the voice of your Creator as He speaks to us. He is addressing a people who are inclined not to believe Him ----sinners who are inclined to declare Him a liar. What does He say to them? Listen to His Word as it comes to us in the text of this sermon, recorded in verse 11 of Ezekiel 33. *"Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?"*

Congregation, these text words contain: "God's Profound Declaration About Himself to Sinners."

We wish to consider:

1. The Significant Introduction of the Declaration (*as I live, saith the Lord GOD...*)
2. The Unmistakable Contents of this Declaration (*I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live...*)
3. The Moving Conclusion to this Declaration (*turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?*)

I repeat, *God's Profound Declaration About Himself to Sinners* - (1) the significant introduction of this declaration; (2) the unmistakable contents of this declaration; (3) the moving conclusion to this declaration.

1. The Significant Introduction of this Declaration.

Congregation, this chapter begins with a striking parable. In this parable the Lord sets before Ezekiel an illustration to which everyone during his era could readily relate. The Lord says to him (and I paraphrase), "Suppose that I bring the sword upon the land" — that is, war upon the land -- "and suppose a watchman was on duty on the wall." Such a scenario was the rule of the day, for all cities were surrounded by walls, Especially in times of danger, however, there would always be a watchman on duty, whose calling it was to warn the city in the event of approaching danger. "Now suppose," the Lord says, "that the watchman saw the sword coming, that is, he saw danger coming, and he warned the city. If the inhabitants of the city would not give heed to what they heard, and if they would

then consequently perish, the watchman would not be at fault. The citizens themselves would be at fault, having refused to heed the warning of the watchman.

“However, if this watchman saw the sword coming and he were to remain silent, those who would perish would still perish because of their sin, but that watchman would be responsible for the death of the inhabitants of that city.”

After relating this parable, the Lord makes the application by saying, as it were, "Ezekiel, I have set you as a watchman over the house of Israel. If I say to you, that you must call the wicked to turn unto Me, thus calling them to repentance, and if they do not listen to you, they will die in their sin but you will be free from their blood. However, if I command you to tell the wicked to turn from his ways, saying unto the wicked, 'O wicked man, thou shalt surely die' (vs. 8), and if thou warn the wicked in his way to turn from it; if he do not turn from his way, he shall die in his iniquity; but thou has delivered thy soul" (vs. 9).

Why did the Lord direct Ezekiel to say this? The Lord had called Ezekiel to be His prophet to the people of Israel who had been led captive to Babylon. What a wonder it was that though Israel had been brought to Babylon due to its persistent idolatry and wickedness, the Lord did not forsake His people! Even there He raises up a man to preach to them and to call them to repentance. However, instead of the Israelites being humbled by the fact that they had to reside in Babylon because of their iniquity, they were still gainsaying. They were still talking back to the Lord, accusing Him that He was unreasonable in His dealings with them, that He was not compassionate with them, and that His ways with them were not equal. This greatly discouraged Ezekiel - as is true for all God's servants when their preaching falls upon deaf ears.

Presently, the Lord wants to remind him of his calling, saying to him in so many words, "Ezekiel, you are my servant; you must continue to say to them what I command you to say. Ezekiel, once more you must go to them, to this rebellious and gainsaying people. You must again declare to them in My Name that they must turn unto Me and live, and that I have no pleasure in their death." Ezekiel must proclaim this to a people of whom the Lord says in verse 10, "Thus ye speak saying, If our transgressions and our sins be upon us, and we pine away in them, how should we then live?" What they mean to say is that the Lord is not really

interested in their well-being. However, to a gainsaying people, a people who are questioning Him, His integrity, His goodness, His mercy, His covenant faithfulness toward them — to such a people he must go and say in the Lord's Name what follows in the text.

This is also what I am commanded to say to you today, congregation. This message is especially intended for those among us who in word and deed manifest that you are still without God and without hope in the world. My dear unconverted friend, this means that you are still living in unbelief -- that somehow you still make the Word of God of none effect by refusing to obey His call to repent and believe. Yet, also to you comes the Word of God in this hour. Also to you the Lord says, "As I live, I have no pleasure in *your* death."

It is remarkable that the Lord introduces this declaration with an oath. Twice you will find language almost identical to the language of our text in Ezekiel 18. You will observe, however, that these declarations are not preceded by an oath. However, in this text the Lord does the ultimate. He begins this declaration by swearing an oath. He says, "As I live," that is, "As I, *Adonai-Jehovah* live!" These are two of His most glorious Old Testament names. These names reveal that He is the *I am that I am*, the God of the covenant, who is also the sovereign and omnipotent Ruler of this universe. The Lord is thus saying, "I, in the totality of My being, in all that I have revealed of Myself, I have no pleasure in your death." It is as if God is saying to the children of Israel, "Children of Israel, you do not believe what I say to you; you are questioning My integrity; you are questioning My sincerity. However, as true as I am God, so true it is that I have no pleasure in your death." Reverently speaking, God puts His own existence on the line. It is as if God says, "If it is not true that I have no pleasure in your death, then I cease to be God; then I am not what I have revealed Myself to be. But as true as it is that I am God, and as true as it is that My name is Adonai Jehovah, so true it is that I have no pleasure in your death."

Congregation, what an overwhelming thought this is! And yet it ought to make us deeply ashamed that God has to resort to an oath to underscore the truth of this statement! Why is this so? Had we not fallen, congregation, there would never have been a need for the swearing of an oath. Why do we live in a society in which

the swearing of an oath is necessary? The answer is painfully obvious: We are liars! As fallen human beings we have become the children of the devil who is the father of lies. We are no longer truthful. That is why our words are no longer trustworthy; man's yea is no longer yea and his nay is no longer nay. Is that not tragic? Have all of us not been stung by the words of those whom we thought we could trust, and who yet proved not to be trustworthy? Let us put our hands in our own bosom! Is there anyone here who would dare to say that he has a clean record? Have we never been dishonest or twisted the truth? It is the inclination of our fallen nature to be untruthful. This explains why at crucial moments in the courtroom or in business transactions, we need an oath. In other words, our inclination to lie mandates that the truth be stated in the presence of an all-knowing God, calling His judgment down upon us in the event we are not truthful. However, even that does not seem to bother people anymore; today people will commit perjury without blinking an eye. Such is our wretched existence!

Do you now understand what the Lord is doing here? He is saying, "Israel, you do not trust Me; you treat Me as if I am lying to you -- as if I am not upright. Now I will avail Myself of an oath. Since you neither trust My Word nor My servant, I will stoop to your level and swear an oath. I will swear by My own Name and My own existence, that as truly as I am God, so true it is that I have no pleasure in your death."

Congregation, we may say that we have even a more sure word of testimony than Israel had, because the ultimate confirmation of this oath is to be seen in His only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ. In the gift of His only-begotten Son, God has sworn His ultimate oath. In the gift of His Son God has once and for all confirmed the truth of these words, because He gave His only-begotten Son into this wicked world of unbelief - into a world of sinners who have no desire after God and the knowledge of His ways. He gave His Son into the midst of a sinful human race which by nature does not believe His Word. In His Son we have the ultimate confirmation of these words.

We must go a step further, however. We must go to Calvary's cross where God's only-begotten Son was hanging between heaven and earth, bleeding and dying on behalf of sinners. There we must go if we would truly understand this text. We

may say with holy reverence that God declared on Golgotha's hill, "Oh, look at My Son on the cross! As I live, as you see Him hanging there bleeding and dying, I have no pleasure in the death of fallen sons and daughters of Adam, and therefore I gave My only-begotten Son. To that end I subjected Him to the curse due upon sin; and therefore I made Him sin who knew no sin in order that His righteousness might become the portion of fallen sons and daughters of Adam." Thus, in the gift of His Son, in His death on the cross, and in His finished work, we have the ultimate confirmation of this oath. Calvary renders the ultimate proof, congregation, that God has no pleasure in your death, but therein that you would turn unto Him and live.

Having considered this oath, let us now proceed to meditate upon:

2. The Unmistakable Contents of this Declaration.

Let us reflect for a moment upon the subjects of this declaration. The Lord says, "I have no pleasure in the death of the *wicked*." It is not very flattering to be called "wicked," congregation. However, that is what God thinks of us in our natural state, God's opinion of us, sinners, is that we are *wicked*. When we think of the word wicked we readily think of people who are guilty of criminal behavior -- which is indeed true for the Hebrew word which means precisely that. The Hebrew word translated here as wicked was used to designate criminals. However, as fallen sinners we are all criminals, for a criminal is someone who deliberately transgresses the law. To be a law breaker is to be a criminal — which is thus true for all of us in our natural state.

Congregation, are you offended by the fact that God calls us wicked? If so, then it is a tragic indication that we have no self-knowledge. For when God begins to work in our soul and when by the light of His Spirit He penetrates the recesses of our heart, we will soon discover that we are wicked indeed, Then we will readily concur with God's evaluation of us that we are wicked at heart. By nature we are breakers of His law and trample upon that law. More than that - We despise His goodness and His love. Yet, it is against that background, against that black and dreadful background of our sinful existence and wickedness - and thus of our criminal conduct, unbelief being the crime of all crimes and the sin of all sins — that the Lord lays bare His heart in this text, saying, "I have no pleasure in the

death of the wicked."

Congregation, we must also consider, however, that He is speaking here to the children of Israel; He is speaking to His covenant people; He is speaking to those to whom the oracles of God have been committed; He is speaking to people like you and me. That makes us even more wicked than the people who dwell in the world. The people in the world, those who know nothing about God and His precepts, can never be guilty of what we are guilty of when we live under the gospel. That is why the Lord Jesus declares that in the Day of Judgment it shall be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah than for us.

And yet for such despisers of His law and His love, God has a message of mercy. He is saying to us, "Oh sinner, oh wicked one, I have no pleasure in your death." However, death is precisely what we deserve; that is our worthy due. The Lord said to Adam and Eve, "The day thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die." Death and eternal damnation are thus the only things to which we have a right, congregation. As fallen sinners we have no other rights. We have no right to this life; we have no right to live a long life; we have no inalienable right to happiness. We only deserve one thing, and that is to die -- spiritually, temporally, and eternally!

However, instead of pronouncing condemnation, the Lord says, "But sinner, I have *no* pleasure in your death." The word *pleasure* is a powerful word. It is a Hebrew word that conveys *intense emotion*. In fact, this word is the equivalent of the Greek word found in God's declaration at the baptism of Jesus in the river Jordan, when He said, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well *pleased*," Thus, the Lord is saying, "From the very recesses of My own eternal heart, I declare unto you this day that I have no pleasure in your death, but that the wicked would turn from his way and live."

In the words "his way" we have another description of our sinful existence, do we not? Being wicked, we go our way rather than God's way. That is the essence of Satan's suggestion to Adam: "Adam, I have a better way; follow my way; and if you follow my way you shall be as God." Congregation, ever since that day we have followed his example and we walk in our way. As religious and as orthodox as you may be, yet as long as you live in a state of unbelief and are unconverted,

you are on *your* way instead of God's way. To such sinners the Lord says in our text, "Sinner, turn from *your* way; I set before you My way. Turn to My Way, sinner, and live."

The word *turn* is a word which occurs very frequently in the Old Testament. It is the word that signifies *repentance*, and occurs almost three thousand times. We could actually say that the message God gave to the prophets in sending them to Israel was in essence always a call to repentance, for they were a people bent toward backsliding. They were ever inclined to turn away from the Lord. In response to this the Lord sent His servants, and they would say in His Name, "Turn again back unto Me."

Let us consider this remarkable word, the word *turn*. We often talk about repentance, but I fear that we have a wrong notion of what God means by repentance. The word *turn* makes it very clear and plain, however.

Let me illustrate this with a passage from Scripture. In 1 Thessalonians 1:9, Paul writes the following to the Thessalonians: "Ye turned to God from idols." Notice, he does not say here: "*Ye turned from idols to God.*" Rather, he says "Ye turned to God from idols." In other words, their turning from idols was the result of their turning unto God. As they turned unto God, as God became real to them, and as they came face to face with God and the holy demands of His law - in other words, when they began to fear God, they were thereby motivated to turn away from their idols. If we reverse the order of these words, congregation, do you know what then happens? We will then become legalists, being preoccupied with turning from our idols rather than turning to God. We will then turn from our sins, the result of which is that we will no longer commit this or that sin anymore. We will break with sin and endeavor to reform our lives — perhaps in a most impressive manner. Such a person will often begin to live a very strict life. However, in all our turning *we have never turned to God!* That is why a legalist remains a legalist until God opens his eyes. "No," Paul says, "you turned to God and therefore you turned from your idols."

It is thus this turning to Him which God demands from you today, congregation, and that is what I must summon you to do in His Name. God is not calling you to first reform your life before coming to Him. Rather, His calling to you today is,

"Sinner, turn to Me; sinner, face Me." By nature we are turned with our backs toward God and we are fleeing from Him just as our first father Adam did. He could not face his Maker anymore. He ran from Him and hid himself, trying to avoid coming face to face with God. My unconverted friend, that is what you are doing; you are on the run. You are guilty of what Jonah did: You are fleeing from the presence of God. You refuse to come face to face with your Maker. You refuse to turn to Him.

Therefore, if you ask me, "What must I do then; what does it mean to turn?) the Lord's reply is, "Sinner, turn around and fall at My feet; acknowledge Me for who I am, your sovereign Maker. Come face to face with Me. Bow before Me and acknowledge your iniquity. Acknowledge that you have trampled upon My law and acknowledge that you have despised My goodness. Acknowledge your iniquity and humble yourself before Me."

Congregation, that is what God calls you to do today. Sinner, turn, oh turn to your Maker today! That is not my word, but it is God's Word. He says it! Never mind that we are not able to do it. He knows that better than you and I do. Your inability is not the issue here, but rather His holy claim as Creator upon you and your life. God wants us to come face to face with His holy demand. We want to find a way to escape this demand, but the Lord will not give us a way out. We want to leave church after this service, and be able to get out from under what we heard, so that we can continue to walk in our way. The Lord will not let us escape, however, for He says, "No, sinner; I am calling *you* today. You *must* turn and you must bow before Me. You must face Me and bow in the dust before Me; you must acknowledge that I am Adonai Jehovah, your sovereign Maker. You must acknowledge that I have a holy claim on your life."

Sinner, are you giving heed to the Word of God? Or do you prefer to live on in your sin? Your Creator is speaking to *you* today. He is speaking to you out of the love of His heart. He is saying, "Sinner, turn to Me today and *live!*" What is implied here? The answer is clear: "If you will not turn to Me, you will not live. If you insist on going your own way, you will perish." That means that the Lord is also saying under oath, "As I live, if you do not turn to Me, sinner, you shall surely die." That is the inescapable implication of this verse.

Do you believe this, or are you still secretly blaming God for your unconverted state? Oh how I wish you would stop arguing with the Word of God! The Lord Jesus rebuked the Pharisees and scribes, saying, "Through your tradition you have made the Word of God of none effect," I am afraid there are so many who have clung to a tradition for years already -- a tradition which leads you to set the Word of God aside in a seemingly orthodox way. Reality is, however, that you are setting it aside so that you do not have to deal with it. Oh, that God would cure you of that wickedness today, and that you would no longer argue with God's Word! If, instead, you feel the overwhelming reality that you are neither willing nor able to turn, then I say to you, "Bow at His feet and confess it before the Lord, begging Him to turn you." It has been my experience that those who truly discover that they cannot turn, will not seek to excuse themselves. Those who have truly discovered that they cannot turn without the grace of God, have stopped arguing with God's Word and will confess their unwillingness and inability before the Lord. My dear friend, if you can still say, "I cannot convert myself," without shedding a tear and without bowing your knees, and if in spite of that reality you can still go to sleep at night, then this is the best proof that it has never become a grievous reality to you that you cannot turn to God.

Congregation, this Word must bring you to your knees, for even that is implied in the Lord's call to turn. He is even saying, "Sinner, if you feel and realize within yourself your hopelessness, your helplessness, and your unwillingness; if you feel the hardness of your heart and your own impenitence, then turn to Me because I am the only One who can do something about it. I alone can make you willing in the day of My power. I alone can open your ears, your heart, and your eyes. Therefore sinner, you *must* turn to Me, for if you do not turn you will certainly die."

However, there is also a wonderful implication in this call to repentance, congregation, God's call to repentance always implies that if we do turn, we will find Him to be a gracious God in Jesus Christ. In Psalm 50:23 the Lord says, "To him that ordereth his conversation aright will I shew the salvation of God." When God calls to repentance, it is never with the intent to destroy us. That was even true when the Lord sent Jonah to Nineveh - and Jonah knew that. He said, as it were, "Lord, I knew it all along that Thou art a gracious God." When he was called to go

to Nineveh, he feared that the result of his ministry would be that the Ninevites would repent, which they did.

Therefore, sinner, when your Maker calls you to turn to Him, He is calling you in order that you might live, for when you turn to Him you will find a gracious God in His Son Jesus Christ. In Christ..you will find Him to be a God who is ready to forgive, a God who is very gracious, and a God who will by no means cast you out. Jesus is the way, the Truth, and the Life. In Him, the Father is willing to receive prodigal sons and daughters whom He invites also in this text to come to Him without money and price.

Congregation, what more can I say? And what more can God say to us today to persuade us to turn unto Him? Your own Creator, your Maker is standing before you in the garment of His Word, swearing by His very own Name that He has no pleasure in your death but that you would turn unto Him and live. Yet, the Lord knows the stubbornness of our hearts. He knows how unwilling we are to listen to Him. He knows how we refuse to be persuaded by His Word, and therefore let us consider what He adds to this declaration. He adds one more urgent plea. Out of the mouth of God comes the heartrending cry, "Turn ye, turn ye...for why will ye die, O house of Israel?" Before we consider this, let us first sing together from Psalter 138:1,4.

3. The Moving Conclusion to this Declaration

Congregation, in the Hebrew language there is no such thing as an exclamation mark. The Hebrews had a much more effective way of emphasizing something. The Hebrew method of emphasis is repetition, stating a truth twice, or sometimes three times. Thus, we read in Isaiah 6, for instance, that the angels cry out, "Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts." It literally means that He is thrice holy — that He is holy in the supreme and the superlative sense of the word. We find this method of repetition all through the Scriptures. A unique example of this is found in Psalm 19. There are several verses there that speak about God's Word. Upon reading it, you will see how the psalmist says one thing, and then restates this truth in different words emphasizing what he had just said before, while simultaneously unveiling a new dimension.

Also in this final plea from the mouth of God, the Lord uses repetition. He uses repetition to underscore the holy urgency and the sincerity of this plea which proceeds from His holy heart. Listen to the voice of God as it comes to you today, congregation: "Turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, o house of Israel?" Thus, the Lord is saying this to us with the greatest possible emphasis. It is, reverently speaking, as if the Lord wants to shout it in our ears. Oh congregation, how do we dare turn our ears from such a plea? If we turn from these words today; if we can leave this house of prayer, and go on in the pathway of sin, congregation, then you will have despised your Maker again! Again you will have made His Word of none effect. Once more you will have made Him a liar, who exclaims, "Turn ye, turn ye...for why will ye die?"

The Lord calls us to turn from our evil ways. What a striking description again of our sinnership! The word evil refers to the *state of our hearts* — to our evil disposition. We have an evil heart -- an evil heart of unbelief. Consequently, our ways are also evil, because the word *way* indicates the idea of a *habit*. In other words, it is the very habit of our life to sin. We are habitual sinners, for the word way is a word that relates to a *well-worn path* - a path worn into a field by repeated use.

Especially in a farming community everyone will know of those well-worn paths used by humans or cattle. Congregation, that depicts our life; our life by nature resembles a well-worn path. We are habitual sinners. To such the Lord is saying, "Sinner, turn from your evil way, for why will ye die, O house of Israel?" Is it not incomprehensible that as fallen sinners we would rather die? That is exactly what the Lord is saying here. He is saying, "Sinner, by nature you are intent on dying, for you insist on persevering in your habitual indulgence in sin." You may respond that this is strong language. But is it really so? Consider what Scripture says in Proverbs 8. There we read that wisdom (the personification of the Lord Jesus) says, "All they that hate me love death" (Prov. 8:36).

Congregation, as long as we are unbelievers and habitual sinners, regardless of all our religion and all our orthodoxy, we are haters of God and haters of His Son. To hate means that I have contempt for someone. That may be a bitter pill for you to swallow, especially if you faithfully come to the house of God. However, this is

not my word; it is God's Word which declares that "all they that hate me love death." And as long as you do not love Christ, you hate Him. There is no third possibility!

What a solemn reality! And yet the Lord says, "Why, why will you die, sinner? Why, sinner, do you insist on going on in your way? Why do you insist on ignoring Me? Why do you insist on setting My Word aside? Why will you not hear Me? Why are you so determined to destroy yourself? Why will you not come to My Son so that you might have life? Why will you die?"

My heart goes out to our young people. Young people, teenagers, the Lord is also speaking to you today. This period of your life is fraught with danger. You are surrounded by temptations with which we, your parents, have never been confronted in such a measure. Furthermore, some of you are yielding to these temptations by dabbling in sin; some of you are drinking it in; some of you are playing with fire, Oh, listen to the voice of the God in whose Name you were baptized! Why, my dear young friend, why will you die? Why do you go on in the way of sin? Why are you so bent on self-destruction? Why do you want to drink in sin by full draughts? Why do you want to destroy yourself? Are there young people here today who are playing with the fire of sin? Remember, I may not know, the consistory may not know, your parents may not even know, but there is One who does know. He sees your and my life with His all-seeing and omniscient eye. He knows how you are living and He knows what you are doing. Yet, His voice also comes to you today, my dear young friend, "Why, why will you die?" Oh that you would heed the voice of your Maker this day before you will enter an eternal night! Young people and children, already when you were baptized God swore a holy oath, declaring, "As I live, the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, I have no pleasure in the death of this child." Dear friends, God already expressed the contents of our text at the beginning of your life, before you yourself even knew you existed. That is why you are here today in the house of God and may sit under the ministry of His Word. That is why God has spared your life until this day. That is why you have survived every illness with which you have been afflicted, and have survived every accident and mishap you have encountered. Why? Because the Lord has not ceased to deal with you; the Lord is still pursuing you with His

mercy. You are still under the ministry of the gospel because God has no pleasure in your death. Oh, listen to His voice today! "Why, why will you die?"

The Lord is warning you today, sinner. If you do not turn you will die. Listen to Psalm 50:22. There the Lord says to Israel, a people who were also ignoring Him, "Consider this, ye that forget God, lest I tear you in pieces, and there be none to deliver." What a statement, congregation! Does that mean that God has a delight in tearing sinners to pieces, which, in fact, would be a contradiction of our text? No; listen carefully to what He says: "*Lest* I tear you in pieces." In other words, "If you will go on ignoring Me, if you will continue to forget Me, then the day will come that I must execute My judgment and pour out My wrath upon you." Sinner, that is also what the Lord is saying to you today. Spurgeon put it this way: "If you will not turn, you will burn."

And so it is! This may be the last call to repentance in your lifetime. Nothing is more uncertain than life and more certain than death. Everyone of us is but a heartbeat and breath away from being summoned before the judgment seat of Christ. If you do not turn to your Maker, you will perish. Oh, do not waste your time any longer. "Today," the Lord says, "is the acceptable day, the acceptable time," Today is the day of salvation, and that means night is coming. Therefore, fall at His feet. Beg Him to make you willing in the day of His power. What an encouraging truth it is that when God demands something from us, He always promises to give what He demands! Not only does God command us to repent, but He has also exalted His Son Jesus Christ as Prince and Savior to *give* repentance! (Acts 5:31).

Thus, your Maker who *calls* you to repentance also gives repentance. What excuse do we then have, congregation? There is no excuse. The Lord is saying, "Fall at My feet, sinner; open your mouth wide. I am willing to grant you that which you need. I have exalted My Son to give repentance. Oh, ask Me then! Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it?"

Congregation, there is nothing else to be added. Therefore, if you hear His voice, harden not your hearts! Turn to Him who is able and willing to save the chief of sinners. Beg Him to pierce through the barrier of your unbelief and to prick you in your hearts today, so that this very day you may fall at His feet, crying out with the

publican, "Oh God, be merciful to me a sinner!"; with the Pentecostal multitude, "Oh men and brethren, what must I do?"; and with the jailer, "What must I do to be saved?"

My dear friend, do not turn a deaf ear to the God who speaks to you and declares in our midst today, "As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?" AMEN.

The Church of the Living God

*Commemoration of 125th Anniversary of the Netherlands
Reformed Congregation in Grand Rapids*

Dr. J. R. Beeke

(Preached October 29, 1995)

- Psalter 368:1,2
- Scripture: Psalm 132; Matthew 16:13-20
- Belgic Confession, Article 27
- Text: Matthew 16:18b
- Psalter 275
- Psalter 367;2,4
- Psalter 247

Congregation, it was 125 years ago tomorrow (October 30, 1870) that the forefathers of our church and the forefathers of the Beckwith church organized a congregation with forty members. Some forty years later they adopted the name of *Netherlands Reformed*; later, *First Netherlands Reformed*, and more recently, We have, as you well know, selected the name *Heritage Netherlands Reformed*. Since 125 years ago our forefathers were organized as an independent church, tonight in our message and psalters we want to reflect upon the living God as Keeper of His Zion, His church. Let us sing Psalter 368:1-2:

*Arise, O Lord, our God, arise
And enter now into Thy rest;
O let this house be Thy abode,
Forever with Thy presence blest.

Thy gracious covenant, Lord, fulfill,
Turn not away from us Thy face;
Establish Thou Messiah's throne
And let Him reign within this place.*

Dear congregation, everything in this world crumbles and decays. In Greek

times there were seven wonders of the world, many of which were structures that stood for centuries. Well, *the wonder* of this world is that there is a church, an invisible Church that has endured from the beginning and shall endure to the end of the world. The only reason the church endures is because of the free and sovereign love and decree and safe-keeping of her King and her Lord. We have read that to you from Psalm 132: "For the LORD hath chosen Zion; he hath desired it for his habitation. This is my rest for ever: here will I dwell; for I have desired it." That is the church's foundation. And you do not read one word in that of man, do you? "The *LORD* has chosen *Zion*; *He* hath desired it for *His* habitation. This is *my* rest for ever: here will *I* dwell; for *I* have desired it. *I* will abundantly bless her provision: *I* will satisfy her poor with bread. *I* will...clothe her priests with salvation: and her saints shall shout aloud for joy." The church is in God's hands; she is a chosen Zion, she is a kept Zion, she is a Zion who will endure, Therefore the psalmist said in Psalm 68: "Why leap ye, ye high hills? this is the hill which God desireth to dwell in, yea, the LORD will dwell in it for ever."

Tonight we want to consider in a more intimate and profound way the foundation of this church which endures from eternity to eternity. The words of our text you can find in Matthew 16:18b, only these words: "*Upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*"

With God's help we want to consider with you, "The Church of the Living God":

1. Established from eternity in Christ
2. Built in time upon Christ
3. Preserved to eternity by Christ

I repeat: The Church of the Living God -- (1) Established from eternity in Christ; (2) Built in time upon Christ; (3) Preserved to eternity by Christ.

I. Established from eternity in Christ.

"I will build my church." These precious words, my dear flock, from Matthew 16 have an eternal foundation. They are an eternal "I will" rooted in the decree of God from the never begun age. God chartered in His Triune Being from eternity and confirmed in the counsel of peace (or the covenant of redemption) that He would make and keep a church chosen to everlasting life for Himself, to His own honor

and glory. He decreed from eternity that He would leave nothing to chance; He would not leave anything in the hands of man or angel or anything of His creation. He will use means, but He will be the King and the Head of His church.

Why did the Lord decree to have a church? Have you ever thought about that? After all, boys and girls, you know that God was perfectly happy with Himself and in Himself from all eternity. God did not need to take one step outside of Himself to create anything. God did not need this vast universe, this "milky way" galaxy, this planet, this country, this city; He did not need your family, this church; He did not need you or me. Why did God decree to have a church, and why did He decree to create and to allow the fall in order to choose from fallen mankind, from all eternity, a people unto Himself? Why? God desired to glorify His own Name and to pour out His own intertrinitarian love onto His creation; to magnify, to exemplify His attributes, yes, to gather a church that may glorify His grace and mercy and love and compassion. And so He chose a church to everlasting life. But He chose that church only *in Jesus Christ*, and we must never think of the church apart from the Lord Jesus Christ. Election is election *in Christ*. Christ is the *eternal* Rock upon which the Father, in consort with the Son and the Spirit, declared from all eternity, "I will build My church in Jesus Christ."

Our forefathers spoke of a *legal* union with Christ and of a *vital* union with Christ. They spoke of a legal union when referring to *justification* — that is, the church is washed and forgiven and justified and brought into a right standing or state with God through Jesus Christ, in time, but that state was decreed from all eternity. And therefore John says in Revelation 13:8 that the Lamb was slain from before the foundation of the world. From all eternity God decreed that His elect church should be in legal union with Him for Christ's sake; and that decree had to be worked out in time. But already in that decree, Christ was declared to be Mediator of His chosen Church; the Church of God was decreed and given to Him. The elect were passed under the rod of His eternal covenant as the great, good and chief Shepherd from eternity; they were bound upon His mediatorial heart from the stillness of eternity. And so this "I will" of our text is really an eternal "I will"; from the counsel of peace, from before creation, God declares in His own inter-trinitarian commitment, "I will build my church."

Now that union must be worked out in time, and when the church is justified in time, is transferred from death to life, God also works a vital union in the way of *sanctification* whereby the church walks in holiness, follows her Master and is united with Him in a real and vital and spiritual way. And oh, what a glorious thing this is, congregation, that the church is made one in time with Jesus Christ! Like David looking down upon Mephibosheth saw Jonathan between him and Mephibosheth, so God can never look upon His elect people apart from Jesus Christ. From eternity He already looks upon them in the womb of His salvific decree, but in time He makes the transfer to salvation real. He takes His people who are as children of wrath, even as all others by nature, and transfers them into His marvelous light; He reckons them to be one in Christ forever. Oh what a glorious thing, is it not? Reckoned in Christ forever! And what is Christ for His people? He is the *Rock of their salvation!* He is the Rock upon which they stand, the Rock upon which they live, the Rock upon which they die, the Rock of their salvation.

Today, evolutionists are talking about rocks that are millions and billions of years old. Well, here is a Rock that far exceeds all their exaggeration. Here is a Rock that was established from eternity, even the Son of God. This Rock has always been there; this Rock is always there; this Rock will always be there. "Upon this rock," says Jesus, "I will build my church."

Now there are many different ideas concerning this text - what this rock really means. There are those, especially in the Roman Catholic tradition, that say this rock means Peter — because in the Greek language, you see, the word Peter is *rock* -- and Jesus says to him: Thou art Peter, and upon this "peter," upon this rock, I will build My church. And out of this interpretation, as a matter of fact, the Roman Catholic church has developed its incredible hierarchy of some seventeen different offices, and has built the entire papal system teaching that Peter was the first pope and that there have been popes ever since. Thus they say the pope has papal authority when he speaks from his papal chair, when he speaks *ex cathedra*; then he speaks infallibly for he is the rock of the church. He has equal authority with the very Word of God. Of course, that interpretation is altogether unbiblical and unacceptable to us.

There are others who say that this rock is eternal election. Though election is foundational to the entire Christian church, this too misses the point of what Jesus is saying here. You see, Jesus had just asked His disciples, "Whom do you say that I am?" Some said, "You are Elijah"; some said, "You are John the Baptist"; but when He said, "Whom do *you* say that I am" as My own dear disciples, Peter spoke up and said, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Peter uses two Messiah titles - *Christ* and the *Son of God*. And by that he was saying as it were, "Thou art God of God; Thou art the foundation of salvation of all ages; Thou art the Rock of our hope; the Rock of our expectation; Thou art all our salvation." And Jesus answers, "Thou art Peter and upon this rock, Peter, that is, *upon the confession you have made*, I will build my church." So Jesus indeed uses the word *Peter* twice but He uses it as a play on words in the Greek language -- thou art Peter and upon this "peter" I will build my church. But He does not mean Peter with a capital "P," meaning the *person* Peter, but He means upon what Peter *said*, upon the confession of Peter, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." It is upon the reality of this confession that the church is made and kept alive. It is upon the reality of this confession that the church has survived from the time of Adam and will survive to the end of the world.

Take Adam, for example. What did he say when God told him of the promise of the Messiah in Genesis 3:15, when God told him about his punishment and about the message of death? Even when God said to him in verse 19, "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return," Adam did not forget the promise of God in verse 15, but turned to Eve and said, "Thy name is Eve." Eve in Hebrew means *life, living!* But how was it possible? Did you ever think about what a wonder the conversion of Adam and Eve is?

Sometimes we speak about Manasseh or Saul of Tarsus as remarkable conversions, and forget that Adam is the greatest wonder of all, for Adam was directly responsible for plunging the whole human race into sin. But now, Adam believed the promise of God; even before he went out of the garden he turned to his wife and said, as it were, "There is hope, there is a future, there is a Rock upon which to build; I call your name Eve - *life, living!*"

So God was gathering His elect Church, saved by the blood of Jesus, already in

Paradise. For after Adam named his wife "*Eve*," what happened? The Lord God made them coats of skin; and the shed blood pointed again to the promise of the Messiah to come. So already in Paradise God was shedding blood pointing to Jesus, and gathering sinners to Himself. And that will go on, congregation, until the moment the last elect child of God is gathered in. "I will build my church" is not only from eternity, but "I will build my church" runs the entire gamut of time. The world today owes its very survival to this Rock and to Christ's preserving care, because the world is continuing so that the living church of God may be altogether brought in.

And that is why we have to be very careful not to predict the end of the world. From our perspective we cannot understand how God can remain patient with us and with the world, and why He has not destroyed this world long ago. Well, the answer is very simple. God has more souls to pick out of the floundering ocean of self-destruction and to place upon the Rock of salvation, even Jesus Christ and Him crucified. And as soon as all the elect are on that Rock, then the Son of God will come and the sickle will be cast into the harvest; the angels shall sound the great trump of God, and God shall gather all men to Himself. But until that day comes, until the last elect one is gathered, this promise shall stand secure — not just 125 years but thousands of years — "I will build my church."

God is pleased to build His church through means. He uses *sinful men*. This afternoon we had a student speak to us. Did you think about what this means, congregation? As God thrusts out men in our congregations to bring His Word, He is declaring, "I am not yet done with the Heritage Netherlands Reformed Congregations; I am not yet done with My church on earth. I have yet men to thrust forth because I have souls to gain - *I will build my church*." That is our hope, our only hope, our sufficient hope.

II. Built in time upon Christ.

We have experienced in recent years, and this church has often experienced in the last 125 years, that if the church is left to man it can only wreak havoc, division, destruction, disaster, sin, confusion, and disappointment. And yet tonight, here we are as poor sinners, as a needy congregation; yet we cannot deny that there is a growing remnant in our midst by the grace of God alone who are built upon the

Rock of salvation, Jesus Christ alone -- *solus Christus*. God will preserve His church despite His church, despite me, despite the office-bearers, despite the children of God in our midst. There is not one who can take the least credit for the building of this church. This is altogether Messiah's work, using sinful men, using His Word in the midst of the church, using all the means of grace. Messiah is the irresistible Builder, He is the able Builder, He is the wise Builder. He builds and He makes no mistakes in His building. He builds exactly that which His Father in heaven wants Him to build. He does not gather one too many or one too few, but He builds graciously and irresistibly.

Now it is an amazing thing *how* He builds. He usually builds a church slowly, bit by bit. He usually builds a church in such a way that when it goes forward a bit, it is attacked by Satan, nibbled at the heel, and so the church is sometimes going three steps forward, two steps back. The church is never static. The church is always changing for better or for worse.

How evident that is also in the local history of this congregation! On October 30, 1870 there were forty people who signed a charter membership; the church was organized that evening with two elders and two deacons under the leadership of Rev. C. Kloppenburg. But it was not long, just five months later, that the church was torn apart. So much trouble came between the minister and the consistory that the church decided to elect an entirely new consistory. The new consistory had only one elder and one deacon. Our church was almost extinguished at that time. The numbers dwindled to a couple dozen, but God blessed the labors of Rev. Kloppenburg and the church began to grow. The people began to meet in the Swedenborgian Church located on the corner of Division Avenue and Lyon Street. After a few years the house and lot on Division Avenue, between Bronson (now Crescent Street) and Bridge Street (now Michigan) was purchased. And in 1873, on December 7, Rev. Kloppenburg preached in the new building, the first building our forefathers owned, a dedication service on the words, "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us."

Two years later the church faced another crisis. Rev. Kloppenburg was getting old, his health was failing and in 1876 he died. Before he died, he asked the consistory and congregation to affiliate with the mother church in the Netherlands,

which at that time was called the *Christian Reformed Church*, which they did. A few months later they received another undershepherd by the name of Cornelius Vorst. He was ordained into the ministry here in Grand Rapids in 1877 at the age of fifty.

In 1877 the first efforts were made by our forefathers to affiliate with others in North America. For those first seven years we were really an independent church. But in 1877 affiliation was established with a church in Lodi, New Jersey; these two churches decided to call themselves a denomination under the name of *Netherlands Reformed*. But the Grand Rapids church did not want to change its incorporated name, so our forebears agreed to call the denomination Netherlands Reformed while retaining the name of *Christian Reformed* for this local church.

Rev. Vorst was a very active minister. He sought new congregations with which to establish ties. In 1884 he went to East Saugatuck, Michigan and organized a church of thirty adults and thirty-nine children. That church lasted one year and disintegrated. He also established a church in Passaic, New Jersey in 1883. Our relationship with this church lasted for many years. Meanwhile, problems surfaced between the Lodi church in New Jersey and our congregation, which resulted in the Lodi church going its own way. Thus the denomination was reduced to the Passaic church and our church. Then in 1886 Rev. Vorst began to work with the South Holland church which still exists today as a very little congregation. For fourteen years Rev. Vorst served our congregation. He was known as a peacemaker and a builder of the walls of Zion. In 1890 Rev. Vorst accepted a call to Lodi, New Jersey, the church that had left the denomination, so he too left the small denomination he had helped to build up.

A few years later, in 1892, Rev. M. VanderSpek came to serve as pastor of our church. He was ordained into the ministry when he was sixty years old. He served for ten years in the Netherlands, came here, and served for about ten months before he died.

He was succeeded by Rev. Gerrit Wolbers in 1896. Rev. Wolbers was converted as a teenager. When he was sixteen years old, he began to speak in the midst of gatherings of God's people. When he was twenty years old, he was asked to speak in the churches. At twenty-five, he was ordained into the ministry. Rev. Wolbers

was a spiritual man. He often would walk along the streets in his neighborhood, praying aloud. But he was a man also of a very independent character. He tried to avoid all denominational ties. He wanted the church to remain independent. Rev. Wolbers served here for eight years, until 1904.

There was a two-year vacancy in the pastorate until Rev. Pieneman came. A few of our older members remember Rev. Pieneman. He served here from 1906 to 1909. He was certainly the most active of all our ministers in terms of establishing new ventures and new churches, both in Holland and here in North America. It was Rev. Pieneman who took the few churches over here, as well as the new churches he organized, and forged some family ties with the *Gereformeerde Gemeenten* in the Netherlands, so that ministers could exchange pulpits in both denominations. Rev. Pieneman was converted as a teenager of fifteen years. He was brought into severe conviction of sin under one sermon, and three days later was delivered and justified in Jesus Christ. In three days he had a very sudden, strong and remarkable conversion. Rev. Pieneman served here only three years but in those three years he helped establish congregations in Sheboygan, Wisconsin and Paterson, New Jersey, which later resulted in the establishment of the Haledon Avenue Church, now the Franklin Lakes congregation. He also helped work on the Kalamazoo congregation and installed Rev. Beversluis in New Jersey.

Rev. Pieneman was also very active in commencing our Christian school. He also established a young men's society already in the early 1900s. Suddenly, however, after three years, he left our congregation and went back to the Netherlands.

Under Rev. Pieneman's ministry there were many who transferred their memberships from the Turner Avenue Church to the Division Avenue Church, which later was subsumed into our congregation. So Rev. Pieneman must be remembered as one whose labors were blessed throughout North America, but also very much in our congregation.

Two years after he left, Rev. Minderman came to our church as the minister of this congregation for ten years. He was installed in 1911 and served until 1921. He was a man known for careful exegesis. He would never allow anyone to come to visit him on Saturdays. He spent a great deal of time in preparing his sermons.

Many people were converted also under his ministry as they were under Rev. Pieneman's ministry. There are elderly people sitting here who remember being blessed under Rev. Minderman's sermons.

After Rev. Minderman's ministry, the pulpit was vacant for twenty-five years. Meanwhile, elders and deacons faithfully served the congregation, English services were commenced in 1922 in a rented hall on Leonard Street. In 1923 Classis approved the organization of an English congregation, and Rev. Wielhouwer organized the church in the Turner Avenue building. The new English-speaking congregation consisted of forty-seven members from our church (Division Avenue) and sixty-seven from the Turner Avenue congregation. And so now there were three churches in Grand Rapids of our persuasion -- Division Avenue, Turner Avenue and Ottawa Avenue.

Rev. Lamain came in 1947 and became known especially as an experimental minister in the area of experiencing sin and misery. And God used him also for many people. Shortly after Rev. Lamain came, the Ottawa Avenue and Division Avenue Churches merged. Our building on Crescent Street was built in 1951 and dedicated on May 9 of that year. Rev. Lamain preached the dedicatory sermon for this building on Haggai 2:9, "In this place will I give peace, saith the LORD of hosts." The church addition was added in 1974 and by the grace of God, the Lord has preserved this church unto this very day. For thirty-seven years Rev. Lamain served you. The church was built up at one point to 1400 people, and then by the time Rev. Lamain's ministry had come to an end, it was back down to about 1100 people.

Through all these years, building up from a small group to well over a thousand, and now in the 800s, God has still kept the church of God. For the last nine years He has granted us the great privilege of bringing you, with many ups and downs, with many fears and in much weakness, the living Word of God. If we look back over those 125 years, congregation, then we have to say, "The Lord has not left us destitute." And throughout all those years He has always taken a remnant, sometimes fewer in number, sometimes more in number, and put them on the Rock of salvation, Jesus Christ and Him crucified. And those who were put on the Rock became the core of the church by which the church received over the years an

increasing missionary zeal to reach out to the world around us. Especially in recent years, we are grateful that God has stirred up in our midst a concern that we cannot hoard to ourselves the heritage of sovereign grace we have received. Though God alone can bring people on the Rock, we are responsible to declare to the world of their need for the Rock and how the Spirit brings them to the Rock, but also to declare the Rock Himself, who He is and what He is willing to be for sinners, and what it means to live out of that Rock out of gratitude unto Him. Oh, let it be our prayer that almighty God who has preserved this flock for 125 years, despite a sad division in recent years, will still be the living God to keep us in the palm of His hands and to bring more to the Rock' here in this church and in Beckwith. One day He will bring many from these congregations to the shores of everlasting bliss where the Church will be one and will glorify God in holy embrace and enjoy with each other the everlasting fellowship of the Triune God. Then all the redeemed will sing the praises of God declaring mutually, without exception, "Saved only by the grace of God upon the Rock of salvation." Oh, the Church will be preserved — not buildings and not institutions, and maybe not denominations, for the candlestick can be removed from one place to another -- but the invisible Church, the living Church of the living God shall never die because Jesus said, "I will build my church", yes, He said, "Even the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." What that means we will see after we sing briefly from Psalter 367:2,4,

God has blessed us, congregation. He has given two hundred elders and deacons in 125 years to serve this flock. He has given seven or eight pastors to serve this flock for ninety out of 125 years -- more than in any other church of the denomination from which we have been put aside. The Lord has given faithful men and women to put their hands to work in various ministries and despite all our shortcomings this church may still be a testimony by the grace of God in the midst of the earth to sovereign grace truth. And what shall it be, congregation, to be in this congregation with the history of God's preserving care, to hear the doctrines of grace, and still to be lost?

This past week I had to speak at the Conference of the New England Reformed Fellowship for a day and a half. There were many ministers there, many of whom find it difficult to believe that we have a church of this size in Grand Rapids which

professes the doctrines of grace. Some are happy to have thirty or fifty people come together who believe the doctrines of grace! Oh, what an opportunity we have; more and more it overwhelms me; what a calling rests upon this congregation! Do you realize that we are among the largest English-speaking congregations in the world that profess the doctrines of Reformed, experiential grace? I am speaking of Australia, New Zealand, Scotland, England, Canada, United States, and wherever else the English language is spoken.

III. Preserved to eternity by Christ.

We have a wonderful opportunity and solemn responsibility to carry to the ends of the earth the message of free and sovereign grace. And as we seek to do so in one way or another, in one ministry or another, the gates of hell will continue to attack us -- we may be sure of that. We ought not be surprised at that. Jesus did not say to Peter, "The gates of hell will not attack the church," but He said, "The gates of hell will not prevail against the church." Satan will take all his battering rams to buffet the church of God. Satan hates churches that seek to glorify God and call men and women to the necessity of the new birth in Jesus Christ. With such churches, it is true what Jesus said to Peter, "Simon, Simon . . . Satan has desired to have you ... to sift you as wheat." Satan wants to have this church, he wants to have you, my friend, he wants to have me, he wants to have our families, he wants to negate the testimony of the doctrines of grace in this city, in this nation and in this world. We ought not marvel that the gates of hell come against us. Luther said, "Cain will go on murdering Abel so long as the church is on earth."

Indeed Paul warns us to be prepared -- to be prepared for the gates of hell, for the principalities and powers and evil rulers in high places that shall attack the church of God. He says: Put on the whole armour of God and be ready to stand. You need the helmet of salvation, you need the breastplate of faith, you need the sword of the Word of God. Your feet must be shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace. You must be clothed in the armour of God from head to toe because Satan will seek to destroy the church of God. The gates of hell will not give up, but the gates of hell will not prevail. You know, we really ought not be overly discouraged when the gates of hell attack, because that is a sign that Satan has something to attack. But rather we ought to remember what Jesus said of His

attacked people, "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and . . . , say all manner of evil against you falsely, for My sake."

Dear congregation, we need to be *Nehemiahs*, By the grace of God we need to take the sword in one hand and the trowel in the other, use the means of grace, and seek to build the walls of Zion, defending the church on the one hand with the sword of the Spirit, and building the church on the other by the grace of God, with the cement of the blood of Christ that cements together His Zion in the midst of this waste-howling wilderness.

Now why is it that the gates of hell will not prevail against the church? Why is it? Well, it is not because of any effort of man; it is not because of any gifts of man. It is because of Jesus Christ who is the Head and King of the Church, because of Christ who died for the Church that she might live, because of Christ who rose for the Church and ascended on high with the Church in His loins. It is because of Jesus who ever intercedes for His Church, world without end. Satan will not win the battle because Christ is mightier than Satan. Gog and Magog shall storm Zion's camp as we draw near to the end of the world, but Christ will come on the clouds to judge the living and the dead. You know, really, the gates of hell *cannot* prevail against the Church of God not only because of Christ, but because of God the Father's faithfulness, because of the Spirit's sealing confirmations and His inward, undying grace in the hearts of sinners, and because of the firm, intertrinitarian covenant which must be worked out. If you had to ask me what is the bottom-line reason why the gates of hell will not prevail against the Church of God forever, I would have to say to you it is that *intertrinitarian covenant of sovereign grace* in which each Person of the Trinity is bound to the others to fulfill His end and obligations of that covenant, The Father cannot desert in His electing love the work of the Son or the work of the Spirit. The Son cannot deny His Father's sovereign electing will nor reject the saving work of the Spirit. And how shall the Spirit cast away the election of the Father and the redemption of the Son and not do His work in the heart of sinners? *God is bound to God* in and through Jesus Christ, and therefore the gates of hell shall not prevail against the Church of God.

On the walls of those who were brought to death through the Roman Inquisition one martyr wrote: "Blessed Jesus, they can kill my body and take me out of my

earthly position in this church, but they cannot take me out of Thy true Church." You see, the gates of hell not only will not prevail against the church in this life, but the gates of hell will not prevail against the Church in glory. Martin Luther was fond of telling the devil that. When the devil would challenge him, he would often say to the devil: "You are at the wrong address because my King and my Master is in heaven. There you have to go, devil, and there you can never go, devil, because my Master is now above your reach. He is above the nibblings on the heel of all your devices. My Head is in heaven, and with Him you must be if you want me because He has taken my heart and run away to heaven with it." Oh Satan, you are a defeated foe! And though you are yet dangerous, so dangerous, that Luther said, "If it weren't for the grace of God, the tail of Satan would knock my conversion out of me"- yet by the grace of God Satan cannot take my conversion away from me, because my salvation is sure and steadfast in Jesus Christ. And He will confirm what you read in Matthew 24, "But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved." So the Church is safe in the hands of God Triune -- *the Church is safe*. The Father cannot desert her, the Son cannot desert her, and the Holy Spirit cannot desert her. She is safe. All praise be to God!

"Yes, but," as one of the old ministers asked one of his dying parishioners once, "are you not afraid that you will slip through the fingers of Christ?" "No, pastor," said that aged woman, "I cannot slip through His fingers because the Church is His body; by grace, I *am* one of His fingers. The Church is His body, and Christ will not crucify Himself again. He will not leave His Church to herself. The Church's salvation is sure. By His preserving grace every believer shall endure to the end."

We believe in the perseverance of the saints and the perseverance of the Church because of the perseverance of the Father from eternity, the perseverance of the Son on Calvary and at the right hand of the Father, and the perseverance of the Holy Spirit in God working out salvation in the heart of sinners. Therefore the believer and the Church shall persevere. God cannot forsake the work of His own hands, and He works such a love in the heart of His people for Him that they cannot forsake the work of His hands. And so faith cannot die, the Church cannot die. It is a two-sided coin, congregation – the whole doctrine of perseverance. The perseverance of God fosters the perseverance of the believer. Both are necessary,

both belong together, and both shall be confirmed, for we love Him because He first loved us. He loved His Church from eternity and His Church cannot help but love Him in return. The gates of hell shall not prevail against the Church of God.

When the Emperor Julian said that he would destroy the church of God, one of the ancient fathers said to him, "If that is your goal, God will destroy you." And that happened very soon. He who lays his hand upon the Church lays his hand upon the apple of God's eye. Empires shall rise and fall, many in the world shall pass away, the very world shall pass away, but the Church of God shall never die, not even when this earth's elements are burned in fire. The Church shall be purged and shall be gathered to her Head. And therefore, dear believer, *never give up on the Lord*. He has enrolled you in His army. He calls you to perseverance. There are no pensions, there are no retirements, there is no quitting in the kingdom of God. You are called to endure to the end; you are enrolled in lifelong service. Do we speak now only of those who are in full-time ministry? Every true believer is engaged in "full-time ministry."

My dear unconverted friend, if you are not a member of the living Church, oh remember, your earthly church membership, if God prevent not, shall perish one day. These walls and bricks, this building and the outward church shall perish. But he who is built on the Rock shall endure forever. Are you built on the Rock? Is Jesus Christ your only hope, your only life, your only expectation? Has He shown you the horrible pit and miry clay within you, has He lifted up your feet upon a Rock, and has He established your goings upon that Rock (Ps. 40:2)? Oh, then you shall never perish! But if you are not on that Rock, the day is coming, if you are not born again, that you shall cry to the rocks and to the hills to fall on you to cover you from the wrath of that Rock, the wrath of the Lamb of God. All they who are in Christ have life; all they who are outside of Christ have the wrath of God abiding upon them. Oh what shall it be to be preserved all our lives in a church in which God has preserved the truth, and never know that truth ourselves? Oh my friend, "Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light." Amen.